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Bass Is My Religion: Syncretic Spirituality and Navigating the Potential for Misappropriation Among Participants in Electronic Dance Music Culture

by
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Abstract

At electronic dance music events in the United States, artists and attendees tend to appropriate religious and spiritual sounds, images, and dress, especially from India but also from elsewhere, to varying degrees. This project explicates the effects of adopting religious symbology, ethos, and atmosphere in the music and culture of EDM, specifically in bass music culture. It argues that although individual participants may adopt aspects of religious traditions in ways they perceive as authentic, the potential for misappropriation still exists. In other words, EDM culture creates opportunities for misappropriation that individual participants navigate in order to construct their own individual forms of spirituality in relation to the live music experience and EDM culture at large.

Utilizing a set of seven interviews with individuals who have close ties to the EDM community, this project explores the ways that attendees navigate conversations about cultural appropriation, specifically in the bass music community. A set of common attitudes, opinions, and beliefs forges a syncretic spirituality among these seven interviewees, which inform how these individuals navigate conversations about appropriation in the EDM community. In addition to these seven interviews, three case studies that focus on specific artists who spearhead specific subscenes frame this project: the psychedelic downtempo duo Desert Dwellers, the multiethnic trap artist TroyBoi, and the cult dubstep DJ Bassnectar. Synthesizing ideas by these seven interviews with previous EDM scholarship and specific cases within these communities, I conclude that as artists and attendees negotiate meanings with one another, they must ultimately choose to justify their appropriation, often by claiming a syncretic sense of spirituality, or to avoid association with it entirely.

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Second, I would thank the seven interviewees, many of whom are dear friends. Their thoughts directly contributed to the ideas that frame this project.

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Lastly, thank you to the entire EDM community, artists and audience members alike. I will see you all on the dancefloor!

Chapter 1

Introduction and Literature Review

Electronic dance music (EDM) events in the United States host artists who produce and DJ in a plethora of styles such as house, techno, dubstep, and downtempo. Many disparate traditions influence the sounds and stylings of each genre. One of the more omnipresent influences across multiple EDM cultures is the sounds, imagery, and philosophy of India and Hinduism as represented in sound samplings (both musical sounds and spoken word), visual projection at live concerts, costuming and vending at music festivals, and workshops and ceremonies hosted by these festivals. Buddhist, neo-pagan, and other mystic and religious traditions from around the world are also influential, creating a highly syncretic sense of spirituality that is projected both aurally and visually at live performances and festivals. Attendees of these events also tend to appropriate—or perhaps misappropriate—these cultures to varying degrees through their dress and/or professed attitudes, opinions, and spiritual beliefs. Though these types of samplings and appropriations occur across many popular music genres, especially hip-hop, for the purposes of this project, my primary focus will be on EDM.

For this project, I define appropriation based on Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao's explication of the concept.[1] As these authors and many others have noted, the concept of cultural appropriation is difficult to define and often nebulous in its application. In addition, conversations about cultural appropriation frequently take place on social media and other

1. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao, "Introduction to Cultural Appropriation: A Framework for Analysis," in *Borrowed Power: Essays on Cultural Appropriation*, eds. Bruce Ziff and Pratima V. Rao (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), 1–27.

widely accessible forums, influencing its definition and cultural significance.[2] In essence, appropriation may occur when members of one culture borrow elements from another culture. Such borrowing may be problematic and thus might better be termed misappropriation when members of a dominant culture, such as mostly white, economically privileged EDM festival attendees in the United States, take from marginalized minority cultures. As Ziff and Rao have noted, this appropriation can harm the marginalized communities, whether by creating false or caricaturized stereotypes of that culture, or by rendering the culture as somehow primitive or "less than" the dominant culture. Appropriation can also impact the cultural object itself, as the act of appropriation may "damage or transform a given cultural good or practice."[3] Cultural appropriation may also allow the dominant culture to benefit materially or financially to the detriment of the original creators. In many cases, "law fails to reflect alternative conceptions of what should be treated as property or ownership in cultural goods," such that there are few legal protections regarding issues of cultural appropriation.[4] This may lead marginalized peoples to feel cheated when these borrowers do not obtain prior consent.

This project seeks to explicate the effects of adopting religious symbology, ethos, and atmosphere in the music and culture of EDM, specifically in bass music culture, here defined as any EDM genre with a focus on the live experience and a focus on the high amplification of bass frequencies. Though in certain instances these borrowings may lead to intentional communities, alternative political viewpoints that challenge the status quo, and an increased sense of belonging in a spiritual sense, EDM culture may misrepresent the cultures from which it borrows and in

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2. Maria Fang and Shaun Axani, "What's Up with Cultural Appropriation on Social Media?" published January 3, 2016, Medium, https://medium.com/@mariafang/what-s-up-with-cultural-appropriation-on-social-media-be43211c91a7.
3. Ziff and Rao, "Introduction to Cultural Appropriation," 8.
4. Ziff and Rao, "Introduction to Cultural Appropriation," 8–9.

turn foster negative or false stereotypes. There may also be a monetary imbalance of power between the borrowing (dominant) culture and the cultures from which it borrows.

In addition to these negative drawbacks of appropriation, artists' inflated egos can contribute to god complexes that lead to abuse of power and privilege, as in the case of the American dubstep producer Bassnectar. As Bassnectar presented himself as a spiritually evolved figure in the EDM community, he was deified by fans. This deification perhaps contributed to his manipulation of young women, as he was accused in 2019 of engaging in sexual acts with several minors. Thus, the deification of artists, especially those that present themselves as spiritually superior, could contribute to their abuse of power, as others have noted.[5]

I argue that although individual participants may adopt aspects of religious traditions in ways they perceive as authentic, the potential for appropriation still exists. In this way, this project seeks to insert itself into a larger conversation regarding cultural appropriation in the EDM community by situating itself between two bodies of scholarship: one that praises EDM's positive qualities without acknowledging its potential for misappropriation, and another that condemns EDM festival goers as culturally appropriative without acknowledging the positive aspects of its spiritual associations. Through critical analysis of songs and videos by select EDM artists, my own experience attending many live EDM concerts and festivals, and interviews with a careful selection of artists and frequent festival goers, I show that EDM culture creates opportunities for misappropriation that individual participants navigate in order to construct their own individual forms of spirituality in relation to the live music experience and EDM culture at large. In three case studies focusing on specific electronic dance music producers—Desert Dwellers, TroyBoi, and Bassnectar—I consider the varied ways in which artists and attendees

5. Rupert Till, "We Could Be Heroes: Personality Cults of the Sacred Popular," in *Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music* (London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 46–73.

negotiate meanings with one another. In doing so, they create feedback loops of influence that ultimately forge a highly syncretic yet insular brand of spirituality. When participants claim "bass music is my religion," they open space for a complex conversation about the role of appropriation in the construct of this spirituality.

Methodology

The seven interviews for this project were conducted in the winter of 2021, and all took place via the video call platform Zoom. Due to the often sensitive nature of discussing ideas about appropriation in today's sociopolitical climate, the interviewees were chosen based on their familiarity to the researcher and their close relationship to the EDM scene. They will be referred to by pseudonyms throughout:

Amanda: The first interviewee is a twenty-six-year-old Vietnamese American female living in Indianapolis who has only been listening to EDM for two years but has formed a close relationship with the type of syncretic spirituality discussed in this project.

Beth: The second interviewee is a twenty-eight-year-old white female who has been listening to EDM for over twelve years. She has been to over one hundred festivals and concerts, worked as a marketing manager for the biggest nightclub in Denver for three years, and helped to run an EDM blog for three years. During her time as a journalist, she interviewed artists and travelled to many festivals in both the EDM and jam band circuit.

Carl: The third interviewee is a thirty-one-year-old white male who has been listening to EDM for over twelve years and who has also been to over one hundred festivals and concerts. He is a singer-songwriter who incorporates elements of EDM into his projects and also creates amateur EDM tracks as a hobby. Carl has helped to lead workshops at various festivals in both Indiana and California, where he currently resides in Santa Cruz. In addition to his musical expertise, Carl has also participated in ayahuasca ceremonies with a grassroots organization in California.

Dan: The fourth interview is a twenty-six-year-old white male who has been working as an EDM artist since 2012. Dan is a DJ in various capacities and also produces his own music, which he frequently DJs in his hometown of Indianapolis. Dan has also led sound-healing sessions that infuse electronically produced frequencies with meditation.

Evan: The fifth interviewee is a thirty-seven-year-old white and Native American male who has been listening to EDM for almost twenty years. He currently lives in Indianapolis where he practices psychotherapy primarily with children who have high degrees of trauma. In addition to this work, Evan conducts formal research on psychedelics in therapeutic settings with a team of psychotherapists.

Fiona: The sixth interviewee is a thirty-year-old biracial female (black and Caucasian) who has been listening to EDM and attending concerts and festivals for over fifteen years. Fiona works as a social worker with the homeless population in Indianapolis.

Garrett: The last interviewee is a thirty-year-old Indian American male who has been listening to EDM music for twelve years. He currently resides in Chicago, where he works as a psychologist.

The seven interviewees were carefully selected to prioritize *depth* within each interview rather than *breadth* of interviewees: there are only seven total interviews, but each lasted approximately two hours. I believe this approach is favorable to this project, as discussions about cultural appropriation are bolstered by a familiarity between researcher and interviewee. Individuals are more likely to be open, honest, and comfortable when speaking about cultural appropriation with someone familiar to them. In addition to these seven perspectives is my own, that of a thirty-one-year-old white male living in Indianapolis who has attended over thirty EDM music festivals as well as numerous concerts and who also considers himself spiritual. Though the interviews represent only seven people within the EDM scene—and they do not always agree on issues of cultural appropriation—I believe that many of the attitudes and opinions expressed by the interviewees are common among a specific set of participants within the EDM scene, especially those who have fostered what I will call a syncretic sense of spirituality through their participation in EDM culture.

Constructing a Syncretic Spirituality

To understand the syncretic spirituality referenced throughout this project, it must be clearly defined. The term "spirituality" is ambiguous—it is considered here as a product of EDM culture, and indeed the seven interviewees help to define its meaning. For many EDM attendees, it is constructed from a variety of sources, but most prominently Eastern religious thought

(especially Buddhism), New Age philosophy (Eckhart Tolle, for example),[6] and psychedelic philosophy (such as Terrence McKenna).[7] In addition to syncretism of these pre-established religious or philosophical ideologies, direct psychedelic experience informs a great deal of individual spirituality. In interviews for this project, interviewees' comments centered on eight of what I call "tenets" that aid in the construction of a recognizable syncretic spirituality for EDM attendees, as summarized in Table 1 and described below.

Table 1. Eight Tenets of a Syncretic Spirituality

Tenet
1. General distaste for organized religion
2. "Interconnectivity"
3. EDM as community
4. EDM as therapy
5. The mundane as spiritually informed
6. America as lacking community or spirituality
7. Aestheticization of spiritual technologies
8. The inevitability of spiritual experience at live EDM events

First, EDM attendees express a general distaste for organized religion. In the United States, this often means turning away from a traditional Christian upbringing. Dan's anecdote expresses a common attitude among many EDM attendees:

> I was raised Christian, but when I was thirteen, I started wondering if all these people that are telling me how it is really knew, or if they were all just as confused and lost as I was. And I found out very quickly that that was the case, and I stopped paying attention to

6. Eckhart Tolle is the author of popular mindfulness books such as *The Power of Now* and *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. One of the central tenants of the latter is that by making personal changes in your own life that embrace a mindful lifestyle, others will follow suite, and this "flowering of consciousness" will create a "new earth" in which everyone is seen to have awakened to their life's purpose. Eckhart Tolle, *The Power of Now: A Guide to Spiritual Enlightenment* (Novato, CA: New World Library,1999); Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005).
7. Terrence McKenna is a popular ethnobotanist, speaker, and writer of many books who advocated for responsible psychedelic drug use. His "Stoned Ape Theory" also popularized the idea that man may have evolved and thereby tripled their brain-size after a group of proto-humans consumed magic mushrooms in the wild. Terrence McKenna, *Food of the Gods: The Search for the Original Tree of Knowledge, A Radical History of Plants, Drugs, and Human Evolution* (New York: Bantam Books, 1993).

> what the man at the pulpit said, because he didn't know what the hell he was talking about either. There's been problems with certain Christians in my experience of it, and it's kind of made me not want to go to church on Sunday.[8]

Dan expresses his sense of disenfranchisement from Christianity via his distrust for his church's leadership, which began in adolescence. He is careful, however, to delineate "certain Christians," showing that his distancing does not equate to total dismissal. Indeed, he continues: "There's still parts of [Christianity] that I do follow. One rule that everyone could probably follow is the golden rule: treat others like you would want to be treated. That follows along PLUR [Peace, Love, Unity, Respect], so everybody who abides by PLUR is kind of following one aspect of the Bible. Even if they hate Christianity."[9] Though the golden rule is found in many theologies throughout the world, Dan's comments show his openness to adopting aspects of Christianity that fit into his personal construction of spirituality.

Carl also explains that disenfranchisement from traditional religion leads EDM attendees to seek alternative spiritual expression: "I think that's something that draws people to those religious sub-cultural expressions too is that they get wounded by the dominator culture. They're looking for alternative ways to give meaning to their life."[10] EDM attendees often turn to Eastern religious thought, which informs their spiritual beliefs with varying intensities. Beth echoes this shift from her traditional Christian upbringing to aspects of Eastern religious practices, which she found through attending music events:

> I'm not really religious, but I grew up in Indiana going to Christian church. I don't follow any of those beliefs. I would say now, through music and festivals, I've been connected with more spiritual beliefs. I'm very into meditation and yoga and those internal practices. I wouldn't say I follow a religion, but I definitely follow practices of other religions like Buddhism and stuff. I definitely discovered that from festivals and that world, meeting people that have influenced me with those kinds of beliefs too.[11]

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8. Dan [pseud.], interview via Zoom by Daniel Backfish-White, January 28, 2021.
9. Dan [pseud.], interview. PLUR is a common saying among ravers since the 90s.
10. Carl [pseud.], interview via Zoom by Daniel Backfish-White, January 22, 2021.
11. Beth [pseud.], interview viz Zoom by Daniel Backfish-White, January 26h, 2021.

This common trajectory—turning away from a traditional religious upbringing, discovering spirituality, turning to some sort of mindfulness practice inspired by Eastern religions, and exploring this spirituality through live music—was expressed in some fashion by all seven interviewees.

A second cluster of comments involve ideas about "interconnectivity," a concept that is difficult to define. At its core, it is the idea that all matter is inherently connected by energy, and therefore all living beings are interconnected. Its meaning is often esoteric and individually constructed, and for many EDM attendees, it has close ties to a specific psychedelic experience, as the consumption of drugs is commonplace and fairly ubiquitous among EDM attendees. It is a concept often related to an esoteric idea of "oneness." Evan states:

> I feel like for the longest time I pushed away spirituality in part because I didn't even feel connected to myself. Largely through [psychedelic] mushrooms, I found spirituality in the sensations of interconnectivity and that helped to catalyze my search. Over the years, I've formed my own little spirituality that borrows heavily from Eastern philosophy, but also Native American philosophy, some Judeo-Christian stuff. Pretty much, if it resonates with me, then I try to adopt principles that can help better my life.[12]

Here, Evan describes interconnectivity as a fleeting sensation and relates it to the idea of spirituality as a form of therapy. Evan later comments on this idea of interconnectivity in relation to what is *not* included in his brand of spirituality: "By recognizing that we're not isolated, recognizing that Western ideology is not the end-all be-all, and learning to take what works well from that, filter out religious dogma, and use it in a way that best serves oneself."[13] This succinctly captures his turn away from traditional religious practice (Christianity in the United States), which he views negatively as dogmatic, his turn toward spiritual practices that help him to remember that humans are interconnected, and his drive to become a morally, emotionally,

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12. Evan [pseud.], interview via Zoom by Daniel Backfish-White, February 2, 2021.
13. Evan [pseud.], interview.

and spiritually healthy individual. Dan likewise professes, "I believe that all of our spirits are connected in some way. When you experience something about another spirit, you're learning something about yourself in some way. We're all one in some way."[14] For other interviewees, this sense of connection plays out on multiple levels. For Garret, "it is this kind of abstract thing, connection, whether it's connection to yourself, to your mind, to your body, or something greater like nature or something outside of us."[15] This type of connection provides Garrett a sense of peace that he considers the overarching goal of spirituality. For Garett personally, there is also a degree of relativism to this idea: "[Spirituality] is the same thing as religion, just stripped of tradition, right? When I think about Christianity…it's a framework. I think the same is true for Hinduism…When we talk about spirituality, you're stripping it of that tradition, the *way* of doing it, that way of approaching it, but you're still keeping the principles."[16] For Garrett and perhaps many EDM attendees, there are many paths to the same sense of connection—participating in EDM culture to varying degrees is perhaps only one way to achieve this.

This sense of interconnectivity also extends to interpersonal relationships among festival attendees, which foster a sense of community. Thus, a third tenet in interviews for this project posits that the community created through authentic connection with others is part of the spiritual experience for EDM attendees. Relating this idea to cultural borrowing, Evan says, "Seeing as EDM borrows heavily from cultures that embrace collectivity or even tribalism, it encourages us not only to discover ourselves, but discover our friends, discover strangers we don't know."[17] This openness to create a sense of community through radical self-discovery and interpersonal connection is essential to the construction of spirituality for EDM attendees. The EDM

14. Dan [pseud.], interview.
15. Garrett [pseud.], interview via Zoom by Daniel Backfish-White, February 24, 2021.
16. Garrett [pseud.], interview.
17. Evan [pseud.], interview.

community is often viewed internally as one that embraces people of all genders, sexual orientations, and races. For Beth, “You go to a show, and it’s all about inclusivity. People who are gay and struggling to come out: that’s the kind of community that I think they would need. I’ve felt down and depressed before and the EDM community has brought me up and made me feel accepted.”[18] The idea of the EDM community as one that allows people to be their authentic selves is spiritual in that it gives attendees a freedom of expression that may otherwise be absent in their daily lives. This in turn fosters a sense of acceptance, which encourages attendees to express themselves even further. A feedback loop is created, and in a sense, people return to these events over and over to feel this freedom. As individuals repeatedly see each other at these events, they form strong bonds, often holding one another accountable to be what they might term as “their most authentic selves.” At the same time, this freedom of expression also creates room for individuals to misappropriate—an individual may justify wearing an inappropriate costume from another culture as an embrace of their “authentic self,” when in reality they have little understanding of the appropriated culture.

A fourth spiritual tenet is the idea that EDM and its event culture constitute a form of therapy. For many attendees, live EDM events are therapeutic in various ways, and this aspect contributes to the culture’s associations with spirituality via its fostering of community. Carl states, “When I was deeply into Papadosio, I relied on those shows and the community around them to work through difficult emotions.”[19] For others, EDM culture offers a refuge from the stresses of modern life. For example, Amanda says, “The most common issue in mental health is people feeling like they have nowhere to go, no one to talk to, people putting way too much pressure on themselves to look a certain way, sound a certain way, have a certain job, make a

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18. Beth [pseud.], interview.
19. Carl [pseud.], interview.

certain amount of money, but in EDM, it truly doesn't matter."[20] While Amanda's comments gloss over the fact that individuals with more financial resources or social capital might occupy more privileged positions in the EDM community, it nonetheless demonstrates that many individuals see the community as supportive. For some participants, the music itself and the sub-contextual messages it projects are therapeutic. Dan and other artists such as Earthcry often incorporate specific frequencies in their music that have associations with either binaural beats or sound healing traditions.[21] Music also has the capability of supporting meditation, which is a key component of spirituality in this context. For Dan, "Music can be very meditative. Even just beyond music: sound and vibration in general can be healing and therapeutic. Everything is energy. Spiritual energy and sound kind of go hand in hand."[22] Festival goers frequently mention this concept of energy, which is also individually constructed and difficult to define *in toto*.

A fifth tenet of EDM spirituality concerns the idea that some spiritual components learned from EDM events carry into daily life. This not only means that individuals incorporate specific spiritual practices into their routines, but also that they see themselves as carrying a sense of spirituality into every aspect of their being and livelihood. My interviewees tended to associate this with a perceived "other" culture from which such ideas and practices are borrowed. For Dan, "In pagan culture, everything you do… making yourself a meal and nourishing yourself, that's pleasing the gods because that makes you happy. It's a holistic way of looking at

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20. Amanda [pseud.], interview via Zoom by Daniel Backfish-White, January 22, 2021.
21. "Binaural beats can be briefly described as auditory responses originating in each hemisphere of the brain that are caused by the interaction between two slightly detuned sine waves, divided between the left and right ears…if one listens long enough, one's brainwave will enter into a sympathetic resonance with this pulsing…This technique has been shown to be useful as a tool for consciousness management in such areas as stress reduction, pain control and the improvement of concentration and information retention…some believe that [it] may facilitate the actualization of more esoteric practices such as astral projection, telepathy, and lucid dreaming." David First, "The Music of the Sphere: An Investigation into Asymptotic Harmonies, Brainwave Entrainment and the Earth as a Giant Bell," *Leonardo Music Journal* 13 (2003): 31.
22. Dan [pseud.], interview.

it, because anything that makes you happy makes your gods happy."[23] While Dan does not cite a specific religion or culture, he nonetheless acknowledges that this holistic view of life is drawn from elsewhere. This concept is perhaps best expressed by popular mindfulness author Thich Nhat Hanh: "Each thought, each action in the sunlight of awareness becomes sacred. In this light, no boundary exists between the sacred and the profane."[24] Carl also recognizes, "In a native culture that would have a medicine tradition, making clothes, making shelter, the way you treat your food, and your landscape are indivisible from the religion, because they are all part and parcel to continually lifting humanity out of that animal state where they have to figure out life for themselves without guidance."[25] For Carl, this idea of spirituality extending to every part of life has associations with civilization—the development of advanced culture, language, and technology that distinguish humans from animals.

Carl also relates this to a sixth spiritual tenet, stating "For [America's] advanced technologies and stuff, socially, we're the most primitive nation to ever exist. We have no cultural guidance…That's why I think there's such a deep hunger in America for transformation and religious subcultures because there is an obvious and glaring need for this in our society."[26] A key component that unifies many in the EDM scene is a view that contemporary American culture is somehow void of spirituality or community, and therefore many seek an alternative route of spiritual connection. I have already established that many EDM attendees reject Christianity based on their upbringings or past negative experiences. These alternative pathways include not only attending and participating in EDM event culture, but also adopting spiritual

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23. Dan [pseud.], interview.
24. Thich Nhat Hanh, *Peace is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991).
25. Carl [pseud.], interview.
26. Carl [pseud.], interview.

practices from other cultures to fill that spiritual void. Relating America's lack of spirituality and community to interconnection, Evan says,

> We live in a culture where we're pretty much devoid of ritual and rites of passage. Last I read, getting a cell phone is now considered more of a rite of passage than getting a car. If that's all we have to look forward to, to define where we're at in society is like, "Do we have a phone and social media to feign connection?" Of course we're running around messed up and disconnected![27]

Evan posits that America's lack of spiritual practices leads to substitution of these perceived losses with hyper-modernized versions of these acts. For him, this leads to disconnection and disenchantment, both of which lead many individuals to seek ways to break this pattern. In addition, Evan says, "Our culture is one of this sort of rabid individualism. We are taught that we are separate from everything, that we have to be better, and that the foundations of our modern world with materialism naturally breaks things down into these separate parts."[28] America's association with "rabid individualism" stands in direct contrast to the community mindset often promoted by EDM event attendees and organizers. By fostering a sense of community within and among EDM attendees, individuals see themselves as committing to a spiritual practice that is also politically subversive to some degree.

Many of my interviewees also mentioned that objects borrowed from other cultures may serve a particular spiritual purpose, and therefore function as shareable technologies, an idea that constitutes a seventh tenet among interviewees. They see their adoption of some select spiritual technologies as constituting a deep embodiment or aestheticization. For these individuals, certain spiritual technologies have been around for eons, and they exist in many cultures in various ways. Items such as singing bowls, the intoning of ohm, adapted versions of instruments meant to maintain a steady beat or meditative drone during religious practices, and more are seen as

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27. Evan [pseud.], interview.
28. Evan [pseud.], interview.

constituting a sense of timeless spiritual technology, almost akin to a public domain of spiritual practice. This may, of course, become problematic when individuals from a dominant culture perhaps misrepresent or misuse objects—especially *specific* objects that may be considered sacred—from a subordinate culture. Relating a specific example to America's lack of spirituality, Amanda says, "When I have my pashmina at a rave, I feel like I have my best friend with me on my shoulder, keeping me safe, warm, joining me on my adventure. We use these items from these other cultures not because we don't respect them but because of their beauty, and because American culture these days doesn't have it."[29] Though pashminas might not have a cultural significance that would render their borrowing problematic, her statement still exposes the fact that misappropriation almost always happens unintentionally, revealing that EDM attendees tend to think of their adoption of aspects of another culture as aestheticizing a deep embodiment of a spiritual practice. In other words, the objects from another culture may serve as a framework for transfigurations of those objects on aesthetic lines—for example, a vendor at an EDM festival may sell an object resembling a Tibetan singing bowl but adorned with psychedelic fractal patterns that they themselves created, rather than a Tibetan artisan. The framework for the technology, which is used in meditation in either context, is altered to fit the aesthetic values of the EDM community and is therefore less directly appropriated.

An eighth and final tenet gathered from interviewees is the perception of an inevitability of spiritual experience at live EDM events. Many people who are drawn to this culture can relate a story about their first live music experience, their "aha" moment. In these stories, interviewees often described a moment of complete bliss, relinquish of control, and a cathartic release of emotion. They also frequently linked this to a simultaneity of realizations, including but not

29. Amanda [pseud.], interview.

limited to the various aspects of spirituality heretofore described. Speaking of the complex development of early EDM events through to today, Carl states, "So, people go to [EDM events] and they would have spiritual experiences. They don't need any sort of aesthetic guidance, they just emerge. It's part of humanity. So then to encourage that kind of behavior, there's kind of a feedback loop of aestheticization."[30] Carl here notes that in the beginning of EDM event culture (circa the late 1980s into the early 1990s), attendees would have spiritual experiences without any sort of outside influence; the music was enough. As EDM events gained more traction and a mélange of DJs, performers, event promoters, light technicians, VJs,[31] and later workshop hosts, festival vendors, and even the attendees themselves began to participate in this complex, ever-evolving culture, they continually influenced one another to further induce these spiritual experiences. This then leads to a highly insular brand of spirituality in the EDM community.

While EDM event culture is not monolithic and reducing all EDM events under the umbrella "EDM culture" is not without problems, a syncretic spirituality emerges by connecting common attitudes of disparate participants in EDM culture. The interviews I conducted revealed that although participants may have personalized constructions of spirituality, they share common features that can unite them in several important ways. Many of these tenets of EDM spirituality are also described variously by scholars who write about EDM event culture. These authors form an array of perspectives and often critique and/or voice support for EDM attendees' adoption of spirituality.

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30. Carl [pseud.], interview.
31. In this context, a term for "visual DJs," who program visual projections for live shows.

Literature Review

Scholarship on EDM tends to fall into two broad categories. On the one hand, a substantial body of EDM research focuses on dance culture's ecstatic and transformative qualities without explicitly recognizing the cultures from which is borrows. Another side of EDM research centers on the appropriative or gentrified aspects of EDM culture. Scholars often touch upon several common, important dimensions in their support or critique of EDM culture: the relative spirituality of dance music events, which range from secular to overtly spiritual; the degree to which events are politically or economically subversive, as some festivals are sponsored by large corporations, whereas others are more grassroots; and the relative commitment of organizers and attendees to environmental sustainability, as EDM can be sites of profound consumption or potential sites of environmental healing. Each of these dimensions, as well as their interaction with questions regarding racial identity, are important factors when analyzing the potential for misappropriation among event attendees, artists, and festival organizers. This project seeks to insert itself into this conversation by adding nuance to an unexplored space between these two bodies of scholarship. As this thesis will show, although misappropriation certainly exists in EDM culture, it frequently happens at the individual level rather than unilaterally, as EDM artists and attendees create highly personalized meanings around culturally borrowed material.

Regarding the relative spirituality of dance music events, Graham St. John, a leading EDM scholar, has analyzed the transformative qualities of EDM culture. Specifically, he has written about the spiritual origins of the psytrance scene and its subsequent subcultural transfigurations in his book *Global Tribe: Technology, Spirituality, and Psytrance*.[32] Psytrance

32. Graham St. John, *Global Tribe: Technology, Spirituality & Psytrance* (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, 2012).

or Goa trance, which started on the beaches of Goa, India, is a specific style of EDM that normally lies somewhere between 135–50 beats per minute with bass drum kicks on every downbeat and some sort of oscillating synthesizer throughout. In addition, Goa trance often appropriates Indian religious culture, as St. John notes in this passage:

> The Oriental spiritual aesthetic intrinsic to Goa was transported around the world in a sound—and in iconography, cover art and textile fashions—persisting long after Goatrance had dissipated as a genre. And Oriental motifs were applied as part of an integralist spiritual technology dedicated to self-transcendence…In the jetstream of the Goa diasporic movement, projects are conceived and promoted with the intent of enabling "oneness," of reconciling the senses, sometimes with quite liberal appropriations of Hindu discourse.[33]

St. John echoes a few of the tenets described by my interviewees, namely the aesthetic embodiment of spiritual technologies and the idea of "oneness." In addition, St. John's use of the term "Oriental" suggests that he is familiar with the postcolonial theories of Edward Said; indeed, he makes brief mention of Said elsewhere in his writing. His recognition that these music scenes freely appropriate from Hinduism's religious practice also shows awareness of potentially problematic associations between the two cultures, though he chooses not to address this in depth.

In other places, St. John discusses ritualization, liminality, and the DJ as "techno-shaman"—all terms and ideas associated with religious practice, though not problematized as such in his writings.[34] In St. John's effort to explicate the heterogeneity of attendees at psychedelic trance events, he cites John Robert Howard's use of the term "plastic hippies," which connotes participants who adopt the clothing and codes of rebellion of hippie culture

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33. St. John, *Global Tribe*, 64.
34. Graham St. John, "Electronic Dance Music: Trance and Techno-Shamanism," in *The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*, ed. Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017), 278–85; Graham St. John, "Liminal Being: Electronic Dance Music Cultures, Ritualization, and the Case of Psytrance," in *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music*, ed. Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman (London: Sage, 2015), 243–60.

without a deeper commitment to ideas of transcendence. These "plastic hippies" stand in contrast to "visionaries."[35] St. John also distinguishes between attendees who go to psychedelic trance events to be intoxicated and avoid responsibility and attendees who wish to raise consciousness and contribute to a new "planetary culture."[36] These distinctions show the varying degree of intention among attendees, not just within the psytrance scene, but across all EDM cultures and events. While the psytrance festival circuit may have more individuals committed to ideas of transcendence than its mainstream counterparts, individuals in other EDM cultures may also be committed to these ideas to varying degrees. I would suggest, then, that a binary of "plastic hippies" and "visionaries" is reductive even as these terms are useful to describe certain phenomena in EDM culture—it is not possible to ascertain where any given individual lies on this spectrum only by looking at them or even having a short-lived interaction with them. As individuals construct personal meanings behind their own brand of spirituality, reducing this question to an oversimplified binary obscures the nuances among individual beliefs.

In contrast to St. John's relative acceptance of religious appropriation is scholar Kaitlyne Motl, who talks about the ways music festival goers adopt a "colorblind racial ideology" when responding to accusations about the appropriative nature of EDM culture.[37] Utilizing fieldwork data collected from large mainstream EDM festivals around the Midwestern United States, she addresses how mostly white participants adopt temporary costumes to express values of EDM culture: "cosmopolitanism, travel, experience, community, and a sense of cultural and spiritual enlightenment."[38] These cultural values are nearly identical to those that St. John praises

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35. Graham St. John, "The Logics of Sacrifice at Visionary Arts Festivals," in *The Festivalization of Culture*, ed. Andy Bennett, Jodie Taylor, and Ian Woodward (New York: Ashgate Publishing, 2014), 53.
36. St. John, "The Logics of Sacrifice," 54.
37. Kaitlyne Motl, "Dashiki Chic: Colorblind Racial Ideology in EDM Festival Goers' 'Dress Talk,'" *Popular Music and Society* 41 (2018): 250-69.
38. Motl, "Dashiki Chic," 255.

throughout his work; indeed, many of them might derive from the psytrance scene (St. John might argue that many psytrance festival-goers are more committed to these ideas than festival-goers at mainstream EDM events and may thus have a different relation to appropriation than the subjects of Motl's research). In Motl's view, attendees at mainstream EDM events utilize "dress talk" to be perceived as having cultural values deemed most desirable within the mainstream EDM community. She argues that adopting clothing, jewelry, and other accessories that contain an external display of religious symbols simultaneously exalts and exoticizes those religious cultures. The traditional meaning of those symbols or clothing (such as West African dashikis, Indian saris, or Native American headdresses) is lost and turned into a consumable commodity with potentially problematic consequences.

With regard to non-material capital, Alan Nixon and Adam Possamai discuss religion and the experience of ecstasy, distinguishing between Neo-Pagan, Christian, and what they deem "secular" rave cultures.[39] Within all three cultures, attendees describe their ecstatic states in similar ways, whether those states are influenced by psychedelic drug use or not. Discussing these ecstatic experiences, Nixon and Possemai note that those who experience these ecstatic states in EDM culture gain some sort of cultural or symbolic capital.[40] Through dancing to specific music and, in some cases, the consumption of hallucinogenic drugs, individuals gain access to the cultural capital of having experienced the esoteric or mysterious.[41] These authors argue that although individuals interpret ecstatic states in different ways according to their spiritual affiliation (or lack thereof), having accessed these ecstatic states can solidify their

39. Alan Nixon and Adam Possamai, "Techno-Shamanism and the Economy of Ecstasy as a Religious Experience," in *Pop Pagans: Paganism and Popular Music*, ed. Andy Bennett and Donna Weston (Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013), 145–61.
40. Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," in *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, ed. J. Richardson (New York: Greenwood, 1986), 241–58.
41. Nixon and Possamai, "Techno-Shamanism," 161.

position within a scene. This study also highlights an important range that exists across EDM events, which can be more religious or spiritual in nature, or more secular or hedonistic in nature. Although some events may be more secular in nature, religious and spiritual samplings, imagery, and a common spirituality are still present among many artists and attendees, though possibly to a lesser or more appropriative degree. At the same time, attendees at more religious or spiritual events may be there for the sole purpose of consuming alcohol and drugs for pleasure, such that the lines between appropriative, appreciative, and reverent are easily blurred.

These considerations of consumption, commodification, and capital are echoed in other scholarly work that highlights another key dimension of EDM events: their relative degree of political and/or economic subversion. Simon Reynolds, in his extensive documentation of the origins of EDM, early rave, and its manifestations in the UK (where it was developed and then exported back to the US), often discusses EDM culture in relation to its gradual commercialization throughout the 1990s in his book *Energy Flash*. Writing from a perspective that focuses on rave's countercultural aspects that are more punk-like in sensibility than hippie-esque, he infuses his florid language with cultural and philosophical readings. He addresses the decline of the German rave scene in the early 1990s, and his reading could be applied to all of EDM culture as it has developed through to today. As the underground, countercultural expressions of rave become more popular, they become more commercialized as they are co-opted by the leisure industry. In other words, rave started out as politically subversive, with illegal parties thrown in corporatized industrial centers, purposefully co-opting these spaces to emphasize their anti-capitalist political position. Over time, as businessmen and corporations noticed that profits could be made by throwing legal, large-scale events, it quickly became escapist, lacking an overt political message. This results in what he calls a "pleasure-prison,"

which strips the subculture of all its subversive undertones, instead focusing on the party.[42] This anti-commercialist undertone is echoed in the works of St. John and other scholars on psytrance and counter-cultural rave scenes. While this eventual commercialization of the rave scene is important to consider, it overlooks the attitudes of attendees at commercial rave events, who often *feel* they are part of something politically or socially radical, even as the scene is not as subversive as its early days in the 1990s. Though commercial EDM events reproduce capitalist modes of power, they still hold the promise of alternative lifestyles that stand in contrast to a stereotypical American experience: the nuclear family, conventional social graces, gainful employment, and the like. These events (arguably) offer escapist temporary autonomous zones that lie on the peripheries of mainstream American experience.[43]

This escapism frames another frequently mentioned dimension of EDM event culture. Some events elect to be more grassroots oriented and created by attendees and artists, whereas others are sponsored events that offer attendees amenities without them having to be a part of the creation process. Grassroots events tend to promote eco-sustainability, often advertising "Leave No Trace" policies and encouraging attendees to reduce and reuse as much as possible. Speaking on grassroots festivals in the psytrance scene, Alice O'Grady frames these experiences as "alternative playworlds," explaining that adults enter a state of "deep play," a term taken from

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42. "…what happened to German rave illustrated Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of 'deterritorialization' and 'reterritorialization.' Deterritorialization is when a culture gets all fluxed up—as with punk, early rave, jungle—resulting in a breakthrough into new aesthetic, social and cognitive spaces. Reterritorialization is the inevitable stabilization of chaos into a new order: the internal emergence of style codes and orthodoxies, the external co-option of subcultural energy by the leisure industry. Szepanski has a groovy German word for what rave, once so liberating, turned into: *freizeitknast*, a pleasure-prison. Regulated experiences, punctual rapture, predictable music. Szepanski talks of how 'techno today is stabilized and regulated by an overcoding machine (the combination of major labels, rave organizations, mass media).' Rave started as anarchy (illegal parties, pirate radio, social/racial/sexual mixing) but quickly became a form of cultural fascism. 'The techniques of mass-mobilization, and crowd-consciousness have similarities to fascism. Fascism was mobilizing the people for the war machines, rave is mobilizing people for pleasure-machines…'" Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 388.
43. Hakim Bey, *T.A.Z.: The Temporary Autonomous Zone* (New York: Autonomedia, 1991).

anthropologist Clifford Geertz, when attending these events.[44] This state of play is "associated with having fun, messing around, cutting loose, making believe, experimenting, imagining, becoming someone else, creating something else, and, ultimately, learning how to be with other people in the present moment through improvised sociabilities."[45] Though she speaks here of psytrance festivals, this concept of play can easily be applied to all music festival environments, both grassroots and commercial, where similar values are persistent on the dancefloor and elsewhere. Throughout her article, however, O'Grady distinguishes between psytrance's commitment to its countercultural roots and grassroots ideology and more mainstream, commercial events that produce a large amount of waste. However, she also explains that "countless stalls" sell a variety of items at psytrance events: "garments bedecked with Om signs and images of Shiva, multi-pocketed belts, flowing dresses and floral head dresses."[46] Thus, while psytrance events may commit to more sustainable practices, monetary exchange still persists (Burning Man and other "burns" are notable exceptions).[47]

Alongside psytrance festivals, which are more popular in Europe than the US, are related yet dissimilar "boutique," "transformational," or "visionary arts" festivals.[48] These events tend to be more grassroots in nature than their commercialized counterparts. Drawing upon his

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44. Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, Basic Books, 1973), 412–453.
45. Alice O'Grady, "Alternative Playworlds: Psytrance Festivals, Deep Play, and Creative Zones of Transcendence," in *The Pop Festival: History, Music, Media, Culture*, ed, George McKa (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2015), 150.
46. O'Grady, "Alternative Playworlds," 157.
47. "Burns" are a type of festival wherein attendees burn a large totem at the close of each event. These events often have a "no spectators" approach, meaning everyone must participate in the creation of the festival environment. They also have "gift economies," meaning money is forbidden, and people must instead trade with others to gain access to whatever they might need for the duration of the festival. Her comments also show the scene's *de facto* acceptance of appropriation of Eastern religious culture.
48. There are many terms for this type of festival, and many within the scene disagree on what term should be used. For some, "boutique" sounds too erudite and has negative connotations within consumer culture, while "visionary arts" and "transformational" might sound overly pretentious or self-righteous. I have given all three terms here and will use them interchangeably.

experiences at Raindance Campout (2013–14), Bryan Schmidt discusses the intersection of technology and aesthetics at these events as they relate to Nicholas Bourriaud's concept of "relational aesthetics."[49] Relational aesthetics value artwork that creates social situations rather than objects for contemplation, and indeed the boutique festival space is "co-created by participants and organizers, where the event's music, dance, sculpture, workshops and ritual practices become social interstices that facilitate micropractices of intersubjectivity."[50] These events, in addition to high-profile musical acts, usually have well-designed and aesthetically pleasing stages, installation art with which to interact, live painters surrounding the peripheries of the stages, and workshops during the day that encourage eco-sustainability, self-transformation, and self-healing. Schmidt notes that the profit motive is still present as in traditional commercial music festival environments, but vendors, artists, and festival organizers alike "sacrifice the possibility of a potentially more profitable scale of production in order to create objects that retain the aura of their creator's labour."[51]

As the name Raindance Campout suggests, however, artists, attendees, and organizers often freely appropriate from cultures seen as possessing elements that aid in the quest of becoming "transcendent," or returning to nature. As Schmidt notes:

> The relative absence of indigenous bodies at events like Raindance speaks particularly loudly, coinciding with contemporary controversies that display the lack of control indigenous groups have over their own representation. The ability to view indigeneity as a mutable category that can be tried on, played with, cast aside or altered if desired undoubtedly speaks to the privileged position many festivalgoers occupy within the US racial and cultural hierarchy.[52]

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49. Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les Presses du Réel, 1998).
50. Bryan Schmidt, "Boutiquing at the Raindance Campout: Relational Aesthetics as Festival Technology," in *Weekend Societies: Electronic Dance Music Festivals and Event-Cultures*, ed. Graham St. John (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2017), 95.
51. Schmidt, "Boutiquing at the Raindance Campout," 100.
52. Schmidt, "Boutiquing at the Raindance Campout," 111.

While Schmidt recognizes the fraught racial component of this and other festivals' free appropriations, the current project more deeply acknowledges the potential for cognitive dissonance as individual participants simultaneously exalt and problematize a culture with which they self-identify. They must negotiate their relationship with these problems at the individual level such that they either justify their own appropriations or change their behavior according to their personal beliefs. This means that each individual develops a highly personal relationship with issues of cultural appropriation, and these almost always have ties to their personal spiritual beliefs.

Importantly, the rendering of EDM events as white spaces is a central component in Arun Saldanha's *Psychedelic White*, which addresses the whiteness of psytrance culture, even though its roots are distinctly non-white.[53] While researching on the beaches of Anjuna in 2001, Saldanha noticed that certain spaces in tandem with certain times of day would attract hippies and ravers, who were usually white. When these spaces became filled with mostly white bodies, they became "relatively impenetrable for Indians," which led him to develop his own materialist theory of race.[54] He coins the term "viscosity of race," noting that groups of white bodies would often cluster together, just as groups of Indian bodies would cluster together in spaces where psytrance music was playing—these tendencies have specific consequences for the psytrance scene at large. He discusses these in relation to "psychedelic whiteness," saying,

> Sixties exoticist imaginations of India are but one instance of a wider yearning of adventurous whites to taste, know, pin down, and/or attain otherness. This exoticism not only betrays the position of those who are imagining—whites—but also begs the questions what happens to actual white bodies once they engage with nonwhite spaces and cultures.[55]

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53. Arun Saldanha, *Psychedelic White: Goa Trance and the Viscosity of Race* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 28-43.
54 Saldanha, *Psychedelic White*, 49.
55 Saldanha, *Psychedelic White*, 19.

Though his argument is nearly impossible to summarize in any succinct way given its complex roots in materialist, postcolonial, and poststructuralist theory, he nonetheless positions himself as a critical voice that seeks to make sense of the racial facets of the phenomenon of rave tourism in India, where tourists often come from countries with historically colonial associations.

St. John responds to Arun Saldhana's *Psychedelic White* in his own *Global Tribe*, remarking that Saldanha's theory is a "surprisingly one-dimensional rendering of the politics of experience in Goa."[56] St. John goes on to deconstruct Saldanha's argument, arguing that the atmosphere of Goa parties is more complex than white people dancing in an Indian space away from Indian people. He notes that Indian people often occupy privileged positions in the scene, and conversely that Indian men, domestic tourists to Goa, often predate upon white women, who are perceived as mythically "loose." He also mentions unchecked commercialism and police corruption, remarking that "while many of these agents of predation would have dark skins, none of their conditions are intrinsically Indian (or racial). Indeed, these are factors threatening experimental and alternative arts scenes everywhere, and are some of the reasons why freaks sought Goa to begin with."[57] In conclusion, he reiterates: "My chief concern is that diverse expectations, relations and aesthetics are discounted by [the postcolonial] approach, and an entire cultural movement—identifying with Goa or not—is condemned to answer the charges of neo-colonialism."[58] Thus, while St. John recognizes the racial dynamics that prompt examination of the psytrance festival circuit through a postcolonial lens, he ultimately avoids rather than addresses the critique by citing the overall heterogeneity of the scene.

56. St. John, *Global Tribe*, 67.
57. St. John, *Global Tribe*, 67.
58. St. John, *Global Tribe*, 69.

In summary, EDM scholars tend to either praise EDM culture's transformative qualities and spiritual appropriations or to critique them, often quite harshly. The authors in the first camp tend to be highly laudatory while overlooking or only briefly mentioning and rationalizing power dynamics that might be problematic. They highlight dance culture's potentially subversive qualities: creating utopian-like societies, challenging the status quo of consumerism and capitalism, and in the case of some alternative EDM cultures, eco-sustainability. The authors in the latter camp focus on the appropriative or gentrified aspects of EDM culture. Scholars writing from this perspective point out that EDM's fan base is comprised of mostly white people though its origins are primarily non-white. They often problematize EDM culture's ties to consumerism. These scholars position themselves in direct contrast to scholars who argue in support of EDM's transformative and perhaps socio-politically challenging qualities. My project intervenes at the intersection of these two bodies of scholarship, arguing that EDM culture is hardly one-dimensional, and its various subscenes cannot be treated uniformly. In addition, attendees of a specific event cannot be treated *en masse*, as not all individuals attend events with the same values and intentions, as I show through excerpts from interviews with individual participants.

Overview

The next three chapters will focus on three separate iterations of the bass music scene as spearheaded by artists who stand as representatives for their respective subscenes: Desert Dwellers, TroyBoi, and Bassnectar. Desert Dwellers stand at the forefront of the music and culture of the psychedelic downtempo genre, which often has the most overt association with the spirituality discussed in this project. TroyBoi is a multiethnic trap music artist who often draws from many cultures around the world; though he may not be personally spiritual, participants at

many of his live events are. Bassnectar is a widely popular dubstep DJ who is often regarded as a de facto spiritual leader by his fans. Recent controversies in his personal life have challenged how EDM concertgoers engage in worship of DJs they love, and this may indeed be one of the negative repercussions of spiritual appropriation. Synthesizing these case studies with ideas from interviewees, a picture emerges in which artists and participants must navigate conversations about appropriation in order to justify their commitment to their personal brands of spirituality.

Chapter 2

Psychedelic Downtempo: Desert Dwellers

Beginning with the most overtly spiritual of the artists to be considered in this project, Desert Dwellers are a duo of electronic music producers named Amani Friend and Treavor Moontribe who freely assimilate sounds and symbolism from multicultural contexts. According to their website, Desert Dwellers were "brought together in the late '90s through the legendary Moontribe gatherings, [and] in 2019 the duo celebrated their 20th anniversary of making music together, adding depth to their reputation as a pioneering and prolific downtempo, psybass, and tribal-house act from the United States."[59] This bio situates Desert Dwellers' role within EDM culture in three important ways. The first is that Desert Dwellers got their start at Moontribe gatherings, events that are akin to the "transformational" music events previously described. The second is their "reputation as pioneers" who have been making music for over 20 years. The third is their style of music, which infuses downtempo, psybass (a term that derives from a combination of "psytrance" and "bass" music), and tribal-house ("tribal" as an exoticist evocation rather than in a literal sense).

Desert Dwellers make music that infuses elements of psytrance with bass music. Psytrance is a subgenre of EDM that is perhaps most closely associated with India given its origins in Goa, India.[60] Whereas psytrance normally lies somewhere between 135–50 beats per

59. "Bio," Desert Dwellers, accessed October 20th, 2020, https://www.desertdwellers.org/bio/.
60. Psytrance's roots are in 1960s psychedelic culture, which had been imported to the beaches of Anjuna in Goa, India by foreign travelers. The most notable of these travelers is "Goa Gil," who left San Francisco and arrived in Goa in 1970. After firmly establishing Goa as a place of psychedelic refuge, DJing became a key feature of dance parties there throughout the late 70s and 80s. By 1986, music in Goa was exclusively electronic, allowing for the development of a new type of music marketed in 1993–4 as "Goa trance" and exported from Goa to the UK, continental Europe, and eventually the United States and elsewhere around the globe. The Goa sound was then further developed, branching out into many subgenres that form the umbrella term "psytrance."

minute with bass drum kicks on every downbeat and some sort of oscillating synthesizer throughout, psybass tends to take a more relaxed approach (other related genres include psydub, psybient, or the umbrella term "psychedelic downtempo," used henceforth). The clearest link between the two is in the material they sample, which is often taken from science fiction, popular psychedelic philosophers (Timothy Leary or Terence McKenna, for example), or soundscapes from Hindu or Buddhist teachings. This "sampledelia" is utilized to encourage states of deep trance (for psytrance) or deep meditation (for psychedelic downtempo).[61] In fact, Desert Dwellers have a whole series of albums meant to accompany the practice of yoga.[62]

While psytrance's states of deep trance dance primarily occur on the dance floor, psychedelic downtempo can be applied in many situations: private affairs such as personal meditation or yoga, public events at outdoor festivals, and even nightclubs. Reading further into their bio, the group states:

> Desert Dwellers' studio output is matched only by their extensive touring history, which juxtaposes performances at America's most iconic festivals like Symbiosis, Lightning in a Bottle, Burning Man, and Coachella, with high-powered sets at the biggest trance festivals around the world; BOOM in Portugal and Rainbow Serpent in Australia. Desert Dwellers are equally at home in the clubs as they are in the yoga studios, and the jungles, deserts, and mountains of far-flung international festivals.[63]

This statement shows the versatility of their performance/listening spaces, as they perform at both transformational festivals (Symbiosis and Lightning in a Bottle) and mainstream festivals (Coachella). Their music is therefore heard by people who may or may not understand or resonate with its spiritual message, though it is assumed that people who identify as either

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61. This is a term used by EDM scholars to describe the style of samples that frequently occur in a specific genre of EDM music.
62. Desert Dwellers, *Jala Yoga Flow*, Bandcamp, 2010; Desert Dwellers, *Satori Yoga Dub*, Bandcamp, 2010; Desert Dwellers, *Asudha Yoga Dub*, Bandcamp, 2010; Desert Dwellers, *Muladhara Yoga Dub*, Bandcamp, 2011; Desert Dwellers, *Anahata Yoga Dub*, Bandcamp, 2012.
63. "Bio," Desert Dwellers, https://www.desertdwellers.org/bio/.

spiritual or non-spiritual might enjoy listening or dancing to their music. Attendees bring their own spiritual practices (or lack thereof) to these events. While some are interested only in the party, others take their commitment to spiritual ideas seriously. Thus, though Desert Dwellers' intention in writing this music is appreciative and perhaps not overly caricaturized, the potential disconnect between artist and audience creates room for misappropriation that individuals must navigate and ultimately justify or avoid. In this chapter, I show how Desert Dwellers project a sense of spirituality through the music create, specifically by sound-sampling music of "the other" or by evoking it through imitation. I then situate their music in relation to the types of festivals and events at which they frequently perform. Finally, I describe how my interviewees, many of whom are fans of this music, navigate conversations about appropriation with regard to this style of music.

"Saraswati's Twerkaba" and Sound Sources

A primary example of Desert Dwellers' overt spiritual syncretism is the 2016 song "Saraswati's Twerkaba." The song's title—which simultaneously references the Hindu goddess Saraswati, Jewish mysticism (Merkaba), and a popular dance style associated with hip-hop

("twerking")—also highlights the syncretic nature of their music. The album artwork depicts the Hindu goddess surrounded by a fractal pattern of speakers (shown in Figure 1).

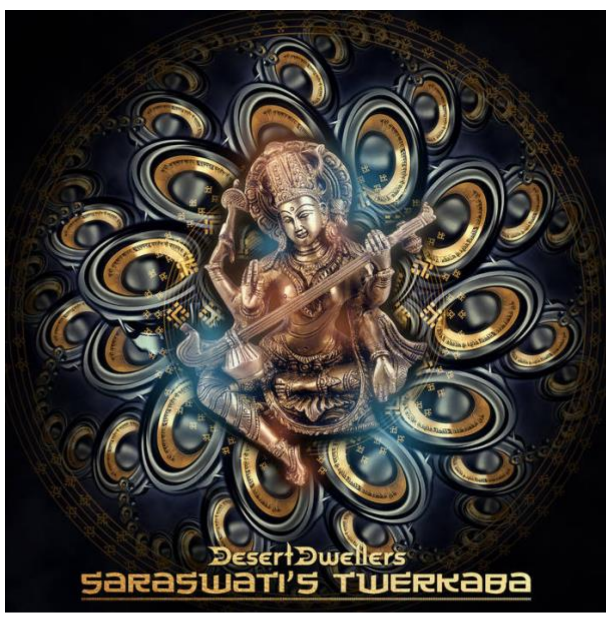

Figure 1. Album artwork for "Saraswati's Twerkaba"

The track begins with a gong-like invocation, immediately signaling its meditative undertones to the listener. There is no steady beat until about 0:44, and instead the track blends ethereal synthesized sounds with ambiguous, non-rhythmic percussion. The sampled Indian *tabla* begins at this point along with a bassline, which combined emphasize a steady beat at around 85 bpm with a tonal center of E. The modal-like scalar pattern used throughout the song further exoticizes its sound: it is similar to E Phrygian, though with an omnipresent raised third, also known as Phrygian dominant—the augmented second between the lowered second scale degree and the raised third scale degree adds to its exoticism.[64] Though this scale is used here to connote

64 "The illicit augmented-second interval [has] long been the musical sign for the Jew, the Arab, the all-purpose racial Other." Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 64.

something "exotic," Indian *ragas* are usually more complex, involving microtones and ornaments—the Phrygian dominant scale itself is more common in flamenco and Jewish music.[65] Its use here is thus potentially misapproriative. There is an omnipresent violin sample first appearing at 0:50, as well as a sitar-like synthesized instrument that first appears at 1:30. These melodic instruments in tandem with the synthesized bassline all emphasize the motion from $\flat\hat{2}$ to $\hat{1}$, a common trope throughout electronic bass music. This $\flat\hat{2}$ to $\hat{1}$ motion encourages a meditative and introspective ethos. Heavily modified vocals, first occurring around 1:13, seem to intone the name "Saraswati," though other vocal samples throughout are less intelligible—also unclear is whether these sounds are sampled vocals, recorded vocals, or some sort of vocoded or synthesized voice. A modulating bassline enters around 1:42, creating a "wompy" effect that is also characteristic of electronic bass music, stimulating the listener into dancing.[66] The layering of all of these elements, as well as adding, subtracting, or regrouping them in interesting ways, propels the song over the course of its five minutes and thirty-five seconds.

On the 2017 remix pack for "Saraswati's Twerkaba," which contains seven remixes by other artists as well as the original track, Desert Dwellers' self-owned label Desert Trax included the following message: "The exotically innovative original from Amani Friend and Treavor Moontribe sees the Desert Dwellers blending their signature downtemple [*sic*] dub sounds with global club flavors." The word "downtemple" here is an amalgam of the words downtempo and

65. "Rāga: In Indian musical theory and practice a melody-type or mode, suitable for expressing aesthetic ethos and religious. A rāga provides the melodic material for the composition of vocal or instrumental melodies and for improvisation (e.g. in Ālāpa). Each rāga is characterized by a variety of melodic features, including a basic scale (perhaps with additional or omitted notes), grammatical rules governing the relative emphasis of different scale degrees and the sequence of notes in ascending and descending contexts, distinctive ways of ornamenting or pitching particular notes, and motifs or formulae from which complete melodies or improvisations can be constructed." Richard, Widdess, "Rāga," *Grove Music Online*, 2001; accessed March 25, 2021.
66. "Womp" is an onomatopoeia that dubstep listeners often use to describe an oscillating bassline, which alternates through different frequency patterns similar to the human voice when saying the word "womp" slowly.

temple, further cueing the reader into its spiritually suggestive undertones. While it may be true that the duo makes new, innovative music, there is tension between the words "exotic" and "innovative," as the artists heavily borrow musical elements from preexisting cultures. This tension is discussed by author Kembrew McLeod, who details the complexities of ownership and copyright law with regard to sampling and borrowing music of the "exotic."[67] She explains that Brian Eno and David Byrne initially included a recording of Algerian Muslims chanting passages from the Koran on their album *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (1981), but after many Muslims objected to its release, calling it blasphemous, they removed the track from the record.[68] In another example, Brazilian musician Jorge Ben sued Rod Stewart over his borrowing of a melody for "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy" (1978). More generally, Latin percussionists often have their drumbeats borrowed without credit. McLeod acknowledges here that rhythm, which is often a central component of non-Western musics, is effectively sidestepped by the recording industry and copyright law, which value melody.[69] She thus states that "copyright law acts as a de facto cultural policy because of the way it can constrain the creative decisions made by musicians and other artists."[70]

In the case of electronic dance music written in the past ten years (2010–20), most artists, including Desert Dwellers are presumably obtaining their sample material from legal sources. Some of these sources, however "exotic" or "non-Western" in character, are mined from creators who often seek to *imitate* the sounds of the exotic rather than sample them directly. Other vocal material is directly recorded by an individual who pays the recording artist a one-time fee and

67. Kembrew McLeod, "Authorship, Ownership, and Musical Appropriation," in *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music*, ed. Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman (London: Sage, 2015), 598–612.
68. McLeod, "Authorship, Ownership, and Musical Appropriation," 602.
69. McLeod, "Authorship, Ownership, and Musical Appropriation," 609–10.
70. McLeod, "Authorship, Ownership, and Musical Appropriation," 602.

then sells these vocal samples in what are known as "sample packs" to other artists, who are then free to use these samples as they see fit. Pro Samples is one such website where users can access sample packs. For example, one of these titled "World Music Sample Pack Vol. 1" contains over 1000 files and costs $24.99 (as of March 2021). The lengthy product description begins: "We are excited to share this comprehensive World Music sample collection created by ethnic fusion master Antandra…There are 28 beautifully recorded instruments from Africa, Australia, Asia, the Middle East, South America, and Europe to bring your music to life."[71] The lumping of music from around the world into the catch-all category of "World Music" is a problem discussed by many other authors and has its own complexities associated with it.[72] The sample pack includes many instruments, such as the Cretian lyra, didgeridoo, hosho, jaw harp, kalimba, mbira, rainstick, sitar, tabla, udu, zither, and even chanting. The sample pack also includes the following message: "All sounds contained in the pack were recorded by Jacob Louis aka Antandra using a Baby Bottle Condenser Mic by Blue, recorded using an Audio-Technica ATR 2100 Dynamic Mic, or were sampled from public domain audio sources." The sounds from this sample pack, then, were either recorded or attained from free sources; for any one sample, it is unclear whether Jacob Louis himself accessed, played, and recorded the instrument, or whether he recorded others playing it. For samples that Jacob Louis possibly recorded himself, he chose how to represent these instruments. In effect, he acts as an agent for the cultures from which these instruments are borrowed even though he is not from those cultures, and in all cases the sample pack strips instruments of their cultural context. Therefore, if a sample contains multiple notes, the scalar patterns could be an exoticized impression of that instrument's "sound" rather

71. "World Music Sample Pack Vol. 1", Pro Samples, accessed March 25, 2021, https://prosamples.com/products/world-music-sample-pack-vol-1/
72. Amelia Mason, "Why Do We Still Have So Many Issues with the Idea of 'World Music?'" *WBUR*, February 5, 2016, https://www.wbur.org/artery/2016/02/05/world-music-crashfest.

than an authentic rendering of it. Many of the cultures from which these instruments originate have complex musical traditions that are then reduced to the recording artist's impression—for example, an Indian *raga* played on a sitar would be far more complex than just the notes that make up a Phrygian dominant scale.[73] Therefore, when an individual who is not trained in the Indian classical music tradition records themselves playing certain scalar patterns, they may be misrepresenting, and therefore misappropriating, Indian classical music. Even if Louis's recording of a raga does come from a knowledgeable player, these ragas also have associations with divine beings, further problematizing the issue of appropriation when they are commodified in a sample pack.

Regardless of the legality of obtained samples, many racial and colonial tensions are at play when examining the ethics of musical appropriation. In effect, Desert Dwellers' sampling of a musical "other" may reproduce imbalanced power dynamics, regardless of the duo's intentions. One could view the Desert Dwellers, two white men, as effectively taking the sounds of India, selecting the parts that they deem beautiful or interesting, and selling them back to a primarily white audience that consumes the music with little understanding of its origins or cultural significance. This echoes colonial attitudes, wherein the white body "discovers" new territories and material goods, which they then utilize for their own economic, political, or cultural gain. While this reading shirks the idea that cultural exchange is a key feature across electronic dance music, it still highlights an important tension in the American EDM community: mostly white producers/DJs play their music for a mostly white audience, even though the nature of EDM is *necessarily* one with high degrees of borrowing and cultural exchange. The same could be said of hip-hop or American pop music, which also frequently sample music of the "other," often

with problematic consequences; e.g. the notorious cases of Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin'" (2000) and Britney Spears's "Toxic" (2003). The difference with Desert Dwellers (and perhaps certain hip-hop artists) is that these exoticized samples are not used solely for the purpose of creating a hit song: they have a spiritual meaning, sometimes a quite specific one. The question then arises: is this type of appropriation more or less harmful to the cultures from which these sounds, objects, and ideas are appropriated? This question, like many questions of ethics related to cultural borrowing, is perhaps unanswerable.

In a now infamous case of how copyright infringement and appropriation of spiritual ethos intersect, Timothy Taylor explains the story of the band Enigma and their legal and cultural troubles with their song, "Return to Innocence" (1994).[74] Enigma sampled Taiwanese musicians who were recorded in concert on tour in France in 1988. These recordings were released by the Ministère de la Culture et de la Francophonie on a CD. Enigma's publishing company then paid the Ministère to license the vocals and *not* the Taiwanese musicians themselves. The song was extremely successful and was even chosen as an official song of the 1996 Olympics by the Olympic Committee, which cited its "timeless" and "spiritual" qualities. Two of the original Taiwanese musicians heard this song on the radio in Taiwan and hired lawyers to sue Enigma's parent record company. The lawyers, representing a Taiwanese record label, said that the human rights of the original musicians had been violated; after all, Enigma and their record company would be profiting from royalties, giving neither credit nor monetary compensation to the original musicians. While the full story is a great deal more complicated, this anecdote displays a reproduction of colonialist modes of power as a Western artist samples the sounds of the Other.

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74. Timothy Taylor, "A Riddle Wrapped in a Mystery: Transnational Music Sampling and Enigma's 'Return to Innocence,'" in *Music and Technoculture*, ed. Leslie C. Gay and René T. A. Lysloff (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), 64–92.

Both this case and the Desert Dwellers' case also echo Romantic era ideas of the artist as creative genius, one who utilizes any means possible to express themself. This mode of creation avoids the consequences these appropriations have for the communities from which they borrow and effectively turns entire cultural artifacts into grist for the often (though not always) white-skinned artist.

Intentional Festivals

Spiritual appropriation may not inevitably be negative though, and indeed, the Moontribe Gathering events where Desert Dwellers began making music are often multicultural spaces with a high degree of intention and collaboration. According to their website:

> Moontribe is a community of friends and family who gather in the desert to dance beneath the full moon. Moontribe is not a legal entity such as a 501(c)(3). No one profits individually from the gatherings, and after expenses are paid any proceeds are set aside for future gatherings. Through radical acts of initiation and participation, Moontribe has matured into the gathering we have come to love. After 25 years, of repeatedly expressing this collective act of volunteerism, aspects of Moontribe's ethos are crystal clear. Moontribe is not publicly marketed, is non-profit in practice, is funded completely on donations, staffed lovingly by volunteers, does not allow vending of any kind yet encourages a gift and sharing culture, enjoys one sound-system and shares directions only to those on the email list. If someone needs to do something in order to ensure a better, safer gathering, then that person might be YOU.[75]

This type of radical grassroots ideology is typical of many of the events where Desert Dwellers perform. These spaces strive to have the most minimal impact on the environments in which they take place as well as a minimal economic impact, such that event spaces foster a utopian sense of community.

Desert Dwellers also performed at Kinnection Campout in 2015, an event that I attended the following year in 2016. At this event, music is only a small piece of what the campout has to

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75. "Moontribe Collective," Moontribe Collective, Accessed February 10, 20201, www.moontribe.org.

offer. Music only occurs between sunset and sunrise, from about 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. the following day. From 9 a.m. to 6 p.m., the campout hosts a variety of workshops. The workshops are conducted on a variety of subjects, as in the table below.

Table 2. Workshops at Kinnection Campout, 2016

Subject Area	**Titles of Workshops**
Permaculture	Permaculture Gardenhacks Shrooming off the Grid Woody Ethnobotany of Southern Appalachia
Entrepreneurship	Community-Minded Business Practices Intro to Creative Leadership
Yoga and movement	Lunar Acroyoga Building Blocks of Double Staff Tai Chi
Communication and healing	Art of Intimacy Letting Go of the Past Medicine Buddha Circle
Community	Collective Restoryation [*sic*]: Curating Meaningful Public Discourse in a Postmodern, Digital Age Three Aspects of Healthy Community Celebrating Across Difference
Crafting	Crafting a Bamboo Didgeridoo Turning Honey into Wine Building and Tending Fires Blacksmithing 101
Music-making	Spirit of the Sacred: Drum Journey Circle Organic Electronics West African Drumming

The festival also created a sweatlodge modeled after those found in Native American societies. The sweat lodge contained a sacred fire, which was tended by fire keepers and hosted prayer services until sunrise each day. One event held within the sweat lodge was a four-hour women's event curated by an African American woman by the name of Sangoma. At Kinnection and other such events, a variety of workshops derived from South/Native American medicine traditions or

Asian religious culture are taught by indigenous bodies, though not exclusively and most often to a primarily white audience, at least in the United States. Others are taught by artists who may not be indigenous (see Figure 2).

Figure 2, predominately white attendees attend a workshop held by artists Rising Appalachia at Rootwire 2014[76]

Though events like these definitely leave room for misappropriation, the high degree of intention often aids in avoiding such associations. After all, many spiritual objects, tangible or not, are technologies and serve a function within a given context. Often the sampled or recorded

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76. Brad Zickafoose, photograph, 2014, http://festivalfire.com/kinnection-campout/. Rootwire is another transformational festival. Many of the attendees in the photo wear Thai harem pants, and many also have dreadlocks, another controversial, potentially culturally appropriative style. In addition, Tibetan prayer flags can be seen in the top left corner, while a woman in the lower left corner is wearing a shirt depicting a Native American man.

material that Desert Dwellers utilize are Sanskrit mantras that originate in religious practice, and to some degree, they retain this purpose for many listeners. Though in this case two white men represent a culture that is not their own by birth or enculturation, they and their audience see themselves as borrowing elements in a highly respectful, well-informed, and intentional manner. This idea of respect is cited by individuals who look to distinguish between cultural appropriation, cultural borrowing, or cultural appreciation.

Of those that I interviewed, all were familiar with cultural appropriation and gave relatively similar definitions of the concept: when one dominant culture borrows from a minority culture, often with some sort of monetary or cultural capital gain on the side of the dominant culture. Interviewees were careful when choosing to label something as culturally appropriative or not. Within the music festival circuit, the most frequently mentioned and universally condemned act of cultural appropriation has to do with Native American headdresses. Every interviewee brought up the case of festival goers adorning Native American headdresses, which have been banned at almost every major music festival across the United States.[77] All interviewees agreed that wearing a Native American headdress to a live music event is culturally misappropriative and therefore wrong. Evan compares the act of wearing a Native American headdress with wearing Thai harem pants, another popular festival garb:

> I know certain corporate overarching entities behind EDM have started to recognize that [cultural appropriation] is an issue and have put rules into place that help with that. The thing that comes to mind the most is wearing Native American headdresses. They are ceremonial, they are not for daily wear. There's a lot of cultural significance that goes into that. Folks that are wearing a headdress to a festival because it looks cool or goes with their outfit, yeah, that's totally appropriation. Folks who on the other hand, say they've got comfy Harem pants on… That's a choice to be comfortable and have breathable clothing.[78]

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77. From the Electric Forest Festival website under Rules & Resources: "No American Indian headdresses: at Electric Forest, all should feel safe, comfortable, and welcome."
78. Evan [pseud.], interview.

Here, the interviewee implies that Native American headdresses are problematic while excusing Thai harem pants, which may not come from a ceremonial context and also serve a specific purpose for EDM attendees. This idea of cultural artifacts serving a specific function is one of the most common ways that individuals in the EDM community navigate conversations about cultural appropriation.

Many other festival attendees display symbols such as the ohm symbol or depict Hindu gods or goddesses such as Shiva on their clothing. Responding to whether he considered this culturally appropriative or not, Carl stated:

> Whatever you might appropriate too, it's not like you're taking it directly from Tibetan people. You are embodying a deep aestheticization that happens with religions. You've seen medicine people… They have all these beads and rattles and whatnot. Buddhist temples have that too. They're colored like crazy… They have a bunch of functional meditation tools and stuff. And so, that would be like getting mad about stealing an idea for a hammer. You notice that both Buddhism and South American medicine use timed pulses during meditation, rattles for focus. So these things are rather technologies.[79]

Carl cites the inherent function that many of these signs, symbols, and even musical instruments serve within their original context, and how these contexts are adopted by many in the festival circuit. He compares this to technologies such as a hammer, stating that one would not get upset over transference of this type of technology to another individual. For Carl and several others, certain technologies constitute a "public domain" of spiritual transmission. When these items are used in the same or a similar manner to encourage spiritual experience, the question of cultural appropriation is sidestepped. For Carl, individuals adopt specific spiritual technologies meant to improve the borrower's relationship with their own spirituality. In another place in his interview, he states: "Established religious cultures give you cultural transmission… They teach you how to cook eggs spiritually. If no one taught you how to cook eggs, you might not ever find the will to

79. Carl [pseud.], interview.

figure it out yourself, or you would stumble upon the technique out of desperation."[80] Carl's personal condemnation of wearing Native American headdresses reinforces that there is complexity to borrowing certain items that may have deeper cultural significance: "When someone wears a Native American headdress to a festival, it's so far back in their mind that they committed genocide against the First Nations people…they're continuing that cultural thrust by devaluing something in that other culture that is ceremonial. To them, it's just a hat. You're besmirching something semi-intentionally that has real meaning."[81] As in this instance, my interviewees commonly differentiate situations when it may or may not be appropriate to culturally borrow.

Interviewees often use the word "respect" in conversations about appropriation. Responding to how some festival goers wear costumes inspired by indigenous peoples, Amanda explains, "We're very disrespectful to take something so meaningful to someone else and turn it into something more shallow."[82] For others, respect and personal spiritual practice can justify cultural borrowing. For example, Evan states, "[Wearing religious symbolism could be culturally appropriative] if that person doesn't practice whatever spirituality that comes from. I would feel really bad about the décor in my home if Buddhism wasn't what brought me to formal spiritual practice…if I was just some kid who thought it looked cool, then that's totally appropriation."[83] Evan's Buddhist beliefs inspire the décor in his home. His respect and reverence for this religion, which comes from another culture, justifies his displaying of these material items. This distinguishing between respectful and disrespectful borrowing was common among all interviewees.

80. Carl [pseud.], interview.
81. Carl [pseud.], interview.
82. Amanda [pseud.], interview.
83. Evan [pseud.], interview.

Even as Evan distinguishes between respectful and disrespectful borrowing, he also recognizes the ways that nuanced readings of cultural appropriation can be problematized by concepts that require more in-depth understanding. He states, "If we go specifically with South Asian stuff—Hinduism, other major forms of spirituality from that area, up into Nepal and Tibet where we shift into Vajrayana Buddhism—it's a very rich culture with a lot of nuance. There's a lot that is easily misunderstood. Coming to an understanding can be incredibly difficult." He recognizes here that "Eastern religious practice" is not monolithic, and to treat it as such would be a mistake. He continues:

> I have one book that says, 'do not even try to read this if you don't have a guru… you're not going to get it.' I'll tell you, that's the most difficult book that I've ever tried to read because it references so much of this rich culture…All too easily, the basic tenets of things can be taken and kind of run away with without understanding the nuance, and I think that can lead to a whole lot of trouble.

Evan explains that people may misinterpret the spiritual messages found in sacred texts; interestingly though, Evan reads this text even though he has no guru to help him interpret, so it may be possible for *him* to misinterpret the meaning behind this text. He then relates this to EDM artists who might sample religious material: "I imagine there's potential for someone to pick an audio sample of a mantra and they use it in a certain way, but do they understand the language? Do they understand the background of it? If not, that can be used in such a wrong way that flies in the face of the message that's behind it in that culture." Evan then recognizes how a complex spiritual message can be oversimplified and taken out of context to contribute to a stereotyped rendering of a spiritual concept, or even just to evoke a vague sense of spirituality that strips the sample of its complexity. In the end, he recognizes, "To do the due diligence, it takes a lot of work, and frankly a lot of people don't like putting in the work."[84] He recognizes that many

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84. Evan [pseud.], interview.

people in the scene might not put in the time or effort to properly understand the objects they borrow. However, his thoughts show that he is aware of potential problems, and that he is willing to address them. This awareness is effectively erased when certain scholars portray a one-dimensional view of EDM festivalgoers as promoting a "colorblind racial ideology." Though this concept is certainly present in the EDM scene, a nuanced reading of festivalgoers' commitments to religious cultures from which they borrow offers deeper insights into where these appropriations derive from in the first place.

The goal of this project is not to judge whether any one individual, artist, or collective culturally appropriates or not: it is more basically to point out that some people in the EDM community take their commitments to this culture very seriously, and therefore they do not see their actions as having any overall negative impact on the cultures from which they borrow. While I am inclined to agree that individuals who adopt a deep embodiment of spiritual practice might be able to justify certain adornments of spiritual or religious iconography—indeed, their use of spiritual technologies in specific contexts might lead to positive outcomes—the problem becomes more complicated when questions concerning music as cultural stereotyping and misrepresentation come into play. In the end, there is usually little monetary profit occurring at the expense of others and the representation of other cultures, while often not created by the people from those cultures themselves, is sometimes done in a respectful, well-researched, and highly reverent way. Again, however, sometimes intention does not matter when addressing appropriation, as even well-intentioned representations can lead to oversimplified stereotypes. As noted previously, scholar Graham St. John claims that individuals from the cultures from which these items are borrowed remain highly respected people within these scenes, though finding examples of this phenomenon is difficult, which speaks to its relative potency. In other cases,

artists might feel themselves as representatives of a given culture but may have no deeper commitment to religious or spiritual ideas that they represent in their music or stage presence. Such is the case of multicultural artist, TroyBoi.

Chapter 3

TroyBoi

Troy Henry, who goes by his stage name TroyBoi, is a British DJ whose unique genre of bass music blends popular sounds from the trap and dubstep genres with urban soundscapes from around the world. TroyBoi is British by nationality, but his Indian mother grew up in Kolkata, and his father is Nigerian-Portuguese.[85] TroyBoi blends influences from his own cultural identities with other international flavors in his music, and he performs in venues all over the world. In the United States, he has performed at festivals such as Electric Forest in Rothbury, Michigan, and Bassnectar's two-day event Basscenter held in Hampton, Virginia. Though he infuses many cultural influences into his sound, TroyBoi's music and persona tend to avoid associations with an overt spiritualism. In contrast to Desert Dwellers, TroyBoi's multicultural influences seem to be less characterized by a purposeful spirituality than by aesthetic choices. Nonetheless, American audiences may still bring their own sense of spirituality to live events at which he performs, creating individualized meaning from his work, whether these constructions are intentional or not.

Through examination of a song and music video by TroyBoi, I explore how TroyBoi blends elements from Indian religious culture and other multicultural sources, even as these aesthetic choices might not have the same spiritual associations for TroyBoi and his fans as for Desert Dwellers and theirs. I will then consider how the live event Electric Forest, at which TroyBoi and other similar artists have performed, allows individuals to create their own spiritual

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85. Samarth Goyal, "British musician Troyboi reveals he's half-Indian, his mom grew up in Kolkata," *Hindustan Times,* July 22, 2017, https://www.hindustantimes.com/music/british-musician-troyboi-reveals-he-s-half-indian-his-mom-grew-up-in-kolkata/story-kJjYbQ2CbOLon3RSITPILP.html.

meanings, or avoid associations with spirituality entirely if they so choose. In connection with this, I will show how my interviewees construct meaning from secular events such as Electric Forest, where many attendees, vendors, and artists invoke a sense of spirituality through their dress, visuals at live shows, and the various workshops and sideshows hosted by the festival itself.

"Mantra" and TroyBoi's Musical Representations

TroyBoi's 2017 song "Mantra" begins with a buzzy synthesized wave of sound that fades in and out over the course of the first twenty seconds of the song.[86] This sound functions similarly to a gong in a meditation session, preparing the listeners for an introspective experience. At 0:22, a synthetically altered low voice intones the word "mantra," which repeats often throughout most of the song. Percussion and an oscillating bassline also begin at this point. The bassline oscillates from a lower C-sharp pitch to a D natural a minor ninth above before it oscillates back down to C-sharp, emphasizing the song's C-sharp tonal center and the half-step motion from D to C-sharp. This motion of $\flat\hat{2}$ to $\hat{1}$ is similar to that found in the song "Saraswati's Twerkaba" by Desert Dwellers (as discussed in Chapter 2). The percussion is a mixture of synthesized and acoustic sounds: one sound appears to be a drumstick being swirled in the horn of a cowbell. The most prominent feature of the track also begins at 0:22, which is a sampled vocal track singing the word *Narayana*, the name of the Hindu supreme being. This melody consists of only two bars and is then repeated throughout the song. It climbs up from C# to E#, a major third, and then quickly slides back down to D where it hovers, before resolving back down to the C#. This melody therefore contains an augmented second (D to E#) and also

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86. TroyBoi, "Mantra," track 14 on *Left is Right*, T Dot Music/Sunset Entertainment Group, 2017.

emphasizes the motion from $\flat\hat{2}$ to $\hat{1}$. This melodic figure contains notes of a Phrygian dominant scale, though it has almost no underlying harmonic progression as in most modal music. It instead emphasizes the half step motion from lowered scale degree two to tonic, creating a hypnotic atmosphere in which a short melodic motif repeats over an oscillating bassline. After a few repetitions of the melody, a harmony a fifth above the pitch begins in parallel motion. Much like in "Saraswati's Twerkaba," all of the aforementioned elements are then added, subtracted, and altered to propel the song through its 3:14 duration.

One distinct difference between "Saraswati's Twerkaba" and "Mantra" is that of representation; in the latter, a mixed-race man who is part Indian represents his own culture for an international audience. Desert Dwellers are a duo of white men who adopt elements of Hindu religiosity for both aesthetic and spiritual purposes. In an article published by the *Hindustan Times*, TroyBoi muses: "Every time I put up a new song, or share something on Facebook or Twitter, a lot of fans from India always would comment things like, 'When are you going to come to India,' and they will send their love."[87] Indeed, a quick grazing of the YouTube comments for the song "Mantra" reveals that many Indian fans were excited about the release of this song, specifically citing the song's Hindu vocal sample. For example, YouTube user R. Mate commented, "This song is more Indian than me even though I live in India."[88] Another user who is not from India but who claims to be familiar with the mantra, Nansi Melanie Louis, responded, "I've heard it may be in mahashivatree… I think. Coz my country which is Mauritius have multiples religions and traditions… maybe I've heard it last year." This inquiry into the origin of

87. Goyal, "British musician."
88. User R. Mate, "TroyBoi – Mantra," comment on online video clip, *YouTube*, February 28, 2017, video posted November 22, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUqELNBrevk&lc=UgjielCxnCGepXgCoAEC&ab_channel=BassNation

the mantra is frequent among users in the comments. Still another user named Kathryn Shenstone commented, "Troiboi has Indian Heritage thats [*sic*] why he makes Indian sounding tracks." This essentialist type of thinking—that because TroiBoi has some Indian heritage he "naturally" will make Indian sounding tracks—avoids the complexities of racial politics and discourse surrounding misappropriation. Taken together, these YouTube comments still show that some appreciate TroyBoi's representations of Indian and/or Hindu culture through his own multicultural lens. Though this mantra is removed from its original religious context, there are some who *do* appreciate their culture being represented in such a way, even as there are many who might take offense. This reveals a complexity surrounding discourse on misappropriation: who gets to decide what is or is not culturally appropriative?

Another of Troyboi's tracks samples a song by the Lebanese band Bendaly Family. The 1978 song "Do You Love Me" is the main sample for TroyBoi's 2019 song "Do You?"[89] The Bendaly Family song and music video blend Lebanese style singing with American style popular music in a 1970s surf-rock idiom. The lyrics are all in English. There are two distinct sections of the Bendaly Family's song, each of which repeat. One repeated section, which begins the piece and returns at 2:50, is Lebanese in character: it contains vocal melismas, non-Western scalar patterns, and non-Western percussion instruments. The contrasting section, which first appears at 1:59 and returns at 3:49, is much more American sounding: the pace picks up, the guitar plays chordal harmonies that shift each bar, the strumming pattern is quintessentially surf-rock, and the singers harmonize on the vocables "lalala," a typical 1970s trope. TroyBoi's samples draw from the chorus in the more Lebanese-sounding section, which repeat, "Do you love me? Do you need me? Do you want me?" Both the Bendaly Family's and TroyBoi's songs emphasize the motion

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89. Bendaly Family, "Do You Love Me," 1978; TroyBoi, "Do you?" track 5 on *V!BES, Vol. 3*, OWSLA, 2019.

from lowered scale degree two to tonic, though the relationship between these scale degrees seems much more complex in the original song by Bendaly Family.

TroyBoi's "Do You?" begins with a plucked string instrument sampled from "Do You Love Me." It introduces a scalar pattern that is similar to E-flat minor, though with lowered second and fourth scale degrees—this immediately cues American listeners into its exotic sources. After the sample repeats twice, a minimal amount of synthesized percussion is added at 0:12, and it repeats another four times, adding more percussion. The first vocal sample from the Bendaly Family's song begins at 0:34: "Do you love me?" At this point, the main bassline of the song also begins, which essentially alternates between the pitches E-flat and E natural with some occasional octave displacement—once again lowered scale degree two to scale degree one. This bassline essentially repeats unaltered throughout the song's 2:26 duration. TroyBoi samples the vocal lines "Do you need me?" and "Do you want me?" from the original track, blending a few other short instrumental samples from elsewhere as well. As with many EDM songs, these elements are then added, subtracted, and altered throughout.

The popular music video for this song was choreographed by Parris Goebel, a mixed-race female choreographer, dancer, singer, director, and actress from New Zealand. The ethnically diverse all-female dancers, ReQuest Dance Crew, also hail from New Zealand. The dancers are costumed in outfits obviously inspired by the belly dancing tradition: their midriffs are exposed, there are coin-like pieces around their waists as well as their breasts, their magenta apparel drapes from their bodies, and they wear golden cusps around their wrists and many rings around their fingers (see Figure 3 below). These Middle Eastern elements are blended with a cosmopolitan urban influence: all the dancers have long yellow nails, dramatic eye makeup, and many have visible tattoos. The dance style is distinctively hip-hop, though with some belly-

dancing techniques interspersed throughout. Though this song and music video are not explicitly religious by any means, they show the extent to which TroyBoi samples and thereby represents cultures from around the world. Throughout his work, however, there is a sense of collaboration with individuals from many different cultural backgrounds, including those that might be marginalized. Although those individuals may not always belong to the cultures that are being represented, his greater commitment to a multicultural ethos within his work helps him to avoid associations with appropriation.

Figure 3. Dancers from TroyBoi's music video for "Do You?"[90]

TroyBoi at Live Events in the United States

The types of events where TroyBoi performs in the United States sometimes do have associations with a sense of vague spirituality, and indeed, many of the individuals who construct their own syncretic spirituality attend these events. One such event that I have attended for eight

90. TroyBoi, "Do You?" August 27, 2019, music video, https://youtu.be/ku3JbhWUwsg.

years in a row is Electric Forest Festival, which has been held annually at Double JJ Ranch in Rothbury, MI, since 2011. Electric Forest values diversity in its artist lineup, as the festival books many styles of EDM and even some jam band music—Desert Dwellers, TroyBoi, and Bassnectar have all performed there. In addition to its four massive stages where numerous bands and DJs perform throughout the day and night, Electric Forest also hosts a large area with interactive art installations, pop-up mixed media performances, smaller grassroots-like stages, unique vending booths, and more. This area, known as Sherwood Forest, is what draws many to return to Electric Forest each year, making the phrase "veteran forester" commonplace among many attendees.[91] In Sherwood Forest, the "choose-your-own-adventure" ethos is strong within the community, and rendezvous with strangers are frequent and often deeply meaningful. This community aspect, one of the central tenets listed at the beginning of this project, contributes to Electric Forest's association with a sense of spirituality that is then further propagated by the festival itself: "Calling all souls to the forest…" underscores a 2019 recap video on the front page of the Electric Forest website.

As noted previously, Desert Dwellers and TroyBoi have both performed at Electric Forest. As artists and attendees bring their own constructions of spirituality to these events, they might hear any representation of some sort of "other" as spiritual. For this reason, it would be possible for attendees to misinterpret the sounds of an artist like TroyBoi, who often samples "others" without any specific spiritual reference, as having some sort of deeper meaning that may be unintentional on the part of the artist. For example, they might interpret the sounds of "Do You?" described above as being spiritual, when in reality, this was a love song by a Lebanese band from the 1970s. Especially given the presence of mind-altering entheogens that

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91. Sherwood Forest here may be a reference to the one found in Nottinghamshire, England, which is most often associated with the setting of the legend, Robin Hood, further encouraging its associations with counterculture.

encourage such experiences, attendees may misinterpret non-spiritual representations of other cultures as having a deeper spiritual message. Compared to Desert Dwellers, then, whose music is meant to be interpreted spiritually, this poses unique challenges to the question: which is more harmful to the communities from which these sounds are borrowed? Representation *without* deeper intention, wherein an artist appropriates from a religious culture but attempts to strip it of its spiritual associations; or representation *with* deeper intention, wherein an artist appropriates from a religious culture for its spirituality but may misinterpret or overly simplify its meaning? The former might see individuals dancing and partying hedonistically to a soundscape taken from religious culture, whereas the latter might see individuals misinterpreting a complex spiritual message in an overly simple way, leading to a potentially negative stereotype. In still another way, for example, an individual might dance to a Desert Dwellers set with no spiritual affiliation themselves, instead interpreting the music as an aesthetically exotic undertone in the bass music genre.

Indeed, many attend Electric Forest with no spiritual attachment whatsoever. For them, "the party" is of chief concern, and any deeper meaning is dismissed, possibly attributed to psychedelic drug use. For Dan, this distinction is quite salient. Speaking of individuals who attend Electric Forest without a deeper sense of spirituality, Dan says,

> They're like non-player characters [a term for characters that the user cannot control in video games]. They're enjoying themselves, they're smiling, they're dancing, but then you ask them anything else besides that, and you find that their lives aren't as enchanted as you would think based on where they are. This person is just having a normal-ass trip in his everyday life. I'm over here having my mind blown and finding new pathways to ancient technology and shit, alien technology, spiritual techniques that I didn't know were possible… and he's over here drinking a Bud Light and smoking a cigarette. It just blows my mind that both kinds of people can exist in such an environment.[92]

92. Dan [pseud.], interview.

At events like Electric Forest, the mélange of people creates interactions between people with differing commitments to a spiritual journey. Compare this attitude to Garrett's: "Not only are people there to listen to music and feel connected, they're also on drugs that make them feel connected…a lot of times your knowledge, your thought processes are impaired…How much of that sense of belonging is conflated with drug use?"[93] Whereas for Dan, his drug use encourages his spirituality and is seen as a positive thing, for Garrett, drug use can also be conflated with spirituality and a sense of belonging. Both interviewees demonstrate a dynamic range that exists among festival attendees, who may or may not take psychedelic substances and who may or may not interpret their psychedelic experiences spiritually.

At the same time, many festival vendors sell goods that cater to those who consider themselves spiritual. T-shirts adorned with figures such as Shiva or Ganesha often incorporate highly psychedelic designs with fractal patterns and vibrant colors, and these articles of clothing are attractive to *anyone* who might feel themselves more or less spiritual or non-spiritual. Therefore, on the one hand, someone may be walking around with a Ganesha t-shirt, unknowing of it meaning and thinking it looks "cool," while another individual may adorn the same t-shirt, attaching some sort of deeper meaning, albeit perhaps with only a juvenile understanding of Eastern religiosity. For Garett, who himself grew up in an Indian religious household, this distinction is important. Speaking about Shiva t-shirts, Garrett says, "Here's an example of something that would be really annoying to me: someone wearing a Shiva shirt and maybe something on their forehead, acting like they're Hindu and very spiritual when the reality is, they've never even attempted to learn about the religion or anything beyond what they've read on the internet."[94] For Garrett, his frustration lies with attendees who attribute deeper meanings

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93. Garrett [pseud.], interview.
94. Garrett [pseud.], interview.

to articles of clothing without truly understanding their origin. These examples demonstrate the extraordinary diversity of thought within the EDM community regarding spirituality.

Interviewees frequently noted a distinction between those who attend events to party and those who attach spiritual meaning. For example, Amanda says, “You hear about people who go festivals, and they say, ‘oh I came back a completely different person.’ That’s when you know that someone has truly learned something. I feel like if you’re not learning something, then you’re not a *real* raver. You’re just partying your ass off.”[95] For Amanda, this distinction signifies whether you are part of the in-group of “real” ravers, or the out-group of those there just to party. The transformational aspect is of deep importance to those who commit themselves to the lifestyle. Beth notes, “[There are] people that are like, ‘I’m never going to a festival again,’ and they were probably there for the wrong reasons anyways. They weren’t there because they actually cared about the music or the community. They were there to do drugs or party or whatever.”[96] Beth highlights another phenomenon that persists within the EDM community—those that experience burnout. This frequently occurs with people who are there for the party, as the demands of the party lifestyle catch up with their bodies. From my own observation and personal experience, those with deeper interests in the community music tend not to experience this burnout as frequently.

Circling back to TroyBoi’s role in this distinction, Beth relates the following anecdote about her time working in the music industry:

> I’ve met TroyBoi and Desert Dwellers. Desert Dwellers to me come off more spiritually awoken that TroyBoi did. Just from the energy that they give off… TroyBoi is more mainstream: the way his tour people handled their show, the way he acted toward the people working with him. Desert Dwellers were way more nice and friendly, where

95. Amanda [pseud.], interview.
96. Beth [pseud.], interview.

> TroyBoi was more like, 'I'll be there when I want' kind of attitude. TroyBoi also costs a lot more than Desert Dwellers.[97]

Artists' personalities play a role in how they are perceived by audience members, both on and off stage. TroyBoi's projected self in his music videos and live performances adhere to a machismo that is common in the EDM community, especially with big-name, large-stage DJs. There is a tension between this ego-driven persona and ideas subtextually expressed in "Mantra," as many Hindu and Buddhist texts encourage the listener to "shed their ego." Desert Dwellers, on the other hand, project a sense of mindfulness throughout their work and in their personal lives, which further reinforce their perception as community-minded, spiritual artists. The relative popularity of either artist contributes to their cost and possibly their personality, as TroyBoi must interact with a greater number of people and therefore may treat others more like staff than fellow community members. This complex friction between popularity, relative spirituality, and ego-driven, performative personality is best exemplified in the case of American cult DJ figurehead, Bassnectar.

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97. Beth [pseud.], interview.

Chapter 4

Cult DJs, Bassnectar

According to Bassnectar's bio on his website Bassnectar.net, "Bassnectar is the brain child of Lorin Ashton, a San Francisco-based DJ, producer, and artist. Lorin, who released his first album in 2001, began the project as an open-sourced musical experiment exploring the interplay between music and community." Two phrases in this biographical portrait emblematize Bassnectar's ethos, and both are essential to understanding how his stage persona influences his position as a cult-like figure in the EDM community. The first is the idea of his work being an "open-sourced musical experiment," which co-opts a term from software licensing to describe his musical aesthetic. The second is the "interplay between music and community," which is to say that Bassnectar commits himself to the interaction between him, his fanbase, the people he works with, and so on. Community is one of the tenets identified at the beginning of this project that helps to define spirituality for EDM attendees, and indeed, by analyzing posts on his community-driven website Bassnectar.net and interviews with (perhaps former) fans, the other tenets of EDM spirituality are present as well.

Although Bassnectar does not often directly appropriate from other cultures (save for hip-hop, explained below) in his music, the projection of a sense of spirituality may encourage his fans to appropriate to various degrees in their dress and mode of speech. Over the course of the 2010s, as Bassnectar used his platform to address social and interpersonal issues, and his live shows became more and more flashy, expensive, and all-encompassing (akin to a psychedelic *Gesamtkunstwerk*), he began to be regarded as a spiritual leader in a sense, codified in a pin that

Beth made and frequently sold out of at Bassnectar events: “Bass is my religion,” with Lorin Ashton depicted as Jesus Christ (see Figure 4 below).

Figure 4. Bassnectar pin, featuring Bassnectar with his signature goatee and long flowing hair, standing in front of beams of light with his arms open in Christ-like fashion

Bassnectar’s Musical and Visual Aesthetic

Extrapolating upon his musical aesthetic, in a 2009 interview, Bassnectar responded to what he meant by his use of the phrase “open source”:

> The absence of rules: If I want to collaborate with someone or feature any sound or style or mood or ingredient or aspect, or maybe even focus on something non-sonic, I will. It's also about creating events, bringing people together, watching how they interact and trying to stimulate them in different ways. That's open-source, too: lots of input, inspiration and exchange.[98]

This quote from his somewhat early days as a producer and touring DJ demonstrate his commitment to the common practice in EDM of collaboration and sampling. These samples and collaborations frequently occurred during live performances rather than in his recorded studio

98. Jessica Steinhoff, “Bassnectar Whips Up an Electronic Cocktail,” *Isthmus*, October 30, 2009, https://isthmus.com/music/bassnectar-whips-up-an-electronic-cocktail/.

work—few recordings of his early DJ sets exist. Bassnectar usually sampled from hip-hop, heavy metal, and other rock genres rather than exoticist sources, however. In this statement, Bassnectar projects an "I do what I want to do" attitude that comes across as patriarchal and even colonialist. A fine example of this is expressed in his 2014 song, "Noise," the lyrics of which repeat, "I do what I wanna do, I do what I like."[99] Though it is difficult to find concrete examples of cultural borrowing outside of hip-hop in his work, this attitude reflects his belief that he could sample from a variety of different sources. The influence of hip-hop is omnipresent throughout his work, and he often features hip-hop artists in both recorded albums and his live shows. For example, his 2009 track "Teleport Massive" features Zumbi, who raps over Bassnectar's hip-hop inspired beat.[100] Bassnectar's positionality as a white male making hip-hop could be seen as culturally appropriative by some. Sound-sampling itself, even if it is not sampling "the other," comes with a slew of ethical problems as many authors have noted.[101] Other elements from this short description are more indicative of the mood projected in his music and ethos: the absence of rules, focusing on non-sonic elements, creating events, encouraging interactions, and lots of input, inspiration, and exchange. Taken together, these buzzwords form an identity around Bassnectar that values a sense of connection between himself, his collaborators, and his audience.

Bassnectar's music sometimes projects a sense of spirituality in his live performance or in released material. For example, the music video for his 2016 song "Reaching Out" includes the following description of its video:

> This song is about human connection, but also about our personal journeys and how they intersect in cathartic and beautiful ways in a kind of metamorphosis. The video opens

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99. Bassnectar, "Noise," featuring Donnis, track 8 on *Noise vs Beauty*, 2014, Amorphous Music.
100. Bassnectar, "Teleport Massive," featuring Zumbi, track 7 on *Cozza Frenzy*, 2009, Om Records.
101. John Oswald, "Bettered by the Borrower: The Ethics of Musical Debt," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, ed. Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner (New York: Continuum, 2004).

> with a person who is locked inside a cocoon (at times she is just existing, but other times she is struggling to break free). The cocoon might be a natural state of her existing just as a butterfly exists within a cocoon before it bursts free; or it might be more confining, like the walls of a prison in her mind. When we see into her mind, through her eyes, she exists almost underwater. She is swimming inside a magical cathedral with vaulted ceilings...always moving toward the light, yet the experience is disorienting and hypnotic like a dream. As the song progresses, the voice says "we're reaching out to set you free" - as if she is being contacted from beyond her current state of awareness. The voice represents an angel, which could be a friend or just an entity of healing. When she bursts through the cocoon, she is set free to move freely and dance across the same terrain which she was once submerged in. The new control and mastery of her body follows her as she moves forward into life, leaving trails of her experiences behind her.[102]

This description suggests a spirituality similar to the one described throughout this project: connection, the idea of the personal journey, freedom, and experience. The protagonist also comes into contact with an angel or other entity, also suggestive of its spirituality. The author makes mention of the experience as being "hypnotic," and indeed, Bassnectar makes use elsewhere of the hypnotic lowered scale degree two to tonic musical trope described in previous chapters, as for example in his 2016 song "Zodgilla."[103]

The Bassnectar Community

As for the "interplay between music and community," one of the simplest ways Bassnectar achieves this is through what he calls the family photo. After every show since at least 2008, Bassnectar takes out a camera or phone from behind his DJ booth and takes a picture of himself facing the camera with the crowd in the background (also known as a "selfie"), counting down backward from three as everyone cheers. He then posts the images to his website, Bassnectar.net, as well as to his Facebook page, where he encourages people to tag themselves in

102. Bassnectar, "Reaching Out," track 1 on *Unlimited*, 2016, Amorphous Music.
103. Bassnectar, "Zodgilla," track 8 on *Unlimited*, 2016, Amorphous Music.

the photo. This simple action fosters a sense of connection between DJ and audience, as attendees are excited to then find themselves in the photo after it is posted.

Bassnectar also fosters a sense of community through his various activist initiatives, which he posts and shares to all of his various social media platforms (Bassnectar.net, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). These initiatives encourage members of the Bassnectar community to actively involve themselves in charity work or political activism. Often these initiatives involve no concrete action, but instead serve to motivate his audience to think deeply, have difficult conversations, or consider multiple sides of an argument. One of these initiatives, originating from a Timothy Leary quote, became a proverbial saying associated with Bassnectar fandom: "Think for yourself and question."[104] The "Think For Yourself" campaign launched on May 14, 2015 and included a long-winded blog post that encouraged readers to form their own opinions on any given subject matter, considering all sides of an argument before taking a firm stance. For example, Bassnectar wrote, "In the pursuit of truth, I would rather follow what makes the most sense, versus what I'm told to believe, or even what I used to believe in the past."[105] His posts and initiatives often have strong anti-government undertones; for example, this campaign criticizes The Patriot Act, saying "funny how they name laws after something nobody wants to argue with, when really this is one of the least Patriotic Acts I can think of." He often encourages freedom of expression both on- and offline. Indeed, Bassnectar has voiced support for Edward

104. "The aim of human life is to know thyself. Think for yourself. Question authority. Think with your friends. Create, create new realities. Philosophy is a team sport. Philosophy is the ultimate, the ultimate aphrodisiac pleasure. Learning how to operate your brain, learning how to operate your mind, learning how to redesign chaos." Timothy Leary, "How to Operate Your Brain," public service video, 1993, accessed via YouTube March 25, 2021. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQq_XmhBTgg&t=6s&ab_channel=TheRugDoctor
105. Lorin Ashton, "Think for Yourself," Bassnectar.net, posted May 14, 2105, https://www.bassnectar.net/2015/05/think-for-yourself/.

Snowden, calling him "a true hero and a true patriot."[106] In another post for this campaign, Bassnectar further expounds:

> I get a lot of my news from www.democracynow.org—it is unapologetic to Democrats and Republicans alike, it is unapologetic to corporate interests, and it seems to side with the well-being of the general population, as opposed to the best interests of the 1% (government, corporate elite, etc). However, this could quickly be dismissed as a hippy-dippy, liberal, socialist, commie rag.[107]

Here, Bassnectar voices his support for alternative news sources to those commonly found in mainstream America and recognizes that this could be perceived by outsiders as "hippy-dippy," here a pejorative term for hippies. Those who subscribe to Bassnectar's socio-political projections often share these opinions and feed into one another's ideas, further contributing to the community. While at first these anti-governmental ideals might not manifest themselves unilaterally for all individuals, the attitude Bassnectar espouses is also one of the tenets of spirituality—that of America as lacking spirituality or community.

In many ways, there is a direct lineage between jam-band culture, especially the Grateful Dead, and Bassnectar culture. Bassnectar fans call themselves "Bass Heads," which is a term taken from his 2010 hit, "Bass Head," but may also reference Grateful Dead fans, known as Dead Heads. At his flagship event Basscenter, he set up an area outside of the show that he called "The Lots."[108] While "The Lots" were essentially a row of vendors outside of the event, Bassnectar also voiced support for a more communal atmosphere: "You could bring your artwork to share, gifts to distribute, costumes to trade, tailgating supplies, music to blast, and Freak Flags to FLY HIGH."[109] This concept is borrowed from jam-band culture, especially the

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106. Lorin Ashton, "Thank You Snowden," Bassnectar.net, posted August 22, 2014, https://www.bassnectar.net/2014/08/thank-you-snowden/.
107. Lorin Ashton, "Think for Yourself: Reading Guide," Bassnectar.net, posted May 13, 2015, https://www.bassnectar.net/2015/05/think-for-yourself-reading-guide/.
108. Lorin Ashton, "The Lots @ Bass Center X," Bassnectar.net, posted August 24, 2017, https://www.bassnectar.net/2017/08/the-lots-bass-center-x/.
109. Ashton, "The Lots," Bassnectar.net.

Grateful Dead, whose "Shakedown Streets" were an essential component of the Grateful Dead experience; indeed, this area was labeled "Shakedown Street" at Basscenter XII, which I attended, and many individuals in the Bassnectar scene frequently wear Grateful Dead t-shirts.

In other, more concrete ways, Bassnectar has fostered community by creating a Tumblr account for fans to upload and share one another's artwork. He also hosts live Q&A sessions in which he answers questions from fans in real time.[110] His charity work has involved giving a dollar for every attendee at a given show to a nonprofit organization, an initiative called "Dollar per Bass Head."[111] He has also launched campaigns with Head Count, an organization that encourages US citizens to register to vote by setting up stations at live shows.[112] He has vocally supported Black Lives Matter: in the summer of 2020 after the outrage over the murder of George Floyd he launched an initiative called "1000 Books," a summer reading program and gift exchange wherein Bassnectar fans were given a book to read about anti-racism, encouraged to write a reflection to upload to his website, and then mail this book back to be exchanged for a different book with another Bassnectar fan.[113]

Taken together, these strong communal elements provide space, both physical and virtual, for Bassnectar fans to connect and share in a way that encourages a brand of spirituality that is markedly similar to Desert Dwellers. Important to note, however, is that many outsiders to the Bassnectar culture tend to view Bass Heads as overly drugged, lacking drive or motivation, and even overly aggressive in their pursuit to move closer to the stage at Bassnectar events.

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110. Lorin Ashton, "BassTumblr Now Open," Bassnectar.net, posted September 19, 2013, https://www.bassnectar.net/2013/09/basstumblr-now-open/.
111. Lorin Ashton, "Dollar Per Bass Head," Bassnectar.net, posted April 19, 2011, https://www.bassnectar.net/2011/04/dollar-per-bass-head/.
112. Lorin Ashton, "Go Vote!" Bassnectar.net, posted November 4, 2014, https://www.bassnectar.net/2014/11/go-vote/.
113. Lorin Ashton, "1000 Books," Bassnectar.net, posted June 26, 2020, https://www.bassnectar.net/2020/06/1000-books/..

Many individuals in the Bassnectar scene also perform a sense of spirituality that for others may come across as self-righteous and sanctimonious. Dan comically presents this idea:

> In the scene there's three types of people. People that are not spiritual at all, people that are on their journey, people that are "finished" with their journeys in their mind, that are "ascended masters" in their own little world. *Those* people sometimes can be a little bit overbearing about how much they know about spirituality versus how much you know about it. They'll act like they're better than you. They'll turn spirituality into a competition. "I know more than you about this, I'm more spiritualty evolved and advanced than you…" They throw passive aggressive shade based on how woke they think they are. They'll eat acid at a Bassnectar show and become a full-blown wook… start saying things like Bush did 9/11 and start suntanning their butthole and wear a tin hat. It escalates so quickly. Sometimes you see a normal person, and then three years later they're watching Joe Rogan every day and shouting about some new conspiracy theory and telling you that your chakras are fucked. We get it! You know about chakras! Can you not be an asshole about it? It gets very annoying when people get this false sense of pseudo-spirituality based on listening to a certain type of music that makes them feel enlightened when they're actually not. They're smoking three packs of cigarettes a day and have five baby mamas and can't get their life together…. But yet they think they're woker [*sic*] than you. Examine the log of wood in your own eye before telling your brother he's got a speck in his.[114]

Here, Dan hyperbolizes the stereotype of a Bassnectar fan, who spouts conspiracy theories and claims to participate in alternative spiritual or wholistic practices. The term *wook* is used, which is an in-group pejorative across many live-music cultures.[115] This is one degree of appropriation that occurs in the Bassnectar scene as well as other bass music scenes: the archetype of an individual who claims to be spiritual in some way or another and often wears or adorns spiritual symbols, but whose lifestyle does not suggest a deeper commitment to these ideals. Frequent

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114. Dan [pseud.], interview.

115. From urban dictionary posted by Sweaty Ray on May 27, 2005: "noun or adjective. a dirty, hairy, stinky, mal-nourished, dishonest creature that often travels in packs, with possibly and unfortunately, mangy, multi-colored dogs on hand-made all natural, organic hemp leashes, or alone wandering aimlessly around a concert (usually "hippie music") parking lot with a few seemingly more important than the music goals; find as many mind altering substances and cram them into their bodies as fast and furiously as possible, get into the show somehow, don't lose the dog this time, and if by chance they come across unattended property such as a cooler, chair, backpack, or a beverage, it will then become their own. also once inside the show and the music begins, even if it sucks, a true wook will never be able to tell the difference because once the substances take effect, many of them can actually be seen dancing and "gooving" to music that only they can hear. wooks are only useful in one way: if you are trying to warn or scare a younger more easily influenced friend about the dangers of drugs, just tell them to observe and study the behaviors of wooks in their natural surroundings, but warn them that if they get too close, they may risk becoming one themselves!"

drug use provides a veiled sense of spirituality that comes across as self-important. This is the far end of a spectrum apparent throughout all bass music scenes but is perhaps more prominent in the Bassnectar community.

Bassnectar's Personal Life and Subsequent Downfall

Lorin Ashton, then, was the *de facto* leader of this community. From my personal experience interacting with participants at his shows and concerts, many spoke about him as if he were a god on stage, literally in control of the audience's emotions and experiences during his performances. This all came to a quick halt on June 28, 2020 when an Instagram account appeared called @evidenceagainstbassnectar accusing Bassnectar of engaging in nefarious sexual acts with minors, using his power and influence to groom and control them.[116] In one post on July 3, 2020, a woman made public a recording of a conversation she had with Lorin Ashton, in which she admits that she was seventeen at the time of their sexual encounter, and he does not deny his involvement with her, in fact responding, "If you think that it's worth me going to live forever in a Tennessee jail to be either raped or beaten to death…"[117] Another Instagram post on July 1, 2020 presents an audio recording of Bassnectar explaining to yet another woman that she should not see another man, demonstrating his psychological manipulation and grooming of women: "I am painting an unreasonable and illogical, inaccurate picture of how men are. Because men are not careful like me… The average guy is not spending this much time thinking about you, worrying about you, making sure it's okay for you."[118] In this clip, Bassnectar uses

116. @evidenceagainstbassnectar, "Reddit post by girls named Becca and Jenna," Instagram photo, June 28th, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CB_0mwcJb2Y/?igshid=1imost5zfxlf4.
117. @evidenceagainstbassnectar, "Lorin speaks with victim 7/3/2020," Instagram video, July 3, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CCNCT-CAxuY/.
118. @evidenceagainstbassnectar, "Lorin Ashton of Bassnectar grooming (audio clip)," Instagram video, July 1, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CCFegEdp8LI/.

his image as a morally superior figurehead to manipulate a young woman. In a way, Bassnectar's position as a monolith in bass culture encouraged idolization among his fans, which was then further embodied by Bassnectar himself. This contributed to at least two of Bassnectar's former collaborators labelling him "a narcissist with a god complex"; this most likely influenced his actions, facilitating his abuse of power and privilege in this scenario.[119] This could be a repercussion of misappropriation of spirituality—the creation of cult-like figures who could abuse others, intentionally or not.

As of October 20, 2020, @evidenceagainstbassnectar had over 18,000 followers on Instagram. Many other artists have spoken out publicly against Bassnectar due to these accusations. This led to Bassnectar stating on July 3, 2020: "I am stepping back from my career and I am stepping down from my position of power and privilege in this community because I want to take responsibility and accountability. I feel intense compassion for anyone I may have hurt. I truly hope you allow me a chance to work together toward healing."[120] Contradictorily, in the same post, Bassnectar says that "the rumors you are hearing are untrue," but that "I realize some of my past actions have caused pain, and I am deeply sorry." Since that time and still as of March 18, 2021, Bassnectar has gone dark, no longer posting on his community website or speaking on any of his social media platforms. This has led many fans and non-fans alike to suspect that Bassnectar has not taken full accountability for his actions. For Beth, who was an avid Bassnectar fan, his reaction was especially jarring: "So you're not going to be the accountable person that you act like you are?"[121] The contradiction between his projected image

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119. Ryan Morse, "Early Burner Speaks to Bassnectar's Psyche & the Problem with Cancel Culture in Open Letter to Fans," *Conscious Electronic*, August 4, 2020, https://consciouselectronic.com/2020/08/04/early-burner-speaks-to-bassnectars-psyche-the-problem-with-cancel-culture-in-open-letter-to-fans-op-ed/.
120. Lorin Ashton, @bassnectar, Instagram photo, July 3rd, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CCMhDGyhT9S/?igshid=1k86cs48igi5y.
121. Beth [pseud.], interview.

and his actions gutted fans and rattled the Bassnectar community. Many fans covered up tattoos of his logo, donated or destroyed clothing articles associated with him or the community, and reluctantly moved on after this deeply painful realization. Others deny that he did anything wrong, and still others hope that he will take fuller accountability so that he may return to making music someday.

Carl points out a double-standard that may exist surrounding the situation: "Would he have been able to have sex with those sixteen-year-olds if he wasn't projecting his spiritual thing, or, the opposite of that, if he wasn't projecting a spiritual thing, would no one have cared that he was having sex with sixteen-year-olds? People give rock stars a fucking pass."[122] Carl first muses on the previously iterated point that it was perhaps Bassnectar's status as a spiritual figure that facilitated his crimes. He then rhetorically asks: if he had not been projecting this sense of spirituality, would people have turned a blind eye to his actions? Carl points out that many rock stars who are still active today have been alleged, or in some cases, are well-known to have had sexual relations with minors and still face few or no repercussions for their actions. One EDM artist, ill.Gates, who frequently collaborated with Bassnectar states, "[Bassnectar] is not the first musician to have relationships like that, and he won't be the last, and there are other people in society that are getting away with far, far, far worse treatment of women…there are levels to this…Lorin crossed the line, but he's not so far on the other side of the line as some, and he did a lot of good."[123] For ill.Gates and for others, there is a double-standard that exists when artists get barred from releasing music and hosting live events by their fans—many artists that are still making music might treat women in more problematic ways. For ill.Gates, Bassnectar should not

122. Carl [pseud.], interview.
123. Morse, "Early Burner Speaks."

be vilified as harshly as he is, as there is nuance to the types of crimes of which Bassnectar is being accused.

Discussions online frequently highlight potential drawbacks of what is now labeled "cancel culture"—who gets to decide and where is the line drawn? One article posted to an online publication called *Conscious Electronic* parses out this relationship between "cancel culture" and Bassnectar in an exhaustive manner, suggesting that, "if anything, a positive to come of Ashton's fall is how so many have learned not to idolize someone to the point where we become blind to their darkness. Perhaps we're the ones to blame for placing the man on a pedestal so impossibly high that it created an ego-trap for his ultimate demise."[124] The author, Ryan Morse, forces the reader, assumed to be a Bassnectar fan, to recognize the ways that *they themselves* contributed to the cult of personality surrounding Bassnectar. By no means does he imply that Bassnectar should not take full accountability, however. His conclusion involves acknowledging Bassnectar's transgressions, encouraging him to take full accountability, empathizing with victims, but also recognizing Bassnectar's "own twisted self-struggle." For Ryan Morse, this dual empathy is the best way to counteract feelings of cognitive dissonance that Bassnectar fans may have experienced.

Beth presents yet another a new path for the future of Bass Heads:

> Bassnectar doesn't have to just be Lorin. His events and the community behind it are more representative of the experiences that I had. I love his music, don't get me wrong, and I had a great time being at a show starting at *his* crazy production, but it wasn't just him…I hope that another group of people can step up and make a cool event that all these people can still go to, and we can still recognize being Bass Heads, but we don't have to worship Lorin.[125]

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124. Morse, "Early Burner."
125. Beth [pseud.], interview.

For Beth, separating the Bassnectar project from the figure of Lorin Ashton and recognizing that many people were involved in creating the atmosphere of his shows could bring about a new paradigm for former Bass Heads. Going forward, fans of this project would not "worship" a single artist by placing too much value in in individual's creative output, such that fans were blinded to his problematic actions. This term "worship" is not necessarily meant literally, though appropriations of religious terminology are frequent in rhetoric surrounding Bassnectar and perhaps further contributed to his self-perception as a spiritual leader.

Regardless of how Bassnectar fans continue to wrestle with complex emotions concerning Lorin's actions, the fact remains that he abused his power, and there are victims who must live with his abuse throughout the rest of their lives. Appropriation of spiritual ideology most likely allowed for such abuse to occur, and in the same way that victims of Bassnectar were rendered powerless in the face of their oppressor, the cultures from which spiritual ideologies are appropriated are also oppressed within a cultural hierarchy. Though these actions are perhaps incomparable to one another, they both have repercussions at the communal level.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

EDM enthusiasts bring a diverse set of attitudes, opinions, and beliefs with them to live EDM events. While no one unified "EDM culture" exists, analyzing the ways that these attitudes, opinions, and beliefs lead to aesthetic choices by EDM artists offers insight into how artists and attendees then construct meaning from these aesthetic choices. This feedback loop is essential to understanding the web of intentionality created by both artists and attendees, who might lie somewhere on a complex scale from overtly spiritual to non-spiritual. These complex constructions of meaning often rely upon pre-existing aesthetics and ideals, often from cultures other than an individual's own. In this way, both artists and attendees alike could misappropriate from these cultures, which could have repercussions, including but not limited to negative stereotypes, monetary exploitation, or spiritual misinterpretation. As artists and attendees negotiate meanings with one another, they must ultimately choose to justify their appropriation, often by claiming a syncretic sense of spirituality, or to avoid association with it completely.

In this author's view, there are many ways that EDM culture could potentially maximize its positive associations while minimizing its cultural appropriative elements. For example, it is possible for one to uphold certain spiritual beliefs without depicting the iconography of Eastern religious culture (ohm symbol, Shiva depictions, etc). Especially as these elements are presented in an environment with a great deal of recreational drug use, with which many individuals from these cultures might not want to be associated, it is not necessary to represent these items physically at events for EDM culture to retain its spiritual ethos. Going forward, artists and attendees could commit to a firm separation between their personal spiritual life and their life at

recreational music festivals. Spiritual appropriations are not necessary musically either; it is possible to evoke a spiritual atmosphere without appropriating sounds from marginalized cultures, as deep house artist Luttrell and many others often do in their work.[126] I do not suggest here that artists should not somehow recognize the influence that these cultures have upon their work, and what this looks like going forward is left up for individuals to decide. Another suggestion might be a deeper and more transparent commitment to authentic collaboration between artists of marginalized and non-marginalized cultures.

In other ways, continuing this broader conversation about cultural appropriation in music may eventually change the culture without necessitating any immediate action. Perhaps the culture will slowly change with the times, and musical taste will evolve such that spiritual and religious appropriations are no longer aesthetically desirable. A still more utopian suggestion might be that through these conversations, a new future will develop in which the global balance of power is shifted so radically that these conversations about appropriation are only minimally or even no longer necessary. This vision posits that scholarship about appropriation has the ability to influence culture at large, and therefore might be one piece in a puzzle that contributes to equity among peoples the world over.

Regardless of these projections, for those interviewed for this project, EDM culture holds the promise of both political and personal change as it relates to their individual brands of spirituality. For them and for many, electronic dance music and the culture surrounding it are deeply meaningful experiences, and this informs how they live their lives both in and out of

126. Luttrell evokes a sense of spirituality in his 2019 album *Into Clouds* through atmospheric sounds and sweeping, panned synthesized noises; many artists in the EDM genre and elsewhere have done similar. Interestingly, however, Lutrell releases music under the Anjunadeep label, which references “Anjuna,” the Indian beaches in Goa where psytrance music began—so even this music does not totally avoid association with India. Luttrell, *Into Clouds*, Anjunadeep, 2018.

EDM culture. In the words of Evan, “there is something about art, specifically music, but all art, that gives us a glimpse of god in us all.”

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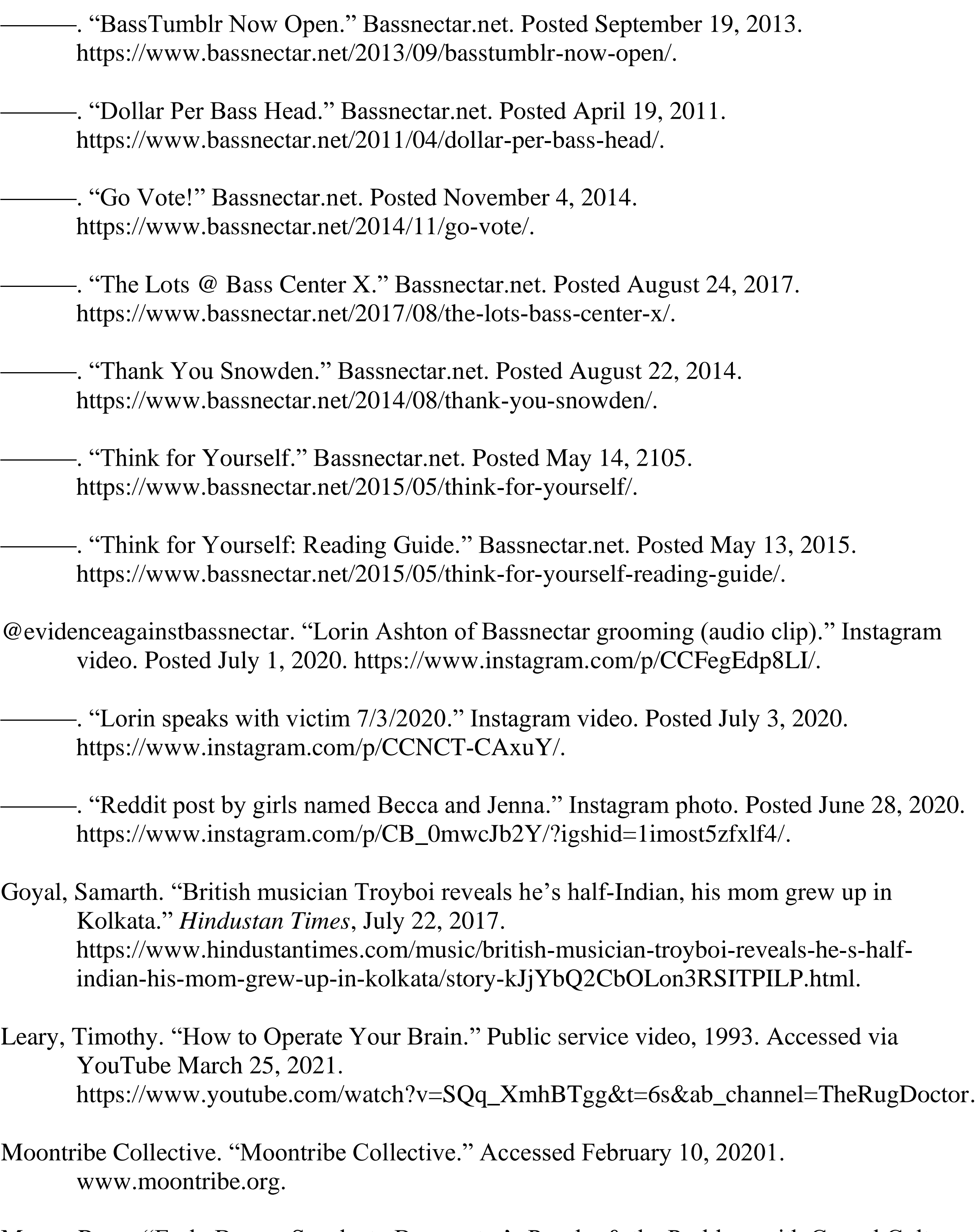

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