Singing for Our Lives: 
Exploring the Interaction of Community, Feminism and Musical Performance 
in the 
Common Woman Chorus

Jennifer L. Womack

A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Curriculum in Folklore.

Chapel Hill 
2009

Approved by:

Patricia E. Sawin, PhD
Susan L. Bickford, PhD
Jocelyn R. Neal, PhD
ABSTRACT

JENNIFER L. WOMACK: Singing for Our Lives: Exploring the Interaction of Community, Feminism and Musical Performance in the Common Woman Chorus
(Under the direction of Patricia E. Sawin)

The Common Woman Chorus of Durham, North Carolina celebrated its twenty-fifth continuous year of music-making in the fall of 2008. Operating largely on the basis of volunteer labor, the chorus produces two major concert events each year, in addition to singing for numerous community events in the interim. As one of many women’s choruses in the United States with roots in the Feminist movement and recognition in the lesbian community, the chorus sings in unison with others across the nation, and yet is unique in the dialogue it enters into with its audiences due to the sociopolitical and geographic context in which it is situated. This ethnography offers an understanding of both the community and the longevity of the Common Woman Chorus through an exploration of the ways in which the construct of a doing community, feminist ideals and musical performance intersect.
DEDICATION

To the most uncommon women of the Common Woman Chorus
of Durham, North Carolina

To the faculty, staff and students of the Curriculum in Folklore at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill who made my pursuit of a different view of the world interesting and provocative.

and

To Sallie for providing perpetual love and support to a perpetual student
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members for their encouragement and guidance: Dr. Patricia Sawin for keeping the faith with my part-time endeavor and gently prodding the final writing; Dr. Susan Bickford for a stimulating introduction to Feminist Theory that greatly influences this work; Dr. Jocelyn Neal for reminding me to dig deeper into the music that is at the core of the mission of the chorus.

I would also like to thank Dr. Virginia Dickie: boss, friend and mentor extraordinaire, who always took an interest and frequently offered a walk-and-talk coffee break to help me move my thoughts along.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................ vi

Chapter

Prelude ......................................................................................................................... 1

I.  *A Common Woman is as common as the best of bread and will rise*
    Background and Methodology ............................................................................. 4

    Background of the ethnographic community ................................................. 6

    Methods ........................................................................................................... 16

Narrative Interlude: The Breast Cancer Concert ................................................. 31

II.  *We Are*
    The Community known as the Common Woman Chorus ............................ 36

Narrative Interlude: “Checking In” With the Common Woman Chorus ............ 52

III.  *Woman Am I*
    Feminist Roots of the Common Woman Chorus .............................................. 53

    What is a feminist organization? ................................................................. 55

    What is being performed besides music? .................................................... 62

    What is transformational discourse? ......................................................... 66

    Further possibilities ...................................................................................... 68

Narrative Interlude: The Woman Who Couldn’t Sing .......................................... 70

IV.  *You Are The Music*
    The Common Woman Chorus and Musical Performance ........................... 74

    The Music ..................................................................................................... 75
Performance………………………………………………………………………………81
Musical Performance in Context…………………………………………………..87

V.  Everything Possible
Twenty-Five Years and Going Strong……………………………………….107

REFERENCES………………………………………………………………………..119
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The Common Woman Chorus at Meymandi Hall……………………………..31
Figure 2: Concert Flyers…………………………………………………………………86
Prelude

The rehearsal room seemed cavernous on that first night: concrete floors and high ceilings lend themselves to acoustic quality but seldom to a feeling of warmth. There were already a dozen or so women in the room when I arrived, some talking together, several setting up chairs, and a trio rolling the grand piano out of the corner into a prominent position at the front of the room. My entrance was hardly noticed as far as I could tell, and rather than wait to be greeted, I guessed correctly as to the identity of the musical director based on the stack of music she was carrying in her arms, and approached her to introduce myself. She pointed me, based on an earlier conversation about my vocal experience, to the second soprano section and I was welcomed by the woman next to me, Joan, who became my guide to the Common Woman Chorus not only that night, but on many later occasions. Joan’s wry wit and affectionately sarcastic orientation to the practices of the chorus (CWC) fostered my becoming part of the community. First, however, I had to become one of the singers.

Prior to this rehearsal, I had spoken with both the musical director and the president of the board of directors of the CWC, asking if I might visit the group for a possible ethnographic project I would be conducting for a class. Both welcomed me with one condition: I would need not only to seek the permission of the group but to commit to the current semester’s weekly rehearsals and performance in the culminating spring concert. Given the emphasis on participant observation in ethnography, I assured them this wouldn’t be a problem; I was more worried, despite the description of the CWC as a non-
audition chorus, about the status of my choral singing some 15 years after my last involvement in a group. This worry was heightened during that first rehearsal when the musical director came to sit beside me during a song that was being directed by another chorus member. I was certain she was evaluating my voice, and at one point found myself only mouthing the words so that she couldn’t hear my hesitant approach to the notes. Many months later, I told Cindy about my fear that night and she laughed, saying that she often sat in the chorus when she had the opportunity, both to welcome new singers and to ensure their placement in the correct vocal part. It wasn’t the only time I misunderstood the complexity of an action within the context of the CWC; it was the first of many times I experienced conscious attention to the needs of individuals within the collective and deliberate acts of fostering community.

I did participate with the Common Woman Chorus that spring, and carried out an ethnographic project, not just that semester, but on and off for the next two-and-a-half years. That journey culminates in this writing. It has been a journey not without obstacles, but one marked predominantly by laughter, friendship, growth, and purpose. The warmth I sensed lacking in the physical surroundings of that first rehearsal has long since become palpable in the smiles from familiar faces, the jokes shared over potluck dinners, the invitations to participate in social events, and the unrivaled power of women’s voices rising in unison. The voices of CWC have much to say, not only in song, but as narrators of both unique and shared experiences. The voices resonate with discord as well as harmony. They provide insight into oppression, activism, trepidation and inevitable change over time. Some voices are powerful in their protective silence. Others speak freely and are confident that they represent the whole. They sing in response to the
world around them, in celebration and in disappointment, in tribute and in protest. The voices of CWC sing for and about their lives and the lives of all women. All voices contribute to the history of the women’s musical community known as the Common Woman Chorus, now a quarter-century old and still singing out strong.
Chapter 1

A Common Woman is as common as the best of bread and will rise\(^1\)

Background and Methodology

What is the significance of an ethnographic study of a women’s chorus? In this case, the outcome could have been a simple narrative of an experience within a context previously unfamiliar to the ethnographer, providing a chronology of the group’s existence and an analysis of its cultural practices. That would have been an unfortunately minimalist approach to what ultimately proved to be fertile ground for shared experiences of transformation. Certainly the twenty-five year history of the Common Woman Chorus deserves celebration; the routines and practices of the group also provide interesting insights into the development of community. Both of those aspects of the Common Woman Chorus could be documented by an outsider, however. In contrast, the reasons for threads of continuity in the quarter-century legacy and the ways in which chorus performances change lives are stories best authored by those who walk in step with – or in this case, sing in harmony with – the community.

The narratives shared within this writing describe a women’s community that originated during the heyday of Second Wave Feminism and delivers its message through musical and theatrical performances focused on song. These three constructs – community, feminism and musical performance – serve as the structural foundation for this ethnography. Each of these major themes is explored in a separate chapter employing interdisciplinary theoretical constructs to understand and portray the complexity of the

\(^1\) Words from the poem The Common Woman by Judy Grahn (1984), the source of the name of the chorus.
Chorus. Interwoven among the warp of this structure, however, are threads of more nuanced issues such as social activism, personal transformation and performance of identity. Each of these threads is apparent in the history of the chorus but also actively woven into the ongoing routines and present-day conversations of the group – routines I had the privilege of assuming, conversations in which I actively participated.

So what might be the significance of this ethnography of a women’s chorus? My hope is that the substance and actions of this community can be seen as constituting a dialogue with its sociopolitical context that serves to introduce ideas, further possibilities and transform lives. Whereas the Chorus conducts that conversation through song with its concert audiences, I offer through this writing a synthesis of the dialogue for a different audience – those with an interest in understanding the power of community to both support continuity and catalyze change. CWC is a community that sings for simple joys it wishes to celebrate in the world, as well as for the change it hopes to enact. As the Chorus recently proclaimed on a sign displayed at a North Carolina Pride parade: “We Sing For Our Lives”.

This introductory chapter serves to structure the unfolding dialogue between ethnographer and community as well as introduce a specific ethnographic methodology used throughout the process. The reader is first presented with some background information about the Common Woman Chorus and a description of the historical and cultural contexts in which it was founded, followed by guiding questions for the remaining chapters and a specific example of the methodology employed in this ethnographic process. One note about the quotes used throughout the test is warranted here: although many members of the chorus were willing to share their experiences with
full disclosure of their identity, only first names are used throughout the narrative in order to maintain consistency with those members who chose this higher level of anonymity. That choice is reflective of the vulnerability many women in CWC feel relative to the topics addressed by the chorus in public venues, despite their willingness to perform publicly as chorus members. That dichotomy will be explored in later chapters; a brief history of CWC will begin to illuminate the complexities at play.

Background of the Ethnographic Community

Nancy describes her desire to start a women’s chorus in the Triangle area of North Carolina in the early 1980s as stemming from her experience singing with a women’s group in Kansas City, MO (personal communication, March 2007). She tells the story of placing an advertisement for women singers in 1983 in a publication called The Newsletter, which at that time was a monthly photocopied document distributed informally among members of the progressive women’s community around Durham, North Carolina, as well as formally through mail subscriptions and feminist and/or progressive bookstores in the area. Unbeknownst to Nancy, another woman, Barbara, had the same idea and also placed an ad in The Newsletter for women interested in joining together to sing, her motivation coming from her experience in a women’s chorus in Minneapolis. Nancy and Barbara answered one another’s ads and agreed to publish a subsequent announcement of the forming of a women’s chorus on the steps of the

---

2 Nancy lives in the Triangle area of North Carolina and is a Feldenkrais practitioner, as well as a singer with an area choral society. She sang with the Common Woman chorus for several years in the beginning of its existence, and was interviewed in March of 2007 along with her partner, Karen, also a founding member of the chorus.
Durham YWCA in the late summer of 1983. As Nancy recalls, twelve women were at that initial meeting. The Chorus began gathering weekly, first at a community meeting space on the east campus of Duke University, and later at the site of the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, formerly located in north Durham. Within several months, they had hired a director, and formed a loose organization that operated on what Nancy describes as “the feminist ideal of the day – a consensus model”. The early days, as described by Nancy and her partner Karen, were filled with many arduous business meetings centering on involvement in political events or movements at the time, with less emphasis on developing the musical aptitude of the group. The CWC archives include several sets of minutes from early business meetings that confirm discussions of community gatherings and political events that were brought to the attention of the group in order to increase awareness or gather support for a cause.

The context of those beginning days of the CWC, Durham, North Carolina in the early 1980s, is interesting to note. In hindsight, several Chorus members describe it as a burgeoning lesbian community, embedded in a larger frame of racial and labor-union issues at the political forefront across North Carolina. Nancy describes the performances of the Chorus in the earlier days as largely determined by the political causes of interest

---

3 Copies of The Newsletter are archived in the Sallie Bingham Collection in the Perkins Library at Duke University. A review of the available 1983 issues did not uncover Nancy’s original advertisement but the October 1983 issue had a two-line ad that read: “Singers interested in forming a feminist chorus, contact Barbara at XXX-XXXX.” The early December edition in 1983 had a subsequent announcement that a feminist chorus was meeting weekly on Sunday afternoons and asked for interested parties to contact “Ladyslipper and ask for Kathy”. Ladyslipper refers to a Durham, NC-based nonprofit organization dedicated to furthering women’s music. More about the organization is found later in this chapter.

4 There are only sparse documents in the CWC archives about the earliest years of the chorus. Copies of The Newsletter from 1983-1985 mentioned such organizations and activities as the War Resistor’s League, National Abortion Rights Action League, Society for Ethical Culture, several labor union issues, and the Triangle Area Lesbian Feminist collective. The latter has been mentioned in over half of the interviews conducted with CWC members as an organization that intersected with the beginnings of the chorus.
to the members. She noted, during my March 2007 interview with her, that her memory of the makeup of the early Chorus was that many of the members identified as heterosexual women, but that these women were typically the more politically active. Nancy’s recollection was that the members readily agreed to sing at events that were oriented toward the lesbian community, if the Chorus would in turn sing at events sponsored by groups such as the Community Workers Party or the War Resistor’s League.

The connection between women’s choral groups and lesbianism is somewhat elusive. Certainly many women’s choral groups exist that are not founded around a lesbian community, but author Jill Strachan (2006) notes that the term “women’s music”, predating formal establishment of lesbian choruses in the United States, served as coded language for “lesbians are found here” (p. 250). Roma (2000) points out that that the lesbian and heterosexual women’s communities came together around music, primarily because the experiences of women were seen as universally marginalized, resulting in women’s choruses “embracing the stories of all women” (p.9) in order to assert women’s voices through means other than those they were typically denied. This convergence of the women’s movement and an increasingly visible lesbian presence on the broader national stage also plays out in the early formation of the Common Woman Chorus.

LeAnn and Miriam, also founding members of CWC, do not have the same memory of significant contingent of women who identified as heterosexual as early members, but they do confirm business meetings focused on political activism. Their

---

5 LeAnn and Miriam were identified by current chorus members as founding singers of the Common Woman Chorus who were active in musical and leadership roles for many years. They were interviewed in July 2008 together with current member Julia, who arranged the meeting between us. LeAnn and Miriam both sang with the group from 1983 until 2000, and are still devoted audience members.
memories of the early days of the chorus were that it had a limited repertoire of music and a variety of venues where it was asked to perform, based largely on the connections of one or more of the chorus members. The early performances they recall ranged from singing at meetings of educational groups to church services to political rallies. The greater social and cultural context of the city of Durham in the 1980s inarguably played a role in determining these connections based on its role as a crossroads of the Civil Rights movement, the War Resistor’s league and the increasing visibility of a growing gay and lesbian presence.

A review of three periodicals published in Durham during the early 1980s reveals both local and national concerns around civil rights, labor issues, and changing sociopolitical relationships. From the fall of 1982 through the fall of 1983, the Durham Morning Herald carried multiple headlines indicating signs of an economic recession in the U.S. and increasing tension between the U.S. and other parts of the world, including the Soviet Union, Central America and Chad. Internationally, labor activist Lech Walesa was released from prison in November 1982 following 11 months of confinement related to his leadership of an independent labor union in Poland, and gained celebrity status among the Polish people (Durham Morning Herald, November 8, 1982). The focus on labor rights is echoed in Durham, North Carolina as activist Sam Reed urges attention to

---

6 The Durham Morning Herald was published from 1893 – 1991 as a family-owned daily newspaper in the city of Durham, North Carolina. The Independent Weekly, labeled as a “progressive voice” for the community it serves, has since 1975 covered events and stories relative to the Triangle (Durham – Raleigh – Chapel Hill) area of North Carolina. The Newsletter was a self-published monthly to bi-monthly periodical sponsored by the Triangle Area Lesbian Feminist coalition.

7 Sam Reed was a Russian immigrant to the United States and an activist in labor and civil rights. He marched with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Alabama and settled in Durham, North Carolina in 1973 where he founded a newspaper dedicated to furthering civil rights (The Trumpet of Conscience) and became the first White man elected President of the Durham NAACP. (Source: The John Hope Franklin Collection of African and African-American Documents of Duke University)
ongoing disparities in labor and civil rights (*The Independent*, March 1983). In August of 1983, the 20th anniversary of Martin Luther King (MLK) Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Sam Reed is also mentioned in the *Durham Morning Herald* (August 22, 1983) in a letter to the editor decrying the “lack of enthusiasm” for honoring Dr. King at the World Council of Churches meeting, but lauding Reed for his attempts to honor the anniversary of that occasion in Durham. Interestingly, an October 1983 Associated Press article in the Durham Morning Herald (October 8, 1983) revisits the MLK anniversary, reporting that a bill to establish a national holiday in King’s honor was expected to be introduced in the U.S. Senate with the potential for a filibuster against it led by North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, who contended that King was “a Marxist with communist ties” (ibid: page 2). President Reagan had already indicated his willingness to sign the holiday into law. In opposing the establishment of a national holiday, Helms was also reported to have denied that his opposition had anything to do with race relations, offering instead this argument: “we need more productivity and less leisure” (ibid).

Enter Mandy Carter onto the Durham, North Carolina scene. Carter, an African-American lesbian and multi-issue social activist, reports that she knew little about Durham when she moved from San Francisco in 1982 to continue her work for the War Resistor’s league (*Women at the Center, 2007*), but found “an amazing black community, a peace and social justice movement, arts and culture, universities […] plus the LesBiGayTrans movement […]” (p.2) Mandy Carter has since gained acclaim for her consistent advocacy related to women’s, racial and gay-lesbian-bisexual-transgendered (GLBT) rights issues. She was particularly active in her support of the ultimately unsuccessful but fiercely competitive campaign of Democrat Harvey Gantt to attempt to
unseat long-time conservative incumbent Jesse Helms for one of the U.S. Senate seats from North Carolina.

Why highlight Mandy Carter’s story? Why consider issues related to labor and civil rights specific to racial minorities in this writing? These movements are integrally intertwined with the women’s movement and the struggle for gay rights, each of them arguing on behalf of groups struggling for equality of treatment and opportunity within their respective and overlapping realms. Contemporary author Yoshino (2006) notes that the gay rights movement is indebted to feminism and the racial civil rights movement, a relationship that provides the foundation for historian Jacquelyn Hall’s ongoing work at the University of North Carolina that she has termed “The Long Civil Rights Movement”\(^8\). The crossroads of these forces – the same convergence that brought Mandy Carter to Durham – was the backdrop for the birth of the chorus. With Mandy Carter, CWC shares a chronology of existence in this specific place; with the African-American civil rights movement and the labor movement, CWC members share identities once subject to overt discrimination, and possibly still struggling with what Yoshino (2006) would argue is a societal expectation of assimilation. The story of CWC cannot be fully understood without knowing this context; it is integral to its genesis and crucial in understanding its evolution and longevity\(^9\).

\(^8\) Jacquelyn Dowd Hall founded the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina in 1973 and continues as its director at the present time. A current major effort of the program is the documentation of the Civil Rights Movement as extending beyond the chronology and borders of the traditional 1960s view of the movement, and affecting multiple minority groups (lcrm.unc.edu)

\(^9\) Three founding chorus members interviewed for this ethnography recounted early performances on behalf of the War Resistor’s League, the Communist Worker’s party, and the Society for Ethical Culture, supporting Nancy’s earlier memory. Each of the interviewees stressed that not all chorus members were always in agreement with the social or political stances of these groups, and one interviewee reported feeling overtly uncomfortable in some venues, but performed in the spirit of supporting other progressive causes.
The Common Woman Chorus today is a non-profit 501(c)3 organization with a membership list of around 80 women, 25-35 of whom typically perform in any given concert semester. The members live mostly in the greater Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina area (also known as the Triangle, named for the geographic proximity of Raleigh, Durham and Chapel Hill), with some attending from as far away as Burlington, Roxboro and Pittsboro, North Carolina. The Chorus generally rehearses and performs in space leased from the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, now located in southwest Durham, occasionally using instead a venue in Raleigh or Chapel Hill, NC.

During its tenure, CWC has had only two musical directors, the first serving for 17 years, and the second beginning her 8th year of service to the group. The membership of the group is primarily made up of White women who range in age from the mid-twenties to mid-sixties, with a small number of women of different racial and ethnic backgrounds more or less a part of the group at various times. There are also chorus members who identify as women though assigned a male gender at birth.

Historically described in membership materials as a “feminist” chorus, the group has within the last two years amended its online and in-print self-description, eliminating that descriptor in favor of “woman-positive” language. While this change was ostensibly made to welcome a broader range of people who identify as women, including those in male-to-female gender transitions, the elimination of the word feminist is not without contention. During a retreat of the board of directors I attended in 2007, younger members expressed feelings that the term is no longer relevant, while those who had experienced earlier times in the feminist movement struggled with letting go that
identifier, concerned that younger members didn’t fully appreciate the battle for gender equality represented by the term.

Unlike the original chorus described by Nancy, the current chorus is decidedly less overtly political, and more focused on developing the musical skills of its members while maintaining the ethic of being a non-audition chorus. Karen, an original member and currently performing with the group after a twelve year absence, describes the Chorus’ present focus as addressing issues through selected music, rather than being a group that sings in protest. She believes\(^\text{10}\) that excellence in musical performance is currently given greater emphasis than political activism, but the latter emerges from the music selection, and accompanying scripts, theatrical performances and readings that take place at concerts.

The chorus has an elected board of directors consisting of 4 officers and 4 members-at-large which rotates on an annual to bi-annual basis. The board meets monthly and also has an annual retreat at which long-term strategic planning takes place. When I began my ethnographic work with CWC, it was with the board of directors rather than the entire group. In a strange twist that later greatly informed my work with the group, one chorus member expressed concern about the project I initially proposed to the whole chorus, in response to which I offered not to conduct it. The CWC board of directors overruled my decision, and asked to become my focused participant group for the semester, with the goal of including the whole Chorus after the board collaborated with me on the first segment. I spent a semester observing and writing about the meetings and processes of the CWC board, following which I was elected as the official “Chorus

\(^{10}\) Karen was interviewed in March 2007 along with her life partner Nancy. Karen provides a perspective on the chorus stemming from several years as a singer in the early 1980s and more recent involvement since 2005, when she rejoined the group for the *Love and Marriage* concert.
ethnographer” serving in the capacity of a member-at-large of the board. Two-and-a-half years, hundreds of rehearsals, five concerts, multiple board meetings, three board retreats, fourteen interviews, one national women’s choral conference and many, many written exchanges later, I stand at the threshold of becoming an ongoing member of the Chorus rather than their ethnographer. I am in a liminal state as Victor Turner (1967) describes: not fully a member, not a member; a participant observer but also at times simply an observant participant. To complete the transition from ethnographer to singer, I would like to honor this community by offering both an examination and celebration of their continuity as a volunteer, non-audition chorus within its greater sociopolitical and socio-geographic contexts.

The primary concerns of this thesis are to explore the community known as the Common Woman Chorus and its longevity and through that exploration to explicate interrelated factors contributing to this continuity. Despite steady changes in membership and evolution in its statement of purpose, the Common Woman Chorus persists after 25 years as a productive, viable organization based largely on volunteer efforts. Beyond its functionality as a group performing public concerts, it is also an entity that carries on a continual dialogue with the larger socio-cultural circles in which it exists. Why has this group persisted over a quarter of a century? I propose that the longevity of the group is intricately interwoven with a shared mission of activism based in feminist roots; a sense of community borne from a multi-vocal yet shared sense of identity, and the dynamic of collaborative performance in a specific socio-cultural and geographic context. To address these propositions, three sets of guiding questions will provide the structure of the next three chapters:
How is the construct of *community* represented by the Common Woman Chorus? How do the concepts of identity and shared experience intersect in the formation and defining characteristics of this community?

In what ways is the Common Woman Chorus feminist? What does this mean in its past and current sociohistorical context and how is it manifest in the practices of the chorus?

How does the performance of music serve to narrate the experiences of the community, assert identity, and dialogue with the current sociogeographic and political contexts in which the group exists?

Each of these areas of inquiry could be closely examined in detail; I will consider them broadly and from the standpoint of their interrelatedness, embedding literature that informs each section. The Common Woman Chorus is not a collective of people that can be encapsulated in a single definition of community and fully understood at that level. The vague borders of identity for the Chorus and its members are fluid and constantly in dialogue with historical time and with the immediacy of performance. The stated reason for existence of the CWC – “musical performance that highlights the diversity and experiences of women’s lives” (www.commonwomanchorus.net) – is linguistically constant and yet subtly and substantively dynamic. That the chorus exists and persists over time is an achievement that belongs not just to CWC, but to women’s choruses across the nation whose threads influenced its formation; to the mothers of women’s music who are the heroes of lesbians emerging from their closets to find a voice singing their joy and pain; to young women who scoff at the stories of “consciousness-raising” and push the dialogue about women’s lived experiences one conversation farther. Each of these issues warrants attention, and yet the intent of this work is not to dissect *community*,
feminism and performance as separate constructs, but to understand their dynamic intersection in this body known as the Common Woman Chorus.

Each subsequent chapter begins with a narrative of a situation I observed or participated in while performing with the chorus between January 2005 and the fall of 2008. These narratives are offered as illustrations of the points highlighted in the chapter and are admittedly biased by my own reading of the situations, though I will support my observations and conclusions with interview excerpts, evidence from archival documents, and specific data from ethnographic field notes. The authority I am allowed in speaking for the chorus in this writing requires attention to the methodology used during the process of data collection with the Common Woman Chorus.

It is ironic, given the polyphony of voices inherently necessary in the concept of chorus, that one in particular, my own, is privileged in this writing. While I hope to present a narrative of the CWC from multiple perspectives, based in principle on a process of reciprocal ethnography (Lawless, 2000, 1992, 1991; Lassiter, 2001, 2000), I cannot omit my opinions and experiences within the group from the account in these pages. This requires that methods of reflexive ethnography (Alcoff, 1991; Clifford, 1983) also be employed, holding a mirror to the ethnographer to reflect the interpretive countenance. The ethnographic process has been an evolving dialogue, parallel to the dialogue between chorus and audience in the concerts I have experienced as a singer with the CWC.

Methods

I began my work with the CWC as part of a class in ethnographic methods through the Curriculum in Folklore at the University of North Carolina in the Spring of
2005. In that tradition, the bulk of data for understanding the culture and practices of the group has been collected in field notes stemming from participant observation. This has consisted of my participation with the chorus in over a hundred rehearsal sessions, seven concert performances, dozens of board meetings, and social events and activities to support related groups over the past two-and-a-half years. I originally conducted eight interviews with chorus board members and leaders in informal roles; a later class in oral history prompted me to collect oral history interviews from two founding members and the first musical director of the CWC, and more current research led to four additional interview sessions with current and former board members and singers. Other coursework has also prompted me to consider the chorus through different lenses in the ethnographic process: Feminist Theory, performance studies and methods of reflexive and reciprocal ethnography have entered into the data analysis. The first two constructs receive considerable attention in later chapters. Reflexive and reciprocal ethnographic methods are introduced here as the interpretive lens for the entire work.

Representation of the ethnographic subject has always been a challenge for the researcher. A claim of absolute objectivity, though reified in the scientific method, is irrelevant in a process that seeks not only to observe but also to engage those observed; to modify the language of research so that indeed they are not *subjects* but *consultants* to the research process (Thraves, class notes 2/3/2005). The conceptualization of *participant observation*, the hallmark of ethnographic processes, shifted from a heavy emphasis on the latter part of the phrase in early 20th century anthropological work, in which prolonged immersion of the observer in the ethnographic geography was stressed but often without true participation (Kroeber, 1935) to an equal focus on the participant’s
effect on, as well as perception of, the observed. Victor Turner (1986) characterized ethnography as the “movement of return – a purified look at ourselves” (xiii). This reflexivity necessitates that the ethnographer recognizes his/her presence as having an effect on the research participants and context, and includes scrutiny of that effect in the process of interpreting ethnographic data.

Conducting a reflexive ethnography requires a skillful straddling of the fine line between self-indulgence and awareness of the influence of the ethnographer’s presence on the feelings and actions of the consultant group. Debate regarding both the subjectivity and essentialness of reflexivity in ethnography escalated in the 1970s and 1980s as scientific methods gained ground (Aunger, 1995; Salzman, 2002); the danger of an unintended autobiographical ethnography is assumed to be the further devaluing of qualitative methods. For anthropologist Myerhoff (1979), however, her immersion in a community of older Jews attending programs at a senior center necessitated that she explicate her own ethnicity and heritage in light of her interpretations regarding the actions of her participants. Though Myerhoff struggled with a move away from a more objective stance toward ethnography, worrying that she had conducted a “personal quest” rather than an anthropological study (Jewish Women’s Archive, retrieved June 19, 2008) she came to a clear conclusion that an analysis of both subject and self was necessary to understand the whole: “When I judge these people, I judge myself” (1975, p.28).

Conducting ethnography with the Common Woman Chorus has also been a practice of “studying my own” (Myerhoff, 1979). Though there is some diversity of ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious belief and socioeconomic status among the CWC,
my personal profile represents the average demographic of the group. The temptation to capture my own feelings and responses to situations has been at times overwhelming: if I am so like the average chorus member, shouldn’t my opinion legitimately represent the whole? On the other hand, positioning myself as an ethnographer also served to relegate me at times to the outside of a group within which I should ostensibly be the ultimate insider. This juxtaposition of identities, manifest for me in this situation, mirrors the same negotiation that many CWC members live on a daily basis relative to issues of sexual orientation, employment, personal safety, and acceptance within their circles of family and friends. Throughout this writing, the subtle yet powerful ways in which this negotiation enters into their choral performances – our choral performances – will become apparent. The reflexivity of this ethnography entails examination of when our paths of expression merged, diverged and ran parallel in the work we did together.

Just as imminent as the danger of self-indulgence in a reflexive ethnography is the threat of exerting too much authority when the ethnographer assumes that she alone can interpret what has been experienced. Elaine Lawless (2000, 1992, 1991) refers to a process of reciprocal ethnography as a means of not only allowing the interpretation of research participants to be considered, but actively seeking and incorporating multiple perspectives into the written record. In her study of women ministers, Lawless (1992) demonstrates a process wherein her initial written reflections are shared with her participants, and their reactions to her writing are incorporated into her eventual manuscript. This is an obviously emergent process, a characteristic often assigned to qualitative methodology; Lawless argues that it is also feminist in nature, embracing the
ideals of consensus models and flattening of hierarchical structures representative of the women’s movement (see MacKinnon’s portrayal of feminist views of power, 1989).

These methods seemed a natural fit with the chorus project, and there are several examples of bringing it to bear in our ethnography. Early in my work with the board of directors, I wrote a reflection of a specific discussion at a board meeting and posted it to a secure, shared electronic site, inviting their responses either in writing or verbally. During this particular board meeting, an invited guest, the female African-American pastor of a local congregation, spoke to the issue of the lack of racial diversity within the chorus. My written reflection triggered a barrage of e-mails regarding my interpretation, some of which differed in their experience of the event, and many of which extended my understanding of the discussion I had witnessed. I was required from the standpoint of my class assignment to produce a written piece using “thick description” and to include a reflective statement in the writing, addressing my own biases in observing the situation. Sharing my written observation introduced a reciprocal ethnographic method as well, ensuring that our collective understanding of the event resulted from a multi-vocal rather than individual perspective. My written reflection is reprinted below, followed by responses from the board members to my writing. The name of the visitor to the board meeting has been changed to protect her anonymity.

Reflection on the Common Woman Chorus Board Meeting
April 7, 2005

She hesitated before saying it and then explained that she didn’t want to offend, but felt it was important to say.

“You say “Y’all come” and then y’all don’t come.”
There was rapt attention in the room: not a tension but a focused silence as Vanessa described the tendency of well-meaning Whites to want to bridge racial barriers by inviting Others into their realms, but rarely reciprocating by moving out of their own comfort zone into the physical, emotional and spiritual spaces inhabited by people of color.

She sat as the lone point of color in a swathe of beige. Nine of us encircled the small living room possessing faces that might have closely matched that old crayon called “Flesh” in the 1960s Crayola box, set apart only by heads of brown, gray, blonde and dye. The tenth, Vanessa, punctuated the room with her mahogany skin and tailored chartreuse shirt against the neutrals of the carpet and furniture.

Vanessa is the pastor of a local progressive church, which she describes as a “primarily lesbian, African-American” congregation. She is a guest tonight of the Board of the Common Woman Chorus (CWC), invited to speak with the group about her conversations with Julia, the CWC Board President, regarding diversity initiatives within both groups. The groups have had some contact in the past: CWC has performed at a church service, but integration of the two groups in a more substantial way has apparently not occurred. There is seemingly cautious interest on both sides. Julia and Vanessa dined together before the Board meeting and have brought their conversation to the Board for further discussion. In addition, Vanessa is present as a member of the North Carolina Religious Coalition for Marriage Equality, a group of clergy who wrote and presented a declaration in support of same-gender marriage from people of faith. In this role, she is invited to be a part of CWC’s upcoming “Love and Marriage” concert.

It is evening and the night is warm, but breezy enough at first that we begin the Board meeting with the living room open to the outside by a sliding screen door. The occasional sounds of neighbors in the apartment complex drift upward to the second floor, and the ceiling fan lulls us with its repetitive pass. The distant chirping of birds accentuates the subtlety and promise of early spring. We experience these things together.
as we listen, suspended in silence, to Vanessa reading the Declaration aloud. For a moment we are all women who love women reveling in the audacity of Vanessa and her counterparts. A moment later, we turn to those things that, despite this common bond, we experience so differently.

Vanessa described the less-than-positive encounter her own partner had when she attempted to join CWC as a singer.

“She didn’t feel welcomed”, Vanessa said, and continued by explaining that her partner is very gregarious and loves to sing, and was looking forward to an outlet to join with other lesbians in making music.

It wasn’t stated that Vanessa’s partner felt unwelcome because she was an African-American woman coming to CWC, but the absence of racial and ethnic diversity with the group is acknowledged as something the Board would like to change. Vanessa comments that a desire for change embraced within a leadership group is commendable, but that both groups (CWC and her congregation) need to do some grass roots work before obliging contact between their members. She speaks of being very intentional about confronting the “-isms” (racism, ageism, sexism, etc), but acknowledges that no matter how much leaders within a group desire to do this, the community as a whole needs to embrace the intent in order to achieve change. She told of examples within her own church community regarding building bridges to welcome children and male members, both of which have taken multiple years to achieve, but finally came about due to the efforts of members beyond the church leadership.

She spoke with humor hovering around the edges of her words, and in measured, respectful tones, yet Vanessa’s words held sway in the group. As she left the meeting, there was a solemnity, almost a palpable sense of earnestness among the CWC Board members to further analyze our own community and its perpetual lack of diversity. When we say “Y’all come” do we mean it, or is it simply a massaging of our own need to feel we have been open to Others? And are we willing to “Y’all come” in return? Vanessa’s
presence confronted us with these questions; her exit allowed us to ponder them within the incredible beige-ness of being.

Self-Reflection

Earlier this week, a former student of mine, a young African-American woman who is now co-teaching a course with me, led a discussion among our current (all White, mostly female) students about cultural diversity, in which she described her time as a student as “terrifying” and “full of paranoia” that she had to be better than everyone else to be considered equal. I was astounded that this young woman, whom I am positive our faculty thought of as nothing less than completely capable and competent, had suffered such anxiety during her time in graduate school. Vanessa’s talk with the CWC Chorus enhanced my perplexity about my student/colleague as well as the situations she described. How can our perspectives of a situation be so far apart? What is it about skin color that draws a line in the sand that resists the attempts of all elements to fill it in?

I have always been particularly puzzled by the gap between the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgendered community and the African-American community. Are we not all Outsiders? Others? Unwelcome at times? I underestimate, I believe, the ability to “pass”, the privilege afforded those of us who know and play by the rules of the Majority no matter what our (hidden) identity. Perhaps the members of the Board of the Common Woman Chorus don’t underestimate this; their willingness to try and cross the line in the sand is maybe the equivalent of answering affirmatively to “Y’all come”. Time will tell.

J Womack 4/7/05

After posting my writing on the chorus’ shared electronic site, I requested and began to receive responses from board members via e-mail. Typically, the document resulting from a reciprocal ethnographic process remains one authored by the ethnographer who incorporates in her conclusions the contributions of other participants in shaping her understanding of the observed. For the purposes of illustrating the process and spirit of reciprocal ethnography, however, I am including here verbatim my request
for feedback from the board members and their subsequent responses, followed by a
summary of how the dialogue modified my assumptions about the situation. All of the
responses to my reflection on the CWC board meeting appear below in their entirety and
in the order in which they were received. Changes to the name of the board visitor and
her organization are consistent with those made in my own reflection. According to the
agreement with board members during this part of the ethnography, only their first names
are used to reference the remarks unless other identifiers were requested.

Hi CWC Board folks,
I am attaching the description I wrote following the meeting tonight. I
chose the more somber one of the two "segments" I considered -
Vanessa's talk with us. If you all have time, I would love a note about
your thoughts....did you feel the same seriousness/earnestness I am
trying to describe? I tried to go with what I experienced, and given
that you all have more history with the attempts at connecting (the
church) and CWC, your insights would be very valuable!
Thanks and happy weekend!
Jenny

Hi Jenny.
First, you're a really good writer - and that's coming
from someone who studied writing at the graduate
level. Your descriptions of the meeting are sobering,
on the mark, and beautifully written.

I at first wondered why you didn't include our
subsequent conversation about (the church's) Christian
identification but, after reading your description
again, realized that you will no doubt explore this
topic in your descriptions of subsequent meetings.

This is wonderfully done and I'm glad the evening
brought up opportunities for you to reflection on your
experience in other areas of your life as well.

Thanks again. I'm really glad you're doing this study.
half-beige Angela

Hi Jenny,

I really like your writings and outside views of the board as a whole.
I'm glad we have taken on this project with you. Thank you for taking
the time to do all of this. You have a great weekend also! Lisa
Jenny,
Wow! I would describe your description as rich, rather than thick. What a beautiful and insightful description you have written. Thank you for transporting me once again into the room. The only observation that seemed incomplete to me was your description of the feeling among the group as solemn. Solemn, yes, but more than that. I felt a deep sense of listening among the women in the room and of looking at ourselves in a new way, but also a sense of hope and the realization of a clearer vision of what our first steps can be toward achieving this elusive thing we call "diversity," probably more aptly termed community. Thanks for bringing us your insights, and I look forward to other exercises.--Julia

First off, you blow me away. I am impressed by your writing and ability to capture the moment.

I would say that there was a palpable sense of earnestness among the board AND also an acute frustration on my part that anyone would feel unwelcome in our group.

I think you hit it on the head when you said there is a seemingly cautious interest on both sides.

I think we need to explore why we are so cautious about it as part of CWC's preparation to attempt to diversify. I digress...

Thanks for your observations so wonderfully written.
Joan

I wasn't there, and yet Jenny's words put me there. So I have two brief responses- Jenny, thank you for taking this on. Your write beautifully. Fellow board members, thank you for saying yes. And Julia, thank you for taking the initiative to talk with Vanessa and to bring us farther down this road. Our lack of racial diversity has been a concern of mine since I joined the chorus- I think it must take enormous courage to be the first mahogany face in a crowd of beige (and half-beige)- when we have had people of color join us ever so briefly, I have made it a point to welcome and affirm their presence- sometimes I fear that I don't do this very well, but don't blame myself for those women passing again from our ranks. I want CWC to represent all lesbian culture- we do pretty well with younger and older, though I fear we may reflect ageism at times (pro-middle age to older). Wish I could be there for these discussions.
Erin

Jenny,
I loved your thick description and have no suggestions for change. I'm really glad we were able to work out this opportunity with you. Best wishes for class tomorrow, and see you Tuesday.

Barrett

Jenny, I must agree with all of the impressions of your excellent writing.
The description was beautifully written.

Some verbose observations with historical perspective...
You note that it wasn't stated that Vanessa's partner felt unwelcome because she was African-American. I also noticed this. It reminded me that we will need to be thoughtful and clear about what we're doing or not because of racism and our unintended ignorant assumptions of blackness/whiteness/otherness, and what we're doing or not because we lack sustained methods of welcoming and integrating people into our group, regardless of race, age, and so on.

The Board has had discussions about being welcoming and the social aspects of chorus in the recent past, and has even formally instituted social times like asking folks to bring snacks and drinks to share after chorus. But interestingly, that after-chorus time isn't happening now. We also created the chorus Yahoo group 3 or 4 years ago specifically for chorus members to announce and invite other members to social outings (meet at a movie or concert or other event), and this seems to be especially useful and used as a way to keep connected when we're on break (usually over Christmas and during the summer). So the Board has had good welcoming ideas, implemented some, and has not sustained all of them. As was noted I think by Vanessa, sometimes things work, and then they stop working, and we need to think about why and make changes if needed.

Additionally, over the past several years, I've seen Board members discuss and intentionally made more effort to simply talk and connect with new members face to face instead of just talking with their friends in the group. So I think the Board has become more and more conscious of how our personal actions can influence the tenor of welcome within the group, and has made conscious efforts to make the place more welcoming.

Vanessa's words about using an anonymous survey to ask chorus members whether or not they want to increase diversity struck me. I don't recall if the Board has ever asked the membership if the lack of diversity in the group, racial or otherwise, is an issue for them. So, I wonder, is the Board concern with diversity simply a politically correct thing? I think it's not that simple, but as your description paraphrases Vanessa, "no matter how much leaders within a group desire to do this, the community as a whole needs to embrace the intent in order to achieve change." So to achieve change in group diversity, it seems that both the Board and the chorus as a whole will have to want and work for it.

As a board member in some fashion for most of the past 10 years, I want to say that President Julia's efforts to connect with Pastor Vanessa over dinner, and Vanessa's willingness to make time to talk with Julia and us all, give me the most hope I've ever had that we can connect with the people of color in the (church) congregation. I've heard the Board discuss diversity for many years, but had become tired of talking about it. I'd concluded that women who like the music we sing will join us, and those who don't won't, and the skin color isn't relevant, so why bother talking more about it.

But having our President actually pursue this connection is giving me renewed energy for the discussion. It all felt so dead-end to me over the past 5 or years, and now it doesn't. The difference this time, I think, is that our fearless leader has gone out and asked a person of
color what we can do to be welcoming, and the person of color is willing to respond. Before, we were a bunch of white girls talking about diversity, and that's not enough and got boring real fast. The missing part was getting real feelings and stories from people of color themselves. By taking this step, Julia has definitely opened up new possibilities.

The thing Vanessa said that struck me the most was that her congregation had to be intentional, and that we will have to be intentional, about being welcoming to people who don't look and act like us. We're lucky, I think, to have Vanessa willing to talk with us about this, because she's walked this road for about 9 years in efforts to get white lesbians, gay men, and youth into her primarily lesbian African-American congregation.

So I see this diversity discussion being given new life due to intentional connection between our President and a Leader in one local community of people of color. It takes real people talking and respecting one another to create understanding and, if desired, change. This is a good start.

Enough verbosity. Again, you wrote a beautiful account of this meeting segment. I look forward to reading your future class assignments, and wonder if we might want to create a new "CWC Historian/Ethnographer" position for you? :-)

Thank you for sharing your work with us.
Take care... Betty

Jenny -
Thanks for choosing to write about this subject the other night. You did a wonderful job describing each moment and pulling the whole picture together. I look forward to more of your work!
Kristen

Jenny--

Thank you.

I am reminded of the value of taking time to reflect--to leave the dance floor and go to the balcony and see the dance (our own and the chorus's) from a different vantage point. I wonder if we will commit to go the distance.

Cindy

Jenny

Excellent. As someone not in attendance, your piece put me in the room and I felt part of the conversation.

My take-away from the piece is that belonging takes effort from all members of a group. Our music may be what draws members to us and gets them to enter our doors. We know very little about why some stay and others leave. Racial diversity is obviously the easiest to notice.
My first inclination in illustrating the reciprocal ethnographic methodology was to exclude those e-mails that were simply complimentary of my writing or appreciative of my efforts in studying the chorus. By including all of the responses, however, there is a clearer picture of the scope and balance of comments. These responses represent all of the board members at that time, plus feedback from the musical director. Of the ten responses, seven provide additional insights into the history, current view, or evolving understanding of the topic of diversity within the group. Certainly it was nice to be complimented for my writing, and to feel that it had pushed the board to think more about the content of the discussion, but the responses also forced me to think differently about my initial impressions.

Angela’s e-mail was the first to give me pause. Her signature line “half-beige” made me aware for the first time that I had assumed everyone in the room besides the woman with darker skin had a homogenous racial and/or ethnic identity. I had placed the pastor in the role of Other and assumed there were no Others present. The point is not that there were other women in the room who had African-American heritage, but that I had assumed commonality of heritage for the rest of us. I later asked Angela about her closing remark and she expressed that she had used it not to assert that she identified differently from a racial perspective, but to indicate that the “beige” descriptor didn’t capture the diversity in the room from other perspectives. It’s hard to describe how that two-word phrase changed my thinking, but I certainly would have written a different piece had I entertained the idea that categorizing everyone as “beige” was as superficial
as I later came to view it. With its use, I was attempting to capture the chasm between Black and White that seems to persist as a barrier in creating a more diverse chorus. Because of the reciprocal method employed here, however, it became obvious that the barriers are far more complex and nuanced than represented by dichotomies of skin color.

Julia and Joan led me to expand my view of what the board members were experiencing that night. While I had characterized their demeanor as “solemn”, Julia added the description of “hopeful” and Joan of “cautious”. Those adjectives tell a different story, one that becomes clearer in Betty’s recounting of the historical account of the ways in which the chorus has attempted to welcome new people. Conversations about diversity in the chorus had been both an exercise based in good intention and a practice resulting in frustration, but ultimately, as Betty states “a bunch of White girls talking about diversity, and that’s not enough”. The intersection of what the chorus does and who belongs are introduced in Betty’s feedback and echoed in Ruth’s, and it has become clearer over my time with them that the two are intimately connected. The chapters on performance and community will explore these connections.

A final note on the effect of this reciprocal process concerns the recognition and appreciation of one another’s efforts among the board members. Several of the e-mail authors comment on Julia’s commitment to the conversation about diversity, and her willingness to act on it by inviting Vanessa to attend the meeting. This outreach solidified Julia’s reputation as a leader who acts on her convictions, and is evident in the trust the chorus consistently places in her as someone who will follow up on crucial issues. The chorus experiences the full range of group dynamics one might expect from any collective of human beings working together, but the membership is also very intentional
about recognition of contributors. This first became apparent to me in these e-mails and has been affirmed many times over in subsequent projects, concerts and events. Perhaps because of the invisibility experienced by members of the chorus in some aspects of their lives, the chorus illuminates and celebrates the contributions members make to its continued existence and evolving community.

Cindy, the musical director, used in her response the analogy of leaving the dance floor to watch the dance from the balcony. That analogy accurately describes an ethnographic participant-observer. To become a participant-observer honoring a reciprocal-reflexive approach necessitates, however, also resolving the latter part of Cindy’s e-mail, in which she wonders if the chorus will “go the distance”. Going the distance with a reciprocal-reflexive method requires openness to re-shaping impressions and granting equal authority to differing views. This reciprocal shaping of the interpretation of a shared event has been a thread throughout the ethnographic process with the CWC, and served to push me in new directions of thought on multiple occasions. Nowhere else in the narrative will the reciprocal nature of the process be as evident as in the writing exchange illustrated above, but the results of sharing experiences, opinions, and performances manifest themselves throughout the remaining chapters in that the final product is, as much as practicable, a polyphonic account of the Common Woman Chorus. My voice is the featured solo, but the background consists of those complex, interwoven harmonies of women’s voices rising in unison.
Narrative interlude:
The Breast Cancer Concert

From the website of the Common Woman Chorus:

*In 2004, the Chorus returned to Meymandi Hall to perform the North Carolina premiere of Diane Benjamin’s Where I Live: A Breast Cancer Oratorio as part of our Raising Our Voices, A Breast Cancer Benefit. This powerful composition for women’s voices includes strings, percussion, and narration based on the writings of breast cancer survivors. Nationally recognized NC State University's women's basketball coach Kay Yow served as honorary chair of the event, and Guest Host ABC-11 Eyewitness News Anchor Angela Hampton joined the Chorus for this event. Thanks to a grant from the Southern Arts Federation, composer Diane Benjamin was on hand for the concert and also participated in special events at nearby Meredith College. This benefit concert raised over $9,000 for the Breast Cancer Resource Directory of North Carolina. ([www.commonwomanchorus.net/2007/aboutus.com retrieved 10/10/2008](http://www.commonwomanchorus.net))*

---

11 Kay Yow, long-time coach of the North Carolina State University women’s basketball team, died from a recurrence of breast cancer on January 24, 2009, during the writing of this thesis.
The Common Woman Chorus performed the Breast Cancer Concert (as it is commonly referred to among the group) in their 21st season. I was not yet conducting ethnography with the chorus at that time, and was not aware of, or in attendance at the concert. I am poignantly aware, however, of this coming-of-age milestone for the group. In every interview I have conducted with both past and present members, the Breast Cancer Concert is mentioned. It serves as a criterion for excellence in performance; it is held as a standard for production and marketing; it is revered as a moment in time when community was ultimately realized. Twenty-one years into their existence, it was the season in which the chorus reached adulthood.

Frequently during rehearsals when a complex piece of music is challenging the group, chorus members will remark “this reminds me of the Breast Cancer Concert” or “if we can do the oratorio, surely we can get this!” Having accomplished learning and performing the music of the Breast Cancer Concert has become a standard against which all subsequent music is evaluated and deemed to be possible. Multiple interviewees described the concert as a musical accomplishment for the group as a whole; it also allowed individual performers and the director to realize their own triumphs, as well as experience personal connections to the theme. Music director Cindy revealed these effects when asked about her favorite chorus memory during a 2005 interview:

*I think the Breast Cancer Concert...and it’s heightened for me because my mother died from breast cancer. And just the way, that evening…getting that concert hall and having the composer there on the front row […] The stage is about 3 feet off the floor and [at the end of the concert] Diane Benjamin just hopped up on stage and rushed to give me a big hug. It was so…so emotional! Yeah, it was very magical – the whole night – and then having people, like I got one of the chorus members’ Christmas letters last year and one of the things she talked about was how her dream came true. She got to sing a solo on that stage at Meymandi Hall. And Abby – she played one of the pieces – she sent us an email that said: “I feel like the rat that walked away with the cheese, because I come to this chorus to*
Realizing the goal of carrying out the Breast Cancer Concert required an organized and laborious planning and marketing regimen. The chorus had offered to perform the concert as a benefit for the North Carolina Breast Cancer Resource Directory, and in deciding on Meymandi Hall – a venue that seats close to 2000 people - they set the stage for a large and impressive event. Making those plans, however, necessitated fund-raising and logistical work that the chorus had never undertaken before that time. It was an ambitious goal, requiring sacrifice and leadership. Long-time event coordinator Lisa was one of those who, although not directly involved in organizing this particular concert, took on other roles in order to balance the workload:

I was on the Board when they needed somebody for [the Valentine’s Dance] and we had the Breast Cancer Concert going on and that was a very intense concert in getting things together. And I just wanted them to completely stay away from the folks who were the leaders on that…you know, just take the pitch….just make it my own project so they wouldn’t have to worry about it.

(Lisa, interview 4/12/2005)

The leadership of the chorus rose to the occasion by modeling for members what could be accomplished when stretching toward a lofty goal. Concert co-chairs Betty and Joan speak of having spent as much time on the concert as they did their paid employment roles for several months prior to the concert. Board members also took on support tasks that set a new standard for publicity for chorus events:

I started my role as President when we were preparing for the Breast Cancer Concert and there were a lot of people who contributed to that, and a lot of work already underway. But I consider that one of the biggest accomplishments the chorus has ever had – you know, raising
nearly $10,000 for an organization that had never had a benefit done for it: that had raised all its money from grants. The Breast Cancer Resource Directory of North Carolina – we came to them to offer our services. [...] What I contributed to that were two things: one was getting publicity and a greater extent of publicity than we had ever had before for any event, getting Kay Yow on as honorary chairperson, and having a press conference, and enlisting a lot of other nonprofits organizations to display at the event and them getting some recognition from it. I am really proud of that! (Julia, interview 7/8/2008)

It is the sense of community that stands out most in memories recounted about this concert, however. The Raising our Voices concert served not only to build community within the chorus, but was also an example of social activism that embraced community in a broader context. The issue of breast cancer and the cause of raising funds to combat it brought an audience consisting of people who may not ordinarily attend a CWC concert, and forged a collaborative partnership with women who may not typically feel comfortable being identified with the chorus. Chorus leaders note that this was evident in the initial reluctance of some dignitaries to be involved, but for whom the importance of the cause – and the community of women who relate to it – outweighed the concerns about the identity of the chorus. They also cite the involvement of singers who have not sung before or since with the chorus, many of whom are described as straight women who had a commitment to supporting this particular cause, without necessarily desiring a long-term relationship with the chorus.

Even among the membership of the chorus the Breast Cancer Concert had a unifying effect. Often when determining how long someone has been in chorus, time is referred to in pre- and post-Breast Cancer Concert terminology. People speak of having gotten to know someone better during planning for the Breast Cancer Concert. I have observed this same phenomenon to a lesser extent with other performance preparation
periods as well, but the frequency and intensity with which the *Raising Our Voices* performance is used as a point of reference is exceptional; its effects are momentous and lasting.

Two closing quotes from members of the chorus who sang during the Breast Cancer concert lead us into the chapter on community. Joan speaks of finding a home; Angela of being empowered by a cause larger than her fears.

*My favorite memory of being in Common Woman Chorus was in 2004 when the chorus did the Breast Cancer Oratorio. Just before we sang the oratorio, we had a period when we were singing in the memory of those who had fallen, and it was a little chant and as we were singing, people would come by the microphone and say the name and circumstances of people who had died or who had survived breast cancer. It was incredibly moving and I was so proud to be a part of this chorus. And as I looked around and saw everybody in their beautiful black with their beautiful [pink] scarves which were eventually given to survivors, I knew that I had found home here.* (Joan, recorded memory 9/9/2008)

*The Breast Cancer concert to me was the epitome of community – all of a sudden cancer just started hitting our group. We had talked about it before but it became very personal, and it started just hitting everybody. People don’t believe this in the chorus, but I’m actually a very shy person. I don’t like to do anything in front of people. When I was an undergrad, you could hardly hear me speak. […] And it was just SO important to me at the breast cancer concert, you know, I had these people I loved dearly who had died from breast cancer and I thought “Damn it, I don’t care if my voice shakes, I am going to walk up there and I’m gonna say their names. We were in this room with – I think it had 1700 seats in it – I’m sorry, that is the thing that pushes my button. And all of a sudden, for me, I was more aware that it was the act of doing that was important. It doesn’t matter if I trip doing it, but at least get up there and do it! […] I think the Chorus helped me in a lot of ways to get to the place where I could do that. I did a duet last time […] I don’t think even five years ago I would have dreamed I could have done a duet in front of a group […] But it’s not just about YOU. The community has helped me figure that out… that you have a responsibility to the performance being a success. And also for me, wanting to be a part of making it a success FOR the community.* (Angela, 4/26/2008)
Chapter 2:

*We Are*¹²

The Community known as the Common Woman Chorus

What type of community does the Common Woman Chorus represent? If defined as a women’s community, the demographics relative to sexual orientation are congruent with only a fraction of women in society as a whole. If characterized as a community focused on musical performance, what accounts for those who seek to perform collaborative vocal music but do not find a fit with the Chorus? If identified as a lesbian community open also to women who do not identify as lesbians, then how does musical performance serve to further define its membership? Is it a community defined by nouns: women, music, feminism – or by verbs: perform, support, celebrate? Added to this list of questions might be the most obvious: why does it matter? The emphasis on community within the interviews conducted as part of this ethnography represents one impetus to explore this topic; the other comes from a realization that what I have experienced as community with the Common Woman Chorus is not easily situated in any one school of thought focusing on the study of community.

*It’s community……I think. Joining the group, I didn’t realize what a family it would become. It’s kind of akin to a church family….in my upbringing I always had a church family, even up until I was about 24, and I joined the Chorus when I was about 25, so…..it’s primarily singing, but [….] for me I feel like I have a whole bunch of mothers. Cause when I started there were only a couple of others in my age group….[names those members] and I’ve always been so much in awe of these women, who’ve*

---

¹² *We Are* is a musical piece performed numerous times by the Common Woman Chorus, composed by Dr. Ysaye M. Barnwell and published by DC Press. The lyrics of the chorus include: “For Each Child That’s Born, a Morning Star Rises and Sings to the Universe Who We Are” (http://www.ymbarnwell.com/lyrics.htm)
been through so much more before me, you know, living their lives as they are…… and that’s just kind of been a big thing.

(Kristen, personal communication 4/28/05)

Given in answer to a question as to why she belongs to the CWC, Kristen’s stated valuing of community is overt. In the interviews conducted with chorus board members, former members, directors and singers, the word community is mentioned more than 35 times. Often the interviewee refers to the Chorus as a community or to the members’ actions as explicit means of creating community. At other times, community is invoked to describe a broader segment of society of which the Chorus is a part, such as “the women’s community” or the “gay and lesbian community”. In the former case, community is depicted as a state of belonging or an act of welcoming and including members. Observations of the Chorus over the past two-and-a-half years indicate multiple levels of belonging, however. While every singer is affirmed as a crucial part of a performance, some have a continuous history with the Chorus, some are involved only when a certain concert theme is performed, and some enter and exit the Chorus without a lasting connection. Is there then an entity with defined borders and functions that can be signified as THE Common Woman Chorus?

The construct of community is informed by and debated within multiple disciplines, among them sociology, anthropology, folklore, psychology, geography, economics, history, political science and cultural studies. Some literature addressing community assumes a universal definition of the construct, while others debate the complexity of its definition, arguing for varying intersections of place, affect, people, populations, interests, identities and/or shared experiences.
Historian Finnegan (1994) offers a bounded list of five potential meanings of community:

1. A locality
2. Some grouping sharing common interests, not necessarily localized.
3. A locality or grouping bound by close ties, such as kinship and neighborliness.
5. A claim or invitation to observe common ties or interests.

To be certain, an examination of the practices of the Common Woman Chorus would uncover some aspect of each of the meanings on Finnegan’s list, but would be difficult to parse out as belonging to one bullet point versus another. For example, the geographic locale of the chorus, as mentioned in chapter 1, meets the criteria for the first meaning of community on his list, but also influences the common interests shared by the women of the chorus, in that it is a rich context for civil rights activities. The sense of belonging together may be somewhat inherent in notions of identity for chorus members, but is also interwoven with common interests. What is most revealing about using Finnegan’s list to examine the CWC as a community is that it requires a focus on nouns: a locality, some grouping, a sense, a claim. The nouns are necessary but not sufficient for describing the community. I will illustrate this later in the chapter with events occurring during a particular concert season; alternative options for understanding the construct of community first warrant exploration.

Within social psychology, the subspecialty of community social psychology has emerged over the last 40 years as concerned with definitions, experiences, and theoretical underpinnings of the concept of community (Garcia et al, 1999). In examining the constructs of community typically used within their discipline, Garcia and colleagues categorized them into two major sets of elements: structural and functional (1999, pp.
The second of these sets, the functional elements, moves beyond the boundaries that were problematic in the historian’s model cited above. Functional elements of community are those processes that happen as a result of interaction between members of the community in both spatial and temporal contexts. Garcia et al contend that recognition of the functional elements of community prompt the question “What is the community for?” (1999, p.735) rather than my opening question: What type of community[...]?

In addition, they argue that a sense of community must be examined in conjunction with a definition of community. In other words, how does the community perceive itself and its history? That perception, argues Garcia and colleagues, is influential in the ongoing expression of community in present time (1999).

This more dynamic view of community was delineated earlier by Wiesenfeld (1996) when she exposed as problematic the homogeneity implied in most definitions of community. Conceptualizing community as a “we”, contends Wiesenfeld, assumes that a group can be viewed as a totality without internal discrepancies – that in traditional definitions of X community, it becomes differentiated from Y community by virtue of the assumption that members of the Y community are not X, essentializing the characteristics of each (1996, p 338). By negating the possibility that individuals not only have the power to, but in fact actively and routinely transform communities – and that communities are in a constant dynamic state due to this transformation – the tendency in considering the construct of community is to celebrate congruity and minimize differences (1996, p. 345). Wiesenfeld advocates for her own discipline to “return diversity to the study of community” (1996, p.348) in order to understand the dynamics, complexity and evolution of definitions of community.
Another useful consideration relative to constructs of community emerges from interdisciplinary work in the social sciences. Collaborative work between cognitive anthropologist Jean Lave and educational theorist Etienne Wenger focuses on situated learning in what they term *communities of practice*, or social networks that interact in order to pass knowledge from the established members of the community to newcomers. In studying apprenticeship situations and the means by which knowledge was passed from masters of a trade to learners of that same trade, Lave and Wenger (1991) coined the term *legitimate peripheral participation* to describe how more implicit aspects of the culture of a workplace are translated along with actual work practices. One of the criticisms that emerged in response to Lave and Wenger’s work was that legitimate peripheral participation conceptualized the learning as unidirectional (Roberts, 2006), nullifying the influence of the apprentices on the workplace culture or the work of the experts.

Wenger’s later expansion of this work (1998) constructed learning as a more dynamic and dialogic process, in which members of a community continuously co-create their community identity through shared experiences and practices. He contends that these experiences can be viewed in terms of tensions that constantly push and pull at one another, serving as a negotiation to determine those practices that will be communally valued versus those that will be diminished. Wenger facilitates an understanding of *participation* as necessary for transmission of community practices, and *reification* (1998, p.55), or the production of forms emanating from those practices (stories, instructions, tools, memorabilia, etc.) as critical to community sustainability. There are
specific characteristics relative to communities of practice (CoP) that can be readily identified in the Common Woman Chorus, including:

- Sustained mutual relationships
- Shared ways of engaging in doing things together
- Knowing community members skills and how they can contribute
- Having local lore, shared stories and inside jokes
- Having a share discourse with a certain perspective on the world

(Wenger, 1998, pp.125-126)

Despite these parallel characteristics, the CoP concept is not a panacea for understanding the chorus community, just as Roberts (2006) contends it is not for understanding organizational behavior. Among her criticisms, Roberts argues that many of the hierarchical structures and interactive technologies present in contemporary work environments necessitate rethinking some of the basic constructs in the CoP model. Those arguments do not relate directly to my consideration of the chorus. Two other points in her critique, however, are compelling in considering the applicability of the CoP concept to the chorus: those of power and trust (2006, pp. 627-628).

In conceptualizing communities of practice, Lave and Wenger (1991) and later Wenger (1998) minimized the role of power differentials in shaping the transmission of tacit knowledge (Contu & Willimott, 2003). In application to hierarchical business structures, this minimization has been criticized for failing to recognize that work practices are often crafted in direct response to authority, whether in a consensual or dissenting vein. The notion of trust is also relatively absent from Wenger’s CoP model; other theorists contend that mutual understanding and trust is imperative for effective
transfer of knowledge (Andrews & Delahaye, 2000; Roberts, 2000), linking trust to beliefs about others in a community, and thus to willingness to share knowledge with them. For the purposes of understanding the Common Woman Chorus as a community, considerations of both power and trust are necessary.

There are multiple places within the by-laws of the Common Woman Chorus where it is evident that attention has been paid to power dynamics in the way language is used and intent of the group is described. Although nothing available in the archives of the CWC speaks overtly as to why certain phrases were used or certain ideals included in the chorus documents, commonalities among feminist organizations in establishing their governing structures as outlined by feminist scholar Stephanie Riger (1994) are helpful in illuminating the examples from the CWC by-laws. Riger noted that feminist organizations arising during and immediately following the 1970s era of the women’s rights movement tended to avoid hierarchical structures, focusing instead on egalitarianism and participation (p. 276), though she notes that as organizations evolve conflict between long-suppressed individualism and commitment to the collective often surfaces, resulting in an eventual combination of hierarchy and collectivist ideals. The original flattening of hierarchy, Riger suggests, stood in direct opposition to the subordinate position women experienced in relationship to men in most formal organizational structures prior to the equal rights era (p.275).

The mission of the Common Woman Chorus as stated in the chorus by-laws provides the first evidence of explicit attention to power dynamics. “The Mission of the Chorus shall be to sing music that:” begins the statement; it then lists five characteristics of the music to be performed. The second item on this list reads: “empowers, rather than
divides or belittles” (CWC By-laws, 2004: 1984). A later article in the by-laws outlining the criteria for membership reads:

Membership in the Chorus shall be open to all women who enjoy choral singing and participate on an ongoing basis with the Chorus. Ideally, Members shall represent various backgrounds, life styles, ages, interests and political beliefs, and shall come together because of their love of singing, their feminist ideals, and their pride in being women. All Members shall serve on at least one (1) committee.

(CWC Bylaws, 2004:1984, p. 7)

Two other articles in the by-laws also speak to feminist ideals of distribution of power embodied in the defining documents of the community. The first, an article addressing payment of membership dues, which has come under recent reconsideration, states that members will be asked to make voluntary contributions on an annual basis to support the work of the chorus. Two features of this section speak specifically to a community ethic based on egalitarian participation rather than hierarchy: first, the by-laws state that member contributions will not be recorded in the Treasurer’s accounts with specific attribution to an individual member; second, the article states that any woman is eligible to participate regardless of her ability to contribute to the chorus’ financial well-being. (CWC By-laws, 2004:1984, p.11).

Another inclusion in the CWC by-laws indicating attention to egalitarianism is a practice I have come to find particularly intriguing in considering the CWC community. In the article on the structure of rehearsals, a subsection entitled “Check-in” (CWC By-laws 2004: 1984, p. 13) stipulates that each rehearsal will have included in it a regularly scheduled time when members may share their names, concerns and any other information they would like known to other members. It was not surprising to me that this was a practice of the chorus community, but its inclusion in the by-laws offered
insight into its importance in sustaining the community. I have asked about the practice of “Check-In” during most of the interviews conducted with CWC members, and at times it surfaced as a topic of conversation before I introduced it as a question. Because of its importance as an explicitly feminist construct, check-in is considered more thoroughly in the next chapter. For the current purpose, its inclusion in the by-laws stands in conjunction with the other examples as evidence that the community of the Common Woman Chorus attends to issues of power dynamics through shared rituals and practices. This explicit attention to structure and collective freedom of participation undoubtedly stems not only from experiences as women, but also from other personal experiences in which establishing trust within a larger societal context has oftentimes been difficult and painful.

Trust enters into consideration due to the self-identification of many members of the chorus as lesbians, a subset of women who are stigmatized and marginalized in many societal circles. The intersection of this identity with the construct of community warrants attention not only from a scholarly standpoint, but through the lens of members of the chorus who have built and nurture the community from the perspective of Other. I mentioned in chapter 1 that a member of the chorus originally objected to my ethnographic presence in the group, and though it seemed through later conversation there had been some misunderstanding about the type of research being conducted, I often suspected, though it was never confirmed, that the potential for being “outed” as a lesbian choral community felt like a vulnerable risk for this member.13 Perceptions of

---

13 This issue was addressed in the Institutional Review process as part of the approval for conducting this ethnography. The board of directors of CWC was allowed to approve my presence at rehearsals but all interviews were arranged through a process of informed consent with consultants determining their own identification within this text. Photos and narratives referring to concert do not mention individual names.
chorus members regarding their public persona are complex, intriguing, and have evolved significantly in even very recent CWC history.

Undoubtedly one reason I was puzzled by the implicit sense of risk of being identified publicly as a lesbian-feminist community was that my entrée into the chorus came at the time CWC was beginning rehearsals for a concert called *Love and Marriage*. A decidedly popular concert\(^{14}\) among the Gay-Lesbian-Bisexual-Transgendered (GLBT) community in the Triangle area of North Carolina, *Love and Marriage* dealt specifically with same-gender romance and included a cabaret-style portrayal of courtship and a wedding performed by a minister of the local Metropolitan Community Church. Among those who attended and supported the performance were representatives from Equality North Carolina, the Triangle Gay Men’s Chorus, Equal Hearts (an outreach project of a local Unitarian Universalist church), and four clergy representing local Christian, Jewish and non-denominational congregations. The concert was advertised in several public venues, including via posters in local coffee shops, bookstores, theaters and with press releases in local independent news publications.

I found myself singing the classic *Fever* (Cooley and Davenport, 1956) with words altered to place the romance of Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas alongside Romeo and Juliet, and felt the chorus respond to enthusiastic audiences with vibrant sound and unbridled energy. I experienced raw emotion upon hearing the four clergy members read a document they had written advocating equal marriage rights for the Gay-Lesbian-

\(^{14}\) My description is based upon ticket sales for the concert, which were the largest in chorus history with the exception of the Breast Cancer Concert. Love and Marriage also enjoyed an encore performance in a second venue in Raleigh, NC at the request of a group lobbying for equal marriage rights for the GLBT community.
Bisexual-and-Transgendered (GLBT) community. I felt the warmth of laughter at stereotypes of the lesbian community played out for a knowing audience. My field notes following the concert are evidence not only of a post-performance high, but of an intensified perplexity about the identity of this choral community:

What an amazing surprise when that first roar of laughter came from the crowd during the opening scene – I wasn’t sure we were performance-ready, but that reaction seemed to lift the anxiety and we celebrated our way through the rest of the concert. I’m sure we missed some entries and notes – I know I did – but what fun! It was light and well, gay. Decidedly gay. I hear chorus members say that it’s difficult for some members to say they belong to a chorus that is lesbian-identified in the community15 but here we are publicly performing a lesbian wedding. The layers of exposure seem incongruent. Granted, audience members have to pay to attend, but it isn’t as if singers’ names aren’t printed in the concert program – or that friends outside the GLBT community who attended the concert might not guess that we are primarily lesbian. What is it that allows the same person who is frightened to say what kind of chorus she belongs to, to be able to stand and sing boldly in support of same-sex marriage? (Field notes April 31, 2005)

The consideration of the Love and Marriage concert as a sociopolitical statement receives more attention in chapter 4. What is most salient to the current discussion is that community emerged during the performance: community emerged through a realization of shared belief and collective action toward an explicit threat and implicit danger. This sense of community as a dynamic materialization of shared action is in keeping with the characterization of community offered by Wenger (1998) and described earlier in the chapter, but can be further explicated relative to musical performance through the work of ethnomusicologist Gregory Barz.

15 This term: “lesbian-identified in the community” is contained in the membership materials given to me after I had attended my first rehearsal. I wasn’t certain from the chorus website that it was a lesbian-feminist chorus. I had suspicions based on their music selections and performance venues, but what was foregrounded was openness to all women who espoused feminist ideals. Once singers came to the rehearsal space, additional information was provided with this description.
Barz (2006), writing about his fieldwork with a Tanzanian choir, describes his consultant group as a “unique, interdependent social system” (p. 21). In this specific context, Barz describes the function of *kwayas* (Tanzanian for “choir”) as responsible for community formation in Dar es Salaam, a rapidly urbanizing area within Tanzania that is becoming home to many displaced rural immigrants. The *kwaya* serves as not only a place but also a means through which community rituals are celebrated, and sustained, and as a context for supporting other social interactions and institutions, such as finding a spouse, or welcoming new members of the community (Barz, 2006, pp. 22-25). Barz’s observation of *kwaya* communities is that they are “gatherings of people involved in social action, in processes that allow performance to function in the definition of self (-ves) within society (-ies)” (p. 29), indicating a dynamic relationship between community and the context in which it exists.

Titon and Slobin (1996) also speak to the idea of a music-cultural model similar to that described by Barz. Their contention that the constructs and realizations of performance and community change over time and in relationship to one another endorses a view of community inseparable from the social context in which it performs. I have attempted to understand the Common Woman Chorus as a bounded entity, characterizing it as if its definition can be stated once and not revisited. Certainly folklorist Henry Glassie (1982), writing about the people of Ballymenone in Ireland, argues clearly that an understanding of that community necessitates recognizing it as in “constant negotiation, always shifting, sometimes radically” (1982, p. 26) and that its function as a community compels engagement with the broader social context, which it changes and through which it is changed. Understanding the community of the Common
Woman Chorus from this perspective renders unimportant my earlier consternation as to whether or not it is or is not a lesbian-feminist community. Its foundation of feminist ideals is salient; its communication of GLBT-related issues is clearly recognizable as political activism, but an attempt to label it as a static entity is fruitless. The community performs lesbian-feminism, an idea revisited in chapter 4, but its definition as either feminist or lesbian-feminist is an ongoing negotiation with its own members and their social context. The *Love and Marriage* concert was one conversation in the greater community dialogue, a dialogue dating back to the early history of the chorus.

Eleanor became the first musical director of the Common Woman Chorus shortly after its inception in 1983. She recalls seeing a flyer posted on a bulletin board in a local university asking for someone to direct a newly forming feminist choir. Eleanor’s leadership spanned the first 17 years of the chorus and she remains an integral part of their identity, known even to those of us whose membership came after her tenure as the “first mother” of the group. I interviewed Eleanor in 2007, and in recently reviewing our conversation, I was struck by her insights into the negotiation of identity for the CWC community:

*They sorted of outed themselves in degrees. Oh, it was very rarely overt, but there were always jokes and innuendoes – many of which I didn’t get (laughing). And slowly I guess those things crept their way into performances by way of the songs that were chosen or skits that were done. I remember that they sort of quizzed me – in a very nice way – as to why I wasn’t anti-gay because it had been hard for them and they weren’t used to people being okay with them. I hope I would have been there even if my first-born hadn’t just come out to me.*

(Eleanor, personal communication 3/12/2007).

The hesitance Eleanor noted of the chorus to be identified as having primarily lesbian members is situated in a social context of the early 1980s. Many of the members whom I
interviewed who were involved with the chorus during that time were specific in their desire to be identified by first-name only when included in this narrative. They expressed residual fear of discrimination - particularly in regards to employment – if associated with an overtly GLBT-identified organization. Several of them laughed in describing their fears, noting that anyone who really wished to identify them as lesbians wouldn’t have to search hard to find evidence. Nevertheless, they preferred veiled anonymity. How did the chorus move from the context of the early 1908s to the performance of *Love and Marriage* in 2005, and what does it signify in regards to the negotiation of community?

Betty was President of the chorus in 2003 when CWC joined with the Triangle Gay Men’s Chorus (TGMC) to present a Valentine concert with the theme *Love, Love, Love.* Though now overshadowed in chorus lore by the Breast Cancer concert, the joint concert with TGMC was actually the first time CWC had performed at the Meymandi Hall venue in the BTI Performing Arts Center in Raleigh, North Carolina. Betty recalls the preparation for this event in a 2005 interview:

> You know, we really did “come out” as a chorus when we did the joint concert with TGMC. I mean, what could we say? Here we were performing with the preeminent gay men’s chorus in the area, and performing music with same-gender lyrics. I mean, it was clear we were of the same mindset. It was uncomfortable for some people, but once we decided to do it, we went for it. It was a great concert, but a LOT of work. But yeah, I would say that was our coming out party! (laughing).
> (Betty, personal communication 3/15/2005).

The back-and-forth negotiation of the Common Woman Chorus with its audience and its public identity is evident even in the Milestones section on the organization’s website. The milestones list begins, apropos to Betty’s description, with the 2003 TGMC joint concert, then lists the Breast Cancer oratorio, followed by *Love and Marriage*, then the 2006 concert *Menopause: A Menstrual Show*, 2007’s *Peace and Justice* concert
(which included content related to GLBT equality as well as racial and environmental justice) and culminates in a listing for the Fall 2008 25th anniversary concert entitled: Divine Secrets of the La-La Sisterhood. In other words: “we’re lesbian – we’re women – we’re lesbian – we’re women – we’re lesbians AND more importantly, women, and (whew) let’s celebrate who we have become over the last 25 years”!

I have come to appreciate that understanding the community of the Common Woman Chorus is to embrace a dialogic definition of that construct (Bakhtin, 1981, 1993). According to Bakhtin, identity is constructed through lived experience, and people within a community negotiate changing social realities in order to continue existence within those contexts (1981; Freed-Garrod, 2008). In a Bakhtinian dialogical perspective, identity is negotiated through speech, gesture, song, and certainly in this case through performance. Some chorus members expressed concern that heterosexual women who had joined the group for the Raising Our Voices breast cancer benefit felt uncomfortable with the same-gender lyrics used in the subsequent Love and Marriage concert, and separated from the group after only one concert season. A connection that had been established through shared interests surrounding the former concert became too contested relative to the latter. Does this mean that the CWC is primarily a women’s community, however, or that it is primarily a lesbian community? In a Bakhtinian perspective, it is both in given performance contexts and neither in absolute terms.

Returning to earlier concepts of community explored in this chapter, the Common Woman Chorus can certainly be described as sharing a common reason for being, occupying a defined geographical and sometimes even physically-bound space, and having a common affinity for music. Those descriptions stop short, however, of capturing
the whole of community that is represented by this group. This chapter proposes that community as expressed by the entity called The Common Woman Chorus is emergent and dialogic; that is, it has fluid boundaries and definitions that are temporarily evidenced through interactions – performance dialogues - with multiple layers of social context. Perhaps it is fair to say that the dialogue of the chorus is predominantly lesbian-supportive, but I would argue that one very explicit reason why the chorus continues to cloak this identity behind a larger veil of “woman-positive” language relates specifically to a desire to join with other women in shared social dialogues surrounding issues of justice pertinent to the broader community of Woman. An exploration of the chorus, then, would be incomplete without further exploration of the construct of woman as expressed through feminist theory, which is the topic of the following chapter.
Narrative Interlude
“Checking In” with the Common Woman Chorus

Purple.
Juliet Binoche.
If I can’t count my brother’s garage band (Green River) performing at the county skating rink, then Neil Diamond.
Once, when driving to a church retreat.
Content.
Tom Hanks.
An old white sweatshirt with “Maine” stitched in navy blue letters.
Idgie.
Thin Mints.
Fly a plane.
Be an actress.
People who judge me at first sight.
“Mother emerging from 25 years of deep denial gifts daughter’s partner with first Christmas gift that isn’t pantyhose.”

These were the answers I gave to the following questions posed at “Check-in” sessions that follow rehearsal sessions of the Common Woman Chorus:

What is your favorite color?
Who is your favorite actress?
What is the first live concert you remember seeing?
Have you ever gotten a speeding ticket?
What is one word that describes how you feel tonight?
Who is your favorite actor?
What is your favorite thing to curl up in on a cold day?
What is the name of your favorite pet?
What is your favorite flavor of Girl Scout cookies?
What would you most like to learn to do?
If you could do any job in the world, what would you do other than your present work?
What irritates you most?
Give a one-sentence newspaper headline to describe your holiday vacation.

This is how I became a member of the Common Woman Chorus.
Chapter 3

Woman Am I\textsuperscript{16}

Feminist Roots of the Common Woman Chorus

In the earliest archived descriptions of the Common Woman Chorus, the group clearly identified as a feminist organization, stating “we are a feminist chorus with the primary mission of performing music that celebrates women’s lives” (Author unknown: notes from 1984 Board meeting: Sallie Bingham archives, Duke University). Through 2006, CWC’s self-description on the chorus website\textsuperscript{17} was as a feminist organization, centering its purpose on performing music that raised consciousness about the quality of women’s lives and experiences. During a retreat of the board of directors in August 2006, that terminology was debated and abandoned in favor of: “a woman positive choral community committed to musical excellence and social change, that celebrates all lifestyles and gender identities” (Common Woman Chorus Long Range Plan, 2006). Both descriptions reflect the historical context and the opinions of the membership at the times they were adopted, but the latest change was not – and is not – without contention. There is some evidence that the former description had its opponents as well. Why then, was the CWC for 23 years advertised as a feminist organization and what did that mean? What

\textsuperscript{16} Woman Am I is a 5-line round by composer Joan Szymko often described as a feminist spiritual. The Common Woman Chorus sang it as part of their Identity Café concert in the Spring of 2008.

\textsuperscript{17} The website maintained by the Common Woman Chorus (www.commonwomanchorus.net) offered until late 2006 a description of the group in the Who We Are link: Common Woman Chorus is a feminist organization that encourages friendship and the open exchange of beliefs and insights through song. Our name is derived from a Judy Grahn poem that reads, in part, “a common woman is as common as a common loaf of bread . . . and will rise.” We are a 501(c)(3) organization that performs primarily at fundraising and political events. Our repertoire features empowering music that highlights the diversity and strength of women’s everyday lives and experiences. (Retrieved 5/2/06.)
does the recent change to a “woman positive” description reveal about the group and its current sociocultural context? What does the change signify about the members and their lived experiences?

In the spring of 2005 I carried out interviews with board members and Chorus leaders and was involved with the Chorus as a participant-observer during the preparation for and performance of the concert entitled Love and Marriage, already described as, among other things, a same-sex twist on traditional musical representations of romance and marriage in popular (U.S.) culture. That same concert was reprised in the winter of 2006, and in between those dates we also staged a holiday concert as well as eight additional one-time performances in conjunction with other groups or events. Those experiences formed my first impressions of what it meant to the group to consider its own community as feminist. Additional interviews conducted in 2007 and 2008, as well as fairly consistent participation in CWC rehearsals and concerts affirmed some of those impressions and altered others. In addition, the early experiences with one particular concert, occurring simultaneously with coursework in Feminist Theory, prompted a great deal of self-reflection about my own assumptions in regards to the Feminist movement and its manifestations in women’s communities in the present time.

As authors of a body of work that promotes women’s experiences as valid representations of what is, feminist theorists would no doubt support the methodology of reflexive ethnography. Their analytical views of the world in which we live and the power structures and dominant discourses that shape it offer other possibilities, however, for examining the Chorus to unearth its relative political power as well as its influence in hosting and shaping discourse around issues of equality, gender and sexual orientation.
The fact that the Chorus is literally a performing group also poses interesting possibilities relative to ideas of performativity and feminist perspectives. In this chapter, I contend that the Chorus not only defines itself as feminist in origin, but manifests a feminist ethic by consciously creating and maintaining an inclusive, egalitarian and participatory structure in its leadership and cultural practices. In addition, the Chorus *enacts* Feminism through personally and politically transformative performances. Finally, in acting to eliminate the term *feminist* from its public self-definition, the Chorus has in essence acted in an egalitarian manner central to feminist principles. In an attempt to support these assertions with a view through a feminist lens, I will first offer an exploration of the work of several scholars of Feminist Theory. In order to illustrate my interpretations of these scholars, I will draw from past interviews with Chorus board members as well as from my own experience of the *Love and Marriage* concert, an event that lends itself to examination for its subtle yet politically charged messages. Finally, I will summarize my stance developed throughout this writing that the Chorus represents what I consider a feminist entity by virtue of its performative deconstruction of dominant notions of gender stereotypes, the manner in which it prepares for and carries out those performances, and through its position as one interlocutor in a transformative discourse.

**What is a feminist organization?**

Given the emphasis on self-determination and deconstruction of accepted definitional norms in feminist movements, I could argue that CWC itself is the authority on stating why it is a feminist organization, and I will return to ways in which it does just that. I find it helpful, however, to also consider two writers who describe various aspects of feminist knowing, and to explore why they may or may not extend to the example of
the Chorus as well. Judith Grant, in analyzing the positioning of feminist standpoint theory, explicates three core (albeit problematic) concepts of Second Wave Feminism that can be traced from early radical feminist groups through current epistemologies, namely the concept of Woman, the validation of women’s experience as a way of knowing, and the notion of the personal as political (1993). While Grant’s purpose is to consider the core concepts and their role in the development of feminist thought and the evolution of standpoint thinking, her treatment of the concepts is helpful in recognizing their presence in CWC’s characterization as a feminist organization. Elizabeth Spelman’s *Woman: The One and the Many* (1988) is also helpful in complicating a view of the Chorus as solely about women. Her concept of privileging certain aspects of identity over others, represented by an analogy of moving through doors in sequence, warrants a deeper look at the Chorus as a lesbian-identified group in addition to its position as a feminist organization. To begin, we consider the first two historical core concepts of Feminism as outlined by Grant: Woman and Experience.

The concept of Woman is central to the identity of the Chorus. The name Common Woman is derived from a poem by Judy Grahn (1984) that invokes irony to confront the description of women as ordinary (see footnote reference. There are only people who identify as women as members of the Chorus, only women in the group of frequent accompanists, and women handle all aspects of technical support, marketing and the financial management of performances. The Chorus membership brochure emphasizes what is outlined publicly on the website: the primary mission is to celebrate women’s lives and experiences through music. It is also evident that the Chorus values and advances the skills of women in roles that are frequently filled by men in other
organizations. There is, in fact, a conscious effort on the part of the board of directors to partner with other women and women’s groups to fulfill these roles. In this way, the Chorus reflects an emphasis on centering and even celebrating the concept of Woman, and yet, Grant argues, there is no essential concept to be centered (p.103). That is, current feminist epistemology argues that the idea of Women is still emerging, continuing to be defined and complicated through the realization that to consider a universal definition would assume that all women share a common life experience, positioning the opposite (male) experience in the default (understood) position. Rather than the idea of a natural essence of womanhood, Grant argues that feminists instead share in common the experience of gendered lives in a context that elevates the opposite gender construct. That notion of gendered experience, I would argue, is the basis on which the Chorus members as individuals come together to perform as a unified group, and in doing so, highlight the personal as well as political. I will return to that after a brief further consideration of Grant’s explication of experience.

Grant criticizes the notion of experience as it has been evoked in feminist theory, noting that in validating individual female knowledge as authentic, it is also positioned as representative of the female whole, a contradictory stance that she asserts evidences the incompleteness of experience as a category of feminist analysis (107). I am intrigued by her notion (as I understand it) of the female experience as the result of a feminist act of viewing women’s lives rather than as the elemental substance of feminist principles. She contends that a move away from an essentialist notion of Women allows us to consider that women experience different events and circumstances in different spaces in the world that can lead to a “distinctive female viewpoint” (p.110) when viewed
through a feminist lens. I could argue that singers who come to the Chorus are already viewing their life experiences through a feminist lens, and yet I also observe that the interpretation of what is viewed through my lens is more sharply *female* when performing with members of the Chorus. Perhaps it is recognition of “common oppression” (hooks, as cited by Grant, p.125) that motivates this interpretation, but I would assert that a *common interpretation of experiences of oppression* is a more fitting term. A regular Chorus ritual serves as an example.

Written into the by-laws of the Common Woman Chorus is the mandate to conduct “Check-in” at the end of each rehearsal. As noted in the previous chapter, this is a five-to-ten minute period following the weekly rehearsal time during which everyone in the Chorus states their name and says something personal, often in response to a question or prompt. Check-in is often humorous, sometimes poignant, and always tinged with political comment. Within the context of the Chorus, even one-word answers are often understood among members to imbue multiple meanings, signifying shared interpretations of the world. One particular check-in that I recall was one of the earliest I experienced in the Spring of 2005 and the prompt was: “What did you give up for Lent?” Though a critical analysis of this prompt might assume a Judeo-Christian bias to the group, the question instead served as a springboard for one member to report “Jesus” several others to say “I gave up Lent” and many people to call out variations of giving up the then-current presidential administration. One active member of the lesbian community brought down the house when she reported she had given up men and someone else yelled: “some sacrifice!” The laughter in the group made it evident that giving these answers was safe, and the commentary surrounding the assertions of giving
up Lent itself spoke to a common experience for some of the women of disappointment, if not outright oppression, in experiences with organized religion. Certainly not everyone in the group resonates personally with this, and yet the possibility of negative experience can be appreciated from the perspective that these particular experiences can and do occur for some women who are a part of the collective whole. What is even more intriguing than the content of Check-ins, however, is the fact that the Chorus values hearing from each member on regular basis, a practice that has roots in a deliberate decision to give voice to people who have not always had that opportunity.

Conversations with both the musical director and the 2005-06 president of the chorus about the practice of Check-in indicated it was deliberately included in the by-laws of the organization so that the equal voice granted everyone at that time has institutional status. As a non-audition chorus, CWC has many members with varying musical talent, and not everyone, for reasons of talent or time, will have a central role in solo performances or chorus leadership, but everyone is heard from during Check-in. The then-president viewed this as a feminist value, and describes it in a way that is fitting to this discussion:

*Even though we have a Board of Directors, we want to be as egalitarian as possible, which we think is a way of being feminist.....there is no real hierarchy here, and that's what Check-in is about. We all have experiences to share, something to say, and here everyone is important enough to have a space to say it.*

(Julia, interview 3/25/05)

This was affirmed during an interview with a founding member of CWC in the summer of 2008, who was a member of the Board when the original by-laws were documented:

*Well I would say that Check-In is feminist in nature. It was about hearing from everyone, recognizing that everyone has something to say, and something important to share with the world. That’s why we*
wrote it into the By-laws, so that someone in power who didn’t like it couldn’t just decide to stop doing it.

(Miriam, interview 7/8/2008).

The content of Check-in represents a dialogue within a community that can be viewed as addressing common experiences and interpretations of the world, but the act of Check-in is clearly situated as a feminist decree of egalitarianism. Both founding members and current Chorus leaders recognize it as the time and space for “everyone”, as indicated by the above quotes from Julia and Miriam. Grant’s idea that the act of viewing women’s lives through a feminist lens, rather than essentializing the characteristics of women’s lives, provides for the inclusion of multiple viewpoints and experiences into a realm of common female perspective is made manifest by the Chorus’ practice of Check-in, a ritual through which common understanding is shaped and shared.

The third historical concept of Feminism outlined by Judith Grant, that of the personal as political, also warrants consideration in positioning the CWC as a feminist organization, but an application of Elizabeth Spelman’s (1988) door analogy to the membership of the Chorus will serve as an introduction to that issue. Spelman, addressing the complexities of declaring and naming parts of our identities in relation to all other parts of ourselves and others, presents a schema of doors (pp 141-147), each with an identity label, through which a person might walk in succession. The gender door might precede the race door or the sexual orientation door depending on which part of a person is privileged at any given time, and/or what relationships are being exercised. She questions through the use of this analogy our ability to distinguish any single aspect of our identity completely from another, because as a whole they constitute a different entity than any one in isolation. Just as Grant argues against the use of experience to essentialize women’s lives, Spelman uses her analogy to dismantle an essentialist notion.
of the identity construct of Woman (p.158), noting instead that anyone walking through the door labeled Woman also walks through doors comprising other aspects of identity, and emerges at the end of her journey still speaking as a woman but with very different perspectives from others whose secondary doors differed from hers. Members of the Chorus may be described as women all of whom have walked through at least one door in common – that of being a Woman - and sometimes share at least three or more metaphorical doorways.

The CWC currently maintains a publicly-accessible website that emphasizes the woman-positive philosophy of the group, welcomes all women who share the desire to celebrate women’s lives through music, and features current and past performance highlights. An average reader of the website content would likely be able to also discern a relationship between the gay and lesbian community and the Chorus: there are numerous examples of performances at GLBT-oriented political events and pictures of last year’s Gay Pride performance. Nowhere on the site, however, does it state what is made clearer in the Chorus membership brochure: the Chorus, while it welcomes all women who share its mission, is lesbian-identified within the community. For many Chorus members, lesbianism is the first door. At the current time, only two women in the Chorus identify as straight, but even they have in common a second door with most other Chorus members: a Euro-American ethnic background. The last characteristic is not one celebrated by the Chorus; there is, in fact, a stated goal to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the group. I would argue, however, that the commonality of lesbianism serves as a primary foundation from which the Chorus performs the personal as political activism. The twice-performed *Love and Marriage* concert offers yet again a powerful example.
Planning for *Love and Marriage* began with the idea to perform popular love songs and romantic classics with a change to same-gender lyrics, a practice that is common for the Chorus. It grew into a theatrical performance with an all-female cast portraying the story of love at first sight, followed by a quick romance and eventual wedding, interspersed with songs about attraction (*Pretty Woman, Nearness of You*) love (*My Girl, Fever*) and marriage (*Going to the Chapel, When I’m 64*) all sung with women as the targets of affection for the women singers. More poignantly, however, the performance was punctuated by a reading of the Declaration of Marriage Equality, a document authored by the North Carolina Religious Coalition for Marriage Equality and read initially on the steps of the NC state house in April 2004, at the height of the constitutional marriage amendment debates. As four members of the clergy read the declaration, a slide show depicting more than 40 commitment ceremonies of same-gender couples served as the backdrop. *Love and Marriage* became *Love and Marriage Equality* through the construction of a performance that positioned members of the Chorus as not only feminists but also lesbian-feminists who foregrounded that aspect of their personal identities in a very public political sphere.

**What is being performed besides music?**

The examples offered in the preceding section present clear evidence that the Chorus performs not only music, but also specifically selected music interwoven with additional messages of a political, even defiant nature. Performance of feminism, it could be argued, extends beyond the concert stage, to rehearsals and Check-ins, and to decisions of the board of directors. What scholarly work might shed further light on interpreting these examples as performative?
Certainly Judith Butler’s writing concerning the performativity of gender attributes serves as a lens for further analysis (1999, pp.174-180). Two particular concepts proposed by Butler can be further explicated in regards to the Chorus; first, her description of parodic displacement, and further, the transformation of the definition of gender attributes from an essentialist to a performative nature. Butler situates drag performance as an example of parody of gender viewed as essentialized in the anatomical body, noting that it serves to effectively displace the “original” (p.176) concept of gender when performed in a context open to the subversion of that concept. The anatomical male appearing as a gendered female may be interpreted as mocking of women when viewed through an essentialist lens of gendered identities, but when considered as bringing into question the very notion of what is labeled “woman”, it serves to destabilize notions of gender identity.

The Chorus’ staging of a same-gender wedding serves a parallel function in the context in which it was performed. Two women exchanging vows before a minister beneath a balloon arch wasn’t viewed as mocking the institution of marriage; it illuminated the possibility of marriage defined as broader than union between a man and woman (problems with essentialized gendering aside for the moment). Four members of the clergy reading a declaration of marriage equality and bringing the audience to tears and a standing ovation doesn’t mock the profession of ministry; it serves to effectively parody the assumed professional boundaries of a minister. Parody in this sense is used to describe the deliberate distortion of an assumed viewpoint rather than simply a satirical characterizing of a cultural ritual. Though presented in humorous fashion, the Love and Marriage ceremony was also performed with great sincerity of purpose, and the overall
effect of the Declaration of Marriage Equality was, as noted above, emotionally poignant. The result, however, paralleled that of Butler’s description of drag performance, in that the concert theme served to subvert a static and essentialized notion of marriage and introduce the possibility of dynamic views of even the most fundamental of cultural institutions.

If, as Butler asserts, gender attributes are performative rather than pre-existing, another example of Chorus performance serves to highlight her notion of gender as a stylized repetition of acts over time that promote an acceptance of those attributes as culturally signified rather than essential. When the Chorus performs for audiences that respond to advertising and pay the ticket fee, the listeners are presumably, as in the former example, open to the possibility of parodic displacement. When performing in other contexts, however, one might view the Chorus as presenting attributes that serve to redefine the concept of female gender in a heteronormative structure.

The Chorus often performs at the Eno River Festival, a public outdoor event held each July in Durham, North Carolina, where various stages host performers of different genres of music. Audience members may or may not know the mission and membership of the Chorus, and listening is optional, as there is plenty of space to roam to other locations. We were particularly aware one summer of three older male-female couples who had brought lawn chairs to sit in front of the stage where we were performing, and several of us commented to one another that we wondered if they knew what was coming their way. Our second number was a four-part harmony rendition of “I Want a Girl (just like the girl who married dear old dad)” and indeed we noticed some audience members sit up a little straighter and lean forward, almost as if to make sure
they were understanding the lyrics correctly. By the end of the song no one had left the area, most people were laughing and clapping, and the subsequent introduction of the Chorus and its mission was met with seeming indifference and (possibly) even appreciation. I don’t know the beliefs of those audience members; I assumed their discomfort based on my own perceptions of heterosexual couples in my parents’ age bracket responding to the subversion of a good old barbershop song from their era appropriated by a group consisting mostly of lesbians. Perhaps the Chorus, when performing for open audiences and maintaining the commitment to changing song lyrics, serves to open the possibility for consideration of Woman as a gender construct that can express sexuality in many ways.

Inherent in Butler’s notion of performativity is that monolithic conceptions of gender are reinforced through the cultural repetition of unwavering and stereotyped performances of this construct. To risk an over-simplification, the more one sees women cast as behaving in specific ways and fulfilling certain roles, the more essentialized becomes the societal notion that this is how women should conduct themselves. After multiple illustrations of this model, it would require a significant shift in the representation of Women to allow for other possibilities. To use an example from American popular culture, the character of Mary Richards in the popular 1970s Mary Tyler Moore television show furthered a dialogue that broadened ideas about living as a single woman and the vocational roles open to women, but the character remained otherwise firmly embedded in culturally-acceptable definitions of gendered relationships (Dow, 1990). The displacement of that singular notion of womanhood required a more far-reaching display of possibilities of embodying that which is known as Woman,
arguably accomplished by Moore in her own later roles, and certainly by other performances occurring in less commercially-influenced venues. Possibilities for expression of sexuality, as with expressions of gender, are broadened through performances that challenge essentialized notions of truth about these constructs. Performance is a discourse between audience and performer that serves to transform both parties, and that transformation is potentially more pronounced when the performance allows the heretofore unspeakable to be discussed without fear. This possibility warrants further consideration in the final section of this chapter.

What is transformational discourse?

Magda Lewis (1992) defines transformation as “the development of a critical perspective through which individuals can begin to see how social practices are organized to support certain interests” (p.168). Her description of events on a college campus that were, ironically, staged in protest to feminist politics speaks to the power of acts of resistance to either enflame or repress oppositional discourse, depending on the response of the audience and its readiness for transformation. Moving her description of discourses of power into the classroom, Lewis gives a compelling report of a classroom moment when she was confronted by a young man who questioned why the topic of violence against women wasn’t addressed from “the other side of the story” (p. 177). Knowing that the female students in the room felt the tension in being confronted with this question, Lewis responded in a way that transferred the responsibility for addressing the student’s question back toward him, defusing the power he asserted in asking it, and modeling for the women in the classroom a mirroring to the young man of his own privileged position in being permitted to ask it. Lewis notes that she felt a tangible
relaxation in the classroom among the women students; it seems plausible to assume that
the moment was transformative for them in understanding how they are marginalized by
discourse that makes them responsible for violence enacted against them, and also how
their response might serve to diffuse masculine privilege. How might male students and
Lewis have also experienced transformation?

Catherine MacKinnon (1989) asserts that the act of consciousness-raising, so
closely associated with second wave feminism, serves to expose and confront oppression
precisely through the coming together of women to give voice to their experiences. The
power of discourse from this social collective lies in explicating the patriarchal power
of dominant social structures and is, by virtue of its grounding in hearing women’s
voices, “transformative as well as perceptive” (p.225). The social collective of students
gathered in a classroom with a woman as teacher may serve as such a forum, allowing
female students the safety to bring to voice their experiences of subordination, and male
students the recognition of their relative positions of privilege. The teacher herself, by
reading a situation as ready for a potentially provocative response, may experience a
reinforcement of her decision to do just that when it opens the door for alternate
discourses. In order for this to happen, however, the interlocutors need to be open to
embodying discursive possibilities that differ drastically from those common outside of
that space. Turning back to a consideration of the Chorus, I would argue that it serves as
another example of creating a discursive space that permits members to embody alternate
realities.

Several members of the Chorus openly admit that they are not “out” as lesbians
in their workplace or in certain social situations. As previously mentioned, they perceive
it as too threatening to their livelihood or, in one case, potentially harmful to her person. They stand proudly, however, with other Chorus members and sing same-gender lyrics, perform at Gay Pride, or in tribute to the 10th anniversary of the Triangle Gay Men’s Chorus. In the context of the social collective, there is not only safety but also a legitimizing of their identity, a practice that slowly erodes the barriers to recognizing those same privileges in a greater context. The discourse between the Chorus and its primary audiences is a lovefest: we stand as women and sing about who we are and who we love; they respond with laughter and applause and with bigger numbers year and year. The discourse feeds itself and is transformational not only for the closeted Chorus member who decides to quit her job where she cannot state who she is, but also for the audience member who signs the petition for marriage equality, the clergy member who vows to lead his or her congregation in becoming an open and affirming church, the parent who sits with the partner of her lesbian daughter at the concert.

Further Possibilities

The Common Woman Chorus defines itself as feminist by virtue of its celebration of women’s lived experiences, its creation of safe space for women of all sexual orientations to affirm their relationships, and its dedication to equality of voice. Each of these characteristics is evident in the performances staged by CWC, performances that also represent a deconstruction of traditional views of gendered attributes. In conducting these performances, a discourse with the potential for social and political transformation ensues; this discourse is intrapersonal as well as interpersonal, scripted as well as unpredictable, and takes place in safe spaces as well as riskier contexts. While perhaps not a classic picture of consciousness-raising as advocated by
early feminists, the chorus nevertheless serves as a social collective that prods its members as well as its audience to give voice to alternate realities of women’s lives, and is in turn prompted to sing them with even greater volume and attention to the diversity of women’s experience.
I had missed the first rehearsal of the semester one year, and returned to the Chorus to find a couple of new faces seated in various vocal sections. One new member of the second sopranos was a tall, statuesque redhead whose voice I could tell even during warm-ups would increase our quality and our volume tremendously. As we began singing through our first four-part piece, however, a different sound crept into the group. I thought at first we were having difficulty getting to the harmony, but became aware of others around me shifting uneasily and stealing glances toward the alto sections. We finished the first run-through and the director, looking a little bewildered, suggested that we sing the two soprano parts alone, followed by the two alto parts. The sopranos were fairly tight with the melodies, satisfactory for an early-in-the-season rehearsal. When the altos began, however, there it was again: a monotonous undertone that sounded like a buzz saw undercutting the tune. It soon became apparent that the sound was coming from the second alto section, and from a newcomer who was smiling, closing her eyes and singing each dead note so enthusiastically one might think she had found her true calling. The rehearsal became increasingly silent; the usual banter within sections so irritating to the director was reduced to throat-clearing and nervous restlessness. Even with a change of music and closer physical proximity between the other members of the second alto section, the buzz saw droned on. The musical director insightfully moved us into vocal parts to rehearse, stating that we needed to polish our parts separately before combining
them again. She assigned leaders to work within each group and assigned herself to the second alto section.

The woman with the buzz saw voice was only present for two or three rehearsals that semester. She had been an audience member for the previous concert and was eager to belong to the community of women she observed performing that evening. I had little direct contact with her except to say hello, but from all accounts and all appearances, she was cheerful and pleasant and enthusiastic about the Chorus – exactly the kind of member the community would wish for. Except she couldn’t sing. What happens when someone joins a non-audition chorus, but sings in monotone and does so loudly and enthusiastically?

Though I have several times since then wondered about the woman who couldn’t sing and how her exit came about, here is what I observed about the actions of the CWC community in response. The musical director acted that first night to minimize the discomfort of other singers and also to minimize the embarrassment of the woman in the event that she began to notice responses to her sound. The director has also subsequently referred to having provided the woman with other opportunities to be involved, but has never publicly aired the issue in front of the group as a whole. Beyond the director’s actions relative to this situation, however, the actions of another member of the Chorus were particularly poignant to observe.

Jude is a stalwart and talented second alto who lives and loves music. She frequently coaches inexperienced singers on ways to learn music, and has been responsible for introducing several a cappella pieces, and vocal and instrumental percussion accompaniments to certain arrangements. At the end of the first rehearsal with
the woman-who-couldn’t-sing, I noticed Jude approaching her and guiding her to the side of the room while the rest of us milled about putting away chairs, moving the piano and engaging in the typical post-rehearsal socializing. I watched her as she looked at the evening’s music with the woman, smiled and nodded, sang through some measures, and patted her back in encouragement. I found myself suddenly emotional watching her in action. Jude had not ignored the problem or left it for someone else to deal with; I knew that she had somehow offered to help the woman learn the music and had preserved her dignity in doing so privately. Her warmth and humanity were evident in her approach. I felt I had witnessed the epitome of creating safe space.

Jude didn’t welcome the woman-who-couldn’t-sing regardless of vocal ability: she offered to help her learn to match pitch and practice the songs. Each time the woman came to a rehearsal, Jude was by her side modeling the sound and rhythm. She attempted to create a space in which the woman’s abilities could be maximized to sing with the group. In the end, the community’s need for competent musical performance outweighed the benevolent desire to honor the woman’s wishes to be involved as a singer. She could not, as much as she might have tried, blend with the group.

At a board meeting several months later, Jude’s actions were discussed and she down-played their importance, but more than one board member noted how touched they had been by her overtures. The musical director has since referred to Jude as “a shepherd”. Jude seemed chagrined that she hadn’t been able to coach the woman into being a more competent singer, but board members were clear in their opinion that the level of performance of the group had to be maintained. The experience with the woman-who-couldn’t-sing had not only immediate but also long-term effects. Not only did
members appreciate the personal support demonstrated in this situation, but it also became clearer that the community exists to perform music together, and to perform it at an increasingly skilled level. The board modified the community’s long-standing self-description as a “non-audition chorus” so that the website text now reads:

Performing membership is open to any woman who enjoys choral singing, can match pitch, and can commit to the chorus’s regular rehearsal schedule. Performing members rehearse weekly and learn the music to the satisfaction of the musical director before performing with the group.

Nonperforming members participate in committee and board work that augments, supports, and enhances chorus activities.

**Non-Audition Policy**

Performing members’ musical skills range from professional musician to untrained shower diva. Auditions are not required for most chorus activities. Our artistic director teaches the basic concepts of music and musical performance during rehearsals. She also confirms that performing members know their music to performance standard.

Chapter 4:  
>You Are The Music<sup>18</sup> 
The Common Woman Chorus and Musical Performance

The previous considerations of community and feminism served to illustrate constructs related to the identity of the chorus and the relationships of those who call themselves members of the group. A third consideration, that of musical performance, broadens the ethnographic lens to consider the dialogue between the chorus and those outside its’ membership circle. Two to four times a year, the chorus steps beyond its rehearsal space into realms of public performance, some more intimate than others, and engages – through music – in conversation with the various broader social and political contexts in which it is embedded. The concerts planned and staged by the chorus, which represent the bulk of the group’s performances, largely draw audiences of affinity: those who have a personal connection with the chorus, are drawn in by the concert theme, or attracted by the reputation or stated mission of the chorus. Other performances, such as the previously described Eno River Festival appearances, as well as music performed for faith-based, social justice or celebratory events, may be more or less aligned with the mission of the chorus, depending on how the event was arranged. In each circumstance, however, the performance of the chorus serves to introduce or further a dialogue between the chorus and the inhabitants of the performance space. This musically-mediated

---

<sup>18</sup> You Are The Music, composed by Joan Szymko was performed by the chorus at their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert entitled The Divine Secrets of the La-La Sisterhood. Consisting of multiple key and timing changes throughout the piece, it was one of the most difficult compositions the chorus had attempted to date.
dialogue requires examination at multiple levels: the medium itself (music), the delivery (performance) and the sociopolitical context (the space, place and time of performance).

The Music

How is the music performed by the Common Woman Chorus chosen? What guidelines exist to influence that process, and what relationship do the decisions about music have to the mission of the chorus? Music performed by the Common Woman Chorus during the past three seasons has ranged from relatively obscure independent compositions with interesting choral complexity to mainstream popular music to scores adapted from traditional songs and rewritten in protest of social injustice. How do these widely differing genres of music find their way into the repertoire of this chorus performing in this sociogeographic context?

Music scheduled for performance in each concert season is determined by a music selection committee of the CWC, and while that committee is open to involvement from any interested member of the chorus, it most typically includes those with more formal musical training working with the designated concert chairs and the musical director. The director also retains the right to include or reject certain musical selections based on the ability of the group to manage their complexity. The by-laws of the Common Woman Chorus (2004, revised) stipulate:

The Chorus shall be organized for the purpose of advancement, appreciation, and public performance of choral music arranged for women’s voices—for the education, benefit, entertainment, and good of Chorus members and the general public, with the ultimate goal of

19 Examples of this range of music include CWC’s performance of You Are the Music (Szymko, commissioned by the Miami University Choraliers in 2006 in celebration of 100 years of women’s choral singing), Wind Beneath My Wings (arr. Allbritton) from the hit movie Beaches starring Bette Midler and Barbara Hershey, and Never Sit Down (adapted from Sit Down Sister!) commemorating the lives of women of color who stood for racial justice.
raising consciousness about the quality of women’s lives and particular experiences locally and around the world…
(Article VI)

and the online description of the Chorus describes its intent to perform music that is representative of the “diversity and experiences of women’s lives”
(www.commonwomanchorus.net, retrieved March 6, 2009). That intention often gives way, however, to music that simply best fits the concert theme, such as the selection of scores written by Elton John for the Disney company movie “The Lion King” and performed by the Chorus in its 2006 children’s concert entitled The Circle of Life. At other times, the selection is made based on the suitability of music for four-part women’s harmony, or on its identification with certain sociopolitical issues.

Four-part harmony for women’s voices demands music that is specifically arranged with first and second soprano parts as well as first and second alto parts; the use of male-voice tenor and bass parts for lower women’s voices does not easily translate. More commonly available is music written for two women’s voice parts – a single soprano and single alto line. Often when music is introduced to the group with this type of arrangement, however, the chorus is somewhat disappointed. Despite varying musical abilities in the group, two part arrangements are viewed as less challenging and therefore less desirable to perform. A long-time chorus member who expressed this view to me in conversation but requested not to be named, stated it this way:

*I just couldn’t sing this semester because the pieces weren’t that interesting. It’s not that I’m a great singer, but we can do more complex things than the pop music we are singing this time. It’s for a good cause, but it just wasn’t worth the time I invest to sing that kind of music. That’s why (name withheld 1) and (name withheld 2) also aren’t singing.*
(anonymous, personal communication March 2005)
Chorus members’ reactions to two-part music as lacking in complexity and therefore not challenging enough to result in a worthwhile performance reinforces the idea introduced in the narrative preceding this chapter that quality of musical performance ultimately trumps the social inclusivity of the community. Women of all musical abilities are welcomed, but with the caveat that they can support the delivery of a quality musical performance. This has most recently been expressed as “being able to match pitch,” a requirement stated in the most recent version of the Common Woman Chorus New Member Guide, drafted by the board of directors in the Spring of 2008.

Excerpts from two interviews conducted as a part of this ethnography speak to the over-arching emphasis on music and musical performance as the foundation of the chorus’ longevity. Miriam, a founding member, was interviewed along with two other chorus members whom she had known for many years. They reminisced at some point about the chorus outlasting many of the other groups in which they had each been involved. When asked why they thought this was the case, Miriam was emphatic:

“…because music is transcendent. Music brings people together in ways that no other cause or organization can. At the heart of the matter, it’s music.”

(Miriam, interview July 2008).

Kristen, a former music teacher and currently a leader in the chorus as past-President of the board and occasional music director, centers music in an equally strong way:

There’s continuity through music. So many people grew up singing and when you reach adulthood, people just don’t do that any more. It’s like reaching back and regaining a part of yourself – finding that continuity through music.

(Kristen, personal communication April 2005.)

In addition to the musical arrangement specific to women’s voices, the Common Woman Chorus – and, according to Stachan (2006), many other women’s choruses –
seeks music with a certain social ethic. This will be covered in more depth in a later section. Finding music that fits the particular cause selected for a concert, and specifically music arranged in four-part women’s harmony and, most desirably, music that is composed by women has not always been an easy task, according to a former CWC board President:

> It’s not easy to walk into any music store or order from any music press and find the type of music we want to perform. Before we found Yelton-Rhodes, we were sometimes stuck with bootleg copies of whatever we could find.

(Erin, interview March 18, 2005).

The name Yelton-Rhodes® used by Erin refers to the Yelton-Rhodes Music Publishers BMI and Barton Rhodes Press ASCAP groups, a California-based company specializing in “not-so-typical” choral music ([www.yrmusic.com](http://www.yrmusic.com), retrieved March 6, 2009). Founded in 1995, Yelton-Rhodes offers printed-to-order musical scores by composers whose work doesn’t often find its way into mainstream music catalogs. As stated on its website, the mission of Yelton-Rhodes music is as follows:

> Yelton Rhodes Music and Barton Rhodes Press publish lyrical music with a message that promotes inclusiveness and tolerance of the broad spectrum of human nature. This catalog reflects a wide variety of points of view with respect to religion, sexuality, entertainment, gender, history, death, life, love, and society.

Retrieved March 6, 2009

While beyond the scope of this writing to judge the uniqueness of the Yelton-Rhodes company in terms of its musical mission, the recognition of their contributions to women’s choral music – and lesbian-feminist choral music options in particular –
by Erin, who is a knowledgeable and versatile musical performer\textsuperscript{20}, speaks to their relative importance for this choral community. Finding “dynamic and relevant literature for women’s choruses” (p.30) has been a long-standing challenge, according to Roma (2004), a choral conductor and professor of music. She notes that while women in many different cultural contexts have a long history of singing together, the study of women’s choral music has been underrepresented in academic music departments, and within the printed repertoire of literature available to women interest in collective singing (2004). Once again a connection emerges between feminism and women’s choral music: Roma credits Second Wave Feminism of the 1970s as responsible for resurgent interest in women’s music and the subsequent burgeoning of sources which have made it more available.\textsuperscript{21}

Despite the enhanced selection of both recorded and sheet music specifically relevant to the lesbian and feminist communities however, the majority of music sung by the Common Woman Chorus comes from many different sources. During the past three and a half years, the sources have been as varied as an individual composer and a mainstream publishing house that supplies popular music from hit television and movie productions. Often the latter pieces are chosen for thematic reasons, and then appropriated by the chorus through a change in lyrics. The lyrical alterations are typically related to re-gendering expressions of affection, or as in the case of the fall 2006 concert

\textsuperscript{20} Erin is classically trained as an opera singer and for a number of years performed opera vocationally. She currently sings in a highly-skilled audition-based mixed gender chorale in addition to her participation in the Common Woman Chorus. As one of the members who frequently serves on the music selection committee and occasionally serves as guest conductor, Erin is recognized as one of the more musically knowledgeable members of the community.

\textsuperscript{21} It is worth noting here the contextual parallels between the advent of Ladyslipper Music® of Durham, a pioneer in cataloging and distributing women’s music from the 1970s till the present time, and the credit given to feminist organizations for the present availability of music that speaks to women’s lives.
*Menopause: A Menstrual Show*, done for comedic effect. The familiar song “Try to Remember” from *The Fantasticks* (Schmidt, 1960) became a parody of memory loss symptoms associated with menopause:

**Trying To Remember**

Music by: Harvey Schmidt  
Lyrics Adjusted by: Bernise (last name withheld) & Joan (last name withheld)  
Arranged by: Roger Emerson

Trying to remember the name of my neighbor--  
What is her name? We just had coffee!  
Now I am trying to introduce her--  
I really know her—What’s happened to me?

Oh for the days when my memory never failed  
Now my cortex is missing details—  
Trying to remember and if I remember, then Wahoo!  
Wahoo….wahoo…wahoo…

Why am I walking into the bedroom?  
I know I came in here for something—  
Where are my glasses and where is my key-ring?  
Post-It notes are my salvation!

Memory lapses or failing synapses, I hear it gets better—  
At least I hope so!  
Work the gray matter, please pass the Sudoku, then  
Wahoo!  
Wahoo….wahoo…wahoo… *(cheering)*

Menopause can make you feel like a fool—might as well  
work on your sense of humor—  
You will be kinder and much more forgiving—  
Or that is one prevailing rumor!

Try to remember but if you can not,  
Then explain that your memory cells are shot!  
Try to remember—HELL! -- I will remember!  
I have to!—need to!—want to!—oooh-oooh  
*(fade and look around as if lost…)*

The *Menopause* concert was the first performance in which memorization of all pieces was mandated by the director and supported by the board of directors: that decision reportedly led to several long-time members dropping out of the chorus.  
Ironically, the *Menopause* concert also contained five songs which consisted of altered lyrics, making the memorization of what might have been familiar tunes all the more
challenging. At that point in time, however, the chorus was pushing its boundaries.
Excellence in performance was gaining momentum as the emphasis of the group: the
music itself was important, but the *quality* of musical performance was paramount.
Performance came into focus as the means through which the chorus communicates the
messages of the music, and the messages of the community.

**Performance:**

Though arguably dating to much earlier times, the current model and practices of
Western community choruses are noted by Ahlquist (2006) to stem from eighteenth-
century notions of “individuality and freedom of association” (p.2). In particular she
notes the influence of nineteenth century German male choruses as models for
organizational music-making that reflected the sociopolitical context of the day and
served as historical determinants for future uses of musical performance. No longer was
music only offered to the masses by professional opera performers or as part of a high
church ritual, but rather it was performed by the masses in many contexts and by various
types of groups. Roma (2004) would add that “ancient, vibrant and varied” (p.29) choral
customs existed much earlier among groups and gatherings of women, but were often
passed on only in oral traditions, leading to their relative obscurity in the academic study
of choral performance. As emphasized with the models of the German male choruses,
however, women’s collective music-making used singing as a means of everyday
communication and self-expression rather than a professional undertaking reserved only
for those educated in its specificities (Drinker, in Roma 2004, p.30)

The profile of the Common Woman Chorus and the performances it enacts
resonate with these characteristics of community choral singing: a non-audition policy for
participation, volunteer leadership (including accompanist and musical director at this
time) and the use of music as commentary on everyday life situate it within both of the
choral traditions mentioned above. The actual concert performances of the Common
Woman Chorus will be covered in the final section of this chapter in a consideration of
those performances as contextually-relevant activism. I would argue, however, that the
performances of the chorus extend beyond the concert as a literal artistic presentation into
other realms of public dialogue through electronic and print materials used to represent
the group and publicize its concerts.

Performance is a concept that has received much attention in Folklore studies in
the past 30 years. Bauman’s (1977:1984) seminal work on verbal art as performance
situated performance as the dynamic focal point of folklore studies, moving the discipline
away from a narrow exploration of bounded historical artifacts and texts toward a
consideration of interaction between performer and audience as emergent (p.57). This
emergent quality – the idea that history is being constructed at the moment of interaction
between audience and performer (Kapchan, 2003, p.122) – challenges the ethnographer
to resist temptation to analyze the act of performing solely from the perspective of the
performance event and attend also to the performative interaction. Though Bauman’s
(1977) early examples of verbal art were of everyday speech and rituals of language
(storytelling (p.13), cultural speech patterns (p.19) and poetry (p.38)), parallels can be
drawn to the levels of performance of the Common Woman Chorus by considering
Bauman’s basic concept of language as social interaction (Bauman & Briggs, 1990).
The chorus, in addition to its literal musical performances, uses two other means of communication which warrant attention as performances of identity and mission. Non-musical narrative pieces performed during concerts, and publications created for the purposes of marketing, advertising and outlining concerts are both frequent and substantial modes of communication employed by the chorus.

My first CWC concert, the *Love and Marriage* theme that has been explored in several chapters in this writing, included a scripted theatrical performance interspersed with music. I later discovered this was not the first time writers in the chorus had taken on that challenge; on at least two previous occasions, a theatrical script had been created to augment the performance. Not all concerts have such an elaborate narrative, but every concert I have experienced as either a singer or audience member has included some form of non-musical performance. For the *Menopause: A Menstrual Show* concert, one chorus member introduced themes with vignettes crafted around a well-known television character from the 1980s and 90s. In the *Peace and Justice* concert, for which I was in the audience, members created a text-and-photo based slideshow to enhance the performance of a specific song. And in the 25th anniversary concert: *Divine Secrets of the La-La Sisterhood*, various members performed tributes to honor the traditions and parody the history of the chorus. Though for this concert it had been decided that music should be the centerpiece of the show, the narrative parts were used to connect the theme, pay tribute to supporters of the chorus, address the “secrets” of the chorus, and allow the director to reflect on the development of the group’s musicality. I will address most directly the function of the “secrets” narrative.

---

22 I would also argue that the chorus website serves to perform identity and mission of the group in a public sphere as well, but given that it has recently been updated and comparison to the original was not done as part of this project, the focus will be on other aspects of public performance.
I had the privilege of writing and performing with another chorus member “The Straight Woman’s Guide to the La-La Sisterhood,” a performance narrative in which we spoke in tandem as women – one straight and one lesbian – musing to themselves about how they were perceived by the chorus as a whole. We played off stereotypes in wondering whether or not our sexual orientation had ever been questioned:

\begin{quote}
Straight woman: \textit{I said something the other day about being a social worker and then heard someone comment on “do-gooder lesbian social workers”}
Lesbian woman: \textit{I brought my dish in a casserole carrier to the potluck last week and almost got laughed out of the room.}
Unison: \textit{I wonder if they think I’m…} (each taking a different ending)…gay/straight?
\end{quote}

Sawin (2002), critiquing Bauman’s explication of performance from a perspective of gendered subjectivity, notes that Bauman fails to fully conceptualize the role of the audience and of emotion in women’s performances. She contends that both gender and artistry are \textit{performed} (p.55) in that they are phenomena emergent in dialogic contexts via processes of shaping that occur at both emotional and intellectual levels during the interaction between performer and audience. While Sawin’s argument focuses on a gendered subjectivity and certainly has relevance to the performance narratives of the Common Woman Chorus, I would also argue that a subjectivity related to sexual orientation plays out in similar fashion within this group. The above example provides a point of analysis.

Sawin argues that to be fully conscious of gendered performances, we must explore not only emotional interchanges, but also aspects of gender identity that are “invoked, enacted, rejected or consciously reshaped” (2002, p.56) in performance. Following the performance of the “Straight Woman’s Guide….” several former chorus
members commented that they enjoyed hearing this aspect of the chorus’ history performed aloud. Though the chorus has always officially stated it welcomes anyone who identifies as a woman and supports the musical mission, its origins within the lesbian community serve even now to create a situation in which the long-standing question on the lips of lesbian women is shifted to those with a majority identity: “Am I welcome here?” Emotion and experience played much stronger roles in the audience’s reception of and reaction to this performance than did intellect. The intent of the narrative we wrote and performed was precisely to bring the issue to an experiential level and perform the emotion of positive regard for one another. Performing identities related to both gender and sexual orientation is evident in publications of the CWC as well.

Virtually all print material used by the Common Woman Chorus over the past 20 years can be traced to the artistic talents of one member. A. Williams listens to the goals of the chorus, reflects on the current concert theme and scans her environment for social, cultural and political cues relevant to both. She then crafts these polyphonic ideas into a graphic and textual representation of the concert being produced (for examples from the last three years, see Fig. 1, page 83). That Ms. Williams is talented goes without saying; that she is trusted to represent the chorus so ubiquitously speaks to her longevity as a member and her established reputation for producing work that is visually appealing, occasionally provocative and consistently interesting. Her designs, a direct and often pointed commentary on political issues and social stereotypes, provide a fitting segue into the final section of this chapter, a consideration of the artistic performances of the chorus in their particular socio-geographic context.

23 In particular note the use of an old-fashioned paper-on-stick church fan design in the top left of Figure 1, the inclusion of a photo from the NC Pride Parade on the top right, and the two female figures on the cake in the promotional flyer for the Love and Marriage concert.
FIG. 2: Concert Flyers. Replicated with permission of the artist. All rights reserved: A. Williams
Musical performance in context

The argument for considering choral performance as a dialogue is empty without considering the dialogic partner, namely the audience. As mentioned in the introductory section of this chapter, the physical audience present for most CWC concerts is an affinity group – people who are familiar with and seek out the messages sung by the chorus. Audience, however, must also be considered as part of a broader context – cultural, temporal, physical and social - that both shapes and responds to that being performed. Music and education professor Freed-Garrod (2008) describes music as a cultural semiotic, a medium for transmitting meaning, and in many cases, sustaining cultural identity. Victor Turner also speaks to the transformative power of performance:

* Cultural performances are not simple reflectors or expressions of culture or even of changing culture but may themselves be actives agencies of change, representing the eye by which culture sees itself and the drawing board on which creative actors sketch out what they believe to be more apt[...]. (Turner, 1986, p. 24)

While the broader context in which performances of the Common Woman Chorus take place could be considered from various perspectives, one of the most poignant angles from which to contemplate its dialogue with an audience beyond the walls of a concert hall is that of a sociogeographic perspective. The American South is home to the Common Woman Chorus, though one could argue that the room it occupies in that home is a relatively liberal, politically progressive niche – much like occupying the basement apartment in your parent’s home once you are no longer a minor. Yet just like the adult child, the chorus must at times emerge from its room and interact with the other members of the household. In this analogy, that household consists of a diverse and contested
family steeped in a gumbo of rich musical traditions and served over a side of discrimination and oppression.

Asked to define Southern music, one might easily think in terms of regional genres: Nashville country, Delta blues, New Orleans jazz, Appalachian old-time. Is a specific locale required as part of the definition of music of the American South, however? Do the musicians or composers need to originate from the South or their music evoke a certain creed or ethic in order to be classified as Southern? When considering the origin or proliferation of certain styles of music in various regional locales, those questions are certainly pertinent. There are, however, other interesting questions to be posed in regards to the intersection of music and Southern identity. If we move away from attempting to define Southern music, and instead focus on attempting to understand how music has been used to perform Southern-ness - or stand in opposition to or attempt to expand that identity - provocative possibilities emerge that render inadequate the questions of geographic origin or regional distinctiveness. Whether or not music originates in the South becomes a secondary consideration in the exploration of how music is used to challenge the dominant culture of the South.

The American South in 2009 finds itself in the infancy of the 21st century unmasked from the façade of white Protestant identity so pervasive throughout the preceding two hundred years. Its refashioning is undoubtedly the result of the voices of Southerners of all types intensifying in volume and demanding acknowledgement as legitimate contributors to the tapestry of Southern culture. These voices have, in many instances, been ones of oppressed groups demanding attention to inequalities, exposing injustices, and proudly expressing alternate ways of knowing the American South. For
the purposes of this paper, the consideration of voices using the medium of music to communicate the need for social change is of central importance. Rather than attempt to establish specific music as Southern, or authenticate groups of singers or musicians as Southerners, I propose to explore the dialogue between music and society in Southern contexts, focusing on the use of music by or in relationship to three distinct communities: African-Americans during the height of the Civil Rights movement in the South, Native Americans living in the southeastern United States and attempting to gain federal recognition of tribal status, and women identifying as lesbian-feminists who perform social activist music in a Southern context. The first two groups and their use of music will be explored from historical and journalistic records; the latter group from an ethnographic perspective.

The southern United States offers an historical, sociopolitical and geographic backdrop for music which results in performance that, I will argue, is shaped in dialogue with that complex context. While the techniques of African-American music, for example, can be linked to instrumentation and vocalization found on the continent of Africa (Waterman, 1990; Jahn, 1990), their use in the plantation fields of the South served specific functions within the community of enslaved people at a particular period in time (see Odum and Johnson, 1926). The later use of music as protest during the U.S. Civil Rights era shows both stability and evolution of musical technique and function, with a continuity of purpose in expressing the situation of a community of people in intense and conflicting dialogue with a dominant ideology. There are scores of musical examples that could be considered in this discussion and a myriad of ways in which they have been analyzed as pertinent to protest and social change (Ames, 1990). For the
purposes of this paper, however, we will consider one specific example of a song originating somewhere outside the region that nevertheless came to speak within and against a culture of oppression in the American South. *We Shall Overcome*, often considered the anthem of the early nonviolent Civil Rights movement, offers a clear example of the appropriation and performance of music by a group of people to express discontent within a Southern context.

Seeger and Reiser (1989) recount that in 1957 Martin Luther King, Jr., after hearing a modified version of *We Shall Overcome* on the previous day, turned to a fellow activist after finding himself humming the tune, and said “*We Shall Overcome*: that song really sticks with you, doesn’t it” (p.8). Dr. King certainly couldn’t predict how much the song would stick. He could not at that point have imagined that 8 years later, in 1965, then President of the United States, Lyndon B. Johnson, would use the lyrics to declare, following the Bloody Sunday attack on civil rights workers, that the United States (*we*) would *overcome* the plight of racism (Murphy, 2003). What King heard that day in 1957 was a Seeger-and-friends adaptation of a song they learned from the musical director of a folk school, who attributed it to striking tobacco workers in South Carolina in 1945 (Seeger & Reiser, 1989) and that likely evolved from a gospel tune originally written by the Reverend Charles A. Tindley, an American Methodist minister from Philadelphia, in 1903 (Branch, 1988 p. 310). The song itself was not southern in origin or in character, and yet it became the freedom cry for southern African-American civil rights workers and their allies, particularly those espousing nonviolent protest.

Murphy (2003) provides an intriguing commentary on the transformation of *We Shall Overcome* through this period of some 60 years. Originally called *I Will Overcome*
Some Day, it is believed to have been sung in an African-American fast-paced gospel style with hand-claps on the predominant beats (ibid. p.4). Its evolution to the current more mournful style was reportedly due to a mixture of intentional lyrical emphasis and accidental stylistic changes (Seeger & Reiser, 1989). The widespread adoption of the song was not without contention, according to Murphy (2003), largely because of the assumed passivity and idealism of the one word that follows the title phrase: “someday” (p.6). Apparently, later civil rights activists decried the song for its assumed message of waiting on the goodwill of others, but Murphy (ibid.) provides an alternate explanation of “participatory adaptation” (p.5), arguing that the song as sung by Seeger and embraced by Dr. King allowed for a growing collective voice to join together in an increasingly powerful number. The collective voice overcame the passivity of the lyrics, and acknowledged a community of people standing together to fight against injustice and discrimination. That community, in a spirit of “participatory composition” (Murphy, 1989, p.5) then began to add its own increasingly potent verses such as the eventual “We are not afraid”.

In the above example a song is passed through time, sequentially touching individuals who are connected by their convictions, and then swelling into the message of a community of activists. That its composer was a black minister undoubtedly gave it legitimacy within the community who came to perform it, but it was a white folk singer who adapted it to its currently familiar form and passed it on to the recognized leader of the 20th century fight for Civil Rights in the American South. A community used this song to articulate its resolve to persevere in the face of unrelenting and appalling discrimination, and in doing so created an identity shared with everyone who lifted their
voice in solidarity with the struggle. Eyerman (2002) notes this as the essence of the use of music in the civil rights movement, a movement in which the collective singing of an oral culture leads to “…identification with a group that [may never] meet face-to-face” but that produces “a great sense of emphatic belonging” (p.446). This notion of shared identity is very powerful for a community that is denied full inclusion into the dominant culture. As shared identity is built, it becomes a means of unifying against the dominating social order: this is also evident in the next example of the use of powwows by Native American people living in current-day North Carolina.

The Occaneechi band of the Saponi nation is a relatively small American Indian community located primarily in northeastern Alamance and northwestern Orange counties of North Carolina (http://www.occaneechi-saponi.org/history.html; retrieved 10 November, 2006). The Occaneechi describe themselves as lineal descendents of the Saponi confederation of Indians, who are a subset of a much larger band of Sioux Indians and whose geocultural origins are traced back to what is now labeled the Mid-Atlantic and southeastern United States (ibid.). Documentary evidence of the Occaneechi people appears in public records as early as 1720 and given that these papers mention adult members of the community, their presence in this area of North Carolina assuredly dates into the 17th century. Prior to this time, it is likely that the ancestors of the Alamance and Orange-county Indians lived near what is today the border between Virginia and North Carolina, in the Piedmont and coastal plains of that area. This geographic orientation is important precisely because of the example of musical activism to be explored here. The Occaneechi community has, for the past nine years, organized a powwow as part of its
reclamation of Indian heritage, a ritual performance that is not native to eastern Indian peoples, but that serves both to claim solidarity and distinguish cultural heritage.

Goertzen (2001), an ethnomusicologist, has explored the cultural identity of North Carolina Indians as expressed through powwows, and contends that for the Occaneechi, beginning a powwow ceremonial tradition was a natural evolution of other community gatherings that was used to firmly establish as recognizable their authentic Indian heritage which has been contested multiple times in recent decades. The Occaneechi applied for tribal status at least six times in the 1980s and 1990s, appealing to the North Carolina Commission of Indian Affairs to recognize their community as continuously organized for centuries (Goertzen, p. 58). Of the eight criteria used to determine the authenticity of a tribe, the Occaneechi representatives were told on at least three occasions that their application lacked sufficient evidence of an Indian expressive culture (typically understood as songs, dances and material arts) (ibid:p.64).

The attempt to gain official state tribal status was important to the Occaneechi as part of their “Homeland” reclamation project (http://www.occanechi-saponi.org/homeland_project.html; retrieved 30 November 2006), an effort to reacquire agricultural lands formerly belonging to the community and to recognize the presence of and contributions by the Occaneechi who first lived in Alamance and Orange counties. Without official tribal recognition, the community did not qualify to re-purchase the land and establish it as a commemorative area. The Occaneechi eventually achieved state tribal recognition in 1999, but not before being first criticized for not having easily recognizable Indian rituals, and later for adopting the custom of hosting powwows, which were native not to Indians of the eastern United States, but to those of the Western plains
Goertzen, p. 58). They did not act like Indians as the dominant society understands them, and yet they somehow misrepresented themselves by adopting the “wrong” rituals as their own. What this characterization represents, however, is a diminishing of the concept of Powwow, and a disregard for the shared cultural practices that allow it to be appropriated by Indians throughout the United States as their heritage in contrast to Anglo-American traditions.

The powwow is a cultural performance, consisting most universally of music and dance rituals, the sharing of food, and ceremonial rites, but can consist in different locations of things specific to that community. Goertzen (2001) reports that powwows in North Carolina often feature traditional Southern food, include members of different bands of area tribes, often include an honoring ritual (such as those for veterans of the U.S. military) and always have a musical component that includes instrumentation that is Pan-Indian as well as local (p.71). The music often includes hymns from the Southern Protestant tradition as well as drumming circles that incorporate call-and-response chants and circular singing from many Native American traditions. Does the absence of a music originating with the Occanechee negate the importance or validity of this cultural practice? On the contrary, one might argue that this melding of traditions effectively represents the historical passage of the Occanechee and situates their powwow as community-specific. Only the Occanechee could stage a powwow that incorporates the geography of the Piedmont with the religious music of Southern Protestantism that was thrust upon them following British colonization, and also embrace the ancient rituals of brethren Indians in a localized performance. The reasons for their decision to host powwows, however, are equally important to their content. As stated in the textual
history of the Occaneechi offered on their website, their relationship to Anglo-Americans, as for many other Indian tribes, was one of enduring discrimination and negation of their tribal customs as well as their ancestral lineages. For the Occaneechi, this discrimination was magnified by their position as people of color in the American South, a socio-geographic context that offered yet another layer of indignity to conquer:

In 1984, some of the Indians [...] formally reorganized as the Eno-Occaneechi Indian Association with the goal of preserving the Indian heritage of the community and teaching the young about their own history. The group began a concerted effort to [...] seek to correct the racial misclassifications on their birth certificates and other official documents that resulted from Jim Crow and other racist laws that had at one time been on North Carolina’s books. In addition, the Indian Association organized an annual Pow-wow [...] with Indians from many different tribes visiting with the community. In 1995, the Tribal Council amended the name to “The Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation” to reflect the historical record more accurately. ((http://www.occaneechi-saponi.org/history.html Retrieved 30 November 2006).

Dwight Conquergood (1991), an ethnographer and professor of performance studies offers a lens through which we might view the evolving Occaneechi powwow tradition:

What every ethnographer understands, however, is that the mode of “discussion”, the discourse, is not always and exclusively verbal: Issues and attitudes are expressed and contested in dance, music, gesture, food, ritual artifact, symbolic action, as well as words. Cultural performances are not simply epideictic spectacles: Investigated historically within their political contexts, they are profoundly deliberative occasions. (p.189)

Dozens of times, the Occaneechi appealed for state-level tribal recognition, effectively being told they were not “Indian enough”. The deliberative occasion they adopted, to paraphrase Conquergood, distinguishes them from the dominant Anglo-American culture in which they have survived for several centuries, continues but repositions their identity as Southerners, and most importantly signifies solidarity with other First Nation peoples.
It is not unreasonable to position the Occaneechi beside African-American civil rights activists and illustrate some commonalities of purpose in both groups’ use of music to assert identity, to stand against discrimination, and to reinforce community. These same concepts: the use of music to narrate community experience, and appropriation of music to assert identity – can be explored in relation to the Common Woman Chorus.

The Common Woman Chorus (CWC), now in its twenty-sixth year of musical performance in this same sociogeographic context, differs from the other two communities addressed in this paper in that it does not represent a distinct ethnic or racial group, but has in common with the previous two groups the use of music to narrate community experiences and assert community identity in a context of discrimination. Much as protest songs were used in the African-American civil rights struggle and powwows have been appropriated as an expression of Native American culture by tribes for whom they were not traditional rituals, the CWC uses music to respond to a cultural context in which its members’ identities are questioned and disparaged. It is a story of modern-day political activism enacted not by those who are confident orators with the support of ardent co-believers, but by those who have been battered and are vulnerable to denunciation and who fight back with the strength of community.

Discrimination takes many forms and stems from many sources. It can become socially institutionalized from an origin in capitalistic motivations as in the case of slavery, develop into oppressive governmental actions as in the case of policies regarding recognition of Native American peoples, or, as is frequently the case in the American South, be bolstered through religious fundamentalism with all the virtuous intentions and fervent evangelism characteristic of its followers. This last entity is the source of
discrimination most familiar to the members of the Common Woman Chorus, and figures prominently in the musical discourse within its Southern context.

John Shelton Reed (1982), in characterizing the enigma of the American South, asserts that it is necessary to understand the role religion plays in the life of the South in order to comprehend the cultural identity of the region. Reed contends that the allegiance of the South to religious life, particularly within White Protestant religious denominations, is one of the striking differences between it and other regions of the U.S., and a significant force in terms of sociocultural beliefs:

*Religious institutions play an important role in the social and spiritual life of the South. Southern Protestants are nearly twice as likely as non-Southern Protestants to assert that churchgoing is an essential part of the Christian life [...] They are less likely than Protestants elsewhere to feel that religion is irrelevant to the modern world, and they are more likely to feel that their churches are satisfactory as they are.[...] Some regional differences in attitudes more or less related to (Southern) religion – anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, opposition to the sale of alcoholic beverages and the like - may be decreasing, but the data strongly suggest that the religion of the New South will be as vigorous and distinctive as that of the Old. (Reed, 1982, pp.134-135).*

Though Reed’s description of Southern religion is more than twenty years old, it is noteworthy as a contemporary of the chorus’ date of origin, and remains relevant to the experiences of some chorus members with local religious organizations. CWC performs in the context of and in dialogue with *this* South – and despite some changes, this South remains heavily influenced by conservative Protestant religion.

Add to Reed’s list of attitudes related to religion – and Southern religion in particular - the relatively ubiquitous opposition to homosexuality, reflected in denominational decisions to reject homosexual members, prohibit homosexual clergy from serving the church, and influence the political process in a fight to establish nation-
wide bans against same-sex marriage in state constitutions. The federal Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA), signed into law by President Bill Clinton in 1996, effectively served to eliminate federal recognition of same-sex unions even if determined to be legal within individual states. In February 2004, President George W. Bush mounted an as yet unsuccessful campaign to amend the federal constitution to define marriage as only between a man and a woman, with the goal of preventing any possible future actions that would legalize or officially recognize same-sex unions. While there is not a direct link to religion made in each of these actions, rhetoric surrounding the rationale for them is infused with Judeo-Christian elements and the Anglo-American interpretation of them. Since the time of the DOMA, eighteen states have expanded the limitations on civil rights by instituting constitutional bans on same-sex marriages and/or civil unions, 10 of them situated geographically within the southeastern United States. In the 2004, 2005 and 2006 legislative sessions of the North Carolina representative assembly, bills have been introduced to amend the state constitution to include such a ban. At the time of this writing, representatives within the North Carolina House of Representatives are once again proposing state legislation that would constitutionalize the definition of marriage as an institution existing between one man and one woman. Each year the bill has been prevented from going forward to the state Senate, despite rigorous campaigning by conservative legislators (www.equalitync.org). Following what they viewed as success in keeping this ban at bay in 2004, but also invigorated by the battle, CWC began rehearsing music in January 2005 for what would become one of their most popular performances among their community audience and one that has been described in a previous chapter: the Love and Marriage concert.
The description of *Love and Marriage* in earlier chapters is sufficient to understand the content of the performance. Consisting of popular romantic music re-gendered and placed in the context of a staged lesbian wedding, the concert offered a message that was in part light-hearted music familiar to most ears; its meaning, however, extended deep into each individual singer’s soul and crescendoed into the world with communal passion to claim “the most fundamental human right…. […] the right to affection and the supportive love of another human being” (North Carolina Religious Coalition for Marriage Equality (NCRCME), 2004). In this sense it represented for this chorus at the time several layers of significance. The CWC not only incorporated into the concert well-known music and a humorous skit written by several members, but also overtly addressed the contemporaneous sociopolitical issues surrounding same-sex marriage through a slide show displaying the commitment ceremonies of all kinds of couples and a recitation of the Declaration of Religious Leaders and People of Faith in Support of Marriage Equality (NCRCME, 2004). The impact of the whole performance in response to the sociopolitical context was poignant for the Chorus members and the audience as well. It was seen not only as standing in opposition to political oppression, but also as important in that it was crafted and performed by women.

The women of CWC were not all born or raised in the South; some members, in fact, still puzzle over references to southern culture, or shake their heads at parodies of southern church hymns that leave the southerners among us laughing wickedly. The cultural context of the South affects all members, however, and not only serves to influence the group’s performances, but also demands responses to its challenging milieu. Related to an earlier discussion in chapter 2, this context speaks most directly to chorus
members as women, prior even to considering the overlay of sexual orientation. This was recently reinforced in an online discourse I initiated with Chorus members in which longtime member Angela contributed these thoughts:

The fact that we're in the most fundamentalist landscape in our country speaks to the special need for a community such as ours here, in the south -- particularly for women who grew to adulthood influenced by this dogma but also for nonsoutherners who live in this arena and are shaped by its limited roles. In larger and more progressive areas, many groups and organizations and communities give voice to feminist and progressive ideals. It is easier to find experiences and people who validate a full range of human experience and opinions. Schools are less likely to espouse one religious viewpoint and women are less apt to conform to Southern Baptist/fundamentalist identities. In our region, however, the dominant voice still tells women to submit graciously to men. It seeks to reign in our free movement in the world and to limit us to the home, making babies. Our fundamentalist neighbors and relatives pressure us to do the same. (Angela, personal communication: November 28, 2006)

It is not the intent of this paper to argue that CWC represents women as a whole community expressing identity through music, for it is, granted, a very specific community of women, accepting of if not involved in same-gender relationships. The Chorus situates itself first as a feminist organization, however, despite the ongoing debate over the use of that term, and as such embraces a responsibility to advance the causes and experiences of all women. This ethic will be revisited later when a past concert – the Breast Cancer Benefit and a more recent concert – Menopause: A Menstrual Show - are explained in more detail; for now we focus on the specific community represented by CWC and explore what it means for this community to exist and perform in the South.

When I asked the members of CWC to consider if there was anything specific about our being a southern feminist Chorus, some members pointed out specific song choices or adaptations to lyrics that represented a cultural reference particular to the South, or commented on things relative to the more specific locale (i.e. the Breast Cancer
oratorio, performed in 2004 by the Chorus, was seen as inspired by a confluence of factors that had to do with a focus on specialized health care in the region as well as the media surrounding several prominent local celebrities who were staging public battles with breast cancer). One member even said: “I’m sure there are things I should think of that are relevant to performing in the South, but it’s just so much a part of me I don’t realize the implications sometimes until someone points it out to me” (Betty, personal communication, November 29, 2006). Angela, a graphic artist who designs the concert programs for CWC, again offers her insights on this topic:

_Homosexuals are told that "God hates fags" on the news and in our newspapers and in our neighborhoods and over loudspeakers at our public gatherings. Employers can legally fire us and landlords can legally kick us out of our homes merely because they disapprove of/are afraid of our sexual identity. Religious groups proclaim us to be god's enemy and claim the right to destroy us. We are threatened with physical and mental harm in our everyday experiences and when we gather together. Homophobes leave hate letters on our cars when we gather together to sing at Binkley [Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, NC]. They use bullhorns to shout their hatred toward us at Pride. So many of the people with whom we rub elbows on a daily basis seek to silence us and work to pass legislation that does just that -- despite the fact that Justice Sandra Day O'Connor declared, in June 2003, that "a law branding one class of persons as criminal solely based on the state's [or region's] moral disapproval of that class and the conduct associated with that class runs contrary to the values of the constitution ... under any standard of review." Still, they work to deny the existence of our families and to pass laws that render us invisible. They paint whole, beautiful, loving women in wide, damning, limiting strokes that leave us all looking evil and inferior and wrong. This is the dominant regional voice. And this is why the community we make and the message we bring to our community are so important. (Angela: personal communication 11/28/06)

The importance of community so eloquently summed up by Angela is a consistent theme underlying descriptions of the CWC by its members. To understand the need for and impact of this type of community for the women involved, it is helpful to revisit
interviews conducted at the time of the first Love and Marriage concert. I interviewed seven of the CWC board members regarding the choice of this concert theme and their involvement with the Chorus as a whole. To a number, every woman expressed their love of music as the primary reason they came to be affiliated with CWC. At least three have extensive musical training, several others have considerable experience with musical performance, and all of them describe their involvement with CWC as principally and originally about music. As Barrett states:

……the reason I’ve never stopped singing in all these 10 years is just because singing lifts up my spirit….on Tuesdays…and even though I don’t feel like coming sometimes, I know that I’m gonna be back the next week because the music is just so interesting and I want to end up learning it. (Barrett: 4/19/05)

This love of music, however, is not the only passion driving their involvement. There are, for example, at least five other prominent choral groups in the Triangle that have been mentioned by board members, but none of them are considered in direct rivalry with the experience offered by the CWC. Erin, a past president of the board and a classically trained singer, belongs to another group that offers her the opportunity to hone her skills and focus on the precision of highly-trained choral performance; the CWC, however, has an emotional advantage over her other group:

For me it’s the only place to go and sing music that’s really speaks to me …there’s a lot of Choruses out there, but it’s the only Chorus where the subject matter really relates to me…being gay, being a feminist, and…. when I’m singing, I use singing as an outlet…an emotional outlet, a release….I love music, I love to sing, and it’s even better when the subject, the text, really speaks to me even more. (Erin: 4/27/05)

While claiming that love for the group with which these women identify influences their membership may be a mundane over-simplification, the notion of emotional connectedness is a repeated theme in conversations with the board members.
The idea of being connected to like-minded others is expressed in at least three ways: the desire for community, protectiveness toward others who have felt vulnerable in regards to their position in the world, and the empowerment experienced when uniting with others to confront social issues. Jolene, the first chorus member who responded to my request for interviews in 2005, provided a touching sense of these connections:

*I have lived in another part of North Carolina where it became unsafe for me to be in the community when it was discovered I was a lesbian – even though I had been involved in the church [...] This feels safer – and the chorus is a big part of that. I don’t underestimate the importance of that safety.*  
(Jolene, interview 1/30/2005)

The practice of members nurturing one another appears to be both spontaneous and intentional. Members greet one another with hugs and inquiries about well-being during rehearsals, occasionally bring snacks to share, and, according to several board members, have connections that extend beyond the confines of the rehearsals and concerts. On a more intentional level, the Board sets an expectation for connectedness that extends beyond music by establishing board positions responsible for the care of the community, instituting the “check-in” ritual outlined in an earlier chapter.

Beyond - and perhaps even surrounding – the idea of connectedness is a focus on safety, as mentioned above by Jolene. The need for safety is recognized as paramount in a community where individual members have felt threatened or discriminated against in the past because of their sexual orientation. One chorus member described it as “a relief” to be with a group where you can let down your guard, and referred to past experiences of people in the group losing jobs or living spaces when people in power discovered they were lesbians. That need for safety has in the past determined how the Chorus identified itself publicly, and also influenced the content of concerts. Betty, the long-time Board
secretary, also served as president in the past, and recalls a time of transition in the late
1990s between concern for secrecy and willingness to openly embrace the identity of the
Chorus as primarily a lesbian-identified organization:

> We were a little concerned when we (the Board) approached the Gay Men’s Chorus to do a collaborative concert, thinking that would be too threatening to the Chorus members. But we decided to put it to a vote, and explained that it would be a majority rules vote..... surprisingly, everyone there voted in favor of it! (Betty 4/27/05)

The concern for safety within the CWC is about more than concern for discreetion around sexual orientation, however. There is also attention to the fact that the Chorus is a group of singers with varying levels of musical training and ability. Despite the stated goal of the chorus to elevate its level of musical performance, there is also a commitment to it remaining a non-audition Chorus welcoming of all levels of ability. To this end, there is recognition that a confrontational or derisive approach to rehearsing music is counterproductive. CB, the music director, describes the environment she strives to create:

> I look at rehearsal as like an educational experience, so I think a lot about creating safety in learning because I think a lot of our...ummm..our traditional classroom settings have made people feel like they have to give the right answer, and there’s a lot of nervousness around that, so [.....] it’s an outgrowth of that[....] No one who comes to Chorus should ever be made to feel they are getting it wrong. (Cindy, 2/25/05)

This community that offers emotional sustenance and safe haven to its members also realizes its power through activism. The activism does not always concern issues of equal rights for people of diverse sexual orientation, but it does always address issues of importance to women. The example of the Breast Cancer concert offered as a prelude to chapter 2 resurfaces in this consideration. The musical content of the Breast Cancer concert focused not only on the tragedy of the illness, but the experiences of women
living with it, their adjustment to altered bodies, and their will to fight for life. The example of this concert doesn’t contribute directly to the discussion of performance in the context of the South, but does speak to the ability of communal performance to publicly assert topics that have at other times been hidden in shame or relegated to intellectual analyses. As Dwight Conquergood (1991) advocates, performance provokes us to ask questions regarding its intention. He asserts that one of the questions performance forces us to face is what the political implications are of the performance itself:


In the first example of the *Love and Marriage* concert, we can argue that the performance absolutely served to subvert ideology as well as resist hegemony. The *Breast Cancer Benefit* concert, while not as overtly political in nature, did serve to critique the dominant opinion that a woman’s body scarred by mastectomy is somehow less valuable than before the ravages of breast cancer surgery. A third and final example of a CWC performance which, despite its lightheartedness, also contained elements worthy of political analysis, was a more recent concert: *Menopause: A Menstrual Show*. Included in this concert was a short segment of Protestant hymns – termed the “Blood Hymns” for their original lyrics (*Nothing But the Blood, Power in the Blood, There is a Fountain filled with Blood and Power in the Blood*) rewritten to express distress over stereotypical symptoms of menopause, but performed in true southern rural church style, and parodied with high-pitched nasal voices and full-volume screeches on the vocal slides. When introducing the Blood Hymn segment, the musical director explained that
for some of the women for whom these hymns were very familiar, the memory of their original context was not altogether comfortable. Rewriting them, then, was an exercise of appropriation of their meaning and resistance to hegemony……and just plain fun.

Comparing the CWC to the other two communities highlighted in this section of the paper is not without controversy, even in my own mind. I don’t at all mean to assert that the discrimination faced by people of homosexual orientation is identical to the experience of racial or ethnic discrimination, only that subjugation in any form results in communities that unite in expressing who they are and in finding ways to be heard within the larger societal discourse. In this case, I offered three examples of musical performance used to protest the actions or assertions of a dominant social mindset, and place these examples in the context of the Southern United States, a region with a rich history of convoluted relationships with her people:

The South has had its full share of illusions, fantasies and pretensions and it has continued to cling to some of them with an astonishing tenacity that defies explanations. But the illusion that “history is something unpleasant that happens to other people” is certainly not one of them – not in the face of accumulated evidence and memory to the contrary. (Woodward, 1968)
Chapter 5
Everything Possible24
Twenty-Five Years and Going Strong

....you need to know that it was you who changed your life – and I’m glad if I got to help on the way – just as it was all of you who were part of an ongoing life-changing event for me…

(Eleanor, in a 2001 letter to the President of the CWC Board shortly following her retirement as its first musical director).

Perusing the archives of the Common Woman Chorus in the Sallie Biddle Collection at Duke University in the fall of 2008, I found the letter referenced above, and realized that the last line of Eleanor’s quote expresses eloquently my own experiences of the last three years with the Common Woman Chorus. It has indeed been – and is – an ongoing life-changing event. Indulging in a moment of ethnographic reflexivity will hopefully serve to illuminate the power of the participant-observer experience rather than ring too autobiographical.

I undertook this project in my mid-to-late 40s, having enrolled in a graduate program in Folklore to recapture past interests that I had not allowed to be the focus of my earlier education. I had vague notions of learning more about transmission of culture, traditional crafts, and oral traditions, but I never envisioned myself as part of a women’s chorus, and certainly didn’t expect to spend almost three years rooted in its soil. Though the major reason for the length of my involvement in the ethnographic process is clearly a parallel career with fulltime work focused on very different priorities, I now view my

---

24 Everything Possible is a lullaby written by composer Fred Small (1993) and performed on multiple occasions by the Common Woman Chorus. The lyrics include: “Oh, you can be whoever you want to be, you can love whomever you will. You can travel any country where your heart leads, and know that I will love you still”
work with the chorus as having come full circle in that my last official ethnographic act was as a performer in the 25th anniversary concert. At an earlier stage in my own life, I would have interpreted those 25 years as a natural consequence of a group of people having a reason to come together. I have experienced enough in life, however, to understand that even the richest of raw materials don’t materialize into substance without thoughtful and skilled attention. Throughout the process of collaborating with other chorus members to plan and carry out the 25th anniversary celebration, it became clear to me that even a group with a reason for being needs intention to actually be.

I have explored the chorus as community, as feminist in nature, and through a lens of performance analysis. No one of those three constructs can stand in isolation and tell the story of the chorus; no one of them can be removed from the others and leave a complete narrative. Yet I find this trinity of constructs still, despite their potential for further mining, a one-dimensional representation of a multi-dimensional being. My literal visual interpretation of what I mean by this is that I view community, feminism and musical performance as three overlapping circles that could be depicted flat on a page. I could even argue that at times the dimensions deepen as one or the other is brought to the forefront, illustrated by the examples I have provided throughout the preceding chapters. I also want, however, to conclude this narrative by figuratively standing those circles on edge, threading an imaginary and moveable line somewhere through their interiors (allowing them still to move between lesser and greater overlap at various times), and then add to the picture those forces that propel the continuity and integrity of these connections through intentional action.
And so I end where I began this journey: with the leadership of the Common Woman Chorus. Throughout the history of the chorus’ engagement with various audiences, its leaders have coordinated, negotiated, cajoled and shaped the outcomes of those interactions. Though most members of the chorus take on some type of leadership role at some point in their chorus career, the board of directors and the musical director are the most visible and ultimately accountable agents of chorus action. The foundations for their leadership have been discussed as feminist in ideology, and the results of their leadership dynamic and evocative musical performances. In between the foundations and the outcomes are the methods of leadership that have proven effective in sustaining the Common Woman Chorus as a viable and thriving community for over a quarter of a century. From my perspective, this leadership succeeds due to three attributes I have observed as consistent over time, though embodied at various times by different people: leadership that is resolute, leadership that is visionary, and leadership that is intentional.

It may seem contradictory to characterize an effective leadership as both resolute and visionary, and yet the presence of both characteristics serves to avoid conflict that Riger (1994) reports plagues many feminist organizations when leaders who wish to empower others undermine that empowerment in that they have the authority to grant it. I use the term resolute to describe leaders of the Common Woman Chorus who not only act to empower others, but are steadfast in making things happen by working alongside others in the opportunities they have created. These are the leaders that carry out the maintenance tasks of the organization: rewriting by-laws, maintaining contact lists, setting up for rehearsals, contacting sponsors, serving as concert chairs, helping to select music for concert seasons, serving as musical accompanists and organizing greeting cards
for members who are ill or celebrating a special occasion. Certainly some of the most resolute leaders are the financial managers of the chorus. Long-time treasurer Ruth was often referred to by other board members as a “fiscal watchdog” responsible for the viable financial position of the chorus at the time I joined; current treasurer Sarah balances careful oversight with humor and flexibility.

Though many members of the Common Woman Chorus participate in these unglamorous but essential roles, Lisa, the long-time special events coordinator, is a prime example of a resolute leader. I, along with about a dozen other members, worked alongside Lisa and her partner in setting up for the reception that followed the 25th anniversary concert. The undertaking of a reception for 200 people is benefited by Lisa’s background in catering, but her ability to use those same organizational skills in scheduling event venues, coordinating a convergence of people, instruments and timing for an annual outdoor festival performance, and managing the relationship with the facility sponsoring the chorus’s rehearsal space speaks to an overall ability to manage multiple tasks in orderly fashion. The 25th anniversary reception was a case in point.

Lisa corrals her helpers through e-mail requests outlining in very specific terms jobs that need to be accomplished in order for an event to be staged. For the 25th anniversary reception, she had assigned a kitchen crew as well as delegated the decorating of the actual reception space to another group with its own leader. She and her partner procured the edible supplies, which arrived in labeled bags and boxes, each category of food designated its own set of serving dishes and utensils. The tasks to be accomplished were clear: wash and cut vegetables, cube the cheese, place garnish on trays, wash, slice and refrigerate fruit, arrange brownies and crackers on trays. Completed
food trays had designated spaces on recently-decorated tables, and color-coordinated silver, white and blue decorations soon transformed our typically sterile rehearsal space into a magical celebratory environment. Lisa undoubtedly invested countless hours in preparation for our help; I would not have wished for her level of fatigue when the event was over. What her leadership ensures, however, is that others are also involved in meaningful and productive ways. There is no risk of showing up at an event Lisa stages and wishing that you could find something to do. Her ability to organize and allocate resources of both people and supplies, and her tenacious direction of an event from beginning to end situates her as a resolute leader. Her skills are well-matched for her leadership tasks, and serve to allow others a specific and definitive way to contribute to the work of chorus events.

Other leaders in the chorus are clearly visionary in their support of the continuity of the group. These are the leaders with ideas that inspire; the leaders willing to go out on a limb to try something new, confront a topic that is potentially controversial, or embrace an unpopular cause for what they perceive as the greater good. Recent presidents of the board of directors have all been visionary in unique ways: Angela in strategic planning after a period in time when the chorus’s future seemed in jeopardy, Betty in forging a relationship with the Triangle Gay Men’s Chorus that ultimately allowed the chorus to own a long-suppressed part of its identity, Erin in expanding the musical and broader community connections of the group, Julia in doggedly pursuing sustaining sponsorships and modeling outreach to minority groups to facilitate greater dialogue about differences and shared interests, Kristen in creating a vibrant social environment and making the chorus experience welcoming for younger and more diverse members. Each of these
women have seen a potential future for the chorus and encouraged the group to reach beyond comfortable bounds for it.

When I first approached the chorus to undertake this ethnography, Julia was serving as President. She agreed to an interview and to be part of an assignment where I attempted to capture what she had said to me in ethnopoetic styling – using graphic representations of speech patterns rather than creating a straight text with the words. When I shared my ethnopoetry with Julia, we were both struck by the interspersion of laughter throughout her talking about chorus leadership. She wrote back to me:

*I'm glad you noticed my laughter; it truly comes from the sheer joy of living--what pianist Barbara Higbie calls "idiot glee." [...] As in music, the inflection, tone and cadence communicate as much as the words. Mostly my responses are a reflection of my enthusiasm for the chorus itself, the creativity that's involved in developing and producing our concerts, our growth and the chance to share all that through your project.*  

(Julia, written communication April 8, 2005)

Julia’s use of the words *creativity, enthusiasm* and *growth* all signify the influence of her leadership; other board members have commented on her strong “sales ability” and “good project management skills”. Julia coordinated a retreat of the CWC board of directors during my initial involvement, and as part of that process we undertook a leadership style inventory wherein each person had to consider various attributes of their own approach and categorize themselves according to animal-based labels. Julia is an Eagle. She soars above the surface where she can maintain a broader view; she glides easily across borders and compels discourse between the chorus and its world. There have been multiple instances since that board meeting when jokes were made about “keeping the eagles in check” or, conversely, “following the eagles” so that small details didn’t stop the group from attaining lofty goals. Julia’s eagle leadership is an example of
the visionary in action; it has resulted in the chorus addressing uncomfortable topics such as the lack of racial and ethnic diversity of the group (see chapter 1) and in a far-reaching plan for financial sustainability of the group. Those in the group who stay closer to the ground sometimes resist the scale of Julia’s farsightedness, but the longevity of the chorus is testament to a balance achieved between this type of vision and other leadership styles that intentionally act to ensure the integrity and continuity of more immediate relationships.

From the moment I first spoke with Cindy, the chorus’ current musical director, she called for commitment. In my case, she asked for commitment to the Common Woman Chorus beyond the relationship I had sought in order to fulfill my own academic work. In agreeing to my participant-observer status in the Spring of 2005, she stipulated that I should plan on rehearsing weekly with the chorus and performing in the upcoming concert. In other words, I couldn’t just get what I needed and walk away. Her mandate has come to exemplify in my mind not only what she expected of me, but also what she consistently expects of chorus members and ultimately of herself as a community leader.

Cindy has served as the musical director of the chorus since 2000, and has been a member of the group since 1992. In March of 2005 and April 2008, I conducted interviews with her regarding her role as director and her sense of the chorus as a community. In each interview she told a similar story to illustrate these relationships. In 2001, Cindy was involved in extensive training for certification in individual and organizational coaching. There were multiple people from around the United States involved in this coaching seminar over the course of a year, and as the sessions drew to a
close, the events of September 11, 2001\textsuperscript{25} became a part of the context of their experiences together. They found themselves, as did many people in the United States in the aftermath of those events, questioning the transience of life and relationships. A couple in the group decided not long after to stop the training, and according to Cindy “sent us an email saying they had gotten what they needed and wished us well.” The leader of their training, however, found this objectionable. In Cindy’s words:

Well, the woman who had led our coaching program, on the next weekly call, she said: “we have failed if we have built a community which people can exit by email”. And it made me really think about what it means to be connected and so I started a conversation with the chorus around community – you know, you’re here as part of a community, and I think I began to model some things that other people naturally model…like when people aren’t [in rehearsal], to mention that – to remind people they don’t just drop out of a community. […] I want to create profound connections with the people in that group. (Cindy, interview 2/26/2005).

The impact of this experience on Cindy’s leadership of the chorus is not explicitly known by all of the singers, and yet both old and new chorus members are acutely aware of her expectations for commitment to the group as well as the music. Newer singers hear her chastise the group when it’s clear no one has spent any time outside rehearsal on the music, and receive her encouragement to tune to those singing around them rather than simply learn the notes in isolation. More long-term members reflect on an evolution in her leadership style over the past eight years, and a few actually attribute it to the same experience Cindy acknowledges. One singer noted:

Cindy is one of the few people I’ve ever known who has actually taken to heart an experience like she had in the coaching training and used it to change her

\textsuperscript{25} On September 11, 2001, the United States of America was attacked by terrorist forces who took control of U.S. airliners and targeted 3 strategic locations: the World Trade Center in New York, the Pentagon in Washington DC, and the White House. The third plane did not achieve its target goal due to actions of the passengers, resulting in it crashing in a field in Pennsylvania. Over 3000 people were killed in a matter of hours (911digitalarchive.org, n.d.)
interactions as a leader. I recall when she used to get more impatient with us – like perpetual PMS – and now she helps us focus, gets us centered within the group before we start singing.

(name withheld by request, personal conversation 9/4/2008).

In the fall of 2007, I did not regularly rehearse with the chorus, and I sat out of the concert performance that semester. Instead, I asked Cindy if I might come to rehearsal as an observer and sit behind her so that I had a sense of her perspective on the chorus. It was spatially interesting but otherwise decidedly underwhelming. I had thought I might have some remarkable insight from her view of the group. I did see the attentiveness elicited by focusing on a specific musical passage, the whispering between neighbors when their part wasn’t being rehearsed, and the movement and expression inherent in Cindy’s directing style. But I see those things on a weekly basis from my rehearsal seat – true, I typically see the heads instead of faces of my co-singers, and Cindy from the front rather than the back - nonetheless it was remarkably unremarkable.

I did not come to understand the community differently through Cindy’s literal view of it. What I saw sitting behind her was simply a mirror image of what I typically see. What I felt took me longer to recognize. I was positioned as an outsider, despite being with women I had known for more than two years at that point. I had little interaction with anyone and felt disconnected from the music, the space and the purpose. The feeling of isolation surprised me. I was not a part of the community when positioned outside of the realm of purpose, despite my ongoing membership. That the Common Woman Chorus is a community that someone cannot simply walk away from comes not from gathering together in a physical space but from doing together with a collective purpose. Cindy as the director facilitates the doing, raises the doing to a higher standard, coaches us to do as one.
There was a point in time which members of the chorus who have a longer history with the group believed the chorus may not survive. Over a period of a couple of years when it was clear that the original director, Eleanor, would be retiring and it was not yet clear who would step into that role, commitment to the group became more tenuous for many. One result of those transition years has been the solidarity of a small group of friends within the chorus who committed to its continuity. No one in this group is a founding member: the last remaining founders exited at the time of Eleanor’s retirement. Oftentimes the chorus refers to its founding members as “mothers;” it seems apropos to call this subsequent group “sisters”. They approached the future of the chorus as a coalition. In a joint interview with Cindy and Angela in 2008, their dialogue speaks to this sisterhood:

Cindy: …there was at that point a core of us who came together to share the leadership of the chorus, which was really pivotal

Angela: I think part of us becoming friends was a sense that the chorus would go away – there was so much dissension. People who had been there a long time would go “I’m leaving” you know, and just kind of huff off, people floundering and wondering “what will we do without Eleanor, and it was so good when Cindy said “I’m willing to be the director”. It was like we had a rudder. […] We became committed to making sure the chorus stayed around.

Cindy: I think it might have felt more like OUR chorus. […] and we had a real sense of purpose together […] It just felt like there were a lot of possibilities.

(Cindy and Angela, personal communication 4/26/2008)

Transition is a challenge in any organization and, in this case, losing founding mothers as well as a true maternal figure in Eleanor, the original musical director, challenged the group toward a new future. It could have had many outcomes; the chorus could have ceased to exist, acknowledging the accomplishments to date but agreeing to
relinquish the mission. Instead, the Common Woman Chorus enters its 26th year of performance still a completely volunteer organization emerging from the last quarter century more culturally diverse, more socially integrated, and more musically polished than its previous incarnation. Certainly each of its leadership groups – the resolute doers, the visionary dreamers, and the intentional connectors have contributed to that successful realization of new possibilities.

A final tribute to this uncommon group of women acknowledges the past and yet firmly situates the chorus in the future. The 25th anniversary concert, performed November 22, 2008 at the Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship in Durham, North Carolina, epitomized this dynamic. Rather than perform long-standing favorites of the group, the chorus saluted the founders with a couple of pieces sung throughout the early years, but the majority of the concert was focused on new, ambitious, musically challenging pieces chosen specifically with the intent of celebrating the group as a choral community. Cindy later complimented the group on “our best concert performance ever” and the general consensus among the group was that the concert had served both to honor the past 25 years and to serve notice that The Common Woman Chorus has moved on. In closing, and in honor of the uncommonly fine women who have been such a part of my life for the past three years, this piece I wrote for promotional purposes at the request of the chorus seems a fitting tribute:

_Sometimes a seed is planted that outlives the gardener, continues to grow, feeds many hungry souls along the way, and gives root to other ideas. Twenty-five years ago a seed of community was planted by two women who loved music and who had experienced the power of choral singing. Having moved to Durham, North Carolina from Kansas and Minnesota, respectively, Nancy and Barbara, both avid choral singers, sought to bring together women to form a chorus. They didn’t know one another, but as fate would have it, the seeds of their ideas were planted at exactly the_
same time in the form of ads each placed in The Newsletter, a Triangle feminist publication. The ads reached out to other women interested in forming a choral group, and resulted in Nancy and Barbara contacting one another and meeting with about a dozen interested women on the steps of the Durham YWCA in 1983. From their initial efforts, the Common Woman Chorus (CWC) grew from the seed of an idea to a community of women.

In the fall of 2008 CWC will celebrate the legacy of this growth, honoring the planters of the first idea, the founding mothers who nurtured it and brought it to life, and the gardeners who tend it today. The Chorus is different than its first seedling, and yet growing strongly from the same root stock. It continues to sing about the diversity of women’s lives. It seeks, as always, to address injustice, to highlight triumphs over adversity, to diminish the power of prejudice by laughing at its absurdity. Change is also evident, however. The emphasis on feminist ideals of the early 1980s has evolved into woman-positive language and values. The political activism of the earlier chorus has given way to more polished performances that serve to address social issues through the messages in the music.

It is not your mother’s chorus, but a fine daughter growing up.

J. Womack  2/26/2008
REFERENCES


Women At the Center. (2007). *Out in the South: An Interview with Mandy Carter*. Sallie Bingham Center for Women’s History and Culture. Duke University Rare Book, Manuscript and Special Collections Library. Issue 11, Spring 2007