

WHY THESE SONGS OF HAPPY CHEER?: CONTEMPORARY CHRISTMAS
CAROLING AS ALTERNATIVE PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

HANNAH HARVESTER: Why These Songs of Happy Cheer?: Contemporary Christmas
Caroling as Alternative Practice
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This thesis explores how the under-studied practice of Christmas caroling in the United States might be considered oppositional to mainstream understandings of music consumption and social relations. Drawing on interviews with thirty carolers and personal observation, I find that carolers share the motivation of experiencing and engendering an ideal version of community that they see as lacking in their everyday lives. This sense of community is created by a spatial practice that brings a public performance into private spaces; by a kind of singing whose unpolished sound invites participation and makes “hearable” its non-commercial intent; and by the fact that the majority of people in the U.S., of any age, are likely to know and have emotional connections with both the traditional body of carols and the idea of caroling itself. I also discuss the benefits and limitations of drawing upon a residual tradition as a resource for oppositional practice.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Sunday, Dec. 16, 2007, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 8 p.m.:

Everyone has places to be. We decide to visit one last house. I don't know why we choose the one we do—there's just one light on downstairs. The porch isn't particularly festive, but we choose it, and sing. No one comes to the door, and we start to leave. Then an old man comes out and tells us not to go. He says there's a woman upstairs who can't come down but who would want to hear us. He goes back inside. We see then the woman come to the second-story window. She wears a light blue bathrobe like my grandmother's, and seems to be at least 80 years old. She presses her body against the window like a lover in a tower, one hand on her heart, smiling at us, and we sing "Silent Night," because we think she would like it. I don't want to leave her all alone in her apartment, so I keep suggesting songs. As we finally leave, we wave to her and she waves and blows us kisses. I start crying, and chalk it off to all the wine we drank at the last house. But my friend Kathleen says she almost cried too, when it was time to walk away from beneath that window.

This interaction occurred at the end of a night of jollity. I and a few friends and friends-of-friends had been caroling around the Cambridge, Massachusetts, neighborhood where I was living at the time. We were a young, small group, and perhaps partly for that reason several of the people to whom we caroled that night invited us into their homes and served us wine. All of these were affluent middle-aged couples who seemed enthusiastic about the fact that we were caroling, excited about entertaining during the holidays, and genuinely interested in us as young people. I had organized this outing and had only gathered enough people—there were six of us—at the last moment. Because things were

going much better than I had expected, and also because we were drinking a lot, I was feeling quite happy when we got to that last house. More than happy—I felt exuberant. The effusive well-wishing that we had engaged in as we took our leave from each home—heartfelt holiday wishes among previous strangers—had filled me with a feeling of overall goodwill towards humankind. Our singing in between houses and buoyant discussion of the hilarious happenings we were experiencing made me feel likewise close to the people I was with, some of whom I had just met that day. But singing to the last woman, for me, was by far the most emotional interaction of the night. The intensity of this moment and others like it have led me to explore the under-studied phenomenon of contemporary American Christmas caroling. I have come to find that emotionally-charged interactions such as these become important to creating the sense of community that often motivates people to carol.

My friend Kathleen recounted the same interaction like this: “I always think of that old woman in Cambridge looking out the second story window because she couldn't make it down, crying because she was so touched. And I don't know, but I imagine she was crying because of her past memories or . . . I don't know why she was crying, but it was very touching to me” (McGovern 2010). I myself do not remember the woman crying. I do remember, however, attributing certain emotional responses to her. I have a clear image in my mind of her hand pressed to her heart, her smiling and blowing kisses, and of the way she was pressed against the window, as though she wanted to push through it. I did not know the slightest thing about this woman, but I remember thinking of her as lonely and isolated and as somehow “needing” our caroling that night. I thought of her as simultaneously embodying youth and age, because I imagined she was reliving

Christmases past as the songs we sang and the “traditional,” unmediated mode of performing them sent her on a journey down memory lane. I also sensed that she was feeling some profound emotion toward us; though I was not sure exactly what that emotion was, I imagined it was something akin to love.

This exchange, one side of which I may have partially imagined, was particularly poignant, and stands out in my mind when I sift through memories of caroling. But it is hardly the only instance that I can recall of an emotionally-heightened interaction occurring during caroling. The extraordinary experience of having this sort of deeply affective interaction with strangers, and sharing this experience with others, is an enormously important part of why I enjoy caroling. The same appears to be true for the approximately thirty carolers I interviewed . . . an outcome I did not expect when I started. I thought, before I began making calls and setting up meetings with local carolers, that I would be having a series of lighthearted, cheerful conversations. I was nervous about how I would make the conversations substantive, since we would be discussing something as simple and wholesome as Christmas caroling. I must have thought that my deeply-felt experience was unique.

This assumption probably had something to do with the fact that I did not have very much caroling experience when I began this project. Furthermore, my outlook toward American caroling was very colored at the time by comparisons with my recent experience of another kind of caroling in another country. During December-January of 2006 and 2007, I had participated in a physically and emotionally intense, rustic, and, to me, exotic Polish country caroling expedition led by a small theater in rural Poland. At the time, I was living in Warsaw and studying Polish alternative theater. A friend of mine

who was writing her dissertation on the same subject told me about small rural theater that ran a “caroling workshop,” and she highly recommended that I attend. I signed up, since I had nothing else to do. But I was rather suspicious. I envisioned people in red and green scarves and stocking caps walking around a little village, singing cheerfully with mouths shaped like O's. I had caroled just a few times as a child, and my memories were quite vague. It was not something I had thought about very much, and when my friend mentioned “caroling” the scene that came to my mind was influenced more by popular imagery and my aunt's “Christmas Village” figurines than by first-hand experience. My overall impression was that caroling was something wholesome, nostalgic, and maybe a little boring.

The 2006-2007 workshop was the twenty-seventh rendition of a revived rural Polish caroling/mumming tradition (called “caroling,” but involving masks and a folk drama). I learned the songs, dances, and drama and went to perform them in three villages, one near the theater and two others in the southern mountains. I was with about twelve other people, several of whom had been caroling with the group since 1990. Sometimes but rarely still practiced in Poland as an unbroken custom, “*kolędowanie*” (from *kolęda*, carol) had become so important to many participants that they would include the two-week workshop as part of their holidays, though they were living and working in France or England.¹

Anything but insipid, my Polish caroling experience turned out to be transformative. It modeled a kind of deeply participatory performance in which everyday people—the workshop participants—became actors and musicians, and the everyday

¹ Publications on *Kolędowanie* attribute the lapse of the custom to disruptions in village demographics and village life in general during the two World Wars, as well as to urbanization following WWII (see Young 1974 and Kunecka 2007).

people we visited became co-performers, commenting on the drama and joining in the singing and dancing that followed. The visiting nature of the performance and the hospitality of the householders imparted a feeling of connectedness and unity to the communities in which we performed (communities to which the group had been coming for many years). The time of the performance—the holidays, the new year, the midwinter, the nighttime—added significance to the hospitality of those who let us in and fed us, and enhanced the sense of ritual accompanying our endeavor. I was moved by the unifying social action of the event, made concrete through the physical acts of singing, dancing, eating, drinking, and traveling.

My role was that of the Goat; my job was make headway into households, using my aggressive goat tactics. In other words, I was the one who crossed thresholds, and this physical motion from outside to in remains one of my strongest impressions of those evenings.² The encounters that took place once we were inside exemplified a gift-exchange, as people offered us hospitality, food and drink, and cash, and we entertained with performance, conversation, and an invitation to dance. I quickly understood why this event was so important to its participants. The obvious pleasure at our company on the part of many of those we visited, especially those elderly men and women who were alone, was gratifying and deeply moving. Walking at night between houses offered a heightened sensual experience of the space around us. As my fellow carolers broke away from our intermittent walking song to call loudly, “Here we come!,” rivers pounded loudly by; I experienced the sensation of carrying light (we had one lantern) from lighted house to lighted house through the dark intervening spaces—and of seeing expectant

² Many households invited us right in, and many made it clear they did not want us to enter—the Goat was used for in-between cases.

faces waiting in lighted windows. I experienced as well the cold-warm pattern of house-to-house caroling, each welcoming home offering respite from the freezing night, like a physical manifestation of the hospitable spirit it offered us. The sound we made in homes was resonant and filled the small interiors; outside it disappeared quickly into the huge darkness, pulling us closer together. The sound was rough and unpolished, the result of our amateur group and the participatory nature of the performance. The food and drink we were given (mostly vodka) literally warmed us for the journey to the next home.

I became preemptively nostalgic at one point as we caroled, knowing I would not be able to come back the next year. Someone asked me if Americans caroled. I said, “Yes, but not like this.”

Back in the U.S. with winter approaching, I quickly realized that American caroling might offer many of the same types of experience that had touched me so deeply in the more “exotic” locale of the Polish countryside. Only then did caroling memories come back to me more clearly. I remembered running in the dark with other kids to brightly lit houses, trays of cookies, and a neighbor—a musician my family had not met before—playing his keyboard and crying while we sang in his home. My parents had been moved by that exchange, while I had been confused and summarily forgot about it. I remembered it then, as I thought about the Polish householders who had sung for us and also cried. I thought also about how, despite my attraction to the Slavic folk carols we sang in Poland, I would feel a very different sort of emotion when Wacek, our leader, would ask me to sing an English carol in some houses, and I would feel the familiar words and melody resonate inside my body, words and tunes that had been with me my entire life, and that were physical markers of both the season and my own personal

history. I realized too how much easier it should be to get people together to carol in the U.S., where caroling is still considered a possible contemporary holiday practice. We would not need a revival or a workshop, just a few willing people, and we would not need to go anywhere special to find people who would recognize and appreciate what we were doing.

So I gathered together some people to carol and, with my intense experience of Polish caroling very present in my mind, out we went. We were invited into homes and had many funny and touching interactions with the people we met. When I decided to interview carolers for a class project, however, I was not prepared to hear people who practiced what I considered “mundane” caroling—such as pre-arranged visits to homes or institutions—tell me about their deep emotional experience of the practice. But that is just what most of them did. I had more than one conversation in which the caroler with whom I was speaking choked up when recounting powerful memories of caroling to the ill or the dying. Many more described feeling strongly emotional themselves, whether in a jubilant or more solemn way, during caroling, and they almost all described the others' reactions as emotional. Not everyone mentioned tears or crying, though many did; some recounted people's excitement and astonishment at seeing “real” carolers, and a few focused their discussion upon the feelings of connection they felt with their fellow carolers. While varied in type and texture, accounts of emotional interaction were extremely common throughout my conversations.

In the pages that follow, I will attempt to demonstrate that shared emotional experience is one of the key motivations for carolers today, in large part because of its close relation to another important motivating factor: ideals of community. Many of the

carolers with whom I spoke, especially those who are either caroling organizers or very enthusiastic about caroling, articulated critiques of contemporary U.S. society, and contrasted the kind of community spirit they feel during caroling with their experience of everyday life. Carolers mentioned a lack of interaction between generations, an overwhelmingly commercialized culture, an overly-mediatised and commodified approach to music, and a general lack of a “sense of community” as problems with our society. What they liked about caroling, they told me, was its contrast to these dominant cultural norms. Because emotional interactions are inherently deeply felt, I believe that these moments come to represent for carolers the ability of their practice to actually create the type of community they see as lacking in our everyday society.

In the following three chapters, I discuss three aspects of caroling that make the practice unusual when compared with status quo norms for performance and interpersonal relations, and that lend to caroling a particular emotional quality that often emerges between carolers and those they visit. Moments of potential connection are facilitated by a spatial practice that brings a public performance into a private or semi-private sphere, and that brings performers and “audience” face-to-face; by a kind of singing that invites participation and whose sincerity or non-commercial intent is “hearable” in its sound; and by a markedly noticeable “traditional” element that is active in both imagery surrounding caroling and the practice itself, often involving feelings of nostalgia. An important aspect of caroling’s association with tradition is its repertoire, which is widely shared. Each of these elements differentiates the practice of caroling from contemporary norms of performance, visiting, and interaction; I argue that this

quality of “difference” has as much influence on carolers' experience and reception as qualities imagined to be “inherent” to live performance or face-to-face communication.

Methods

I draw on interviews with carolers; personal participation in caroling events; scholarship on performance, soundscape, landscape, and related seasonal visiting traditions; social histories of Christmas; and evidence from popular and material culture (internet discussions, consumer products) to form my interpretation of contemporary caroling. The ethnographic dimension of this research includes thirty interviews conducted in 2008 and 2009, with consultants who primarily hail from North Carolina and Massachusetts (though include people who have caroled in Texas and Illinois). I have spoken with folks who carol with their church choirs, with church youth groups, with school groups, with friends, and as a family; carolers whose traditions reach back twenty or more years, and those who have gotten people together and gone on the spur of the moment. My consultants include people who carol at hospitals and nursing homes, “randomly” door-to-door, within their own neighborhoods, and on pre-arranged visits to homes of shut-ins and elderly church parishioners. Their numbers include one professional caroler and three carolers from a semi-professional group, who hire themselves out and do concerts but for whom the focus of the season is their annual neighborhood “traipse.” Although I did not ask my interviewees for extensive demographic information, they are all white Americans, born in the U.S., who come from lower-middle to upper-middle-class backgrounds. They range in age from 19 to 65. Despite this age and geographical range, my consultants are all from the same, fairly

narrow, cultural milieu of college-educated, middle-class white Americans. I am sure that broadening this pool of consultants would reveal greater variety in terms of practice, conceptions of, and motivation for caroling. For the purposes of this project, however, I look only at this limited segment of the population.

I conducted approximately two-thirds of my interviews by phone (interview circumstances are noted in the bibliography). Whenever possible, I met with my consultants in person, but conducting phone interviews allowed me to speak with many more carolers than I would otherwise have been able to.³ Because of the constricted time window for caroling, I was only able to participate in three caroling events that I myself did not organize. Thus I limit my personal observations mostly to the six caroling events I have organized over the past three years. In these descriptions, I am cognizant of how my personal history and my own mixture of desires, nostalgia, fears, and imagination led me to create those events, and I attempt to analyze my own motivations in the same way or more deeply than I analyze those of others.

Theory

No scholarly research has yet been conducted on the subject of contemporary caroling; however, scholarship on space and place, sound and music, and tradition inform my interpretations of the phenomenon. Scholars have also written quite extensively about other performative house-visiting practices. Research on Christmas mumming (Halpert and Story 1969; Szwed 1969; Chiaramonte 1969; Glassie 1975; Cashman 2000), related traditions like belsnickling and janneying (Firestone 1969; Bauman 1972), and Cajun

³ I found that those people whom I spoke to by phone were more likely to discuss emotionally-intense experiences with me.

Country Mardis Gras (Lindahl 1996, Sawin 2001) analyze seasonal house-visiting practices in terms of social order, community, memory, tradition, and sense of place. I bring caroling into this conversation, looking at similar aspects of what caroling *does* socially, as well as what its practice can tell us about contemporary outlooks on community, social life, place, and tradition.

I engage this house visit scholarship particularly in chapter one, where I discuss caroling as social and spatial practice. In comparing contemporary caroling with related traditions, I reference recent sociological research on contemporary sociability, as well as work by urban history and design scholars on the relationship between the built environment and sociability, in order to properly contextualize the social effects of a house-visit custom in a non-visiting culture (Mugerauer 1993; Gindroz 1997; Putnam 2000; Ross and Joon Jang 2000; Hayden 2003). I additionally draw upon the work of popular music scholar Sara Cohen and philosopher Michel de Certeau, who have both written about the power of movement to produce social space, to discuss the ways in which carolers' motion interacts with and influences their physical and social environment (De Certeau 1984; Cohen 1998).

In turning to the acoustic dimension of caroling I will follow ethnomusicologists Veit Erlmann, (2004) and Steven Feld (2005, 1982/90), among others, in engaging sound and the act of listening to deepen our understanding of how people relate to one another (see Erlmann 2004: 3). I discuss what the “sound of caroling” can tell us about the *intention* of its participants, and how this sound, especially in its differences from the “keynote sound” of recorded, processed music that makes up much of the contemporary U.S. sonic experience, may influence the affective responses of those who are caroled to

(Schafer 1977/94). Sociologist of music Simon Frith's work on listening and the voice is particularly important to my discussion of the perceived sincerity of carolers by listeners (Frith 1996, 2007). I use Communications scholar Jonathan Sterne's article on programmed music in the Mall of America, which draws in part from ethnographic research in the Mall and conversations with representatives of the programmed music industry, to frame my discussion of the sound of caroling in the context of the sound of programmed music—an appropriate comparison since, as Sterne points out, “Americans on average hear more hours per capita of programmed music than any other kind of music” (1997: 24).

I will also join in the ongoing discussion on tradition in folklore and cultural studies, considering how participants' differing perceptions of caroling as “traditional” or “not traditional” affect their experience of the practice. I consider the tradition of caroling as a resource upon which cultural actors draw in order to create the kind of community they desire. I suggest that folklorist Ray Cashman's concept of critical nostalgia applies to carolers' desire for a certain kind of interpersonal interaction that they imagine existed in the past and has been lost (Cashman 2006). I then draw on Raymond Williams' concepts of residual, emergent, and dominant cultural elements to examine how caroling's “traditional” status plays out in the context of our dominant culture. I argue that carolers both draw upon on a cultural practice that is residual of gift-exchange economies and create an emergent cultural practice as they remove the expectation of reciprocity from the gift-exchange model, in a reaction against what they perceive as dominant capitalist tendencies towards commodification of caroling, music, and Christmas (Williams 1977). Folklorist Richard Flores's and Michel De Certeau's work on gift-exchange, as well as

social historian Michael Connelly's and Cultural Studies scholar John Storey's social histories of Christmas, all inform this discussion (Flores 1994, De Certeau 1980, Connelly 1999, Storey 2008).

I rely heavily on the words of my consultants throughout this thesis, both as examples of contemporary caroling practice and as indications of ways that carolers frame and think about their practice. When appropriate, I analyze their words not only for their content, but also for what their manner or poetics of speaking about caroling might reveal about contemporary motivations for this activity. My purpose is to show that caroling, which is so often treated in popular culture as a vanishing tradition, a commercial gimmick, or a wholesome but mundane little activity, is in fact for many of its practitioners an opportunity to experience community, music, and Christmas in an intensely different way than those offered by dominant cultural models. Moreover, it is a way to share this type of experience with others who might not otherwise elect or have access to this sort of alternative cultural expression. In this way carolers enact—if but briefly—the kind of community they envision as lacking in their own and others' everyday lives. In my conclusion, I argue that the brevity that is so essential to caroling does not mean that caroling encounters are *merely* ephemeral. Drawing upon Victor Turner's work on *communitas* and liminality (1982), I suggest that the temporally brief but emotionally rich nature of caroling may encourage more people to participate than might otherwise do so, and make them likely to seek out similar experiences in the future. Caroling, in sum, has consequences, both for individuals and for the culture they create around themselves.

CHAPTER 2

CAROLING AS SPATIAL PRACTICE

The progress of the mummers' performance may be broken into a series of scenes. In the first, the players perform without invitation. This is the drama. In the second, the players perform at the audience's request. This is the dance, song, or repetition of the drama. In the third, players and audience unite in the guessing game. In the fourth, the breakdown of the separation of performer and the audience is complete and the reversal of roles begins as the audience entertains the players with food and drink. Reversal is complete in the fifth scene, when young boys play mummers on the hillside: the audience has become the players. This movement is an attack upon the Western tradition that separates an artist from his audience, a teacher from his class, a politician from his mob. The closed door was opened, the formal became informal, the unknown became known. The mummers attacked the forces that keep people apart.

Henry Glassie, *All Silver and No Brass: An Irish Christmas Mumming*

The people there are often in really bad shape; often they have physical problems in addition to whatever mental problems they might have, and so when you have these people singing along, and requesting songs, you just see lights come on in some people, in the midst of all their misery. With the kids especially, some of them are really shut down, and if you can get one to participate, even just to ring the bell or something, it feels like a little victory. So it's really about making those connections, you know—people start out staring at the T.V., and when you leave they're looking at you, and smiling.

Sarbagha Falk, caroler, personal communication

Introduction

The mummers of Balleymenone, writes folklorist Henry Glassie, attacked the forces that keep people apart. Christmas carolers attack them. Unlike the practice of

mumming, which had already lapsed when Glassie was doing his research, Christmas caroling is still a common-enough practice in the contemporary United States that a quick internet search will call up thousands of photos, videos, and local interest articles of families, youth groups, and church choirs caroling, especially to institutions such as hospitals.

Although different in content (the mumming Glassie describes involved masked and costumed men performing a drama and then sometimes being asked to sing, recite, or otherwise further entertain the householders), contemporary caroling involves similar social action from separation to union: carolers perform without invitation, then often perform particular songs at the audience's request. Carolers and audience unite when the audience sings or claps along. The breakdown of the separation of performers and audience is complete with the sharing of food or drinks, and reversal of roles begins as former audience members join the carolers in their rounds, choose to carol the next year, or perform a vocal or instrumental solo for the carolers.

Very importantly, this all happens (with plenty of variation, which I will discuss) in the context of a culture whose model of performance, and of visiting, is very different from those enacted by carolers. Thus caroling can act against “the Western tradition that separates an artist from his audience” as well as against trends that increasingly separate neighbors and compartmentalize people by age and health.

Carolers select and move to their audiences. This is a reversal of the expected performance model in the contemporary United States, in which audiences elect to come *to* a designated location to see a show. The difference is essential, and creates unusual opportunities for participants. Most importantly, it provides a means for face-to-face

interaction with people with whom interaction might otherwise be rare or impossible. The physical closeness of this interaction, in turn, allows for emotional engagement that often creates or enhances a sense of community for carolers and those they visit. Many carolers in fact choose to carol largely in order to create or experience this sense of community, which they feel is lacking in our society.

The traveling performance model is unusual in the contemporary U.S. but is hardly unique in world history. People in most parts of the world have celebrated or continue to celebrate festivals by making various types of ritualized, performative house visits. Christmas caroling is believed by most scholars to be a later relative of older rituals like European mumming (Ancelet 1991: 84, Halpert 1969: 3). Drawing comparisons between the spatial and social action (which I will call “socio-spatial” action) of caroling and of its predecessors will help illustrate the different notions of community at play in these different times and places, especially our own. Though motion to what for lack of a better word I am calling “audiences” is inherent to all of these traditions, I will argue that it is a particularly significant feature of contemporary caroling because this type of motion is so unusual in our society, in terms of mainstream models of both performance and sociability.

In this chapter I will explore the importance of motion to the experience of community in caroling. First I will discuss how carolers' motion from public to private or semi-private spaces has particular emotional consequences for both carolers and those they visit. Next I will describe how the two main types of caroling that I have identified—what I am calling “service” and “neighborhood” caroling—illustrate different contemporary notions of community. Finally I will show how bodily motion itself can

influence people's experience of community in a physically and sensorially grounded way.

Motion/Emotion

Carolers envision their practice as building community, both among participants and with those they visit. From my discussions with carolers, I have come to see that the sharing of emotional interactions is an important part of what gives carolers a sense of community. These interactions require face-to-face contact that would not be possible without motion to a potential audience—it is the motion, more than the music, that makes caroling caroling. The act of *going* caroling, of “getting out there,” of moving from house to house or even from room to room in an institution, is a very significant part of what makes caroling meaningful for my interviewees. It is so important to the carolers I spoke to in large part because this motion engenders what would otherwise be rare or impossible social interactions with neighbors, strangers, elders, and home-bound and institutionalized persons. These interactions can become emotional in large part due to the rarity of such encounters in daily life, especially for people who are isolated in one way or another, and to the relative unusualness of interactive entertainment in a society in which entertainment (and emotional experience) is most often accessed through media such as television, which do not require face-to-face communication in order to be experienced. Although not every caroling encounter is deeply emotional, and perhaps the majority are not, those that are become important to carolers' understanding of the significance of their traveling and visiting activity.

Interestingly, the practice of singing the carols that are best-loved today originated as part of a movement that did not originally demand going door-to-door. The mid-nineteenth-century “Christmas carol revival” was not a “caroling” revival, as far as scholarship indicates (Connelly 1999: 62-99). The movement arose to save English folk carols that were envisioned as vanishing. The idea of ordinary citizens (as opposed to paid town musicians, for example) going door to door with those carols in an urban setting seems to have come well after the revival of the carols themselves, and likely originated with visits to hospitals (Connelly 1999: 89). Today, a love of the carols themselves is certainly a part of many if not most carolers' motivations for caroling, but those who choose to take their songs to the streets have a different priority in mind than only enjoying the music. Longtime caroler Haskell Fitz-Simons, who has a large library of recorded and written Christmas carols (perhaps the biggest in the Southeast, he says), who can wax poetic about the modal harmonies and rustic texts of English folk carols, and whose caroling group is auditioned and sings in four-part harmony still told me that “the music is very important, but really it's the experience, getting out there, and the looks on people's faces, when you hit them between the eyes with something that just makes them—sometimes makes them *weep*, you know? And you *share* an experience when something like that happens”(Fitz-Simons 2009).

Fitz-Simon's speaking about weeping may seem an exaggeration to someone who has never caroled, but my conversations and my own experience have shown me that emotionally-charged interactions are often a key part of carolers' motivation for their practice. Though it is certainly not a part of carolers' explicit intention to make people cry when they decide to go caroling, crying is something that happens quite often. My

interviewees often mentioned people crying when I asked about why caroling is important to them, or mentioned it with no prompting from me at all. Because tears are a clear indication of an emotionally aroused state, they can be an affirmation for carolers that their activity is touching people. For instance Tim Baker, who takes his United Methodist youth choirs caroling in Chapel Hill, told me that “There is always that one house where somebody really needed it. And those moments are very touching. You can see it clearly; you can tell right away when someone is really touched. Usually it's older people who are touched the most, if they're shut in they kind of need it the most.” He went on to describe two particular moments from the previous year, describing one elderly woman whose husband had just died standing in her doorway, “just thrilled, with tears just streaming down her cheeks” (Baker 2009).

When I asked Shawna Prather—whose caroling group visited many people in her small town in Texas—to tell me about people's responses, she immediately brought up crying, saying,

We had people cry. Some of the older people, that weren't expecting us to come and we would go and surprise them, especially older people who had had surgery or had just gotten out of the hospital, you know who were really truly stuck at home. It was—a good feeling to know that a lot of these people who couldn't get out of their houses, especially to go to church, who were kind of home-bound—it was a good feeling to be able to bring them something of Christmas. And then we had people who were really happy, and they would sing along, and clap—always good reactions. We never had anybody get mad at us. But the ones that stand out the most in my mind are the ones who weren't able to get out, and then we'd do that, and they were very, very emotional about it. And that made me feel good for doing it. (Prather 2009)

In these two examples, the interactions that stood out the most for Baker and Prather were those that became emotionally charged, because these moments made them feel they had done something positive or filled a need. I have found this to be true for many of the

carolers with whom I spoke. Even when they talk about people being excited and happy to see them, they tend to concentrate their narratives on the few moments of tears. In this way, the reversal of the contemporary model of performance and the movement of carolers from public (which would be inaccessible to the home-bound) to private (and often isolated) space enhances both carolers' experience and presumably that of their listeners as well.

Kim Peck, a woman in her mid-twenties from Boston, Massachusetts who carols professionally in December, prefers caroling in nursing homes to any other location because of the emotional content of the interactions there. She spoke to me of her work as a professional caroler in somewhat negative terms, saying that it is “depressing” when clients treat them as “background music,” and that by Christmas Eve she is “done” with singing carols—so much so that she refuses to sing at the parties of friends and family. Nevertheless, she does enjoy going to nursing homes, because as opposed to other venues (including corporate events, malls, and parties),

I feel like it means the most to them, out of all the venues we work at. People are just really touched by the music, and it's really beautiful to see people sing along, or really enjoying themselves, or, you know, hearing that special song that makes them cry because it makes them remember, you know, who knows what in their long, long lives that they've had. The music really seems to speak very powerfully, and I just think that their reactions are the best, at the nursing homes—that it's really meaningful, really meaningful for them. (Peck 2009)

Peck also told me that there was a marked difference in the emotional tenor of interactions taking place in a group setting (for instance, in the common room of a nursing home where everyone has been brought in to hear the carolers) and those that occur in the private rooms of residents too sick or otherwise unable to come to the party. These situations emphasize the importance of the carolers' motion *to* their audiences even

more: they have not come just to the nursing home itself, but have moved past the designated performance area to seek out the most isolated residents in the home. According to Peck, this is usually something the carolers, hired to sing at the party, choose to do of their own accord, and it is very important to her, in part because the reactions in private rooms are so powerful. “Nine times out of ten, if we go into someone's room, they'll cry,” she told me. She thinks this is tied to both the situation and the music itself. “You never know if that person has a lot of family visiting often, or not, but obviously I think it's common that people feel terribly lonely, so it's very meaningful to have special attention paid to them. And the music is so beautiful, I think it appeals to people on a very basic level”⁴(Peck 2009).

The tendency on the part of my interviewees to talk about crying may also indicate more about their attitudes toward caroling than it does about actual instances of weeping. We cannot know, in each situation described, whether an individual actually cried when caroled to, and how much, or whether their eyes simply became watery, or they seemed emotionally affected but tears were not present. Except for a few specific stories, my interviewees usually spoke about crying in general terms, saying, for example as Prather does, “We had people cry,” or more specifically as Peck does, “Nine times out of ten, if we go into someone's room, they'll cry” (Peck 2009). Nine out of ten may be an exaggeration, or it may not. From my own experience, I know that the emotional interactions I've had when caroling include joy, excitement, amazement, as well as also indifference or confusion, but many of the responses that stand out the most in my memory are those in which someone has cried. It is as interesting to note the importance

⁴ I will discuss the importance of the *type* of music being sung to the emotional tenor of these interactions in the following chapters.

carolers seem to ascribe to instances of weeping as it is to remark that tears and crying do seem to be a fairly common feature of caroling interactions. It points to the salience of such deeply-felt interchange to carolers' experience of their practice.

The importance of visible emotion to carolers indicates the importance of face-to-face interaction, which allows emotions to be visible and also allows them to be shared. For example, visible emotions may trigger an affective empathic response (see Snow 2000) in someone perceiving the emotional experience of another, as with Kim Peck, who told me that “[when someone starts crying] I’ll usually feel pretty choked up, too. It’s just a very powerful emotional exchange—you can see that glisten in their eye and know that they’re just *really* touched by what’s going on” (Peck 2009). Similarly, Kathleen McGovern, who has led caroling groups with me in Cambridge and Quincy, MA, since 2007, reminisced about her feelings during an encounter with one man whom we visited in Quincy—he appeared very moved by our visit and wept, saying, “You’re doing this for me?”:

You know, seeing that man cry when we caroled last year in Quincy, when he came to the door and was so moved by our singing—it was really emotional for *me*, too. This man seemed like he lived alone, he didn’t strike me as an artsy sort, but just the act of us visiting him and sharing our voices, our care for the whole community—it’s just really impressive that the average person is moved by it. I felt touched—touched and also—proud. (McGovern 2009)

McGovern, then, felt both a sort of emotional empathy towards this individual as well as a feeling of “pride” or affirmation that our actions were having a positive affect on others. I have similar reactions to others' tears, and the resulting feeling of being moved or touched is mixed with a sense of affirmation of my activity (which I often have organized). I can also become teary or “choked up” as an almost purely physical response to another's weeping. As an example, this past year when caroling in Quincy a middle-

aged man, apparently quite drunk, approached us on the street and asked us to sing for him and his wife. While we sang “Silent Night,” he stood in his doorway with tears literally streaming down his face, smiling broadly and singing along. We had actually had a nearly identical interaction with the same man the year before, and so the situation was somewhat amusing (especially given the somewhat disapproving looks from the man's wife). Nevertheless, the sheer quantity of joyful tears coming out of the man's eyes touched me, and I went up the stairs to his porch to give him a hug and wish him a Merry Christmas before we moved on. When he hugged me back, I felt his tears on my face and felt his sobbing, and at that moment I became somewhat choked up myself, despite the fact that I was simultaneously amused by the encounter. I highlight this moment because it shows the importance of close, face-to-face contact to this emotional exchange, as purely visual and physical cues were able to trigger my emotions (our singing was not very sweet that night). I will not take on the psychology and science of emotional empathy in this project, except to say that it has been shown to be real, measurable, and to vary in degree among individuals (see Mehrabian and Epstein 1972, and Plutchik 1987). In the next chapters I will discuss how singing, and the specific songs involved, are particularly well-suited to engendering emotional interaction even further. For now I only want to point out that emotional response can occur in some individuals simply from *seeing* that another has become emotional; tears are one of the most obvious visible signs of heightened emotion.

The importance of tears to my interviewees (and to myself as a caroler) may also indicate something about our society's culture of emotions or “emotionology” (Stearns and Stearns 1985). Most of their stories attribute tears to people who have some sort of

“need”—they are ill, mentally disabled, have experienced a loss, are home-bound, institutionalized, or otherwise socially or physically isolated. Yet there are also stories of people who are presumably sound of mind and body and socially connected crying when hearing or singing carols. Anna Millar told me a story of her father, whom she described as stolid and someone who “never cried,” weeping during the singing of Silent Night at a family gathering. She said she thought that “*music* has a way of making people very emotional. It's not a *sad* stirring, it's more a heartwarming feeling, it's heartwarming, and stirring, too.”(Millar 2008). Millar did not seem ashamed of her father's crying, and she also seemed to indicate the music also “stirs” her. Others also spoke of the emotional power of the carols. No one condemned others for crying, but instead pointed to those instances as salient moments of deep experience during their practice.

Communications scholar Christina Kotchemidova's historical work on the changing emotional culture of the U.S. may be enlightening here. She states that “historical scholarship on emotions in America notes a tendency towards lowering the intensity of emotion experiences over the twentieth century,” and persuasively demonstrates that process. Joy, she says, is “the only discrete emotion that remained positive,” and by the 1930s even joy was “found problematic when too intense”(2005:14-15). Thus “cheerfulness” became the predominant and most socially acceptable emotion for Americans, especially in public (Kotchemidova 2005). My interviewees' positive attitude towards displays and feelings of deep emotion would seem to complicate her thesis. If, as she argues, Americans have now internalized the “cheerful” and low-intensity emotional ethic or practice “emotion management” in their public lives (Kotchemidova 2005), then it may be that we value moments of intense emotion more

highly because they are rarer today than they were one hundred years ago. We can also see how an unexpected interruption of emotionally-stirring music into someone's daily life might become even more emotional by contrast to their normal experience, and the display of that emotion might be more meaningful to people unused to such displays in their daily lives. We might also conjecture that the context of musical performance and of the Christmas holidays—advertised as a time of sentiment—might make crying more acceptable to Americans. Shawna Prather, whom I quoted earlier, told me that she thinks that others' displays of emotion create the sense of a “safe space” for being emotional oneself. “Everybody's crying, so you know no one's going to judge you. It's a safe way to experience emotion,” she told me (Prather 2010).⁵

Further, Kotchemidova does not argue that Americans do not experience intense emotions in their daily lives at all, but rather that they compartmentalize and control their emotional experience through the use of media. She writes that

today's media serve as a means of emotion experience which is controlled, predictable, “disposable,” undemanding, and therefore delectable. Media is the culture's ingenious way of providing its members with exactly the kind of spontaneous experience they are missing in their rationally organized lives without impinging on their rational lifestyles. Consumers can engage in mass-mediated emotions to the full while retaining control over their emotion experience and avoiding the risks of personal communication. Media thus foster emotion consumerism.(Kotchemidova 2005: 17)

Kotchemidova goes on to argue that

twentieth-century culture has developed a new, more precise and highly reliable system of emotion regulation by confining emotions to specific time-space-consumer group cells. Our present-day “emotion spaces” are not exactly private since they can be public theaters, bars, casinos, stadiums, TV programs, print media, and so forth; they transcend the distinction between “public” and “private.” These are environments created for experiencing various emotions—individually or in-group—

⁵ Prather made these comments during the discussion that followed my reading of the current argument during a Folklore colloquium.

at a particular time and place (for example, a two-hour video). At the same time, cheerfulness remains the only emotion that is almost always appropriate in the vast public space. (Kotchemidova 2005: 17)

Given this context, the surprise nature of caroling, its unpredictability, the face-to-face interaction required to determine the content of the performance, its emergent quality, and the demands it implicitly places on its unsuspecting audience's energy and attention are all quite unique for many Americans. Carolers penetrate the controlled temporal structure of emotional experience that so many of us are accustomed to as they penetrate the barriers between public and private space. The moments of emotional connection that arise from this breaking-down of barriers become markers of success for carolers who want to create “community” through their actions.

Service and Neighborhood Caroling

Emotional connections enhance a sense of community for carolers, but just what “community” means differs among individuals and groups. I will argue that, in general, service carolers want to strengthen *specific* community connections, whereas neighborhood carolers want to create a more *general* sense of community in a given locale. I will propose that the idea of a “general” sense of community does also pervade the service caroling model, and is the feature of contemporary caroling that stands out the most from the socio-spatial action of older house-visit rituals.

Service Caroling

As demonstrated in the examples above, the people who are most visibly moved by caroling are usually elders, often home-bound or institutionalized. “Service” caroling

to people who could not otherwise enjoy live singing of Christmas carols is probably the most-practiced form of caroling today; the sense that the person visited cannot move from their space makes the movement *to* them by carolers more important, in part because carolers feel that they are filling a human need of those they visit. Sarbaga Falk of Carrboro, NC has been caroling with a group of friends to the Neuroscience ward of the UNC Hospital for the last twenty-five years, and told me that the purpose of their visit is engagement with the patients. She emphasized the importance of motion to making those connections, saying, “Everyone can make CDs. They can sit on shelves. Performance guarantees you'll reach people” (Falk 2009). In addition, she told me that the group originally decided to carol to the Neuroscience wing because a friend of theirs who worked in the hospital told them that the “Psych Ward” was the only part of the hospital that carolers did not visit. Thus a group of friends who already met to sing together designated what they perceived as a need, a place where people were likely to spend the holidays without taking part in live musical performance, and decided to go to that place in order to fill that need. Falk said that when they see someone “open up” to the music, “that's our reward.”

The concept of caroling to people who “need it” is extremely common. Caroling to hospitals is so popular in the U.S. that most hospitals have official policies regarding carolers—many restrict them to lobbies (Irvine 2003). In this conception, carolers go to a very specific population, but often envision this practice as part of a more generalized “community service.” Thus Anneliese Gannelie, who founded the UNC student group “Carolina Carolers” with a friend, used the phrase “the community” throughout our conversation to gloss the various institutions, such as hospitals and nursing homes, that

her group visits. By reaching out to those people who are most isolated, the logic goes, carolers bring cheer to a small segment of the population, increasing a feeling of connection between the “outside” community and this isolated pocket, adding to feeling of generalized human connection.

For parents especially, caroling is a chance to bring elder and younger generations together into both physical and emotional contact, creating “community” among population segments that are often kept separate today. Some churches and organizations (notably the Girl Scouts) concentrate on taking their children and youth to sing at elderly parishioners’ homes, or in nursing homes. Members of Chapel of the Cross, an Episcopalian church in Chapel Hill that has gone caroling for several years to home-bound parishioners (both in their homes and in assisted living centers), specifically invite families with young children to join. The parishioners of this church with whom I spoke all emphasized this aspect of their caroling. As Anna Millar put it, “it’s really an intergenerational activity where you have you know, *very* young children, you know we had some newborns toting around on people’s bellies, all the way up through—we celebrated one woman’s hundredth birthday, that we sang to, so kind of bringing together these generations”(Millar 2008). Boykin Bell said, “For me what’s so cool for the kids is, they might see their own grandparents but they don’t see that many old, sick, winding down a lot of these people are winding down and it’s interesting to see the kids like, leaning on their beds, they get up close, they’re not at all intimidated”^(Bell 2008). Carolers stress the lack of intergenerational contact in their lives and express concern about the effect of age segregation on their children. Millar, whose family is spread out across the world and who moves often because of work, said, “It is very easy to lose that

intergenerational connection. To the point where it's only, you know, once a year" Millar 2008). Anne Baker told me that,

I think there's a lack of intergenerational focus and activity and so on. In general in American culture. You know, people don't live in their extended family necessarily, parents work so kids are usually in age-segregated activities, you know, a huge part of the time. People don't spend as much time in their neighborhoods; older people often live in retirement communities, so, I think there's not enough intergenerational things that go on (A. Baker 2008).

Heather Benjamin described how she sees the contact of her son with older people during caroling already impacting the way he exists in the world. His coach, she said, had a very bad accident, had her jaw wired and

looked really bad, and the kids were scared of her except my son—he went up and hugged her! And I thought, you know why? Because he has to hug all those folks in wheelchairs [general laughter, "right!"]—every Christmas! It's just not that big a deal to them, which is nice, ["It is nice"] –I mean, it's multi-generational, it's really from one extreme to the next. 'Cause some of our kids have been caroling since they were babes in arms.(Benjamin 2008)⁶

Parents, then, carol not just to cheer up the elderly and sick, but also as a way to instill values and experiences in their children—specifically care for the elderly—explicitly shaping the attitudes of the next generation.

This contact between some of the oldest and youngest members of a given community, reestablished every year, sometimes leads to sustained relationships. Several members of the same church group told me about the one older woman they visit every year, who always has hot drinks prepared and also has a CD of cats "singing" Christmas carols that she plays for the kids. "Now every year the kids say they want to hear the cat

⁶ I spoke together with Heather, Greg and Boykin Bell, their children, and several other parishioners who came and went from the room at Chapel of the Cross after a choir practice. I asked very few questions and let the conversation flow—thus the interjections.

songs,” Gretchen Jordan told me (Jordan 2008). And, from Heather Benjamin: “The kids see all these people they wouldn't otherwise. My son always goes with the same group and they have a particularly good time. One woman in particular always has something prepared and she has cats singing on tape and he always looks forward to that. My son and daughter absolutely love it; they start talking about the cats days before”(Benjamin 2009). These singing cats have become a ritual marker of what has become a yearly interaction between this older women and the children who are brought to visit her.

Pre-planned caroling visits give residents an opportunity to prepare for an interaction that has become important for them. As Anna Millar told me,

It's unbelievable how much they looked forward to it, I mean they got dressed *up*. They, you know, made cookies, hot apple cider, eggnog, had their living room ready with their holiday napkins, I mean you could tell that this was something that for the weeks leading up to it they were really genuinely looking forward to. And so I think for the children, to see, you know how much this meant to these people, who, you know, couldn't really leave their homes, as a parent, you know, *of* these children, it was a great message for me to send to them, you know that this *is* giving and this is what Christmas is about. And it doesn't have to be a materialistic thing that you're giving, either. (Millar 2008)

Many other carolers, especially those who practice “service caroling,” also envision caroling as a specifically non-commercial or non- materialistic *gift*; in sharing that model with their children, they hope to impress on them a certain idea about the Christmas holiday, one that involves the importance of face-to-face community.

Because the point is to visit specific people or specific groups of people, who often may not live in the same physical area as one another, service caroling often involves driving. As Millar told me, those who carol with her church gather first for fellowship (and to clarify the logistics of the event, in which about 60 people will be visited) in the church building, and “then we all jump into our cars and go off into the

community” (Millar 2008). In this conception, “community” is composed of church parishioners who cannot physically come to church, spread out over a fairly large area. Last year I joined this group, and passed house after house in the back seat of a car driven by a man in flashing reindeer antlers. At one point we drove for over ten minutes to reach a house; in three hours, we visited four homes. The distances were long and the time we spent in each home was quite extended, allowing for ample conversation and musical sharing. Spatially, this caroling model connects specific individuals across fairly large distances, that could only be efficiently traversed in a vehicle. Because generations are more residentially separated from one another now than they once were, especially elders, this kind of caroling could be seen as physically bridging that gap (if only temporarily—when the same people visit the same people year after year, though, those temporary bridges can solidify into something more lasting).⁷ Additionally, with repeated trips at the same time each year to the same places, carolers literally embody the community that they have envisioned (as composed of church parishioners, or of both elder and younger generations). As popular music scholar Sara Cohen writes, “[Through motion] place can be seen to be literally embodied. Through their bodies and bodily movements (whether through long-distance travel, walking, conversation, etc.) people experience their environment physically. [Movement] can have a deep impact upon individual and collective memory and experiences of place, and upon emotions and identities associated with place” (Cohen 1998: 286). When the bodily movement of singing—the same words at the same time as one another—is considered alongside the motions of cars across the landscape, we can see how community comes to be literally

⁷ Residential segregation by age has been shown to have increased throughout the 20th century, with the sharpest upswing during “the period of rapid urban sprawl during the 1950s” (Cogwill 1978).

embodied in space and time, through the act of caroling. As I will continue to demonstrate, this is how the carolers with whom I have spoken also envision their practice: as creating and maintaining community.⁸

In the same way that folklorist Carl Lindahl describes the Basile Mardi Gras leaving and returning from the “hub” of their community, church members leave and return to their church, the center of their church community. And just as this Mardi Gras “generally skips the houses of Protestants, African Americans, and new arrivals in town to affirm its longstanding ties to older, Catholic Cajuns” (Lindahl 1996:130), the church carolers do not visit the homes of non-parishioners. There are, however, several key differences. In caroling to home-bound parishioners, churchgoers also “skip” the homes of members who are healthy and young (though all of these members are allowed and encouraged to carol). Thus the feeling of the well *servng* the unwell is quite present. This may affect carolers' reception by some parishioners—the feeling that carolers are visiting out of a sense of duty might not be a pleasant one for an elderly person being visited. And the space that is marked out (though not physically, as by horses' hooves) is less a circle and more of a ragged net, with large gaps representing the many unvisited houses. This configuration is very different from that created during neighborhood caroling.

Neighborhood Caroling

As I have said, service caroling seems to be the most popular rendition of the practice of caroling today. One reason for its predominance is that the other option, neighborhood caroling, seems to be diminishing in popularity.⁹ If this is so, much of the

⁸ I discuss singing as physically communal activity in more depth in the following chapter.

⁹ This claim is supported by anecdotal evidence from my interviews, other conversations, and online

explanation would seem to lie with the fact that people, especially in the communities of my consultants, often do not know their neighbors and feel awkward about approaching their private space, especially to sing songs thematically tied to a specific religion. Thus prearranged visits, which eliminate those concerns, have come to be preferred. Additionally, neighborhood caroling does not guarantee the feeling of being appreciated that service caroling does.

Sarbagha Falk told me that she believes that service caroling is the better way to achieve positive interactions with those visited. She remembers that she once went caroling door-to-door, but that, “We didn't get many people to throw open their doors. I think it's a dying tradition. No one is expecting you; not everyone is welcoming. Plus you don't know if you're singing to a Jewish household or something . . . (Falk 2009).¹⁰ Nevertheless, people do carol door-to-door, often for the very reasons that others do not: feeling that a “sense of community” is lacking, either in their area or in general in our society, they wish to create or increase a feeling of sociability by doing something that entails displays of neighborliness. These displays are physical: the knocking-on and opening of doors, the mingling of bodies on thresholds, the invitation into homes, the sharing of drinks. The socio-spatial results are quite different from those of service caroling. Rather than reaffirming community bonds over a large distance or across physical barriers that divide young from old and well from unwell, neighborhood caroling occurs within a relatively conscribed area and does more to create a “general” sense of community than to affirm specific ties.

discussions; and I will discuss it more in the final chapter.

¹⁰ I reconstructed Sarbagha's comments from detailed notes I took during our conversation.

The classic vision of mumming involves small communities in which every willing household will be visited—and entered—by one or more bands of mummers during the Christmas season, and unwilling households are exceptional (Glassie 1975, Chiaramonte 1969, Szwed 1969).¹¹ Through this spatial and social practice, mumming served to reaffirm those communities in which it took place. Contemporary caroling is very different: there is not an expectation that every home in a given community will be visited, since people will generally only go caroling once in a season, and will not have time to visit a large number of homes.¹² Usually neighborhood carolers in an urban or suburban setting will try to “cover” just one street, or select houses somewhat randomly, based on their appearance and whether there seems to be anyone home. In cities, apartment complexes complicate the picture. People who live on the interiors or upper floors of buildings can be skipped over. In these situations, there is not the sense that an entire community has been united or reaffirmed by caroling. Instead, people describe the feeling of “spreading good cheer in general,” to the “general” community—the relatively few homes visited can come to represent carolers' well-wishes and “care for the whole community” (Keating 2008, McGovern 2009).

Furthermore, it is rare that the members of a caroling group will all actually be from the neighborhood caroled in. Usually only one or a few are. This is partly due to the difficulty of finding willing carolers, and partly a result of the fact that many people do not know their neighbors. Thus their friends are likely to be from outside their immediate

¹¹ Each of these authors gives examples of households that do not admit mummers, their reasons, and the results. A sick family member was an acceptable excuse, but stinginess or grumpiness were not and indicated that this person “was willing to live in an area without being bound into the community by the proper public exchanges” (Glassie 1975:111).

¹² Exceptions are the Kings family, whose neighborhood is composed of one rural road lined with houses set far apart, which it takes them several hours to visit, and the carolers in Shawna Prather's Texas town, who visited most of the town's residents by riding on a flatbed trailer.

locale. People who like caroling, however, will join a caroling party in a neighborhood that is not their own because of the concept of spreading “general cheer.” There are variations on this theme, of course. Folklorist Jill Hemming Austin’s annual caroling party is formed mostly of families from her immediate neighborhood, and the neighbors do know one another (in part because they came together out of necessity during an ice storm in 2002 that caused many of them to lose electricity for several days). In this way it more closely resembles the classic mumming model than other types of neighborhood caroling. Nevertheless, people from outside the neighborhood join her caroling party, and they only have time to visit the houses on one block. Thus there is still a “general cheer” element to the evening.

A number of my interviewees who carol in neighborhoods specifically contrasted their practice to the service caroling model, saying that the point is more to visit each person regardless of any special “need” or community membership; as Kathleen Legg told me, “We never take cars, we always just go to regular people, whoever is at home”(K. Legg 2008). In Kathleen McGovern's words, “I feel like caroling in this unplanned way is more what caroling is about. It's spreading Christmas joy *in general*, and I think it's building community spirit *in general*. Whereas it's nice to carol to people that you know, but I don't think it brings the same, like, special joy of “Wow, I don't even *know* these people, and they're taking the time to sing this song at my door”(McGovern 2008). The act of visiting strangers in a spirit of social openness, rather than of visiting neighbors and reaffirming preexisting social ties with them, becomes the social statement of this type of caroling.

Falk's description of people not “throwing open their doors” to carolers points to the considerable difference between the idea of community enacted through neighborhood caroling and that implied by the classic house-visit model of related practices like mumming. Caroling has inherited some of the imagery associated with those practices, including the idea of householders “throwing open their doors”—implying invitation into the home—to neighbors who have come caroling. However, since many of these customs occurred in very different social contexts from our own; namely, well-established visiting cultures, it is not likely that contemporary caroling would have the same social consequences (the reaffirmation of social order for an entire, discrete community). Falk's disappointment that those she sang to did not act in the way that many envision as an essential aspect of door-to-door caroling suggests a tension between a popular vision of hospitality connected to caroling and the reality of visiting culture in many of today's neighborhoods.

In reality, a house visit in a culture in which visiting is in decline (Hayden 2003) is quite a different act than it would be in a culture where visiting is common (or common during festive times). First, there is the obvious fact that if one does not know one's neighbors, one cannot determine whether it would be appropriate to visit them or not. Mumming scholars, especially those writing about lapsed customs, often take as a given that community members knew one another and their situations. Thus folklorist Ray Cashman tells us that when he went mumming with his friends and ethnographic consultants in rural Ireland, “before choosing a house to visit there was always discussion about whether one of the occupants was sick and needed rest, whether the children were too small and might be scared, or whether there had been a recent death in the family

making merriment inappropriate” (Cashman 2000: 80). In addition, several scholars note that mummers avoided certain houses because their inhabitants were known to be inhospitable (Glassie 1975, Szwed 1969, Chiaramonte 1969). Visitors might expect those householders they visited to “throw open their doors” in part because they knew them and knew them to be amenable to a visit.

Practitioners of these customs were both bound by and able to play with conventions for visiting and social interaction. In certain areas of Newfoundland, anthropologist Louis Chiaramonte tells us, little visiting took place among households during the year, but during the twelve days of Christmas, visiting in groups of men, women, and children took place every night during this extended period of play and leisure from work. Both “social drinkers” and mummers acted with an acute awareness of reciprocity rules: “No adult male mummer would take a drink without first removing his mask,” Chiaramonte states, “for, if a man were to take a drink without exposing his identity, he would not be able to fulfill the obligation he incurred by accepting the drink. When the mummer removes his mask before drinking, the host is free to visit the mummer's house with or without a disguise.” These rules also determined which groups visited which homes. For groups of male mummers and social drinkers, Chiaramonte tells us, “Men stop in succession at the houses of each man in the group. In this way everyone becomes a host in turn, reciprocating the hospitality he has received.” These groups of men will also visit the homes of people who have visited them earlier (Chiaramonte 1969: 84, 85). Social anthropologist Melvin Firestone describes other communities in which mummers (here known as “janneys”) masquerade as “strangers.” They defy visiting conventions as part of the game: “When janneys come to the door they knock

loudly and impressively. Their knocking clearly sets them apart as strangers. When visitors come they normally walk right into the kitchen and sit down. The kitchens of the area are in a sense communal” (Firestone 1969: 67). Firestone demonstrates that in fact the social action of the janneys' visit was based upon householders' knowledge that the janney was not what she appeared and purported to be: a stranger. Identifying the janney was an important part of the interaction, and affirmed a sense of community identity for janney and householder alike. Neighborhood carolers' intention to spread general cheer by visiting strangers is a completely different concept.

That caroling is related to these customs that took place when house-visits would have been more expected can lead to tension for people who are unsure which norms of privacy and “personal space” can or should be breached for the sake of “building community.” As an example of this tension, folklorist and occupational therapist Jenny Womack recalls caroling a few years ago as part of a Christmas party held by a couple who had recently moved onto a cul-de-sac. Part of the couple's reason for wanting to carol, Womack told me, was to introduce themselves to the neighborhood, but in practice they stood and sang at the edge of each driveway, not approaching the houses at all. “I don't know why we did it that way. I guess because they didn't know the people well enough to go knock on their doors so it was sort of the safe thing to do, to be a little bit farther removed. So we didn't have any real interactions with anyone. I do remember one woman opening her door and standing there with her kids and clapping when it was over”(Womack 2009). The carolers placed themselves precisely on the edge of the official demarcation of private space, close enough to be heard but out of danger of confrontation (or intimate interaction). This physical separation also turned the caroling

more into a performance (which can be applauded) than into an opportunity for interaction, singing along, requests, and so forth.

For most of my interviewees, visiting neighbors is not a part of day-to-day life. When I caroled with my immediate family in our immediate neighborhood, we met our (spatially) close neighbors for the first time, though my parents had lived there for three years.¹³ And, according to sociologist Robert Putnam, there has in fact been a marked decline in face-to-face sociability among Americans over the past twenty-five years. In his influential book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam presents data that show that fewer Americans invite friends over for the evening, go on picnics, play cards, or participate in a wide variety of other social activities across all classes, ethnic groups, age groups, religions, and regions in the U.S., and attributes this decline in what he calls “social capital” to “society-wide changes” that include the growth of individualizing technology (especially television), increasing time and money pressures, and suburbanization, sprawl, and commuting (Putnam 2000). Other research on the effect of increased car usage has shown similar effects: the more time people spend in cars, the less they are likely to have repeated encounters with people on the street (Adams 1999).

Given this context, it is easy to see why the moment of interaction on the threshold of a home during caroling becomes heightened for many. Neighborhood caroling often entails a certain tension that does not exist in service caroling, a tension that comes with carolers' knowledge that their actions do not conform to current norms of neighborliness and privacy. Aran Keating, a musician in his twenties who caroled with me in Cambridge in 2007, felt very uncomfortable just going to people's doors. When I

¹³ My mother knew one of our next-door neighbors as there are no physical boundaries between their backyard and ours, but they were not home that night so we didn't visit them.

asked him what stood out in his mind about the night of caroling, he said that, “I guess the number one thing is that I felt very vulnerable. Doing something that was kind of, um—it’s kind of a very confrontational thing to do, in a way, and I felt –definitely a little *exposed*. So that’s the biggest thing, that kind of awkward moment of going up to someone’s door you don’t know and like kind of wanting them to answer and kind of not wanting them to answer, too” (Keating 2008). As it turned out, many people that night actually invited us into their homes and gave us drinks; Aran told me that he felt “it’s rare to have that kind of random interaction with people; even if you’re from that community, you don’t really get that quality of interaction from your day-to-day life” (Keating 2008). In this way the unusualness of the type of encounter engendered by caroling served to heighten the ensuing positive interaction for Aran.

Aran, though a professional performer, was nevertheless nervous about caroling because of the tension he felt about approaching the boundaries of strangers’ private homes. Other “first time” carolers have told me they were similarly nervous about caroling, but all of them have told me afterward that they were surprised at how much they enjoyed it. One friend who caroled with me in Carrboro, N.C. told me that he thought caroling was “presumptuous,” but then when the people we visited were pleased and not angry or annoyed, he told me he was glad he had come. I think there is a pleasure in realizing the permeability of some boundaries by crossing them.

Some of my interviewees consciously want to increase the sociability of their area. Caroling is a practice, and an at least somewhat socially-sanctioned one, that gives people an excuse to visit their neighbors. Jill Hemming Austin, for instance, told me that “the social capital in the neighborhood needed a little bumping up” (Hemming Austin

2009). Kathleen McGovern and I chose to carol in her neighborhood of Quincy, M.A., partly out of a sense of defiance; her neighborhood is considered by many to be “sketchy” or dangerous.¹⁴ Unlike the affluent Cambridge neighborhood in which we had caroled the year before, Quincy is a working-class city. Additionally it has a large working-class foreign-born population. While we had less overall success getting people to open their doors to us in Quincy than in Cambridge (we estimate that in 2008 about half of the houses we sang to opened their doors), and we were not invited into any homes, we both had a sense that the caroling was successful, because of how very appreciative those who did respond to us were. We caroled twice in Quincy in 2008; Kathleen said that despite the rather small number of responses, she “still felt like they were both successful nights, I guess because the people who *did* answer their doors were so appreciative.” When one mother and daughter asked if they could join us, Kathleen says she felt

Ecstatic. I mean, that's what Christmas caroling is supposed to do, right? It's supposed to get random people together, you're supposed to like, spread cheer to people who you've never seen before and may or may not ever see again, and it's just nice to meet these people under these circumstances; I would never have otherwise met these people, and they seemed really, really touched by what we were doing, and they wanted to do it with us, and they wanted to keep in touch, do it next year and they gave us free booze. (McGovern 2009)

In fact, that mother and daughter did not actually give us alcohol, but they led us to it through a chain of social ties. After joining our caroling group, they led us to a friend's house on a nearby street, which we otherwise would not have gone to. The people in that house gave us a bottle of champagne and a case of beer.

¹⁴ Two of Kathleen's immediate neighbors have been arrested this year for major drug-dealing. She says, “When I told my cousins [lifelong Quincy residents] I had moved into a place off Copeland Street, they said, 'Congratulations. You've just moved into the worst area of Quincy,’” and they tried to persuade her to move. (McGovern 2009)

The year before in Cambridge, we had “wassailed” business owners, attorneys, and Harvard professors. Almost all of them invited us into their (large) homes, sat us down in their living rooms, and brought us our choice of alcoholic beverages. That was a very unique experience, but somehow for me being given alcohol by the one family in Quincy was more meaningful, in part because of the social interactions that led to that event and the reputation of the neighborhood. In a sense the mother and daughter *did* give us the alcohol: without them we would not have gone to visit their friends. Also, their presence in our group of twenty-somethings appeared to be surprising and joyful for their friends. This likely made them see us more favorably, and want to help us keep our party going. The fact that this chain of social ties occurred in a neighborhood considered by many to be dangerous is particularly significant given the large amounts of sociological research that shows neighborhood interactions and social capital increase perceived and actual neighborhood safety. Sociologists Catherine Ross and Sun Joon Jang write that “perceived neighborhood disorder and social ties significantly interact: informal social ties with neighbors reduce the fear- and mistrust-producing effects of disorder”(Ross and Jang 2000: 401; see also Wellman and Wortley 1990, Sampson and Groves 1989, and Putnam 2000). In this same neighborhood, Kathleen received a hug from a man who recognized her as the girl whose car he'd helped shovel out of a snow bank a few weeks before. I cannot forget another man, an Italian immigrant, who looked extremely angry as he came to the door, and the look on his face when his son explained to him what was going on. As my brother, who was with us, described it, “He was *so, so angry*, and then he got *so, so happy*” (Harvester 2009). In this way, new social ties and neighborhood sociability were generated by one night of visiting.

The interaction that occurs at a doorway is loaded with the meeting of the public and private spheres. A group of people approaches someone's private space, sometimes acoustically invading it by singing before requesting admittance in the socially-sanctioned way (by ringing the doorbell or knocking).¹⁵ And yet they approach the barrier to the private sphere in a state of vulnerability: they depend on the door being answered to perform, and they hope for a positive response. When the door is opened and an interaction occurs, the barrier between the private and public spheres is broken down (if momentarily), social ties are created or strengthened, and people, sometimes, are pulled away from isolation and into a moment of face-to-face community. This is especially true when someone is living alone, but also when the person answering the door calls to the rest of the household to come join them—televisions are turned off (or down); people get up from the computer and come to the door.

These interruptions of mediated entertainment, while brief, are to my mind still important. I remember at least three specific occasions in which I have caroled at a house where the children were watching television or a movie. In each case, I am fairly certain that the children went back to watching their show after we left. I am not going to rail against television here, only suggest the importance (at least to this caroler) of other kinds of entertainment that more directly involve face-to-face interaction and active participation of the audience. Our live, embodied singing presence, coming in the midst of a different kind of entertainment, accomplished a particular thing: it created or strengthened in these children's understanding of reality another possibility than the dominant one for the ways in which humans can interact and entertain one another. In

¹⁵ We do this so that people will know what is going on and choose not to answer the door if they don't wish to interact with carolers; the majority of people I spoke to usually knock or ring first, then sing when the door is answered.

this way, it expanded the children's understanding of entertainment as well as of sociability. When we consider Kotchemidova's insights into contemporary media's affects on emotional experience—"Consumers can engage in mass-mediated emotions to the full while retaining control over their emotion experience and avoiding the risks of personal communication"(17)—carolers' interruptions of mediated entertainment experiences with entertainment requiring personal communication become examples of alternative types of emotional experience as well.

Carolers' language, as well as their explicit statements, can help demonstrate their attitudes towards community. For example, a number of carolers used the verb "spill" to describe how their groups physically occupied a house or lawn. "Sometimes we would stand halfway on the porch, spilling out into the lawn and sometimes out to the street if the lawn was small," writes Brian Legg (2008); Shawna Prather describes filling a living room and "spilling" out the door onto the lawns of the people to whom her group caroled in Texas (Prather 2009). Kim Peck used the word to describe what happened when her group stood in the doorways of nursing home rooms, "spilling" from the hallway into the resident's space (Peck 2009). This choice of words is more evocative and positive than, for example, saying that "we wouldn't always fit, so some of us had to stand outside." It connotes bounty, an overflow of blessing, and might also evoke a sense of spontaneity.

In addition to the poetics of this language, which tells us something of carolers' emotional experience and their envisioning of the mood of these events, these examples also describe instances in which carolers' bodies literally connected public and private space. Although in many contemporary U.S. neighborhoods, particularly in the suburbs, porches and lawns are considered private space and residents do not use them in the

socially transitional way that was once more common in the U.S. (and remains common in certain neighborhoods in this country), carolers' use of this space activates its liminality and social possibility. When carolers gather on a porch, they use this liminal architectural form as Urban Design scholar Robert Mugeraur envisions it, as "a site emphasizing the 'between' and enabling gathering and lingering to occur," because, he writes, it "does not force one to make the unattractive choice between admitting one to the full intimacy of the home or of keeping them in the distanced relation of the formal public realm. The result is interactions that are only minimally committal, thus promoting acquaintance with neighbors and neighborhood" (Mugeraur 1993:118,111). The porch is then used in a way in which it was once used much more often, before "the automobile had pushed families off porches into the relative quiet of the backyard in the 1920s, and "air-conditioning and television had drawn them indoors in the 1950s" (Hayden 205, citing Buckley 1992 and Arsenault 1984). We might see carolers' use of the porch, then, as "residual" of an older usage, that enacts a social alternative to the normative approach to private space in my consultants' neighborhoods.¹⁶

Sensual Experience of Community

A porch, lawn, or doorway is a place between public and private; it is also a place between outdoors and in. Most carolers carol at night, and many with whom I have spoken are from Massachusetts, a place that is very cold at night in late December. These factors complicate what occurs on people's porches, stoops, and doorways, and bring me to the last point I will make, which is that nighttime caroling and the act of moving from

¹⁶ See Raymond Williams 1977 discussion of residual culture as a potential source for alternative cultural practice in his *Marxism and Literature*. I draw more deeply on his concepts of dominant, residual, and emergent cultural elements in chapter 3 of this thesis.

place to place sensually heighten the experience of caroling for both carolers and their listeners, while physically grounding their sense of community in the sensorial realm. My interviewees, especially but not only those from the North, mention the cold as a key part of their experience of caroling. When I asked Brian Legg of Massachusetts what he remembered about caroling as a child, he told me that “Christmas caroling always makes me think of temperature. A small house with 20-80 people in it—the numbers were probably always closer to 40ish, but it seemed like 80 when I was younger—gets very warm. But then there was the stark contrast of when we would go outside to carol” (B. Legg 2008). Brian’s mother Kathleen Legg spoke of the “fun of being all together in the dark and the cold and the ice” (K. Legg 2008). Similarly Martha King of North Carolina told me that “being outside in the neighborhood at night is part of the fun. It's never too cold, but it's cold enough that we can get bundled up, so there's sort of that nostalgic cold Christmas feeling”(King 2009). Kathleen McGovern said, when I asked her what the “ideal” conditions for caroling were, that “first off I couldn't imagine caroling in warm weather”(McGovern 2008).

The cold is important in part because of the desire it creates for warmth, which is available from other people: by gathering close together, sharing drinks, or being invited into a home. It also represents the householder’s sacrifice when he or she steps out of the warmth into the cold to encounter carolers. When a householder steps out onto their porch or stoop into the cold night, their experience of a caroling event becomes sensually heightened as they move from the warmth and light of the indoors into the cold and darkness of the outdoors. If they stand with the front door ajar, as many do, they experience the physical sensation of being in-between the two realms of light and

warmth, dark and cold. And if they offer the “gift of admittance”(Mugeraur 124) to carolers, they feel the cold enter the house as they hold the door open, and know they are offering cold bodies respite in a warm interior. They may also offer carolers warm cookies, warm drinks, or alcohol, likewise with the knowledge that they are giving both sustenance and warmth. These physical acts and sensations ground the sociability of caroling in concrete bodily experience, and mark the site of (door-to-door) caroling as one of in-between-ness and thus of social possibility.

Jenny Womack told me of the importance of the physical experience of the out-of-doors to one particular couple to whom she caroled with her church choir in rural North Carolina:

I remember a man whose wife had multiple sclerosis and had been in a wheelchair for fifteen years. He was just this devoted caregiver to her for many years, and I remember the person who organized it said, now we have to call Mr. S__ beforehand so he can be ready, and that meant that he would get her bundled up in her winter coat, with her hat on, in her wheelchair, and outside to make sure she could hear. So I always had this sense of when we drove up that he was waiting at the door, and had her all bundled up and ready to roll her out so she could hear what was going on. We could have gone in to her, but it was important to him that she would experience it as you would experience caroling, in the cold of the outside. (Womack 2009)

Thus even when driving on pre-arranged house visits, the physical sensation of the outdoors can be important to those visited, in this case, as part of the fullness of the caroling experience. The carolers' knowledge (in this case Womack's) that the experience is important to those visited (“I had this sense that he was waiting at the door”) completes the circle of social and emotional exchange.

Carolers’ heightened physical experience of the space around them heightens their emotional experience of the practice, as well as their feelings of closeness to one another. A number spoke of the feeling of excitement lent by walking around at night, especially

when groups would bring along candles or lanterns (the majority of nighttime carolers whom I spoke with do this). Hemming Austin said, “The kids love the candles. It's not very often you get to walk around with candles when you're an 8-year-old, so that's like, 'whooh!'—really cool. And it's a very dark neighborhood, so you feel like you're in on a big secret or something, like it's so cool, you're out there roaming the streets at night, people don't know you're coming, then "boom!" you're just going to show up, fill their space” (Hemming Austin 2009). For my brother, “everything's more *mysterious* at night, everything's more mysterious and you feel more like, the possibility that the spiritual elements that could be alive in the world are greater, at night. And with lanterns, and the light of people's houses, for me it gives it more of a ritual feelingYou can play with themes of light and dark” (Harvester 2009). For Kathleen Legg, singing with others in the dark increased her connection with both community and the mystery of her faith. She spoke of the importance that the songs are “about the birth of Jesus, and, what does that mean and what's that mystery, you know—if God really sent a baby, you know, what does that mean? You know, a poor baby. So you know there's a lot of mystery, and we are all singing about it in the dark, in the night, and it's very powerful. It's kind of opening yourself up to each other, to community”(K. Legg 2008). And for Laura Stratford, who caroled with us in Quincy, the homemade candle lanterns we carried gave her, she said, a “reverential feeling” (Stratford 2009).

The physical act of going together to the doorway of a neighbor or stranger, to sing to them and possibly share with them an emotionally-rich encounter, especially when positive reactions are not guaranteed, makes carolers feel closer to one another;

their encounters with those they meet strengthen social ties in neighborhoods and across generations. As Jill Hemming Austin put it,

It feels great, especially when you know you've got neighbors that are older, they're kind of shut-in, and you know, they need a little—a little action. So there's like that anticipation, and then there's always people who kind of let you down; they're kind of lame. And there's a sense of like, conspiracy, when someone's excited you came, and you were excited to be there, and you all have that communitas thing going on, like 'yeah we were all here together, and, we sang, and you loved it, and you gave us cookies or whatever' . . . I also value social—*juice*, that lubricates the bigger machine, I just think that people have to spend time together. I think you learn a lot about other people when you're singing, and people talk about memories and things that have happened in their—you know, it's a good setting for getting people talking about themselves and things they remember; it's also about passing on that to kids. (Hemming Austin 2009)

Similarly Laura Stratford, who caroled with her church choir in her Boston suburb, told me that the time spent between houses was “a time to talk about the reactions we'd got, and what that reminds you of, and appreciating the spirit of thing. The mood was happy and joyful; we never got negative reactions, people would humor us even if they didn't like it, and the people who did like it would kind of buoy us up with their excitement about it” (Stratford 2009). Both of these examples express the idea that walking from house to house is a bonding time for carolers, and additionally that the responses of those visited affect the mood of the group—from creating a feeling of being “let down” by an unenthusiastic response to one of being “buoyed up” by a positive one. Brian Legg remembers as a child “racing from door to door wanting to ring the doorbell and share what amazing fun we were having with the people at each new house” (B. Legg 2008).

Shawna Prather's group did not walk, but drove from house to house on two flat-bed trailers. This way they were able to carol to people who lived throughout the entire

town. She described a feeling of communion with her entire town, brought about by the sensorial experience of outdoor singing and movement:

You definitely had that feeling of, we're not really supposed to be doing this. So kind of a little rebellious thing, you know? But we knew nobody was going to stop us, so it was kind of nice. The thing is it's such a small town that everybody knows everybody. We would drive by police cars, and they would wave. But you still do have that idea of, oh, we're not supposed to be doing this. Plus, people decorate a lot there, outside the house, and so you're driving down the road on the back of a flatbed trailer, and it's chilly but not cold, so you're bundled up a little bit, everybody's singing, all the lights are on and people come out of their houses, you know, to see you and wave and stuff, because everybody knows that that's the night, and it's very—it's a very *emotional* feeling, almost like a high, like a Christmas high, where everything was really great, for that time, and you knew you were helping people, you were doing something good, and it was also Christmas-y, it tied the whole community together, you had that community spirit thing going. At that moment, I felt a part of [the town], and I felt like I belonged, and I felt like that was where I was supposed to be. Other times of the year, I did not feel like I belonged there at all. But that caroling, and that community spirit, made me feel like I belonged. And it may have just been for that night, but it did feel like I belonged. I mean it tied us all together. (Prather 2009).

It is remarkable to me that Prather said that the caroling “tied the whole community together,” as her group of about sixty people only visited a small percentage of the 3,500 residents of her town. It seems likely that the physical motion on the trailer around the entire town helped to create this feeling. Sara Cohen writes that “music plays a very particular and sensual role in the production of place, in part through its particular embodiment of movement and collectivity”(1998: 269). Prather's description demonstrates this idea, and shows how in addition to the sounds and sensations of people singing together while traveling, the visual impact of the lighted houses and neighbors waving, the physical sensation of being bundled up in the chilly weather and of riding through town on a flat bed trailer, and the slightly rebellious sensation of doing something not entirely legal, at night, made her feel emotional and connected with her community, though she did not normally feel connected with that town. In this way the

caroling event, in its sensual fullness, can be said to have “produced” Prather's town for her in a very particular way.

Conclusion

I have a similar feeling to Prather's sensation of a “high” when I walk from lighted house to lighted house, down a dark street, in a group of people who walk bearing candlelight. Michel de Certeau writes that “spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life. . . .They weave places together they spatialize” (1980:96, 97). Carolers singing on a truck sonically weave together the houses in a Texas town; carolers on foot spin a crazy web of light among and between the welcoming homes in an “unsafe” neighborhood; residents walk out of warm, bright houses into the cold, dark night. One woman who knows carolers are coming from the church lights candles; she will experience a feeling similar to that she would have felt at her church's candlelight service, if she were able to attend. The substitute may be richer in many ways, because it represents the motion of her church community *to her*, into an intimate space of interaction. These are examples of spatial practice which shape and influence social life for carolers and those they visit. Furthermore, these practices shape a physical and social holiday landscape that is otherwise marked by consumption. They heighten the celebratory side of the festival and its values of community and giving without supporting the materialistic aspect of the holiday.

The importance of physical motion in caroling leads me to consider caroling as an active component of the physical landscape, the built environment of the places in which it is practiced. Cohen's observations on the production of space will again be helpful here. She writes,

Neighborhoods, cities, and other places are socially and materially produced as practical settings or contexts for social activity, but through such activity places are also produced as concepts or symbols. To describe places as being “produced” is to emphasize the processes that shape their material, social, and symbolic forms. Music is part of such processes. Music reflects aspects of the place in which it was created . . . but music also helps to produce place. (Cohen 1998: 277)

When carolers take to the streets and move from place to place singing, they not only use the neighborhood or place as a “practical setting” for their activity, but also help to produce the place as a concept or symbol of “community” or “neighborhood.” They additionally add to the number of social, material, and symbolic possibilities for that place—a given street is no longer just a place where people live and drive (for example, both McGovern and Hemming Austin told me people as a rule do not walk in their neighborhoods), but is now also a place where people walk, sing, carry lanterns, and visit their neighbors. The street has been both embodied and “ensounded” by the caroling, and when householders open their doors, the street has become socially porous as well.¹⁷ The caroling becomes part of the landscape and soundscape of the place it moves through, and changes its social and symbolic form as well.

Additionally, as caroling is a seasonal practice, confined to the ten or so days before Christmas, it becomes specifically a part of that seasonal landscape—already marked by the physical and social signs of both celebration and heightened consumption.¹⁸ As a markedly non-commercial activity, in which performance is envisioned as a gift, and appropriate forms of reciprocity include hospitality, positive feedback, and possibly food or drink, the presence of carolers can texture a landscape in a unique way, adding to expressions of heightened sociability while implicitly questioning the model of Christmas as a festival of capitalism and material consumption.

¹⁷ See Ingold 2007, 12. Ingold's term “ensoundment” implies motion and is contrasted to “emplacement.”

¹⁸ I have not spoken to anyone who carols in the first half of the month of December; most go in the week before Christmas.

CHAPTER 3

THE SOUNDS OF CAROLING

As we get ready to leave Dahm's apartment, I hit a butter knife against various objects, trying to find something that will make a ringing sound, and Aran quickly fashions a shaker using rice and an empty container. My makeshift bell doesn't happen, but Aran's shaker became important at one house when he hands it to a little boy about two years old, who shakes along to "Jingle Bells," happy as can be.

In another house a dinner party is in preparation. The lawyer and her businessman husband open a couple of bottles of wine for us and ask us about ourselves while their friends cook in the other room. Then one of them gets the idea of singing "Baby, It's Cold Outside" along with their recording of it, in male and female parts—for some reason they have several copies of the lyrics and hand them out, then organize us into groups, men and women, in their plush carpeted living room. The cook and a couple friends join us from the kitchen and we're ready to sing. Our hosts seem tipsier than we are but are adamantly against my suggestion that we switch the gender roles of the song. We sing "Baby, It's Cold Outside" several times before leaving that house, happy, but quizzical.

These moments from caroling in Cambridge in 2007 reveal the participatory nature of caroling. In the first, a makeshift instrument becomes "instrumental" in garnering the participation of a child not quite old enough to sing; in the second, a couple goes from being our "audience" to our hosts and co-performers, as they direct us in a joint choral performance for no one's benefit but that of our own entertainment. These and moments like them, I will suggest, are able to occur in part because carolers' *sound* communicates their participatory intent. Unlike performers who thrill others with their skill, carolers often have an amateur sound which can send the message that anyone is welcome to join

along. By thus fostering participative engagement, caroling can offer an alternative to the predominant cultural and economic model of music as object.

Introduction

In this chapter I will examine the sonic aspect of caroling, and show how the practice of caroling acts against the contemporary model of music as commodity. A specifically non-commercial approach to the sharing or “gifting”¹⁹ of music is the explicit intent of several carolers with whom I spoke. I will demonstrate how this non-commercial intent can be *heard* in the way caroling sounds, in various ways depending on who is involved. Part of what is hearable in this sound are the *differences* from the recorded music one hears during the holiday season. These differences include: an amateur or unpolished sound; an a cappella or semi a cappella sound; the sound as live and unmediated, not amplified, and not disconnected from its source; the space the sound is created in (whether a private home of a visited person, their porch or yard, a hospital room, etc.); extra-musical sounds such as words expressing intent, laughter, etc.; and what I am calling paramusical sounds, including the possible presence of familiar voices, including one's own, or the presence of voices of a range of ages. The presence of some or all of these aspects of sound mark the caroling as “sincere” and not commercial; influencing the quality of interaction that becomes possible between carolers and those they visit.

This chapter is not as much about music as it is about music-making, or “musicking” as Christopher Small (1998:8) would prefer we call it. The social aspect of caroling, more than the music sung, is the main motivation for carolers. This is the first

¹⁹ See Flores 1994. I will discuss Flores' concept in more depth in the next chapter.

important difference that sets caroling apart from commercial music. In *Music as Social Life*, Thomas Turino writes that what he calls “modernist-capitalist” cosmopolitans,²⁰ encompassing the majority of U.S. citizens,

tend to think of music as a thing—an identifiable art object that can be owned by its creators through copyrights and purchased by consumers. The strength and pervasiveness of the music industry and its mass-mediated products during the past century have helped to create this habit of thought. If we briefly consider the products of the music industry over time, we can glimpse cosmopolitans' gradual shift in thinking of *music making* as a social activity to *music* as an object. (italics original) (2008: 24)

Although a love of Christmas music, particularly Christmas hymns, is a large part of many carolers' motivation for caroling, the act of caroling itself and the encounters it engenders are equally, and often *more*, important. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the act of moving the performance from audience to audience is what differentiates *caroling* from carol-singing, and this motion implies a heightened and specific kind of sociability. Several of my interviewees are dedicated amateur or even professional musicians, and both musicians and non-musicians spoke about their enjoyment of the Christmas carols themselves; all, however, emphasized the social activity of caroling as the most important element of the practice. Later in this section and also in the next chapter I will discuss how the singing of traditional songs is uniquely suited to engendering social communion; for now I will simply state that the music itself and face-to-face social interaction are inseparable in caroling, and in that way the practice of caroling is profoundly different from the practices surrounding commercial music. As Erin O'Hara of the Oakwood Waits told me, “Compared to recorded music, it's more

²⁰ Turino describes this as “the most prominent cosmopolitan cultural formation in the world today . . . spread by European and U.S. colonialism; it is defined by habits of thought and practice derived from a combination of Christianity and capitalist ethos and practices under the umbrella discourse of modernity”(2008: 118) For Turino's definition of cosmopolitanism, see Turino chapter 4.

personal, because the people are right there in front of you. And you're interacting with them, too . . . Part of the experience is having people give you cookies, or milk, invite you in, give you cider. That's really part of it, more than just singing" (O'Hara 2009). Similarly, recall Haskell Fitz-Simmons's words from the previous chapter: "The music is very important, but really it's the experience, getting out there, and the looks on people's faces when you hit them between the eyes with something that just makes them . . . sometimes makes them *weep*, you know?" That caroling is seen by its participants as a verb, as social activity, and not as a noun or object, sets it apart from the predominant contemporary model of music exchange or "consumption" in the U.S., and the *action* is seen as important because it both moves other people ("sometimes makes them *weep*") and binds the the carolers together ("you *share* an experience").

The fact that there is usually no money involved in caroling²¹ further sets it apart for the majority of Americans, whose musical experiences are largely mediated through commercial interests.²² "Today, wherever there is music," writes political economist Jacques Attali, "there is money" (1985: 3). Musicologist Christopher Small discusses how the commercialization of music has led to a system of specialization, in which "our powers of making music for ourselves have been hijacked and the majority of people robbed of the musicality that is theirs by right of birth, while a few stars, and their handlers, grow rich and famous through selling us what we have been led to believe we

²¹ Every so often people complain on websites in response to someone's blog or a "how-to" about caroling that carolers have come to their door collecting for a charity or church. Of the thirty carolers with whom I've spoken to, none has ever collected money. Furthermore, people's online responses to donation-collecting carolers are always negative, strengthening my claim that it is its difference from the music-as-commodity model that improves caroling's reception.

²² I am not claiming that caroling is the only form of noncommercial music available to Americans; clearly it is not. Several of my consultants engage in other forms of amateur music-making or are active in their church's music ministry. However, the dominant musical culture for my consultants, middle-class white Americans, is in fact commercial. The many who resist the dominance of the music industry do so because they do perceive it to be dominant.

lack” (1998: 8). Furthermore, caroling is a markedly non-commercial celebration of a holiday infamous for being a time of commercial excess in the United States. Christmas shopping accounts for one-third of annual retail sales in the United States (Carrier 61, quoted in Mundy 2008). Commercial interests attempt to use Christmas music to further consumption and make consumption itself “festive.” As Media Studies scholar John Mundy writes, Christmas

is a global festival largely dedicated to expenditure on, and consumption of, commodities, whatever religious, cultural and spiritual allegiances are ostensibly in operation. In a global economy dedicated to maintaining a precarious balance between the production and consumption of goods, Christmas in America, Europe, Japan and other 'developed' nations serves an important function . . . as [shoppers] flock to the shops and stores in November and December, their purchasing underscored by the ubiquitous soundtrack of Christmas pop songs.(Mundy 2008: 170)

Many of my consultants expressed dislike for the commercial aspect of Christmas, and told me that they see caroling as a way to celebrate the Christmas festival without partaking in its consumerist ethos. Many of the carolers with whom I spoke are explicit on this point. Parents talk about wanting their children to see “that side” of Christmas, and others relate the noncommercial-ness of caroling to their faith, to the “true meaning” of Christmas. They stress interpersonal interaction together with the absence of the commercial character of the Christmas holiday, which has become almost normalized in American society. Kathleen Legg said that caroling

is my own way of keeping Christmas, that's not dependent on—money. It's not commercialized. It's just—grass roots, low tech, cooperative, inclusive, and—Most people come because they like that kind of feeling, that it's a—family, shared, cooperative thing. And so there isn't a lot of tinsel, there isn't a lot of money, and there isn't a lot of presents . . . I think that it's so easy to forget that the message of Christmas is really for all people, and especially those who are poor, helpless, disenfranchised, you know, living in stables. And when we get all commercialized about it, and frantic, we can lose that. (K. Legg 2008)

Often adults want to share this conception of Christmas with children. Ann Millar described “feeling good as a parent, that your children are seeing...*this* side of Christmas because it gets *very* commercialized in the U.S.”(Millar 2008). Tim Baker, the music minister of University United Methodist Church in Chapel Hill, who brings the youth choirs caroling, says that though some of them start out ambivalent about caroling, “when they see that heart get touched, they usually soften up a bit. When we go on our tour in the spring, we have lots of time to talk, and they always talk about caroling experiences, that’s what comes up the most, and it’s the specific interactions they remember, like, ‘Remember when we sang to that old lady, she was so cute’”(T. Baker 2008). Baker’s group has been invited to perform (for pay) at malls, but he always refuses: “They’re just wanting us to do that to bolster sales. We can find other ways of raising money.” Like many others, Baker sees caroling as a “gift,” freely given, and the interpersonal interaction fostered in this act of giving and receiving as what makes caroling worthwhile.

Baker's quotation also brings up the phenomenon of Christmas music in malls. Christmas in the U.S. is *the* commercial holiday, and “shopping malls have become icons of consumer society” (Sterne 22). As my brother sees it, “Christmas is like, the mall's time to have its best decorations and do its whole thing, and you know, it's the co-option of a holiday that's supposed to be something cool, but it's instead used for the purposes of making money. It's, you know, the Holly Jolly Christmas and all that shit, it's just sucking the soul out of it, for material purposes” (Harvester 2009). I will draw comparisons between the sound of caroling and that of holiday “mall music” throughout this chapter

because the sincerity of carolers' intent and their participative ethos can be heard in their sound and in its differences from the dominant soundtrack of the holiday season, centered in malls and shopping centers. I will discuss the aspects of its sound that differentiate it from commercial sound one by one for the sake of organization; in reality they overlap quite a bit.

Sound

When I asked Kathleen McGovern what she thought about Christmas music in malls, she spoke about her dislike for paid carolers. Her words indicate that an imperfect sound signals authentic or sincere caroling, and is the sound of people singing together for fun and in order to share a positive feeling with others, specifically avoiding a commercial exchange:

First of all, Christmas carolers should not sound perfect, which generally these people do. Like, the beauty of Christmas caroling comes in when, like, random people, who, maybe they're professional singers or maybe they're not, but they haven't put any particular effort into singing these particular songs at this particular time, and they like, burst out in harmonies or little improvised "ho-ho-hos", and they don't care about how stupid they sound, they're just *having fun singing*. And these Christmas carolers in the stores, they're not having fun. They're making money. And the malls are not having fun, they're making money. And the people who walk by them, are forced to consider, what a commercial holiday Christmas has become. The nice thing about improvised Christmas caroling is that it's bringing joy around to all these houses without any sort of commercial aspect. (McGovern 2009)

An amateur or "unpolished" sound in caroling is easy to hear and helps to shift the predominant paradigm of music as commodity towards an activity that begets face-to-face social interaction. Those of my consultants who emphasized the importance of sounding unpolished were also the ones who spoke of caroling as predominantly about inciting social interaction, both with those visited, and also among carolers. For Jill

Hemming Austin, it is very much about adding what she calls “social juice” to the neighborhood. She listed the people who normally carol with her by family group, remarking that some can't sing very well, but “we love them.” When I asked if I might be able to come along that year, she hesitated: “Are you a good singer?” she asked. I replied that no, I'm not a very good singer. “Oh, good,” she responded. “We might not want you if you were” (Hemming Austin 2008).

I believe that what is meant by being a “good singer” in this context is really having a “trained voice”—a prominent vibrato, for example, that would make one stand apart from the crowd (Hemming Austin did not ask me if I could carry a tune, and then refuse me when I said I could). The point is that for amateur groups, the community aspect of caroling trumps the model of a skillful performance. Kathleen Legg, who has been hosting a caroling party in her home for the past 25 years, says, “We started to get more people who had actual skill in music, and most of them didn't want to...step into that skill,²³ they wanted to just be a regular person, part of the crowd” (K. Legg 2008).

In addition to a lack of vibrato, a lack of careful or prominent harmony is another component of vocal sound that can signify an amateur group—and an amateur intent. The carolers with whom I spoke had varying thoughts on the importance of harmony to caroling, but most agreed that while it is nice when someone is able to add harmony, it is not necessary. The predominance of the melody in many groups makes a visited person more likely to feel like they could sing along without disturbing a “performance.” A few of my consultants' groups do sing harmony, including one group who goes as a family, say that people do not usually sing along with them, whereas groups who do not sing

²³ When I asked Legg to clarify what she meant by “step into that skill,” she explained that the skilled singers in the group did not want to take leadership, sing solos, perform at the piano before going out, or stand out in any way.

careful harmonies often have the people they visit join in their singing. These groups tend to appreciate it when someone can add a harmony or a descant, but the resulting sound is not polished and does not sound like it has been arranged and rehearsed. Rather, it sounds like a group of amateur singers, some of whom are more skilled in music than others. It sounds like “participatory performance” according to Turino's definition, in which “the inclusion of people with a wide range of musical investment and abilities within the same performance creates a unique dynamic as well as a series of constraints on what can or should be done musically” (2008: 30). The fact that the same body of Christmas music is sung year after year in contexts such as church choirs and school performances means that more musically invested or able singers can sing at a different level of difficulty (singing, for example, a descant or harmony they have learned in the past) with a group of less-advanced singers. This mixing, for Legg (herself an accomplished singer and a frequent church soloist), helps to build community among carolers:

When you Christmas carol with a lot of people, everybody owns it. Everybody sings the song, and people who are able to sing better, do, and put harmonies in, and people who don't sing well—*feel* like they do, and they're more likely to sing louder. And that combined with the community, of being with other people, and the sharing of all these voices coming together into one voice It's kind of opening yourself up to each other, to community, to that risk of performance, even though alone you probably couldn't do that. (Legg 2008)²⁴

Shawna Prather described feeling a similar sensation of community, stemming from the mixture of unpracticed voices in the group with which she went caroling:

It was a real mixture: you had your few people who could sing really well, and the few who couldn't sing well at all but thought they could, and so they'd sing really loud. And so I think you had a mixture of the good and the bad, and I think all together it sounded really nice. Because it wasn't perfect. But it had that really nice, I don't want to say *family*, maybe *community* feeling, where everybody belonged and everybody was a part of it. So, I really liked that. And you had your young voices and your older voices, and it was probably an equal mixture of young voices and

²⁴ Both Hemming Austin and Legg are active in their church music ministry; Legg is a frequent soloist.

older voices. It didn't sound professional, because none of us could really sing, except for that one lady, but we put our hearts into it, and I think that made it special; that made up for it. (Prather 2009)

In these two descriptions, an “unprofessional” sound, a mixture of trained and untrained voices, comes to create a feeling of “community” for my interviewees. This sound for them is a tangible manifestation of the inclusive participatory activity occurring. In addition, Simon Frith's observation that the bodily actions involved in singing particular words and notes are the same or similar for all people (Frith 1996b: 192) should add to our understanding of what makes people feel this sense of community when singing in a group. In addition to hearing the mixture of voices around them, they are also engaged in the same physical undertaking as those around them. This is part of the reason why carolers find participation on the part of their “audiences” desirable—it helps to expand this feeling of community to them, in part by pulling the audience into simultaneous corporeal endeavor.

An unpolished sound can help encourage participation between carolers and those they visit. At least, this idea is part of my interviewees' conception of their sound. As my brother Dan commented, “When there's six or ten people singing in perfect harmony, and doing an *arrangement* of a carol, that's in perfect harmony, you're not encouraged to join in. Whereas, if it's just people who are singing the melody, the way you know it and the way they know it, you could be like, 'well yeah, I'll just hop in here.' Because otherwise it's like a *performance*, rather than a sing-along” (Harvester 2009). Sarbaga Falk also articulated this point, telling me how her group (composed of several invested and trained singers) eschews a professional sound in favor of a sing-along dynamic. She told me that:

We're clearly not a polished church choir that sings flawless pieces—'rag-tag' might be too strong, but it's really whoever wants to sing, whether they're really great or not. It's the spirit of the thing that forms the group. Because there's an assumption that if a polished group came and sang flawlessly, that would be a performance. And what we were looking for was engagement. If a group is performing, you perform, you don't engage people. And our purpose was to engage. . . .

I think part of our strength is that we're more than willing to make fools of ourselves, to do the dance, and not sound the greatest. That's our plug; we totally get into the songs themselves and make fools of ourselves. I think we create more of an opening that way than if we were trying to be really professional. (Falk 2009)

Aran Keating, a professional singer and musician who caroled with me in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 2007, cited our interactions with those we visited as the highlight of the evening (adding that he had been “ready to hate on” caroling before we went, because it sounded boring and “quaint—like something you do with old people”). He thinks that our lack of polish contributed to the fact that many people that night invited us into their homes. (I should note that this group did warm up and practice for about half an hour, finding appropriate keys for different songs, before going out. We did not sound bad; rather, we sounded unpolished.) He said, comparing himself with family friends who carol with five-part harmony and really “put on the show”:

But it wasn't like that for me at all; it was more kind of—uncomfortable. And maybe people kind of got the sense of that and they wanted to also put themselves out there a little bit. There was a healthy dose of spontaneity that came through. Because—you know if we *did* put a lot of work in it and did sound really good, that means *we* know what we're doing better than *they* know what they're doing, and that puts us in control, and we weren't in control, so much. (Keating 2008)

In a similar vein, my brother remembers how the difficulty of singing “O Holy Night” sparked humorous interaction with our neighbors (whom we hadn't met before) when my family caroled in 2007: “I remember we would sing ‘Night, o NIGHT!!’ [Dan screeches out the high note, emphasizing its difficulty] and we would always joke about the high note, we would kind of try to find the right key for it—and I think when we sang it, of

course Dad sang it like, really loud, people'd be like, 'Yeah!' like, 'You did it!' They'd be like, 'Nice.'”(Harvester 2008). I remember this interaction as well, and the excitement that was generated between ourselves and our neighbors as they listened with more and more intensity as we neared that climactic note, then the eruption of cheers and laughter when we successfully (if not beautifully) pulled it off. Because it was clear from our sound that we were not professional singers, able to soar gracefully up to the notoriously high note in this particular song, our neighbors became invested in our singing in a sense as equals: rather than thrilling in awe at our abilities, they laughed with us as we exhibited the difficulty of achieving a physically challenging musical moment.

Even self-described “semi-professional” carolers, such as the Oakwood Waits of Raleigh, who sing paid gigs in order to pay for their elaborate Dickensian costumes as well as to raise money for charities, told me that they adapt a less-polished, less formal and “controlled” sound when they go on their traditional, unpaid “traipse” around the neighborhood of Oakwood on the Saturday before Christmas (Adams 2009). While they are likely still recognized by their neighbors as pros, nevertheless it seems that the social aspect of caroling dictates an informal sound, which is somehow more sociable than a professional sound. It may also have to do with Frith's observations that people “use the voice . . . not just to assess a person, but also, even more systematically, to assess that person's sincerity: the voice and how it is used . . . become a measure of someone's truthfulness” (Frith 1996b:197). Carolers appear to be aware that their audiences (unconsciously or not) assess their voices in this way, and that a less formal or professional sound has come to denote sincerity in some contexts.

An anecdote from Anneliese Gannelie, co-founder of Carolina Carolers, a student organization at UNC Chapel Hill that carols to hospitals and nursing homes: supports my argument that the sound of caroling manifests the preeminence of social motives for caroling. Describing the first time the group went caroling, to UNC Hospitals, she said:

It's really funny. The lady that was leading us—we'd never, we don't like, rehearse or anything or have meetings or anything like that—so it was the first time we'd ever sung together and we had a couple of international people who'd never even sung any of the songs before, so—we all sang together and the lady that was leading us around, she said, 'You guys are really bad.' [Anneliese laughs.] And we were like, well, that's okay. A lot of people's families were there because this was towards the holiday season, and they really appreciated it, you know, we would get, like, requests for songs and stuff. (Gannelie 2008)

Here, Gannelie claims that although her caroling group sounded “bad” enough that a stranger commented on it, nevertheless those they visited were appreciative of their actions. Caroling is unique in that its performers are not always responsible to their audience for the same level of competence that is usually expected from performers, in part because the social action of caroling is its most important feature. Folklorist Richard Bauman has defined performance as “the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of . . . competence. . . . Additionally, it is marked as available for the enhancement of experience” (1997: 11).²⁵ It appears that caroling is a special type of performance in that the “enhancement of experience” it can offer comes less from the skill of its practitioners than from other qualities, such as the chance to participate, the body of music sung, the holiday context, and the element of visiting.

People most often carol without accompanying instruments, although it appears that someone showing up with a guitar or other acoustic instrument is usually welcome.

²⁵ He is speaking specifically about verbal performance, but his interpretation has been applied to other forms of performance as well.

Several of my consultants' groups do carol with instruments, usually a guitar or rhythm instruments. The lack of instruments or presence of just a few "sing-along" instruments adds to the sense that caroling is more participatory than presentational. It also foregrounds the sound of human voices joining together, helping to emphasize community (as described above by Legg and Prather). Laura Stratford, who caroled with me in Quincy, Massachusetts in 2008 and also as a child and teen with her church choir told me she thinks that part of the power of carols is that they

were written in ways that allow them to be sung a cappella with just other just voices; they don't feel like they would be missing something because they would be relying on some kind of instrumentation we couldn't provide. I think that that's a huge part of the power of [these songs], which is the power of the human voice being used in different ways and in different registers, and different strengths to create a kind of a tapestry of sound, that you wouldn't automatically think just a couple of people singing could achieve. (Stratford 2009)

A cappella singing also helps to change the texture of the same songs that one might also hear in a commercial context. The Oakwood Waits sing mostly less familiar carols, but occasionally sing the standards (which they call the "chestnuts") when they feel that's what their audience wants. John Adams says, "some of what we sing sounds just like what you'd hear in a department store, minus the swelling orchestras and synthesizers or whatever it is they use, because it's a cappella. I guess that makes even that music sound somewhat unique" (Adams 2009).

Caroling is also unamplified, which further sets it apart from recorded music, and from certain live performances of holiday music as well—for example, children singing in a mall may have an "amateur" sound, but might also be amplified. To be clear, I am not attempting to vilify amplification or recording, but rather to suggest out that their pervasiveness in contemporary U.S. musical experience is likely to influence listeners'

response to music that is not amplified or recorded. Philip Auslander writes in his book about the concept of “liveness” that “The project of describing the position of other cultural discourses within our mediatized environment is as pressing as that of describing that environment itself [here he is speaking specifically about works on television culture.]. Because live performance is the category of cultural production most directly affected by the dominance of media, it is particularly urgent to address the situation of live performance in our mediatized culture” (Auslander 1999:2). Because of the prevalence of recorded, amplified, and manipulated musical sound in our culture, sound which is unmediated, live, and not “schizophonic”²⁶ is often both heard and thought of as essentially “different” from the dominant sound of mediated music.

Before the invention of the microphone, for example, a person singing would rely upon his or her physical organism and the surrounding space to control the volume of their sound. The electric microphone drastically changed that situation, ushering in a completely new technique of singing (Lockheart 2003). Electronic amplification has completely altered the relationship of surrounding space and distance between singer and audience to the sound of the human voice. It has also led to the foregrounding of the individual voice in ways since the time of its invention (Frith 1996b: 7), and drawn more attention to the individuals whose voices have come to represent them to their listeners. Frith writes that the electric microphone

made it possible for singers to make musical sounds—soft sounds, close sounds—that had not really been heard before in terms of public performance. . . . The microphone allowed us to hear people in ways that normally implied intimacy—the whisper, the caress, the murmur. . . . (Frith 1996b: 192-193).

²⁶ R. Murray Schafer coined the term “schizophonic” to describe the sound that has been severed from its source—for example, by recording and reproduction (Schafer 1977).

As a result, listeners are now accustomed to hearing individual voices, often belonging to and imagined as representative of the most intimate *selves* of celebrity musicians (Frith 1996b, Lockart 2003).

Furthermore, the music many of us are most likely to hear on a regular basis will have been mixed and manipulated, for example by adjusting reverberation to give the voice a resonant quality, and employing Auto-Tune to bring it to perfect pitch. Auto-Tune is quite standard in professional studios (Everett-Green 2006:1), and sound mixing and Auto-Tune are also employed in live performance. Given this situation, nonprofessional and unmediated voices singing together are more likely to sound exceptional.

Moreover, the sound of the unamplified and otherwise unmediated voice singing is increasingly rare to many people today. As of 2001, less than 1% of people in the U.S. made music in public “with any regularity, and only about 5% of us still sing in public, mostly on Sundays” (Benzon 280, quoted in Keil 2001:1). Ethnomusicologist Charles Keil conducted interviews with people who no longer sing in the shower. “On the basis of one unkind comment by a family member or dorm-mate they stopped singing in the shower, perhaps forever,” he writes (2001: 1). Kathleen Legg has a similar perception. Speaking about what she called “ownership of music,” she told me,

I think that as a kid that's something that I took for granted, partly because it was more that way in the whole culture in this country. I noticed over time that people were more. . . uncomfortable with just *singing*, or telling stories, and—you know when I talk to people about well do you know this song or do you know that song, it used to be that they'd say, 'Yeah, and it goes like this:' Then, it started changing to, 'Oh let me play it for you' and they go to their, you know, tape recorder and their CD or, 'It's on my phone.' (Legg 2008)

Jenny Womack, who conducted a two-year ethnography with a women's chorus in Durham, N.C., told me that in her conversations with chorus members,

What is really striking to me is how many people have said to me over the years that if you're not a churchgoer, as an adult there are so few places to sing. And then how many people are involved in groups like this because they just want to *sing*, you know, use their voices as instruments to make music, and there really *aren't*, you know, sort of cultural ways of doing that in the U.S.; there are very few ways as an adult to make music in a community sort of way, to share that. (Womack 2009)

Thus, when people *do* sing together, including those who do not consider themselves “good singers,” as with caroling, the sound is unusual to ears accustomed to the sounds of professional singers (usually amplified and professionally mastered). It foregrounds the community and participatory aspect of the activity. A lack of amplification allows participants to hear the space in which the musicking takes place. The space provides the particular quality of resonance to the sound, and will affect volume. The resulting awareness of space will further heighten the importance of the moment of musicking as being unique to that particular place and the individuals gathered in it.

The outdoors offer a particular type of environment for singing that showcase how what might be considered “limitations” of the unamplified voice can become strengths when caroling is the performance context. The tendency of the voice to disappear outdoors, with little to reverberate off of, causes carolers to sing more loudly, adding to the “boisterousness” of their sound. As some of the songs were created for outdoor singing (such as the many “wassailing” songs), they lend themselves to this type of use of the voice. The difficulty of singing outside may also increase intimacy among carolers, who describe standing close together in order to hear each other singing, especially when outdoors (e.g. King 2009). It may pull carolers and their audiences closer together, as they get up under a porch roof and the visited person joins them outside.

Outdoor carolers are often trying to sing *through* doors and walls, or even *up* to residents on the upper floors of buildings. Although some groups ring doorbells and only sing when the door is answered, others begin singing and then ring the doorbell. The idea is to be heard from inside the house before being seen. This involves a certain intentionality of directing sound that unites the carolers in their shared effort. It can also positively affect those to whom it is directed. For example, it took some time for one young family living on the second floor of a subdivided home in Quincy to realize that we were caroling to them from down below, as we had no way to ring their doorbell. We kept singing up to them, with as focused and directed a sound as we could muster, because their balcony was decorated for Christmas. When the couple did hear us and came out with their young children, dancing and singing along, we felt our efforts rewarded, and the couple thanked us repeatedly, expressing their amazement that we had bothered to attempt to sing to them, and telling us how glad they were that their children had the chance to experience caroling.

When carolers are invited inside homes, then the musicking that happens within is different in important ways from music normally heard in a domestic context.²⁷ Often the space belongs to the person in it, or that person has been dwelling there for some time. That person may expect to hear choral singing in other contexts, but hearing it in their private space “amplifies” the unexpectedness and uniqueness of the event, while enriching that space with another layer of possibility for social and material (in the form of sound) action. Martha King told me that her family often hears the comment that “This is something you don't ever hear in real life!” (King 2009) Householders also have a very

²⁷ If carolers actually sing once inside; when my friends and I were invited into a number of homes in Cambridge, we mostly just socialized, drank wine, and were told to go to law school.

different type of control over the sound of other people singing than they do over recorded music or radio. A large group of carolers can “really fill a house” (Haskell Fitz-Simons told me, “We’re a big sound, a big presence. We can really fill up a house” [2009]; Shawna Prather describes literally filling up the small houses in her town with a group of about sixty people [2009]). Householders have less control over volume; because volume control really belongs to the carolers, their sensitivity to the differing situations in each house or room will determine how loudly they sing. Thus when carolers choose to sing a tender or soft song, or when such a song is requested, the emotional effect of that soft music is socially meaningful; if a householder were to listen to the same carol softly on their CD player, the emotional effect would not be tied to the actions and sensitivities of individuals in the same way.

In a mall situation, the music is there to create a particular mood that will lead people to make purchases. The shopper has no control over volume or which songs they hear. Often, the music played reasserts the “star system” that Small thinks has “hijacked” ordinary people’s musicality.²⁸ My interviewees’ statements on music in malls reveal distaste for the music tied to its commercial intent. Most said that they try to “tune it out” because they know it is being used to get them to make purchases—though they love the songs, they cannot enjoy them in a commercial context.

Live music too can become tarnished by its commercial context (thus Tim Baker’s refusal to let his youth choir sing in the mall). The Oakwood Waits sometimes sing in the mall (and stress to me that they do this to pay for their costumes and to be

²⁸ People’s decision to sing or dance along to music in shopping centers, however, can resist that system and foster community among fellow shoppers who respond to their singing.

able to travel and give performances that are more meaningful to them). Haskell Fitz-Simons told me that

Malls are what we call wallpaper gigs... people's eyes *still* light up, they still get teary-eyed, if they can catch you in a place where they can actually *hear* you, but a lot of times they *can't* in malls, and a lot of times you might just as well be those automated figurines in the toy store window, you know, they just want something that looks like that. You would be amazed how many times we get to a place like that and we have to say, "Would you please turn off the Muzak, if you want us to sing?" And they'd never even thought of that. (Fitz-Simons 2009)

Fitz-Simons's distaste for performing in the mall comes from his feeling that those doing the hiring are using his group as "wallpaper" or "automated figurines," as well as from the difficulty the group has in connecting with potential listeners, who often cannot hear them due to bad acoustics and programmed music. Others of my consultants dislike mall caroling largely because of its context, and additionally feel that the polished sound of those carolers remove them further from the envisioned, participatory social action of caroling, both because listeners would likely not feel welcome or able to sing along with them and because their professional sound suggests that they have been paid to sing. Their "goodwill" or "holiday cheer" is thus not seen as sincere, but part and parcel of the mall's commercial intent. My brother reiterated this impression about carolers in the mall, connecting them with the overall "shallow" sound of those locations, and contrasting them with the positive and sincere sound of amateur carolers:

You have a bunch of unpracticed people doing something for the sake of doing it or for very good reasons, versus—if you're going to do something to make money, you have to do it really well. So that's the sound of the four-part harmony of the carolers in the mall. Also it's the sound of—like, everything in the mall at Christmas is like, tinkling. It's like 'tinky tinky tinky tink' and it's so—it doesn't have any depth to it, it's like, "Come check out the surface!" (Harvester 2009)

The space in which carols are heard, then, is an important factor in creating differences in listening and reception. In a shopping center or store, individuals have no

control over what sort of music they hear. Indeed, just the opposite is often true in malls, which use music to a great extent to control shoppers. As Communications scholar Jonathan Sterne writes: “A store deploys programmed music as part of a fabricated environment aimed at getting visitors to stay longer and buy more (1997: 25).” In one's home, in contrast, a person usually has a large amount of control over what they hear and how it sounds. A group of live, potentially singing bodies approaching or entering that private space changes the dynamics of control over sound in the home; but whether or not they sing, how long they stay, whether and how they are compensated, and the overall emotional tenor of the interaction are all negotiated in real time between the visitors and the visited, with the people visited usually having more control over the unfolding of the encounter. In this way the experience of listening can become much more empowering than in other contexts, especially contexts in which one's response to music is treated as an economic unit.²⁹

This difference is important in part because the musical encounter in the home is much rarer than the experience of programmed music: “In 1982 it was estimated that one out of every three Americans heard programmed music at some point everyday; that number has steadily increased since then. Americans on average hear more hours per capita of programmed music than any other kind of music” (Jones and Schumacher 1992: 157, quoted in Sterne 1997: 23). Given the prevalence of programmed music (and the particular ubiquity of Christmas music in December, especially as foregrounded music in shopping centers), and given the increasing rarity of public singing, I argue that the often

²⁹ See Sterne for a discussion of the “production, distribution, and consumption of [listener] response” to programmed music (1997: 26).

unexpected entrance of unmediated singers into one's private space is likely to present a profoundly unusual listening experience for many Americans.³⁰

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the location of caroling in the private spaces of those visited creates opportunities for musically-facilitated affective interactions among those involved. This intimacy of space can also affect the emotional quality of the songs chosen, and the manner in which they are sung. These choices are negotiated between visitors and visited, a negotiation made possible by the fact that the performers have come to their audience with a degree of supplication, depending on them for the invitation to perform. A number of my interviewees pointed out that there are two main groups of Christmas hymns in terms of mood. In Laura Stratford's words, "there's the kind of joyful, triumphant ones, like "Joy to the World" and "Deck the Halls," that are very kind of happy and bouncy, and, tend to be more forte; and then there's the kind of quiet, more reverent, worshipful, and pretty and soft ones, that, almost have this feel of a lullaby" (Stratford 2009). "Silent Night" is perhaps the most popular of these softer songs; when I asked my consultants which songs was most often requested, "Silent Night" was always the response. This is also the case in my experience. Other songs with these qualities include "What Child is This," "Lo, How a Rose," "Away in a Manger" and "O Little Town of Bethlehem". Because of the intimacy of many caroling encounters, moments of emotional connection often occur as the result of attentiveness of behalf of carolers (or their leader) to the mood of an interaction or an individual; as Kim Peck told me, "I feel like there's something about Christmas music—maybe because it's about a baby, so much of it is gentle, soft and lyrical—that causes people to open up in

³⁰ In the final chapter I will discuss how this sense of the unusualness of their venture adds to carolers' experience as well, causing several to describe it as a "heightening" of life.

some ways, and become kind of vulnerable . . . More often than not when you're working with something that is emotionally powerful, you can kind of sense or case the mood of a group. I guess it's something I unconsciously pick up on" (Peck 2009). Sometimes the carolers are the ones emotionally touched by the tenderness of a song, whether or not the person listening is as well. Haskell Fitz-Simons explained to me that his group tends to sing the "quiet" carols when in the hospital, creating a very different atmosphere for both themselves and those they visit than their usual "boisterous" mood:

Every year we go to the hospital, and you get into a lot of tough situations there, because you can't hide behind the boisterous stuff there, you have to sing quiet stuff, and the quiet stuff—is the tender stuff, and the most emotionally charged stuff. And sometimes, you're singing for *very* sick people. And I remember we were once asked into a room, and the woman there was in the last stages of cancer. And she had been a singer. And she asked us to sing 'Lo, How A Rose,' and, [Haskell paused, and when he spoke again his throat was constricted] it was very, very hard. But important to do. It's hard, and sometimes it's harder, depending on what's going on in *your* life. Because hospitals are places of *not* much joy—but—that that makes the need all the greater, I think. (Fitz-Simons 2009)

These two examples show how a particular kind of Christmas music can stir the emotions of both those receiving it and those singing. The social aspect of this emotional response to the music is key. We should keep in mind when discussing Christmas carols that while the words of songs may be important (as familiar since childhood and for their religious content), song words "[bear] meaning not just semantically, but also as structures of sound that are direct signs of emotion and marks of character" (Frith 2007: 229). The use of one's voice is a way to convey emotion and intent. Further, because of this double nature of song words, Christmas carols are able to convey emotion and personal intent for non-religious as well as religious people, though likely the emotional experience of listening to a Christmas hymn will differ according to one's faith. This is why many non-

Christians such as myself and several of my consultants enjoy caroling. The songs, and poetics of the song words, bear emotion for them even without belief in their religious message.

Christmas carols can be powerful emotional forces in and of themselves. Many Christmas songs (both hymns and “popular” songs) are familiar to people since childhood and thus easily evoke memories as well as physical sensations tied to those memories. Residents in a nursing home might listen to a recording of Christmas music alone in their room and become emotional; a shopper might get choked up hearing “White Christmas” in the mall. The situation of the caroling activity ensures that this emotional response to music happens in a social context, which provides a feeling of connectedness to others during what can be a particularly lonely time for many. As opposed to the conscious emotional manipulation of music in commercial places, the choice of emotionally-affective music in a caroling context is often subtly negotiated in a “conversation” of feeling. Of course, such songs can also be requested by those visited. For example, Kim Peck told me that it is much more common for nursing home residents to request the more tender carols when they are in their private rooms as opposed to at the common party. Peck and her fellow carolers know that these situations are likely to become emotional, and use their voices in such a way as to most sensitively respond to the mood of the encounter.

This brings me to discuss “extramusical” sounds: because the makers of the music bring themselves into close proximity with those they visit, they can talk to each other. I wouldn't point this out if it were not so different from most other modes of music exchange in the U.S. today. It is also very important today when caroling is usually not

expected, and many people, especially immigrants, may not be familiar with the idea. A few carolers I spoke who carol to a specific place, like a nursing home, do not carol door-to-door because they are afraid of offending non-Christians or scaring people. The fact that we are able to speak and explain who we are and what we are doing (we did this several times in Quincy) usually means caroling to a non-Christian or immigrant household can become an opportunity for dialogue and learning, not a cause for conflict.³¹ Sounds such as laughter or joyful emotions in the voice can also help when dealing with a language barrier. The fact that householders can see their visitors up close, and read their facial expressions, is of course also very important. Laughter and joking among carolers also adds to the sense of informality (discussed above). Finally, the opportunity for conversation opens up the chance for social interaction, well-wishing, and community-building among neighbors and strangers.

Paramusical sound, or aspects of sound other than those tied directly to the words and melody, can also play a role in the community-building aspect of caroling. Familiar voices heard year after year, the voices of friends and neighbors, and of different generations, create a blend of sound that is distinct from most other contexts for musical sharing. Especially for groups who have been caroling together for decades, this point is fairly obvious when it comes to the experience of singing *with* the same voices year after year, and hearing new voices joining as families grow, or voices suddenly absent when people pass away. Martha King's family has caroled the same route in rural North Carolina since Martha's husband was a child, and perhaps before. She joined the group when she married into the family eight years ago, and this Christmas will bring along her

³¹ Until this past Christmas this had *always* been my experience. I will discuss the one exception in the final chapter. Also, this of course does not include those householders who do not open the door—always an option for them.

one-year-old child along on her back. She says the biggest changes over the years have been the addition of children, as her siblings-in-law give birth, and the passing of her father-in-law. The family is Mennonite, and sings in four-part harmony, each singing the part they have learned in church and at home. The children “chime in on” the melody, and will come to sing parts as they grow older. Like the adults, they will come to stand in their part groups and begin to hear the same voices to either side of them in the same place each year. In a nursing home, the voice of a little child may blend with that of an elder—not generally the sound we hear when holiday music is played on the radio or in a shopping center. This particular sound of old and young voices can create a sense of community for those who hear it, as it did for Shawna Prather, who described for me how the equal mixture of old and young voices gave a “community feel” to the caroling event she took part in (Prather 2009).

Conclusion

“Fetishized as a commodity,” writes Attali, “music is illustrative of the evolution of our entire society: deritualize it as a social form, repress an activity of the body, specialize its practice, sell it as a spectacle, generalize its consumption, then see to it that it is stockpiled until it loses its meaning” (1977: 5). As commercial interests use music and its affective ties to the holidays in order to encourage shopping, and hire professional “carolers” to sell a *vision* of an imagined Victorian Christmas or create a festive mood, amateur carolers resist the trend towards specialization and commodification of music that our culture has taken. Their resistance is “hearable” in the ways I have discussed. My interviewees seem to share this view, envisioning their practice in specifically anti-

commercial terms, viewing it rather as a celebration of or even means by which to build community. “Is carolers' intent hearable?” I asked Kathleen McGovern.

“It *is* hearable,” she replied. “It's imperfect, it's festive, it's happy—it's the sound of happy people singing, like happy people sang before there were professional singers.”(McGovern 2009) Caroling changes the paradigm of musical exchange from commodity to activity. The idea of the “gifting” of performance inheres. If performance can be both “a gift that obliges reciprocity and creates sociability and a commodity whose value resides in the material object alone, alienable from its producers and the process of its production,” (Flores 1994:) carolers more often than not envision their performance as a gift. The reciprocity they hope for is social. Carolers particularly mention emotionally-rich interactions with those they visit, and cite these as the most important result of what they do. That social interaction, and not any sort of commercial exchange, is their intent, and can be heard in their sound. The overriding attribute of this sound is its “sincerity.”

Thomas Turino writes that “the practices that emerge from the unique aspects of individuals and groups in relation to novel circumstances affect the social and physical environment in new ways, which in turn affect the internalized habits and dispositions of individuals in new ways, and this it is here where there is room for innovation, creativity, and transformations at the individual and group levels” (2008: 121). When people who want to sing with others and to create connections with their neighbors, their elders, or those who cannot leave their homes, draw on the cultural resource of Christmas caroling to do so, they are working also to transform our cultural habit of music consumption. The sincerity of their actions is heard and (usually) appreciated by those they visit, and the

hegemonic economy of music described by Attali is resisted by the sound of ordinary people musicking together.

CHAPTER 4

TRADITION

I can remember it like it was yesterday. People were stunned and thrilled and amazed and charmed; we had people stop us and videotape us outdoors because they had relatives serving in the Armed Forces overseas, so they could send them and remind them what Christmas is like. We had people bring silver punch bowls to the sidewalk, to serve us and serve those who were kind of stragglers along behind us. We quite literally, and we still do to this day, stopped traffic. I mean, we'd find a street corner and traffic would just plain stop. It didn't matter how cold it was, people would open their car windows and shout out requests, and just soak it all up.

John Adams, caroler, personal communication

Introduction

When a group of friends, several of whom lived in Raleigh's historic Oakwood neighborhood, decided to put on evening clothes and go caroling in 1984, they were doing something new, but they were also doing something old. The people they encountered—those who came outside or stopped their cars to hear them, and those whose homes they approached—responded to them on both levels. Adams says that “stunned” and “amazed” people videotaped them to send to relatives overseas, to *remind* them “what Christmas is like.” People in this neighborhood were not expecting to see and hear Christmas carolers singing on street corners; for this reason they were amazed. But the idea of caroling is broadly recognized and associated with a “traditional” Christmas and so, it seems, at least one individual wanted to send a video of the carolers to his or

her family member who would not be celebrating an “American Christmas” that year. The impulse to bring drinks out to the carolers—in “silver punch bowls,” no less—was also both new and old. New in that it is not considered normal behavior to bring drinks in fancy vessels to singers on the sidewalk, and that those householders had probably never done such a thing before; old in that a custom of giving drinks to carolers *does* exist, and *people* have done it before. The people who Erin O'Hara, another caroler with this group, told me drove to a Krispy Kreme and brought back a dozen donuts for the carolers after having listened to them through their open car window, were similarly creating a new type of action that stemmed from an old idea.

A common reaction I receive when I tell people that I am writing about Christmas caroling is something like, “People still do that?” This reaction demonstrates the perception that people *once* caroled, but no longer do. And in fact, that perception seems to be largely accurate: the large majority of Americans do not go Christmas caroling. According to the only statistical data I was able to find on caroling in the U.S., six percent of Americans planned to go caroling in 2005.³² In 1996, the figure was 22 percent, demonstrating a noticeable decline in just one decade. In addition, representations of carolers in media such as Christmas cards and “Christmas Village” figurines, as well as the growing number of professional carolers in shopping centers, at corporate events, and on television, all rarely without their Victorian garb (more on this phenomenon later), continue to create and maintain associations between caroling and an imagined “Dickensian” past. The Oakwood Waits, whom I introduced above, switched

³² This figure comes from polls of 1,001 Americans in 1996 and 2,012 Americans in 2005, conducted by Harris Interactive for the National Christmas Tree Association. The margin of error is 3%.

from wearing evening clothes to wearing Victorian costumes after a few years of caroling together. Calling themselves “Waits” strengthens associations with the past.

The carolers with whom I have spoken hold, in general, two related motivations in common. They hope to share emotionally-rich encounters with their co-participants and with those to whom they carol. They also hope to contribute to the creation of a certain kind of community that they feel is lacking in their daily lives. This desired community is marked by social connectedness (particularly between different generations) and participatory as opposed to mediated culture and entertainment. The availability of caroling as an activity that can be engaged in during late December provides a means for people to act on these motivations in a culturally-sanctioned way. This situation is complicated, however, by the indefinite status of caroling as a “tradition” in the United States. Many see caroling as a custom belonging to the past, something that is no longer practiced in contemporary times; and in many places, caroling is certainly unusual, if it occurs at all. Therefore, it is difficult to define where caroling stands on the continuum between a continuous tradition and a revival. Different individuals' varied perceptions of the traditionality of caroling will affect their emotional experience of the practice, and may play into their motivations for caroling as well.

From my conversations with carolers as well as from reading the sometimes lengthy discussion threads posted as commentary to online articles and how-to guides about caroling, it seems that in simple terms, instances of caroling can be divided into two groups: those that belong to a longstanding local tradition, and those that do not. The two types of experiences are very different, for both carolers and those they visit.

Members of groups that have been caroling for several years or more tend to talk much more about feelings of ritual, about the importance of the annual caroling event to their celebration of Christmas. The three members of the Oakwood Waits with whom I spoke, for instance, all stated in various words that Christmas would not be Christmas without caroling in Oakwood the Saturday before December 25th. They also have the impression that they have become an important part of the holidays of those they visit. John Adams described both sentiments: “They know we're coming. Many organize their holiday parties around us, which is pretty amazing if you think about it. . . . During those years when I'd taken a hiatus, I never missed that evening. I always joined them for that evening. Because it meant so much to me. It's a real, dare I say it—labor of love. It really is. [We] do it because we love it, and we love each other. It's like a big family” (Adams 2009). Erin O'Hara echoed these ideas, telling me that “I think for a lot of people it makes their Christmas, and I would say that's true for me, too . . . Christmas gets a little crazy, but there are a lot of really fun people in the group. . . . It's like a little family” (O'Hara 2009). Haskell Fitz-Simmons told me it is common for residents to tell the Waits that “it wouldn't be Christmas if you didn't come by” (Fitz-Simmons 2009). In the same way, Jill Hemming Austin said that her neighborhood caroling party has “become the kind of thing that people are like, 'oh when are we going this year?' so, there's some expectation people have that we'll do it . . . I think it's become part of the annual thing” (Hemming Austin 2009). Martha King, whose in-laws have been caroling since before her husband was born, said she thinks they have become a “minor characteristic of other people's Christmases,” telling me it's common for them to hear neighbors calling, “The Kings are coming!” as they approach (King 2009).

Several of the people with whom I spoke host annual caroling events also caroled as children, usually regularly and with their families. This factor adds another element of “tradition” to their practice, that of carrying on a seasonal family custom, and adds to their feeling that caroling is integral to the celebration of Christmas. When I asked Kathleen Legg, for example, how her caroling party started, she told me that “As far as I know, my parents started it, unless of course *their* parents started it; I don't know that piece” (K. Legg 2008). Legg caroled every year that she can remember around her childhood neighborhood in Cleveland Heights, Ohio. In college she organized caroling around the dorms, and when she moved into her first apartment she invited people from work to carol with her. “And we went from that year on, every year.” Kathleen's son Brian describes their caroling party in the same terms. When I asked him where caroling fit into his family's celebration of Christmas, he told me that

Caroling is actually a tradition that my mother brought from her childhood. Her parents used to have caroling parties during her own childhood out in Ohio. My grandfather, I think, would play the piano and they would use these ancient caroling books and they would sing at home first—just like we do, and then go around the neighborhood. The caroling books that we still use today are a mix of books older than both my parents and some from probably the late 60s. Many are missing pages, torn in half, but they definitely add character. (B. Legg 2008)

Interestingly, when I caroled with the Leggs in 2008, these books did not make an appearance, though both Kathleen and her son had mentioned them specifically when talking to me about their party. This might indicate that the idea or image of the books has remained important in their minds while the actual items have outlived their usefulness for the event (or they are concerned about further damaging what have become family heirlooms). Jill Hemming Austin said she always caroled as a child because her mother would organize it, and that she “loved it.” Members of the King

family, according to Martha, feel a sense of carrying on a practice that her husband's father, who passed away a few years ago, used to do—though they have never articulated that sentiment aloud. “It's about sharing this music with the neighbors,” she told me, “But also it's for us, for our family. We really like it” (King 2009). The sense of custom, of the necessity of caroling (always on Dec. 23 or 24), caused the Kings to carol door-to-door when they were traveling in Germany, though they were not certain what the response would be (it was positive).

These are a few examples of long-standing caroling traditions, and how they can become institutions of the Christmas holiday for families and neighborhoods, such that carolers might even come to feel that their practice has become a traditional and integral part of those they visit, as with the Oakwood Waits. For the remainder of this chapter, however, I will concentrate on the “second” type of caroling events, those which occur independently of a long-standing tradition. Many characteristic elements of this type of practice apply to long-standing traditions as well, because, with the possible exception of the Kings, the audiences for the longstanding traditions still change from year to year. People move in and out of neighborhoods. The Leggs have moved several times since Kathleen first began organizing the parties, and new people have moved into their current neighborhood. Erin O'Hara of the Oakwood Waits also told me that, “I think there are still people we surprise. There are always new people moving in”(O'Hara 2009).

Caroling to unsuspecting audiences, in neighborhoods where caroling is not an annual event and may not ever have occurred at all, is an extremely complex undertaking in terms of how it works (or does not work) through mechanisms of tradition. Because caroling is imagined to be a very old tradition (and is related to holiday visiting traditions

that are hundreds of years old) and the caroling repertoire consists of “traditional” music that is known by multiple generations, people have associations with carols and caroling that color their responses to it. But in heterogeneous societies, not everyone will have the same or even any associations, limiting the ability of carolers to perform the envisioned work of community-building.

Nostalgia

One of the factors at play is that of nostalgia, and ideas about a type of community or neighborliness that carolers imagine once existed and could exist again. For instance, when I asked Erin O'Hara what about caroling with the Waits “made her Christmas,” she replied, “Definitely the Saturday before Christmas, going out, when it's cold and . . . people invite you in, and you feel, like, a part of this bigger community. And it's kind of a throw-back to the old days, when people really . . . knew their neighbors, and invited them in, and gave them eggnog, you know” (O'Hara 2009). Similarly Kathleen McGovern told me that caroling “is like a link to a time when people really knew each other, and families sat around the fire and told stories, and sang together” (McGovern 2010). Dan Harvester, in a tongue-in-cheek but sincere comparison, connected the type of hospitality displayed by householders during caroling with past values:

You know, there was a time when a person would like, show up at your door and be like, “Good evening—Christian brother—or like, Goodwife! I am a poor, traveling stranger, I need a place to stay, and a meal, can you help me? I'll chop your wood or something.” And that doesn't happen anymore, but the one time you *do* have someone show up at your door and ask for something, based on the values of the society and your hospitality—your hospitality *as* a value of the society—is in these pre-formatted situations. (D. Harvester 2009)

Although nostalgia has been seen in a negative light from the conception of the term to a number of negative critiques in the 1980s and 90s (see folklorist Ray Cashman's article, "Critical Nostalgia and Material Culture in Northern Ireland" for a brief history of the term and attitudes toward it), scholars have more recently been reconceptualizing the idea of nostalgia and positing that it should not be seen as an inherently negative phenomenon. What I find interesting about nostalgia as a motivating factor for caroling is that in acting upon what may be an imagined and idealized version of the past, carolers' actions create (sometimes ephemerally, sometimes more concretely over time) the very type of community they see as lacking in contemporary times. As Brian Legg told me, "Caroling always makes me feel a great sense of community, something which I feel has been lacking in modern culture of late" (B. Legg 2008). Brian has described inviting new neighbors back to the party after meeting them during caroling, as well as experiencing a feeling of intergenerational bonding during caroling. In this way the nostalgia some carolers feel for a time envisioned as having a more vibrant sense of community than our time causes or encourages them to take actions that in fact create community connections: they visit and get to know their neighbors, bring their children to visit with elders, sing together. Their nostalgia is "critical" in the sense that it instantiates "informed evaluation of the present through contrast with the past," and in the sense that it is "vitaly important, for inspiring action of great moral weight, action that may effect a better future" (Cashman 2006: 137-138).

Caroling itself, alongside the neighborliness and ideal of face-to-face interaction that it represents for some people, is often spoken of in nostalgic terms as well. I get this sense more from online discussions about caroling than from my interviewees, who as

active carolers are less likely to view the practice as dying out. This sense also comes from the remarks of those to whom I have caroled, who often say that they have not seen carolers in many years, or that they have never seen them. It is fed by the media, which tends to cover Christmas caroling in terms of a “dying tradition” (e.g., “Caroling or Silent Nights? A Holiday Tradition Vanishes” in USA Today, 12/17/2007). Several of my interviewees told me that this perception that caroling is vanishing influenced their reception by residents quite a bit. As noted above, caroling as an activity has in fact declined significantly over approximately the past ten years—the discourse about caroling as a vanishing practice is thus well-grounded in reality. Except in places where traditions are long-established, carolers are usually quite unexpected visitors. But at the same time, caroling is widely recognizable as a holiday activity. One online article begins, “Most everybody knows what Christmas caroling is, but who does it anymore?” (Puente 2007). People are familiar with the *idea* of caroling from various media, especially television (more than once someone has said to me some variation of, “I thought that was only on T.V.”). It is probably for this reason that several householders to whom I have caroled have said that they have never seen “actual carolers” before. This expression, “actual carolers,” may also be employed in contrast to the professional, “Dickensian” carolers who sing for hire in malls and at parties.

This situation, in which people recognize the paradigm of caroling and likely are familiar with the carolers' repertoire, but do not expect or prepare for carolers' visits, brings up the concept of active and passive bearers of tradition. In folklorist C.W. von Sydow 's 1948 definition of the concept, “It is the active bearers who keep tradition alive and transmit it, whereas the passive bearers have indeed heard of what a certain tradition

contains, and may perhaps . . . recollect part of it, but do nothing themselves to spread it or keep it alive” (von Sydow 1948:12-13, quoted in Goldstein 1971:1). In the case of caroling, it appears that those who go caroling are the active bearers, and those caroled-to are the passive. However, the role of these “passive bearers” is essential for keeping the tradition of caroling “alive”: without their knowledge of the caroling tradition, the encounter between them and carolers would likely fail (as it has in my experience when I have caroled to immigrants with no knowledge of caroling). It is very interesting that images of caroling in mass culture and, likely also the “commodified” version of caroling (paid carolers in malls) have maintained popular knowledge of this performance genre, making it more likely that “actual” caroling succeeds.

Moreover, householders often recognize caroling not only *as an activity* when carolers come to them, but also *as a tradition*, and particularly as a tradition very much associated with the past. At least this is how I and my interviewees interpret their responses, a reading that also reflects the popular discourse on caroling. For example, imagine the responses of the authors of the following online posts, were carolers to come to their door:

Christmas caroling was a wonderful tradition in Philadelphia during my youth. Our church youth group went caroling at nursing homes, hospitals, and through the neighborhood. Back then (1950's) there seemed to be a greater sense of community and family, and less of a commercial Christmas. Trading tradition for technology has made an impact on our society.

Christmas caroling, like many of the traditions in our past is just that, in the past. We used to sing on Halloween to get either snacks - always homemade and some really great cookies and candied apples, or nickles. Then people started to do dastardly things like putting pins and junk in them so people would get hurt. The joy and fun of Christmas caroling is ruined by people that don't want to be annoyed. They seem to no longer have neighborhoods that they have attachments to. Many people don't know their neighbors. Hell, I know people that live in neighborhoods for years and

don't even know their next door neighbor's name. Everyone seems to be afraid of everyone. What a shame for what we have become.

Last time I did anything like that was in the early 90s, singing carols at a retirement home. It's one of those traditions that will pass by the wayside, like Sunday visits and social calls. Now everyone is so busy and reliant on technology. Interperson[al] communication becomes threatening and invasive. (all three posts in response to Puente 2007)

In each of these posts, the author names caroling a “tradition” and suggests that caroling has vanished or is on its way out, seemingly equating the word “tradition” with the idea of the past. The authors furthermore relate this disappearance to societal changes that have made us less connected with our neighborhoods, families, communities—at least two posters directly attribute this change to technology. I believe it is partly due to this widespread sense of caroling as a vanished or vanishing tradition that some householders' responses to it are so positive. Remarks along the lines of “I haven't seen carolers since I was a kid” are regular fare in my experience caroling. Other carolers have the same perception. Choral director Joel Sindelar, who for several years has led the Boston Caroling Mob (an impromptu chorus coordinated through the Internet in the manner of a “flash mob”) told a reporter that “It's by no means common And because people don't see them as much as they used to, it's doubly powerful when you carol these days” (Reed 2008). My brother recalls that when my family caroled in our immediate neighborhood for the first time, in 2007, our neighbors:

usually would be very confused, some of them, like, “What are you doing?” and then they'd be like, “Oh I remember that!” Like, “I've seen that on T.V. That's...that's great.” But then there were also people who like gave us cookies and stuff—didn't they? [...] So overall the response was kind of like, “huh?”, but like, *very* appreciative. People, once they understood what was going on they were like [making a sound of sudden recognition]: “OH! Let me get the kids! This is—oh, this is awesome! Oh you *guys*, we just *love* ya!” (D. Harvester 2008)

Similarly Anne Baker, who leads an annual neighborhood caroling party, told me that “Often people’ll come to the door and look for a minute . . . and then they’ll sort of call other people, ‘Look! Look! There’re carolers!’”(A. Baker 2008). Others described similar reactions.

These sorts of responses, for me, are very exciting, and add to my enjoyment of caroling; the sense that I am bringing something totally unexpected and often very special into someone’s day is invigorating. The same is true for other carolers with whom I have spoken. Haskell Fitz-Simons told me, “It’s just exciting, like mumming, or a guerilla theater kind of thing, it has no predictable outcome, when you knock on a door, they may be freaked out, their eyeballs may pop out, or they’ll bring a little child who is just starry-eyed and in wonder of the whole thing, and you never know what’s going to happen” (Fitz-Simons 2009). Interestingly, though interactions during mumming were always emergent and unique to the individuals involved, householders would nevertheless be expecting mummers at some point in the season (as on Halloween in the United States). Caroling interactions are emergent in similar ways to other house visiting customs, but often involve an additional element of complete surprise—which means people really are sometimes “freaked out” by carolers.

Laura Stratford caroled regularly in her own neighborhood with her church choir while she was growing up, and told me that the activity was always viewed as “normal” by those involved. Her reaction to caroling with my group in Quincy in 2008 demonstrates the difference in the emotional and mental experience of caroling in an area where that sense of normalcy is not present, and illustrates the importance this difference can make in a caroler’s experience, which is closely tied to the reactions of those visited:

The responses were so different; I can't forget that one man who was terrified, and that family that had no idea what was going on, and then there were the people where you saw the light of recognition come in them, so that was a whole different kind of excitement. And that was really cool because it made caroling feel new to me—which it's not, because I've done it enough that it's not really new—but it was a different enough context that it felt new and exciting. It was almost like I could see again why it's an extraordinary thing, coming from a culture where people have traditionally done this. It's like I'd forgotten how different it is from how people normally interact, especially in this day and age and it in this country, and how kind of extraordinary it is . . . (Stratford 2009)

Householders unfamiliar with caroling react to the carolers both on the level of direct inter-human interaction with the people at the door, and on the level of being presented with a “living” tradition that they more likely than not associated with the past.

Carolers' knowledge of this situation can form a part of their motivation for caroling, as well as add to the excitement of the venture. By caroling in an area where they will be unexpected, they make a conscious decision, not only to “build community” in that particular area but also in a sense to *revive* a custom which is not yet defunct, as it is still recognizable. By going caroling with the expectation that householders will receive them, they assert the currency of a practice which they themselves recognize as not quite “normal”—“It's a quirky thing to do in 2009,” one caroler admitted in an article in Time Out New York (Harris and Petreycik 2009). By so doing, they make a statement about the type of activities they feel should continue to exist in their society, while simultaneously taking action to perpetuate those activities.

The people with whom I spoke who verbalized this idea most explicitly were my brother Dan and Kathleen McGovern, who both have caroled with me in situations where they were not only entering previously “un-caroled” neighborhoods but also were assuming the role of co-leaders of the events. Thus it makes sense that they have thought deeply about the implications of our actions. As my brother put it,

It's a strange thing to do today, but people still recognize the paradigm. . . . They recognize it as being *a tradition*, and that's why they don't shoot us; that's why it's able to *function*. But at the same time we're *asserting* the traditionality of caroling as we do it, because it *can't* be taken for granted; it's definitely not *–normal*. Everyone knows what it *is* so they kind of have to accept it. So it's kind of strange, because we're there saying like, “This is a tradition; you *should* come out of your house, and like, build community with us, even though this *isn't* like, a *thing* which the community is based on— like it's a thing which communities *have been* and which they *could be* based on. (D. Harvester 2009)

By enacting a performance form widely associated with past communities envisioned as more neighborly, carolers implicitly argue for that kind of community. They are furthermore able to take advantage of romantic associations with caroling, which interestingly are maintained by popular culture. As Kathleen McGovern sees it:

There's almost a sense of revival because a lot of the people we visit have never experienced carolers, or haven't in a very long time. And one of the reasons I think they like it is that it's part of traditional Christmas images, like if you go into a convenience store to buy a Christmas card, there'll be cards with like, Dickensian carolers on them, so it's become part of the romantic vision of Christmas we have today. And when we carol in a neighborhood like mine, you know, where several of my neighbors have recently been busted for drugs, or, you know, killing people through craigslist—we're spreading the message of: "hey remember back in the day when neighbors got along and there was a community spirit and your neighbors were your friends? Well maybe it can be like that again"—I mean we're walking at night, knocking on doors and bursting into songs that recall older days, happier days, less cynical days, days when people got along.³³ (McGovern 2010)

In this way, popular notions of caroling as a vanishing tradition tied to a more neighborly past encourage carolers to enact that tradition, as they assume that some if not all of the people they visit will share those views and respond positively to their visit.

³³ The infamous “Craigslist Killer” of 2009 lived a few houses away from Kathleen on her street.

Songs

Of course, it is not only householders' knowledge of the idea of caroling that makes caroling work, but the shared repertoire of Christmas songs that comprises the main content of the caroling performance. The fact that the body of Christmas carols is widely known, popular, and contains many songs that are quite old is an enormous asset to carolers whose goal is to create connections among themselves and other community members. It is part of what makes people who have goals of community-building turn to the activity of caroling as a resource.

That the carols are widely known means that they will be familiar to most listeners. This shared material provides common ground for connection even among strangers, and allows for greater participation on the part of those visited to both sing along and to make requests (the humorous interaction my family had with our neighbors while singing “O Holy Night” would not have been possible if everyone involved was not very familiar with that song). It also makes caroling something that can be done with minimal preparation, allowing for wider and more spontaneous participation than if the songs were unfamiliar. Caroler Jenny Womack told me, “especially for people like me who grew up in a church context, they become so ingrained in you, the Christmas songs, that you can sing without—you know, that everyone's going to know the words to, everyone's going to know at least the first verse and the tune and whatnot, so it really *can* be community doing it, you're not relying on having to teach someone new music or make a full time thing out of it” (Womack 2009). This is the reason that events such as the Boston Caroling Mob can actually function, as well as why it is possible to

spontaneously invite particularly enthusiastic householders to join a caroling group. As Kathleen McGovern put it,

People can request songs; you've never seen these people before and they've never seen you, but they know your whole repertoire, because everyone knows the same Christmas carols, and a whole bunch of people did request songs, and we might not have known all the words, but we tried to stumble through, and most of the time we succeeded. It's like a common . . . culture. And I don't know how many other things that *really* we have in common with our neighbors nowadays, but . . . at least we all still know the words to the same Christmas carols. It's like, a celebration of oneness."³⁴ (McGovern 2009)

Additionally, because the songs are tied to the Christmas holiday and generally sung or listened to during the same season of each year, people come to have emotional connections to them that reach back to their childhood. They become markers of the season, of the passage of time, and of personal associations with the Christmas holiday. Jenny Womack described how, “there is something about the Christmas carols, when you see kids singing them for example, that can make you think about –you do have these memories that you attach to people and places and your first exposure to the music, that's kind of nice” (Womack 2009). This richness of association is part of what makes caroling emotionally rousing for many (a key factor in establishing the feeling of emotional connection between carolers and caroled-to, which I have proposed is one of the main motivations for carolers). Because they are so closely tied to a very particular time of year, simply singing them together can be a way to celebrate a holiday with others. In Erin O'Hara's words, “People are glad to see you; they're glad to hear those tunes again. That you only get to hear once a year. I think everybody loves them . . . I think most people really like to hear those familiar tunes” (O'Hara 2009).

³⁴ This is clearly an idealized view of the interaction, since many immigrants who were not very familiar with the carols live in Kathleen's neighborhood, and this is one situation in which caroling becomes very much *not* a “celebration of oneness.” I will discuss caroling to immigrants later in the chapter.

The familiarity of carols and the fact that people's connections to them reach back to their childhood can be important for the practice of service caroling, which I discussed in the first chapter. A number of my interviewees who practice this type of caroling discussed the effectiveness of familiar carols in creating connections with people suffering from dementia or other conditions that affect the memory and emotional behavior. Parent and Chapel of the Cross parishioner Heather Benjamin, who has caroled many times in an institution where residents suffer from advanced dementia, described this phenomenon: “Some of these patients don't have any recognition . . . of anything. And yet you're singing, you know, 'Jingle Bells' or 'O Holy Night' and all of a sudden they're singing along with you, they're tapping their foot with you because they recognize that song” (Benjamin 2008). Jenny Womack, who carols annually to nursing homes with members of her community chorus, told me that

I have always loved seeing people . . . who have dementia, having this moment of connection with something that is familiar, and you know for that moment that there is a contentedness, that they're not lost in the world like they are so much many times with dementia, and I absolutely think music can do that, that they have this moment of kind of touching base with themselves, and that's really wonderful to see, you can see this contentment wash over their faces and they're *with* you at that moment, you know, they can be engaged with you, even though most of the time they can't. (Womack 2009)

An extremely important factor to the success of caroling is that most of the songs in the caroling repertoire are old enough that they are known by both the oldest and youngest generations alive today. who care about bringing their children into meaningful contact with the elderly particularly emphasized this aspect of the songs, but every single

caroler whom I interviewed mentioned the importance of intergenerational connections. Many attributed extra emotions to the elderly, attached to the idea of the continuity of these songs over the years. “Just to know there are still young people still singing the carols can be very comforting to an older person, maybe brings them back to a time in their youth,” Tim Baker told me (T. Baker 2008). Jenny Womack said that “there is this continuity of, you know, learning the traditions through the years, that you can be ninety and hear a tune that you've known since you were five, and see a five-year-old singing it, it's sort of a sweet continuity that is passed on”(Womack 2009). Laura Stratford said that when she goes caroling the “older folks get happy and misty because it reminds them of when they were younger,” and Kim Peck described nursing home residents as crying during caroling “because it reminds them of . . . who knows what in their long, long lives that they've had” (Stratford 2009; Peck 2009). While there is certainly a lot of assuming going on here, I believe that people make these assumptions in part because they too have experienced the conjuring of memories that specific songs can bring about. The younger tend to imagine that the elders are transported on a longer or deeper journey of memory than they are, and then feel empathetic towards the elder person whom they perceive to be so touched.

Many of my interviewees spoke of elderly people connecting with the very young through song words, which even children who were too young to read already knew. Anna Millard described her toddler and a 99-year old woman singing together: “And the really neat thing is, there was a song, 'We Wish You a Merry Christmas,' that the *three*-year-old could even chime in on, and yet this woman who was almost a hundred years older than our youngest child also knew the words too, so this kind of instant connection

between this *large* age span through this simple little Christmas carol”(Millard 2008). Lisa Nichols, choir director at a church in Wilmington, N.C., told me about one 93-year old woman in a nursing home who called over the carolers to her room—her nurse said she was not able to communicate very well and had very restricted abilities, but she apparently knew “every word to every Christmas carol.” So the group went to her room, “the little children came up close and some held her hand and you know, *she* sang to *us*, and you know, she sang. And it was *awesome*, you know, it was *awesome*! So that's what I mean, you get so much more out of it than perhaps they do” (Nichols 2008). Nichols' example illustrates how important the sense of connection with an older generation is to the carolers themselves: it is not simply that the elderly are included in an activity, but that what they bring to it often moves the carolers.

Further, the oldness of many of the songs adds an additional layer of “traditionality” to caroling, imparting the sense that singers are participating in a time-honored custom. As Kathleen McGovern put it, “it's weird and really cool that for however many centuries these same songs have been sung over and over again at this particular time of year. I also find it nice that it's the one time you hear on all radio stations, no matter what genre, folk music, like folky kinds of music that have lasted, and are still appreciated” (McGovern 2008). My brother Dan said that his favorite carol is “God Rest Ye Merry, Gentlemen” because it is “*So* oldey-timey, and so . . . *English*” (D. Harvester 2008). Sarbaga Falk told me that “Religion is not what got me into the caroling, but rather a love of singing and of this tradition. These songs are ingrained in our brains and our lives; you hear them every year. And they're beautiful songs. They've

lasted that long for that reason. It just gets into you; if you're a singer, you like to keep these traditions alive” (Falk 2009).

The general knowledge of Christmas carols and of the activity of caroling, combined with positive, often nostalgic connotations that these songs and the idea of caroling have for many, make caroling an apt resource for people who hold a particular vision of society. I am not trying to say that all or even most carolers believe that they will bring about that vision through the act of caroling, but rather that they have critiques of several aspects of contemporary life to which they feel caroling responds. As an activity that can only happen for a limited period of time each year, caroling could not possibly rearrange the norms of dominant society. For this reason my interviewees used phrases like “a drop in the bucket” (Hemming Austin 2009) and “for a brief, shining moment” (McGovern 2009) to describe the community-building action of caroling. In general, they look upon caroling as a practice that enacts alternatives to the status quo. As such caroling is a resource for oppositional practice.

Residual or Emergent?

As I see it, the alternative aspects of contemporary caroling derive from both older, past visiting customs and from newer, contemporary emphases. Employing Cultural Studies scholar Raymond Williams's categories of potentially alternative or oppositional cultural influences, we might describe contemporary caroling as both “residual” and “emergent.” Its residual aspect may be easier to see, and resonates strongly with the sense of “tradition” that caroling holds for many people.

Williams' definition of the residual seems to account for the strong associations that caroling has with the past, while remaining recognized as a valid (and in many places quite “normal”) seasonal practice. He writes that

The residual . . . has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past, but as an effective element of the present. Thus certain experiences, meanings, and values which cannot be expressed or substantially verified in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practiced on the basis of the residue—cultural as well as social—of some previous social and cultural institution or formation. (1977:122)

While the exact evolution of caroling as we know it today is unclear, we do know of many precursors and relatives of the practice. Various house visiting customs have existed for hundreds of years (if not much longer), and were well-documented in their extant forms by scholars through the late twentieth century. These include many different versions of Christmas mumming and wassailing, as well as similar practices related to other holidays, such as the Cajun Mardi Gras.³⁵

Contemporary carolers draw upon knowledge of these customs, along with images of twentieth century American caroling, to differing degrees in envisioning the basis of their activity. A few of my consultants specifically mentioned mumming and wassailing in relation to caroling, and many more referred to past versions of caroling in vaguer terms. Contemporary caroling does indeed carry over certain elements of these practices that are no longer valued by dominant society. The most noticeable is the very idea of a visiting performance (discussed in chapter one) performed by amateurs (discussed in chapter two). Which real or imagined version(s) of the past individuals may envision is not as important as their common idea that caroling was practiced in the past

³⁵ For the sake of ease I will refer to all of these customs as “mumming” in this paper.

as an integrated part of society. By enacting a practice which they imagine was once commonplace or even dominant, but no longer is, carolers create an alternative or even oppositional meaning for caroling.

In this way, caroling appears to be residual of past visiting practices in both form and accompanying values. However, certain of carolers' emphases in their current practice seem to be emergent. Emergent elements, according to Williams, are those “new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships and kinds of relationships [that] are constantly being created” and that are “substantially alternative or oppositional” to dominant culture (1977: 123). These emergent emphases, I suggest, are the result of an ongoing struggle between the forces of dominant capitalist culture that would make Christmas an entirely commercial holiday and those who oppose this increasing commercialization. Similarly, as commercial interests move us toward an ever more totalizing view of music—and listeners' response to it—as commodities, a growing number of people is emphasizing the importance of participatory and amateur performance. Thus my consultants' emphasis on the importance of an amateur sound to their caroling events, and the importance they place on the fact that caroling is non-commercial, both would appear to be emergent meanings or values of this visiting practice.

The carolers with whom I spoke overwhelmingly described their practice as a “gift.” This way of viewing caroling, too, seems to contain both residual and emergent elements. First, the idea of the “gifting” of performance may be residual of a form of economy that was based on the notion of the gift rather than the commodity. Philosopher Michel de Certeau sees residue of this gifting economy—which he labels *potlatch*,

drawing upon the historical practice of northern Pacific Indian nations—in contemporary capitalist society as available for oppositional purposes, much in the way that Williams describes for residual cultural elements. He writes that:

Mauss' notion of the *potlatch*, that game of voluntary prestation which obliges to reciprocity and organizes a whole social circuit around the “obligation to give in return” is . . . of course no longer the economic law of our own societies: the basic unit of liberalism is the abstract individual, and exchanges between such units are organized around money as a universal equivalent. . . . Meanwhile, *potlatch* seems to persist within the Western economy as something like the trace of a different mode of production: it survives on into our own system, but on the margins, or in the interstices. . . .The politics of the “gift” thereby *also* become a tactic of subversion. (De Certeau 1980: 4-5)

Because responses to caroling are uncodified today to the point that many people visited by carolers do not know how to respond, and thus simply listen, it would be impossible to state that caroling instantiates a social order organized around the idea of reciprocity.

Nevertheless, it is interesting that the idea of giving something to carolers in exchange for their visit is present in enough people's minds that: 1) I have never gone caroling without being given food or drink by at least one householder; and 2) I have on several occasions witnessed a surprised householder think for a while before striking upon the idea of giving something to us. Aran Keating described this type of reaction to our caroling in Cambridge: “You could tell; you know, they were like, 'Shit, you know, let's, let me do something, listen, I got—money, and wine, and booze, and let's, and . . . here's a cookie,' you know . . . so like by giving something to them, that was kind of like, so obviously selfless, and like, *nice*, it gave them an opportunity to kind of show—it kind of brought out the best in all those people” (Keating 2008). These moments of thinking and then coming up with the idea of reciprocating might represent a reaching-back to less currently-dominant ideas of exchange, to models of reciprocity that are not in the

forefront of our minds but that are still with us, latent, ready to be activated by an appropriate action. In this way they continue to exist “on the margins, or in the interstices,” available to be stirred to momentary predominance by folkloric or residual performance. Further, when householders offer money and carolers refuse but accept gifts of food (something that I have experienced a few times), the carolers' thereby help to instantiate the gift-exchange over the commodity-exchange.

Folklorist Richard Flores, writing on differences in the “structures of feeling” brought about by two different performances of the same Christmas play in Texas—one in a home, embedded in a gift-exchange structure, and the other commodified, presented for tourists—writes that “the distillation of difference between gift-exchange and commodity-exchange allows us to perceive the *qualitative* difference between two social forms and the social relations that produce them” (1994: 278, emphasis added). Unlike the Shepherd's Play (*Los Pastores*) that Flores describes, caroling is not usually “produced” *by* a gift-exchange form, but rather attempts to produce such a form itself. The qualitative difference in experience from the status quo of a capitalist society, brought about by enacting this different social form, is part of what makes the experience of caroling special and unique for those involved.

Importantly, carolers do not usually *fully* enact a gift-exchange form. Flores emphasizes that “the gifting of performance . . . is the process of performance and gratitude that engages performers and audience in a cyclical event founded on shared communication, social solidarity, and mutual obligation”(1994: 279). Caroling does not always constitute a cyclical event involving “mutual obligation”; rather, the carolers with

whom I spoke emphasize that they give their performance with no expectation of reciprocity.

This approach is quite different from that of much mumming and wassailing, which often involved begging or demanding of goods, or if not, then the clear expectation of them in return for performance. It is also quite different from what some scholars believe to be the most immediate precursor to caroling—the performance of the Christmas waits. Briefly, English town waits were professional musician-watchmen, whose Christmas duties included playing/singing Christmas songs under residents' windows, presumably in hopes of a gratuity on Boxing Day. When town waits were abolished in 1835, “private musicians embraced the opportunity of earning a little money in the character of waits” (Wagner 1968: 180). Christmas waits appeared in the U.S. as well, particularly, it seems, in Boston, but it is unclear if and when people calling themselves “waits” began to serenade without expectation or hope of remuneration.³⁶

While it appears that the first officially-organized caroling groups, in the 1920s-1930s in England, followed soon by similar efforts by the National Bureau for the Advancement of Music in the United States, did not sing for money, these activities were also quite different from door-to-door caroling today.³⁷ The emphasis then, it appears, was much more concentrated on the importance of the carols themselves, their cultural value, and the musicianship of the carol-singers. Efforts to “revive” outdoor caroling in the U.S. concentrated on creating carol-sings in town squares and parks; articles reporting

³⁶ See *The American Book of Days* for a description of Boston waits (Douglass 1937: 641), and Edward Everett Hale's late 1868 century short story “Christmas Waits in Boston,” for a description of an event that sounds very similar to contemporary caroling (minus the horse-drawn sleigh).

³⁷ Charity singing in London hospitals and “slums” bears a close resemblance to today's service caroling, although with a much greater emphasis on the musicianship of the carol-singers involved than is common today (Connelly 89-90).

on growth of such events make no mention of door-to-door caroling. Some events in London emphasized service, going to hospitals and poor areas of the city. These events *may* mark the beginning of the idea of singing without remuneration, though they still do not account for the door-to-door neighborhood caroling that many of my consultants practice.

In the early twentieth century in the United States and Britain (from which many Americans' ideas of a “traditional” Christmas derived), then, many festive house-visit and carol-singing practices existed alongside one another, including caroling in the city streets for charity, children caroling for money in England, American children in some rural areas “serenading” their neighbors with noise and threat of pranks in exchange for food, the many British and North American mumming traditions that continued into the twentieth century in rural areas, organized town carol-sings, and perhaps some derivation of door-to-door singing by “waits,” with or without expectation of monetary reward.

Exactly when or how door-to-door caroling as we know it today emerged from some of these practices or ideas about them is unclear, but what has developed in contemporary caroling is a unique blend of residual and emergent features. The format of caroling contains a latent opportunity for gift-reciprocity exchange inherent to house-visit customs developed before industrial capitalism was as dominant as it is today. When the first people decided to carol as “Christmas waits” but not ask for or accept money, they may have been drawing on their knowledge of different models of exchange in “medieval” Christmas visiting customs. For instance, in the one scholarly account I have found of early twentieth century urban caroling, social historian Mark Connelly writes that when in 1919 the English League of Arts decided to “revive the Christmas Mummers

Plays and to organize bands of carol singers,” they “arranged everything in a self-consciously antique style,” costuming their carolers in medieval garb and equipping them with lanterns on poles (1999: 89); we know also that English and American Victorians drew their imagery of a “traditional” Christmas from their ideas of medieval “Merrie England.” Art historian Sara Dodd writes that “The creating of a Christmas tradition, with its associated symbols and rituals, can often be seen in constructed images of a nostalgic past—in a ‘great house,’ for example—where the happy antics and activities of wassailers in an ordered feudal world provide credibility and sustenance for the Victorian present” (2008: 32; see also Storey 2008:30).

Ideas about medieval mumming and wassailing more than likely influenced the development of turn-of-the-century caroling in England and America. Thus the format for a gift-exchange has remained basic to the caroling form, although caroling for money (for oneself or for charity) was also well-established in the 19th century, and continued into the 20th century. Folklorist Herbert Halpert, for instance, categorized caroling as an example of the “collector’s performance” in “The Informal Visit” section of his 1969 *Typology of Mumming* (1969: 36). At some point “freely gifted” caroling arose from these influences.

Whenever “gifted” caroling arose, I suggest that the importance many of my consultants place on the gifting aspect of their performance is likely different in nature than previous “gifted” caroling, because of the particular circumstances and attitudes toward the commercialization of American Christmas today. As I have shown in the previous chapters, the majority of my consultants specifically contrasted their practice to the overriding commercial and “frantic” feel of the contemporary Christmas season, and

emphasized the importance of showing their children what real “giving” is, or told me that caroling was a way to experience the “true” spirit of Christmas. While Christmas has involved the exchange of commodities for at least the past 150 years (Storey 2008), it was not until 2008 that a person was trampled to death during a “Black Friday” stampede at a Long Island WalMart, and Black Friday shopping-related brawls have been in the news for approximately the past ten years. As a result, conversations about the negative aspects of commercialized Christmas have increased. Thus while gifting of caroling performance may not be new, the anti-commercial emphasis of this gifting has very likely emerged subsequent to both Victorian service caroling (whose practitioners were likely the same urban middle-class who invented the “traditional English Christmas” during a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization out of “nostalgia for the feudal power relations of the past,” creating their “utopian version of industrial capitalism: a temporal and social space in which . . . exploitation and oppression can exist in harmony with deference and 'goodwill to all men'” [Storey 2008: 30]); and to mid-twentieth century neighborhood caroling, which would have occurred in the context of the “Golden Age of Capitalism.”

Finally, I would like to point out that several of my consultants contrasted themselves to professional carolers, whose presence has grown quickly in the past several years,³⁸ and suggest that this newly commodified version of caroling has influenced some carolers' self-presentation. A brief excerpt from a conversation I had with Kathleen McGovern makes this point. Although Kathleen and I had organized caroling parties

³⁸ Of the first thirteen professional caroling groups called up by a Google search, five were founded in the 1980s, two in the 1990s, and three in the 2000s. Three did not give their founding date and I suspect that those were founded recently, as those founded in the 1980s advertised their history and longevity. Twelve of these 13 groups advertise their “Dickensian” garments; only one showed pictures of its carolers in both concert dress and Victorian dress, presumably offering the choice to the consumer.

together, she had never mentioned her dislike for professional carolers until she told me she could put me in touch with a friend of hers who has that profession. She told me to ask her “why she cheapens Christmas,” so I asked her to elaborate:

KM: It bothers me that malls hire people in order to create a false festive atmosphere. Like, they stand in *one* place, dressed in *Dickens* clothing. The fact that they're dressed in Dickens clothing drives me up the wall.

HH: Why?

KM: Because that's not what Christmas caroling *is*. Christmas *carolers* are normal *people*, they're not, like, out of a *Dickens* novel. (McGovern 2009)

Williams writes that “a residual cultural element is usually at some distance from the effective dominant culture, but some part of it, some version of it . . . will in most cases have had to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in these areas” (1977: 123). If caroling is in some ways residue from an economy of the gift, and Christmas is a festival of capitalism (Dodd 2008, McKay 2008, Storey 2008, Connelly 1999), then it might be expected that caroling would be commodified, and both carolers and their music turned into commodities. Professional carolers' costumes mark them as a particular, identifiable item, and remove them from the present day. Their costumes also mark wealth and affluence, if not of the actual individuals wearing them, but of those who can afford to hire them for their corporate events and private parties. Websites for these caroling groups advertise above all their professional, polished sound and their “elegant and luxurious” costumes. One can listen to samples of their songs (generally recording-studio quality) and look at many pictures of the carolers in their top hats, hoop skirts, and muffs. Red and green velvet are particularly favored fabrics for gowns and capes, and men are never without that symbol of wealth, the high top hat. These visual mark caroling as a thing of the past that must be paid for in order to be experienced, making the carolers and their music into commodities. In this way, capitalist tendencies

have co-opted a residual performance from a previous (and now alternative) social-economic structure.

Kathleen's contrasting of what she sees as “actual” carolers to professional carolers reveals the dynamic process of hegemony at work. While earlier in the twentieth century, children and Christmas waits may have serenaded for tips without being accused of having been “commercialized,” the reincorporation of what had become a gifting performance for profit is available for censure by amateur carolers who emphasize the noncommercial and community aspects of their practice. Their reaction to professional carolers may cause them to emphasize even more the “free” giving of their practice. For example, in 2007 when a few residents offered us money for our caroling, we declined and soon forgot about it. In 2009, after Kathleen and I had had an extended conversation about the phenomenon of professional carolers, which Kathleen in particular described as very negative, we both felt very upset when one immigrant couple gave us a five-dollar bill and shut the door in Quincy. We talked about how we had just accomplished the opposite effect that we had desired, and only half-ironically exclaimed that we had “ruined Christmas.”

Other carolers also seem to envision their practice in terms of struggle with dominant, commercial culture. For example, Boston Caroling Mob leader Joel Sindelar used very specific language in his account of being kicked out of Copley Place (an upscale mall) after attempting to sing there, published in the Mob's blog:

Our first stop, after warming up in Back Bay Station, was to go to the mall across the street. We sang Joy To the World in the first space we came to, and then realized that there was a brass quintet playing in the middle space of the mall (this is a very upscale mall, complete with marble floors, a waterfall, etc.) We went to the middle and asked them if it was ok if we sang another tune- they said, sure!- so we sang Longfellow's "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day" (which was only subtly

subversive, I thought).

We finish. Security guard 1: Are you the leader?

me: Maybe. Why?

SG1: Could I see some ID?

me: We were just leaving. (pats shoulder. Probably a bad move)

SG1: Don't touch me.

Me: Sorry.

2 seconds pass:

Security Guard 2: Are you the leader?

me: Maybe. Why?

SG1: Could I see some ID?

me: We were just leaving. We've already been asked to leave. (note that this time I do not pat his shoulder)

SG2: OK.

2 seconds pass. We are almost at the downward escalator.

Security Manager-type woman: Are you the leader?

me: maybe. Why?

We step onto the down escalator.

SMTW: Would you come downstairs with me?

me: Um. Ok. (we're already going downstairs)

SMTW: Could I see some ID?

me: May I ask Why you want to see my ID?

. . . and so on. I didn't give anyone my ID. I found out later that there are elements of the world who have gone into that very mall to sing anti-corporate christmas carols, which might explain the rather hostile reception. Crazy. Well. People. (Sindelar 2004)

Sindelar, although not a leader of an explicitly anti-corporate caroling group, employs the language of struggle against unreasonable dominant authority in his account. For example, his security guards speak only in directives, demanding official information about his identity, and asking him to “come downstairs” when he is already on the down escalator. Furthermore, Sindelar uses the colloquial, friendly “Sure!” to show how the paid musicians were more than willing to let the carolers sing. Naming the third authority “Security Manager-type woman” identifies her with a “type” of authority whose sole purpose is to guard the interests of retail. I see this account, therefore, as evidence of two things. First, assuming that the events did unfold more or less as described—with

likely some differences in the actual reported speech—we have one example (and there are others) of informal carolers being asked to leave a place of retail, where musicians must be *hired* to perform. This would seem to indicate retailers' nonacceptance of the residual version of caroling, as opposed to their use of the commodified version. Second, Sindelar's language illustrates how some carolers perceive official culture as engaged in a struggle against them. This in turn demonstrates Williams' thesis of the ongoing interaction and struggle between alternative and dominant practices.

To summarize, I see caroling as residual of related practices in former gift-exchange economies. As such it is inherently alternative, as suggested by De Certeau. However, because of ongoing attempts by dominant cultural forces to encompass this practice by commodifying it, carolers emphasize the non-capitalist aspect of the custom, to the point where the expected gift-reciprocity exchange often does not occur. While carolers often say that they benefit from caroling as much as those they visit, they seem to envision this reciprocity as nonmaterial, for example the perception of having emotionally touched another person. The audience's appreciation of the “gift,” or even the very fact of having been allowed to perform at all, becomes the carolers' reward. Carolers tend to envision this type of gifting as residual of a former state of things, when in fact it is more likely a significant modification of the ethos of former caroling-like practices.

Limits to Caroling as Oppositional Practice

I have shown that caroling's residual nature, and the common perception of it as a tradition, make caroling a *resource* for people who wish to “build community”—often a specific kind of community that they deem lacking in their everyday lives. Different

groups and individuals emphasize different aspects of caroling, and practice different versions of the genre, in order to accomplish different goals. A lack of strict notions about what caroling consists of as a genre makes this sort of adaptation possible; this looseness, combined with the broad recognition of caroling, allows people to push at the boundaries of what caroling can be and do. Explicitly anti-commercial carolers and the Caroling Mob are examples. But there are also certain limitations on the practice, and on the liberties which people may take with it. Because caroling is recognized as traditional, people do have some basic expectations for it, from which it is difficult to stray too far, and associations with it from which it can be difficult to extricate one's particular version of the practice.

First, the songs themselves can be one of the main deterrents to caroling. Because so many of them are religious hymns, many people fear offending non-Christian households. In situations where carolers do not know their neighbors well, they often hesitate to sing to homes where no Christmas decorations are present. I have experienced this many times, and several of my interviewees mentioned going to homes where they either knew the residents or where there were decorations. This practice can give rise to a tension between the desire to be inclusive and carol to everyone in a neighborhood, and the fear of offending others and actually creating feelings of antagonism among neighbors. Some carolers have tried to mitigate this issue by focusing on secular songs, both the more recent (such as "Jingle Bells") and the older (such as "Deck the Halls"). Carolers' intent to sing non-religious songs, however, cannot be anticipated by a householder, and since the practice is very clearly associated with the Christmas holiday, it can have the opposite-than-desired effect on householders. While the intention is

inclusion, non-Christian householders may feel even more *excluded* from mainstream society when they hear carolers at their door in yet another manifestation of the hegemony of Christianity in the United States. Consider the following anonymous response to an eHow.com article on “How to Treat Christmas Carolers who Come to Your Door” (posted in 2006):

The appearance of Christmas carolers at the door of a non-Christian or non-religious family is usually interpreted as an imposition of dominant theology upon the members of the house. It serves as a form of out-group reinforcement, and as a way of demonstrating that happiness (superficial at least) is only possible with one world view.

In our experience living as minorities in a small Northern Canadian town, carolers did not leave right away, like salespeople, after the doorbell was ignored. This can be very frightening to children of the house who are not familiar with Christian rituals, and have been subjugated to Christian doctrine and hostility in school or in public.

The person posting this message then offers a variety of suggestions to discourage carolers, including putting a sign on one’s door, turning off porch lights when the singing begins, and opening the door partway and asking carolers to leave. This post brings up the important point that Christmas caroling is considered by most to be a celebration of Christmas, and as such could well come to serve as a further example of Christian hegemony imposed upon non-Christians. Though religious faith is not the main motivation for the carolers with whom I spoke, including those associated with churches, and though many non-Christian and non-religious people go Christmas caroling, the fact remains that the practice is, at least in contemporary times, inseparable from Christmas.

Along the same lines, to people who feel tired of the Christmas holiday in general—not only of its religious aspect, but of its commercial and general prominence throughout December—carolers could also seem to be yet another imposition of the holiday upon their lives. It is interesting that the very economic system that carolers

imagine they are enacting an alternative to has become so powerful that it can engulf caroling as well. The use of the caroling motif in television commercials likely adds to this absorption. Yet attempting to set themselves apart further from the generally-understood idea of caroling (for example, by attempting to sing songs other than Christmas carols), and from the Christmas holiday, would make it more difficult for carolers, who are already unexpected visitors, to successfully make contact with their neighbors. They rely upon associations with Christmas and a traditional format to function at all.

Two years ago I wanted to carol with fewer Christian songs, and more songs that were about good will and peace. But aside from “Deck the Halls,” these songs were not well-known, which meant I had to teach them to those who had gathered to carol. One song which several in the party did know was “Dona Nobis Pacem,” but the group rejected the idea of singing this while caroling because it was not Christmas-y enough and they feared people would be confused by it; also, not enough people knew it that they would be able to sing along. So we ended up with a very small repertoire of songs that were still quite associated with Christmas though their words were not explicitly about that holiday, and householders requested the usual hymns. My attempt to make our songs less dogmatic failed because of the traditional understandings of caroling.

As I mentioned earlier, I believe that the fear of offending non-Christians is one of the reasons that service caroling is more popular than the door-to-door variety in many places. While service caroling is capable of accomplishing many positive actions, its relative popularity when compared with door-to-door caroling is indicative of the unwillingness of many to act counter to challenge certain aspects of mainstream society,

for example by testing the borders between public and private space through a knock on a neighbor or stranger's door. There is also the risk that service caroling can become a chore or task to be endured, which was how Greg Bell of Chapel of the Cross described caroling in nursing homes. Interestingly Bell used to hold a caroling party in his home which went door to door in the neighborhood. Though he hasn't entirely rejected the idea that they might one day go again, he thinks he would hold the party inside the home and sing around the piano. "We just don't know people's feelings about, their religious feeling and so on," he told me (G. Bell 2008). Speaking of the mood of those former parties, he used the word "exuberant"; to describe caroling with the church, he decided on the phrase "forced exuberance." For Bell, then, the only viable form of caroling today is a form he considers more of a chore than a joy.

Some want to stretch these boundaries. With the connotations of community inclusiveness that caroling holds, they imagine expanding the sense of community in a given area through caroling. They hope that when faced with people who are unfamiliar with the custom or who do not celebrate Christmas, the caroling might prompt conversation, allowing the carolers to explain that they are celebrating a festive time of year and that they wanted to include the particular householders in that celebration. In this way they could expand the number and type of people included in the local "community," while asserting and instantiating the currency of a socially-open, profoundly amateur and participative performance practice. The caroling parties that I have organized with my friend Kathleen McGovern in Quincy, Massachusetts, are an example of this sort of attempt. The positive and negative outcomes of those evenings

(three in number) illustrate the particular challenges that arise from using tradition as a resource for action, as well as the particular rewards.

Kathleen's neighborhood has quite a high population of people who were not born in the U.S., in particular people from East Asia. Those reactions that we perceived from nonnatives ranged from suspicion and confusion to excitement about being included in a previously unfamiliar "American" custom. We cannot be sure, but we think that a good number of non-responsive households were also composed of people unfamiliar with the custom of caroling. When our explanations about what we are doing succeeded, I felt great pleasure (sentiments echoed by most of the people in our group). One daughter of Chinese immigrants literally told us, "You've shared your tradition with us, and now we want to share our holiday tradition with you" as she gave us red envelopes with dollar bills inside, luck for the New Year. At least three times I have seen anger and suspicion turn to pleasure and even joy when children have explained to their parents what we were doing. These moments exemplify the best possible result of caroling to people formerly unfamiliar with the practice. For whatever reason, perhaps by chance, all of these events occurred in 2008, and at the house party after caroling, we passed around the red envelopes and talked over the positive interactions, very happy with the results of the night. In 2009, however, many doors simply remained closed to us. One couple thrust a bag of Halloween candy and a five dollar bill at us and closed the door, as we tried to talk to them and explain what we were doing. This was the first interaction our party engaged in that night, and it upset us, as we felt that we had just had the very opposite effect on our neighbors than desired. That night the only positive responses we received were from white native-born Americans. Many doors remained closed. Afterwards, Kathleen and I

discussed what had happened, and, believing that many of the closed doors belonged to immigrants or people unfamiliar with caroling, lamented that they might have inferred an exclusionary message from our singing. Perhaps, hearing people singing Christmas songs outside their doors, they assumed that the custom was only for those “in the know,” that is, native-born Americans. Might that have caused them to feel even more cut-off from the dominant American holiday?

Conclusion

People have been going Christmas caroling in this country since at least the early 20th century, and have been practicing similar visiting rituals since Europeans first came to the land.³⁹ Other related traditions and precursors have been and were practiced for hundreds of years, if not longer.⁴⁰ Although people tend to have an unclear understanding of the origins of caroling and the way it was practiced in the past, they do associate it with an idea of holiday tradition and with an image of a more neighborly past. Some of the songs sung during caroling really are hundreds of years old (though they may not be sung in their entirety); almost all of them are known by the eldest people alive today. Carolers are cognizant of these associations and draw upon the idea of caroling as tradition in order both to try to build community and to celebrate the holiday in a participative, non-commercial way. They draw on caroling as a resource for culture-building in the way that folklorist Henry Glassie describes: “tradition is the creation of

³⁹ For a description of Native Canadian mumming, see Ben-Dor 1969, “The 'Naluyuks' of Northern Labrador: A Mechanism of social control,” in *Christmas Mumming in Newfoundland*. Ben-Dur contends that the source of this custom lies in the Moravian Mission which came to Labrador in 1771.

⁴⁰ There has been ongoing debate on this subject among historians (see, for example, Fees 1989). 19th century antiquarians claimed that mumming had its origins in the Saturnalia (introduced in 217 BCE) and this connection has been upheld more recently, for example by Jonassen 1990 (see p. 64)).

the future out of the past” (Glassie 2003:176). Carolers, however, who want to use pre-existing house-visit models to act out a more socially integrated, , and less commercial culture do not merely paint upon an empty canvas with traditionally-ground and chemical-free tints. They are involved in a struggle with other cultural actors and forces, including those of the dominant culture and other alternative elements that are also trying to influence the outcome of this painting—and the way it is viewed. In the next chapter, I will discuss one more factor that complicates the ways in which carolers are able to influence the future of societal relations in their communities: the brevity of caroling and its resulting gestural quality.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

I have described three major ways in which caroling challenges contemporary American norms of social interaction and performance. Carolers engage a spatial approach that fosters face-to-face interaction and pushes boundaries between public and private; favor an amateur, unpolished sound that encourages participation and distinguishes carolers from commercial models of music; and choose an activity whose perceived and actual traditionality makes it accessible to many generations and enacts residual, alternative models of social interaction.

In this way, caroling often instantiates values that are substantially different from what most people experience as the dominant tendencies of our society. These differences help my consultants experience a sense of community with their fellow carolers and those they visit; the carolers, in turn, often contrast this “community spirit” to their everyday social experience, which they experience as less integrated and open. Despite its reputation of wholesomeness, and the fact that mainstream or dominant institutions—such as the Scouts or church choirs—are some of its main practitioners, caroling is in fact deeply alternative to mainstream culture; and practitioner with whom I spoke often envision it as such.

An obvious question arises from this claim: what importance does the alternative nature of caroling have when it is bound by custom to be so brief and ephemeral? After

all, caroling can only happen once a year during a time period of about two weeks; householders do not expect the same carolers to visit a home more than once in a season; and each interaction is generally expected to last from a few minutes to perhaps a little under one hour (with these longer visits usually being pre-planned). Even though caroling provides an opportunity for amateur singing and participatory performance, does one night of such group singing in the course of a year really challenge the dominant outlook that music is a commodity? Does one person's reluctant joining in on "We Wish You a Merry Christmas" alter the pervasive separation of performer from audience in Western tradition? Does the brief, unexpected emotional interaction between strangers change people's approach to obtaining and controlling their emotional experiences through mass media? Does a *night* of visiting create a *culture* of visiting? Does a yearly visit to sing in a nursing home change the fact of age segregation? Does a fleeting sense of oneness with mankind affect future actions?

Carolers encounters are usually brief, and the sense of community that they sometimes generate is ephemeral. Certainly many people who carol or are visited by carolers once or twice will not find themselves substantially changed by the experience, and a night of caroling will not topple the musical star-system or substantially challenge capitalism. Nevertheless, as I have hinted throughout the previous pages, I do believe that despite—or in fact, aided by—this brevity, caroling can constitute an important challenge to dominant norms, and can sometimes lead to lasting change in social relations or approaches to performance. My evidence for this assertion is anecdotal, and comes from my conversations with carolers. For example, there is the mother who thinks that her son had no qualms about embracing his post-accident coach—of whom all the other kids

were scared—because “he has to hug all those folks in wheelchairs every Christmas.” She believes that her son's caroling experience has influenced his approach to the elderly and disabled. Others have formed lasting and very important personal relationships through yearly caroling. For example, the Oakwood Waits and former Oakwood resident Donna Oakley (age 84) have formed a caroling-mediated relationship over the past twenty-six years that is so important to both parties that even when Oakley moved to a new neighborhood, the Waits still began their annual “traipse” at her house, and Oakley stipulated in the sale of her Oakwood house that the new owner would have to welcome in the Waits when they caroled. Oakley provides food and champagne to the carolers every year; she told me that “it's all about loving your fellow man” (Oakley 2009).

One might argue that people who carol already value face-to-face community, participatory musicking, non-commercial and unmediated experiences. This is quite true for several of my consultants (and this “type” of person was likely over-represented in my interview pool because the people who were most willing to talk to me or to whom I was referred were the most enthusiastic carolers, and because several of my consultants have studied Folklore). However, it is important to mention that caroling is well-enough-recognized as a potential and socially acceptable holiday activity that it is one of the more likely situations through which someone who has never sung in a group or participated in other “alternative” activities might be introduced to such realms of practice. In my own case, for instance, it was the experience of participatory singing during caroling that caused me to seek out other opportunities for amateur singing, which is now an important part of my life. By the same token, I recently learned that an acquaintance of mine whom I met at a monthly amateur singing group came to the group through caroling with them.

A singer-songwriter, he had previously sung alone much more often than with others. More generally, the intimate interactions I have had with strangers, especially elders, during caroling have truly influenced my attitude toward the people I meet in daily life and caused me to seek out contact with my elders.

Given the intense caroling conversion that I underwent in Poland and that was reaffirmed in the U.S., I am likely an extreme example; however, I am not alone in this regard. Anneliese Gannelie of the UNC group “Carolina Carolers,” for example, began the club as a chance to sing without having to audition, and as a vehicle for what she envisioned as community service. In their first year, having had a very positive experience at Christmas, the group decided to go caroling to nursing homes on Valentine's Day. Gannelie said they decided to do this because “people always come around during Christmastime, but—[on] Valentine's Day, people start to feel lonely, especially if they're by themselves in a nursing home” (Gannelie 2008). In this way, experiences fostered through Christmas caroling inspired a group of students to expand their efforts to interact with elders, and to push the boundaries of what is considered the traditional seasonal context for caroling. Others are inspired to carol year after year, building concrete relationships with specific individuals over time (examples are the Oakwood Waits, Martha King's family, Jill HemmingAustin's party, and caroling to home-bound church parishioners) or interacting with new people in new areas each year, expanding their sense of “general” community (examples are the caroling parties I have organized with Kathleen McGovern, the Boston Caroling Mob, and the caroling events Kathleen Legg has organized in each new area in which she has lived).

Thus, what begin as fleeting experiences of community can inspire people to want to repeat those communal experiences, ultimately leading to changes that stretch beyond the brief encounters of one evening. Victor Turner describes this very phenomenon for what he terms “communitas,” and his influential work should further our understanding of how brief but deeply-felt experiences such as those engendered by caroling may sometimes create lasting change. The moments of felt “connection” with others that my consultants have described and my own emotions during caroling sound very much like Turner's definition of “spontaneous communitas,” which he describes as

a direct, immediate and total confrontation of human identities. . . . It has something “magical” about it. . . . Is there any of us who has not known this moment when compatible people—friends, congeners—obtain a flash of mutual understanding on the subjective level, when they feel that all problems, not just their problems, could be resolved, whether emotional or cognitive, if only the group which is felt (in the first person) as “essentially us” could sustain its intersubjective illumination. . . . When the mood, style, or “fit” of spontaneous communitas is upon us . . . we feel that it is important to relate directly to another person as he presents himself in the here-and-now, to understand him in a sympathetic . . . way, free from the culturally defined encumbrances of his role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche. (Turner 1982: 48)

These sorts of feelings particularly relate to the door-to-door caroling to strangers, which provides the sense of garnering a “general” sense of community. As I discussed in chapter 1, in some conceptions the idea of caroling is to sing and “create community” with whomever is at home, without concern for this person's “role, status, reputation, class, caste, sex or other structural niche.” The idea behind “random” caroling is to disregard such attributes and “connect” with previous strangers on the basis of shared humanity.

Turner writes that “in tribal societies and other pre-industrial social formations,” it was liminality that provided “a propitious setting for the development of these direct,

immediate, and total confrontations of human identities” (1982:46). Liminality is the defining attribute of the transitional, ambiguous period and area of anti-structure in pre-industrial rites of passage. In industrial societies such as our own, Turner believes that true liminal experiences are rare, but that “it is within leisure, and sometimes aided by the projections of art that this way of experiencing one's fellows can be portrayed, grasped, and sometimes realized”(1982: 46). For Turner, industrial leisure genres provide a similar domain of “anti-structure” and thus create the opportunity for what he calls “liminoid”—or “liminal-like” experiences (1982: 32-33). Liminoid settings are thus the context for experiencing *communitas* in societies such as are own.

Because feelings of *communitas* are desirable, people—having experienced them—want to repeat them. People seek, through various means, “the lost 'kingdom' or 'anti-kingdom' of direct, unmediated communication with one another” that liminality offers (1982:58). Thus, people's experience of *communitas* during caroling likely causes them to want to repeat such experiences. Importantly, *communitas* is most often experienced as an experiential contrast to normal structures of everyday life. Turner notes that “*communitas*, in the present context . . . may be said to exist more in contrast than in active opposition to social structure, as an alternative and more “liberated” way of being socially human, a way both of being detached from social structure—and hence potentially of periodically *evaluating* its performance” (1982: 51). In this way, the desire to repeat experiences that are alternative to those offered by mainstream culture may make people who carol more aware of dominant norms, and encourage them to evaluate these. Even for carolers who may not experience Turnerian “*communitas*,” I believe that the experiencing of alternative models of being—such as participatory performance,

visiting, gift-exchange models of reciprocity, and emotional openness and engagement—could well encourage individuals to consider dominant modes of being *as dominant*, and alternative modes as viable options for ways of engaging in the world. Of course, caroling is only one experience out of many that could provide such a doorway. However, its very brevity and “mundane” reputation may make it be one of the more accessible and non-threatening alternative experiences available.

As I suggested earlier, people unlikely to want to do something “alternative” may agree to go caroling because it is a brief commitment, and one that will likely involve a party; furthermore, they can take an “ironic” stance towards caroling, thus saving face while still engaging in an activity that is likely to lead them to experience some of the emotions or feelings of or about community which I have mentioned. Consider, for example, some of the posts on the facebook event pages that Kathleen McGovern and I created for our caroling parties. Kathleen described her event as “Drinking and Singing Christmas Songs at Strangers!” My event posting, in turn, was not at all ironic. Nevertheless, the comments posted in response—posted by people who attended the parties—were filled with irony:

“holy shit this caroling party sounds tough as fuck. im coming for sure. also possibly getting skull and cross bones tattoo with "merry fucking xmas" underneath it.”

“I went caroling once. It was a disaster. I made almost no money. Why do you wish this on me again?”

“I don't think my attendance is making this any cooler...I'll try to wear fashionable slacks.”

People thus played with associations that caroling has with wholesomeness, dorkiness, noncommercial “goodwill,” and bad singing (“Singing at Strangers!”). In so doing, they were able to distance themselves from the perception of uncoolness associated with caroling while still engaging in the activity.

Ironic participation in caroling can take varied forms. In order to encourage his friends to come to my 2009 caroling party in Carrboro, N.C., for example, Christian Leow, my housemate and a doctoral student in Philosophy, composed a lengthy email with fabricated scholarly quotations about caroling. His “treatise” effectively called attention to the fact that no one really has actually studied caroling, presumably because it is mundane, wholesome, and nothing like the revolutionary practice that his imagined scholars claim. He wrote, for example, that according to these scholars, “caroling is a global youth movement, a lovely expression of protest and counterculture. . . . Not sanctioned by advertisement, media or corporate culture, caroling as a human activity can be conceived or rationally understood as a revolutionary practice. . . . Other writers see caroling as *sonic graffiti,* a 'violent' resistance to mass-culture.” Through this tongue-in-cheek attribution of revolutionary intent to something as supposedly innocuous as caroling, Christian demonstrated his ironic stance towards caroling to his friends; at the same time, the time and care spent on the email simultaneously indicated his enthusiasm about the party. In a different rendition of irony, Brian Legg told me that one of his favorite memories of caroling as a child is the father of one of his friends singing Bart Simpson’s naughty versions of carols in between houses (B. Legg 2008). This seems to me like an attempt by this parent to keep an activity that could easily become stigmatized as “uncool,” especially for school-aged boys, “cool.”

In this way the possibility to poke fun at caroling while engaging in it (due to its traditionality and reputation of dorkiness), combined with the brevity of the commitment to carol, may very well increase the likelihood that persons who might not choose to take part in a more demanding or “serious” type of alternative activity might agree to go caroling. If they then experience any of the emotions that my consultants have reported to be common during caroling, or any of the feelings of community—or *communitas*—that the situation often engenders in its participants, then they may find that these experiences have been meaningful to them, and may even begin to seek additional avenues for such experiences. Even if this isn’t the case, their very act of participation will expose them to and engage them in different models of being.

Just as the brevity of caroling might encourage otherwise hesitant singers to join in the activity, so too might it make the activity less threatening for its potential audiences. Knowing that carolers will sing a few songs and move on, they may be more likely to “humor” them by opening the door. In this way carolers can avoid, at least with some householders, enacting Turner's prediction that people who have experienced *communitas* and want to share it with others may alienate those they hope to include (Turner 1982: 51). While carolers often do have an agenda of “creating community,” householders who are familiar with the custom of caroling realize that the carolers will not stay for long. A potential criticism of caroling is that such brief encounters with strangers could not possibly have a lasting influence on societal or neighborly relations. I am suggesting that the very brevity of these might make it more likely that even someone who is normally not open to intrusions on their privacy or time would actually engage with carolers. They may then possibly experience a deeply-felt encounter with the

carolers, which may influence their future actions. The briefness of caroling encounters combines with the transitional space in which they occur, the set-apartness of the holiday season, and in-betweenness of the evening to create a very liminal situation. As Turner writes, “liminality . . . provide[s] men with a set of templates, models, or paradigms which, at one level, [allow for] periodical reclassifications of reality . . . and man’s relationship to society, nature, and culture. But they are more than mere cognitive classifications, since they incite men to action as well as thought” (1974: 83). Thus, while a single night of caroling may not create radical change, it very well may influence its participants as social actors.

Folklorist Deborah Kapchan has written that “in their function as either preservers or reshapers of tradition, social performances are indexes of social transformation” (1998: 122). Contemporary caroling marks the response of individuals to the over-commercialization of Christmas, but this reaction is related to a broader reaction against an increasingly mediatized and isolating society. Carolers take advantage of the format and associations of the tradition of Christmas caroling, as well as the general sense of festivity of the season, to self-consciously embrace of performer-audience participation and reciprocity, social openness, intergenerational contact, and face-to-face community. Enacting these values, carolers transform themselves and others, in turn transform society. Because so many carolers consciously include all ends of the generational spectrum, communal performance becomes a concrete part of the lives of children growing up today who carol. Further, the alternative values that caroling embodies enter the lives of those whom carolers visit, some of them people who may not have elected to participate in alternative culture otherwise.

Turner has called the human species “homo performans . . . a culture-inventing, social-performing, self-making and self-transforming creature . . . inspired by the struggle for meaning,” suggesting that our predilection to transform culture through performance is essential to our very humanity (Turner 1986: 81, in Conquergood 1991:358). When ordinary people carol for the sake creating the kind of community they would like to infuse our lives, we see that Turner’s *homo performans* is alive, well, singing, and still struggling.

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