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## The sociology of scenes, the Sacramento poetry scene

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THE SOCIOLOGY OF SCENES,  
THE SACRAMENTO  
POETRY SCENE

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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## ABSTRACT

### **The Sociology of Scenes, The Sacramento Poetry Scene**

By

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For this ethnography, I use my feminist perspective, grounded theory, participant observation, and autoethnographic techniques to explore an urban poetry scene. I suggest that scene studies are a viable alternative to community studies and that we move our articulation of social experience to reflect it as it occurs, on a multitude of continuums. My goal with this project is to develop, use, and discuss the utility of a definition of scene that is intended to be useful to scene studies researchers. To this end, I both evaluate an outdated definition of scene (Irwin 1973 & 1977), and define the three core components of scene as identity, space, and participation.

The Sacramento Poetry Scene emerges here as a site for the contestation of power. I conclude that the definition of scene space is a product of the interactions between participants and find that conflict between participants exposes definitional processes. I confirm that scene participation is not stable, fixed, or necessarily limited. I also find that multiple collective identities can come to be articulated on the same scene. Furthermore, I identify that social network theory may be useful for informing future scene studies.

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## CHAPTER 1

### THE SACRAMENTO POETRY SCENE

During the dark hours in certain midtown spots, the cement sidewalks literally glitter in hues of dull yellow by lamplight. Sacramento's midtown is a place where people want to be. Trees here are old, big, and plenty; the streets wide and inviting. Between downtown and midtown, there is access to almost any urban luxury that a person could want. People often ride bikes and take walks, use electric train or public bus-lines to get around. The Pacific Ocean, mountains, desert, forest, lakes, delta, and the San Francisco Bay Area are all nearby.

My block is home to well-kept Victorian houses and small apartment buildings. It is socially integrated, calm, and pleasant. Everyone who lives in my building knows each other, and many of us establish friendships by spending time in the evenings chatting about our days in the courtyard. On Thursdays the calls of drums and ankle bells can be heard from afar as Ballet Folklorio practice gets underway at the community center one block over. True to Northern California stereotypes, the weather is generally kind here.

Nothing beats the summer evening breeze- a time of day and year when downtown and midtown come alive. Jasmine and lavender and rosemary seem to grow everywhere, including from sidewalk cracks and in the rich mounds of soil used to slow traffic. Mocking from the intersection of technology and nature, songbirds sing their "car alarm"

songs well into the early morning. I can feel it in my bones; this is a time and place for poetry.

### *Poetry In Sacramento*

“Poetry Unkempt” and “Poetry Collective Tuesday” (“PC Tuesday”) are the two main longstanding poetry readings in Sacramento. Both of these readings series feature one or more poets each week who are accompanied by an open mic. Open mic literally means “open microphone” and, at least in the U.S., they can be found in just about any big city and in some smaller locales as well. These are spaces where poets can either listen to the work of other poets, or have their own work heard by a live audience. Held in venues such as Sunny’s- a small deli downtown- and The Poetry Collective (The Collective)- a poetry organization in midtown- open mics usually involve poets who attend specifically to sign-up on sheets for allotted stage time.

Every open mic has a “host.” This person’s role involves setting ground rules for performers, keeping track of the sign-up sheet, emceeing, and running the event smoothly. When one’s turn to “take the mic” comes up, a poet can either try their original work out on a public audience, read something that was written by someone else, or spin words into random “freestyle” rants about whatever they happen to have on their minds. Aside from “PC Tuesday” and “Poetry Unkempt,” I have found other hot spots for public poetry activities in Sacramento. A list of these places includes: The Book Pile- an independent used bookstore located in midtown, Public library and museum reading series, readings hosted by large retail booksellers and various other smaller, short lived, or sporadic venues for open mic or performance poetry action.

Most of the poetry scene activity in Sacramento is centralized within a thirty or forty block radius in the midtown/downtown area. This is where Sunny's and The Collective are located. The Collective is a small formal nonprofit center for poetry, and this organization's physical location is the venue for "PC Tuesday." Poetry scene activity in Sacramento includes a wide range of face-to-face happenings such as readings, book release celebrations, and writing workshops. There are also informal, private, or spur of the moment gatherings of poets after readings, or for special events and notable occasions.

Although it rarely gets produced and mailed on time, The Collective's free monthly hardcopy publication includes an events calendar which catalogues most of the scene's events. For those who want to know what is going on ahead of time, this information is also usually available on The Collective's website as well. Other good sources for information about poetry happenings include bulletin flyers posted around town, and listings under a separate "poetry" heading in the weekly events section of the local independent news-rag. There are also privately moderated email listservs and, of course, the most effective source of information tends to be word-of-mouth through the networks of poets.

A number of small local independent presses and "Do It Yourselfers" routinely circulate publications around the scene which range from zines and chapbooks, to poetry translation projects and formal edited volumes of poetry. An independent film about the history of poetry in Sacramento was produced- and caused some controversy among local poets- in 2007. There is also a Sacramento Poet Laureate program supported by the local Arts Commission and ultimately sponsored by the California Arts Council. Poetic

activities on nearby college campuses sometimes overlap with the poetry scene. Campus based activities that fall into this category include community celebrations of annual literary magazines, high profile visiting poets who cause excitement in poets across the city, and local professors who moonlight on the scene.

For a few years in the early 2000's, there was a publicly-funded teen empowerment program that employed poets in several of the county's low-income neighborhoods. The public transit system in Sacramento participates in the "Poetry in Motion" project, putting student poetry onto posters displayed on light rail trains and busses throughout the city. Poetry as part of a public arts agenda or academic outreach initiative can be found in most places throughout California. There are two statewide projects that writers from around the state participate in: one places visiting poets in schools, and another places them in prisons. Even the small rural county I grew up in has poetry readings once a week, a poet laureate, and Poets in the Schools programming.

Yet, public poetry in Sacramento is an intimate experience. The scene here has wide breadth and a multitude of perspective, but with intimate appeal. As a city and well-integrated urban place, there's diversity here. This wide array of experience becomes visible through a variety of locale art endeavors. Yet, downtown/midtown Sacramento manages to still feel like a small town.

Perhaps because everything is so centralized in this unique geographic location, I run into poets from the scene at the market, the park, the coffee shop. The woman who hands over my bread at the bakery on a Thursday is the same person who read the poem about oranges at Sunny's on Wednesday; the guy who writes a lot about trees and birds also edits for the Sacramento Bee. Folks get together regularly after readings to have a drink

at a favorite bar down the street from a venue; they throw parties or salons for each other, and give one another rides to readings in or out of town. Sacramento is also a destination. Poets from outlying areas drive in on Wednesdays every week for “Poetry Unkempt,” they come- sometimes from very far away- to give featured readings.

Sacramento’s proximity to the Bay Area has an impact on its local poetics. A major site of the Beat Poetry movement in the U.S., San Francisco’s North Beach is often a reference for excellence and historical claims to poetic legitimacy. The Bay Area scene is an internationally notorious locale for poets and other writers. Sacramento is close enough to the Bay Area for many local poets to have and sustain relationships with Bay Area writers, and it’s common for local poets to “commute” to the Bay for readings or other literary and social events. Sacramento poets often define their location as existing either in opposition or in relationship to the Bay Area, so the influence of the Bay Area on the poetry scene in Sacramento definitely seems substantial.

As is the case in the Bay Area or on any other scene, poetry in Sacramento involves the use of public space for poetry readings. Non-institutionalized spaces are, perhaps, more inviting to some people than institutionalized spaces such as schools, community centers, libraries, or museums. Sunny’s is one of these non-institutionalized places, and it is the only one that has stood the test of time as a long running venue in Sacramento. “Poetry Unkempt” is often referred to as “the place to go for poetry in Sacramento” because it creates room for people to participate on the scene who might otherwise not show up to a poetry reading, people who perhaps are not comfortable sitting at art performances where there are chairs in straight rows and unspoken norms of reverent silence.

The poetry that is shared at Sunny's helps to define poetry in Sacramento as incorporative of poets who represent a breadth of experience, purpose, and perspective. Poetry at Sunny's can be, in a word, fun. Going to "Poetry Unkempt" is considered by many to be a pleasurable way to spend a Wednesday night. The relaxed environment, food and drinks, and social event vibes here contribute something to the poetic experience for audience members. Despite the longstanding popularity of "Poetry Unkempt," The Collective's "PC Tuesday" is also a longstanding poetry series in town. "PC Tuesday" is very different than "Poetry Unkempt," but is equally definitive of the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

Sunny's "Poetry Unkempt"

"I've been working on my proposal. Haven't been making it out to Sunny's as much as I'd like. You know, this project has been going on for so long, I'm tired and want it to be over already." It's nice to have Rag Dog- an infamous poet from Brooklyn, my favorite dirty old man and dear friend- to care about my dissertation woes.

"You'll find your groove. You have the whole summer ahead of you. You know how it is, kiddo, everyone will be out. Plenty of time. It's nice to see you around." I forget sometimes that Rag Dog has ridden through cycles for eight years with me...

"Yeah, you're right. I have the whole summer." Summer, it seems, changes everything.

Sunny's is named after its business owner, Greg Sun and as the above conversation reflects, summers are hopping at "Poetry Unkempt." For more than ten years, every Wednesday Greg's small deli night fills with anywhere from fifteen to fifty people. These folks are curious locals who have heard about "Poetry Unkempt," regulars- poets or

writers, and visitors invited by friends to “check out the poetry scene.” Most people come to see friends and eat dinner, to hear a “featured” poet read, or to sign themselves up for five minutes of open mic stage-time. Regulars, folks who show up time and again to participate in this Sacramento Poetry Scene time honored tradition, describe this weekly event as “friendly,” “warm and open,” a place where “poets come to be among our own.”

Sunny’s is a local stomping ground. It is a quaint homey spot that offers a unique artistic environment for fresh food and beer, coffee, and ice cream. On this deli’s busy nights, the waitresses- young women dressed in vintage smocks and hipster thrift-store outfits- are important back stage personalities. They run tabs and brave the puzzle of a packed room to refill coffee and serve food to a rowdy crowd.

There is no cover charge for “Poetry Unkempt,” so waitresses try to uphold the standard of a one-drink-minimum to cover the venue’s costs. Yet, no one is ever “turned away for lack of funds.” A lot of free ice waters are served here. At this joint, it pays to be nice to the waitress because it is likely that you could wait forty five minutes for a coffee refill. Sometimes it is hard to figure out which is easier; to wait for her to bring the coffee, or find a way through the maze of bodies toward the counter at the back of the room?

On Wednesday nights, people spill onto the sidewalk in front of Sunny’s. Outside, people smoke cigarettes and swill coffee in cups, play hacky-sack, practice acrobatics and poi spinning, chat, take “walks” to hit their weed pipes, and bask in the delicate white light from the holiday bulbs that Greg strings all year long around the windows of his storefront. It seems impossible to keep the thick smoke that hugs the sidewalk from

wafting inside. Despite the consistent attention Greg gives to keeping the front door shut, I often feel like I am breathing in smoke when I come here.

During the cold months, thick condensation from a room full of breath coats the high windows. It drips in streaks, making small trickle-lines that people peer through to see what the crowd looks like inside. At times like this, the room feels warm and cozy. On the other hand, the room can feel stifling during the hottest spells of summer. These times are when the rag tag combination of ceiling fans and a straining air conditioning system are no match for an overheated mass of bodies. Sometimes folks fold paper into fans and do what they can to move stagnant air toward their faces.

In a bustle of poetic activity, there is always an interesting mix of heat and excitement here. It smells like vinegar and pickles, sweat, dark coffee, and somebody's mellow perfume. On the busiest nights, there is hardly a spare square inch of the old yellowing linoleum to walk upon. A whole new definition of crowded gets written at "Poetry Unkempt." There are times when every chair in the house is taken and folks lean against the rickety wooden bar that lines the back of the room, sit two to a seat, and squat like contortionists onto the open floor spaces.

The seating situation at Sunny's definitely catches most newcomers to "Poetry Unkempt" off guard. Unlike at most other venues around, strangers share tables with each other here. Regulars know that to secure a table during the busy season, they either need to show up early or send a scout to save them a seat. When a newcomer shows up after the room has already filled, they are likely to be approached by a waitress, Greg Sun, the evening's open mic host, or by a regular offering them help to find a place to sit or stand. Since it is likely to be awkward for people who are not familiar with the scene



to approach strangers, staff and regulars are always on hand to help negotiate the sharing of space.

The tables and chairs are small and rickety. In the winter, I have a hard time adjusting my coats to keep my belongings off the ground. Although Mike, one “Poetry Unkempt” host, describes Sunny’s as an “intimate” experience, an “intimate place for poetry,” the physical intimacy can be a bit much to bear at times. Open mic hosts rotate by weeks of the month here, with four to five men sharing this key responsibility to keep the series running. With a little yellow sign, a table is reserved each week for the host and his friends. It is usually the same table, the best spot in the house, and a person does not need to show up to “Poetry Unkempt” too many times to understand that a seat at this “reserved table” denotes a certain kind of recognition and status among regulars.

Even though there is a small PA system set up on the stage, sound can be an issue in this room. Inside there is a blender, an espresso steamer, a cash register, and jingle-bells strung on the front door which all make their respective sounds intermittently. Sometimes folks engage in side-talk while poets are on the mic, but the host usually puts a quick stop to this behavior by making comments or a small soapbox speech about courtesy. Outside sounds such as loud talking and laughter, street sirens, and motorcycles also disrupt performing poets from time to time. Occasionally, a newcomer will have a cell phone conversation or talk too loudly while someone is “on the mic,” but the host or other audience members are usually quick to point out the inappropriateness of these behaviors. People come here to hear the poetry and, for the most part, it appears that folks care to be respectful of this collective purpose.

About once a month, new artwork by a local artist is hung on the walls of Sunny's. Artwork extends throughout the building; in the men's room someone has taken care to hang a beautiful oil painting of a Chicana with a bunch of lilies in her arms. She smiles at the person in the mirror who washes their hands in the chipped porcelain sink. In the women's room, there is the permanence of a colorful hand crafted mirror with a price tag on it for six hundred and fifty dollars. I imagine someone must have made it without the space to store it.

It is just like Greg to offer Sunny's up as a cluttered home for anyone- or anything- that needs a place to be. Amidst all of this kindness and charm, a small well-loved wooden stage stands proud. The stage commands the center of the space. It rises from the middle of a jumble of mismatched tables and is booked out to local musicians on most nights. Wednesdays, however, are always for the poets.

*The Collective's "PC Tuesday"*

Local College Instructor: "This is a nice space for poetry!"

"PC Tuesday" Host: "Yes, but there's no insulation, so we get everything in here."

Local College Instructor: "Oh, the light rail and everything? Not just poems?"

"PC Tuesday" Host: "Yes. Be prepared to have your poems punctuated by the light rail."

Local College Instructor: "Well, I guess you can deal with that. It's a nice space."

"PC Tuesday" Host: "The old building was a bit antiseptic. I like this space, it reminds me of old warehouse districts in other cities I've lived in."

About twenty blocks from Sunny's, an old mustard yellow warehouse compound has been converted into a mixed-use art space. A German language club, art studios, a playhouse, and several small art galleries reside here in long short buildings that encircle a fenced-in gravel courtyard. There are few windows, summer dust, winter puddles, and

plenty of room for creativity here. The Collective has always shared space; it is the kind of public arts organization that survives by folding into whatever nooks and crannies seem to make the most sense for the least amount of money.

As a formal nonprofit, The Collective has a board of directors for official oversight. The board is responsible for writing small annual grants for local arts commission funds that enable the organization to contribute a yearly writer's conference, a children's outreach event, a quarterly literary publication, visiting writer stipends, and a monthly poetry newsletter to the Sacramento Poetry Scene. The Collective is membership based; it has a listserv, a website, and several annual fundraisers. Poets on the scene in Sacramento both love and criticize The Collective's poetic endeavors, but most participate- at least to some degree- in the organization's weekly "PC Tuesday" series.

Before moving into a large room shared with an art gallery in the art compound, The Collective was housed in a few small rooms attached to a nearby theater company. For years, "PC Tuesday" was hosted in this company's large, airy, and mirrored practice room. Poets complained endlessly about reading in a room with bright fluorescent lights, an ever present air conditioned chill, and a pronounced echo. One poet told me that he "used to go to 'PC Tuesday' when it was in the other space but got out of the habit because the acoustics and lighting weren't good" there. Yet every week at the "old space," an intern or host showed up and set up folding chairs, plugged in a small PA system, and set out membership information and a donation jar on a folding table. Every Tuesday, poets would show up to hear the feature or to read on the open mic for free... whether they had complaints about the space or not.

In fact, “PC Tuesday” used to be almost as popular among local poets as “Poetry Unkempt” is now. There were weeks in the early years of this ethnography, when twenty five or more poets- some of whom also read at Sunny’s, and some who read exclusively at The Collective- would sign up to read on the open mic. Although “PC Tuesday” is still advertised as an open mic series, few people show up to read on the mic here anymore. The environment just does not seem to be welcoming enough for this to be successful as an open mic event. The Collective is taking new strategic directions for public poetry in Sacramento, making decisions that involve more outreach to outlying metropolitan areas and less focus on the inclusion of open mic readers into the traditions of the longstanding “PC Tuesday” series.

The old performance space was complained about, but The Collective’s new space has its own character. A tin roof, grey cement floor, and the lack of adequate ventilation, climate control, or insulation give the effect that “PC Tuesday” takes place in a makeshift workshop. The best part about the space is that there is a different art show hung on the stark white walls each month. Each show is coordinated, professionally hung, well lit with track lights, and inspiring in a unique way.

It is easy to sit in the audience at “PC Tuesday” and stare off in daydreams at the artwork hanging on these walls. It is easy to forget to listen here, to forget that there are poets in front of the rows of folding chairs, standing behind a music stand, reading poetry. In the background, there are the sounds of railroad traffic guards going up and down, up and down, as light rail trains whiz by blowing horns and dingding bells. A train whistle in the distance sounds quite beautiful to the backdrop of silence and the monotone of a poet’s drone.

When it is raining outside, the pitter-patter of gentle water drops sometimes lulls people to sleep. Heavier rain sounds like an onslaught of an apocalypse threatening to blow the tin roof right off of its exposed, whitewashed rafters. What “PC Tuesday” lacks in extreme open mic action, is made up for with extreme temperatures. When it is hot outside, and it can get very hot in the Sacramento Valley, the constant hum of floor fans and two ceiling fans barely help to cool the room. To sit in the audience during the summer, a person needs a bottle of ice water and a handkerchief to wipe the sweat from her brow. In the cold months, several space heaters emitting little more than a dull buzzing sound. Sitting dangerously close to one with a cup of hot tea brought to ease the discomfort does help to moderate the chill, but there have been times when I have given my attention to watching my breath on the air instead of to listening to the poet standing at the microphone.

Once during a field observation, a space heater fell over during a featured reader’s performance. Since space heaters are a fire hazard, the ones The Collective uses have built in alarms that sound off in the event that one should fall. The night one did finally tip over, it took folks a moment to figure out what was going on. Other than the poet’s voice, the room was filled with the gentle buzz of humming floor heaters until the sound of metal crashing into cement resounded. The alarm that followed was startling and needless to say, the mishap was an amusing and rather confusing interruption.

Another aspect of “PC Tuesday” that confuses me is the seating arrangement rotation. The orientation of the room changes from time to time, but chairs are always ceremoniously arranged in straight rows that almost completely fill the space. Regardless of how many people are anticipated- even for weeks when there is no featured reader

scheduled to read- the host arranges the room full of folding chairs every Tuesday.

Sometimes there are only five people in the audience, but there are at least twenty folding chairs lined up in rows. Other times, the room bustles with activity and hosts seem to magically appear with more folding chairs to add to the ends of crowded rows.

Hard folding chairs are not comfortable to sit in for two hours or longer. By far, the comfiest spot in the room is an old two-seater couch. The couch is usually put next to a make-shift information table and is taken by the host or other Collective hosts and board members who happen to attend any given “PC Tuesday.” Like at “Poetry Unkempt,” the role of the host here is shared by four or five men who rotate duties by weeks of the month.

At the beginning of each week’s reading, a host gives a routine spiel. The spiel involves thanking The Collective’s grant funding agencies, acknowledging the art groups who share the performance space, and directing attention to the information table. Most weeks there are free snacks set up next to a donation jar. The size and appeal of the snack selection varies greatly from week to week. Sometimes a veggie tray and some bottles of water suffice, but other times there is a full wine and cheese spread. Once, I heard a host make a joke in his spiel about not wanting to catch minors drinking any wine.

It makes sense to give a warning like this if a host has concern about enforcing the law, because sometimes the room is very full and it would be difficult for anyone to monitor wine bottles. “PC Tuesday” can occasionally feel a bit like a cocktail mixer, complete with the small talk and endless smiles, handshaking, and introductions to people whose names will be forgotten by the end of the evening. This is more likely the case when Rock hosts, he sets up Rasta music on a small boom box in the corner and always

pays special attention to the spread of food. Rock appears to put a lot of effort into making the event feel informal. For example, he never uses the microphone when he addresses the audience. For anyone who has a little projection, it really is not necessary to use a mic to be heard here.

It is true that Rock does need to put out extra effort if he wants to make “PC Tuesday” feel relaxed. Otherwise, the environment feels very stiff and formal and the readings are more like college lectures than they are raucous or fun with poetry. Disruptions become very obvious when everyone is on their best behavior. For example, every week, about half way through “PC Tuesday,” theater practice lets out at one of the nearby collectives. At this point, the courtyard becomes alive with laughter and socializing. The sounds are distracting to the poetry readings and, every week, the host goes outside to ask people to be quiet.

Other noise from around the art compound, such as drumming or choral practice, can also be distracting to the reading. Yet without fail, these kinds of distractions come up each and every week. In another environment, a game might easily be made out of the anticipated disruptions. From what I have observed, hosts at “PC Tuesday” do not even go so far in their welcoming spiels as to mention this nuisance to assembled audiences.

### *Characters of the Sacramento Poetry Scene*

The poets who participate in “Poetry Unkempt” and “PC Tuesday” are a diverse group of characters. Taken together, their interactions and poems, their idiosyncrasies and readings and social networks create the poetry scene in Sacramento. It is the character traits, personal styles and relationships of these people that make this scene a vibrant, sought after location for poetics in Northern California. Here, I introduce you to the

characters that you will hear more about as this ethnography unfolds. I organize brief character sketches of some of the folks from this scene into the categories of “Dirty Old Men,” “Characters from The Collective,” and “Characters from Sunny’s,” not to give the impression that poetry scene participants are limited to one venue or another. Rather, I want to share with you the way I have come to think of these people as being grouped according to a dominant status on the scene, such as Dirty Old Man, or as being more or less associated with a specific venue more so than any another.

### *The Dirty Old Men*

The “Dirty Old Men” are a group of men whose participation in the poetry scene spans across multiple venues. As I discuss at greater length in Chapter 5, the stereotype of the dirty old man is applied by participants of the Sacramento Poetry Scene to a loosely defined group of men. Dirty Old Men whose characters are pertinent to this ethnography include: my key informant, Rag Dog, Jack and his best friend Al, Mike Dizzy, and Richard. Although several of these men have had falling outs with one another and they are certainly very opinionated about each other, these folks have been very important to the development of this project.

*Rag Dog.* Rag Dog, “Sacramento’s premier make-out poet” (Costello 2007), is a key informant for this project. He also takes the title Dirty Old Man to another level entirely. It has been said that this man has “penned thousand of poems with the female clitoris as the star and his own penis as the antagonist” (Fernandez 2008). I do not doubt this one bit because I have, myself, heard a good number of what I have overheard Dog call his “fuck poems.” Perhaps a more cordial way of explaining this character, is that he is “Sacramento’s most prolific erotic poet” (SN&R Staff 2008), a true “hippie-poet



provocateur” (Costello 2007) who is a little rough around the edges. Rag Dog is hardly shy to admit that he did hard time in the joint for a bad drug deal back in the 1960’s.

Among poets, it does not hurt his reputation one bit that Rag Dog got busted while living in Greenwich Village where he rubbed literary elbows with a number of the Great Beat Poets who defined this era. Describing himself to me as a “Brooklyn Jew,” Rag Dog once sat me down to a fancy brunch of bagels and fresh orange juice to tell me the story of how he came to California to “find himself.” He found himself alright, and had a hoot of a good time selling junk on the flea market circuit, betting at the race track and selling stock to finance the buying of a house to settle down here in Sacramento. Now a father, a local legend, a dear friend and role model for many participants of the Sacramento Poetry Scene, Rag Dog enjoys the notoriety of having his own special audience cheer to welcome him to local microphones.

Rag Dog has wire rimmed glasses that slide down his crooked nose in the middle of most of his sentences. There are laugh lines covering every nook and cranny of his smiles. He is usually wearing shorts and has bad knees, a slight hobble, and a pipe full of marijuana in his pocket at all times. Plus, Rag Dog is, hands down, one of the kindest hosts I have ever known. Although, at times, I have questioned if maybe he would rather get me drunk than tell sit and tell me his stories?

*Jack.* Jack is a good long time friend and consistent guest at Rag Dog’s house. While Rag Dog is known for his rabble rousing on the East Coast, Jack is known for having lived a similar lifestyle- at a later point in time- in San Francisco. Still very connected to the literati in the Bay Area, Jack is one of the longstanding hosts at “Poetry Unkempt.”

He also hosts a poetry radio show and is involved with several small but significant poetry projects.

Jack has a deep appreciation for the French surrealists and a slight flair for kink, both in his poetry and tongue and cheek humor. I have heard Jack read erotic pieces about transgendered women and refer to himself, many times, as a “lesbian trapped in a man’s body.” Although Jack is, in some ways, less flamboyant with his sexuality than some of the other Dirty Old Men, he is one of the henchmen of this group. Like the others, he has been around for what seems like forever and takes great pride in his participation on, and role within, the local poetry scene.

One thing that is unique about Jack is that he drops names like no one else I have met while doing fieldwork for this ethnography. In some conversations, I have realized that every other sentence he speaks involve someone’s name, a reference to some semi-famous poet or writer or musician. Although I remain unclear about what Jack seeks to accomplish with this kind of communication, it is a consistent part of his character. So much so, that Jack self-identifies- both on the mic and through emails sent to his poetry listserv- as a “shameless name-dropping whore.”

Whether he is one or not, Jack certainly does not look like a stereotypical whore. It may have something to do with the dirty old teddy bear that Jack brings with him to poetry readings. Strings of Jack’s shoulder length hair usually graze the neck of a loosely fitting button-up, or a plain white t-shirt. A serious illness has caused him to lose a lot of extra weight from his once round gut, and the attention he has paid to his health really shows. He is well tanned and, until recently, lived a rural lifestyle. In fact, for years Jack

commuted nearly an hour each way to get to poetry events in Sacramento. He did this habitually, at least once every week for “Poetry Unkempt.”

Al

Do not be fooled into imagining that Jack did all of this driving himself. I am not even sure if Jack drives at all. His best buddy and sidekick, Al, was for a long time responsible for driving them both into Sacramento from yet another rural area. At times it seemed to me as if these two men were inseparable. Jack is, however, much easier to get to know than Al.

Al does not talk much, but he is certainly a character with a lot of props. A tall black top hat is usually perched atop his round head and, for awhile, he carried a white-tipped cane. He also brings a fan to set up at the reserved at “Poetry Unkempt” during the hot months, often passes a money can to “feed a desperate poet,” and has a cow bell that he rings for applause and to assist Jack in gaining audience attention. I have also seen Al pass out hand wrapped presents to every person in the audience at “Poetry Unkempt” around the holidays and share a number of self-produced publications in a similar fashion. From the mic, I have heard Al describe himself as “an Asian with strange Japanese humor.” In Chapter 5, I talk more about Al’s handwritten signs and the camera that it usually with him.

*Mike Dizzy.* Although he knows a lot of local poets well, Mike Dizzy does not appear to be particularly close to any of the other Dirty Old Men. In an article published in a local independent news rag (Keifer, 2006) and various response letters in reaction to this article, Mike Dizzy is introduced as a “self-made Sacramento legend and self-described urban shaman.” He is someone who gets “vociferously agitated” and uses “wild-swinging

wisecracks” to command attention in the name of poetry. Mike Dizzy has an accent from the Bronx, a halo of white hair framing a bald spot, a bad heart, “doughy features,” and three hard-earned master’s degrees (Keifer 2006).

Mike Dizzy is true to his working class roots. This is a man who dresses in jeans and a t-shirt regardless of where he goes. Clearly a controversial local figure for more reasons than I could possibly list here, Mike Dizzy has been called “the zealous superintendent” of Sacramento’s grandest poetic events. It is true that Mike Dizzy was the producer of most local large-scale poetry events for many years. He is referred to as a person who has spent the better part of three-decades establishing himself “at the center of Sacramento’s Poetry Scene” (Kiefer 2006).

There are few poets on the Sacramento Poetry Scene not able to recount tales about beefs, arguments, fights, or offensive transgressions between Mike Dizzy and other local poets. It is also a well-known fact that this man is an obsessive admirer of the Beat Poets. Like many of the great Beat Poets, he has an historic reputation for thinking and demonstrating that a person needs to be drunk in order to write good poetry. No longer the sloppy drunk he once was; Dizzy still drinks, but not enough to get kicked out of poetry readings.

Mike Dizzy’s general offensiveness, however, remains uncurtailed. One news article respondent describes his performances as reminiscent of “a case of Montezuma’s revenge in Ensenada: Quite the experience but definitely not one I would care to repeat” (Tutt, 2006). He has the ability to clear an audience quickly, alienating “college students and hippies alike” (Tutt, 2006). My own first experience with Mike Dizzy is recounted in Chapter 4 as a meaningful tale from the field.

*Richard.* I have categorized Richard in this subsection because his dirty old man stats is equally as prominent upon the Sacramento Poetry Scene as his historical role as past president and mover and shaker of The Collective. He is a Dirty Old Man who does not seem to be particularly close with any of the other Dirty Old Men. I have noticed, however, that at times he has been far more well adorned- or adored- by beautiful young women than have the others. Richard has a reputation among local poets for “chasing skirt at poetry readings” (Staff Writer 2002). Always the first to invite people to a bar after a poetry reading and the first to buy the ladies drinks, Richard is a retired politico who came to Sacramento to work for a senator at the capitol.

Like Rag Dog, Richard is a father and an old-hippie. Like Mike Dizzy, Richard is associated with a good deal of controversy, but not all of his skeletons in the closet have to do with the poetry scene per se. In 1999, while working for a Congressman, Richard was the target of a sexual harassment suit that cost the taxpayers a good deal of money (Staff Writer 2002). On the other hand, his political connections also helped get a bill passed to appoint a California State Poet Laureate. Richard was also, for years, pivotal to the founding, on going financing, and vitality of The Collective.

Before he retired from his professional career, Richard usually wore nice suits to poetry readings. He is a large man with grey hair and twinkling eyes. It is not uncommon to hear Richard effacing himself by telling younger poets that they are “much better writers than he could ever hope to be.” One of Richard’s most significant relationships is with another male writer who is both well published and well connected in the Bay Area; perhaps another Dirty Old Man at large? In retirement, Richard seems to finally be writing the books he has always talked so much about wanting to work on.

### Characters from the Collective

The following character sketches are of poets whom I associate with The Collective. This is not to say that my only field notes involving these folks are from “PC Tuesday”. Rather, I think of these individuals in reference to this venue. They play a prominent role at The Collective, frequent this venue, or are involved in stories I tell about The Collective in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

*Rock.* Rock is a tall middle aged man with a deep, powerful voice. While he usually has a gentle welcoming presence, he commands attention with theatrical flair. Rock is one poet who has gone through a very definite personal, poetic evolution over the course of this ethnography. When I first entered the field, Rock was newly out of the poetry closet, attending readings at many venues around Sacramento with his wife and three children. After a long trip to the East Coast for his day job, where he fraternized with an infamous group of poets at a bar whose writers have been featured in well noted poetry documentaries and anthologies, Rock returned to Sacramento to begin the process of marital divorce and the process of transformation as a writer.

By the time I returned to the field after a break for graduate school courses, Rock had reinvented himself as an afro-centric poet. By this, I mean that he dresses and creates poetic space which suits this role. Rock routinely shares information about the lineage and history of African and African American poetry with audiences at The Collective. It is not uncommon to see Rock in clothing such as brightly colored kaftans and Rasta hats. He lights incense and plays drum-call cds to set the mood when he hosts “PC Tuesday.”

As I have mentioned, one of my favorite things about Rock is that he avoids using the microphone whenever possible. This is not to say that he does not address audiences, just

that Rock projects his voice instead of using a microphone when the room is small and quiet enough for him to make himself heard. Since joining the board at The Collective and publishing a compilation of his poetry, Rock has become a diplomat or politician of the Sacramento Poetry Scene. I, myself, have experienced multiple reintroductions to this man that are accompanied by warm handshakes and blank stares. Nonetheless, Rock is always positive, kind, and quick to welcome people to the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

*Missy Jean.* Missy Jean is the woman who initially helped me make my way into The Collective. A busy, bossy, brash woman in her early forties, Missy Jean brought me into the folds of this organization by taking me under her wings. She took me to board meetings and editorial gatherings, made sure I got invitations to key events. She vouched for my participation whenever necessary. An absolute necessity for my eventual acceptance into The Poetry Collective, Missy Jean also made sure that I received organizational tasks to help me learn more about the people involved in hidden aspects of the Sacramento Poetry Scene. Best described as a behind-the-scenes mover and shaker, this woman has had longevity both on the Sacramento Poetry Scene and as an integral part of the inner workings of this organization. In part due to her affiliation with The Collective, Missy Jean was hired several years ago to teach English and Creative Writing at one of the local community colleges.

*Mark Rouse.* Mark Rouse is a local poet who teaches at a state college and volunteers at The Collective as a board member and “PC Tuesday” host. He tends to speak candidly about his children and personal life experiences, but uses self effacing humor. Mark is a person who views himself as being in a position of poetic authority because he often makes offhanded remarks about how poetry “should” or “should not” be written, read

aloud, or shared with others. When Mark hosts there is sure to be at least one lecture. These lectures, along with public comments that make some late arrivers feel rude or intrusive, excessive name drops, and odd displays of deference to poets who have higher ranking credentials than his own are all part of Mark's professorial act.

He often cites more details about authors' publication names and awards, and times and dates of upcoming events than even I- as an active note taker- can keep up with. It is often difficult to figure out what Mark is actually communicating because he buries listeners beneath a great deal of specificity. Nonetheless, Mark is a dedicated "PC Tuesday" participant who comes every week to read at least one of his own poems. He also takes pictures of featured poets and maintains both The Collective's website and poetry blog.

Mark's frame is slight; he is a thin man in his late forties who often mentions as a point of sacrifice that he drives to "PC Tuesday" from his home in the suburbs. His dress is casual, usually he wears jeans or khaki pants and loafers with a Hawaiian print or plain button front shirt. Mark wears wire rimmed spectacles and has a whine to his reading voice that is hard to listen to for long periods of time. Although he became active on the Sacramento Poetry Scene in between the two phases of my ethnographic fieldwork, my encounters with Mark have had major effects both on me and this project. In Chapter 4, I talk at length about my process of learning to avoid this person whenever possible.

*Chip.* Chip is another character who came onto the Sacramento Poetry Scene while I was between phases of fieldwork. Unlike Mark, who has lived in the Sacramento region for a long time now, Chip had recently moved to the area when I returned to the field. He often calls himself an activist and has made numerous mentions to me that he came to the



capitol of California specifically to work on issues about the rights of people with disabilities and gay rights. My one-on-one time with Chip routinely takes place on the streets when he rides his bicycle up to me to hand me a flier for a rally or other event.

In conversation about his passion for poetry, Chip has clearly stated that, for him, poetry is a political practice. He works hard to share poetry with any and every person whom he encounters and believes strongly in the civic value of individuals' creative articulations. Chip has also declared himself to me to be both sober and a person of meager means who lives on disability pensions. Despite disparity between Chip and other Collective board members in the department of personal resources, Chip seems to be every bit as much of a defining personality of the organization as anyone else is.

Chip is a man with a strong, assertive voice who is not afraid to speak up to anyone about anything. In appearance, he is a thin man in his early forties. In part because bicycling is his means of transportation, Chip looks very tan, fit, and healthy. At one point, when The Collective was hosting readings at a library in the suburbs located conveniently near Mark's house, Chip rode his bike thirty miles each way to participate in poetry readings.

*Renee and Mary Linn.* Renee and Mary Linn are two women who both attend "PC Tuesday" with intermittent regularity. By intermittent regularity, I mean that they both seem to come in spurts of regularity. I do not know how well these women know one another, but I introduce their characters together in Chapter 5 as individuals whose participation in the Sacramento Poetry Scene appears to be unrecognized by other scene participants. This is especially the case with Mary Linn, a long time Collective volunteer.

Mary Linn is an active woman in her late sixties. She is usually smiling, friendly and comes across as having a very positive attitude about anything having to do with poetry. Mary Linn goes the extra mile to come to “PC Tuesday,” sometimes arriving late still in her scrubs from her job as a Certified Nursing Assistant. In each and every interaction I have had with Mary Linn she has been sincere and kind; she often remembers personal details about my life and always updates me on hers. It is not the least bit uncommon for Mary Linn to offer to help clean-up after readings, or to pitch in with organizing an event.

Renee, on the other hand, is less active than Mary Linn in terms of volunteering her time with The Collective. However, she is always ready to participate in “PC Tuesday” by reading her own poetry on the microphone and by listening to others’ poems. I know that Renee uses public transportation because I have often seen her getting on or off of busses around town or waiting at a stop. I do not know Renee’s story because she is slow to share personal information, but Renee sometimes carries her belongings around with her in large black plastic bags and often falls asleep during poetry readings.

*Miles.* Miles is a soft spoken, gentle man in his early fifties. He works for the state and has been active across the Sacramento Poetry Scene in a variety of capacities for many years. Miles usually focuses his energy on sharing and celebrating the poetry of his favorite authors as opposed to focusing public attention on his own work. However, it stands that Miles is one of the most well published local poets who actively participates on the scene. He is married to a woman whose writing is equally as prolific, another local poet whom he met at a poetry reading.

### Characters from Sunny's

These character sketches are of folks whom I associate with Sunny's. I think of these individuals in reference to this venue. However, I do have field notes taken from other venues that include some of these people. These folks are regulars at Sunny's, frequent this venue, or are involved in stories I tell about Sunny's in subsequent chapters of this dissertation.

*Alex.* Alex, a young man in his twenties, attends poetry readings exclusively at Sunny's. The first time I met Alex was at an invite-only salon at Rag Dog's house. We were introduced across a platter of salmon and cream cheese with crackers in our hands. He is a very nervous person, unsure of what to do with his hands. He is a midtown hipster, a young scruffy white guy who wears trendy thrift-store fashion and hangs out in coffee shops poring over his notebook. Alex asked me a lot of questions about my knowledge of the scene before it seemed like he was comfortable chatting with me about anything else. Although we have been introduced by Rag Dog several times, and I have engaged him one-on-one a few times, I am never sure that Alex remembers who I am.

*Emeril.* Emeril is a controversial character due to problems he has controlling his behavior in public. Sunny's is the only poetry venue where I have ever run into him. He is a local drunk, a red-faced young man whom I have never seen without a beer in his hand. It is not uncommon for him to express anger or unpopular views that are racist or otherwise inappropriate for the culture at Sunny's.

Nonetheless, to my knowledge Emeril has never been turned away from, or kicked out of "Poetry Unkempt." He has been kicked off the microphone several times, but continues to come back week after week, sometimes bringing friends or drinking buddies

along with him. Occasionally he gets so drunk that he falls out of his chair or hits on women ruthlessly. Emeril is not well liked by many scene participants and several of the Dirty Old Men have expressed contempt for Emeril by calling him an “asshole” or- ironically- a “sexist bastard.”

*Mike.* Mike is a high profile local poet who circulates across the Sacramento Poetry Scene in a variety of capacities. He has recently come to roost at Sunny’s as a member of the weekly host rotational. Like Emeril and Alex, Mike is a young man in his late twenties who has become active on the Sacramento Poetry Scene since I first began my observations here. A political poetic activist, Mike often talks about race and social injustice from the microphone. Since becoming a host in the rotational at Sunny’s, Mike has drawn a crowd of new people to the venue. In part, this is because Mike is a charismatic and inspirational leader with a strong social network which spans across the local poetry, music, and spoken word scenes. He also hosts a radio and local television access show and hosts a variety of collaborative artistic events around the city.

*Nick.* Nick is a man in his mid to late sixties who attends a variety of poetry venues throughout the Sacramento to region. I put Nick into this subsection of characters from Sunny’s because it is at “Poetry Unkempt” where I have had the most interaction with him. Like Mark Rouse, Nick seems to fancy himself as an expert on poetry, the local poetry scene, and many other things. Nick refers often to how busy he is with his day job as a high ranking crime investigator, but still manages to participate far and wide across the scene at many different venues. Nick has related to me that he goes to many poetry readings in order to read his own poetry aloud to audiences. He also makes the time to

maintain a poetry listserv and emails me regularly with information about upcoming events.

*Carmen & Nila.* Carmen and Nila are young women who were close friends during my earliest years of fieldwork. Although I spent a great deal of time with them at many different poetry events throughout Sacramento, they both referred to Sunny's as their poetic home. They are two of the first people I met on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. We are close in age and are all collegiate women who live downtown. Both Carmen and Nila came of age on the scene, they read at Sunny's as teenagers and eventually left to transfer their studies to universities. They are actively remembered and occasionally return home to read at "Poetry Unkempt."

#### *Toward a Sociology of Scenes*

All of the people in this ethnography live out significant moments from their lives on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. It is at Sunny's and The Poetry Collective, on the sidewalks and in the cafes and neighborhoods of downtown/midtown Sacramento, that I use the tools of ethnography to explore their world through this scene. The poetry scene is a space where these individuals who I have introduced to you are welcome to be poets, it is where they support, encounter, and build relationships with one another as such. Some of these folks even refer to themselves as part of the "Sacramento Poetry Community."

Instead of engaging with the muddled vernacular of community, I contend that the term "scene" is useful as a way to talk about the phenomenon of local poetics in Sacramento. It is hard to tell if participants on this scene think of themselves more so as participants in a community than as participants on a scene. This is because the two terms

are often used interchangeably. I take seriously that one of the jobs of a sociologist is to debunk social myths and will argue in Chapter 2 that the concept of community is imbedded in myth and mired with subtext.

In doing so, I refer to the collective work of other researchers who hold that “community” is evocative of some sort of mythical sense of social reality (Alleyne 2002, Barnard 2000, Brown-Saracino 2004, Graham 1998, Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2002, Ridge et. al. 1997 & 1999). Yet, I want to draw attention to Miranda Joseph’s book, *Against the Romance of Community* (2002), because it initially prompted me to think through potential dangers associated with the concept of community. One key point I take from Joseph’s work is that that there never really was any community as we romanticize it in our collective sociological imagination. Joseph also shows community to be hotly contested and a poorly defined concept for research.

Joseph theorizes community as a counterpart to capitalism (2002:1) and illustrates how the discourse of community- a romantic discourse- actually nurtures and strengthens the systems and underlying logic of capitalism (2002:6). One of the major current discussions among community sociologists is the idea that community has somehow “eroded” over time (Bellah 1985, Putnam 1999). This discussion is, in essence, subverted by Joseph’s point that whatever the social phenomenon that is argued among community sociologists to be eroding may be called... it is actually a nostalgic image. Such problematizing of community leaves very limited room for successful articulation of collective social experience within the scope of community discourse.

The collective work of researchers who expose the limits of community (Alleyne 2002, Barnard 2000, Brown-Saracino 2004, Graham 1998, Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2002,

Joseph 2002, Ridge et. al. 1997 & 1999) leaves me feeling confused and at a loss about how to discuss what I observe occurring among poets in Sacramento. It is my general belief that at the point of confusion, there is the potential for growth of social knowledge, perspective, and imagination. What I offer here, is an ethnography which illustrates how the concept of scene might be used in place of community to talk about collective social experience in a local milieu. This study is part of a larger sociological project currently in the process of becoming articulated by researchers who conduct Scene Studies (Alredge 2006, Davis 2006, Futrell et. al 2006, Irwin a1973, b1977, Kahn-Harris 2004, Malam 2004, Moore 2004, Polsky 1967, Salanha 2005, Straw 2006).

What I hope to contribute to Scene Studies, is a cohesive definition of the term “scene.” I have no metanarrative, grand plan, or final truth to tell within the context of this dissertation; it is a partial view of a small collection of social realities which exist co-determinantly in a specific place for a short moment in time. Scenes are constituted by common spaces and interaction between people. As I have described in this introductory chapter, The Sacramento Poetry Scene involves public poetry readings and other social gatherings, a complex social network- or series of social networks- centered upon formal and informal representational organizations, standing dates, story-telling, gossip, and the various practices of poetry.

I do not want to create the impression that Scene Studies are the only way to address the complexities of community. In Chapter 2, I explore sociological literature that addresses the concepts of community and scene at length. In this literature review, I outline some of the other ways that researchers respond to dilemmas associated with the

conceptual limitations of community. The culmination of Chapter 2 is a comprehensive definition of scene that I put to test with this ethnography.

Chapters 3 and 4 correspond to each other but also remain distinct. Chapter 3 offers the methodological background for this project. Included in this chapter is information about data collection and documentation practices, differentiation between two separate stages of fieldwork, and discussion about key decisions I have made as a researcher. In Chapter 4, I draw focus to my postmodern, feminist methodology. Here, three distinct stories about key interaction in the field comprise an autoethnographic methodological exploration of the fieldwork associated with this project.

In Chapter 5, I create context for discussion about scenes by presenting information from my observations about the Sacramento Poetry Scene. In this chapter, I use data from the field to elucidate core components of the term scene. Chapter 6 is where the bulk of discussion about the definition of scene put forth in Chapter 2 takes place. This is where I discuss the versatility, utility, and limitations of the concept of scene from within the context of The Sacramento Poetry Scene and draw project conclusions.



## CHAPTER 2

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE FOR COMMUNITY AND SCENE

The ultimate goal of this literature review is to create a working definition of scene that is grounded in several definitional components of the term community to provide conceptual cohesion for a Sociology of Scenes. I create an argument for the efficacy of Scene Studies but ultimately situate this dissertation within the realm of Community Studies. In doing so, I contemplate *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, two operative terms used both by classical and contemporary sociologists. I present the definitional components of community that Kusenbach (2006) establishes: locality, the presence of shared social ties, and meaningful social interaction. Then, I discuss the work of social researchers who problematize community (Alleyne 2002, Barnard 2000, Brown-Saracino 2004, Graham 1998, Joseph 2002, Ridge, Hee and Minichiello 1999, Ridge, Minichiello and Plummer 1997). After a brief examination of the relationship shared by Community Studies and Scene Studies, I transition our discussion to the sociology of scenes.

To lay groundwork for the building of a cohesive definition of scene, I discuss the framework for a sociology of scenes as it was created by two sociologists whose work was published in the 1960's and 1970's (Irwin 1973 & 1977, Polsky 1967). Since the Poetry Scene in Sacramento has deep bohemian roots, I also include a brief inquiry into literature that addresses how bohemianism relates to scenes historically. Following this

chapter's foray into history is a subsection that considers more recent developments in the sociology of scenes (Alredge 2006, Davis 2006, Futrell, Simi and Gottschalk 2006, Kahn-Harris 2004, Malam 2004, Moore 2004, Salanha 2005, Straw 1991). These developments include updates and additions to, reinterpretations and current definitions of, the term scene.

I engage the remainder of this chapter in the discourse of scenes. I explore the concept of cultural geography which leads to an exploration of identity, space and participation in scenes. This chapter culminates with what I consider to be the crux of this dissertation, a cohesive working definition of scenes. This definition is the anchor for my analysis of the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

### *Community Studies*

Ferdinand Tonnies (Loomis 1964) engages a two-pronged notion of community. His ideas, as well as his use of the terms *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, remain relevant to social research today. "Community," according to *Gemeinschaft*, encompasses a way of life characteristic of pre-industrial Europe. In communities of feudal times, people focused on common-law governance, the predominance of kinship ties, and religion. *Gesellschaft* refers to community as it is often represented in the capitalist and industrialized world. Modern capitalism is a social system characterized by the use of contracts to form social obligations, impersonal relations, and bureaucracy. According to this theoretical paradigm, "community" exists either before or during industrial capitalism.

The history of the concept of "community" is inextricable from the development of capitalism. Inasmuch as it is rooted in Tonnies' two-pronged understanding,

“community” is underpinned-at a fundamental level-by dualism and chronology. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, sociology in the US illustrates the occurrence of a split between the ideas of the community and the individual (Alleyne 2000). This split is concurrent with the cultural trajectory of American capitalism.

Researchers who conducted Community Studies early on in the history of US sociology were predominantly white, middle to upper class men. They practiced “community” sociology of a downward hierarchy. By sociology of a downward hierarchy, I mean that ethnic minority groups were often described as having “community” where-as those populations with similar race and class dispositions of the sociologists were instead said to have “individualism.” Sociology of a downward hierarchy is reflected in macro-sociological terms within the collective social scientific notion that western societies have “individual citizens;” while other societies have “community” (Alleyne 2002).

Perhaps this shift toward individualism is why, to a large extent, the concept of community fell out of our sociological imagination following the heyday of the Chicago School’s urban ethnic Community Studies. Prominence of the concept of community in social thought was only somewhat regained by a resurgence of interest in it beginning in the 1980’s. Resurgence of the concept of community happened, in part, due to multi-disciplinary theoretical shifts toward multiculturalism and pluralism (Keller 2003). Today, community is a theoretically loose term; a word thrown around in a variety of social research contexts, with a multitude of meanings. Perhaps it is because community feels like such a familiar term that its meanings are often left unspecified by researchers.

Likewise, Community Studies could be viewed as an incoherent, or confusing, sub-genre of Sociology. For example, as it is canonized today, Community Studies is the best place for me to situate this ethnography within the discipline of Sociology. This is counterintuitive because Scene Studies are an emergent alternative to Community Studies. For this study to be necessarily categorized- even for the purpose of justifying a dissertation written to satisfy academic requirements- as a community study, points to the very analytical weakness of community that I am suggesting we move past.

In this spirit of moving on from the limitations of community, I find the concept of the social scene to be useful for analytical exploration of social experience. “Scene” is different from-and in some situations more appropriate than- “community.” Discourse surrounding the history of the concept of community sheds light on the limits of its utility for social research (Joseph 2002). I refer to peoples’ social collectivity around poetry in Sacramento as a scene, in part, both to challenge decontextualized notions of community and to call attention to concern that historically situated notions of community need to be modified and critiqued.

General criticisms lodged at Community Studies include its neglect of conceptual issues such as power and conflict, reliance on methodology which is essentially descriptive, and failure on the part of researcher to transcend the specificity of place and time (Crow 2000:173). Counterarguments in favor of Community Studies highlight one of its benefits as the creation of opportunities for researchers to illustrate the meaning of macro-level trends for people’s everyday lives. Strengths of Community Studies are emphases on the context for and accessibility of social research. Reader friendliness is characteristic of the narrative style of many texts of this genre. Community Studies

involve creative ways to approach questions about how human agency relates to social structure. Such work is often grounded research. It is research that gives expression to the interplay of biography and history; it challenges conventional hierarchies that are often constructed between researchers and readers (Crow 2000).

With this ethnography, I respond to these strengths and weaknesses of Community Studies by engaging grounded theory as part of a multi-methodological approach to conducting social research. I use narrative writing techniques- especially in Chapters 1 and 4- for the purposes of description, concept exploration, and reader accessibility. I also address issues of power and conflict. Much of the analysis in Chapter 5 is about issues of power as they come to life on the Sacramento Poetry Scene to affect the lives of people I have met throughout the course of this research.

#### *Toward an Understanding of What Constitutes Community*

Before we deconstruct the term, we need to better understand what sociologists mean when they say community. Its definition is, at best, vague, slippery and contested (Alleyne 2002, Barnard 2000, Joseph 2002, Kusenbach 2006). The discourse of community includes differentiation of types of community; perception of value attached to these differentiated social groups and the relationship between culture and community. Important within the context of this ethnography, there are three definitional elements of community which are generally agreed upon by researchers: locality, the presence of shared social ties, and meaningful social interaction (Kusenbach 2006). You will notice that I use these three definitional components of community to structure a working definition of scene. I do this to establish continuity between the two terms; because scene

is emergent as an alternative to community, there needs to be room for reasonably accessible translation from the language of community to the language of scene.

There many associations and differentiations made by researchers who use the term “community.” For example, Brown-Sarachino (2004) finds that people distinguish between different types of community within their own neighborhoods. This is an example of term modification, a strategy for retaining the term community that I expand upon in more depth in the next subsection of this chapter. Brown-Saraccino’s research involves social preservationists, a group of people living together in a neighborhood that is undergoing revitalization. Social preservationists perceive a difference between “authentic” and “inauthentic” community, in which they consider inauthentic community to be displacing of authentic community (Brown-Sarachino, 2004:140).

Social preservationists consider community which existed first, in a chronological sense, to be “authentic.” Scorned as “inauthentic,” is that which usurps, replaces, or otherwise displaces authentic community. This perception of difference between “authentic” and “inauthentic” is relevant to this ethnography because it illustrates a key point about specificity and differentiation. Peoples’ perceptions about the coexistence of multiple, different types of community within one space can, and does, result in variability in the value, status, and overall desirability. People consider an “authentic” community to be valuable- a sort of cultural commodity worth preserving (Brown-Sarachino 2004:136). Social preservationists illustrate a connection between *Gemeinschaft* notions of historic community and nostalgia (Brown-Sarachino 2004:146). Nostalgia is, for many people, a powerful motivating force.

Brown-Sarachino's research also illustrates the strong conceptual link between culture and community. So strong is this link that the production of community can otherwise be thought of as the production of culture. For example, ethnic identity based communities can be understood as places whereby members are presumed- however il/legitimately, contested or uncontested- to share, build, generate, and participate in a common culture. Ethnic communities are often conceptualized using a dualistic binary ingroup/outgroup logic (Alleyne 2002). I trace this logic back to classical sociology's orientation to a *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* view of community and also point to its presence in social preservationists' views of neighborhoods as authentic and inauthentic. Community emerges here as a rigid notion, whereby a social collectivity cannot be both *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* at the same time, nor does its use create much room to articulate the fluid nature of the boundaries of authenticity.

Power is implicit in discussions about culture and community. Processes of cultural production are often invisible and distorted by dominating, exploitative social relations that are weighed down with subtext about power (Alleyne 2002). This subtext underlies the production, sustainment, interpretation, enactment, remembrance, and definition of culture. Perpetuated by both those in powerful social positions and those not, belief that culture is a natural state existence serves to maintain existing social hierarchies (Alleyne 2002:615). Questions about who benefits and in which ways people benefit from these hierarchies may never be asked at all if this subtext of power remains unexamined.

People share social power with one another through social networks. Any notion of community carries with it the presumption of an existing social network (Alleyne 2002:612). Social networks correlate to community in the *Gesellschaft* sense. They tend

to be understood functionally, as devices that help people deal with the impersonalization of modern urban life (Alleyne 2002). In places and times characterized by disassociation- as postmodern times are- social networks become a way to enable complex human relations by facilitating links among kin, neighbors, friends, and people who share a way of life or a common identity. The Sacramento Poetry Scene occurs amidst the conditions and constraints of postmodernity. In regard to the connection between Community Studies and Scene Studies, it might be useful for us to think of scenes as momentary postmodern communities (Shank 1994:xiv).

Some components of community theory are useful for the creation of a working definition of scenes. According to Kusenbach (2006) the three basic components which dominate the definition of community that is widely used and recognized by social scientists are: the presence of a shared locality, significant social ties, and meaningful social interaction. Shared physical territory has historically been considered a necessary precondition for community (Driskell and Lyon 2002, Hermann 2006, Keller 2003, Kusenbach 2006). Physical space is understood in one of two ways: either as the actual physical space inhabited by a group of people, or as the psychological sense of place experienced by group members (Hermann 2006). Recent social research successfully challenges a geographically rooted definition of community (Driskell and Lyon 2002, Futrell et al. 2006, Gardner 2004, Straw 1991).

Kusenbach (2006) identifies an emphasis among community researchers on the presence of significant social ties or the relationships that individuals develop under specific place-bound interpersonal contexts. I see both of these emphases to be present in recent research. For example, transgender people who form bonds while working the



streets together in Oakland, Ca is conceptualized by a group of social researchers as a place-bound transgender “community” (Eyre, de Guzman, Donovan, and Boissiere 2004). Relationships between people are also formed in ways that are seemingly independent of place and time. For example, music festival goers may only see each other intermittently at temporary events, but they perceive their interactions to be deeply meaningful. Despite the temporality of their interaction, festival goers interpret their relationships as constitutive of community (Gardner 2004). Social ties are what define and help to sustain the psychological components of community (Driskell and Lyon 2002).

The third component of community Kusenbach (2006) identifies, the presence of meaningful social interaction, may seem self-evident. Yet, this is actually a debated gray area within Community Studies (Driskell and Lyon 2002). At what point does interaction become meaningful enough to constitute community? Do internet relationships count? Does interaction need to be meaningful to everyone involved in order to count, or can it have varying levels of significance to group participants?

### *Community Destabilized*

Some social researchers point out that the conceptual framework of community is vague and problematic. Embedded in this loaded concept are a number of myths that cover up how social power operates in society (Alleyne 2002, Barnard 2000, Brown-Saracino 2004, Graham 1998, Ridge et. al. 1999& 1997). For this dissertation, I use existing theory and research to develop the term scene. I then apply the concept of the social scene to my Sacramento Poetry Scene fieldwork as a way to address- by suggestive redirection- concerns that social scientists have with the concept of community.

To justify the necessity for the theorization and development of the concept of scene, I briefly catalogue a few of the ways in which the term, “community” is viewed as problematic by social scientists. I do so briefly because problematization of community is an area of literature too broad to address adequately in this literature review. First, use of the term within sociology carries with it an often unspoken reference to that which is nonwestern and pre-modern (Alleyne 2002). Second, talk about community tends to obscure both diversity (Ridge et al. 1999: 148) and the extent to which power operates to define reality at the interactional and structural levels of society (Barnard 2000, Ridge et al. 1999). Third, the idea of community has a limited scope because it perpetuates what we might call myths.

For many people, community brings to mind images of collectivities of like-minded folks who share a way of life (Ridge et al. 1999). Another potential myth commonly perpetuated about communities is that they are comprised of people who engage in collective endeavors (Brown-Saracino 2004). Collective endeavors presuppose equality, unity, social connection and cultural commonality (Ridge et al. 1999). Plus, it is often the case that such pursuits are assumed to take place in a common locale (Ridge et al. 1999). In this sense communities are, in a nutshell, imagined (Alleyne 2002, Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2002). This abstraction manifests in a tension between the imagined “ideal” and people’s actual experiences. When researchers are not reflexive about their work, ideology can dominate their research. (Alleyne 2002: 622, Ridge et al. 1999: 174).

When these myths of community are comingled with the dualistic notions of *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, an ingroup/outgroup-inclusion/exclusion paradigm of collective experience is created, perpetuated, and utilized by sociologists. Queer theory

has demonstrated an innovative method of reviewing and challenging this by disavowing binary understandings, and by destabilizing any understanding of community as fixed, stable, or specific (Barnard 2000: 70, Ridge et al. 1999). Queer is not a community, rather queerness is a response to community. Queerness can be understood in a phenomenological sense as a response to the governing of and colonization of the lifeworlds of citizens by official agencies through the use and deployment of vague notions of community (Alleyne 2002:622). It subverts the old community discourse and the hierarchies of gender, class and race. Queer is a notion that demands its own agency and it is in this sense that Scene Studies are queer studies.

Researchers have also adopted other strategies to address the conceptual problems of community. Instead of dismissing it as a mythic ideal, some sociologists and other social researchers place emphasis on the preservation of the usefulness of the term (Brown-Sarachino 2004, Gardner 2004, Keller 2003). I call this strategy term modification. For example, term modifiers such as “portable” communities (Gardner 2004), “imagined,” and “intermittent” communities (Keller 2003), preface the concept of community with modifiers in order to extend its utility for social science.

Doing so is an attempt to clarify which kind of community a researcher is discussing. I see this practice as an additive-explanative method for creating understanding whereby various lists of characteristics are attached to a vague theoretical notion. It results in confusion due to self-reference. In other words, a researcher needs to use additional modified forms of the same term in order to say anything at all.

For example, Gardner’s “portable” community (2004) refers to geographically mobile communities that are supplemental to members’ notions of home. Gardner theorizes that

“portable” communities are distinctly different from traditional communities, although “traditional” remains undefined. In spite of not providing definition for the root word community, term modification is carried further by an explanation of “portable” communities as juxtaposed to traditional communities, residing somewhere between “lifestyle enclave” communities and communities “of memory” (Gardner 2004:156). Here, “lifestyle enclave” and “memory” communities are yet two more kinds of community that are suggested by another researcher who is peripheral to Gardner’s work.

Modified notions of community are not understood to be the same as community- whatever that may be- but can instead be thought of as supplements to, or variations thereof. Exercises of clarification about specific kinds of community could go on endlessly. One of the reasons I propose Scene Studies as a way to expand discourse about social collectivities beyond the realm of Community Studies is because it seems that Community Studies has largely fallen into this confusing practice. Without a strong root concept, how can we have useful conversations? Nonetheless, term modifiers are still one strategy used by social researchers who vie for continued use of the term community.

Some researchers who retain the *Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft* informed notion of community call for adoption of a “reflexive, radical modernist sociological approach” to Community Studies (Alleyne 2002: 618). This is a call for researchers to clarify our positions relative to the people we study. This approach involves work on the part of the sociologist to locate herself within the web of social relations she studies. She is relied upon to map the social networks that she is a part of; to reflect on her own social position. Participation in these activities sheds light on the notion that acts of locating the self- what is essentially the crafting of identity- are articulated with reference to community

(Alleyne 2002:618). The articulation of self takes place from within the context of community.

### *Community to Scene Studies*

Community is relevant to this ethnography in two key ways. First, this study of the Sacramento Poetry Scene is- at least until the successful establishment of Scene Studies as a sub-genre of sociology- a community study. Second, the crux of this dissertation rests upon my proposal of scene as a worthy conceptual alternative to community. Thus, the definition, deconstruction, and problematizing of community is relevant to our theorization of scenes. To this end, we take from our discussion of community some important information.

First, I utilize strategies adopted in queer theory to respond to some of the conceptual problems of community. I interpret scenes as a concerted attempt to think past the boundaries of dualistic insider/outsider logic. Since binary logic is inherent in the concept of community as it has been developed by sociologists in the US, using queer theory to form alternatives is a task I see fit to be taken up within the sub-genre of Scene Studies. Much like queer theory itself, scenes create room for the articulation and analysis of postmodern social experience.

Second, the ways that power operates in society is a key item on the agenda for a theory of scenes. Since culture implies power and community and culture are interrelated concepts (Aithchinson 1999, Alleyne 2002:615), any discussion about scenes as it is conceptualized as emerging from within community theory necessarily involves a discussion about power. Kahn-Harris expresses concern that participants on some scenes get wrapped up in a sort of micropolitics whereby they come to view scenes as safe

spaces that are somehow separate from the workings of power in society at large (2004:109). It follows that forms of power and domination wind up being enacted from within the scene itself, by scene participants themselves, (Kahn-Harris 2004:109), and often in unreflexive ways. It is more likely that power operates at both the structural and interactional levels of scenes (Ridge et al. 1999:62).

Third, Scene Studies also acknowledge that the relationships between community and both culture and social networks are potentially valid within the context of social scenes. Given their centrality to Community Studies and my observations of the Sacramento Poetry Scene, focus on how social networks and culture operate on and within social scenes seems warranted to me. A final point about the continuity between Community Studies and Scene Studies is that the three common components of most definitions of community used by social researchers: the presence of shared territory, significant and shared social ties, and meaningful social interaction (Kusenbach 2006), can be modified to create a working definition of scene. In this modification, shared territory, significant social ties, and meaningful interaction are translated respectively into space, identity and participation.

### *Scenes*

Research conducted under the rubric I call the sociology of scenes (Aldredge 2006, Davis 2006, Futrell et al. 2006, Irwin 1973 & 1977, Kahn-Harris 2004, Malam 2004, Moore 2004, Polsky 1967, Salanha 2005, Straw 1991) shows how scenes can be theorized as similar to but different from communities. Scene Studies provide a platform for discussion about collective social experience which engages only some of the aspects of the notion of community. One main difference between the concept of the social scene

and the concept of community is that scenes are not mired with all of the loaded and often unspoken subtext of community discourse. In this chapter subsection, I sociologically explore scenes from multiple perspectives so that we can build a broad conceptual definition of the term as it has been used by social scientists both in the past and present.

One key area of social science literature relating directly to the sociology of scenes deals exclusively with music scenes. (Aldredge 2006, Davis 2006, Futrell et al. 2006, Kahn-Harris 2004, Moore 2004, Straw 1991, Todorovic and Bakir 2005). Some have said that scene is one of the few concepts popular music studies has pioneered for social science on its own (Hesmondhalgh 2005:27). A second key area of social science literature for the sociology of scenes considers varying aspects of queer scenes (Casey 2004, Eyre et al. 2004, Graham 1998, Petzen 2007, Ridge et al. 1999 & 1997, Taylor 2007). Some of this body of literature is well suited to the development of a general sociological definition of scenes (Davis 2006, Futrell et al. 2006, Straw 1991). However, some of the existing research uses the term “scene” more as a cultural or geographical locator than as a theoretically distinct concept (Aldredge 2006, Eyre et al. 2004, Kahn-Harris 2004, Malam 2004, Salanha 2005).

Following a traditional chronological trajectory, I begin this exploration of scenes by covering some of the relevant social research history. This history includes development of a classical definition of scene which is most directly informed by Irwin (1977) and Polsky (1967). As a relevant side note, I also discuss elements of bohemianism that influence a poetry scene such as the one I observe in Sacramento. I then develop a theorization of scenes inclusive of contemporary perspectives.

### *An Overview of Development from Then*

Lending strength to my argument that there is a conceptual leap from community to scene, Pfadenhauer (2005) points out that scene is used as a synonym for community. Scenes are defined by this theorist as social networks of like-minded people such as “the alternative scene,” or the “jazz scene.” It is also suggested that the original context for social research about scenes is juvenile delinquency. Deviant subcultures researchers of the 1920’s in the United States theorize about social scenes (Pfadenhauer 2005).

Along these lines, Polsky’s book *Hustlers, Beats, & Others* (1967) is a text that is well-cited by social researchers who conduct Scene Studies. It is also the earliest example of research within the sociology of scenes that I have found. Polsky provides countless examples in support of Pfadenhauer’s point regarding the link between sociology of scenes and delinquency studies. *Hustlers, Beats, & Others* is an entire text dedicated to the occupationalization of deviant subcultures; it is homage to sociology as it existed in the US at the time that Polsky was writing.

Resonate of the link between culture and community, Polsky draws upon the link between culture and the beat scene. This link is apparent in Polsky’s discussion about various components of a “beat culture.” According to Polsky, beat culture is comprised of racial segregation, drug use, cops and violent policing activities, media glamorization and tourism. All of these cultural elements, Polsky argues, are central to the beat scene (Polsky 1967:157-8).

Another link between the concepts of community and scene is found in the overarching presence of dualistic logic in Polsky’s research. Although he theorizes scenes, Polsky does so from a perspective that appears to be heavily influenced by a



Gemeinschaft-Gesellschaft informed notion of community. Throughout extensive occupationalization of the hustler, Polsky points repeatedly to the role that “outsiders” play in stigmatizing hustlers; here, we see the dualism of an insider/outsider, binary logic which also unpins the notion of community. Polsky points out that hustlers are a group that is particularly hard to study because they are so wary of outsiders (Polsky 1967:65). It is implied that the categories of “insider” and “outsider” are mutually exclusive, and that these categorizations can be- and are- used to “other,” “stigmatize,” or segregate people into hierarchies based on membership status.

Two additional early examples of research that is well-cited among researchers who conduct Scene Studies are John Irwin’s article “Surfing: A Natural History of an Urban Scene” (1973) and Irwin’s book, which is aptly titled *Scenes* (1977). Based more or less on a fashioning of Goffman’s dramaturgy into a sociological theory of scenes, Irwin’s symbolic interactionist informed definition of scene has become a classic benchmark to be interpreted, modified, and used by others (Aldredge 2006, Davis 2006, Futrell et al. 2006, Kahn-Harris 2004, Moore 2004). Irwin considers a number of different scenes including the surfing, hippie, bohemian, and billiards hall scenes. Emergent from Irwin’s work is a general understanding of scenes as leisure activities that are important for members’ identity construction. This idea that scenes are comprised around a specific leisure activity is reminiscent of our understanding of communities as being comprised of people who engage in collective endeavors (Brown-Saracino 2004).

Irwin’s scenes are organized around specific leisure activities defined as “total lifestyles.” They also take place in public, urban space. In this context, leisure activities can be thought of as hobbies, or extra-professional meaningful activities shared in a

public or group setting. As “total lifestyles,” scenes are understood by Irwin to be systems of leisure activities that involve: life choices, the use of expressive social symbols, development of enduring social relationships, and the construction and enactment of an identity for and by scene participants.

There is one part of Irwin’s classic definition of scenes that I take specific issue with; the notion that scenes occur in public, urban spaces. Similar to how the Chicago school sociologists overlooked the existence and experience of non-urban based communities by focusing their Community Studies primarily on urban ethnic enclaves, we risk missing a great deal of potential insight about social experience if we narrow scene theory and research to public, urban spaces. Although they might sometimes center on different activities, scenes likely exist in non-urban places. For example, in rural areas there are rodeos, county fairs, or 4-H and other farm sustainment or agricultural collectives that are both socially based and convincingly constituting of total lifestyles.

Likewise, there are also scenes that conduct shared group activities in non-public space. To use an extreme example to illustrate this point, it could be argued that cannabis collectives in California suit Irwin’s definition of a scene in every other sense, but they exist mostly in private space. The cannabis use and legalization scene is less visible in public space perhaps- at least in part- because of the borderline legality of some of the respective activities associated with it. However, these collectives have existed as examples of social scenes far longer than the recent bout of public attention has been given to drug legalization causes. It seems clear to me that the sociology of scenes should include room for consideration of non-urban scenes and of scenes based around collective activities that are conducted primarily in non-public space.

Irwin also points out that scenes tend to be referred to in terms of the collective activities that they are centered on. For example, Bennett and Peterson compiled an entire volume of essays about music scenes (2004), and Irwin (1977) and Aldredge (2006) both name poetry as one of the activities that scenes are centered around. Researchers' projects have also considered; "open mic" scenes (Aldredge 2006), scenes centered on dance ritual (Salanha 2005), tourist scenes (Malam 2004, Salanha 2005), and art scenes (Shrank 2004). A common point of departure from this practice that I see is constituted by scenes that are associated with collective notions of identity instead of with specific activities.

Examples of scenes based upon a common notion of identity as opposed to clearly identifiable common activities, are queer, lesbian, and transgender scenes (Eyre et al. 2004, Ridge et al. 1997, Taylor 2007). These scenes do not necessarily involve identity construction that is centered on an easily identified, clear-cut shared activity. Instead, these scenes involve a wide array of activities associated with participants' performances of a shared identity. Dancing and drinking at queer night clubs and bars, patronage of local queer owned businesses, participation in or attendance at drag and other theatrical performances, gay rodeo, church, choirs, support groups, or other events are only some of the activities involved in a local queer scene. The queer scene can be interpreted as a sort of collection of activities whereby participation involves a notion of shared cultural identity.

The existence of such scenes draws attention to the possibility that identity-based scenes- which ultimately, perhaps all scenes are- may have something to lend to the development of an updated, comprehensive, or far-reaching definition of scenes. Scenes become appropriately complex and therefore potentially explanative if and when we

recognize that commonality between participants can be established through an array of shared activities instead of just one dominant, or easily identified, common leisure activity. The bohemian scene is an historicized example of an identity based scene, so it is unlikely that identity based scenes are a recent phenomenon. To illustrate how scenes can transcend the boundaries of place and time as well as to explore an identity that is arguably relatable for poets on the scene in Sacramento, I explore the example of the bohemian scene in more depth.

*The Bohemian Scene.* The bohemian scene is relevant to this ethnography in both historical and contemporary contexts. In some ways bohemia has transcended the abstract and binary logic of community, much like queer theory. People active on bohemian scenes engage in many different shared activities including drug taking, the pointing out of political ironies, poetry writing and performance art, hooking up, and perfecting the art of unemployment (Nathe 1978). Additionally, an exploration of the history of bohemia can elucidate on the nature of the Sacramento Poetry Scene because of its geographical and cultural relationship with the San Francisco Bay Area.

The Beats are a bi-coastal bohemian phenomenon often associated with bohemian enclaves in the San Francisco Bay Area and Greenwich Village in New York. In the sense of the larger sociological imagination, The Beats are often thought of specifically as being a poetry movement, so much so that “The Beats” and “poetry” have become interchangeable synonyms. So entwined are notions of the Beats and poetry itself- especially in locations such as Sacramento which is near the San Francisco Bay area- that a poet finds herself addressing at least some of the core concepts associated with a bohemian identity in any scene-based negotiation of her identity as a poet. A list of

essential bohemian values relevant in this regard includes: idealism, honesty, equality, leisure, creativity, and self-expression (Nathe 1978:394).

While both Irwin and Polsky consider the bohemian scene at length, neither address how the diverse multitudes of activity taking place on the bohemian scene complicate the concept of scene itself. In the spirit of what Irwin calls Grand Scenes, or eras such as the hippie era whereby ideals of a scene come to penetrate culture at large (Irwin 1977:88 & 162), Nathe conceptualizes bohemianism as a political movement (1978). Bohemianism is understood within this context to be a reactionary response to bourgeois ideals, an acting out of a type of seemingly apolitical politics characterized by conscious (Polsky 1967:162), humanistic (Irwin 1977:69), passive opposition (Nathe 1978:390) to the rise of the bourgeois class. What I see here is the groundwork for an overlap between the sociology of scenes and social movements research, an overlap which is further substantiated by Baumann's work whereby art worlds are overtly likened to social movements (2006). Inasmuch as this ethnography redefines as an art scene what may be otherwise referred to by some sociologists as an art world (Becker 1928), Baumann's Neo-Marxist social movements perspective goes hand-in-hand with Nathe's classical Marxian politicization of the bohemian scene.

Although Irwin considers surfing to be the earliest example of a scene (1973), bohemia have been around much longer than surfing scenes (Nathe 1977 & 1978). Nathe points out that it is not as if bohemians came up with a new thing; rather it is the case that bohemianism is part of an ongoing dialectic of opposing classes of people who live within the social structures of a capitalist hierarchy. Throughout history, antiestablishment revolts by powerless groups who feel no hope for the future have

always been a social fact (Nathe 1978:387). Bohemianism becomes visible as an expressive movement, gaining cultural attention and appeal as a social scene, when the bourgeois class is fairly stable. Yet, when poverty and financial insecurity abound in a society and the political pendulum swings toward Marxism, bohemianism appears to disappear as the once clearly defined lines between bohemians and the bourgeoisie become blurred (Nathe 1978).

There are several concepts that I take from Nathe's class politics perspective of bohemianism relative to this project. First, a deeper look at the class politics on the Sacramento Poetry Scene may yield valuable information. Second, Nathe offers in depth insight about one component of the concept of the social scene that was clearly identified early on in the development of a sociology of scenes; values are unique to each specific scene. Third, it becomes clear that through the bohemian scene, we can begin to articulate and conceptualize a geographical component for Scene Studies.

Bohemianism is a social phenomenon that was initially thought of as being specific to a location that then spreads across time and space (Irwin 1977, Nathe 1978:390). Bohemias, in a classic sociological sense, are thought of as inexpensive urban areas, places where intellectuals and artists congregate until real estate prices go up and bohemians are stuck finding new ways to make a living (Gioia 1993). Yet, bohemia defined in this way can also be viewed of as examples of a social scene involving multiple specific geographic sites (Shrank 2004). This multiplicity of the bohemian scene manifests itself locally as well. Take for example the hangouts – the galleries and coffeehouses of the LA postwar art scene (Shrank 2004) – which are all sites where

group socialization, engagement, and perpetuation take place (Nathe 1977 & 1978, Shrank 2004).

Reminiscent of Irwin's definition of the scene as a total lifestyle, Nathe conceptualizes bohemianism as a creative lifestyle (1978:398). Although bohemianism is a lifestyle which tends to be attractive to artists and intellectuals, bohemia is better thought of as a way of life separate from its artistic, intellectual, or revolutionary elements (Nathe 1978:398 & 412). There is a direct association between poverty and bohemianism, as bohemianism is a social phenomenon that comes into existence by individuals making the choice to pursue a vagabond existence, to live in debt and by wits alone (Nathe 1978:399), and to embrace poverty as intellectual gain (Polsky 1967:161). Bohemianism is viewed as deviant in a society (Irwin 1977:67, Nathe 1978:402, Polsky 1967), its major factors found to be hedonism, escapism, alienation, nomadism, identification with other disinherited people during periods of prosperity, romanticism in opposition to rationalism, as well as self-expression and the preference of psychological development over financial success (Nathe 1978:402).

The relationship between bohemianism and this ethnography of the Sacramento Poetry Scene can be demonstrated in three ways. First, there is the influence of the values and typified experience of bohemianism on poets' contemporary identities. Whereas it is likely the case that some but not all poets in Sacramento could be adequately described as bohemians, it is likely the case that most if not all of the poets in Sacramento are at least well acquainted with, if not directly affected, by bohemianism. Second, we have an interrogation of bohemia as either places (Polsky 1967:164), or as social collectives of some sort which may perhaps be best defined as social scenes. The fieldwork for this

ethnography is centered around midtown, the district in Sacramento that could be adequately referred to as bohemian. Finally, it is also the case that bohemianism historically, however stereotypically, has been thought of in association with art and artists (Nathe 1978, Polsky 1967, Shrank 2004). Polsky goes so far in this direction as to directly critique the poetry of the Beats as “bad” in saying that the Beats have failed to extend the range of old aesthetic forms (1967:179).

*An Overview of Development to Now*

Regardless of Polsky’s assertion that Beat poetry is bad, the legacy of these poets is now fully canonized (Gioia 1991 & 1993, Shrank 2004). We have moved from a time characterized by discussion of bohemianism to a time characterized by discussion of neo-bohemianism (Gioia 1991 & 1993). Arguably well-aligned with much of postmodern thought, new bohémias are conceptualized as being atomized, decentralized, interdisciplinary, computerized, and anti-institutional (Gioia 1993). The existence of poets in new bohémias relates directly to the shift that took place when poetry became bureaucratically institutionalized in the US; whereby poets ran out of bohémias and into universities. The difference in these two poetic orientations is a very important political differentiation to make because poets themselves are well aware of it. The charge of being an “ivory tower” poet is used on poetry scenes as an insult to accuse poets of being out of touch with reality.

In a class analysis, Gioia claims that poets in the United States abandoned the working-class heterogeneity of urban bohémias- otherwise known as the same Beat scenes Irwin and Polsky studied in Greenwich Village and Northbeach- for the professional homogeneity found in academia (1991). Although urban bohémias once



supported writers and artists (Gioia 1991), many of these places are now subject to gentrification. Gentrification- a process of urban reclamation mired with class politics, displacement, capitalist expressions, and the colonization of culture- is a process of neighborhood change associated with the term “neo-bohemian” (Brown-Saracino 2004). Unlike bohemians, Neo-bohemians are people who also appreciate urban grit, but instead of basing their experience in real-world social mixing, their appreciation for diversity is largely aesthetic (Brown-Saracino 2004:140).

In other words, the bohemian scene has changed over time. The bohemian scene that poets carry nostalgia for- the Beat era that some poets fashion their poetic identities around- is a thing of the past. Likewise, the concept of the social scene has also changed in regard to how it is used, defined, and theorized by sociologists. There are myriad ways that the concept of the scene has been modified since Irwin came up with a classical definition of the term.

I consider of the evolution of the term scene beginning Irwin’s notion that they constitute total lifestyles organized around specific leisure activities. This total lifestyles perspective is modified by Pfadenhauer (2005) who instead theorizes scenes as being organized around “thematic fields of interest.” Perhaps this shift in perspective from total lifestyles to thematic fields of interest is, at least in part, because of the increasing focus of researchers on identity-based scenes. It seems that thematic fields of interest could potentially differ from total lifestyles in several ways.

First, a field of interest might be only one part of a scene participant’s life. An individual could conceivably participate or hold interest in multiple fields simultaneously. Second, a field of interest might involve a multitude of distinct leisure

activities. These activities could conceivably be either complimentary to each other, or seemingly mismatched. Finally, Irwin conceptualizes leisure activities, the basis for total lifestyles, as being hobbies or extra-professional meaningful activities. Contrarily, a field of interest might involve meaningful activities which are instead associated with a scene participant's profession, daily life needs, or other personal activities that do not fit so well with the notion of leisure.

Contrary to Irwin's definition of scene, which is theorized as something that takes place in public and urban space, recent studies involve scenes that take place underground (Shrank 2004, Todorovic and Bakir 2005). Using a line of reasoning similar to that of my previous cannabis collective, Todorovic and Bakir (2005) study the underground music scene in Belgrade. Here, underground scenes are theorized as having three distinct connotations which distinguish them from above ground scenes. One connotation relates to the non-normative aesthetics of music produced on an underground scene. Next, there is relative autonomy in the modes of production, distribution, and consumption of music on an underground scene. Finally, general underground scene practices are counter-culture or subversive to normative society (Todorovic and Bakir 2005:415). Pointing to the hacker scene as an additional example of a widely recognized underground scene, Todorovic and Bakir make it clear that contrary to Irwin's classical definition of the term, not all scenes are public.

One common element found on many scenes is the connection to specific geographic locations. Although there are countless examples of this, the connection between locale and scene is apparent in Shank's (1994) consideration of the music scene in Austin, Texas. It appears that Irwin's classical definition of scenes is, at least in part, in

agreement with the linking of geographical specificity with the conceptual notion of a scene. As I read Irwin, the general life-course of a scene is that it: begins with a few key insiders, becomes publicly recognized as existing in several specific public, urban places, and is then extorted by the media, copied by outsiders, and eventually diluted, dissolved, or forgotten.

The role of the media seems paramount to the communication of a scene's culture to others, including potential participants. Perhaps the pervasiveness of media in our postmodern time means that the life-courses of specific scenes have sped up compared to the life courses of the scenes Irwin studies. Polsky (1967) focuses at greater length than Irwin does on the influence of the media on scenes. Pfadenhauer continues this lineage of attention given to the important role the media plays within a general theory of scenes (2004).

There is ample indication that scenes are both classically and currently constructed as being time and place specific. Perhaps a better of way thinking about this is to say that specific examples of scenes are bound by time and place. Scenes themselves, of which there are identifiable occurrences or examples, are entities which can be thought to transcend the boundaries of time and place. One area of development within the realm of Scene Studies in particular supports this careful verbiage. Researchers point out that scenes are being influenced by communications technology, such as the internet, to such an extent that they are actually able to exist in locales, both real and imagined, which span across geographical boundaries (Futrell et al. 2006, Kahn-Harris 2004, Salahana 2005).

Another characteristic of scenes, as they are classically theorized, is that they experience change over time. This point is accepted and more recently illustrated by Casey (2004), whose research looks at changes regarding who is or becomes included and excluded on a particular scene. Casey's work looks at who is in/visible on Newcastle's commercial gay scene over a period of time. Instead of a queering of the notion of scene, what I see here is a continuation of the binary, insider/outsider logic found in the classic conceptualization of scene still present in recent work (Casey 2004, Graham 1998).

A final point of consideration regarding the classic definition of scene in light of current research is the continuance of Irwin's focus on the connection between scenes and identity. Irwin's definition of scene refers to them as leisure activities important for members' identity construction. I point out that there has recently been an increase in focus on scenes that are identity- as opposed to activity- based. Research involving identity based scenes broadens both the theoretical utility of the concept of the social scene and the potential scope of Scene Studies itself.

One way to interpret this connection between scenes and identity is in terms of visibility. In other words, scenes can be thought of as spaces where members' identities become visible (Moran, Skeggs, Tyrer and Corteen 2001, Ridge et al. 1999). Excellent utility of this perspective is that identity within this context is something that can be expressed, seen, or discussed in terms of varying degrees. The representation of identity does not take place in absolute terms. It is not a matter of an individual's identity being in/visible on any given scene; it is about to what extent, or in which ways, an individual's identity becomes in/visible on any given scene.

### *Theoretical Overview for The Sociology of Scenes*

Scene is a term “whose rich connotations encourage a productive kind of theoretical and analytical promiscuity” which means the term is “less likely to overdetermine or homogenize the context” (Kahn-Harris 2004:98).

The possibility of theoretical promiscuity sounds exciting and well worth our effort to make Scene Studies visible within sociology. If the concept of the scene is to offer the kind of utility that Kahn-Harris suggests it might, I offer that a Cultural Geography framework may be helpful. In the previous chapter section, I discussed the idea that scenes are places where participants’ identities become visible. This perspective is aligned with the concept of the scene as it is developed from within the framework of Cultural Geography (Hesmondhalgh 2005, Moran et al. 2001, Salanha 2001).

Within this framework, scenes are understood to be imagined by participants as dynamic geographical locations. In a singular sense, participants think about a scene as being a real place in their lives. This perspective is interesting because it implies that individuals think of scenes as being real places, regardless of whether they actually involve a built environment or not, regardless of whether they involve multiple built environments as opposed to just one. Internet based scenes fall nicely into a category of scenes that involve abstract geography instead of actual built environments. A Cultural Geography informed perspective is also interesting because although localized scenes can occupy multiple places- for example, a music scene that encompasses many venues in a major metropolitan area; individual participants still think of a scene as being a specific place. In this light, scenes become disembodied spaces that exist in the minds of scene participants.

Cultural Geography is social science jargon that originated in 1990's (Aitchison 1999). It is a relatively recent theoretical blending of cultural studies with traditional geography that can be reasonably described as a placing of greater emphasis on agency than structure. Cultural Geography points toward the relative and symbolic nature of space and embraces complexity. A comfortable fit for postmodern thought, this perspective demonstrates that space and place are ultimately unfixed notions in constant states of transition.

The idea of variance of visibility- meaning the visibility of identity- on a scene is a potentially transformative and/or limiting force in the lives of scene participants (Casey 2004, Petzen 2007, Ridge et al. 1999, Salanha 2005, Shank 1994). The notion of scenes as sites of potential transformation is perhaps most comprehensively theorized by Shank in "Dissonant Identities: The Rock'n'Roll Scene in Austin, Texas" (1994). Here, Shank offers ethnographic illustrations of the microsociological implications of scene participation. What this contributes to Scene Studies is a concerted focus on the emotive, personal, and perceived impact that being part of a scene has for individuals.

Scene space can be thought of as necessary for the visibility and social recognition of marginalized groups (Casey 2004, Moran et al. 2001:409). This is the case so much so, that activists and scene organizers work hard to increase the visibility of certain subgroups of people in institutional and other spaces that are symbolically associated with a particular scene (Casey 2004, Petzen 2007:20). An example of a subgroup taking action to increase visibility on a scene can be seen in the case of Asian men on Melbourne's gay scene (Ridge et al. 1999). Here, Asian men found themselves to be

underrepresented- or invisible- on the gay scene and, in response, developed their own social groups and networks within that that scene.

Within the framework of Cultural Geography, boundaries are dynamic. Boundaries can be both literal and physical- as they are in the traditional on-the-map geographical sense- or they can be recognized as abstract, imagined, and in constant states of flux. Examples of abstract and imagined boundaries can be found in the social relationships developed, sustained, and experienced over the internet (Driskell et al. 2002). Although often understood as outer limits of either social acceptance or physical space, boundaries are really very complex (Moran et al. 2001:414) and exist in constant states of re/negotiation. Both the internal and external boundaries of scenes are fluid, variable, and unstable (Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2002, Todorovic and Bakir 2005).

In regard to the constant re/negotiation of boundaries that takes place on scenes, scenes can be adequately theorized as sites of contestation. As such, scenes are- or can be- both policed and invaded (Moran et al. 2001). Space and place are continuous parts of ongoing dialectical struggles of power and resistance between providers, users, and mediators of space (Aitchison 1999:29). Therefore, in a theoretical discourse about scenes, a perspective informed by Cultural Geography engages a particular point of view regarding figurative power.

This is to say that scene participants are included as potential agents and/or exchangers of power. Power is not understood here only as something that is owned by the few and coveted by many. The same can not be said for power in terms of scenes as they were classically theorized. Unlike with the influence of Cultural Geography, the deviance and subculture studies (Irwin 1978, Pfadenhauer 2005, Polsky 1967) that

inform the classical definition of scenes very much incorporate a static perspective of power.

If it is true both that subcultures have failed to bring about social change and that some people associate subculture studies with Scene Studies, then we need to be prepared for the question of how scenes might also fail to be transformative. One way in which we can move away from this conundrum is by abandoning the theoretical framework of structural-functionalism as much as possible. Within the framework of structural-functionalism, scenes are understood as places characterized by social deviance. This is not a preferred direction for Scene Studies, as the limits of this line of reasoning have currently been exhausted.

A structural-functional theorization of scenes views them as sites of social dysfunction. Scenes are understood in this light as places characterized by non-normative social identification and behavior. In contrast, scenes informed by a Cultural Geography perspective are thought of as counterparts existing in the same places where dominant norms, culture, and definitions of social reality also prevail. What we are left wondering is not what is or is not normal and functional. Instead, we are left always wondering how scenes change, respond to, or reflect the ideals of normative social structures.

#### *Theoretical Situation for Study of The Sacramento Poetry Scene*

By taking into account the relevant criticisms and couching Scene Studies within its historical-theoretical context, I can situate this dissertation into the scope of social research. First, I consciously cultivate a perspective informed by Cultural Geography. This perspective is the best option for moving Scene Studies beyond the dualistic logic inherent both in the concept of community, and in the classical theorization of scenes.



Second, in being reminded that a lack of focus on how power operates in society is one of the criticisms of Community Studies, I also hold that analytical interrogation regarding how power operates on scenes is both a responsible and necessary component of Scene Studies. Finally, along these same lines, I choose to embrace practices of self reflexivity throughout my research processes.

### *A Concept by Concept Exploration of Scene*

The remainder of this literature review is a consideration of scenes organized around three separate concepts: identity, space, and participation. Identity and space are both concepts associated with the building of a perspective which is informed by Cultural Geography. They are what I see as backbone concepts for the study of social scenes. It is scenes, I argue, which provide a good milieu for the bringing together of these two concepts.

I offer participation as a way to talk about belonging. The dualistic logic which underpins Community Studies as well as the very notion of community itself conceptualizes belonging as membership. This ingroup/outgroup paradigm is a stifling way to discuss a social reality that is always experienced as fluid and changing. Participation, with its verbiage about degrees and various ways of participating, is a concept that can help transition discussion about communities into discussion about social scenes.

### *Identity*

Identity is a complex, multifaceted and layered construct. A person's identity involves multiple fragments of identifiers -such as gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race, profession, familial role, personal interests, etceteras- that are jumbled together into a

cohesive sense of selfhood. The concept of community becomes ever more problematic when we consider how communities situate in and among each other. For example, a study of transgender youth shows how members of a transgender community are situated as members of larger African-American and Queer communities (Eyre et al. 2004). These researchers draw attention to complex webs of power based relationships as they are constructed between the participants of multiple identity based communities. These webs become important to identify and discuss whenever various identity based communities converge. They are also the foundation for identity politics as we experience them in the United States today.

In an extensive interrogation of the concept of community, Keller puts forth that identifiers only have the potential to build community when individuals consider them to be significant as basis for shared identity (Keller 2003:8). Shared identity is clearly an important component of the construction of community, and another way to refer to shared identity is as collective identity. Collective identity can be broadly described as an expression of group cohesiveness. It is a cohesion understood to be deeper than social solidarity, expressed through symbols which represent the commonality shared by individuals within the group (Lowe 2000). These are the same symbols I refer to when I talk about the visibility of identity- or symbols of identity- on scenes

Identifications also shift constantly at the individual level, implying that identity involves a fundamental instability (Casey 2004, Graham 1998). This fluidity fits well with scenes, which are also fundamentally unstable. If people seek out community for the feelings of security said to generate through *Gemeinschaft* relations, then perhaps scenes

involve social interactions which are more fleeting. Maybe scenes are a better framework than communities for thinking and talking about postmodern identity.

Scenes are hardly immune to processes of negotiation associated with the interplay of complex identities. They are, in fact, a good place to study the details associated with how these complex constructs are negotiated, maintained, and changed over time. For example, Davis (2006) shows how age and punk identities mutually affect each other on a punk scene. In another example, Ridge et al (1999) discuss how Asian men negotiate their ethnicity in relation to their sexuality on a predominantly non-Asian gay scene.

Both individual and collective identity develops when shared activities foster the growth of feelings and ideas about oneself and one's group (Lowe 2003:373-174). Some researchers actually consider community to be necessary for the conceptualization and articulation of selfhood (Eyre et al. 2004). The same might also be said for scenes, inasmuch as scenes are something that people can be visible on (Petzen 2007, Ridge et al. 1999). As I have said, this involves visibility interpreted and articulated as degrees of presence and absence of social symbols which signify the reflection of a particular identity.

In other words, a scene becomes something that one establishes- and therefore conceptualizes herself as existing- on (Ridge et al. 1999). They are places where one's selfhood becomes established or, perhaps, invalidated. The concept of the social scene is durable enough to take the place of community in regard to the conceptualization, articulation, experience, and reflection of selfhood. Within the realm of Scene Studies, identity is understood to be a fluid, non-binary, negotiated, contested, and built process (Malam 2004).

In a study of the independent music scene in San Diego, Moore finds that in the event of commodification, scene insiders experience a loss of identity (Moore 2004: 233). This loss of identity occurs because the identities of members of some scenes experience a sense of selfhood that occurs when their scene is commercialized. Processes of scene commodification, it seems, have the potential to encourage self reflexivity. This is especially the case when the dominant collective identity of the scene is dependent on a sense of opposition to mainstream culture. For example, in terms of some scenes, being recognized as a scene participant carries stigma. This is the case for people on the beat scene (Polsky 1967, Shrank 2004), and on the underground music scene in Belgrade (Todorovic and Bakir 2005). Put one way, these stigmas could be viewed as signaling issues of inclusion. Put another way, these stigmas signal issues of participation.

### Space

It is space that identity comes to be reflected upon within scenes. Plus, we are talking about the workings of a larger social system that is based around a politics of identity. There are also spatial dimensions of social power relations (Aithchinson 1999:25, Graham 1998). Thus the politics of spatial access matter a great deal. One study about the queering of Turkish identity shows that the notion of a fixed identity politic is being displaced by strategic identity politics that are imagined within a multitude of diverse spaces (Petzen 2007:29). In other words, there are many potential identities and the use of these identities by individuals can be viewed as politically strategic. Identities are potentially enacted by people differently in different spaces.

To talk about the relationship between scenes and space, we need to differentiate between what can best be thought of as “space,” and what might otherwise be called

“place.” Graham’s work (1998) is useful to us here. Following the work of Michel De Certeau, Graham explains that a place is an official environment arranged to best serve powerful interests. Place is controlled to a greater extent than space, controlled by people who are in positions of relative social power (1998:181).

A space, on the other hand, exists in its own right, separate and apart from the exercise of power by authority. Spaces are social arenas where identity creation and culture are created, maintained, and where these things change over time, sheltered and relatively free from an overarching sense of social control (Graham 1998:181). For example, the beat scene took place in East and West coast bohemias and these bohemias are can be thought of as spaces. San Francisco’s North Beach and New York’s Greenwich Village are the neighborhoods where these bohemias thrived; these are places.

Space fits well with the key component of the definition of the concept of community that refers to shared territory (Kusenbach 2006). Spaces are, in a sense, territories. Scenes occupy space (Salanha 2005, Taylor 2007) and could, perhaps, be discussed in terms of the territory they occupy. Scenes are also thought of in terms of being tied to specific locations or places (Salanha 2005, Shank 1994, Shrank 2004). It is important to keep in mind, however, that some- if not all- scenes transcend the boundaries of place (Futrell et al. 2006).

Straw’s theorization about scenes is unique in that it conceptualizes scenes as different from communities specifically on points regarding geography and how people move across space (1991). Straw argues that communities presume relatively stable populations, whereas scenes do not (1991:373). Compared to communities, scenes are less rooted in specificity. This makes sense in regard to the perspective of Cultural

Geography, which developed around and after the postmodern turn. One difference between cultural and traditional geography is that Cultural Geography deals with, in addition to the concept of place, the idea of space (Aitchison 1999, Moran et al. 2001, Salanha 2005).

It makes a lot of sense to think of shared environments in terms of space. Space is something that people experience a sense of entitlement to (Taylor 2007). They can also develop a sort of mythic quality (Shrank 2004). Scene Studies provide us with opportunities to develop better understanding about issues related to entitlement and space. A sense of entitlement to space seems necessary for a person to be able to participate in the activities which take place on any given scene. It is also the case that entry into spaces occupied by a scene is controlled and constrained by processes and acts of exclusion (Taylor 2007:167). Some identities are authorized, or “in place” within some spaces, while other identities are not legitimated, or are “out of place” in the same space (Taylor 2007:162).

### Participation

The presence of one shared identifier, one potential commonality shared among participants, is not enough to define a group. Especially since it is found that claims to an identity no longer- if ever before- guarantee access, visibility, and inclusion within the spaces that a scene occupies (Casey 2004:448). To illustrate the logic I use here, we can think of the example of variation within specific genders as being greater than the variation between genders. Questions about participation become fundamental within the realm of both identity politics and Scene Studies.

Questions about participation are a fundamental response to this issue of identity. Similar to the dualistic insider/outsider logic associated with the concept of community (Friedman 1989), most Scene Studies research to date articulate scene participation as membership. This is to say that Scene Studies' researchers tend talk about participation in terms of insider/outsider status (Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2002, Moore 2004, Pfadenhauer 2005, Polsky 1967, Ridge et al. 1997, Todorovic and Bakir 2005). Instead, I propose we discuss the varying degrees of peoples' participation. Talking about participation on social scenes instead of group membership expands the theoretical utility of the concept of the social scene and will help us avoid the pitfalls and exclusions of binary logic.

Boundaries for acceptance within a scene are understood by one Scene Studies researcher to be self-explanatory to scene insiders, and not self explanatory to outsiders (Pfadenhauer 2005). Taken together, Pfadenhauer and Ridge et al.'s work becomes an example of how limitless this discourse on participation can really be. Scene affiliation is understood by Pfadenhauer (2005) to be the object of negotiation processes whereby an elitism of insider knowledge becomes the main factor for a sense of scene participation. In some cases, insider/outsider boundaries related to insider scene knowledge in lieu of other more common sense types of snobbery, are one of the main characteristics of a scene (Ridge et al. 1997:425).

Exclusion is a component of binary logic. If these researchers were really discussing scene participation in terms of membership, then people could become scene members simply by knowing what the insiders know and people would be denied membership based on sheer lack of knowledge. However, things are never really this cut and dry. In reality, some participants know more about things which are considered "insider

knowledge,” while others know less. In this example, use of the word participation changes the expression of membership- a limiting binary concept- into degrees of participation based on amounts or displays of certain kinds of knowledge.

In scenes that involve people assuming a stigma as a part of their identities associated with scene participation, “outsiders” are generally thought of as the people doing the stigmatizing (Polsky 1967:65, Ridge et al. 1997). This is one of the reasons why scene participants police, or regulate, boundaries. Participation- meaning who is welcome to participate, accepted by other folks on the scene, invited to happenings, afforded visibility on the scene, and other such factors which may signify social acknowledgement- is always subject to processes of internal regulation. Another way that an individual can come to feel unaccepted on a scene, is if she fails to belong to- or participate in- a social network that garners value within the scene (Ridge et al. 1997:174).

In the case of the queer scene they study, Ridge et al (1997) characterize the way people relate interpersonally as being through social networks. Sometimes radically different social networks overlap in scene space. This creates larger scenes which can be thought of as multi-group inclusive (Petzen 2007:25). Sub-groups have varying levels of social status on the scene, and one’s relationship to said sub-groups is demonstrated through network affiliation. I think of network affiliation as something that is demonstrated on scenes- at least in the case of the Sacramento Poetry Scene- by what I refer to as “networky” behavior. Name dropping, strategic use of subtle social symbols, showing up to be seen “in the right place,” “at the right time,” or “with the right people,” and joining in with the fads or fashions which are acceptable on a given scene are all



things I think of as “network.” I would guess that networky behavior can be observed on literally any and every social scene.

Some of these behaviors, especially participation in fads or fashion and the strategic use of subtle social symbols, could also be thought of in terms of the performance of identity. Taylor explains the performance of identity which takes place on scenes by using Bourdieu’s concept of “cultural capital” (Taylor 2007:167). Folks who fail to display the cultural capital associated with a given scene are excluded either directly or indirectly from entering or participating in the scene from which they seek recognition, affirmation, or inclusion. The use and deployment of stereotypes are one way that boundaries of ex/inclusion are regulated. Another researcher points out it is unclear who has the most valid claims to scene space; in other words, participation has muddled or unclear boundaries (Casey 2004:453).

Scenes are milieus whereby existing social segregation and power struggles can become visible, articulated, and audible. For example, Salanha’s covert participant observation of the Goa Rave scene (2005) shows how racial dynamics marked by inequalities play out between white and Indian tourists. Another example is Kahn-Harris’ ethnography (2004) which shows the black metal scene (2004) to be a micropolitical space where power and domination are enacted inside of the scene (Kahn-Harris 2004:109). One application of Scene Studies could be toward a greater understanding of how social inequalities are acted out, expressed, and experienced by individuals.

### *Definition of Scene*

One of the goals of this chapter is to define scene for the emergence of a conceptually cohesive sociology of scenes. The working definition I offer here is based both on

discourse with colleagues and, although not quite in a concrete citable sense, on the literature I have reviewed in this chapter. This definition is intentionally broad and is intended to be applicable to any scene, including the Sacramento Poetry Scene. To maintain focus on the conceptual link between community and scene, I break this definition down into the three aspects of scene as they can be understood to correlate with the commonly accepted core components of community discussed at length earlier in this chapter. These three themes of community are locality, shared social ties, and meaningful social interaction and are mirrored within scenes discourse as space, identity, and participation.

#### *Locality: Space*

Scenes are best thought of as occurring in space, whether that space is concrete or abstract. One reason why space is preferred vernacular is because place is an inadequate terms for discussing scenes. They can and often do transcend the boundaries of place; multi-site scenes or those which exist primarily or exclusively on the internet are examples of such boundary transcendence. The existence of internet scenes also support the notion that scenes can be thought of as mediated or affected by media and technology, especially communications technology. Media portrayals of scenes can have profound effects on the development, geographical dispersion, imagination and sustaining of any given scene.

Scenes occur in public and private milieus, they are urban, rural, and suburban phenomenon. Although they can and do transcend the boundaries of place, scenes are hardly immune to these boundaries. Specific examples of scenes- such as the beat scene, the folk music concert circuit scene, the Sacramento Poetry Scene etc- are thought of or

remembered in time and place specific terms. Likewise, scenes which occur over time also change over time. For example, although bohemian scenes have existed for many years, their incarnations vary drastically from era to era, from country to country, from neighborhood to neighborhood and so on.

### *Shared Social Ties: Identity*

The conceptualization, enactment, and visibility of individuals' identities takes place on scenes. One aspect of the exchanges involved with these processes is the multitude of opportunities for self reflexivity which abound on scenes as individuals interact not only with other individuals but also with notions of collective identity. Commonality among participants on a scene is established through an array of shared acts. Shared acts are often based around a common activity but are sometimes better thought of as loosely organized activities centering on a collective identity.

Shared acts usually occur on the scene itself whereby participants bear witness to one another. However, acts that are collectively recognized by scene participants to carry legitimacy on the scene sometimes take place either historically or in a realm which is not on the scene. These acts are taken to be legitimate identity markers for scene participants so long as other participants carry knowledge about the occurrence of these acts. This means that trust between scene participants can be an important element of social exchange. Examples of such situations in the case of Sacramento would be the publishing of a chapbook of poetry that took place long before an individual came to Sacramento, or a Sacramento poet flying to another state to give a poetry reading.

In addition to the establishing of status for and by individuals within specific scenes, existing social hierarchies in a larger sense are also legitimated by the social process and

interactions that occur on scenes. These processes and interactions involve folks sharing, building, and maintaining interrelated social networks. Such networks often overlap and they operate, at least in part, based on perceptions of commonality among scene participants. Commonality sometimes involves shared values among scene members which may or may not be clearly articulated.

### *Meaningful Social Interaction: Participation*

Scene membership is expressed not in terms of absence or presence, but as a continuum of voluntary participation. Although some people do participate in scenes in a long-term sense, scenes can and often do maintain revolving doors as participants come and go “on” and “off” of a scene. There is no presumption of a stable or even relatively stable population of participants. Participation in scenes is also unlimited. This means an individual could potentially participate as much or as little as they choose, or in many different or overlapping scenes simultaneously. Participation involves a multitude of acts and occurs in varying degrees.

Scene participation is meaningful in that it often has emotive, personal, perceived or real impacts for participating individuals. Boundaries at the personal and social group levels are constructed, asserted, crossed, tested, negotiated, and maintained on scenes. Thus, scenes can be conceived of as sites of contestation. A useful way to think of scenes here is that the social collective becomes a known entity through focus on the identities and identity roles of individual scene participants. Here the focus is clearly on human agency.

## *Sociology of Scenes*

I continue to assert that scenes are similar to but different from communities. One benefit to talking about social collectivities as scenes instead of as communities is that scenes are not yet over theorized. Scenes are also not entrenched within the conceptual baggage associated with communities; such as an obscuring of the diversity of participants, an obscuring of the extent to which power operates, the implication of nonwestern premodernity, or an unyielding dualistic logic. There are likely many potential areas for the conceptual development of scenes not limited to the areas I focus on here; identity, space, and participation.

In the coming chapters of this dissertation, I go about the work of trying this definition of scenes out by applying it to the Sacramento Poetry Scene. What I am looking to find out about is the potential utility of this definition, to determine some of the ways it could stand to be further modified. In Chapter 3, I lay out the methods I used to gather data about the Sacramento Poetry Scene. In Chapter 4, I present autoethnographic data both to expound upon my methodology and also to offer additional insight and reflection into the three conceptual sub-topics of scenes discussed in this chapter: space, identity, and participation. Chapter 5 involves the presentation of Sacramento Poetry Scene data to provide grounds for discussion about the definition of scenes as I have presented it here. Chapter 6 is where discussion about the utility of this definition takes place.

## CHAPTER 3

### ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

This project is an ethnographic exploration based upon my experiences in the field with a group of poets who practice public poetry in Sacramento. I conceptualize this group of poets and the places they inhabit with their regular open mic activities as a scene. In doing so, I hope to move social thought beyond limitations found with use- and overuse- of the concept of community and into the construction of an alternative realm of sociology of scenes. My documentation and reflection upon fieldwork experiences on the poetry scene in Sacramento is a platform for discussion about some of the potential conceptual connections and differences between communities and scenes. This chapter is a guide regarding both how I go about conducting and organizing my understandings and interpretations of fieldwork, and for how I present myself to others on the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

As a ritual of accountability and to demonstrate ethical sincerity, social researchers look to one another for detailed accounts of the methods we use to do research. This means that I have Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Nevada at Las Vegas for fieldwork associated with this project and that I take measures to ensure my methods are ethical. In this chapter, you will find information about my researcher disclosure practices as well as the inclusion and privacy of project participants. Also

included in this chapter is an outlining of my data collection practices and introduction to the methodological and rhetorical tools that I employ. These tools include: the application of modified Grounded Theory, theoretical sampling techniques, the use of research memos, researcher reflexivity, a phenomenologically informed approach to interviewing, and a practice of social poetics.

Also included in this chapter is a section which offers in-depth information about the ethnographic fieldwork for this project. I differentiate between Before Vegas and After Vegas, the two locators that I use as a frame of reference for my orientation in time. Other topics include: my choice of research sites, acceptance into and processes of entering and re-entering the field, and my roles of unobtrusive researcher and participant observer. I also address various fieldwork strategies including temporary partial-anonymity and conscious use of a key informant.

### *Disclosure*

It is part of my fieldwork protocol to tell Sacramento poets that I am a researcher-participant. In other words, I tell people that I am a poet practicing poetry in Sacramento who is also conducting sociological research on the poetry scene. To communicate this information, I engage in two practices as a matter of routine. First, I introduce myself as a researcher during each first encounter with a person whom I have not met on the scene before. I do this so that my status as a researcher is included in each participant's first impression of me. Second, I announce my involvement with this project every time I approach a microphone to read poetry in Sacramento. These simple announcements tend to be something along the lines of: "Hi, I'm Dana and I'm working on a long-term research project about poets in Sacramento."

### *Participant Inclusion*

Any person who shows up to a public poetry event in Sacramento is potentially included in this ethnography. Although most participants in this study are local poets, my field notes do include commentary about other people too. When I make mention of audience members or guests, I am generally indicating non-poets on the scene. By guests, I mean unknown individuals who accompany poets to readings or events.

By audience members, I mean seemingly unaffiliated, anonymous individuals whom I can neither identify as poets nor associate as the guest of a poet with whom I am familiar. Some audience members drop in to poetry readings once or twice to check things out and never return. Others return often enough to eventually garner specific recognition in my field notes. There are also audience members who frequent readings and eventually establish themselves as poets or as regular participants on the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

I am also aware of two specific categories of people who are non-poets circulating on the Sacramento Poetry Scene that are known to me as regular audience members. First, there are the significant others of poets. Some, although not many, scene participants who are not poets themselves begin as the guests of specific poets and return to readings often enough to gain general acceptance by other scene participants. Acceptance is garnered despite the fact that these individuals never participate on the scene by reading poetry on the microphone. More often than not, these people are either the significant others of poets or they become the significant others of poets whom they meet on the scene. Second, business owners who proclaim themselves as a “supporter of poets-” such as Booker Haynes from The Book Pile and Greg Sun from Sunny’s- are the other category



of scene participants who are known audience members that do not read poetry at readings.

There is also one local poet whom I consciously exclude from this study. In a one-on-one conversation in her home, this individual expressed to me that she is concerned about always wondering if she's "being watched" by me. I first identified her as a local poet early on in my fieldwork and years later became introduced to her as the mother of a close friend. I decided to react to this person's concern by leaving her out of this study. I made this decision because I receive personal information about this person from her child; I am invited into her home and life as a familial guest, not as a poet or researcher.

Like this friend's mother, other poets also invite me into their homes. Perhaps because my relationships with these other poets center upon my fieldwork and do not cross over into friendships from my personal life as it occurs aside from this project, these invitations seem somehow different from being invited into the home of a friend's mother who also happens to be a local poet. I do not want to give the impression, however, that the bulk of my fieldwork occurs in peoples' homes. It is the case with this ethnography that most of my fieldwork takes place in public settings.

I do, however, acknowledge my responsibility as a researcher to protect the privacy of study participants regardless of where I conduct fieldwork. One way I ensure privacy is by giving pseudonyms to poets and locales. There are no exceptions to the use of pseudonyms. I also alter distinguishing characteristics to obscure identity.

### *Data Collection Practices*

I collect, organize and analyze data for this project using modified- or partial-grounded theory. The majority of my data comes from notes taken from observations and

informal interviews. Additional sources include: The Collective's monthly newsletters, website, and blog, email correspondence, poetry videos; collected flyers, poetry publications and local Sacramento news publications. Other specific methodological techniques that I blend into my practice of grounded theory include: reflexivity (Brown 1996), a phenomenological approach to field research (Katz and Csordas 2003, Fontana 2000, Gardner 1987), and writing as a method of inquiry... which I practice as social poetics (Richardson 1994a, 1994b & 2002).

### *Modified Grounded Theory*

When I formally entered the field for this ethnography in 2000, I did not know what grounded theory was. Early on, I sought literature but was ultimately left with disjointed comprehension; feeling confused about whether what I do qualifies as grounded theory or not. After studying grounded theory extensively in a PhD program, including exposure to the work of Cathy Charmaz (2002) and Anselm Strauss (Strauss and Corbin 1990). I am reluctant to say outright that what I use is a grounded theory approach. I have doubts that my research methods are analytically rigorous in the same way that grounded theory- according to these authors- is meant to be.

It represents my work more accurately to say that my use of grounded theory is modified or partial. I do, however, maintain that this ethnography is an application of grounded theory because I make regular use of key grounded theory elements. These elements include coding data for emergent concepts and themes, the use of research memos, and theoretical sampling. As one would expect to find in any application of grounded theory, there is a tight fit between my data and analysis.

### Documentation

Before gaining advanced understanding of grounded theory, I needed to get this project going. At that point, I conceived of documentation practices which have stuck with me for the entire length of this project by using what I call a “do what seems right” and “keep it simple” approach. First, I get a composition notebook and a couple of my favorite pens. Then I show up to poetry readings and take notes. I write down details about interactions and events as I see them happening, and I try to keep track of my interactions with other poets.

Sometimes I document observations shortly after they take place instead of in-the-moment. This is the case particularly if note taking would be rude or inappropriate, such as during direct conversation or while engaged in another activity. For example, I do not bring my notebook with me to a party at a poet’s house because taking notes at a party would be socially awkward and would likely be interpreted by others as unkind behavior. In these sorts of instances, I write down recollections when I get home afterward.

As a matter of routine, I type up my hand written notes as soon as possible. My goal is to always shoot to have notes transcribed within twenty-four hours, so my memory is not yet faded. These typed documents- or direct observations- are much lengthier than handwritten field notes, as they are embellished with greater detail. It is during the act of transcribing and rereading typed notes that I find additional questions, curiosities, or sensitizing concepts to take with me back out into field.

As part of my practice of social poetics, I often write poems to get my thoughts flowing before typing notes, or to decompress when I get home from a poetry reading. If I perform these poems in the field, they become part of my observations. Other

documentation activities worth noting here include the making up of code names for places and people, and the writing and rewriting of character sketches for the prominent personalities I come into contact with frequently. I also create visual-spatial maps of the poetry spaces where I conduct observations to help me remember the physical positioning of people, stages, tables, chairs, and other physical details. As is the case with ethnographies, my field notes are continually coded and recoded.

### *Theoretical Sampling*

Since the beginning of this project, I have been both inadvertently and consciously engaged in theoretical sampling practices. If I think I see a pattern in my notes, I look to the field for explanations, or for exceptions and deviations to this apparent pattern. On many occasions, I have also sought someone out specifically to ask them to elaborate upon my inclination or curiosity. For example, after several months' worth of observations, it became apparent to me that women are marginalized among poets in Sacramento.

After coming to this realization, I deliberately sought several female poets out and asked questions to see if they felt this way. I also asked several prominent male poets for their thoughts about the subject. At that point, I also started to look more closely to see if the behaviors of the female poets who are present in this ethnography seem consistent with the idea of marginalization. I also started to look to the field to see if the behaviors of the male poets seem to be marginalizing.

### *Research Memos*

Whenever I think of something related to the project or need to get started on a formal document related to the project, I write a research memo. I create these casual journal-

style documents to brainstorm, to maintain effective memory, or to synthesize my thoughts either with fieldwork or social science literature. The writing of these memos helps me to draw links between concepts from my field notes and broader sociological themes. For example, social hierarchies constitute a general theme in sociological discourse and a social hierarchy is visible in specific concrete details which I have observed in the field. To further this example, a research memo written in 2001 keys me into how my observations illustrate the existence of a social hierarchy at “Poetry Unkempt.”

The memo helps me begin to articulate the larger theme of social hierarchy in terms of real interactions from the field, interactions regarding “the reserved table.” I introduce the reserved table in Chapter 1 of this dissertation and, in fact, my field notes include many references to it. It is in a choice location at Sunny’s and is reserved by way of a small handwritten sign for a group of men who sit there every week during “Poetry Unkempt.” Regulars know, as a matter of routine, not to sit at “the reserved table:” to do so is sure to ruffle feathers and garner comments of caution or admonishment from others. It also seems as if one of the men must call ahead to let Greg Sun know if they decide not to come on a given week because there are rare occasions when the reserved sign does not appear.

On these rare occasions that the sign is not put out, it is still the case that no one sits at this table. When the men skip “Poetry Unkempt,” the table remains empty until every other table in Sunny’s is taken first. When audience members who are unaccustomed to the space show up early and mistakenly sit at “the reserved table” before the sign is put out, awkward interactions follow. Someone- either Greg Sun, a waitress, or a regular

scene participant- asks the often embarrassed or confused intruders to please sit somewhere else.

There is a social hierarchy that I have long sensed at “Poetry Unkempt” which becomes visible through interactions regarding the reserved table. Interactions such as conversations regarding the table, the use and the timing of use of the reserved sign, signals to and the quality of service from waitresses, and processes of determination of who does and does not sit there occur among Greg Sun, the waitresses, the men the table is reserved for, regular poets, and audience members. These interactions ultimately concern the policing of who is and is not permitted to sit at this table during “Poetry Unkempt.” I also see the presence of a social hierarchy in that these interactions are manifestations of the politics regarding the luxuries, recognition, scene status, insults, or tolerances afforded to the people who reign at this table.

The research memo from 2001 which initially clued me into the significance of interactions regarding this table is an example of how memos assist me in my fieldwork and analysis. Early on, research memos were a missing link for me with this project. I have always written to myself journal-style as a way of thinking things through, but analytical elements- such as a signal to the larger sociological theme of hierarchy- are largely missing from my earlier memos. I now tend to write memos less often than before, but they are longer and involve more detail than my earlier musings. It remains, as it may always be, a difficult intellectual task for me to focus in on key analytic elements in these memos.

### Preflexivity

Preflexivity is a contraction of “prior reflexivity in which personal experience and the narrative that stems from it preceded the fieldwork and interaction with respondents” (Brown 1996:85). Preflexivity is useful in accessing the entwinement of personal history with research. Writing and working from memory of personal experiences which relate to one’s research field bring a researcher into the writing of ethnography. This methodological tool also brings the ethnographer into the research moments associated with her project.

I was a poet long before I became a sociologist. My formal socialization as a poet began when I was a preteen and began receiving scholarships to writing workshops, so my recollections of experiences with poets precede this ethnography by a decade. My identity and history as a writer shapes this body of work to a great extent. Through writing and thinking about recollections and giving them a place within this ethnography, I mean to honor the ethnographic writing process. I also mean to honor each moment of research in which I participate.

My past experiences as a poet influenced how I initially approached the field and affects my encounters with others in the field to this day. My experience as a poet contributes greatly to how I am viewed and accepted- or not- by other poets. Memory is an especially important tool for me in this field because it is through remembering what it was like for me to become socialized as a poet that I clue into details in the field which could easily remain undetected by people who have not been through such social processes. I am also well positioned to ask questions about whether the details from the

field which are- or were- significant to me have any impact whatsoever on the poets with whom I share this field.

One acknowledgement I share with Brown regarding reflexivity is that it is a technique that runs an inherent risk of romanticization. I interpret romanticization to mean making history out to seem better than it actually was. Whenever one involves herself in research that is based- even in part- in memory, she runs the risk of focusing her attention on the details she associates with romantic notions or positive feelings. I would like to pose the counterpoint that it is more likely the case that I remember most vividly the details, moments, and interactions that have had a strong impact or have made a strong impression on me. This is the case whether these impacts and impressions are romanticized and positive, or strong in other emotive ways. It would seem that people tend not to forget the events, people, interactions, or moments that make them feel angry, isolated, embarrassed, or excluded any more so than they forget those that have made them feel happy, safe, comforted, or accepted.

### *Phenomenological Interviewing*

Another technique I use for this project is a phenomenological approach to conducting interviews in the field. In an account about how the postmodern turn changes the way we approach, conduct, and report information from interview research, Fontana (2000) outlines a theoretical lineage for phenomenologically informed interviews. This style of interviewing is informed by symbolic interactionism and carries the underlying assumption that as members of the same society, we share a common stock of knowledge (Fontana 2000:165-166). Instead of using a classic modernist approach to interviewing, whereby my interview partner or partners would be envisioned as objects for my



questioning, I see this study's participants as people who tend to have differing personal points of view regarding topics related to our shared experiences.

It just so happens that I tend to spend a lot of time thinking about these topics because I am intensely researching this scene. Through a phenomenological creation of researcher- participant partnership, an ethical dilemma about power in field based relationships begins to become addressed. We clearly have different interests in this research, especially since acknowledging that I have something specific- namely a PhD- to gain from it. There is an unequal distribution of power between us, but I argue that partnerships which are truly equal on all levels are, at best, an abstract ideal. The best I can offer toward equality is an awareness of my position of relative power and a commitment to engaging phenomenologically with participants on the scene.

In an example of applied phenomenological interviewing, Gardner describes it as a faithful reconstruction of conversations which occur naturally (Gardner 2004:162). He uses this technique in research at music festivals to gather interview information from participants who he may not come into contact with again for several years, and to converse with folks in a way that does not impinge on their enjoyment of the music which takes place concurrent to interviews (Gardner 2004:162). Poetry readings are similar to live music; they involve people on a stage, engaging in artistic expression for the enjoyment of an audience. Similarly to Gardner's use of phenomenological interviewing as a way of respecting peoples' enjoyment of music, this approach renders me able to gather interview material while people enjoy poetry.

In phenomenological interviews, questions become a part of banter. Interviews take place in episodic conversations instead of being contrived as conceptually specific events.

An interview is a part of what happens as interactions unfold in the moment. This banter is a normal mode of interaction between poets, especially at Sunny's where the festive environment is laid back, loud, and interactive. I find episodic conversations to be a way of engaging about what is going on that is non disruptive and low key.

Instead of running the risk of objectifying the participants of this ethnography in my interviews, by engaging conversationally I instead run the risk of not doing enough to acknowledge the power I wield in and through our interactions. By doing what I can to blur the boundaries between myself and other poets in Sacramento, I create situations where we work together to create "co-contingent dramatic realizations" (Fontana 2000:166), "organizing accounts" of stories and "coherent explanations" from the fragments of our everyday lives (Fontana 2000:166). Ultimately, I decide what of these realizations, stories, and explanations make it into ethnographic reports. It is only the interviewing process that is affected by use of this phenomenological approach, not the ultimate distribution of power between sociological researcher and the sociologically researched.

### *Social Poetics*

Social poetics comes from an epistemology that is informed by poststructuralist thought. This involves recognition that there are many truths and that sometimes multiple truths can seem to be congruent, while at other times they can appear to be in conflict. Poststructuralism also involves a fundamental understanding that subjectivity is constructed through language. This perspective is something I feel particularly comfortable with since it seems to me that- especially as a writer- the power of language hardly warrants further explanation.

In regard to poststructuralism, truth is like language in that it is context relevant; it is time, place, and perspective specific. There are also many valid ways of coming to and communicating knowledge. Within sociology, this takes the form of writing and research practices that are subversive to the metanarrative of science. Forms of presenting sociological information that are alternative to scientific convention- such as performance (Denzin 2003, Jones 2003, Latham 1997) and other evocative representations (Ellis 1997, Richardson 1994a) including narrative writing (Arrington 2004, Brown 1996, Maines 1993, Richardson 1990, Van Maanen 1988) and social poetics (Denzin 1996, Richardson 1994b)- can be referred to as experimental representation practices (Richardson 1994a:520).

Within this context, experimental is not meant to imply scientific experiments with control groups, variables, or scientists in white lab coats with clipboards in their arms. Here, experimental means alternative, different, or against existing scientific- or scientific- norms. Working from within the postmodern paradigm, researchers who engage in experimental representation raise important questions: what is the position of the author as knower in relation to the researched; how does the author position herself as a knower and teller; what problems of authority, subjectivity, authorship, and reflexivity are raised by the text; how does the representational form relate to the information being delivered (Richardson 1994a:520)? For some kinds of knowledge, knowledge of a poetry scene for example, alternative forms of representation may actually be considered preferable (Richardson 2002:415).

One reason for this might be that from within the context of postmodernism, the boundaries between various academic and artistic disciplines are often broken. This is

how we become able to move beyond academic defensiveness into moments where we are able to acknowledge sociologists who write poetry and poets who write sociologically. It is my opinion that Richardson gets to the heart of the matter when she connects poetry to ethnography in pointing out that “the question is not how a lyric poem is ethnographic, but rather, when is lyric poetry not ethnographic” (1994b:12)?

Developed largely from Richardson’s assertion that narrative is crucial to the understanding and communication of the sociological (1990:117), my practice of social poetics is praxis oriented.

Denzin points out that ethnography, writing, and theory are inseparable practices, that writers of ethnography are also writers of theory (1996:526). Poetry is how I put theory and thoughts into action. It is how I delve deep into my Self toward understanding; how I problematize and interrogate notions of what is reliable, valid, and truthful information. As you can see, writing is very much a method of inquiry for me (Richardson 1994a). Writing poetry is a way of finding out about myself, about the poetry scene in Sacramento, and about the conceptual connections between community and scene. Richardson points out that writing, itself, is a way of knowing (1994a:516). It is both a method of discovery and a method for sociological analysis. Furthermore, social poetics can be- as it is within the framework of this project- an invaluable autoethnographic component.

The narrative and poetic snippets included throughout the body and appendices of this dissertation are self-reflexive representations of my curiosities, understandings, impressions and feelings related to my ethnographic work on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. I follow Richardson in her assertion that valuing this personal, poetic sociological

text is linked to the feminist notion of the personal as political (2002). My breaking down of mythic barriers between truth that is valid as personal knowledge and that which is supposedly acceptable as public knowledge makes a political statement. What matters to the individual- in this case myself as the ethnographic researcher- may also matter to others, may also offer you access to a way of finding some truth.

When it comes to research and autoethnographic practices like social poetics, discourse becomes intellectually sticky when the necessary topic of criteria for judgment comes up. How can we judge the merit, usefulness, or quality of poetic text? In agreement with Holman-Jones (2005), I believe that Richardson's criteria for judging creative analytic practices (2000) may be helpful for addressing these kinds of concerns. Richardson's (2000) criteria are broken down into five different components: substantive contribution to an understanding of social life; aesthetic merit; reflexivity; emotional and intellectual impact; and clear expression of a cultural, social, or communal sense of reality.

In judging this ethnography, I encourage you to use these five categories as a general guide whenever they seem helpful. Along with asking yourself if this dissertation makes a substantive contribution to an understanding of social life, I also ask you to consider the honesty of my reflexivity. Do any parts of this dissertation make an emotional or intellectual impact on you? What aesthetic merit do my character sketches, poems, or narrative have? Am I in any way successful in representing the cultural, social, or communal reality of the poetry scene in Sacramento?

### *Before and After Vegas*

Two distinct stages of fieldwork support this ethnography; one stage spans the years of 2000-2002 and another 2006-2008. I refer to these stages of fieldwork as Before Vegas and After Vegas because they involve time I spent in the field before I left Sacramento to move to Las Vegas for a PhD program, and after I left Las Vegas to return to the field. Since I am in pursuit of a PhD, everything in my life from fieldwork to my basic orientation in space and time occur in reference to my doctoral program in Las Vegas. Poets in Sacramento knew I was headed there long before I left; ask me questions about the poetry scene in Las Vegas; have anticipated my support in planning a series of readings Sacramento poets did in Las Vegas in 2006; and continue to talk to me both about Las Vegas and about work on this dissertation.

From 2003-2006, I maintained only intermittent engagement with fellow poets in Sacramento due to intense university responsibilities which required my full time presence in Las Vegas. Sincere efforts to keep up with the field during these years include: stopping by open mic readings several dozen times when I was in town and reading poetry on the mic several times, working from afar as co-edit a zine with two women who maintained a strong presence on the scene in Sacramento in 2003 & 2004, co-hosting a zine release celebration for this project at "Poetry Unkempt" in 2004, collecting news articles about poets in Sacramento from on-line media sources, and habitual reading of The Collective's monthly newsletter. During this time I also wrote poetry although I did so independently from any poetry scene. I also continued to receive email announcements from several poets in Sacramento whom I became acquainted with through fieldwork.

I documented research experiences from my time in the field Before Vegas for the completion of an MA thesis. That project was a case study of a local poetry scene for a thesis about community poetry and politics. Fieldwork that I conducted After Vegas was done specifically in support of this doctoral dissertation. Before Vegas and After Vegas is not only how my experiences with the field are arranged in time, but also my professional, sociological, and intellectual development. No doubt the rigor of a doctoral program has had an impact on my ability to collect sociological data.

Indeed, some research moments associated with my return to the field were epiphanic and have been very telling about how things such as social status, scene recognition, and socialization work on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. There are continuities in -and beaks in continuity from- patterns and themes that I find in the field Before and After Vegas. The Sacramento Poetry Scene definitely changes over time in. Some, but hardly all, of this change can be accounted for by my development of my self, skills and research perspectives. I find this Before and After way of thinking about the field to be a useful activity for building and discovering useful information about this scene.

### *Pinning Down Poets*

My initial identification of the Sacramento Poetry Scene came from listening to other poets drop names and tell stories. When I was grappling for a topic for my MA thesis in 1999, “the local poetry community” came to mind. I imagined the poetry community- whatever that meant to me at that time- to be a field where I would be able to sustain long-term ethnographic research. Already aspiring toward a PhD, it felt important that I pursue a topic and conduct fieldwork in a field that would be stable for me over a long period of time.

Since few aspects of student life are stable, I realized that if I was going to pull off writing this ethnography, my field was going to need to be. Stability meant choosing a field in which I could envision myself stomaching intensive fieldwork all the way through ten years of graduate school, a field I would genuinely enjoy and be able to talk to lots of different people about after my formal education commenced. Not knowing anything about academics fund research at the time, stability meant accessing places where I could conduct meaningful research that involves no direct cost. I now understand that stability means tapping into a part of my identity that is so central to my self concept that it remains intact throughout the rigors of research, never tapping out or growing stale. Stability means turning to the things in my life that have always been and will always be constant. Poetry.

I approached the poetry scene in Sacramento with solid leads on where to find the places where poetry action takes place in this town, feeling confident that my writing and oration skills would help me gain acceptance. A phone book was all it took to figure out where Sunny's and the Poetry Collective are located. At my very first observation, I heard about other events happening at different venues. At the outset of this project, I went to almost every poetry happening in Sacramento that I caught wind of. This long list includes: Sunny's "Poetry Unkempt," a Tuesday night series at the Poetry Collective ("PC Tuesday"), the "Thursday Night Writer's Workshop" sessions also hosted by the Poetry Collective, event-based and short-running readings at various art galleries such as La Galleria De Luna and Terminated, events at local libraries and colleges, several different short-running series that took place in bars, small independent bookstore readings at places like The Book Pile or Jenny's Books, and freebie readings scheduled



on the community calendars of corporate booksellers like Barnes and Noble or Borders Books.

It took approximately six months of dedication to a wide field for me to narrow the scope back down to Sunny's "Poetry Unkempt" and "PC Tuesday" at The Poetry Collective, the two main sites of data collection for this ethnography. While I occasionally collect data from other venues, the vast majority of data comes from these two sites. Maintaining a consistent presence at "Poetry Unkempt" and "PC Tuesday" has, at times, been a big priority for me. On another hand, my attendance at other venues tends to be very sporadic and is usually motivated by specific reasons. For example, if someone from "Poetry Unkempt" with whom I am particularly connected is promoting an event happening at The Book Pile, or if a poet who is someone's friend is coming in from the Bay Area to read locally at a library event, I try to go if I can. I also meet poets for coffee or meals; go out for food or drinks with groups of poets after readings and attend private gatherings- which are sometimes referred to as salons- in peoples' homes.

"Poetry Unkempt" and "PC Tuesday" are the two main sites for this project for three reasons. First, they are both free public readings and this makes for affordable and potentially inclusive research. I can afford to commit to doing this research. Plus, poets are not excluded from my group of participants because events are cost prohibitive, which would likely be the case if I went to poetry workshops instead of open mics.

Second, these readings at Sunny's and The Poetry Collective take place weekly with few exceptions. This abundance of opportunity to conduct observations is consistent and reliable; it enables me to conduct long-term ethnographic research. Finally, these two venues have been running for the two longest spans of time when I compare them to any

other regular readings in Sacramento. Although there are various and conflicting accounts from different people, the consensus seems to be that “Poetry Unkempt” has been going on at Sunny’s for about fourteen years, and the Poetry Collective began in 1979. This long history means that poets know these two venues as the places to go for poetry and mingling with other poets in Sacramento.

Since I am interested in opening my pool of potential ethnographic participants as much as possible, I spend my time where the majority of local poets know to go for poetry. Aside from being referenced word-of-mouth by poets in Sacramento often, both venues run weekly ads in the independent newspaper, are included in a good number of local listservs and internet calendars, are cited often in local news articles, and are sometimes featured on local television. Taken together over time, I believe that these spaces create a reasonable composite image of the breadth and diversity of poetry that is publicly accessible in Sacramento. By collecting data consistently over the years at these two sites, I have come to learn and experience a lot of what goes on with poets around town.

I hear about local controversies, gossip, news, projects, publications, and successes as they occur. I also cross paths with, observe, and know of the greatest number of local poets I believe to be possible by one researcher working alone. It is important not to take the idea of a composite image of what public poetry in Sacramento looks like too far. In actuality, The Poetry Collective and Sunny’s are two incredibly different places.

“PC Tuesday” and “Poetry Unkempt” are very different poetry venues and it is often the case that different poets show up in each of these spaces. Poets who involve themselves regularly in public poetry around Sacramento –not audience members, guests,

or poets who rarely drop by readings- tend to indicate through casual conversation that they more or less in allegiance with one venue or the other. Although both readings occur on weeknights at places located within a fifteen blocks radius, there are very few local poets who either attend both venues with regularity or who rotate back and forth between the two often. The differences between these venues are most definitely noted and discussed among poets in Sacramento.

*Entrée and Acceptance into the Field Before Vegas*

From January to July 2000, my main challenge was to enter the field and gain acceptance from scene participants. During this time, I conducted observations at approximately fifteen different venues in order to figure out who is who, where people tend to go for what, and how specific venues operate. Since some organizers and venue owners want to attract a sizeable audience, poetry events are sometimes quite large. Size varies greatly, usually between twelve to fifty people, with a hundred people being a good turnout for a special event such as a movie screening, black tie fund raiser, or retirement party.

Since no one seemed to notice my earliest presence on the poetry scene in Sacramento, I refer to this stage of fieldwork as unobtrusive. People were often friendly in introducing themselves to me, but no one asked extensive questions. No one seemed to remember me if we crossed paths a second time, seemed alarmed by or even necessarily interested in me or my reasons for being there. I remember feeling excited, almost sneaky like an undercover agent, a “real” sociologist.

I had concern that I would run into poets I already knew from poetry classes, workshops, or other public arts programs and be faced with explaining a project I had

little grasp of yet. However, I realized quickly during these first six months that I would only very rarely run into someone I had met through my involvement in poetry before beginning formal fieldwork. Only once during this time period did a poet I had met elsewhere respond to a smile or nod of recognition. This leads me to think that my eventual acceptance into the field is not overtly tied to any of my preexisting relationships. However, this is not to say that my cultural capital and ability to name drop, or to write and perform poetry had nothing to do with my acceptance into the scene. It had, I believe, everything to do with it.

### *Note Taking Practices*

Much to a fieldworker's delight, I learned quickly that it is perfectly acceptable and warrants no explanation to write short-hand, jotted notes while actually at poetry readings. Writers tend to carry paper and pens everywhere. In fact, I remember being socialized at a young age to think of jotted note taking as behavior that writers encourage. The guidelines I remember hearing over and over from writing teachers in junior high school- ironically before I was old enough to drive- is to keep a notebook "Even on the bedside table and especially in the car."

It is normal behavior for writers to scrawl notes at any moment when moved to do so. Seeing people writing in notebooks, on laptops, napkins, toilet paper, on the backs of flyers or other pilfered pieces of paper is not uncommon at readings in Sacramento. So, aside from one exception I explain at length in the methodology chapter beneath a section with the mirror title "Entrée and Acceptance into the Field," my note taking is not a problem. For many writers, notebooks are security blankets; a way to help insure that

nothing important is forgotten. This creates the perfect circumstances for an ethnographer to do her fieldwork.

### *Participant Observation at Sunny's*

After July 2000 but Before Vegas, I moved from the position of “unobtrusive researcher” into the role of “participant observer.” As tends to be the tradition at Sunny's, a poet's “first time” on the microphone is often a noted, celebrated, and applauded event. I explain more about this phenomenon and tell the story of my own first time reading on the scene in Sacramento in Chapter 4. After a rough first encounter with a host at Sunny's, it ultimately took about two months of reading at “Poetry Unkempt” every week before I started meeting poets there.

I should explain that in the vernacular of this- or any- poetry scene, “reading” does not necessarily mean reading words from a page and it definitely does not mean reading quietly to oneself from a book. Reading means performing, reciting, or reading ones own poetry straight off the page into the microphone for a public audience. For example, a routine question that poets ask each other in greeting as a venue is filling up for a weekly reading is “are you reading tonight?” At this point, a poet either offers an affirmative response or is compelled by social norms to offer an excuse as to why they are not participating in the event in this way. If for some reason an individual intends to read another poet's work, this is also the point in time at which a “yes” response is modified to say something such as “but I thought I'd read from the new Norton anthology instead of doing my own stuff this time.”

Although full acceptance took much longer, the process of becoming accepted by other scene participants began after I read each week for two consecutive months.

Acceptance, for me, became marked when hosts started offering me a pass at the open mic sign in sheet before other open mic poets chose their performance slots. Acceptance became marked when the waitresses started to recognize me, offer to run my bills on tab and give me free refills of coffee. I knew I was closer to real acceptance on the scene when interactions that signify specific recognition or a quality of deeper intimacy began to take place with regularity. For example, people began greeting me personally, acknowledging me by name, and hosts started stating that they expect me to sign up for open-mics, people asked frequently about my progress with this project, complimented my poetry and placed requests for copies of specific pieces.

I also began to find myself receiving invitations to go to Church's, a seedy bar across the street from Sunny's. Church's is usually empty at night but serves as a state capitol politico networking spot during the lunch hour and early evening. Poets go there to hang out after "Poetry Unkempt" ends between 10 and 11 pm. If a poet garners status on the scene or if someone wants to get to know them better, then they are invited to these gatherings.

I have also been included in more exclusive ad-hoc late night house parties after readings. These gatherings usually involve eating bread and cheese, drinking red wine and reading poems to each other in living rooms; partying until near dawn when the group disperses with piles of people asleep on the floor. I have been warmly invited to poets' featured readings at other venues and greeted with face time when I attend. I was asked to feature my own poetry at a reading one night and have developed several important friendships. The poet friends that I met in the field Before Vegas were Rag Dog, Carmen, and Richard.

### *Participant Observation at The Collective*

Gaining acceptance into the poetry scene through participation at The Poetry Collective is a different game altogether from gaining acceptance through participation at Sunny's. Perhaps one reason for this is because "PC Tuesday" is a formal event run by a small nonprofit organization, whereas "Poetry Unkempt" has a grassroots feel and is run by an informal, social, and loosely defined group of folks. I define The Poetry Collective as a formal organization because they compete for small grants, have formal 401c3 nonprofit status, an oversight board, and an ever changing mass of organizational resources. Over the course of this project, this list of resources has included a storage unit, interns, shelves of poetry books for lending to members, a membership base, funds, a website, blog, computers, office space and furniture, a phone number and mailing address, annual fundraising events, and several publications for which they are responsible.

Organizationally speaking, Sunny's has two separate meanings. On one hand Sunny's is a legitimate for-profit business, a small independently owned deli that supports the owner and several minimum wage part-time employees. In another sense Sunny's is an informal community center, an art space, a gathering spot. "Sunny's" is also a reference or a locator in conversations between poets who refer to Sunny's when they otherwise mean "Poetry Unkempt."

So, to gain acceptance into a poetry space run by a formal organization, I took what could be called a bureaucratic approach to fieldwork. I scheduled a meeting with Missy Jean, the woman who, from what I could tell, assumed responsibility for keeping things going at The Collective. She is also someone I had been hearing about for several years

from an old mentor. Whether Missy Jean would have made the time to meet with me so quickly and regularly, made so many arrangements for my participation, and taken such a keen interest in my work had I not referenced my old mentor- a man who is also an old mentor of hers- is something I can not know.

Missy Jean and I met for the first time at the theater building, or what I call a “clinical and impersonal” setting for public poetry in Sacramento. The theater building is a midtown practice space that The Poetry Collective shared with a local theater company during the years Before Vegas. The Poetry Collective rented space for cheap from the theater company, space where they housed their small library collection, held “PC Tuesday,” and hosted special events. Missy Jean and I met for the first time in a small, cramped office and she asked me a lot of questions about this project. She suggested I attend a Poetry Collective board meeting the following week at Bruno’s. Bruno’s is where board meetings were held back then, a casual Italian restaurant next door to the theater building.

At my first board meeting, Missy Jean vouched for my credibility and swiftly networked me with key members of The Poetry Collective. It probably did not hurt my legitimacy one bit that one of the “at large” board members turned out to be my childhood mentor, Rebecca Malison. Once I was “in,” it seemed like an instant acceptance. I did not have to put the several months’ worth of time into building recognition that was necessary at Sunny’s.

This was likely, at least in part, because The Poetry Collective relies on volunteer labor. I was viewed as a potential organizational resource. Before Vegas, my volunteer labor did help keep The Collective running on a week-to-week basis. I was anticipated at



“PC Tuesday” every week, sometimes referred to by other known poets as an intern, board member, or volunteer. Poets who regularly attended “PC Tuesday” came to know me quickly.

My acceptance at The Poetry Collective was pretty clearly marked after that initial board meeting. Another key indicator of my acceptance was that about a year into my fieldwork, The Poetry Collective asked me, without prompting, if they could schedule a Tuesday reading event “for my research?” I used the event to conduct a casual focus group with the poets who showed up that week. My photo and a poem I wrote also appeared on the cover of their monthly newsletter in 2003, to promote me in a celebratory featured reading before my move away from Sacramento. I knew for sure that I had been accepted into the folds of whatever politics may or may not exist at The Poetry Collective when I realized that people spoke frankly in front of me about the histories, fallouts, and antics between poets in Sacramento.

### *Re-entering the Field After Vegas*

I refer to the collection of moments and experiences I have spent regaining acceptance into the poetry scene in Sacramento as “re-entering” the field. These moments are characterized by eerie feelings of déjà vu, as I see things I have seen happen before, but many of the faces are different this time. I also find that remaining consciously open to new field material is more difficult than I ever imagined. Major tasks I associate with re-entering the field include: rekindling relationships with poets I did not see much of for three years; figuring out what has happened to poets who played parts in my fieldwork Before Vegas and have since disappeared; gauging how people who came to the scene after I left for Las Vegas react to, ignore, or otherwise come to make sense of my

presence; assessing who remembers what about me and this research project from my fieldwork Before Vegas and who is nonresponsive to my return; and fielding curiosities about me by using relationships which benefit from trust I built Before Vegas as a tool for gaining credibility.

Hand in hand with my feelings of déjà vu, it strikes me upon re-entry that the field remains the same in some ways. The majority of the poets who dominate stage time and all of the people who serve as hosts- a visible role which denotes status and recognition on the scene- are thirty to sixty year old men. A status hierarchy persists and seemingly contributes substantially to meaningful details of the scene such as: who gets how much stage time and when, whose names get dropped both in casual conversation and from the mic by event hosts and poets, who sits with or near whom at poetry readings, who associates with whom outside of poetry reading settings, and who is given invitations to invite-only gatherings. Several differences about the field which catch my attention After Vegas are that some of the key players have changed and some poets who were once characters in this ethnography now make effort to avoid me. Just as I would expect with any process involving coming and going, new poets have arrived and gained acceptance into the field while I was in Las Vegas and old acquaintances have fallen, drifted, or walked away.

### *The New Poets After Vegas*

Now that I have become a participant on the poetry scene in Sacramento and have gone away for a good length of time, I return once again in search of a certain kind of peculiar acceptance which is pertinent to fieldwork. In making sense of this component of re-entry, I find myself with questions about the grounds for and practices indicative of

acceptance by the people on this scene. For clues, I look to those poets who I do not already know from past fieldwork, a category of people I refer to as “the new poets.” The new poets are people who gained acceptance into this scene while I was in Las Vegas; they are not necessarily people who are new to poetry, nor are they necessarily associated with any poetic movement or institution dubbed to be a new school of poetry. Otherwise put into the vernacular that a number of Sacramento poets use in conversation with me, the people who I call new poets are not necessarily “new school” or “old school,” they are simply new to me and to process of this ethnography.

#### *Changes in Receptivity After Vegas*

Gauging changes in poets’ receptivity to me After Vegas plays an important part in making sure that my presence is not obtrusive or unwanted in peoples’ lives. Cues such as eye contact, body language, the use of physical space in the positioning of bodies through seating, standing, and movement, and a lack of verbal engagement in the event of my pursuit for conversation are all concrete behaviors which are useful to me in the gauging of receptivity. Although learning about why I am being avoided or unengaged would certainly be helpful to my research; it is my opinion that it is important for a researcher to follow others’ cues as much as possible when in the field. I would feel too aggressive if I were approaching people who send signals that they do not want to be approached. Gauging receptivity also helps to ensure that participation in this ethnography, and the choice to engage with a known researcher, is voluntary.

#### *Temporary and Partial Anonymity*

Aside from friendly greetings, quick conversations and fleeting affections with a small handful of poets who continue to acknowledge me from my participation Before

Vegas, I am unknown to the vast majority of the poets who participate on the scene in Sacramento. I conducted observations with a low level of participation from December 2006- January 2008. By low level of participation, I mean that I did not read poetry on the microphone more than a few times or initiate conversations with anyone who I did not already know from Before Vegas. I also hesitated to follow up with introductions to new poets, instead watching to see how scene participants reacted to my more passive presence.

This partial anonymity strategy for re-entering the field has some consistency with the exploratory period of fieldwork Before Vegas, the period of time which marks my initial entry into the field. Since I was brand new to the field back then, I knew very little about what to look for in regard to the subtleties of how this scene operates. In terms of this research, I feel lucky that I was able to revert to the status of being largely unknown in the eyes of the vast majority of scene participants at a point where I had already gained advanced understanding of communication and interactions between poets on this scene. In other words, I saw a lot more the second time around and even more so from people who are unaware that I have a good deal of context for what I am seeing.

The strategy of partial anonymity is useful in positioning me to gain insight into the reception of scene participants toward newcomers. I learn how newcomers are received by half-posing as one. Additionally, remaining unknown to most other poets on the Sacramento scene provides me with a fresh lay of the land. I avoid relying on old information, which would be taking the risk of missing details which are important to this ethnography due to my own overconfidence in stale knowledge or impressions based on past experiences.

### Key Informant After Vegas

After Vegas, my relationship with Rag Dog has taken on newfound importance. Before Vegas I was reluctant to name or use anyone as a key informant for fear that overemphasizing some field relationships would alienate others. No doubt that strengthening key relationships makes for great data, but Before Vegas I was nervous about keeping up with the fieldwork. Now that I have been engaged with the poetry scene in Sacramento for more than eight years, I feel secure and comfortable making more active decisions in my field-based relationships.

As one of the poets with whom I kept in intermittent contact between 2003 and 2006, Rag Dog and I share a unique sense of continuity regarding each others' lives. We share personal information about our experiences, feelings, thoughts, and opinions with each other. Rag Dog is also a major key player across venues on the Sacramento Poetry Scene; he gets a lot of local press, invitations to read, respect, and general recognition from other poets. He is the only person I have ever seen make an assembled audience wait a half an hour because they ran late to a reading where their attendance as an audience member was anticipated. Rag Dog operates on what he calls "poet time," which appears to me as a lackadaisical approach to coming and going from dates and poetry events, which is routinely accompanied by various states of obvious drug induced relaxation.

As key informant to this ethnography, I value Rag Dog's: openness and availability, dependability, long history as a well networked poet in Sacramento, his insider view of poet scandals and stories, hospitality, and what feels like genuine interest and willingness to invest his time in both me and this project. Rag Dog is a person who has a strong personality and a big presence, attributes which sometimes factor into some of the

personality conflicts and public confrontations which take place on the poetry scene.

Given these things, I find his ability to keep out of trouble and act as a peacekeeper to be both refreshing and most useful to me as a researcher. These are two of the reasons why he is so appealing to me.

After Vegas and the opportunity to use some retrospective reflection, I realize that being seen or publicly viewed as being aligned with, recognized as being friends with, or fond of Rag Dog is unlikely to create trouble for me with other poets in this field. Inviting him into my life and research as a key informant and trusted friend was a conscious decision. Making this choice gives me a definite outlet for collaboration, a specific place to go when I need ideas for fieldwork from someone else who has an intimate understanding of this poetry scene. I tend to go to Rag Dog for clarification, for his perspective regarding some of my more abstract thoughts and questions related to poetry in Sacramento. He is also someone I go to for information when I hear rumors, want to know more, or have questions about gossip I have heard. Rag Dog always knows what is going on the poetry scene in Sacramento, or at least he can surely find things out with reliable speed.

### *Conclusion*

This project is about learning about the similarities, differences, and conceptual connections between communities and scenes. In Chapter 2, I explored the concept of scene by contextualizing it as a transition away from the concept of community. Through conceptualizing the places, events, and groups of poets in Sacramento who are included in this ethnography as a scene, I hope to explore what a sociology of scenes might have to offer to Community Studies. On a personal level, this ethnography becomes a building of

my understanding about belonging both in the sense of myself as a poet and researcher, and in terms of other poets in Sacramento who belong to a meaningful collective.

Ethnography is a powerful tool for developing insight into social phenomenon that we might recognize or have a sense of but have a difficult time naming, describing in concrete detail, or talking about outright. Scenes operate like this. We know they exist but have a hard time putting our fingers on them. For example, we might not be able to easily explain what the difference is between regularly occurring events and events that come together to form a scene, or what the difference is between a grouping of loosely affiliated people who live in the same place and a group of loosely affiliated people who come together to form a scene. Being recognized as affiliated with a scene can carry a negative connotation, it can involve a certain downgrading of the importance of an individual's social participation. In this way the terms "scenester" and "hipster" are often lodged as insults against people accused of being somehow less authentic.

I attentively use the tools of ethnography, my own scene participation, and self reflection as ways to view this social phenomenon from an inside point of view. This approach to research enables me to address key areas of sociological relevance such as scene socialization and interaction, social structure and inclusion. In a theoretical sense, this project is a conceptual development of scenes and an exploration of how they relate to communities. In Chapter 4, I bring you into research moments as I have lived them. I share self reflective moments to explore some of the building blocks which help me begin to understand this scene.

## CHAPTER 4

### AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS

The focus of this chapter is autoethnographic analysis of data from the Sacramento Poetry Scene. This includes focus on the methodology I employ at different points throughout this project. Methodology refers to the way that I use the methods outlined in Chapter 2. Joey Sprague explains that methodology is where philosophy and action meet. Through careful, conscious reflection upon how we do research, we expose our research choices and ask important questions about how power operates in social relationships (Sprague 2005:5). As a feminist methodologist, self disclosure and active discussion about the ways power operates as a part of research are important components of my ethics. These reflection practices are also one way for me to account for some of the ways that social power operates on the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

I am inclined toward a central aspect of postmodern thought which considers knowledge to be attainable only within a partial sense, only from within specific, contextualized situations. Community Studies, a rubric under which this study falls, are noted for having a holistic treatment of social relations that is apparent from their emphasis on context (Crow 2000). In short, I consider it to be part of my job to offer the most complete picture of this research possible. My ideas, interpretations, and analysis of



the information I gather from the field is based on my reactions to and ruminations upon field experiences.

My autoethnographic voice incorporates a narrative writing style. Laurel Richardson's definition of narrative includes that it is a display of the goals and intentions of human actors, a humanizing of time, and an act that allows us to contemplate our actions (117:1990). Narrative is present everywhere- in how we talk and write and mentally process social experience- it is both a mode of reasoning and a mode of representation (Richardson 1990:118). Richardson goes so far as to argue – and I tend to agree with her- that narrative is actually the best way to understand the experiences of others because it is how we understand our own lives (1990:133). Narrative writing proliferates at the crossroads where sociological perspective and poetics meet; Dana Gioia names a broad revival of narrative among young writers as one of the ten primary aspects of a new American poetry (1993).

Within the social sciences, narrative writing is prized for its analytical sharpness and reader accessibility (Crow 2000), and for exposing a metanarrative of science that is counterproductive for social inquiry (Richardson 1990). Far too many sociologists to catalogue here have successfully written about research using a multitude of narrative writing techniques (Arrington 2004, Bass Jenks 2002, Brown 1996, Denzin 1987, Ellis 1995 & 1997, Holman-Jones 1999 & 2005, Rambo 2005, Richardson 1994a & 1994b, Shank 1994, Warren 2001). Denzin sees new writers- or those who use narrative, autoethnography and socio-poetics as tools for writing social science- as social scientists who address a central question about what constitutes truth. These questions are of key concern for sociologists who take seriously the development of a postmodern perspective.

New writers locate the boundaries between fact and fiction- or problematize what differentiates fact from fiction- within lived experience (Denzin 1996:527).

Ellis explains that autoethnographic projects are one response to the dilemma of postmodern truth. Autoethnography is about accepting that when one moves their thinking farther away from concern about whether or not all of the ethnographic details are “right” and toward a showing of interaction, readers are able to participate more fully in the emotional process of research (Ellis 1997:127). Now that we are in what Maines refers to as sociology’s “narrative moment” (1993), our focus shifts away from the delivery of social facts and toward storytelling. In this chapter, I establish a textual approach for the telling of some of the research stories that have come with this project.

Recollections from the field and adapted field notes provide most of the information for the stories you will find throughout the remainder of this chapter. Autoethnographic narrative and field note excerpts are offset from the rest of the text by indentation from the left hand page margin. Some of the writing tools that I use in this chapter include: self reflexive dialogue about particular field experiences, dialogue with and illustration of details about characters from the scene, focus on the emotional aspects of field encounters, and attention to environmental details. The three stories told here are arranged in congruence with the three subtopic themes of scenes that I explored in Chapter 2: identity, space, and participation.

The first story I tell in this chapter is about scene participation. It is a recollection of the first time I read my poetry on a microphone on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. My first reading took place about six months after I entered the field and was quite unnerving, but not for reasons you might expect. The second story I offer is about scene space and the

entitlement that some people feel they have to behave authoritatively within it. This story is about a difficult relationship I have with a host at The Collective's "PC Tuesday" and unfolds through a series of unwelcoming encounters I have experienced upon re-entering the field After Vegas. The final story I tell here is couched in reflexivity about my own identity as a woman and as a feminist in relation to "The Dirty Old Men" on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. Here, I tell about the first time I was openly identified as a feminist by scene participants.

*A Grain of Salt= A Grain of Truth*

In an article titled "Ten Lies of Ethnography: Moral Dilemmas of Field Research" (1993), Fine discusses various aspects of the "underside" of qualitative research. Fine points out that although topics such as animosity and sexual intimacy in the field are very much a part of social research, they are rarely mentioned in social science literature. Images of ethnographers as honest, open, passive, and having precise observational abilities are based on partial truths and self deceptions (1993:269). Even when conscientiously compiled, quotes taken from the field are- at the same time- both true and false. Instead of taking them as verbatim representations, such quotes are better thought of as being "along the lines" of what was said, a researcher's interpretation of the words of others (1993:278).

I bring up Fine's various points about the lies of ethnography here because I want to acknowledge how messy and seemingly incomplete the fieldwork for this project has been for me. What I am able to offer is insight into my own interpretation of the Sacramento Poetry Scene, partial truths which are obscured by whatever self deceptions I am unable to recognize or overcome. In most cases, the quotes from scene participants

that are included in this dissertation are recollections from my jotted notes, or they are taken from field notes in which I was able to write down what someone said as they said it. I do not want to leave you with the impression that I used a tape recorder to record conversations or recorded peoples' words word-for-word.

### *Participation*

How do poets in Sacramento come to be recognized and acknowledged by others on the scene? As a researcher who had been conducting unobtrusive observations at Sunny's for roughly six months, signing up to read my own poetry on the microphone seemed like an obvious answer to this question. One's first reading on a microphone at a regular running venue is a rite of passage of sorts, a kind of poetic coming out. An individual's routine participation on the mic at one specific venue is one way that scene participants can come to know an individual; it gives folks some form of common ground to start building relationships.

For a person to become accepted into the social networks that make up the Sacramento Poetry Scene, they need to first offer something about themselves up to the group. Poetry is the common language spoken here. People come to each other to make casual conversation, to make comments of appreciation for one another's poetry, during the intermission breaks and periods of time leading up to or following a reading. It is through this kind of direct contact that people receive invitations to after event gatherings or to socially exclusive events which are not mentioned on general circulation fliers or in event announcements delivered in public forums. Such conversations are also where personal invitations are made between poets to one another's upcoming featured readings or to public poetry events being hosted in other locations.

It would be hard not to notice that a lot of name dropping takes place in these quick conversations. I have also overheard people talking to each other about the books they carry with them. Books, notebooks, and knowledge about other poets become social props- ways to convey cultural capital- at poetry readings. Regardless of what the conversations are about, who approaches whom for conversation is a source of information about existing social hierarchies on the scene. For example, one way that I came to know I had become accepted on the scene was when long standing, well known scene participants began approaching me for pleasantries instead of the other way around.

Yet, how did I know when it was time for me to approach a public microphone in terms of the field research I was conducting? Well, my field notes had become repetitious, my concepts saturated. Interacting with and engaging in inquisitive conversations with the other people at the readings seemed like a necessary next step for this research. I had found that since most poetry events involve sitting and listening to a performance, much like attending a play or live music event, it can be awkward to find openings to begin conversations with strangers. Carrying volumes of poetry around with me had not produced the kind of conversational interaction I had hoped that it would.

#### *First Time Readings and the Phenomenon of "Special" Applause*

As I mentioned above, any mingling that takes place at poetry readings tends to happen during intermissions called "breaks," or before and after readings. Although occasionally someone shows up stag, most poets either arrive with others or gravitate to people whom they already know. I felt hesitant and insecure about dropping the names of poets I knew to others because I was concerned that this behavior might make people feel like I was consciously being intimidating or trying to show off. It became pretty obvious

to me from observing the readings that my other option for becoming included on the poetry scene would be to put my poetry out there to others from the microphone.

Reading “on the mic” is how poets on the scene in Sacramento refer to this act of participation. It is about making a public acknowledgement of and reinforcing the collective perception that everyone involved in the poetry scene engages in the same activity; the writing and public reading of one’s own writing. A few people I made mention of in my field notes made it a point after attending “Poetry Unkempt” for several consecutive weeks to sign up for open mic slots specifically to read poems written by poets whom they admire. In each case, the person exclaimed to the audience that they are not poets themselves but are, instead, “admirers” and “lovers” or “supporters” of poetry. What interests me about these observations of non-poets’ first readings, is that their gestures of scene participation and acknowledgement of the collective activity seem as important to audience members as does participation from people who read their own original poetry. What keys me into this scene acceptance of non-poets who read others’ poetry on the mic is the presence of “special” first-time reader applause.

On the poetry scene, it is customary for audiences to recognize first time readers with a round of special, extra enthusiastic, supportive applause. This is especially the case at Sunny’s “Poetry Unkempt.” Here, the host will usually ask any reader whom they do not recognize something along the lines of, “Is this your first time reading here?” Any affirmative response is met with the host calling to the audience for a round of first time reader applause. This applause which is sometimes invoked for other reasons but consistently occurs for first time readers, involves hooting and whooping, clapping, the ringing of a cow bell, shouting, and banging on tables or clinking silverware against

glasses. The first time reader's oration is subsequently followed up with a second round of special recognition applause. Non-poet first time readers receive the same first time reader applause and recognition- both before and after their reading- that is given to any other first time reader.

While strategizing and thinking about my own scene participation, I thought about this special applause. It does not seem to matter if a poet has experience reading publicly elsewhere since, at "Poetry Unkempt," the point of special applause is to welcome anyone who is new to the stage at Sunny's. Since this ritual takes place as a matter of routine at "Poetry Unkempt," I chose to start reading my own work on the Sacramento Poetry Scene here instead of at The Poetry Collective. If nothing else, I figured people would likely note my presence as new to the stage and that this alone may generate openings for the conversations I hoped to have. It felt to me like I had a sort of research advantage in knowing that people tend to be extra nice and welcoming to first time readers.

This kindness toward first time readers may come from writers who empathize with the experience. I have heard first time readers say they felt "stage fright" or that they were too nervous to go through with it, and I have also seen people physically shake or be moved to tears by fear or nervousness at the microphone. Some hosts make encouraging statements to first time readers caught in such moments by saying things such as: "It's okay, take your time. We've all been there," "It's hard to get up here and read," or to the audience: "We all remember the first time we read aloud, let's show some support." Yet in my case, the first reading itself did not make me half as nervous as the realization that I

would need to find a way to explain my position as a poet doing sociological research on the scene in the conversations I assumed would follow soon after.

*My Own First Time, A Special Dizzy Ride*

I had some slight moment-of-jitters the first time I read at “Poetry Unkempt,” but more than anything I felt distracted by the realization that I had made what felt like a huge mistake. Hosts rotate by weeks out of the month at “Poetry Unkempt,” a schedule created to share the burden of keeping the venue running among several committed poets. On the night I signed up to read for my first time, the usual host was home sick and an occasional stand-in named Mike Dizzy manned the mic. Mike Dizzy is a controversial and confrontational character who I had been hearing rumors about for years. His is a name often dropped.

Mike Dizzy pops up a lot on the poetry scene in Sacramento because he has been organizing large scale, fairly high profile poetry events around town for more than twenty years. His events tend to involve attention from the local media and a decent amount of hype among local poets. Had I realized that Mike Dizzy was the man passing the open mic sign-in sheet around before “Poetry Unkempt” on this particular evening, I would have thought twice about reading. Here is the story of my first time reading. It includes recollection from my field notes that are contained by quotation marks, interspersed with my reflections upon these notes.

Sunny’s: 7-00 “Everything seems normal; Sunny’s is bustling. Waitresses are serving dinner at 7:30pm, roast beef sandwiches and gyros half an hour before Poetry Unkempt starts. This place is already bursting at the seams. I’m here early enough to get a seat this time. Doing fieldwork on my feet for four hours gets hard, and it’s tough to write standing up. I order a cold juice to ease the heat. There’s sweat running from my neck, down my spine and in between my shoulder blades.



The air in here feels stagnant with so many bodies crammed into such a small place. Cozy my ass, not in the summer. They could use better air conditioning. Body smells and deli smells- peppers and salami and beer and coffee- don't mix so well.

Unlike every other time when I've passed it up, I accept the sign-in sheet and add my name to the bottom. A distracted man who I've never seen before is passing the sign in sheet around the room, from person to person. He is an energetic older man (50ish?) bent over a bit at the middle of his upper back. It looks like he has back problems or something because he never stands straight up. He wears jeans and a black t-shirt with tennis shoes, has a scruffy short beard, and it's kind of gross but he spits a little when he talks. I watch a woman wipe his spit from her cheek after signing up for open mic. He's also pretty loud... good at projecting.

He doesn't say anything to me, but instead puts the clipboard in front of my face and nods toward it. I watch him mingle around the room fifteen minutes before the reading is supposed to start, talking to people and shaking hands with folks. Why didn't he shake my hand? Should I have said something, introduced myself, or made an attempt at conversation? I didn't because we never made eye contact and he seemed pretty hurried about moving the sign-in sheet along to the next person.

This man gets on stage to start the event and spits toward people sitting at the foot of the stage. I'm glad to be sitting farther back, against the wall and away from his line of vision. He addresses some audience members directly from the stage with conversational comments like "Can you please be quiet, it's time to start," and "How's your girlfriend doing?" Introducing himself "for those who don't know" as Mike Dizzy, he explains that there will be no feature tonight since the feature and the scheduled host are both sick. Instead, he will read some of his own work after cycling through the first five open mic readers.

Oh. So, this is Mike Dizzy?

I'm oddly curious about this guy. Is he really as offensive as folks have warned me he would be? A spitting problem is hardly grounds for full offense. However, it quickly becomes apparent to me that the answer to this question is yes, and even more so. Outside of the context of his poetry, but in direct reference to it, he says things on the microphone like "I invented the word cock in the eighties. No one put the word cock in a poem until I started doing it. Now everyone loves to talk about cocks," and "I don't want to talk to you if you're an ugly woman, a man has no use for an ugly woman."

Over the course of his time on the mic, I watch several people get up and walk out. They appear disgusted, shaking their heads "no" and walking

with intense body language toward the door. “Good, get out of here if you can’t handle it” Mike Dizzy says to a departing plaid shirted back.”

I was so wrapped up in my field notes- noting the blatant misogyny and the discomfort I felt sitting there listening to him, watching him move around the room during the break- that it caught me off guard when he called my name to come to the microphone. As it turned out, I was the first open mic reader signed up to read after the break.

“Okay, quit being such shitheads, get back in here, sit down, and shut up. We have our next reader, Dana. Dana, I don’t know you. Have you read at Poetry Unkempt before?”

Sooooo uncomfortable! I dumbly nodded “no,” feeling struck by the awkwardness of this guy talking to me, calling me by my name. I wished he didn’t know my name. It doesn’t seem like he should get to say it out loud and I don’t even want him to EVER hear my poems!

I don’t remember what I read and I don’t remember reading. What I do remember is that Mike did not call for any first time reader applause, so my plan had backfired. I also remember, clear as day, Mike Dizzy getting down on his knees at the foot of the stage and literally kissing the tops of my sandaled feet after I read. “His dry scratchy lips were there on my skin before I could take a step down from the stage. My eyes searched frantically for a way out, a path into the small spaces within the sea of chairs. As I looked down, all I saw was a dirty white linoleum floor.”

“Jesus. We have here a poet-Goddess. Have you ever heard shit like this here before? And from such a gorgeous young woman! I worship you Dana; that was really something. Clap for her again, don’t you people know how to show appreciation for fine poetry? I swear some of you wouldn’t know good poetry if it hit you in the head.”

Like I wanted to hit him in the head. Mike Dizzy touched me! With his nasty, spitting lips. Without even asking, he kissed my feet. And I let him. I didn’t kick him in the face like I wanted to. This first time reading felt nothing like audience encouragement or appreciation for my participation. Instead, Mike Dizzy made me feel disgusted with everything. Like a sexualized object. Had I even remembered to tell the audience that I’m doing research? If I weren’t obligated to return for fieldwork, I would never have gone back there again. Not in a million years.

I honestly do not know if it is Mike’s poetry or his manner that offends me so much, but my aversion to him is- to this day- sincere. The hair on the back of my neck stands on end when he’s around. On that first night I read at Sunny’s it was everything I could do to

keep myself in a chair instead of walking out during his reading of his own poetry.

Initially, I felt guilty about not feeling open to- or safe enough to be open minded in- my field observations when Mike Dizzy was around.

In an article written as a co-narrative by Ellis and Berger, Ellis gives perspective that helps me to contextualize my repulsion to Mike Dizzy. Ellis mentions that qualitative researchers often focus on how positive or empathic feelings shape their interactions in the field, but that her inability to relate to her research participant instead illuminates how negative or differing emotions also shape ethnographic relationships (Ellis and Berger 2002:856). Although the kinds of emotions experienced by people doing interviews about bulimia- the topic of Ellis and Berger's project- likely differ from what comes up for me throughout the course of my fieldwork on a poetry scene, this idea that negative or differing emotions shapes ethnographic relationships resonates. Ellis points out that letting readers know how she emotionally reacts to her participants brings them into the interview context, it allows readers to watch the research unfold and imagine how they might respond in a similar situation (Ellis and Berger 2002:862).

Honesty about my disgust with Mike Dizzy and about my frustration with myself for going straight to the point that my status as a woman is more important to some people than anything else about me could ever be, is meant to offer a chance for you to imagine how you might respond in a similar situation. Would you have kicked Mike Dizzy in the face like I wanted to? Walked out before things could have gotten any worse? Chosen a different venue altogether for your research observations? Written the experience up in your field notes and done nothing else about it until the time came, years later, to write a

research story in the methodology chapter of your dissertation? Or, would you have done something else entirely?

### *Space*

As I discussed in the review of literature about space, there is a difference between space and place (Graham 1998). Places are official environments arranged to serve the interests of people who are in relative positions of social power whereas spaces exist in their own right as separate and apart from the exercise of power by people in positions in authority (Graham 1998:181). In this regard, I would like to be able to think about both of my research sites, Sunny's and The Poetry Collective, as spaces. My idealism leads me to imagine the environments where poetry happens as social arenas where identity and culture is created and maintained in a sheltered way, relatively free from an overarching sense of social control. However, I cannot do this.

My experience on the scene in Sacramento leads me to think of Sunny's "Poetry Unkempt" as an example of a poetry space and The Poetry Collective's "PC Tuesday" as an example of a poetry place. I feel at a loss for any way to explain this delineation other than to talk about seriousness. Folks are simply more serious about everything at The Collective than they are at Sunny's. At Sunny's there do not seem to be any pretensions about right or wrong ways to do, experience, or engage with poetry. At The Poetry Collective, everything from how the space is physically set up, to the poetry of the featured readers chosen to headline readings, to how the readings are hosted comes across to be as rigid and predefined. I would go so far as to agree with scene participants who have described The Poetry Collective to me as "uptight."

### Poetic Reverence

I refer to “PC Tuesday” as having poetic reverence. This venue is an example of how the behavior of individuals comes to be covertly socially policed nonverbally. The policing seems to come from some combination of a sterile feeling, highly structured physical environment and extreme seriousness on the part of participants. Here are some excerpts from my field notes where I begin to expand on this idea of poetic reverence:

The Collective: 6-06 I think about what Julie [a colleague] said to me and remind myself that ‘this is not my poetry’. It’s not my idea of poetry; it’s not how I like to think of poetry being represented. It feels like this is the church of poetry and I’m a heathen or something. It doesn’t feel hospitable, open, or inclusive here.

The message given here is that there’s a way poetry is supposed to be, there’s reverence and respect. But if there were an explanation about the version of poetry offered here, it would feel condescending. Art is hardly expression here, it’s barely communication. It’s a fancy show-off, protective of something hidden kind of thing. Protective of some idea of how such things should be. Hoity-toity.

and from field notes written the following week:

The Collective: 6-06 I drop my pen and I feel slightly self conscious as I reach to the floor for it. It’s a quiet reading. The room is really still. It feels like we’re not supposed to move. Clearing a throat or something would make a really big sound. Like poets don’t have noses that sneeze or bodies that have needs or anything!

The hosts don’t even tell you where the bathroom is here, and it’s hardly obvious. You have to walk outside and around a corner and it’s actually really hard to find. Point being, I have never successfully located it. I take special care to make sure I use the bathroom before my observations.

It feels uncomfortable here. Like a church or something. The church of poetry? At any rate, it’s important to sit, well behaved and quiet for an extended period of time. This much I know.

In the spirit of these and other observation experiences, I think of “PC Tuesday” poetic reverence as reminiscent of my experiences of formal Christian Sunday church

services. Both events carry an air of seriousness and involve a certain amount of physical discomfort, yet people appear to listen to the person who stands at the front of the room with a sort of disengaged attentiveness, regardless of the message being delivered. This disengaged attentiveness of audience members has made “PC Tuesday” a comfortable place for me to conduct observations. It is easy for me to observe in a place where people rarely push boundaries.

### *A Complication Called Mark*

Speaking of boundaries, the choice I made to return to unobtrusive observations After Vegas, to remain a mystery to some poets at “PC Tuesday” while re-entering the field, has pushed boundaries for at least one high profile scene participant. In a general sense, conducting unobtrusive observations After Vegas afforded me a certain kind of leverage for research. It’s a strategy that is essentially about getting to know the players on the scene before engaging. There has been one specific backfire resulting from my partial and temporary researcher anonymity.

This story goes back to an earlier comment I made in Chapter 2 about the one exception to the convenience of my note taking practices. A host of “PC Tuesday” named Mark Rouse- a man who was not around during the fieldwork I conducted Before Vegas- comes across to me as being uncomfortable either with me or with my note taking practices. Although I have explained this project to him several times and was defended on-the-spot as legitimate by a well known local poet, I continue to feel uncomfortable with the way Mark engages me in front of audiences gathering for poetry readings.

Mark’s condescending tone and his unwelcoming behavior while playing the role of event host surprises me because The Collective is a nonprofit organization committed in

mission and general practice to public poetry. Since audience size and diversity have been longstanding foci for this organization, I assume that anyone showing up to support poetry in Sacramento would be welcome or, at the very least, ignored. Here are anecdotal recollections based on field notes about my first two interactions with Mark. I have come to think of Mark as the self appointed poetry police at The Collective. As with the previous story, reconstructed field notes appear in quotations.

The Collective: 1-07 It was a nasty January evening. I showed up for “PC Tuesday” at 7:30pm to find that, in classic volunteer-run event style, the start time had either been changed at the last minute or posted wrong on the website. This was only my third consecutive observation at The Collective after re-entering the field and I felt excited and anxious to continue to build consistency with my fieldwork.

Randi, a past board president who knows me from previous fieldwork, approached me as I came through the door. She apologized for the inconvenience and misinformation by offering that I should wait inside for the reading to begin at 8:00pm. She explained that this week the reading was later because The Collective’s board meeting was scheduled to take place beforehand.

Happy to take her up on the offer since it was incredibly cold outside, I sat as far away from the five member board proceedings as I could in order to give them privacy for their meeting. I was about twelve feet away from the meeting table. I read a book and busied myself without any feelings of impatience or frustration. Readings start late often and I’m used to this kind of waiting when doing fieldwork.

The Collective’s shared art space has a tin roof and is not well insulated. On this night there were several space heaters running. I had a sweater on under my coat, left my leather gloves on, and still had an icy and uncomfortable dripping nose.

“I’m still reading a novel, filtering information I overhear from the board meeting while reading slowly. My back is to the meeting, I put my smaller field notebook next to the open book in my lap... so it looks like I’m writing short notes about the book if anyone bothers to wonder what I’m doing. Even though several of the board members know me well, I don’t want to risk making anyone feel uncomfortable. I feel someone standing over me.

“So, did you just come in here to do your homework or are you here for the duration?”

Mark, whom I recognize as a Collective board member and “PC Tuesday” host, stands over me looking down at my lap.”

Mark had seen me here exactly twice before this encounter, and I was always quiet and polite. My routine, planned and often reevaluated, was to respectfully decline to sign-up for open mic with a “No, but thanks for asking” when hosts approached me with a sign in sheet. Mark encountered me in this fashion once but never asked me anything personal or introduced himself.

“I look up at him over the top of my eye glasses, trying to figure out what to say back. Several things run through my mind as he stands looking down at me.

For one, I am not quite studying. Two, he sounds accusatory. Three, he has a perturbed expression on his face and I don’t like how he’s looking at me.”

It felt like he was telling me that a person should participate differently than I was; reading a book while waiting for a scheduled poetry reading to start later than expected. It felt like he was implying that I was doing something inappropriate. Being at “PC Tuesday”, conducting observations, and participating in poetry events felt so normal to me by this point, that I wasn’t spending a ton of energy scrutinizing my behavior or imagining that others would be.

Was I supposed to stop reading and turn to address him when they finished their meeting? Should I have said something to show benevolence when he approached me? I waved goodbye to Randi when the meeting dispersed but hadn’t felt weird turning my attention back to my novel after that. Is this his way of extending friendliness, or am I somehow pestering him?

The look on my face must’ve communicated my confusion with his comment. It had felt demeaning and I don’t imagine that my face hid my displeasure.

“He tries again, this time putting his hand out to shake mine. “I’m Mark, I don’t believe we’ve met”

“I’m Dana,” I smile and offer my hand. This feels like a normal introduction. He shakes it and looks at me, it seems like he’s waiting for me to say something else. “I come here to listen to poetry”

“Oh, Okay” he promptly turns his back to me and walks away.”

I felt like my response sounded really dumb, like I’d just stated the obvious, but I really couldn’t think of anything better on the spot. I felt relieved that he seemed to change his tune with me, but I was also confused because just when I thought we were starting to have a



conversation, he turned around and walked away from me. How had I shut him down?

“Rock, another “PC Tuesday” host, and Mark chat a few feet away from where I sit. Rock asks Mark if he’s going to another event that is coming up soon?”

Mark says: “No, my wife won’t let me be there. But I’ll be there next weekend when she’s out of town. A well deserved break.”  
Was he talking about a break for her or for himself?

“She’s taking the kids?”

“Yeah”

“Well, there you go!” Rock is enthusiastic and sounds encouraging, happy even, that Mark gets off the hook of father duty for a weekend. They laugh together.

Mark and Rock continue to talk about wives. Mark makes a comment to Rock about going home later, in a tone conveying how ridiculous he finds his wife to be “My wife will probably still be angry with me... whatever”

I was not thrilled with sitting there listening to what I perceived to be machismo. I felt resentful for Mark’s wife that he would feel so deserving of a “break” at the expense of her doing extra child rearing duty without his help for a whole weekend. But to be fair, Mark had already rubbed me the wrong way... so I figured I was probably going to interpret his behavior unfairly now. Nonetheless, their public conversation still struck me as being a display of the kind of male-centric discourse that runs through a room as if the only folks inhabiting it are male.

I looked around at this point and realized that I was, in fact, the only woman in the room to overhear this jest. Although clearly Mark knew I was there since he had just finished shaking my hand, the two female board members had left promptly after the meeting and another couple of women wouldn’t arrive for at least ten or fifteen minutes. At this moment, Mark began to make an odd sort of familiar sense to me. I couldn’t quite put my finger on it yet, but I knew that he made me feel disregarded.

After the reading, which was short and to a small audience, Rock approached me as I prepared to leave. It was clear by the way that his eyes searched my face that he either wanted to but couldn’t place me, or that he was consciously choosing not to acknowledge that he remembers me. When we met and chatted easily with one another during my fieldwork Before Vegas, he was still with his wife. We knew each other

before he started going through a messy and well-gossiped about breakup which involved him being the scapegoat for a failed marriage. I figured it to be social grace to let go of any reference to our earlier encounters. "I don't believe we've met, I'm Rock"

"I'm Dana" I smile and extend my hand to shake. There is no more eye contact.

His eyes shift sooner than my name is out of my mouth. As quickly as I respond to his introduction, his eyes move toward another person. He's half talking to another woman as I stand there, so I take advantage of the chance to smile big and slip past him toward the door. I can't take much more fieldwork tonight.

"Have a good night!"

"Thank you! See you soon" I always have liked Rock, he's reliably cheerful and friendly.

I am so glad to be out of there. It's freezing outside. I call for a ride home and stand a block away from The Collective to wait."

I watched Rock and Mark leave The Collective together while I stood in the shadows waiting. They stood on the curb talking for a good long while. This moment that I spent watching their figures huddled toward one another in the foggy lamplight gave me pause for reflection to wonder about their relationship. It seemed rather important for them to savor this exchange. It was so cold outside- they had both made repeated comments about the harshness of the weather throughout the course of the evening- and I, for one, felt close to freezing while waiting for my ride. Yet they appeared to be toughing out their discomfort in order to share some sort of an elongated goodbye.

I stood there thinking about how to some people- myself included at times- poetry in Sacramento seems to be a good old boy's club. I imagine it as a social activity that some people use as a way to get together, an escape from their families, an outlet to complain about their wives and feel good about their creative selves. I begin to develop a conceptualization of "PC Tuesday" as a sort of philanthropic extra curricular activity that might be covering something else up. Maybe sitting on the board at The Collective is a way that Mark and Rock are able to feel comfortable relating to each other. Perhaps they spend this time together under the guise of being poets while, in actuality, they are re/de/constructing their masculinity and using a poetry organization as a crutch for their own identity reinforcement.

This does not feel fair to me, to box people in with my imagination using nothing more than impressions that are, in fact, based on snippets of interaction. I don't know them intimately, their deep seated reasons for

doing what they do with The Collective. But given my discomfort with him, it seems unlikely that I'll let Mark get much closer to me than this. So, I doubt I'll come to know him any differently.

Overall, I wasn't sure what to make of this unsettling interaction with Mark. It seemed incidental, so I tried to rationalize it with discourse about me being biased and unfair. I must have been keyed up about doing fieldwork or feeling way too sensitive that night. Yet, unsettling feelings from our first encounter stuck with me throughout the following week. There's a certain air of superiority about Mark that doesn't sit well. I reminded myself several times, even chastised myself, not to carry judgment into the field.

But it's a difficult leap for me to make from hearing someone mocking his wife in a public space to picturing him taking me- also a woman, with my "homework-" seriously. I relate to her position. I imagine her knowing that while she spends Tuesday evenings with her children, her husband is happy to have yet another well-deserved break from their life together. I find myself hoping that she also gets one night a week, a weekend now and then, to do whatever she wants without worrying about her family's needs. I even find myself wondering how she would spend that time. Does she write poetry too?

My gender feels more prominent to me in this situation than my role as a fieldworker. My role as a student feels more prominent than my role as a researcher- or as an academic with credentials which are actually equal to and on the verge of outranking Mark's. Two weeks later, after avoiding one observation because I just didn't "want to deal with it" and then figuring I just had a bad night the last time around, I returned to "PC Tuesday" for another observation.

"As usual, I show up to a "PC Tuesday" reading. I wander in, perch on a chair that is in the middle of the room and pull some stuff out of my bag.

A woman named Renee comes in with several black plastic trash bags half full of who knows what. She is always carrying large bags with her but I have never seen trash bags at her side. She sets the bags down near a seat on the other side of the room from where I'm at and walks the length of the floor to give me a flyer. It is printed on goldenrod paper.

Looking it over, I see that it's formatted more like a letter than a flyer. Before I get a chance to read what it says:

Mark: "So, you're taking notes here, today?"

"Yes"

"Okay. Just wanted to make sure we had our official note taker so we can begin"

His voice drips sarcasm. Is he uncomfortable with me taking notes? Why is he hassling me? He comes off as being really condescending.”

I was hardly the only person with a notebook there. I had checked in with the current board president a month earlier to make sure approval of my presence would be extended from Before Vegas. The president had seemed delighted to see me and encouraged me to do my “thing.” Plus, Mark himself sits in the back of the room during readings- whether he’s hosting them or not- and types on a laptop.

How is what I do so out of the ordinary? It’s not much different from what he does; it’s even arguably less disruptive because I don’t tap keyboard keys. I clearly felt defensive with him and didn’t have a single idea about what to do about it. I don’t even know that I wanted- or ever needed- to do anything about him.

“Mark walks to the other side of the room and leans on the wall with his arms crossed. There are seven audience members sitting horizontally between the two of us, the room is large and feels full of his contempt, my confusion. He directs his words across the room, over folks’ heads, toward me:

“So, we’ll be under more scrutiny then?” Huh? Oh crap. He’s positioning himself for a public confrontation.

“No, no scrutiny”

“So, what’s this for then? Who sent you here?”

There’s an emphasis on the word “who.” He walks the span of the room toward me and his stance is starting to feel a little aggressive. His shoulders drop back, he slacks his arms by unfolding them and letting them slack toward his pants pockets.”

I realized in that moment that Mark was searching to undermine any legitimacy I might have had with the other people in the room. This is not between him and me, if it were he would approach me for a one-on-one conversation. This is a display of his struggle for authority or of his perception of me as intrusive or something. He seems to feel challenged by whatever it is he thinks I’m doing.

“Heads are turning as people listen to our conversation. Miles’ head is one of the heads to turn; he’s sitting in front of me.

Miles makes direct eye contact with me and smiles softly. I smile back. I’m feeling nervous now, and am glad to see a kind and familiar face.”

(To Mark) “I’m working on an ethnography.”

I see Renee, the woman who handed me the flyer, get a look of interest on her face and say out loud in a confused voice while Mark is in the middle of starting his next sentence "You're doing research? I want to hear..."

Mark [cuts Renee off]: "For Sacramento State?"

I'm happy to explain myself to anyone who asks, but getting "called out" or "outed" in front of a room full of people on someone else's terms sucks. I felt uncomfortable and put on-the-spot.

"No, through UNLV. For a doctoral dissertation. I worked on this same project for my master's thesis awhile ago through state though. That's when I first started working with The Collective board"

I consciously made a quick choice to pull whatever rank or connections I have out in front of everyone even though I risked the possibility of alienating people. I wanted Mark to be clear that I had board permission to do what I was doing.

Already having done the background research to know that Mark is a local teacher with a Master's degree, I was hoping that a reference to my academic position would get him to back off.

About a half dozen people- Renee among them- were listening closely to our exchange. Heads bobbed back and forth as if they were watching a tennis match. I hated every moment of it.

"Miles turns around and saves my face. He nods toward Mark

"Yes, she canvassed the whole scene. It was really something, you should have seen it"

Then, directly to me, Miles quietly says "I'm sorry, it's been so long, I recognize your face but have forgotten your name."

"I'm Dana, you're Miles, right?" he smiles more widely than before."

I believe Miles was pleased I remembered him so clearly.

"I badly need an out from this conversation with Mark. Thinking on my feet, I ask Renee about the flyer she had handed me. It's still in my hand."

She either didn't hear me or didn't register what I was asking about. She had been looking at me with a confused expression, her mouth open slightly as if she were about to ask a question, since Mark first spoke up at me from across the room.

“Mark: [to Renee in a condescending tone which seems meant to convey surprise that anyone would actually care about what Renee is doing]  
“You hear that Renee? Someone’s interested. She wants to hear about your event”

Renee: [With deference to Mark] “Oh. Well, you’re going to mention it, right? I could answer any questions....”

I felt like I could just about lay a piece of my mind into this jerk of a host. It’s enough that he wanted to express doubt about me, but why was he talking to Renee like she’s an incapable idiot? Here is a woman who did not seem so sure of herself anymore. She had plenty of confidence when she walked right up to me, a stranger she had seen around a few times, and handed me a flyer for her event. Perhaps she is someone Mark is much more comfortable with than he is with me? Unlike with me, he can direct her in conversation... which is exactly what he did.

“Mark: [Cutting Renee off again] “No. Renee, I think she wants to hear about it now, you should go ahead and tell her”

Renee fumbles her words and I feel bad now because everyone is looking at her instead of at me and Mark. She explains in stutters and circles that she has flyers for a fund raising event.”

Why did he find it necessary to broker the interaction between Renee and myself? As two grown women, we could probably manage to have a conversation with each other without his help. After reading the flyer, I learned that Renee was soliciting poets to come for free entrance to read at an event she was hosting with a sobriety organization.

Something about Mark makes me feel defensive and protective of myself and others. I do not appreciate it when people are talked down to or treated in ways which imply that they are incapable of accomplishing something for themselves. It concerns me that he, as a host, is the face of The Collective that the public sees when they come to “PC Tuesday.”

After several more encounters with Mark at “PC Tuesday,” I began to feel that his tendency to call me out in front of poets with whom I am beginning new relationships had the potential to become damaging to my fieldwork. Because he is a host and sits on The Collective board, some folks on the scene regard him as being in-the-know. My rationale is that if I allowed him to continue shunning my presence by expressing scorn and doubt about me in front of groups of folks- most of whom did not know me yet- my

field relationships could become crippled before they ever began. After a pivotal conversation with a personal mentor who happens to know Mark as a colleague about his general nature and demeanor in the workplace, I do not expect his unwelcoming attitude toward me to change.

My desire- which is, in my opinion, in the best interest of this project- is to avoid any more power struggles with Mark. My strategic response has been to avoid him as much as possible. This has involved working to avoid conducting observations on nights when he hosts “PC Tuesday.” However, we still encounter each other indirectly because he shows up to this reading series regularly. To me, Mark and Mike Dizzy are both examples of how misogyny or an unwelcoming demeanor-however you want to think about their behavior toward me-can really serve as a hindrance to a positive experience on the poetry scene in Sacramento.

### *Identity*

At this point, two things seem glaringly apparent. First, the role of the host seems like it could be pivotally important to the poetry scene. Thus, this role is analyzed at greater length in Chapter 5. Second, my perception of the identities of hosts and how they interrelate with my own identity plays a huge role in how I interpret and react to situations in the field.

Identity is complex and ever changing. Two key aspects of my identity have remained consistent throughout the entirety of this project; I am a single woman and I am a poet who is producing original creative work. Thinking about myself in terms of these two aspects of my identity gives me windows of specific insight to how social power can become visible on the poetry scene. The fact that I am a poet continuing to produce

original creative work matters here because there is an awkward sort of insecurity associated with productivity that can permeate a writer's identity. If a writer is not producing new work, then she may be called upon for an explanation or feel put on the spot by questioning from other writers. I am, perhaps, more relaxed than some other writers in this regard because I define a writer simply as "someone who writes."

The combination of my gender, age, and relationship status also seems relevant here because, in all actuality, each and every field encounter I have had that has felt problematic or degrading to me has involved one or more older men. Scenes that incorporate people with different identities also harbor power based relationships between scene participants. Our collective identity, as writers, offers no clear guidance about what to do as we encounter and negotiate our differences in other areas such as gender, race and ethnicity, age, and sexuality. Yet, scenes are spaces where individual's identities come to be seen and articulated. Highlighting the processes of negotiation of difference among various identities which come into play on the poetry scene is an important point for a discussion about social power. There are, after all, both intended and unintended consequences to the reflection of identity on the scene (Kahn-Harris 2004).

### *Dirty Old Men*

Most of the young women I came to know through fieldwork refer candidly to the "Dirty Old Men." They are referencing a fairly non-integrated group of older men thought to hang out at poetry readings as a way of coming into contact with women. The stereotype of the sexual pervert, or the older man seeking to lure a younger woman into a sexual situation, is definitely at play here. In a conversation with one young woman



named Carmen, I was told that I would have no problem getting noticed because the “Dirty Old Men like young women.”

Carmen’s opinion is that in the pursuit of recognition or group acceptance, one’s poetry doesn’t matter as much as her age, gender, and – I infer- sexual appeal and availability. Carmen herself is known to be “best friends” with one of these so-called Dirty Old Men. Richard has taken his turn as board president of The Collective and has been influential, in a bureaucratic sense, in local poetry over the years. I have had drinks and conversations with Richard many times throughout the course of my fieldwork, as he has seemed to me to be very inclusive whenever folks from the poetry scene planned to gather together outside of a specific poetry venue.

There were always at least one or two other young women with us whenever I joined Richard at a bar for drinks. We also spoke together at length in his living room once before a party he hosted for an exclusive subset of the local poetry scene. However, Richard has pulled back from public poetry in Sacramento quite drastically since the earlier days of my fieldwork. I run into him sometimes around town, writing in cafes, and we always exchange pleasantries.

Carmen once related to me over a dinner at her house, unsolicited and before departing for a long trip overseas, that she does not care if people question her friendship with Richard because she knows what he means to her. Years later another poet related to me how “tired” he is of hearing Richard’s poems about how much he loves, misses, and adores Carmen. The poet who criticized Richard’s poetry is, himself, known to be a “Dirty Old Man” I cannot help but wonder about the possibility of competition between these men for the attentions of young women?

*Connections Between Gender and Feminism, Dirty Old Men and Me*

There are connections, albeit very convoluted and complicated ones, between gender and feminism. Although I have never identified myself as a feminist to anyone I have met through fieldwork, I doubt anyone has missed the fact that I am a woman. Nor do I turn down invitations to go out for drinks, visit peoples' homes, or meet for coffee because of other poets' gender, age, or personal and unidentified motivation for engaging with me. In regard to the possibility that some folks in the scene may regard me as being sexually available, I have on many occasions brought people with me into the field. No one has ever asked me directly about the nature of any of these relationships.

There have been people who I have met since beginning this project who are in no way poetry scene participants but who have responded to my mention of my work with comments regarding the "Dirty Old Men" who hang out at "Poetry Unkempt." Several people I have met elsewhere, who also write or frequent art spots around town, have said that they personally decided not to return to "Poetry Unkempt" after checking it out because they found it to be an unwelcoming space for women. I have had invitations to join me in the field turned down specifically because of these perceptions of sexism or "Dirty Old Men." On another hand, I have also gotten positive response from folks who appreciate these same aspects of the scene.

Two personal contacts who are actively involved in local feminist organizing related to me about the time they went to a reading at Sunny's and loved "that nasty old guy with the fuck poems." Of course they meant Rag Dog, as he has a reputation that precedes him. I have affectionately come to think of Rag Dog as "my favorite Dirty Old Man," or as "the quintessential Dirty Old Man." I would describe him as being so irreverent and

obnoxious and sexually explicit that he's both undeniably disgusting and incredibly entertaining. He's so upfront about who he is and so unapologetic about it, that he gets away with his behavior. I respect him for this upfront style.

Although others might not expect such reception from a self-identified feminist, I totally get Rag Dog, who he is and where he is coming from. I don't know what exactly it is that makes him able to pull off being a Dirty Old Man when other people try and can't do it half as effectively. I guess it's that he does respect my boundaries, but at the same time I expect him to push them. My alliance with Rag Dog may, at first glance, seem to be out of sync with my identity as a feminist. Yet, I am a feminist who feels both safe and completely comfortable with my favorite Dirty Old Man. I have never once been as offended by Rag Dog as I have been by Mike Dizzy or some of the other Dirty Old Men. I do have to admit, however, that I wonder- in regard to this Dirty Old Man stereotype- if being old is supposed to be a prerequisite for being dirty, and if all old men are dirty or if it's just some of them.

*Ready or Not, Feminist I am.* Aside from the fact that I have a strong writer's voice, I do not know exactly why or how I came to be identified as a feminist by poets in Sacramento. Perhaps all women who are self-aware are considered feminist on this scene. The title of feminist was, however, directly assigned to me for the first time on the poetry scene by Richard. This encounter took place during the summer of 2001 and, as he is clearly her favorite Dirty Old Man, Carmen was there too. This event is entirely reconstructed from a research journal entry that was written Before Vegas. Direct journal quotes are noted by quotations.

“Poetry Unkempt”: 8-01 “Poetry Unkempt ended early tonight and folks headed over to Poor Harley’s, a sports bar about a half mile away from Sunny’s. I don’t know why they didn’t just go across the street the Church’s tonight. I took my own car to Poor Harley’s and stopped off at the bank on the way to get cash. I am late showing up. I am acutely aware that it is late at night and I am alone, going to meet a group of people at a bar I’ve never been to.”

I parked in a parking lot of a nearby business and walked in the front door of the bar. It was dark inside but pretty empty. I easily spotted the group I was looking for. They were clustered at the bar in the back of the room. Carmen and Nila were both there; I was relieved not to be the only woman. Several of the “Dirty Old Men” were there too. I waved and walked up to an outburst of laughter. People were laughing at me. Richard was the first to speak.

“Oh, here’s the feminist. We’ll have to stop talking now and behave ourselves”

“What? Are you saying something you’re ashamed of or something?”

“I always am, Dana, I always am.”

What’s he hiding? And what joke would be so offensive that he doesn’t think I’d laugh at it too?”

I realized in this moment that there are parts of themselves that some of these folks aren’t willing to share with me. There’s also something about me that leads them to believe that I’d be judgmental if they didn’t “behave” in front of me.

Plus, these things have something to do with their idea of me being a “feminist.”

I’m confused because I don’t remember talking about my politics or my identity as a feminist with any of these folks. It seems as if “feminist” here could maybe mean “strong woman,” or a “woman who holds her own in conversation.”

But neither of these things would make me any different than Carmen or Nila. Why are they laughing along with everyone? Aren’t they labeled as feminists too?

How would these people be acting differently if they didn’t think I was a feminist? Would they be calling me a feminist if I were male?

I do not know that I have managed to work out answers to any of these questions. In my last featured reading in Sacramento before leaving for Las Vegas in 2003, Missy Jean

described my poetry as “a dull roar that fills a room with the sound of her voice.” It is true that I am a woman with a strong voice and it is possible that because of this, people are moved to make sense of me as a feminist. What is undeniably true is that my age, gender, perceived sexual availability and identity as a feminist do play overt roles in relationships I have with poets in the field. I feel as confused as anyone else might about how these aspects of my identity interrelate with the identities of the people I come into contact with; it seems to be a puzzle I am moved to try put together on a play-by-play and only when an encounter does not sit right with me.

*Sexualized in the Field.* What I do know, is that it felt hard to negotiate being a young, single woman in this field. At times Before Vegas, it felt like I spent more energy wondering how to handle romantic advances from men in the field than I did formulating my Master’s thesis. Although my professionalism is always at the forefront of my mind, Rag Dog is the only person who approached me amorously on the scene that I have ever felt successful deflecting. He, unlike numerous others, got the point that I am not on the Sacramento Poetry Scene to date. Before Vegas, I got asked out on many dates and received many advances from men in the field. These interactions seemed never to cease and when I walked away from them, it was not with a light heart or with a sense that mutual respect was intact.

Retrospectively, I realize that I effectually did a duck and cover move in reaction to unwanted attention from men on the scene. Although I remain unclear about the extent my reaction to unwanted advances from these men played in my decision making, it concerns me that such advances were a big enough deal to me that I would seek male companionship to avert them. Within six months’ time from the point at which I began

becoming recognized by scene participants, I found myself a boyfriend who was respected on the scene and often requested or accepted his accompaniment in the field. His mere presence put an end to the uncomfortable conversations I had been faced with on a weekly basis before being seen on his arm. I had not wanted a boyfriend when I set out to conduct fieldwork nor did I particularly welcome his involvement in my research. I had hoped to remain single and focused on my academics until my Master's degree was finished.

When I re-entered the field After Vegas, it was with the realization that I wanted to seem less open to these sorts of advances the second time around. Although a fieldworker seeming less open- whatever that means- could be viewed as antithetical to good field work, this is what I need to tell myself to feel secure putting my observational skills, intelligence, and poetry first in this field. In any other workplace, the same man asking me out each week and calling me a "rude bitch" when I politely declined a dinner invitation would quite possibly be viewed as sexual harassment. In this field, this sort of thing seems par for the course.

More concerning to me than difficult conversations, however, is the impact that the overt sexualization of my person had on my writing Before Vegas. My creativity felt infiltrated with a sexualized way of thinking, visceral imagery, an overpoweringly heteronormative imagination. Nothing is necessarily wrong with this; it is simply a new thing that I notice in my poetry as it coincided with fieldwork experiences. Indeed, I do wonder if my ability or willingness to meet the maker at his own task might not have a thing or two to do with the relationship that Rag Dog and I now have. Audience reception for raunchy (hetero)sexual tones in my work was off the hook. I cannot quantify the

praise I received for the sexually explicit poetry I wrote and performed toward the tail end of my time in the field Before Vegas.

On the following pages, I include two examples of my poems to illustrate this field phenomenon. The first poem, “The Night the Lord Saved My Soul at the Motel 6,” was written at what I would call the height of my reaction to feeling sexualized on the scene. In contrast, “What I Think About When I Think Of Escaping” was written around the time that I began to realize I had been feeling oversexualized on the scene in ways that felt uncomfortable within the context of my own self image. The first poem received overt praise from participants on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. The second poem garnered a handful of hushed responses from women who have approached me, always alone, after I read it in public with comments such as “It was like you were reading my mind,” and “I don’t really like poetry that much. But I really like that one.

*The Night The Lord Saved My Soul at a Motel 6*      4/02

Found god at Motel 6 on a Monday night;  
Musta got through with church on Sunday  
Musta given a hellfire sermon  
Musta rode his motorbike straight outta small town nowhere California:  
Bodfish, Glenhaven, Timbuktu

into urban ghetto motel lobby where he  
found me,      a wet coke in my hand  
an extra white bleached towel for a hot steamy  
day’s worth of greasy buildup binge,  
my wide grinnnnnn-  
no toothbrush for days wicked fuzzy smile.

god musta liked my tight skin and serious eyes.  
He watched me put on berry chapstick from a shiny purple tube,  
beckoned me with one finger to come home,  
didn’t care that I hadn’t shaved under my arms for a week.

god had a nice ass, wore baggy jeans, had a helmet in his right hand  
used a Visa card to pay for everything.  
The back of his neck was wide and brown, no freckles,  
made me think of licking salt without tequila and smelling heaven anyway.

god rode into town with a Harley seat between his thighs.  
Rode smooth leather;  
Smelled like road funk rolling golden hills and street grime smog  
Cigarettes                      Leftover sex                      and me.

god spent a Monday night in a Motel 6;  
one room to the right of paper thin walls  
where the deaf Pope couldn't have slept after prayers.  
god threw his leather bomber over the back of a plastic desk chair,  
Rode his cock with his hand to Showtime, Cinemax, complimentary HBO;  
Called home thick voiced for a blackbook booty call, for three way chat;  
Took                      two girls in time, answered smooth, like a politician  
knock after knock-  
took a shower after each one,  
Made me his orgy wife  
wedding band tattooed on my left nipple.

god ate pizza with pepperoni, didn't use a napkin  
Made a 1 am beer run, took a shit and didn't light a match.  
Never asked me my name,  
Licked pussy like an angel,  
Lapped on and on forever- got his nose into it- wet his eyebrows and  
Made                      me                      forget                      his                      face.

god left town fast, solo on a motorcycle.  
Didn't look back or offer a cup of coffee, cheap breakfast  
Phone number  
Apology, or single half-backed glance.

I'd know him if I saw him anyway.  
Imprint of my front teeth  
to the right of the crack in his ass.



I think of marrying a handsome man once and for all.  
Who shaves smooth,  
has a wide-lipped smile,  
some professional job with the constant looming and actuality of advancement.

He likes to eat pasta, knows about wine but will drink a good beer,  
smells like popular cologne with an undertone of ivory sweat.  
He is white and has a full head of nice thick hair.  
He loves me, but not too much,  
admires my strength but will probably insist upon impregnating me anyway.

As usual, I will grow to hate him in all of his male perfection.  
I will continue to enjoy his comfortable salary.  
He will pay the house bills,  
will purchase a nice home in the eclectic neighborhood of my choice  
two new cars and a boat for sharing with friends.

I will fall silent around his mother (she sees straight through me)  
will befriend his older sister (she can relate)  
will summer at the family house in the Hamptons  
will vacation at the family villa on Nantucket  
will develop strange allergies to things like cantaloupe and synthetic carpet fibers.

I will eventually get over my fear of suffocating on exercise and  
will take up rugby or some other brutal full contact women's league sport.  
I will meet a teammate with strong calves and a square jaw.  
Her smile will make me giggle and eventually I will separate  
or twist something during a tough match.  
She will offer to rub it out, to smooth me down.

I'll then make the ultimate mistake later on that same night in bed with my husband.  
But he will be kind and forgive me. He will not suspect,  
but instead will comfort me as I sob about the stress.  
Such a full schedule! unending responsibilities!  
preconception jitters and invasive fertility treatments.

She will laugh when I tell her of my Freudian slip, will assure me that it is okay.  
She'll offer to hold my hand through an abortion,  
will make me dinner, bring me ice cream,  
and rent me movies while I recover on her couch.  
I will easily admit to her through tears (and my second glass of red wine)  
that I never have been afraid to leave him.  
That really, the alimony won't be necessary- I mean, I want a clean break.  
Really, I am happy with my career working from home, anyone's home will do actually,  
And matter of fact... hers is quite nice.

I want to keep my car for freedom's sake,  
my friendship with his sister.  
Oh, and the dog!  
I am simply not going anywhere without the dog.  
After all, I really love that dog.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS

In Chapter 4, I used autoethnographic techniques of storytelling and self reflexivity to explore various field encounters that elucidate three core components of the definition of scene. These three components of the definition of scene are: identity, space, and participation. In this chapter, data from the Sacramento Poetry Scene are organized into these same three definitional components. This chapter involves analysis of data taken from participation observation on the Sacramento Poetry Scene over two three year periods of time.

Here, spatial definition emerges as an opportunity for the contestation of power and authority on this scene. Spatial access and differential access to private scene space also emerge as ways to talk about power and status. The Sacramento Poetry Scene is established as a multi-site scene that is affected by media. I also discuss the impacts of physical space on the social interactions that occur within them.

In this chapter, I discuss various aspects and intersections of individual and collective identity, including gender, class, race, and ethnicity. I introduce a major emergent theme I found on The Sacramento Poetry Scene; the failure of connection between, or among, social networks. I highlight tokenism and humor as two ways scene participants address

diversity, or a perceived lack thereof. I also address questions about why people participate on this scene.

Finally, I discuss seating arrangements, the “reserved table”, photography, and the use of signs to signal wait staff as examples of how boundaries are maintained and asserted on this scene. The goals of this chapter are to clarify some of the specific ways that this scene operates and to provide analysis of this scene to support the discussion which constitutes Chapter 6. Chapter 6 addresses the utility of the definition of scenes developed in Chapter 2. This definition is reiterated in an edited fashion as header items for each subsection of this chapter.

### *Space*

Scenes are best thought to occur in space, whether that space is concrete or abstract. Scenes can and often do transcend the boundaries of place. They can be thought of as mediated or affected by media and technology, especially communications technology. Scenes occur in public and private milieus, they are urban, rural, and suburban phenomenon. Likewise, scenes which occur over time also change over time.

Shifting away from the discourse of community and toward use of the language of scenes, space becomes a keyword signaling topics, conversations, and concepts related to locality. Locality basically means any common, shared space. In a sense, translations between space and locality create conceptual links between scene and community. In the following subsections, I talk about the definition of, entitlement to, accessibility of the space which, in part, constitutes the Sacramento Poetry Scene. I also discuss private spaces within this scene as well as aspects of media, multi-site reality, and potential impacts of the physical environment on the interactions which take place among participants.

### *Entitlement and the Definition of Space*

The story I told in Chapter 4 about Mark Rouse, the unwelcoming host at The Collective, is a story about space and entitlement. I have come to think of Mark- the self appointed poetry police- as having a sense of entitlement to determine who should participate in public poetry space, and how. At my fifth or sixth observation at The Collective where I ran into Mark, he followed me while I found a seat for “PC Tuesday.” He handed me a membership application to The Collective and told me, in no uncertain terms, what it was. Regardless of my organizational status- information Mark must not have been privy to- the implication was that if I was going to continue attending this event, then I had an obligation to join this organization.

In all of my observations, I have never seen anyone else put this kind of one-on-one pressure on “PC Tuesday” attendees to join The Collective. Optional and non-required membership is usually mentioned briefly on the mic during the host’s opening spiel. Arts commission funding that The Collective receives stipulates that this series be free and open to the public. It does not, however, surprise me that Mark took this directive approach to building membership.

Mark has a tendency to be directive. When he reads his own poetry, the work tends to be accompanied by a sort of mini-lecture about what does or does not work in the piece. These mini-lectures include off-handed remarks about the “shoulds” and “should nots” of poetry, such as “We all know one should never write from the middle of an emotional experience,” and “I should give you the context to understand this poem.” Mark is, through these seemingly innocuous remarks, being directive to others about the appropriate content, format, voice, and delivery of poetry.

Mark always introduces featured poets with formal bios that highlight, first and foremost, the credentials of these writers. The bios he uses are long and outline peoples' professional accomplishments, prestigious awards received, and extensive listings of their publications. Other "PC Tuesday" hosts and one "Poetry Unkempt" host also tend to give formal bios for featured readers, but Mark definitely does this task the most justice in terms of the length and formalism of the introductions that he gives. He also tends to correct, or adds his own information or opinions, to the words of other hosts. He does this from his spot in the audience on nights when he is not scheduled to host himself.

Taken together, these practices- the suggestive insistence of organizational membership and use of the mic to outline the rules of poetry, an unyielding focus on poetic credentials and the correcting of others when they are in semi-authoritative roles on the scene- give participants an idea of what information they should include when defining The Collective's space in their own minds. These practices contribute to the building of a collective impression that poetry is something an individual becomes accomplished at by creating a curriculum vitae with a lot of fancy titles on it, following a list of rules about what works and what does not, and by joining poetry organizations where there are poetry lectures. These practices add to the creation of a space for "PC Tuesday" that is marked by formalism, poetic reverence, and inaccessibility.

I do not want to give you the impression that Mark single-handedly defines this space. He is simply a cohesive example that stands out to me as offering of a quintessential illustration of how things often go down at "PC Tuesday." It is more accurate to say that spatial definition is a product of the interactions that take place

between participants on the scene. Definitional processes can become apparent when there is conflict, such as the conflict I feel with Mark.

What I perceive to be conflict between Mark and I, likely occurs because I also feel entitled to access scene space and to participate fully in it- both for fieldwork and as a local poet. Mark and I struggle, in some ways against each other, to determine the appropriate use of this space that we sometimes share. We also struggle to communicate within this space, to define what appropriate communication looks like here. In these ways, The Poetry Collective becomes a site for contestation, a space where power is negotiated between and among people who are connected to one another through participation on the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

#### Accessibility

Which of us- Mark or I- is in a position to define the space at The Collective, to define how it is used and to determine the kind of poetic credibility which sets the tone here? Either of us, neither of us, both of us? And, to whom is any given space accessible? Accessibility is one issue associated with space, and I find The Collective to be a space that is defined, at least in part, as inaccessible. Although I may find this to be the case, it is likely that some scene participants would disagree with me.

Is a certain space more accessible for some people than it is for others? In what sense is a space accessible; does the space encompass a welcoming atmosphere, is it physically accessible? Accessibility certainly implies physical accessibility, but there is also room to talk here about how welcome people feel to participate in the activities that the space is, at least in part, defined by. Can folks understand the activities taking place in a given scene space? Do they feel comfortable participating there?

Thinking about accessibility in terms of the Sacramento Poetry Scene relates to an experience I had trying to find The Collective for a particularly confusing “PC Tuesday” observation. The organization had a well publicized move during the time that I was away in Las Vegas. They had only moved fifteen blocks, but I had not yet been to their new location. Their previous space was shared with a theater collective, whereas this new space is shared with an art studio and gallery. Housed within an art compound that is made up of urban re-use industrial buildings, The Collective now gets foot traffic from art openings and city-wide arts celebrations that it did not have before the move.

As excited as I was to see the new space, finding it turned out to be more difficult than I had envisioned. Here, I share an example based on concrete details from the field that illustrates how “public” space may not always be so physically accessible, even to an individual who tries hard to access space and is well equipped to do so. Indented below is an excerpt taken directly from field notes written immediately after my first attempt to observe at “PC Tuesday” upon re-entering the field After Vegas.

The Collective: 5-06 I can’t locate the new Collective venue! I received an email about tonight’s “PC Tuesday.” I accidentally left the address that I jotted down at home. I didn’t go back for it because I remember it’s at the corner of 12<sup>th</sup> and C streets and I thought I’d see it. This is how things work on the grid [in midtown Sacramento], coordinates are all you really need to find anything. Boy was I wrong!

I think the event starts at either 7 or 7:30pm, I’m not sure which. They had different times for different weeks posted on the website. I figured it wouldn’t matter because if I got here early, I could use the time to get acquainted to the new digs and reconnect with old field contacts.

I think I found a cluster of buildings where The Collective is, but there are a lot of mysterious doors (eight or ten of them). There is a brown wooden fence running around the outside of the compound with a bunch of signs hanging on it. None of the signs says poetry anything. The place



is pretty deserted and there's nowhere on the inside or outside of the fence for me to sit and wait. Just gravel on the inside of the compound and sidewalk with dirty gutters on the outside.

I took a close look at all of the signs, some of them are small. One of them is a gold octagon that has "PC" spray painted on it in black. Does this stand for The Poetry Collective? Is this icon some sort of new branding mark that the organization is using? It isn't on any of the emails or poetry publications I've received in the mail; this is the first I've seen of it. The gold octagon says "1238 C street" in small black letters at the bottom, so I walked around the inside of the compound twice to see if any of the doors are labeled with this address. Nope. And a man making trips from his mini-van to one of the doors said he has no idea about The Collective or which door is for 1238.

I sat across the street on a bench to write these notes and I have to admit I'm feeling a little peeved that I can't find the door. Do I really need to jiggle handles? It's past 7:30pm now. Where is the A-frame sign hosts put out on the sidewalk shortly before readings start, so people don't wind up in this exact situation? Is this going to be a waste of time?

No, data are data. Having such a hard time finding this joint is, believe it or not, something that actually matters. A "public" event taking place in an unmarked location. Totally confusing. And, if I weren't committed to a project, who's to say I'd go out of my way to try again another week?

I am starting to see people trickle toward the gravel yard with notebooks. Poets!? But wait. They're all going in different doors! Ughhh!!! I'm going to have to go stand by the opening in the fence and ask people if they know where I'm supposed to go. But it's almost 7:45pm, is the reading cancelled?

Although I gave it an honest effort, I did not make it to "PC Tuesday" that night.

After an hour, during which I asked several people if they could direct me to The Collective, I gave up. Instead of trying door handles, which would have meant taking the risk of walking in on a theater practice or on an artist working in her studio, I went home to scour my emails and the internet for details to help me find their exact location for my next observation.

I found no helpful information on-line, but I did return the following week to try, once again, to find “PC Tuesday’s” new home. This time, the familiar A-frame sign was out on the sidewalk to guide me toward a door standing, wide open, in the corner of the gravel courtyard. Upon entering the room and getting settled into a chair to wait for the reading to start, I asked the people seated near me if they knew anything about the previous week’s reading having been cancelled? Nobody gave any indication that they knew anything about it.

To this day, I do not know what went wrong the night I missed the reading. Did the reading happen at a different time than was announced in the email I had received from The Collective’s listserv? Did the host forget keys? Or to put the A-frame sign out on the sidewalk and leave the door open for people? Was the reading cancelled altogether or hosted at an alternate location? What I take from this experience is cause for reflection about the accessibility of space at this venue. I had tried to access this public, well publicized, space for poetry in Sacramento, but left defeated.

### *Private Space*

Our working definition of scenes suggests that they occur both in public and private milieus. Clearly Sunny’s “Poetry Unkempt” and The Collective’s “PC Tuesday” are two public spaces which can, ideally, be considered accessible to whoever cares to participate. However, these are not the only spaces relevant to this scene. In addition, there are private spaces which are also integral to how this scene operates.

Examples relevant here are the after-event gatherings that take place at bars, restaurants, and scene participants’ homes. These gatherings seem to be impromptu, accessible only to folks who are in-the-know and hear about them by word-of-mouth.

Once the poets at Sunny's got to know me, most weeks someone would invite me during "Poetry Unkempt's" intermission to go somewhere specific with "everyone" after the reading. It did not take long for me to realize that not "everyone"- not even every regular- gets invited to these after event gatherings. Rather, the "well liked" or "popular" characters are included while the less popular characters do not receive invitations.

Other examples of private scene space include fundraisers or readings which have ticketed entrance. Ticketed entrance events are cost prohibitive for some people who might otherwise attend. They can also be thought of exclusive in that complimentary entrance is extended to well known scene participants who are sometimes offered "featured reading" opportunities. There are also the rare events where some individuals are offered entrance in exchange for volunteer time which can- and sometimes does- amount to nothing. Other examples of private spaces which are relevant to the Sacramento Poetry Scene are pre-planned salons and parties, especially those which are expressly "invite-only".

Parties seem self-explanatory. However, the first time I was invited to a gathering referred to by the person who invited me as a "salon", I had to look up the definition of what a salon is to see what I had been invited to. As it turns out, salons on the Sacramento Poetry Scene involve gossip and information sharing about the scene, an abundance of fantastic food, a lot of marijuana and liquor, and the screening of news footage or other video media involving local poets. The only difference I see between salons and parties on the scene and other parties I have attended in my life, is that it is not uncommon here for someone to either request or whip-out poetry for on-the-spot performances. Attendance at these gatherings seems to represent who's-who on this scene

and knowledge of what goes on at these events is valuable cultural capital. Stories of antics which have transpired at past invite-only events are told again and again, and in various places, by people on the scene.

### *Media and Multi-Site Scenes*

Media portrayals of poets from Sacramento and portrayals of Sunny's and The Poetry Collective do have an impact on the scene itself. It seems appropriate to discuss the feature length documentary about the history of poetry in Sacramento here. This documentary, which was spearheaded by two local poets, created a great deal of discussion and controversy among local poets regarding who is included in, and who was consulted for the film, and why? Plus, as much as it is viewed by people outside of Sacramento, this film makes a statement about what the Sacramento Poetry Scene is and who is respected, or represented, on it.

This is a multi-site scene. Although I realize that there are likely far better examples of multi-site scenes to be found, there are a number of physical sites- located both inside and outside of Sacramento- associated with this particular scene. In announcements given on the mic, it is hardly uncommon for events located outside of Sacramento to be mentioned. Local poets travel elsewhere to give featured readings and poets from other places also come to Sacramento for readings. Various local poetry scenes, such as Sacramento's and the Bay Area's, are linked in these and other ways.

It is actually the case in a handful of situations that I have observed, that poets from the scene in Sacramento move to another physical location and then keep in touch with other key scene participants from afar. Friends who remain in Sacramento publically relay these stories about distant poetry scenes, often from the mic, to those on the

Sacramento scene. Plus, the stories that Sacramento poets tell in other places about the scene from whence they have come, builds bridges and common links between scenes. Some scene participants have actually moved away from Sacramento and have started poetry readings where there were none. In a sense, these are ways that the Sacramento Poetry Scene lives on in other places.

### *The Impact of Physical Space on Social Interaction*

Physical environments can be seen to have an impact on the social interactions that take place on a scene. For example, The Collective is a space where I describe the majority of the interactions among scene participants to have a tone of seriousness. Here, the physical space is barren and formal. By this, I mean that the walls are white and serve as gallery walls for exhibits hung with uniformity and precision, chairs for “PC Tuesday” readings are arranged in rows, the lights are fluorescent, and there is usually an official looking information table set up with fliers and copies of the organization’s various poetry publications.

There is an air of seriousness to social events where the chairs are arranged in rows and this rigidity could be interpreted as carrying over into the conversations and other social exchanges that take place at The Collective. The impact of physical environment on the interactions which take place within them becomes especially apparent when I compare “PC Tuesday” to “Poetry Unkempt”. At “Poetry Unkempt”, it is not uncommon to see people performing or practicing acrobatics on the sidewalk in front of the venue, making out with each other while leaning against an outside wall of the building, or falling drunkenly from chairs. I have never seen any of these sorts of activities at “PC

Tuesday”. Actually, the thought of any of these activities taking place at “PC Tuesday” seems rather humorous to me, probably because it is so unlikely.

### *Identity*

The conceptualization, enactment, and visibility of individuals’ identities take place on scenes. Commonality among participants on a scene is often based around a common activity, but is sometimes better thought of as occurring through loosely organized activities that center on a collective identity. Existing social hierarchies are legitimated by the social processes and interactions that occur on scenes. These processes and interactions involve folks sharing, building, and maintaining interrelated social networks. Such networks often overlap and they operate, at least in part, based on perceptions of commonality among scene participants. Commonality sometimes involves shared values- which may or may not be clearly articulated- among scene participants.

The anecdotes I tell in Chapter 4 illustrate how social hierarchies can be legitimated by social processes and interactions which occur on scenes. Major social themes such as gender, sexuality, age, and polarized political difference run as a steady undercurrent throughout the stories I tell there. In the previous discussion about space, I elaborate upon the conflict I perceive between Mark and myself to illustrate how The Collective becomes a site for contestation. The Collective is a space where power is negotiated between and among people who are connected to one another through participation on the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

Like many people on the scene, Mark and I occupy different social positions, relative to one another. Power is differentially associated with the various positions that are occupied by participants on a scene. Mark is a Collective host and board member; I am a researcher and past organizational volunteer. We share the identity of poet, although I take care to keep my poetic practice and history private from him. I interpret this aspect of my identity to be where I hold a certain amount of personal power that I do not wish to

share with him. We are both teachers who work in the local college system although, again, I doubt he is privy to this information. He is a middle-aged white man whose background I am unaware of. I am a white working class white woman working on a PhD in my late twenties.

### *Gender on the Scene*

I elaborate here on gender as an overarching key theme which underlies social hierarchy as it is legitimated on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. I choose to talk predominantly about gender- as opposed to the other key themes that I also find to be prevalent in the field such as race and ethnicity, age, class, and sexuality- for several reasons. Gender has come up for me time and again as an element or topic of conversation with poets in the field. Gender is also a pervasive concept throughout my field notes, something I just cannot seem to get away from... a theme that comes up over and over and will not cease its nagging at my psyche.

I attribute this pervasiveness of gender both to my own focus on the topic and to the discourse I see in the words and actions of scene participants. I also consider my focus on gender instead of race to be a playing out of my social position; it is indicative of my white privilege. It is the words of women poets of many races and ethnicities- Maya Angelou and Lucille Clifton, Lydia Lunch, Anne Sexton and Sandra Cisneros, Denise Levertov and many others- that initially drew me to poetry. These are the same voices that continue to intrigue, delight, and perplex me; they continue to draw me deeper and deeper into the folds of language.

One way for me to talk about gender here is to look at some of the snippets of field notes where I record the low level of representation of women at the mic on the Sacramento Poetry Scene.

Sunny's: 5-06 I do notice that, other than Lena and Carmen, there isn't a strong presence of or for women at Sunny's. Was Lee-Ann mentioned a few times on the mic tonight? Nothing substantial was said tonight about any of their work, and we're talking about 3+ hours of mic time. Most of which seems filled with men talking poetry, men talking about men, men promoting the local poetry activities of other men. Tonight the features were both women. But the open mic readers... not so much. Huh. Is this an unwelcoming environment for women to read their poetry in... unless they're being featured in the limelight?

Sunny's [from jotted notes taken down in-the-field]: 6-06 At this point, there have been four men on the open mic and no women. 5 poets have read so far... no women. And we're well into the first feature. And there are all of these homoerotic jokes going down between the feature and the audience. References to men jacking each other off; the featured poet ejaculating on the audience. Is this just such a sexualized space in general that it tends toward homoeroticism when there aren't women present and interactive enough to be objectified?

[and later] Finally, a woman. 7<sup>th</sup> on the mic. 1/7 tonight. Yup. Equal representation for poetic justice and all. No wonder all of my own writing is becoming so hypersexual! I'm starting to feel defensive just sitting here thinking about it!

In an interaction between myself and a host who routinely seeks women out to feature at "Poetry Unkempt", I try to use humor to decline one of his regular attempts to sign me up for an open mic slot. At this point in my fieldwork, I had been politely refusing his request to use me as a featured reader for several months. Jack, who works to include women more so than any other host at Sunny's, tries to persuade me to read by citing gender representation as his purpose.

Sunny's [from notes jotted in the field]: 5-07 Jack passes around the sign in sheet. This is the host who tends to refer to himself as a lesbian



trapped inside of a man's body. Jack wants me to sign up. Looks right at me and says "unless some people sign up, we're going to have all straight men reading here tonight!"

He shows me the list of men who have already signed up. Tired of always coming up with a new way to say no to him, I ask "how do you know I'm not a straight man?"

This catches Jack off guard. He trips up in dialogue and laughs. "well, I guess you're right. I, myself, believe I'm a lesbian. I've had a few people tell me that and I just figure okay and run with it"

I have established that Sunny's and The Collective are different from each other in a number of ways. Consideration of how the theme of gender is visible on the scene at both sites brings me back to this same point. Although the open mic portion of "PC Tuesday" has dwindled substantially since Before Vegas, during the same month that I had made note of how grossly men outnumber women on the mic at "Poetry Unkempt", I also noticed how women tend to outnumber men in the audience at "PC Tuesday".

The Collective: 6-06 Mostly older women are in attendance. White women. Everyone aside from Rock is white. Oh. Is Fancy Roth the feature? I remember hearing that she was going to feature at The Collective soon. And I see her here, sitting with the poet laureate, in a sea of old women.

Instances of potential gender disparity that cause me to raise questions about "PC Tuesday" differ from the parody of overt sexism- such as talk about cocks being a normal part of the repertoire on the mic- that I have experienced at "Poetry Unkempt". For example, in the following excerpt from my field notes I talk about watching a woman who is disregarded and ignored as she vies for participation in a conversation with a small group of men while waiting for a reading to begin at The Collective.

The Collective [from noted jotted in the field]: 9-07 I see a woman I remember from... was it the literary magazine class I took at the

community college a few years ago? A poetry course at State? Anyway, I have it in my head that she's a really good writer. She's petite and tan, brunette with long straight hair in a white beret, and she is hanging on the guys' every word. She tries to make eye contact with each of them individually, nods when they make points. I can't hear a word they're saying but not once do I see any one of the men look at her or acknowledge that she is standing right there in their circle. She looks eager to participate; she looks intent and opens her mouth several times as if to interject or add a comment to the conversation. It doesn't look like she follows through with saying anything though because she kind of open and closes her mouth like a fish. Don't tell me that they are ignoring her patronage!? Eventually her eyes wander to the art on the wall. I wonder if she's still listening to what they're saying?

*Gender and Class on the Scene.* Another observation that involves gender and my questioning of how women are dis/regarded at The Collective also seems to be about a Collective volunteer's class status. Mary Linn is a woman in her sixties who has been an intermittently active on the scene and has served as a volunteer for The Collective off-and-on for more than five years. I notice that she appears to be sidelined. She remains unengaged and peripheral to other key scene participants.

The Collective: 9-07 Mary Linn comes in dressed in a bright red sweat suit. She sits next to Renee on the other side of the room from me. They chat comfortably together and it makes me happy to see that someone from The Collective is going out of their way to be nice to Renee. She does attend these events regularly, after all, and I would think that The Collective would be thrilled with such a supportive participant. I wonder if these two women are friends?

They seem to share a certain incidental status on the scene. They come regularly to events, Mary Linn even volunteers at The Collective... she even told me about a skit she's doing for their Halloween celebration next month... but no one appears to pay either of them much mind. They don't get greeted warmly or welcomed into talk with other participants. Come to think of it, their poetry doesn't seem to be taken too seriously either. Is this what happens when a person opts to read on the open mic here? Why haven't either of them been featured? People who never attend events are invited to feature, but these two women who write a lot and come often haven't done a feature yet. Not that I know of anyway.

Come to think of it, neither of these two women seem to have the kind of money or class status that most of the prominent and active scene participants at The Collective do. Renee is involved with that sobriety organization and I've seen her using public transit around town a number of times. And I know from chatting with her that Mary Linn works as a CNA. The other people I know at The Collective are professors, long-term state workers, real estate high rollers, political aides, non profit administrators, and retirees. Hmmmm. Although I doubt it would be a conscious thing on anyone's part, maybe these two women are seen as the poor women who come to poetry because it's free or something.

Mary Linn is always so nice saying hi to me, being real personal in asking me how I'm doing and such. I wonder why she doesn't seem to have more friends among other scene participants here?

The definition of scene I consider here says that the processes and interactions that legitimate social hierarchies on scenes are built upon interrelated social networks. These networks operate on perceptions of commonality among scene participants. So, it makes sense that when there is the perception of an existing difference among scene participants-such as a potential class difference- that people would build and maintain their networks accordingly. Perhaps this is what has happened to Mary Linn, an active scene participant whom I have seen have few conversations with others whose participation at "PC Tuesday" parallels her own?

#### Collective Identity on the Scene

Commonality on a scene is established through shared activities. The activities common to most of what takes place on the Sacramento Poetry Scene involve poetry. Examples of these activities are; the reading of poetry on the microphone to an audience, the writing of poetry or ideas for poetry at poetry readings, the organizing and announcing of upcoming poetry readings, storytelling about past poetry readings and

poets, and discussions about poetry and topics associated with the writing and distribution thereof. Another way to think about collective identity on the Sacramento Poetry Scene is to consider that multiple collective identities, in addition to poetic identity, are articulated and become visible here. The ways that poetry readings on the Sacramento scene are segregated- by race and ethnicity, class, sexuality, religiosity, etc- supports this view.

*Gender and Race.* Race and ethnicity are common themes used to perpetuate ideas of social difference in society and the Sacramento Poetry Scene is no exception in this regard. My vantage point is unique in that, to use Nile's words, I "canvassed the whole scene." During that phase of my fieldwork, it became obvious to me quickly that there are venues and poetry readings in Sacramento organized specifically by and centered upon the poetry of black and Chicano poets. This leads me to believe that there are, indeed, social networks built on commonality which overlap to create this scene.

However, these networks sometimes fail to connect. In an example taken from an observation at The Collective, gender and race- both social themes associated with the legitimating of social hierarchies- can be seen. This observation is of a Black History Month celebratory reading. The reading itself was organized through great effort from an especially active scene participant who focuses a lot of his attention on issues of inclusion at The Collective. I have often heard Chip mention sexuality and physical access openly as a way to create inroads for the inclusion of people who are different from the norm across the scene. Although he clearly did a great deal of work to make sure that the Black History Month reading drew a large crowd, I find myself wondering if gender was at all a concern in booking poets to headline this event?

The Collective: 2-08 One of the featured poets reads a poem honoring women as the leaders of the black community. Yet, only one woman read tonight. The irony feels thick to me on this one. I haven't heard of her before. But it bugs me that only one of seven headliners was female while another poet stands up and specifically highlights the leadership roles of black women. For crying out loud, I can name half a dozen strong, black, women poets in Sacramento. And I can't imagine all of them turning down an invitation to read here. Is there a conflicting event I don't know about? Were they even asked to participate?

*Diversity on the Scene.* It is quite possible that The Collective volunteers involved with organizing the Black History Month celebration do not know the black female poets I have in mind. Although all of these individuals are part of the Sacramento Poetry Scene, their social networks are certainly different. When it comes to overlapping social networks, I find Sunny's to be far more culturally diverse than The Collective. Whether it is to announce upcoming events, or to read or listen to poetry, a lot of different people from many different walks of life- sexualities, ages, races and ethnicities, class statuses- stop by "Poetry Unkempt".

The Collective, on the other hand, has a reputation among many scene participants as being about poetry for and by "old white people." In my field notes, I describe diversity in the audience at The Collective as "whitewashed" and as having "a lack of visible diversity." Whitewashed may sound like a slur and, although this is not my intention, the term is surely often used as such. It is hard to talk openly about diversity because it is a topic that often uncovers the realities of social inequalities.

Diversity is a problematic concept in a lot of ways, one being that it cannot always be "seen" with the eyes. For example, Jewish, queer, immigrant and ethnically blended identities are only sometimes visible. Plus, diversity is complex in that identifiers such as

“Asian” or “Black” say nothing about individuals’ lived, regional, or cultural experience. The only point that either of these terms successfully convey, on a surface level, is not white.

This being said, I took rough head counts of the diversity of participants to represent my perception of a lack of visible diversity at The Collective. I did this because I want to illustrate what an audience at this venue can look like. I do not mean these head counts to be a way of erasing difference or implying that none actually exists here. It often feels like there is not much diversity at “PC Tuesday”, perhaps because here the differences that exist are more hidden than they are obvious? A lack of visible difference may make The Collective feel unapproachable or unwelcoming to folks who do not fit the normative mold of what the poets here seem to be.

The rough head counts I did capture audience profiles such as; “one person who looks Asian and one who looks Hispanic out of an otherwise white appearing twenty person audience;” and “one black person, two people whom I know to be Hispanic, and- on a night dedicated to Vietnamese translation poetry- one person who appears Asian out of an otherwise white audience of twenty four people.” Two people of color out of an audience of twenty and four people of color out of an audience of twenty four is embarrassing given the rich and visible diversity in Sacramento, especially in the actual neighborhood where The Collective is physically located. The behavior of some scene participants results in the creation of an environment that could be interpreted as hostile to or intolerant of human differences. For example, on the night featuring Vietnamese poetry translations, I happened to sit in a place where I was able to overhear one Hispanic

poet turn to another Spanish-Speaking Hispanic poet for whom Spanish is a first language and whisper in frustrated reference to the feature, “Is he speaking English?”

The Collective board is aware of this overall lack of diversity at “PC Tuesday” and the Black History Month reading could be considered a nod in this direction. In one sense, the reading was a definite success. The venue was packed, at least half full with black people whom I had never seen out on the scene before. On the night of this reading, I had a conversation with Chip during intermission about how packed the event was.

The Collective: 2-08

Chip: “tonight’s turnout is good, a great turnout! The Collective needs more involvement from the black community.”

Dana: “There’s not a lot of involvement?”

Chip: “You know Rock has been involved for a long time but The Collective needs more participation from the black community. He can’t be the only one.”

Dana: “So, you’re hoping this’ll make a difference? Maybe people will come back?”

Chip nods affirmatively: “yeah, maybe they’ll come back. Just now three women [implying 3 black women?] were asking me... “you do this every Monday night?” and I told them yes, to come back and bring their poetry!”

To the best of my knowledge, the three women Chip mentioned did not return to The Collective. Nor did any of the other black people I saw at the Black History Month reading. What Chip was referring to, in terms of Rock being the only one, could also be viewed as his desire to avoid the continuance of existing tokenism. I share this desire;

many times in my field notes I wrote things such as “As usual, Rock is the only person here who doesn’t look white.”

Indeed, on the night of the Black History Month reading, one featured reader made a point on the mic about black inclusion being about more than a one-night celebration.

Mike is a well known poet who has been circulating on the scene for at least seven years.

The Collective: 2-08 I want to hug Mike for making the black history month comment he makes. In his intro, Mike says, “so, this reading is about black history month but to me, black history is every month because I’m black every day, so I celebrate black history every day. Just to clarify, to let y’all [white people?] know.

Every day Mike is black. Every day Mike is a poet. From what I have seen, most days Mike is out and about being active on the poetry scene in Sacramento. Rarely does Mike ever come to The Collective, a local organization dedicated to poetry in Sacramento. He does, however, serve as one of the rotating hosts at Sunny’s.

The hypersexualized masculinity that routinely comes to define the space at Sunny’s is one thing that ensures that “Poetry Unkempt” falls short of being a picture perfect example of inclusivity. Then again, there is no such thing as a picture perfect example of inclusivity. Even in terms of race and ethnicity, many poets on the scene at Sunny’s remain segregated, or are viewed by some participants as being somehow separate from one another. When I asked Jack, one of the rotating hosts of “Poetry Unkempt” who rarely misses a reading at all, how a reading I had missed the previous week went, he said “Oh, we didn’t make it either. It was Mike’s week and he kinda has his own crowd. He’s good. He does his own thing.”

What I heard, but what went unsaid, is that Mike has his own “black” thing, his own “black” crowd. I heard this because every time I have observed “Poetry Unkempt” on a



night Mike hosts, there are a lot more black people in the audience and on the stage than at any other time. Folks come to “Poetry Unkempt” specifically on the nights that Mike hosts, specifically because of the features and people he invites. What I find interesting is that having a black host in the rotational at Sunny’s produces this effect, whereas Rock is in the rotational at The Collective and in no way seems to cause- as Chip puts it- “involvement from the black community.”

Is it possible that, at least in part, the seriousness I have mentioned, the formalism, at The Collective prevents inclusion from occurring? Sunny’s is, after all, very different in this regard. Sunny’s is a very relaxed space. Like The Collective, the deli also has a new art show hanging every month, but unlike The Collective, many of the shows hung here are amateur and by artists who align themselves with the Chicano movement.

The very topics of race and ethnicity are handled differently by scene participants at these two venues. At The Collective, it almost seems like there could be an overt “us and them” mentality at play, a white “us” who creates a celebration once a year for the black “them.” At Sunny’s, the topic is often handled with humor. Here are two examples of what I mean when I say humor is used to address race and ethnicity at “Poetry Unkempt”.

Sunny’s: 7-07 There are two Hispanic guys sitting behind me. Earlier they had folding chairs and had a hard time finding a place to situate them. The waitress kept having to ask them to move so she could get around and they’d joke with her each time “it’s because we’re Mexican, huh?” Everyone seemed to understand that it is a joke. No one would get away with giving people a hard time because they’re Mexican here.

Sunny’s: 1-08 The host, a white guy, tells the audience that they should drink the “liquidados” and enjoy some “delicatos.” He intersperses his welcoming statements with a lot of Spanglish. Someone from the audience shouts “Man, your Spanish sucks!” and people, especially the host himself, laugh at the butchering of Spanish by a white guy.

The final field excerpt I wish to share in this section pulls together a number of the various points I have touched upon in this subsection. A white man named Nick who is in his mid to late sixties became very active on the scene during the time that I was away from the field. When I met him at Sunny's upon my return and introduced myself as a "sociologist doing research on the poetry scene," Nick was very welcoming. He offered me a lot of information about different venues around town and had plenty of ideas about what I should do for my fieldwork. Here is a look at what transpired throughout the course of our interaction at the first poetry reading we both attended. Unlike with some of my other field note excerpts, there are direct quotes included here.

Sunny's:5-06 It also came out that I should really go to some of the "ethnic readings around town." He explained that there are "several black ones" and "even some Chicano ones." He looks really conservative so I was surprised he used the word Chicano... I harkened to thinking it was indicative of his CA living.

Nick explained that he's usually "the only white man there" at "the black ones." He ran down a list of the different venues to me and went on to tell me about the "The Collective". He refers to The Collective as the "lily whites." He described the people there as "liberal and white." I can't see how this description would be any different than him? Maybe he sees himself as being different than these liberal, white "lily whites" because he goes to "the black ones" too?

Nick went on to say that he feels a certain "intellectual distancing" in the poetry at The Collective. He doesn't like it.

"You see, the thing about the lily whites, is everything is in the third person. Everything's intellectually distant. At the black readings, it's not like that. Everything's in the first person. It's, 'I got beat up one night', or 'I did crack and got pregnant'. That's the kind of stuff I like."

Oh my goodness. He seriously used I did crack and got pregnant and I got beat up as his examples of "black" poetry. It was really hard to be the good little sociologist who is capable of biting her tongue.

Nick made it a point to tell me that I'm "in the right place" at Sunny's. He did, however, clarify for me that I am "getting a slanted picture" here. And that I "should be obligated, for research, to include the ethnic venues and The Collective." I did not tell him about my knowledge of the scene, mostly because the things he said while describing it to me is invaluable material! Also because it is obvious to me that Nick likes to be directive and I'd rather just let him feel in charge here.

Later, I heard Nick read some stuff of his own. To me, his own poetry seems pretty "intellectually distant." Maybe his participation on the open mics at a lot of the "ethnic readings around town," where he is "the only white man there" is some form of participatory cultural voyeurism?

Nick did an excellent job of pointing out that poetry readings on this scene are segregated by the boundaries of race and ethnicity. Throughout the conversation we shared, he also puts specific words to the point that The Collective is a venue viewed by some scene participants to be a very white space. There are undertones of racism in some of the things Nick said to me. The examples of first person "black poetry" that Nick chose to offer me, the pleasure he takes in being the "only white man" at "the black ones," and the way he distances himself from the "lily whites" with whom he shares some obvious characteristics are perhaps, in and of themselves, concrete examples which illustrate why some of the social networks on the Sacramento Poetry Scene remain separate.

### *Participation*

Scene membership is expressed as a continuum of voluntary participation. Scenes can and often do maintain revolving doors as participants come and go "on" and "off" of a scene. Participation in scenes is also unlimited. And involves a multitude of acts and occurs in varying degrees. Scene participation is meaningful in that it often has emotive, personal, perceived or real impacts for participating individuals. Boundaries at the personal and social group levels are constructed, asserted, crossed, tested, negotiated, and maintained on scenes.

To elaborate on the notion that scene participation is meaningful for individuals; here is where I discuss some of the reasons why people participate on The Sacramento Poetry Scene. This list of reasons includes networking with other participants whom an individual deems desirable, to be recognized, and to hear themselves read their own poetry into a microphone. In this subsection, the examples of seating arrangements at Sunny's and photography at both venues are used to discuss the enforcement, contestation, and defining of boundaries on the scene. We see here that social norms on the scene vary from general social norms. Finally, the topic of accessibility is revisited in this subsection because participation and accessibility are interrelated components of scenes.

#### *Why People Participate on the Scene*

Nick made it a point to tell me that he does still attend "PC Tuesday" despite the fact that he does not care much for the intellectually distant poetry shared there. I asked Nick why he likes to attend "the black ones;" goes to readings where he does not like the poetry; and why he puts so many miles in going to so many readings throughout Sacramento? Nick responded, "I go to read. To read my poetry. I won't go to anything that doesn't have an open mic." Clearly Nick gets something meaningful from other people, or other poets, listening to the poetry that he himself has written.

Although joys of reciprocity- such as getting to hear some great poetry from other people, or getting feedback from other writers- does not enter the reasoning Nick shared with me for going so far out of his way to participate on the scene, he clearly reaps personal impact from the open mic portions of poetry events. I suspect that other poets on the scene also reap positive benefits from hearing themselves read their own poetry over

the microphone. One reason I think this is because people continue to show up to participate in open mics. Another reason I think this is that other folks have made similar comments, such as Jack's explanation for why he missed the same night at "Poetry Unkempt" that I did, the night Mike hosted.

Sunny's: 6-06

Dana: "oh, you didn't make it either?"

Jack: "no. but Al does have this new venue in Modesto that I've been helping him promote. We went out there this week and they moved us from the lobby of the theater into the big theater. it was cool. We only had three rows up front, it's a really big theater and it echoed a lot. But we got to use the PA system and it was cool, y'know, hearing your voice booming over the whole place"

Other poets have also shared comments with me that imply they reap meaningful social interaction through participation on the scene. Alex, a mid-twenty-something poet who I first met at a private salon at a poet's home, implies that he attends readings strategically to see certain people whom he wants to spend time with. He seems to be particularly invested in building a specific social network; several times he invited me to meet him at key social events such as a screening of the Sacramento Poetry Scene documentary and a featured reading of a well known poet at a bookstore.

Sunny's: 1-07 Alex, the guy I met at Rag Dog's a few weeks ago, comes up to me. He says he forgot my name and we reintroduce. He apologizes for missing the screening (I had completely forgotten we had planned to meet there). Says he really did want to hang out with me but quite frankly didn't want to go to the screening that night. I tell him it's fine. I tell him I came over to Sunny's afterward but didn't see him here either?

Alex: "oh, I thought it'd be dead so I didn't bother. I didn't think there would be anyone here"

I wonder who “anyone” is? They didn’t cancel “Poetry Unkempt”... it was just Mike’s night to host.

Dana: “it was a full house”

Alex: “oh, well there was a feature”

I find myself feeling confused, isn’t there always a feature? Does Alex mean to say that he doesn’t personally know Mike or the feature that night? That he didn’t come because he didn’t think he’d know anyone else who would be showing up that night?

There are other people who participate on the scene because they reap meaning from the personal recognition they find there. Poets tell personal stories about each other over and over to audiences. For example, I heard the story several times about the time Humberto came to the stage covered in paint after shoving a handful of mushrooms into his mouth. Humberto is a person whose life is so interwoven into the social context of the poetry scene in Sacramento that he chose to move back and continue participating in it after a move out-of-state did not work out. He is one of a handful of people I have met through my fieldwork for whom this scene is a huge part of their lives.

Some poets seem to get so much meaning from being recognized on the scene that they are offended when their contributions are not immediately recognized. Here is a conversation I overheard between Jack, a long-term rotating host and regular at Sunny’s and Chip, The Collective volunteer who organized the Black History Month reading. This anecdote, which involves the symbolic nature of the “reserved table” at Sunny’s illustrates a wrangling for status and recognition by two men who are both prominent characters on the scene.

Sunny’s: 5-07 Jack is unpacking his bag at the reserved table where Chip is sitting. Does Chip not know that this table is usually reserved for the host and his group? Surely Chip has been to Sunny’s before? I don’t

recall having seen him here before, but I don't come every week. And I know I see him at The Collective regularly, I guess I assumed that he's so active on the scene that he must frequent "Poetry Unkempt" too.

Jack turns to Chip. I don't think anyone asked Chip to sit at the reserved table, he moved there to reach eye level for a conversation with me."

Chip [to Jack]: "so, you're a host here, too? I didn't know that"

Jack looks at Chip with sheer disbelief in his eyes, an incredulous look on his face. He seems taken aback and is silent for a few conversational beats.

Chip [who must notice the look Jack shot toward him]: "I mean, I knew Mike and Mike Dizzy and... switched off... but I didn't realize you hosted too"

Ooooh. I think this is going to be good. Chip clearly doesn't know the etiquette around here. Jack is one of the regulars who has been super involved for years and years. Not acknowledging this about him is sure to cause a scuffle.

Jack: [to Chip, after literally rolling his eyes toward me] "Yes, I've probably hosted more than anyone else other than Juan himself" [Juan is the man who first founded the venue more than a decade ago.]

Jack goes on to explain his dedication to Chip. He talks about how he's the one who does all of the event promo, the email announcements, etc. The message he clearly intends to communicate is about scene status. It almost seems like Jack is trying to make Chip feel dumb, like he doesn't know what's up and is therefore totally out of- and not welcome into- the loop.

Chip dismisses Jack quickly by shifting his attention away from both of us. He gets up and walks away from the reserved table while Jack makes a move to show me that, unlike Chip, I am included in his eyes as someone who knows enough about the scene to deserve being included in it. Jack does this by showing me the publications he intends to read from tonight, as if I knew anything at all about the authors he is cites.

This anecdote is useful because it illustrates how boundaries of status and inclusion are enforced on this scene. It also shows how, although the networks are interrelated and

overlap between Sunny's and The Collective, the players and their frames of reference for the scene can be very different. Although the work involved with serving as a rotating host for "Poetry Unkempt" seems no different than playing the same role at "PC Tuesday," the word "volunteer" is the vernacular used to talk about folks who participate in this way at The Collective. I have never heard the word volunteer used to describe the hosts at "Poetry Unkempt," but I have listened to Mark explain to another poet why he volunteers his time for "PC Tuesday."

It seems like Mark gets a sense of meaningful interaction from carrying on the work of an important mentor and from feeling like he is in a position to impact positive social change. Also, like Nick and Jack, hearing himself read seems to have something to do with the meaning Mark gets from his participation.

The Collective: 5-06

Mark: "for a long time, this institution was being not very well run, but now there are some new faces". He talks about a workshop mediator he has been working with for a few years who jazzes people up about "getting out there and making things happen."

Mark: "I'm still not a terribly effective administrator, all I really want to do is read and write. But this gives me a chance to read, which I like. I'm learning to enjoy it"

Joan, his conversational partner, talks about how busy she is, how busy everyone is. Joan tells Mark how nice it is that he's volunteering his time like this. She calls it "donating your time."

Mark talks about a writing workshop he has been participating in. The guy who facilitates it is real big on "getting out there and doing something." He relates that his volunteering here is about trying to carry on that spirit.



Social recognition is an important component to how this scene operates. It is not uncommon to see scene participants at venues or events which they rarely attend, just to hear a specific poet read. Who shows up to whose reading, who is asked to read by whom and when and where... these are all things that matter to many of the poets who circulate on the scene.

Early on in my fieldwork, I thought that accessing the poetry scene would be similar to how one might access a music scene. I thought that I must show up in order to figure out who the “good” poets are, and then peruse the fliers and ads in the paper to go only to the “good” readings. Little did I know then that most of the poets who are active on the scene know each other and, rather than going only to the “good” readings, they go to the readings that their friends- or the friends they want to have- host, feature at, or invite them to. Perhaps I would have known this going in to my fieldwork had I ever been an active participant on a music scene.

### *Boundaries on the Scene*

As the previous example which illuminated the symbolism of the “reserved table” at Sunny’s and Chip’s failure to recognize or acknowledge Jack’s status on the scene illustrates, boundary construction and enforcement are related to participation on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. As I became more and more a part of this scene, what I eventually experienced was a breaking down of boundaries- my own and others’. As I came to understand, and to feel included as a part of the scene, I took note of how some of the social norms on the scene are different than in other spaces I have participated in. The definition of scenes we discuss here explains that scenes are where boundaries are constructed, asserted, crossed, tested, and maintained. The way that general social norms

operate within a given scene illustrate how scenes are unique spaces in and unto themselves, separate from other realms of social experience.

An example of how social norms are negotiated in a way specific to this scene is the seating arrangement at Sunny's. It would have been impossible for me to keep track of how many times I have seen people who have probably never been to Sunny's before, walk in during "Poetry Unkempt" and immediately get confused or overwhelmed looks on their faces. This reading tends to be packed, so seating is a commodity. If a person does not arrive early enough to secure a table, they are likely to be led by a waitress or directed by a stranger, to sit at a table full of people whom they do not know. This kind of closeness to strangers in an intimate setting can be off-putting to folks who are used to having personal space, especially in business establishments where they are likely to be ordering food and drinks.

Another example of how social norms are negotiated in ways which are specific to the Sacramento Poetry Scene is photography. It is a general social norm to ask someone for their permission to take a photograph of them. This is not the case on the poetry scene. If an individual attends a poetry reading at Sunny's or The Collective, it is likely that their photograph will be taken without their permission, by someone whom they do not know, for an unclear purpose. Most every week at The Collective, usually Mark but sometimes another person, has a camera out to take photos of the feature and the audience. A few times I have overheard vague reference to the photos being "for the website," but the purpose of photographing audiences remains unclear because I have not seen these photos posted anywhere on the website.

Al brings a camera with him to Sunny's every week. Al has told me that he tries to take pictures of each and every person and that he has boxes and boxes of years and years worth of stockpiled photos of poets in Sacramento. He kindly invited me to sift through the pictures to choose photos for this project, but the lack of consent made me think better of this task. What Al actually does, unbeknownst to those who are unfamiliar with him, is develop the photographs and return weeks later with copies of pictures to give to people as a sort of way to memorialize their participation on the scene.

People who do not know Al can easily be put off by- as one scene participant put it to me- "someone shoving a camera in my face." Another person who eventually became active on the scene once asked me about "the weird guy who took my picture without asking." I have also had a number of conversations with young women- one of them far younger than eighteen, which says something about how Al may be securing his reputation as a "Dirty Old Man-" about how awkward they felt having their pictures taken like this. I have to agree that the norms about photography are different at Sunny's than in other places, but once a person becomes a regular at "Poetry Unkempt," Al's eccentricities and his pictures almost seem normal.

Boundaries are constructed, asserted, crossed, tested, negotiated, and maintained on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. When lines are crossed, humor is sometimes used as a way of policing, or defining what is and is not acceptable behavior. This is especially the case at Sunny's, where it sometimes seems as if peoples' eccentricities are as much of the experience of "Poetry Unkempt" as the poetry itself. An example of how humor is sometimes used to assert and maintain boundaries is when Karin, a waitress at Sunny's,

needed to keep Emeril, a reliable drunk at “Poetry Unkempt,” from using the microphone during the reading’s intermission break.

Sunny’s: 5-07 Emeril grabs the mic during the break and Karin shouts from across the room “NO, Emeril, that is not allowed!”

Karin turns to Sunny, the deli owner and asks “can I kick him in the head?”

Sunny laughs out loud and says “yes”

“Whew! Kick him in the head, kick him in the head” Karin dances across the room toward Emeril and heads out the front door after him. Everyone is laughing about Emeril getting chased to get kicked in the head by the waitress for acting out of turn.

The tendency of some scene participants to get drunk, be loud, and break rules, is a fairly common occurrence at Sunny’s. A little more out of the ordinary, is Al. Al is the man who takes photographs and gives copies to participants and he has a number of props he uses as a way of contributing to the weekly poetry readings. Although I have seen him use a variety of gimmicks- everything from handing out individually wrapped presents to all audience members near Christmas time to blowing bubbles on the sidewalk at break, Al can be relied upon to have a cow bell that he rings to help hosts get audience attention. He also uses signs handwritten on small squares of poster board as his main means of communicating not only with the audience- as appeals for sitcom style applause or laughter- but with Karin and the other waitresses.

I watched Al use his signs which carry messages such as “more coffee,” “service here,” and “check please” for months to see if they would cause a stir. Although I recognize Al’s participation gimmicks as part of his quirkiness, having worked as a waitress myself led me to anticipate that Al’s signs would be interpreted as rude.

Especially in this gendered situation where all of the wait staff at Sunny's are young and female and Al is a man who sits at the "reserved table" with other "Dirty Old Men." The following excerpt from my field notes illustrates how a waitress who objects to Al's signs uses a threat to make her boundaries clear.

Sunny's: 5-07 The waitress working tonight does NOT like Al's signs. Yes!! I finally get to watch a waitress object to them.

She stands there and looks at him for a long minute, cocks her hip and lets out a long exhale. It's like she's sizing him up or something.

"You know, you're lucky I don't have my lighter on me."

His sign reads "more coffee." She makes him finish the last drop of coffee in his cup before taking it away with her.

She catches my eye when she turns around with it and rolls hers. She looks exasperated, like she can't take him seriously and doesn't care much to humor him.

### Accessibility

In the section of this chapter about space, accessibility is discussed at length. Accessibility and participation are interrelated components of scenes, as accessibility precedes and, at least to a certain extent, is a likely determinant of an individual's potential participation. Accessibility should matter not only to event organizers but also to those who actively participate on the poetry scene in Sacramento.

I say this because this scene's continued existence and success does not rely on a population of stable, regular, participants. Sure, some folks are active on the scene in a long-term sense and their contributions are important, but there is also a revolving door of people coming and going, on-and-off of the scene. In the case of the Sacramento Poetry Scene, there are more participants who come and go than who stick around for the

long-term. This means that the maintaining of a semblance of accessibility for potential participants is vital to the likelihood of this scene's continued success.

My field notes point out that "most of the people" in attendance at "Poetry Unkempt" the majority of the time "come every other week or, more often than not, even less frequently" (Sunny's Field notes: 5-06). Some weeks I have been hard pressed to identify any "repeat attendees" from all of my previous observations at Sunny's, combined. I find it "notable how the joint fills up each week with new folks." (Sunny's Field notes: 5-06) It appears as if Sunny's "Poetry Unkempt" is a spot that scene participants use each week "as a sort of drop-in center. There's a social hour going on out on the sidewalk while people perform on the stage inside. This goes on completely unchecked except for a rare request that folks keep it down out there, even though it's distracting for people trying to listen to poetry. Some people never even come inside to hear the poetry; people just drop-by here. To see what's going on, to meet friends and run into the people they want to see." (Sunny's: Field notes 7-07)

### *Conclusion*

Analysis included in this chapter draws attention to several important aspects of scenes. First, the failure of social networks to overlap or connect creates situation whereby some scene participants are left out of some scene spaces or activities. Second, the physical, built and aesthetically created environments that constitute scene space impact the social interactions that take place within these physical spaces. Third, the definition of scene is a site for the contestation of power and authority on The Sacramento Poetry Scene.

In this chapter, The Sacramento Poetry Scene comes to be understood as a space where social boundaries are asserted, maintained, and contested. The notion of identity on scenes comes to be understood as both an individual and collective phenomena. Plus, spatial access is understood to be an element of scenes that necessarily affects participation. In the next chapter, I use the information presented in this chapter to inform a discussion about the utility of the definition of scene.

## CHAPTER 6

### TOWARD SCENE STUDIES

Scene Studies researchers need a cohesive definition of scene in order to solidify the sub-field. Scene Studies have the potential to add to the sociological articulation of collective social experience. The analytical problems and limitations of community are well documented (Alleyne 2002, Barnard 2000, Brown-Saracino 2004, Graham 1998, Hitzler and Pfadenhauer 2002, Joseph 2002, Ridge et. al. 1997 & 1999). Researchers currently conducting Scene Studies (Alredge 2006, Davis 2006, Futrell, Simi and Gottschalk 2006, Kahn-Harris 2004, Malam 2004, Moore 2004, Salanha 2005, Straw 1991) represent a growing group that is positioned to move our collective social project beyond the conundrums of Community Studies.

Scene Studies are a viable alternative to Community Studies. For this shift to be plausible there is need for space for translation, room for transition, between the two sub-fields. Most helpful in creating this space is Kusenbach's (2006) distillation of community down to its three basic conceptual components: locality, the presence of shared social ties, and meaningful social interaction. I frame the working definition of scene around these three components of community by restating them as identity, space, and participation.



Framing the definitional components of scene by using community as a template creates room for translation between the two concepts. Doing so makes it seem more likely that there is room within Scene Studies for anything that could potentially be otherwise stated as a Community Study. Consider this move a good faith effort on my part in signaling toward a necessary- and hopefully a fruitful- transition from Community Studies to Scene Studies. It is my perspective that this conceptual shift from community to scene is a redirection that sociology stands to benefit from.

I suggest that we move our thinking away from binary logic. A more honest reflection of human experience is to think of it as it actually occurs, on a multitude of continuums. Scene Studies are a tool to equip sociologists who are interested in this endeavor. However, I do not want to give the impression that scenes are a new topic for social science.

“Scene” is a term that serves as part of the common vernacular in the United States. There are countless examples of this throughout 20<sup>th</sup> century history, such as with the “jazz” scene, the “beat” scene, the “flapper” scene. The word is used similarly in a relaxed conversational way by people today, such as with the “grunge” scene, the “gay” scene, or the “skater” scene. Polsky (1967) and Irwin (1973 & 1977) were the first researchers to take note of the possibilities for Scene Studies within sociology. In fact, it is Irwin’s definition of scene that tends to be used, sometimes in slightly modified ways, in more recent examples of Scene Studies.

In Chapter 2 of this dissertation, I go over the details of Irwin’s definition of scene. This definition and the modifications made to it by others are the basis for the definition of scene that I put forth. Analysis of various aspects of the Sacramento Poetry Scene that

I offer in Chapters 4 and 5 is meant to be a common ground to use in beginning a discussion about the utility and versatility of scene. Such discussion is the main focus of this conclusion, but first, I reiterate our working definition of scene.

### *Scene, A Definition*

To reiterate, scene membership is expressed as a continuum of voluntary participation. Scenes can and often do maintain revolving doors as participants come and go “on” and “off” of a scene. Scene participation occurs in varying degrees, is unlimited, and involves a multitude of acts. Commonality among participants is based around a common activity or is established through loosely organized activities that center on participants’ perceptions of a collective identity.

Scene participation is meaningful in that it has emotive, personal, perceived or real impacts for the people who participate in them. The conceptualization, enactment, and visibility of individuals’ identities take place on scenes. Existing social hierarchies are legitimated by the social processes and interactions that occur on scenes. These processes and interactions involve folks sharing, building, and maintaining interrelated social networks that often overlap on scenes. Commonality sometimes involves shared values- which may or may not be clearly articulated- among scene participants.

Boundaries at the personal and social group levels are constructed, asserted, crossed, tested, negotiated, and maintained on scenes. Scenes transcend the boundaries of place and occur in both abstract and concrete space. They are affected by media and technology and change over time. They occur in public and private milieus, and are urban, rural, and suburban phenomena.

### Utility Discussion

Analysis of the Sacramento Poetry Scene leads me to conclude that definition of scene space is a product of the interactions between participants. People in leadership roles, such as Sacramento Poetry Scene venue hosts, tend to set the tone for a shared definition of scene space. However, other participants also play important roles and are in positions to challenge the spatial definitions put forth by those in leadership roles. Conflict between participants can serve to expose definitional processes.

The conflict that I experienced in the field with Mark Rouse, an unwelcoming host at The Collective, is an example of a power struggle over the definition of Sacramento Poetry Scene space and its appropriate uses. In this way, The Sacramento Poetry Scene became- for a few specific moments in time- a site for contestation. By site for contestation, I mean a space where power was contested, exerted, and negotiated. On scenes, at least on this scene, the definition of space can be viewed as both collective and as always changing. This is especially the case at Sunny's, where group participation, such as first time and other applause, drunken jokes, and reading on the mic, are integral to the space.

Yet- it is unclear to me exactly where the definitional processes of scene space fit best into our definition of scene itself. Since power is constantly being negotiated between people, and the definition of scene space is part of an ongoing negotiation of power, maybe these definitional processes fit into the notion of scenes as a phenomenon that change over time? Or maybe it is necessary to say something more explicit about the definition of scene space being the product of interactions between participants in the definition?

Another component of scene that needs development is the impact of physical space on the social interactions that take place between participants. I found this impact prevalent, in terms of both the physical and aesthetic environments at Sunny's and The Poetry Collective. For example, the antiseptic, white-washed, intemperate gallery space that houses The Collective, coupled with folding chairs in straight rows seems to create room only for surface level interactions between scene participants. The whole experience of poetry and scene participation here, at least for me, is reflective of the physical space; it is sterile, almost forced and seemingly insincere.

This is not to say that scene participants are not personal with each other at The Poetry Collective. Rather, they engage intimately with one another in scene spaces that are more private such as editorial and board meetings, invitation-only parties, and after-reading gatherings. Which scene participants have access to these private scene spaces seems to reflect a sort of unspoken hierarchy of status on the Sacramento Poetry Scene. This is even the case at Sunny's where public interactions are far more intimate than at The Collective. It seems appropriate that the definition of scene include public and private milieus in the parameters of scene space. However, The Sacramento Poetry Scene is not a case example to address whether scenes are rural and suburban phenomena in addition to being urban.

Another aspect of the definition of scene that I put forth that would benefit from additional inquiry is the notion that scenes are mediated and affected by media and technology. I did not get a good sense at all about how media and technology affect The Sacramento Poetry Scene. Quite frankly, its impact on this scene appears minimal to me.

Once I was confused due to a lack of adequate information on-line and in email sources about the location of The Collective.

I also know that the movie documentary about the history of this scene created a scuffle that spilled into local independent newspaper letter writing. This is actually another example of how a scene becomes a site for the contestation of power. There were a lot of questions asked about the decisions made regarding who was included in this film that stands to historically canonize The Sacramento Poetry Scene. The people who were left out of the film- as well as those who were not- were very vocal about the filmmakers' editorial choices. Nonetheless, it remains that funding for the project was independently sought. The ultimate choices made about who was and was not included in this cinematic representation of The Sacramento Poetry Scene's history rested in two pairs of hands, one of them belonging to a controversial figure on the scene.

Perhaps I do not see clearly the various affects of media because I researched from the inside of this scene instead of outside of it, looking for sources of information. Another possibility is that I am minimalizing the affects of print media on this scene, such as books and other poetry publications, because these things were not a focus on my fieldwork. Nonetheless, other Scene Studies researchers (Irwin 1973 & 1977, Pfadenhauer 2004, Polsky 1967) point to media as being relevant to the study of scenes. I do not doubt their sensibilities, but I do question what I might be missing with my analysis.

It is true that I am overly inundated with media and that I live a life rooted in technology. So- it seems likely I might miss how these things contribute to- or mediate- The Sacramento Poetry Scene. For example, it did not strike me as anything other than

normal that The Collective has a blog, email lists, and that many of the poets I met maintain independent listservs to disseminate information about events that take place on the scene. If I were to research “poetry scenes” in a grander sense, or on a larger scale, the networks among poets that are mediated by the internet and other forms of media technology might become more important. For example, these things enable slam poets to build relationships among themselves across many state lines, book tours, and travel the nation doing performance poetry.

My analysis of the Sacramento Poetry Scene supports the notion that scene participation is not stable. There is a revolving door of folks who come and go, on and off of The Sacramento Poetry Scene. These folks vastly outnumber those who stick around long-term and are, in a sense, the bread and butter of the scene. Without these participants, there would be no scene worth speaking of. Yet, from what I have seen, many of them go unnoticed, un-greeted, and under appreciated. This is likely the case even for regular participants, such as Mary Linn, who participates at a high level- she even volunteers and organizes events- when she is around.

There are many different ways that people participate on this scene, and participation does appear to be unlimited. There is, however, one rite of passage that a participant needs to go through to become recognized and accepted by other participants. I am referring to one’s first reading on the mic. Otherwise, there is an endless list of expressive social symbols and behaviors that an individual can participate in using or demonstrating.

Networky behavior such as name dropping or author citing, and the referencing of books, publications, or writing circuit institutions are signals of a certain kind of scene participation. Another expressive symbol of participation, one that a person does not need

any special knowledge to participate in, is applause. Whether it is “special first time applause” or enthusiastic applause, this activity- at least at Sunny’s- is collective and engaging. Plus, at least in the case of The Sacramento Poetry Scene, simple attendance and listening counts as active scene participation.

It would be lucrative to research a scene that does not have such an obvious structure to it to learn more about the different ways that people participate on scenes. I have researched poetry venues with regular readings that involve an open-mic portion. Yet, if I were researching a Sacramento scene that is broader, for example, the “dive bar scene” or “the hipster scene”, I might have more insight about scene participation. Other scenes, or a different project, may also have more to offer in terms of information about the emotive, personal, perceived, or real impacts that participating on a given scene has for individuals. Aside from a few poets who like to hear themselves talking on the microphone, most of my sense that this portion of our definition of scene is adequate remains inferred.

What I have found about our working definition of scenes, is that the notion that boundaries are constructed, asserted, crossed, tested, negotiated, and maintained on scenes definitely seems to be on the right path. My fieldwork has countless examples of this. What I think my fieldwork and analysis both lack, however, is a focus on the role that social networks play on scenes. From what I have seen on the Sacramento Poetry Scene, it seems that people likely share social power, knowledge, and connections with one another through interacting as counterparts of shared or overlapping social networks.

Social network theory may have a lot to offer to Scene Studies. It is possible that participation on scenes can be viewed, at least in part, as participation in the social

networks that make up the scene itself. It strikes me that social networks might be the structural components of scenes. Plus, if networks operate based on perceptions of commonality among network participants, they are likely part of how existing social hierarchies come to be reinforced, reenacted, or re-inscribed on scenes.

The example that I discuss in my analysis that points most specifically to this phenomenon, is the Black History Month celebratory reading at The Collective. It seems like the various social networks that operate on the Sacramento Poetry Scene failed to overlap in this instance. Thus, black poets were unintentionally ghettoized to a one-time headlining spot and a largely black audience showed up only once, just to see their friends and the poets they know read. Plus, black women were hardly included in an event that, in part, explicitly celebrated them.

At the same point in time, regular participants at Sunny's often chose not to show up the one night of the month that Poetry Unkempt was hosted by a black man. Mike "kinda has his own crowd. He's good. He does his own thing." Even at Sunny's, a scene spot championed by participants for its diversity and openness toward including everyone, the social networks do not necessarily overlap. It could even be argued that participants avoid interacting with folks who participate in networks different from the ones that they desire to participate in- or envision themselves a part of.

Nick comes to mind here, with his aversion to the "Lily Whites" at The Collective. Nick was invested differentiating himself from the "Lily Whites", as he dubbed the folks who participate in The Sacramento Poetry Scene by attending "PC Tuesdays". Clearly he does not experience a sense of commonality with these other scene participants. Yet, I saw subtle similarities in the subtle racist logic of some of Nick's statements about the



“black readings” and The Collective’s unsuccessful- in a long-term sense- attempt to include black poets and audience members in their regular readings series. It seems possible to me that, although they are not clearly articulated, Nick and some of the folks organizing readings at The Collective share some common values.

Another aspect of my analysis that points to common values among participants on The Sacramento Poetry Scene is the case of The Dirty Old Men. Here I am not referring to The Dirty Old Men themselves, rather to those who dub and refer to them as such. This process of singling men out, this determining of who is and who is not a Dirty Old Man, is an example of how identity can be constructed and articulated on The Sacramento Poetry Scene. Their maleness and behaviors associated with notions of appropriate and inappropriate masculinity are understood by other scene participants to set this group of men apart from other men. Likewise, my understanding of myself as a woman, a feminist, and a sexual object, is an example of how identity can become visible and defended on this scene. It is through interacting with The Dirty Old Men and others on this scene that I came to recognize, articulate, and react to these components of my person.

Yet- one thing that I discuss in the review of the literature is the idea that some scenes are actually identity based. The idea here is that commonality on scenes is not just based around a common activity, such as poetry. Rather, sometimes commonality occurs through loosely organized activities that center, instead, on a collective sense of identity. Research on queer scenes, or identity specific scenes such as the black hip-hop scene or the white power music scene, are likely far better examples of this than The Sacramento Poetry Scene.

What I did reap from thinking about identity based scenes in terms of my analysis, is an understanding that these two kinds of scenes are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Many participants on The Sacramento Poetry Scene self-identify as poets. The practices of poetry are central to some poets' self-concepts. Sharing public open-mic space on a poetry scene is one aspect of some poets' practices of poetry; many of them also spend time in writing workshops, teaching or learning poetry, reading poetry, and writing it. Some participants on The Sacramento Poetry Scene also assume that everyone who participates does so because they also write. The perception of a shared identity is sometimes there, whether every participant writes poetry or not.

I also found that multiple collective identities become articulated and are made visible on the same scene. It is not enough to talk about identity as it is articulated on The Sacramento Poetry Scene only as it relates to poetry. Gender, race, and class are equally important collective identities that I found being actively articulated on this scene. There are also likely some collective identities that did not make it into my fieldwork or my field of vision.

In part, the in/visibility and articulation of multiple collective identities on The Sacramento Poetry Scene contributes to the legitimating of existing social hierarchies within this scene. What needs to be added to our working definition of scene is that, as sites of contestation, existing social hierarchies are not only legitimated on scenes. They are also challenged.

### *Notes of Conclusion*

All in all, the definition of scene that I offer with this project is useful for analysis of The Sacramento Poetry Scene. There are a few main points from this discussion of the

utility of the definition of scene that I summarize here. First, social networks may very well be the structure of scenes. It seems likely that social network theory has something to offer to Scene Studies. Second, scenes that involve the building of participant commonality around a common shared activity and those that involve perceived commonality centered on a sense of shared identity are not mutually exclusive. These two kinds of scenes can also be one in the same.

Third, multiple collective identities are in/visible, and to varying degrees, on the same scene at the same time. Fourth, scenes are sites of contestation. Likewise, the notion that boundaries are constructed, asserted, crossed, tested, negotiated, and maintained on scenes is integral to the definition of scene. Fifth, there are two key topics included in the definition of scene that are in need of further discussion. The affect of media and technology on scenes is an area of Scene Studies that would benefit from research explicit to these relationships. Another key area of research lacking is inquiry about suburban and rural scenes.

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