

Greetings everyone, welcome to my thesis defense. Thank you all so much for coming.

This project, *Reaching Through*, is an EP of electronic music about reaching for connection, closeness, and possibility. Over the course of the last two semesters, I have put together 5 tracks of original music, visualizers, and a live concert performance. I'll first discuss some context for the project, going over the themes that inspired it and the research that went into it. Then, I'll play about 10 minutes of music and video content, and then I'll discuss my process.

*Reaching Through* is an EP of electronic music that I wrote, composed, produced, and performed over the course of my two semesters in thesis. In *Reaching Through*, motion, light, and travel converge, mapping out memory and connection through music and its accompanying visuals. Dreamy synths and dance beats propel us forward, providing momentum. I captured city lights and roads, bright lights and long drives. Lyrically, I look to explore what it means to reach out and grasp connections and new possibilities, specifically those related to grief and memory. In a live performance setting, the music and visuals took on a more playful, energetic, and lively meaning, creating a space for joy and reveling in this newfound openness. To give an overview, this project culminated in a 4 track EP, accompanying photography, real-time video content, an off-site exhibition, and a live concert performance, which is *a lot*.

Initially, I had proposed to make a full album of electronic music, consisting of ten tracks. The body of music was the main priority. Over the break, my mentor Erin connected me with local music organization Friends of Noise, who very graciously offered myself and another thesis student a double bill concert show at The Off Beat in North Portland. This was an exciting, yet

big undertaking. My project shifted to be a smaller body of music and the production of a live concert.

Thematically, I was inspired so much by driving and travel. To me, driving is very meditative, calming, and peaceful. It's a break from context, allowing me to both physically explore the world and mentally explore different ideas. I personally find driving to be a very poignant, sentimental visual metaphor, using the exterior world to reflect on the interior world.

I was specifically inspired by a couple key concepts for this project. I was interested in how driving, or more specifically, traversing physical space, could act as a metaphor for desire, connection, and possibility. I came across the work of Anne Carson, a classicist who wrote about desire in her book *Eros the Bittersweet*. In her book, she discussed how desire is constructed through distance and proximity. Traversing that distance between you and what you want is called the reach of desire, an action *towards* something. While Carson's writing was primarily about romantic desire in classical poetry and literature, it provided a nice framework to conceptualize desire for my project. I wanted to take her romantic and erotic framework and apply it to platonic, sentimental longing. The reach of desire particularly inspired this project, even to its name. To me, driving is a reach. And although there are no romantic songs on this EP, I found myself writing about longing for connection with people, places, and emotions. Through these songs and visuals, I'm reaching towards the people I love and miss. I'm reaching towards place, home, and possibility.

This project changed in a lot of ways, and I encountered a lot of challenges while making it. So much of this project became about memory and grief.

In late February, one of my best friends, Aden, suddenly passed away. I spent the entire month of March grappling with this, and I still carry it with me today. I felt like I was suspended in air. I had lost basically all motivation for academics. I was in shock. Everything was happening so fast, and I had no way to make sense of anything around me. I had just helped her move to her new place. We had just gotten lunch together. She had just texted me inviting me to her housewarming party.

Continuing to make work felt weird, strange, and meaningless. If I'm being candid, I stopped caring about thesis for a while. I knew that I still needed to get work done, even if I wasn't in the best place to do so. Even today, it feels strange presenting this work without her here. She was one of my biggest cheerleaders, and I know she would have been overjoyed with me completing this project.

One night in early March, I was driving around town, trying to clear my mind. I had checked out a camera, even though I had no plans of what to or desire to make anything. It just felt like something to do. I drove to the top of Rocky Butte in Northeast Portland. I pulled up to the viewpoint, scared of who I'd run into alone with a bunch of camera equipment in the middle of the night. I mustered up the courage to go take photos, and found myself surrounded by families and couples taking pictures. It was strange being surrounded by people spending time together. I get mad at random strangers now, mad that they get to be here and she doesn't. Still, I had to find

something worth doing during all of this. I set up the camera, composition, and posing as it felt natural. I knew I wanted the city in the background. One of the photos really struck me. Covered in light and overexposed, all you can see is my bright silhouette and the city behind me. It's the photo that I used as the cover for my EP. Even today, it feels weird that such a striking photo came from such a sad time. Not good or bad. Just weird. I know that Aden would have been happy that I was doing something creative, though.

This photo felt representative of this project. High above the city. Lights and cars in the background. Overexposed and heavenly. It was quiet, and it struck me. So much of my previous photographic work included me, but this was a new iteration, myself without a face. I feel as though no expression can accurately capture what I've been experiencing, so my figure blinded by the light felt appropriate. There's a Bjork quote I've been thinking about lately. When discussing the cover of her third album, *Homogenic*, on which she's dressed in royal clothes, she said that while writing it, she "had to become a warrior. A warrior who had to fight not with weapons, but with love." I can't quite place why, but this resonates with me. This semester was so hard, but I'm proud to be standing here today.

The driving imagery that I was so accustomed to also changed. I see my friend Aden everywhere. I drive home and see her in the trees and the cityscape. I see her in strangers I pass by and places we used to spend time at. In the past couple months, as I'd drive up Interstate to the venue I performed at, I'd pass two of her previous apartments, both of which I'd helped her move in and out of. I keep finding myself confronted with this deep feeling of absence whenever I drive around town. I feel her presence everywhere. Before, driving represented a wandering

around of one's own desires, a physical and spatial reach towards something. It still feels like that, but it now feels more reflective. I remember a couple days after she had passed, I pulled over on the section of MLK that goes over I-84 on the East Side. I was still in shock from grief, and trying to make sense of everything. The city in view, there was the most beautiful sunset. Every drive since then has felt like I'm wandering through my own grief. I don't know where it's going, and I don't quite know if that's the point. The act of traversing space, of traversing the reach towards connection, is what I'm interested in. Longing for closeness, and quite honestly, missing my dear friend, roads and viewpoints became new. They became contexts for exploration. I feel as though memory is something to be traversed. Closeness is something to be arrived at.

I'll soon play some music and video content for you all.

Before I do, though, I'd love to say thank you to a handful of people who made this project possible.

I'd first love to thank my family for supporting me throughout college and being a great support system. I'd also love to thank my mentor, Erin, who I've had the pleasure to work with throughout this whole process and during my time at PNCA. Also a big thank you to Otis, who has been such a close collaborator during thesis. Thank you to Andre and the folks at Friends of Noise for trusting us with a concert and exhibition. I'd also love to thank Davis Bashungwa for assisting with screenprinting for merch, Carter Gubbins for working merch at our concert, Ryder Booth for shooting some of the video content for this project, and Morgan Berry for taking the

best photos I could have asked for at our concert. I'd also love to thank all of my professors who have given me the tools for making this project. Some of them aren't here because of scheduling conflicts but I'm gonna thank them anyways. I'd love to give a big thank you to Megan McKissack for teaching me how to use TouchDesigner, Teresa Christiansen for teaching me how to use a camera and introducing me to photography, Seth Nehil for teaching me how to use Ableton, Ran Sheng for supporting all of my sound-related tech requests, and the folks at Tech Checkout who put up with all of my requests, questions, and emails, which are sometimes on a daily basis. Also a big thank you to my friends who kept me sane and showed me so much love and support during this time. And lastly, a big thank you to Aden, who I miss so much.

[Play video]

I'll now discuss my process and how the project came about.

All of the music in this project was produced in Ableton Live, a music production software that I've been using to make songs for the past couple years. I designed synth instruments myself, modified samples and presets with audio effects, and processed my voice with a variety of effects. My main goal was to make dreamy electronic music.

With the synth instruments I made myself, I primarily focused on dreamy, buzzing sounds as lead instruments. One of my personal favorite effects to use and create is a chorus effect, which can be achieved in a variety of ways. With some synthesizers, there are two oscillators in play at the same time. If you slightly detune one, it will play the correct note but sound just slightly off,

creating a doubled effect. I also achieved this by layering together different vocal tracks, creating a chorus of voices. I was really drawn to the ways in which buzzing electronic sounds can be made soft through processing.

There were also a variety of sampled sounds that I used. One of my favorites is an electric piano instrument reminiscent of the Yamaha DX7 synth, which was used in a lot of 80s pop music. I wanted to tap into the nostalgia and history of that sound to explore themes of sentimentality and memory.

With my vocal processing, I fell in love with autotune and layered vocals. Part of it was some fear. Singing is scary, but part of it was me enjoying the complex sounds I could add to my voice. I personally think that there's something really gentle and sweet about heavily produced vocals, like a computer trying to sing to you. The contrast of very human lyrics with very digital sounds appealed to me, and it strengthened my exploration of closeness and connection.

I focused a lot on dance and pop music for this project, it felt approachable and doable. I found that a dance beat can do a lot of heavy lifting in a track, providing forward momentum. This momentum is something that I carried with me into my visuals. So much of this project is about movement and navigation, and, to me, pulsing and skittering dance beats reflect that. Dancing is also joyous and fun. With a project about reaching towards possibility and optimism, it's only natural that dance would make its way in. It also grounded me in my performance of the project. I knew that when it came to performing the EP, energy was something that would be needed, and dance offered a solution to that.

During my first semester of thesis, so much of the feedback that I had received was about an airy, ethereal quality to some of the sounds and aesthetics of my project. I chose to lean into this with some of the sounds, effects, and visuals used. I quite enjoyed leaning into this with various chorus and phaser effects, layering vocals, and reverb and delay. Visually, I leaned into this with the EP cover in which I'm high above the city. In my video content, the sky and clouds move and interact with the edge, overlay, and feedback effects I used.

I'll go ahead and discuss some of the tracks and the video of the project.

This EP became about a reach towards memory and closeness – that of closeness with friends, family, place, and memory. I became interested in what writer Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as the “chronotope of the road,” which is a construction of time and space in narrative works revolving around roads and travel. The road reflects time passing, a journey, and experiences gained.

The track “Perfect Angel Baby,” one of my favorite songs on the EP, is one I made honoring my friend Aden who passed away. I was practicing the guitar and found a chord that I really enjoyed. Knowing that I was more skilled at playing the keyboard and producing with MIDI information, I turned it into an arpeggiated melody and wrote over it. The lyrics reflect what I had been experiencing since she had passed. I see her everywhere, and I'm trying to remember goodness and joy. I was really enchanted by the quality of the electric piano sound. I chose to surround it with layers of vocals and a comforting 808 bass. When playing, writing, or just practicing piano or guitar, I find myself really drawn to loops and how a line, phrase, or chord progression can

live on its own and repeat within itself. I was really inspired by the French musician Oklou, who in her music often uses really gentle looping melodies and connects them to sentimental experiences. I found the main piano melody a great basis to riff on. With the change in the chord and rhythm in the second half of the song, I wanted to explore another long extended chord. I quantized the rhythm in ableton, making it snap to the grid of the beats. It became more rigid, but still open. I additionally played with deeper piano sounds. Lyrically, I was inspired by the memory of Aden. In trying to find any sense of joy in the current circumstances, I chose to think of all the joy she brought to the world. We had just gone out for her birthday in September, and she was always asking if I'd want to join when she went out dancing. I also chose to include some anecdotal lyrics about a trip we took to the beach in her red convertible bug, in which I spent much of my teen years.

The song "Some Day," was a track I started last semester about some family members who had passed. It too expanded this project's exploration of grief and memory. The demo version of the song was rather minimal, but I was inspired to add more texture and intensity to it. I had a lot of fun playing with filtering out audio and using phasing effects to add some space to the sounds. There's an arpeggiating synth that has a filter shifting at a fast rate, giving a kind of pulsing electronic sound. This move was inspired by some of Bjork's slower, more mid tempo songs that incorporate dynamic ambient sounds in the background. I felt that it was a nice way to make the song feel more alive.

The song "Calling Out To Me" was inspired by ancient Greek myths of sirens. Sirens, to me, operate as a great metaphor for the distance and reach of desire. I wanted to reimagine the siren

as something hopeful, rather than deadly. This song was inspired by my four years working in retail. I worked at the cascade station target for so long, and I was really good at it. It sucked. It was right by the airport, and planes were always flying overhead. It was a reminder that there is something better for me out there.

For this project's visuals, I wanted to capture some photos of myself for EP cover imagery and driving visuals for performing live and song visualizers. This semester, I did one main photoshoot, which resulted in the cover image. I also used some photos that I took during last semester's thesis development and during the beginning of this semester to act as supplementary EP visuals. During my time at PNCA, I have experimented a lot with shutter speed and motion blur, and the imagery you see here is a continuation of that. The cover image is a long exposure with flash. The longness of the exposure combined with the instantaneous aspect of the flash results in a look that I find dreamy and ethereal. The flash renders the foreground still, as if it was taken with a fast shutter speed. The shutter staying open, though, allows for the background to expose and for things to still appear in the foreground. Light can bleed and images can come through the blur. I was inspired by Portland fine art and music photographer Brendon Burton, who places a great emphasis on the space and context of a photo, even when a person is in it. With some of the other photos for this project, I looked to continue the motion blur, such as a photo of the road or of myself alone in my room, covered in light.

For the video content, I used footage of driving, cityscapes, and timelapses. Last semester, I took a trip to Bend with my mom to go see a concert. I was able to get some video footage of driving through rural, forested Oregon, her charm to remember my grandma dangling from the rear view

mirror. During this semester, myself and fellow photo student Ryder Booth took a sony camera and the BlackMagic to get some video for my project. We shot video along the highway and roads around Portland. Additionally, I returned to Rocky Butte because I was enamored with the way in which the photos from up there came out. We were able to get some beautiful shots of the city high above. I love how small and far away everything becomes from high up. That distance intrigues me. Everything distant, just out of reach, yet still so close. Yes, these are landscapes, but I can't help but see other things in them too. I see my loved ones and new possibilities in them. Something far away is something begging to be found and embraced.

I think so much of my fascination with reaching for possibility in this project comes from a variety of places. On one hand, I'm considering the conceptual framework I learned from Carson's writing. On another hand, I think these experiences of travel and movement feel comforting, like there's a purpose in going *somewhere*. I think in the context of this project, that somewhere is memory of loved ones and the closeness to possibility. What that possibility is I don't know. I chose to leave it vague. It's about the reach.

As for the editing of the visuals, they were made in TouchDesigner, a real-time video software that can be used for a variety of visuals using node-based programming. I programmed my touchdesigner project to receive video input and then process them with a variety of custom effects I programmed myself. The videos overlap each other. The edges are detected and singled out. The lighter parts of the videos bloom, increasing in intensity. I also used video feedback to make a blurring effect. I found that these videos, with their different speeds and motions created a dreamlike sense of movement that I found myself really enjoying both as video content and as

performance content. The timelapses provided speed for dance music, and the slower footage and processing created space for a calmer experience. The visuals were also programmed in a way in which I could perform them live. This gave me something tangible to operate during my performance, which I'll now talk about.

Perhaps the biggest change to the project was that it also became a concert event. During winter break, my mentor Erin connected me and otis to Friends of Noise, a local organization that looks to support youth and emerging musicians. Friends of Noise offered us a concert and exhibition at The Off Beat, their venue in North Portland. This was kind of a gigantic undertaking, but I was really excited about it. This opportunity meant that I was scaling back the scope of the project from an album to just an EP.

This involved a lot of planning and logistics between me, otis, and the staff at Friends of Noise. Together, we planned an exhibition of mine and otis' work from Thursday, April 9th to Sunday, April 12th and a live concert event on Saturday, April 11th. Our exhibition and show, titled *halcyon noises*, involved several site visits, meetings, and many, many emails.

The exhibition planning went smoothly, and I'm happy to say that I exhibited a series of printed photographs and a video installation of my thesis visuals with a projector. I knew that the concert was going to be the event that required a lot more planning, so I decided to keep the installation simple and easy to install. Still, I'm happy with the work that I was able to show and how it filled the space, as I don't normally print large, and I had never done a projection installation before.

The live concert, which was a lot of fun, required so much more planning and preparation. Otis and I promoted our show as soon as we could. We put up many posters, posted a lot on social media, and were even able to get a batch of free tickets for PNCA students. This involved taking photos on a surprisingly sunny day early in the semester, designing posters, printing posters, and distributing all of this information. We also screenprinted T shirts with the help of our friend Davis, which I'm happy to say we sold out of! I was surprised at how much people loved buying t shirts.

Initially, I had planned to perform alongside two bandmates, one on guitar and one on the backing tracks and visuals. My friend Thomas was going to be playing guitar for me, and we were super excited to put together a set, as we both love music and he had just finished his undergrad program in sound engineering. However, due to our friend passing and the circumstances around that, he unfortunately had to back out. Additionally, due to some other circumstances, my friend who was going to be operating the backing tracks and visuals also ended up not performing. This was *stressful* to say the least. I found myself thinking *how on earth am I going to perform this set? Both of my bandmates have to back out, performing alone is scary, and also one of my best friends just died.* I don't mean to toot my own horn, but I pulled it together because there was no other option and I'm a boss. I rehearsed with otis, gathered my backing tracks together, and pulled through. I was able to rely on some key folks around me. Erin and otis both were such reliable collaborators with this project. I really lucked out befriending otis and collaborating on this together because we're both overly obsessed with making sure everyone is on the same page and that plans are going through. I also was able to contact and hire my friend and photographer Morgan Berry to take photos for the concert. I'm so

happy with how they came out, and it was a joy to be able to work with several different artists and coordinate all of this. At the live concert, which was a lot of fun, I performed original songs from my EP, some covers, and some house music in which I mixed the synth instrumentals live. I was *very* nervous about performing. I was so nervous that I started going to open mic nights around town to practice, which actually ended up being quite fun. It went very smoothly, and it was such a joy. The only regret I had is that I wasn't more excited for it, but it's ok because I absolutely plan to do more performances post-thesis. When I was meeting with Erin once, I had nervously shared that although I'm nervous, the good thing about performing is that the vibes are up to me. I mostly said this in an attempt to convince myself, but I really believed it when I was actually up there performing and was having a lot of fun.

Performing solo ended up being a silver lining. With all of the craziness and grief going on, I had only really prepared backing tracks, which can be somewhat dry when it's just audio and vocals. Performing the visuals myself gave me something to *do* when performing when no vocals were needed. My only thought now is *more*. I know I can do *this* now, so there has to be room for more, and I'm really excited and already planning what a live performance set can include. The last piece I played for the performance was a house mix in which I adjusted and performed the synthesizers live. It was something I had in my back pocket because I was worried about my set being too short. It ended up being one of my favorite parts of the show. I think looking forward I definitely want to incorporate more interactive backing tracks, more live instruments, and more live synthesizing. Also more visuals! Overall, I'm proud of the concert and if anything, it just made me more excited to keep performing.

As for the future of this project, I plan to keep performing the music, remixing it, and releasing it on streaming. With all the craziness of this semester, I prioritized (1) finishing the work, (2) the exhibition, and (3) the performance. The release of the music will likely come in the near future, and performances will hopefully continue. I hope to use the more visual aspects of this project in any visual art scenes that feel fruitful or will look at it, as I'm really proud of the visuals on their own as well. I see the current audience of the music aspect as local electronic music scenes, as well as online communities around independently produced electronic music. In short, I'm gonna continue to make music, release it, and hopefully continue finding some joy in it.

Before I end, I'd like to again just say thank you to everyone who supported me during this project and thank you to all of you for coming. So, thank you.