

## DISSERTATION ABSTRACT: ELIZABETH NAVARRA VARNADO

### **Authentic Experience at Popular Music Festivals in the U.S.**

(research director: Donna Kwon)

#### Abstract

My dissertation will investigate two themes pertaining to authentic experience at popular music festivals. First, I will define the parameters of authentic experience, and will unfold the layers of mediation that promote such experiences. I operate on the basic definition of “authentic experience” presented by Chris Anderton: “spontaneous feelings of euphoria, transcendence, and *communitas* (Anderton, 2018; 168).” With a focus on the three types of individuals within the music festival community (fans, musicians, and festival organizers), I will use interviews and observations at festival events to ethnographically analyze what authentic experience looks and feels like at festivals, and how it may come about. Nostalgia is an important component of many festivals, and thus, critical discussion of the history of popular music festivals in the U.S. is necessary for my research.

Second, my dissertation will present a brief but critical history of popular music festivals in the U.S. from the 1960s to present day. My critical history functions to emphasize that music festivals are sites of remembrance, to be remembered. I posit that some of this historical knowledge is implicitly understood by the musical festival community (through various routes of mediation), and holding that knowledge is necessarily performative. Through their participation, music festival communities *perform history*, in that they are simultaneously re-enacting historical events and creating contemporary festival history. Investigating how members of the music festival community (fans, musicians, and event producers) participate and perform history uncovers not only the cultural work being done at popular music festivals, but also the mechanisms that fuel authentic experience within these events.

My research approach echoes several compelling examples of festival research: Fry’s “We Are the Blues (2010),” Wynn’s *Music/City* (2015), and Regis and Walton’s “Producing the Folk at the New Orleans Jazz and Heritage Festival (2008).”