“Serious is Bad”:
A Queer Reading of Punk, Midwest Emo, and Connecticut DIY

by

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Class of 2019

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Sociology

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2019
Acknowledgements

Without Professor Jonathan Cutler, this thesis would not have come to fruition. I owe my composure and relatively tame blood pressure levels to his advising throughout the thesis writing process. Additionally, Professor Cutler’s guidance led me to ideas and topics that I would not have considered otherwise. I am deeply grateful for his involvement in this thesis.

Thank you to my family, whose love I could depend on. I appreciate the late night phone calls we made amid the existential this thesis caused at times.

I am deeply thankful for several close people in my life that encouraged and enabled me to complete this project. Without Declan, I may never have stumbled on to Connecticut’s robust DIY scene. Veronica dedicated numerous hours to editing my writing, far more effort than I ever could have expected of someone. Grant kept me emotionally stable through this process. My thesis buddy Chiara kept me on track through the process. And Sam is someone I could always trust to listen when I needed it. I’m eternally thankful for these and all my friends to whom I recited my thesis ad nauseum.

Finally, I would like to thank Dawson, Vin, Vik, Nora, Devon, Scabs, and everyone I reference in this thesis. This could not have been possible at all without you. Thank you for allowing me to write this, and thank you for the art you create.
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Introduction: Halloween at Purchase College

This thesis began when I stumbled onto a subculture I unwittingly joined. By a series of events, I found myself interpellated into Connecticut’s DIY music scene, which is brimming with queer people. Initially, my thesis analyzed LGBT performance in popular culture, which I quickly found politically uninteresting, if only because appealing to a popular audience necessarily means producing art that is palatable to straight people. When I found myself, by chance, in a room of a dozen transgender people with a shared taste in aesthetics, I found that quite interesting. I sensed immediately

Declan was my entrance into DIY—a subculture named for its amateur-driven musicianship. Declan is a transgender man, who looks like a Vans store vomited on him. He lives in Connecticut, and you might find him hanging around Wesleyan University, but he isn’t a student there. The fact that he lives in a city away from campus drew me to him in the first place. Though I enjoy Wesleyan’s community, Declan provided a much-welcomed escape.

Thanks in part to Wesleyan’s campus, I have explored my feelings of transness and I’ve found great moments of euphoria through thinking of myself as nonbinary. Yet life within Wesleyan’s walls can be disappointingly cisgender. The transgender population at Wesleyan is significant—much greater than my home in Louisiana—but still small enough that I feel the need to prove my legitimacy at every turn; the smallest decisions can become intensely charged. Which bathroom do I use? Do I, at the risk of being mistaken for a man, wear baggy jeans for warmth or a skirt
with stockings? The opportunity to spend time with a transgender man off campus came as a respite from that constant, active performance.

Declan, like me, is a music fanatic. Nearly everyone likes music, but Declan and I listen obsessively. I listen to hours of music each day in pursuit the next goosebumps-triggering composition. Declan, in my estimation, can name nearly every band from Connecticut. Music (in addition to Nintendo) served as a major bonding agent between the two of us. Instead going to the movies, Declan asked if I wanted to see a show with his friends at Purchase College during the Halloween weekend.

Before I knew it, I was sitting with a dozen other people in an apartment on Purchase’s campus near the border of Connecticut and New York. On the wall there were two lists: “the black list” detailed everything banned in the household, and “the white list” enshrined everything that the apartment loved. Having seen the pair of costume giraffe ears on my head, a person named Vin ran over to add “giraffes” to the white list. “Minecraft” was also listed on the white list, and its counterpart “Roblox” on the black list. Under that, I saw “TERFs” (transgender-exclusionary radical feminists) on the banned list.

A different person, Vik, was on the couch watching reruns of *Beyond Scared Straight*, ranting about the show’s awful lighting. *Beyond Scared Straight* was a reality television show designed to frighten “troubled teens” by exposing them to the horrors of incarceration, often perpetuating homophobic and racist stereotypes. To a slightly skeptical viewer, the show reads almost like satire instead of an ode to the triumphs of the prison system. Vik watched for the show’s irresistible absurdity rather
than for the premise. It reminded me of *The Room*—a movie admired for being one of the worst movies ever made.

Fittingly, Vik wore a suit composed of several clashing plaids. A leather collar hugged his neck. When Declan and I arrived at the venue, we noticed the audience shared the same outlandish fashion as Vik. One person dressed as Alfalfa from the movie *The Little Rascals* and must have spent quite some time perfecting the signature cowlick hairdo. Another dressed as a cowboy, sporting ass-less leather chaps for good measure. Purchase students, in my estimation, find it *cool* to dress as absurdly as possible, often incorporating elements of camp into their outfit choices.

Judith Butler argues that gender is a script that people use. We are constantly performing ourselves (a sentence you’ll hear nauseatingly often in introductory sociology classes). She writes, “Discrete genders are a part of what ‘humanizes’ individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.”¹ This has certainly been my experience in a variety of settings, including Wesleyan. And many of those boundaries of gendered performance are intensified as a transgender person. Misapplying eyeliner can feel like a referendum on the validity of my gender.

The broader subculture encompasses Purchase College celebrates the violation or parody of the gender script. Adhering closely to a gendered performance is not disparaged, but transgressing its boundaries is *cool*. Vik, who is a transgender man, demonstrated this well: his suit signifies his gender, but the contrasting plaid distances himself from an unplayful hypermasculinity. Others presented themselves

androgynously through clothes and makeup. As I would learn later, this wasn’t some Halloween-inspired anomaly; Halloween was simply a backdrop that fit well with Purchase’s preexisting ethic of play around gender.

Girlpool served as the evening’s opener. The indie/folk/punk duo achieved national success, which in this genre means receiving four million streams on a single on Spotify. For context, indie rock band MGMT released a song last year that yielded over 23 million streams, and their biggest single received around 230 million. Girlpool’s fans are a niche group, and the Purchase College venue was overflowing with them. Girlpool and the punk campus opener Bushies garnered equal amounts of fanatical applause. Oh, and another thing: all but one of the musicians were transgender, and the only cisgender one was a lesbian.

This is the Connecticut DIY music scene. Purchase is one college that’s part of a bigger music scene—a punk/emo continuation in Connecticut with a sizeable queer presence. DIY earned its name for its amateurism and accessibility. You don’t need to be a fantastic musician or even have access to a recording studio. If you can find a group of people and a microphone, you have a DIY band. Now, more easily than any time before, you can take what you create and post it on the internet using a streaming service.

When I returned from the show, someone was noticeably absent.

“Where’s Dawson?” Declan asked.

“They’re mixing Grass Stains,” Vik responded with a knowing look.

Unfortunately, “mixing grass stains” is not a euphemism for smoking weed, which is a big missed opportunity if you ask me. Rather, Grass Stains is one of
Dawson’s bands. Dawson, who I consider a good friend, is prolific in their musical career. They had performed in Bushies earlier that night, and they are a member of Grass Stains and Bye Forever!. Alone in their room, Dawson toiled over an upcoming rerelease of a Grass Stains album—an album they had been remixing seemingly forever.

The DIY music I encountered has a great sense of humor and self-awareness, and its sonic aesthetic is characteristically messy. These qualities can be found also in punk and emo, two root genres of this scene. That’s why I initially found it odd for Dawson to expend so much energy into mixing a DIY album. Nonetheless, this music is still a performance that is curated. Sure, the lead singer’s voice might crack, and you might hear an echo from the instruments bouncing off the recording room’s walls, but these elements are desirable and chosen with intention. DIY music has a messy, imperfect beauty to it, and that’s by design.

Something is going on in Connecticut. There is a subculture of queer people who attend and perform at music venues. They produce art and music, which often incorporates irony and camp. The white and black lists and the plaid suit are two of many examples of a Queer DIY attitude. It is silly and sincere, proving that “I’m joking” and “I mean it” is a false dichotomy. I trace their subcultural mode of expression back to the Midwest emo scene of the 90s and punk of the 70s, two seemingly unlikely roots of a queer music scene. I argue that punk has queer origins, and that punk and emo subcultures produced work that facilitates a queer musical aesthetic, which drives the Connecticut DIY scene.
Before my experience at Purchase College, I had never been in a room full of transgender people, let alone transgender musicians and artists. And in that moment, I discovered the need for this work. Niche subcultures can fade without much documentation, and queer narratives are overlooked by the straight researcher (as is the case with punk). Without an active attempt now to identify and contemplate queer DIY, it could be difficult to piece together its existence years after the fact. Though I’m skeptical of LGBT visibility politics, heteropatriarchy can only benefit from queer erasure in the archive.

The subjects documented break form, and so must this thesis in order to capture a queer musical culture that depends on defying normative gender and sexual performances. I have embedded QR codes within the text that, when scanned, take the reader to recordings of the songs I am analyzing. Additionally, this work blends personal essay, ethnography, and textual analysis to challenge dominant historical narratives of the past and understand the queer present. Strict adherence to the formalities of the academy feels ill-fitting for the material.

This work also rereads history. Walter Benjamin writes, “The true picture of the past whizzes by. Only as a picture, which flashes its final farewell in the moment of its recognizability, is the past to be held fast.”

History is always a practice of reading, and because history is frequently written by those who hold power, queerness is often erased. This thesis is a queer reading of history, and a queer documentation of the present.

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Punk is Queer… and Homophobic

You’re kidding yourself if you think anyone can adequately define punk. The word refers a subculture and a musical genre, but the specifics are complicated and contradictory. It’s possible to spin multiple narratives of punk with none more accurate than the other. Here I choose to read punk through a queer lens and bring attention to sites of queer-related phobia. This may not be the definitive punk story, but it is one that largely forgotten in favor of white masculine history.

Punk, in its origins and in its very name, is queer, and punk subculture also has a history of unsettling homophobia. This contradiction is best exemplified in the name itself. “Punk” was a synonym for “prostitute” through the 16th and 18th centuries, and today, many use it as short hand for the Ramones. Between those periods, the term was something of a homophobic slur. William S. Burroughs said, “I always thought punk was someone who took it up the ass.”

Some of the first punk artists were openly queer and played with gender presentation. Lou Reed appears on the first edition of Punk magazine in 1976. After the Velvet Underground broke up in 1973, Reed began to play with gender presentation and was known for sexual fluidity. Andy Warhol, the sponsor of the Velvet Underground, assisted another early punk act. One of the “Warhol superstars” was Jayne County, an early punk rocker who defines herself now as gender fluid (according to her song IGenderTy).

“Gender fluid” is a term that has only recently entered the English lexicon. Years first known, decades after Jayne County started as a punk rocker. For that

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reason, many people that we might call transgender today were simply known as drag queens. Though Jayne County exclusively used feminine pronouns for herself, writers refer to her as a man who performed in drag. Many publications call her “Wayne County,” the name she used before she changed it to Jayne. The assumption on the part of many punk documenters is that Jayne was actually a man performing an act as a female character. This is likely due to the ubiquity of the word “drag.”

Several early punk acts performed in drag such as the New York Dolls, who are sometimes credited as the first punk band. In fact, Punk: A Definitive Record of a Revolution argues that the New York Dolls influenced the Sex Pistols in every facet except costume. It’s hard to know what terminology we might use for the Dolls now, but at the time they were simply known as men in drag. Despite this, some of their hit songs seemed to address queerness.

The New York Dolls also attracted a queer audience. Three years before the Ramones debut album, the New York Dolls were forging a new scene in New York. A Rolling Stone review from 1973 reads:

The Dolls are a lot more than just another visually weird band. In much the same way that the Stones and the Who began as symbols of and for their club audiences, the Dolls, in their series of legendary gigs at the Mercer Arts Center came to be the forefront of a new creature/clan. Somebody once described them as “the mutant children of the hydrogen age”: boys and girls of indeterminate gender, males with earrings and flashing orange hair, females

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with ducktails and black leather, interchangeable clothes, makeups and postures, maybe gay, maybe not—and what’s it to ya, mothafuckah?\(^6\)

The article’s emphasis on “indeterminate gender” reveals punk’s ability to queer. Punk spaces featured gendered or sexual liminality. As the final clause of the excerpt demonstrates, these early punks were sexually fluid and androgynous, and judging from the use of obscenity, punks didn’t care what you thought about it.

The campy aesthetics of the New York Dolls and Jayne County, which center on gender performance, create a space for queer existence. Though these drag groups put a lot of effort into their appearance, they were not aiming for realism. Their hair was disheveled, and their makeup was applied hyperbolically. This can be understood through theater theorist Bertolt Brecht, who believed the audience should be constantly reminded they’re watching a cultivated performance. Western theater, by contrast, often hides the wires and strings that hold a performance together to immerse the viewer in the world of the play. Like Brecht, early punk drag *emphasizes* the performance of gender, rather than trying to make it look natural. In doing so, these bands the loosen the strict confines of gender and embody a more fluid performance.

As the punk genre expanded, punk’s members fought over its identity, centering on queerness and authenticity. In CBGB in 1976—the year of the Ramones’ first album—punk rocker “Handsome Dick” Manitoba verbally harassed Jayne County with homophobic slurs.\(^7\) She smashed his collarbone with a microphone

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\(^7\) Jarek Paul Ervin, “The Sound of Subterranean Scuzz-Holes,” 2.
stand. *Punk* magazine, the same one that featured Lou Reed on its first issue, railed against County.⁸

One of the founders of *Punk*, Legs McNeil (born in Cheshire, CT), exemplifies the homophobia in punk subculture. McNeil’s position with *Punk* was unique because of his direct role in knowledge production. Truthfully, punk was and is dramatically amorphous, but the narrative construction process necessarily privileges certain details over others to preserve cohesion. The CBGB club produced the Ramones but also their contemporaries Patti Smith, Television, the Talking Heads, and Blondie—hardly a homogenous bunch musically or aesthetically. People like McNeil create popular definitions of punk and wield the power to include and exclude people from the label of “punk.” McNeil produces knowledge. In an account of punk’s history called *Please Kill Me*, McNeil describes punk’s opposition to queerness:

Gay liberation had really exploded. Homosexual culture had really taken over.... Suddenly in New York, it was cool to be gay.... So we said, “No, being gay doesn’t make you cool”.... People didn’t like that too much. So they called us homophobic. And of course, being the obnoxious people we were, we said, “Fuck you, you faggots.” Mass movements are always so un-hip. That’s what was great about punk. It was an antimovement [*sic*], because there was knowledge there from the very beginning that with mass appeal comes all those tedious folks who need to be told what to think. Hip can never be a mass movement. And culturally, the gay liberation movement and all the rest of the

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movements were the beginning of political correctness, which was just fascism to us. Real fascism. More rules. ⁹

I’m not really sure how anyone could classify being gay as “cool” in the 1970s. Gay people were (and still are) the targets of hate crimes and harassment. Additionally, oppressed minorities tend to be the victims of fascism rather than the proponents of it. In 1969, queer people led an anti-police riot in Stonewall Inn after officers had repeatedly targeted the bar. Rioting against a physical manifestation of state power is downright antithetical to fascism.

McNeil’s observations are bizarre, but there’s a sentiment in them that I share. Punk subculture was an anti-movement that generally opposed fascism. Ironically, the queer punks that McNeil despises would probably agree with that assertion. In fact, queer punk bands existed in a time when performing drag faced state scrutiny. A person had just been arrested for cross dressing in New York in 1968, and New York police targeted queer spaces throughout the 60s and 70s. ¹⁰ What could be more punk than daring to perform obscenity-laden music while in drag?

Legs McNeil built a narrative of punk, as did many others. And make no mistake, I’m doing the same thing. McNeil understood punk’s ideology as directly opposed to gay liberation. By contrast I’m using a similar interpretation of punk’s ideology to argue that the subculture is uniquely suited to queerness. I also locate the origins of the movement in queerness. There can be no unifying narrative of punk because there is no unifying sound or beliefs to punk. This narrative illuminates the

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radically queering tools of punk aesthetics that other readings miss. Through their music, appearance, and stage performances, queer early punk artists created a scene that resisted heteropatriarchal logics. They existed in the space where the institution had just unraveled—a space with truly no rules, as McNeil prefers. Queer people used and continue to use punk as a means of creating a space that exceeds the normative constraints of gender and heterosexuality. As Johnny Rotten said, “We’re into chaos, not music.”
Microphone Phalluses and Other Queer Punk Performance Strategies

Every queer analytical work after 1999 must include an explanation of disidentification, so here’s mine. Detailed by José Muñoz, disidentification is a performance strategy of queer people that avoids dominant discourses by rejecting the binary of identification and counteridentification. Muñoz writes, “Disidentification is a performative mode of tactical recognition that various minoritarian subjects employ in an effort to resist the oppressive and normalizing discourse of dominant ideology.”¹¹ Disidentification is like an intentional mis-implementation of ideology, creating new meaning. Muñoz demonstrates this concept with punk artist Vaginal Davis.

Dr. Vaginal Creme Davis is a bit of a heroine of mine. Though she performed mostly on the West coast, her work is a blueprint for using punk as a queer liberation tool. Davis, a black transgender woman, still performs in drag, which Jose Muñoz focused on in a chapter of Disidentifications. He was particularly interested in Davis’ character named Clarence, a militant, homophobic white supremacist. Muñoz argues that the performance of Clarence attacks whiteness and homophobia while providing Davis a script for sincere emotion not normally afforded to her. Punk is the only context in which such a performance is completely authentic and ironic simultaneously. Punk’s tendency towards irony and energetic display lends itself well to this type of queer political technique.

Davis represents perfect example for this performance strategy. Muñoz explains:

¹¹ José Esteban Muñoz, Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 97.
“Although many gay people eschew such negative images, Davis conversely explodes them by inhabiting them with a difference. By becoming the serial killer, whose psychological profile is almost always white, Vaginal Davis disarticulates not only the onus of performing the positive image that is generally borne by minoritarian subjects, but also the Dahmer paradigm in which the white cannibal slaughters gay men of color.”

Because of Davis’ social position as a Black trans woman, her embodiment of the white militant racist skewers whiteness, and in doing so, Davis creates a new space for self to occupy.

The Dadaism and camp of punk makes it ideal for queer politics that sidestep the identification-counteridentification dynamic. Rightly, theorists such as Dick Hebdige have identified punk rock’s roots in Dadaism, an art movement that attempts a work related to Vaginal Davis’ performance strategy. Dadaism, according to Hebdige, subverts common sense and collapses oppositional logics (e.g. dream vs. reality) to create new meaning. Surrealist André Breton writes that the art can ignite “a total revolution of the object: acting to divert the object from its ends by coupling it to a new name and signing it.” This is like wearing safety pins as earrings, divorcing it from its original purpose.

Enter Jayne County. The 1970s punk’s show is vulgar and sexual. Her most famous track (and my personal favorite) is “Fuck Off” which features the chorus: “If you

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12 Muñoz, Disidentifications, 107.
don’t want to fuck me, well baby… baby, fuck off!” A popular image of County shows her squatting with a microphone stand extending from her crotch like a phallus. This image is representative enough of County’s sexualized performance style that she uses it as her official Spotify profile photo.

The use of instruments and equipment in rock as phalluses is anything but novel. Mick Jagger struts on stage, gyrating and all. His wielding of the microphone reads as a phallic symbol—a direct extension (pun intended) of his sexualized dances. Also, Jimi Hendrix famously treated his guitar sexually at the Monterey Pop Festival. Steve Waksman writes, “The electric guitar as technophallus represents a fusion of man and machine, an electronic appendage that allowed Hendrix to display his instrumental, and more symbolically, his sexual prowess.”15 Worthy to note here is that Hendrix subsequently lights his guitar on fire and smashes it, complicating the psychoanalytic reading of his performance.

Like Davis’ embodiment of whiteness, Jayne County performs a masculine, sexual action with the microphone from a position of difference, reforming its meaning. Instead of rejecting the microphone as a phallic symbol, County embraces it. In doing so, she implodes the aggressive male sexuality of musical performance and creates new space to occupy. Before the term gender fluid existed, County found a way to embody fluidity rather than conforming to the oppositional logic of masculine and feminine.

Another early 70s band the New York Dolls used similar Dadaist techniques. Their lyrics are often nonsensical; their seminal track “Personality Crisis” contains strings of words that simply don’t fit together. Reading their lyrics felt like my brain was collapsing in on itself. They perform the song with such a conviction, however, that I don’t even notice the bizarre syntax. The discernable lyrics describe a person struggling to pin down their identity. “And you're a prima ballerina on a Spring afternoon,” vocalist David Johansen croons, “Change on into the wolfman, howlin' at the moon, hooowww.” The meaning of the song isn’t totally clear, but these lines lend themselves to a queer reading. “Ballerinas” and “wolfmen” present a gendered dichotomy—one that collapses for the song’s protagonist. Later Johansen sings, “Personality, everything is starting to blend. Personality, when your mind starts to bend.” Combined with their drag presentation, the song reads like a contention with gender fluidity. It is a song about contradiction embodied by rock star men who wear dresses and makeup. The use of “blend” and “bend” imply that the band are not burly, hairy men who sometimes like to dress pretty; they’re both simultaneously.

The Dolls were also campy. If Dadaism rejects oppositional categories of meaning, camp flips meaning on its head. To state it a bit simplistically, camp is an aesthetic taste that enjoys media precisely because it is bad. Early punk contains many examples of camp, but you could find numerous examples in DIY scenes today. I left several DIY venues unsure whether a performance was brilliant or horrible. There is, for example, AJJ’s song “Kazoo Sonata in C Major,” which is exactly what
the title suggests. When they performed the track live at a show I attended, the crowd cheered thunderously for the grandly layered kazoo symphony. It’s ludicrous, and it’s great.

Malcom McLaren had a similar experience with the New York Dolls. Prior to his role as the manager for the Sex Pistols, McLaren managed the Dolls. McLaren penned a reflection of the Dolls when the band reunited in 2004. “I was shocked by how bad they were,” he recounts. “How much it hurt my ears! And then I started to laugh—laugh at how stupid I was. How bad they were. Bad enough to be good. By the fourth or fifth track, I thought they were so, so bad, they were brilliant.”

McLaren describes here a core tenet of punk—the performance was messy and even abrasive, which made it great. The association of camp with queer aesthetics may have deterred people from applying the term to punk, but there’s no mistaking it, punk music is campy. Some campy innovations were even championed by heterosexual, cisgender rockers. The Ramones’ appeal rested in their brevity (songs less than two minutes long!) and sloppiness. “Blitzkrieg Bop” is not beloved because it is a technical masterpiece of music; their songs break all the rules, and that’s the fun of them. Johnny Rotten of the sex pistols said it well: “We want to be amateurs.”

Vaginal Davis’ Clarence character makes use of this preference for sloppiness. The idea of Clarence is more important than “realism;” Davis is not

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literally trying to look like a racist militant. If anything, the parodic elements of the performance are heightened by Clarence’s rushed and sloppy white-face makeup and strap-on beard. The New York Dolls’ use of drag similarly advanced their image. Their wigs were messy, and their blush was dramatic and unblended. One band member left his copious chest hair exposed. They weren’t doing drag poorly, they were doing drag well by dressing poorly on purpose.

The Dolls’ presentation fits with Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater, which puts the audience at a distance from the world of the characters, reminding them that they are watching a consciously constructed performance. Brecht writes, “[In epic theater,] what the audience sees is not a fusion of D1 [the actor] and D2 [the character], an independent D3, in which the contours of D1 and D2 are lost…. The opinions and feelings of D1 and D2 are not coordinated.”18 The division between actor and character must be clear to prevent the viewers from losing themselves in the play. If the theater keeps the audience at a distance this way, the audience can think more critically about a play’s messages.

Brechtian theory doesn’t necessarily mean that there is an authentic self-offstage and a false persona onstage. Instead, the epic theater model draws a distinction between the performance of the self and the performance of a character. Performing, on and offstage, is inescapable, and the term should not imply

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artificiality or disingenuity. Likewise, gender is a performance, but it is so deeply ingrained that skirts and bows feel *naturally* feminine. When we perform gender each day, those actions are not conscious facades. Brecht’s model separates the community’s reality from the play’s, but it cannot separate truth from illusion because the two aren’t mutually exclusive. Gender is a *truthful illusion* in that gendered identity, regardless of one’s cognizance of it, falsely feels essential but carries real meaning.

The Dolls’ drag was Brechtian because it called the viewer into a conscious recognition of the musician’s gender performance, but it didn’t imply that gender is fake. In fact, drag is only legible through the social *reality* of gender. Like Jayne County’s microphone phallus, the New York Dolls were not *rejecting* gender, but embracing gender performance. As a result, they created space for gender fluidity (or a more gender fluid masculine performance). The Dolls’ message seemed to be, “All of this is a performance, so why can’t this be ours?”

Through its aesthetic practices, punk seeks to create new space for meaning and escape dominant logical systems. For queer people, who are definitionally non-normative, this can be a scene of liberation. Before terms like “gender fluid,” there were still gender fluid people—they were punks. As New York Dolls’ concerts prove, the early punk scene was a place that not only welcomed queer people, they were the main draw. A microphone phallus here, some poorly applied blush there, and suddenly you have a place to exist.
“Emo” as a term first appears in the late 1980s as a shorthand for “emotional hardcore.” As journalist Andy Greenwald notes, this music was “a strain of hardcore punk that was notable for its obsession with feelings (as opposed to politics, anger, smashing stuff up).”\(^\text{19}\) It frequently carries the same stigma as “hipster;” no one would readily identify with the label, and the term is almost always used to indicate one’s superiority by contrast. The stigma of the name seems to have dulled with fans of more contemporary emo bands, but even today, many reject the label. My Chemical Romance is often the first band people associate with the word “emo.” But lead singer Gerard Way said, “I think emo’s a pile of shit.”\(^\text{20}\)

Beyond music, “emo” means any number of things to people. If you ask an average person to distinguish between emo, goth, and scene subcultures, could they come up with definitive answers? I’m not sure I could. Even the association between emo and rock music seems to be questioned; there’s a current genre called “emo rap” with figures like Lil Peep and Lil Uzi Vert at the helm. I like their music quite a lot, but other than talking about inner pain, I fail to identify the musical similarities between the genres. “Emo” is such a commonly used term with such an ambiguous definition that it’s remarkable anyone understands the word in conversation. A number of narratives, like punk, compete to define emo music and who emo people are.


The first bands that earned the label were located in the Washington D.C. punk scene. Rites of Spring are often regarded as the first emo band, and their sound contained many hallmarks that would never leave the genre. The D.C. punk/emo scene attacked social issues with a sense of (sometimes crude) humor not unlike the queer punk bands detailed in previous chapters. Tomas Squip of emo band Beefeater would stick flowers in his anus during his set to scare away homophobes. The political messages of the first emo bands contradict the primary criticism of them: that they’re self-absorbed and uninterested in topics besides their own feelings.

Though these early emo bands were clearly related to the hardcore punk scene, the following generation of emo would emphasize certain novelties of early emo over hardcore elements. This second generation of emo bands arose in the mid-90s and splintered into multiple scenes. For this thesis, I’ll exclusively be investigating Midwest emo, a specific subgenre spread across the Midwestern United States that grew out of the ashes of the D.C. emo scene.

Midwest emo amplified the complicated musicianship and poetic, personal lyricism of early bands but drifted away from buzzing distortion and screaming vocals. Bands of this genre also played with odd time signatures and open guitar tunings, which makes Midwest emo the logical precursor to modern math rock (a genre known for its atypical rhythmic patterns, angular and complex guitar melodies, and odd time signatures).

Various DIY artists pull from every emo subgenre, but Midwest emo seems particularly influential in the scene. The World is a Beautiful Place and I am no

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Longer Afraid to Die, a Connecticut-based emo band featuring transgender musicians, directly descends from the Midwest Scene; they’ve been called a “revival band” for their striking musical similarities. Other DIY bands from Connecticut like Ovlov and Have A Nice Life have clear 1990s emo influences more generally.

Incidentally, Midwest emo was my entrance into the queer DIY scene. As I stumbled upon bands like American Football and the Promise Ring, I also stumbled upon a vibrant DIY scene that I had failed to notice for years. While I initially considered my simultaneous enjoyment of the two genres as a coincidence, several peculiarities popped up. The only people I met who knew American Football were transgender and were interested in the local music scene. Though that may be purely anecdotal, my sample size is not limited to transgender DIY musicians because they comprise a vast minority of my friends. My sneaking emo-DIY suspicions grew during an emo binge listening session. Have a Nice Life of Middletown, Connecticut, appeared in Spotify’s “Fans Also Like” section for the emo band Slint. Finally, my hunch was validated when, between sets at a DIY show I attended, the DJ alternated between emo and DIY songs. Both music genres arrived at the same time in my life precisely because they’re heavily related.

Emo, however, is dominated by cisgender, straight men. But the lyrical and musical features of Midwest emo address themes of existing in liminal environments. Liminal existence and straight, cisgender men aren’t often associated concepts. Though much of the scene was assuredly straight, their response to a unique collision

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of circumstances was a collectively queer moment, under the understanding that queerness is a boundless state transcending social identity.

“Liminal” belongs at the top of a cliché queer theory words list (right next to “hegemonic”), but no word better describes this genre of music. Midwest emo is all about the in-betweens: somewhere between pop and hardcore punk, somewhere between adolescence and adulthood, somewhere in the middle of the country. There’s a reason Jimmy Eat World released a song called “The Middle.” The Midwest emo scene was caught in-between a number of identities, and their music contended with it.

*Nothing Feels Good* by The Promise Ring (perhaps the most successful band in this genre during the 90’s) serves as a good case study in this concept. The album’s cover features a boardwalk with candy-colored blues, greens, and reds. A cyclist whirrs by, leaving the closed-down boardwalk looking somberly frozen in time. The song “Red and Blue Jeans” begins with the phrase “Nothing feels good like you…” whereas the song “Nothing Feels Good” concludes with the lyric “And I don’t know if anything at all would feel alright.” There are numerous references on the album to places outside of the Midwest including Maine, Alabama, East Texas, Louisiana, Maryland, Atlanta, and Canada. It’s as though they would rather be anywhere else than their home in Milwaukee. Closing track “Forget Me” places an exclamation mark on the
album’s late adolescent nostalgia. They sing, “I thought everyone was you where forget-me-nots and marigolds and other things that don't get old.” From the album art to the happy/depressing lyrics to the numerous references to anywhere else, Nothing Feels Good exemplifies the Midwest emo disposition: stuck in-between.

Anxiety from liminality typifies Midwest emo. Boys Life pleaded, “Let me out of here” on the track “Sleeping off Summer,” which references feeling trapped in the rural Midwest—a point the band hammered home with the distant train noises on the record. The Van Pelt examined the loss of innocence on “Yamato (Where People Really Die)” and implore the listener to “make [your child] realize the continuum between ignorance and childhood.” Braid’s “Urbana’s Too Dark” is a fantasy of burning down their Illinois hometown for its dullness.

Emo boys are undeniably straight, but their confluence of liminal conditions led to a collectively queer moment—relishing in the space between child and capital-M Man. The high prevalence of transgender and gender nonconforming fans of Midwest emo could be an identification with the placelessness of the music. Midwest emos, by virtue of their circumstances, sat in an undefined identity—one that the queer experience can relate to.

So how did the Midwest emo scene end? The collective moment ended abruptly after five years because they were interpellated into adulthood, an identity that emo specifically resisted. The former emos graduated, moved to the city, and got “real” jobs.
Thanks to the dynamic of the internet, this small subgenre of emo found a youthful audience a decade (almost two now) after it was over. Some bands like American Football went so viral years after their dissolution that they’re practically a meme (in internet layman’s terms). In revisiting emo music as texts, I find many queering moments and queer performance strategies. These factors explain the young, queer fanbase of Midwest emo and the genre’s influence on DIY music. In the following sections, I provide a queer reading of Midwest emo’s performance of masculinity, aesthetics, and wordplay.
Emo Masculinity: A Chapter About Sports?!

The 2019 NCAA Division One Basketball Tournament, aka March Madness, kicked off with a familiar but curious message. An announcer for one of the first games in the enormous tournament emphasized the range of emotions that will be on display throughout March. The role of emotions for men in the NCAA championship is interesting because they’re an integral feature of the show rather than a bug or extraneous occurrence. The emotions are just as important as the basketball itself. Each year, the “One Shining Moment” video, March Madness’ concluding highlight video, dedicates a significant amount of airtime to the jubilation and despair of the tournament. Where have you seen so many young men openly crying in the same place before?

Though male athletes may be more stoic outside the arena, they express emotion openly during competition. Sporting spaces encourage a level of bonding and trust that can replicate a family dynamic. Coaches often describe themselves as father figures, and sometimes they emphasize the single-parent households of the athletes, implying that coaches fills the void of absent fatherhood.23

When men and boys talk about the parental relationship with their coaches, they reveal that men’s emotional expression or validation is communicated in a limited number of settings. This sentimentality is why it’s okay to cry when your team wins or loses a championship (see Lebron James in 2016 and Tim Tebow in

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s2009 respectively). Michael Jordan even cried for his late father after winning his first championship in 1991. The sports arena represents one of the few spaces where men express their grief and joy, even about relationships that extend far beyond sports.

Despite what a Clint Eastwood movie might have you believe, men are very emotional (like all humans). My favorite twitter joke comments on the myth of masculine stoicism:

“People are so easily offended these days. That's why I only ever make jokes at the expense of white men, whose thick skins and calmly rational attitudes make them impossible to upset.”

The image of the stoic man is built through media like Dirty Harry, but that hardly matches reality. Though men are emotional, the image of masculinity is not built on open and vulnerable emotional expression. Instead, men seemingly circumscribe spaces to express emotions indirectly. It could be, for example, on the fishing boat, the golf course, or the football field.

This is where American Football comes in—the band not the sport. Producing one record in college 1999 before disbanding, American Football achieved viral success long after they gave up on the project. While initially unpopular, American Football’s music is recognized as genre defining for its open tunings, complicated guitar passages, and unrestrained and vulnerable lyrics. Their first album, a diaristic exploration of teenage

emotions post breakup, is one that recognizes the unexceptional nature of adolescent heartbreak but nonetheless engages those feelings. That self-awareness of relative unimportance differentiates Midwest emo from other variants of emo.

Though other emo scenes embrace emotional vulnerability, they seem to compensate for any perceived lack of masculinity with rage, often directed at ex-lovers. Brand New’s “Sic Transit Gloria…Glory Fades,” a song about an older woman sexually abusing a boy, encapsulates this dynamic. In the music video, Lacey sits at a bar and notices that all the men in the room copy his gestures, strongly implying they share a similar pain. But later in the music video, Lacey becomes a full-on puppeteer, forcing one person to undress and another to caress a woman’s face.25 Within the music video’s world, Lacey fails to reach out to the men who share his experience and instead contends with his pain by abusing others. It’s an analogy for Brand New’s career; Lacey sexually harassed and groomed underage women, enabled by the success of his anguish-replete music.26

Midwest emo, however, rejects the abusive and hypermasculine performance of most emo, which is readily apparent in their band names. The band Boys Life was named after a magazine associated with the Boy Scouts of America (in my experience as an Eagle Scout, Boy Scouts hardly represented dominant masculinity—quite the opposite). There’s also The Promise Ring, whose name speaks for itself regarding

hypermasculinity. More contemporary emo bands in the same vein include Modern Baseball and Mom Jeans. Even the founders of the genre, who more closely resembled hardcore punk, had whimsical names like Cap’n Jazz and Sunny Day Real Estate. If anything, these bands names were a joke about their own lack of traditional masculinity.

This genre of emo is well known for its introspective, vulnerable lyricism, which American Football mastered. It can occasionally seem like these Midwest bands relished sorrow, taking some pleasure from wallowing in problems. The reliance personal narrative lyricism, however, is what makes Midwest Emo politically interesting and easily adaptable to queer politics.

Politics that center personal narrative can create cultural flash points and political gains. The #metoo movement, started by Tarana Burke, aims to end sexual violence through the visibility of people who use the twitter hashtag. “We’re here, we’re queer, get used to it” is another example in which asserting one’s existence acts as political resistance. Black Lives Matter protests state-sanctioned violence against Black people through the affirmation and recognition of Black individuals and their stories. Their website reads, “Tamir Rice, Tanisha Anderson, Mya Hall, Walter Scott, Sandra Bland—these names are inherently important.” The experiences of various marginalities are incomparable, the similarities in rhetorical strategy must be noted. For oppressed minorities, the boldness to say “I exist, and my life has value” is a radical act.

27 Tarana Burke, “Me Too is a movement, not a moment,” YouTube video, 16:15, posted by TED, January 4, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zP3LaAYzA3Q
Existence-based activism has long been a part of queer activism. Gay artist David Wojnarowicz, among many works, is known for his photograph of his lover Peter Hujar shortly after Hujar’s AIDS-related death. Hujar was a photographer known for his black and white portraits, which Wojnarowicz emulated in his photograph. Like a lot of Wojnarowicz’s art, his portrait of his lover centers queer existence to attack the system that erases the AIDS crisis. About the portrait, Wojnarowicz said, “To turn our private grief for the loss of friends, family, lovers, and strangers into something public would serve as another powerful dismantling tool.”\(^\text{29}\)

Sharing stories and rendering visible the invisible are the only tools queer people have sometime. Transgender people must rely on personal truth to validate their existence. The first weapon I have as a trans person is the sentence “I exist.” The transphobe cannot argue against that; the transphobe must first acknowledge this existence and is subsequently left only with the argument that transgender people are something other than what they think they are (mentally ill, having a sexual fetish, etc.). The transphobe does not have the option of saying “no, you don’t exist.”

Considering the history and effectiveness of personal-experience politics, a personal-feeling oriented musical genre could attract and engage a queer audience. Though there are plenty of genres that focus on the political through the personal (ahem, Solange), emo is unique in its position in the rock world. The scene departed from its masculine parent genre of hardcore punk, which falls under a broad umbrella of aggressively masculine music.

The term “emo” arose as a way to differentiate hardcore punk bands that focused more heavily on personal anguish. Worse yet, it seemed to be a bit of a pejorative joke.\textsuperscript{30} Identifying the “emotional” element of the music separated emo from more “politically-focused” punk rock.\textsuperscript{31} “Political” versus “emotional” is a false dichotomy of course. Here “political” can be read as masculine and “emotional” can be read as feminine; this framework makes the dichotomy make more sense. Midwest musicians accepted their distance from aggressive and traditional masculinity (as I’ve demonstrated with their band names), and they treated their personal lives and feelings as important topics unto themselves.

As a rock template, emo music is primed for queer engagement because of its relationship to masculinity. The founding of emo itself stemmed from its emotional expression, which failed to satisfy the aggressively masculine standard of hardcore punk. Many emo bands attempt to compensate for this though violent, misogynistic lyricism, but Midwest emo delivered an absolute refusal to perform an aggressive masculinity. The obvious influence of Midwest emo in the queer DIY scene in Connecticut could be related to the association between queer politics and the personal expression you’d find in emo.

Following the belated viral success of their first album, American Football reformed, releasing a second album in 2016. Over a decade after their first album, the band reentered music among a slew of bands they inspired, including bands forged out of Connecticut’s scene. On their third album (2019), American Football speak openly about fatherhood, alcoholism, and selfishness. These topics are delivered with

\textsuperscript{30} Greenwald, \textit{Nothing Feels Good}, 2.
\textsuperscript{31} Greenwald, \textit{Nothing Feels Good}, 3.
a wink of self-awareness that the first album mastered. Intentionally or not, they
released the album on the first day of March Madness, the biggest college basketball
tournament in the country.
Cap’n Jazz and the Meaning of Nonsense

Tim Kinsella, lead singer of mostly defunct band Cap’n Jazz, openly admits that he wrote the lyrics to his music by a campfire, quite high on mushrooms. The influence of psychedelic drugs on their sole album makes itself apparent at every turn from outlandish metaphors to bizarre time signatures to even a recitation of the alphabet on one track. Cap’n Jazz, a high school band from Buffalo Grove, Illinois, helped found the Midwest emo genre through their musical (and chemical) experimentation. Their music was playful nonsense, which is their remarkable contribution to emo music.

The title of that album is absurdist: *Burritos, Inspiration Point, Fork Balloon Sports, Cards in the Spokes, Automatic Biographies, Kites, Kung Fu, Trophies, Banana Peels We’ve Slipped on, and Egg Shells We’ve Tippy Toed Over*. The album is known colloquially as *Shmap’n Schmazz*, which is scrawled on the front cover.

Beyond the title, the lyrics are equally absurd. For example, “I’ve got tobacco allergies, and a bloody tongued cat lick tickling the lil piggy peeping out of a size and a half ago shoe” appears on the track “Precious.” On “In the Clear,” Kinsella delivers an incredibly wacky play on words, “Canine ate seven sick five-year-olds” (which is a group of homophones for “Nine eight seven six five”). It can sound like an E. E. Cummings poem, making better sense the less you think of it. The words on the album often feel like broad gestures with small moments of extreme detail; the metaphors are made loosely and roughly but occasionally get uniquely poetic and

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intricate. “Hey coffee eyes,” Kinsella sings, “you got me coughing up my cookie heart.” He means that the eyes of his partner make him “melt,” at which point it is difficult to adequately express his feelings for them.

Yet, there are intense moments of vulnerability and intensity that comes from adolescence. On “Puddle Splashing,” Kinsella earnestly sings, “I remember her saying ‘This whole world is a waste of my time.’ All I could say is ‘I wish I had something to say.’” Little existential quips like this are sprinkled throughout the album, nearly concealed by the playful language and sound.

The album cover’s crudely drawn red wagon doubly indicates their interest with the existentialism following lost innocence and accurately represents the band’s playfulness. The LP’s existentialism is outweighed by its child-like amusement (though the two aren’t always mutually exclusive). There are numerous examples of youthful play on the record: there’s a song called “Little League;” another song named after children who love to jump in puddles; and on “In the Clear,” they define adulthood as being farther away from the ground relative to a child. The songs are appropriately unpolished. It’s like children’s theater, where the audience is given the minimum amount of information to convey meaning. (When I played Uncle Henry in The Wizard of Oz at age 12, they gave me a white t shirt, khaki shorts, and a prospector hat.)

Though the musicians in the group were highly talented, they layered multiple complex guitar passages over intricate drum patterns and topped it off with Tim Kinsella’s scratchy vocals. Cap’n Jazz coupled their complicated instrumentation with low-quality production, which sounds cacophonous and chaotic despite the
band’s stellar rhythm. Occasionally, there are points on the record where I’m convinced the band wanted to sound as anarchic as possible.

For example, their chaotic cover of A-ha’s “Take On Me” is undeniably hilarious. The band rushes through the song, and the vocals cling for dear life on to the fast tempo. It’s rough and imperfect, and Kinsella’s voice cracks multiple times throughout the recording. Yet the track greatly benefits from it. Cap’n Jazz seems to understand that the worse the cover sounds, the better. They’re in on their own joke.

This is a campy aesthetic which distinct from the punk implementation examined earlier. Midwest emo says, “fuck it” whereas punk says, “fuck you.” You will not see Midwest emo bands gripping microphone phalluses like Jayne County, nor will you find drag in the style of the New York Dolls. The Midwest emo scene found its voice through its environment, or rather, the lack thereof; they were bored.

The Promise Ring formed because their previous bands fell apart and they were “bored to tears.” Jessica Hopper, a rock critic who got her start in Chicago in the 90’s, remembers the birth of the Midwest emo scene: “It’s like no one young ever thought to pick up a guitar before.” During the 90s, the University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana produced several influential bands in the scene such as Braid, American Football, and Hey Mercedes because… what the hell else is there to do in Champaign-Urbana? These two cities are so small that many people refer to them as

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33 Greenwald, Nothing Feels Good, 35.
34 Greenwald, Nothing Feels Good, 35.
one entity. The University’s student body outnumbers Urbana’s population by three thousand.\footnote{“Demographics.” Student Affairs at Illinois. 2017.}

Midwest-inspired boredom underlies the language these bands employed. The Promise Ring wrote several songs whose lyrics are a single, short sentence. For example, “Nothing feels good like you in red and blue jeans and your white and night things” are the entire lyrics of “Red and Blue Jeans.” Several songs in their discography repeat these little sentences and phrases multiple times, forcing the listener to search for something in the words beyond their definitions. The Promise Ring’s implementation of repetition causes the feel of the words to matter more than their meanings.

Vitreous Humor’s “Looper” has several phrases that are repeated in a similar fashion. The first is “staying in bed” and the second is a complete mystery to me. They might be saying “Antoine’s a looper” or “I want to loop her” or “That one’s a goober” (It’s likely not the last one considering the title, but trust me, there’s no way to tell). The entire song is like that; there certainly are words, and they are discernably English on occasion, but good luck deciphering what Vitreous Humor is saying most of the time. Because of the band’s lack of popularity, there are no lyrics online (I hear the hipster accusations already). But then again, making sense of the words goes against the point. Sometimes liberation comes in the form of nonsense.

People often hate uncertainty. This is evident in gender reveal parties. These events creatively reveal the sex of a couple’s fetus for the first time in a public setting. A couple might, for example, pop a balloon to reveal blue confetti or cut a
cake to reveal pink insides without either partner knowing the gender beforehand. These parents assign a social identity (gender reveal) to a person that is yet to exist because the prospect of an existing person without a gender is too horrific to live with. These parties are premised on an anxiety of unknowing. The tension builds up to the revealing act, at which point the anxiety is released with the knowledge of the child’s sex.

When the child is actually born, it’s common to see them wrapped in pink or blue sheets. Baby girls wear bows or even have their ears pierced at an early age. Even after infancy, ambiguous gender presentation induces anxiety in others. On several occasions, my friends have leaned over to speculate on the gender of an androgynous stranger out of earshot. The desire to gender runs deep; most people, including myself, immediately associate a gender with inanimate objects adjacent to gender performance. Subconsciously, I instantly correlate with bows, dresses, skirts, etc. with femininity. Gendered ambiguity prompts anxiety because meaning is confined within the gender binary.

Everything can only be known though the frameworks we construct. We are constrained conceptually by dominant ideology, and as such, existing outside that ideology’s framework is literally unthinkable. As such, the dominant ideology limits the ability to comprehend non-normative identity. Every term for identities outside of the gender binary (or gender altogether) relates to the system it breaks from. “Nonbinary” is a legible term because we can only understand nonbinary identities in relation to the binary itself. Under the dominant framework of the gender binary, people outside of that binary make no sense. Even binary transgender people pose a
problem for the dominant ideological system of gender, which is so reliant on biological essentialism that the word “female” means “biological sex” as a noun and “denoting woman” as an adjective.\(^{36}\)

The root of a lot of transphobia lies in the discomfort of this form of nonsense. Transphobes will force transgender people back into the dominant ideological framework (using a trans person’s dead name, intentionally misgendering, etc.). They will also preserve the dominant ideology by reclassifying a trans person. Transphobes may say something along the lines of: “You may think you’re trans, but you’re actually mentally ill.” In such an argument, “mental illness” is an othering term meant to imply that a person’s sense of self fails to match reality. The transphobe’s strategy is to reclassify the trans person as mentally broken, preserving the meaning-making system of the dominant ideology.

My understanding of my own gender is not easy to communicate to others. In fact, it’s hard to explain my gender to myself; I feel gender better than I can verbalize it. There cannot be concrete terms that adequately capture nonbinary experiences because the system wasn’t built for it. So, why should I be forced to make sense of myself? An incredibly liberating act, by extension, is to actively produce nonsense.

The members of Cap’n Jazz, from the research I could gather, are straight like the majority of emo bands. But they did produce nonsense. The period between adolescence and adulthood presents many moments of identity formation that elicit anxiety. It is the point at which many people decide on their future careers and define

\(^{36}\) “Woman doctor” makes no sense because “woman” is currently used exclusively as a noun, but “female doctor” links gender to sex. It’s also confusing: is every transgender person male in one context and female in another?
themselves by their labor. Sometimes titles and suffixes are added to names (Dr., PhD, or JD for example), reaffirming the connection between identity and labor. Rather than grappling with those defining decisions, Cap’n Jazz used nonsense to circumvent them altogether.

Many emo bands contend with existential anxiety, and Cap’n Jazz was no exception. Their album Schmap’n Scmazz contains moments of candid existential exploration, but it is dwarfed by a wealth of shroom-generated lyrics that defy meaning. The cultural practice of consuming shrooms may itself be a form of nonsense making, in the sense that the joy of psychedelic drugs derives, in part, from the escape of rational reality. In any form, the production of nonsense is a queering tool because it defies the dominant ideology’s understanding of meaning. Because of the dominant ideology’s totalizing power over the mind, the only form of escape is to abandon meaning itself.
Thunderously Applauding a Kazoo:
A Queer Reading of a DIY Show

DIY, because it’s a subculture, produces several modes of performance such as art, music, and fashion that inform each other. It is for this reason that I am starting the DIY section with a case study from a small concert I attended. The ethnographic style of this chapter recognizes the relationship between various forms of performance and resists the tendency to compartmentalize them.

I selected this particular show as an example because it appeared representative to me as a member of the DIY scene, and it demonstrates my theorizations on the subculture’s queer punk and emo roots. I concede some fans/musicians engage deeper with the subculture than I do. But I hardly consider myself an outside observer of the scene; the friendships I maintain with DIY-invested people are not premised on this thesis, and I chose to attend this show for leisure, which subsequently doubled as a research as I recognized its relevance to this work. Nonetheless, the process of selecting a representative example cannot be an objective pursuit. For all of these reasons, I call attention to my own existence in the performance space to remind you, the reader, that experiences and understandings color readings of social events always.

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As I shuffled into the Space Ballroom in Hamden, CT, it was clear I was slightly out of place. I located the bar at the back of the venue and walked there, wading in a 60-person sea of dark clothing. The light grey turtleneck was the wrong
choice. The first rule of DIY fashion is that there are no rules. The second rule is that you should probably wear black. Beyond

A person in front had a bowl cut, one half dyed jet black and the other a matte orange. Their eyebrow piercing was hardly distinguishable from the other audience members’ face piercings. Another attendee wore an ankle-length black velvet skirt. Though were many men in the audience wearing simple black band t-shirts and jeans, there was a sizeable number whose gender presentation was completely ambiguous.

Of course, the crew of familiars appeared—fans that are likely to turn up at any given DIY show on any night. There was Stripe Shirt Swoopy Hair (that’s the name I’m running with) with a group of cardigan-clad men. The mustached, skinny-jeans-wearing bikers also showed up. Then there was Zack the camera guy. I had recently encountered Zack at the last show, giving me the confidence to approach him and ask about his photography.

He told me that he just photographed for fun mostly now and that he usually shot over in Middletown. “Do you know Bye Forever!,” he asked. “I hang out with them a lot.” I responded that of course I knew Bye Forever!; the members are my personal friends and video game competitors. In DIY circles, talking about bands is sometimes about music. Many times, however, it’s a shorthand for saying, “do you know my friends Dawson, Nora, and Devon?” for example. The self-produced and locally-oriented tendencies of DIY music means that the roles of performer and friend are intertwined.

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37 I’m not positive of the gender identity of any attendee, and I make a few educated assumptions for readability and analytical purposes. It is possible that every one of these cardiganed people dressed in a masculine manner but do not self-identify as men. Such a scenario is unlikely, however.
The audience are the bands and vice versa. It wasn’t odd that all of the musicians, including the headliner, were milling about the crowd while they weren’t performing. It didn’t appear that there was a backstage at all—no greenroom to hide away in. David Byrne of the Talking Heads writes that the lack of green room at the CBGB club fostered the punk scene because it rendered an elitist attitude as a performer (which Byrne names “diva behavior”) unsustainable. Like punk, DIY’s lack of distinction between performer and audience maintains a sense of community and tempers the tendency to idolize artists.

Likewise, the first performer, Glambat, blurs the distinction between performer and audience member. She would blend in perfectly with the rest of the audience. Her songs are filled with local references and cover themes of homosexual discovery. Glambat sounds like anyone you might meet at a DIY show; she just happened to have a guitar and mic in front of her.

Glambat’s music sounds a lot like a cross between a recent trend of twee indie pop and 1990s emo artists. One of the three songs Glambat has released is called “Cole Gate,” whose lyrics combine dark themes with childish humor. She poetically details the actions of main character Cole, who is prone to abuse. Despite the song’s dark subject, Glambat throws in silly puns in the middle: “And the toothpaste has his name printed on it. He squeezes from the bottom.” Near the end of the track, Glambat sings the words, “There’s always a moshpit,” which received cheers and applause when she performed it live.

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When the first act ended, the audience returned to conversing in little pockets around the room. This was a second reminder that instead of just a show, this doubled as the socializing site of DIY subculture. Between acts, a DJ played several local bands through the speakers, which included DIY/emo acts like Ovlov (from Newtown, CT) and Have a Nice Life.

Shellshag then took the stage. Regulars on the Connecticut circuit, Shellshag has earned a cult-like following in its decades-long career. The fanatical adoration for the band was on full display. The 60-person room erupted after each song, showering the romantic punk partners with hoots and hollers of adoration.

Shellshag sounded like a blend of older punk and Tom Waits. Their music covered many topics such as their love for the road, each other, and drugs. One song encapsulates all of those themes with their love for “white lines and black tar.” They have a tendency for word play and humor. Another one of their songs “Hello My Name Is,” is a play on nametags you may get at a conference, and the lyrics use the confessional nature of the nametag format to reveal the internal struggles that the singer is dealing with.

In a similar vein, the duo gave a heartfelt cover of Mariah Carey’s “Without You.” The original, mainstream-pop recording of the song certainly does not fit the ethos of the crowd, but recontextualized as a punkish ballad, the song takes on new meaning. Shellshag committed to the bit well. My friend studied me and my uncontainable laughter; she didn’t know the song was a cover. Shellshag delivers the performance with straight-faced irony such that
the joke isn’t intelligible to someone unfamiliar with the original tune. Unfortunately, there’s no recording of the Shellshag cover online. But a similar example this particular humor, which can be found on Shellshag’s Spotify page, is their cover of 1980s hit “The Promise.”

The final performer that night was Sean Bonnette of Phoenix, Arizona, folk/punk group AJJ. Though Shellshag has toured with him, Bonnette was the only artist of the night to have national recognition. Many DIY bands are more like Glambat, an artist small enough that I stumbled on to her personal Facebook page. Bonnette’s unusual popularity may be owed in part to his songwriting, which is self-aware, humorous, dark, and tender. Each of these qualities are often present in DIY lyrics from my experiences, and Bonnette incorporates all of them well.

His first song begins with the line, “Songs are just commercials for narcissists, and if you don’t listen, they’ll starve, and that’s alright” (This may be a slight paraphrase because this song has not been officially released yet). The insult of narcissism is comically undercut by being self-referential. Yet, the track is dark for its accuracy and applicability to much of the DIY scene.

Another song he performed called “American Tune” covers the subject of being “a straight white male in America.” In his performance, Bonnette listed privileges of white manhood (like walking alone at night or dealing with the police easily), after which it pivoted to a humorous chorus: “So if I see a penny on the ground, I leave it alone or fucking flip it. I’m a straight white male in America; I’ve got all the luck I need.” I noticed (what I interpreted to be) a multiracial lesbian couple in the front row singing along. Bonnette’s willingness to address race and
gender, often in poetic language, fits perfectly well in Connecticut’s queer-inclusive DIY scene. As if reading my mind, Bonnette repeated the lyric, “People are people regardless of gender” several times in the following song “People.” He really drove the point home for me.

AJJ’s “American Tune” ponders whiteness beyond the limited discourse of privilege. White privilege refers to the beneficial differential treatment of white people over other races. Though privilege emanates from a larger institution of race, white privilege is often framed through individual interactions. That’s the case even within “American Tune;” each privilege Bonnette lists focuses on interpersonal scenarios like talking to a police officer. The song advances beyond privilege recognition by arguing that white heteropatriarchy victimizes itself. “I can get a girl pregnant, and just as easily flee,” Bonnette sings. “Just like my straight white male dad did to me.” This example remains interpersonal like the rest of the song, but it highlights how white men are hurt by the very system that enforces their dominance. AJJ complicates popular notions of white male privilege by turning it inward.

Between introspective moments in that vein, Bonnette’s performance became downright silly. Bonnette whipped out a kazoo as the crowd cheered in anticipation. Sitting in front of tech equipment, he played notes on his kazoo, looping them digitally so he could duet with himself. He created a solo kazoo symphony, which is fitting considering the song is named “Kazoo Sonata in C Major.”
Finally, Bonnette returned for an encore song. He called up Shellshag to help him sing “Mega Guillotine 2020,” which sounded like an optimistic ode to the future. 2020 of course references the upcoming US presidential election. What better way to end a set than by half-jokingly dreaming of political leaders dying in a comically large decapitating device?

This show at the Space Ballroom in Hamden encapsulates many of the ideas of this thesis. DIY is not just a musical descriptor (or even a cohesive genre), it’s a subculture. Connecticut’s DIY scene draws from the queer presentation and political motivations of punk, and it also pulls from the self-aware humor and chaotic musical aesthetic of emo.
Importantly Unserious:

Queer Performance Strategy in DIY Music

“You just want to make things serious. Serious is bad,” sings Bushies frontperson Scabs. Bushies are a band based out of Purchase College, and according to my friend, they started as a joke. Their unintentional success is a bit ironic because their fans agree with them: serious is bad. DIY bands know how to joke around, but the threat of seriousness extends beyond humor. “Serious” can be a coded command meaning “act in a normative behavior.” To be “serious” about a relationship usually means commitment in a long term, monogamous relationship where there is a prospect of a future like marriage. Take your life “seriously” and suddenly you’re shopping for childproof cabinet locks for your suburban home in West Hartford.

In some ways, non-normativity (and an aversion to seriousness) is the only unifying feature of the DIY community. In a recent interview, SPACE CAMP’s Sam Usifer agreed: “The two scenes that we’re a part of in Connecticut and Western Mass. are a bunch of bands that aren’t necessarily similar in sound. There’s a similar ideology binding everyone together.” From a broader perspective, DIY artists tend to draw clearly from punk and emo. But in a sense, Usifer is correct; there is not a single musical element that all DIY bands have in common. The same is true for DIY fashion. Though many DIY fans look like a Vans retail store vomited on them, I’ve

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encountered many eclectic and androgynous combinations of clothing. Connecticut’s DIY scene is held together by a set of values (which includes queer politics) and a love for self-made music.

Despite the strong ties to punk and emo, the diversity of musical styles in DIY is robust as Usifer indicated. Bushies are a punk band that combines the rudimentary songwriting of 70s punk with the flat, jangly vocals of the Smiths. SPACE CAMP is clearly queercore, featuring all the screams and personal lyrics of first wave emo/hardcore punk. The World is a Beautiful Place And I Am No Longer Afraid to Die (TWIAP) is a direct descendant of Midwest emo. Waveform drifts into some blend of psychedelic-indie-folk rock, if you can believe it.

Despite the diversity of styles, there are some unique features of DIY music that warrant examination. The first relatively common feature of DIY music is what I like to call the washing machine effect: the music sounds like its playing from a speaker inside a washing machine. Dawson, a nonbinary DIY artist and someone I consider a friend, agrees with my observation. “Graininess is the LOOK,” they texted me. “The less high def the better it seems.” Ultra clean production may be technically impressive, but it ruins the charm—it’s sterile.

Grainy production is certainly a carryover from emo and punk, and some bands use it prototypically. On Bushies’ self-titled album, you can hear the buzz of an amplifier, a sound that matches the energetic buzz of punk. Another common production “flaw” is a slight echo on the vocals. Bushies and many others make use of this, and it almost sounds like an effect applied to the microphone. Emo-DIY band
Ovlov (I can’t find an indication that they’re queer) embraces this production to create a layered fuzz like the on the track “Baby Alligator.”

Waveform creatively uses “bad” production to create an ethereal world in an album. The vocals are melodic but hushed, and you can hear a musician’s fingers glide along the strings between notes. There’s never complete silence on the album because there is a persistent white-noise hiss in the background, which only intensifies the hum of the subdued vocals. One track, “Paternal,” features ambient noise of children playing, and the haunting vocals sound like they were recorded in the shower. There is something downright uncanny about the sound. The album cover seems to capture this as well; the grainy, sepia-tone photograph captures the warm glow of a lamp and visually represents the sound perfectly.

Though DIY artists can be musically obsessive, their musical ideas always trump execution. Many vocalists clearly lack classical training, which is a part of the style if anything. Frequently, the musical foundation of the songs is solid, but the performance is imperfect. Several DIY musicians with national popularity like Peaer, Snail Mail, Hand Habits, and Lomelda have released live albums, which I often prefer to the studio. The popularity of live albums speaks to the preferred aesthetic of amateurism. DIY artists are generally quite talented musicians who deliberately choose and benefit from an amateur aesthetic. DIY performances sound more organic, in that humans are prone to mistakes. Mistakes remind the listener that someone
worked to make the music, removing some layer of abstraction between the musicians and the product of their labor. They’re musicians of the people.

Lyrically, DIY often builds off the personal poeticism of emo, and it’s obvious how the format lends itself to queer experience. Grass Stains’ first record *New England Will Kill Me* is full of ultra emo lines that take on new meaning when read through a queer lens. Vocalist Dawson sings, “What does it mean to be young? To run around the yard and have that be enough? That’s who I am!” This line addresses the central anxieties of adolescence and existentialism from the original, defunct Midwest emo scene. But the trans identity of several Grass Stains band members can turn tired emo tropes into questions of queer existence. “I’m sorry I exist, but I couldn’t resist,” they quip on the track “Grocery List.” On “Brokelahoma,” Dawson sings, “I am done with this body and the eyes of my father whenever he sees my broke dick dreams of being your girl.” These lines wouldn’t seem that out of place in an emo song, but themes of inevitability of existence and and being tired of the body mean speak to the difficulties of queer existence in straight culture.

On the other hand, T-Rexstasy, a New York band that frequents the Connecticut circuit, sing a bit more openly about their gay desires. I believe the five-piece band all identify as women, but I cannot be sure from the information available. On “Maddy’s Got a Boyfriend” they say, “Maddy’s got a boyfriend, it’s tearin’ me apart. Thought I’d find my one queer love from the very start.” Singing about girl problems is classically emo, but most emo bands aren’t led by a gay woman. Her play
on the phrase “one true love” also suggests she learns in the song that she is excluded from heteroromantic scripts. Near the end of the song, each member completes each other’s sentences in commentary of queer performance. “Well, I cut my hair three weeks ago. I got some Carhartt jeans. Well I switched off boys on tinder to find the partner of my dreams. But I’m scared that I’m not queer enough.” The emphasis they place on key words highlights norms of normative homosexuality, and the concluding lyric references a common fear that performance alone cannot legitimize queer existence. This is a blending of political observation and personal insecurity that arises at the juncture of punk and emo.

Like the 90s emo outfits before them, DIY bands mock and distance themselves from hypermasculinity. Glambat’s track “Andy” mocks the heterosexual masculinity through a character that is “an ass man, not a titty man.” Bye Forever!, which features two trans members, released a song whose title speaks for itself: “Big Dick Truck.” Even straight DIY musicians such as Sean Bonnette of AJJ mock their own masculinity on tracks like “American Tune.” It’s worth noting that DIY bands often criticize masculinity through humor.

On “Rock the Dwayne Johnson” (which is already a parody of masculinity), SPACE CAMP exclaims, “[I’m] not your bro if you've forgotten. We do not have shit in common!” Comically, the group performed this track at a local American Legion after the servicemen began to heckle them for being trans. SPACE CAMP is consistent with that confrontational humor. Member Jon Whitin explained the name of their most recent album Force Femmed: “[It’s] a reference to forced feminization
where (in BDSM) a male dominant is ‘forcibly’ feminized and dominated by a woman. It’s mostly just a continuation of our fling for deconstructing masculinity.⁴⁰

DIY tends to be far leftist or anarchist,⁴¹ but SPACE CAMP uses their queerness like a sledgehammer against straight institutions. On the track “Gender Reveal Party” the singer exclaims, “Cut open the cake, blood spills from the inside!” This sentence, in my humble opinion, is the most brutal queer joke ever spoken. Gender reveals are gatherings in which a pregnant couple and their friends will learn the gender of their yet-to-be-born baby. Assigning gender at birth is a violence on trans people because it miscategorizes them and becomes difficult to change legally. SPACE CAMP replaces the blue/pink cake with blood and flips the violence back at the family.

Humor is a consistent theme in DIY, much of which is self-aware. The ability to transform any subject into a joke is an immense power. The reflexive humor of many artists takes control over their own narrative. Glambat’s track “Brasil” considers her overwhelming fears, which she initially states are weighty and important but immediately admits are about scary movies. Shellshag and AJJ’s music are full of self-deprecating references to themselves. SPACE CAMP’s “Our Lemon Tree” opens with a description of lipstick smeared on a napkin, which they’ve heightened through the lyric, “‘Dysphoric at Forever 21’ makeup on canvas, 2015.”

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⁴¹ The World is a Beautiful Place casually tweeted, “Quick reminder that all cops are bastards” in 2015, for one example. TWIAP&IANLATD, Twitter post, November 24, 2015, 5:32 PM. https://twitter.com/twiabp/status/669327778144063488
which mocks language used in art exhibits. The ability to joke about oneself robs the power to do so from detractors.

The aversion to treating anything seriously, including themselves, allows DIY artists to maintain a queer space. There is no “authentic” image that DIY reaches for because there is something to treat seriously. AJJ makes fun of himself as a musician, T-Rexstasy rags on their own stereotypically gay fashion, SPACE CAMP mocks their gender dysphoria. Bands may make political statements that they believe in, but they often make those statements through humor. And DIY bands are certainly not afraid to make songs with strong political messages and then name it “Coolio’s Eulogy.”

You may find a few common sounds in the DIY community may hear if you spend hours on Bandcamp like I do. There’s “awful” production, which coupled with a first-take-best-take approach to recording generates their amateur aesthetic. And there’s a lot of punk-and-emo-derived musical ideas. But it’s not easy to pin down the genre because of its massive diversity of style. Though there may be some trends, they’re not absolute, and there is no perfectly unifying musical quality of DIY. But there are overarching politics and political tactics.

DIY, as indicated by their lyricism, are antiestablishment and anti-normative. Many bands also overtly name queer politics in their music. Their lyrics draw on the aggressive politics of Punk and the personal narrative and humor of 90’s emo, delivering a political message uniquely effectively. That self-aware humor gives artists a lot of individual power. The tendency to turn anything into a joke allows DIY artists to avoid calls to behave normatively. Heterosexuality? LOL! Gender Binary? What a massive joke! An individual can maintain some level of queerness by turning
entire systems like gender and sexuality into a big, cruel joke. The call to behave normatively is not as strong when you don’t take it seriously.
Parting Thoughts

Was Isaac Newton a gay man? Newton never had a wife, and biographers contend that he died a virgin. But Newton did live with a man, Nicolas Fatio de Duillier, for much of his adult life. Following de Duillier’s death, Newton suffered from a nervous breakdown, during which he sent an accusatory letter to John Locke:

“Being of opinion that you endeavoured to embroil me with women, and by other means, I was so much affected with it, as that when one told me you were sickly and would not live, I answered, ’twere better if you were dead.”42 Does this mean Isaac Newton was gay? It doesn’t really matter to me. I’m much more interested in what it means to claim that Newton was gay.

Judging from personal observation, there’s a popular game LGBT people play in which they reinterpret historical figures as gay using a series of ambiguous facts. Isaac Newton is one example of many. Abraham Lincoln, Eleanor Roosevelt, and all of ancient Rome are other examples.

This game relies heavily on anachronism. The term “homosexual” was coined after the lifetime of Newton and Lincoln and during the lifetime of Roosevelt. The ancient Romans possessed no words in their language for homo and heterosexuality. Characterizing any of these cases as “gay” or “homosexual” applies current social frameworks on to cultures that did not use them.

The process of that anachronism is unavoidable, however. It’s a fantasy to think that the historian can simply separate their ideology, shaped from their social

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context, from their understanding of history. Walter Benjamin phrases it another way: “Only for a resurrected humanity would its past, in each of its moments, be citable. Each of its lived moments becomes a citation *a l’ordre du jour* [of the order of the day] …”43 History is a narrative set in the past about people of the present. As such, this thesis is a reflection of myself.

I cannot separate my queerness from myself nor myself from this thesis. We cannot unlearn our social position or conceptual frameworks, and thus we must read media with that awareness. I’ve embraced this narrator-narrative relationship rather than attempt to tell absolutely objective accounts of punk, emo, and DIY.

In a culture that rigidly supports a gender binary and heterosexuality, it is a political act to purposefully read moments or people in history as queer. It disrupts the compulsory heterosexuality historians afford these figures, and it substantiates the non-straight self though the authority of the past. What knowledge can be produced by reading moments and figures of the past through a queer lens?

Early punk and Midwest emo are scenes that no longer exist and cannot be accessed. Thus, those subcultures remain as texts—albums, images, stories, even grainy YouTube videos—which are open to interpretation. Reading these texts from my specific queer perspective reveals their influence on Connecticut’s queer DIY music culture.

Could a straight, cisgender punk/emo/DIY fan arrive at the same conclusions I’ve drawn? I’m reminded of a sociology class I took in 2017, in which the students struggled to differentiate between irony and disidentification. The professor pointedly

inquired, “Is there no difference between irony and disidentification?” which illuminated that it is difficult to understand the complexities of a performance strategy that do not apply to one’s lived social experience. Must a person feel caged within gender to recognize when its bars have been loosened as they are in DIY? I believe so.

Like transgender ESP, I sensed a heightened energy (very unscientific) on my first visit to SUNY Purchase. When had I ever been in a room full of only queer people let alone transgender people? There’s an old joke at Wesleyan University: Seventy-five percent of campus is gay, and the other twenty-five percent are first years. Yet there was something different when I entered a DIY space for the first time—a feeling I encountered as the result of my specific relationship to gender and sexuality. Purchase, and queer DIY generally, produces a space that is queer—not simply LGBT.

Connecticut’s DIY subculture celebrates the subversion of gendered and sexual scripts, lessening the salience of gender and sexuality as social identities. Through a number of aesthetic styles, DIY provides an avenue for queer expression. As such, Connecticut’s DIY subculture encourages transgressing the normative boundaries of gendered and sexual identity. The non-queer observer may write this off as irony or silliness or even nonsense. But, as I’ve argued, nonsense can be meaningful.

Queer people, by virtue of their identity, find themselves through media and symbols that weren’t intended for them. This can be as elaborate as Vaginal Davis’ Clarence or as quotidian as claiming Isaac Newton was gay. Similarly, many of the
subjects in this thesis play with and subvert symbols to exist in non-normative space: Jayne County and her microphone, Cap’n Jazz and their nonsense, and Bushies with their nonseriousness. As I’ve stressed in this concluding note, my own existence is tied to this thesis. And I found myself in an apartment at SUNY Purchase in October.
Bibliography


TWIAP&IANLATD, Twitter post, November 24, 2015, 5:32 PM.

https://twitter.com/twiabp/status/669327778144063488
