Joking About the Darkness

Affect, Queerness, and Politics in the Work of Amanda Palmer

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Abstract

Amanda “Fucking” Palmer began her musical career in 2000 as half of The Dresden Dolls and has since produced numerous solo albums and multimedia collaborations, garnering modest success in the U.S. Palmer’s performances are often divisive; audiences have frequently damned and lauded Palmer’s often darkly humorous portrayals of gender and sexual violence. In response to criticisms about “making light” of these issues, Palmer posits, “When you cannot joke about the darkness of life, that’s when the darkness takes over.” Drawing primarily on the work of Sara Ahmed, Jonathan Dollimore, and Bertolt Brecht, I explore Amanda Palmer’s musical acts of feminist and queer transgression. I focus my study primarily on the elements of dark humor, trauma, and expressions of negativity. Examining the roots of her “Brechtian punk cabaret” aesthetic, I create a musicological framework for understanding Palmer’s characteristically theatrical musical performance style that seeks to estrange audiences to create awareness and effect shifts in cultural ideology. I analyze several case studies of Palmer’s music, lyrics, and performances alongside her own writings to trace her strategic uses of humor, trauma, and negative emotional expression, which seek to problematize societal norms surrounding self-expression in general. Finally, I show that Palmer’s self-aware irreverence and intentional use of bad feelings simultaneously express what many fans feel are honest (if unpopular) responses to trauma and negativity, while also generating jarring, controversial, and political performances that ultimately lead to greater awareness of violence against women and gender/sexual minorities in society.

Résumé

Amanda « Fucking » Palmer a débuté sa carrière musicale en 2000 en tant que l'une des deux « moitiés » des Dresden Dolls. Depuis, elle a produit de nombreux albums solo et collaborations multimédias qui ont remporté un succès notable, quoique modeste, aux États-Unis. Figure polarisante, Palmer a été à la fois condamnée et célébrée pour ses représentations souvent humoristiques de la violence genrée et sexuelle. En réponse à la critique voulant qu'elle « éclaircisse » son point de vue à ce sujet, elle répond : « Quand on ne peut pas plaisanter sur l'obscurité de la vie, c'est à ce moment que l'obscurité prend le dessus. »

Cette thèse s'appuie sur les travaux de Sara Ahmed, de Jonathan Dollimore, et de Bertolt Brecht afin d'explorer les performances musicales de transgression féministe et queer d'Amanda Palmer. Mon étude se penche principalement sur les éléments de l'humour noir, les traumatismes, et les expressions de la négativité dans son œuvre. En examinant les racines de son esthétique de type « cabaret punk brechtien », je déploie un nouveau cadre musicologique afin d'aborder la théâtralité distinctive du style de performance musicale de Palmer, qui cherche d'une part à s'aliéner son public afin de susciter une prise de conscience, et d'autre part à entraîner de réels changements dans l'idéologie culturelle dominante. À travers plusieurs études de cas de la musique, des paroles, des performances de Palmer ainsi que de ses écrits, j'analyse ses utilisations stratégiques de l'humour, du traumatisme, et de l'expression émotionnelle négative afin de retracer de quelle manière Palmer problématise les normes de la société entourant l'expression de soi en général. Enfin, je montre que l'irrévérence consciente de Palmer ainsi que son utilisation intentionnelle de sentiments négatifs expriment simultanément ce que beaucoup de fans considèrent comme des réponses honnêtes, quoique impopulaires, aux traumatismes et à la négativité, tout en générant des performances surprenantes, controversées, et politiques qui mèneent à une plus grande prise de conscience de la violence envers les femmes, les minorités de genre, et les minorités sexuelles.

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Introduction

When Amanda Palmer released her first solo album in 2008, she gave it the darkly humorous title *Who Killed Amanda Palmer*. While the working title had originally been *That's Amanda Fucking Palmer to You* (a title she joked both her mom and Wal-Mart may have trouble accepting), she changed the final title to better reflect the macabre thematic content of the photographic storybook and music video series that developed alongside the album.[1] All three of these sister-projects centered on mostly fictional narratives in which Palmer herself experienced violence, trauma, and death. These fantasies were showcased in a variety of media and formats, all of which were underscored with Palmer's music and references to the album as a whole. Likewise, the new title was also an homage to one of Palmer's inspirations, David Lynch's similarly dark and humorous TV series *Twin Peaks*, where the driving question among fans was "Who killed Laura Palmer?" While those of us that were members of Palmer's small but dedicated horde of fans who were already familiar with her earlier work rejoiced at the release of her solo album, most people encountering her music at the time were not wondering, "Who killed Amanda Palmer?" but rather, "Who the hell IS Amanda Palmer?" and "Why is she so morbid?" Ironically, it was these same questions that initiated my own discovery of Palmer merely three years prior.

Like for many, my first introduction to Palmer's musical oeuvre began in 2005 with the release of Projekt Records' compilation album *A Dark Cabaret*, which featured "Coin-Operated Boy" by The Dresden Dolls (Palmer's debut musical duo with drummer Brian Viglione). My

[1] Amanda Palmer, "The S/T Interview: Amanda Palmer of the Dresden Dolls," interviewed by Mike Tedder, *Self-Titled*, January 8, 2009. http://www.self-titledmag.com/2009/01/08/the-st-interview-amanda-palmer-of-the-dresden-dolls/

friend Jodi had acquired this album and became interested in more of The Dresden Dolls' music, all of which she shared with me during our freshman year of high school. A lover of musicals and a radical teen liberal who grew up in a funeral home where the macabre was commonplace, I was very much drawn to Palmer's unrepentant, in-your-face, theatrical performances and morbid topics. As I became a fan, I discovered more and more about both her music and background that continued to intrigue me. Palmer's devotion to her fans and deep desire to blur the lines separating performer and audience by sharing personal experiences resonated strongly with my own identity and also helped me understand Palmer's position as the composer and lyricist of her music. Moreover, my appreciation of her avowals and performances of negative feminist and queer orientations only deepened as I began studying critical theory and music in earnest in college. Given her still-growing celebrity and her own open stance on sharing her experiences and beliefs as part of her musical practice, a brief overview of her general biography and career to date will be useful to readers prior to the more detailed and systematic analysis of her performance practices in the subsequent chapters. Additionally, the discography provided in the Appendix lays out her most significant works, both solo and collaborative, live and studio.

Amanda "Fucking" Palmer, as she styles herself, began her performance career at Wesleyan University, where she studied theatre and performance art.[2] While she had already written a small number of songs in high school that she would later produce on albums, she describes herself as musically "shy" in high school and college. She also experienced significant

[2] Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer on Wesleyan," interviewed by Will Feinstein, *Aural Wes* (YouTube channel), September 18, 2011. https://youtu.be/aO7FAJQEUz4

writer's block during university, beginning many songs that would eventually become the first Dresden Dolls' songs but never finishing them. In addition to her struggle to complete her compositions, she did not regularly perform her music for anyone, despite her tongue-in-cheek senior theatre thesis project focusing on her inability to finish her songs.[3] Following college, she began pursuing a Master's degree in "anything she wanted" at Heidelberg University in Germany, but withdrew and returned to the United States almost immediately after she began.[4] During the next several years, she worked primarily as a living statue street performer in addition to various service jobs like ice cream server and/or barista. Palmer also occasionally engaged in sex work and stripping when she needed money, a fact she is not shy or ashamed to discuss. It was also during this time that she moved into an artist collective in Boston called "The Cloud Club" where she still resides part-time.[5]

Palmer cites both her work as a living statue as well as her life and connections at The Cloud Club as two of the most important experiences that helped her to finally begin her musical career in earnest. Moreover, several experiences in her personal life, mostly failed romance, also inspired new songwriting at this time that helped her produce much of her original performance material. Having met drummer Brian Viglione at a Halloween party at The Cloud Club, Palmer formed The Dresden Dolls with him in 2000. The Dresden Dolls began playing small venues in Boston, developing a cult following of fans until, in 2004, they became more widely popular by signing with a record label (Roadrunner) and opening for larger U.S.

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[3] Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer on Wesleyan."
[4] Amanda Palmer, *The Art of Asking* or *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Let People Help* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2014), 22.
[5]Amanda Palmer, *The Art of Asking*, 59–60.

bands on tour such as Mindless Self Indulgence and Rasputina.[6] Their notoriety further increased in 2005 when they toured as the opening band for Nine Inch Nails and when the aforementioned Projekt Records album provided more widespread awareness of the band and their music. This album cemented The Dresden Dolls as the face of the small but fierce "Dark Cabaret" genre that they continued to develop.[7] As stated, Palmer was the initial creative force for the band having already written many of their early songs, and she continued to be the primary songwriter of the duo throughout their prolific period 2000–2008.[8]

After releasing *Who Killed Amanda Palmer* in 2008 and after a "messy breakup" with her former label Roadrunner that produced it, Palmer recorded a series of live and cover albums over the next four years. She also produced another major studio album, *Theatre is Evil* (2012), one of her biggest successes as a solo artist. *Theatre Is Evil* was especially notable because it was entirely crowdfunded on Kickstarter and was, at that time, the largest music project to ever be crowdfunded online. 24,883 backers provided her with approximately $1.2 million in funding to produce the album and tour. This was $1.1 million more than her initial goal of $100,000.[9] This resulted in both praise and media attention Palmer was not accustomed to experiencing. She also received substantial backlash and accusations of "selling out" when she asked local musicians to join her over-funded tour and offered to pay them with "love and hugs." Though

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[6] The Dresden Dolls, *The Dresden Dolls* (official website), "Shows" tab. http://www.dresdendolls.com/home.html

[7] The Dresden Dolls, "History" tab.

[8] Amanda Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion* (New York: Eight Foot Music, 2006), 19.

[9] Amanda Palmer, "Theatre is Evil: the album, art book, and tour," crowdfunding campaign on *Kickstarter,* last updated February 6, 2014. https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/amandapalmer/amanda-palmer-the-new-record-art-book-and-tour Last accessed February 25, 2018.

Palmer had frequently invited local musicians to join her without offering monetary compensation prior to this album/tour (an offer that had never before received significant outcry), she did eventually offer to pay the musicians. While this assuaged some, it also increased others' accusations of hypocrisy.[10] Such debates surrounding hypocrisy and questions of ideological sell-out continue to haunt her as she grows in fame, in addition to the criticisms she has always received regarding her dark thematic content. Besides the acoustic version of the same album called *Piano is Evil* (2017), *Theatre is Evil* has been Palmer's last solo album.

Palmer has also produced numerous collaborative albums, the most notable of which were *Evelyn Evelyn* and *Evelyn Evelyn*, the eponymous EP (2007) and full-length album (2010) created by her duo with Jason Webley. In addition to her extensive discography and live tours, Palmer frequently collaborates with other musicians and artists on an expansive number of musical performances and recordings that do not result in albums. Her collaborations often result in smaller and/or less costly forms like singles, videos, live performances, etc. Furthermore, she has also engaged in much work that has not been directly related to her music. She has written an autobiography entitled *The Art of Asking* or *How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Let People Help*. She has collaborated with university professors on both compositional projects and courses at Bard College and Wesleyan University, trying her hand at teaching and artistic coaching. In a similar vein, she created and directed a musical based on Neutral Milk Hotel's album *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea* for the students at her alma mater Lexington High School. All of this and more has occurred alongside further street performance

[10] TED, "The art of asking | Amanda Palmer," TEDTalk, YouTube video, March 1, 2013, https://youtu.be/xMj_P_6H69g.

art and activism.[11] Most recently, she has been an active artist and creator on the online platform Patreon, a social media/crowdfunding platform that allows patrons of specific artists to pledge what they wish in an ongoing system of support. This differs from her former crowdfunding projects in that it allows Palmer's patrons to offer funding of any amount on a consistent basis (monthly) to support her creative endeavors, musical and otherwise, rather than only project by project like Kickstarter. In her time with Patreon, she has continued to create music, videos, writings, drawings, and more.[12] Throughout the majority of her career, she has maintained an impressive presence on social media and the blogosphere, in addition to giving interviews and talks frequently.

As for her personal beliefs and attitudes, Palmer has never been shy about her radical leftist politics, feminism, queerness, and life experiences both good and bad. She lives her life unapologetically and shares intimate details freely. She engages directly with audiences and artists of all levels of notoriety, believing that connecting with people and creating community is one of the best and most necessary parts of being an artist.[13] She eschews global commodified models of production and living in favor of more local bartering and sharing methods, such as trading her music and art for housing when she's on tour. Moreover, she has been a vocal proponent of free digital access to art, and offers most of her own work for free or on a "pay what you want" basis, except for those she is contractually obligated to withhold. An

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[11] Aviishay Artsy, "Neutral Milk Hotel Album Transformed for Stage," *All Things Considered,* NPR, May 10, 2009. https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=103939612
[12] Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer is creating Art," *Patreon.* https://www.patreon.com/amandapalmer
[13] Amanda Palmer, *The Art of Asking*, 29; Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer is creating Art," *Patreon.* https://www.patreon.com/amandapalmer

outspoken feminist, she frequently engages in activism and support for female bodily autonomy, undermining gendered beauty standards, and women's rights, such as her nude living statue early literacy drive for the New York Public Library while pregnant.[14] This is especially evident on her social media where she condemns conservative politics, gender bias, sexism, and homophobia. She is married to prolific comic artist and author Neil Gaiman with whom she has a son, Ash (Anthony). She openly self-identifies as bisexual with a preference for open relationships (which her marriage is), and her fiercely feminist and queer sensibilities underpin most of her knowingly dark work.[15]

Where such dark themes are concerned, they are not entirely uncommon in popular music. Goth music often contains themes of depression and exclusion while punk and emo express anger and self-destructive tendencies. Even more mainstream genres like female singer-songwriter often discuss bad feelings related to experiences of gender and romantic/sexual relationships. However, Palmer's strategic affective use of negativity as a defining and integral part of her work seeking to create opportunities for increased awareness and audience-community building is noteworthy. Her open acknowledgement that many of these topics come from her own experiences relating to her grooming habits (or intentional lack thereof), body image, numerous failed relationships, time spent as a sex worker, history of abortion, history of sexual harassment, and date rape is also uncommon in its breadth, at least,

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[14] Olga Khvan, "Pregnant Amanda Palmer Recreates Naked Damien Hirst Statue in New York City," *Boston Magazine* (online), August 21, 2015. https://www.bostonmagazine.com/arts-entertainment/2015/08/21/amanda-palmer-pregnant-living-statue/

[15] Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer Gets Intimate," interviewed by Jerry Portwood, *Out*, September 20, 2012. https://www.out.com/entertainment/music/2012/09/20/amanda-palmer-neil-gaiman-open-relationship

if not frequency.[16] Whether she is employing fictional or real material, most of Palmer's work addresses bad feelings surrounding such experiences, usually related to gender and sexual trauma. Her refusal to "deal" with them the way one is expected accounts for much of the criticism she receives and also why I posit she is a very important performer worthy of increased scholarly attention. Moreover, given that there is almost no musicological scholarship dealing with Palmer, and very few pieces of non-musicological scholarship that address her work, my study comprises an initial step in creating an affective musicological framework for understanding her feminist and queer musical and emotional performance practices.

In chapter one, I seek to establish a framework for understanding Palmer's musical and performative aesthetic. I begin by dissecting Palmer's self-titled genre categorization, "Brechtian punk cabaret." Drawing on the work of Bernard Gendron (2002) and Mel Gordon (2006), I briefly trace the historical and stylistic roots of the fin-de-siècle cabaret, focusing on the overtly political, satirical, and erotic German *Kabarett* from which Palmer draws much inspiration. Specifically, she embraces the Dada and punk aesthetics of "anti-art" and "anti-bourgeois" ideology as well as the more fluid audience/performer boundaries found in cabaret that allow for more collaborative and conversational musical frameworks that facilitate her political and affective aims. Next, I give a detailed overview of Brecht's theorizing of "*Verfremdungseffekte*" or what I translate as "estrangement effects." I use extensive quotations from Brecht's writings to show how he envisioned his work as one that unsettles audiences and stimulates social critique and change, focusing on specific practical methods for achieving estrangement. I also examine Brecht's writing on *gestus* or gestic music alongside the

[16] The Dresden Dolls, *The Dresden Dolls* (official website), "History" tab.

work of Daniel Albright (2000) to establish how Brecht and his collaborator Kurt Weill envisioned music within the dialectical theatre employing estrangement and how intentionally disparate parts of a performance can function in meaningful ways as a whole.

After establishing the philosophical underpinnings of her work, I begin a systematic analysis of Palmer's Brechtian methods for effecting estrangement in her own performance practices, organizing them into direct and indirect methods. While such categories can and do overlap, I categorize direct methods as those which function without regard for the medium (i.e., recorded, live, or video) and/or those that effect an immediate response of estrangement; I categorize indirect methods as those that do depend on medium and/or require contextual or prior knowledge on the part of the audience to effect estrangement. I analyze several musical examples such as "Australia," "Formidable Marinade," "Coin-Operated Boy," and "Good Day" to portray her direct method of breaking the fourth wall both in her musical performances and within the context of her songwriting process. These breaks serve to estrange audiences by foregrounding the mediation of her music in favor of audience identification with the narratives she presents. They also serve to re-center Palmer's own mediated feminist and queer subjectivity within the context of society at large rather than obfuscating it or contextualizing it only within a single song or performance. By doing this, she forces audiences to confront both the reality of her subject position and thus the social reality of marginalization of women and queer people in which they might be complicit.

Where Palmer's indirect methods are concerned, I address aspects of her visual aesthetics such as costuming, makeup, set, and film effects alongside her music in the videos for her songs "Girl Anachronism," "Oasis," and "What's the Use of Wond'rin'?" I demonstrate how Palmer creates juxtapositions of the absurd and erotic to create estrangement dependent on specific visual or narrative contexts. in “Girl Anachronism,” Palmer displays her ability to make audiences critically examine her subjectivity through her use of multiple simultaneous characterizations of negativity to blur the fictional and realistic creating a context for her work as a whole. In “Oasis” and “What’s the Use of Wond’rin'?,” she uses strategies like pastiche and parody/cover to force audiences to break their suspension of disbelief and examine both the underlying emotional value systems of familiar musical tropes and genres and the processes that normalize them. Furthermore, she creates this awareness within the context of her own non-normative political ideals. These methods are also often synonymous with her portrayals of bad feelings which I explore more deeply in chapter two.

At the end of chapter one, I use the work of Jonathan Dollimore (1991) to link Palmer’s Brechtian aesthetic to one of queer transgressiveness as exemplified in her songs “Oasis,” “Please Drop Me,” and “Do You Swear To Tell The Truth The Whole Truth And Nothing But The Truth So Help Your Black Ass.” I demonstrate how Palmer, like Oscar Wilde and Jean Genet, effectively blurs the distinction between the sexual and the non-sexual in terms of aesthetics by always forcing audiences to consider her music within the context of her own queer subjectivity. She transvalues queer negativity as a weapon through her musical performances to destabilize normative “truths,” forcing audiences to question how and where they place value within a musical framework that also creates awareness of marginalized subjectivities. Finally, I demonstrate Palmer’s use of self-destruction and hypocrisy to embody queer paradox, or using the very tools of her own marginalization to critique society from within and without normative structures. I argue that Palmer knowingly situates her performances in such a way that not even her own negative musical performances are above reproach, as she consistently undermines the frameworks in which she participates to make her critiques.

In chapter two, I address Palmer's emotional politics and affective performance practices. Beginning with a detailed musical and visual analysis of performances of Diane Warren and Lady Gaga's "Til It Happens to You," I first describe normative musical and performative codes of negative emotions, specifically as they relate to gender and sexual trauma. Drawing on the scholarship of Jennifer Freitag (2018) and Sara Ahmed (2004; 2010) and using statistical information about trauma from the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network (RAINN), I destabilize the dominant "victim-to-survivor" paradigm of trauma presented in "Til It Happens to You." I demonstrate both the inaccuracies and hegemonies created by normalizing (mis)representations of heterosexualized victim-to-survivor trauma narratives. I also problematize the ways such performances participate in a process of normalizing specific performances of and responses to trauma.

I then turn to a multi-layered analysis of Palmer's video "Oasis" to explore her use of dark humor and affective performance practices to disturb dominant structures of negative emotions relating to gender and sexual trauma (like those presented in "Til It Happens to You.") Drawing on theories of humor and irony in popular media developed by Linda Hutcheon (1995), Viveca Greene (2011), and Ted Gournelos (2009; 2011), I explain Palmer's use of dark humor as both an affective political strategy and an extension of her queer Brechtian aesthetic established in chapter one. I use Palmer's own writings on her song "Oasis" and her experiences of censorship surrounding it to establish the foundations of her non-normative performance practices regarding emotion. Specifically, Palmer knowingly inverts both musical and bodily emotional codes surrounding trauma and negativity in her performance of “Oasis” to create her signature dark humor that forces audiences to reflect critically on the process of normalizing certain expressions of and responses to both negativity and trauma. Moreover, she foregrounds her own subjectivity to create awareness of the ways such norms further marginalize certain groups while still pigeonholing others, thus creating non-normative opportunities for reflection and change built in part from her own life experiences.

Turning away from humor, I briefly explore Palmer’s use of seriousness and ambiguity within her affective musical practices. Using her song “Bad Habit,” I explore Palmer’s musical positioning of self-harm as an affective political strategy. I situate “Bad Habit” in terms of what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls “crisis ordinariness” to simultaneously problematize the use of exceptional trauma as a site of study and affirm the importance of everyday expressions of negativity. Analyzing Palmer’s lyrics, I create a dialogue between her representations of happiness and self-destruction with Sara Ahmed’s (2010) ideas of enforced reciprocation of happiness. Using Ahmed’s figures of the “feminist killjoy” and “unhappy queer,” I demonstrate Palmer’s self-actualization of her negative position as an affirmative political stance, supported by her characteristic Brechtian musical aesthetic. Finally, I use Palmer’s own notes on the creation of “Bad Habit” to examine her use of ambiguity as an affective performance practice by highlighting the ways she undermines binary understandings of intensity and negativity.

I conclude with a brief discussion of areas for continued study within the frameworks I have created. Specifically, I offer a brief example of how this model could be applied to other popular music artists such as The Magnetic Fields and Vermillion Lies. I also highlight the benefits of a deeper exploration of reception for understanding the impact of such models of affective musical analysis and the potential for studying neutral or positive affect.

Chapter 1: Amanda Palmer's Aesthetic and Philosophy

> I have a poster in my kitchen with a quote from Bertolt Brecht. It says "Art is not a mirror held up to society, but a hammer with which to shape it."[1] I live by those words and I'm going to make a wild guess that so does every single person involved in this project. I'm so honored to have been a part of it.
>
> – Amanda Palmer on her recent music video cover of Pink Floyd's song "Mother" with Jherek Bischoff [2]

Amanda Palmer's music has been described as alternative rock, indie rock, piano rock, punk, post-punk, and dark cabaret. In contrast, she defines her music as "Brechtian punk cabaret" or "punk cabaret."[3] Whether she is intentionally drawing attention to the performativity of her music or its recording media, using her lyrics and musical gestures to break the ideological reverie of her audiences, or even performing a cover song in an act of political *non sequitur*, Palmer's works exhibit a strong influence of Weimar-era German poet, playwright, and cultural theorist Bertolt Brecht. Palmer's familiarity with Brecht's political work stems from her long-term involvement with both the world of theatre and performance art and her interest in German art and culture.[4] Furthermore, she counts Brecht's contemporary and collaborator Kurt Weill among her musical influences. Other musical influences include bands such as The Tiger

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[1] There is dispute as to whether or not this quote is originally by Brecht. It was said earlier in a slightly different form by Trotsky. Though, Brecht did essentially say the same thing later, and many, Palmer obviously included, believe it to be by Brecht originally; See: Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach, trans. Rose Strunsky (1925; repr., Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 120.

[2] Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer and Jherek Bischoff – Mother," *Amanda Palmer* (Blog), November 16, 2017. http://amandapalmer.net/mother/

[3] The Dresden Dolls, *The Dresden Dolls* (official website), "Shows" tab.

[4] In addition to studying theatre and performance art in college, Palmer has both studied German and spent much time in Germany throughout her career, as discussed throughout her autobiography and various interviews cited throughout; See Palmer, *The Art of Asking*.

Lillies and The Legendary Pink Dots who also integrate Weimar-era cabaret aesthetics and experimentalism.

While the "Brechtian" aspects of Palmer's idiom can be easily identified, as can the disruptive musical valence of the genre punk with which she elides Brecht, her relationship to the category of cabaret is less clear. Part of this confusion lies in the varied significations of the term "cabaret" itself. The word "cabaret" is now used in contemporary discourse to describe performance types ranging from small bar shows to large theatrical productions to dinner theatre; however, Palmer's connection to cabaret is better understood in relation to the original forms of cabaret associated with the radical political milieu of early twentieth-century European cabaret. In brief, the original French cabarets like Le Chat Noir were characterized by both the intimate and functional aspects of the physical space. They operated primarily as cafes and bars where those performing and providing entertainment were not confined to any singular performance area like a stage, as there often wasn't one. Rather, the cabaret performances were characterized by a less-rigidly policed boundary with frequent engagement across the so-called fourth wall since the audience and performers were often mixed in close quarters.

The performance topics were typically comprised of intellectual and bawdy themes, often mixing thought-provoking symbolist poetry with sexual and subversive narratives and movements characteristic of the bohemian lifestyle and art. While these performances were usually directed at intelligent and socially-engaged audiences, they almost always mixed in so-called "low" art or "low" humor in "not unpleasant" ways. This was especially true of cabaret after it was exported from France to Switzerland and Germany, with Café Voltaire in Zürich serving as the artistic crucible for the Dada movement.[5] Critiques of societal norms such as class divisions were common, as were erotic and sexual performances such as burlesque and drag, especially in German *Kabarett*.[6] Many if not most of these performances included some sort of musical framework with a range of professional and amateur composers and performers (like Satie and later Weill) involved alongside actors, poets, dancers, and visual artists to create a multi-faceted work of art or performance. Cabarets were also often central to the idea of underground and dissident artistic lifestyles characteristic of the modern/fin-de-siècle period, and cabaret as a genre became synonymous with countercultural significance. This association still exists today when the term is deployed in contemporary discourse.

Palmer's own cabaret aesthetic draws on the traits of both Dada and *Kabarett* and blends them within an intentionally messy and aggressive musical framework similar to punk or post-punk. Specifically, Palmer employs the "anti-art" and "anti-bourgeois" artistic ideology that both Dadaism and punk espoused, especially in her own radical leftist politics and ideology. While she does not often fully embrace the mixed media eclecticism of the Dada cabaret in her performances, she does draw on its self-aware absurdism, ironic emotionality, and melodramatic or "too-serious" presentation of the everyday in her performances and compositions.[7] *Kabarett*, in addition to being the German word for the imported French cabaret, had a second meaning separate from its French forbears and Swiss neighbors that is also especially important for Palmer. The German *Kabarett* was typically engaged in overtly

[5] Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 74–75.
[6] Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: the Erotic World of Weimar Berlin* (New York: Feral House, 2006), 115–116.
[7] Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 73–74.

political satire, often presented through the use of dark or gallows humor.[8] *Kabarett* favored more serious and direct social critique, sometimes eschewing the absurdism found in Dada and some traditional French cabarets just as punk music later embraced nihilistic viewpoints in opposition to more commercial genres. Furthermore, while French cabaret was likewise known for its welcoming attitude to burlesque and erotic performances, *Kabarett*, especially in Berlin, seemed to have an almost omnipresent tone of eroticism-meets-darkness underlying its political intentions. As Mel Gordon writes:

> In a sense, these were hip Music-Halls presented within an intimate restaurant setting. The evening's mood in these houses shifted expeditiously, from laughter to tears to awe to artistic appreciation and finally back to laughter, with each succeeding act. In the standard Jägerstrasse *Kabarett*, however, they were only two moods: the bitterly sardonic and the heart-thumpingly erotic.[9]

This sardonic-erotic, socially critical framework of *Kabarett* was highly amenable to Brecht's own political and artistic goals and was the form of cabaret in which he was most involved. He was variously a patron, actor, director, and writer in many *Kabaretts* during the 1920s, and this experience with *Kabarett* continued to inspire his works after this period of intense involvement.[10] Moreover, while this period was influential for Brecht and therefore extremely important for Palmer's own aesthetic, Brecht's most significant theoretical writings about what would become "Brechtian" theatre occurred shortly after this time, prompted by his engagement with Chinese theatre in Moscow in the early 1930s.

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[8] Humor specifically focused on topics that are considered macabre, morbid, bleak, sad, depressing, or related to death and violence.
[9] Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic*, 112.
[10] W. Stuart McDowell, "Actors on Brecht: The Munich Years," *The Drama Review: TDR* 20, no. 3 (September 1976): 102.

During his time in Moscow, Brecht attended performances of Mei Lan-fang's Peking opera troupe that was in residence there. Immediately after returning from Moscow in 1935, Brecht drafted a short series of writings on Lan-fang's performances and workshops.[11] These writings seek to highlight the differences between contemporary European acting methods and those Brecht observed in the Lan-fang's Chinese theatre productions. The culminating and longest piece was an essay entitled "Verfremdungseffekte in der chinesischen Schauspielkunst," which has typically been translated as "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting."[12] Over the next five years, Brecht followed this essay with a series of additional essays that detailed the use of and methods for creating *Verfremdungseffekte* ("alienation effects"). Taken as a whole, these writings form the core of Brecht's theorizing on methods of acting that comprise what would later be called "epic theatre" or "dialectical theatre" (Brecht preferred the latter).[13] The "dialectical theatre" seeks to divorce audiences from traditional theatrics and empathetic responses to a narrative in favor of critical engagements with social reality off the stage. Such an act is meant to unsettle or estrange audiences rather than repulse or disgust them. For this reason, I have chosen to modify the translation of *verfremdung* here from "alienation" to "estrangement."[14] This strategy aligns with the idea of "making strange" commonly associated

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[11] Bertolt Brecht, "On the Art of Spectatorship," in *Brecht on Theatre*, 3rd ed., ed. by Marc Silberman, Steve Giles, and Tom Kuhn, trans. by Jack Davis, Romy Fursland, Steve Giles, Victoria Hill, Kristopher Imbrigotta, Marc Silberman, and John Willett (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 149.
[12] Bertolt Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 91–99.
[13] Brecht never situates these theatrical practices inspired by Chinese theatre within a Chinese theatrical or historical context. Moreover, he similarly does not address the colonial and/or racial implications of his use of these practices within a European context in any of his essays.
[14] Anthony Squiers, *An Introduction to the Social and Political Philosophy of Bertolt Brecht: Revolution and Aesthetics* (New York: Rodopi, 2014); While other Brecht scholars like Anthony

with queerness and queering, ideas that are also prominent in Palmer's work to which I will return at the end of this chapter.

"Estrangement Effects in Chinese Acting" is where Brecht begins to lay out the concepts of dialectical theatre.[15] Brecht writes,

> This method was most recently used in Germany for plays of a non-aristotelian (not dependent on empathy) type as part of the attempts being made to evolve an epic theatre. *The efforts in question were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters of the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious.* This effort to make the incidents represented appear strange to the public can be seen in a primitive form in the theatrical and pictorial displays at the old popular fairs. The way the clowns speak and the way panoramas are painted both embody an act of estrangement[…] It is not all that simple to break with the habit of assimilating a work of art as a whole. But this has to be done if just one of a large number of effects is to be singled out and studied.[16]

For Brecht, these effects make strange the familiar theatrical experiences. Brecht refers to this as the "bourgeois" theatre, or what we might think of as "apolitical" or "pure" theatre. This bourgeois theatre is primarily concerned with maintaining the illusion of a seamless narrative. The fourth wall is never broken, and there is little to no additional directorial or performer commentary. The bourgeois theatre allowed audiences to engage in what Brecht thought of as forms of escapism by allowing the performative nature of theatre to be forgotten, or more simply, it allowed audiences to suspend their disbelief and be drawn into the story line. In doing so, audiences feel as if they are in the story and often do not consider their theatrical

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Squiers have also modified the original translation to "estrangement" as I have, more recently, Anglophone scholars have been choosing to leave *verfremdung/Verfremdungseffekte* untranslated, as no word in English seems to capture the exact meaning of the effect.

[15] For a summarized chart of specific methods for creating estrangement and examples, see Figure 1.1 on page 26.

[16] Brecht, "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," 91. Emphasis mine.

experiences to be anything more than entertainment. They do not consider the performance's context or implications in the larger world.

In dialectical theatre, as outlined in the above quotation, audiences are prevented from engaging in their normal practice of suspending reality and disbelief and are instead forced to acknowledge the artifice of the theatre. The reality and lived experience of an actress's offstage life is not able to be removed or disregarded by the audience in favor of identifying with only her character. Rather, viewers must acknowledge that the actress is acting, and whatever she says or does must be evaluated in the viewers' and actress's social reality, both inside and outside the theatre, rather than within the framework of the fictional narrative alone. Viewers and performers alike must always remember that theatre is a performance and is related directly to the world offstage at all times. To illustrate, Brecht gives the examples of clowns who historically occupied a liminal space between theatrics and realism. Clowns were given license to comment on society in ways that were typically forbidden to common people, such as being able to rebuke the monarchy without fear of reprisal. Clowns' audiences were thus forced to engage in a type of doublethink where they had to engage with a clown's irreverent performances as both entertaining absurdism and real social critique. Clowns were also usually protected from retribution because their words were encased in theatrical presentations and deprecating humor. Common people would most likely have faced censure or punishment had they said the same words outside of the social role of a clown. Thus, Brecht compares the effect of clowns to his concept of estrangement – like clowns, his theatre required audiences to simultaneously be aware of the artifice of performance while also evaluating theatrical content in relation to the social and cultural world outside of a staged performance.

Perhaps more significantly, the purpose of the estrangement effects Brecht theorizes is to instigate social and political change. “The aim of this technique, known as the estrangement effect, was to make the spectator adopt an attitude of inquiry and criticism in his approach to the incident.”[17] In opposition to the bourgeois theatre, Brecht’s dialectical theatre (or what he refers to in this section of his essay as the “historical” theatre) employs these estrangement effects to force audiences to acknowledge that the events unfolding onstage are being purposefully performed and are therefore artificial. By doing this, theatrical performances become “historicized,” and audiences acknowledge the culturally-constructed and contingent series of contexts and events that brought about the performance. They are unable to suspend reality or any disbelief. For example, this technique is often employed specifically so that viewers become aware of and address their own complicity in the process of naturalizing ideas and circumstances of class oppression in a narrative theatrical framework that they would find appalling in any real setting. Ideally, this acknowledgement then leads to activism and revolution outside the theatre once audiences have critically engaged with the ideas and realized they are relevant in their own realities. “The actress must not make the sentence her own affair, she must hand it over for criticism [to the audience], she must help us to understand its causes and *protest*.”[18] This social change for Brecht was primarily in support of Marxist ideals: an acknowledgement that the cultural ideology being reified in the bourgeois theatre assisted abuses of the working class and the bourgeois theft of working class labor and surplus

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[17] Bertolt Brecht, “Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect,” in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), 136.
[18] Brecht, “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting,” 98. Emphasis mine.

value. As we shall see for Palmer, this social critique and change, while not unrelated to critiques of capitalism, is primarily concerned with gender and sexual freedom as well as emotional expressions and trauma.

Finally, while Brecht states that for the estrangement effect to occur audiences must not undergo the "empathy operation" (i.e., be allowed to empathize with the character rather than the actor), he also states clearly, "The rejection of empathy is not the result of a rejection of the emotions, nor does it lead to such. The crude aesthetic thesis that emotions can only be stimulated by means of empathy is wrong."[19] Therefore, while it is a common Brechtian practice to play apathetically what would usually be a highly emotional role, or using emotionlessness as a means of unsettling the audience, this is but one choice among many which could result in creating the necessary distance that leads to critical reflection. Moreover, such a technique, in Brecht's original conception, was never meant to curtail the audience's emotional responses, but to instead resituate them into a real-world, conscious context rather than a subconscious, empathetic one. That is, if a Brecht-styled performance that effectively estranges an audience causes them to get angry, that anger is directed at real-world problems an actress has forced them to acknowledge, not her character or the story.

Within music, such estrangement effects might be achieved by what Brecht calls "gestic music" or *gestus*. In *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts,* Daniel Albright describes the idea of *gestus* more generally as a sort of "hieroglyph or ideogram

[19] Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect," 145.

read from the human body."[20] He describes the function of this hieroglyph as "an entity intermediate between a gesture and a narrative; a sort of schematic of a human figure that defines or epitomizes a whole discursive context in which such a contortion might come into play. In other words, a *gestus* is a whole story contracted into a single bodily movement."[21] Thus, *gestus* is "a confrontation, a demand, [and] a political act" comprised of a physical body/ideological narrative sign as a whole that produces distinctive qualities that cannot be achieved by its constituent parts alone.[22] Music can also act as a similar component in creating a *gestus* when employed alongside texts and actions to create a complex singular sign.[23] However, these elements are only ever in precarious agreement with one another. In working against the Romantic idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* or total work of art, Brecht saw music as playing a crucial role in creating cognitive dissonance and disrupting the unity of a performance. With regard to Brecht and Weill's working relationship, Albright states "[Brecht] and Weill were engaged in two different businesses. The business of Brecht was to display the monstrousness, the untenability, of modern life; the business of Weill was to make this bitter wisdom so adorable that it could be smuggled into a theatre dominated by reactionary forces."[24] Thus, the cognitive tension created by the juxtaposition of Weill's romantic music alongside Brecht's jarring text was crucial to what Brecht and Weill saw as the "social gest" or *gestus* of the work as a whole.

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[20] Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent: Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 111.
[21] Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 111. Emphasis original.
[22] Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 111.
[23] Bertolt Brecht, "On Gestic Music," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 104–106.
[24] Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 118.

Perhaps one of the best examples of this is the *Zuhälterballade*, or "Pimp Ballad," love duet between the pimp Macheath and his favorite prostitute Jenny in *The Threepenny Opera* by Brecht and Weill. As Albright further suggests, Brecht felt the "deliberate misapplication of (sentimental) music to (low-life) text" caused audience members "to feel, and then criticize one's feelings," to "learn the inadequacy of [the bourgeoisie's] own Pavlovian response to the theatre."[25] In other words, Brecht felt it was specifically the "tenderest and most intimate" qualities of Weill's "love song" that persuaded audiences to initially swoon and become immersed in the story.[26] However, the empathetic and theatrical reverie induced by the sweet music only served to create a greater effect (or affect) of disillusionment when the narrative of a criminal pimp and prostitute proclaiming love for each other inside a brothel shattered audiences' initial feelings and instead highlighted a social and cognitive dissonance they were unable to reconcile. Moreover, this dissonance was then intensified by the disorienting bodily gestures and estranging stagecraft of the actors on stage. The results of combining independent and often disparate music, text, and actions co-constituted the estranging effect Brecht saw as crucial to the social and political *gestus* necessary for effective dialectical theatre.[27]

With this in mind, I now turn to Palmer's interpretations and applications of Brecht's ideology and techniques for creating estrangement and social critique. I preface my analysis with a table outlining some of the specific techniques Brecht presents in his essay "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Estrangement Effect" in Figure

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[25] Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 121.
[26] Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent*, 121.
[27] Bertolt Brecht, "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, 38.

1.1. This table offers a summary of both Brecht's suggestions for creating estrangement as well as practical examples of how to enact it. While my examination of Palmer's music and performances will not address an interpretation of every method outlined in the table, it will encompass several in the subsequent analysis.

Brecht's Suggestion	**Example Strategy**
Remove "the magical" effects of theatre; i.e., create no special setting that obfuscates the stagecraft used to create the show	Show the sources of lighting, rigging ropes, microphones, out of tune instruments, etc.
Never give the illusion of a fourth wall, or if you do, intentionally break it	Address the audience directly, not as an aside, but a "full turn" with obvious intention. Disregard stage and theatre boundaries
Do not use special acting skills to evoke empathy; however, normal emotions are fine	Actual emotions such as crying is okay, but do not force yourself to show emotions or appear to show them to garner empathy
Show what is NOT being done; imply or suggest alternatives to what you are doing; be hypocritical	Say "I'm going for a walk" and then sit down or crawl; hug your "children" while saying, "I detest you; I'd never hug you;" Fan yourself with a cross while proselytizing
Show that everything is a choice or decision that has been carefully constructed ("Fixing the 'not… but'")	Play with/vary declamation and prosody in ways that show you are making decisions about emphasis; change speeds of action or movement to highlight one's agency in deciding these
Never transform fully; Everything is transparently a quotation or copy	Show that you are acting as a character. Embody the character one moment and then just as easily allow yourself to be seen (over)acting the character
Speak and act in third person; switch tenses and/or speak aloud stage instructions	Say something like, "The Character feels that…" Begin speaking about events currently happening in past tense; say "walk downstage right" as you do it (or not)
All emotions are externalized (*gestus*)	Convey your real feelings through gesture and movement; for example, a woman might go about performing the character's chores angrily to show her own distaste for the patriarchy even though the character obviously does not "feel" this way in the narrative
Involve the audience in conversations; show there is no "universal human" and that everything is historicized	Ask the audience how they feel about the actions being taken to highlight historical/contextual differences between the imaginary show and actual reality. Question current standards they hold in the answers they give also
Show any organizational/structural frameworks	Show title cards for acts and scenes, do not hide scene changes, show plans for lighting and design
Highlight divisions between audience members as well as between the audience and performers	Get people to disagree with one another; address racial and gender disparities; highlight class difference and that the actors are working

Figure 1.1: A summary of Brecht's techniques for creating estrangement effects (*verfremdungseffekte*) from "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Estrangement Effect"

In what follows, I give an overview of Palmer's Brechtian methods, classifying them as either direct or indirect methods. This binary is merely categorical for the purposes of this study and not meant to be limiting. In practice, direct and indirect methods are often, if not usually, intermixed, and some of the practices discussed could be categorized as both. Direct methods shall be those that do not depend on the medium (i.e., recorded, live, or video) and/or those that effect an immediate response of estrangement while the indirect methods will be those that do depend on medium and/or require contextual or prior knowledge to effect estrangement in audiences.

Perhaps the most obvious example of Palmer's direct Brechtian methods is her frequent breaks in the fourth wall.[28] This means that audiences rarely, if ever, experience a show by Amanda Palmer where they can forget that it is a show. Through her insistence on breaking the fourth wall, Palmer's audience is prevented from suspending reality and escaping into an imaginative world of their favorite songs as they might at more mainstream performances. She requires her audience to move constantly across the performer/observer boundary which interrupts typical listening practices. In addition to working against audience performance expectations, this direct address further inculcates audiences into Palmer's socio-political reform by making them participants in her live performances themselves. This strategy also transfers to Palmer's recordings, many of which are live recordings. Yet even among those that are not live, Palmer often includes material either on the track or within the song itself that

[28] Here, I focus primarily on the Brechtian aspect of illusion-shattering breaks in the fourth wall. However, it should be noted that Palmer also uses such breaks to create spaces for conversation and collaboration with her audiences. While an in-depth examination of audience reception and participation is beyond the scope of this study, suffice it to say that Palmer endeavors to create a sense of community and support with her fans.

break the fourth wall for listeners. One such strategy is to acknowledge the performance media or mediation of her music. By drawing attention to the fact that she is performing a show and/or recording, Palmer exposes the artifice of her music and performance to refocus the engagement on how her performance and the issues she explores relate to the larger social framework in which they occur.

For example, her live album *Amanda Palmer Goes Down Under,* recorded at the Sydney Opera House, includes several instances where she acknowledges the production and references the digital media surrounding the event. The track "Australia" begins with dialogue between Palmer and the audience:

> Palmer: So, um… So I-I read on the internet that, um, you guys, had a picnic – out on the opera house steps. [*Cheers.*]
> Audience Member: You missed it!
> Palmer: I Know I fuckin' missed it! I had to get ready for the show. [*Piano begins.*][29]

This exchange occurs before the opening of the song and acknowledges the amount of preparation required to put on the *show*, a move that makes a nod to the show's artifice before immediately diving into her performance of it. That being said, the fact that Palmer chose to include this dialogue on the track for the album also speaks to her desire to acknowledge the media and production with listeners in non-live settings, especially since it is the first of her own songs that she performed (the first song/track is a cover of "Makin' Whoopee.") This

[29]Amanda Palmer, "Australia," *Amanda Palmer Goes Down Under* (Melbourne: Liberator Music in Australia and New Zealand, Self-released worldwide on Bandcamp.com, 2011). Transcribed Square brackets [] represent that which can be heard on the recordings while rounded brackets {} represent that which can only be seen in YouTube videos of the live performance for the album recording, which will be cited as necessary in subsequent transcriptions.

strategy is but one Palmer employs to consistently remind audiences that the show is not self-contained and is related to reality offstage.

Another cut from this album, "Formidable Marinade," illustrates a similar dynamic.[30] Palmer begins by describing the forthcoming song to the audience. She discusses the number of instruments her collaborator Lance Horne will play (and makes jokes about how many instruments he played the night before), establishes the tempo verbally, and then turns to singer Mikelangelo and quips, "Uh, sing me the beginning: I totally forget how the song goes. [*Palmer and Mikelangelo laugh*]"[31] While such an exchange is not uncommon in a live performance before beginning, Palmer again actively chooses to include this dialogue on the recording for the album rather than cut it. Moreover, this is not the only instance of such an exchange, nor do such exchanges occur only in between songs. Such interactions also occur *during* the song, with Mikelangelo frequently pausing and glancing mischievously at Palmer as they humorously and half-heartedly try to get each other off track. One such exchange occurs after Palmer stops, while laughing, to reset and begin again after Mikelangelo has come to a full stop after a dramatic *ritardando* that got her off track. Their exchange is as follows:

[30] This is a cover of a song originally by Mikelangelo & the Black Sea Gentlemen. Palmer's recording is a collaboration between herself, Mikelangelo, and Lance Horne.

[31] Amanda Palmer, "Formidable Marinade," *Amanda Palmer Goes Down Under* (Melbourne: Liberator Music in Australia and New Zealand, Self-released worldwide on Bandcamp.com, 2011). Transcribed by the author.

Mikelangelo: You’re playing it beautifully. I like it. [*begins counting her in*] Two–
Palmer: Thanks! [*Begins playing softly, but stops*]
Mikelangelo: – Three, Fo-
Palmer: OKAY! [*Begins playing again, with a stronger downbeat and without stopping*]
{*In the video, we see Mikelangelo getting closer to the edge of the stage*}
Mikelangelo: I was just getting slightly worried about falling into the orchestra pit here.
Palmer: Don’t fall in there! We’ll get in trouble… [*audience laughter*]
Mikelangelo: You seem so far away, darling… {*He joins her on the piano bench*}
Palmer: Hello… Nice–
Mikelangelo: {*Looking at her legs*} Are you sure you only got those tights four and a half years ago?
Palmer: [*Dramatic pause*] I wash them… [*audience laughter; Mikelangelo begins singing*][32]

Palmer and Mikelangelo have several more exchanges throughout the song. They announce Lance’s marimba solo and subsequently laugh at his mistakes. Mikelangelo tells Palmer to play with her feet for her solo (which she does, on the Steinway & Sons concert grand at the Sydney Opera House). Palmer also tries to sneak a drink of water into the final caesura at the end of the song but fails to do so, causing Mikelangelo and the audience to laugh and her to finish the final hit late. These conversational breaks in the flow of the lyrics and music, especially those that directly reference the regulations imposed by the Sydney Opera House and the discussion of the cleanliness and age of Palmer’s tights, firmly grounds listeners and audience viewers in the mediation of the production. They cannot simply allow the overarching social implications of the mediation and the technical aspects of production (which may not have occurred to the audience in the first place) to disappear in favor of complacent identification with the narrative content of the song or its typically obfuscated musical underpinning. They are also unable to accept Palmer or Mikelangelo’s character presentations without question, as they must now

[32] Palmer, “Formidable Marinade.” Transcribed by the author; Sydney Live Music, “Amanda Palmer & Mikelangelo: ‘A Formidable Marinade’ @ Sydney Opera House 7-Mar-10,” YouTube video, March 12, 2010, https://youtu.be/U3gySTE997s.

consider, for example, her choice in tights, why she chose them, and what effect that has on the performance.

Nor can listeners simply identify or disidentify with a character inside the lyric narrative. The song's lyrics relate a dark, sadomasochistic sexual scene between Satan's son and daughter. Mikelangelo describes violent and carnal images that function as flirting and foreplay, and he assures audiences that "when juices mix in the heat of the fray" from this knowingly depraved, animalistic, incestuous meeting, "it will make a formidable marinade."[33] Rather than presenting this narrative in a straightforward manner with distinct characterizations towards the macabre and queer topics to which audiences could react without needing to consider its offstage context, Palmer and Mikelangelo instead use breaks in the fourth wall to disturb audiences' listening. By doing so, they undermine the assumed necessity for a framework of judging the narrative altogether. Rather than an undisturbed narrative suggesting a framework of perhaps endorsement, indifference, or disavowal that would evoke in audiences either a similar or dissimilar response to the narrative itself, Palmer forces listeners to instead critically engage with the process of assigning meaning and moral judgements to the narrative's queer sexual practices. Audiences must consider how the musical performance of a narrative of queer sexuality fits into the contexts of larger societal ideas of sexual freedom, emotional negativity, and the fine line between trauma and consensual acts of pain. Rather than ascribing meaning, at least initially, they must instead consider the process of ascribing meaning and its implications. Finally, audiences must acknowledge Palmer and Mikelangelo as well as their own subject positions in relation to the narrative and the performance, an act of othering that

[33] Palmer, "Formidable Marinade." Transcribed by the author.

requires self-awareness and critique about how one draws such boundaries rather than where those boundaries are drawn.

Alongside such conversational exchanges that bookend songs or are interjected into them, Palmer also employs this direct method of acknowledging a song's mediation within the frameworks of the lyrics and music. For example, she states in the bridge of "Coin-Operated Boy" by The Dresden Dolls, "This bridge was written to make you feel smitten-er / with my sad picture of girl getting bitter-er. / Can you extract me from my plastic fantasy? / I didn't think so, but I'm still convincible."[34] Not only does this break the reverie of the "fantasy" being played out in the rest of the lyrics, but it also forces the audience to acknowledge themselves as the receiver of this address and to ask themselves what part they play in the emotional exchange happening in the song. Within these self-referential lyrics, listeners are also required to acknowledge the song's form, the songwriting process, and the artifice of its performance at the moment of listening in light of this knowledge. Finally, if one is listening to a recording of the song, this statement could also indirectly acknowledge the recorded nature and medium since listeners reflecting on the previously-noted artifice of performance would know it was also not live and merely a reproduction, actively thinking about this fact rather than only knowing it subconsciously.

Palmer's reference to "this bridge" also instantaneously brings the narrative and lyrical fantasy surrounding it back into the context of Palmer's lived experience. This turn supports her overt political agenda of creating awareness of the limited opportunities for and types of emotional expression available to herself, women, and queer people at large. Drawing

[34] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 124.

attention to this acknowledgement also helps to create new opportunities and new methods of self-expression through its act of making conscious and raising awareness. She implores audiences to think critically about her experience and, by extension, their own. As Brecht notes, "[The actor] will at all essential points discover, specify, and imply what he is not doing; that is to say he will act in such a way that the alternative emerges as clearly as possible… [and] other possibilities [will] be inferred..."[35]

By breaking the fourth wall and creating this queer estrangement effect, Palmer acknowledges the artifice of her own performance and her fantastical escapism. Further, she asks audiences to grapple with the "alternative" to this fantasy of having a coin-operated boy, i.e., the reality from which she is escaping: crying at night, complicated love, "destroying" real boys, and girls sacrificing their own desires in an attempt to receive emotional support from boys that have been taught not to show emotion.[36] Here, Palmer addresses the heterosexist patriarchal circumstances of many young women searching for meaningful relationships. This address is further complicated by Palmer's queer sexual desires which require a coin-operated boy so that she "can even fuck him in the ass," the assumption being that most "real" boys would never let her. Audiences must at least acknowledge the unfortunate status quo that necessitates a fantasy like "Coin-Operated Boy" by acknowledging its production and the reasons for it to which Palmer alludes directly.[37] This acknowledgement, while in itself a form of musical awareness-raising and activism on Palmer's part, would ideally lead to audience

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[35] Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect," 137.
[36] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 55.
[37] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 128.

activism coordinated with hers that would seek to change this status quo and create more open forms of expression surrounding it.

If we examine the lyrics of the estranging bridge itself, they also oblige audiences to reflect on the level of care and support they provide for people who are harmed by the interpersonal gender and emotional politics upon which it comments, specifically women and queer people. While creating societal changes that would mean the aforementioned problems no longer exist is the ideal course of action, Palmer's song also suggests we must also realistically examine how we allow people in such situations to express themselves and the types and amount of care and support we can and do offer them. Why does Palmer seek to make audiences "more smitten-er" with her "sad picture" of escapist fantasies that supplant real life? While I will address these concerns more fully in chapter two, suffice it to say such questions require audiences to consider the current moment and transitionary periods as well as the future in terms of social change. Moreover, they require listeners to reflect on multiple levels of social problems as identified by Palmer in addition to asking if and how they should be handled. "What can we do now?" and "How can we create change for the future?" become equally valid questions in Palmer's sociopolitical *gestus*.

"Coin-Operated Boy" also contains a musical form of direct estrangement, again related to the media. Immediately prior to the aforementioned bridge, Palmer mimics a skipping record or CD glitch, repeating the music and lyrics to a single phrase continually in what seems like an ametric framework (though she has written it as a seamless transition from 4/4 to 5/4 and back to 4/4 in the sheet music). "And I'll never be alone / And I'll never let him go / And I'll never alon– go / And I'll never be alon– go / And I'll never be alon– go / And I'll never be alon– go…"[38] This tactic calls attention to the constructions of form and meter as well as the recording medium. In her self-compiled sheet music companion books with handwritten directions (or what we might consider physical/emotional *gestus*), she states at this point of the song, "Mimick a skipping record… this notation is approximate. anticipate [the words] each time…. and repeat until satisfied… [*sic*]"[39] This strategy requires listeners to suddenly divorce any empathetic feelings caused by the music and sympathetic emotional response they have developed in relation to the narrative up to this point and instead focus more directly on the musical structures, itself an act that unsettles the previously dominant text/narrative. Moreover, they must confront the fact that the song and performance are constructed and/or mediated through both the songwriting and recording process. Palmer is actively estranging the recording medium and making listeners (at least initial listeners) question whether or not their CD is skipping or their .mp3 file was made from a faulty copy.

This strategy is especially effective since this occurs seconds before the direct address to the audience in the bridge. Musically, it forces an acknowledgement that the rhythmic, metric, and tempo structures are referential and situated within larger frameworks and comprise specific decisions Palmer made when writing the song. It also forces a recognition that these structures are malleable and always open to improvisation outside of the framework the artist has established, regardless of expectations and norms. Audiences must immediately listen closer to ascertain whether or not this passage fits within the musical framework they have

[38] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 128.
[39] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 123.

probably taken for granted as stable and repetitive up until this point and figure out if and/or how it will resolve. Even listeners who might interpret what they hear as the change in meter Palmer has written in the sheet must take note of the tension created by the superimposition of previously four beat phrases and lyrics suddenly being given what feels like an extra downbeat in this new context. Palmer employs a similar strategy in the opening of the song "Good Day": an odd number of measures loosely in 15/16 and 5/4 meter (in what will become a mostly 4/4 context), alongside instructions to imitate a skipping record, repeating at will, where the "stops are more random."[40]

The final direct strategy Palmer employs to foreground the mediation is drawing attention to both the instruments and her performance techniques. As mentioned in the above discussion of "Good Day," Palmer suggests that the rhythmic structures are "random" or arbitrary. Similarly, other performance indications throughout her self-compiled sheet music companions direct performers to "BASH WITH ALL ONE'S MIGHT," "SMASH PIANO WITH WHOLE HAND, LOWEST KEYS," "feel free to hit more notes. . .," and "improvise like an insane person as needed. . ."[41] Palmer, of course, employs these techniques and more in her own performances, often on a Kurzweil keyboard where she has replaced the "z" with a "t" in homage to "Kurtweil."[42] Where such instrumental performance practices are concerned, Palmer even responds to frequent criticism that such tactics are instead examples of her being

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[40] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 85.

[41]Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 93, 100. Emphasis original; Amanda Palmer and Brian Viglione, *The Virginia Companion* (New York: Cherry Lane Music Company, 2008), 160, 343. Emphasis original. Also note this "bashing" is indicated for an "approx. chord," or rather, tone clusters.

[42] Palmer and Viglione, *The Virginia Companion*, 22.

“too lazy, too loud, too imperfect,” writing in the introduction to her third sheet music companion,

> Music is not brain surgery. Nobody will die if you fuck up. It’s quite the opposite; the fuck-ups are what make you *real*, as a performer, to other people. The more you allow yourself to blunder, flub, crack, shift, and mess, the more you will locate what makes music joyous. Especially you classical folks. Please bang loudly… you probably need it. Anything goes.[43]

These strategies drawing attention to technique and instruments, while certainly not new to the avant-garde classical music tradition, performance art traditions, or even punk/post-punk, are not practices one unfamiliar with Palmer’s music expects to find in music marketed as cabaret music (or even “dark cabaret” music) in the contemporary musical market, let alone at performances on the concert grand piano at the Sydney Opera House. Of course, Palmer’s fans and those familiar with her work might have some general expectation that she will surprise them with unexpected elements, but they would not know the specific forms such unsettling strategies might take. By drawing attention to the instrument itself, Palmer forces audiences to refocus their attention on the physical reality of the piano/keyboard rather than allow their consciousness to focus only on her voice and words. Furthermore, in highlighting her intentionally “bad” keyboard techniques, she also emphasizes the harmonic and textural aspects of her music by employing as many “mistakes” and noises as possible. These direct methods, like those before, keep audiences grounded in reality and focused on Palmer as a person and performer, rather than allowing her to disappear completely behind characters in the narratives or seamless musical illusions. Finally, these tactics in particular allow Palmer to

[43] Amanda Palmer, *Who Killed Amanda Palmer* (companion), coordinated by Rebecca Skidmore (New York: Cherry Lane Music Company, 2009), 7. Emphasis original.

create affective emotional moments in her music (usually related to the lyrics and bodily performances), a process that will be elaborated in chapter two.

Palmer also engages in a host of indirect Brechtian methods. These strategies create estrangement effects, but require specific contextual knowledge to be effective. This is perhaps most apparent in Palmer's juxtapositions of the absurd and/or erotic. For example, Palmer frequently uses costuming, sets, and make-up to create absurd and unsettling visual aesthetics that she then underscores with eroticism and nudity, especially with The Dresden Dolls. She often performs in various types of face paint or extreme make-up, such as a white grease paint base reminiscent of clowns or mimes (often even commercially labelled as "clown white.") She changes her notorious painted eyebrows as an expression of both her artistry and emotionality. They might be singular lines drawn sharply down towards the nose in an expression of anger, intricately drawn filigree, or perhaps just smears depending on the performance or day. The artifice of her eyebrows as an expression of herself is especially disconcerting: they are simultaneously more comforting than no eyebrows yet also discomforting for viewers who might desire a more "natural" visage that she denies them, especially when she is wearing no other makeup. Her hair is typically put up haphazardly with bobby pins shoved anywhere and everywhere, and she usually wears some type of lingerie and/or period-piece costume, if she is not performing in the nude or almost-nude.[44] Evelyn Evelyn, her freak personas with Jason Webley, similarly use a specialized costume dress, wigs, and make-up to create conjoined twin

[44] Palmer and Viglione, *The Virginia Companion*, 20-25.

sisters in an act of intentional enfreakment to disturb audiences expecting a more physically-normative presentation.[45]

These disorienting theatrical and visual effects are heightened when performed in venues or contexts outside of theatre stages or cabarets (whether Weimar-inspired or otherwise), such as bars with a stage, house parties, nightclubs, music festivals, and even larger contemporary pop music performance spaces like stadiums where Palmer often performs. Of course, such theatrical tactics are not entirely new to feminist musical practices, especially for musical performance artists like Diamanda Galás or DIY punk/post-punk artists like those of the riot grrrl movement. However, Palmer alone takes these practices even further by blending so many disparate aesthetic strategies and visual effects into her political performances, especially in the way she plays with period-costume and aesthetics. She creates heightened and intentionally disquieting levels of absurdity by merging otherwise unrelated contexts and time periods. This effect is intensified alongside songs like “Jeep Song,” “Leeds United,” and “Myspace,” the lyrics of which address contemporary and mundane facets of life like driving around Boston or using social media. This divide is further deepened when Palmer shifts from playing an original piece like “Night Reconnaissance,” which addresses these aspects of material absurdity directly, to a cover of, say, Britney Spears’ “Baby One More Time.”

Palmer alludes to these juxtapositions most directly in the Dresden Dolls’ music video for “Girl Anachronism.” In the video, Palmer is shown putting on various costumes (including

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[45] Evelyn Evelyn, *Evelyn Evelyn* (Seattle, WA: Eleven Records; New York: Eight Foot Records, 2011); Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

some that viewers may recognize from her earlier street performances), doing her makeup, and drawing on her eyebrows with liquid eyeliner – one flawlessly drawn and the other smeared and purposely messed up.[46] Moreover, she plays multiple characters, and the viewer is left unsure as to whether or not they exist within the world of the video or merely in her head. The insinuation of psychosis and medicalization runs throughout the video's narrative and forms a type of visual Brechtian estrangement dependent on the video medium where audiences see multiple characters all performed by Palmer. This idea is supported by her lyrics that also give voice to multiple characters, differentiated by timbre, tessitura, and melody. "And you can tell… / That I'm not right now at all / *There I go again!* / Pretending that I'll fall / *Don't call the doctors!* / Cause they've seen it all before / **They'll say just / Let her crash / And burn / She'll learn** / The attention just encourages her!"[47] These strategies, especially Palmer's intentionally awkward and not-quite-right acting, distance the audience from identifying with Palmer's character(s) in favor of focusing on the foregrounded media on which these effects rely.

However, rather than simply relying on a narrative of psychosis that medicalizes the difference of the character(s), the lyrics state, "I am not so serious / this passion is a plagiarism / I might join your century / but only on a rare occasion / I was taken out / before the labor pains set in and now / behold the world's worst accident / I am the girl anachronism!" Palmer intentionally blurs not only the fourth wall between this song and the audience, but also between herself and the characters. While such breaks in the fourth wall referring to herself

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[46] dresdendolls, "The Dresden Dolls 'Girl Anachronism' music video," YouTube video, January 2, 2007, https://youtu.be/sO5APfKnR50.

[47] dresdendolls, "The Dresden Dolls 'Girl Anachronism' music video." Straight type is one "character," italic type is a second, bold type is both of these first and second characters together at once, and underlined type is a third character.

and performance were previously discussed, this avowal of difference and negativity for both the character(s) and Palmer herself showcases Palmer's social-awareness intentions and disrupts a normative viewing for not only this song, but also the rest of her work surrounding it. She is knowingly, intentionally, and transparently embodying the negative perception of mental illness that many viewers and listeners project onto her works. By blurring her own subjectivity carried between songs and performances with those of the characters within "Girl Anachronism," she contextualizes the rest of her work and performance practices as well, even if audiences only notice it in the visual aesthetics that carry from this song across other songs and videos. She creates self-referentiality and context that translates across her corpus as a performer, adding new levels of nuance and effect for fans and those more familiar with her work and blending the idea of fantasy and reality for those that are new and perhaps only watching "Girl Anachronism."

Another of Palmer's indirect methods can be found in her use of pastiche, or songs designed to imitate other genres and styles without intending to be musically parodic. For example, her song "Oasis" is a pastiche of light-hearted, pop-rock tropes, recalling the mid-century American commercial music of bands like The Beach Boys or The Monkees. Besides the timbre of Palmer's voice, the emphasis on piano, and the contemporary production methods, this song is musically/sonically indistinguishable from the music it imitates. It includes back-up singers with "Oo" and "Wah-ah" surf-rock harmonies over a simple, repetitive harmonic and formal structure, driving percussion, and rhythmic piano. Without seeing the video or paying attention to the lyrics, one could conceivably believe it was a piece from a Beach Boys cover band with a female lead singer. Much like the way Weill and Brecht conceived of the music for

The Threepenny Opera discussed earlier, the music of Oasis is deliberately conducive to easy sympathetic responses in listeners.

However, when one takes the lyrics and the video into consideration, the sonic and musical qualities become estranged by a genre-uncharacteristic, violent narrative and the unassuming music reinforces a parodic agenda within the context of the whole. Palmer lyrically and visually insists that getting date raped, molested, having an abortion at a protester-ridden clinic, and having your "best friend" tell everyone about it all afterwards by saying, "[she's a] crack whore," is actually okay since the band Oasis answered your fan letter.[48] This biting sarcasm situates gender and sexual traumas with a protagonist (Palmer) who seems to have all-too-perfectly embraced the overarching societal aphorisms of "look on the bright side" and "focus on the small victories." This tactic effectively alienates the genre of which it is a pastiche as well as its listeners who are unable to reconcile the disparity between their expectations of the music and the lyrics, despite the presence of happy-go-lucky 60s back-up singers and a catchy, surf pop aesthetic. This strategy is further heightened in the video which foregrounds the smiling "band" and back-up singers by placing them in the doctor's office during her abortion with a fuzzy pink coat hanger and having them interact with characters in the narrative, despite the fact the band is not at all involved whatsoever in the narrative of the lyrics. The juxtaposition created by Palmer is simply too absurd, and it forces the audience to think about the reality of these types of harmful trivializations in society. They must ask, "Is it possible to just get over something like that?" and more importantly questions like, "Is that

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48 Amanda Palmer, *Who Killed Amanda Palmer* (New York: Roadrunner Records, 2008).

what I did when I suggested to my depressed friend that a spa day would make her forget about being assaulted?"

Palmer employs similar tactics in songs such as "The Jeep Song" (where she actually quotes The Rolling Stones) and "Map of Tasmania," where she collaborated with The Young Punx to create a club dance tune about her refusal to shave and her nude performance practices that "they don't play… on the radio."[49] This strategy serves a political subtext seeking to critique the members of society who produce(d) and listen to such genres by creating similar music with satirical themes. This strategy is taken to its extreme in her collaboration Evelyn Evelyn. Every song on the eponymous album, with the exception of the song "Evelyn Evelyn" itself, is a pastiche of another genre. However, the freak personae of the Neville sisters are played by Palmer and Webley as "classically" disaffected girls that missed out on crucial human bonding at a young age. Moreover, each song is performed in the "traditional" Brechtian method of emotionlessness and apathy (especially when performed live). The combination of the unsettlingly apathetic acting choices and the violent and tragic narrative of the girls' lives recounted in the spoken word pieces between songs effectively estranges the genres of the musical pastiches performed by Palmer and Webley. Moreover, these effects are amplified by the collaborative way Palmer and Webley perform as if they were conjoined twins, playing two-hand piano, accordion, and ukulele parts with one hand each, allowing mistakes to flourish as previously discussed.

Similar to the idea of pastiche, Palmer also creates an indirect form of estrangement through her regular practice of covering other artists' music. While some do not necessarily

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[49] Amanda Palmer, *Amanda Palmer Goes Down Under*.

function in an indirect way, since Palmer plays them in homage and appreciation with occasional direct forms of estrangement (such as the previously discussed "Formidable Marinade"), others are played to be intentionally parodic and ironic and to foreground the fact that they are a copy or quotation.[50] Though she creates a rendition true to the original in terms of lyrics, melody, and harmony, fans familiar with Palmer's feminist, sex-positive, body-positive political agenda hearing her sing "Pretty in Pink" (originally by The Psychedelic Furs) must confront the irony she creates by juxtaposing the lyrics with her own campy and political performance practices. Similarly, many will be watching or listening to Palmer perform her estranging cover while simultaneously remembering and envisioning the classic John Hughes film of the same name for which the original song was used. Palmer thus creates a satire about gendered cultural politics by juxtaposing her body and persona with this particular song, creating a subversive opportunity for listeners to acknowledge the irony of the juxtaposition and therefore the performativity of it, no matter how authentic the cover is. Such a practice is reminiscent of earlier popular musicians using their subjectivities to create political critique through cover. For example, the political subtext created by Nina Simone performing her famous cover of "Ain't Got No" from the rock musical *Hair* while female and black hardly needs analysis when juxtaposed with the original version performed by mostly white actors portraying the affirmative hippie subcultural privilege to "turn on, tune in, drop out" in the U.S. in the 1960s.

[50] Brecht, "Short Description of a New Technique of Acting which Produces an Alienation Effect," 142–143.

This parodic cover strategy is taken even further in Palmer's music video for her cover of "What's the Use of Wond'rin'?" (originally from the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Carousel*) with St. Vincent. The duo creates irony and disorientation by performing a song with such clear "stand-by-your-man" sentiments regarding domestic abuse which stands in clear opposition to their own overtly liberatory political agendas. However, Palmer and St. Vincent take this strategy a step further with their version by creating a new 1950s-inspired lesbian housewife romantic intertext wherein the couple kill and eat Palmer's husband for his repeated abuse. Musically, the melody and lyrics are preserved entirely while the accompaniment is minimal (celeste, vibraphone, and piano). Moreover, the accompaniment is especially reminiscent of both Broadway and theatrical cabaret performances in the way it is performed to follow the text and action. The only sonic/musical additions are whimpers and sobs added in the background of the mid-section and the use of duet (monophonic). Palmer and St. Vincent's creation of an overtly queer intertext for this trauma alienates audiences from a normative response to it, especially those familiar with the original. It challenges them to acknowledge the performance of gender and sexual roles in a heterosexist patriarchy and the ways those roles are complicit in reproducing trauma. Moreover, they knowingly situate this intertext in a way that is simultaneously self-aware of its absurdity and its avowal of queer negativity and bad feelings surrounding trauma. For example, facetious scenes of the two delicately and properly creating Jell-O salad side dishes garnished with gummy bears and marshmallows are interspersed with honestly presented moments of the two connecting emotionally amid bruises and tears. Finally, the video ends with them as a seemingly happy couple as they sit down to their macabre main course accompanied by their saccharine side dishes.

Reflecting on these direct and indirect tactics, I have chosen to discuss them in terms of "estrangement" rather than "alienation" or the untranslated "*Verfremdungseffekte*" because, as mentioned earlier, "estrangement" more clearly aligns with ideas of queerness or "making strange." Given Palmer's overt focus on unsettling gender and sexual norms in much of her music alongside her employment of this Brechtian aesthetic of making strange, it is necessary to link Brecht's original conception of estrangement with a modern, queer one by also discussing Palmer's aesthetic as one of queer sensibilities and transgression. In his work *Sexual Dissidence*, Jonathan Dollimore discusses the idea of gay sensibilities and transgressive queer aesthetics in the work of Oscar Wilde, Jean Genet, and Joe Orton, among others. On Wilde, Dollimore states,

> As such, sexuality in its normative forms constitutes a 'truth' connecting inextricably with other truths and norms not explicitly sexual. This is a major reason why sexual deviance is found threatening: in deviating from normative truth and the 'nature' which underpins it, such deviance shifts and confuses the norms of truth and being throughout culture. Wilde's transgressive aesthetic simultaneously confirmed and exploited this inextricable connection between the sexual and the (apparently) non-sexual, between sexual perversion and social subversion.[51]

Palmer also notably blurs the line between the sexual and the nonsexual within her music in the name of questioning normalized "truth." By intentionally refocusing her audiences' awareness from simple identifications with the characters to herself and especially the media instead, Palmer's work is always already asking audiences to consider her music in terms of her subjectivity as its performer. Moreover, since her subjectivity is blatantly and politically queer and feminist within the heterosexist patriarchal society she seeks to critique and change,

[51] Jonathan Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 309.

Palmer uses this strategy to act as a bridge between the sexual and the non-sexual, especially for her music that is not explicitly referring to issues of gender and sexuality. By using her Brechtian methods to recontextualize her performances to foreground her own queer subjectivity instead of obfuscating it, Palmer queers the normative structures that underlies the context of most listening experiences as an outgrowth of assumed cultural "truths."

In linking the sexual and the non-sexual, another aspect of Palmer's performances and political agenda that queers normative sensibilities is her avowals of negativity, even to the point of self-destructiveness and self-deprecation. Dollimore again discusses this within Wilde's life and work saying,

> There is a positive desire to transgress and disrupt, and a destructiveness, even a running to one's own destruction, paradoxically creative… The anarchic and the political, the anger and the boredom, are all active in Wilde's transgressive aesthetic, and most especially when the survival strategies of subordination—subterfuge, lying, evasion—are aesthetically transvalued into weapons of attack, but ever working obliquely through irony, ambiguity, mimicry, and impersonation.[52]

As discussed briefly in some of her music earlier in this chapter, Palmer has similarly transvalued negative attitudes, associations, and practices. For example, she reverses the discourse surrounding psychosis and mental illness in "Girl Anachronism," weaponizes the violence of domestic abuse and trauma in "What's the Use of Won'drin'?," and knowingly creates characters for herself in "Oasis" and Evelyn Evelyn that garner backlash for insensitivity.[53] She embodies these typically "self-destructive" behaviors, avowing them as a choice rather than disavowing them as a victim. Moreover, she uses this stance to attack

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[52] Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 310.

[53] Another example of negative, self-destructive tendencies that Palmer transvalues as tools in her queer Brechtian aesthetic can be found in "Bad Habit," a song about self-harm that is discussed in chapter two.

audiences' pre-conceived notions of emotional normalcy through her use of irony, humor, and self-aware mimicry and ambiguous musical techniques as previously discussed. By weaponizing that which is seen as a fault, Palmer seeks to critically engage audiences in reconsidering both their values and the process of valuation itself to effect social changes based on such reconsiderations. This framework is especially important where queerness is concerned since Palmer resituates her works to be considered within the context of her own queerness. Finally, while Palmer primarily engages in these queer aesthetic practices to create change where gender and sexual norms are concerned, she does simultaneously engage in more traditionally Brechtian Marxist critiques, another example of linking the sexual and the non-sexual to which I will return momentarily.

Going further with the ideas of destructiveness, undermining, and self-deprecation, Dollimore turns to Genet to further discuss the transgressiveness of queer aesthetics. Quoting Genet, Dollimore says, "Dehumanizing myself is my own most fundamental tendency."[54] He describes Genet's driving force as intentionally at odds with a quest for the "authentic self." He continues quoting Genet, saying, "to every charge brought against me, unjust though it be, from the bottom of my heart I shall answer yes. Hardly had I uttered the word—or the phrase signifying it—than I felt within me the need to become what I had been accused of being... I owned to being the coward, traitor, thief and fairy they saw in me."[55] Finally, Dollimore describes the paradox of queer aesthetics and sensibilities evident here by expressing the tenuous double consciousness required to simultaneously reject the self that conforms without

[54] Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 313–314.
[55] Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 314.

critical thought (norms), invert it parodically (queer valuing of the Other by eschewing the Self), and ultimately reject even these inversions by undermining the idea of selfhood altogether (Othering even the Other). However, one cannot consciously be entirely outside a framework; thus, Dollimore posits that "Genet reinscribes himself within the violent hierarchies of his oppression, installing himself there relentlessly to invert and pervert them."[56] This reinscription functions to knowingly and simultaneously be within and without the system it seeks to critique. One operates within the codes of an oppressive framework in a perverse way, highlighting for audiences the queerness present in conscious acts of failure. Such a liminal position is an often problematic but ultimately transgressive position Palmer also frequently occupies in her performances of negativity and queerness.

For example, the previously discussed song "Oasis" functions in this way. Palmer critiques not only the gender and sexual norms surrounding sexual assault, but also the use of popular media, undermining society's often dismissive and hypocritical treatment of these issues.

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[56] Dollimore, *Sexual Dissidence*, 314.

When vacation was over
The word was all over
That I was a crack-whore,
Melissa had told them.

And so now we're not talking
Except we have tickets
To see Blur in October
And I think we're still going, Oh oh…
I've seen better days
But I don't care,
Oh, I just got a letter in the mail.
Oasis sent a photograph,
It's autographed and everything,
Melissa's going to wet herself
I swear…[57]

Palmer uses exaggeration and absurdity to critique what she feels is the preposterous notion that concert tickets could easily help someone get over a traumatic abortion experience further exacerbated by having that experience outed to everyone by a friend. However, Palmer makes this critique with a pastiche of popular music as a popular music artist herself. She critiques the idea of using concert tickets (and the implied attendance of said concert) to work through trauma, yet she herself knowingly sells tickets to perform this very song for the purposes of effecting change for those like herself who are harmed by the norms she undermines. She both directly and indirectly uses music as a form of expression for herself and others, albeit in a non-normative way, while simultaneously critiquing the use of music to "get over" normative trauma. Much like Genet, this leaves critics wondering if and where the lines are drawn to limit her critiques and what, if anything, one should value when even the Other-self is denied. Put another way, Palmer uses her music and performances to inhabit a space that is simultaneously

[57] Palmer, *Who Killed Amanda Palmer* (companion), 85–86.

critical and set apart from normative codes of expression regarding gender, sexuality, and trauma yet at the same time reinforces some of these same norms through her avowals, both direct and indirect, of transvalued negative responses. In her efforts to transgress, she must occupy sometimes antithetical and seemingly hypocritical positions to overcome oppositional binaries.

Palmer invokes similar strategies in her quasi-cover of “Moon River” entitled “Please Drop Me.” In this cover, she actively antagonizes her own record label for deeming her first solo album “a failure” for having only 25,000 sales (which was certainly not a failure for Palmer when compared to her previous sale history at that point) and for the label’s overt, gendered body shaming practices such as editing out Palmer’s stomach in the music video for “Leeds United.”[58] Talking with the audience prior to the performance, she states that it is meant “genuinely” and asks a fan to please put it up on YouTube when they get home so she can see it. She also dedicates the song to her (then current) label Roadrunner. The lyrics are as follows:

[58] TED, “The art of asking | Amanda Palmer.”

Please drop me, I don't fit on your roster
I'm tired of this pointless shit.
Please drop me, what do I have to do?
I'm tired of sucking corporate dick.
You don't get me
You won't let me
Continue my career in peace, and it's making me sad.

Too late now to fix this fucking mess
Please just let me go, I swear
You won't miss me
You don't love me
I'm not making you any money

Plus you'll still have Slipknot
and Annihilator and Machine Head
and Cradle of Filth and Megadeth
and 3 Inches of Blood and Life of Agony
and Mutiny Within and Hatebreed
and Killswitch Engage and… Nickelback[59]

In an added irony (and perhaps contractually obligated show of support), Roadrunner released a statement of their continued encouragement of Palmer's artistic creativity and freedom until the negotiation period of her contract began officially months later.[60] Again, Palmer chooses self-destruction and paradox. She openly mocks her label and attempts to get them to drop her while also continuing to play shows and sell albums, both damaging and promoting herself and the label, whether directly or indirectly. However, this song also hints at Palmer's more recent critiques of large-scale industrial capitalism, as it was part of her strategy for obtaining complete artistic control that was at least in part to make her music and art more widely

[59] MaxSenn, "Amanda Palmer – Please Drop Me (03.28.2009) Fort Lauderdale," YouTube video, 2:49, March 28, 2009, https://youtu.be/iMi7wRfmoMs. Transcribed by the author.
[60] Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer Tells Roadrunner Records: 'Please Drop Me,'" interview by Ryan Dombal, *Pitchfork*, April 1, 2009. https://pitchfork.com/news/34979-amanda-palmer-tells-roadrunner-records-please-drop-me/

accessible. After gaining her artistic independence and being dropped from her label at their earliest contractually compliant opportunity, she made all of her music that she was legally able to release available on a "pay what you can, if you can" basis.[61] She continues to embrace more direct patron-to-artist models of crowdfunding for her current projects, offering most of her work for free or on a one-time donation of any amount for unlimited access basis.[62] Such an act of disavowal of larger music industry models regarding gender and sexual shaming, especially by means of Palmer's aesthetic of queer covers of heterosexual love songs, is in keeping with both Brecht's original conception of a primarily Marxist critique of capitalism and classism while also linking the sexual and the non-sexual within Palmer's practices of musical queering.

Finally, the last example to address briefly within this transgressive aesthetic is Palmer's treatment of race. The celebratory song Palmer released (for free) after she finally broke ties with her record label was entitled, "Do You Swear To Tell The Truth The Whole Truth And Nothing But The Truth So Help Your Black Ass." In her open letter to Roadrunner and fans after the split, Palmer states, "before any of you get up in arms about the title (peoples gettin' mighty sensitive lately) please know: the title is a reference to a lyric in a song called 'fuck tha police' by a band called Niggaz With Attitude. look it up. [*sic*]"[63] Despite her citation of the well-known N.W.A. song criticizing police brutality and profiling against young black men, Palmer's song does not address race directly other than her reference of this quoted phrase. In fact,

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[61] Amanda Palmer, "Welcome," *Amanda Palmer* (Shop), 2018, https://shop.amandapalmer.net.
[62] Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer is creating Art," *Patreon.* https://www.patreon.com/amandapalmer
[63] Amanda Palmer, "FREE AT LAST, FREE AT LAST (Dear Roadrunner Records…)," *Amanda Palmer* (Blog), April 6, 2010, http://blog.amandapalmer.net/free-at-last-free-at-last-dear-roadrunner-records/.

nearly every aspect of this autobiographical song exudes unacknowledged whiteness and white middle-class cultural norms, making the refrain of "You can bet your black ass that I'm going to" stand out all the more. While a wider examination of audience reception of Palmer is beyond the scope of this study, suffice it to say that she has been the focus of many critiques, especially with regards to controversies surrounding issues of race such as this one.[64] While I do not wish to defend Palmer's lack of nuance with regards to issues of race, I believe this example showcases her irreverence and willingness, like Genet, to embody any and all of the worst traits in the name of irony and transgression for better or worse. While her politics may openly deride racism, she knowingly uses the phrase "bet your black ass" in anticipation of, perhaps deserved, accusations of racism. Her willingness to use this phrase in juxtaposition to her own invisibly white, but visibly queer and feminist, lifestyle as a form of irony and political critique attests again to her aesthetic of transgression to the point of self-destructiveness in her queer Brechtian performance practices.

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[64] Caroline Prate, "Macklemore's Grammy Win is About Race, But Not the Way Amanda Palmer Thinks," *Bustle*, January 29, 2014. https://www.bustle.com/articles/14081-macklemores-2014-grammy-win-is-about-race-but-not-the-way-amanda-palmer-thinks; Louis Peitzman, "7 Times Amanda Palmer Pissed People Off," *Buzzfeed*, April 26, 2013. https://www.buzzfeed.com/louispeitzman/7-times-amanda-palmer-pissed-people-off?utm_term=.dtlzW5VmR#.dkogRZ937. While there are too many social media and personal blog posts documenting public sentiments regarding controversies surrounding Palmer with regards to race, here are two popular media sources addressing some of these.

Chapter 2: Comparative Analyses of Emotional Politics and Affective Performance Practices

Now that we have explored Palmer's Brechtian methods, let us turn to the emotional politics and affective practices these methods support in her performances. As explored briefly in Chapter 1, most of Palmer's works address lived experiences related to gender, sexuality, and trauma. Her primary method of engaging with these topics is through a lens of emotions culturally defined as negative.[1] She embraces feelings and emotions like anger, sadness, depression, violence, apathy, and complicity rather than disregarding or marginalizing them. Her avowals of negativity stand out from the predominant cultural narrative of how to deal with bad feelings that suggests one "work through" these emotions to come to a "better" place of joy, contentedness, acceptance, or normalcy by expressing them in the appropriate ways, a therapeutic model of dealing with negativity.[2] This model comprises the "victim-to-survivor" narrative often associated with those who experience trauma. Such a narrative emphasizes a progression from seemingly disempowered victimization to empowered, self-identifying survivorship and also comprises the most common model for understanding trauma in gender and sexual violence discourses.[3] However, such a binary of trauma responses, especially when

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[1] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002). While the concepts of *feeling*, *emotion*, and *affect* necessarily interrelate and it is often difficult to distinguish if and where one ends and another begins, I will strive to use these terms in distinct ways. Loosely following the work of Brian Massumi, feelings are predominantly pre-lingual physical and psychic sensations one has in response to stimuli. Emotions are the culturally-constructed ideas about how these sensations circulate and work in society, usually linguistically, but also musically and bodily. Finally, affect is the intensity of a given situation or object in which emotions and/or feelings are involved. It is the ability to affect or be affected and the measure of if and to what degree this happens.

[2] Jennifer L. Freitag, "Four Transgressive Declarations for Ending Gender Violence," in *Transgressing Feminist Theory and Discourse: Advancing Conversations Across Disciplines*, ed. Jennifer C. Dunn and Jimmie Manning (New York: Routledge, 2018), 139.

[3] Freitag, "Four Transgressive Declarations for Ending Gender Violence," 138–139.

set within a linear and hierarchical framework, fails to account for both the diversity of emotional responses to trauma and also the fact that many people do not experience trauma in a linear or progressive way. Palmer problematizes the underlying notion that certain feelings and emotions are expected at all and how and why those emotions are acceptable when expressed in certain ways while other are not. She does not simply invert these norms by valorizing victimhood and eschewing the stance of survivorship to make space for negativity. As queer theorists and affect theorists have argued, simple code reversals that do not critique the underlying social framework often serve only to reinforce the norms they seek to subvert.[4] Rather, Palmer destabilizes this binary of positions by questioning why the two must be separate and also showing that sometimes the bad feelings associated with victimhood are a recurring and necessary experience of surviving.

Often conveyed through both fictional and biographical narratives, Palmer's art exploring traumatic topics like rape, abortion, and violence simultaneously critiques therapeutic models of negativity like the victim-to-survivor narrative while also inspiring new attitudes and explorations of emotions for both Palmer and the audiences she engages. Furthermore, her self-acknowledged political art attempts to inspire larger cultural and societal change surrounding the emotional practices her music addresses. Given that she has written extensively about these issues herself and in an effort to honor her sentiments, I will use her own words as often as I can in presenting my own analyses of her work. However, before beginning my analysis of Palmer's countercultural musical performances, I would first like to examine an example that typifies the normative expressions Palmer seeks to disrupt. By giving

[4] Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 144.

an analysis of a broadly popular song and a widely-viewed performance of it, I seek to describe the musical and emotional norms surrounding the bad feelings it both expresses and helps to establish. I will then turn back to Palmer's musical performances that attempt to disturb this normative framework, critique positivity-washing, and question the process of normalizing emotional responses in general to create awareness and acceptance of non-normative musical expressions of negativity through her queer Brechtian performance practices.

Bowed strings play swelling chords as a somber light shines on a single performer on a darkened stage. She is clad only in white with coiffed platinum blonde hair and clear jewel adornments, sitting at a white grand piano and barely visible amid the subtle lighting except for this contrast of white and black. The camera zooms in on her as the orchestral strings fade to silence, and the singer strikes the first notes on the piano. The lights slowly come up on her face as she begins to sing into the white microphone. "You tell me it gets better / it gets better / in time. / You say to pull myself together / pull it together/ you'll be fine. / Tell me what the hell do you know / what do you know? / Tell me how the hell could you know / how could you know?"[5] *As she begins the chorus, the orchestra begins again, supporting her voice and piano with more long-tone chords.* "Til it happens to you / you don't know how I feel / how I feel. / Til it happens to you / you won't know / it won't be real. / No it won't be real / won't know how I feel."

Her performance becomes increasingly emotional and impassioned. Her body becomes progressively more active while her face communicates with emotional expressions like snarls

[5] FMCA New, "Lady Gaga 2016 Til It Happens To You Oscar Performance 1," YouTube video, July 31, 2017, https://youtu.be/0rufPMisw4o. Lyrics transcribed by the author. All lyrics are from this performance.

and grimaces. She begins the bridge. "Til your world burns and crashes / til you're at the end / the end of your rope…" *Having built to a musical and bodily high point, there is a momentary release and quiet as she begins the final chorus. Simultaneously, a curtain rises, and the outline of many people are shown by light blue back lighting: the first appearance of color and the first instance of light that points to something other than the singer. As the full stage lights finally begin to rise, these people come rushing forward, right arms held out, displaying painted-on phrases like, "Not your fault," "Unbreakable," "It happened to me," "You are loved," and "Survivor." The music immediately returns to its previous fever pitch and the singer stands and gesticulates emphatically while still singing and playing. The camera pans across the faces and arms of the teary-eyed group of people as the singer finishes the final phrase standing among them. Those on stage begin holding hands and raising their arms as the camera turns to the faces of the tearful audience giving an uproarious standing ovation.*

Such was the performance of Diane Warren and Lady Gaga's 2015 song "Til It Happens to You" at the 2016 Academy Awards. This song and Gaga's performance of it at the Oscars exemplify a normative emotional and musical treatment of culturally-defined negative feelings and trauma. This normative expression is presented through a classic victim-to-survivor narrative surrounding sexual violence. Both Warren and Gaga identify as survivors of sexual assault, as do many of the people that took the stage with Gaga during the performance.[6] Furthermore, both Warren and Gaga support a victim-to-survivor narrative reading of this song

[6] Diane Warren and Lady Gaga, "Lady Gaga and Diane Warren open up about their song 'Til It Happens to You,'" interview by Michael Ordoña, *LA Times*, December 10, 2015. http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/la-en-diane-warren-lady-gaga-til-it-happens-to-you-20151210-story.html#

that was originally written for the 2015 documentary *The Hunting Ground*, which explores sexual assault and violence on college campuses in the U.S.[7] As Warren expressed in a joint interview with Gaga for the L.A. Times, "In the movie, in the song and in the video, to me, there's three parts. You start out as a victim, in the verse you're more vulnerable, then they get more [ticked] off — in the movie, they're becoming survivors — then in the last verse, you're victorious, like the movie and the video."[8] While such a narrative seeks to empower "survivors," this normalizing therapeutic model does not always result in empowerment, as experiences and expressions of negativity and trauma are varied, and one size certainly does not fit all.[9]

Before beginning my analysis of "Til It Happens to You," I wish to state that my critique in no way seeks to blame or imply a harmful intent on behalf of any of the participants in this song. While I wish to explore how "Til It Happens to You" participates in normalizing a specific musical expression of trauma and bad feelings, a process both Palmer and I seek to problematize, it is not my intent to suggest that anyone involved in this song or this performance is intentionally trying to exclude or marginalize others that express negativity and trauma differently. Similarly, I do not seek to invalidate the stance of any person regarding trauma or emotional responses, and I honor the self-identifications of the survivors involved. Rather, I aspire to explore the underlying cultural values surrounding normative expressions of trauma and negative emotions in music like "Til It Happens to You" and to demonstrate the

[7] *The Hunting Ground*, directed by Kirby Dick (New York: The Weinstein Company/RADiUS-TWC, 2015), DVD.
[8] Warren and Gaga, "Lady Gaga and Diane Warren Open Up about Their Song 'Til It Happens to You.'"
[9] Freitag, "Four Transgressive Declarations to End Gender Violence," 139–140.

exclusionary and deleterious effects the circulation of those values has on expressions that differ from it for people like Palmer and many of her fans.

Let us begin with the lyrics of "Til It Happens to You." While they initially seem to question if there is a predictable or "right" way to feel after experiencing trauma, the focus quickly shifts to an implicit gatekeeping regarding the ownership and mediation of such feelings. Instead of emphasizing that people could not know how the speaker feels because responses to trauma are unpredictable and varied, the message is instead that people could not know how it feels until "it" happens to them and, presumably, they become victims who transform into survivors. Rather than problematizing expectations of if and how one responds to trauma, Warren and Gaga seek to critique appropriation and regulation of trauma by those who have not experienced trauma themselves, setting up an insider/outsider dichotomy. Momentarily setting aside the specific emotional implications of this ideological move, this dividing strategy in "Til it Happens to You" raises further questions of what counts as trauma, whose trauma counts or does not count (and when and why), and how people navigate discussions and explorations of trauma through the resulting differences in belief.

Furthermore, the assumption that one will have a marked and noticeable response goes unacknowledged, as does the implication that something *will* happen ("til"), not just that it *might*. Thus, while it is true that trauma occurs and that many, if not most, people who experience trauma will have some response, the ideology expressed in this song does not seem to be self-aware of its complicity in co-creating and systematizing trauma and certain responses to it. Specifically, it does not articulate how having expectations that trauma will occur and be accompanied by particular emotional responses promulgates trauma and normalizes the expected responses while marginalizing other responses. This strategy is often self-fulfilling because it heightens the affect or intensity surrounding trauma, encouraging people to have a noticeable response. This affect of exceptional trauma then becomes colored by the specific emotions and parameters that cement an expected response, in this case handling negativity therapeutically by progressing from victim to survivor. As Sara Ahmed describes, these expected affects then become "sticky." Through the process of normalization and the cultural circulation of these emotional responses, these expectations and affects "stick" or exist as expectations and cultural understandings that surround other situations and bodies people want to portray as similar, despite how they might be felt and expressed differently.[10] Therefore, by presenting only the victim-to-survivor narrative and a therapeutic model of experiencing or handling bad feelings (as we shall see momentarily), "Til It Happens to You" indirectly reinforces a cultural politics that validates some expressions and responses to trauma (the "norm") while simultaneously repressing and invalidating others.

In Gaga's performance of "TIl it Happens to You," the emotional response to trauma is most certainly one of "working through" one's assumed pain and suffering to come to a seemingly better place, or going from being a victim to a survivor. While the lyrics of the verses and chorus reinforce the aforementioned issue of policing trauma and survivors, only hinting at the feelings of the narrator by undermining the words of those who have not experienced trauma, the lyrics of the bridge discuss the emotional state of the narrator directly. The bridge states that one's world "burns and crashes" and that one will reach "the end of [one's] rope."

[10] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 11–12; Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 44–45, 69.

While the lyrics do not actually provide any framework for what happens after this, by its nature as the bridge (a transitional section), the listener knows that this is only a temporary state. Moreover, the music and performance themselves give a clear indication that the narrator is transitioning through this and where she is going. The visual metaphors all imply a sense of "coming out of the darkness," a linear progression from trauma victim to trauma survivor: the crisp, clean white of Gaga's costume, piano, and mic; the unbroken lines and unobstructed views throughout her performance; her flawlessly styled hair and makeup; the unexpected appearance of light, color, and other people at the back of the stage; those people's almost entirely straight path from darkness to light to join her; the slowly-rising light levels throughout the performance; and the ending show of people standing strong together with their arms raised in full-lit solidarity. All of these reinforce the idea that it does get better and one will survive the emotional turmoil (of the bridge) when it happens to you.

This idea of survival is supported further by the expressions painted onto the bodies of the survivors: "Unbreakable," "You are loved," and "Survivor." In fact, the phrase "It Happened to me," a phrase focusing on the past negative experience of trauma and painted on the body of a male-presenting person, is barely seen as the camera turns instead to the phrases "You are loved" and "Survivor" that are painted on female-presenting individuals. Besides reinforcing the gendered aspects of trauma by focusing on the female-presenting people and passing quickly over one of only a few male-presenting people, this visual tactic again reinforces the end goals of a therapeutic and progressing model of trauma.[11] Rather than allowing the eye to linger on

[11] "Victims of Sexual Violence," Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), accessed on July 2, 2018, https://www.rainn.org/statistics/victims-sexual-violence. Of course, it is true that most people who experience sexual violence are in fact female-identifying people and

the more negative aspects emphasizing victimization, the camera instead focuses on the end result of reclaiming agency and emotional positivity emphasized by survivorhood. Moreover, such strategies imply that there will be supporters and fellow survivors in the process to lift you up and understand how you are feeling, especially in the end. Though those who have not had "it" happen to them cannot understand the sadness, pain, and negativity you have experienced, it is without doubt something you will have made your way *through*, from "victim" to "survivor."

Such metaphors of working through and moving past are further supported and elaborated in the music video for the song which was inspired by the documentary.[12] This video presents four narratives of five female-presenting college students who are violently sexually assaulted by male-presenting peers. Only one of the perpetrators appears to be known to the woman he assaults while the others appear to be engaging in unplanned predation. Four of the women "go through" periods of extreme negativity (again supported by phrases such as "I am worthless" and "Sometimes I hate myself" painted on their bodies) before coming to an empowered and seemingly validated stance of personal survivorship at the end. This occurs at least in part through the help of friends, family, and fellow survivors, all of whom walk confidently alongside them out of the dorm and into the light after this process. While such

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misrepresenting such a disparity plays into larger cultural problems of misogyny and the disenfranchisement of women. However, over-emphasizing female-presenting survivors outside of this larger discussion of gender disparity in sexual violence indirectly reinforces the delegitimization of sexual violence perpetrated against other, in this case male-presenting and male identifying, survivors.

[12] Content Warning: This music video shows graphic and violent depictions of sexual assault. Lady Gaga, "Lady Gaga – Til It Happens To You," YouTube video, September 17, 2015, https://youtu.be/ZmWBrN7QV6Y.

narratives do indeed occur with frequency, they do not represent the diversity of responses nor do they accurately portray the norms of sexual violence on college campuses they attempt to represent. The narratives presented are only violent and mostly random instances of heterosexual sexual violence perpetrated by men against women rather than more common examples of coercion and physically non-violent assaults perpetrated and experienced by a diversity of genders. Moreover, this singular narrative obfuscates the fact that most sexual violence is perpetrated by individuals known to those experiencing the violence.[13] Such portrayals at odds with reality unintentionally reinforce an exclusive binary that the most important or "real" forms of trauma are violent, heterosexual, and random while everything else is somehow lesser in both importance and impact, regardless of the context or statistical likelihood.

Furthermore, the narratives of the music video also participate in the normalization of the victim-to-survivor narrative by emphasizing only a therapeutic model of suppressing or getting over negativity and working towards positivity. The narratives of the music video go so far as to show friends of one woman forcing her out of bed and out of her dorm room. This happens immediately before a segment showing her walking confidently and more physically put-together with the other survivors, seeming to confirm that such an active denial of agency and repression of her negative feelings was ultimately "for her own good" so she could "get better." In fact, the only woman that does not explicitly conform to this victim-to-survivor

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[13] "Perpetrators of Sexual Violence," Rape, Abuse, and Incest National Network (RAINN), accessed on July 3, 2018, https://www.rainn.org/statistics/perpetrators-sexual-violence. RAINN has a wealth of resources for those who have experienced or are experiencing sexual violence as well as demographic and statistical information relating to sexual violence.

narrative is shown moving out of her room after the attack, seemingly unable to cope, and her story is never revisited in the music video, implying that the other responses are more worthy of endorsement than a lived experience that experiences negative feelings differently rather than simply getting over them.

Turning now to the music of "Til It Happens to You" and the role it plays in these ideas, there is a sense of building and forward momentum throughout the song that is never broken, especially in Gaga's live performance at the Academy Awards. It musically creates a feeling of progression underscoring the trauma narrative of "moving forward" presented in the lyrics and visuals. At no point in the performance is the audience forced to think critically about the performance itself through tactics like Palmer's Brechtian estrangement, nor are they given an option to identify separate from the adversarial insider/outsider binary of trauma set up in the lyrics. Short of disidentifying entirely, they must simply take the performance at face value. This victim-to-survivor progression within the music is perhaps most evident in the harmonic framework of the song, which sets up a system of constant shifting between the submediant (vi) and tonic (I) until the final chord of the song. In the key of C major, the chord progression of each phrase of the verses is vi – I – IV – I – V (or Amin – C – F – C – G) with the exception of the last phrase which is truncated as vi – I – IV in preparation for the chorus. This progression begins by establishing the submediant before moving to the tonic (with a dominant or subdominant chord at the end of each phrase in preparation for the next). If we accept that minor chords are stereotypically coded and reported as sad and major chords as happy, especially the submediant and tonic respectively within tonal frameworks in popular music, this progression mirrors the therapeutic model presented in the visuals and lyrics. It is one of working through bad feelings associated with trauma (vi) to come to a better place (I), at least in a microcosmic sense. In the larger sense, this repeated deceptive cadence of G to Am in all the verses creates a delayed or lessened sense of release throughout the song. This tension is almost resolved by the beginning of the chorus (C), but ultimately still delayed as I will demonstrate momentarily.

The harmony in the bridge creates an interesting tension through the use of almost exclusively G to F shifting chords, except for the final phrase which incorporates a C chord between them. This can be interpreted aurally in two ways. First, one could hear this as an extended dominant pedal that is reinforced by shifting between the dominant and subdominant chords, creating increasing musical tension and the need for resolution one assumes will come at the beginning of the subsequent chorus. This reinforces the larger lyric narrative by positioning the dominant as the musical signifier for the negative feelings associated with the narrator's trauma that are finally being disclosed in this section and heightening the musical tension or affect that will be resolved by the return of the chorus. However, this reading is undermined by the use of the C chord in a rhythmically and structurally weak position in the middle of the final phrase. This would effectively act as an anticipated or early arrival, one that does not effectively resolve the harmonic tension, especially considering the immediate return to G as the final chord of the phrase.

However, if one interprets the bridge as a momentary modulation to the key of the dominant (G), this strategy becomes clearer. This effectively reinterprets F, previously the subdominant, as a flat-subtonic chord (flat-VII). The infamous flat-VII is often used to disrupt harmonic progression and create a heightened sense of intensity by suddenly shifting from harmonic progression to a non-functional modal figure, especially in popular music.[14] The listener is suspended in this plateau-like moment until the music once again resumes a pattern that implies harmonic movement, forcing them to focus their attention on other aspects such as the lyrics. While such a moment could be used for critical self-reflection, the lyrics and visuals do not support this. Instead, it effectively forces the audience to focus momentarily on the negativity of the narrator's end-of-her-rope world crashing and burning only to further heighten the sense of relief once this tension is resolved musically and narratively. The C chord in the final phrase further legitimizes this interpretation. In this new tonal context, it is reinterpreted as the subdominant preparation for the G tonic as the final chord, a much more likely use for this sonority at this structural point than an anticipatory tonic. Moreover, as a subdominant chord, the music once again resumes harmonic motion, preparing the modulation back to shifting C tonic/Am submediant after the final G tonic chord of the bridge (which is of course the dominant of the subsequent chorus). This effectively ends the modal suspension created by the shifting I – flat-VII and resolves the tension of the bridge by preparing the final chorus and outro, which will resolve the large scale tension of the song.

Finally, in keeping with the idea of a shifting C/Am framework, the harmony of the chorus is loosely a reversal of the previously-discussed pattern of the verses. Each phrase begins on the tonic chord C and progresses to Am (which always occurs on the significant words "feel" and "real.") The actual progression is I – vi – I – IV – I – vi (or C – Am- Cm – F – C – Am), lacking the use of the dominant G. The final phrase is truncated to I – IV, recalling the

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[14] David Temperley, "Scalar Shift in Popular Music," *Music Theory Online (MTO)* 17, no. 4 (2011). http://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.11.17.4/mto.11.17.4.temperley.html

truncation of the final phrase of the verse. Though this reversal does create microcosmic moments of harmonic resolution by finally resolving the subdominant and dominant chords of the ending phrases of the verses and bridge to the beginning tonic C chord of the chorus, these resolutions are always immediately undermined by the progression back to Am at the end of the chorus phrases (minus the final truncated phrase preparing the next section). While this inverted progression would seem to effectively reverse the framework of sadness-to-acceptance or victim-to-survivor, it is only a momentary cognitive dissonance with the overarching message previously discussed. During the final extended chorus outro, the overarching tension of the C/Am shifting complex is ultimately resolved rather than ending on the truncated subdominant harmony. An extra melodic phrase is added to resolve from the truncated subdominant ending to C tonic, harmonically confirming the sense of musical and emotional progression from victim to survivor, Am to C, once and for all.

This harmonic and emotional progression is enhanced by a sense of building that occurs primarily in the texture, dynamics, and melodic contour. The introduction is comprised of softly bowed strings, which foreshadow the same motif being used for a sense of emotional arrival in the final moments of the song. As the strings fade, the first verse begins with only minimal piano and Gaga singing. Her vocal dynamics generally increase throughout the first verse. This slow increase in dynamics continues into the first iteration of the chorus, where the bowed string accompaniment rejoins also thickening the texture. As the bridge occurs (the original second verse and chorus having been cut for this shortened performance), the texture thickens yet again with the entrance of the drum set and added vocal harmonies. The dynamics are similarly amplified in all parts, with the bridge being the loudest section of the performance to this point. There is a brief moment as the second chorus begins after the bridge where the texture, instrumentation, and dynamics are reduced only to immediately build back to their highest point. This continues until they taper slightly for the outro, which is again, a mirror of the beginning that finally resolves. Likewise, the melodic contour of each section (excluding the intro and outro) is like a miniature wedge within a larger wedge structure for the song as a whole. Both the melodic range and shape of the contour for each phrase of a given section expands and varies more than the last. Moreover, each section then also builds on the previous section creating an overall wedge for the song in terms of melodic contour, which of course effects the registration and timbre of the voice.

The timbre and articulation even further reinforce these building strategies. The vocal articulation is used to highlight specific words and phrases. “Fine,” “you,” “could,” and “real” are all emphasized by Gaga. She couples this with timbral choices (and facial expression and body language) to convey senses of frustration, exasperation, and sardonicism with these words since they are words often used by those who have not experienced trauma that she is critiquing. The use of strings, particularly bowed strings playing mostly long note values, draws on well-established instrumental tropes to persuade audiences with feelings of longing and romanticized sadness. Rather than playing more idiosyncratic rhythmic patterns to create and ornament a melody, the strings are used as a supportive accompaniment, which, when set alongside Gaga’s emotional lyrics and bodily performance of sadness, anger, and overwrought desperation, musically confirm for audiences these emotional responses the strings seem to support rather than inspire.

All of these enhancing strategies serve to heighten the effects discussed in the previous harmonic and narrative frameworks by increasing the affect. The more overt tensions and progression shown in the visuals, sung in the lyrics, and heard in the harmony are intensified by these effects that add emphasis and building. They serve to appeal to subconscious bodily sensations and feelings to increase an empathetic response. For example, while a section like the bridge that suspends harmonic movement might be notable in its own right for being different than the previous harmonically active sections, it would not affect audience members the same way if it were, say, quiet with a reserved melodic contour and little to no textural elements. This might instead read as a static and placid dream rather than the pinnacle of an emotional progression. By enhancing the more obvious and conscious choices with ones that are less consciously noticeable to listeners, the performance intensifies the affect of the victim-to-survivor progression "Til It Happens to You" seeks establish in response to negative feelings and traumatic experiences. These strategies reinforce a sense of working through traumatic experiences of victimization by emphasizing the intensity of the negativity as a tension that must be relieved, which inevitably strengthen the sense of resolution and arrival once one has done that and becomes a survivor.

Turning now to Amanda Palmer, we can begin to unravel the ways she destabilizes such a normative framework of trauma and negative emotions in her own works. Her use of humor, specifically dark or gallows humor, is perhaps the most significant strategy to examine when discussing her emotional and affective practices.[15] As previously discussed, dark humor was one

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[15] Amanda Palmer usually refers to this type of humor with the phrase "black humor." I have chosen not to use this phrase given the racially-charged connotations that exist for some people.

of the most characteristic features of the German *Kabarett* and one of the features on which Palmer bases the majority of her work. While she certainly creates music that situates negative emotions using strategies other than humor, strategies like seriousness and ambiguity to be briefly explored later in this chapter, the majority of her works intentionally contain a certain amount of sardonic wit, even if it is created situationally by Palmer in performances rather than being directly inserted into the music and lyrics. Such uses of dark humor and irony as a discursive and cultural-political strategy have been explored thoroughly in Cultural Studies and Popular Media Studies. In her foundational text *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*, Linda Hutcheon lays the groundwork for conceiving of irony as "a discursive strategy operating at the level of language (verbal) or form (musical, visual, textual)," one whose "edge" lies in its "inscrutable" or intentionally unstable ethics.[16] Drawing on her work, scholars like Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene have explored the use of dark humor as a destabilizing political force in post-9/11 media discourse in popular media like *South Park*, *The Onion*, and *The Daily Show with Stephen Colbert*.[17]

Gournelos asserts, "through a chaotic approach to opposition, [*South Park*] produces areas in which conversation can take place outside the accepted or dominant discourse, and deploys those alternative spaces in a radical, and often internally dissonant, critical pedagogy."[18] Recalling the reflexive nature of Brecht's dialectical theatre, Gournelos further

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[16] Linda Hutcheon, *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 10.
[17] Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene, eds., *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011).
[18] Ted Gournelos, *Popular Culture and the Future of Politics: Cultural Studies and the Tao of South Park* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books 2009), 32.

argues that such an unstable and internally contradictory critical pedagogy of dark humor can "both construct a community and direct that community toward a self-critical or self-aware set of practices."[19] Greene elaborates on Gournelos' idea stating, "From this perspective, *South Park* might be seen as engaging in a form of Socratic irony, whereby basic assumptions and political commitments are subjected to a form of interrogation… in the form of ironic gestures that highlight contradiction and incoherence."[20] She further claims, "ironists often [speak] the unspoken, [challenge] the political, social, and cultural status quo, and/or [attempt] to consolidate community (or countercommunities)."[21] Thus, the transgressive power of dark humor and irony lies in its ambiguity and internally conflicted nature, similar to Dollimore's theorizations of intentional contradiction and self-destruction in the works of Genet as the basis for a queer aesthetic discussed in chapter one. This conflicted nature requires audiences to question how, why, and for whom the humor functions, forcing people to examine their own cultural values in an act of self-reflection that is always already political. Moreover, by presenting paradoxical and seemingly incoherent situations, those who use dark humor disrupt prescriptive identifications and open windows of opportunity to create change by undermining the larger social framework they critique from both within and without the underlying value system. As we shall see, Palmer's uses dark humor and irony in her own works, especially those from her personal life, similarly undermine the cultural-political status quo surrounding the

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[19] Gournelos, *Popular Culture and the Future of Politics*, 97.
[20] Viveca Greene, "Critique, Counternarratives, and Ironic Intervention in *South Park* and Stephen Colbert," in *A Decade of Dark Humor: How Comedy, Irony, and Satire Shaped Post-9/11 America*, edited by Ted Gournelos and Viveca Greene (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 127.
[21] Greene, "Critique, Counternarratives, and Ironic Intervention in *South Park* and Stephen Colbert," 134.

expressions of negativity and trauma for women and queer people present in pop music discourse as exemplified in "Til It Happens To You."

For example, returning to her parodic pastiche song "Oasis," Palmer details the initial inspiration for the song in a blog post entitled "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor."[22] She states,

> it isn't a simple issue, obviously. but the fundamentals seem clear to me. i sat down one day in or around 2002 and wrote a tongue-in-cheek, ironic up-tempo pop song. a song about a girl who got drunk, was date raped, and had an abortion. she sings about these things lightly and joyfully and says that she doesn't care that these things have happened to her because oasis, (her favorite band) has sent her an autographed photo in the mail. and to make things even better (!!), her bitchy friend melissa, who told the whole school about the abortion, is really jealous. if you cannot sense the irony in this song, you're about two intelligence points above a kumquat.[23]

She also elaborates on the process of actually producing this song in 2007 with Ben Folds saying, "he produced the song to sound *fantastically happy*, a full-on *peppy* beach-boys style number complete with ba ba ba back-up vocals."[24] She and Folds were both "very proud of" the song because "it was funny*, and* sad, and made sense. to [them]."[25] After this, she produced the "VERY literal" music video with Michael Pope that had a "play-by-play of what was being related in the song" that, again, made sense both to her and her collaborator.[26] Thus, Palmer

[22] Amanda Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor," *Amanda Palmer* (Blog), February 3, 2009. http://blog.amandapalmer.net/on-abortion-rape-art-and-humor/. This blog was released mainly as a response to criticism surrounding the song as well as the banning of "Oasis" in the UK; however, it contains a wealth of knowledge about the emotional and musical aspects of her songwriting and performance practices.
[23] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Given that Amanda Palmer has a very idiosyncratic and personalized style of writing, I will reproduce her typography throughout whenever possible.
[24] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Emphasis mine.
[25] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Emphasis mine.
[26] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Emphasis original.

intentionally created a positively-charged musical and affective pastiche framework for discussing these negatively-charged issues of abortion and sexual violence to produce dark humor. This unexpected and conflicted irony simultaneously creates a potential for honest self-expression of Palmer's own non-normative responses to traumatic experiences at odds with societal expectations, and also allows her to challenge audiences who expect the negative emotions of sexual violence and trauma to be handled within a musically normative pop aesthetic, as in the previously discussed "Til It Happens To You."

The music video for "Oasis" foregrounds the ironic use of emotion to create social critique. Throughout the two-minute video, the viewer is presented almost entirely with carefree, happy-go-lucky body language and set design. Smiles, winks, fist bumps, high fives, head nodding, making out, swaying, and dancing are presented amid bright, sparkly, and colorful rooms. Even Palmer's own hair and make-up are uncharacteristically kempt and colorful. As discussed in chapter one, these lighthearted and overtly mundane expressions (along with the musical and cinematographic elements outlined above) are intentionally juxtaposed with the intensity of the traumatic events in the date-rape abortion narrative to create an absurd and situationally ironic type of humor throughout the video. In fact, only a few aspects are presented in an emotional context other than happy. The Christian protesters' initial entry into the abortion room showcases a serious demeanor, yet this seriousness eventually turns to sexy dance party fun, with their signs, crucifixes, and dogma seemingly forgotten. Palmer's boyfriend embodies nervousness as he visibly shakes throughout the abortion, but he transitions to expressing relief after the procedure is complete, nonchalantly reading a book in the middle of the final party sequence. Finally, Palmer's friend Melissa presents as disaffected and apathetic throughout the video (itself, of course, an emotional response); however, she does smile once when she fist bumps with the nurses she knows at the abortion clinic who will later bottle feed the aborted fetus with a forty-ounce bottle of malt liquor, a nod to her own possibly traumatic past at the clinic.

Where Palmer is concerned, there are only two moments that do not fit within the stereotypically happy setting of the video. The first is when the fuzzy pink coat hanger is used during her abortion and her face displays surprise and slight discomfort. The second is at the beginning of the fourth verse immediately following the abortion scene. Here, Palmer presents a serious, annoyed, and slightly disheartened facial expression when she delivers lyrics describing her friend disclosing her traumatic experiences to everyone and calling her a “crack whore;” however, this serious moment is immediately revealed to be related more to the fact that Palmer and Melissa’s Blur concert tickets could be in jeopardy because they are not speaking, rather than the fact that Melissa outed her. Palmer transitions seamlessly from this serious-seeming moment back to her happy-go-lucky character. She cheerfully says they are probably still going and becomes even happier when she realizes she received an autographed photo from Oasis in the mail and her actual hard work has paid off.

This seemingly serious moment is particularly telling because it is the only moment where Palmer seems to be displaying what might be perceived as an “appropriate” emotion for the situation. It is also supported by a reduced and softer musical texture and low lighting that encourages a more personal and reflective engagement by drawing viewers momentarily into the story. Furthermore, it is the only scene where Palmer is alone, except for the first shot that lasts barely two seconds. This more serious moment changes the emotional framework of the entire video up to this point, shifting the affect from flippant to serious. This shift mimics an affect closer to what normative viewers might expect based on more common musical expressions of trauma. Viewers expecting a serious treatment of these topics finally seem to have a moment to believe that Palmer is perhaps going to break the "façade" and show them her "real" emotions. Therefore, it makes it all the more effective when Palmer reinterprets this moment as having nothing to do with the date-rape and abortion they have just witnessed, confirming for herself and non-normative audiences that happiness and humor is still primary in her expression of trauma and negativity and further estranging normative viewers who must question why this has happened.

Of course, many people did not and still do not see the irony in this song. Palmer experienced significant backlash when she released "Oasis," and the criticism primarily revolved around her perceived flippancy and "making light of rape, religion and abortion."[27] As such criticism implies, it is not Palmer's exploration of disconcerting topics that garners disapproval, but rather, it is her intentionally humorous treatment of them.[28] Palmer refuses the expectations surrounding the events that take place in the lyric narrative of "Oasis." She does not "work through" her negativity in a progression from victim to survivor as related in "Til It Happens To You," nor does she approach the topic with reverence or an air of catharsis, as one

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[27] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor."

[28] Amanda Palmer, "Amanda Palmer: Visionary or Egotist?," interviewed by Jon Ronson, *The Guardian* (online), June 22, 2013. https://www.theguardian.com/music/2013/jun/22/amanda-palmer-visionary-egotist-interview. Palmer has similarly been accused of hypocrisy for various other aspects of her career as well, as this interview details.

might find in other normative frameworks like the music of Tori Amos, for example.[29] Rather, Palmer supplants these expected responses with an unexpected, happier response, creating irony and an irreverent, almost chaotic effect of humor. In keeping with her Brechtian methodology, she forces audiences to consider the uncomfortable reality of sexual violence and abortion as a societal issue in this song by making them question their own response to her non-normative expression. Her own anti-normative approach also implicitly asks audiences to reconsider what emotions they consider “appropriate” when engaging with these issues and why any emotions are “appropriate” or “inappropriate.” These are questions that many normative viewers are unaware of, in disagreement with Palmer about, or simply uncomfortable considering.

Sara Ahmed discusses this idea of discomfort in her chapter “Queer Feelings” saying, “‘ideally’ [queer] lives will maintain a discomfort with the scripts of heteronormative existence.”[30] She elaborates further: “Discomfort is not simply a choice or decision… but [it is] an effect of bodies inhabiting spaces that do not take or ‘extend’ their shape. So the closer that queer subjects get to inhabiting spaces defined by heteronormativity the more *potential* there is for a reworking of the heteronormative.”[31] While I have already discussed Palmer’s use of Brechtian estrangement to create effects of discomfort and queerness surrounding production and performance, it is important here to note the framework of compulsory heterosexuality

[29] See Bonnie Gordon’s work on Tori Amos, trauma, and protest; Bonnie Gordon, “Tori Amos’s Inner Voices,” in *Women’s Voices Across Musical Worlds*, ed. Jane A. Bernstein (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 2004), 187–207.
[30] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 151. Ahmed immediately goes on to problematize her own use of the word ‘ideally,’ hence her use of scare quotes.
[31] Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, 152. Emphasis original.

that Ahmed points out surrounding feelings and emotions.[32] She highlights the queer potential created by the inability to seamlessly occupy heterosexual spaces and how one can use that ill-fit and awkwardness as a means of creating change.[33] Palmer enacts this queer potential through humor supported by her Brechtian methods. She uses the dark comedy, absurdism, and irony in "Oasis" to dislocate her own feelings of queer discomfort stemming from her inability to fit within the heterosexualized norms surrounding negative emotions and trauma narratives, and then transfers that discomfort to normative audiences who are forced to acknowledge their complicity in creating her "bad" feelings. Following my previous discussion of Dollimore in chapter one, Palmer uses humor to transvalue her own queer feelings as a weapon to attack societal norms regarding emotional expression from both within and without normative musical structures.

By forcing audiences to feel her discomfort generated by their own gendered and sexualized policing of emotions, she forces them to question the validity of this system. In questioning it, she and audiences weaken the emotional norms that structure society by showing them to be constructed and marginalizing rather than natural or essential. This is particularly true regarding the lives of those who are most likely to experience trauma, namely women and queer people like Palmer herself. Moreover, her decision to use humor that causes a reevaluation of emotional politics also creates an affect that this song might not have

[32] Note that this is the framework often implicitly espoused by the victim to survivor narrative, as shown in my analysis of the music video for "Til It Happens To You."
[33] This recalls the ideas I present in chapter one regarding Dollimore's study of Genet's transgressiveness. In his attempts to be everything people accuse him of and to intentionally work within a system that works against him while also actively working against it, Genet was enacting the ideas Ahmed presents here.

otherwise had. Listeners and viewers can be affected on more levels at once (thematic content, gender and sexual politics, and emotional politics), and also at higher levels of intensity, given the controversies surrounding the song and video specifically because it does not handle trauma in the prescribed way. One wonders: without the offending darkly comedic aspects, would people have been nearly as affected by her song in such a way as to generate the larger discussions and debates which Palmer herself encourages? I shall return to this point momentarily.

With regards to her own feelings on creating the song and video, Palmer says, "i'm sure there's a part of me (it seems obvious) that was processing my pain, coming to terms with my experiences through the song. that's what i do. i'm a songwriter who writes about personal shit. but because i chose to do it in a black-humor way, with my tongue shoved firmly in the side of my cheek....does that make it less valid? it shouldn't."[34] Responding directly to her naysayers who say things like, "'we don't joke about things that are personal and emotional and sad!,'" she asks, "wait, what? don't we? i do. i have to. you're damn right this shit makes people uncomfortable. it makes people uncomfortable to hear ANYONE talk about abortion and rape bluntly, much less talking about it LIKE THIS...."[35] She does not deny that in the song itself nor in her own experiences of producing the song that there was pain and sadness; however, she also never states that she wished to "get over" it or get rid of it. As discussed in chapter one, Brechtian estrangement such as Palmer's does not require performers or audiences to divorce themselves of emotion; rather, it merely seeks to redirect those emotions from solely

[34] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor."
[35] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Emphasis original.

individualistic identifications and concerns to societal and cultural frameworks, as Palmer does here. She discusses "coming to terms" with her emotions "through the song" and "processing" them by using the dark humor she felt in response to both the experiences and the song itself. She avows her own and others' use of humor as a vital strategy in dealing with trauma and problematizes the notion that anyone could have an open and honest discussion of rape and abortion without discomfort. Finally, she questions the disapproval of humor as a response, implying that it is equally valid. Palmer is thus completely aware of the emotional norms surrounding these topics and is actively choosing to manipulate them to create discussion with the hopes of fostering cultural-political change. While she might not have expected the extent of the backlash she received, she certainly knew her strategy would have an effect and what that effect would most likely be.

Where her choice of topic is concerned, she states, "the song isn't even so much ABOUT those topics [abortion and rape], it's about denial, it's about a girl who can't find it in herself to take her situation seriously. that girl exists, everywhere. you probably know her. you've probably met her. you might be her."[36] The video supports this, as the focus is always on Palmer and her emotional responses to her obsession with Oasis and pop music rather than the ongoing trauma. The rape, abortion, and disclosures are treated as merely background events or formalities, despite their prominence in the lyrics. However, it is not mere happenstance or coincidence that the lyrics and video include a recounting of these events. Palmer's intent is primarily concerned with the emotional politics she so deftly navigates, and extreme experiences of trauma like rape and abortion provide intense, affective examples to foreground

[36] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Emphasis original.

such politics. While I shall momentarily problematize the notion of using intense and often exceptional trauma as a basis for creating widespread awareness, suffice it to say that the use of women's sexual trauma as a cultural experience to do emotional work like Palmer's is telling in its political agenda and, moreover, serves as a form of awareness-raising in itself for listeners (and viewers) in tandem with Palmer's emotional politics.

Regarding the use of humor as a political strategy in this song, Palmer says, "WHEN YOU CANNOT JOKE ABOUT THE DARKNESS OF LIFE, THAT'S WHEN THE DARKNESS TAKES OVER."[37] Palmer further goes on to point out that people laughing off "intense heavy experiences" is a common reality, especially for teenagers, and anyone that does not see that this is the case is not "ALIVE" or "AWAKE."[38] Moreover, while she could "try to win points by talking about how [she's] been date raped" or "how [she has] every right to joke about this if [she wants] to because [she's] had an abortion," she does not believe people need to have had those experiences to lend credibility to their engagement with them.[39] Finally, she addresses her stance on humor, flippancy, and emotional politics more generally:

> our COLLECTIVE freedom to approach situations with humor, with irony, with anger, with sadness, with darkness, with an edge, from a different perspective, from within the situation…it's ESSENTIAL. we have to agree about this or we ALL get in trouble. the minute you discount humor, you give evil things POWER. you fuel them. you let them rule you.[40]

Though she foregrounds her subjectivity as someone who has experienced gender and sexual trauma and acknowledges the importance of those experiences, she seeks instead to

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[37] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Emphasis original.
[38] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Emphasis original.
[39] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor."
[40] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor." Emphasis original.

problematize the more fundamental process of regulating emotional expression altogether. She urges audiences to challenge any notions they might hold that there are “acceptable” and “unacceptable” emotional expressions in favor of acknowledging that a diversity of perspectives is both creative and liberatory. Moreover, she urges listeners and readers to consider the ramifications for their own lives if they are complicit in any system controlling emotional expressions. In other words, she suggests that the characteristic distinguishing one form of censorship from another is merely the power structure people buy into that empowers certain “evil things” or people to make such decisions.

With regards to my earlier question of what the effect of this song would have been if Palmer had adhered to musical and performative norms of emotional expression regarding gender and sexual trauma rather than employing humor as an act of emotional dissidence, Palmer addresses some of these points herself in a subsequent section of her blog response. She says,

> as i was walking over to the bbc the other day and my label rep mentioned that they might not let me play “oasis” on the air, i suggested that i might be allowed to play it if i just slowed it way down and played it in a minor key. think about it. if they heard the same lyrics against the backdrop of a very sad and liliting [*sic*] piano, maybe with some tear-jerking strings thrown in for good measure, would they take issue?
>
> imagine these lyrics to the tune of “strange fruit”. or “yesterday”.
>
> “when i got my abortion, i brought along my boyfriend we got there an hour before the appointment”… (cue swelling strings, tears well up in singer’s eyes)
>
> “and outside the building”(singer looks down, brushes away invisible oncoming tear, lights change, strings ease up mournfully)
>
> “were all these annoying fundamentalist christians”
> (singer’s voice breaks, a pin could drop in the audience, the strings suspend their sorrowful bowing for a breath)
>
> “we tried to ignore them…” (the singer lets a single solitary tear flow down her right cheek and turns her head away from the audience in an i-can’t-even-face-you-right-now moment).
>
> and the crowd goes wild!!!!! such PAIN. such GRAVITAS!
>
> would this make people happy? maybe. it would be within a context they could rely on, feel safe in, write off. “she’s sad! of course she’s sad! she had an abortion! abortion is sad! abortion is personal and emotional! look, she is expressing directly the way she should feel about this! and we don’t joke about things that are personal and emotional and sad!”[41]

While it is true that this imagined version may seem somewhat over the top, her sentiments reveal her awareness of what she perceives as a more normative version (which ironically aligns with many of the trope that Warren and Gaga would later use) and also her own disposition to that norm. She offers a new rendition of “Oasis” fitting into what she believes audiences would consider a more appropriate musical, emotional, and affective framework. For example, she

[41] Palmer, “On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor.” Given the relatively artistic and personalized style of this quasi-stage direction section, I have quoted at length in an attempt to capture the full effect of Palmer’s prose. The quotation marks appear in the original.

first suggests slowing the song and shifting the mode to a minor key, followed by indications of instrumentation and texture: lilting piano and swelling strings. These musical codes of emotion are perhaps all too familiar to music scholars and music listeners alike, as discussed in my earlier analysis. However, Palmer goes further by offering melodic models. Assuming that Palmer is nodding to the most famous versions of these songs by Billie Holiday and the Beatles respectively, “Strange Fruit” supplies a more “appropriately” gendered example of lamenting contour, timbre, and phrasing accompanied by a lilting piano while “Yesterday” supports the mid-twentieth-century pop rock tropes of a plaintive, strophic melody with wistful lyrics accompanied by swelling strings.[42] Finally, having set the stage with these models, Palmer provides several acting or emotive directions to accompany a performance that creates an emotionally inverted image of her original version to show the (imagined) audience what Palmer believes they wish to see.

In her essay “Feminist Fairy Tales in *Who Killed Amanda Palmer*,” Monica Miller discusses the use of mirroring or doubling as a strategy often used by feminists that “allows for new perspectives on old problems.”[43] She also quotes Neil Gaiman, one of Palmer’s collaborators, in his discussion of mirrors as saying, “Fantasy – and all fiction is fantasy of one kind or another – is a mirror. A distorted mirror, to be sure… which we can use to tell ourselves things we might not otherwise see.”[44] While Miller discusses Palmer and Gaiman’s use of

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[42] The racial and gender implications of these models go unacknowledged by Palmer in the blog, but they are certainly relevant.

[43] Monica Miller, “Feminist Fairy Tales in *Who Killed Amanda Palmer*,” in *Feminism in the Worlds of Neil Gaiman: Essays on the Comics, Poetry and Prose*, ed. Tara Prescott and Aaron Drucker (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co., 2012), 212.

[44] Miller, “Feminist Fairy Tales in *Who Killed Amanda Palmer*,” 212. Originally quoted from Neil Gaiman, *Smoke and Mirrors: Short Fictions and Illusions* (New York: Harper, 1998), 2. Gaiman

mirroring almost exclusively in the context of the companion book of photography and creative writing, this analysis is similarly useful in thinking about "Oasis" and Palmer's imagined version of it.[45] Through the overtly emotional and gendered body language in her stage directions, Palmer offers a demure and emotionally fragile feminine double in opposition to the "peppy," matter-of-fact woman she presents in her original version of "Oasis." She creates a distorted mirror of herself in this imagined version that is in opposition to the image she presents in the original. She foregrounds an image of a distraught woman outwardly overcome with feelings of sadness and aligns it with stereotypical musical and bodily accompaniments. Her suggestions of dramatic tears, voice-breaking sorrow, and the inability to face the audience in the midst of overpowering emotions become almost a caricature of a damsel in distress or victimized princess. In fact, the picture that accompanies the lyrics of "Oasis" in the companion book is a portrait of Palmer taken to this emotional and affective extreme. It shows Palmer as a teenage prom queen in a frilly, pink satin gown with a long, blonde wig and tiara lying dead on a bed. Her body posture and clothing position seem to imply she could have been sexually assaulted and strangled in a similar expression of an abused and broken femininity.[46]

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collaborated on the book project that was produced alongside *Who Killed Amanda Palmer* for which both the track and music video for "Oasis" were recorded.

[45] Interestingly, Palmer herself uses mirrors as a metaphor for art and society in the quotation at the beginning of chapter one.

[46] Amanda Palmer, Neil Gaiman, Kyle Cassidy, and Beth Hommel, *Who Killed Amanda Palmer: A Collection of Photographic Evidence* (New York: Eight Foot Books, 2009) 23–24. Please note that this book is not paginated. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, I have chosen to number the pages by beginning immediately after the title page with page 1. (Page 1 is the album cover picture of Palmer in a red coat holding an antler in her right hand and barely touching the hand of another person with her left.) This decision also aligns with the way Monica Miller chose to paginate the book for the citations in her essay.

However, this double Palmer creates in jest with her imagined version is actually the reflection of a reflection. Palmer's quasi-parodic original version was *already* an intentionally distorted mirror of the "you'll get over it" culture of victim-to-survivor trauma responses discussed in the beginning of this chapter. Palmer's original version used humor and parodic happiness to highlight what Palmer feels is actual "pain" and "gravitas" related to society's response to expressing non-normative emotions surrounding date-rape and abortion. In contrast, this imagined version intentionally uses depictions of normative pain and sadness to expose the audiences' own invisible pleasure at being able to engage sympathetically and uncritically with emotional norms. The fact that the imagined audience is pleased by and expects to sympathize with certain emotions, and thus to be affected in a certain way, demonstrates that certain types of negative expressions and an assumed emotional response to trauma comprised of pain and sadness are already stuck to Palmer's female body. Moreover, these particular emotional norms are also simultaneously reinscribed on her body by the process of the audience sympathizing.

This imagined normative response is reinforced for both the singer and the audience with lighting and musical dramaturgy. Palmer's cues appeal to the body with musical sensations ("swelling" and "suspend… for a breath") and emotional codes ("sorrowful bowing" and "ease up mournfully") that further enhance a sympathetic engagement with the audience's expected response. Significantly, these traditional theatrical and musical practices allow audiences to suspend their awareness of reality in favor of the fictional aspects of performance, an act that is in direct opposition to Palmer's Brechtian aesthetic. Furthermore, such practices, specifically the musical practices, provide a sort of confirmation bias in that the unacknowledged and unchallenged norms of emotional musical codes seem to be an expression of real feelings rather than their likely source. In other words, the audience takes for granted that the musical and dramaturgical effects supporting the singer's performed emotions *reinforce* the naturalness of her expression that they perceive to be real, rather than considering that these effects might actually be the fundamental *cause* of their seemingly sympathetic response.

The imagined audience in this version is completely taken in by Palmer's performance, and the outpouring of praise Palmer describes confirms their approval of the sympathetic affect they wished to experience from the beginning. In doing so, it also reinforces complicity in the systematization of trauma and subsequent policing of women's negative emotions. Expecting white women to feel certain negative emotions in specific, "acceptable" ways as a result of trauma not only codifies the affect of how white women perceive and respond to traumatic events, but also suggests that they are pre-disposed to expect to experience these events that trigger such responses in the first place. Such a reifying response is yet again directly at odds with Palmer's Brechtian desire to create dialogue and social change. It does not require audiences to question unchecked reproduction of societal norms, as she notes by saying the audience could easily "write off" this more predictable version since it confirms and thus recreates their beliefs and desires rather than problematizing them. Palmer elaborates on this point later in the blog post when she says, "should we just cry about it demurely and hope that the proper reaction, the one that society deems appropriate, will make it go away? fuck that shit."[47] It is in the process of questioning and rebelling that one creates an affective possibility for change. That Palmer herself finds humor and amusement as well as derision and frustration

[47] Palmer, "On Abortion, Rape, Art and Humor."

in imagining performing this song in a normative way further emphasizes both the potential for societal change as well as the importance of her own deconstructed, non-normative approach to trauma found in the original.

In fact, after writing this imagined, normative reinterpretation on her blog, Palmer actually performed a version of it at a live show.[48] After explaining the context to the audience who expresses approval of her emotional political standpoint, she begins performing her slower, minor-mode version, playing up every potential trigger word and expected emotional response.[49] However, neither Palmer nor her audience, most of them already familiar with the original version given their familiarity with the lyrics and were given a prior context by Palmer, could take this version seriously. They laugh and scoff throughout the first half of this version of the song until Palmer finally says, "This is so stupid… I don't like this version. FUCK IT!" and begins to perform the original version from the beginning, to which the audience responds favorably and with much more enthusiasm, their laughter dying away. While this performance does not offer a positive confirmation of what Palmer expected a normative response to be, it does offer insight into the audience's perception of normativity regarding society's expectations of emotional expression. Moreover, while it is worth noting the disparity between Palmer's imagined audience's response and the actual audience's response, such a disparity speaks more to the difference between Palmer's actual audience probably comprised primarily of fans and her imagined normative audience of BBC listeners. The actual audience's laughter

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[48] marchingstars, "Amanda Palmer - slow then normal version of Oasis (Electric Ballroom, London)," YouTube video, 6:36, February 5, 2009, https://youtu.be/fG1McdiEpfU.
[49] While she definitely nods to the performance indications she wrote on her blog, this version does not seem to take melodic influence from "Strange Fruit" or "Yesterday." Rather, it is a minor-mode reinterpretation of the original melody.

and the fact that they are "in on the joke" critiquing Palmer's previously-discussed envisioning of appropriate expression suggests that they are likewise aware of (and in agreement about) the normative codes of musical and performative expressions of negativity. If they were unaware of such original norms and expectations, Palmer's parodic humor would have fallen flat or caused confusion, or at the very least a lack of response.

While humor comprises Palmer's primary strategy for creating estrangement in her affective performances, she does employ other emotional frameworks in her music as well. I would like now to briefly explore her use of seriousness and ambiguity in the song "Bad Habit" to offer another example of her affective and emotional politics. "Bad Habit" represents a very different style for Palmer than "Oasis." Perhaps the most significant difference is one of lyric content. "Bad Habit" deals with mundane, everyday occurrences of negativity rather than intense and exceptional trauma events like "Oasis." The title refers to Palmer's own "bad habit" of biting her cuticles and the skin of her fingers, as well as stabbing herself with sharp objects like pens.[50] As Lauren Berlant has argued regarding expressions of negativity, focusing on the ordinary or what she terms the "crisis ordinariness" gives a better perspective on affective cultural performances and patterns relating to negative expression than trauma does, because trauma events are exceptional and ahistorical.[51] Put another way, trauma events like those described in "Oasis" usually generate severe, sudden shifts in ideology and emotional expression given the extreme intensity or affect of such experiences. Since such extreme events do not typically occur with any regularity or repetition in people's lives (or in a society), more

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[50] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 64–65.
[51] Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

common and habitual forms of crisis like cuticle biting, albeit a less affective experience, comprise more realistic and relatable sites to elaborate the cultural politics of affect, especially over time. While examples of trauma may be more easily identifiable and decipherable given their intensity, they must be considered within their context of exceptionality and not conflated with everyday life. Palmer offers just such a commonplace example in "Bad Habit," which uses her own experience of ripping the skin off her cuticles to foreground an everyday habit that is coded as negative and indicative of bad feelings.

Rather than using humor to disrupt an audience's ability to relate on an emotional level and thus question their expected emotional norms, Palmer opts for a more serious treatment of her negative topic. The lyrics begin,

> Biting keeps your words at bay, tending to the sores that stay.
> Happiness is just a gash away. When I open a familiar scar,
> pain goes shooting like a star. Comfort hasn't failed to follow so far.
> And you might say it's self indulgent, you might say it's self destructive,
> but, you see, it's more productive than if I were to be healthy…
>
> And pens and penknives take the blame, crane my neck and scratch my name.
> But the ugly marks are worth the momentary gain… When I jab a sharpened object in
> choirs of angels seem to sing hymns of hate in memorandum.
> And you might say it's self indulgent, you might say it's self destructive,
> but, you see, it's more productive than if I were to be happy…"[52]

Addressing the negative associations of self-harm as "self indulgent" or "self destructive," Palmer seems to respond directly to inferred cultural sentiments like "I just want you to be healthy" or "I just want you to be happy." Such "healthy" and "happy" states are assumed to be both advantageous and mutually exclusive from Palmer's practices of cuticle biting and

[52] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 138–140.

stabbing, which are implied to be unhealthy and unhappy. Discussing the cultural and political valence of happiness in her book *The Promise of Happiness*, Sara Ahmed posits that "Happiness involves reciprocal forms of aspiration (I am happy for you, I want you to be happy, I am happy if you are happy) and also forms of coercion that are exercised and concealed by the very language of reciprocity, such that one person's happiness is made conditional not only on another person's happiness but on that person's willingness to be made happy by the same things."[53] She highlights the ways society attempts to force individuals to be complicit in an invisibly reciprocal affective framework. When wishing another person happiness, one not only assumes that they share an understanding of happiness, but also situates the would-be well-wisher's own happiness as contingent on this premise, all while concealing this enforced reciprocal structure. If Palmer is not "happy" (and I would add "healthy") as one assumes by her non-normative and negatively coded behaviors, then she is not only perceived to be unhappy, but, more importantly, she is perceived to be actively preventing those who wish her happiness from experiencing their own happiness. The initial implication that placed her in this negative position, the presumption that she *should* be happy and that others' happiness is rightly contingent on this, is obfuscated by Palmer's perceived dissidence. The fact that Palmer's non-normative position does not fit into this framework and therefore restricts her ability to participate in other people's happiness becomes the focal point perceived as troublesome rather than being seen as an opportunity to problematize the construction and biases of emotional norms and reciprocal happiness themselves.

[53] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 91.

This enforced reciprocal framework is also always already caught up in an emotional politics of identity concerned with power disparities based on gender and sexuality. Discontent experienced by women and queers as a result of their marginal or non-normative relationship to the heteropatriarchal mainstream is always positioned as a symptom of their own perceived difference rather than a symptom of normative structures. Thus, as Ahmed points out, those who refuse complicity in this system and who problematize the regulation of these affective norms from feminine and/or queer positionalities are not just seen as unhappy or "downers," but rather "feminist killjoys" or "unhappy queers."[54] However, despite the challenges presented to feminist killjoys and queers by compulsory complicity in a self-deprecating emotional system, Ahmed suggests that one can and should embrace and/or refuse this discursive positioning and use one's status as a feminist killjoy or unhappy queer as a source of power and activism. "There is solidarity in recognizing our alienation from happiness, even if we do not inhabit the same place (as we do not). There can even be joy in killing joy. And kill joy, we must and we do."[55] Feminist killjoys and unhappy queers situate their very existence as an affective political act that seeks to disrupt the processes of normalization surrounding emotional expression which are complicit in their oppression. Recalling my discussion of Palmer's Brechtian aesthetic as one of queer transgression, feminist killjoys and unhappy queers transvalue their negative frameworks as weapons to critique emotional and affective marginalization.

This is especially evident in Palmer's performance of "Bad Habit." Like Ahmed, Palmer rejects the underlying premises surrounding her own behaviors and bodily autonomy. Rather

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[54] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 17.
[55] Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 87.

than insisting that she is or is not healthy or happy, which would affirm a shared belief of what these terms mean, she intentionally creates contradictions between self-destruction and health/happiness that undermine this dichotomy by stating that her "self destructive" bad habit is more productive than being what society deems "healthy" or "happy." In overtly and politically practicing what is considered to be self-harm, she actually creates joy and comfort for herself in personally meaningful and fulfilling ways. Moreover, as she points out, these practices bring her more comfort than she would experience by being complicit in a system that calls it self-destruction. She even directly addresses her intentional deployment of contradiction, stating, "And you might say it's self-inflicted, / but you see that's contradictive. / Why on earth would anyone practice self-destruction?"[56] Finally, in an effort to dissuade further attempts at convincing her and also reaffirm her investment in her negative self-expressions, she states, "I've tried bandages and sinking. / I've tried gloves and even thinking. / I've tried Vaseline. / I've tried everything!" but these attempts only "[make her] want to give [herself] a beating!"[57]

Musically, "Bad Habit" recalls many of Palmer's characteristic direct Brechtian methods discussed in chapter one. While "Oasis" engaged in the practices of parody and pastiche, using easily recognizable and digestible musical tropes to create situational discordance and irony, "Bad Habit" is entirely original. The meter shifts frequently between 6/4, 5/4, 7/4, and 8/4 with no regular pattern. Palmer indicates accents to be played on the downbeats of many measures, emphasizing this irregularity, while the rhythm within the measures is generally very

[56] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 142–143.
[57] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 144–145.

syncopated. Moreover, Palmer indicates the song is to be played at 172 beats per minute in a "Fast + Frantic" manner, increasing the deliberately unpredictable character of the piece.[58] The song also includes directions to "WHAP" non-chord cluster tone using one's "entire fist" and has a "random ritard" ending.[59] Finally, the melody shifts between a middle-voice and a high-voice register with very little conjunct motion connecting such shifts, and the dynamics similarly change in very sudden ways from medium loud to very loud. These musical strategies create a sense of unstable musical urgency, allowing Palmer to create the frantic atmosphere she indicates. As elaborated in chapter one, such strategies prevent the audience from passively listening by avoiding or intentionally disturbing musical structures , thus drawing attention to the mediated nature of her performance. Moreover, they simultaneously support Palmer's affective framework of embracing negativity and killing joy by refusing to conform to more normative musical structures and expectations. Her "frantic" and unstable musical performance similarly transvalues typically uncomfortable musical gestures as a means of unsettling audiences to increase the affect of her lyrics.

With regards to Palmer's own feelings about "Bad Habit," she says the following in the companion notes about her creation of the song.

[58] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 138. There is a random squiggling arrow drawn beside the tempo indication here for added effect.
[59] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 144–145.

> Bad Habit came out of a desire to express my frustration with myself and my inability to stop causing my fingers to bleed[…] This is actually an easy song to understand and also an easy song to misunderstand. We've gotten plenty of Hate mail from Angry Parents about this one (go see the Hate Mail section of our website if you don't believe me) and most of the fans who love this song assume that it is about taking a blade to your arm. It's not, exactly. When I wrote it I realized how easy to misinterpret it would be, and I deliberately let the line blur. I do this with a lot of lyrics. Lots of songwriters do. I may never have taken a razor to my wrist or other body part, but I certainly witnessed a lot of that firsthand within my circle of self-destructive friends, and I related the urge to harm oneself with my own compulsion to tear the skin off around my cuticles with my teeth. I couldn't stop. They were getting gross and red and infected and oozing and I was just disgusted with myself[…] So the song turned into an all-purpose hymn for self-destruction in all forms, and how the general self-destructive state of the world seemed to merit a self-destructive reaction.[60]

Palmer affirms her ownership of feelings of failure, frustration, and disgust and aligns them with her views of the world as self-destructive. Though Palmer does not specify in exactly what ways she sees the world as self-destructive and though it is more than likely that she is intentionally drawing on multiple layers of meaning in this assertion, it is reasonable to align this statement at least partially with an awareness of the emotional politics implicit in reciprocal models of happiness previously discussed. Moreover, I read this statement of purpose in the same self-aware tradition of feminist killjoy and unhappy queer actualization and activism that Ahmed posits. This is further supported by Palmer's confirmation of the cultural and political importance of creating a similarly self-destructive hymn as a form of social commentary.

However, of equal importance to Palmer's affirmation of her negative standpoint is her acknowledgement of intentional ambiguity with her polysemic lyrics. As seen in the previous quotation of her lyrics for "Bad Habit," Palmer is not specific in her descriptions, and as she

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[60] Palmer, *The Dresden Dolls Companion*, 64.

suggests, it is easy to imagine this song describing cutting and various other forms of self-harm. This is an important strategy because it creates a type of strategic essentialism among Palmer and others who practice self-harm as a controversial and seemingly contradictory form of self-care and self-actualization. Such ambiguity functions in multiple ways. First, it heightens the affect of the song by allowing audiences to imagine the most extreme forms of self-harm standing in for the less extreme forms that might garner less attention. In other words, it recontextualizes more common forms of negative expression that might not necessarily be considered valid as an affirmative political act (like cuticle biting) into the same sphere as more explicitly politicized and debated acts of self-harm (like cutting). Someone inclined to believe that cuticle biting is not serious given how common it is can consider it in a new context and understand its identification with other more easily recognized forms of self-harm. At the same time, intentionally conflating various degrees of self-harm also serves to destigmatize and make relatable its more extreme intense forms. People who may be triggered into extreme responses by the perceived severity of cutting are required to consider it alongside similar acts like cuticle biting to which they may not feel inclined to react as strongly. Moreover, though all of the forms of self-harm mentioned by Palmer still perhaps fall outside the realm of trauma intended by Berlant in her problematizing of trauma as the go-to site for understanding affective cultural ideologies, this elision of various types and intensities of self-harm moves away from a binary understanding of types of crisis that matter (such as rape or assault) and types of crisis that do not (such as self-harm or negative self-talk) by creating a spectrum of responses entirely dependent on context.

Conclusion

This study comprises an important first step towards the creation of a musicological paradigm for understanding performances of negative affect within both feminist and queer musical contexts. While my work focuses almost entirely on Amanda Palmer who I believe to be an excellent case study for reasons already outlined, I have endeavored to be both thorough in depth and broad in scope with the hopes of creating a framework that could be transferred to similar studies. Such expansions could easily take many forms: similar artist studies, studies focusing on performance practices with regard to specific emotions, analyses of specific musical strategies for creating affect, etc. I would like to conclude with a brief exploration of what I believe to be the most logical and beneficial extensions of this work.

I believe the most obvious addition to this study would be to apply it to other artists who operate within a similar musical framework to Palmer. Two artists that stand out in my mind are The Magnetic Fields and Vermillion Lies. Briefly, The Magnetic Fields is a band fronted by Stephin Merritt that has focused on intentional performances of negativity from a queer perspective. Upon being told he'd been called "the most depressed man in rock" by an interviewer, influential guitarist Bob Mould said, "He's never met Stephin Merritt, obviously."[1] Their music uses a wide variety of styles similar to the way I have discussed pastiche in this work. For example, the iconic *69 Love Songs* intentionally samples across a multitude of genres to create its negative affective frame for portrayals of love in a queer context. Moreover, their work would offer an opportunity to explore serious portrayals of negativity, as this is more

[1] Bob Mould, "Interview: Bob Mould," interviewed by Kyle Ryan, *AV Music*, August 21, 2005, https://music.avclub.com/bob-mould-1798208710.

characteristic for them than humor and could include intersection with disability studies given Merritt's known hyperacusis. Vermillion Lies, on the other hand, could offer an expansion of the idea of negative feminist affect and cabaret. Comprised of sister Kim and Zoe Boekbinder, Vermillion Lies performed alongside The Dresden Dolls as the bands were both active members of the dark cabaret genre at the same time. Their circus-themed music often focuses on non-normative performances of femininity and issues of feminine agency. While they no longer perform together, both sisters have gone on to have successful solo careers that could be further valuable areas of study.

Turning now to topical consideration, a closer examination of reception would be extremely useful for this type of study. The need for more complex and detailed analyses of Palmer's unique performance practices left me room in this work for such an undertaking. Throughout my work, I strove to include relevant sources of reception and to discuss audience responses whenever possible; however, I do not offer detailed theorizations of reception or extensive analyses of evaluative commentary regarding Palmer's performances. Such an intersection would be particularly illuminating in terms of impact and efficacy for affective musical performance practices. Similarly, a study of reception could be useful in establishing a basis for studies of artistic influence when looking at musical performances of affect across generations.

Finally, while my work's primary concern has been creating a discursive space for performances of negativity within the field of musicology, studies of the affective performance of positivity and neutrality could prove similarly fruitful. As explored in chapter two, Sara Ahmed suggests in *The Promise of Happiness* that happiness, at least, occurs in a reciprocal framework. The implications for such a study of positive affective structures could easily focus on this co-constitutive aspect of affect as a form of feminist collaboration in musical performance rather than an act of political negation. Moreover, as Lauren Berlant suggests in *Cruel Optimism*, perhaps it would be wise to seek to apply this paradigm of affective analysis to musical examples that do not seem to display any heightened forms of affect. For example, applying this model to forms of instrumental art music that are intentionally abstracted from more easily decipherable codes of emotion could prove useful in elaborating a framework for the ways affect and emotion become sticky and are projected onto and circulated with music.

Appendix
Amanda Palmer's Discography

Year	Title	Solo/Collaborators	Media Type	Other notes
1996	Songs from 1989–1995…	Solo	Demo	
1997	Summer 1998 Five Song Demo	Solo	Demo	
2002	The Dresden Dolls (EP)	Brian Viglione	Studio album	The Dresden Dolls
2003	A Is for Accident	Brian Viglione	Live album	The Dresden Dolls
2003	The Dresden Dolls	Brian Viglione	Studio album	The Dresden Dolls; Reissued in 2004
2006	Yes, Virginia…	Brian Viglione	Studio album	The Dresden Dolls
2007	Elephant Elephant	Jason Webley	Studio album (EP)	
2008	No, Virginia…	Brian Viglione	Compilation album	The Dresden Dolls; Though marketed as a compilation, it does contain previously unreleased recordings
2008	Who Killed Amanda Palmer	St. Vincent, Zoë Keating, Ben Folds, Born Again Horny Men of Edinburgh, Strindberg, East Bay Ray, Jared Reynolds	Studio album	Released by Amanda Palmer as a solo album; released alongside the companion book *Who Killed Amanda Palmer: A Collection of Photographic Evidence* with Neil Gaiman and a music video series

2010	Evelyn Evelyn	Jason Webley	Studio album	Artwork by Cynthia von Buhler; “Myspace” has a chorus of indistinguishable, blended voices credited to many collaborators through social media that are unlisted here
2010	Amanda Palmer Performs the Popular Hits of Radiohead on Her Magical Ukulele	Solo	Studio album (EP)	Cover album; Though listed as a studio album, it does contain live tracks as well
2011	Amanda Palmer Goes Down Under	The Young Punx, Brian Viglione, The Jane Austen Argument, Mikelangelo, Lance Horne	Live album	Released by Amanda Palmer as a solo album; Created while on tour in Oceania
2012	Several Attempts to Cover Songs by The Velvet Underground & Lou Reed for Neil Gaiman as his Birthday Approaches	The Jane Austen Argument, Lance Horne	Live Album	Recorded while on tour in the US
2012	Theatre is Evil	Michael McQuilken, Chad Raines, Jherek Bischoff	Studio album	Released by Amanda Palmer & The Grand Theft Orchestra (the collective name of the listed collaborators)

2013	An Evening with Neil Gaiman	Neil Gaiman, Margaret Cho, 8 in 8, Jason Webley, Lance Horne	Live album	Conglomeration of spoken word, narration, interviews, and live songs
2015	The Virginia Monologues	Brian Viglione	Compilation album	Combination of Yes, Virginia… and No, Virginia…
2016	Strung Out in Heaven: A Bowie String Quartet Tribute	Jherek Bischoff, John Cameron Mitchell, Anna Calvi, Neil Gaiman	Studio Album (EP)	Released as Amanda Palmer and Jherek Bischoff; David Bowie tribute album
2016	You Got Me Singing	Jack Palmer	Studio album	Released by Jack & Amanda Palmer (her father)
2016	You Got Me Singing: Track by Track	Jack Palmer	Live album	Released by Jack & Amanda Palmer (her father); this is a spoken word album of commentary on the creation of the album with the same name
2016	Sketches for the Musical JIB	Jason Webley	Studio album (EP)	Released as Amanda Palmer and Jason Webley; written for The Windmill Factory and Old Sound Room's 2016 production of *JIB, or: The Child Who Went Forth to Learn What Fear Was*

2017	I Can Spin a Rainbow	Edward Ka-Spel	Studio album	Released as Amanda Palmer and Edward Ka-Spel
2017	The Hands	Edward Ka-Spel	Studio album (EP)*	Released as Amanda Palmer and Edward Ka-Spel
2018	Quartet for Dolores	Jherek Bischoff	Studio album (Single)*	Tribute to Dolores O'Riordan; covers of The Cranberries

*- Palmer has many, many singles that are not listed here; however, I included only *Quartet for Dolores* as it is the only one with multiple songs (A-side/B-side). Similarly, though *The Hands* is listed as an EP (as it is marketed), it is also only two songs.

It should be noted that I have not included projects by other artists where Palmer is listed as a collaborator, though there are many. Rather, I've only listed projects of two or more songs where Palmer was a primary creator.

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