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Queer Theory in the Metal Music Scene: How These Cultures Influence Each Other

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Queer theory means many different things to many different people. The word "queer," down to its function, is used to broadly define folks that have adapted micro labels – to group them in a way that includes many different identities rather than boiling it down to a masculine gay and a feminine lesbian. Queer theory in general is an interdisciplinary field that encourages one to look at the world through new avenues (Indiana Library, 2023). Many scholars use this explanation of Queer theory to help channel the lens in which they want to work in their disciplines. It is more about utilizing queer lenses to expand new ideas and possibilities than it is about forcing queerness on a specific area.

The Word Queer and How It Is Used

To understand queer theory is to first understand where the word queer comes from and then the impact it has on the community. Queer has multiple meanings that made it politically and historically, socially, and non-socially problematic (Clifford-Napoleone, 2015). The book *Queerness in Heavy Metal Music: Metal Bent*, categorizes non-heteronormative behavior and performance in the metal music scene. Here, I think queer theory best follows that of Judith Butler's definition. Gender performativity and gender theory to Butler is what queer theory is to Michel Foucault (1978) and later Teresa De Lauretis. It is not tied to the material bodily facts but is solely and completely a social construct. (Butler, 1990)

Theorist Nikki Sullivan says that defining the word queer is "a decidedly unqueer thing to do," (Sullivan, p. 43, 2003). She then, however, goes on to define it. She breaks queer down into two different examinations: A question of being or doing. The first meaning alluded to is queer (theory) as a sort of vague and undefinable practice. The word queer gives those who identify with it a set position politically and within society's confines; It is sort of like a stereotype. She calls on the definition Halperin conceptualized in 1995. Because queer is more of a position you

hold rather than an identity, it is not restricted to gay and lesbian folks. This meaning today would make it more of an aesthetic or "core" as popularized on social media. It is not an identity but rather something closer to an idea that resembles the power of a republican or democratic label.

Defining queer as "being" Sullivan says, plays as the antithesis of "doing" queer, saying that using queer as a label of social standing rather than an identity is setting in place some sort of closure. Mckee states that this way of thinking is dangerous for the study of queer theory in academia (Mckee 1999). Because of this split in defining "queer," its study has been whittled down to who is studying it, what articles in specific disciplines have been examined, and who is willing to define it in a way that encompasses the way theories want to define it. Queer issues up until this point have been centered around the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. Although this is not what queerness is in its entirety, around this time that's all it was. Queer was associated with the image of white, male homosexuals. Not only was "doing queer" reduced to a horrible disease, but it also erased the rest of the folks who identified with that identity. Thus, queer theory from then on was male-centered, anti-feminist, and race-blind (Sullivan 2003).

Queer theory to Teresa De Lauretis was the term she used to name her work in *Difference*, a feminist journal first established in 1989. *Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities* (1991) challenged the belief that lesbian and gay studies are of one single entity. She then continues to explain her term as being three concepts: one of refusing heteronormativity as the basis of sexual learning, one being that race shapes a sexual bias, and that gay and lesbian studies should be taught/thought about in the same way (Illinois Library, 2023). From there, it has been picked apart, prodded, and whittled down to the very essence of the word.

In the same text, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory,* Sullivan says that queer theory, rather than gay and lesbian theory, is challenged by bisexual theorists. In chapter three of her book, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (2003), she mentions the ideas of those who challenge the functions of queer theory and why defining it would be more harmful to the theory than it would be to help its cause. Sullivan mentions the thoughts of Pat Califia and her words in a 1983 article published in *The Advocate*. Califia argues that words like gay, lesbian, and heterosexual were very limiting in terms of sexual identity.

A group of female sex workers in Bangladesh debated the label lesbian, coming up with two different labels. These women choose to use the lesbian label when it benefits them even though it may not align with their whole being (Browne, 2019). In the same text by Sullivan, she calls upon quotes from Jan Clausen saying that bisexuality isn't a sexual identity at all, but more of a rejection of the binaries created by gay, lesbian, and heterosexual. It was more of a challenge to desire, saying that limiting the desire of those who do not fall under the category of the created binary, bisexuality was a statement, antagonistic to it rather than against it.

"Queer" as It is Used Academically, Its Origin, as a Measurement

Queer theory is an academic topic, getting its first footing in the educational sphere. It was often written into curricula in the same vein as sexuality studies and feminist theory. There was this intersectionality of topics involving those who were oppressed politically. While queer theory was a fairly newer theory with ideas established in the 1990s, its main focus was to sift through and understand the difference between good and bad sexualities (if there were such a thing) and how the binary was formed as a result of these ideas. Even though queer theory has, and continues to have, a wide variety of meanings and methods, the main understanding that theorists contend is that there are no set norms, but there are changing norms that folks may or

may not fit into. From this definition, theorists can challenge the binary according to this definition in hopes that this will destroy difference as well as inequality (Illinois University Library, 2023).

Queer Theory vs Power or 'Norm' Society

Theory in this way opens the door for some sort of power to be in play. If queer theory is the idea of viewing society in ways other than heteronormativity, then heteronormativity holds power over the societal functions that withhold them. Because heterosexuality is universally known as being the “norm,” this creates the other side of the binary that theories and theorists can measure from. The two ends, in layman's terms, are the same as they are in modern society. Using “Hetero” and “Homo” as a form of measurement for identity is using it to understand how much society can reject each other without tipping the scales to the point of backpedaling. Heterosexuality, at its root understanding, is the “norm” for those who identify themselves as heterosexual. This measurement, however, challenges that because homosexuality is the “norm” for those who identify themselves as homosexual. If both ends of this binary view themselves as the “norm,” the power they both hold can never be unbalanced. It can never tip within this example.

The implications of queer theory as it presents itself in society have just been questions of sexuality (Illinois University Library, 2013), throwing the blanket over catered questions pertaining to gay men and lesbian women. It is under the guise that talk of sexuality cannot be separated by other categories of intersectionality, the interdisciplinary field it creates because of this lack of separation.

Queer theory as an interdisciplinary field means that there are many other theories and areas of academic ideas interlocked with the main theory, mostly used in the field of

communications and research. Queer theory and the concept of interdisciplinary both have French roots (Downing 2012). At this same time, Cultural studies of any kind were stopped in the US, while they continued to develop in the UK. Not many academics were pursuing this idea because of the lack of American-applied scholarships. Most of the texts we have access to on the subject are by French theorists because of this hemorrhage.

Theorists of queer and sexuality studies were hesitant to agree on the binary in which queer theory should fall for fear of the ideas becoming too limited. Queer theory is meant to challenge the norms set in place by the institutions that were supposed to support them. These norms are straight, white, rich, thin, cis-gendered men (and in some cases women). If queer theory is challenging the norm and then applying it to the study of everything else, that's a whole lot of intersections at play. If theorists put a true definition on what queer theory is, then they run the risk of inclusivity– the exact thing they are trying to challenge.

Michel Foucault maintains that queer theory, or queerness in general, is the difference between the powerful and the powerless; He is a poststructuralist. This means that his theories are centered around the way that structure is changed based on one's cultural, political, social, and economic position in the world. Differentiating between the powerful and the powerless is distracting to the evolution of the political movement, this political movement in particular. Foucault says that oppression cannot happen within a group but must be the direct antithesis of an outside force. Maintaining this position in the 1980s is one of the bigger reasons that queer theory is the discipline it is today.

Queer Theory in Media: Queer Lens

Queer theory in media is the erasing of heteronormative power and messaging by representing queer characters in a positive light in television and other media (Leonardo 2020).

However, queer theory or the label of “queer” has not always been applied like this in the media. There are so many subcategories of queerness in this sphere that it gets studied similarly to Sullivan’s breakdown of the word queer itself. There is a study of queerness itself in television and cinema, then the study of cinema as it practices queer transformations/paths (not following the proper production codes, thus being outcast by audiences.) Interpreting media in this way falls under the discipline of a queer lens.

If the main idea of Queer theory is a way to look at societal functions in a non-heteronormative way and see how far we can measure the two, then the way we absorb media is and should be affected by this as well. I like to think that this makes every piece of media and other functions of politics inherently queer. Queer coding is a small example of this– coding being when things are not confirmed queer or have queer influence but have a queer nature anyway. It is a question of how often, how many, and how affirmative these representations are (Tongson 2017). Queer coding is a major aspect of queer theory. It was how queer characters and stories were represented in the early stages of media. Queer characters were often written to be hiding in plain sight (Leonard 2020) as if the writers assumed that audiences would not pick up on the coding.

Queer Theory in Media: Production Code and Queer Coding

The Production Code, popularly known as the Hays Code, named after Will H. Hays (Juda n.d.), was a set of regulations for media creators that was created in the 1930s. It was a guide for self-censorship, what was allowed to be on screen and what was not. The screen was not permitted to portray homosexual characters or homosexuality of any kind. The Hays Code calls these characters “perverse' characters. Thus, the creation of non-explicit queer characters/styles was formed. In the 1960s, male characters were written a certain way, typically

as an executive, dull or bland (Kearns 2019), as part of the establishment, and never flamboyant. It was a test of creating the least amount of personality for male characters. And if personality was written, it was almost always written in the tone of prick, stubborn, or absent.

Queer Theory in Media: Queer Coding Villains

Queerness in the media up through the 1990s was more of a look than it was a feeling to writers and producers. Writers would censor only the look of queer characters rather than how the stories or the archetypes of the characters might feel to audiences viewing it for the first time. This is also where that definition of queer-coding comes from. However, characters who might be inherently evil or have a more negative effect on the storyline were more likely to have a stereotypical queer personality. If queerness was seen as the other side of the binary, was frowned upon by society, and the villains in stories were written with the same intent, then those villains and antagonists were queer-coded.

The villainization of queer characters and characterizing villains as queer is deeply rooted in the media. In most older media, queer characters are banished to dark alleys or written for predatory actions. This is also normally where evil lurks. One study examined why audiences find villains more appealing than good protagonists (Krause & Rucke, 2020). Villains and their actions leave audiences wondering why they do what they do. Because queerness was written as a secret or not written at all, it would make sense that queerness is a direct tie to villainization.

Because the good guys always win in mainstream media, queerness is part of the characterization of villains. In short, manly, heterosexual heroic characters will always come out on top while the cowering queer-coded villain will fail. Time and time again.

Critical Analysis

Eddie Munson, Dio, and Hanky code

An example of queer coding and its villainizing effects is in season four of *Stranger Things* (2022). A character named Eddie Munson is suspected of the murder of popular cheerleader Chrissy Cunningham. In part one of the fourth *Stranger Things* season, the audience learns quite a bit about Eddie's character. One of the most prominent is that he is a metalhead, a term used by non-metal music listeners to describe avid metal listeners. This season is set in 1986, which was the height of Glam Metal, better popularized as Hair Metal. His look was very reflective of this: long, volumized hair, and a leather jacket on top of which sits a battle vest. Battle vests are a staple in the metal and punk scene and it signifies who and what exactly you listen to. These were first worn by World War II fighter pilots and their main purpose was to show personality, something that was slowly washed away while being a fighting soldier. The idea was later adopted/resurrected by biker gangs in the 1960s.

Eddie Munson, most notably to the audience, wears a black bandana in his back pocket. Fans concluded this to be a sign of what is known as Hanky coding. The Hanky code was created and used in 1972 in San Francisco (then it became widespread in the rest of the US, Canada, Europe, and Australia) and used in the 1980s to give a discrete sign to other queer folk about what and who it was they were interested in. Everything down to the side of the pocket the bandana was worn in piqued the audience's interest deeper into the character. Audiences concluded that Eddie Munson was a misunderstood queer metalhead who was being hunted for murder.

Kai Woodward broke down the appearance of Eddie Munson and how audiences perceived him. In the article *Hanky Panky: Eddie Munson and Flagging in Stranger Things 4*,

author Kai points out that the hanky being placed in his back pocket could have been a silent but deliberate alluding to his character's identity as a queer person or just another staple in his metal head aesthetic. Viewers believed it to be deliberate – the creators of the show conducting research into metal listener's aesthetic and the history of it, deciding on the hanky being in his pocket, and set designers placing a pair of handcuffs very visibly on the walls of Eddie's bedroom wall.

The intersectionality of this character who dies at the end of the season, caused his name to be added to two lists. One was "evil, gay characters" and the other was "Favorite "evil" gay characters." Although this queer label is not canon, the signs are all there. This character also loosely follows the Production Code. If a gay-coded character is not a villain, then they must meet a tragic death. At least that's what it should say because it happens so often.

Although the sexuality of this character was not determined canonically (a term used in modern-day slang as being one's personal or universal general law or principal) by the creators of *Stranger Things*, fans of the show find deep comfort in his coding and journey. In that same article written by Kai Woodward, they close the article by saying that "while Eddie's sexuality is never stated… it doesn't stop fans from exploring it for ourselves…", they continue by stating, " A queer metalhead nerd who isn't afraid to be his authentic self is someone that I, as a queer person myself would have looked up to if the show had been made and released when I was a teenager trying to figure out who I was and where I fit into the world" (Woodward 2022). This statement made me and other readers feel vindicated. So many queer folks love metal and find peace in it for some weird reason. I believe there is a tangible reason. I believe there is a want for inclusion that sounds the most enticing to queer folks when it is screamed unapologetically. That is what metal music is to me and other queer metal heads.

Another noticeable thing about Eddie's appearance was the giant Dio patch on the back of his battle vest. Dio was a popular metal band in the 1980s, starting in 1982. Their lead singer, Ronnie James Dio, left the 1960s metal band, Black Sabbath, with drummer, Vinne Appice, to start the band, Dio. In 1983, a year after the band formed, they released their first record, *Holy Diver.* It was and still is one of the best metal albums of all time. It features songs like, "Invisible", "Rainbow in the Dark", and the title track, "Holy Diver."

The song "Invisible" is emotional in disguise. James Dio explained that there were stories he wanted to tell that fit an abused girl, a gay man, and him. The song is about going within yourself to deal with trauma, that if you give yourself the space to become invisible, you can deal with anything. Upon further research into this song, I concluded that overall, the lyrics display themes of being kicked around for not being what people expected you to be. This song is a siren song. Dio rarely wrote songs about women unless he was sympathizing with them (Sheffield 2010). This seemed to be one of those instances.

History of Hair Metal, and Its Tie to Queer "Looks"

Dio is not considered Hair Metal, which is a popular misconception. This begs the question, what is Hair Metal, what exactly is the look and why does this appearance classify this genre? Glam metal, or what I will be referring to in this essay as Hair Metal is a subgenre of heavy metal that features pop-influenced guitar riffs and lyrical cadences. Some would describe it as heavy metal-lite. This genre gets its name from the more delicate attention to style and the glamorization of hair. Its official name is Glam Metal, but as time moved on and it slowly became popularized, (when grunge rock was breaking the scene and MTV was slowly kicking out glam metal groups,) the term "Hair Metal" was used as a derogatory term. Bands like Metallica and Anthrax stayed away from the "Hair/Glam metal" title because of this slow to

popularity, they figured they could get to popularity quicker by remaining true to themselves and the “true” metal look. A lot of folks thought the genera (Hair Hetal) distasteful. More similar to pop music than metal. The grunge scene viewed Hair Metal as over-the-top, which can be argued was the whole point of Hair Metal. However, Hair Metal bands couldn't keep up with the rate at which different genres were taking precedence over MTV. The term “Hair Metal” although in a snide way, was not a reflection of the talent of the musicians in these bands and folks still enjoyed the music made.

Heavy Metal was described at the time of its emergence as loud and heavy (obviously). Bands like Led Zeppelin in the 1970s (‘68 -) were largely credited for being heavy metal, although still having hints of soul and blues influences from Black artists from the 1960s. The magazines and news outlets at the time took what the bands described themselves as firmly. Most contemporary listeners agree that Led Zeppelin is not metal. Because Led Zeppelin is not a metal band, this gave listeners who believed they were metal fans a rude awakening when bands like Black Sabbath (1968), Twisted Sister (1972), and Motörhead (1975) gained popularity in the mid-1970s. The sound of these songs mixed with the media used on the album covers set metal bands and Led Zeppelin apart.

Heavy metal was also described as devil music, by the media and parents. It was branded weird and deviant. It was pushed onto outcasted characters and misunderstood children. It became an archetype of a no-good character, just like queer or queer-coded characters. So who relates to them? Queer folks. They began to see themselves in these portrayals because all the characters followed the same production codes as the ones used in the 1950s and 1960s. It was natural for them to then see the significance of heavy metal as more of a characteristic than just a genre of music.

Leather is a huge part of the Heavy Metal uniform. Although its history in the music realm begins in 1950s hard rock, its legacy lives in 80s metal. Leather has always been an appealing garment. From Elvis to Arthur "The Fonz" Fonzarelli to Danny Zuko from *Grease* (and even Sandy), leather's look was made to stand out. It produced a certain *Rebel Without a Cause* look. It was placed on outcasted characters, giving them something to belong to. Leather was a culture within itself. That fact then became joined in holy matrimony to the heavy metal scene- both utilizing and uniting in their undesirable characteristics.

Anthropologist Amber R. Clifford-Napoleon quotes Hanson Jobb in the first chapter of her book *Queerness in Heavy Metal Music: Metal Bent.* Jobb tells HX Magazine, "Heavy metal is for everyone. The beauty, the leather, phallic worship of a Fender Stratocaster guitar… wait a minute. It's so the gayness. It's gayer than young Nathan Lane at choir camp*"* (Clifford-Napoleon, 2015). Queer people had this look in the 1970s and 1980s; at this time, "queer" was mostly a male-dominated term. So when someone said "gay" or "queer" as a derogatory term, they thought mostly of white men. Being gay or looking gay had a tell; gay men were often weak-looking or small in general. Gay men paid attention to things men normally didn't. Heavy metal musicians looked the complete opposite of traditional men of that time and they were embraced for their look.

Clifford-Napoleon says that desire is embodied in the hyper-masculine performances and hyper-feminine video vixens of heavy metal." If audiences viewed heavy metal and the artists who participated in it as bad or giving off a "bad-boy look" and the opposite end was portraying women as hyper-feminine (which usually meant a naive and sexually-inexperienced "good girl"), then it created this image of outcasted, different looking folks being desirable. This often led to younger people watching these music videos and wanting to be something that could be desired. Much like how horror is something that aligns with gay sexuality because of the drama of it all,

heavy-metal music videos created interest in queer demographics. It became more of a love for the art form than it did for the music. The love of great music came a little later. Here was this scene of people who took a feminine look and made it something so masculine it was confusing. KISS and Mötley Crüe, for example, created looks in the 1980s that were previously unimaginable.

History of Hair Metal: Why This is the Look

The look of heavy metal was often referred to as “heavy metal uniform.” For several reasons, the use of the word “uniform” was intentional if not used as a direct oxymoron to the overall point of the style of heavy metal and punk culture. The main historical style metal (Hair Metal and most subgenres) maintained is studded leather jackets and motor boots of 1970s British and American biker gangs. Deena Weinstein explains that elements of metal style are pulled from two late 1960s youth cultures: biker culture and hippies (Weinstein, 2000.) Black Sabbath fans took the fashion of self-proclaimed hippies and made it darker, almost drawing on and aiding in the creation of a goth aesthetic, in which the term “goth” originated. Metal style found a middle ground between the two and included vests with long sleeves or t-shirts underneath and longer hair. In the 1960s, the metal look resembled blue-collar clothing, only darker and with a few more patches. It started to morph as metal became less appealing to wider audiences. Heavy metal drew influences from blues music and jazz timings, so it made sense that it could be appealing to fans of those genres. As it slowly started to pull from different genres like rock and later pop, it then appealed to those audiences. As the guitar riffs got dirtier and the vocals got more guttural, the genre started to weed out the people it no longer appealed to. The people and the style. Its deviance lived within the definition it maintained: the desire to be

excluded by the general masses. When it came to the point that metal had its select dedicated fans in the late 1970s and early 1980s, its look became almost exclusively leather.

There is a direct tie between gay men and World War II veterans in the 1940s. They both had leather motorcycle bars. Gay men felt their lives lacked power because of their sexualities needing to be hidden. Motorcycles in the 1940s were a sign of power and danger; this sort of outlaw image was hyper-masculine. I can only describe it as being so masculine its audiences become the opposite of what it was catering to in the first place. Its low-key homoerotic feelers and depictions gradually began to exclude women and include rough-edged men. Male desire switched from "wanting women" to "wanting to look like the men who got the women." These bars contained powerful machinery and powerless men and became a safe space for men to engage in their fantasies. The leather started as a united symbol among motorcycle gangs and then shifted over to become something that unites gay men. In short: all of these subcultures of exclusion found homes within one another. The outlaw images that came with a motorcycle and leather jackets provided comfort in the lives of outcasted gay men. They found unity and power in things that had a villainous image and held seemingly no power.

Anthropologist Amber R. Clifford-Napoleon opens the first chapter of her book, *Queerness in Heavy Metal Music: Metal Bent,* by saying that she does not remember when she became a metal music fan just like she can't remember becoming a lesbian. She, much like many other queer metal fans, found a sense of belonging and understanding in places where metal fans resided. She goes on to explain in this chapter about the first occurrence she experienced with her partner when entering a space with other metal fans. Her partner was nervous and felt like she was in danger. Before interacting with metal folks she felt they were intimidating. Why? It all draws back to the look of metal fans and the fans themselves – the demographic. The

connection between popular music and gendered identities is a changing one, but a prominent one nonetheless. The idea that people look like what they listen to is a description used in metal music a majority of the time because of the nature of the music and its history. At the end of the day, a lot of metal music is men screaming. As awesome as it is, a lot of women have to deal with that daily, hence the loss of interest. So who does that leave in the front row of these shows? Men. The majority demographic of metal music enjoyers are straight, white men. Thus, entering a space as a queer woman looking out on a crowd of straight white men screaming and being rough could, understandably, put her on edge. The images of this also tie into masculinity. Metal at its core is very masculine. Clifford-Napoleon asks the question, is the masculinity of heavy metal extended only to straight white men? And is the image of this masculinity only straight?

Gender, Judith Butler says, is a performance. I agree. Applying this specific theory to the male gender in metal spaces and the masculinity they present, one can argue that a large part of the metal look is masculinity, almost treated like an accessory.

The history brought up earlier in the paper, of WWII men and their queer biker lovers, is a prime example of this preformed masculinity. Masculinity became a safety net, much like how it is used as armor for queer metal fans today, through various fashions. Judith Butler also says that masculinity becomes true masculinity when it leaves the white male middle-class body. This being said and applied here, heavy metal isn't masculine at all. It is a preformed culture, “using BDSM style and “abnormal” sexual behaviors and meetings, with performers (Rob Halford of Judas Priest) who defy heteronormative culture norms of appearance and behavior. “The preformed masculinity is nothing more than a drag show” (Clifford-Napoleon, 11).

The understanding of queerness through metal culture is something that many people know exists but no one knows why. They seem to be two opposite ends of the cultural spectrum.

This unsureness of this history is mostly rooted in homophobia (its history being unknown to a mass population rather than just those who are a part of it), but also appears to be something that queer folks within the metal community accept rather than damn. When metal's history was beginning, not talking about queerness was a way to survive. It became a code of honor among queer folks. It makes sense why it is not a populated history. The performance aspect of masculinity will never fail to fascinate because it has become something that queer folks used to be accepted, in a space that was quite frankly created by them, popularized by them, and helped get it on the map as it is today.

Being a metal fan means a lot to me. It means belonging to something that doesn't have rules or a set way to do things. Any way you do it is a way to do it. Queer metal fans (myself included) understand that this was not how the metal scene always was, but it is the way it will always be remembered.

Queer theory in the metal music scene is the understanding of queer identity as it is expressed and performed in a music scene that is the direct opposite of stereotypical queer folks; understanding issues of gender and how gender reacts in a space that is known for something that is gendered.

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