JOYOUS RETALIATION: ACTIVISM AND IDENTITY IN THE NEW TONE SKA SCENE

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ABSTRACT

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Ska music—a genre that began in independent Jamaica in the late 1950s before reaching global fame in the mid-1990s—is often remembered in American popular culture as an embarrassing, implicitly white moment in popular music. Since ska's decline in mainstream popularity, a new generation of groups dubbed new tone push back against this construction and reposition the ska scene as a space for inclusion, activism, and DIY community. This dissertation uses a mixed qualitative methodology that puts ethnographic interviews in conversation with song analysis and social media texts to understand the scene's relationship to ska history and to social justice advocacy.

I investigate activism in the scene via three case studies, which I categorize in three layers: the personal, the local, and the cultural. Drawing from interviews with new tone musicians, I use "dysphoria songs"—or songs that depict the lived experience of trans and non-binary musicians—to illustrate how personal narratives can serve as political statements in heteropatriarchal societies. Next, the South Texas ska-themed concert "Skank for Choice" illustrates activism in local spaces, where the group L@s Skagaler@s tell stories of their home in the Rio Grande Valley to raise funds to benefit vulnerable local populations. Finally, some ska artists use the repeated lyric "Eat the Rich, Feed the Kids" to voice cultural critiques that link capitalism, colonialism, and racism in creating contemporary forms of inequality. Ultimately, I suggest that the new tone ska scene utilizes virtual scenes to recreate ska music as an overtly activist and inclusive space, thus resisting constructions of ska as embarrassing or rock in general as a white cis-male space.

To my mom, who could not see the final project but was there every step along the way.

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Figure 1- "Ska is the Future." Printed with permission of Ricky Vigil

CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION: A JOYOUS RETALIATION

"New Tone is not about their 'sound,'" tweeted "Cool Chris" Reeves, owner of the label Ska Punk International, "It's about what the bands stand for" (@skapunkintl, 13 December 2021)[1]. In American popular culture, ska—a musical genre that began in independent Jamaica before reaching global fame in the mid-1990s—is often remembered not for "what the bands stand for," but for its embarrassing history of cultural appropriation in the U.S. While ska musicians have been fighting this stigma since it began, as Reeves' comment notes, throughout the 2010s and early 2020s a cohort of bands has formed to not only refashion ska so that it is no longer an embarrassment, but to make it an explicitly inclusive, activist space. New Orleans band Bad Operation coined the term "new tone" to represent the scene, stating that ska is "setting a new tone in the way we occupy public space with our music. Through our upbeat joyous music, we want to create real change within people's consciousness and actions" (Sacher 2020). The philosophy drives the scene as much as the music. This dissertation argues that the contemporary ska scene actively pushes back against the cultural memory of ska as appropriative, and instead works to make it a space for DIY community, inclusivity, and activism.

A music scene is a community formed by a variety of participatory roles—including musicians, commentators, reviewers, fans, and producers—that gather around a shared taste in music, style, and aesthetic (Straw 1991). While the notion of *scene* was originally conceived as a way to understand local performance and communities (Shank 1994), scholars have expanded its geographic scope to include the connections made between the local and the trans-local, as well as how the physical spaces translate into virtual spaces (Bennett and Peterson 2004). For a music scene to continue, being able to hand the sound, aesthetic, and overall community from one

[1] When citing tweets and personal correspondences, I will utilize the spelling and grammar of the sender's text

generation to the next is essential. As Wallach and Levine note, "[T]here are always two groups of scenesters: old-timers who run the institutions … and the youngsters entering the scene who constitute the main customer base and form the new crop of bands" (126). My project explores this generational handoff in ska music. After reaching its commercial peak in the late 1990s, ska music spent the next few decades with little subcultural success and lacking a distinctive identity. In fact, Aaron Carnes notes in *In Defense of Ska* that music journalists in the 2000s and early 2010s would regularly "out" musicians and entertainers who were previously involved in ska music. However, I posit that in the mid-2010s, there was a generational change in the scene, where the "youngsters" were more concerned with pushing the genre forward musically and culturally rather than nostalgically remembering the 1990s American ska-punk scene.

Musically, ska is difficult to pin down. The most iconic aspect of the music is the "skank" riff, where the guitar and occasionally organ emphasize the upbeat of each note, creating a bouncy danceable rhythm. Other common attributes include the use of horns, ranging from a saxophone or trumpet to a whole brass line, walking basslines, and a high tempo. Most new tone bands utilize at least some of these elements, but resist nostalgically limiting the sound: some artists, like Tape Girl, feature chiptune and video game sounds, Eichlers' signature "hyperska" sound incorporates hip-hop and electronic influences, and Dissidente infuses brutal metalcore music. Pushing the genre in creative ways beyond a nostalgic memory of 1990s pop-punk is one of the hallmarks of new tone. While the musical ties are sometimes loose, the connection through political activism and promoting DIY musical communities tie the bands together into a cohesive scene.

Riding the Waves: The Three Waves Thesis and New Tone

Academic and fan music historians alike (AllMusic n.d.; Traber 2013; [MBaits] 2014; Alvarez 2018) typically categorize ska into three eras based on the location of its commercial success: first wave Jamaican ska, second wave 'Two-Tone' British ska, and third wave American ska (sometimes called ska-punk)[2]. Jamaican ska and two-tone each hinted at anti-colonial and anti-racist activism. While conceived as dance music, many Jamaican ska musicians drew inspiration and imagery from the island's independence from Britain. Similarly, for the two-tone scene, ska's transnational movement acted as a metaphor for racial solidarity; as a white nationalist presence was building in the British punk scene, two-tone's sound and iconography capitalized on the intermingling of Black and white performers and styles. Variation among individual performers did occur, of course, but directly addressing racial activism was a recurrent theme in the first two waves.

Third wave ska, on the other hand, tempered the genre's radical components. While there are some notable exceptions[3], third wave ska's juvenile humor pushed the explicit political engagement to the background, adopting a radio-friendly tone. Angelo Moore, singer and front man for the all-Black ska-punk band Fishbone, notes the difficulty talking to his primarily white audiences about racism, partially because his group performed a style of music perceived as not being "Black":

> Talkin' about racism … nobody was taken the extra effort to put that out there. Especially playing to majority of white audiences because we played rock. That's

[2] I utilize the "three waves" construction because of its near universal understanding by scene participants, scholars, and music fans more generally. For clarity, it is a useful tool to identify different eras of ska music Still, it is not without its faults; many new tone musicians note that ska never went away between the waves.
[3] See chapter one of this project for a more thorough analysis of the three waves idea and American ska

> what made it difficult to get through. And the visual of a bunch of Black guys playing rock. We are supposed to play R&B and funk (Carnes 2021b).

With some key exceptions, for much of the third wave scene, the discourse around how to combat colonialism and racism that was central to previous waves was severely tempered. Indeed, Moore's experiences illuminate a reluctance to discuss inequality around the American ska scene. I have previously argued that the ska scene in the late 2010s was negotiating the genre's history of both anti-racism and negative cultural appropriation (Stendebach 2021).

Though the term "new tone" may only be a few year old, the scene has been around for several years, with Bad Operation positioning it as a direct response to Donald Trump's campaign and presidency: as the group said in a *Brooklyn Vegan* feature, "Our current administration has everything to do with the revitalization of ska. People are hurting and want change. Ska is a joyous retaliation" (Sacher 2020). Thus, I roughly conceive of the scene beginning in 2015 as a reaction and "joyous retaliation" against a political landscape increasingly accepting of racist, sexist, and xenophobic rhetoric and actions.

The new tone scene has been successful in creating an identity distinct from its ska punk predecessors. Florida musician Jer Hunter (they/them), famous for their "Ska Tune Network" YouTube channel, articulated this in a 2021 Instagram story:

> It's super dope that there's a whole scene and following that's slowly growing with us new generation of ska bands. … I know that we aren't gonna be a quick microwaveable meal like the third wave was. We're the good ass meal chillin in the crock pot. We're taking our time but when it's done…. It's gonna hit different (Ska Tune Network 2021).

Hunter notes how they imagine their scene as fundamentally different from the ska scene that came before them. For the musicians, the current scene is not a "microwaveable" fad genre, but a "good ass meal," something that will have longevity in its niche of popular music. The question is, what makes new tone different? And what are the aesthetic, musical, and lyrical themes that make this crop of bands "hit different?" My dissertation examines how the new tone scene operates, including how the artists build community, utilize social media, practice activism, and construct music history narratives.

Additionally, new tone artists have access to an important innovation unavailable to the previous eras of ska: social media. Social media has been a useful tool not only to communicate with the existing ska fan base, but also to bring the younger generation in. In an interview on the *Ska Boom* podcast, Mike Sosinski, owner of ska label Bad Time Records, articulated the success Jer Hunter (signed to Bad Time) had in bringing new fans into the scene via social media: "[Hunter] really is using [YouTube] and social media in such a dynamic way that are bringing people in who are just entertained. This person has something to say, and the music is really fun, and it's a cover of a song I recognize but done in a different style" (Wasserman 2021). Many members of Hunter's fanbase are, as Sosinski puts it, "younger ska fans, people coming up who really don't know what ska is at all" (Wasserman 2021). Unlike the old school, nostalgia-driven ska fan, the younger generation via Ska Tune Network comes for the unique mix of activism (having "something to say"), joyful expression ("the music is really fun"), and appeals to popular culture ("a song I recognize").

While most of the musicians, fans, and label owners I spoke to embrace the term new tone to represent them, a few musicians were uncomfortable with the term. Tim Hildebrand and Brittney Luna of the band Catbite, for instance, feared that the term can limit inclusivity:

> I don't really want to consider us new tone … I don't honestly think it's the best thing for the scene if bands start treating it as a new style of music or a new generation of music because it gets to the point where we're doing a classification or another wave. It just seems like it's a way of saying this is a new entity and shuts other bands out if they're not in the Bad Time Records family … in the long term it may have more negative than positive (Interview, 30 January 2022).

while it may create a scenic consciousness, it can also be a gatekeeping tool. For Hildebrand and Luna, the potential problem for using the term new tone is that it risks defining who *is not* a part of the scene due to not being on a certain record label or not having a certain amount of record sales. For them, they prefer to have Catbite described as a "ska band" or even just a "rock band" (Interview, 30 January 2022). Catbite's concerns are understandable, but I find it helpful to use the term to describe the loose collective of bands studied that shape the sound, aesthetic, and political ideologies of contemporary ska music.

Music Subcultures and Scenes in Cultural Studies

This dissertation contributes to a rich body of cultural studies scholarship that dates back to the Birmingham School, studying how music communities create identities and resist hegemonic ideas of gender, class, and race. Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) began a lineage of popular music scholarship that focuses on how individuals form individual and communal identities around musical affiliation, aesthetics, and their political meaning. Tracing subcultures from the Teddies and Mods to his contemporary British punk scene, Hebdige suggests that that spectacular style of British subcultures offer participants a way to resist dominant ideologies and British nationalism. Following Hebdige's lead, other scholars

approached subcultural theories from different lenses such as a feminist critique (McRobbie 1990) and subcultural hierarchies (Thornton 1995).

In the early 1990s, "scene" became the fashionable term, noting some conceptual problems with the earlier term (Straw 1991; Shank 1994; Bennett and Peterson 2004). The term scene was first used in popular music discourse before being adapted into an academic theory. For scene theorists (Bennett and Peterson 2004), subcultural studies posed an inherent antagonistic relationship between the mainstream and the subcultural. While this may be true for some of the most extreme subcultures, it lacks nuance; thus the "scene" was suggested to allow more fluidity between cultural roles. Will Straw gives a clear, early definition of what a music scene exactly means in academic terms. It is:

> … that cultural space in which a range of musical practices exist, interacting with each other within a variety of processes of differentiation, and according to widely varying trajectories of change and cross-fertilization (1991; 373).

While perhaps abstract, key to Straw's conception of the term keeps individuals and groups fluid; genres and scenes "cross-fertilize" each other, individuals move between scenes, but ultimately create forms of "differentiation" or unique community identities. Scene and music subculture theorists have expanded in the subsequent decades, including focusing on internet communities (Lysloff 2003), specific genre trends (Wallach and Levine 2011), and how scenes look with older members (Bennett 2016).

Crucially, much of the new tone scene's growth happened in 2020, the height of Covid-19 lockdown and most in person music events were postponed. In response, much of the new tone scene's formation occurred over social media, what Shams Bin Quader calls "Online DIY practice" (2021; 2). With in-person events and merch sales—key sources of revenue to many

musicians—temporarily closed, musicians had to quickly and efficiently move to other means of financial stability. In Quader's interviews with Australian musicians, the sudden unavailability of live gigs forced musicians to shift their focus to other avenues of the music business, such as "enhancing their home studio skills, social media marketing and branding skills, [and] online content creation skills" (13). In my own interviews, I investigated the ways new tone musicians worked on these skills. For a band like Catbite, this meant strategically capitalizing on the producer-oriented platform Bandcamp (Hesmondalgh et al 2019) to keep their brand relevant in punk spaces. For others, like "Cool Chris" Reeves, the pandemic created the available time necessary to form his label. In both cases, while lockdowns had a dramatic and negative influence on much of the music industry, it created the time and space to focus on online DIY practice and grow their reach.

The Skalership: A Literature Review[4]

In popular music studies, ska has often been seen as an interesting footnote, something to gesture toward alongside other musical moments deemed more significant. For these authors, ska was merely a splintering of punk, reggae, or alternative rock. Because of this, scholarship looking at the scene and genre remains somewhat in its infancy.

For example, two members of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies each included a ska section in their books in 1987, almost a decade before the American scene became a commercial sensation. In Dick Hebdige's *Cut 'n' Mix* (1987), British two-tone ska demonstrated "that a new hybrid cultural identity could emerge along with the new music" (109). Ultimately this leads to Hebdige's titular thesis, where "cut 'n' mix" suggests that "we shouldn't be concerned about where a sound comes from. It's there for everyone to use" (146). Almost

[4] Ska musicians are infamous for their frequent often-forced ska puns, a practice I gleefully continue

utopian in thought, Hebdige's colorblind calculation of musical influence does not account for the positionality of the musician, where not all acts of musical appropriation are political or economic equals[5].

In contrast, Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) takes a more critical look at British ska, putting the genre in a lineage of activism that prioritizes "'anti-racism' rather than black liberation" (150). Notably, Gilroy's use of the term "anti-racism" is much different than how the term is used today, as in Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Antiracist* (2019). If "black liberation" means a commitment to fighting racism in its structural, legal, and cultural forms, then, for Gilroy, anti-racism means a commitment against the most overt and bigoted forms of racism: fighting Nazis, National Front members, and racist skinheads while failing to address everyday racism. As Gilroy writes specifically about two-tone, "The two-tone operation depended on being seen to transcend the various prescriptive definitions of 'race' which faced each other across the hinterlands of youth culture" (171). The perception of being a radical force in the punk scene was, for Gilroy, an essential part of the movement's commercial success.

Looking at American ska music, again we see that the scene is most commonly addressed as an aside to analysis of another genre. Writing at the commercial peak of third-wave ska punk, Gayle Wald's "Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth" is primarily concerned with how girlhood imagery was strategically performed by mainstream alternative rock in the 1990s. However, her prime case study, Gwen Stefani, drew heavily from ska sound, aesthetics, and performance in Stefani's version of alternative rock femininity. For Wald, Stefani's alternative rocker girl image "is tacitly a strategy of bolstering

[5] See Steven Feld's "A Sweet Lullaby for World Music" (2000) for a compelling non-ska counterargument that stresses understanding the origins of music, especially in relations between the global north and global south.

white racial authority"[6] by "minimizing the visibility of another, more salient aspects of her performance—her negotiation of ska" (589). In other words, Stefani's outrageous, uninhibited, and consequence-free rocker girl image prioritizes and is most accessible to white middle-class women, at the expense of women of color and minimizing the musical innovation of Jamaican ska and, to a lesser extent, two-tone ska.

The work of scholars like Hebdige, Gilroy, and Wald are useful for trying to understand specific moments in ska history, but Daniel S. Traber's "Pick it up! Pick it Up!: The Transnational Localism of Ska" (2013) provides the first comprehensive look into the genre, connecting the various ska scenes and "waves" into one history. Utilizing the term "transnational localism," Traber posits that ska musicians are notable for taking the "cultural fragments" (1) of the musicians before them and reinterpreting them for their local context. "Transnational Localism" has similar insights as well as shortcomings as Hebdige's "Cut 'n' Mix" in that the political and economic consequences of reinterpretation are minimized.

Since Traber's article, two master's theses were published using his article as a jumping off point, connecting ideas of race, gender, protest, and ska music. Denny Alvarez's ethnomusicology thesis *Los Angeles Latinx Ska* (2018) applies Traber's framework to a specific temporal and geographic location. Introducing the term "subaltern rhythms," Alvarez illustrates how ska music has been utilized by Latinx communities to "create the avenues from which to express historic antagonisms, formulate their consciousness, and articulate a creative imagination" (2018; 17). Similarly, historian Isabella Sangaline's thesis *Gender and Sexuality in the Ska Scene: How the Ska Community Continues to Pick It Up* (2022) importantly updates scholarly understanding of ska music. Specifically, they "explor[e] the history of women and

[6] Similar critiques arose in 2023, when during an interview with *Allure* magazine, Stefani asserted several times that she is Japanese (Calaor 2023).

queer people in the ska community by highlighting how gender and sexuality have been discussed as they make space for themselves within this subculture" (Sangaline 1; 2022) and suggests the "genre's potential to be protest music" (3).

Traber's, Alvarez's, and Sangaline's works are helpful and insightful in connecting ska history and illustrating how a portion of its fanbase utilizes the music, but I see my dissertation as having a distinctly different task that continues to provide context and nuance regarding how scholars understand and interpret the scene. By the nature of the time of when Traber's article was published—a creative low point in the scene—most of Traber's analysis ends with the genre's decline in mainstream popularity, roughly the early 2000s. Alvarez and Sangaline, on the other hand, crucially updates theoretical conceptions of the scene to the 2010s, including musicians a part of or adjacent to new tone music.

Thus, I see my project well situated to add to the current body of scholarship: like Traber's (and to a lesser extent works of Hebdige, Gilroy, and Wald), my project looks back at how ska music history is constructed and remembered, a subject that is always popular conversation among nostalgic fans, younger fans, and increasingly in mainstream music discourse. And like Alvarez's and Sangaline's work, my project will examine how the music becomes a conduit to articulate social resistance, ultimately in hopes of a more equitable future. In practice, this involves examining how and why the new tone generation of ska musicians view and position themselves within music history and future of the scene, both in virtual and physical spaces.

Method and Methodology

To best understand the new tone scene, I utilize a mixed methodology including ethnographic interviews with musicians and fans, virtual participant observations[7] such as connecting with fans and artists using Twitter hashtags and Discord groups, and close readings of songs and social media posts as texts. This interdisciplinary approach to research will draw influence and insight from ethnomusicology (Wallach and Levine 2012; Meizel 2020; Przybylski 2020), Trans Studies (Stryker 2006; Blackston 2022), and Ethnic Studies (Gilroy 1987; Ambrosch 2018; Kendi 2019) to understand the ska scene and how music performance creates communities. The work of ethnographic researchers provide a theoretical understanding on how to conduct scene research, discuss the voices of intersectional identities, and discuss the differences between digital and in person music communities. From there, Trans Studies and Ethnic Studies provide the theoretical foundation to interpret the words and music of songs discussing dysphoria and appropriation respectively.

Information from interviews is foundational in my research. For most of my interviews, I reached out to musicians via the message feature on Bandcamp, Twitter, or Facebook and scheduled time to meet on the video call program Zoom. Some interviewees were also helpful in putting me in contact with their label mates and music collaborators, almost in a snowball style method. A few interviewees interacted with my posts on #SkaTwitter and our interview was scheduled from those conversations. I conducted interviews with 15 scene participants, the majority being musicians, but also with label owners and self-described active fans.

[7] I also attended as many in person new tone shows as possible, but do to Covid-19 protocols and living in the Midwest, my experiences were limited to a handful of shows: Catbite (2021), Eichlers (2022), and We are the Union (2022).

Before conducting interviews and starting my formal research, I had been following bands associated with new tone since 2017. In following these groups as a listener, I gained familiarity with themes in their music and their social media presence more broadly that would eventually become central themes in my interviews. Jer Hunter, for instance, has never been shy about social issues and regularly discusses radical politics in their digital presence. Their interest in social justice manifested in their original songs such as "R/Edgelord" (2020) and "Ska Has Progressed Past the Need for Incels" (2021) specifically addressing normalized racism and sexism within alternative music scenes and American culture more broadly. These songs argue that artists and fans have a responsibility to take active steps to purge bigotry from their music scenes. As I started to study ska as a researcher, I knew many of the themes I wanted to trace such as activism, antihatred, inclusivity, and community formation online and offline and I used interviews to provide deeper context for how musicians and fans view these themes. The Covid-19's presence during my research added an unexpected subtheme to my scholarship, as I was curious to hear how ska musicians approached—and in the case of many of the artists like Catbite and Flying Raccoon Suit rose in popularity—during the pandemic.

The nature of interviews makes each one unique, with conversations going in different directions based on the interests and stories of the interviewee. Still, some questions and topics were consistent among all the interviews. After a few important warm up questions ("How did the band form?" "How did you get into music? What is your ska origin story?"), I asked question about what defines new tone, what is the role of politics and activism in ska, and broadly how participants utilize internet and social media in their fandom.

1. What are some of your music or non-music influences?
2. What do you want listeners to take away from your music?

3. How did the pandemic affect your music?
4. Which social media platforms do you use to promote your music? How do you connect with others?
5. How do you respond to the idea that ska is "embarrassing" or "problematic"?

Each interview lasted between thirty minutes and an hour and was conducted over Zoom.

While the scene has grown considerably over the past few years (Sacher 2020a; Wintle 2021; Gordon 2021), it is still very much DIY, independent from much of the major music business. Bad Time Records, named after advice given to owner Mike Sosinski that 2018 was a "bad time to start a ska label" (Wasserman 2021), houses many of the key players. Among their roster are the bands We are the Union, Catbite, and the band that coined the term "new tone," Bad Operation. I also worked closely with the label Ska Punk International, formed in 2020 by "Cool Chris" Reeves. As the name implies, Reeves formed the label to import and distribute music that he saw as being ignored by American fans just because it was not from America. While the label does continue its mission to distribute international music, they still work with many American artists including Tape Girl, Kmoy, and Hans Gruber and the Die Hards. Most of the musicians I interviewed for my project are affiliated with one or both of these labels, but a few are not, instead being a part of a loose collective of artists and fans on #SkaTwitter.

In addition to interviews, the social media and distribution avenues for musicians was an invaluable resource for gathering contextual information. Nearly all of the musicians I interviewed utilized most of the major social media platforms including TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. But the site that was most heavily preferred and the artists found most helpful in building their brand and audience was Twitter. My interviewees note that the userbase and fandom is noticeably more supportive than on Facebook and Reddit, and the

stream of Tweets allowed for easy and natural conversations to happen between fans, labels, artists, and the shifting roles between them. Indeed, with Elon Musk's acquisition of Twitter leaving the future of the cite uncertain, the DIY ska and punk community still use it as a key site to communicate about music, politics, and culture.

For distribution, one platform that is especially important for virtually all DIY bands including ska is Bandcamp. Founded in 2007, Bandcamp has become a space for independent musicians to distribute files and promote merch, such as physical music releases, t-shirts, stickers, buttons, and more. Bands retain between 80-85% of revenue for these sales[8], although during much of the Covid-19 pandemic, on the first Friday of every month, "Bandcamp Friday," the percent jumps to 100%. Bandcamp Friday becomes a day where many bands drop surprise singles, EPs, and merch designs to capitalize on the moment. The day is often highlighted in fan forums, where threads are dedicated to musicians to post their pages in the comments for other fans to listen to and financially support. This holiday-like moment of fervor in the ska community enacts the "online DIY" (Quader 2021) ethos; with the pandemic limiting how bands can generate a sustainable revenue, the explosion in interest in Bandcamp Friday illustrates taking the branding, promotion, and even creation of the music more seriously. Creatively, this is also a space where bands could experiment to elicit interest and excitement from fans: in April 2021 Catbite dropped what they called a "Yee-Haw" album, covering their own ska songs in the style of old timey American roots music, equipped with harmonicas, fiddles, and acoustic guitars. This type of experimental novelty release is effective for a surprise Bandcamp Friday drop; it's not "canon" enough to require the promotion leading up to a new album, yet is engaging enough to generate revenue on Bandcamp Friday.

[8] This percent does not include credit card fees, which can proportionally take a large percent for single song purchases

While the musicians are obviously essential to music scenes, equally so are the fans, and for new tone, the fanbase is passionate and supportive, with different forums appearing on a variety of platforms, including Facebook, Reddit, Twitter, and even YouTube comment sections. Here I find ethnomusicologist Liz Przybylski's understanding of music producers and consumers in the internet age helpful. She posits that "we must interpret individual actors in multiple roles—as artists/content makers, audience members, readers—in ways that change based on time, location, and purpose" (6). Przybylski blurs the line between a simple unidirectional producer-consumer relationship; for a somewhat small and DIY scene like new tone, the distinction is even messier. Fan books, blogs, podcasts, and memes illustrate "fans" in the classic sense of the word functioning as content makers for the pleasure of other fans.

Russ Woods, recording under the name Eichlers, notes the importance of being an "engaged fan." For Woods, actively engaging with posts, videos, and music from other ska bands is important for giving the spotlight to other artists. He notes "The best way you support the artists is just engaging with bands and artists you like on social media. It's so important. Even just leaving like a five word comment on their latest Instagram video that they posted will do so much more than just liking and scrolling away" (Interview, February 11 2022). In Przybylski's interpretation of online music culture, Woods freely moves between audience member and content maker. The connections Woods formed by being an active fan eventually led to his own record deal of Bad Time Records and the release of his album *My Checkered Future* (2022).

Alongside the information gained from the interviews, I aim to keep the music central to my analysis. Textual analysis—lyrics, music, and music videos—provide another layer of insight into how new tone artists construct their identities. The scene is very loose in what it considers "ska" music, with several artist creating new hybrid genres and subgenres distinct from

each other. Eichlers' signature "hyperska" sound features elements from hyperpop, trap, and hip-hop, while Skatsune Miku[9] utilizes computer generated vocals for their vocaloid ska. Some releases like L@s Skagaler@s' *Skank for Choice* carry little of the sonic qualities of the genre, yet the band still promotes the release as "ska themed." Bad Operations, on the other hand, make the conscious choice to severely limit the punk and hardcore elements, saying that "it was a conscious decision to nix any punk or hardcore sections in the music" (Sacher 2021b). Lyrically, many of the songs serve as subtle or overt political commentary. As Mike Sosinski reflects on his label's releases,

> it's not like we all get together to write this album about anti-racism. the bands are talking about the world they live in, they are talking abut the world around them. These issues aren't going away and they need to be talked about. The bands are just talking about their experience. It comes naturally (Wasserman 2020).

In my discussion of the advocacy and ideology of the artist, I draw on the musical innovation and lyrics to illustrate how these musicians see themselves fitting within wider cultural discourse. Putting all of these elements of the scene in conversation together allows me to examine the creative and political process holistically, while keeping the stories and art of the artists central in the analysis.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter two serves as a ska history and ska memory chapter, providing the musical and cultural context for the current scene. Many scholars and fans alike conceive of ska in the "three waves" thesis: the genre's history can be understood in three waves categorizes by a country, time-period, and cultural moment. These correspond to revolutionary and independent Jamaica,

[9] A ska pun on the Japanese vocaloid icon Hatsune Miku

Thatcher's Britain, and America in the mid to late 1990s. While the first two waves are often remembered for their radical politics, the third wave is notably constructed as being an "embarrassing" and problematic moment in the genre because of its depoliticization and musical appropriation (Carnes 2021). This chapter on history sets up the activism/appropriation within ska memory that new tone artists intervene in.

Chapter three offers the first case study and focuses on how appropriation has been discussed around ska music, suggesting that the scene's antiracist "Eat the Rich, Feed the Kids" song offers a necessary rebuttal against accusations that ska music is inherently cultural exploitation. Ska music in America is often critiqued as a textbook example of cultural appropriation (Gross 2017; Ambrosch 2018). While many of my interviewees agreed that American third wave ska could be problematic, the new tone scene is aware and corrects many of these critiques. For "Cool Chris" Reeves, this means 1.) playing Jamaican music without vocally trying to vocally "sound" Jamaican with a patois accent and 2.) playing and performing music with an antiracist ideology. After accounting for vocal appropriation in American ska and reggae music, I argue that the "Eat the Rich, Feed the Kids" song illustrates how anti-hatred—as Bad Operation says in the song "Kinda Together," being against "racism, sexism, capitalism, homophobia and transphobia"— manifests in new tone music.

Chapter four describes the ways different fans and artist utilize technology to create a virtual community, something crucially important during the Covid-19 pandemic. While I suggest that new tone began in the mid-2010s, 2020 was a watershed year where increased mainstream coverage (Gordon 2021; Wintle 2021) brought attention to the scene, including Bad Operation's article that named the scene (2020). Paradoxically, this same year was the year with the strictest lockdowns due to the Covid-19 pandemic, an event that caused many industries,

including the music industry, to drastically change their status quo to survive. Using three musicians and three platforms as case studies—Jer on YouTube, Eichlers on Twitter, and Catbite on Bandcamp—this chapter argues that new tone consciously use social media in ways that foster scenic consciousness, such as creating an inclusive environment for marginalized identities, questioning the artist/fan dichotomy.

Chapter five offers the second case study, and highlights how transgender rights and identity are discussed within the scene. New tone musician Reade Wolcott describes her album *Ordinary Life* (2021) as her "coming out album," being the first album she's released while publicly identifying as a woman and features several songs exploring how individuals and American society conceives of gender. On the *Grrrls like Us* (2021) podcast, Wolcott describes what she sees as a new archetype in pop music emerging, what she calls "dysphoria songs" and she imagines that the archetype will one day be as common as "the love song or the depression song." The term dysphoria comes from psychology's approach to transgender identities, where "it is psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity" (psychiatry.org n.d.). Drawing from Wolcott's comments, I define dysphoria songs as songs that critically engage with individual and social ideas of gender, and thus not only include gender dysphoria, but also gender euphoria, a colloquial term for positive emotions caused by gender affirmation. I suggest that Wolcott's work and Colorado new tone musician Beth Rivera, recording under the name Tape Girl, offer important perspectives on how dysphoria and euphoria are discussed in punk music.

Finally, chapter six hones on the Rio Grande Valley band L@s Skagaler@s and uses their benefit album *Tales from the Border: Skank for Choice* (2019) as a case study to understand how ska bands advocate for intersectional identities, in this case the reproductive rights of migrants.

Despite calling the album and accompanying concert 'ska themed', musically, the album features little of ska's elements: upstroke rhythms, prominent brass and walking bass lines—the hallmarks of ska music—are all absent. Instead, the album offers three hardcore tracks, before the band's drummer takes center stage and delivers three bilingual hip-hop songs. This chapter seeks to understand what "ska" as a signifier means in this context. It suggests that L@s Skagaler@s utilizes double meanings, such as "skank" in the title and a feminist pseudonym, to gesture toward both ska's history and feminist activism. Ultimately, this highlights the anti-racist and anti-colonial moments in the genre's history, while also posing a corrective to the depoliticized third-wave ska sound.

When considering what activism means within my case studies, I think of them in three different levels: the personal, the local, and the cultural. Ska dysphoria songs are not activism in the traditional sense, as they are personal stories about how trans and non-binary musicians reflect on their own lived experiences. Yet those experiences are expressed in a culture where trans lives and identities are threatened legislatively and at times violently. In this environment, expressing non-cisgender stories functions as an act of resistance. *Skank for Choice* illustrates activism in a more traditional sense, serving a fundraising effort to directly benefit local vulnerable populations. L@s Skagaler@s's work gathers testimonies from Rio Grande Valley history and people, reinterprets those stories into music, and then uses funds generated from the music to advocate for reproductive rights. The Eat the Rich, Feed the Kids trilogy of songs takes a broader, cultural critique. Drawing inspiration from Bad Operation's original lyric, Eichlers uses the lyric to critique white passivity to racism, while for Hunter it becomes a rallying cry to understand how colonialism shaped contemporary American society. Each case study offers a

different level of resistance, and taken in conversation with one another, illustrates how new tone ska music can foster equitable change from individual to national levels and beyond.

Conclusion

The project's title, "Joyous Retaliation," recalls Bad Operation's mission statement; I have chosen this reference because it highlights new tone's emphasis on fun and resistance and how the two can be intimately linked. "Joy" as a theoretical concept has grown in popular discourse, such as African American Studies professor Mei-Ling Malone articulating the concept of "Black joy" for *Voice of OC*: "The whole idea of oppression is to keep people down. So when people continue to shine and live fully, it is resistance in the context of our white supremacist world" (qtd. in Pham 2021). Ska—in all its waves and beyond—is notable *because* of its capacity for joy: its danceable, energetic, and above all else "fun." Ideas around Black joy, brought in by Black musicians and fans, synergize with ska's naturally upbeat and danceable sound. With new tone, whether it's Hunter high stepping in their bedroom or Catbite releasing a tongue-in-cheek "Yee-Haw" cover album, the danceability and sense of fun is always present.

Much of the "joy" expressed in the music featured in this dissertation, though, does not stem from the lyrics. Hildebrand notes a contrast with his band, Catbite's, lyrical content and musical sound: "I've always really liked the contrast of a sad song with an up tempo, which is why ska works so great for our songwriting" (Interview, 30 January 2022). He later describes the importance of "go[ing] to a show and be[ing] able to dance and let however you feel out" (Interview, 31 March 2022), at times recalling Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures* (1996) and the unique form of collective embodied experience dance can create. Similarly, D-Ray, bassist for Bad Operation, notes that, "Through our upbeat joyous music, we want to create real change within people's consciousness and actions" (Sacher 2020). Notably, D-Ray does not cite the

lyrics as joyous, but much like Hildebrand's comment, it's the tone, sound, and danceability of the music that is joyous. This at time cognitive dissonance creates much of the power within new tone ska's protest music: it's fun and danceable, but with earnest lyrics and themes that demands change.

Crucially, the fun of the music acts as a conduit for activism and DIY community; or in other words, a form of retaliation. Sosinski notes that "having something to say" is an important aspect for new tone to connect with its audience (Wasserberg 2021). The video for We are the Union's "Morbid Obsessions" video, via the metaphor of a campy zombie movie, directly address how non-binary and transgender identities are marginalized; L@s Skagaler@s's *Tales from the Border: Skank for Choice*, through a feminist play on the word "skank," highlights a history of violence against Latinx women on the US-Mexican border; Sosinski's own work on the *Ska Against Racism* compilation attempts to expand ska's two-tone metaphor beyond a white/Black binary into a wider intersectional paradigm. In all of these instances, the sound, style, and aesthetics of ska music are not only utilized for "fun" or for dance, but for explicitly activist purposes and resistance to conservative social practices. My investigation of the sound, discourse, and experience of this relatively new and independent scene will contribute to a deeper understanding of what being an activist means and its overlap with being a musician.

CHAPTER II. "STOP AND THANK OUR ROOTS": NEW TONE'S ENGAGEMENT WITH SKA HISTORY

Ska musicians love to talk about other ska musicians. When listening to ska music, the number of references to ska music and its history—to first wave Jamaican ska, British two-tone, ska-punk, and other new tone—illustrates how participants in the new tone scene actively think of themselves in conversation with a timeline of ska musicians. This chapter will discuss some of the key moments in ska's history, paying special attention to the "three waves" construction of ska (Allmusic n.d.; Traber 2013; Alvarez 2018) as well as how ska is remembered in 21st century American popular culture. I argue that ska's relevance in American popular culture is either noted for its radical or revolutionary politics (as in Jamaican ska and British two-tone ska), or the exact opposite, as an embarrassment at best and white cultural appropriation at worst. By locating the new tone scene within this history, I highlight how new tone bands are actively in conversation with this history as they reposition American ska toward overtly political discourse, inclusivity, and DIY (do it yourself) community.

Remembering the Waves in Popular Culture

Ska fans and scholars typically trace ska's history through three distinct waves, each wave signifying a change in geographic positioning (AllMusic n.d.; Traber 2013; [MBaits] 2014; Alvarez 2018). The first wave began in Jamaica in the late 1950s, where musicians developed a distinct sound by combining the instrumentation of American rhythm and blues—such as saxophones, trumpets, and electric guitars—with the syncopated rhythms of mento, a form of Jamaican folk music. While the music was first and foremost dance music, it also helped the newly independent nation form a musical identity. The Skatalites, one of the most prolific and influential groups from the first wave, released instrumental singles like "Independence Ska"

(1964) and "Freedom Sounds" (1964) to unambiguously link the young music genre with anticolonial politics. Other songs, such as Desmond Dekker's "Mount Zion" (1965) supported a Rastafarian framework, closely linked with examining Black pride and Black identity (Hebdige 1987). Throughout the 1960s, the tempo of ska music would slow down, the focus was placed more heavily on vocalists, and the signature drop beat, or emphasizing the third beat of the measure, would develop the foundation of the roots reggae style.[10] Some artists, such as The Maytals and even The Wailers,[11] first performed ska music and transitioned into reggae at the end of the 1960s and into the 1970s. From its inception, ska has been tied to racial politics, as Jamaica found a voice and identity outside of its history as a British colony.

During this time in Britain, labor shortages caused by World War II decreasing the British population created job opportunities and made immigration from the Caribbean more attractive to Jamaicans. This generation of immigrants is colloquially referred to as "The Windrush Generation," named after the arrival of the ship *MV Empire Windrush* on 22 June 1948 (Stratton 2013). While Britain needed workers and promoted equal treatment, Caribbean immigrants were consistently funneled into jobs deemed undesirable by white Britons, such as garbage collecting and maintaining London's underground rail network, the "Tube" (Stratton 2013). Along with their labor, they also brought their music. Ska songs like Jamaican Millie Small's "My Boy Lollipop" (1964) and the British all-white group Migil 5's "Mockin' Bird Hill" (1964) were top ten singles on the British charts (Stratton 2010). The integrated British rock group The Equals, which featured future reggae super star Eddy Grant, would include lyrical themes influenced by ska music, such as the rude boy" (a ska outlaw figure) anthem "Police on

[10] A slower, more vocal centered style known as rocksteady bridges the gap between ska and reggae.
[11] The Wailers, led by Bob Marley, would collaborate with The Skatalites on the ska staple "Simmer Down" (1963). The track would go on to be covered by several notable ska artists, including Doreen Shaffer, The Specials, and The Mighty Mighty Bosstones.

my Back" (1967). Music releases from or influenced by Caribbean artists and genres became staples in British youth subcultures, most famously among the mods and their harder cousins, the skinheads.

The influence of Caribbean immigrants and music led to ska's second wave, two-tone, emerging in late 1970s Britain, with a pointed political philosophy to keep punk subcultures inclusive. British ska was centered around the Two-Tone record label, named after the black and white iconography in album art which in turn symbolized Black and white racial solidarity. Jerry Dammers, white songwriter for the integrated group The Specials, notes that they reconfigured the Black genre of music and appropriated it into punk music as a means to fight back against the growing racist presence in Britain. Dammers references the fascist organization The National Front when he writes that "I was trying to find a way to make sure [punk] didn't go the way of the NF" (qtd. In Petridis 2002). This anti-racist rhetoric has led scholars like Paul Gilroy (1987) to argue that the second wave of ska depended on being seen as racially subversive, positing that "The two-tone operation depended on being seen to transcend the various prescriptive definitions of 'race' which faced each other across the hinterlands of youth culture" (171). For Gilroy, the perception of anti-racism was of paramount importance for two-tone's connection with its audience. Lee Thompson, saxophonist and songwriter for the all-white band Madness, illustrates this during his 2017 appearance on *That One Show*, where he notes how his position as a public figure fed into an obligation to write anti-racist songs, such as "Embarrassment" (1980): "It had to hit home, particularly in the era that I lived. Some of the reactions and attitudes to mixed race wasn't nice at all. And fortunately I was in a position to pop back" (*That One Show* 2017).

The two-tone movement's emergence in the early 1980s coincided with the ascension of Margaret Thatcher to prime minister and the rise of neoliberal politics. Katherine Meizel notes

that "neoliberalism argues for institutional decentralization, privatization, and the individualization of entrepreneurship and consumerism" (Meizel 2020; 4). Much of the lyrical content in the two-tone movement directly confronted neoliberal ideals. From The Beat's critique of Thatcherism ("Stand Down Margaret") to Selecter's depiction of working-class frustration ("Three Minute Hero"), the two-tone movement was marked by its opposition to neoliberal politics. The memory of two-tone as an activist moment in popular music continues well into the 21st century; Lucy Robinson notes that The Specials are remembered for their "social commentary" (2019; 165) and that their hit "Ghost Town" [12]acts as "a marker of its historical importance today" and is the "ubiquitous sound track for retrospective documentaries" (2019; 158). Similar to the way Jamaican ska was used to assert an ethnic identity, two-tone ska functioned as a tool for racial equality and activism. Ska acted as direct counternarrative to white supremacy in music scenes.

The third wave of ska is marked by its rise in popularity in America. Groups like The Toasters, The Untouchables, and Fishbone performed ska in America in the 1980s, but commercial success would wait until the following decade. Second wave ska added a strong punk element, and American third-wave ska pushed the punk elements even further and upped the intensity, with groups like The Mighty Mighty Bosstones and Operation Ivy creating "ska-core," a fusion of ska and hardcore, an extremely fast and intense punk subgenre. Ska-core music added an emphasis on aggression to the soundscape, but key aspects of the genre remained in the music, such as the skanking rhythm and horn sections. Another third wave ska group, Reel Big Fish, embraced the emergence of pop-punk as performed by bands like Green Day on *Dookie* (1994). Like the pop-punk bands, Reel Big Fish did not add the aggression of ska-core, but

[12] The track discusses unemployment, isolation, and violence within British inner cities. Coupled with the song's release around the Brixton Riots and the song became representative for British urban inequality in the early 1980s.

instead adopted a tongue-in-cheek juvenile humor to its music. Reel Big Fish's single and video for "Sell Out" illustrates the most successful example of pop-punk ska; with the band's lyrics making fun of its own record deal and the music video featuring such goofy scenes as a fast food mascot named "Fry Boy" blowing up the label, Reel Big Fish were a top ten band on the 1997 Billboards Modern Rock charts.

The newer sound influenced by punk and hardcore found unprecedented success in the U.S. Reel Big Fish's *Turn off the Radio* went gold in 1996The Mighty Mighty Bosstone's *Question the Answers* went platinum in 1997[13]. While the record sales are important markers of third wave ska's success, equally as important was the perpetuation of ska music in mainstream media. The Hollywood film *Clueless* (1995) featured the Mighty Mighty Bosstones in the film itself, performing "Someday I Suppose" in a party scene. The children's television network Nickelodeon featured ska in several of its productions, including The Toasters' "Two-Tone Army" as the theme song of the cartoon *Kablam!* and Less Than Jake's recording a ska version of the *Good Burger* (1997) theme, "I'm a Dude," to accompany the movie. The Bosstones and Less Than Jake would appear on another children's movie soundtrack, *Digimon: The Movie* (2000), further emphasizing ska's child-safe status. With the success of the records and inclusion in mainstream films, notably films targeted toward young children, we see the radical Black politics of the first two waves transformed into a safe and easily consumable movement, especially for middle class white punk fans.

Even within the ska and punk scenes, the late third wave sound was viewed as losing its political subversiveness. Blue Meanies singer Billy Spunke, who performed on the "Ska Against Racism" tour noted that "it was almost like the [anti-] racism part of this tour was just a

[13] Weird Al Yankovic even released a genre parody, "Horoscope for Today" (1999)

marketing tool" (Jones 1998). While the tour did raise some money for the charities Anti-Racist Action, Artists for a Hate-Free America, and the Museum of Tolerance (Reiss 1998), performers and critics viewed the tour as a failure, with the "party overtaking the politics" and the activist dimension being minimal (Jones 1998). Similarly, punk commentator Finn McKenty's YouTube video "What Killed Ska?" (2021) from the channel *Punk Rock MBA* describes the American ska scene in the mid to late 1990s as "G rated band-nerd type kids," a safe and parent friendly part of punk subculture. Both of these examples from within punk subcultures, one from the 1990s and the other in a retrospective of that time, highlight the late third wave's kid-friendly and apolitical ska aesthetic.

There were, of course, some exceptions to the apolitical ska-punk sound. American ska in the 1980s, which had more direct roots in overtly political hardcore, took a firmer activist stance, with Operation Ivy's *Energy* (1989) and Fishbone's *Fishbone* (1985) being two examples of bands openly addressing political discourse in its music. In the more commercially viable ska of the 1990s, Mike Park, among a handful of other artists, positioned his Asian-American identity at the center of his music in what Sydney Hutchinson calls an act of "Asian Fury," or "contest[ing] the expression of Asian males and the infantilization of Asian females" (Hutchinson 2016; 412). Founding the record label Asian Man Records and the all-Asian ska band The Chinkees (a tongue-in-cheek band name that reclaims the racial slur), he continued ska's anti-racist and anticolonial lineage. Park's success, while celebrated within ska fan circles, was overshadowed by the radio-friendly and less political releases mentioned above. Thus, while activism was present in the third wave of ska, I posit that the most visible and most remembered elements of the movement were far from it: cartoon jingles, French fry mascots, and *Clueless* cameos.

Third Wave Ska's commercial success in the United States would prove to be short lived. One reason could be that the scene lost its biggest superstars, thereby losing "gateway bands" that would lead people to dig deeper into the scene. Bradley Nowell, singer and songwriter for Sublime, died of a heroin overdose in May 1996. Sublime posthumously released several hit singles including "What I Got," "Santeria," and "Wrong Way" which would lead to the album *Sublime* (1996) to go 5x platinum. After his death, Nowell (and his dalmatian, Lou!) became an iconic voice and image for ska music, but without his songwriting skills, Sublime broke up and a major mainstream ska voice came to an end. Notably, Sublime reformed in 2009 as "Sublime with Rome," adding Rome Ramirez on guitar and vocals. The reformed band has had a few modest hits, such as "Panic" in 2011 reaching #4 on the US Alternative Rock charts, but the decision to continue the band without Nowell has had its share of pushback. Nerdcore rapper MC Lars expressed this sentiment with his song "Sublime with Rome (Is Not the Same as Sublime)."

Less tragic, but arguably more important, was Gwen Stefani's slow distancing from the ska scene. Stefani rose to ska punk superstardom in the mid-1990s off the success of *Tragic Kingdom* (1995) by her band No Doubt, spawning several hits like "Spiderwebs" and "Just a Girl." Gayle Wald suggests that Stefani's "pogo-inspired dance style and her display of raw, raucous energy are themselves hallmarks of ska performance reframed within the context of outrageous, uninhibited, and confident white female alternative rock performance" (Wald 1998; 590). Yet, as her career went on, Stefani deemphasized the "hallmarks of ska performance" in her music (Wald 1998). *Rock Steady* (2001)[14] and its leading single "Hella Good" have a much stronger influence from dance pop and light electronica than ska and punk. This would carry on

[14] It is ironic that No Doubt pivoted away from ska on an album called *Rock Steady*, a reference to a music genre that bridged ska into reggae in late 1960s Jamaica. *Rock Steady* still featured a few ska songs and elements, such as "Underneath it All," but was not as prominent as the dance and electronica elements.

into Stefani's solo career as in the electronic hip-hop number one single "Hollaback Girl" (2004).

Ska's Decline and the Lean Years

Gwen Stefani would stay away from ska music almost entirely until her 2021 performance on *The Voice* where she debuted her single "Let Me Reintroduce Myself," the title lyrics about an "original me" possibly referencing a return to the genre that gave her fame, ska. As she explained to *Entertainment Weekly* about the song, "All the riots had happened, and I just started thinking so much about when I started loving music and why … It was eighth grade when I learned about ska and Madness and the Selecter and all those bands that started to define the kind of music that I felt like I fit into … But that music was all about unity and anti-racism, and that was in the '70s. Then we were doing it in the '90s. And now here we are, again, in the same old mess" (Carly 2021). Quick to ignore the problems the late third wave, Stefani traces her return to ska directly from public displays of unrest around racism. Musically, she highlights the second wave Two-Tone era, Madness and Selecter, and minimizes the problems of the late third wave.

Meanwhile, in the DIY scene, in the 2000s many ska band and record labels closed or diversified into other punk and alternative subgenres. Moon Ska Records, based out of New York, went out of business in 2000; Asian Man Records, Mike Park's label out of California, still released music throughout the 21st century but from a wide range of punk subgenres such as emo and folk-punk. The Aquabats, a popular albeit kid-friendly act, pivoted away from ska on its fourth album *Charge!!* (2005), adopting a synth pop punk sound closer to Devo's "Whip It!" era than anything else.

At the same time, emo music, which has had its own series of vibrant scenes dating back to the Washington D.C. Dischord Records scene in the 1980s, was quickly becoming the dominant form of alternative and punk youth subculture. My Chemical Romance's *Three Cheers for Sweet Revenge* (2003) went triple platinum and #28 on the US Hot Hundred, Dashboard Confessional's *A Mark, A Mission, A Brand, A Scar* (2003) went gold and #1 in the US Hot Hundred, and Taking Back Sunday's *Tell All Your Friends* (2003) went gold and #183 on the charts. Fall Out Boy, and especially the teenage heartthrob looks of Pete Wentz, would lead emo in the music charts and inspire dozens of imitators to follow. These are just a few representations of the whole, but by 2003, as Tim Hildebrand of Catbite reflects, ska's "circus music" aesthetic was out and dark introspection was in (Interview, 30 January 2022).

While ska may have been considered "safe" in the 1990s, the 2000s solidified its "embarrassing" legacy. Notably, journalists habitually "outed" musicians and entertainers who had any connection to ska. Aaron Carnes's *In Defense of Ska* highlights the public outing of former ska musicians such as when post-punk alternative band The Killers's Brandon Flowers notes that members of The Bravery were former ska kids. As Carnes writes, "Music lovers everywhere were shocked to learn the coolest band on the planet had such a treacherous past, playing literally the worst music ever invented" (Carnes 2021; 1). Following the "outing" of The Bravery, articles ranging from *Spin*'s "Ska-letons in the Closet" (Montgomery 2005) to *Entertainment Weekly*'s "Reaching for the Ska" (Greenblatt 2005) regularly made public spectacle by unveiling popular "cool" musicians as performers into ska in their youth. The trend of bringing up popular figure's ska roots as a form of public interest and mockery continued throughout the 2000s—arguably continuing into the 2010s when headlines about *Star Wars* star Oscar Isaac's brief affiliation with the genre circulated in popular culture headlines (Enis 2020;

Richards 2020). Isaac's involvement in the genre was notably fleeting, with most of the significance imbued by the popular press's interest: "I asked Less than Jake's lead singer/guitarist Chris DeMakes if he remembers playing with either of Isaac's bands in the '90s Florida scene, and he drew a blank. These weren't bands that got far" (Carnes 2021; 7). Even for someone like Isaac whose connections with ska were brief at best, being associated with the scene was enough to capture negative media attention.

As the outing of public figures continued to proliferate, ska music as a bad punchline seeped further into American popular culture. *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, *Mission Hill*, *The Great North,* and *Cobra Kai* all utilize a similar joke at ska's expense in which the nerdy, white, male character feels shame for having liked or currently liking ska music. In this sense, the joke acts as an extension of outing actors and musicians for their ska phases. Classic examples include the pilot episode of *Mission Hill* (1999) when lead Kevin French (Scott Menville) has his first alcoholic drink at a party and erratically yells "EVERYBODY SKA!," or in *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* ("Skyfire Cycle" 2016) where a teenage flashback to Jake Peralta (Andy Samberg) exclaims "Ska defines who I am as a person and I will never turn my back on ska. Hep!" Variations of the joke appear in *Cobra Kai* ("Fire and Ice" 2019), where joining a ska band is a symbol of a "midlife crisis," and again in *The Great North* ("Beef Mommas House Adventure" 2022), where Wolf Tobin (Will Forte) notes having "checked out a new ska lullabies CD from the library." These are just a handful of examples, but the amount and repetition of "ska is for white male dorks" in American TV illustrate how closely associated ska is with embarrassing white men in mainstream American discourse.

These jokes also hint at critiquing ska for cultural appropriation, or taking musical and cultural elements from Black culture and repackaging it into a commodified form for a white

audience. Cultural theorist Gerfried Ambrosch poses such an argument, noting that while some ska artists may view their music as an act of "cultural appreciation," 1990s [ska-punk] artists such as Rancid and Inner Terrestrials can still be "problematic … [because] the appropriation of these black sounds in the context of white rebellion arguably exploits blackness for its symbolic value. Set against the backdrop of a white hegemony, blackness signifies alterity and dissent" (Ambrosch 2018; 908). While Ambrosch's ska argument is quite broad, the late third wave's penchant for "party over the politics," as seen in the "Ska Against Racism Tour" 1998, supports this argument, as any anti-racist rhetoric was a marketing tactic at best for an overwhelmingly white audience. From this vantage point, the connections to Jamaican ska and two-tone can be viewed as abstract forms of rebellion packaged for consumption. Andy Samberg, featured in the *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* ska joke, has addressed cultural appropriation in Caribbean music explicitly in Lonely Island's "Ras Trent" video, where he portrays a dreadlock wearing college student bemoaning living in the "shanty dorms" and "toil[ing] part-time at Jah Cold Stone Creamery." Walking by a group of Rastafarians as he sings, Samberg suddenly drops his head, lowers his voice, and mumbles his words, acknowledging the problematic nature of his fixation on reggae culture. The fake patois accent and juxtaposition of Rastafarian terminology and privileged American positionality make the skit's critique sharper than the *Brooklyn Nine-Nine* ska joke, but in conversation with one another they point to how third wave ska's perception can be embarrassing both for its goofy lighthearted tone, but also because of its appropriation of Black sounds and styles for a white audience.

Still, a few ska bands did manage to continue and found success in the early 21st century. Streetlight Manifesto might be the most notable ska artist to emerge in this era. Formed in 2002, the band has released five albums, with *The Hands that Thieve* (2013) reaching the highest

commercial success, landing at 95 on the Billboard 200 and 26 on the Billboard Top Rock Albums. Featuring a four-piece horn section, poetic lyrics, and influence from salsa music, the band's artistic approach connected with punk fans well past ska's peak.

Despite being arguably the most successful ska band of this era, Streetlight's classification as "a ska band" was met with skepticism. Several posts on reddit pages like r/Ska and r/StreetlightManifesto interrogate the limits of genre classifications. The music satire website *The Hard Times* even made a parody of these conversations with its article "Opinion: Streetlight Manifesto Isn't Ska – They're Good." Whether the group is considered ska or not is not what is important here (they totally are). What is important and highlighted by *The Hard Times* is the continued legacy of ska being viewed negatively well into 2013; Streetlight Manifesto may have had an album crack the Billboard charts that year, but its connections with ska were always tenuously embraced by its fan base.

Ska music was publicly the laughingstock of the music press, the punk scene, and even mainstream media. While Streetlight Manifesto kept a semblance of the genre alive, nearly every other ska band of the 2000s never went beyond local shows. Some artists associated with New Tone began playing in bands in this era and have noted the frustration of being a ska musician in the mid 2000s. Tim Hildebrand of Catbite notes that when he began playing ska music in 2009, the genre was "right at its worst" and that it was difficult to consistently get "people to come out" to a ska show (Interview, 30 April 2022). Mike Sosinski of Kill Lincoln and Bad Time Records, reflecting on trying to start a ska band in college in 2007: "it took me a while to get a band together because I couldn't find anyone that liked ska. I had some friends who kind of liked alternative music, but I couldn't even find punk friends" (In Defense of Ska Podcast). While Hildebrand and Sosinski's work would become central to the ska scene a decade later, at the

beginning of their careers, ska's embarrassing legacy was having a physical and financial impact on their bands, limiting the people who would attend shows and even limiting potential band members.

New Year, New Tone

The term "new tone" was first used by Bad Operation in an interview with Andrew Sacher of punk news outlet *Brooklyn Vegan* (Sacher 2020). Partially as an homage to its hometown of New Orleans and the politically radical two-tone movement, the band state that the term connotes

> setting a new tone in the way we occupy public space with our music. Through our upbeat joyous music, we want to create real change within people's consciousness and actions. For me, it means being outspoken about racial injustice. It means being an active part of your community and taking part in local politics. It means committing to a lifelong fight for unity and equality for all (qtd. In Sacher 2020).

Bad Operation's interview created a term, identity, and label for the new generation of ska bands, and "new tone" has been used as a music hashtag, in choruses to songs, in names of singles, and broadly as a unifying signifier for ska music. While they may have coined the term in 2020, I place the scene's birth closer to 2016 because of two unrelated but significant events: the starting of the Ska Tune Network YouTube channel by Florida non-binary musician Jeremy "JER" Hunter and the volatile campaign for the 2016 presidential election.

No other ska artist has done more to revitalize the scene's popularity than Hunter. First releasing a video in December of 2016 with "Feliz NaviSKA," Ska Tune Network is

a YouTube channel that records and? releases ska cover songs. As the name implies, many of the early videos on the channel were covers of cartoon and video game music; the channel's repertoire has grown considerably to include a variety of pop, punk, and pop culture music. Some of their music collaborates with friends and local musicians, others with mainstays in the punk scene, but most are just Hunter in their bedroom. Chapter Two takes a more thorough look into their strategies when creating online content, but it is worth noting the sense of "fun" in Hunter's music and videos. Whether alone or in a collaboration, the intimate look into their bedroom setting, high energy skanking, and skilled musicianship that features Hunter playing guitars, bass, keys, saxophone, and trombone among other instruments have attracted a large fan following to their YouTube channel—210,000 as of January 2023.

While social networking will be explored in more depth in chapter IV, I do think it's important in this history of ska to briefly mention Hunter's use of social media. Out of the new tone scene, Hunter perhaps has the most active and diverse social networking pages, be it Instagram Q&As, regular YouTube covers, Twitch streams, and a steady stream of tweets. Mike Sosinski of Kill Lincoln and owner of Bad Time Records cites Hunter's social media presence as a key aspect of getting a younger, more diverse, and oftentimes more passionate fan base into ska music. He notes that "[Hunter] really is using [YouTube] and social media in such a dynamic way that are bringing people in who are just entertained. This person has something to say, and the music is really fun, and it's a cover of a song I recognize but done in a different style" (Wasserman 2021). By having "something to say," Sosinski refers to Hunter's commitment to social justice causes on their public profile. From releasing the "Ska against Transphobia" design in the

wake of nationwide transphobic legislation, to critiquing structural racism in their Instagram stories and tweets, to noting the environmental impact of one's dietary choices in the "Up Beat Eats!" videos, responding to political discourse is a recurrent theme in Hunter's content.

Another cause for new tone's emergence could be opposition toward the 2016 election and the rejuvenated energy in far-right groups. The Trump presidency inflamed many "culture war" debates and his signature loose cannon approach to social issues mainstreamed discriminatory ideas and actions. Among the ample examples include racially divisive language toward Latinx populations (Causey 2016), African and Caribbean nations (Vitali et al. 2018), as well as ableist (Carmen 2016), and sexist speech (Rucker 2015). This led to further acceptance and normalization of racist demonstrations and acts of violence including the white supremacist presence in the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia in 2017, a 20% increase in overt hate crimes (Villarreal 2020), and the January 6th insurrection in reaction to Joe Biden's transfer of power. The increased acceptance of far-right ideas in the American mainstream created the conditions for new tone's reemergence, with its balance of political ideology and fun danceable rhythms, what Bad Operation calls their "joyous retaliation" in direct opposition to far-right rhetoric.

In addition to being in opposition to Trump-era discrimination, many new tone artists are also acutely aware of the pitfalls of mainstream American ska and seek to correct them. Specific examples of how the scene discusses gender and racial inequality will be discussed in depth in later chapters, but here I want to stress how new tone artists create a new sense of identity instead of being "third wave part 2" or some seamless continuation of 1990s ska. Hunter described this trend in a 2021 Instagram story:

> It's super dope that there's a whole scene and following that's slowly growing with us new generation of ska bands. … I know that we aren't gonna be a quick microwaveable meal like the third wave was. We're the good ass meal chillin in the crock pot. We're taking our time but when it's done…. It's gonna hit different (Instagram).

Others, like "Cool Chris" Reeves, note that New Tone artists attempt to fill the silences left by the third wave: "New Tone is a group of bands that are outspoken against things like transphobia and racial injustice. It's a direct response to much of the 3rd wave that didn't do that. New Tone is not about their 'sound' it's about what they stand for" (@skapunkintl 2021). Hunter's and Reeves's comments speak to the new tone sound being a conscious correction to the embarrassing legacy the third wave left in American popular culture.

Following Hunter's success, other ska bands active in the scene began to receive more attention. Washington D.C.'s Kill Lincoln (named after a quote from the cult 1980s teen comedy *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*) is led by vocalist and guitarist Mike Sosinski. Sosinski started his record label Bad Time Records in 2018, named after advice to not start a ska-based label because 2018 was a "bad time" for ska music. Bad Time Records houses many, but certainly not all, of the most visible New Tone artists. After rereleasing older material from Kill Lincoln and We are the Union, Bad Time made its first official new release with Catbite's *Catbite* on May 7, 2019. Over the next year, Bad Time Records released a string of ska albums by Catbite, Kill Lincoln, Omnigone, and the compilation album *The Shape of Ska Punk to Come: Volume 1.*[15]

[15] A reference to Ornette Coleman's *The Shape of Jazz to Come* (1959), a landmark free jazz album that achieved the title's bold claim. By referencing Coleman's album, Sosinski makes the same claim about the influence his label will have in the ska scene.

For Sosinski, the turning point in Bad Time and New Tone in general was the release of the *Ska Against Racism* (2020) compilation. A collaboration with Mike Park of Asian Man Records and Phillip Lucas-Smith from *Ska Punk Daily*, the album reworks the arguably disappointing third wave "Ska Against Racism" tour (Jones 1998). The album features Bad Time regulars like JER, Catbite, and Omnigone alongside nationally recognized ska acts such as Tim Timebomb of Rancid fame, Less than Jake, Hepcat, and The Interrupters. Originally only having a 1,000-copy vinyl run, Sosinski reflects that "Within an hour, we sold out of all 1,000 records. I've never seen anything sell that fast. It was crazy that the message was just spreading that fast" (Carnes 2022). Sosinski quickly added an additional 500 copies of the album, and it sold out in "a minute." He notes, "I got to watch in real time something extremely sought after sell out, it was chaos. It's like as soon as you hit the button, it was in someone's cart." For Sosinski, the success of *Ska Against Racism* marks a "symbol or moment in time where the interest in ska was changing." While the new tone scene had been building momentum for the previous few years, the success of *Ska Against Racism* demonstrated that there was a core ska fanbase ready to support the new artists and move beyond a nostalgic, goofy and "embarrassing" ska aesthetic.

With *Ska Against Racism* and Ska Tune Network bringing more attention to the scene, even more ska bands began to form, interact in the virtual scene, and record music directly influenced by New Tone's overt inclusiveness and political radicalism. "Cool Chris" Reeves, a ska fan since the 1990s, formed Ska Punk International in April 2021 to showcase to an American audience the breadth of ska globally. Along the way, he signed Kenny Malloy, recording under the name "Kmoy," and Beth Rivera, recording under the name "Tape Girl." Malloy and Rivera met on the Ska Tune Network Patreon page, a website allowing fans to directly support artists by agreeing to pay a monthly fee for different perks. While relatively

inexperienced with music (Rivera describes "not really being a musician" until hearing Hunter's music), the two have been active releasing singles, contributing to compilation records, and in Malloy's case, releasing the full-length album *The Precure Album* (2021). Mississippi's Flying Raccoon Suit put its album *Afterglow* (2021) on a successful Kickstarter campaign after seeing bands have success on that platform, and California native Russ Wood, "Eichlers," created his "hyperska" sound in 2020 after being unable to play in his emo band during the Covid-19 pandemic. This is far from an exhaustive list of bands and albums released after *Ska Against Racism*'s influence but illustrates how the scene has proliferated.

Notably, all the bands and labels mentioned in the above paragraph embrace the term "New Tone" as the name for their movement, explicitly linking the scene to leftist politics. Eichlers made the most overt musical-political statement in his January 2022 release "ANTHEM FOR A NEW TONE," where he expresses his frustration with social acceptance of those who endorse far-right politics, whom he calls "fascists":

> What the fuck do you mean, why are you yelling at me?
>
> Do you expect to correct that behavior with tweets?
>
> Cuz these fascist fuckos don't exist in your echo chamber
>
> Brushing up on leftist theory
>
> doesn't mean shit if you're not sharing
>
> Information with the folks in the back
>
> Who can't access the resources you can. …
>
> Cuz we can build a new life, a new community
>
> Invest in mutual aid and help the folks on the streets

Eat the rich, feed the kids, don't grow up to be a capitalist[16]

While "new tone" may capture the zeitgeist for many ska bands, a small but vocal group of ska artists are actively speaking out against the scene, sometimes claiming the bands are too sonically and ideologically derivative of previous ska scenes, such as the unity message of two-tone or the pop-punk influenced sound of third wave. New Zealand musician Paul the Kid released in December 2021 "Fuck Your New-Tone," a track that he describes is "silly" and "for fun <3" but also offers a sharp and pointed critique of the New Tone scene. Paul the Kid sings "You say you wanna change, but I don't see the difference, no! … Fuck your New Tone. Nothing different / You're repeating the same old shit!" Paul shared his song with "Cool Chris" Reeves of Ska Punk International before releasing it, to make it clear that it's a joke, but the direct critiques of New Tone led Reeves to take the song as "meanspirited" (Interview, 10 February 2022). As Reeves describes, the joke song did not play well with artists associated with new tone, but was "shared widely" in group circles that are critical of the scene. Whether Paul intended the lyrics to be taken seriously or ironically, the outcome of his song did little to help new tone artists, instead being utilized by people seriously critical of the scene.

At other times, such as in spaces with older, more nostalgic ska fans, there's paradoxically the opposite fear that the music is too different. Eichlers' "hyperska" sound features an array of sounds not commonly associated with ska music, such as heavily autotuned vocals, electronic drum samples, hyperpop's "ear worm" vocals, or vocals autotuned to inhumanly high pitches, and rap verses. As such, for some ska fans accustomed to the trad ska, two-tone, or even third wave ska sound, Eichlers's innovations can be off-putting or even perceived as not ska. When pondering posting his latest single, which features Beth Rivera, to

[16] Lyrics included with permission from the artist

the more nostalgic r/Ska reddit page, Rivera joked on Twitter: "NO DON'T!!! IM TRANS AND THIS IS A SONG WITH 'electronic elements'!!! Those #Skaboomers are gonna really not like those too [*sic*] things." Rivera's fears are hyperbolized for comedic effect, but her tweet still expresses a sentiment that older ska fans critique the more experimental new tone artists for being too different, not ska enough, or even too inclusive. The correlation between "electronic elements" and being transgender in Rivera's tweet highlights the perception that, at least within ska circles, a taste that is nostalgic and musically conservative is often linked with political conservatism or even bigotry.

Conclusion

A widely circulated tweet among ska fans from 2018 states: "I once heard Ska described as 'what plays in a 13-year-old kid's head when he gets extra mozzarella sticks' and nothing in this world is more accurate" (@NeverOnBrand 2018). Parodies, memes, and even mundane pictures of mozzarella sticks proliferated in ska fan forums and twitter threads. It is easy to see why the tweet connected with some segments of the ska fanbase; it is nostalgic in tone, gesturing back to a constructed simpler time when eating junk food and hearing the new ska song on the radio were the most important things, and channels an unthinking and uninhibited juvenile joy. Screen shots of the tweet have passed around the internet, including on the Reddit page r/WhitePeopleTwitter where the photo received 23,000 upvotes as of June 2022.

Despite—or more accurately in spite—of the tweet's popularity, many of the new tone artists I interviewed position it as what is wrong with the ska scene and explained that it represents the mindset that they are trying to correct. All of the reasons that made the tweet connect so broadly – its nostalgia, its naivete, perhaps even its implicit whiteness—are what much of the new tone scene is in opposition to. Chris Reeves describes really appreciating when

ska fans move beyond "all the mozzarella stick stuff" and supports up-and-coming bands (Interview, 10 February 2022), while Bad Operation's D-Ray notes the mainstream views of ska music is all "Hawaiian shirts[17], *Clueless, BASEketball* [and] whatever that meme is with the mozzarella sticks" (Interview, 31 March 2022).

As I have suggested throughout this chapter and as the cheesy fried snack helps illustrate, American perceptions of ska music carry connotations of embarrassment, childishness, and culturally appropriative whiteness. While there were activist and progressive figures in the late third wave scene, among them Fishbone, Operation Ivy, and Mike Park's various bands, many more bands adopted pop-punk-influenced juvenile humor that remains in the center of public perceptions of ska music. The new tone scene strives to correct this perception, putting themselves in conversation with previous eras of ska music and highlighting how DIY community, activist tendencies, and inclusivity can be the focal point of the music scene rather than mozzarella sticks.

[17] Aaron Barret, lead singer of Reel Big Fish, regularly wears Hawaiian shirts while performing. The films *Clueless* and *BASEketball* heavily use ska in their soundtracks.

CHAPTER III. EAT THE RICH, FEED THE KIDS: CULTURAL EXPLOITATION, CULTURAL EXCHANGE, AND ANTI-RACIST ACTIVISM

In summer 2020, Bad Time Records, in collaboration with veteran punk label Asian Man Records, released a revitalized *Ska Against Racism* compilation with proceeds to benefit a variety of progressive non-profits including The Movement for Black Lives, NAACP Legal Defense Fund, and Black Girls Code. The album featured a variety of artists, including rising new tone artists alongside more established artists who rose to popularity in the 1990s, such as Tim Timebomb and Hepcat. Mike Sosinski, owner of Bad Time Records, notes that when designing the album's layout:

> I very specifically didn't go for a strictly two-tone motif with that album art. I wanted to include a multicolored color palette for some of the highlight text. My thinking there … was that it's not just about racism, it's not about black and white. …. It's about thinking about everything under the sun. Thinking about the gambit of orientation, not just racism. That was me subtly pushing the message forward (Wasserman 2020)

Sosinski's thinking on identity, beyond just "black and white," gestures towards an intersectional (Crenshaw 1989) approach, where oppressive systems targeting gender, sexual orientation, race, class, and other identities are intricately intertwined.

While neither Sosinski nor Asian Man owner Mike Park say this specifically, the timing of the album's release makes it likely a response to the murder of George Floyd by then-Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin. Following Floyd's murder, protest about policing and general racism erupted around the United States and many people turned a critical eye toward how race, privilege, and power function. Among them was D-Ray, the

white keyboardist for the integrated New Orleans group Bad Operation. For D-Ray, the political discussion around race in America led to a critical examination of his own privilege as a white American and musician. With the new project he was forming, Bad Operation, he notes wanting to center anti-racism and anti-hatred more broadly into the sound, imagery, and lyrics.

Still, while Bad Operation and *Ska against Racism* (2020) tried to center anti-racist discourse in the ska scene, the elephant in the room is the regular critique of cultural appropriation leveled at the genre, both by the academy and in popular music circles. Cultural theorist Gerfried Ambrosch suggests that:

> What is problematic about [ska-punk music] is that the appropriation of these black sounds in the context of white rebellion arguably exploits blackness for its symbolic value. Set against the backdrop of a white hegemony, blackness signifies alterity and dissent, which might be one of the main reasons for punk's long-standing relationship with reggae (Ambrosch 2018; 908-909)

For Ambrosch, white groups like California's Rancid or London's Inner Terrestrials actively cultural appropriate Black music; even if the artists see it as "cultural appreciation," they still contribute to and profit from Black stereotypes of "alterity and dissent."

"Cool Chris" Reeves, the white owner of the record label and radio show Ska Punk International, sees a difference between appropriating the rhythms and instrumentation of ska music and appropriating the voice of Jamaican musicians (Interview, 10 February 2022). In other words, the music is there for everyone to use—especially important for Reeves who imports and distributes ska from a variety of central

American, North American and European sources—but that is fundamentally different from trying to vocally sound Jamaican, utilizing a performative Jamaican patois accent or speaking in "Dread talk," or words associated with Rastafarianism but divorced from their religious context.

In this chapter, I analyze the ways that the new tone ska scene reflects on and engages with anti-racist themes in their music, and I also address the question of cultural appropriation. First, I utilize Reeves' music/voice split as a frame to understand the differences between what Richard A. Rogers (2006) calls "cultural exploitation" and "cultural exchange." In doing so, I draw a comparison between white ska artists and white reggae artists, focusing on the history of performative patois especially how it pertains to the 2020s, when new tone began to rise in popularity. I contrast this with New Orleans group Bad Operation, who coined the term "new tone" and helped establish progressive politics as a foundation for the scene. In doing so, they inspired a trilogy of songs—Bad Operation's "Peachy," Eichlers' "ANTHEM FOR A NEW TONE," and Jer's "Decolonize yr Mind"—that utilize the slogan "Eat the Rich, Feed the Kids" as a catalyst for considering the relationship between capitalism, racism, and power and for broad social activism.

Fakin' Jamaican: Patois in American Reggae and Ska

American ska music is often critiqued, alongside another Jamaican genre, reggae, for being a textbook example of cultural appropriation. While these are different genres with different scene affiliations, their cultural origins in Jamaica coupled with their international following makes a comparison helpful. Communication theorist Richard A. Rogers defines cultural appropriation as "the use of a culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies

by embers of another culture" and is "also inescapably intertwined with cultural politics" (2006; 474). It is always an active process; merely being exposed to another culture is not an act of appropriation, but taking those elements and "making them one's own" is what qualifies as appropriation (Richard 2006; 476). While in most common use contexts, the term "cultural appropriation" carries strongly negative connotations, the meaning of the appropriation is based on a variety of factors. Rogers further breaks down ideas of appropriation into four subcategories: 1) Cultural exchange; 2.) Cultural dominance; 3.) Cultural exploitation; 4.) Transculturation (2006; 477). For Rogers, appropriation does not have to be a negative attribute: "cultural exchange", for instance, refers to a mutual exchange of ideas between cultures. For the purposes of this chapter, I want to focus on the differences and tensions between exchange and exploitation.

Cultural exploitation is the closest to the common use of the term appropriation. As Rogers explains, "Cultural exploitation commonly involves the appropriation of elements of a subordinated culture by a dominant culture in which the subordinate culture is treated as a resource to be 'mined' and 'shipped home' for consumption" (Rogers 2006; 486). Ambrosch (2018) follows this line of critique, with white punks throughout the US and UK "mining" black sounds to construct a rebel feeling, or as ska musicians would say, "rude" aesthetic. Outside of the academy, ska often faces this critique. Diarmid Gross (2017) describes American ska as another form of "artistic colonialism" and contributes to "the erasure of black creators." He continue to go on and compare it to other genres: "like, imagine when someone said 'rap', people would roll their eyes with thoughts of Macklemore. Imagine if the common understanding was that George Thorogood invented the blues. Like Adele invented soul." (2017). In chapter one of this dissertation, I suggested that the interpretation of ska music as cultural exploitation has led to

the genre's disavowal by the mainstream music industry and its consumers, positioning it as an "embarrassing" moment in popular culture.

In contrast, cultural exchange refers to a more symbiotic relationship. Rogers explains cultural exchange as "the reciprocal exchange of symbols, artifacts, rituals, genres, and/or technologies between cultures with roughly equal levels of power" (2006; 477). The United States, a colonizing nation in the global north, and Jamaica, a post-colonial nation in the global south, are far from having "equal levels of power," yet they have a rich history of mutual musical exchange; ska's transnational flow[18] between Jamaica, Britain (Gilroy 1993), the U.S. (Traber 2012), and then its global spread (Wallach 2008; Williams and bin Zaini 2016) is one of the most discussed aspects of the genre. Rogers even notes "two-way flows of music" being a hallmark of musical exchange. American Black communities and Jamaican musicians influenced and innovated with each other for the last half of the 20th century; R&B influenced ska and reggae, which in turn influenced hip-hop, which in turn influenced dancehall. For Rogers, key to cultural exchange that is not appropriative? is providing cultural credit and financial compensation to the origins of cultural products.

Looking at the new tone scene, universally the musicians I interviewed viewed their participation as mutual exchange. This makes sense: if performing ska music was exploiting the music and labor of Jamaican musicians, they likely would not participate. Dominic Minix, the Black lead singer of Bad Operation notes "The person being accused of a proper cultural appropriation [in ska music] doesn't even see that. They just see the music. They just are so in love with the music that they don't think about it" (Interview, 17 October 2022). In the *BrooklynVegan* interview that helped propel Bad Operation to the forefront of the ska scene,

[18] See Chapter Two on ska history

Minix described his bandmates as "students of ska," implying their intimate knowledge of the genre from Jamaica to the present. For Minix, the rhythms and instrumentation of ska music is there for everyone to use, contingent on the musician or fan loving and honoring the music. While Rogers does not use the phrase "cultural appreciation," Minix's comments on being "in love" with the genre gestures towards a cultural appreciation reading; where learning the history and context for the genre's formation and proliferation are key.

Still, while the music may be available to the public, other ska musicians have more criticism on the political ideology of the music, especially when the genre reached peak popularity in the third-wave. In other words, without an explicit commitment to anti-hatred ideology, as seen in much of the American third-wave, something is lost in the music. On his podcast *Ska Boom!*, veteran ska fan historian Marc Wasserman recalls "I felt [third-wave ska] lost its connection to two-tone … I felt like American ska had lost its way a little bit. In terms of celebrating what, let's be clear, is a Black art form from Jamaica, a Black country. I felt at times there was a bit of a disconnect" (Wasserman 2020). "Cool Chris" Reeves had similar thoughts on the 1990s ska scene. He notes that

> I think it's fair when people that aren't totally familiar with the genre will say 'well you know that's just another genre that's ripping off Black people.' It's ok to say that, like I don't have an issue with that, that definitely happened a lot in the 1990s. I was there. I definitely remember it's why most of that stuff aged very badly" (Interview, 10 February 2022).

Citing the ideas that "there was a disconnect" (Wasserman 2020), or that much of the third-wave ska music "aged very badly" (Reeves, Interview,10 February 2022), points to the critical position taken by many contemporary ska musicians regarding the political context of 1990s music, not

dissimilar to Ambrosch's critique of the mining of Black symbolic meaning. Looking at reggae music, popular music scholar Mike Alleyne notes that:

> the mainstream Euro-American audience has continually demonstrated a propensity for adopting reggae-oriented material on the basis of its aesthetically pleasing surface quality rather than for explicitly political or deeper musical content. … Chart successes by reggae artists and pseudo-reggae songs by white pop artists have utilized fragmented elements of the music's syntax while simultaneously divorcing it from the political polemics of Rastafari, and reggae culture in general (2000; 15).

In short, for ska and reggae, the use of Black sounds without advocating for anti-racism is what creates the environment of cultural exploitation.

For Reeves, alongside the politics of the music, the voice and singing style are crucially important for determining whether someone is participating in cultural exploitation or cultural exchange. He explained to me that he is regularly sent music from aspiring musicians to either be played on his radio show or released through his label that utilizes, usually white singers, singing in a Jamaican patois.[19] Reeves refers to this genre as "bro reggae," and when musicians send him this music he "politely [says] I'm not sure if you're the sound I'm looking for" (Interview, 10 February 2022). For Reeves, performing in patois is a clear-cut example of negative cultural appropriation and should be strongly discouraged. He further notes that "bro reggae" is "not a part of our scene" (Interview, 10 February 2022); singing in patois and being a new tone band, for Reeves at least, are mutually exclusive.

[19] Discussion of Jamaican speech in reggae music is sometimes referred to as "patois," "patwa," or "creole." The former is the most common and what I use in this chapter.

When analyzing the voice and patois, a comparison between American ska and white reggae is helpful. Patois entered U.S. popular music with the roots reggae movement in the 1970s. The vast majority of Jamaican popular music in the 1960s, such as first wave ska and rocksteady, was sang in standard English. Even music by The Wailers in this era—who would spread patois globally during 1970s "Marley Mania" (Gerfer 2018)—sang in standard English for most of their singles in the 1960s[20]. Roots reggae artists in the 1970s, such as Bob Marley and the Wailers, Burning Spear, and Dennis Brown, and later Black Uhuru sang in patois and spread the manner of speech globally, to the Black diaspora and otherwise. Simon Jones's *Black Culture, White Youth* (1988) analyzes British reggae subcultures in the 1980s and suggests a complicated relationship with white reggae fans and speaking in patois. Like nearly every aspect in culture, context is key; though in some instances a white use of patois could signal a working class, interracial solidarity, in a different context it could be read as mockery. As Jones writes, "Its use by young ethnics could assist in processing the political and ideological discontinuities between black and white within small 'pockets of interracial friendships. … It was required to rest on close, pre-established ties if it was not to result in harsh condemnation from young blacks" (147).

In reggae music, white appropriation of patois happened sporadically throughout the 1990s and 2000s. White Canadian rapper and reggae artist Snow released "Informer" (1992) to chart topping success, reaching #1 on the Billboard's Hot 100 Chart. Reviews contemporary to the song's release were positive, with several American and European music journalism outlets praising the track for passing as Jamaican (Cemark and Ross 1992). *The Network Forty* praised Snow's authenticity, writing "You'd swear you were

[20] See *The Wailing Wailers* (1965) for the groups early ska and rocksteady singles, sang almost exclusively in standard English

listening to a Jamaican straight out of Kingston, but this 22-year-old white male hails Toronto's ghetto" (Cemark and Ross 1992). In the mid-2000s, reggae musician Matisyahu would achieve similar acclaim, singing about his Jewish identity in a dancehall musical style and patois accent. Reception of Matisyahu's music is complicated, with some noting how he draws a solidarity between Jewish and Rastafarian ideologies, while others place him in a historical lineage of Jewish performers in blackface dating back to Al Jolson and beyond. Financially, Louis Kaplan suggests that "The bottom line here is that Sony Records sees in Matisyahu a way to tap into a white market for reggae music (or even better 'Hasidic reggae music')" (Kaplan 2007).

The early 2020s saw a rise in discourse over white artists' patois use. Chet Hanx, rapper and son of actor Tom Hanks, brought attention to white appropriation of Jamaican patois at the 2020 Golden Globes. The video went viral, where Hanx exclaims "Big up! Big up, the whole island!" before thanking his family in a performative patois. The video's success propelled Hanx into the public sphere, including appearances on internet talk shows such as *Channel 5* and the Showtime talk-show *Ziwe.* Famous for his crude manner of speaking—a contrast to his father's relatively squeaky-clean image—Hanx describes how he began speaking with the accent:

> I was hooking up with this chick, and one day she was on the phone with her family in Jamaica and she was really in the middle of a heated conversation. … I was like 'wow, wait, break that down.' … she was just telling me how to say different shit and I went a week like I was really on a Jamaican kick, and that just happened to be the week of the Golden Globes (Channel 5 2021).

Hanx released the song "White Boy Summer" to capitalize on his new fame, featuring a verse performed once again in a Jamaican patois.

Bad gyal, white don dada (Buck)

Rude boy, it's a white boy summer (Buck, buck)

Bad gyal, white don dada (Buck)

Rude boy, it's a white boy summer (Buck, buck, buck)

The term "white boy summer," a nod to Megan Thee Stallion's and Nicki Minaj's "Hot Girl Summer" from 2019, became Hanx's catchphrase. Others outside of his fanbase interpreted the term as possibly gesturing toward violence from white males in the wake of events such as Joe Biden making Juneteenth a national holiday or the sentencing of Derek Chauvin (Burnett III 2020). As journalist and pop culture critic Zaron Burnett notes in "Black man's review of White Boy Summer":

> White boys who grow up to be white men have always believed they are somehow more important than everyone else. So they don't need to brand a summer as theirs to make it their own. Abortion bans don't hold white boys accountable. Voter laws are designed to protect their interests. Education curriculums are based on their comfort. Political will gets directed by their imaginings and follows what matters most to them. (2020)

While far less mainstream than Hanx's celebrity status, the reggae world had its own grappling with white appropriation of patois during the 64th Annual Grammy Awards. "Best Reggae Album" is the only award given to reggae as a genre, far less attention than that given to other mainstream genres in America. Since the category began at the 27th Grammy Awards with Black Uhuru's win for *Anthem* (1983), the category has always been won by a Jamaican or

Jamaican diaspora artist[21]. At this particular Grammy ceremony, the mostly white[22] group based in Virginia, SOJA—an acronym for "Soldiers of Jah Army"—beat out an otherwise all-Jamaican nomination base, marking the first time an American artist won and only the second time a white artist won the category. Their album *Beauty in the Silence* (2021) won the award, and features collaborations with a variety of reggae artists such as all-white groups from the United States like Slightly Stoopid, The Dirty Heads, and Rebelution, alongside a few artists outside the United States such as Bermudan Collie Buddz and Colombian Nanpa Básico.

Reception of SOJA's win was mixed from Jamaican reggae fans and artists. Claims that SOJA are "Cultural Vultures" (qtd. In Segarra 2022) were common, with one Twitter reggae fan noting that the "majority of Jamaicans across the world are unaware of your existence, you should not be winning a Grammy for best Reggae album, sorry not sorry" (qtd. In Segarra 2022). Several prominent Jamaican artists spoke out against SOJA's win, including dancehall musician Bounty Killer who put on his social media account *"*What a big piece a sell out gwaan ya so white folks winning best reggae album over Jamaicans wtf" (qtd. in Stein 2022). American commentator Claire Lampen was especially critical of SOJA's win, directly asking them to "stop it with the faux Jamaican patois" (Lampen 2022). In contrast, other Jamaican musicians, including fellow nominees Etana and Gramps Morgan, were supportive of their win (Stein 2022). Jamaican dancehall musician Chronixx has been one of the most outspoken proponents of SOJA's win, critical of those who dismiss the band for not playing authentic reggae. He wrote on an Instagram story, *"*Soja been one of the best bands in America for years. Overall one of the top reggae bands in the world for years. So You shouldn't have to be a fan to show respect"

[21] At the 61st Grammy Award (2019) was given to a collaborative album from Black Jamaican artist Shaggy and white British artist Sting.
[22] Two of the eight members identify as "Hispanic, from Venezuela and Puerta Rico (Gardner 2022)

(Seitaram 2022). The response to SOJA's win received praise and criticism, but alongside the viral success of Hanx's "White Boy Summer," it made cultural appropriation, patois, and Caribbean-influenced music a topic of discussion.

American ska music has far less patois usage than its reggae counterpart, but historically has utilized a related idea: Dread Talk. Gerfer (2018) suggests that the idea of dread talk (also known as Iyaric) is directly related to the appropriation of patois; musicians use Dread Talk musicians as language rooted in Rastafarianism, divorced from its religious connotations, as a way of signaling reggae authenticity. Gerfer notes that bands adding "Babylon," a term for an oppressive system, and "Jah," referring to God, are two of the most prominent examples. Dread Talk is also still somewhat common in ska music. Sublime released the compilation album *Jah Won't Pay the Bills* (1991), and even in the 21st century, ska-punk band Interrupters encourages listeners to "Rebel against the kings of Babylon!" (2016). For a mainstream ska band[23] such as Interrupters, the lyrics expects their audience to have familiarity with Dread Talk to understand the lyrics. To return to Reeves split between the voice and the music in ska music, trying to "sound Jamaican" with Dread Talk leans into cultural exploitation.

Skankin' Pickle parodied, although not quite condemned, the use of patois and Dread Talk in their track "Fakin' Jamaican." Skankin' Pickle is notable in the ska-punk scene for its member Mike "Bruce Lee" Park, who would go on to form the label Asian Man Records, form a variety of ska acts like the all-Asian group The Chinkees, and organize the 1998 "Ska Against Racism" co-release the album *Ska Against Racism* (2020). "Fakin' Jamaican" was released on *Skafunkrastapunk* (1991), a title which proudly proclaims Rogers' cultural exchange theory. The

[23] Interrupters toured In support of the Hella Mega (2021) tour with pop-punk icons Green Day, Fall Out Boy, and Weezer. Their single "She's Kerosene" went to #4 on the US Alternative Chart, and #1 on the Canadian Rock chart where it would later go gold. While culturally outside of new tone, Interrupters are arguably the mainstream face for ska-punk in North America.

track takes a satirical stance at their colleagues in the scene that lean into Dread Talk, patois, and generally "performing" Jamaican: "I'm fakin' Jamaican / And I think I'm a Rasta / My hair looks like pasta / I think I'm a Rasta / I'm fakin' Jamaican." With the minimalistic lyrics, vocalizations parodying dancehall exclamations, and shouts of "Rastafari!" its hard to read "Fakin' Jamaican" as an outright critique of appropriation. It is certainly a commentary, but risks contributing to the idea that it may be critiquing. While discussing the album as a whole and not just "Fakin' Jamaican," the *Allmusic* review poses a similar interpretation, noting that "while the group tries to make some sort of political statemen … they are essentially just punky party music" (n.d.).

Questions of cultural appropriation, cultural exploitation, cultural exchange, and cultural appreciation are complex, messy, and at times contradictory. In my interviews, especially with "Cool Chris" Reeves, I identified three ways that new tone musicians prevent cultural exploitation: "loving" the music and its roots in the Black Jamaican experience, maintaining an ideology of anti-hatred in the music, and avoiding a performative Patois or Dread Talk. Next, I highlight a band that I see as emblematic of the "cultural exchange and appreciation" reading of ska—Bad Operation—and the trilogy of activist songs that were inspired by their music.

"Upbeat Joyous Music": Anti-Racist Ideals and the Formation of Bad Operation

Ibram X. Kendi's *How to be an Antiracist* (2019) encourages readers to think of racism in America as a series of normal, common, everyday acts rather than as a bigoted, malignant extreme. For Kendi, racism is simply "the marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequality" (2019; 17-18). Instead of being something that someone is (noun), racism can be seen as something that someone does (verb). This conception of racism helps account for a variety of social phenomena that promote racial inequity even against the conscious desires of the subjects acting. Implicit bias, or favoring one group over

another during moments of unconscious action, and structural racism, the idea that American legislation has built-in advantages for white Americans over other groups, are two examples that explain how "good people" can still contribute to inequality. As Kendi writes in regard to written and unwritten policy, "There is no such thing as a nonracist or race-neutral policy. Every policy … is producing or sustaining racial inequity or equity between racial groups" (18).

Thinking about racism as a verb was especially important for members of the integrated New Orleans ska group Bad Operation. When I spoke with D-Ray, the band's white keyboardist, he noted that the racial discourse in summer 2020 had a profound effect on his conceptions of race in America. Citing the murder of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man killed by Minneapolis police that summer, the racially divisive rhetoric of Donald Trump, and the pandemic more generally, D-Ray notes "my journey in educating myself and being vocal about [inequality], and just making it a part of the conversation. Because if we're too afraid to talk about it, if we're not talking about it … if we're not making a part of our conversation, making it a part of our reality, then how do we expect anything to change?" (Interview, 31 March 2022) D-Ray became cognizant of his place in society, and that being a white man allowed for greater privileges in society. In the framework of Kendi's anti-racist theory, where there is no "race-neutral policy," by benefitting from America's racial structure without calling attention to the system that benefits white people, D-Ray recognized that he? may have contributed to inequality through passivity.

For D-Ray and drummer Greg Landry, one solution was returning to ska, a genre that they had been playing for over a decade, but with a fresh approach. Before forming Bad Operation, both members were a part of the band Fatter than Albert. To create a welcoming space for touring bands as well as promote Fatter than Albert, D-Ray and Landry formed a

record label called Community Records. Operating at a time in between the CD boom and the vinyl renaissance, Community Records began as more of a promotional tool than a record label. As Greg Rodrigue explained to me:

> We thought [Community Records] was going to be more of a collective than a label. It was like, we're going to distribute downloads for free. We're going to be this kind of website that collects all these bands that are king of doing something a little bit similar. And we're gonna use the Community Records platform to promote the albums and promote tours (Interview, 31 March 2022).

At this time, creating a label was not so much about releasing new music, instead being a tool for creating a scene: to create an environment for touring bands, promote their colleague's music, and in general create a scenic consciousness.

It was through Fatter than Albert that Bad Operation's future singer, Dominic Minix, learned about Community Records and ska more broadly. Minix described to me his approach to music as a three-circle Venn diagram: his music is at the intersection of punk, jazz, and hip-hop. Relatively unfamiliar with ska music until the mid 2000s, Minix notes an "apocalyptic feeling" when attending his first Fatter than Albert show. For Minix, attending Fatter than Albert shows felt "epic, exciting, dangerous, and real" (Interview, 17 October 2022). Through connections with the band, Minix began performing at several of their shows and eventually releasing a song on the label's compilation album of BIPOC artists *Works on Progress vol. 1* (2021) and releasing his solo experimental jazz album *Sun will Rise Again* (2020). Minix has been outspoken about Community Records' positive business practices for artists: "I think the way Community Records functions is the future of how business needs to be done in the music industry between

the presenters and the artists. … after the record label makes back the money they spent, the artist gets everything else" (Minix qtd. In Helfand 2020).

Outside of Community Records, Minix, has been critical about racism he's experienced in the entertainment industry as a Black creator. In an interview for the lifestyle blog *Laid off NYC* (Helfand 2020), Minix recalls the exploitation he experienced in the modeling industry. Minix modeled for the New Orleans sunglasses company Krewe and, in his words, the advertisement was "some white people shit" (Minix qtd. In Helfand 2020). Minix recalls being paid $500 for modelling job, but was lied to about how the photos would be used: while told it would be just on the Krewe website, the photos were used on billboards. For Minix, his image was tokenized: "The reality is I got $500 and they got to look like an inclusive brand. I gave them more than they could ever give me … they got to hide behind my dreadlocks for a minute and pretend like they're inclusive" (Minix qtd. In Helfand 2020). Unlike Community Records' equity minded approach to business, Minix comments hint at a culturally accepted inequality in the entertainment business, where Black creators are not paid equally for what they provide.

To promote the release of the debut Bad Operation album (2020), D-Ray, Minix, and Greg Landry coordinated with punk news outlet *Brooklyn Vegan* to release the article titled "Joyous Retaliation," which not only coined the term "new tone," but also helped solidify the radical tone of the emerging ska scene. While Fatter than Albert was aggressive in its approach to ska music, for Bad Operation, the idea was to consciously minimize the hardcore and metal influences in favor of a softer, danceable, and ultimately more joyous sound. While D-Ray notes enjoying "screaming, punk vocals" (qtd. In Sacher 2021) like those in Fatter than Albert, he hypothesizes that the angry and aggressive vibe was not what people needed in 2020. Citing a cultural sense of dread and depression, D-Ray sees his new musical project as a potential to

uplift the mindset of people and the ska scene more generally. As he told me, "people were ready to embrace some joy, some dance, some happiness" (Interview, 31 March 2022).

D-Ray also notes that that the goal of new tone is more political than aesthetic. While Bad Operation may have a clean, two-tone influenced sound, an emerging new tone movement is more about the political leaning:

> On a deeper level, my hope is that New Tone is more substantial and timeless than a fad or a wave or a bandwagon. It's about setting a new tone in the way we occupy public space with our music. Through our upbeat joyous music, we want to create real change within people's consciousness and actions. For me, it means being outspoken about racial injustice. It means being an active part of your community and taking part in local politics. It means committing to a lifelong fight for unity and equality for all (Sacher 2020).

One way this is enacted in Bad Operation is by addressing bias even within the band. Minix notes a shift in how Bad Operation and Community Records broadly operates. While he describes working with other musicians and music industry personal as being "beat down," Bad Operation can "transcend the myth of success" in pursuit of "fun, whatever fun means" (Interview, 17 October 2022). Having his work taken seriously and graciously by the rest of the band was a unique experience for Minix: "The environment of trust and joy in the band made it possible for me to share this candid writing with the band without fear of judgement or criticism. Making this record [*Bad Operation* (2020)] was a lesson in learning to trust my own work" (qtd. in Sacher 2020).

A Trilogy of Decolonizing Anthems

The track "Peachy" has become a significant song in the new tone scene, with its opening lines serving as an icon for resistance and social justice. Following an introduction in the band's upbeat danceable style, the music strips down to just a basic guitar upstroke on two and four as Minix sings "Eat the rich / Feed the kids / Are you Jedi / Or are you Sith?" Following the release of the song, the line became an icon and tagline for the new tone scene. When answering a Twitter question "songs that remind you why you're a communist," Jer Hunter replied with the lyric. Other ska fans on Twitter create memes with the lyrics, cite it during times or unrest, or just repeat it back into the Twitter timeline. In all instances, the fiercely anti-capitalistic line is used as inspiration for social change toward? equity.

Minix traces the origins of his lyrics in general, and the iconic line in particular, to his life experiences and his formal and informal teachers along the way: "Who is really singing through us? [In reference to "Eat the Rich / Feed the Kids] I hardly said that. I put the words down, but there are so many influences along the way, not just teachers, bands, people live like that. All go into this, and it's just a circle" (Interview, 17 October 2022). Minix's philosophical musings about the community's influence on his songwriting echo French literary theorist Roland Barthes's essay "Death of an Author" (1967). As Barthes notes, "The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of cultures. … the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writing, to counter the ones with the others" (1967; 86). Just as Barthes sees the author as a patchwork of other authors and cultural influences, Minix sees his lyrics as a reflection of the people around him. In this sense, the lyric illustrates a culture wide frustration with a growing wage gap, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when many working-class people faced the brunt of economic hardship.

Furthermore, Minix sees the meaning of his lyrics created by the listeners. Following "Peachy" and the subsequent fan responses, other new tone musicians echoed the line with their own songs, drawing inspiration for their own protest music. Russ Woods, also known as Eichlers, released his "ANTHEM FOR A NEW TONE" in January 2022. Building off Bad Operation's lead, Wood encourages listeners to "[support] marginalized voices as best as you can. Giving your time and energy and money to organizations, when you can help people who are pushing to help those who can't or might not be in a position to help themselves" (Interview, 11 February 2022). In the song's lyrics, Woods responds to and expands Bad Operations lyrics saying to "Eat the rich / Feed the Kids / Don't grow up to be a capitalist." As Barthes writes in "Death of an Author," "The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (1967).

For Woods, a white male, Minix's lyrics became a call to action against passively accepting racism. Psychologists Steven O. Roberts and Michael T. Rizzo (2021) suggest that passivity is "perhaps the most insidious component of American racism … an apathy toward systems of racial advantage or denial that those systems exist" (483). For Roberts and Rizzo, "Taking refuge in the comfort of other societal bystanders, fearing the ramifications of speaking out against racist institutions, and the denial of the full weight of the consequences of living in a racist society all passively reinforce racism" (483). In Kendi's anti-racist philosophy, passivity is a destructive, racist force: to not be anti-racist is to be racist. Woods wrote "ANTHEM" as a way to combat not only overtly bigoted individuals ("fascists"), but just as importantly the passive racism seen every day:

> During 2020 when Covid hit and when the BLM uprisings started happening and seeing fascists around me and people being complacent and not doing anything. … People are so hesitant to talk to their family members and take a step within their own bubble. … [ANTHEM] is a reminder to myself and the listener that this is an important step to take. It's difficult, but change has to come locally before it can come globally (Interview, 11 February 2022)

During the third verse of the song, Woods directly speaks to the liberal passively accepting racism: in a stripped-down section only featuring a skanking guitar rhythm, a distorted Eichlers sings "You've got to do better than that. / Shit, you got to do better-er-er-er" as the final syllable is looped. The repeated better serves as a call-to-action for a white audience; they have "to do better" than not being racist, instead moving toward anti-racism.

Following Eichlers and Bad Operation, Jer Hunter released their own spiritual successor, "Decolonize Yr Mind" from their debut album *Bothered/Unbothered* (2022). Talking to the punk blog *Punk Black,* Hunter describes the track as:

> a song that explores the idea of what the world would've been like if imperialism and colonization never destroyed the lives of millions of black people. Despite living in a country that has severely oppressed us, we still manage to create so much beauty in this world. So the question now is, imagine if we didn't have systems constantly suppressing us, and imagine how we would be influencing this world? We can create that world, but to start to build that world, we must first learn to unlearn these toxic systems and begin to imagine the world we want to see (Hunter qtd. in *Punk Black*; 2022).

Hunter's comments on "toxic systems" firmly roots their approach to racism in a framework that recalls Kendi's, in which racism is seen as a common, everyday practice. In promotion for the song, Hunter uploaded a lyrical breakdown of the song, explaining what they see as the meaning of the lyrics. The song describes Hunter "dreaming of an alternate reality / free from the colonizers serving us our history." Specifically, Hunter recalls having a literal dream of playing an all-Black show including ska band Fishbone and hardcore band Soul Glo with an all-Black audience. They describe the reaction to this dream: "I immediately was taken back by the likelihood of me playing a lineup that is all Black at a punk show or ska show or alternative, indie is not likely. It got me thinking why is that a reason?" This initial inquiry led Hunter to trace the connections between capitalism, colonialism, racism, and environmentalism throughout the song.

Musically, the song embraces an eclectic array of Black influences, homages, and references. The song is noticeably slower than many of the other songs on *Bothered/Unbothered*, embracing a roots reggae style beat. While Hunter sings the first verse, the second verse features Hunter rapping, something they have done in different TikToks and the occasional YouTube video, but is far from their typical musical style. Aesthetically, the mixture of roots reggae and hip-hop on the track functions as an homage to Black artistic innovation, something Hunter gestures toward in the lyrical breakdown noting "the system constantly works against [Black folks], but despite that, despite all of the oppressions, and all of the ways we are constantly being kept down, we as a people still create so much beauty in this world. … from Black Wallstreet, to the Harlem renaissance, to the hip-hop movement" (Skatune Network 2022). Continuing the theme of Black solidarity, the track prominently features other DIY Black musicians

including Elise Okusami, recording under the name Oceanator, on the chorus's vocals and an ending guitar solo by Phoenix musician Kal the Thot Slayer, and references not only to Bad Operation, but also Black activist and hip-hop artist Noname.

The reference to Bad Operation comes in the hip-hop verse. If, as Bad Operation and other scene affiliates suggest, new tone is about finding new ways to occupy space that empowers marginalized identities, then Hunter's lyrics that trace capitalism, racism, and inequality exemplify the ideal. As they end the verse:

> We're gonna eat the rich, we're gonna feed the kids
> When there's nothing left to eat (left to eat!)
> And y'all been warned about your greed
> Exploiting for your salaries

As Hunter explains, the environmental impact of capitalism is having a profound impact on the world's food supply, eventually making it so there will be "nothing left to eat but the rich, meaning they are going to reap the consequences of their mindless destruction of this world just to become richer" (Skatune Network 2022) While the track also features homages to hip-hop activist Noname and veteran punk artist Jeff Rosenstock, the Bad Operation reference is especially significant, continuing a trilogy of songs that utilize the "Eat the Rich, Feed the Kids" slogan.

While the song discusses heavy themes of inequality, its paired with a music video that highlights Black joy. "Joy" as a theoretical concept has grown in popular discourse, such as African American Studies professor Mei-Ling Malone articulating the concept of Black joy for *Voice of OC*: "The whole idea of oppression is to keep people down. So when people continue to shine and live fully, it is resistance in the context of our white supremacist world" (qtd. in Pham

2021). As Hunter notes "As a leftist it's easy to slip into a doomer mentality, where nothing matters, the powers that be are so powerful that they are going to win. I don't believe that." The music video has a nostalgic aesthetic, featuring desaturated home movies, emulating a pre-virtual video sharing VHS experience. The collage of videos are openly joyous, furthering the ethos of new tone, and feature Black folks skating, dancing, playing music, and modeling clothes for the actors own enjoyment. The song's chorus strikes an optimistic chord, noting "and oh I know someday we won't beg and plea / for us to be set free / from this society!" as the guitars add distortion for energy and the colors abruptly move from desaturation to oversaturation. From the home movies to the color splashes, the visuals of the video illustrate Malone's argument that living fully can be "resistance in the context of our white supremacist world" (qtd. in Pham 2012).

Conclusion

Future artists will likely pick up the slogan where Minix, Woods, and Hunter left it. Andrew Heaton, songwriter, guitarist, and trombonist for Flying Raccoon Suit, notes wanting to make his own "eat the rich, feed the kids" song, continuing the legacy. Whether bands do continue mirroring the lyric or not, talking overtly about race and power in their music will continue. As Mike Sosinski, owner of Bad Times Records and released all three songs, notes,

> it's not like we all get together to write this album about anti-racism. the bands are talking about the world they live in, they are talking about the world around them. These issues aren't going away and they need to be talked about. The bands are just talking about their experience. It comes naturally (Wasserman 2020).

For Sosinski, the music his label releases is a natural commentary on contemporary American inequality: they release music that represents the political and social conditions their musicians are drawing from. In this way, the biting social commentary and explicit commitment to radical politics pushes back against the images of appropriation and white-washing associated with the genre's commercial peak in the 1990s.

CHAPTER IV. "FOR THE GIRLS AND FOR THE GAYS!": NEW TONE'S VIRTUAL "TAKE OVER"

"Not a lot of older ska bands are hip to using certain platforms," recalls Florida musician Jer Hunter to *Reverb Nation*. "I sort of used this as an advantage. I could take over the ska hashtag and talk about things that are important. Now I do feel like there's more content on these platforms, but I do think it's important to talk about the diversity of the genre" (Sick 2022). Hunter's ability to "take over" ska discourse on digital platforms illustrates a technological and generational shift in ska music; while many older bands mainly use social media to advertise tours, merch, and the occasional album, new tone band have the technological prowess to utilize it for community formation, or what Andy Bennett and Richard A. Peterson dub the "virtual scene" (Bennett and Peterson 2004). Importantly, Hunter's take over of virtual ska communities highlights "diversity of the genre," purposefully pushing back against constructions of ska and rock music more generally as a heteronormative white male space. As they declare at the start of their single "Ska Has Progressed Past the Need for Incels" (2021)[24], "This one is for the girls and the gays!"[25] marking the virtual space as a safe space for women, queer, and gender nonconforming fans and musicians. This chapter will highlight musicians on three different platforms—Hunter on YouTube, Eichlers on Twitter, and Catbite on Bandcamp—arguing that the new tone scene utilizes virtual spaces to recreate the ska scene as an inclusive space.

Utilizing the virtual is especially important for when this research was conducted: during the height and continuing presence of Covid-19 and its subsequent lockdowns. While new tone was beginning to develop in the years prior, its growth in popularity coincided with the

[24] "Incel" is an internet term for a man who believes himself to be "involuntarily celibate," and is hostile to women and queer folk online.
[25] Isabella Sangaline's thesis on ska (2022) mirrors this call and is dedicated to the "girls and the gays."

pandemic, thereby making much of its communication, promotion, and distribution happen online. In my interviews with Philadelphia's Catbite, Mississippi's Flying Raccoon Suit, and Bay Area's Eichlers all note specifically trying to create engaging social media presences to keep the bands afloat during lockdown, and in fact went beyond that goal and saw massive growth during the pandemic in both social media followers but and record sales.

Virtual Scenes: The Shifting Roles of a Scenester

Virtual Scenes are communities of fans, musicians, journalists, record owners, and promoters that primarily communicate through technology in digital spaces. First used by Bennett and Peterson (2004), the term "virtual scene" acts as the third layer in which a music scene can take place, alongside local scenes and translocal scenes. As Bennett and Peterson write, "Like the participation in translocal scenes, participants in virtual scenes are widely separated geographically, but unlike them, virtual scene participants around the world come together in a single scene-making conversation via the Internet" (10). As virtual scenes grow, they "evolve norms of communication; novices to the group are informed about the norms of civility, and there is the exchange of the kind of knowledge that Thornton (1995) refers to as 'subcultural capital'" (11). Just as local scenes may have a shared experience around local venues and scene musicians, so too do virtual scenes develop their own in-jokes (memes) and appreciation of similar bands and styles.

Early examples of virtual scene theory discuss fans and musicians in very separate ways. Bennett and Peterson write (2004), while local and even translocal scenes are mediated by "gigs, club nights, [and] fairs" that put institutional needs before fan needs, but "fans are in primary control of virtual scenes, as the virtual scene involves direct Net-mediated person-to-person communication between fans, and the scene is therefore much more nearly in control by fans"

(11). Similarly, when analyzing an alternative country listserv called P2, Lee and Peterson (2004) note a clear cutoff between musicians and fans in the virtual scene: "[L]ike other virtual scenes, P2 is focused on fans' reactions to the music and not on creating and experiencing the music itself" with one member of P2 even writing that musicians' reactions to the virtual scene "vary between indifference and slight hostility/annoyance" (201). This could be because alternative country musicians, in general, are less scene-focused or that the idea of a virtual scene was viewed as inconsequential, especially from the vantage point of the early 2000s. Other times, the fans are suspicious of the musicians, as "group members are sensitive to attempts by musicians and music industry members (the latter called 'weasels') to promote their own work or the work of their artists via the listserv" (Bennett and Peterson 11). In other words, the virtual scene should be a space for fan-created discourse and community, free from the interactions of record industry intervention.

In contrast, the new tone virtual scene is much more fluid in its roles. Unlike the foundational virtual scene theorists above, Liz Przybylski suggests that "we must interpret individual actors in multiple roles—as artists/content makers, audience members, readers—in ways that change based on time, location, and purpose" (2020; 6). Przybylski blurs the line between a simple unidirectional producer-consumer relationship, or the musicians/fans dichotomy of Bennett and Peterson. Based on what a scene member is doing, they could be a passive fan, such as by streaming music, an engaged fan (commenting on posts, replying to tweets, and engaging to boost an algorithm response), or even a producer or musician. Most of my participants in this study describe serving multiple roles. "Cool Chris" Reeves, for instance, notes developing a following on TikTok based on posting videos talking about his favorite DIY bands, which ultimately

led to starting his own DIY record label, Ska Punk International, so he can serve those bands in a direct, business- oriented way.

Wallach and Levine suggest a similar discussion, highlighting the importance of "amateur musicians" (2013; 123) in local metal scenes. They describe that, for a metal scene, there must be a "critical mass of musicians willing to remain for long periods in a liminal state … due to the amount of actual earnings obtained from playing in a band—even a touring band—that plays its own songs instead of covering popular hits that appeal to a bar-going crowd" (123). While there are distinctions between a ska scene and a metal scene, they both share an interest and goal that do not necessarily align with mainstream success; instead of appealing to nostalgia or "covering popular hits," the new tone scene is much more focused on grassroots musical communities. Catbite guitarist Tim Hildebrand on Twitter, for instance, notes the importance of bands "hyping up other bands" at one time, but also "doing Instagram Live and talking with fans" to build "a sense of community" (Interview, 30 January 2022).

While musicians and fans have been paying attention to virtual spaces since for decades (Lysloff 2003; Baym 2018), the suspension of in-person events such as concerts and festivals in the wake of Covid-19 lockdowns in the early 2020s pushed music even further into online spaces. Cultural Studies scholar Shams Bin Quader (2021) uses the term "online DIY" (2) to describe the strategies utilized by local musicians to maintain financial stability during lockdowns. In Quader's interviews with Australian musicians, the sudden unavailability of live gigs forced musicians to shift their focus to other avenues of the music business, such as "enhancing their home studio skills, social media marketing and branding skills, [and] online content creation skills" (13). Thus while concerts may be unavailable, Quader's subjects

illustrate how local musicians create new ways to stay afloat in spite of the pandemic. While the new tone scene existed before the pandemic, most of its growth, including recognition in mainstream music outlets, occurred during the height of the pandemic.

"You got your ---- Card Revoked": Jer Hunter's Virtual TakeOver

Jer Hunter first rose to prominence on YouTube, a platform that allows an intimate look into the lives of creators. After uploading the video "Feliz NaviSKA" (2016), Hunter became a rising star in ska fandoms and punk more broadly. As the pun off the television channel Cartoon Network suggests, most of Hunter's early videos connect with cartoon, anime, and gaming hobby subcultures. Musical renditions of the television shows *Steven Universe*, *Gravity Falls*, and *Sailor Moon* and video games such as *Super Smash Bros.*, *Sonic the Hedgehog*, and *Undertale* being a part of their catalog. Media scholars Anatoliy Gruzd and Jaigris Hodson (2021) studied YouTube cover musicians specifically and suggest that the musicians who are most successful on the platform are the ones who add elements into their content to establish parasocial relationships: they write that "musicians are encouraged to show aspects of their personality that they might not normally share in other venues, since social media interactions tend to privilege the idea of authenticity" (3). Proving one's authenticity is especially important in many punk scenes, where there is a wariness toward sell outs, especially during the 2000s when there was an increased discourse on the relationship between the artist, the music business, and capitalism more broadly. For Hunter, audiences gain glimpses into their bedroom-recording studio combination, seeing ska, punk, and cartoon imagery that show not only Hunter's recording and musical prowess, but also authenticates their digital brand.

Hunter's success on YouTube can be understood through Theresa M. Senft's (2008) concept of the microcelebrity. Similar to how some mainstream outlets use the term "influencer,"

Senft utilizes the term to understood how fandoms operate within a fractured internet landscape. Crucially, Hunter has used their microcelebrity status to give the spotlight back to the DIY ska scene instead of capitalizing on nostalgic interest. Russ Wood, recording under the name Eichlers, notes how essential Hunter's features and shoutouts to new ska musicians have been for the scene:

> They [Hunter] are riding so hard for this new wave of modern ska bands and not caving into the "yo , remember 'The Impression that I Get'"? They're not caving into that stuff. They're like there's some very cool, very diverse bands doing very, very sick shit right now, you need to fucking listen to that. I just have so much respect for that and they've been doing that for so long and the fruits of their labor are finally paying off. (Interview, 11 February 2022)

Wood's reference to the Mighty Mighty Bosstones hit "The Impression that I Get" gestures towards how the Ska Tune channel could arguably find more success by making content for established legacy bands, yet Hunter still chooses to devote time and energy toward bringing more awareness to the scene's up-and-coming generation. By hyping up other bands – most of which smaller than Ska Tune Network – Hunter contributes to developing the scenic consciousness within the virtual scene.

Following their microcelebrity success on YouTube, newer and younger fans were brought into the ska scene. Mike Sosinski, owner of ska label Bad Time Records, articulated the success Hunter (signed to Bad Time) had introducing new fans into the scene via social media: "[Hunter] really is using [YouTube] and social media in such a dynamic way that are bringing people in who are just entertained. This person has something to say, and the music is really fun, and it's a cover of a song I recognize but done in a different style" (Wasserman 2021). As

Sosinski puts it, many of the new fans are "younger ska fans, people coming up who really don't know what ska is at all" (Wasserman 2021). The mixture among of popular culture, activism, and fun upbeat music drew this segment of the fanbase into the ska scene.

I spoke with two musicians who met and began writing and recording together through a shared interest in Hunter's music. Beth Rivera and Kenny Malloy met on the Ska Tune Network Discord page. Discord is a group chat app where users typically based around a specific interest or community can congregate and communicate with one another. First launched in 2015, Discord "boomed in popularity during the pandemic, as more people have worked, played games, and socialized online" (Delfino and Dean 2021). For Rivera, the platform and discussions on the ska page acted as a crash course in how to compose and record music. As she reflects discussing Hunter's music, she learned to "listen to the song and listen to what the bass is doing, listen to how these instruments are working with each other, and I feel like that really helped [her learn music]." Because of her interactions on the Discord server, Rivera's role in the new tone scene began to transition; she became? as much a fan in the scene as a creator in it. She released the "No Thoughts, Head Empty" and "…And You're Doing Nothing" singles in 2020, and the success of the singles would eventually lead to providing the introductory track to Bad Time Records compilation release *The Shape of Ska Punk to Come, Vol. II* (2021)[26] and signing to "Cool Chris" Reeve's label, Ska Punk International.

Hunter's identity as a non-binary Black musician is also significant for a scene that has often struggled with addressing discrimination within. For some heavy and alternative music scenes, addressing racism and sexism within the scene can be met with ambivalence. Laina Dawes explores black and queer members of metal scenes and suggests that the denial of racist

[26] See chapter 5 of this dissertation for more about Rivera's music

or homophobic motivations behind jokes, for instance, "[h]inders active participation by [black and queer] fans" (2015; 386). Looking at ska specifically, a track like Third Wave Ska band Reel Big Fish's "She Has a Girlfriend Now" (1996) acts as one instance of homophobic motivations behind a joke: to get his queer, ex-girlfriend back, the song's protagonist exclaims "I'll shave my legs, I'll wear a bra, I'll even cut my penis off for you." Isabella Sangaline's thesis *Gender and Sexuality in the Ska Scene* notes that being "transgender is presented as a joke" in the song and that Hunter describes finding it "hard to feel welcome in a space when your existence is the punchline of a joke" (Sangaline 2022; 30-31). Similarly, Angelo Moore, singer and front man for the all-Black ska-punk band Fishbone, notes the difficulty talking to his primarily white audiences about racism, partially because his group performed a style of music perceived as not being "Black":

> Talkin' about racism … nobody was taken the extra effort to put that out there. Especially playing to majority of white audiences because we played rock. That's what made it difficult to get through. And the visual of a bunch of Black guys playing rock. We are supposed to play R&B and funk (Carnes 2021b).

Reel Big Fish's homophobic jokes and Moore's feelings of marginalization illustrates Dawes's claim that many alternative and heavy music scenes can be hostile toward Black and queer scene members. For a scene like ska which frequently promotes Unity! as a message, this contradiction is especially significant.

In contrast, Hunter's identity as an openly non-binary Black person creates an especially welcoming environment for identities historically marginalized by alternative music scenes. Kenny Malloy, another fan turned new tone musician, cites Hunter's presence as a key reason new tone has a large LGBTQ+ fan base:

> Jer is Black and Jer is non-binary. [Being] non-binary is not something you could see, but like even me, I can tell they're visibly gay you know, and I think that's something that other people latch on to. I noticed these days so many of the ska fans are gay, and I think it has a lot to do with that representation (Interview, 21 January 2022).

Beyond just merely representation, Hunter also actively promotes gender and racial diversity within the ska scene; they actively curate a playlist of ska bands with queer members who "never get a lick of attention" (Twitter June 14 2020), promote a line of "Ska against Transphobia" merch with profits being donated to the non-profit organization "Black and Pink." As I suggest below when analyzing Catbite's digital footprint, pairing with gender activist non-profits is a common and important practice in the scene.

But beyond just representation and scene formation, many of Hunter's original songs are explorations of their own social identity within American culture. While they were famous for cover songs and a handful of promotional singles, *Bothered/Unbothered* (2022) was Hunter's first full length release of original songs. Several of the songs discuss social justice and identity in American culture, but "You Got Yr ---- Card Revoked!" is the track that most overtly discusses how people perceive Hunter as a Black non-binary person. The redacted word in the song's title is intentionally ambiguous, referencing Hunter's race or gender at different portions of the song. For instance, in the opening verse, Hunter responds to accusations that they are not a limited, stereotypical idea of how Blackness looks and sounds: "You say my life isn't rough / You can hear it in how I speak / How I dress and basically / Everything about me." The opening reference to "life isn't rough" could be a reference to a story Hunter has told in several interviews where in the mid-2010s " this band said that I didn't experience racism because I grew

up in the suburbs," (Sick 2022) with the speaker implying that anti-Blackness only exists in overt, bigot ways rather than the structural, covert racism ethnic studies scholars have long argued (Crenshaw 1989; Kendi 2018; Roberts and Rizzo 2021). At other points in the song, Jer's redacted lyrics stands in for their non-binary gender identity, such as in the third verse when Hunter describes explaining to their mom a circulating photo of Hunter "In a black and white dress." The song's closing refrain illustrates Hunter unashamedly claiming their identity in spite of harassment, misgendering, and marginalization: "I shouldn't have to prove myself / Just because you need to get a clue / I shouldn't have to prove myself / Within my own community."

Alice Bag, queer feminist activist and lead singer of the 1970s Los Angeles punk band The Bags, in her songs, memoirs, and academic articles, has looked back at punk history and highlighted the queer and POC voices active in the scene. As she writes,

> History has a curious way of focusing itself through the biased lens of the dominant culture. … Until the turn of the millennium, one could easily have been forgiven for thinking that punk was largely a white, male, musical style … As the post-millennium generation took a look back at the last significant countercultural movement of the twentieth century, they discovered that there was much more to the story and that the reports of punk's demise were premature (2012; 233).

For Bag, both activism and punk scenes exist "as a continuum; just as something came before punk which created the social context for it to occur … so too did something follow" (2012; 234). Hunter's music and the diverse fanbase that follows them illustrates one example of the next stage of the ska "continuum," adapting and reacting to the new "social context" (2012) and pushing back against ska being a straight white male genre.

“Engaged Fandom,” Eichlers on #SkaTwitter

Californian hyperska artist Russ Wood, recording under the name Eichlers, found his audience by being what he calls an “engaged fan” on social media. Wood spent most of the 2010s playing in various emo and pop-punk bands as he moved between Salt Lake City, Utah and the San Francisco Bay area. That all changed when Covid-19 lockdown meant that Wood could not meet with his band members. “Eichlers” was Wood’s solution. The name Eichlers, named after the mass-marketed houses developed by Joseph Eichler, was originally designed to convey nostalgia, a nod to his childhood neighborhood and because “suburban houses are nostalgic & emo” (Personal Correspondence, 14 June 2022). Much later Wood learned that his project’s name carried a politically subversive undertone, noting that “Joseph Eichler was a strong advocate for non-discrimination and inclusive housing in his communities, so that makes the name choice even better!” (Personal Correspondence, 14 June 2022). Musically, Eichlers is a one-man solo project that combined his interest in emo-rap (also known as Soundcloud Rap), hyperpop, a loose collective of surrealist synth pop music, and the genre he was nostalgic about from his childhood: ska. As Wood explained to me, he appreciated how emo-rap walks a balance between being “very silly and also very serious and melodramatic” (Interview, 11 February) a parallel to ska music, especially in new tone, where upbeat danceable music is often met with political lyrics or songs of personal struggle.

As Wood began to enter the ska scene, he was conscious and precise in trying to amplify the engagement with new and upcoming artists, rather than older established acts, and in the process made connections with some of the most successful artists in new tone. Eichlers stresses that “The best way you support the artists is just engaging with bands and artists you like on social media. It’s so important. Even just leaving like a five-word comment on their latest

Instagram video that they posted will do so much more than just liking and scrolling away" (Interview, 11 February 2022). This strategy—which was originally designed to support *other* artists—led to Wood making connections and collaborations with artists throughout the new tone sphere. In November 2021, Wood released the "2 of Us" single, a collaboration with Reade Wolcott, singer for We Are the Union. He also connected with Mike Sosinski of Bad Time Records and released his album *My Checkered Future* (2022) on the label which featured guest appearances from other ska artists like Jeremy Hunter and Beth Rivera. He also toured the West Coast to promote the album as a support act for Orange County's Half Past Two and We are the Union. These accomplishments—collaborations, signing to a label, touring—he attributes to not only his production skills, but because of the connections he made in the virtual scene by consciously being an active fan. In Przybylski's theory, Wood represents someone shifting roles, sometimes being a fan while at other times being a creator based on the context.

Wood's engaged fan approach does not just include musicians themselves, as he also takes the time to individually reach out to all his followers. Whenever someone follows Wood on Twitter and Instagram, he sends the follower a direct message thanking them for taking the time to follow him.[27] As Wood explains why he does this, "This is the biggest project I've been a part of, so the fact that people are finding me and liking what I do, I want to reach out to that person and thank them for taking any interest in me, whether it's because of my ska punks or my music and just try to build a little relationship or just to say hi." Taking the time to say "hi" to everyone has become a part of the Eichlers brand, with Wood tweeting a different "hi" message ever morning and his album *My Checkered Future* opening with the song "Hi (Album Edition)". Just as Wood was purposeful in supporting newer ska bands through his active fandom, he is equally

[27] Most of my interviews begin by sending emails to artists to tell them about my project. For Eichlers, our communication began when he sent the thank you message.

purposeful to engage his own followers in crafting relationships. While most new tone artists discuss the importance of community in ska and DIY music more broadly, Wood's precise yet personal attempts to amplify creator's content and engage fans illustrates the potential virtual scenes have in building community around a shared musical aesthetic and preventing gatekeeper mindsets within the scene.

Catbite, Catlite, Catfite

Philadelphia's Catbite provides a useful case study to understand how strategically utilizing the distribution and pseudo-social media platform Bandcamp can be used to promote one's own band, as well as help generate scenic consciousness during pandemic lockdown. During the height of the pandemic, when new tone began to rise in popularity, the music streaming service Bandcamp was an essential space for bands to generate revenue. When examining how musicians and fans utilize music distribution services, Sociologist David Hesmondalgh et al. (2019) separate platforms into two categories: "consumer-oriented" and "producer-oriented" (2). Hallmarks of consumer-oriented platforms, such as Apple Music and Spotify, include utilizing streaming as the primary means of distribution, revenue being generated from a combination of advertisements and subscriptions, and arguably providing a small return to artists. As the name suggests, these platforms cater toward the needs and convenience of consumers. For artists, these platforms are useful for the breadth of listeners they reach and the ability to go viral; while streaming revenue may be limited, landing a song on a popular playlist can lead to a relatively unknown artist having a hit song.

In contrast, producer-oriented platforms, such as Soundcloud and Bandcamp, are the inverse, favoring musicians having control over their music rather than chasing viral status. On these platforms, downloading files and ordering physical media are pushed more heavily than

streaming, revenue is paid by consumers to bands (with Bandcamp as a mediator) rather than for a service, and that revenue is comparatively high for musicians (Hesmondalgh et al 2019; 2). The downside to utilizing a producer-oriented platform is that it is hard to "discover" music in the same way as on Spotify; it lacks the algorithm funneling music to listeners. Thus, while an artist can "break out" on a consumer-oriented platform, on Bandcamp, listeners need to be actively searching the site, and more than likely other social networking websites such as Twitter, Facebook, or TikTok to find new artists. The most successful artists utilize both forms of platforms to their advantage, but especially for artist that practice independent music (Quader 2021), such as new tone, the producer-oriented platforms are especially important for connecting with a DIY ethos (Hesmondalgh et at 2019).

On March 6th 2020, Bandcamp began its first "Bandcamp Friday" promotion, which, with a few hiatuses, remains in effect as of 2022. The promotion began as a direct result of lost revenue from the pandemic, providing musicians the opportunity to profit more from the website. As the platform reflects at the start of 2022, "Over the course of 17 days, fans paid artists and labels more than $70 [million], helping cover rent, mortgages, groceries, medications, and much more" (qtd. In Broerman 2022). Bandcamp Friday created a unique space for DIY music scenes, where bands had one day of the month to mobilize their fanbase. Catbite, for instance, viewed preparation for each month's Bandcamp Friday as a challenge, to think creatively and strategically to maximize their reach and resources during the height of lockdown.

Catbite formed in 2018, when it began recording songs and touring the local area, but most of the band's growth came in 2020. In our interview Catbite explained to me that while the pandemic was, obviously, not a "good thing," for the band it forced them to think about their music and marketing in creative and global ways that led to their rapid growth. In other words,

instead of solely focusing on their local, Philadelphia scene, they began consciously and actively engaging with the virtual ska and punk scene. The Bandcamp Friday promotion provided the financial, but perhaps more importantly the emotional, incentive to produce new and creative content when live performance was unavailable. With what the band dubbed "Timmy Brain" (Grrrls like us Podcast), a reference to Hildebrand's unfiltered thoughts, the band began perusing any idea—no matter how absurd— that would allow them to generate interest for the monthly promotion. These ideas would range from staging quirky photoshoots, creating new merch designs, rewriting lyrics about Pabst Blue Ribbon beer, staging photoshoots with Hildebrand and Luna's dog Nacho, or raffling off signed albums to incentivize purchasing on Bandcamp Friday.

Hildebrand described his use of Catbite's social networking pages as two pronged, thinking how Tim, the individual, would write simultaneously with how Catbite, the band and brand, would write. The conscious duality in how to approach promoting the band gestures towards trying to find the correct balance in content to display the appropriate amount of intimacy; add enough to make Catbite the band feel real and like "friends," but keep the band's product, the music, centered enough to still generate sales and interest. When analyzing how fast-food chains utilize social media, David Stephens notes a similar phenomenon that he describes as "play":

> This play … is an expression of the ways businesses are dealing with the existence of social media. This space gives companies another avenue, another page, as it were, to create new narratives about themselves. Essentially companies recognize the freedom and agency that social media offers consumers *both personally and commercially* (Stephens 2020; 4, emphasis mine).

Stephens argument that brand's playful use of social media requires a mixture of personal and commercial presence in posts resonates with Hildebrand's approach to virtual promotion. Indeed, Hildebrand even cited Wendy's Twitter roasts as inspiration for how he would promote Catbite. The fact that ska often carries connotations of lighthearted fun (whether that's present in the lyrics or not), creates an emotional tone that Hildebrand can tap into with their social media brand.

The playful mindset contributed to the release of their most ambitious Bandcamp Friday releases, the twin cover albums *Catlite* (2021) and *Catfite* (2021). At the start of lockdown, Catbite began writing new material that would culminate into their sophomore release *Nice One* (2021). The problem being that without the steady revenue generated by live performance, the band lacked the capital to record the new album. Thus, in March of 2020, the band started working on *Catlite*, what the band dubbed their "Yee Haw!" record. Essentially a cover of their self-titled debut, the album recreates that release in a pastiche of country, folk, and bluegrass styles. The band proper performed with all acoustic instruments, and then outsourced other musicians to play steel guitar, harmonica, fiddle, and cello to fill out the arrangements. The cover album is very tongue-in-cheek, with gratuitous "yee-haws" from band members, and an accompanying music video for "Amphetamine Delight," featuring the band performing with cardboard props and obviously green screened backgrounds. Much like the photoshoot with Nacho the dog, the homemade props and settings from the video serves the dual purpose of being an accessible video style during lockdown, while also contributing to the intimacy and authenticity that can develop loyalty in fans and scene participants.

Catlite solved the financial problem the band foresaw with the sophomore release. Hildebrand notes that producing the Yee-Haw record "won't cost anything and [it'll] be a good

way to make a couple hundred bucks to help pay for the record" (Interview, 30 January 2022). The project was released in the April 2021 edition of Bandcamp Friday—the day after April Fools Day—and with a push on the band's Twitter page the release was a success and generated the capital needed to produce the new full-length record. Additionally, to encourage the "pay more" feature on Bandcamp and to buy on Bandcamp Friday, Catbite raffled away an autographed test pressing of the self-titled album to any user who paid $5 or more, rather than the band set $1 minimum price. And it worked. With promotion from punk outlets (Sacher 2021), the album allowed the band to rent studio time and produce a proper sophomore album later that year.

Part of *Catlite*'s success derives from how astutely it utilizes Bandcamp Friday as a unique space. Ska as a genre is often remembered and celebrated for its goofiness. Hildebrand gleefully calls ska "circus music," and many bands in the current scene deliberately tap into the sense of fun in the music, such as New Orleans's Bad Operation describing their music as a "joyous retaliation" (Sacher 2020). The *Catlite* album taps into this element, offering a surprising novelty release whose own bizarreness would generate interest. But, as punk journalist Andrew Sacher notes for Brooklyn Vegan, it may be "a little tongue in cheek, but the music is genuinely great," (2021) with the outsourced musicians helping to provide the necessary polish to elevate the covers. As a surprise drop, priced competitively, and further incentives to buy on the designated holiday (the raffle), the album conceptually matches the type of release that would succeed on Bandcamp Friday.

Following the success of *Catlite*, the band released *Catfite* to coincide with Bandcamp's Juneteenth charity event. At this point in the pandemic, Bandcamp Friday was on hiatus but it would be revived later and continues as throughout 2022 and into 2023. In place of having that

promotion, Bandcamp unveiled their Juneteenth charity event. On June 18, 2021, the platform would still take their usual cut from any revenue generated by an artist, but instead of keeping the money, they donated 100% of the proceeds to the NAACP Legal Defense Fund. Following the same strategy as the previous experiment, *Catfite* was released on the fundraiser day with all album proceeds going toward the non-profit Hearts on a Wire. As the organization's website explains

> Hearts on a Wire is a grassroots inside/outside prison advocacy organization working to address the needs of transgender people in Pennsylvania's prisons. We are building a movement for gender self-determination, racial and economic justice, and an end to the policing and imprisoning of our communities (Hearts on a Wire, n.p.)

Donating to this particular organization was a "no brainer" (Grrrls like Us) for the band because of its intersectional approach to social justice that was influencing their home state. "Hearts on a Wire" and its focus on transgender advocacy also has resonance with the virtual ska scene in particular which has adopted the phrase "Ska Against Transphobia" as a slogan of sorts, first used by Jer Hunter. Catbite's charity fundraising works in tandem with Hunter's own advocacy and representation, further solidifying the virtual scene as an inclusive place for queer participation.

The *Catfite* project covers the self-titled release for a second time, this time in a hardcore style in the vein of Black Flag, Minor Threat, or Gorilla Biscuits. Sonically, hardcore and ska have much closer ties and crossovers than a country album, making the album seem less of an outlier and lacking a goofy "circus" quality. Still, the experiment was once again a success, and the band notes raising "over $700" (Grrrls like Us) for

Hearts on a Wire on a surprise release that was made quickly and efficiently. For Catbite as a band, this kept the brand's name active in punk journalism and active in virtual scene spaces such as #SkaTwitter and Facebook music groups.

Conclusion

Jessica Jeansonne, lead vocalist for Mississippi's Flying Raccoon Suit, notes that being fun and authentic on social media generates far more sales than traditional advertising campaigns. She told me,

> It's funny. We'll post something on Facebook about selling our album, and maybe one or two albums are sold. When we tweet just some nonsensical whatever, then like fifteen people have bought something within the hour. It's really just like the [beer brand] PBR thing, they've gained a lot of traction just tweeting about eating ass (Interview, 6 February 2022).

Paying Facebook advertisements money to promote their album[28] yielded significantly less money that actively engaging with and supporting the virtual scene. As I have suggested throughout this chapter, Jeansonne's comments speak to the importance of community within the new tone scene; advertising to a wide spectrum of consumers is a far less effective strategy, both in terms of sales and social media engagement, than creating intimacy with their audience and engaging with other DIY bands online. Russ Wood's "active fan" concept encourages individual fans to take the initiative to provide engagement with their favorite band's content and spread it on a grassroots level.

[28] Andrew Heaton of Flying Raccoon Suit notes spending $75 on Facebook promotion, which yielded three sales, earning the band less than the cost of advertisement.

This is not to say that every social media interaction with every ska fan is always positive and supportive. Many of my interviewees noted that networks that have a older fan base—such as FaceBook and Reddit—are prone to toxic, gatekeeping interactions, with rigid definition of what "ska" or "punk" even are. Still, on platforms that have a younger base, like Twitter, Discord, and distribution/social media platforms like Bandcamp—my interviewees note the websites as overwhelmingly welcoming to new artists and diverse voices. In terms of my own ethnography, I found #SkaTwitter especially helpful, with plenty of fans and musicians alike eager and willing to talk to about their experiences.

But the commitment to the scene also marks the scene as a distinctly queer space. With Jer Hunter being the breakout star and groups like Catbite tying their work to queer non-profits, the new tone scene queers concepts of what punk subcultures look like, becoming an inclusive space for LBGTQ participation. As Isabella Sangaline write about new tone, "As representation has increased, so has participation of fans and artists because they now feel as though they belong and own the space. They no longer must make space for themselves because their existence is respected" (2022; 54).

CHAPTER V. "IT'LL BE SECOND NATURE IN TIME": IDENTITY AND NORMALIZATION IN THE SKA "DYSPHORIA SONG"

On the track "Kinda Together" from their self-titled release (2020), New Orleans group Bad Operation call out various forms of discrimination in America. The track is mostly an instrumental song, featuring a vamp heavy groove encouraging dancing. Vocalist Dominic Minix does not sing on the track, instead speaking to the audience through a voice modulation that mimics the sound of speaking through a megaphone. During his spoken segments, Minix declares "2020 calls the downfall of corrupt capitalism, transphobia, and racism." As historian Isabella Sangaline reflects on the song, "What is new, is the mention of transphobia. … Bad Operation is pushing the old messaging of ska music further by including transphobia openly in their song, and having it be seen as an equal issue as capitalism and racism" (Sangaline 2022: 44-45).

Advocacy and awareness about transgender experiences have become central to much of the new tone ska scene's identity. Jer Hunter's "Ska against Transphobia" merch line serves as a key moment of bringing awareness around trans advocacy to the forefront of the scene, while other moments like Catbite's partnering with "Hearts on a Wire," an advocacy group to help the incarcerated Philadelphia trans community, and tracks like "Kinda Together" illustrate the scene taking transphobic thoughts, actions, and policies as serious issues to combat. A ska fan documentary (2022) on the YouTube channel *Miss Upsetter Design* traces the history of British mod and ska singer Brigitte Bond, an open trans woman and in the 1980s her image would be the basis of the English Beat's iconic "Beat Girl" design. The beat girl would become a literal icon for ska music, appearing on countless official and bootleg merchandise. Kenny Malloy notes on

the film's comment page, "The fact that the history of queer ska goes back this far and is tied to someone so ICONIC is frankly a monumental discovery."

Trans and non-binary musicians have heavily contributed to the new tone ska scene. We are the Union's album *Ordinary Life* (2021) is what singer Reade Wolcott calls her "coming out album," where many of the songs address or are influenced by her experiences realizing she was a trans woman and coming out (Grrrls like Us Podcast). Similarly, Tape Girl's song "Halfpipe (The Art of Vocal Feminization)" explores singer Beth Rivera's relationship with her own voice, discussing what it means to sound feminine, her perception of her own voice, and how that relationship has changed over time. The presence of trans representation in the musicians carries over into the fan base, as well. Chris Schoss, the cisgender male keyboardist and vocalist for the St. Louis band Boss Battle, recalls how common discussing gender dysphoria is in ska Discord servers, especially for younger scene members:

> There's a huge gay and trans population [on ska Discord servers] and it's really been a cool thing to see that they found each other. You can tell some of these kids are like seventeen, eighteen, nineteen years old. They live in small towns where there's not a lot of people who are like them. … But they've also kind of found each other and been using each other kind of like a resource. It's been really great, like they came out of a ska scene that is embracing margini liz[ed identities]." (Interview, 7 July 2022).

On the *Grrrls like Us* Podcast, Wolcott imagines a future where the "dysphoria song" is as common a pop archetype as "the love song or the depression song." This chapter examines two examples of new tone "dysphoria music," We are the Union's *Ordinary Life* and Tape Girl's "Half Pipe" to trace the themes they bring to the Wolcott's proposed archetype. The American

Psychological Association defines gender dysphoria as "psychological distress that results from an incongruence between one's sex assigned at birth and one's gender identity. Though gender dysphoria often begins in childhood, some people may not experience it until after puberty or much later" (psychiatry.org n.d.). Dysphoria is no longer considered a disorder, with many governments officially changing that distinction (Russo 2017), but the term still has use especially when some trans folk reflect on before their transition, such as Wolcott's use of the term. Because gender dysphoria manifests in unique ways for each person, the dysphoria song offers an individualized way for different trans musicians to share their experience and ultimately contribute to its normalization. This chapter examines suggests that We are the Union and Tape Girl offer two important perspectives on what the dysphoria song could sound like.

Gender as "Performance" in Trans Studies

This chapter approaches the terms "gender" and "gender performance" in a way influenced by queer cultural scholars and trans studies theorists. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) famously used the term "gender performance," or the idea that gender is created by imitating others who in turn imitate others, to describe how gender is created and perpetuated. In Butler's own words, "Gender is an identity … instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 1990; 179). By adding the term "performance," Butler underscores how gender is something that is for outside observers in that individuals act out gender scripts for others. In American society, the "stylized repetition of acts" reinforces ideas that some behaviors, words, gestures, clothing and more are "feminine" and "masculine." Sociologist and trans studies scholar Aaron Devor (2011) describes these attributes as "clusters" and "are most commonly seen as mirror images of one another with masculinity usually characterized by dominance and aggression, and femininity by passivity and submission"

(672). The opposition between these clusters upholds hegemonic ideas of a biologically based male/female binary, with little room for identities outside it or movement between it.

But as historian Susan Stryker notes on the intersection between Butler's work and trans studies theory, just because gender is a performance, it is not just a "'mere' performance" or suggesting that gender is not "real" (2006; 10). In Stryker's analysis of Butler's work, "To say that gender is a performative act is to say that it does not need a material referent to be meaningful … A woman, performatively speaking, is one who says she is—and who then does what woman means. The biologically sexed body guarantees nothing: it is necessarily there, a ground for the act of speaking, but it has no deterministic relationship to performative gender" (2006; 10). For Stryker, gender being performative does not make gender any less "real," but instead synergizes with a trans identity and allows them to perform gender divorced from the gender assigned at birth. If, like Devor observes, American culture privileges an oppositional masculine/feminine cluster, a performative trans studies approach like Stryker's allows movement between or even outside the two.

The two musicians highlighted in this chapter identify as trans women, but some members of the new tone scene, including Wolcott's bandmate Jer Hunter, identify as non-binary. Non-binary is an umbrella term that includes a variety of gender identities that fall between male and female, shift between them, include both categories, or reject gender (Losty 2018). While some non-binary people also identify as trans, not all do and it is a highly individualized experience. Some scholars (Tompkins 2014; Bey 2017) utilize the term "trans* studies" with an asterisk to make the term trans as inclusive as possible, gesturing toward an expansive and open-ended definition. Sociologist Avery Tompkins notes that some believe that "trans" only refers to binary trans-men and trans-women, and that "Proponents of adding the

asterisk to trans argue that it signals greater inclusivity of new gender identities and expressions and better represents a broader community of individuals" (Tompkins 2014). Since Tompkins writing, academic use of the asterisk has

Throughout the 2010s, attention and representation of trans and non-binary folks dramatically increased (Blackston 2022). The cultural impact of that attention, however, was far from universally positive. As gender studies scholar Dylan McCarthy Blackston notes, the increased visibility and acceptance of trans identities in some communities "in fact [went] hand in hand with greater hostility against trans people" (Blackston 2022; 2-3) in others. While greater awareness of trans and non-binary identities, so too came cultural and legislative measures to mark spaces as transphobic: "den[ying] them affirming healthcare or medically assisted gender-transition, that bars them from sports or public restrooms that match their gender identity and expression, and that excludes them from gender appropriate shelters or social services" (Blackston 2022; 3). In a time met with both acceptance and hostility, the dysphoria song offers the opportunity to humanize and normalize critically engaging with gender and its relationship with individual's psychological distress as well as joy, the latter colloquially referred to as "gender euphoria."

Reade Wolcott Can't Live an *Ordinary Life*

Reade Wolcott has been the singer and songwriter for We are the Union since 2005. Releasing several albums in the 2000s with stylistic ranges from ska, emo, and power-pop, the band took a hiatus in 2013, writing that "we were a band, Maybe someday we will be again" (qtd. In Paul 2013). The band would reunite in 2015, featuring Jer Hunter of Ska Tune Network as a permanent member on trombone, and recentering ska as their core musical style (though the emo and power-pop influence is still present). In her 2021 feature in *Spin* "Dysphoria dies at

MAGfest," Wolcott notes that she began questioning her own gender identity on 2018, falling asleep while reading the trans memes subreddit page, and finally coming to the realization that she was a woman (Stratis 2021). At the article's titular MAGfest (Music and Gaming Festival), Wolcott began performing openly as a woman, and shortly thereafter began hormone replacement therapy with estrogen (Wolcott playfully references this moment on *Ordinary Life*'s "Wasted," asking to be "injected with iced coffee and estrogen").

For Wolcott, coming out narratives, especially her own on *Ordinary Life*, serves two purposes, one for a straight audience and one for a trans audience. Firstly, for a straight audience, it can be a "learning moment" to hear trans narratives such as someone's experience with gender dysphoria, or even to learn what it is to begin with (Wolcott qtd in Grrrls like Us). For many cisgender Americans, pop culture and media examples are driving forces for rethinking gender beyond a cis binary framework (zamantakis and Sumerau 2019), something Wolcott hopes her band can contribute to. But more significantly for Wolcott, her album can be a tool for queer individuals to explore their own gender identity or get the confidence to present themselves authentically. As she recalls, "We've had so many people reach out since we announced the record and put out the first song ["Morbid Obsessions"] and say things literally like 'your song inspired me to come out to my family.' And it's never the sole factor, but to be any push much less the final push is an incredibly empowering feeling" (Grrrls like Us). While of course noting that the band is just one factor in among many, her comments reflect on how the singles and albums contribute to the normalization of queer and trans identities, and can help fans gain agency in their own gender.

Seeing public trans figures—crucially in punk music scenes—is especially important for Wolcott since she looked into her own gender identity through the influence of Jer Hunter's,

non-binary trombonist for WatU. As I suggested in the chapter on virtual scene, Hunter has had a profound influence on DIY ska because of their microcelebrity status and overtly queer performance; their public image has made the scene more inclusive to queer people and sexualities. Wolcott is one person positively influenced by Hunter. Wolcott explains, "Truth be told, I don't think anything would have happened if it weren't for [Hunter]. A lot of my friendship with them has normalized the queer experience. That helped me so much be comfortably accepting myself" (Grrrls like Us).

One of the ways gender dysphoria manifested for Wolcott was anxiety and depression. She explained that:

> That obsession with assigning your own value to your life. … I look back now and think wow, that's dysphoria. I was struggling with my own mortality. Because I was not living the life I wanted to live. I was struggling with assigning purpose because it wasn't that I didn't have a purpose but I wasn't standing in the right place. When I finished [*Ordinary Life*], I looked back and it really clicked that wow, so much of this was informed by dysphoria (Grrrls like Us).

These themes—while not explicitly articulated as being symptoms of gender dysphoria—are heavily present in WatU's pre-*Ordinary Life* catalog. The appropriately titled *Self-Care* (2018) album, for instance, features the track "What's Wrong with Me?" which features a then-closeted Wolcott singing "I'm just trying to explain / why nothing feels that good to me / Can't escape the way I feel / Why do I keep / Running away when life gets real / What's wrong with me?" Other tracks like "Riding the Waves of Depression," where Wolcott notes "I'm gonna ride like I don't know how to swim / I don't need no board, won't see me no more" gesturing towards the "struggle" over "mortality" that she describes in discussing her pre-transition identity. "What's

Wrong with Me?" and "Riding the Waves of Depression" are just two examples from their previous album where Wolcott's retrospective comments link mental health crises with closeted gender dysphoria.

The lead single and video for *Ordinary Life*, "Morbid Obsessions," takes the form of a B zombie monster movie as a metaphor for Wolcott's gender identity. The video opens with a male-presenting Wolcott being immediately hit by a car, only to rise from the dead in a zombified, female-presenting state. Now in the zombie-trans form, Wolcott spends the rest of the video becoming accustomed to her new body, forming connections and community with other zombies, and ultimately fighting discrimination (against the undead).

Supernatural creatures are a common metaphor for gender identity and sexuality. Ethnomusicologist Katherine Meizel notes the "spectral turn" in trans studies, with many trans musical artists describing their "ghost selves" (Meizel 2020; 147) when describing reflections on vocal changes. The ghost represents a pre-transition identity, a way to acknowledging the journey and changes that happen to one's identity throughout their lives. She suggests that "the ghost becomes not merely an echo of an individual life, but a manifestation of thoughts and ideas that stay with us" (Meizel 2020; 148)." The ghost does not need to "haunt" the trans singer in a negative sense, but instead offer reminders of the journey.

For "Morbid Obsessions," the undead do not signify the lingering memory of pre-transition history, but instead looks forward toward post-transition subjectivity. In the video's use of supernatural imagery, zombies become a glimpse at a new way of life, connected but distinct from what came before. Literary scholar Tatiana Prorokova (2019) notes that unlike other monsters, such as vampires and werewolves, zombies have little control over their

monstrous state and are unable to return to a human form[29]. As Prorokova notes, "This transformation [back to human] is … not possible in case of a zombie, because once a human turns into a zombie, this monster cannot switch back to his/her human side" (2019; 152). Having the zombie transition be a permanent one is especially salient for trans identity, where transphobic fears of transition being "made on a whim for deceptive and nefarious purposes" (Meizel 2018; 152) are still common discussions in some political and popular circles. For Wolcott's zombie, it's not the impossibility of looking back but the joy of rebirth that drives the metaphor.

The first act of the music video depicts the zombified Wolcott returning to her bedroom, trying on different outfits in her new identity. The outfit section of the video has a playful tone, as Wolcott tries on a variety of styles that are outside of traditional masculine wardrobes, including sun dresses, a tie dye hippie outfit, and ultimately settling on a "rocker chick" look featuring a leather jacket. But the video only contributes half of the meaning, since music videos are "the union of two elements: a song taken in its whole and a series of images linked to it" (Gabrielli 2010; 90). Lyrically, the song's hook plays over the scene, slyly acknowledging the zombie theme of the music video, with the album's theme of living authentically: if I've got one life, I'm gonna do what I want!" Wolcott's vocal performance is not drastically different from her earlier albums, with the hook sang in a melodic pop-punk style that almost encourages audience participation and singing along. Thus, while this moment in the video may be about Wolcott's individual experience, symbolically gestures toward a much broader cultural application.

[29] Prorokova (2019) spends much of the article highlighting the few exceptions, such as *Warm Bodies* (2013) and *iZombie* (2015-2019)

As the video moves into its second act, it overtly addresses transphobia and queerphobia in mainstream America. Wolcott's character enters a bar with his bandmates, only for the bartender, clad as a medieval plague era doctor, to hold up a "no zombies allowed" sign and prevents her from entering. The anti-zombie sentiment is a less-than-subtle mirror of transphobic feelings and legislations—which determines which bathrooms trans people can use, which sports teams trans people can play, which healthcare and social services they have access to, and culturally which spaces are trans friendly—with the bartender representing overt discrimination and hostility. The bar is filled with other zombies hiding their rotting flesh—IE their gender identity—under thick, heavy clothes. The other zombies are played by several prominent non-binary members of the ska scene, including WatU's trombone player Jer Hunter and Poindexter vocalist Gracie Pryor. Much like the sing-song pop-punk hook, the zombie metaphor does not act just as the "death" of male presenting Wolcott, but instead for queer subjectivity more broadly. The inclusion of non-binary identities working alongside trans identities gestures toward a solidarity among genders outside of a hegemonic cis-binary structure. The video concludes with Wolcott leading the zombies to shed their baggy clothing, being open about their identity, pouring their own drinks, and ultimately taking pride in their queer subjectivities and agency in their own lives. Feminist media scholar Alexis Lothian's *Old Futures* (2018) suggests the subversive power of speculative fiction lies in imagining "the possible and impossible futures speculated by and for oppressed populations and deviant individuals, who have been marked as futureless or simply left out of dominant imaginaries" (2018; 2). The zombies seizing their place at the bar—and the society writ large—illustrates Lothian's vision of oppressed populations imagining a possible future.

While not a concept album per se, *Ordinary Life*'s tracks are filled with themes of dysphoria. The second single "Boys will be Girls" and the video's kaleidoscopic color scheme centers the fluidity in gender performance, while "Big River" illustrates dysphoria related depression: "When you don't fit in your skin, locked in a permanent prison, Are you feeling disconnected?" The album ends with the track "December," a final message Wolcott makes to her former, closeted self. Wolcott explains that in the original track listing for the album, "December" was not present, but in the process of finalizing the track list before recording, the band felt like the album needed a closure track to bring the album full circle (Grrrls like Us podcast). "December" fulfills that bill, with its title hinting at ideas of ending eras, renewal, and rebirth. When describing the reasoning behind adding "December," Wolcott recalls discussing that "We need a goodbye letter. Write a song to the Bane hoodie, Detroit flat brim person you were masquerading as fifteen years ago. What would you say to them?" (Grrrls like Us).

The YouTube comment section for the "Morbid Obsessions" video is full of the confessions of fans relating to the lyrics and themes of the song. One commenter expresses "I just love and appreciate this so much. I've been getting back into ska heavy the last few months and also have been dealing with a lot of dysphoria and struggles related to my trans identity. When I see y'all live I'm going to cry while dancing for suuuure," while another user writes "This is why I love ska, and the scene we have. Acceptance is great and life is great and it's great to be part of our scene that accepts folks for wanted to live their lives I their truest forms." If for Wolcott, the twin goal of *Ordinary Life* was education and the normalization of "dysphoria songs," then the views expressed in the comment section suggest that the album was a success, at least for the new tone ska scene. Tape Girl's "Half-Pipe (The Art of Vocal Feminization)"

continues this idea, as singer Beth Rivera tells her own process learning to sound the way she imagines she can.

"I Don't Know anyway to be Heard": Tape Girl Reflects on her Voice

Beth Rivera "HATES!" her song "Half-Pipe (The Art of Vocal Feminization)."

Specifically, she hates the mix that was used on Bad Time Records' *Shape of Ska Punk to Come vol. II* compilation CD. As she explained to me, when Mike Sosinski, owner of Bad Time, asked her to contribute a song to the compilation, she wanted to "make a song that sounded very encompassing of the music I was working on. This is THE Tape Girl song" (Interview, 13 July 2022). The song features her frequent collaborator Kenny Malloy and discusses her perception of her own voice as she learned techniques to sound feminine after going through puberty. Because of the time crunch to make it on the compilation, Rivera outsourced the mixing of the song to Reade Wolcott. Wolcott, who at this time was not open about her gender identity, was very enthusiastic about working with Rivera on the song. While Rivera appreciates Wolcott's skill and stresses that it's "no diss" to her personally, she feels that not mixing the song herself lost some of her vision of the final project; part of her voice was lost in translation, replaced with Wolcott's.

In the course of researching this chapter, I conducted two Zoom interviews with Rivera, alongside several emails, and general interactions on social networking apps like Twitter. Our first interview was in January 2022 via a group interview with her and Malloy, discussing their general approaches to music, popular culture, ska, and DIY practice. A follow up interview was conducted in July 2022 with just Rivera to discuss "Half-Pipe" specifically, why she wrote the song, how it was produced, and her relationship with her voice as a trans woman.

Figure 2- Malloy's "Beth has Secrets" single. Illustrated by Anj Capizzi and printed with their permission. Featuring Rivera's Tape Girl avatar.

"Half-Pipe" is somewhat of an anomaly in Tape Girl's discography, taking a much more vulnerable position in the song's lyrics. While she is still quite early in her musical career (she has not released a full album yet, only singles or compilation appearances), the majority of her songs are lighthearted, consciously creating a "quirky" feel (Interview, 23 January 2022). Early releases like "Shoveling (Myself out of the Snow)," "No Thoughts, Head Empty," and employing heavy video game sounds ("chiptunes," or using sound samples from 1980s and 1990s video games) and references create a sense of fun playfulness.

"Half-Pipe," in contrast, is autobiographical, describing her own experiences as a transgender woman to make her speaking and singing voice sound the way she envisions she should sound. The first verse primarily focuses on the anxiety of speaking:

I'm filled with dread when I speak

In a voice I know isn't me[30]

I wish I didn't have to say a word, but I don't know anyway to be heard

The tensions between feeling "dread" when speaking, while also having the desire "to be heard" hints at using her voice in a metaphorical sense. In other words, the desire to tell her own narrative, the metaphorical voice, while having to use her work-in-progress literal voice. As the song progresses into its second verse, the song's speaker gains confidence in her ability:

I may not sound the best

But I think I'm making progress

I'll feel content to speak in the voice that I know is not me

Emphasis on "progress" rather than conclusion underscores how the voice can be best seen as a process rather than a finished, completed idea. As the track moves into its chorus, which doubles as the outro, the speaker comes to terms with her speaking voice as something simultaneously familiar and unaccustomed.

It's like a new instrument I have to relearn

I've got to half my pipe

Not unlike "Morbid Obsessions," and possibly because of Wolcott's mixing, Rivera's vocals are at the front of the mix and melodic pop-punk style allow for easy identification and singing along.

The original idea for "Half-Pipe" was not an exploration of dysphoria, doubt, voice, and identity, but instead an homage to a childhood video game favorite. Rivera notes that cultivating a sense of quirkiness in her music is an intentional stylistic choice, featuring homages and

[30] Lyrics included with permission

aesthetic nods to cartoons and in the case of "Half-Pipe," Sonic the Hedgehog. She explained to me that when forming the idea for the song she "was playing [the video game] Sonic the Hedgehog 2 at the time, so I was like 'those half-pipe special stages, I want to write a song called half-pipe" (Interview, 13 July 2022). In the game, players unlock "special stages" in between the main levels where they control the prickly critter through a half-pipe collecting coins and avoiding bombs. Outside of the chiptune inclusion, most of the Sonic references were removed in the songwriting process once Rivera thought that "half-pipe" could also refer to vocal cords, with "pipe" being a slang for one's throat.

For Beth's collaborator on the track, Kenny Malloy recording under the name Kmoy, utilizing cartoon and game homages can also be a tool for inclusion and questioning hegemonic gender constructions. In our group interview, Rivera and Malloy both cite Rebecca Sugar's Cartoon Network series *Steven Universe* and the indie role-playing game *Undertale* as key musical and aesthetic influences on their work. Both works are notable for their queer representation, themes, and even in the case of *Undertale*, gameplay (Dunn 2016; Ruberg 2018). Video game scholar Bonnie Ruberg suggests that for *Undertale,* "The queer elements take many forms, ranging from the representational (e.g., the inclusion of nonheteronormative characters and romance storylines) to the interactive (e.g., the design of ludic systems that resonate with LGBTQ experiences and queer theory" (Ruberg 2018). For Kenny, the androgynous avatar of *Undertale* was especially inspiring, allowing for a range of gender identities to project themselves onto the ambiguous, pixelated protagonist. Kenny created his own character when writing *The Precure Album* (2021), Val, with the intention of having a similar inclusive approach to listeners: he notes that he created "the character … because I think this is the thing that people can relate to, regardless of what gender they are. I don't want to specifically say because I am

male this person is male, too" (Interview, 23 January 2022). Thus, while Kenny's music is literally about personal topics about addiction, self-doubt, and escapism, via the cartoon imagery and aesthetics, his work connects to a larger musical project normalizing queer subjectivity, echoing in some ways Wolcott's dysphoria song.

For Rivera, most of the confidence in her voice stems from "voice training," or consciously seeking out online tools to aid in adjusting her voice to sound feminine. Rivera began voice training in high school and currently is in her early twenties. Her training primarily involved reaching out to trans communities online. YouTube tutorials and reddit pages were early ways she learned how to adjust her speech. Later, she notes how the voice chat feature on Discord allowed her to record sample texts for other trans women to critique, pointing out different ways to improve. Throughout the different modes of communication, all of Rivera's voice training came from online discourse rather than professional voice coaches, in many ways reflecting the fiercely DIY approach to music that Rivera would carry over into her musical practice.

Rivera's experience connecting with other trans people online for support continues a practice that reaches back to the early days of internet communication. Online DIY communities, rather than professional help or even in-person subcultures, have been a key place for trans people to communicate and give advice for each other. Legal scholar and trans activist Stephen Whittle notes that

> The growth of home computer use in the 1990s, and the encouragement of many trans women at the forefront of information technology and internet development, was crucial to the development of a new, geographically dispersed, diverse trans community in the 1990s. Online, this newly formed community was able to

> discuss its experiences of fear, shame, and discrimination and, as a result, many community members developed newly politicized personal identities (Whittle 2006; xii).

For Whittle, the internet and its ability to connect a sprawling trans community was paramount in forming a political movement around trans activism. As he writes, this new political consciousness "forged a determination to change the world … for the next generation of trans youth" (Whittle 2006; xii). Rivera's experiences turning to online communities to connect and be informed with other trans people continues a lineage of online trans political and personal discourse.

While "Half-Pipe" tells the narrative of Rivera coming into her own voice, notably, she considers the process of her vocal training still incomplete. In Rivera's words, the lyrics are about "How I was after male puberty, testosterone puberty to, I guess, I may be partially where I am now," latter describing that she feels "90% there." (Interview, 13 July 2022). Rivera does not often look back at her voice before beginning vocal training. When I asked how she felt about her voice overtime, she quickly noted that she does not have many recordings of herself from that era, and the ones she does have she rarely watches. In our conversations about the song, she described on several occasions her relationship to her voice as a "journey," something that is on-going and not complete. Katherine Meizel's discussion of opera singer Lucia Lucas poses a similar claim, where Lucas believes that "transition does not comprise a simple beginning and endpoint, but, as with any other aspect of identity, is an ongoing process" (Meizel 2018; 152). Like Lucas's belief that transition is an ongoing process, Rivera too sees her journey to be "90% there," pleased with where she's at and the progress that she's made, yet still striving to push toward her imagined end goal.

Because "Half-Pipe" does not match the version she intended, Rivera purposefully has not released the single outside of the *Shape* compilation. Normally, following an appearance on a compilation, she would repurpose the song by adding it to a single on websites like Bandcamp or Spotify. "Half-Pipe," though, was left on the compilation and not actively promoted on her social media page. She explained to me that she's actively mixing and remixing the song, trying to get it closer to encapsulating everything that is Tape Girl. Whenever she finds satisfaction with mixing "THE Tape Girl song," the final mix will, hopefully, capturing her voice, both as a musician and as a transgender woman.

Conclusion

Russ Wood, known as Eichlers, headlined the "Ikenastic Tour"[31] in Summer 2022 and played in several midwestern cities ignored by touring bands. New tone artists are still building their following and fanbases, and it is rare for them to get into the middle of the country, and when they do, they are often the opening act for established punk bands.[32] Eichlers' Omaha show was the first time I've seen a headlining new tone artist. I drove three hours from my parents' house in Kansas City and was not sure what the crowd would look like. When I entered the bar venue The Slowdown, We are the Union's "Morbid Obsessions" was blaring over the sound system, and a punk looking individual in a heavily studded battle jacket[33] had across their back in big white letters "THE FUTURE IS QUEER," cementing in the physical venue what I already knew in digital locations: new tone shows are overtly inclusive spaces for queer participation.

[31] A portmanteau of the two tour headliners, "Ike" Eichlers and electronic emo musician Dynastic.
[32] For instance, We are the Union opened for Reel Big Fish at "The Slowdown" in Omaha, NE in 2018, and Catbite opened for Jeff Rosenstock at "The Bottleneck" in Lawrence, Kansas in 2022.
[33] "Battle Jackets" are custom-made clothing items in metal and punk subcultures where fans publicly announce their favorite bands, images, styles, and in the case of this individual, personal philosophies. See Cardwell (2017) for more on battle jackets in music subcultures.

Perhaps Reade Wolcott's future vision of a "dysphoria song" revolution is too utopian. Even by her estimation, pop music is still decades away from fully embracing the archetype. Yet, Tape Girl and WatU's music contribute to a body of work, ska or otherwise, of musicians exploring dysphoria and gender presentation in their music. Considering how personal and individualized gender construction and presentation is, the more stories being told about their experience expands gender definitions beyond a hegemonic cis/trans? binary. Doing so, as Wolcott aspires with her own music, can be positive experience, for cis straight listeners but especially for trans listeners learning to gain confidence in their identity.

CHAPTER VI. ON THE BORDERS OF SKA: L@S SKAGALER@S REAPPROPRIATE SKA TROPES FOR WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS[34]

On June 24, 2022, the United States Supreme Court ruled on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, overturning 49 years of precedent set by *Roe v. Wade* and ending the constitutional right to abortion. Following the court decision, 26 states were projected to severely limit the right to abortion (Nash 2022). Of these states, 13 had "trigger laws," or restrictive laws that would take effect the moment SCOTUS released their decision. Among them was Texas, a state that made headlines throughout the early 2020s for its limited availability to abortion care and harsh penalties for those who aid in violating it (The Associated Press 2021; Romo 2022).

The Supreme Court decision was especially difficult for Denni Arjona, who uses they/them, founding member and saxophonist for the Rio Grande Valley (RGV) band L@s Skagaler@s[35] and co-founder for the advocacy group South Texas for Reproductive Justice. Following the decision, they tweeted "We've lived in a post-Roe world before and we're done patching its cracks. We're rebuilding and dreaming bigger than ever in the RGV to continue the fight ahead." (sic) (7/27). The tweet concluded with a link to support the turning of Whole Women's Health, the RGV's only abortion clinic, into a community center following the facilities closing with the trigger law. For much of L@s Skagaler@s' history, pro-choice[36] activism has been central to the band's identity[37], organizing several live events called "Skank for Choice" and two albums, *Tales from the Border: Skank for Choice* (2019) and *Skank for*

[34] Portions of this chapter previously published in *Popular Music History* 14(3)
[35] The "@" in the band's name represents the band's male and female membership, and also pushes back against sexism embedded in language.
[36] Arjona told me that they prefer the term "pro-abortion" to describe their cause because it not only fights the legislation blocking abortion access but also the stigma surrounding it; for clarity, I chose to stick with the more common "pro-choice"
[37] Saxophonist and vocalist Marco Lopez sees the band as about activism as a whole, including fighting inequality wherever it exists.

Choice: 2020 Quarantine Compilation (2020) to fundraise for abortion access and spread awareness about the issue. The "ska themed benefit show" has been a staple of the band's live performance since 2014.

This chapter focuses on the band's 2019 album to highlight their use of ska tropes to synergize with pro-choice activism and migrant rights. The album is split into two halves: a hardcore and punk side that features L@s Skagaler@s performing under the name "Contraceptors" (a nod to the ska trope of enters band names with "-ters" variations), and a second side where the group's drummer, Carmen Castillo, takes center stage performing bilingual hip-hop that draws on the Valley's musical history via samples. The songs feature almost journalistic reports about reproductive rights in the RGV, functioning like a punk *corrido*; topics include a memorial to Rosie Jimenez, the first woman to die from an unsanitary medical procedure following changes in legislation that restricted abortions with the Hyde Amendment (1976), and the verbal abuse hurled at patients as they enter the clinic by nearby pro-life protestors.

Much of the band's discography fits within a typical skacore music convention. Their most popular music video on YouTube, "2 Tales of the Working Class" (2018), and their contributions to the compilation series *What Do You Know about Ska Punk?* (2020) contain elements such as a prominent horn section, skanking guitar rhythms, and a style of singing reminiscent of Gwen Stefani's stint in No Doubt. Yet on *Tales from the Border*, these elements are curiously minimal. Despite the lack of ska elements, the group labeled the event as a "ska themed benefit show," with codes such as "skank" and "Contraceptors" clearly gesturing to ska culture and history. What does it mean to evoke ska as an aesthetic without directly playing the music? How does playing on the border between genres allow for musical traditions to be in

dialogue with one another? Does this musical dialogue enhance the activist lyrics and intent? I argue that by creating a hybrid form of music that puts ska in dialogue with hardcore, hip-hop and RGV music and history, *Tales from the Border: Skank for Choice* illustrates music that is not only about the border, but also challenges the border between genres.

Additionally, my analysis is informed by borderland theory. In *Borderlands/La Fontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987) famously described the borderland generally, and the Rio Grande Valley in particular, as "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture" (1987: 3). A border culture is a metaphorical place as much as it is a literal one, representing areas of in-betweenness; borrowing the "life blood" from two places but being distinct from either. Josh Kun (2000) adapts Anzaldúa's borderland theory and applies it directly to popular music. For Kun, popular music has the capacity to "render the border in sound" and to "[make] the border and all of its experiences and histories and political narratives [audible]" (2000: 2). For Kun, studying the "aural border" offers insight into "the daily performances, rituals, and acts of the people who live within its physical and psychic borders" (4). L@s Skagaler@s' music illustrates these "daily practices" of feminist issues and activism in the exceptional "third country". Through highlighting and celebrating Chicanx and migrant women, *Tales from the Border*'s distinctly hybrid and transnational take on ska offers a deeper understanding into how identity is negotiated in both the literal and metaphorical border.

While I was in the process of researching and writing this chapter, the band announced on their social media that they were entering an indefinite hiatus. On July 19th 2022, the band coheadlined their final show in their hometown of McAllen, TX alongside hyperska musician Eichlers. The band's public statements on the hiatus describes changes in the members' life

situations, an understandable scenario for a DIY punk band that has been operating for over a decade. As the band wrote on their Twitter account, "We will never stop fighting for abortion access and a safe, equitable, inclusive, and demilitarized border, but after 10 years, it is time for us to prioritize our growing families and honor our needs for rest as a band" (@skagandopalo 9 June 2022). Still, while the band currently lies dormant, their music and organizing left a positive mark on the RGV, especially with the local community's openness to discuss issues surrounding abortion and reproductive rights.

L@s Skagaler@s are somewhat outside from the new tone scene. When I interviewed members Marco Lopez and Denni Arjona, Lopez mentioned that he had never heard of the term "new tone" until reading my article (Stendebach 2021), and thinks of his band as "skacore," citing Californian Latine ska band Voodoo Glow Skulls as one of his chief influences. Arjona, on the other hand, has toured with We are the Union, and cited Bad Operation specifically as an influence, so is familiar with the term. While the band does not embrace "new tone" as zealously as other musicians and fans discussed in this dissertation, their features on several new tone compilations[38], their split bills with Eichlers, and of course their activist messaging fit within the ways many of my interviewees conceptualize the term and the scene.

First, I will briefly outline the foundation of the event "Skank for Choice" and how it influenced the band's activist identity. Then, I will discuss how Skank for Choice evokes ska community through the linguistic doubleness, further appropriating ska terminology into a feminist and activist project. Finally, I will engage in a textual reading of three of the album's tracks—"Y So Salty?" and "Roses" by L@s Skagaler@s and "*Agarra La Onda*" ("Get with the

[38] Notably, Bad Time Records' *Shape of Ska Punk to Come, vol. II*

Program") by Carmen Castillo—to articulate how the blurring of genres allows the artists to demonstrate how the music is crafted to specifically reflect the RGV.

Origins of *Skank for Choice*

Saxophonist Denni Arjona had been involved with pro-choice activism since high school in the late 2000s, but it was upon seeing what they call "one of the most intense abortion bans" (Interview, 18 February 2022), House Bill 2 (2013), passed in Texas that they became very invested**.** In addition to their work with L@s Skagaler@s, they also co-founded the organization "South Texans for Reproductive Justice" (STRJ) to provide information, financial assistance, and support for people seeking reproductive healthcare. As they note, being so close to the U.S.-Mexican border is especially dangerous for undocumented people seeking an abortion, as straying too far from the Valley risks detainment or deportation. The intersections between migrant status, classism, and reproductive rights make seeking an abortion an especially perilous endeavor for undocumented people. STRJ seeks to "demystify" the process (Interview, 18 February 2022), while also providing escort services, and in some cases financial assistance to patients. The founding of "Skank for Choice" was one-way Arjona thought they could provide further assistance.

The event "Skank for Choice" predates the album. L@s Skagaler@s created the event in 2014 to participate in a contest called Bowl-a-Thon, where participants would form teams to see who could raise the most money for pro-choice charities and non-profits. As Arjona explained it, the mission of "Skank for Choice" was to "educate people, raise awareness and, importantly, raise donations for abortion funds" (Interview, 18 February 2022). The fundraising for the first event went toward The Lilith Fund, while subsequent events partnered with other pro-choice organizations in Texas. As the Lilith Fund's mission statement states, the organization provides

"financial assistance and emotional support while building community spaces for people who need abortions in Texas—unapologetically." Much like L@s Skagaler@s' mission, the Lilith Fund's mission statement gestures toward a cultural shift in how abortion is discussed, "unapologetically" discussing the issue and trying to counter social stigma around receiving the procedure.

The first Skank for Choice was a modest success, but it emboldened the band to put activism as a key component to the band and inspired them to continue to hold the event in subsequent years. Lopez notes that after the first Skank for Choice, "we realized that if we played shows we were able to raise money for things that were important or things we cared about" (Interview, 18 February 2022). While the band has played events for a variety of causes, the Skank for Choice event became one of their central, regularly occurring causes. Arjona estimates that the first event raised $800, but later renditions of the event would reach $3,000. They especially takes pride in knowing that the money was raised through small dollar donations, meaning the fundraising was a grass roots community effort rather than one entity providing the full financial support. The success of "Skank for Choice" would lead to a local recording studio donating time to the band to use to make the event's follow-up: the album *Tales from the Border: Skank for Choice*.

Doubling and Reappropriating Ska Tropes

Daniel S. Traber (2013: 1) uses the term "transnational localism" to describe ska's potential to be appropriated, reappropriated, and imbued with new meaning in different localized contexts. He writes that the ska trope 'Pick it up!' signifies "a double metaphor: first for cultural travel and diaspora, the act of packaging something and taking it somewhere else; and second, as a call to future generations to pick up these cultural fragments, to take them and use them"

(2013: 1). Appropriating ska music and aesthetics into a Latine environment is not a new phenomenon; Traber uses Houston band Los Skarnales as his example of "borderland ska" (2013: 13). Denny Alvarez builds on Traber's work in *Los Angeles Latinx Ska* (2018) by conducting ethnographic research into a DIY Los Angeles scene. He utilizes the term 'subaltern common sense' to describe how Latine ska groups in South Central Los Angeles utilize the genre for subversive means:

> Latinx ska emerges as a musical expression that is not the dominant rhythmic form in society … and which consequently gives way to the formation of a subaltern common sense; it is from such conditions that Latinxs in the Greater Los Angeles region create the avenues from which to express historic antagonisms, formulate their consciousness, and articulate a creative imagination (Alvarez 2018: 17).

Alvarez continues to note that ska concerts became a space where Latine performers and fans could "reinforce their political common sense," usually by denouncing the government and Donald Trump. To use Traber's terms, ska's "cultural fragments" have been picked up and used to vent frustration with the conservative status quo. For *Tales from the Border: Skank for Choice*, the "cultural fragments" of ska are metaphorical, allowing the group to connect with a larger ska activist project that gestures as far back as postcolonial Jamaica. Utilizing the metaphor of the border allows us to understand why the album strays so far from the standard ska conventions. Thus, I argue that when L@s Skagaler@s describes the event and album as a 'ska themed benefit show', they are not as much describing the genre of music (the concert featured hip-hop prominently, for example) but, rather, the history of activism in the genre.

The primary way that L@s Skagaler@s connects *Tales from the Border: Skank for Choice* to a larger ska project is not through the music per se, but instead through strategic choices of words that carry double meanings, akin to Traber's "double metaphor" (2013: 1). In particular, the "Skank" in the album's title and the activist pseudonym "Contracepters." To properly understand the full meaning of the doubleness, the listener needs to have some understanding of ska history[39]. In this way, the wordplay acts as a form of community building, providing a deeper listening experience to a listener versed in ska. René T. A. Lysloff (2003) draws on Benedict Anderson's work when writing about musical communities, positing that "the idea of community is predicated on a collective sense of common interests and purpose" (2003: 243). For Lysloff, music subcultures— knowing the "rules" of the community, such as pivotal music and subcultural figures and terminology—allow for alternative communities to form not strictly bound by nationality. The double metaphors in L@s Skagaler@s reflect the cultivation of ska as a music community by rewarding listeners who are members of the ska scene: they "get the joke" that would be lost on listeners not familiar with the homages as a form of scene building.

The first meaning of skank in the title, for instance, is not bound specifically to ska music, as it reclaims a misogynistic slur to disempower its negative connotations. Reclaiming and reappropriating slurs have been effective ways for marginalized groups to gain cultural power. In arguing for reclaiming the term "queer," the activist group Queer Nation, for instance, posited that the word is "a sly and ironic weapon we can steal from the homophobe's hands and use against him" (1990). Psychological studies, such as Galinsky et al. (2013), attempted to confirm the Queer Nation's assumption by using surveys as a methodology to assert that self-

[39] See Chapter Two

identification of a slur can "weaken its stigmatizing force' while also 'transforming the very words designed to demean into expressions of self-respect" (Queer Nation 1990; Galinsky et al. 2013: 2020). The feminist meaning behind using the word "skank" seems to seek this exact meaning: to disempower a word like "skank," which has been used to insult and harm women via their sexuality, similar to something like "slut," and "transform" or empower women when they are at their most vulnerable: seeking reproductive healthcare.

But the terms carry a second meaning when used within a "ska themed benefit show." Within the ska scene, skank is a dance consisting of a "running man" move with the feet, while the sometimes-bent arms mirror the movement on the opposite side. In practice, skanking creates a light and bouncy motion that corresponds with the energetic upstroke ska rhythm. Skanking has been a part of ska music since the first wave but has especially been associated with the ska scene in the third wave, where skanking and moshing, a form of dancing in metal and hardcore scenes where fans playfully slam into each other, bleed into one another, thereby expressing a cathartic release of energy and emotion to the upbeat music. American third-wave group Mustard Plug's instructive "Skank by Number" (1993) overtly states the role the dance has in the scene: "Skankin' ain't just dancing, it's our way of life / away from trouble, away from strife." Mustard Plug's ode to the dance highlights how central the dance is to the ska scene: to know the dance and to expressively perform it means that one knows the "way of life," or in other words, that the dancer is a participant in the musical community.

What does it mean, then, to gesture toward the reappropriated slur and the dance simultaneously? Primarily, I suggest that L@s Skagaler@s are utilizing ska terminology to return the scene to an activist space. As third-wave ska became more commercially viable, its activist roots were severely tempered. "Skank by Numbers," for instance, may act as a

celebration of ska dancing, embodiment, and history (the track ends with an encyclopedic listing of pivotal groups from the three waves), but it lacks the anti-racist and anti-colonialist meaning central to the genre's roots. By playing on the feminist and ska uses of the word, "Skank for Choice" acts as an intervention into the music's history by returning to the genre's politically radical origins and framing it within women's rights. In other words, the title continues the third wave's revelry in the music's history and community, without sacrificing the music's subversive and activist potential.

Similarly, the band's activist name, "Contracepters," continues a ska tradition of bands ending in the suffix '-ters', again taking the fragments of ska aesthetics and using them for feminist means. One unusual aspect about the album is that the band performs under a pseudonym: why is "Contracepters" the listed performer and not L@s Skagaler@s? Unlike how pseudonyms are usually used by bands?, it is not to separate the album from the rest of the band's oeuvre: the liner notes read, 'This album was written by members of the RGV ska band, Los Skagaleros (aka Contracepters on the CD)' (the fluidness of the '@' to 'o' in the band's name was retained from the liner notes), directly placing the album in the rest of the L@s Skagaler@s discography. So why use an alternative name? What does the pseudonym mean?

The suffix "-ters" places the band in a musical lineage that traces back to the first wave of ska, while notably reconfiguring the lineage into something feminine and feminist. Lee "Scratch" Perry first used the suffix in a ska context in the first wave of ska. Dubbing his house band "The Upsetters" and releasing his debut album *The Upsetter* (1969), the suffix has become a mainstay in the subsequent waves, as different artists pay homage to the genre's Jamaican roots. From nationally recognized acts like The Interrupters to contemporary independent DIY bands such as The Upstarters, the "-ters" suffix has been a signifier to identify musical groups as a part of ska

history. Much like performing the skank, having "-ters" at the end of the band's name signals that they know the music history and position themselves as continuing to represent the scene going forward. It also identifies the band and its members as people who do something, active agents of their culture.

"Contracepters," however, takes this formula and utilizes the suffix as a means to invigorate the music scene with feminist and activist politics. Band names like Upsetters and Interrupters carry a certain rebel and rude quality to them; ska and punk have been conceived as rebel genres, and the bands vaguely "Upset" and "Interrupt" abstract ideas, like the "system". Contracepters, on the other hand, is much more specific: the name is a portmanteau of sorts, combining contraception with the ska suffix. The implication of the combined band name sees L@s Skagaler@s rebelling in pointed, specific, and possibly more effective ways: contraception and reproductive legislation. The name Contracepters acts as a feminist correcting of the ska naming convention, turning the abstract rebellion into a pointed critique. Through doubling terms like skank and the band's name, L@s Skagaler@s firmly positions the group within both ska's history of activism as well as the trans-local ska scene. By invoking the former, they also intervene in the latter, resisting the sanitized and white-washed elements of ska. In the next section, I provide analysis for three of the songs on the album and demonstrate how the feminist critique plays out in the music proper.

Sonically Representing the RGV

As I have argued thus far the term "ska" as a sign on the album functions as more than just music, instead acting to engage a musical community, the trans-local ska scene, and reposition it towards social justice. But the question remains: what is the music like? If it is on the borders of ska, how does it negotiate the influences? The album is divided into six songs,

with a clear split between the first half and the second. Contracepters provide the opening three tracks, a barrage of aggressive hardcore numbers that assaults the listener and forces them to face systemic violence. The final three songs feature the band's drummer, Carmen Castillo, taking center stage, as she raps over hip-hop and pop beats in a mixture of Spanish and English—a choice that, as Mausfeld (2020) argues, creates an imagined community between listener and artist. I will analyze three tracks from the album—two from the hardcore side, and then the closing hip-hop track—to illustrate how the album connects the present, past and future of the border through the lyrics and music. In other words, while the genres may be different on the two halves, with each using ska loosely, they are united by telling how historical violence connects to present, local discrimination, and imagines a safer and healthier future. While I may be selectively analyzing three of the tracks, they are indicative of the overall album, mainly by weaving personal and historical narratives of the RGV together for subversive purposes.

For instance, the album opens with one of the most musically aggressive and hardcore songs on the release, "Y So Salty?" (a bilingual linguistic play on "Y" also meaning "and," could be read as "Why So Angry?"), which brings the listener to a specific contested location: the Whole Women's Health clinic in McAllen, TX. Clocking in at just under two minutes, the track describes the daily harassment patients seeking abortions face from the pro-life protests that occur near the clinic. To combat the noise from the protests, the clinics play music through speakers to cover the harassment, creating a sonic battleground, with each side attempting to drown the other out while still staying under legal sound ordinances (South Texans for Reproductive Justice 2019). The song opens:

> It's morning at the clinic Escorts rise and shine!!
>
> We come equipped with speakers

And tunes to drown the hate!

We deal with so much bullshit

Straight from the frontlines

We're Bombarded daily.[40]

The lyrics are delivered in the typical hardcore punk style, where lyrics are shouted and with an occasional change in pitch meant to communicate urgency and heightened emotion. David M. Pearson (2019) argues that the short, direct and aggressive nature of hardcore makes it "a music of direct communication unencumbered by any musical excess" (2019: 32). The "direct communication" in the music work in tandem with the on-the-ground-journalism approach to the lyrics to force listeners to see the ugliness and violence that abortion patients endure from prolife protestors.

The track also heavily features a style of singing that Marco Lopez calls "gang vocals" style at the chorus. Common in hardcore music, gang vocals comprise of a call-and-response style, where a group of vocalists sing with the vocalist often to symbolize community. As Natasha Heinz writes for the music magazine *AP Alternative Press,* "when half the band is screaming the lyrics at the same time, where's a good chance you will want to join in. That's what makes gang vocals so irresistible: they make you feel like a part of the song." On "Y So Salty?," the band describes various group and individuals who "condemn abortion," as the gang yells at them to "GET OUT." The gang vocals are performed by escorts at Whole Women's Health, and Lopez described to me the cathartic release the escorts felt being able to yell and scream what they were feeling from the recording booth. While the song may be about "handing

[40] Lyrics printed with permission from the band

the mic" metaphorically to the escorts, their literal presence on the track provides further agency to resist anti-abortion sentiments in the Rio Grande Valley.

While "Y So Salty?" demonstrates the present, the comparatively softer punk track 'Roses' shifts the temporal focus to the past, crucially connecting the present and past of gendered violence into a continuous narrative. "Roses" is a memorial to Rosie Jimenez, a single mother from the Rio Grande Valley who died in 1977 from infection following an unregulated abortion. Her death directly resulted from the passing of the Hyde Amendment, a piece of national legislation that banned Medicaid from being used to fund abortion procedures, forcing women like Jimenez to seek cheaper and less safe procedures. By using Medicaid as its focal point, the Hyde Amendment effectively targets poor populations exclusively.

"Roses" acts almost as a punk *corrido*, using a narrative format to trace Jimenez's life and articulate her importance in the RGV. As Gloria Anzaldúa notes, *corridos* are lyrical ballads from the U.S.-Mexican border that arose "during early conflicts between Chicanos and Anglos." She continues that one function of *corridos* is to uphold significant members of the community, especially when in conflict with colonial powers: "the *corridos* are usually about Mexican heroes who do valiant deeds against Anglo oppressors" (Anzaldúa 1987; 83). In the context of *corridos*, Jimenez is elevated to the role of Mexican hero. While the first verse tells of the passing of the Hyde Amendment, the second provides details about Jimenez:

Rosie was only 27

And a single mother

Daughter of migrant workers Almost through with college

Her whole future ahead of her

Until she became pregnant (Group singing)

All because of the Hyde Amendment!

The verses are sung (as opposed to yelled) in a pop-punk style, culminating in the group joining in the vocals on the final line, the indictment of the Hyde Amendment. By signaling her status as a "daughter of migrant workers" and being "almost through with college", the track portrays Jimenez as a model of success in the RGV: the lyrics romantically paint her as a potential rags-to-success narrative cut short by Hyde. As the song moves into the final chorus, the lyrics turn, of course, to her tragic death: "She could not afford a safe abortion / So she opted for a risky cheaper option / Infection took her life / She was the first casualty of Hyde". Unlike on the album's hardcore tracks, the added pop melodies to the chorus and verses make "Roses" less about "direct communication" and more about sympathetic connection with the protagonist. "Y So Salty?" may have taken the listener to the "frontlines" of discrimination and harassment, but "Roses" places the present moment in a historical lineage, where the poorest and most at risk members of society are targeted. Significantly, the song's chorus ends in a call to action, further underscoring how deaths like Jimenez's are just one part of a larger historical trend that requires anti-racist resistance: "We have a long way to go / to reverse these toxic bans / To ensure our health and safety / so no more lives are ever claimed!" The chorus returns to the group singing motif began in "Y So Salty?", thereby returning the action to the music scene and RGV as a whole; only through the community can, as the song goes, "health and safety" be achieved.

The album's closing hip-hop number, Carmen Castillo's "*Agarra La Onda*" (Get with the Program), bookends the album by moving into the future, theorizing how music can be utilized as a tool to build community. Notably, "*Agarra La Onda*" features one of the most diverse array of genre influences on the album: the track opens with a funk inspired drumkit beat, while a guitar creates a "skank" staccato strum on the upbeat of two. As the track develops, the musical

layers thicken, adding a hypnotizing, repetitive accordion sample, the rattle of a *huiro* (an instrument made of a hollow gourd common in Puerto Rican and Cuban music), all before Castillo exclaims "*Orale, Mi Gente*, It's time to mix it up!" as the song erupts into a stripped-down double-time midsection. The overall sound echoes what Dick Hebdige (1987) called hip-hop's "mosaic effect": "Just as in a mosaic the overall pattern is made by placing little bits of differently coloured stones together, so hip hop is made by splicing together fragments of sound from quite different sources and traditions" (1987: 129). *Tales from the Border: Skank for Choice* may lie at the intersection between genres, but Castillo's closing number offers the most whole and transparent hybrid mixture, drawing hip-hop drums, ska-punk guitars, *norteño* accordions and Caribbean percussion all into one mosaic soundscape.

Lyrically, Castillo's rapping brings together abstract concepts of resistance with the concrete location of the Valley. For instance, Castillo utilizes canonical Latin American protest chants[41] to gesture at the abstract idea of brown pride: "*Porque 'El pueblo unido jamás será vencido!' cantalo con orgullo, en conjunto, con el huiro*" (Because "the people united will never be defeated!" Sing it with pride, in unison, with the *huiro*). The reference to the *huiro*, one of the instruments used in the song, reads as especially significant. The rhythmic clinking of the percussion provides the literal and metaphorical cadence for Castillo's conception of resistance. Yet, while the call to action may be abstract in Castillo's lyrics, the geographic location is specific, portraying the RGV itself as the lead character in the narrative. For instance, the chorus reads "*Es dificil entender, retener esa idea agotadora de el valle componer, componer*" (It's difficult to understand, to hold that tiring idea of the Valley repaired, to repair). The specific references to the local are underscored in the English verse where the listener is "Welcome[d] to

[41] The lyric was originally a chant for Chilean socialist Salvador Allende before being utilized in an international hit by Inti-illimani and subsequently covered by numerous artist.

the RGV / Rich in creativity / homegrown like our citrus trees / where art is breathing heavily". References to the floral in the "citrus trees" and the living, breathing art illustrate pride and celebration of the local and the scene. In lieu of a specific figure (as in Jimenez) or building (Whole Women's Health), the RGV itself becomes the focal point, the character that the listener follows. Combining the abstract resistance with the specific locale? ultimately portrays the Valley as a place where political struggles can lead to tangible, structural and equitable change. In this sense, the closing track completes the ska metaphor evoked in the album and event's title—where the idea of music itself can lead to radical politics.

Conclusion

While Texas continues to restrict reproductive healthcare following the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* decision in 2022, *Skank for Choice* had a tangible effect on abortion discussions in the RGV. Positioning both the local community and the new tone ska scene toward discussing and fundraising for abortion funds, Arjona notes that "A part of Skank for Choice is just normalizing abortion and being able to get people to talk about it in the very beginning" and that seeing people identity as the once taboo "pro-abortion" label was a gratifying experience. While some bands were hesitant to join an overtly pro-choice event at first, Arjona notes seeing a cultural shift, as more and more local bands became involved with the event. They recall, "people [were] afraid to be open about it or talk about it out loud and that's totally changed. I would say the culture shift has been phenomenal. People are like embracing the term pro-abortion, open to singing the songs" (Interview, 18 February 2022).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, like most of the music industry, L@s Skagaler@s cancelled the in-person event in favor of a virtual event. Less focused on the local as a result, the 2020 compilation featured a large geographic spread of artists including Jer Hunter, New Jersey

ska-metalcore band The Best of the Worst, and California musicians Omnigone[42]. Describing the quarantine album as their most "ska leaning" release, Arjona thinks of the quarantine compilation as "the silver lining of the pandemic. We were able to coordinate with artists, where we otherwise might not have been able to. Folks were very supportive of it and we were able to generate support online" (Interview, 18 February 2022). Shifting away from strictly the local, L@s Skagaler@s positioned the whole new tone scene to benefit reproductive and migrant rights. For both compilations and the event as a whole, "Skank for Choice" illustrates a band, a local scene, and the virtual ska scene coordinate to combat racial and gendered discrimination.

[42] Omnigone features Adam Davis and Barry Krippene, former members of the 1990s skacore band Link-80

CHAPTER VII. CONCLUSION: THIS IS MY CHECKERED FUTURE

The title of Eichlers' album *My Checkered Future* (2022) is significant because it flips a cliché. Because of ska's black-and-white checkered color scheme, the joke about having a "checkered past" has been passed around more than a few times (Carnes 2021; *Checkered Past: A Ska'd Cast).* These references are done with fond remembrance for the genre, but as a listener, I appreciate Eichlers forward thinking and experimental take on the genre. Over a mix of programmed drums, samples, live horns, and skank guitar, Eichlers exclaims on the album's conclusion "I'm a whiny emo rudeboy lose / and I've got a checkered future / This is my checkered future." As music journalist Dane Jackson writes in his review of the album,

> Ska music has been around since the late '50s/early '60s, so evolution of the form should be expected. That's how we got 2-tone, ska punk, ska core, and now that's how we got hyperska. I'm excited about the beginning of hyperska, and cant wait to see (hear) where it goes next (2022).

Not every new tone ska band needs to create an eclectic sonic collage of influences to be innovative in the genre, but Eichlers' album represents the forward-thinking approach to ska music that pushes back against ska as strictly 1990s kitsch. Or as D-Ray of Bad Operation described it, thinking beyond "Hawaiian shirts, *Clueless, BASEketball* [and] whatever that meme is with the mozzarella sticks" (Interview, 31 March 2022).

More than just musical innovation, I have argued throughout this dissertation that the new tone ska scene actively resists depictions of ska (and rock more generally) as a white, heterosexual cis-male space (Dawes 2015) and prides itself on its inclusivity. Jer Hunter has been instrumental in this shift, with their songs about Black and queer identity, social resistance, social media prowess, cartoon references, and promotion of other, often smaller bands creating

the ecosystem for this shift to occur. As Bad Time Records owner Mike Sosinski reflects on Hunter's success, "[Hunter] really is using [YouTube] and social media in such a dynamic way that are bringing people in who are just entertained. This person has something to say, and the music is really fun, and it's a cover of a song I recognize but done in a different style" (Wasserman 2021), which in turn brings in a younger and more diverse fanbase. The new influx of voices—and the return of several notable acts from previous eras—created the environment for many of the activist and protest case studies highlighted throughout this work: The *Ska Against Racism* album, "Eat the Rich, Feed the Kids" as the unofficial scene slogan, the "Skank for Choice" events, and the general increase and presence of dysphoria songs.

Looking ahead toward ska's future seems bright. As of February 2023, Bad Time Records is organizing a nationwide tour headlined by multiple bands on their roster and an accompanying documentary film, *This is New Tone*, documenting the tour and its place in ska history. Ska Punk International, meanwhile, is coordinating "SPI Fest," a similar label themed event but this time located strictly to the Texas area. Jer Hunter themselves even managed to crack into the Billboards, with *Bothered/Unbothered* (2022) peaking at 74 on Billboard's Top 100 Album chart in the US. On #SkaTwitter, new ska bands are forming, reforming, and releasing music at an increasing rate. With an influx of new voices, so too will come more perspectives and nuances in the case studies I have presented in this dissertation, while creating new ones along the way. Future scholarship could trace the connections and divergences with the many adjacent punk subgenres, like emo, folk-punk, and hardcore, and future research can trace the cross fertilization of activist and inclusive ideas among the scenes. Others can push the online/offline fandom themes further, investigating how communities move between spaces. Regardless of where future scholarship goes, ska's presence in the DIY scene does not show

signs of cooling down, and the movement away from embarrassing white-washed music into inclusive protest music will continue.

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APPENDIX A. IRB LETTER

BGSU
BOWLING GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board

DATE:	October 10, 2022
TO:	Steven Stendebach
FROM:	Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board
PROJECT TITLE:	[1818706-3] The New-Tone Ska Scene
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Continuing Review/Progress Report
ACTION: APPROVAL	APPROVED
DATE: EXPIRATION	October 21, 2022
DATE: REVIEW	October 20, 2023
TYPE:	Expedited Review
REVIEW CATEGORY:	Expedited review category # 7

Thank you for your submission of Continuing Review/Progress Report materials for this project. The Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board has APPROVED your submission. This approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a project design wherein the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

The final approved version of the consent document(s) is available as a published Board Document in the Review Details page. You must use the approved version of the consent document when obtaining consent from participants. Informed consent must continue throughout the project via a dialogue between the researcher and research participant. Federal regulations require that each participant receives a copy of the consent document.

Please note that you are responsible to conduct the study as approved by the IRB. If you seek to make any changes in your project activities or procedures, those modifications must be approved by this committee prior to initiation. Please use the modification request form for this procedure.

All UNANTICIPATED PROBLEMS involving risks to subjects or others and SERIOUS and UNEXPECTED adverse events must be reported promptly to this office. All NON-COMPLIANCE issues or COMPLAINTS regarding this project must also be reported promptly to this office.

This approval expires on October 20, 2023. You will receive a continuing review notice before your project expires. If you wish to continue your work after the expiration date, your documentation for continuing review must be received with sufficient time for review and continued approval before the expiration date.

If you have any questions, please contact the Institutional Review Board at 419-372-7716 or irb@bgsu.edu. Please include your project title and reference number in all correspondence with this committee.

This letter has been electronically signed in accordance with all applicable regulations, and a copy is retained within Bowling Green State University Institutional Review Board's records.

APPENDIX B. PERMISSION LETTER