

¿Soy Emo, Y Qué? Sad Kids, Punkera Dykes and the Latin@ Public Sphere

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In March and April of 2008, emo youth in Mexican and Latin American metropolises were vulnerable to violent, physical attacks, which the world witnessed, aghast, via YouTube. Journalists, pundits, and cultural commentators around the globe wondered, first, how to define “emo”; second, how to explain its presence in Mexico and Latin America; and third, whence such a violent reaction? This essay tackles those questions, and tries to think through emo to something more than the post-NAFTA angst to which it has been commonly ascribed in the US and Mexican media. Tracing a route from US Chicano punk and new wave, to Mexico’s self-proclaimed emo youth, to Myriam Gurba’s short fiction featuring southern California’s Chicana dyke-punk communities, I ask how emo travels, and how these highly self-conscious and very public performances of affect speak to the intersections of race and gender in twenty-first-century Latin@ and Latin American youth culture.

Plaza de Armas – Querétaro, México – 7 March 2008. In the grainy, cell phone video footage the crowd surges from left to right. There are around eight hundred young people in the twilight plaza laughing, screaming, and cheering. Towards the right-hand side of the screen is a young man, his face a blur as the crowd repeatedly shoves him against a wall. At one point he turns his head to them, his face contorted in pain.¹ In the next few weeks similar attacks would spread to cities throughout Mexico as members of various *tribus urbanas* (urban tribes), defined by their musical interests in punk, ska, or heavy metal, organizing via the Internet and text messaging, and inspired in part by the host of a popular music show on Mexican television, lashed out against *los emos*.

“Emo” – known by the same name in the United States – has its etymological root in “emotional,” and young people who identify as such do so because “their philosophy is to act in accordance with their emotions and feelings,”

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¹ Footage from the Querétaro riots (in Spanish) and from Televisa VJ Kristoff’s anti-emo commentary (in Spanish, with English translation) can be found online at *Spin Magazine* (www.spin.com/articles/anti-emo-riots-mexico). Unedited amateur footage can be found easily on YouTube (<http://youtube.com>), by searching for “anti-emo violence.”

a definition borne out by emo's history in the United States.² The public perception of emo as a US phenomenon fuels Mexican hostility towards it, though commentators and participants in the attacks have attributed the violence to a range of causes from ideological differences over cultural production, to homophobia, to an attempt to divert attention away from national crises in education and unemployment.

For example, Ignacio Pineda, director of Foro Cultural Alicia, which houses and coordinates several youth groups in Mexico City, attributes the heightened violence to a growing conservatism in Mexico. The punks are not the real source of danger, according to Pineda, who sees something more sinister behind the recent violence. "I see this as a very conservative movement, the deliberate objective of which is to divide the youths and distract them from their complete lack of opportunities and hopes for the future," he told the Mexican newspaper *La Jornada*, warning against the possible spread of violence towards other marginalized groups like blacks, women, and homosexuals.³ "It's more convenient for the government to have divided, rather than critical and questioning youths," he notes.⁴ Édgar Morín, on the other hand, professor of social sciences at Mexico City's Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), reads the incendiary episodes as revolutionary acts. He claims that emos differ from other *tribus urbanas* in that the former are dissociated from a politicized cultural production. Emo, he claims, is "a youthful style characterized by a mix of punk and dark aesthetics, but, at the end of the day is appropriated from movements originating in other countries."⁵

Even if, as Pineda suggests, the anti-emo violence is part of a government conspiracy, one thing is clear: the bulk of hostilities towards emos in Mexico stems from the assumption, shared by Morín, that emos have no appreciable philosophy. One anonymous youth in Mexico City, for example, told a reporter, "I want to beat them up because they don't have their own culture; that is, they steal culture from the punks and everyone

² Marianna Chávez, "Integrantes De 'Tribus Urbanas' Atacan a Jóvenes *Emo* En Querétaro," *La Jornada*, 9 March 2008, available at www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/03/09/index.php?section=estados&article=031n1est, accessed 14 July 2008. The original Spanish reads, "su filosofía es actuar conforme a sus emociones y sentimientos" (all translations from the Spanish are my own; if no Spanish is provided the quote appeared originally in English).

³ Rosa Elvira Vargas and Emir Olivares, "Los *Emos*, Blanco Del Conservadurismo," *La Jornada*, 21 March 2008, available at www.jornada.unam.mx/2008/03/21/index.php?section=sociedad&article=032n1soc, accessed 14 July 2008. "Lo que veo es una connotación muy conservadora, el objetivo deliberado es dividirlos, porque no les pueden ofrecer expectativas de futuro."

⁴ *Ibid.* "Al gobierno le conviene tener más jóvenes divididos que críticos y demandantes."

⁵ *Ibid.* "un estilo juvenil que se caracteriza por una estética con mezclas de lo punk y lo dark, pero que al final son reapropiaciones de movimientos que se generaron en otro país."

else.”⁶ Emos have not done much to dispel this notion. Erik, a sixteen-year-old emo from Ecatepec, says that he and his friends are emo because “it’s the way we like to dress and think.”⁷ Because their fashion styles and musical tastes are heavily influenced by US markets, emos are roundly criticized for, as Morín argues, participating in a meaningless cultural performance. But is that opprobrium valid? Though neither Erik, his friends, nor any of the other emos quoted in the Mexican press can offer any compelling insight into their own behavior, are their gestures truly empty?

They are not, but their meaning is difficult to parse. The media have reported one common observation Mexican emos have made, summed up in Erik’s explanation of why people feel such antipathy towards them: “Well, I don’t really know, sometimes we flaunt our emotions, or make them more dramatic.”⁸ While the chorus of negative responses to the emos’ very public emotiveness might suggest a reading of their affective performances as a powerful mode of resistance to multinational capital’s privatizing moves, there has, in recent years, been a critical backlash against such readings of emotion. In *The Female Complaint*, for example, Lauren Berlant develops her idea of the “intimate public” as the mass marketing of emotionality and sentiment that creates a “juxtapolitical” affective community less interested in changing the world than in surviving in it.⁹ In Berlant’s model, emotional communities, such as the Mexican emos, are maintained through market forces that create and manage their difference, to the state’s benefit. Eva Illouz, in *Cold Intimacies*, argues for a similar reading of emotion as a public, rather than private, manifestation of state and market power, theorizing “emotional capitalism” as the process by which economic and emotional relationships define and shape each other.¹⁰

Berlant’s and Illouz’s efforts to complicate the relationship between affect and resistance gel with sociological analyses of subcultural action that distinguish, as Glenn Muschert explains, between agentic and structural action. “Since society needs deviance to reify its norms,” Muschert writes, “the existence of a social milieu that produces subcultures might be functional for

⁶ Victor Hernández Elías, “Emos Y Punkeros: Batalla Campal Frente a Seguridad Pública,” *Milenio*, 16 March 2008, available at www.milenio.com/mexico/milenio, accessed 14 July 2008. “los quieren madrear porque no llevan una cultura misma, o sea, les roban las culturas a los punks, a todos.”

⁷ *Ibid.*: “es la forma de vestir que nos gusta, la forma de pensar también.”

⁸ *Ibid.* “Pues no sé, a veces tendemos a llevar nuestras emociones más arriba o hacerlas más dramáticas.”

⁹ Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 5, 2, 27.

¹⁰ Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 2.

the whole.”¹¹ Since the Mexican emos have no expressly political philosophy, they cannot, in Muschert’s terms, be acting with any kind of social awareness (agentic action) and must thus be acting as an intimate public within societal norms (structural action).

Such a reading, however, feels almost too dismissive. While both Berlant and Illouz recognize the reification of the self that occurs within a market matrix, they both resist the pull of pure critique. Berlant takes critics to task for valuing subcultures only in terms of their “convertability to politics,”¹² and seeks to understand the affective communities she refers to as “intimate publics” instead in terms of “what is absorbing in the defensive, inventive, and adaptive activity of getting by.”¹³ Illouz, in the same spirit, wants to avoid a “counting of the ways,”¹⁴ in which culture promotes or represses a political agenda. She rejects the metonymic assumption that culture merely reflects the social and seeks, instead, an “immanent critique”¹⁵ that moves away from the realm of pure theory towards a deeper analysis of the context whence social action springs. Illouz, like Berlant, challenges critics to “analyze the social without presuming to know in advance the emancipatory or the repressive.”¹⁶ Neither Berlant nor Illouz is content with easy answers; both strive to find value in the emotional communities they study, whether those be Berlant’s mass-marketed instances of women’s culture, or Illouz’s provocative study of Internet dating.

Berlant and Illouz clear a space for considering the meaning of the Mexican emos’ public emotiveness. Critiques of the emos’ stylistic affect as a pointless, empty, falsely liberatory commodity are unsatisfying and incomplete. Even if the emos are not self-consciously political, their musical and stylistic communities can tell us something. My aim here is, if not to figure out what that something is, then at least to trace its outlines. Such tracing begins with situating Mexican emo as a transnational refraction of Chican@ engagements with punk and new wave. These musical histories heavily influence *Desirée Garcia*, the protagonist in *Dahlia Season* (2007), Myriam Gurba’s collected short fiction about queer, Chican@, emo communities in southern California. Californian and Mexican cities are, of course, different spaces inhabited by different social networks; while those differences are notable, I find their similarities and points of convergence more significant, hence the geographical vagueness of my title’s “Latin@ public sphere.” Reading Mexican emo in conjunction with *Desirée* as part of a genealogy of public, emotional performance, a vision of Mexican emo’s use-value begins to come into focus.

¹¹ Glenn W. Muschert, “Is Style Action or Agency? A Social Structural Essay on Hebdige’s Subculture,” *Quarterly Journal of Ideology*, 31, 1–6 (2007), 2.

¹² Berlant, 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁴ Illouz, 92.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

In determining “value,” however, I hope to avoid Berlant’s derogation by searching for what Illouz calls the immanent critique. Both Desirée’s and the emos’ performances are about, alternately, Latin@ belonging and ostracization from broad national and global communities. Emo’s stylistic flourishes afford a window onto how the body registers such geopolitical concerns.

As Milagros Peña argues in *Punk Rockers’ Revolution*, the value of social action and performance can be understood not only as a critique of oppressive institutions, but also as an attempt “to transform normative expectations of individual behavior.”¹⁷ This is precisely what emo style represents: a desire to resignify the body, to free it from heteronormative discourses of race and gender. Desirée and the Mexican emos comprise a narrative of this resignification’s transnational success and failure. While the Mexican emos succeed in transforming systems of bodily signification in Mexico insofar as their fashion choices do not necessarily correspond to the homosexual behavior they are widely perceived as indicating, Desirée Garcia, the protagonist of Gurba’s titular novella, fails in her rescripting despite *Dahlia Season’s* intense interest in language. Desirée, who suffers from Tourette’s and obsessive–compulsive disorder, is remarkably in tune with the particularities of her own body, but her behavior at the novella’s end is relatively conventional. While both she and the emos can be understood as structural actors, their actions offer a way to think about emo style as meaning something agentic, however, particularly through its queer gestures.

“YOU’RE NOT PUNK, AND I’M TELLING EVERYONE!
SAVE YOUR BREATH; I NEVER WAS ONE”

Jawbreaker, “Boxcar”¹⁸

Emo, however, *means* decidedly different things to different constituencies. It is generally regarded as a subset of punk, an emotional strain of hardcore that includes heartfelt lyrics about relationships, romantic and non-romantic, as well as the difficulties of maintaining personal ethics in an unethical world.¹⁹ Very little scholarship about emo exists, in contrast with punk, which has been widely studied in the British context as an expression of working-class

¹⁷ Curry Mallott and Milagros Peña, *Punk Rockers’ Revolution* (New York: Peter Lang, 2004), 12.

¹⁸ Jawbreaker, “Boxcar,” *24 Hour Revenge Therapy* (San Francisco: Tupelo/Communion Records, 1994). Sound recording.

¹⁹ Andy Greenwald’s *Nothing Feels Good: Punk Rock, Teenagers, and Emo* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 2003) is the definitive study of emo to date, while Biran Cogan focusses specifically on emo’s relation to punk rock in the *Encyclopedia of Punk Music and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006).

alienation during the administration of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher (1979–90). Punk aesthetics, as Dick Hebdige reminds readers, “were expressly designed to undercut the intellectual posturing of the previous generation of rock musicians,”²⁰ whereas emo is widely regarded, even by the bands who are labeled as such, as “essentially meaningless, and more of a corporate attempt to label music than an honest reaction to a musical style.”²¹ Emo, the term and the music associated with it, is thus roundly criticized as the commodification of the punk ethos.

While this depiction is not untrue, it is an oversimplification. Punk and emo have shared histories; the scenes were very closely linked in the United States in the 1980s, and there are ways in which contemporary emo is not quite so distant from punk as music historians suggest. Emerging in the 1980s out of Washington, DC’s punk scene, bands like Fugazi took hardcore punk in a more personal, experimental direction, inviting the “emo-core” (or “emotional hardcore”) moniker. Throughout the 1990s, emo-core moved through various incarnations as acts such as Jawbreaker, Samiam, and the Promise Ring created a more melodic emo-core that began to draw national, big-label attention to the genre. As emo became marketable, it began to transcend its musical confines into fashion (with a unisex code of tight jeans and t-shirts, long, floppy bangs, heavy eyeliner and a preponderance of black) and performative displays of strong emotion (such as cutting, or other forms of self-harm). Hence, in the United States, at least, the classification of bands as “emo” can be tricky as listeners identify with particular eras of “emo,” and fans of Fugazi, for example, might reject the term outright for its seemingly watered-down, apolitical aesthetics.

Though punk and emo share musical roots, most contemporary US emo music does lack punk’s overt social consciousness. Andy Greenwald, emo’s most sympathetic chronicler, sees emo as the solipsism of youth, “a specific sort of teenage longing, a romantic and ultimately self-centered need to understand the bigness of the world in relation to *you*.”²² He locates emo solidly in the middle classes and differentiates its inclusiveness and need to belong from punk’s antisocial opposition.²³ Emo’s status as a reserve of the middle classes wherein one can ponder one’s universal angst is markedly distinct from punk’s grounding in the class antagonism of the British proletariat.

Critics’ dismissal of emo on these grounds, however, is redolent both of Berlant’s observation that scholars of cultural studies value cultural production in terms of its express relation to politics,²⁴ and of Muschert’s distinction between the cultural production of those oblivious to and that of those

²⁰ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge, 1988), 63.

²¹ Cogan, 69.

²² Greenwald, 5 (original italics).

²³ *Ibid.*, 56.

²⁴ Berlant, 27.

oppositionally aware of their class status.²⁵ In this study I am using Berlant and Muschert as lenses through which to read Mexico's recent outbreaks of anti-emo violence, and using that reading as a way to understand racial and ethnic identity formation among contemporary US Latin@ youth. Such identities as those performed by the characters in *Dahlia Season* mark a complex nexus of the personal and political, of language, biology, and performance, the lived experience of which can be either an intense expression of social consciousness or an individualistic set of survival strategies. The meaning of racial and ethnic identities, in other words, is both class-dependent, in that racialized punk is easier to grasp than racialized emo, and a function of emo's juxtapolitical value, an assertion readily visible in parsing these musical histories.

Punk, Brian Cogan notes, "has always had an ambiguous relationship with the issue of race."²⁶ The enormous popularity in the United States of Bad Brains and Fishbone, two African American hardcore bands, did not counterbalance the racism and general isolation felt by punks of color, movingly chronicled in James Spooner's film *Afro-Punk* (2003).²⁷ Dick Hebdige offers a grounding history to the ambiguity Cogan traces. Hebdige describes the symbiotic relationship between Black British and punk communities, with West Indians providing models for articulating alienation that disaffected punks borrowed. "Certain features" of punk aesthetics were, writes Hebdige, "lifted directly from the black West Indian rude and Rasta styles."²⁸ Despite, or perhaps because of, reggae's status as "a black hole around which punk composes itself,"²⁹ punk exhibits a fair amount of racial antipathy due, in Hebdige's psychoanalysis, to the fact that while Black Britons could place themselves beyond the pale in an imagined elsewhere, punks "were bound to a Britain which had no foreseeable future,"³⁰ condemned to an alienation without catharsis.

The majority of scholarly analyses of punk's racial antagonism, however, are predicated on the erasure of punks of color from musical history. Brian Cogan, who writes about "Punk and Race" dutifully in his encyclopedia,³¹ manages to talk about seminal Chican@ punk acts like the Bags and the Zeros, which he misspells as "Zeroes,"³² without noting their Mexican American ethnicity. Similarly, Andy Greenwald waxes eloquent about the band Jawbreaker and never mentions J Church, their Bay Area compatriots, with whom they toured

²⁵ Muschert, "Action or Agency?," 2.

²⁶ Cogan, 166.

²⁷ James Spooner, dir., *Afro-Punk* (Image Entertainment, 2003). DVD.

²⁸ Hebdige, 65. Tavi Nyong'o, in "Punk'd Theory," *Social Text*, 23, 84–85 (2005), 19–34, 24, gives Hebdige a great deal of credit for reading "'race' into styles that conspicuously dismiss black style," but takes him to task for his inability to account for punk rock's racialized homophobia. Nyong'o's excavation of "punk's" etymology as African American slang for male, homosexual sex offers a metacritical gloss to my investigation here of brown, queer, emo.

²⁹ Hebdige 67.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 64.

³¹ Cogan, 166.

³² *Ibid.*, 258.

and recorded, fronted by Asian American rocker Lance Hahn. With the exception of Martin Sorrondeguy's documentary *Beyond the Screams/Mas allá de los gritos* (1999) and Michelle Habbell-Pallán's work in *Loca Motion* (2005),³³ the history and significance of Chican@ and Latin@ punk is rarely recognized in studies of the genre, and "race," if it is discussed at all, refers largely to African American musicians, or to white punks' racial anxieties.

As Habbell-Pallán's research reveals, brown punk addressed social inequality and racism, forming cross-cultural alliances amongst a diverse body of artists.³⁴ Chican@ punks were able to appropriate "British youth musical subculture [and] invent local cultural practices that allowed them to express their realities in a public context."³⁵ While the seizing of punk aesthetics to further racial justice is understandable, the Chican@ and Latin@ embrace of emo is less clear, and invites Berlant's and Illouz's methodologies.

"NINGÚN REGGAETONERO NOS DIRÁ PUTOS!"³⁶

In both Mexican and US Latin@ communities, emo music is perceived as foreign, as the violent response to emos in Querétaro and elsewhere makes clear. Emo, Mexican critics argue, is an outside influence, not a *sui generis* culture. In both the US and Mexican contexts, therefore, appreciation of emo music signals cultural imperialism, the visible emblem of a transnational, economic colonialism.

This argument has long been a feature of discussions of rock music in Latin America, however, and is not specific to emo. Beginning in the late 1950s and early 1960s, rock was seen by Latin American governments and intellectuals as an unwanted US import, "at best, a distracting influence from the more urgent task of revolution, and at worst, the cultural component of what was perceived to be a blatant imperialist offensive."³⁷ Given its proximity

³³ Martin Sorrondeguy, dir. *Beyond the Screams Mas Alla De Los Gritos: A U. S. Latino Hardcore Punk Documentary* (Chicago: Lengua Armada: Video Data Bank, 1999). Videorecording. Michelle Habbell-Pallán, *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2005).

³⁴ Habbell-Pallán criticizes studies of punk, such as Hebdige's, that "present punk culture as a monolithic, white-boy-only fad" (173). She examines the rich and varied terrain of brown punk, ranging from Los Bros. Hernández's comic series *Love and Rockets* to the films of Jim Mendiola, and musical acts like the Brat, the Bags, Los Illegals, the Zeros, and the Plugz, who played all over Los Angeles, from the west side to the east side, in the 1970s.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁶ Elias, "Emos y punkeros." "Nobody who listens to reggaeton music is going to call us fags" (anonymous riot participant).

³⁷ Deborah Pacini Hernandez, Héctor D. Fernández l'Hoeste, and Eric Zolov, eds., *Rockin' Las Américas: The Global Politics of Rock in Latin/o America* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 6.

to the United States, this sentiment was even more acute in Mexico, where rock music and political protest existed in parallel universes throughout the 1960s. Leftist intellectuals believed that rock musicians were “mere cheerleaders for the Mexican economic ‘miracle,’ having been co-opted by bourgeois ideology.”³⁸ A native Mexican rock scene did not begin to emerge until the late 1980s, well after the massacre at Tlatelolco in 1968 and the Avandáro festival in 1971.³⁹ The stigma of cultural imperialism attached to rock has never been fully transcended despite the existence of rich, homegrown punk and *rock en español* scenes today.⁴⁰ As Eric Zolov notes, Mexico has a short memory when it comes to rock music, and this fractious history is today “barely recalled.”⁴¹ If it were, Mexican anti-emos might see their attempts to exclude emo music as analogous to previous generations’ unsuccessful attempts to outlaw rock and roll.

Though there may be widespread criticism of emo as a foreign import, the debate amongst Mexican youths about what constitutes “real” Mexican emo suggests that some do view it as a native genre. On Urban Dictionary, for example, poster InferNeko distinguishes between US bands like My Chemical Romance and “national bands” such as Panda, whom InferNeko refers to as “true Mexican emos,” and differentiates from other Mexican acts like Allison, Kudai, and Nikki Klan.⁴² The last of these, according to InferNeko, are cynical sellouts representing the mainstream’s commodification of “true Mexican” emo culture.⁴³ Fans of mainstream pop’s version of emo are “prepy [*sic*] people,” says InferNeko, a designation signaling the latent class antagonism fueling much of the anti-emo violence.⁴⁴

The majority of Mexican emos are young teens comfortably situated in Mexico’s upper middle classes.⁴⁵ Ultimately, however, these attacks are not primarily about class, about who listens to better music, or about who has more valid political goals; they are about the meaning of sentiment and affect

³⁸ Eric Zolov, “La Onda Chicana: Mexico’s Forgotten Rock Counterculture,” in Pacini Hernández, Fernández l’Hoeste, and Zolov, 32.

³⁹ On 2 October 1968, ten days before the opening of the 1968 Olympic Games, Mexican government forces opened fire on crowds of protestors assembled in the Plaza de Tres Culturas in Mexico City’s Tlatelolco neighborhood, killing hundreds. Three years later, a few hours’ drive from Mexico City, a music festival in Avandáro drew large, apolitical crowds to an event that has been largely forgotten in Mexican cultural history. Zolov.

⁴⁰ Maritza Urteaga Castro-Pozo documents the emergence of Mexican punk scenes in the aftermath of Avandáro in *Por Los Territorios Del Rock: Identidades Juveniles Y Rock Mexicano* (Mexico D. F.: Causa Joven, 1998).
⁴¹ Zolov, 42.

⁴² InferNeko, ‘Emo Mexican,’ www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Emo%20Mexican, accessed 1 May 2012.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ See Ioan Grillo, “Mexico’s Emo-Bashing Problem,” *Time*, Thursday, 27 March 2008, available at www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1725839,00.html, accessed 16 July 2009, for further discussion of class politics and Mexican emo.

in the public sphere. Who has the right to feel in the Americas, where are we allowed to express those feelings, and what does that expression mean? The problem with Mexican emos is not, however, that they have feelings, or that they flaunt their difference. As Muschert argues, societies need difference to offset normative behavior, and as Berlant and Illouz demonstrate, public emotionality is necessary fuel for the fiction of state and economic rationality. Mexico has, throughout its history, harbored its fair share of *tribus urbanas*, or popular youth subcultures. The problem with Mexican emos is that they feel the wrong things. As an anonymous reader wrote to *La Jornada*, “depression is a sickness, not an ideology. It’s not healthy to cut yourself to be cool.”⁴⁶ Another reader wrote to *Reforma*, “Instead of asking for tolerance, they should make a huge campaign with psychologists and psychiatrists to find out what is happening to these kids who call themselves emos.”⁴⁷

Alternatively, the emos are criticized for having no feelings at all, for simply succumbing to a transnational commodity culture; though, to be fair, both Illouz and Berlant argue that emotions are commoditized, hence such criticism is perhaps unwarranted. The emos’ depressive affect and their explicit rejection of the political render them, to a certain extent, unmanageable within the Mexican system of recognizable *tribus*. The reaction against them can be read then not as a top-down repression of revolutionary feeling, but as the public’s own self-censorship of the juxtapolitical.

Berlant explains the juxtapolitical as a largely aesthetic realm that operates with awareness of, though not in direct relation to, the political, grounding intimate communities that shore up the individual’s desire for complacent normalcy.⁴⁸ Mexican emo’s intimate publics deploy a strikingly feminine, or androgynous, personal aesthetic whose putative deviation from the norm has clearly hit a Mexican nerve. Emos’ jeans and black eyeliner are deemed unsightly for young women, and altogether unacceptable for young men. “They’re fags, they dress like women,” one attacker told a reporter.⁴⁹ Since the 1901 arrest of Los 41, a group of cross-dressing men enjoying a male-only, private party in Mexico City, sentimentality has been inextricable from femininity and homosexuality in the Mexican public imaginary.⁵⁰ Androgynous emo fashion creates a powerful image in Mexico of emo as queer culture and

⁴⁶ Olivares and Vargas, ‘Los Emos’: “no existe una ideología basada en la depresión, ésta es una enfermedad. No es sano cortarse por ser cool.”

⁴⁷ Marion Lloyd. “In Mexico, ‘Emo’ Subculture Won’t Be Subdued,” *Houston Chronicle*, 6 April 2008, available at www.chron.com/dispatch/story.mpl/front/5679356.html, accessed July 11, 2008.

⁴⁸ Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 3.

⁴⁹ Elias, ‘Emos y punkeros’: “Son putos, se visten como mujeres.”

⁵⁰ See Robert McKee Irwin, Ed McCaughan, and Michelle Rocío Nasser, eds., *The Famous 41: Sexuality and Social Control in Mexico, c.1901* (New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

has led to heated debates over emo sexual identity. Much of the anti-emo violence has had clear homophobic motivations, as *SerGay*, Mexico's national gay magazine, has reported.⁵¹

While some emos are queer-identified, many are not and resent the association. As one emo told a reporter, "We won't let anybody who listens to reggaeton music call us fags, discriminate against or insult us."⁵² If Mexican emos by and large do not identify as queer, and if their fashion choices do not necessarily correspond to homosexual behavior, then how are we to understand their gender play and provocation of Mexico's heteronormative patriarchy? What, furthermore, is the relationship between their queer pretensions and the desire for normalcy suggested by Berlant's theory of the juxtapolitical? Put yet another way, the Mexican emos' playful flirtation with queer signification; their intense individualism; and their rejection of communal, political goals raises the question of what happens at the intersection of emo, queerness and *mexicanidad*.

TOTALLY GAY, OR CRAZY SEXY COOL?

Dablia Season productively explores that intersection with a queer, Chicana protagonist, Desirée Garcia, who shares the musical and fashion sensibility of the Mexican emos, creating a transnational trajectory of queer, emo *mexicanidad*. Reading Desirée in conversation with the Mexican emos opens up their subcultural gender play on both sides of the border to feminist critique. The Mexican emos' performances of affect – queer or not – are still very much set on a masculine stage and organized around symbols of masculinity and patriarchal anxieties, leaving little room for discussions of female sexuality or affect.

This kind of gender disparity is a constitutive feature of emo. Andy Greenwald notes, "Women's roles in emo songs were frequently reductive, distancing."⁵³ Jessica Hopper, punk veteran and music journalist, lambasted emo as a genre that disempowers women and foregrounds male angst. When the mainstream media coopted emo as a marketable sound, writes Hopper, it

⁵¹ "Cobertura Especial Sobre El Ataque a Emos Y Gays En La Glorieta De Insurgentes," *SerGay OnLine: El Magazine Nacional Gay de México*, 16 March 2008, available at www.sergay.com.mx/blog/2008/03/16/cobertura-especial-sobre-el-ataque-a-emos-y-gays-en-la-glorieta-de-insurgentes, accessed 14 July 2008. *SerGay* has dedicated a section of its website to tracking the attacks because of the ways in which the attackers have conflated emos with queers and how the attacks have come to include violence against queer-identified Mexicans. The attackers, the editors of *SerGay* write, "se reunieron en este lugar [Glorieta de Insurgentes] para atacar a emos y gays por igual" (met up here [Glorieta de Insurgentes, a public square in Mexico City] to attack emos and gays equally).

⁵² Elias: "No vamos a permitir que cualquier reggaetonero nos diga que somos putos, que nos discrimine o nos esté insultando." ⁵³ Greenwald, *Nothing Feels Good*, 45.

became “just another forum where women were locked in a stasis of outside observation, observing ourselves through the eyes of others.”⁵⁴ In *The Aftermath of Feminism*, Angela McRobbie describes a similar situation in her analysis of fashion photography, which serves in the book as an allegory of women’s loss of feminism. Images featuring seemingly liberated, insouciant women present viewers with visions of female agency suggesting equality and the end of gender discrimination.⁵⁵ Just as women listening to emo music can only, in Hopper’s words, observe “ourselves through the eyes of others,” fashion photography offers women not liberation but opportunities to reflect on themselves as objects.

Such reflection, McRobbie argues, encourages women to assume control of their “look” to “manage the power” that renders them second-class citizens and leaves them “without the means to challenge the symbolic order.”⁵⁶ This state of disempowered “empowerment” also describes Latin@s like Desirée for whose benefit countless marketing and political campaigns are designed in the United States, but who are granted no real political power and continue, in fact, to be legislated against. It also describes the lives of Mexican youth whose opportunities are curtailed as their government fails to adequately meet their needs.

McRobbie establishes a causal relationship between such manipulations of subjectivity; the political loss of feminism; and the “normative discontent” of depression, eating disorders, cutting, and other self-harming practices plaguing young girls.⁵⁷ Feminism, which McRobbie defines as the political, communal love for women,⁵⁸ can no longer be the bulwark against such normative discontents that it once might have been, she argues, but she suggests that subcultural communities might offer the communal, political love and possibilities for human connection that feminism once did.⁵⁹ Though McRobbie finds the threat of market cooption more problematic than does Berlant, both allow emo to serve the subcultural function McRobbie describes: bringing Latin@s and Mexican@s together in a powerful affective, if relatively amorphous and apolitical, community. McRobbie’s argument also, however, opens a space from which to question emo’s gender politics.

Emo might salve some wounds, but it also inflicts harm, as Hopper notes, trapping Latinas and Mexicanas in a double bind of race and gender. Desirée Garcia, the protagonist of *Dablia Season*, makes clear that flirtations with

⁵⁴ Jessica Hopper, “Emo: Where the Girls Aren’t,” in Mickey Hart, ed., *Da Capo Best Music Writing 2004: The Year’s Finest Writing on Rock, Hip-Hop, Jazz, Pop, Country, & More* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2004), 122–28, 124.

⁵⁵ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2009), 101.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 101–2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 98.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 121.

queerness allow Latin@ and Mexican@ emos to elliptically address that double bind. She refuses to be objectified in terms of race or gender, and though she certainly expresses discontents, they are hardly normative. The novella opens the summer before Desirée is to begin high school. She is fifteen when her “petals unfurled,” revealing her to be “a dahlia, an artist, a goth chick.”⁶⁰ Hoping to “knock some Hispanic sense” into her, Desirée’s parents send her to Guadalajara to spend the summer with relatives. The rest of the novella traces the effects of that trip as Desirée negotiates her identity as an Americanized member of a fringe subculture in relation to her Mexican cousins, as well as a Mexican goth in her largely Anglo, US high school. Desirée moves back and forth between the US and Mexico throughout *Dahlia Season*, travels that set up the novella’s exploration of boundaries between countries, cultures, people, languages, minds, and bodies. At bottom, *Dahlia Season* is very much about the idea of borders, with Desirée as both a border-crosser and a border in her own right, negotiating the space between her Mexican family, the “Chicano nerds” that are her parents (*DS* 113), and her Anglo friends.

Negotiating this space proves exceedingly difficult for Desirée, however, because of her undiagnosed obsessive–compulsive disorder and Tourette’s syndrome, which rage uncontrolled until after she has graduated from college. These illnesses could be read as versions of the normative discontents McRobbie argues follow in the wake of feminism’s loss. That loss, however, in McRobbie’s analysis, involves a renunciation of womanhood that McRobbie connects to Judith Butler’s “heterosexual melancholia,” her reworking of Freud on woman’s rejection of mother-love.⁶¹ But Desirée renounces nothing; her lesbianism is the one thing in which she consistently finds joy. Rather than expressions of patriarchally induced melancholy, Desirée’s illnesses are a way for her to physically resist patriarchal control. Her body is an important hinge in the novel: the locus not of heterosexual, but perhaps of Latin@, melancholia.

Dahlia Season is thus about bodies as much as it is about borders; it investigates the language of the body and explores how the body registers emotional and geopolitical dislocation. In this, the novella’s characters have much in common with the Mexican emos who also deploy their bodies as a means of finding their way and establishing their place in a complex, ever-shifting, global marketplace.

Desirée’s body, however, is initially the source of confusion and suffering. “My thoughts,” as she describes her teenage self, “ran in speedy circles, like starved hounds at the racetrack . . . I shook and sniffed and dug at my scalp and

⁶⁰ Myriam Gurba, *Dahlia Season: Stories & a Novella* (San Francisco: Manic D Press, 2007), 66; hereafter cited in the text as *DS*.

⁶¹ McRobbie, 94.

couldn't stop touching my hair" (*DS* 76). Bodies figure prominently in *Dablia Season* and Desirée's own sense of being caught between the United States and Mexico is figured physically. These internal conflicts of emotional geography are mediated by three bodies in particular. She identifies keenly with the Mexican Santa Inocencia, whose body, which Desirée visits in Guadalajara, "took its sweet time rotting" (*DS* 73). Santa Inocencia was a "Roman girl-martyr" murdered by her father for becoming a Christian. Desirée connects with Inocencia's cultural rebellion as well as with her "fleshless phalanges" and "crown of fake flowers" (*DS* 74). Inocencia was caught between her family's patriarchy and the putative liberation of Christianity, whose own patriarchy has preserved her body, if not her spirit, not unlike the photos McRobbie analyzes.

Desirée is likewise trapped between two physical powers. She identifies with Inocencia, but also with her Mexican cousin Nito, struck by polio at a young age, left with one leg noticeably shorter than the other. "Nito," thinks Desirée, "could not control his extremity like I couldn't control myself sometimes" (*DS* 76). Nito represents Desirée's physical pull towards Mexico, while Nito's counterpart, El Tecolote (the Owl), Desirée's student later in the novella, represents her physical connection to the United States. E. T., as Desirée refers to him, limps, like Nito. Also, like Nito, E. T. believes himself to be in love with Desirée, and seeks, again like Nito, to control her. Caught between two men, two physical impairments, two countries, is Desirée, pictured at the novella's start on arrival in Guadalajara having "never stood on foreign soil alone before" and tapping upon that soil "furiously" with a perfectly functional foot (*DS* 68) whose perfection suggests a reading of her illnesses as geopolitical angst rather than feminine capitulation to patriarchy.

Though *Dablia Season's* bodies represent cultural and political conflict, those bodies, and the borders that divide them, are mediated through language and performance. This emphasis on language presents the novella with an unresolved paradox: Desirée attempts to free herself from linguistic constraints through an embrace of her body, yet that embrace can only be expressed through language, which suggests that her freedom is ultimately illusory. Language, in the novella, is both a core element of culture as well as a site of cultural resistance. The Mexicanness of Desirée's parents, for example, is presented as primarily a fact of language. Her father is "a big pun man" who studied linguistics in Mexico and is a professor of languages in the United States, and who trades in "word riddles" that have all the resonance of "Aramaic" to Desirée's mother, a chemist, whose alterity is depicted through a dual linguistic alienation: of disposition and lexicon (*DS* 112). Language creates a sense of distance between Desirée and her parents, but also between her and the dominant, Anglo culture of her hometown. Studying *The Scarlet Letter*, Desirée fantasizes "that Hester Prynne was a young Mexican girl who

wore a black sweater with a red “M” on it,” at once writing herself into US cultural history at the same time that her identification with Hester expresses Desirée’s deep, literal alienation (*DS* 108).⁶²

Desirée’s playful depiction of her own, tenuous linguistic privilege suggests that she does not have total access to the cultural knowledge it contains. This is true for Spanish as well as for English. For example, Desirée’s aunt refers to her cousin Nito as “un hippie,” a designation Desirée blithely dismisses. “To Tia, hippiedom spelled danger, but by my sophisticated American standards, Nito only rated as a garden-variety malcontent” (*DS* 76). The use of “sophisticated” indicates Desirée’s sardonic self-deprecation. Clearly she is meant to be missing something, but the novella does not reveal what that something is. Desirée mistranslates “hippie,” reading it in the US rather than Mexican context, where *jipis* were the depoliticized embracers of a European-inspired countercultural style of the 1960s and 1970s.⁶³ After Tlatelolco,⁶⁴ the *jipis* of “La Onda Chicana,” Mexico’s late 1960s, early 1970s counterculture, sought community apart from the politicized, Mexican left, taking “Chicano” from US activists and deploying it in Mexico to signal a loss of culture, a loss of identity, a nomadic state between an oppressive Mexican nationalism and Northern cultural imperialism.⁶⁵ To call Nito a *jipi* (not “un hippie”) thus connects the disaffected Desirée with her equally rootless cousin in a trick of language lost on the protagonist.

Language presents a border that in some ways is insurmountable, but in others is a place to take a resistant stand, as with the several characters Desirée encounters who do not, or will not, speak Spanish, from her friend Laura who is half-Costa Rican and half-Puerto Rican (*DS* 110), or Paco, who “looked straight up Indian. Olmec. Tarascan,” but declares, after a contemplative hit from a bong, “No se habla español, man” (“Spanish is not spoken,” *DS* 122). Language is also, however, a mode of striking back at such effects of cultural imperialism. Vacationing with her Mexican relatives near Lake Chapala, Desirée reflects on the town’s history as a Huichol fishing village, before a “battalion of old, white farts had pushed the Indians away from their life-giving water” (*DS* 78). Watching an older couple from the car, Desirée imagines them as Bob and Karen from Saskatchewan, and invents a conversation between them, fabricating such details of their lives as Karen’s macramé business and the accomplishments of their daughter Tawny, a figure skater (*DS* 79).

This aggressive rewriting of the Anglo invader correlates neatly with Desirée’s scene of imagined violence at Club Ajijic, Lake Chapala’s newest

⁶² In Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel, Hester Prynne is banished to the outskirts of her settlement and forced to wear a scarlet “A” when she refuses to name the father of her child, who is clearly not her absent husband.

⁶³ Zolov, “La Onda Chicana,” 33.

⁶⁴ See note 39 above.

⁶⁵ Zolov, 35.

disco, which Desirée describes as a “bored jet setters’ hangout.” The club is decorated as a garish, tropical fantasia that leads Desirée to imagine one of the huge, papier-mâché parrots falling and knocking a patron unconscious. This person would fully recover from their injury “except for a life long speech impediment like a stutter or a lisp” (*DS* 85). Desirée’s response to a cultural imperialism signaled by loss of language is to seize imaginative control of the language of imperialism.

Language is such a crucial part of Desirée’s teen angst in part because she is constrained by discourses both personal, with her father’s multilingualism and her mother’s preference for Spanish, and institutional. She stops writing to Nito, who has fallen in love with her, because her “Spanish writing was only slightly above googoo gaga, leche [milk], agua [water] level” and she resents the hours wasted making mistakes and flipping through dictionaries (*DS* 95). Undaunted, Nito mails Desirée *un hechizo*, a spell: a scented, circular piece of paper covered in curious writing that Desirée cannot decipher. “It wasn’t IndoEuropean. Not Asian. [She] guessed it wasn’t African either” (*DS* 130). The *hechizo*, according to T-Rex, proprietor of the local “magick” shop, is designed to obtain “total control over [Desirée’s] mind, heart, body, and soul” (*DS* 134), through a writing that Desirée vigorously resists. El Tecolote, Desirée’s ESL student, attempts something similar when he asks Desirée to cosign a loan with him so that he may purchase a duplex, in one half of which he offers to let Desirée live rent-free (*DS* 175).

The most affecting ways in which Desirée simultaneously resists and capitulates to language concern her illnesses, however. Her Tourette’s expresses itself in physical, as well as verbal, tics. Her first major episode comes the summer before college, and is primarily linguistic in nature. “Eager? An eager beaver? Eager beaver with a fucking meat cleaver! Why was I rhyming? Rye, Rye, Rye, Rye syndrome,” she prattles, before desperately fighting the urge to yell “Pussy!” at her local librarian (*DS* 145). In college, she resists the diagnosis of kindly Dr. Rose because the pamphlet Dr. Rose gives her about obsessive-compulsive disorder does not contain “any descriptions of Chicana dykes worrying they might become serial killers” (*DS* 162). When, however, she later finds an apt description of her symptoms in a guide to OCD given to her by her girlfriend, her “hands started to tremble” and she cries tears of joy (*DS* 168).

Language is a powerful defining force for Desirée in terms of how it simultaneously both constrains and liberates her body, as with her friend Laura’s shirt, the balance of whose phrase “Double the Rican Double the Fun” (*DS* 110) delights and soothes Desirée, much as her own shirt, reading “Tit for Tat,” does at novella’s end (*DS* 188). Much of the angst Desirée experiences as a result of her illness comes from her body’s struggles with language. Her elbows jerk because, she says, “my body didn’t want me to lie” (*DS* 147). Style – like her bondage suspenders (*DS* 101), her “Torn black fishnets.

Mini-kilts. Christian Death t-shirts. Blood smeared across [her] mouth" (DS 66) – becomes a language of its own with which Desirée can resist being written by others. Nito, too, enacts a stylistic rebellion, but in a language that Desirée cannot understand. To her, his purple T-shirt, tight jeans, and ponytail are incomprehensible. "Gee it was weird," she muses. "I stared straight at the tight red pants. I guessed shit that came off as totally gay back home came off as crazy/sexy/cool here" (DS 91). For both Nito and Desirée style is a way to write a resistant self, and in their gestures towards the iconoclastic, Desirée and Nito support McRobbie's reading of subculture as a means of connecting with others, of recapturing communal, political love.

Stylistically, however, the Mexican version of resistance does not compel a Chicana chafing against patriarchal control. Though the substance of Nito's style remains impermeable to Desirée, her appreciation of his outfit suggests, despite her comical failures, a longing to connect with Mexico and *chicanismo*. She returns to the United States with an idealized vision of Mexico that she deploys as a defense against Anglo culture. "Like a bad, bad American, I romanticized my stay there, fetishizing the experience," Desirée remembers. Taken by her "ethnic roots" she "sketched still lives of tropical fruits to the strains of mariachi records" and braids her hair like Frida Kahlo's while reading the *Communist Manifesto* (DS 94). "A long tradition mandated that as a Chicana I go through a red phase. And so I did," she quips (DS 95). But such a performance cannot sustain itself indefinitely. Under pressure from her Anglo friends she says "not adios but buh-bye" to her ideal Mexico, realizes that her "coif didn't read neo-subversive. It read Swiss Miss," and begins to listen more closely to her father, who, "as much as he loves Mexico . . . talks a lot of crap about it" (DS 96). Desirée's brief infatuation with Mexican icons allows her to understand how those icons mask Mexican reality, and also to see how culture, like her own style, is a performance in and of itself that bears little tangible connection to the real. This is something Desirée senses while in Mexico. Her observation that Fermina, her aunt's maid, sets "the volume on a nearby TV high enough for her to listen to telenovelas as she tended to La Casa's Precolumbian art" crisply juxtaposes the fetishization of Mexico's native past with its present reality of class and race disparity (DS 80).

"Without Inocencia's hands or Nito's legs" to guide her, Desirée comes to see authenticity of culture, of the body, even her own alternative style, as yet another controlling discourse. In rejecting her idealized vision of Mexico, Desirée also rejects Chican@ iconography, scoffing at her own "red phase" and an outmoded *chicanismo* that blithely accepts the romanticized revolutionary mantle adopted by the contemporary Mexican state. The novella offers a different kind of Chican@ identity, one grounded, like that of Desirée's "Chicano nerd" parents, in a clear-eyed critique of Mexican inequality, one that can build a transnational youth culture capable of listening to and

learning from *jipis* like Nito. Though style can be coopted, as McRobbie argues, it can still trace the outlines of an intimate public that functions, as Berlant describes, in the juxtapolitical realm.

Desirée and Nito's transnational intimate public is grounded in a *chicanidad* that bears a complex relation to race and ethnicity. When, for example, T-Rex, who is black and has thrown her white friends into what Desirée describes as a "black panic," examines Nito's *hechizo*, he asks Desirée what her cousin "is." In response to Desirée's confusion he asks, "Is he a Wiccan?" Desirée replies, "We're Mexican. He's from Mexico," implying a difference between the two. Moreover, positing "Wiccan" against "Mexican" suggests a connection between Desirée's Mexicanness and her punk/goth aesthetic and interest in the occult (*DS* 134). Both alienate Desirée from the Anglo majority of her hometown, but each serves also to alienate her from the other. Her parents cannot understand her clothes, and her friends, who call Desirée's Vicente Fernández records "wetback music" (*DS* 96), and have no interest in Mexican culture.⁶⁶

While such dismissal potentially elevates the importance of race in the novella, Desirée actually agrees with her friends and puts the records away. Gurba downplays traditional cultural or racial icons, like Fernández's music, and elevates discourses of style and disability. Yet, for all her dismissal of things Mexican, Desirée spends quite a bit of time pondering racial and ethnic identity. She is embarrassed by her friends' behavior in T-Rex's shop, and she "felt a tiny pang of solidarity" with Nito when the police ask him to move from her front lawn. "Our white neighbors had spied a Mexican with a knapsack studying Hegel on our grass," she explains. "Highly suspicious. Better nip this in the bud now or soon there'd be drive-bys" (*DS* 114). However, Desirée's peripheral awareness of race cedes importance to her sense of her own particularity; race, in other words, becomes an abstraction mediated through the specificity of her own body.

The physicality of Desirée's illness – her tics and obsessions with her skin and hair – renders the physical alienation of race and ethnicity, as does her sexual desire. "Thank God I was still a homosexual," she thinks, when Nito's *hechizo* fails to control her. Desirée's lesbianism frames the novella and drives the bulk of the action; it is also how Desirée parses the links between ethnicity and style. When her white girlfriend Blaze dumps her for Hannah Hills, "Santa Bonita's prettiest honky," Desirée feels the rejection keenly (*DS* 103). "I hated this Aryan maiden [Hannah]. She had a tan. I was so devoted to my subculture I covered my face with veiled pillbox hats . . . I wore gloves even.

⁶⁶ Vicente Fernández is a Mexican icon, a *ranchera* (Mexican ballad) singer who, while relatively unknown in Anglo America, has sold millions of albums worldwide and continues to fill stadiums with his live shows.

In California” (*DS* 104). The chiasmatic irony of the tan white girl and the pale veiled Chicana is delightfully quirky, but it also evokes the distance Desirée must travel in order to perform her subculture’s maudlin sentimentality. Breaking up with Blaze inaugurates a period of celibacy during which Desirée dwells on AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (*DS* 137). Her insecurity about her unruly body and its desires drive her to desperate, at times comical, attempts at controlling her unruly body.

By the end of the novella, however, Desirée has come to terms with her body, embracing rather than fighting her tics and desires. She lives happily in Oakland, with her girlfriend Rae, who has convinced Desirée to quit stripping and to take a job teaching English as a second language. Nito may have named his first child after her (*DS* 189), but the story ends by presenting Desirée as having taken linguistic control. “Demonstrating verbs on [her] hands and knees, pretending to be an exotic noun, [Desirée is] usually too busy to be interrupted by tics” (*DS* 171). With this triumphant conclusion the novella suggests that a kind of resistant truth resides in the body. Desirée’s freedom relies on her ability to experience and enjoy, rather than know, or be told about, her body.

The blending of body and language, depicted in Desirée’s physical performance of words to her students, invokes a certain freedom from controlling discourses, and yet that freedom comes from embracing an alternate set of institutional discourses that manage difference, like the explanations she finds in the book Rae gives her. Her relationship with Rae enacts a similar conventionality: she abandons life as a stripper, a profession she describes as populated by mentally ill women (*DS* 165), for staid, lesbian, domestic bliss. *Dahlia Season’s* staging of queerness and physicality as sites of resistance falls flat, therefore, as both are ultimately far less resistant than the novella imagines them to be.

Desirée’s actions, then, can be understood as structural: she embraces modes of manageable, documented difference and inhabits a subculture defined by fashionable commodities whose nature and acquisition she spends a fair bit of time describing. In abandoning her youthful style, the novella endorses a progress narrative of socialization, wherein Desirée grows up, on the one hand, or rejects queer temporality in favor of bourgeois normativity, on the other. The latter reading borrows from Judith Halberstam’s theorization of queer temporality as a logic that resists the idea that the past must condition the present, and that the future represents the present’s fruition.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 11.

As with the Mexican emos, however, such dismissal of Desirée's failed resistance is too easy. Even if the intimate publics both Desirée and the emos inhabit are not actively resistant, they are survival strategies that, as Berlant and McRobbie remind readers, warrant close consideration. These performances of hyperstylized affect, in which both Desirée and the emos engage, express a multifaceted, transnational alienation, the shared community of which projects a kind of utopian longing for something better. But what is that something else, and what do its border-crossings mean?

Berlant argues that the main utopia of the market-driven intimate public "is normativity itself . . . a condition of general belonging."⁶⁸ In *Cruising Utopia*, José Muñoz ties that utopian drive expressly to queer "ideality," which he explains as the understanding of queerness as "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the present."⁶⁹ A queer aesthetic, such as that projected by Desirée (she is, after all, still queer, no matter how domesticated or blissful) and the emos, "contains blueprints and schemata of a forward-dawning futurity," says Muñoz.⁷⁰ Halberstam makes much the same point when she distinguishes straight time, which follows a bourgeois, reproductive logic, from queer time, which embraces an unscripted future.⁷¹ Rather than dismissing Desirée and the Mexican emos for their apolitical *naïveté*, we might instead wonder about the nature of their alienation, what they have in common, and why it is articulated through a queer, emo aesthetic.

QUEER TIES THAT BIND

Both Desirée and the Mexican emos can be understood in Berlant's and Muñoz's terms as expressing a deep dissatisfaction with the present and a longing for a future whose outlines and motivations remain relatively unclear. By taking emo seriously we can begin to grasp the possibilities of that future vision. Though emo might differ on either side of the border, emphasizing the points of convergence between Desirée's and the Mexican emos' self-stylings lays the groundwork for a productively juxtapolitical reading of emo affect.

Music is the central axis around which both Desirée's and the Mexican emos' affective style revolves, and both listen to music produced primarily by musicians whose ethnic and national origins differ from their own. Desirée's "favorite crooner, Morrissey" (*DS* 137) is closely associated with US emo. He also has a very large Latin@ fan base in southern California, and Desirée's appreciation of him connects her to this community of US Latin@ emos.

⁶⁸ Berlant, *Female Complaint*, 5.

⁶⁹ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ Halberstam, 2.

Morrissey's popularity with US Latin@s has long puzzled critics and culture watchers, but is perhaps best explained by fan José Maldonado who connects Morrissey's position as a person of Irish ancestry in England to that of Latin@s in the United States. "There's that feeling of being an outsider in a place that really wasn't for you," he says.⁷²

Likewise, the music most closely associated with Mexican emos is foreign, suggesting a similar dislocation, though Mexican emos are neither cultural nor racial outsiders in the same way as US Latin@s. However, the popularity of bands like New Jersey's My Chemical Romance among Mexican emos (see, for example, InferNeko's post on Urban Dictionary) leads some to consider Mexican emos "whitewashed," thus creating a racial othering parallel to that experienced by US Latin@s.⁷³

Desirée's and the Mexican emos' attachment to foreign music implies a local isolation that Berlant suggests is a key motivating factor in the establishment of intimate publics whose forms of expression allow isolated individuals to connect "with the feeling of belonging to a larger world."⁷⁴ Desirée, in this context, can be understood as mitigating her sense of disbelonging with an emo aesthetic that allows her to feel important, which, in turn, mitigates "many kinds of structural and historical antagonism."⁷⁵ Emo, in other words, is a way for US Latin@s like Desirée to sidestep the emotional pain caused by racism and structural inequality in the United States.

While Berlant's theory does offer a way to understand Desirée, it seems less applicable to Mexican emos whose experience as Mexicans in Mexico is necessarily different from that of Latin@s in the United States. Svetlana Boym's theory of diasporic intimacy, however, which she defines as "a survivalist aesthetics of estrangement and longing," does offer a way to think about Mexican and US Latin@ emos as similarly dislocated.⁷⁶ Berlant, like Boym, sees the intimate public as a survival strategy,⁷⁷ but, for Boym, survival is explicitly tied to the pain of exile. Boym acknowledges that exile is an old and worn-out metaphor for the human condition, and she makes clear that her argument is about "actual exile," which eludes the writer's skill. Exile has no poetics; it is, instead, an "art of survival."⁷⁸ Emo, as practiced by US Latin@s, thus must be understood as such, as the aesthetic manifestation of diasporic intimacy.

⁷² Cole Haddon, "Make Like Morrissey: Passion Show," *Phoenix New Times*, 31 May 2007, available at www.phoenixnewtimes.com/content/printVersion/453643, accessed 10 Sept. 2008.

⁷³ Lisa Chavez, "Emo Mexican," www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Emo%20Mexican, accessed 1 May 2012. ⁷⁴ Berlant, 4. ⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), xix.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 2. ⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 256.

Boym posits that diasporic longing can affect immigrants as well as “alienated natives,” such as the Mexican emos, in so far as the sense of displacement and the object of longing it generates is neither a “nostalgia for the homeland” nor a “restoration of the past.”⁷⁹ It is “not really a place called home, but this sense of intimacy with the world.”⁸⁰ What has been lost, for emos on both sides of the border, is not an imagined real, but a general feeling of belonging.

Emo’s critics have generally assumed feelings to be as devoid of political content as emo music, however, and feelings are even more suspect when articulated through such flamboyant performances as those of *Desirée* and the Mexican emos. But Boym argues that the intimacy produced by diaspora, in the foreigner’s acknowledging a fellow foreigner, is predicated on performance. It is always elliptical, “approached only through indirection and intimation.”⁸¹ “Immigrants always perceive themselves onstage,” she writes, a dissociation that precludes real intimacy, and demands, as a necessary defense mechanism, an assumption of pretence and performance in all action.⁸² If emo is emotional performance, how are we to understand those emotions? Are they any less real, or significant, and, as highly individual registers of feeling, do they, no matter how diasporic, bear any relation to the political?

To a large extent these questions are moot if we are reading emo juxtapolitically, but the questions do return us to the critique of emo as depoliticized punk, and it is worth noting that the emo/punk divide – which might hold true in Anglo music history – is not present in the history of US Latin@ music. The 1990s, during which emo’s commercial market share grew, also saw the rise of Latin@ hardcore scenes across the United States. Bands like *Los Crudos*, *Bread and Circuits*, and *Kontra Ataque* formed, as Martin Sorrendeguy documents in *Beyond the Screams*, in response to such political events as the 1994 uprising in Chiapas and domestic struggles like Propositions 209 and 187 in California.⁸³

Emo and punk scenes are synchronic for US Latin@s, not diachronic in the ways depicted in Anglo histories of the genres. Sorrendeguy, who founded and sang lead for *Los Crudos*, explains that “for us punk didn’t mean breaking the

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 254.

⁸³ On 1 January 1994 native Mexicans rose up in arms in Chiapas, Mexico’s southernmost state, against the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement, which they saw as exacerbating tensions and inequalities between them and wealthy ranching and agribusiness interests. In 1996 California voters passed Proposition 209, a ballot initiative designed to make the consideration of race in university admissions, state hiring, and the awarding of state contracts a crime. Proposition 209 built on the provisions of Proposition 187, which aimed to prohibit illegal immigrants from accessing state medical, educational, and other welfare services. Proposition 187 was approved by voters but later struck down in federal court as unconstitutional.

ties with our community . . . it meant working with them to get to a new level.”⁸⁴ All the musicians interviewed in his film express similarly deep political commitments that evolve from their experiences of inequality and anger over their families’ social location in the United States. Fernando Lozana, Youth Against’s drummer, says, “The music, all its volume, the noise, it isn’t just noise, it’s feelings that are coming out and trying to reach a larger community.”⁸⁵ The political, for these musicians, is intensely personal and emotional, which makes the case for a juxtapolitical reading of US Latin@ emo.

The same juxtaposition cannot be enacted for emo in Mexico, however, where popular bands are either hugely successful US imports like My Chemical Romance, or studio creations like Nikki Clan.⁸⁶ Neither the musicians nor their audiences have publicly expressed any commitments to issues affecting Mexico or Mexicans. Again, however, the explicitly political context for these youth subcultures is less significant than the juxtapolitical similarities, such as their queer aesthetic, found in emo communities on both sides of the US–Mexico border. A large provocation for the anti-emo violence in Mexico, and a core element of Desirée’s self-styling, is a subversion of patriarchal heteronormativity.

Following Boym’s assertion that exiles always imagine themselves as performing, we can read emo gender play as part of a hyperstylized emotional performance that makes diasporic angst visible through the body. Queerness, as a function of Latin@ diaspora, must, in this case, be read elliptically; as Boym cautions, the intimacy it promises is “not an unmediated emotional fusion, but only a precarious affection.”⁸⁷ I do not mean this as a critique of queer affection, only as a suggestion that queer, Mexican and Latin@, emo style be understood allusively.

It alludes to the general feeling of disbelonging, what Boym describes as the lost “sense of intimacy with the world”⁸⁸ experienced by the US Latin@ diaspora and young Mexicans who, as the Mexican press has observed, feel their opportunities shrinking as Mexico’s domestic struggles continue to challenge the nation both at home and on a global stage. Feelings are unsatisfyingly vague, however, to critics, culture watchers, and the anti-emo Mexican public. Queer, Mexican and Latin@, emo style gestures towards, in Berlant’s terms, the political, to Mexican class antagonism and economic crises, and to US racism and xenophobia, but it cannot comment directly on

⁸⁴ Sorrondeguy, *Beyond the Screams*.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ Mexicali-based Nikki Clan is a studio creation of veteran Mexican producer Abelardo Vázquez, as Evan Gutierrez notes at “Nikki Clan: Biography,” www.allmusic.com/artist/nikki-clan-p1029414/biography, accessed 1 May 2012.

⁸⁷ Boym, 252.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 251.

these things, only elliptically, and the ties that bind them are affective, if not causal. That affective performance signals a simultaneous desire for and refusal of connection, a desire for belonging, but a refusal of nostalgia.

Desirée's music and fashion choices, along with those of the Mexican emos, thus represent concurrent attempts to connect through the shared pain of loss while also rejecting cultural nostalgia: Desirée says "buh-bye" to her Mexican kitsch (*DS* 96), and the Mexican emos establish themselves in a tradition apart from their country's musical history. This transnational, emo community turns its eyes not towards the past but towards an unscripted future full of undefined hope and redefined boundaries of race, ethnicity, nation, and opportunity. Such utopian longing is, according to José Muñoz, the provenance of an unabashedly queer aesthetic that imagines a future predicated on the collective betterment of all.⁸⁹ It is this future towards which queer, Latin@ and Mexican, emo style alludes, on both sides of the border.

⁸⁹ Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 11.