

HEAVY METAL HUMOR:
CONSIDERING CARNIVAL IN HEAVY METAL CULTURE

A Thesis

by

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ABSTRACT

What can 15th century France and heavy metal have in common? In *Heavy Metal Humor*, Gary Powell explores metal culture through the work of Mikael Bakhtin's "carnavalesque theory." Describing the practice of inverting commonly understood notions of respectability and the increasing attempts to normalize them, Bakhtin argues that carnivals in Francois Rabelais' work illustrate a sacrilegious uprising by the peasant classes during carnival days against dogmatic aristocrats. Powell asserts that Rabelais' work describes cartoonish carnivals that continue in as exaggerated themes and tropes into other literary styles, such as comedy and horror that ultimately inform modern-day metal culture.

To highlight the similarities of Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais' work to modern-day metal culture, Powell draw parallels to between Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory and metal culture with two different, exemplary "humorous" metal performances, GWAR and Anal Cunt. Powell chooses "humorous" metal groups because, to achieve their humor, they exaggerate tropes, and behaviors in metal culture. To this end, Powell explores metal culture through GWAR, a costumed band who sprays their audience with fake body fluids as they decapitate effigies. He points out examples of Rabelais' work which Bakhtin uses to describe carnivalesque tropes, and threads them to modern-day metal culture. Powell then indicates how carnivalesque performances amplify with Anal Cunt, a "satirical" hateful, grindcore group. In the band's performance which is both serious and humorous at once, Anal Cunt draws on several carnivalesque behaviors. To

dissect this band's performance, Powell augments Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory with Richard Schechner's theory of "dark play" and Johan Huizinga's "play communities" to more describe and illustrate why some aspects of modern-day metal culture do not match Bakhtin's theory based on medieval French literature.

However, carnivalesque humor becomes ambiguous and social and political problems arise as it escalates. As disrespectability is promoted, social and political tensions surface. Countering Bakhtin's utopian notion of carnivalesque uprising, Powell highlights how socio-political turmoil presents itself in carnivalesque performance by referring to examples of confusion and concern regarding racism and sexism, something left unexplored in Bakhtin's work. Powell suggests expanding and modernizing Bakhtin's carnival could open pathways toward solutions to carnival culture's socio-political ills.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my fiancée of 8 years, Liz Pearse. Thank you for being a rock of support and a wailing wall for my concerns and anxieties; my mother and father who have been understanding and sympathetic; and to the memories of Dorene Powell and Maureen Fancher, my grandmothers who passed as I wrote this thesis, both of whom be horrified to be associated with the content of this thesis.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: I PLAY METAL

Hey Metalheads! Take it from me; the most hilarious man-thing in metal – metal is funny! But I still get snooty looks from that Slayer dude when I walk around naked at award shows, tripping over my penis. Lighten up, Lucifer! Metal can still be stupid! Because it's also awesome, excellent, and exceedingly funny! It's supposed to be. Laughter is the foam on the beer of life, and beer is good. To argue that humour has no place in metal is idiotic. But that has never stopped me from arguing before! (Brockie 2012, 38)

Many people are surprised at the mix of humor and metal culture. When discussing this thesis with those unfamiliar with metal culture, many were surprised or perplexed at the idea of comedy being found in metal culture. Admittedly, few metal bands overtly perform humorⁱ, but as suggested by the above epigraph, there are some band for whom humor and metal are integral.

This thesis discusses Bakhtinian carnival through an examination of two metal bands considered humorous in metal culture. Chapter 1: I Play Metal describes methodology, delimits scope, and establishes a theoretical basis. This chapter argues that most heavy metal culture is a modern form of Mikael Bakhtin's interpretation of the carnivalesque tradition. While Bakhtin describes traditional carnival as a category of social behaviors oriented toward laughter, this thesis views metal as playful, but not always humorous. Because carnival theory is oriented toward laughter, and because carnival is most easily observed in the humor of a carnivalesque culture, this thesis examines metal culture humor. Chapter 2: GWAR illuminates metal's carnivalesque qualities through a case study of the band GWAR. To this end, the chapter explores

GWAR's use of carnivalesque forms and grotesque realism in live shows, recordings, and non-musical performances. Chapter 3: Anal Cunt explores the band Anal Cunt and their dark play style, in which the band is considered playful, but often presents itself otherwise. I examine the ambiguity of this play style in the band's live shows, recordings, and non-musical performances. This chapter describes Anal Cunt's dark play as reaction against punk culture's interpretation of social respectability while engaging extreme metal culture's carnival approach. Chapter 4: Reconsidering Carnival highlights areas of Bakhtinian carnival that could be updated and modernized by looking at areas of metal culture that do not completely fit Bakhtin's description of carnival.

Methodology and Scope

This study's data constitutes interviews, media and concert observations, and message board discourse obtained from October 2009 to February 2012. I began the study by interviewing lead singer David Brockie. Concert observations followed from their *Lust In Space*, *Bloody Pit of Horror*, and *The Return of World Maggot* tours from events in Indiana, Kentucky, and Texas. I researched Anal Cunt through fan discussions, fan pages, news articles, and heavy metal message boards. I confirmed my observations and interpretations through interviews and internet correspondence with fans.

I chose GWAR and Anal Cunt as subjects because they represent the value of transgression in metal culture more clearly than more mainstream, comedic acts. Mainstream entertainment, like Adult Swim's animated television show *Metalocalypse* and MTV's *Beavis and Butthead* depict metal culture imagery and ideals humorously. Further, their creators, Brendan Smalls and Mike Judge are involved in metal culture.ⁱⁱ

But their work, being animated and presented on television, goes through many hands with other priorities and requires a great deal of money to be produced. Consequently, these shows, while appealing to metal culture to some degree, are less able to take risks and transgress against mainstream culture than GWAR and Anal Cunt because they cannot offend viewers or advertisers who control their expensive productions.

GWAR and Anal Cunt, on the other hand, have a minimal profit motive, and are therefore freer to express metal culture values. Both groups began as joke bands, not as profit-making ventures. In 1985 David Brockie and some art students from Virginia Commonwealth University collaborated to create GWAR for fun (Brockie 2010). Seth Putnam started Anal Cunt in 1988 as a “as a big rock and roll laugh” that would only make a demo and play a show (Bromley 1997). Although GWAR and Anal Cunt signed to major metal labels Metal Blade and Earache, the labels profit while both bands make very little (Working Class Rock Star 2008).ⁱⁱⁱ Anal Cunt’s Seth Putnam supplemented his music career with day jobs, disability assistance, and his wife’s income (Bromley 1997; Szprot 2010).^{iv} GWAR is profitable, but not enough to provide insurance for its production crew (Working Class Rock Star 2008).^v As a result, these bands are more representative of metal culture’s values than more mainstream humorous metal representations in film and television, because they do not seek mass market approval that would provide them wealth. Because metal culture positions itself against mainstream culture, as discussed later in this chapter, and because metal culture is the primary audience of these bands, they cater more to metal culture and thereby appeal more to its values.

These bands are driven by an artistic need to transgress perceived overbearing social ideals. GWAR denigrates celebrities, politicians, and activists (who are considered respectable because of their wealth, status, or high morale stances) with their humor by “killing” effigies of them on stage. Anal Cunt, whose humorous intentions are unclear, transgresses against notions of respectability in punk and mainstream culture by loudly and flagrantly and hyperbolically espousing racism, hatred, and misogyny instead of minimizing and ignoring their existence. While these bands could obtain more money and mass market appeal by catering to mainstream cultural values, they sacrifice wealth in favor of expressive, artistic ends that transgress and critique respectability.

Being subculture-oriented, Anal Cunt and GWAR humorously express the cultural concerns and behaviors of metal culture. Transgressive humor suggests uneasiness about or rejection of the value being transgressed. When a band can transgress freely, because they appeal to a transgressive subculture, they highlight things that mainstream culture may not have concerns with or acknowledge. When done with humor, typically transgression is exaggerated with ridiculous hyperbole; making these concerns laughably clear through their exaggeration. Because Anal Cunt and GWAR exaggerate behaviors and transgression with ridiculous hyperbole, they illustrate behaviors, concerns, and attitudes in metal culture.

The next section of this chapter will discuss a frame of reference to interpret metal culture’s humor. By looking at metal subculture as a carnivalesque play-community, one views the subculture as a space in which its denizens can safely play with transgression against dominant social ideals. However, it concedes that metal

culture has transgressive limits. This differentiates GWAR and Anal Cunt to the degree that GWAR is situated solidly within the transgressive limits of metal, making their transgressive humor accessible for metal fans. In contrast, Anal Cunt crosses those lines and therefore breaks the sense of playfulness with their transgression. To understand this interpretive framework, this next section begins with a discussion of play and play-communities.

Carnavalesque Play-communities

In *Homo Ludens*, Johan Huizinga argues that people explore their experiences through play. “Play” is a freeing, voluntary “stepping out of real life” into a temporary sphere of activity with its own negotiable, playful or serious rules (1980; 7-9, 18, 20-21, 28, 180). Play comes in two primary forms; representation (pretending) and contest (competing) (1980, 13). Through play, people explore potential experiences and realities with minimal risk by playing games (1980, 28). Although play can be serious, play creates fun by exploring the tension in situations while minimizing real risk. (1980; 10, 20-21, 47). People explore experience by pretending and competing with one another to either fit potential roles in hypothetical realities or to explore and overcome boundaries through competition.

Play creates play-communities that continue after games conclude (1980, 12). Play-communities are communities of people who “mutually withdraw from the rest of the world” to play games with one another. However, the community becomes a play-community when on-going relationships are based on players’ willingness to play with one another again after a game is through (1980, 12). Players create in-group knowledge

that differentiates their community from “the common world” through their exploration of boundaries and roles (1980, 13). Play-communities also assume players want to play again after games have ended (1980, 12). People contribute to the play-communities’ solidarity when they play without a profit motive. They expand one another’s realm of experience through competition. Players explore possible realities through pretending. A game may begin when players meet because the play-community, held together by esoteric knowledge of the group, continues on after a game has ended (1980, 12).

If playfulness ends, the game ends, but the play-community continues. Playful expression of risky behavior allows community groups to explore areas of tension (1980; 12). However, a player breaking the play-environment, or sense of play that separates the game from the “common world,” robs it of its playfulness. The player destroys this sense of play when the tension of risky behavior is made both certain and usually consequential. This makes the play frame of the game more apparent, forcing players to re-examine rules that constitute the game, and thereby ruining the atmosphere. The player who breaks the play-environment may be kicked out of the play-community, but the play-community will regroup and play again.

Carnival is a play event. Similar to Huizinga’s discussion of play as a temporary space with its own rules, Bakhtin defines medieval carnival as an event in which people temporarily abandoned their social responsibilities and social hierarchies were suspended (Bakhtin 1984, 10). Bakhtin’s described sense of abandon resonates with Huizinga’s description of play as a temporary “stepping out of real life.” Clearly carnival is playful. However, while Bakhtin describes carnival as being oriented toward laughter,

Huizinga argues that play can be serious and unhumorous, such as a game in the midst of a heated tournament. To that end, carnivalesque play can be serious and unhumorous as well. However, because the seriousness is still understood as play, behaviors performed in carnival or play sessions are judged by the rules of the game rather than by the consequences of rules in everyday life.

Bakhtin argued that carnivals in 16th century France worked as resistance to the moral authority of the Catholic Church, the government, and the Sorbonne (The University of Paris). The rules of Bakhtin's carnival derive from Rabelais' *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, a series of novels written between 1532 and 1552 (Bakhtin, 1984, 339). In Rabelais' era, the Catholic Church restrained the peasant class with moral authority to maintain order and keep followers, while the French civil wars and the plague created tension, unrest, and uncertainty among the French population. Colluding with the government, the Church enforced rules by owning the majority of the land and maintained a social hierarchy that created a vast wealth disparity between the peasants and the church and upper classes. The Church's feudal ownership of the land meant that it had power over the peasants, limiting social mobility. This was compounded by the Church's collusion with the Sorbonne, who trained most of their leaders, the King, and parliament, who made and enforced laws. The tumultuous reality of 16th century France, the services demanded by the Church and upper-classes, and the Church, Sorbonne, and government enforcing moral authority created a demanding life. The peasants escaped these pressures by throwing carnivals that demonstrated resistance against moral authority.

In the Middle Ages, the Church and state banned laughter from all official events (Bakhtin 1984, 73-74). The Church gave in to peasant and middle class demands for laughter over time, partially to attract pagans who had holidays that promoted laughter (1984; 8, 33, 76, 218; Holquist 1984, xviii). Carnivals progressively became more transgressive as the events increased in frequency, spurring churches to attempt to stifle them. However, they did not eradicate them until the Renaissance,^{vi} after Rabelais. Churches attempted to hold their own sanctioned carnivals, but they never held the resistant spirit of lower-class carnivals. Although other descriptions of carnival exist, Bakhtin considers Rabelais the best carnival representation in literature.

Peasant carnival resisted moral authority and power by inverting their perception of the upper-class's values. Peasants and the middle-class escaped the oppressive dogma and morality of everyday life through carnival. Resistance against dogma and moral authority came through valuing the opposite of the upper class. They committed comedic blasphemy against the pious Church. They played foolishly against the knowledge of the Sorbonne. They comically and symbolically decrowned kings and crowned fools. They resisted by embracing behaviors that differentiated themselves from the upper class.

Carnivals resisted upper-class values by employing the grotesque realist aesthetic, which emphasized the body over the mind, heart, and spirit. Grotesque realism is oriented on a bodily "topological hierarchy" that associates vertical anatomical location with the value attributed to them by authorities (1984, 19). The Church and upper-classes valued love, knowledge, and "higher" ideals associated with the heart and brain. Carnivals inverted this logic to value the "lower strata" of the body. Carnavalesque

imagery exaggerated the genitalia, buttocks, belly, and mouth to emphasize their value of bodily processes like sex and eating. Because the church valued restraint, exaggerated depictions of the body were wantonly exaggerated.

Grotesque realism inverts the abstract and the material, degrading abstract ideas into bodily form (1984, 20). Just as the carnival brings officials down to the level of peasants, grotesque realism does not demean or devalue but brings to the material level that which is situated in the abstract (1984; 19, 21). Grotesque realism created approachable creatures that represented invisible threats like Plague, social oppression, and drought, and made them vulnerable and laughable (1984, 19). This made the invisible and foreboding into something approachable, conquerable, and real for the audience to destroy through comic violence and laughter.

Bodily byproducts were signature of grotesque realism. Beyond exaggeration of lower strata of the body, the inverted topology expressed the inside of the body to the outside. Carnavalesque stories commonly featured disembowelment. Urine, feces, blood, and inner bodily products coming out was a common aesthetic trope.

Bodily inversions were abstracted and applied to other aspects of life, and uses of bodily terms were more highly valued. “Foul language” referring to the body was typical of grotesque realism. Visual imagery exaggerating the overcoming bodily boundaries was turned into practices that pushed limits of the body, like shouting, which pushes the limits of the voice. Exaggerated bellies were filled with large quantities of food and wine. The material body became a physical battleground for debating abstract issues.

Bodily inversions created a variety of images and behaviors based on abstractions that served the ends of carnivalesque laughter.

Ambivalence was carnival's primary comedic material. Bodily and carnival inversions merged conflicting ideas. Like Harlequin, the comic figure who exemplified heaven and hell toppling over one another through acrobatic trickery, depictions of conflicting ideas like fertility and death merged into one character were common (Bakhtin 1984, 306). Unlike Harlequin, who was a clown, conflicting ideas were exaggerated and distorted into the grotesque realist aesthetic as monsters who appeared huge and bulbous in their overabundant appearance (1984, 26, 64, 184, 281, 292, 303). These creatures' ambivalence and distortion made them comic monsters whose insides are out and outsides are in, are both good and evil, are both dead and alive, are completely incomplete (1984; 24-27, 62, 318).

Carnival inversions developed into "inside-out" logic. These inversions culminated in a complex set of social behaviors and symbols that differentiated the folk from upper-class authority (1984; 17, 187). These behaviors included blasphemy against the church, the promotion of foolishness, and foul and abusive language to contrast the clean, "official" language of the upper class. For instance, Insults and verbal abuse, or "billingsgate," signified caring and endearment (1984, 187). Symbolic death was valued over life. Symbolic evil was better than good. Interactions between conflicting ideas were a common aspect of carnivalesque characters, like Harlequin. Hyperbole was valued over understatement. These examples became tropes of carnival that

differentiated the folk from the authorities. It also differentiated daily life from the life of the carnival.

Lower-class people lived dual lives, the carnival and the official (Bakhtin 1984, 96). The official life occurred every day, but carnival life happened periodically. Carnival's exploration of the tension between carnival life and everyday life was the source of its fun. Transgressive competitions through parody and satire, with blasphemy and cursing, made carnival life into a game to see how far one could stray from everyday life. The increasing frequency of carnivals increased the tension between the difference between the everyday life and carnival.

That increased frequency was also an attempt to merge life with carnival expression. The Church's rules imposed restrictions on speech and behavior. Carnival rebelled against restraint with "marketplace frankness," or the valorization of the everyday and taboo. Increasing frequency of carnivals meant that free speech was more common. If it could happen every day, the expression was always free. Carnival was thus an attempt to merge everyday life and carnival fantasy into one.

The most successful at merging carnival and everyday life were clowns and fools. Bakhtin argues that "footlights kill carnival" (1984, 7; 11). Using a theatrical metaphor, he suggests that placing carnival behavior only in the heightened performance space of a stage destroys its essential meaning. Further, footlights emphasize the theatrical frame around carnival. This draws attention to its temporality, which destroys the sense of immersion into "another reality" that constitutes carnival's playfulness. Therefore, the carnivalesque spirit thrives when it is simply merged into the everyday.

Clowns and fools were bearers of the carnivalesque spirit and were crowned leaders of carnivals because they lived every day using a carnivalesque, “inside-out” logic.

Although carnival was oriented toward laughter, clowns and fools were tricksters who were not always humorous. Like Harlequin, fools and clowns inverted values constantly, making them unpredictable and unstable. While they were a central source of carnival laughter, they also used their ambivalence to point out new ways of thinking about ideas and problems.

Synthesizing Bakhtin’s interpretation of “carnivalesque forms” and Huizinga’s discussion of play-communities, I suggest the idea of “carnivalesque play-communities.” Carnival participants create carnivalesque play-communities by establishing codes of behavior that indicate their willingness to play with others. Bakhtin states that while carnivals are temporary, communities create special kinds of carnivalesque “marketplace speech and gestures” that carnival participants share with one another (1984, 10). This is similar to Huizinga’s discussion of the “esoteric knowledge” that only players in a play-community use to build and maintain play-communities (1980, 12-13). Because of this esoteric knowledge, players in the same carnivalesque play-community can identify one another through “marketplace speech and gesture” in the case of Bakhtin’s carnival. Upon identification as a carnivalesque player, they can play carnivalesque games with one another with minimal threat of misinterpretation.

Like Huizinga’s “play-communities,” in which a group’s esoteric knowledge and game rules are shared, carnivalesque players use inside-out logic to play carnivalesque games that build community. People wishing to play carnival games must be fluent in

the symbols and styles of play that the community uses. This differentiates the carnivalesque play-community from the rest of the world and binds the group together. Examples of games Bakhtinian carnival players would play would be competitive hyperbolic speech, blasphemy, playful violence, and insults. To authorities, these “games” seem ridiculous or strange, but to peasants they were playful and served to differentiate them from the aristocratic class (1984; 5, 10). By using play and competition, carnivalesque players could explore new ways of transgressing and share them with other play-community members.

Though focused on transgression, carnivalesque play-communities have rules. Huizinga emphasizes the importance of rules in playing; play ends, he argues, when the play-environment is broken. In contrast, Bakhtin argues that only highlighting carnival performance kills carnival. Otherwise, carnival values transgression against moral imposition and censorship. It values hyperbole, blasphemy, and playful violence. Bakhtin doesn’t describe limits to peasants’ transgression. Huizinga’s play like Bakhtin’s carnival is temporary. However, Huizinga sets a limit that one can “go too far” and break the play-environment. If carnival is play, then carnival can go too far as well. Although carnival can be broken by breaking rules, the play community exists afterward to regroup and play again. This rule of carnivalesque play-communities is important when discussing Anal Cunt who has carnivalesque qualities but often breaks play, an essential element of their performance style that I refer to in chapter 3 as “dark play.” Unlike Huizinga’s play-communities, in which breaking the rules may ruin the game or

damage the community, carnivalesque play-communities let games break and see value in play breaking.

Carnivalesque play-communities play as a group during carnivals, but outside of a play-environment, they engage esoteric knowledge to find other players and play in less conspicuous games. During carnivals, the folk play with one another through playful insults, grotesque realist costumery, parodic speeches, and other types of games. Less conspicuous games, like playful insults, are still played outside the carnival. If two players who have engaged in carnival previously run into one another outside of the carnival space, by knowing one another's esoteric, carnivalesque knowledge, they may perform lower level games like playful insults. They carry a presumption of play with one another through their mutual understanding of esoteric carnivalesque knowledge. They reinforce the cohesiveness of the group through esoteric, inconspicuous play. However, if one "goes too far" and breaks their presumed playfulness, the game ends. Despite the game ending, games can resume at another time through the play-community. Esoteric playing heightens playful group solidarity and comes together at carnivals where they express exoteric resistance against their perception of rigid normative values.

In summary, carnivalesque play-communities are groups of people who share in-group, carnivalesque knowledge and play carnivalesque games with one another. Although theoretical carnivals are temporary, heightened spaces in which players played games based on carnival's inside-out logic; the play-community perpetuates itself after games have ended with in-group knowledge. This knowledge creates community and

differentiates the carnivalesque players from normative society. The games which carnivalesque play-communities engage in have rules that can threaten a game's playfulness. Nevertheless, although play may be broken, the community continues on to play again.

Metal as Play

Metal culture and Bakhtin's interpretation of Rabelais' discussion of medieval carnival have surprising qualities in common. The notion of applying theory predicated on medieval carnivals to modern day seems anachronistic on its face. However, when considering the cultural heritage of metal culture and the similar socio-economic spaces from which metal and medieval carnival developed, the anachronism carries less weight.

The occult influence found in metal culture is heavily influenced by Rabelais. Early heavy metal performers Black Sabbath and Led Zeppelin are both strongly influenced by occultist Aleister Crowley. Black Sabbath guitarist Tony Iommi, who wrote most of the lyrics to their earlier work, enjoyed exploring Crowley's works in his younger years (Classic Albums: Black Sabbath - Paranoid 2010). In 1971, Crowley enthusiast and Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page purchased the occultist's former home (Schick 2009, 93). Crowley promoted the Thelema philosophy that is rooted in the statement, "Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law" (The Book of the Law). In *Gargantua*, Rabelais wrote about The Abbey of Thelemé in which the law would be "Do as thou wouldst" (Rabelais 2012). This thread leading from Rabelais to Crowley, then to metal bands that highlighted occultist themes suggests that the carnival tradition in Rabelais that Bakhtin highlighted would manifest itself in metal culture. It may further

be suggested that the socio-economic climate from which metal culture developed has analogous threads to 16th century French feudal society.

While feudalism and capitalism differ, both French peasants and American working-class metal fans are exploited by the societies they live in. French feudalism was a very rigid system in which the people who were born into the peasant or aristocratic classes were going to stay in their class. Peasants who lived and worked on aristocratic land paid the landlord their excess crops so they could live on the land (Sau 2011, 2). As such, the majority of their labor value was theirs to keep. This differs from capitalism in that workers are paid for the totality of their labor, but are paid a small percentage of their total labor value. Although one may find a difference in that capitalist workers can be upwardly mobile, their capacity to be so has greatly diminished since the 1970s (Berger 1999, 283). Capitalist employers are driven to find workers who demand the least pay, but create the most labor value. Because of this, employers take advantage of opportunities to lower wage costs and increase worker productivity.

In the lifespan of heavy metal culture, businesses have engaged in deindustrialization, technology, and deregulation to the ends of increasing productivity and minimizing labor costs, which limited working-class upward mobility. Deindustrialization of cities increased unemployment and created opportunities for companies to lower wages. Trade deregulation in the 1980s further enlarged the employment pool by shipping worker positions to less expensive labor markets abroad (Lerman and Schmidt 2011). Businesses used technology over the course of the 1980s and 90s to automate positions previously held by humans and connect offices in less

expensive countries to businesses in the United States (Pfanner 2012). Consequently, owners of businesses increased worker productivity and lower labor cost to become wealthy. In the search for employment, the working-class often take salary cuts and suffer job instability because the supply of employees is greater than the demand of employers. In this system, the income gap between the working-class and the upper-class ever widens with opportunities for upward mobility for the working-class shrinking (Gilson and Perot 2011). Though 16th century French carnival's feudalism differs from modern-day capitalism in its rigidity, 20th century working-class metal culture takes place in a capitalist economy that is becoming more structured and fixed as wealth gaps widen and advancement becomes more difficult. Although they are similar economically, the world in which metal exists is fundamentally more complex socially.

Metal culture deals with a wider range of issues than earlier forms of carnival. Sixteenth century French carnival rebelled against the peasant's interpretation of Christian authority and dogma by being blasphemous and body-oriented, instead of pious and spirit-oriented (Bakhtin 1984, 132, 149). Carnival dealt with everyday issues by making them comedic monsters to overcome. Metal culture has more complex symbolism that integrates not just religion, but dogmatic activism of any stripe, particularly if the activism targets metal culture. Further, it engages with modern day issues of crime, technology, capitalism, and scores of other social matters that affect modern existence. Metal culture's engagement with this wider range of everyday topics makes it a more complex expression than French carnival.

Further, metal culture is more complex than 16th century French carnival culture because Bakhtin's carnival theory is based on selected aspects of Rabelais' work. Although Bakhtin is touted as a key reason for Rabelais being reconsidered in the Academy, critics have pointed out that Bakhtin's carnival theory picks from selected areas of Rabelais' work that simplify 16th century society (Kinser 1990, 248). Consequently, aspects of that culture are missing in Bakhtin's theory. Therefore, while there are aspects of metal culture that don't appear in this discussion of carnival, it could be because those aspects have evolved with the tradition or that they were not acknowledged in Bakhtin's text.

Nevertheless, by reading key ideas in metal literature through the lens of Huizinga's play-communities and Bakhtin's carnival, this section illustrates how metal culture is a carnivalesque play-community. Beginning with Huizingan play-communities, this next section discusses Keith Kahn-Harris' ideas of transgressive and mundane subcultural capital as contest and as representation games (role-performing) in metal culture. Transgressive subcultural capital can be understood as a game of transgressive one-upsmanship in metal culture. Further, the section establishes the framework for Chapters II and III, which illustrate the movement toward greater transgression from GWAR to Anal Cunt. The section then examines Deena Weinstein's discussion of metal culture's Dionysian and Chaotic themes as carnivalesque symbolism. Finally, the section discusses carnivalesque politics and their relationship to modern-day capitalism and political morality highlighted by Weinstein, Robert Walser, and Harris Berger.

In *Extreme Metal: Music and Culture on the Edge*, Kahn-Harris illustrates a pattern of increasing transgression in metal culture. He describes the movement of metal culture from “heavy metal” to “extreme metal” as a movement from heavy metal’s two primary subgenres, glam and thrash, toward the myriad, more abrasive, and more transgressive subgenres inspired by thrash metal (2007, 2-3). In making sense of this transgressive trajectory, Kahn-Harris defines his notions of transgressive and mundane subcultural capital.

Metal play-community members play games of contest to obtain transgressive subcultural capital. A performer collects transgressive subcultural capital through distancing his or her artistic choices from mainstream and metal culture ideals. In the earlier “heavy metal” period, performers achieved more transgressive subcultural capital by distancing themselves increasingly further from mainstream religious and sexual ideals. In the later “extreme metal” period, performers garnered more transgressive subcultural capital, not just from distancing themselves from mainstream ideals, but from dominant metal culture ideals as well. By transgressing both standards of respectability in mainstream culture and critiquing and transgressing behaviors in metal culture, performers gained notoriety as innovators and embodiments of extremity (Kahn-Harris 2007, 128). I interpret performers attempting to collect greater amounts of transgressive subcultural capital as a Huizingan contest game, in which one player attempts to best another. In this light, transgressive subcultural capital becomes a “high score” game to see who can out-perform others. Chapter III discusses this in greater

detail by analyzing Anal Cunt's humor, which exaggerates and emphasizes this aspect of metal culture.

Performers and fans collect mundane subcultural capital through games of representation. Mundane subcultural capital is collected through maintaining the infrastructure that keeps metal culture functioning, such as running a label or zine, or simply participating in metal culture for an extended period of time (2007, 126). A fan or performer's engagement with metal culture over an extended period creates a body of esoteric knowledge that garners them respect (2007 121). This is similar to Huizinga's games of representation, in which a person tries to accurately perform an idealized depiction of a role (1982, 13). In metal culture, mundane subcultural capital is given to people who accurately represent metal culture.^{vii} Huizinga states that play-communities form themselves around esoteric knowledge that separates the community and its play from the "real world." The esoteric knowledge created through the collection of mundane subcultural capital solidifies the bonds of the metal play-community. This esoteric knowledge is formed into tropes and themes that establish the language of the culture.

Deena Weinstein's *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture* describes themes that are similar to those found in carnival. Weinstein explores how heavy metal is made, used, and transmitted by social groups and draws out symbolic themes that she describes as "Dionysian" and "Chaotic" (2000, 4; 19). These themes constitute a code of non-systematic rules that determine the position of an item of cultural expression either at the core or the periphery of heavy metal culture (2000, 6). The description "non-systematic

rules” fits with carnival’s “inside-out logic,” a way of understanding that inverts itself based on the official discourse (Bakhtin 1984, 11). An example of this code using “inside-out logic” is the transvaluing of the officially denigrated metal performer into a praised “rock and roll rebel” (Weinstein 2000; 142, 238). This suggests that metal culture is a carnivalesque discourse that inverts dominant, official ideals.

Centered on promiscuous sex and excessive drug-use, Dionysian themes are carnivalesque. Weinstein describes the use of Dionysian themes in lyrics and performance, particularly in the 1980s glam metal genre (Weinstein 2000; 35-37). Bakhtin describes carnivalesque laughter as a combination of “mockery and praise, uncrowning and exaltation, irony and dithyramb” (1984, 142). An antiquated term, “dithyramb” was an enthusiastic hymn, poetry, or dance performed in honor of Dionysus, which often exalted wine.

Chaotic themes resemble the blasphemy and death found in carnival. Chaotic themes include imagery that reflects the absence or death of relationships that are addressed through violence, confusion, or death itself (2000; 29, 33, 38, 128). These themes include Satan, the occult, or violence (2000; 40-42). Chaotic themes respond to the pieties and platitudes of “normal” society (2000, 39). Medieval carnival responded to the Church’s tightened control with blasphemy. Carnival participants used playful violence to “kill” monsters that represented abstract mortal threats such as disease and drought.

Importantly, Weinstein raises the matter of class in metal culture. She describes the working class origins of metal performers and the importance of working class garb

there (2000, 46; 113). But in explaining the reason for metal's globalization, she says that "youth are in rebellion against their more traditional parents and invest their identity in neither the nation-state nor religious groups" (2000, 282). In other words, metal culture expresses working class rebellion against parental, nation state, and religious authority. This resonates with carnival's rejection of feudal control, in which both the nation state and religious authorities reigned over peasants. However, even if it resonates with carnival's rejection of feudal control, metal culture exists in a more complex period. Is metal culture expressing something as simple and homogenous as "rebellion?"

In *Running With The Devil*, Robert Walser discusses heavy metal as a complex, contested social signifying system that reacts to cultural politics (1993; xiii-xiv, xvii, 104). This signifying system uses musical timbre, lyrics, and imagery to respond to topics like musical authority, governmental authority, social tensions, and bourgeois capitalism (1993; 149, 163, 166). This signifying system foregrounds social issues concerning metal culture and addresses them with the symbolic expressions of power. Walser's discussion of metal culture is addressing social concerns is a carnivalesque trait. Carnival engages with topics "official" society avoids in its attempt at politeness (Bakhtin 1984, 105). Walser's political discussion of metal culture shows the difficulties and conflicts of modern-day carnival.

For Walser, metal's social signifying system is rooted in volume and distortion, key qualities in grotesque realism. Volume represents power through bodily engagement; music played loudly enough to shake the body (1993; 2, 9, 44-45, 108). A previously unwanted effect, distortion becomes fetishized, which he summarizes by

quoting heavy metal producer Mack, “The more distortion you get, the more satisfying it is. There’s something slightly superhuman, psychologically speaking, about the sustain, the nearly endless notes” (1993, 42). Grotesque realism distorts and exaggerates imagery to create monstrosities that appear to overcome their own boundaries. Sonically, metal’s distortion and volume express power by overcoming the body through sonic penetration. Tonally, the sound overcomes itself by expanding harmonically.

Unlike Bakhtin’s 16th century carnival, Walser emphasizes that metal culture is not utopian. Time and again Bakhtin describes carnival as utopian. Walser raises the issue of metal’s patriarchal structure. In metal culture, women often perform the role of objects to be mutilated or temptresses that titillate or reject the performer (Walser 1993, 116-117). Bakhtin describes similar issues in the French tradition of carnival which was hostile toward women, unlike the traditional French style. It presents women as wayward, sensual, false, materialist, and base. However, they are also a foil for men’s avarice, jealousy, stupidity, hypocrisy, and bigotry (Bakhtin 1984, 240). This tradition introduces the cuckoldry theme in carnival, in which a woman leaves her husband for another man (1984, 241). In the best of lights, the woman has rejected the patriarchal role of the chaste, moral, pure, “ideal woman.” However, males dominate the discourse, which revolves around their complaints of women restraining their rebellion. For some women, this is empowering in its rejection of dominant ideology; for some men, this reinforces the sexist “male victimization” perspectives. While metal culture follows carnivalesque tropes, metal is not a carnivalesque utopia regarding gender. Further, it is a problematic space for race as well.

Berger's *Metal, Rock, and Jazz* expands the complications of metal and carnival into matters of tolerance and racism. His ethnographic study centers on a metal scene in Akron, Ohio, a Midwestern, deindustrialized city (1999, 283). Previously discussed by Walser and Weinstein, metal culture has roots in class issues. Berger's ethnography highlights industrial outsourcing's negative impact on the local community. Economic strife commonly agitates community racism^{viii} (Craig 2002, 92-93). While white supremacists are a small fraction of metal culture, racism exists in the culture. Berger addresses racism with Dann, an interlocutor, who argues that death metal is apolitical, checking its politics at the venue door (1999, 269). Describing the culture as radically tolerant and individualistic, Berger problematizes tolerance and individualism in metal culture, which sometimes has the unintended consequence of giving aid and comfort to racism (1999, 292). Dann believes that metal's tolerance doesn't support racism, but accepts it is as a reality to be confronted (1999, 280-281). As a carnivalesque play-community, metal culture requires a degree of tolerance to allow play to happen. As described by Huizinga, play is a place where potential realities are performed. In order to explore those potential realities, particularly with carnivalesque tropes like blasphemy and violence, a large amount of tolerance must be maintained. This results in metal fans presuming playfulness, even if a performer is truly being intolerant.

Weinstein, Walser, Berger, and Kahn-Harris all express ideas that can be read as carnivalesque. Their work acknowledges metal as a working-class discourse the same way as Bakhtin's carnival. Weinstein's Dionysian and Choatic symbolism as a rebellious expression is similar to symbolism found in carnival. Walser points toward the

rebellion's politics and problems. Berger illustrates the mundane tolerance necessary to make carnival work in everyday life. Kahn-Harris describes metal's transgressive trajectory which makes tolerance difficult and amplifies the metal's politics. Bakhtin's carnival promoted merging art and everyday life by increasing the frequency of carnival events. In metal culture, carnival merges the two by placing "evil" performers into everyday life as well through increased frequency of carnivalesque celebrations, like concerts, and as expounded in Chapter III, by breaking the theatrical fourth wall.

Considering metal as carnivalesque play provides new insights into behaviors and interpretations in metal culture. It establishes a basis for understanding metal culture and its exploration of tension. In interpretation, it gives reason for the problematic position of genres like Christian black metal, which uses aesthetics of metal in Christian praise (as compared to black metal which is thematically blasphemous). Because carnival is playful, humor emphasizes its playful quality and provides insights into the culture by exposing the tensions discussed in the culture's humor.

Later chapters in this thesis discuss the use of humor to address carnival in detail. As previously stated, carnival is playful and, while not always humorous, it is accented in humor. This chapter highlighted how metal culture is a carnivalesque play-community, which, while often being serious, is understood with a sense of playfulness. With this understanding, the following chapters look at comic metal bands to detail how they perform in a carnival, both against mainstream culture and subcultures. These chapters highlight carnival with GWAR, who exemplifies carnivalesque playfulness, and play-community with Anal Cunt, who breaks carnival with "dark play" to comic ends.

Endnotes

ⁱ Humorous metal bands have always struggled within the subculture. GWAR and Anal Cunt, the two bands focused on in this thesis are infamous as humorous bands. However, despite their notoriety, GWAR barely breaks even on tours, their greatest monetary source (Working Class Rock Star 2008). Anal Cunt often operated at a loss and often had difficulty maintaining label funding (Bromley 1997).

Metal bands who are otherwise successful have dabbled in comedic culture.

Death metal band Cannibal Corpse appeared in *Ace Ventura: Pet Detective* and metal pioneer Lemmy Kilmister of Motörhead's made appearances in British comedies *Eat The Rich* and the television show *The Young Ones* (Mudrian 2004, 188-189). Thrash metal bands Anthrax and Metallica established satirical parody projects, Stormtroopers of Death and Spastic Children, respectively (Konow 2002, 241). These bands, while often taken seriously, used these opportunities to highlight their lighter side and to relieve the stresses of success.

ⁱⁱ Mike Judge and Brendan Smalls participate in metal culture in different ways. Smalls is well respected in the metal community. He tours as Dethklok, the band in *Metalocalypse*, with respected metal bands. He writes the death metal music for the show. His characters are all based on heavy metal icons. Mike Judge, while not as directly engaged, enjoys metal music (metalinjection 2011). Smalls takes a more active role as a performer and creator, while Judge listens to and consumes the culture.

ⁱⁱⁱ Because music labels advance money for album and tour production, and expect the money to be recouped before bands receive money, it is possible for bands to lose money while a label profits. I have no contract information for GWAR or Anal Cunt. However, record labels provide advances, or loans, to bands to create albums. Some labels only provide album advances to cover the recording costs and distribution. Bands can lose money depending on the terms of their contract if their advance does not cover the cost of recording, if the label overcharges them for services, or any number of other complications. Bands must recoup that money through sales before they profit. If the label provides no tour support, a band can lose money because the cost of the tour may outweigh their profit. Depending on the terms of their contracts, GWAR and Anal Cunt could have easily lost money in their endeavors.

^{iv} This issue is further complicated by how well the band handles money. Former member of Anal Cunt, Josh Martin, claims that a \$5000 advance provided by Earache to the band to record *It Just Gets Worse* was largely spent on cocaine by Putnam. The record was ultimately recorded in their practice space, Putnam's mother's basement (Prindle 2011).

^v GWAR's financial situation is not uncommon in metal culture. *Working Class Rock Star*, a documentary on the economics of the music industry, illustrates that even the best known and respected bands in the metal culture, like Lamb of God and Amon Amarth have only recently been able to quit their day jobs and only work as performers (Working Class Rock Star 2008).

^{vi} The Calvinists' witch hunts and the changing, more restrictive role of the Church in society reined in carnival events. However, Bakhtin's description of carnivalesque literature remained in satire and pornography. These two forms often featured sacred officials, monks, and nuns giving way to sexual temptation in the 17th to the 18th centuries. For examples see Van der Kamp 2011.

^{vii} The word "accurate" is difficult to define in metal culture, which is always changing. However, an example of the "accurate" qualifier would be a comparison of Slayer and Metallica. Both bands have existed for a similar period of time. However, Slayer is more respected in metal culture than Metallica. Although Metallica sells more albums than Slayer, Metallica is often denigrated as the quintessential "sell-out" metal band. On the other hand, fans rarely deride Slayer. This is because Slayer never performed

ballads, Bob Seger covers, or “softened” their music to appeal to mass culture, unlike Metallica. They are therefore more representative of metal culture than Metallica.

^{viii} Although economic strife can agitate racist violence and attitudes, the emergence of other ethnic groups in largely homogenous communities can as well. Metal culture, being primarily white and working class, isn’t immune from these attitudes. While exposure to diverse ethnic populations helps calm racism to an extent, homogenous communities respond negatively to new groups that threaten their dominance.

CHAPTER II

GWAR

We're just saying, "Don't get offended by raunchy humor!" You know, quit taking yourself so seriously. Because it turns people off. You've got to be able to laugh at yourself in all the foul and disgusting forms that we have. And, you know, if you can laugh at something, then you've really defeated it. You don't want to have things that scare you in your life. You don't want to be cowed. You want to be fearless! And humor is the best way to achieve that. I don't care what kind of situation you're talking about, if you can throw humor into a situation, you make it better. Immediately. (Brockie 2009, pers. comm.)

David Brockie, the lead singer and founder of the comedy metal band GWAR, used the above quote to summarize the underlying philosophy of his comic band. The statement's references to "defeating" something, becoming "fearless," and making a situation "better" draws forth questions the questions: what is being defeated? Why are they fearful, and what is so bad that it needs to be "better"? What constitutes "better"?

This chapter explores the rhetorical and comedic devices with which GWAR expresses humor by interpreting their performance through the lens of Bakhtin's *carnavalesque* mode and *grotesque realist* aesthetic to extract an understanding of GWAR's confrontation. The first section of this chapter lays a foundation by providing a description and history of GWAR. This section discusses how they act out their characters, how their behaviors have developed over time, and provides the essential qualities of the group from which this chapter draws its interpretation. The second section introduces the theoretical foundation through a summary and description of Bakhtin's "carnavalesque" mode and "grotesque realist" aesthetic. This establishes the

means by which behaviors are interpreted by defining basic terms that will be applied to GWAR's performances.

The latter portion of the chapter explores examples of GWAR's performances in three contexts: concert performances, media-based performances, and non-musical appearances. Concert performances consist of live, musical events in which the band performs their music and theatrical behavior. Media-based performances consist of their work on albums and music videos. Non-musical performances are those in which GWAR's characters are taken out of spaces in which they have control, and placed in reality television programs, talk shows, and interviews. Looking at their work in these different contexts illuminates the different methods the group must use in each context toward the end of "defeating" issues.

GWAR

GWAR is a 27-year-old, comedic, thrash metal band consisting of a cast of characters outfitted in oversized costumery and props who "battle" on stage, kill celebrities and political figures, and spray fake blood on their audience. Started in 1985 by David Brockie as hardcore punk collaboration between his punk band Death Piggy and a group of Virginia Commonwealth University film students, GWAR began as a joke band that would open for Death Piggy (Brockie 2010; Slave Pit Inc 2003). However, as time wore on, GWAR became a more elaborate, heavily costumed, theatrical performance that included latex prosthetic-based costumes, fake blood, oversized props, and characters. Musically, the band moved from a hardcore punk style into the largely thrash metal performers they are today.

As the band's stage shows became more involved, regular characters, stories, and gags became common. The key characters who build up the band are vocalist Oderus Urungus, guitarist Balsac The Jaw of Death, bassist Beefcake the Mighty, and drummer Jizmak Da Gusha; although various band characters like vocalist Slymestra Hymen, Flattus Maximus, and Emcee Sleazy P. Martini appeared occasionally over time. In performance, these characters play music, but between songs they engage in storylines that involve battles with minor enemies like Pig Cop, Nazi Skinhead, and Grey Aliens; monsters/animals like The Jaegermonster, World Maggot, and tyrannosaurus rex Gorgor; and arch-nemeses like Cardinal Syn, Techno Destructo, and Sawborg. Typically the performances begin with the basic story and minor battles, culminating into a climactic final battle between GWAR and an arch-nemesis. As an encore or as a minor climax in mid-show, an effigy of a celebrity or political figure will appear who will be beheaded, disemboweled, and dismembered. From these battles and mutilations, GWAR developed a shtick based on spraying fake blood on the audience and battling on stage. Further, they picked specific celebrities to appear repeatedly, like Michael Jackson, who has had a gag in which Oderus inquires about and tests the authenticity of Jackson's nose, only to pull off his entire face (Brueckmann 2009).

These performances all build a "mythology" which ties GWAR's performances and albums together over time. The band's story is based on the group being alien warlords called The Scumdogs of the Universe who were banished to Earth millions of years ago by "The Master." Frozen in Antarctica, the group was thawed in 1985 by global warming caused by the hairspray used by "hair-metal" bands, allowing them to

become the master of the human race, who they wish to destroy (Mythos). From that story, GWAR's performances involve their machinations on Earth, leaving Earth, or battling with arch-nemeses that are often inspired by abstract concerns like religion, politics, and celebrity. While the themes and behaviors are very uncommon, they are part of a lengthy tradition.

Carnavalesque

In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin explores the folk humor tradition found in Rabelais' novel *The Life of Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Riddled with surreal, scatological, and crude humor, Rabelais' book repulsed and perplexed its readers for centuries (Bakhtin 1984; 3, 117). Bakhtin argues that the reason why the book baffled its readers was that they interpreted from the perspective of their own time, rather than that of Rabelais, and that they didn't look at the work as a whole, but in separate, small parts (1984; 45, 17, 224). His exploration draws out aspects of Rabelais' books using social and contextual information from the time in which it was written. Through this method, he drew out interpretive forms and symbols that he refers to as the "carnavalesque form" and the "grotesque realist" aesthetic.

As discussed in chapter I, carnivals oriented themselves against the folk's conceptions of upper-class values. The folk used blasphemy, billingsgate, and grotesque realist imagery to differentiate themselves from the upper-class. Through these traditions, they inverted the values of the upper-class and created comedic monsters that addressed their concerns ambivalently (266). These carnivalesque behaviors conjured

laughter and play from the people and created esoteric knowledge that bonded the folk together as a group against the upper-class.

A fundamental part of the carnivalesque is its consciousness of social life. Carnivals overcame the concerns and fears of the lower classes by confronting them with the healing power of laughter (1984; 67-70, 92, 94-95, 174, 335-336). The rigid hierarchy of medieval social life was subject to small revolutions as laughter was used to level the power of intolerant authorities and build the power of fools, who questioned accepted “truths” and maintained a carnivalesque lifestyle (1984; 11-12, 34, 81, 84, 140, 168, 197). The performance of the people’s carnival was a recoding of the “truth” of authority and an expression of the relativity of power and authority (1984, 285). Peasants, understanding of the relationship between power and their station in life, took ownership of the symbols the upper-class used to differentiate themselves from the lower classes.

Rabelais’ work reinterprets issues that affect the lower classes. Having written *Pantagruel*, in 1532 and the later four books over a 20 year period, Rabelais’ work reflects French issues, life, and culture of that time period (1984; 339, 370, 440, 445). In the time of *Pantagruel*, France suffered a lengthy drought for six months which threatened fields and vineyards. Further, an outbreak of plague appeared in various areas of France. These threats sparked an uptick in the number of church ceremonies and processions intended to quell fears and maintain order (1984, 340). *Pantagruel* addresses these matters by anthropomorphizing the draught into Pantagruel, a devil that makes people thirsty, and the plague as lethal vapors emitted from Pantagruel’s stomach (1984,

340). This anthropomorphizing behavior levels the power of these threats into a manageable, understandable, conquerable creature, similarly to power of officials in carnival.

Despite the spectacle of anthropomorphizing abstract issues into comic monsters, carnivalesque forms were meant to occur every day. Bakhtin states that the carnivalesque “does not know footlights” (1984; 7, 265). It is a lifestyle people live that treads the line between the everyday reality and the world of art (1984; 7, 258). He discusses a passion play being held during a carnival in Amiens, France in 1500 prior to which priests sent devil characters out into the market. This became customary and “devils” would often roam the markets for days before a performance (1984, 265). The spectacle of anthropomorphization is the grotesque realist aesthetic, in which issues are turned into monstrosities, applied to the carnivalesque phenomenon. Carnival, on the other hand, works to make the ideals and “utopian” reality of carnival into an everyday experience. While grotesque realism is generally spectacular, carnival finds ways to move from being a sort of theatrical “performance,” to a common performed reality.

The familiarity of the carnivalesque form and the grotesque realist aesthetic is important to understanding GWAR’s performance. Bakhtin argues that objects and situations consisting of the grotesque realist aesthetic can only be understood within the folk and carnival spirit (1984, 52). This is true in that the carnivalesque values found in the grotesque realist aesthetic result in the confusion of the observer, as exemplified by Rabelais’ confused readers (1984; 45, 17, 224). Not understanding the carnivalesque forms and grotesque realism results in commonplace obscenity rather the search for a

new perspectives and deeper understandings (1984; 208, 269, 380). To these ends, the latter portion of this chapter both illustrates how GWAR fits into carnivalesque forms and the grotesque realist aesthetic in their musical, media-based, and non-musical performances. While this chapter is not an all-inclusive analysis of GWAR, it serves to illustrate, through example, their carnivalesque and grotesque realist approaches.

GWAR in Musical Performance

GWAR's musical performances are rich with grotesque realist imagery and carnivalesque forms. The band's use of costumery is carnivalesque unto itself. Their masks and make-up index the carnivalesque by hiding the head and face, the upper strata of the topology. Akin to Bakhtin's medieval carnival, their masks illustrate a transitional appearance, thus signaling the liminal quality found in the grotesque realist aesthetic. Particularly in the case of Oderus Urungus, the mask hides the face while the rest of the costume exposes his buttocks and belly, the lower strata of the body. This raises the prominence of the lower strata through exposure to be viewed.

The style of their costumes further references this aesthetic. When GWAR is interviewed in costume, the size of their costumes always dwarfs the person interviewing them. The gigantic size both emphasizes the importance of the body and signals the appearance of overabundance (1984; 230, 343). In carnivals and parades of Rabelais' time, giants were common figures for carnivals and celebrations as benevolent characters who signaled the beginning of the festivities (1984, 343). Similar to the Rabelais' giants, GWAR's costumes indicate "carnival" and their leading role in it.

Overabundance and exaggeration emphasize the lower strata in their costumes while turning them into grotesque realist monsters. With the size of their costumes, GWAR presents overabundance in a few more ways. For example, Oderus' painted on "8-pack abs" signal an exaggeration of strength in the belly, in the lower strata of the body. A second are the gaping maws of Balsac The Jaws of Death and Jizmak Da Gusha. In *Pantagruel* the gaping mouth is a central symbol signifying the borderline between food and the stomach (1984, 279). Finally, "The Cuttlefish of Cthulhu," understood as Oderus' penis, emphasizes the lower strata of the genitalia. These, along with animal characteristics like Balsac's hooves, Jizmak's doglike face, and Oderus' horns make these characters into monsters that are both animal and human.

The symbol of the monster is central to the grotesque realist aesthetic and marks GWAR as carnivalesque clown figures. In concert, GWAR crowns themselves kings (and queen) of their own carnivalesque world. As previously stated, the carnivalesque spirit degrades real kings and queens to the level of the folk while clowns and fools become leaders and heralders of new truths through their own "inside-out" logic (1984; 49, 93). In Rabelais' work, new truths were freedom from personal material interests, from having to deal with personal affairs and family, freedom from constraining norms, from selfish interests, and appreciations of the established world (1984, 262). GWAR's spectacle as performers gives them power within the concert space. In the carnivalesque concert space, they create their own rules within a spectacular ambiance that draws the audience out of the everyday world, giving in to the hierarchy of the concert in which the

performer is central. They are the rulers of that space and present their work in a comic way that fits their logic and ideals.

However, considered as clowns and monsters, GWAR is ceaselessly ambivalent. Just as issues and fears are turned into exaggerated, monstrous characters in their degradation, GWAR's monstrous appearance illustrates their ambivalence. As leaders in the carnivalesque world where values are inverted, their being "evil" is highly valued. This is exemplified in their mythology in which they are warlords who are out to kill humanity. As bringers of death, they are characterizations of death, which in the grotesque tradition is always depicted as a "funny monster" (1984, 49-50). Further, as exaggerations in both appearance and story themselves, they are characteristically negative (1984, 306).

Nevertheless, as much as they are negative, they are the heroes in their carnivalesque world. While they chastise their audience in song, they provide laughter. They present themselves as fools, but they are articulate. Just as the harlequin character in the Renaissance did somersaults, continuously placing the lower strata above the higher and back again, topologically representing heaven and hell at once, GWAR is the same sort of grotesque realist, ambivalent clown that represents good and bad things all at once (1984; 8, 309). The carnivalesque being the stuff of laughter, Bakhtin argues that humor stems from ambivalence, thus clowns are ambivalent as well (1984, 195). The ambiguous stances that "clowns" take in the carnival culture of metal will reveal themselves later in this chapter, but to a greater degree in chapter III.

GWAR depicts carnivalesque forms and grotesque realist imagery in their comic mutilations. Their live performances always depict their battling monstrous characters of various sorts. Usually these characters are ultimately disemboweled, dismembered, or beheaded as “blood” flies onto the audience.

Disemboweling in the grotesque realist tradition, brings the inside out and presents the intestines to the audience, which Bakhtin interprets as “one big grotesque knot” (1984, 163). To Bakhtin, the intestines represent human life through its orientation in the stomach; death through the slaughter of the character; life-providing food, and feces all in one (1984, 162-163). It is the play of the upper and lower strata that positions it in the grotesque realist aesthetic (1984, 163). The ambivalence of the intestines in the carnivalesque thus makes them a source of humor (1984, 195).

Dismemberments, disembowelments, and beatings were common in Rabelais’ stories. GWAR’s dismemberments often occur after a “battle” in which a character is beaten viciously. Considering it the quintessential carnivalesque death, Bakhtin cites an instance in Rabelais’ work in which two law enforcers are beaten to a pulp and dismembered (1984; 201, 268). Bakhtin considers the story to be carnivalesque because the enforcers were described as being “like two kings” being decrowned as the two were beheaded (1984, 198). He describes the episode as grotesque in both the anatomical description of their beating and the ambivalence of beatings in the grotesque aesthetic, where destruction is considered praise (1984; 198, 202-203). Further, the killing of the characters is regenerative by building a new hierarchy in which fools reign, causing every blow to be a step toward a new world of ideals (1984, 206). To clarify, clowns

destroy things in wantonly violent ways the things they hate in ways that basically bring their innards outward. However, “abuse” is a sort of praise in carnival culture, so sometimes the things clowns love, they will destroy as well. In the case of GWAR, as illustrated later in the chapter, while they behead politicians they dislike, they also feed their fans that they “dislike,” to monsters. Carnavalesque creatures are ambiguous because they destroy everything, both good and bad. While the understanding can be subtle, in the instance of GWAR, fans understand that their “being destroyed” is a sort of endearment while destroying a politician expresses a dislike of institutions of power.

GWAR’s use of decapitations falls into the carnivalesque and grotesque realism traditions as well. Commonly after battling with a “human” character, GWAR decapitates the body. These characters are usually celebrities and political figures that hold a high status. Bakhtin states that the loss of a head is a minor loss for a fool, to this end, it is simply a comedic act (1984, 382). However the decapitation of a figure both destroys their upper strata and “decrowns” them, inverting the social hierarchy (1984; 11, 312). This displays their power over people of “high status,” and highlights something that their status won’t keep them from, dying.

The decapitation of celebrity figures is an example of GWAR’s response to everyday reality. GWAR picks recent celebrity figures and politicians of all stripes to be killed in effigy. While David Brockie insists there is no underlying philosophy behind who is chosen to be killed beyond, “Whatever is the most funny at the time.” the fact that all these figures have been propelled into fame or wealth coincides with Bakhtin’s

description of the decrowning and degrading to the material level (Brockie, pers. Comm., 2009). It declares a desire for an egalitarian, carnivalesque society.

GWAR's use of body fluids builds community. In live performance GWAR is best known for the spraying of faux body fluids on the audience. These fluids come from the mutilated bodies of their enemies, a monstrous spray gun, and from Oderus' "Cuttlefish of Cthulhu." The fluids represent everything; they are ambivalent. They are blood, semen, and urine simultaneously while in reality just "colored water." The trope of hosing masses of people is found as well in *Pantagruel* in which Gargantua urinates on a town and drowns 260,418 men (1984, 190). The flinging of body fluids on people is a debasing gesture that ties to some the oldest examples of the grotesque. Further, the stories and GWAR represent the lower strata being exaggerated and exposed for all to see, making being sprayed with these a debasement and a baptism all at once (1984; 148, 151). Audience participation, a key aspect of carnival, appears when they are sprayed and, more importantly, attempted to be sprayed as much as possible (1984, 249). This creates a sense of community in the audience in which the debasing gesture of being urinated, bled, or ejaculated upon becomes a carnivalesque blessing. All the members of the carnivalesque community bond as part of a marked group by experiencing this distinctive marking together.

GWAR's labeling of these fluids allows them to confront certain fears and concerns in society. Oderus often describes his semen as being "AIDS infected" (Houston 2011). When GWAR came to be, in the mid-1980s, AIDS was a serious social concern. Those who had the disease were marginalized due to popular misconceptions

about the spread of the disease. In fact, David Brockie's brother battled with and eventually succumbed to the disease (Brockie 2011b). In Rabelais' work, despite the epithet of AIDS being a "gay disease" for different reasons in the 1980s, syphilis and gout were considered "gay diseases" that signified an overindulgence of food, drink, and sexual intercourse (Bakhtin 1984, 161). In this instance, the belly and genital strata are emphasized implicitly while a disease with a great stigma is given to everyone in mass. It confronts the fear of marginalization attached to it and makes it a manageable, material thing that can be defeated with laughter.

GWAR in Media-based Performance

On album and in music videos, GWAR is confined to performing carnivalesque and grotesque realism through mediated sound and imagery. While albums and music videos can capture some of their carnivalesque and grotesque traits, they are stripped of their best known shtick, spraying body fluids. Because of this, they are relegated to creating carnivalesque lyrics on albums and imagery in music videos. To illustrate this, this section focuses on lyrics from their song, "Sick of You" and their music video *Phallus in Wonderland*, which shows their use of the carnivalesque to address their social reality.

On albums, GWAR's lyrics are their primary source of grotesque imagery and carnivalesque orientation are found in the use of debasement and bodily language. The song, "Sick of You" exemplifies this in its lyrics:

Your socks they smell, your feet they stink,
You never take a bath.
Your nose it runs, you bust your buns,
You always finish last.

[Chorus:]
Sick! (Sick) Of!
(Of) Youuuuu.
I'm so sick, so sick of you.
Your face is gross, you eat white toast,
You don't know what to do.
It's just your luck, you really suck,
That's all - I'm sick of you
[Chorus]
(Bring it down... I said bring it down! Thank you)
Don't ya know? So sick of you.
Things you say, and all the things you do. [x6]
[Chorus x3]
Human filth.. Sick!
(Azlyrics.com)

Even in its title, this song is one lengthy debasement. This abusive language in the carnivalesque space is an expression of intimacy through the dropping of formal language behavior with indecent language and mockery (1984; 16, 27). In this situation, abuse becomes a sort of praise, making statements of either kind ambivalent. However, its absurdity signals its carnivalesque nature to the listener, making it humorously absurd and understood as playful (1984, 165). Along with abusive language, the use of hyperbolous metaphors and epithets regarding and destroying the grotesque body, particularly the lower strata, are used to devalue and level the power of others (1984; 279, 307, 319). Bakhtin states that this style of communication is essential to comic scenes in the carnivalesque, thus making this style of abuse not only a presenter of praise and intimacy, but an indicator of comedy (279). In the case of “Sick of You,” beyond its use of debasement, it uses metaphors dealing with the face and statements regarding bodily hygiene that index the grotesque realist aesthetic. The ambivalence of it is also rooted in GWAR themselves, who are monstrous, ugly, evil heroes who are insulting in

a situation indicating a carnivalesque atmosphere, resulting in a humorous understanding.

GWAR exhibits a social response in their long-form music video *Phallus In Wonderland*. In 1990, Brockie was arrested in North Carolina for disseminating obscenities, although the charges were dropped to “exhibiting a harmful performance to minors.” The “Cuttlefish of Cthulhu” worn by Brockie as Oderus was confiscated by the police in the process (Steffen 2005). This occurrence in the midst of a political climate in which the Parent Music Resource Center hearings were attempting to censor heavy metal and rap artists, resulted in *Phallus in Wonderland*.

Phallus in Wonderland, like Rabelais’ work, pulls from the social and political climate of the time. The film features Edna Granbo, an “old hag” who wants to destroy GWAR. She then assembles the Morality Squad who attempts to steal Oderus’ “Cuttlefish of Cthulhu.” Succeeding, they then create “Tiny” a mutant beast designed to destroy GWAR. In response, GWAR wages battle with Edna, The Morality Squad, and Tiny (Plot Summary 2011). Just as Rabelais’ work referred to his social reality in which the symbolism of his work was easily understood, *Phallus in Wonderland* works the same as well. However, unlike the ambiguity expressed thus far in other examples, the carnivalesque does have room for the degradation of holders of “old gloomy truth” (1984, 172). In *Gargantua*, Rabelais degrades holders of the old way of life through description of their inability to urinate, defecate, or become sexually stimulated, thus removing them from the lower strata and pointing out their hypocrisies (1984, 172-173, 212). On video, GWAR performs a similar act when they wage battle with Tiny, Edna,

and the Morality Squad in *Phallus in Wonderland*. For this video, the song “The Morality Squad” was made to illustrate their stance.

We're the morality squad
Armed with the wrath of God
My name is Granbo
And here's my holy hot rod
Freedom for all the people
Brave and true and strong
Freedom for all the people
Unless I think they're wrong!

Blasphemy!

Rapist mentality!
Teen suicide!
Necro-bestial anal butt sex!!

Ooooooh!

I got a couple of friends here
Trained by the CIA
Special agents here to blow you the hell away
Gwar, you're the worst. I'll put an end to you
You're even grosser than 2 Live Krew

My Grandson the superhero just back
From the war with Iraq

Corp Punishment: My name is Corporal Punishment.
 I want to scratch your back

Granbo: My nephew Tiny, a hundred tons of man!

(lyrics007)

The lyrics to “The Morality Squad,” mock the government, religion, and other social establishments. Granbo wants to censor both GWAR and 2 Live Krew (who was a primary target for the PMRCⁱ at the time). As discussed earlier in the chapter, the carnivalesque pushes for freedom of speech, thus pitting the Morality Squad both against

carnavalesque ideals. While grotesque realism is minimal in this song, since it is sung by the Morality Squad, the hyperbolic description of not just sex, but anal sex with dead animals, signals its place in the mockery.

GWAR in Non-Musical Performance

A significant aspect of GWAR's humor involves their placing themselves in "the real world." In the 1980s, they appeared on public access television shows. Gaining notoriety in the 1990s, they appeared regularly on syndicated television talk shows like *The Jerry Springer Show* and *The Joan Rivers Show*. Into the 2000s, they made appearances on reality TV on *Viva La Bam* and the late night spoof news show *Red Eye* on Fox News. Along with these appearances, they make significant use of YouTube, on which they post commercials for HM Magazine and "skit" videos with them singing Christmas Carols or looking for crack on the streets of New York. In these situations, they have varying levels of control over their carnivalesque space, but despite the lack of control, Brockie stated that it is their funniest work (Brockie 2009). This section will look at the band's appearances on *Red Eye* and illustrate their expression of social awareness on their appearance on the "Shock Rock" episode of *The Jerry Springer Show* (TheRealScarr 2009).

On Fox News' *Red Eye*, Oderus has to find new ways to establish his carnivalesque role because he on television. For several months in 2010, Oderus Urungus played the part of an "Interplanetary Correspondent" on the late-night, satirical talk show, *Red Eye*. In Oderus' segment on the show, host Greg Gutfeld discusses recent discoveries dealing with space. For instance, in one episode Oderus is asked if he has

visited a recently discovered planet. To which he responds, “Yes, the planet Postrate, or was it Prostate?” General banter surrounds the discussion, which included a recent survey that found “the song that makes most men cry” is REM’s “Everybody Hurts.” Gutfeld asks Oderus if the song makes him cry, to which Oderus responds that, “Of course, a sad song would make a human cry,” but the song that makes him cry is “Happy Birthday,” because it reminds him of all the hard work of killing that he has to do (LurkerDood 2010). On television, Oderus cannot curse, blaspheme, or maim as the band can on their own music videos or on tour. Because of FCC regulations, he is unable to curse, and political reasons, he cannot readily challenge authority.ⁱⁱ

Oderus establishes carnival through wordplay in spaces he doesn’t control. By referring to the planet “Prostate,” he uses grotesque realist imagery that exaggerates a gland found in the lower strata of the body that is linked to male orgasm. His reference to his work of killing people and joy at the sadness of men establish a carnivalesque inversion. However more subtle aspects are at work as well. His mispronunciation of “prostate” illustrates an incompetence of his role as a “correspondent,” a trait of the carnivalesque in which characters act stupid or crazy (1984, 104). In his own way, using the means available to him, he is signaling his carnivalesque stance in a manageable, unspectacular way within “reality.”

Oderus also uses the incongruity of his appearance to carnivalesque ends. His giant, monstrous costume situated next to casually dressed, “normal” correspondents drags the situation into the carnivalesque. Bakhtin states that in Rabelais’ work, social positions of character and authority represented the dying order (1984, 53). By placing

Oderus in the role of a “correspondent” on a “news channel,” Oderus points out the relativity of the world of “authority” and degrades it with his grotesque appearance and humor (1984, 256). By taking over a position of respect in dominant culture, and presenting himself as a correspondent who succeeds well enough to end up on television, he makes a mockery of the role itself.

GWAR’s appearance on the “Shock Rock” episode of *The Jerry Springer Show* illustrates how they use the carnivalesque to address social concerns. On this episode, a parent confronts GWAR about the violence and negativity in their performance. Fully costumed, the band arrives as any guest would and answered the woman eloquently and sincerely about the band’s stance on violence. They address the social issue of violent lyrics in music by juxtaposing against the military’s real violence and the high authority given to it. Bakhtin states that the carnivalesque “knows no footlights.” Just as devils and clowns were let out into the marketplace days prior to carnivals to carry the carnival spirit out into the “real world,” GWAR performs as clowns who embody the carnivalesque spirit and bring it into the real world (1984, 8). The placing of their characters into a talk show in which “real people” address social concerns destroys the authority of the show (in a very carnivalesque way). Further, they invert their own mockery by being sincere on a television show largely known for culminating into fights between guests. This turns the situation on its head and into the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque “fool logic” of the positivity of negativity, independent thought, and free speech without dogma, authority, and “narrow-minded seriousness” that they argue for

in the episode is logically argued (1984, 3). Their humor is clarity in a space that is commonly not authoritative.

This chapter illustrated the various ways GWAR expresses humor through carnivalesque forms and grotesque realist humor while describing ways they address social concerns, both personal and public. Their humor exaggerates and highlights metal culture as part of carnivalesque tradition. Further, the themes, humor, and practices of the group are esoteric knowledge with which fans of the band interpret the band. The band creates carnivalesque, participatory games, like being spray with body fluids, to mark and bond the community together. Their humor emphasizes these carnivalesque qualities, but, as described in the next chapter, it isn't the only way metal fans express and understand metal culture and its humor.

Endnotes

ⁱ The PMRC, or Parents Music Resource Center, was a political committee established by Tipper Gore in 1985. The special interest group was concerned with giving parents control over music by labeling work that had foul language, references to drugs, and descriptions of violence.

ⁱⁱ It was eventually established that he cannot challenge authority the same way outside of *Red Eye* because he was removed after FoxNews executives found video of GWAR “killing” Sarah Palin, while being a correspondent on the station (Brockie 2011a).

CHAPTER III

ANAL CUNT

Well, I recently went to a Gay Pride parade with my friend Gay Keith. We've called him Gay Keith for so many years that he goes by it now. It's his name on MySpace. We did a European tour called "All Our Fans Are Gay," and had "I'm Gay" printed on shirts in big letters. Keith is gay and half-Jewish and I don't give a fuck. He's a good friend and I don't care. So many people say I'm anti-this and anti-that. They read my lyrics and assume they know everything about me. (Norton 2011)

After being asked if any of his friends reacted negatively to his music, Seth Putnam, lead singer and founder of Anal Cunt, responded with the above epigraph. The quote indicates his band's style, which espouses hyperbolic, violent, hateful rhetoric, but frames it as "humor." Unlike GWAR, whose humor is cartoonish and visual, Anal Cunt performs with no costumes and, while they do perform humorously exaggerated, angry songs, their primary member, Seth Putnam, also behaves in ways that suggest that his beliefs are not far off from those espoused in Anal Cunt's work. This compels fans to make assumptions about the band, their motives, and the nature of their own laughter. Additionally, it pushes the limits and breaks the rules of metal culture's carnivalesque qualities that promote tolerance of ideas.

This chapter examines Anal Cunt's "humor" as resistance against respected values in mainstream, hardcore, and metal cultures through the performance of carnivalesque "dark play." In the previous chapter, I discussed GWAR rebelling against dominant social mores while promoting metal culture through the performance of

carnavalesque, grotesque realist imagery. In this chapter, I analyze Anal Cunt, a band who uses more involved carnivalesque tactics. I begin by providing a brief history and explanation of Anal Cunt. I then expand my scope to touch on the grindcore genre as an intersection between anarcho-punk and metal culture. Having established Anal Cunt's cultural space, I illustrate how they can be read as a humorous, carnivalesque group. This leads to defining "dark play," how it fits into Bakhtin's discussion of carnival, and ultimately why I consider metal as a "carnavalesque play-community," rather than simply describing it as carnivalesque. Finally, I provide examples to highlight Anal Cunt's ambiguating behavior as examples of "dark play" in musical, recorded, and interview situations.

Anal Cunt

Anal Cunt is a grindcore band from Boston, Massachusetts best known for their "humorous," offensive song titles. Seth Putnam started Anal Cunt in 1988 as a one-off, joke band that would release a demo and play a show (Putnam 2002). The band parodied the extremely noisy and fast grindcore genre by purposefully writing fast, "bad" songs consisting of screaming and guitar noise. Despite Putnam's low expectations, the Boston underground punk and metal scenes received Anal Cunt well. This led to the recording of a series of independent-label, 7" record EPs over the course of six years with humorously impossible, descriptive names like the *5643 Song EP* and *Unplugged EP*.ⁱ

In 1994, the band changed course by including lyrics. Anal Cunt signed to Earache Records in 1994 with whom they released *Everyone Should Be Killed*. This album contains songs that lament the act of titling songs ("Song #5," "Abomination of

Unnecessarily Augmented Composition Monickers[sic],” “Having to Make Up Song Titles Sucks,”) and mock subcultural elitism (“I’m Not Allowed to Like A.C. Any More Since They Signed to Earache,” “MTV Is My Source for New Music,” “Selling Out By Having Song Titles on His Album.”)

While at Earache, their song titles and themes became increasingly hateful. Their 1995 follow-up *Top 40 Hits* mocked K-Tel-style Top 40 compilations by copying the graphic design of an official K-Tel compilation.ⁱⁱ Continuing the parody, the album included mocking covers of Top 40 artists “American Woman” and “Stayin’ Alive” by Top 40 artists The Guess Who and The BeeGees. The album contained little hateful humor beyond the homophobic song “Art Fag.” In 1996 they released *40 More Reasons to Hate Us* which began their shtick of offensive, abusive, and insulting lyrics. While the band humorously insults themselves with “Everyone in Anal Cunt is Dumb,” a disturbing trend begins with racist songs with songs with no comic signs. The song “I Hope You Get Deported” chastises interracial relationships with the lyrics:

First you fucked a nigger, you ugly fucking whore
Ran out of men in Canada and came here for more
You could shower all your life and you’d never get clean
because you fucked someone that wore Afro-Sheen.
(Prindle 2011)

This transgressive trend intensifies with *I Like It When You Die, It Just Gets Worse*, and *Defenders of the Hate*. Although the band still performed humorous works, and even recorded a whole satirical, acoustic album featuring “Sensitive” Seth Putnam called *Picnic of Love*, each album had hateful moments with no indication of humor.

As Anal Cunt became more extreme, Putnam's public persona intensified as well. After releasing *40 More Reasons to Hate Us*, Putnam worked with and was rumored to be a member of white supremacist band Vaginal Jesus. In the 2000s, Putnam divorced his wife and fell into a two month long coma caused by an overdose of crack, heroin, and Ambien (Szprot 2010). After a year of rehabilitation, Putnam re-established Anal Cunt and was rumored to have attempted to sign with white supremacist label Resistance Records (Kahn-Harris 2007). When announcing the release of his "cock rock" album *Fuckin' A*, his label announced the release of a sex tape, but only released a picture of a naked Seth Putnam being fellated on stage while using a hypodermic needle (Patac 2010). As the band's only constant member, Putnam's name became synonymous with Anal Cunt. Consequently, as I move into discussing Anal Cunt in greater depth, Putnam's behavior will be discussed as being representative of Anal Cunt because his persona became synonymous with the band. Before analyzing Anal Cunt's work, I first want to discuss how Anal Cunt can be read as humorous.

A Carnavalesque Anal Cunt

Anal Cunt plays on respected values and expectations in punk and metal discourses. Intermingling since the early 1980s, the mixture of metal and punk cultures established many distinct genres that spawned generations of subgenres. As a band in the subgenre "grindcore," Anal Cunt engages in carnivalesque play against grindcore's punk politics while playing into expectations of "evil" performance on both styles. To begin, I will touch on grindcore to situate Anal Cunt's cultural space.

Grindcore grew out of an anarcho-punk political tradition that is heavily influenced by metal culture. Metal and punk have long influenced one another, creating: British crust punk, grindcore, American hardcore, and death metal. British anarcho-punks, influenced by New Wave of British Heavy Metal bands, invented crust punk. This style combined the anti-authoritarian politics of anarcho-punk with the heavier musical aesthetics of NWOBHM bands. Grindcore carried forward this political tradition, but engaged sounds and extreme imagery of death metal coming from the United States (Glasper 2009, 16). Consequently, this influence formed a style of music that both looks and sounds very similar to death metal, but with a distinct political edge (Glasper 2009, 8-9; Kahn-Harris 2007, 4; Mudrian 2004, 35). The anarcho-punk political orientation that differentiated grindcore from death metal plays a large part in the way each genre perceives evil, and ultimately informs how Anal Cunt performs.

Metal performers perform “evil” while grindcore implicates “evil.” Metal explores occultist and violent themes as though the performer is a villain that actually engages in them. By contrast, grindcore and its punk forbearers present evil as real-world political threats (capitalism, racism, sexism, etc.) that they resist through their music and culture (Glasper 2006, 5). While both are focused on themes of “evil,” punk culture points outward while metal points inward.

Anal Cunt performs carnival against grindcore’s anarcho-punk politics while fitting metal culture’s demand for embodied “evil” by portraying themselves as a hate group. It’s widely agreed upon, in both musical and scholarly circles, that politicized punk traditions tend to be overbearing and dogmatic. By performing as a grindcore,

right-wing hate group, Anal Cunt indexes a real threat, found in Nazi punk, that is both real and fundamentally opposes anarcho-punk political ideology. In their carnival resistance, Anal Cunt inverts social respectability by promoting a disrespected political orientation as a villainous character. In embodying that threatening “outside” role, Anal Cunt satisfies the desire for an embodied villain found in metal culture while presenting a credible, “outside” threat preferred by anarcho-punk culture.

Anal Cunt roots their humor in their opposition to respectability in metal and punk cultures. At the juncture of punk and extreme metal in grindcore, Anal Cunt mocks the dogmatic politics of punk as villains. However, while they embody “evil” in their “comic” hyperbole in a way that appeals to metal culture, they simultaneously deride its more commercial aspects. Ultimately, their more absurd works aped punk’s preachy style while their more hate-filled works hid comic markers befitting their role as a credible, “evil” characterization. This performance style, I argue, is closer to metal’s carnival tradition of embodying evil and resisting dogma in a carnival fashion.

As a “hate group,” Anal Cunt can be seen as a carnivalesque rebellion against this dogmatic faction of punk culture. In politically-charged punk culture, social consciousness and knowledgeability of the scene create respectability. Anal Cunt’s “When I Think of True Punk Rock Bands, I Think of Nirvana and The Melvins” and “Being Ignorant is Awesome” engages a polar-opposite stance that undercuts scene elitism and promotes ignorance. Their opposition to punk culture respectability illuminates the social respectability inversion that marks carnival play.

Compared to white supremacist bands, Anal Cunt's carnivalesque humor keeps them from being marginalized with white power punk bands. Songs like "I Went Back in Time and Voted for Hitler" and "I Sent Concentration Camp Footage to *America's Funniest Home Videos*," certainly display anti-Semitism. However, while not necessarily popular, Anal Cunt is less marginalized than Nazi-punk bands because their approach is considered ridiculous. Unlike the nationalist themes found in Nazi-punk bands like Skrewdriver, Anal Cunt presents such exaggerated insensitivity, a hatred that transcends space and time to do something so purposefully evil and petty, that it paints them as absurd (Hochhauser 2011, 168). Consequently, to the punk scene, they appear as a satirized version of the white supremacist bands that have plagued their scene since the Nazi-punk style began (Hochhauser 2011, 164).

This "satirical" representation draws out the most dogmatic punks and ultimately makes their outrage look ridiculous. An interlocutor who attended an Anal Cunt performance in 2001, noted the laughter garnered by a young punk who jumped on stage and yelled at Putnam for being a misogynist (Interview with fan). The punk's obliviousness to Anal Cunt's reputation as a satirical, villainous band, and that she, as a punk, was trying to tell someone what to do in an anti-hierarchical culture, made her self-righteous anger appear absurdly dictatorial. This leveling of punk dogma also appeals to metal fans who attend both metal and punk performances.

Anal Cunt appeals to metal fans for their extreme transgression and stance against punk dogma. The instance discussed in the previous paragraph highlights Anal Cunt's confrontation of punk dogma. Although extreme metal culture and punk culture

overlap in many ways, as previously discussed, metal culture has generally opposed anti-authoritarian ideology (Berger 1999, 66; Konow 2002, 4). By drawing out orthodox punks with exaggerated hatred that unorthodox punks understand as satire, they make a make fun of the orthodox punks' dogmatic policing.

Anal Cunt also resists subcultural hierarchy in metal culture. In songs like, "Chris Barnes in a Pussy" and "Brutally Morbid Axe of Satan," Anal Cunt pokes fun at Chris Barnes, lead singer of seminal death metal act Cannibal Corpse, and metal culture's fantastical Satanic imagery. Being that grindcore is a cross-genre between two cultures, although Anal Cunt appears to be protesting dogmatic punk culture most heavily, they also critique and heckle metal culture's institutions as well. But, as suggested by Kahn-Harris' idea of transgressive subcultural capital, extreme metal culture values transgression against rigid ideals in metal and mainstream cultures.

A further indication of Anal Cunt's carnivalesque position is their use of carnivalesque tropes that counter mainstream popularity and respectability. The band's name, their album title, "Everyone Should Be Killed," and their grindcore parodies of Top 40 songs present aspects of grotesque realism and traditional carnival. Anal Cunt's name, being both "foul language" and referencing an anatomical impossibility consisting of the lower regions of the body is grotesque realist. The album title, "Everyone Should Be Killed," is blatant violent hyperbole typically found in carnivalesque performance. Anal Cunt's covers are akin to what Bakhtin refers to as *parodia sacra*, or "sacred parody," in Rabelais' time. During carnivals, as an act against the dogma of The Church, parodic readings of gospels, wills, and epitaphs were read to make fun of their high

standing (Bakhtin 1984, 14). By transforming these popular forms into grindcore by a disrespected band, it plays a parody on their own unpopularity and defames Top 40. As quickly illustrated by these previous short examples, and ones coming later, Anal Cunt presents carnivalesque qualities.

To tie this together, Anal Cunt is a grindcore band that can be seen as a carnivalesque reaction against dogmatic punks while simultaneously catering to metal culture's love of mainstream transgression and rejection of punk culture. Developing in punk culture's anti-authoritarian tradition, Anal Cunt's performance as a "hate group" appeals to some irreverent, anti-dogmatic, anarcho-punk fans. Differing from "real" hate groups, Anal Cunt fits into punk culture by appearing as a satirical band by displaying carnivalesque humor and absurdity. Simultaneously, by rejecting dogmatic punk values and presenting and embodying a believable villainous character, Anal Cunt fits metal culture, garnering further fandom. However, despite the perception that Anal Cunt is a satirical band, they often present behaviors that suggest that their villainous, threatening performance is serious.

Anal Cunt as Dark Play

Anal Cunt treads a line between playfulness and seriousness that can be read as "dark play." In the previous section I focused on how Anal Cunt can be viewed as a humorous resistance against punk dogma while resonating with attitudes in metal culture about punk and mainstream respectability. But as their career progressed, Putnam's song writing and public behavior began to be peppered with instances that have no signs or traces of humor to them. In this section, I will be discussing what "dark play" is, how

Anal Cunt performs it, how it relates to carnival, and how it complicates carnival, resulting in my referring to metal culture as a carnivalesque play community, rather than it simply being carnivalesque.

Although most Anal Cunt fans laugh at the hyperbolic, carnivalesque aspect described in the previous section, many are taken aback when seemingly serious acts of hatred are performed by the band or Putnam. Although many of Anal Cunt's songs have overblown, ridiculous titles and lyrics, there are others that contain no apparent comedy. This is evident in songs like "I Hope You Get Deported" (lyrics on page 55), and "Hootie and the Blowfish":

The singer's a nigger,
The other three are geeks,
We'll get front row tickets and show up in sheets
(Putnam quoted from Prindle 2011)

Further, Anal Cunt, and Putnam, have performed covers of, and rumored to have performed in, white power band Vaginal Jesus (Zebub 2010). These songs, mixed in with their "humorous" work casts doubt in the listener. Is this a humorous band that riskily plays with racism or is this a racist band with a sense of humor?ⁱⁱⁱ This doubt highlights the ambiguity they create through what I view as "dark play."

"Dark play" is playing and acting as though one is not playing. Schechner describes "dark play" as being a situation in which two contradictory realities coexist (1993, 36). These realities are of those understand the situation as "playful," and those who do not (1993, 38). He states that dark play "subverts order, dissolves frames, and breaks its own rules, so that the playing itself is in danger of being destroyed (1993, 36). Some characteristics of dark play include physical danger and intentional confusion or

concealment of a situation being playful (1993, 38). In Schechner's "dark play," performers take assumptions that constitute playfulness in theater and then undercut them with threatening or consequential aspects that "break the rules," thereby calling the playfulness of a performance into question. By presenting apparently real, threatening, or consequential elements in what is a presumably playful space, the performer discredits the idea of a situation being playful and ultimately dissolves the theatrical frame that shapes the audience's interpretation of events. Anal Cunt performs dark play by presenting themselves as hateful villains on stage, where playfulness is a given, and then presenting seemingly contradictory serious behavior in interviews and on album.

Anal Cunt's mixing of "humorous" and "serious" racist songs on album presents two conflicting worldviews, like those found in dark play. Anal Cunt's listeners often debate whether they are really playful. Typically, they present two approaches. The first views Anal Cunt as a seriously racist group and assumes that they may be racists with something of a sense of humor. The other assumes Anal Cunt is playful and assumes they are irreverent humorists playing with racism. For many, these perspectives contradict; one presumes they are racist and the other not. Lacking clarity, the listener must decide if Anal Cunt is playful and the serious songs are bad jokes, or if they are serious and tamping their ideology with humor. By blending serious and humorous work, and never clarifying his stance, Putnam depicts dark play in Anal Cunt.

Anal Cunt's blurring of playfulness and seriousness reflects the merging of everyday life and metal culture's transgressive play. Taking cues from punk culture, extreme metal culture worked to break the theatrical "fourth wall" between performer

and the audience. In punk culture, this nullified the performer's power, making their anarchist performance one with which the audience could identify and engage (Dale 2012, 55). In metal culture, this influence is shown in the shift from early heavy metal's spectacular costumery and stage performance, to modern metal's everyday apparel, like band shirts, sneakers, and jeans (Mudrian 2004, 170; Prindle 2003). Metal differs from punk in why it breaks the fourth wall. While anarcho-punk breaks it to embody politics, metal breaks it to embody transgression. While early heavy metal bands would be "themselves" in interviews, then a character on stage, extreme metal performers shifted to being a villain all the time. The characters they perform on stage are now "real," blurring the beliefs they espouse on stage that are accepted as tongue-in-cheek hyperbole with their everyday existence, blurring fantasy with reality.

Dark play fits metal culture as a style of carnivalesque performance because carnival attempts to merge fantasy and reality. In *Grindcore – 85 Minutes of Brutal Heavy Metal*, Mike Browning of Nocturnus says:

"Our songs are more like short stories, and they're kept at a very fictional level to where it's like, somebody can't actually go out and build a time machine and go back in time. It's like when you have bands talking about sacrificing people or whatever. It's like, people can actually go out and to that stuff and that's where it gets... There's the line that you draw between real life and fantasy." (Mike Browning interviewed in Styxhexenhammer666)

Similarly noted by Keith Kahn-Harris, extreme metal makes the lines between fantasy and reality very difficult to discern (2007, 7). Although Nocturnus makes a specific, determined attempt to draw a hard line, many bands do not, leaving the question unresolved. Bakhtin states:

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. (1984, 7)

In medieval carnivals, fools used ambivalence and shifting logic to trick people for entertainment purposes and were the only performers who continued performing in everyday life in royal courts and town centers (1984, 3, 8, 85, 195, 197). As suggested by Bakhtin's quote, carnival is meant to be mundane, leaving the performer and actor indistinguishable,^{iv} just as performed in punk and punk-influenced metal culture. However, when the theatrical fourth wall is broken, particularly in the performance of a realistic villainy, peculiarities with carnival occur.

Despite Bakhtin's assertions, carnival's transgressions have limits that can destroy the playful space it creates. Throughout my research, I often ran across arguments between metal and punk fans about Anal Cunt's sincerity. For those who had thought they were not serious, the potential revelation that they may have liked, or monetarily supported, a hate group troubled them.^v Throughout *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin asserts that carnivals are a playful space that promotes playful hyperbole, insults, and seemingly endless transgression. Because these fans are seriously offended and concerned, it's apparent their sense of play has been threatened. This suggests that carnival has rules that can be broken that go unaddressed by Bakhtin. By integrating Huizinga's "play-communities," we can clarify these fans' reactions.

Anal Cunt breaks carnivalesque rules, but they don't destroy the community by doing it. By acting in excessively transgressing, by going "a step too far," Anal Cunt

inspires skepticism of their playfulness. If you determine that they have gone “too far,” then they are no longer playful. Carnival is rooted in playfulness, and destroying playfulness therefore destroys the carnivalesque sense of escape. Huizinga describes “spoil-sports” who “take things too far” and ruin the others’ fun (1980, 12). They break rules, destroying a play-community’s games because players, instead of being focused on the game’s engaging play, are forced to pay attention to the game’s rules (Huizinga 1980, 11). Anal Cunt destroys the fantasy of the metal performer, who only role-plays as dangerous, by performing realistically. This causes the fans their tolerance for performers’ hyperbolic statements, and wonder if they have possibly given over so much that real villains are involved in the scene.

However, the complication with carnivalesque culture is that rules are meant to be broken, but only so much. Carnival culture values transgression and hyperbole. It always seeks ways to overcome boundaries. In metal culture, Kahn-Harris’ idea of transgressive subcultural capital represents this by offering scene respectability to the most transgressive against both mainstream culture and previous attempts at transgression by other metal performers. The goal is to “go too far,” which means that performers seek to break “rules” and be more rebellious than their precursors. But when serious bands “break rules,” it stays well enough within metal culture’s buffer zone as to not repel fans. It’s still playful, as “serious” as it may appear. Anal Cunt, because they are “humorous,” is more tolerated because their playfulness seems so “obvious.” However, this extra leniency apparently overruns that tolerance buffer because upon

discovering that Anal Cunt may not be humorous, fan's sense of safety in their playfulness is greatly shaken.

The following sections outline Anal Cunt's dark play performance style by showing their contradictory behavior. So far I've described Anal Cunt as a band, and how people see them as a carnivalesque, satirical performance. I then discussed dark play as a carnivalesque performance style, which toes the edge of carnivalesque playfulness, and how Anal Cunt calls into question metal fans' playful tolerance for performers. In this next section I provide examples of conflicting behavior Anal Cunt presents in concert, album, and in-person that can be initially seen as carnivalesque satire, but become questionable with serious behavior.

Anal Cunt in Concert

Anal Cunt's live performances present a very strong dark play element. Expanding on the concert detailed on page 52, the band's concert on the *Defenders of the Hate* tour featured a "serious" Nazi-punk opening act. Expressing misogynistic views between songs, the band also Nazi-saluted the crowd and played anti-Semitic songs, enraging the audience. Anal Cunt then stepped on stage and asked quizzically, "Why are you so mad? We're just as bad as them!" They then performed "Into the Oven," "Body by Auschwitz," and "Hitler was a Sensitive Man" (Interview with fan). Throughout, Putnam Nazi saluted. Those that know the band as satirical would assume that the opening band was planted to rile up the crowd. Putnam saying that he's "just as bad" as the Nazi-punk band is comic villainous performance. The audience familiar with Anal Cunt's music would know that "Into the Oven" is about cooking a turkey, "Body

by Auschwitz,” mocks dieting, and “Hitler was a Sensitive Man,” actually heckles Hitler. But to the unfamiliar, they aren’t apparently playing.

The music and framing of a Nazi-punk band obscures playfulness. Those that don’t know Anal Cunt will see the Nazi-punk band and Anal Cunt performing songs mentioning Auschwitz, Hitler, and ovens while Nazi saluting. For those intolerant of Anal Cunt, the Nazi-punk band was not funny. Moreover, that Anal Cunt shared the stage with them means that they artistically financially promoted white-power music. Regarding Anal Cunt’s songs, the screech-and-growl grindcore vocal style conceals lyrics in a live setting. By not being able to hear Anal Cunt’s lyrics, audience members could only assume that Anal Cunt were as serious as the Nazi-punk band. This ambiguity marks Anal Cunt’s live-performance dark play.

The Nazi-punk band’s sincerity cloaks Anal Cunt’s “humor.” Schechner describes dark play as creating two worlds in one space, one understood as playful and another as consequential. By playing it straight and presenting the opening act, Anal Cunt is relying on the audience to decide how to read the show. Some will not see playfulness and naturally assume Anal Cunt is a hate-group. Others with a playful perspective will have their tolerance challenged, forced to question Anal Cunt’s playfulness by their hate-group affiliation. Does Anal Cunt hold the same beliefs as the punk band, but present them in a funny way? Should we laugh at the Nazi-punk band for their absurdity and their dogma? On album, Anal Cunt presents a similar ambiguity.

Anal Cunt on Album

Anal Cunt ambiguates their albums by including “humorless” songs. *I Like It When You Die* contains a lot of work that is typically considered humorous/funny. Songs like, “Ha Ha, Your Wife Left You,” “Being a Cobbler is Dumb,” and “Your Favorite Band is Supertramp,” all feature qualities fans consider jocular. “Ha Ha, Your Wife Left You,” fits the theme of insulting the unfortunate. “Being a Cobbler is Dumb,” is typical of their work referring to an occupation, object, or anything as “dumb,” “stupid,” or “gay.” “Your Favorite Band is Supertramp” denounces the listener’s scene credibility by asserting that their favorite band is progressive rock band Supertramp. These tracks present a carnivalesque quality in their gratuitous meanness, particularly in “Being a Cobbler is Dumb,” and “Ha Ha, Your Wife Left You,” which insults workers in a waning industry and the recently divorced. Although loving Supertramp isn’t a crime, presuming the listener is involved in grindcore, metal, or punk culture, it accuses them of being distanced from the scene. Further, the lack of critical thinking in the song and lyrics, which also include homophobic and anti-Semitic insults, opposes punk culture’s demands for accountability and social consciousness. Fans find these humorous because they are wantonly mean and ridiculously immature on their face. However, *I Like It When You Die* also includes some songs that are simply hateful.

Anal Cunt disguises their satirical position with songs that appear to have no comic intent. Although Anal Cunt’s “humorous work” is often littered with homophobic, racist, and anti-Semitic slurs, the songs’ exaggerated hatred presents an immaturity that

paints Putnam as a satirical, stupid, hateful villain. In, “You Own a Store,” the lyrics are simply racist:

hide your dogs, hide your cats-gook,gook
you can't drive, your face is flat-gook,gook
your eyes aren't straight, it's you i hate-gook,gook
you pick rice, we bombed you twice-gook,gook

chorus:
you're a fucking gook x4

your accent's gay, please go away-gook,gook
you look alike, you ride a bike-gook,gook
you own a store, i kicked in your door-gook,gook
you fucking gook, you make me puke-gook,gook
(Mp3lyrics)

Although many “humorous songs contain immature racist and anti-Semitic insults, the racism in this song hit too close to home. Other work includes an exaggerated angle that wantonly insults something, or a hateful, convoluted plot against a group or person. There is nothing sensationalized enough that suggests that this song is a satirical representation of racism.

The blending of humorous and non-humorous songs ambiguates Anal Cunt, suggesting that their hatred, racism, and anti-Semitism may be factual. Central to the debate on whether Anal Cunt are serious racists are songs like this. Many fans overlook the songs as poor attempts at racial humor or may simply not care if it is offensive. Others see this as evidence that their other work, while exaggerated, has some truth to them, and therefore doesn't warrant their support. Nevertheless, serious hatred intervening into the “comical” space creates motivational questions and generates

obfuscates. However, a lot of this doubt comes out of the album and the concert spaces, in Seth Putnam's public persona.

Anal Cunt in Non-Musical Performance

Anal Cunt's non-musical performance highlights a marked shift between extreme metal and earlier varieties of metal. In the previous chapter, I explained how GWAR brings their characters into the "real-world." Although GWAR performed their characters outlandishly, there was always a division between the player and the character. In earlier years, metal fans could look to interviews to learn the "real" perspectives of performers and understand their motives as the people behind the characters on stage. As extreme metal developed, and the merging of metal's carnival culture and everyday life grew, the division of "stage character" and performer disappeared, creating dark play.

Anal Cunt performs dark play in interviews by sending mixed messages. In an interview with *The Grimoire of Exalted Deeds* Issue 10, Putnam argues that "Hitler Was A Sensitive Man" was playful and humorous (Interviewer in Bold):

"Hitler Was A Sensitive Man".

It's a true story. Read the lyrics.

You've compelled me to read the lyrics. "He went to art school when he was younger."

True.

"He wanted to be a painter. Hitler was a vegetarian. He was also a non-smoker." So what are you trying to say here about politically correct people?

I wrote a song about Hitler that's all true so they can't get mad at us. I wrote a song to piss everyone off, and they can't get pissed off because everything we wrote about is all true.

“He hired gay and handicapped officers. He was concerned about overpopulation. If Hitler were alive today he'd listen to The Cure, The Smiths, and Depeche Mode.” Dude, that is brilliant. You ever think about doing stand-up comedy?

Yes. I thought about it for like 20 years.

You have to do it.

Read the lyrics. That's my stand-up comedy.

Dude, you have to do Anal Cunt Unplugged on MTV.

Those lyrics are basically stand-up comedy.

(Zebub 2010)

In this conversation, Putnam declares that his work is humorous. He writes his songs to anger people, play a villain, and be funny. This indicates that his racist hyperbole is a shocking variety of edgy comedy that toys with racism and hate. In the same interview, the interviewer jokingly asserts that Putnam is Jewish, enraging him:

Yeah. People don't understand this because they say to me, “Why does Seth make fun of jews when he is one himself?”

I'm not a jew. I'm half English and half Irish.

But they say that Putnam is highly Jewish.

Actually Seth is kind of a Jewish name. Putnam is kind of an old English name.

...

Are you positive you're not just trying to hide your Jewish identity?

No! I'm not a fuckin' Jew!

Because that's what Jews do, you know.

No. I'm not a fuckin' Jew pretending that I'm Italian or something like that. I look like an Irish person.

Well you drink like an Irish person. You're fulfilling that stereotype.

Basically I'm... if you really want to know my ethnic background... I'm a quarter Irish and a Quarter English. My father's side of the Family was English and they came here in 1630. And my mother's side of the family... there was a potato famine.

Are they Irish Jews?

No. We all hate Jews. My mother hates Jews. My father hates Jews. Well actually my father's job is deporting people actually. I'm not even trying to be funny.

Do people cry when he tells them "Get out"?

He tells me all these hilarious stories like people pretending they can't speak English. I think that it's totally cool that he deports people and he volunteered to be in Vietnam and everyone was avoiding the draft. He re-enlisted like three times because he's all into killing people.

I'm glad that I'm interviewing you because, out of all the bands I've interviewed, no one has ever produced as much mail as an Anal Cunt interview.

You promised me you'd send me magazines and you haven't, you fuckin' Jew. What does it cost? Like fifty cents? You kike! I haven't gotten a new Grimoire in a while, you raging jew! When people ask me how much racist I am I'm not gonna back down.

I enjoy the fact that you magically seem to find the worst thing to say.

I don't know if I told you in person, but I think Grimoire is the only magazine worth reading since *Kick Ass* in the early '80's. Every other fanzine is gay. Everyone cares about things. Anyone who cares about anything is fucking gay faggot. You know I'm married now?

(Zebub 2010)

In this portion of the interview, the humor discussed earlier in the interview is suspect. He claims his 20 year career is “stand-up comedy,” but while many consider his entire act to be a satirical performance of a hate-group, this portion indicates that his hatred wasn’t a joke.

Because non-musical, recorded, and live musical performances all index one another, they blend to create one very large dark play performance. While one can look at this interview and see it as him taking himself and his “beliefs” humorously the quote cited in the epigraph of this chapter suggests that anything he performed was not serious:

Well, I recently went to a Gay Pride parade with my friend Gay Keith. We’ve called him Gay Keith for so many years that he goes by it now. It’s his name on MySpace. We did a European tour called “All Our Fans Are Gay,” and had “I’m Gay” printed on shirts in big letters. Keith is gay and half-Jewish and I don’t give a fuck. He’s a good friend and I don’t care. So many people say I’m anti-this and anti-that. They read my lyrics and assume they know everything about me. (Norton 2011)

While we can take this statement at face value, the fact that they were signed to Resistance Records, but dropped because they weren’t serious enough suggests otherwise (Kahn-Harris 2007b). We’re left to determine whether we find Anal Cunt humorous or not, the consequence of dark play.

This chapter highlighted the move from one style of humorous carnival performance in metal culture to another through Anal Cunt’s comic performance. Previously, I discussed GWAR’s spectacular, very grotesque realist carnivalesque performance. Using fantastic, monstrous costumes, they befit many Bakhtinian carnivalesque qualities. In this chapter I used Anal Cunt as an example of extreme metal, which with punk influence, merges the performed art and everyday life. While

performing grindcore, Anal Cunt rebels against grindcore's anti-authoritarian idealism while fitting metal culture's rejection of dogma and dominant culture. They succeed in this by presenting carnivalesque humor that suggests insincerity. However, in performing as metal-style villain, they perform dark play by hiding their motives and presenting contradictory messages of playfulness. I then presented examples in three different settings in which mixed playful messages befuddle the audience. In the next and final chapter, I move from analyzing metal through theory to considering what about the theory doesn't fit metal culture, and how the theory may be revamped to work.

Endnotes

ⁱ *5643 Song EP* is humorous because a typical EP length is 30 minutes. This would require each song to be approximately .32 seconds long. The *Unplugged EP* is humorous because volume and distortion are central to grindcore's sound. It further mocked the mainstream popularity of "unplugged" albums being released in the wake of *MTV's Unplugged's* success in that time.

ⁱⁱ K-Tel was a record label whose business model focused on selling music compilations through television commercials.

ⁱⁱⁱ Although a common reaction to learning about Anal Cunt is to wonder whether they are serious or not, I argue that it's not whether it's one or the other, but the ambiguity of Putnam's portrayal that is the most compelling aspect of Anal Cunt. The act of being told if something is satirical or not tells the listener how to read a piece. It simplifies interpretations and makes things cut and dried for the listener. Because Anal Cunt claims they have humorous intent, but betrays it so often, fans are forced to make their own determination. Because the listener isn't being told how to read it, they have to use their experience and understanding to make a judgment. Consequently, a fan's reaction to Anal Cunt, whether to take them seriously or not, says a lot about the fan and their level of tolerance.

Anal Cunt's performance promotes a playful interpretation of metal hyperbole, but they cause the audience to critically engage with the assumption that everything in metal is playful. Metal performers, particularly in the development of extreme metal genres, create mythologies about themselves with hyperbolic claims and sensationalized stories. Over time, fans learn to take these with a grain of salt and understand that it is a playful part of the performance. Putnam describing Anal Cunt as humorous extends the room people give the band to be playful and hyperbolic, because their ridiculous rage makes them comical. However, when he tries to sign to white supremacist labels, or actually affiliates with white power bands, his hateful claims, as ridiculous as they are, become more real. This pulls the rug out from under the audience and both makes them question his intent. They then have to critically think about whether they are willing to freely tolerate anything said by a performer, or if they are going to set rules about what they believe is "too far." To this end, as much as the fans don't know whether Putnam is serious or not, I think it's probable that he may not know where that line sits with himself, or if he cares.

It's possible, when performing a realistic character, to lose sight of where the line is between the performer and the character. Carnival culture seeks to make every day the fantastic world of the carnival. While Bakhtin describes the increasing frequency of carnivals in the 15th century, metal culture attempts to do this by blurring the line between the character on stage and the performer. Particularly in the extreme metal period, performers embodied their stage personas at all times. When considering the reasons for ending Crass, Penny Rimbaud cites the destruction of his performer and character divide as a reason for his ending the band:

“You know, seven years away from your own being is a long time, and we all were... We were living a theater day and night. I remember once making love to Eve and thinking, "Oh, I'm making love to Eve Libertine. I'm not making love to Bronwyn Jones, who is my girlfriend. I'm making love to a sort of idea." That sort of thing. In seven years you can become quite an idea of yourself, and not yourself because you've forgotten who yourself was because every day, every fucking moment, it's either in the studio writing a song, doing an interview, being this, being that. You didn't have time to know who you were.” (BurningThemDown 2011)

Crass became the embodiment of an ideology that came to be a dominant ideology in punk culture. In their performances, and their everyday lives in their commune or on tour, the band performed as the embodiment of anarcho-leftist ideology. Putnam, in creating a joke band that was only going to go for a performance and demo tape, ended up being in that band for over 20 years. In that time period, one's sense of identity could become convoluted.

Because of these two factors, focusing on whether Anal Cunt is satirical or not doesn't get to the heart of the group. After 20 years of playing an offensive character, he may not even had a clear idea of how much of the stage performance consisted of him, or if it was an amplified portion of a smaller part of his being. Even if he did know, it's apparent the purpose of Anal Cunt is the not knowing, and the goal should be to find the message within that not knowing. As I've argued in this chapter, the message is to question the trust one places in the performer's playfulness in metal culture.

^{iv} This seems wrong because many groups that one would call “carnavalesque,” like GWAR's spectacular costumery in the previous chapter. This aesthetic is grotesque realism and is often paired with, and typically signals, carnivalesque performance. Certainly, Anal Cunt has aspects of this aesthetic, but they apply them to words and the minimal imagery they use. This allows the carnivalesque to overcome the binds of the theatrical stage and make its way out into everyday lived reality.

^v Kahn-Harris' blog, *Metal Jew*, provides an excellent presentation of a fan's reaction to discovering Putnam's more extreme work. Despite his own admitted indulgence in Anal Cunt's work from time to time, his post displays an anxious questioning of Putnam's motives. Upon learning of Putnam's mingling with hate-group Vaginal Jesus and a rumored attempt to sign Anal Cunt to Resistance records, Kahn-Harris exemplifies the anxiety some fans feel when discovering that Putnam could be serious in his endeavors (Kahn-Harris 2007b).

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: RECONSIDERING CARNIVAL

Throughout this thesis, I analyzed metal through a theoretical lens. I discussed humorous heavy metal as Bakhtinian carnival, Huizingan play, and Schechner's dark play. Concluding this thesis, I want to consider what metal has to say about the theory. While theories often describe or explain a phenomenon, they rarely match completely. In these portions that don't fit, we see opportunities for theory to evolve and sharpen.

In this chapter, I will address unconsidered aspects of the theories used. Specifically I want to address points made using Schechner and Bakhtin's theories. While assuming I have made a convincing argument for how my humorous metal examples fit these theories, I will highlight ways they can be reshaped to fit different historical and social conditions. Schechner's concept of dark play can be carnivalesque. Schechner states, "Unlike the inversions of carnivals, ritual clowns, and so on (whose agendas are public), dark play's inversions are not declared or resolved; its end is not integration but disruption, deceit, excess, and gratification" (1996, 36). This statement outright dissects dark play from carnival, suggesting that it is more dangerous and risky because carnival is framed. However, as illustrated in the third chapter, Bakhtin describes carnival's integration into everyday life, which requires undeclared inversions. While not all dark play is carnivalesque, Anal Cunt illustrates how carnival culture certainly uses dark play to merge fantasy and reality into everyday life. By considering dark play as a carnivalesque phenomenon, we can see modern cultural

behaviors as advanced carnivalesque performances that are more problematic than Bakhtin lets on.

Bakhtin's idealized reading of Rabelais keeps us from considering the problematic issues of carnival culture. Many times throughout *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin describes the carnival atmosphere as a freeing, utopian, radical space (Bakhtin 1984, 10, 12, 19, 33, 48, 89). But if we consider metal culture to be carnivalesque, we find that it is far from utopian. As indicated in this thesis by Anal Cunt's politics, and many other academic discussions about metal culture, there are many race and gender issues in metal culture that could not be addressed in Rabelais' time and place, or in Bakhtin's reading. Problematizing carnival and seeing how politics are played out, not only in metal culture, but other carnival cultures as well, opens the opportunity to extend carnival theory into political spaces that weren't covered previously.

Importantly, the notion of carnivalesque performance is incomplete unto itself, opening the opportunity for expansion, modernization, and reconsideration. Critics of Bakhtin indicate that Rabelais' work only contains a few carnivals described, and that of those described, their inversions were not as utopian and radical as Bakhtin asserts (Kinser 1990, 248; Berrong 1990, 10). Consequently, Rabelaisian scholars argue that Bakhtin's reading is a skew of Rabelais' description of carnival. Therefore, Bakhtin's idea of carnival is to some degree incomplete or inaccurate. Because not all the pieces are there, it's possible that some carnivalesque behaviors depicted in Rabelais are not documented by Bakhtin. While these may not be included in Bakhtin's reading, it means there is opportunity to flesh-out and extend the theory to include uncovered material. In

the light of modern history, compared to the historical texts with which Bakhtin worked, insights into the social lives of people from Rabelais' time and the reasons they did what they did could build out this theory more extensively.

Because Bakhtin's project is incomplete, and because carnival is traditional, we can further his project by considering different, unique ways in different historical and social conditions. Traditional carnivalesque performance provides insight into the relationship of power, culture, and morality in the time in which it exists. Texts, aesthetics, and ideas have updated and changed over time to fit each era's concerns and address social issues in different ways. Extending Bakhtin's groundbreaking work to fit multiple contexts into a cohesive understanding of how different periods' carnival plays out will allow us to better understand behaviors in other eras. In my future work, I plan to update and reconsider what carnival is today, how it changed, and how different approaches toward up-ending rigid dogma interact and relate to one another.

To the end of expanding on Bakhtin's work, this text aimed to describe metal as a carnivalesque phenomenon through the analysis of humor in metal culture. By analyzing carnivalesque tropes and approaches in chapter I, I tied current metal studies literature to tropes described by Bakhtin. I then analyzed GWAR's comedy as an exaggeration of those grotesque realist and carnivalesque tropes. I proceeded to Anal Cunt, who uses a dark play style to highlight the shift from spectacle to everyday carnival in rebellion against mainstream and punk respectability. This move from spectacle to the everyday indicates a trajectory in carnival culture, the shift from infrequent, spectacular carnivals to everyday performance of carnival.

This chapter moves the theory behind this forward by reconsidering the theory by seeing what does not fit metal culture. Schechner's dark play can be carnivalesque.

Bakhtin's work, while fitting, has many areas that can be built upon and modernized.

This text modernizes and builds up some aspects of carnival by highlighting Anal Cunt's carnivalesque use of dark play, by highlighting the deeper issues at play, and by touching upon the far-from-utopian and disconcerting aspects of Anal Cunt's "humor."

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