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"Pure language" : Authenticity, Punk Ideology, and Belonging in A Visit from the Goon Squad

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Jennifer Egan's novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* through its themes of identity, communication, and the search for authenticity, focusing especially on its treatment of punk aesthetics and technological communication. In dealing with these themes, this paper encourages consideration of the novel's portrayal of punk aesthetics as they influence the way the characters perceive their own identities, their sense of belonging within a community, and their views on personal and artistic integrity. Of note are the characters Bennie Salazar and Scotty Hausmann, whose experiences in the punk scene of 1970s San Francisco inform how they recognize and perform legitimacy as adults, as well as how they perceive community as advanced, technological modes of communication become more prevalent with time's passing. While either character centers himself around his idea of authenticity, their differing interpretations of punk ideology cause them to develop contrasting views on the maintenance of that authenticity. Despite these contrasting attitudes, these two characters share a desire for a meaningful connection to those around them, and a sense of belonging within a community, both of which are challenged by advancing technology. Depicting New York City in the 2020s, the novel's closing chapter suggests that the character Alex, who is representative of a newer generation, feels isolated by this technology due to its ubiquity, while struggling with his own perception of ethical purity as technology allows for the commodification of personalities and interests. This paper argues that Bennie and Scotty, through their punk-informed ethics of authenticity that are challenged by advancing technology, influence characters such as Alex toward a sense of connectedness that overrides their preoccupation with individual validity.

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"Pure Language": Authenticity, Punk Ideology, and Belonging in *A Visit from the Goon Squad*

by

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I: Introduction

Packaged as a novel, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* encompasses a broad array of individual stories, each focusing on figures and settings that differ significantly, yet exist within a wider network of characters related by temporality, circumstance, and social connections. Acclaimed for its unconventionally-structured narrative, critics have also noted the novel's use of punk rock music and aesthetics as they contextualize each character's relationship with the progression of time. Such readings of the novel have examined the role punk identity plays within the novel's themes of nostalgia, aging, and authenticity both in art and in one's own self-representation. Critics have located these themes in the characters' unease at the idea of growing old; for the characters involved in the music industry, this threatens their perception of authenticity as it applies both to themselves and the music they love. Critics, then, have considered Egan's treatment of punk aesthetics as symbolic of the desire to maintain youth. For example, Martin Moling proposes that the novel's aspiration to "access literature's potential for slowing down time" is reflected in Egan's use of punk aesthetics to frame the fear of aging prevalent in the narrative (Egan 53). Also centered around the novel's treatment of temporal anxiety, Gerard Moorey's analysis of *Goon Squad* explores the way that punk music and ideology themselves are changed with time's passing. In either reading, the characters' adherence to punk ideology is considered a behavior that challenges their growth, especially for the characters who were involved in music-based communities in their younger years.

In engaging with the relationship between punk aesthetics and temporality in this way, these critics do not consider the influence of punk aesthetics on the way the novel's

characters perceive and participate in communication with others. As Moling and Moorey suggest, the characters Bennie Salazar and Scotty Hausmann, having come of age in the 1970s San Francisco punk rock scene, are led by punk ideology to reject indicators that the world around them is changing with time. Such indicators include modern developments in telecommunication and music production, and produce feelings of unease in these two characters. However, just as their anxiety over aging can be traced to their involvement in the punk scene, Bennie and Scotty also develop particular views on community resulting from either character's separate attachment to the abrasive, identity-oriented tenets of punk ideology. I propose that these attitudes toward community are necessary to consider when examining Bennie's and Scotty's relationship with technology. This reading of the novel suggests that this relationship is informed by anxiety about technology's effects on communication in the decades following the dissipation of the punk scene. Moreover, their views on both community and technology are related to the contrasting interpretations of authenticity, or artistic, social, and ethical purity, that they developed as punks. In my analysis, I compare Bennie's and Scotty's punk-curated relationship with technology and communication to that of the next generation of characters, whose reliance on technology belies a sense of unease regarding its use. I argue that both generations' standards of authenticity, while originating from different social factors, stem from a shared desire for involvement within a community. This is made evident by the concert that Scotty performs at the novel's climax; the expression of punk-informed sentiment through live performance prompts a sense of connectedness between characters, despite the differing origins of their views on authenticity.

While the volume and diversity of the novel's ensemble cast of characters are indicative of the many different avenues through which they become associated with one another, the characters Bennie, Scotty, and Alex highlight the differences and similarities between generational perceptions of authenticity in the narrative. While Bennie and Scotty emblematize the punk aesthetics that shaped them, Alex represents the younger generation and their complementary views on authenticity, technology, and communication. Despite these differences, these three characters are connected by the fact that they are either dedicated consumers, performers, or producers of music, each occupying a role within the many facets of music production and distribution. Bennie and Scotty, both former punk musicians from the same band, exemplify opposite outcomes of the potential development of young musicians. Bennie becomes a producer and president of a prominent music label, Sow's Ear Records, while Scotty, known for his enrapturing performance and music skills, fades into obscurity and reclusiveness. Drifting apart and reconnecting at various points throughout the novel, Bennie and Scotty finally develop a fully-formed professional relationship by the final chapter, with Bennie managing Scotty as a musician. This chapter, which takes place at the latest chronological point in the narrative, centers around Scotty's first solo performance, for which Alex had been hired to generate an audience using social media. The process of preparing for this event, specifically the ethical dilemma of utilizing technology and money to draw an audience for the concert, highlights the generational differences between the three characters that inform their reactions to or awareness of this conflict.

This generational rift is especially evident in each character's ethics of authenticity. While these characters are only three out of an ensemble cast that is depicted through varying time periods and locations, they emblematize the novel's analysis of authenticity and its effects on the ways that communities function, from the exclusive punk scene of the 1970s to the technologically-connected society of 2020s New York. Through their beliefs and behaviors, two diverging interpretations of authenticity may be identified: individual authenticity emphasizing the performance of ethical or ideological integrity, and an authentic sense of connectedness between people. The characters' reactions to growing technology and changing modes of communication also bring to attention the major conflict between authority over oneself and the maintenance of a functioning community. Bennie's sense of artistic integrity lies in the capacity for music performance to emotionally connect people to one another, an ability threatened by the digitization of modern recording methods. Meanwhile, Scotty and Alex share an interest in the outward appearance of social and ethical purity that they hope will assert their status as individuals uncompromised by consumerism and protect them from rejection by others. Scotty's performance of authenticity is reactive to the feelings of insecurity regarding one's identity that were prevalent in the punk scene, which contributed to the exclusion of community-members who were not perceived as legitimately punk. Alex's conflict lies in the fact that the prospect of buying an audience for Scotty's concert goes against his own ethics of authenticity, and moreover, his agreement to the job causes him to question his own self-perception as someone who is ethically pure.

The shared interpretation of individual integrity between Scotty and Alexis born from different social contexts, yet both characters exhibit a vulnerability that results from and

causes a feeling that one is an intruder upon one's own community, an insecure mindset that perpetuates further isolation. Given the novel's themes of identity-conflict and disconnection, the incorporation of punk aesthetics in the development of Bennie's and Scotty's relationships with themselves and others suggests the capability for a member of an ideologically- and aesthetically-driven community to self-isolate in the interest of performing authenticity. This is paralleled by the tendency for the novel's future generation to exhibit the same behaviors as they feel separated from their own identities as a result from widespread technological communication, attempting to resist the commodification of their identities by those technologies. In both cases, this behavior only allows for self-exclusion and inhibits connectedness between members of the respective community. However, Scotty's concert winds up reinforcing Bennie's idea of the valuable connectivity made possible by music performance, allowing Scotty a positive outlet for his self-imposed seclusion, and foregrounding the realization that Alex's own feelings of exclusion and inauthenticity are experienced by his generation at large. This event, then, highlights the shared insecurities and anxieties of both performer and audience despite their different experiences with commodification, technology, and community, moving them toward a more traditionally communication-oriented society, and away from a preoccupation with individual authenticity. In what follows, I will examine the ways that this idea is reflected in Egan's treatment of communication and community, both in the organized circle of the 1970s San Francisco punk scene and in the broad population of 2020s New York. Aside from establishing these concepts as necessary toward a new understanding of the narrative, this analysis will highlight the novel's contribution to a contemporary literary canon that explores the way

communities respond to changes in technology and mainstream culture.

II: The Pitfalls of Punk Aesthetics

As I suggested above, the novel's study of punk aesthetics is centralized in the characters of Bennie and Scotty, whose relationship with these aesthetics follows their presence in the novel from adolescence to adulthood. Identifying the ideological shifts these characters undergo with time's passing requires a look at their experiences within the punk scene as teenagers, as well as an understanding of the beliefs and behaviors at the core of punk subculture. At its core, the purpose of punk subculture is like that of style-based subcultures generally: to resist hegemonic structures in society and challenge the "principle of unity and cohesion" suggested by such systems (Hebdige 18). During the height of its social significance in the late 1970s, American punk subculture "sought to tear apart consumer goods, royalty, and sociability… to destroy the idols of the bourgeoisie" (Clark 225). In comparison to prior or concurrent counter-culture movements, the punk movement specifically was noted for its aggressive rejection of mainstream values, utilizing style and art "to shock and dismay, to disobey prescribed confines of class, gender, and ethnicity" (223). The core beliefs of punk philosophy are examples of non-performative aesthetics, which are presented through behaviors that reflect them. Comprising an ideology of anti-consumerism, rejection of societal rules, and anger toward the hegemonic establishment, they are expressed through punk's performative aesthetics, the most recognizable of which is the material performance of punk ideals through fashion. Punk's classic visual style is notable in its

distinctiveness, with punk fashion traditionally consisting of distressed clothing and improvised accessories. These reflect a philosophy of disassociation from consumerist and conformist beauty ideals and norms.

Aside from aiding one's individual self-expression, the encouragement of bricolage in the personalization and arrangement of punk fashion also demonstrates the subculture's resistance to the pervasiveness of consumerism in mainstream society, asserting a fashion style which is intended to be created or altered, as opposed to merely purchased. Examples of this include clothing modification through the incorporation of "dog collars and safety pins and shredded T-shirts" into their wardrobes s (Egan 40). Of equal importance is another model of performative punk aesthetics, the performance of music within the punk rock genre. Punk music is sonically characterized in many cases by "a barrage of guitars with the volume and treble turned to maximum… against a turbulent background of cacophonous drumming and screamed vocals" (Hebdige 109). Through its typically aggressive instrumentation and candid, vulgar lyrics, punk music communicates the anger towards mainstream society that was a driving force of the movement's conception. Like the subculture's distressed clothing, classic punk's rawness, vulgarity, and informal composition express the anger at the heart of punk subculture. Whether through the material performance of creating and wearing punk fashion or the indispensable practice of performing, recording, and listening to punk music, these examples of performative aesthetics suggest that communities based in punk subculture are centered on representations of punk ideology and identity through style and art. Along with these types of performative aesthetics, the social and behavioral performance of punk ideology reflects the movement's rejection of the materialist, conformist practices

encouraged by late twentieth-century American and British society. Expressing feelings of anger and frustration through cathartic practices such as “slam-dancing” as well as through destructive or even self-destructive behavior like drinking and smoking, punks’ actions both within and outside of the punk community are traditionally aggressive in order to renounce the bourgeois status quo (Egan 52).

These practices and aesthetics are important to the events and interactions that occur in the novel’s third chapter, which takes place in San Francisco in 1979 and centers on Bennie’s and Scotty’s social circle. Having come from different backgrounds and experiences, the teenagers in this friend group identify as punks and are varyingly involved in Bennie’s and Scotty’s punk band, the Flaming Dildos. Rhea, one member of the group, struggles deeply with her own sense of authenticity within the punk community, asking: “When does a fake mohawk become a real mohawk?” (46). Narrating this chapter, she ruminates on the ways in which punk aesthetics are reflected in her social circle and the larger Bay-Area punk scene. The most obvious example of the group’s practice of punk aesthetics is presented in the beginning of the chapter, in which the teenagers listen to punk music, “blasting bootleg tapes of the Stranglers, the Nuns, [and] Negative Trend” in Scotty’s van (39). The presence and influence of music within the punk subculture is depicted through the friends’ involvement in San Francisco’s punk scene and their closeness to one another results from a mutual interest in punk music.

Much of this chapter surrounds the musical efforts of the Flaming Dildos as they gather new members, rehearse, and record sample tapes of their music in the hopes of performing at the Mabuhay Gardens, a San Francisco club that is regularly attended by

members of the local punk community. Frequenting “the Mab” on weekends after rehearsing their own music, the friends immerse themselves in the active subculture, eavesdropping on community gossip in the bathrooms and slam-dancing at the shows that take place there (45-6). Emulating the energy of this environment and their favorite punk bands in their own music, the Flaming Dildos boast a repertoire of aggressive songs with expletive-laden lyrics that the friends “holler… aloud in Scotty’s garage” (44). Aside from the band’s sound, their lyrics match the tone of the punk groups that have influenced them. Their song “What the Fuck?” communicates feelings of bitter anger, confusion, and apparent betrayal: “You said you were a fairy princess / You said you were a shooting star / You said we’d go to Bora Bora / Now look at where the fuck we are...” (45). Notably, Rhea comments that Alice, a newcomer to the group from a privileged family, is the person to suggest this reference to Bora Bora, as the others had “never heard of it” (45). While Bennie and Scotty are the band’s bassist and guitarist, respectively, Jocelyn, Rhea, and Alice are not musicians; although they sing along during rehearsals, the three of them have no desire to be on stage for actual performances. Of their friend group, Bennie and Scotty are the most invested in music performance and production, particularly Scotty, who attracts crowds when he plays his hand-made slide guitar on school grounds. Within the band, Bennie acts as both its bassist and manager, soliciting venues in order to book shows while he and Scotty write music and repeatedly change the band’s name, conceivably to perfect its relation to their aesthetic. Yet despite these contributions, they clearly are responsible for only part of the effort by which the band operates. For example, the Flaming Dildos invite musicians from outside of their social circle and even outside of the punk community in order to improve their quality and

distinctiveness as a punk band, and to raise their chances of being signed to a record label. Meanwhile, the non-musician members of the friend group contribute toward this goal by providing recording equipment and writing all of the band's lyrics.

These facets of the band's music and its creative process demonstrate the important role that the creation and consumption of art plays in the characters' feeling of belonging in their local punk community. The communal effort of the Flaming Dildos is a microcosm of a larger culture of creative consumption within the anti-consumerist punk subculture, one that serves to perpetuate the scene while minimizing the extent to which a punk may merely be seen as a consumer. Of the various tenets of punk ideology, one that notably frames the creation of art within the subculture is its "belief in spontaneity and 'doing it yourself'" (Sabin 3). The emphasis on "doing it yourself," or DIY culture, results in part from a desire to separate oneself from the mainstream consumer through more active engagement with the art and other commodities that one consumes. On this idea, Robert Garnett states that through such engagement, punks "were no longer passive consumers, they could 'think for themselves'. This is, I think, the true meaning of the phrase 'Do It Yourself'" (Garnett 27). In terms of viewing musical performances that communicate the ideological aesthetics of punk subculture, one way that punks may further separate themselves from the practice of consumerism is by intending to produce music of their own that is directly inspired by and draws from the music that they listen to. For the chronically-insecure Flaming Dildos, creating music and performing at the Mab is not only a form of expression and a method of bonding with like-minded artists, but a method of justifying their initial involvement in the subculture itself.

In terms of materially performative aesthetics, the concept of creative consumption through DIY culture is depicted through the characters' practice of modifying and improvising fashion items. Rhea emphasizes the group's adherence to punk fashion through repeated descriptions of their dyed hair, the ripped clothing that they themselves have distressed, and the dog collars and safety pins they use to accessorize (Egan 40). Just as through engagement with and perpetuation of art, the practice of damaging or repurposing purchased fashion items allows for one to alter the role of the consumer, contributing to a material form of self-expression. Through these personalized yet basically consistent visual aesthetics, each member of the group expresses his or her individuality while also establishing his or her place within their local punk community, consequently expressing the fixed identity of a punk. For Rhea, the maintenance of visual self-expression results from a desire to fit in to the punk scene, directing attention away from her natural features in order to rewrite her identity as punk. Endlessly self-conscious about her freckles, she questions: "how can anyone call me 'the girl with the freckles' when my hair is green?" (Egan 43). Other members of the friend group are shown to use punk fashion to differentiate themselves from those representing more mainstream fashion choices, and even those from other subcultures, such as the down-and-out hippies Rhea sees in the streets or her classmates who are involved in the cholo subculture. Bennie, described by Jocelyn as being a "cholo" based on his ethnicity, contrasts in style against their "black leather coats and clicky shoes and dark hair in almost invisible nets" (42). Alice, who is from an affluent family and lives in an upscale neighborhood, "wears ripped jeans and drippy black eye makeup" to outwardly express her identity as a punk (47).

One would expect, then, that the distinctive punk visual style would be seen by the teenagers as an indicator of authenticity within their community and friend group. However, even as these characters present the visual aesthetics of the punk scene in order to assert their place in the community, they feel separated from it. In particular, Rhea's sense that punk identity is tied in large part to material performance is challenged by Alice's adherence to those aesthetics. A wedge exists between Alice and the other members of the group for a number of reasons: she is unfamiliar to them and new to the music scene, she comes from a wealthy background, and she has been invited into the scene partly because Bennie hopes to form a romantic relationship with her (42). For Rhea, the idea of someone entering the subculture and immediately adopting the fashion style suggests a simplicity to visual self-representation that allows someone like Alice to pass as punk, fueling her inability to accept punk fashion as an indicator of authenticity.

This unease experienced by Rhea indicates an underlying problem in the idea of punk fashion as a symbol of authenticity by the punk community at large. The punk community in the novel is depicted as being internally divisive and troubled, with Rhea serving as one example of a punk who distrusts other punks and even her own status of authenticity. The severity of this community's response to a breach of their code of authenticity is depicted in the Flaming Dildos' first concert at the Mab, where the members of the audience accost the band while they play. A distraught Rhea observes "garbage… spewing at the stage, chucked by four guys with safety-pin chains connecting their nostrils to their earlobes" (52). Soon after, one of the garbage-throwers attempts to climb onto the stage, only failing to do so because Scotty knocks him back. As suggested by Rhea throughout the chapter, such

behavior is rooted in the fact that the band members are presenting punk's visual style does not designate them as authentic.

This mindset, though prevalent, belies the fact that materially performative aesthetics are a necessity in the 1970s San Francisco punk scene. Clearly, society in this time period did not have the technology afforded to those in future decades, with only basic forms of telecommunication that lacked the reach of internet-based social media. As such, community-based subcultures such as the punk scene utilized different modes of communication and identification in order to perpetuate themselves, largely through aesthetic materials. An example of this is the zine, "a novel form of communication" distributed on cheap paper and used to share various forms of punk art" (Duncombe 2). Similarly, the punk community would have benefited from the existence of an unofficial uniform that is "homologous with the focal concerns, activities, group structure and collective self-image of the subculture" (Hebdige 114). By rendering punks easily identifiable, material performance of punk ideology allowed community members to immediately recognize and correspond with one another, as well as determine the clubs and venues in which they were likely to congregate.

However useful, material performance is problematized by the fact that they are able to be purchased and appropriated by those outside of the community. Frank Cartledge notes that punk fashion had evolved throughout the 1970s in response to its tendency of being "rapidly commodified", with the popular understanding of punk's visual aesthetics having been "frozen" in the punk fashion of 1979 (146-7). Cartledge then argues that this narrow view of punk fashion undermines the stylistic diversity of various punk scenes that resulted from the "spiked Mohican haircut, bondage trousers, and studded leather jacket" having

become designated as “commodity punk” (Egan 147, Laing 95). Punk fashion as it appears in *Goon Squad* does indeed reflect the quintessential 1979 punk style, depicting the Flaming Dildos and other, more perceivably established members of the community as donning similar accessories or types of clothing. As such, Rhea’s questioning the authenticity status of herself and her friends, especially her shock at Alice’s ability to shrug the aesthetic of her clean, girlish bedroom and instantly adopt punk fashion, suggests an awareness of the superficiality of punk’s visual style. This threatens Rhea’s own sense of authenticity, adding to her anxiety about her own status as a legitimate punk; she becomes aware that, at least potentially, not everyone in the punk scene is in fact punk, including her. While she is knowledgeable of the other punks’ affairs, such as certain club patrons’ artistic endeavors or drug addictions, this is only possible because she and her friends blend in enough to eavesdrop; she comments that such knowledge “makes us one step closer to being real, but not completely” (Egan 45-6). Based on the behavior exhibited by the audience at the Flaming Dildos’ first performance, it stands to reason that this anxiety permeates the entire music scene. For the established punks of the novel’s San Francisco scene, this anxiety extends to the idea of outsiders infiltrating their community, prompting them to socially perform punk ideology with higher emphasis in order to prove themselves as legitimate and bar entry from outsiders. These actions, however, prove to inhibit the community’s functionality and problematize the self-perception of its members rather than fend off those who do not belong.

This is exemplified in the altercation between the Flaming Dildos and the group of punks who accost them during their performance (51-2). Notably, this scene suggests that punk fashion is only superficially accepted as an indicator of punk status, as evidenced by the

safety pins and piercings of the audience members. The Flaming Dildos are similarly dressed to emulate the aesthetics of their environment, and when they perform their first song, Rhea observes: “No one is dancing or even listening; they’re still coming into the club or killing time until the bands they came for start playing” (51). It is the presence of Marty, the Flaming Dildos’ non-punk violinist, who draws attention from the crowd towards the idea that the entire band may be a group of impostors. Following the appearance of Marty, the four punks who Rhea has titled “the garbage throwers” begin to throw bottles, injuring Marty, then directing their attention to Scotty when he retaliates (52).

For the four garbage-throwers, the involvement of one non-punk figure on stage indicates that the other band members’ adherence to punk fashion cannot be trusted as proof of their punk status. Just as Rhea perceives her punk appearance as demeaned by Alice’s adoption of punk fashion, the garbage throwers now must compensate for the inadequacy of the band’s appearance, which reflects their own appearance’s potential inadequacy in proving their punk status, by directing their behavioral performance of punk ideals toward the band. They do so by inflicting their ideology of anger and rejection – an important facet of punk aesthetics that the community ordinarily directs toward mainstream establishment – onto Scotty. Similar to how the Flaming Dildos watch performances to create new art and buy clothing that they destroy, the garbage throwers’ attempt to assault Scotty and his success in fighting them off echo the productive cycle of collaborative consumption within punk ideology. Specifically, the cyclical perpetuation of anger in this scene suggests a level of connectivity between performer and audience that would ordinarily be conducive to

community growth and art production, had the target of this anger been the societal establishment that is meant to be the subject of the community's rejection.

However, unlike the anger normally directed towards the mainstream by the punk community, this anger at the perceived inauthenticity of Scotty and his band mates is rooted in the fear of one's identity being compromised as material performance loses its subversive edge. Its expression encourages communal strife, as the altercation between Scotty and the garbage throwers moves others in the audience to "slam-[dance] hard, the kind of dancing that's basically fighting" (52). Even Rhea, still attempting to gauge the authenticity of those involved, notes that "Scotty's smiling now, grinning like I almost never see him grin, wolf teeth flashing, and I realize that, out of all of us, Scotty is the truly angry one" (52). However, Rhea is not able to conclusively deduce whether she and her friends truly belong in the punk scene, even at the chapter's end, at which point the Flaming Dildos have disbanded. The idea that the garbage throwers instigated the altercation with Scotty because they also hoped to reinforce their own authenticity speaks to the ubiquity of aesthetic insecurity within the punk community. It suggests that this scene, despite partly operating and self-perpetuating through material performance and physical proximity, maintains a high level of emotional disconnectedness as every punk is simultaneously at odds with one another and with his or herself. Moreover, as is shown with Rhea, this question of identity and belonging does not resolve with participation in the consumption and creation of music, which is a core facet of punk expression.

The fact that one's status as a performer of punk music proves inadequate in evidencing his or her punk status to the rest of the community, as well as its rejection of

material performance and emphasis on behavioral performance, suggests that the scene's standards of authenticity do not lie in a sense of authentic connectedness, but in the individual appearance of authenticity. While all three performative aesthetics that I have referenced should ideally serve to emotionally connect the community members through their shared ideology, the dismissal of music creation's role in solidifying one's punk status and the suspicion raised by material performance cause a preoccupation with proving oneself as authentic, such as in Rhea's case. As Rhea exhibits, she is preoccupied with her own authenticity such that her questioning the punk status of those around her is not related to genuine concern over their level of belonging, but in her own feelings of inadequacy. That the apparent trend in this community is to prove oneself as punk on an individual level and, in the case of the garbage throwers, to do so by challenging the authenticity of others, implies a misdirection of punk ideals toward self-separation between punks, rather than between punks and mainstream society. Any sense of authentic connectedness within the community, then, is problematized by the subculture's particular relationship with conformity and materiality, which in turn yields the prioritization of performing authenticity over prioritizing true connectivity. At later points in the novel, Bennie and Scotty's behaviors are reactive to these complications, which encourage the development of their differing views on authenticity as adults.

III: Technological Advancement, Experience, and Connectivity

Of the group of friends in the novel's third chapter, Bennie and Scotty are the most closely followed by the narrative as they separate from one another and change over time.

These two characters, suggested by Rhea to be the most authentically punk in their circle, emblematize different aspects of the same community that brought their interests and personalities to light: Bennie is largely concerned with music, while Scotty is dedicated to his status as a contrarian. As adults, they exhibit these same behaviors. While Bennie settles into a successful, lucrative career, Scotty's life goes in the other direction, the previously "magnetic" performer now a reclusive janitor who no longer plays music for others (42). These changes can be directly attributed to their experiences as punk teenagers and their current drive toward different interpretations of authenticity, which also inform their reactions to the social and technological changes taking place around them. In Scotty's case, his reclusiveness and unconventional lifestyle during adulthood correspond to his continued adherence to the ideologies he adopted through involvement in the punk community, particularly the subculture's emphasis on reaction to and retaliation against hegemonic oppression and bourgeois conformity. He also retains latent destructive urges and anger toward mainstream society, especially Bennie, about whom Scotty entertains the idea of "ripping off his head, yanking it from the neck of that beautiful white shirt" (102). As the altercation between Scotty and the garbage throwers suggests, the anger Scotty expresses during both chapters reflects not only the problematized practice of punks retaliating against other punks, but his anger that is encouraged by punk subculture. By engaging the garbage throwers in their assault, Scotty contributes to the strife within the punk community while also presenting himself as an authentic punk.

For teenaged Scotty, the revelation of this particular emotion is unexpected, as he is described as the most introverted and quiet of the group of friends. However, behind his

reticent and anxious demeanor lies a series of traumatizing experiences that have influenced his overall mood, inability to socialize, and attachment to a music genre and subculture that operate on the cathartic expression of negative emotions. Scotty is a model of the punk emphasis on retaliation through self-destruction, having intentionally and permanently damaged his vision following his mother's abandonment of his family (45). Such self-destructive behavior is common among the punks in the book, such as in Jocelyn's affair with the much-older Lou or the friends' wanton drug use and alcohol consumption. This behavior results in part from the predominant dissatisfaction with societal norms expressed within punk subculture, and in the case of the friend group, it is arguably a way to assert their status of authenticity that cannot be proven by visual aesthetic alone. Still, unlike his friends, Scotty does not act out so that he may appear more authentic to those around him, but rather in response to the anger and anxiety he feels following the tragic events that befall him as a teenager. That Rhea considers Scotty's angst and repressed emotions in her search to define authenticity, then, suggests an importance to behavioral presentations of negative emotions that result from real experiences.

Well into adulthood, Scotty is depicted as still dealing with the aftereffects of his childhood trauma and self-harm, experiencing "headaches from eye damage I had as a kid" (105). However, more than in his negative experiences, his reclusiveness at this point is rooted in a continued attachment to the importance placed upon behaviorally performative punk aesthetics. Despite no longer being involved in the punk community, Scotty's asocial behavior as an adult remains influenced by the functions of the 1970s Los Angeles punk scene, reflecting Mark Sinker's suggestion that "the purest expression of punk community

may be the refusal to reach out" (126). Having come of age within a community whose own relationship with punk aesthetics problematized its internal sense of connection, Scotty has normalized the idea that punk ideology yields and justifies emotional isolation, serving as a divider between the counter-culture and mainstream. In Scotty's adulthood, this isolation becomes physical as well as emotional. Scotty lives alone and maintains a small group of two friends with whom he only interacts while fishing. He apparently owns only practical clothing; for special occasions, all he has to wear are "khaki pants and a jacket that I dry-cleaned a *lot*" (94). . By shrugging away outer society and the material goods that he does not deem necessary to own, Scotty abides by the minimally-consumerist tenets of the punk community decades after his involvement. The nonconformist attitude promoted by punk subculture is also clearly present in Scotty's personality and thought patterns. The unconventionality of his activities, such as fishing from the East River and offering a caught fish to Bennie as a gift, seems purposeful and raises palpable feelings of discomfort in the people with whom he interacts, a fact that fills Scotty with delight. Clearly, Scotty's eccentricity, while likely an unmanufactured aspect of his personality, is exploited in order to garner such reactions and promote himself as a nonconformist. Unlike how he conducted himself as a teenager, Scotty no longer behaves in reaction to the experiences he has had, but rather in the interest of establishing himself as a contrarian, particularly to the successful and wealthy Bennie.

Desiring to separate himself from the mainstream and from corporate figures that he perceives as being elitist, Scotty now functions as an emblem of punk ideology by presenting them through his behavior and social interactions. Just as the punk community of his youth

succumbed to its members' insecurities about their inclusion in the scene, Scotty becomes concerned with his own performance of authenticity. Unlike those involved in the punk scene, Scotty intentionally acts upon this interest to exclude himself from others, his punk-informed behaviors designed specifically to reject those not in agreement with the community's ideals. However, despite Scotty's intention of separating himself from the mainstream and from his old friends, he exhibits a strong desire for community and companionship. One sign of this is his avoiding thinking about Alice, who he had married and divorced in the time between the performance at the Mab and his visit with Bennie. Scotty makes no mention of Alice until Bennie asks if Scotty has remarried, prompting Scotty to "think of her, as opposed to think about *not* thinking about her, which I did almost constantly" (103). Scotty is preoccupied with suppressing his memories of her because he continues to mourn the connection that he felt with her, especially in the face of Bennie's successful marriage and newborn son. So, too, does Scotty's visit with Bennie reflect a desire to reconnect with his past, especially with someone he had once considered a close friend .

However, Scotty's conflicting desire for companionship and his stern individuality strongly manifests in his meeting with Bennie and are foregrounded by his views on technology. As Scotty ruminates on the ease of communication in the "information age," he affirms that "computers scared me; if you can find Them, then They can find you, and I didn't want to be found" (97). That Scotty's concern is with being "found" by a nebulous second party suggests that the ubiquity of personal information on the internet threatens his carefully-cultivated sense of privacy, revealing a deeper motive to Scotty's maintaining the appearance of punk authenticity: he views the internet as a power structure through which

outer society is able to subjugate him, stemming from his resentment toward those more successful or wealthier than he is. Consequently, Scotty hopes to maintain his sense of identity, and thus his sense of dignity, by controlling the extent to which he is included in mainstream society. As this desire conflicts with his concurrent longing for communication, Scotty compensates for his self-imposed isolation through the perspective that all experience is shared. Scotty argues for a similarity between the functions of computers and the human mind, referring to humans themselves as "information processing machines," arguing: "if I had not only the information but the artistry to *shape* that information using the computer inside my brain… was I not having all the same experiences those other people were having?" (96-7). While such an idea may seem counter-intuitive for a character who strongly exhibits punk ideology, it reinforces the idea that Scotty associates the appearance of punk authenticity with the reclamation of power. Employing this mindset, Scotty is able to both regain control over the establishment and quell his feelings of exclusion by being able to perceive the experiences of others as his own.

This mindset is problematic for a number of reasons, the most obvious of which is that it does not serve to actually connect Scotty with anyone around him, the shared experience being entirely imaginary. It also proves to be easily challenged, as is depicted twice in this chapter (97-8, 101-3). The first instance finds Scotty overlooking a gala at the New York Public Library, observing the festivities taking place within. Hearing the "giggles and yelps and big scoops of laughter" of the guests, Scotty is stricken with pain: "not in my head, not in my arm, not in my leg; everywhere at once," suggesting that the pain is emotionally driven (97). After he leaves the area, he seems to experience an epiphany that

reinforces his initial idea that he has not actually been excluded, claiming that his sudden feeling of rejection was simply a "delusion" based in the false idea that experience is "unique and special, that those included in it are privileged and those excluded from it are missing out" (98). Ultimately, though he is able to free himself of this "delusion," this event illustrates that Scotty is not immune to feelings of dejection despite his interpretation of experience, and his theory about shared experiences is a means of compensating for his exclusion.

Scotty's meeting with Bennie proves to be even more challenging to Scotty's theory than the gala. As Scotty is faced with Bennie's myriad material luxuries, he is shown to enjoy them yet remains aware that they signify Bennie's financial success, especially after Bennie assumes that Scotty has visited to offer his music for the record label's consideration. This exchange ignites a powerful anger in Scotty as he considers the fact that the old friend with whom he sought to reconnect is uninterested in rekindling their friendship. Moreover, Scotty perceives that Bennie is uninterested because Scotty's experiences as a reclusive janitor do not relate to his own experiences as a corporate executive. Realizing this, Scotty internally argues against what he perceives as an expression of elitism from Bennie: "There's nothing you have that *I* don't have! It's all just X's and O's, and you can come by those a million different ways" (103). Yet in considering Bennie's relationship to Scotty's own success, Scotty becomes acutely aware that in both material and immaterial wealth, "I didn't have what Bennie had" (103).

Scotty concludes this in recognition of a truth that he has been suppressing throughout the events of the chapter: that he can be and often is excluded from the experiences of others

that he would like to join, reinforcing the societal power dynamics that he so detests. In response to this knowledge, Scotty retaliates by exercising the ideals that informed his contrarian attitude, exhibiting behaviors that he believes will level their power imbalance. Now that he has been offended, the reason for Scotty's visit – his interest in bridging the gap between their youth and their current lives – is articulated as a challenge, with Scotty questioning the reason that Bennie has achieved wealth and happiness despite Alice having "picked" Scotty instead of Bennie (101). For the remainder of the visit, Scotty appears aloof and unaccommodating, his own discomfort at his negative memories spurning his drive to make Bennie similarly uncomfortable. Before leaving Bennie's office, he takes a final opportunity to shock Bennie by smiling to reveal that he is missing a number of teeth. This action is shown to be intentional; Scotty comments that smiling is "something that I very rarely do" because of this condition (103). Yet in acting on the "celebration of ugliness and discord" that is punk ideology, he is able to shift their power dynamic in his favor (Prinz 588). Scotty comments that "all at once I felt strong, as if some balance had tipped in the room and all of Bennie's power… suddenly belonged to me." For Scotty, emblematic of the type of punks who "took pride in debasing their characters and were indisputably amused by people's obvious disgust and disbelief," Bennie's reaction is "valuable in and of itself" (Kristiansen, Blaney, Chidester, Simonds 33). No longer seeking to share experiences with Bennie, he instead claims for himself the experience of power he has been denied. Now believing that his desired connectedness to others is impossible, he compensates by seizing control of the way Bennie perceives him, which he believes gives him authority over the situation itself.

Facing the reality that material and experiential boundaries do influence one person's level of connectedness to another, Scotty believes that there is no possible way for them to relate. Naturally, this behavior serves to disconnect Scotty from a person with whom he may have otherwise connected regardless of their differences in experience or status. It also suppresses Scotty's revelation of his own vulnerability, the same latent fear of exclusion experienced by the members of his former punk community. Like those involved in the scene, Scotty's punk-informed behaviors result from feelings of powerlessness and disconnection, and his attempts at gaining an imagined sense of power over Bennie are meant to compensate for his status as an outsider. By asserting dominance over Bennie and appearing authentically punk, he presents the idea that he controls his own exclusion, stifling both his loneliness and his awareness that he is behaving in reaction to his detachment from others.

Furthermore, at this time, performing punk aesthetics through behavior is Scotty's only method of communicating his feelings of anxiety and anger toward established social norms, having abandoned his prior dedication to musical performance. He only resumes his role as a performer at a later time after being influenced by Bennie's own renewed commitment to an ethics of authenticity, which have evolved in reaction to technology's effects on communication and music production 333). The stark contrast between Bennie and Scotty in this chapter belies the fact that Bennie's relationship with music has been influenced by punk subculture, despite his executive role in the music industry. While Scotty's adherence to behaviorally performative punk aesthetics is grounded in his resentment toward his own social exclusion, Bennie's interest is in music and its ability to

form communities such as the punk scene. His involvement in this scene and his relationship with musical performance as a teenager precipitates his future views on authenticity, especially in the music that he produces, which he deems inauthentic due to modern recording methods and the record industry's insistence on marketability.

Although Rhea's narration suggests that Bennie is authentically punk by her standards, Bennie is only loosely affiliated with punk ideals. Rather than exhibiting anger at the status quo, an emphasis on rejection, or insecurity about whether or not he belongs in the community, Bennie is devoted to the musical aspect of the scene. In nearly every one of Rhea's descriptions of teenaged Bennie, he is recording, performing, or listening to music. This fact suggests that Bennie's attachment to music results from an appreciation for the emotional connectivity of the medium, which itself is a consequence of his place within a music-driven community. His preoccupation with the enjoyment of music itself is evident at punk shows, where Rhea observes that Bennie, while the other members of the group are slam-dancing to the performance, "does less of this. I think he actually listens to the music" (46). When Lou comments that Bennie is "not much of a player," Rhea suggests to him that the formation of the band, though clearly a collaborative effort, was originally Bennie's idea, an idea evidenced by his quietly authoritative presence during the band's recording session (52).

Indeed, Bennie exhibits a managerial trait not only in terms of the music that he and his friends produce, but in the music that they listen to outside of the shows they attend. This is best demonstrated towards the end of the chapter, in which the friends gather at Lou's apartment after their performance. While the group socializes and recovers from the intensity

of the show, Rhea comments that "Bennie's alone in Lou's studio, pouring music around us. A minute ago it was 'Don't Let Me Down.' Then it was Blondie's 'Heart of Glass.' Now it's Iggy Pop's 'The Passenger'" (55). Based on this behavior, it is clear that Bennie, while not necessarily a qualified performer, feels confident in sharing music with others. Moreover, through the sharing of music he finds a sense of connectedness with others that is shown to be reciprocated. His choice of "The Passenger" in particular garners an emotional response from Rhea. The lyrics of this song, narrated by a self-described "passenger" who "rides" indefinitely within a city, convey a theme of isolation that complements Rhea's feelings of alienation. . Believing that Bennie may have chosen the song to communicate his own detachment from the friend group and the punk scene, she internally expresses her similarity to him: "Listening, I think, You will never know how much I understand you" (55). Because Rhea's sense of disconnection lies in her unwilling, perceived exclusion from the punk community, she assumes that Bennie must feel similarly. However, this section of the chapter suggests that Bennie does not share Rhea's insecurity, instead feeling comfortable sharing music with friends and unconcerned about appearing authentic himself. Moreover, it suggests that Bennie's standard for quality music lies not in that to which he has been exposed by the punk community, but in his ear for music that is particularly affective.

For Bennie, the affective nature of music is the aspect that renders it emotionally and ideologically connective, and consequently authentic. While he clearly enjoys punk music from adolescence to adulthood, the diversity of the music he chooses in Lou's apartment, ranging from the classic rock of the Beatles to the mellow, moody Iggy Pop track, highlights the fact that Bennie appreciates music regardless of genre. His taste in music gravitates

toward the punk rock genre, but it does so because the energy of punk music is conducive to an emotional response, as has been illustrated both in the typical concert-going audience at the Mab and in the relatively calm and inwardly-focused Bennie. Even as the Flaming Dildos rehearse or record their own songs, Bennie is shown to be listening in a trance-like state, meditating upon the technical and affective qualities of the music in order to gauge its level of authenticity (45). Like his apparent lack of concern in presenting himself as a punk worthy of inclusion in the punk scene, this behavior suggests a degree of separation between Bennie and the rest of the punk community. Bennie is depicted as somewhat of an outsider compared to Jocelyn and Rhea, who are actively involved in the social aspect of the scene, or Scotty, who reinforces his visual aesthetic with his role as a performer. Based on this, it can be gathered that Bennie's love of music is not a consequence of his involvement in the punk scene, but rather a reason for it. The energy and themes of punk music render the genre especially affective to Bennie even in adulthood, when he concedes that his current love for the genre is rooted in "the rapturous surges of sixteen-year-old-ness they induced" (23).

Although he is long separated from the punk scene of his youth, Bennie remains attached to the sound quality and recording methods of the punk music he listened to growing up. The second chapter of the novel introduces Bennie as the president of his label, Sow's Ear Records. The stresses of his work as a record executive have caused him to develop an ambivalent and neurotic mindset regarding the quality and integrity of the music produced by his label. Bennie's anxieties over the music he produces and distributes coincide with his idea that quality music is able to elicit emotion, an aspect that he now believes is achieved when the music contains an element of having been performed rather than digitally

constructed. Bennie takes issue with the "precision" and "perfection" of his label's music, suggesting that the imperfect recording process used in the 1970s contributed to the affect and authenticity of the music he enjoyed then (23). By contrast, he precise, calculated composition and instrumentation of the music he distributes differ from those in traditional punk songs, which are "often out of tune, incompetently played, and poorly recorded" (Prinz 587). He describes the music currently being distributed as "bloodless constructions," all the parts of a song assembled separately and, while still "constructed," lacking the humanity and relatability of the music that Bennie would deem authentic (Egan 22).

These issues suggest that Bennie's standards of authenticity in music are comprised of not only the music's affect, but its quality of having been performed and recorded using traditional methods. As the punk scene of the 1970s and its ideological aesthetics doubtlessly influenced Bennie's prioritization of performed music, he similarly prefers the minimalistic process of analog recording, which he believes maintains the human element that is missing from contemporary music. Despite Bennie's distaste for the music released through his label, he believes that his desire to produce a more meaningful, connective listening experience is more broadly challenged by the influence of new technology on recorded music. As illustrated in Bennie's internal lamentations on the state of the music industry, his complaints emphasize not only his label's tendency to produce music that is accessible and easily commodifiable, but the digitization of music generally. The digitization of music in this case carries two implications: the perceived aesthetic inferiority of digitally recorded music, which for him lacks affective quality. This perception deepens Bennie's loyalty not only to

the aspects of music he deems authentic, but to the experience of involvement in a musical performance.

The defining event of the second chapter is an impromptu recording session that Bennie requests from the Stop/Go sisters, a failing band under his label that he hopes to revive. In contrast to his mood the beginning of the chapter, Bennie is reinvigorated by this session to a euphoric degree, enlivened by the performance of the music itself, the rawness of which "communed directly with his body, whose shivering, bursting reply made him dizzy" (30). Bennie is even moved to join in on the performance, taking a cowbell and "whacking at it with zealous blows." This demonstrates the extent to which Bennie is receptive to the affective nature of musical performance, specifically the experience of listening to it live. It also exemplifies the desire for involvement that Bennie experiences when observing such a performance, which encourages the practice of creative consumption, in this case taking the form of Bennie's direct involvement in both the performance and its production. As Martin Moling argues, Bennie is "'on fire,' not only because he is aflame with the vertiginous vehemence of the music, but because he seeks to perpetuate this moment" (55). The excitement invoked within Bennie by witnessing and contributing to the process of recording an intact performance allows him to believe that his label still has the ability to release music in which the essence of performance is not lost.

However, as Bennie and his assistant Sasha discuss the recording session afterwards, they both concede that the music itself was "unlistenable," an idea that Bennie himself struggles to admit is the reason for their lack of popularity (33). Notable, then, is the fact that Bennie was nevertheless so moved by the performance itself. Aside from reinforcing his

emotional attachment to music, Bennie's reaction to the session and his recognition of the low quality of the Stop/Go Sisters' music suggests that Bennie's enjoyment of the music was strictly rooted in the experience of involvement in this improvisational, impermanent performance. It also proposes that even the traditional recording methods coveted by Bennie, such as the practice of recording the performance of the entire band at once rather than each instrumentalist's individual performance, are unable to recreate a sense of involvement in the music, and thus are unable to generate the affect he desires. Even as Bennie orchestrates his own firing from Sow's Ear and founds his own record label in which he "return[s] to producing music with a raspy, analog sound," he finds that the true essence of Scotty's personality is not communicated in its recorded form; what sounds "pure" to Bennie sounds "dire" to Alex when Scotty's music is played for him (312-13). It is based on these experiences that Bennie arranges Scotty's first concert, offering Scotty the outlet for his latent feelings of loneliness and anxiety that he has been expressing through the rejection of others.

IV: Performed Authenticity and the Commodification of Identity

Just as the punk community proves capable of perpetuating self-isolating practices in reaction to one's own insecurities about belonging in a community, the younger generation of characters focalized at the novel's end exhibits a tendency toward similar behaviors as technology challenges their perception of communication and connectedness. The novel's final chapter takes place within Egan's interpretation of New York in the 2020s, a "post-9/11

surveillance state" characterized by "an omnipresent culture of touchscreens, text messages, and digital avatars" (Carruth 352). This setting highlights the extent to which technological advancement has changed human interaction and influenced society's views on authenticity and community. As depicted in this chapter, most notable change in communication between the 1970s and the 2020s is the widespread use of electronic modes of correspondence, especially the prominence of cellular handsets that are used for calling and "T-ing" (shorthand for "texting"), navigating, and playing music, among other uses (321). This type of device is not only present, but prevalent throughout this chapter, accentuating its ubiquity in nearly every aspect of modern life, especially in terms of socializing and self-expression. This is also highlighted by the fact that nearly every character featured in this chapter owns one and uses it regularly, even toddlers, to whom companies have marketed a particular type of handset with features specifically curated for children (referred to by advertisers as "pointers") (Egan 313; Funk et al. 56). The broad functionality of these devices and the ease of communication they provide have solidified the handset's prominence in society and suggests its ability to make modern social connections more manageable.

Even still, characters of the younger generation in this chapter are portrayed as maintaining a complex relationship with their increasing reliance on cellular devices and social media to remain in contact with others. Despite the fact that such technology is not as alien to this younger generation as it is to middle-aged characters like Bennie and Scotty, the apprehension toward technology that is exhibited by Bennie and Scotty in their adulthood is also reflected in the thoughts and behaviors of the young adults in this setting. Interestingly, while Scotty retains his fear of technology, Bennie is shown to have begrudgingly accepted

the importance of technology in remaining connected in this era: “It’s about reach. That’s the bitter fucking pill I had to swallow” (Egan 312). Just as Bennie’s decision to accept new technology is conflicted but deemed necessary, the younger generation’s ambivalent attitude toward the prevalence of such technology is best articulated through the perspective of Alex, who is hired by Bennie to generate an audience for Scotty’s first solo concert. Seeking involvement in the music industry, Alex approaches Bennie for work, carrying his own strict standards of authenticity while doing so and facing an internal conflict regarding artistic and social integrity. Though Alex’s conflict in this chapter somewhat mirrors Bennie’s own struggles against the perceived lack of authenticity within the music industry, it is ultimately rooted in a mindset specifically constructed from his generation’s relationship with technology, identity, and commodification. Alex’s sensibilities are challenged when Bennie overlooks him as a potential music producer and instead asks him to compile a list of social media “friends” to “parrot” or spread information about Scotty’s concert via electronic word-of-mouth, compensating them for doing so (315). This task contradicts Alex’s belief that enthusiasm in Scotty’s concert, or any kind of performance or product, should develop and spread organically out of genuine personal interest, and that “if your reasons are cash, that’s not belief” (320). Though Alex accepts the offer, his attempt to understand his acquiescence calls for an understanding of his generation’s complex relationship with technology.

Much like Scotty, the ambivalence toward technology expressed by Alex’s generation is rooted in the feeling that they lack control over their identities and relationships given the widespread and constant use of telecommunication to stay connected. The pervasiveness of social media and T-ing, while contributing an ease and manageability to communication that

was not present in past decades, is also responsible for the various levels of disconnection experienced by this generation in the 2020s. The most immediately evident of these is the physical separation between people in this time period. Alex's attempt to identify potential parrots among his 15,896 social media friends highlights the vastness of his communal reach and the ease with which he is able to access his friends' information, including their own "reach" and the facets of their personality that may influence their "corruptibility" and "need" for money (315). Yet Alex's own reach and the massive number of friends to which he is connected on his social media account also suggest that he does not maintain relationships with most of them on a personal basis, and certainly not on a physical or verbal level. Even Bennie's assistant Lulu, whom Alex has met in person and contacts often, communicates with him primarily through T-ing, leading him to perceive her primarily as "a person who lived in his pocket" (327). In recognizing that he has access to communication with Lulu at all times, Alex conflates her with the device he uses to correspond with her, dehumanizing her as he separates her physical self from the ideas that she sends him through text.

Alex and his wife, Rebecca, appear receptive to the tendency for people to unknowingly and metaphorically dehumanize others in this way or render themselves separate from the physical world around them under the influence of technology, as they both restrict their use of their handsets when in the presence of their toddler-aged daughter. However, while Alex is aware of the perils of electronic communication and social media, he and Lulu both justify their own handset use through the idea that T-ing is a more direct and effective way of communication. Sharing a conversation in which they struggle to

consolidate their respective views on the ethics of their work under Bennie, Lulu expresses frustration at there are "so many ways to go wrong" in verbal communication: "You can't ever just *Say. The. Thing*" (321). When they then T each other whilst sitting across from one another, they both conclude that T-ing is an easier, more "pure" way of communicating. However, this section also depicts the way that T-ing actually ill-equips people for verbal conversation, rather than being a truer way of connecting people to one another as Lulu suggests. Moreover, it does not support Lulu's conclusion about communication; instead of resolving their debate about authenticity, they T each other to redirect their attention toward the immediate requirements of their job, effectively distracting them from resolving or even coming to a compromise over their disagreement.

Similarly to the way Alex justifies his use of telecommunication, he partially justifies his involvement in Bennie's plan through his awareness of the way that time and technology have shifted subjects of commodification from material objects to intangible information, including the personal information of social media users. As he finds himself expressing contempt for those who agree to parrot information about Scotty's concert, Alex is reminded that he, too, has agreed to Bennie's request. Moreover, he expresses knowledge "that every byte of information he'd posted online… was stored in the databases of multinationals who swore that they would never, ever use it-- that he was *owned*" (316). Based on this idea, he is receptive to the involuntary nature of identity commodification, sympathetic toward people "like him, who had stopped being themselves without realizing it" (317). Alex's true conflict, then, lies in the fact that both he and his parrots are consciously choosing to "let themselves

be bought," contributing to his awareness that he is simultaneously himself and a product (315).

While Alex is able to admit his inauthenticity to himself, he struggles to disclose his role in Bennie's plan to others, especially Rebecca, toward whom he has always acted in a way that comes across as ethically pure . Now, he is especially conscious that he is performing this purity rather than practicing it, having developed an interest in appearing authentic to others despite his acceptance of his own deviation from those standards. Having cultivated these standards within a different context from the 1970s punk scene, Alex's performance of authenticity differs from Scotty's in a number of ways. In an era in which all members of society who utilize telecommunication comprise a vast and all-inclusive community that is the antithesis of the exclusionary punk scene, Alex's generation does not perceive outsiders the way the punk community had done decades prior. For that matter, due to the commodification of the immaterial aspects of one's personality and the lack of materiality in communication, they do not experience any complications in the perception of one's ethics of authenticity through his or her visual appearance. The invisibility of ethical purity, then, allows Alex to hide his self-appointed inauthenticity from others, highlighting that by doing so, his authenticity can only be self-enforced, and his contempt can only be directed inwardly. This behavior in the interest of maintaining a positive image toward those around him encourages both his paranoia at being perceived negatively and his self-imposed emotional separation from those around him.

Although this behavior is strictly self-imposed, the sense of vulnerability that both drives and results from Alex's self-isolation resembles Rhea's tendency toward assigning

authenticity to nearly everyone in the punk scene but herself. Having personally gathered each of the fifty parrots needed for Scotty's concert, Alex's knowledge of who among him has agreed to parrot stokes his awareness of his own self-commodification, especially when faced with the idea of confessing his status of inauthenticity to Rebecca. This line of thinking implies that Alex sees himself as an intruder in a community of people who, though commodified themselves by unseen corporations, have not willingly allowed it to happen. His resentment toward his own inauthenticity is compounded upon by his remorse for deceiving those around him; the omission of his role in the "parrothood" occurring throughout the city "made Alex writhe with guilt whenever the subject came up" around Rebecca (328-9). His preoccupation with his deception and anxiety over being identified as ethically impure influence Alex's continuing focus on his own perceived invisibility, as he concludes, "in the form of a brain-T: *no 1 nOs abt me. Im invysbl*" (330). This invisibility is both positive and negative, serving to separate Alex from others while allowing him to maintain his facade of purity. The sense of invisibility Alex feels in this scene is nonphysical, as his behavioral ability to hide his involvement is expected to assuage his anxiety about his responsibility for the concert's success. Still, his quiet nervousness appears in his physical contact with Rebecca as she notes that he is "squeez[ing] her hand," suggesting that his physical expression belies his apprehension toward the upcoming event. This also conveys Alex's desire for visibility and transparency despite the comfort provided by his performed disassociation from the planning of the event.

Perhaps for these reasons, Alex attaches himself to Lulu, who he perceives as sharing his level of inauthenticity despite her disagreeing with his standards. Since their relationship

centers entirely around their work and their shared reactions to Scotty's eccentricities, Alex is able to exercise the transparency he desires through contact with Lulu, relieving the remorse he feels for his deception of others. Aware on some level of the nature of his bond with her, Alex begins to confide in Lulu about his personal fears unrelated to work, such as the impending loss of air and light in his apartment due to the building being built directly next to it. Doing so, however, reaffirms the potential communicative downsides to T-ing, especially through the shortening of words and substitution of letters to maximize efficiency in correspondence. As Alex expresses that he is unable to move from his current location, Lulu T's back the word "*nyc*," understood by Alex to be a sarcastic application of the word "nice" (327). Confused at this because "the sarcasm seemed unlike her," Alex realizes that the message is intended to be read as "New York City." Aside from illustrating that T-ing is not a foolproof method of direct communication, it also highlights the fact that, as noted by Alex, "he hadn't seen or even spoken to Lulu since their meeting three weeks ago." The awareness of Alex's lack of verbal contact with Lulu reinforces the fact that he is not able to perfectly connect with her despite their shared lack of ethical purity.

Though this physical and consequently emotional disconnection between Alex and Lulu results from his insecurity about the dishonesty within his marriage, Scotty's concert reveals that this disunion is experienced by Alex's generation at large. On this scene, Wolfgang Funk proposes that "it is… through music that the idea of the authentic stages ts ultimate confrontation with the forces of stimulation, inauthenticity, and consumer capitalism which govern the dystopian world of Egan's final chapter (Funk et al. 55). This idea is reinforced by the audience's multifaceted reaction to Scotty's music as it challenges their

fatalistic view of technology's role in their disjointed society. When Scotty opens with the simple, "pointer"-friendly songs that have made him popular amongst the city's children, Alex "expect[s] a roar of rejection" from the crowd, surprised to see that "the pointers… clapped and screeched their approval, and the adults seemed intrigued" by the understated sophistication of the lyrics' "double meanings and hidden layers" (Egan 335). As Scotty transitions from these simpler songs to more explicit "ballads of paranoia and disconnection," the audience becomes even more receptive as the music reflects their own sense of anxiety resulting from their generation's relationship with technology (336). The actual physical nature of this event is also imperative in bringing attention to the audience's regular separation from their own materiality as they consider Scotty a beacon of their latent emotions. The narrative posits that their reaction to the concert may be rooted in the idea that "two generations of war and surveillance had left people craving the embodiment of their own unease in the form of a lone, unsteady man on a slide guitar" (335). As they react to this figure who shares their reaction to the state of their society, the audience members reveal the sense of fear they have hidden, as well as a desire to interact with that fear. They are thus able to process their anxiety because Scotty is a tangible representation of their worries, which highlights the fact that their physical separation from one another is partly responsible for their unease.

Supporting this idea is the fact that the performance drives Alex toward a desire for the physical presence of his wife and child. As he watches this physical manifestation of his own ambivalence and insecurity, he "wished he could be with Rebecca and Cara-Ann, first dully, then acutely – with pain," mirroring Scotty's own reaction to his exclusion from the

gala (336). With Alex aware of the detachment from his family that he has cultivated by maintaining his insecurity about his authenticity, his actions now reflect an attitude that personal contact is necessary in truly connecting with them. He fears that he will be kept from "ever again touching the delicate silk of Rebecca's eyelids, or feeling, through his daughter's ribs, the scramble of her heartbeat," both of which are minimal but intimate efforts that are simple and direct in their physicality. Using the camera on his handset to locate Rebecca so he can go to her, he "panned the rapt, sometimes tearstained faces of adults, the elated, scant-toothed grins of toddlers," and Lulu, who watches the concert while holding hands with her fiancé. The apparently universal emotional reaction to Scotty's music is a testament to its having awoken the audience to their latent need for more meaningful connection to one another. Moreover, the recognition of their desire for physical contact in an era of immaterial communication speaks to the importance of not only the music, but the experience of involvement in the performance itself.

Aside from drawing the New Yorkers of Alex's generation closer to one another, this concert also emotionally attaches Scotty to the audience, allowing him to break away from his self-imposed isolation. Scotty's undisclosed and unnoticed desire for meaningful human contact is explicitly revealed during this scene by his performing songs specifically about his anxieties and isolation that the audience perceives as having been "ripped from the chest of a man… who had lived in the cracks all these years, forgotten and full of rage" (336). That Scotty had not released these songs with his album meant to appeal to children implies that whether they had been written during the years in which he did not perform around others or more recently, Scotty had not intended for them to be shared with the world. Yet the feelings

of “disconnection” expressed in these songs clearly convey a desire to move beyond his seclusion, while his apprehension and paranoia influence him to reject involvement with his fans through social media and even personal contact, even attempting to escape his trailer so he would not have to perform. Notably, just as his music influences his audience toward the realization of their detachment from each other, the audience enables Scotty to perform these songs for the first time in front of a crowd of real people. As “a swell of approval palpable as rain” erupts from the crowd, it “rolled back at Scotty with redoubled force,” physically “lifting him off his stool, onto his feet… exploding the quivering husk Scotty had appeared to be just moments before” and inspiring him to share the emotions he has hidden from those around him (335).

This reinforces Bennie’s views on not only the connectivity of music as an expressive device, but on the collaborative nature of the physical experience of performance, in which both performer and audience may inspire one another to express more openly and engage with one another more deeply. It is also worth noting that Scotty’s traditionally punk ideals, such as anti-establishment sentiment, anger and anxiety about one’s place within a community, are expressed through musical performance in a way that is conducive to an overall deeper connection within the context of 2020s New York. It stands to reason that the audience’s gestures of approval and their clear emotional reaction to the themes of Scotty’s music awaken Scotty to the idea that his beliefs are not inherently isolating as they were in the punk scene, but that the punk community’s relationship with power and commodification problematized their expression of their beliefs. Given the younger generation’s relationship with these social elements, the communication of these sentiments through musical

performance, a practice that should have been a connective aspect of Scotty's punk community, is rendered more effective.

These ideas also convey an overall important factor in the success of this event: the concept that both parties' feelings of vulnerability over their sense of belonging and lack of communication are shared despite their differing levels of exposure to technology and the contrasting types of communities that sourced their anxieties about inclusion. For the audience, Scotty's having "never had a page or a profile or a handle or a handset" is notable as it establishes his "purity" in this era of telecommunication, but it does not render his feelings of disconnection any less palpable than their own (336). Perhaps for this reason, the audience is reinforced in their views on personal integrity in the information age, aside from their idea of technology serving to detach themselves from each other. The purity assigned to Scotty by the audience reflects a continued adherence to a standard of authenticity related to one's use of technology. This illustrates that the audience, like Alex, still attaches a sense of artistic genuineness to the isolated figure who has rejected technology but still suffers from its ubiquity. Gerard Moorey offers another interpretation of Scotty's purity: a "purity of purpose," as he shows no personal interest in gaining wealth from his audience (34). As such, Scotty's own perceived purity resonates within the audience as they, like Alex, become aware of their own inauthenticity by comparison. However, like their basic recognition of their detachment from each other, their self-perception of inauthenticity also seemingly influences them toward a deeper sense of connectedness to one another, which in turn shifts their emphasis on individual authenticity to one on authentic connectedness. Each factor of this event, then – its physicality, its use of music as an expressive device, and the sentiment

behind the music itself – have a role in achieving this. Through Bennie's circulation of his communication-based standards of authenticity, Scotty's past of self-isolation and insecurity, and the physical and emotional collaboration of the audience, Alex's generation is temporarily unified into a community.

V: Conclusion

Egan's treatment of punk aesthetics in *A Visit from the Goon Squad* has been discussed by critics in connection to the novel's focus on time's inevitable passing, yet there is a clear relation between the performance of punk ideology and the actions of the characters who grew up in the punk scene. This idea is important to consider when examining Bennie's and Scotty's differing attitudes toward the society they live in and to the practice of communication itself. Moreover, it is necessary in understanding the way that their past in the punk scene has influenced their actions leading up to and during Scotty's concert, which causes the younger generation's awareness of their own separation from one another and their desire for a deeper sense of connectedness. Aside from differentiating Bennie and Scotty from the generation below them by contextualizing their beliefs, associating these two aspects of the narrative also highlights the fact that both generations share a similar sense of anxiety regarding technology's effects on what they perceive to be authentic.

Bennie, Scotty, and Alex each carry a different ethics of authenticity as it applies to themselves and to the art they produce, consume, and/or promote. However, the sense of anxiety experienced by all three characters at the idea of breaking these principles can be

traced to a shared and latent yearning to belong in a community, a desire that is compromised by both the aftereffects of the problematic punk community and the ubiquity of telecommunication in the final chapter. Based on this, it becomes evident that the internal conflict experienced by the representative characters of either generation inherently results from punk ideology or technological advancement, but rather the strict subscription to a subjective standard of authenticity and the internal divide that occurs when performing authenticity while aware of one's own deviation from it. For this reason, the concert's ability to draw its audience together lies both in Bennie's and Alex's use of technology in promoting the concert and Scotty's communication of punk sentiment through his music. At the heart of the concert's success, however, is Bennie's idea that authenticity is the result of an openness to human connectedness, rather than being a performed trait that results in one's acceptance into a community. It is through this interpretation of authenticity, encouraged by the efforts of Bennie, Scotty, and the audience itself, that Alex is influenced to resolve his inner conflict, allowing him to become part of the unified community of concert-attendants.

Aside from representing the novel's newer generation of characters, Scotty's audience also depicts Egan's interpretation of a generation that has developed alongside the rapid technological advancement of the twenty-first century. Their ambivalence toward the changing technology around them results from their unique relationship with this transition between different forms of advanced communication. This aspect of *A Visit from the Goon Squad* is notable in that it comments on the rapidity of technological progress taking place in the early twenty-first century, as well as the way that reactions to this changes differ depending on one's generation and exposure to technology. What is especially notable about

this novel's treatment of this concept is the importance placed on subculture and art in one's personal development, and consequently in the way that a person perceives oneself and one's role in society. Other than placing her characters in a certain generation, Egan's use of punk aesthetics highlights the way that the concept of community itself has changed with time. In doing so, it calls attention to the challenges the information age poses to questions of identity and belonging, highlighting their importance even as technology has removed the social boundaries of subculture.

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