

Daisy [REDACTED]

Professor Lopez

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Pursuit of *Swing*: How Performing Queer Existence Brings Liberation

In the summer after my seventh-grade year, on my family’s yearly trip to Texas to go stay with my grandma and tía, I discovered music. It’s not that I hadn’t ever listened to music, but the intricacies that come with a personal music taste had eluded me until that night spent in a shared room with my sister, watching music videos on my laptop in the dark. I don’t exactly know what spurred it, but that night I started *listening* to music rather than just hearing it. A few years later — my junior year of high school — I sat isolated¹ in my room listening to my favorite teacher drone on about music theory, four-part harmony, plagal cadences, melodic whatever. At the same time, the same teacher taught me how to play jazz piano, and the rules of classical composition seemed more arbitrary the more I thought about it. My girlfriend at the time made me a playlist that I still listen to, but I don’t think she knows that. A couple years later, my freshman year of college, I played symphonic pieces at the collegiate level for the first and only time in my eleven-year long stint as a percussionist. That was the first year I ever cried to an album; *Retired from Sad, New Career in Business* by Mitski. I’d come to intimately understand my gender troubles over the past three years, and, coming to a head, hopelessness plagued my every thought, motion, and word. That summer I took estrogen for the first time to *Blue Rev* by Alvays, as well as tried not to make any life-ending decisions when I had to move back home for sophomore year. Despite being torn away from the distance I’d become accustomed to over

¹ I mean “isolated” quite literally, as my junior year of high school was spent almost entirely in my house during the COVID-19 pandemic.

the past year, I found that making and listening to music mediated the rapidly increasing degree of emotion I felt. I became infamous among friends for having horrible music taste, though I didn't think it was horrible, it was just messy and loud — different. I felt more and more constituted by the music I listened to, each lyric an inscription on the walls of my brain, each chord a filter through which I saw the world. Life's purpose — that unmistakable call to exist in a way that just felt *good* — grew closer, became more clear. In a lot of ways, music — my tastes, my own art — transitioned with me. A clear-cut life became intricate — a middling appreciation for music became my constitutive parts — all in search of that *feeling*, my own personal *swing*² that clicked more into place as I became more myself.

If we take music to be a metaphor for transition, it feels appropriate to begin with the Western European classical tradition³. The rules of classical composition are many; there are to be no parallel fifths or octaves, there should be four-part harmony in which the lines move away from each other (but not too much, of course), and there should be a proper cadence, a perfect, satisfying conclusion to each section of music. Music is primarily for the purposes of worship, and you can dance, but only in the permitted ways. These suffocating, at times contradictory rules run parallel to the delusional demands of the gender binary — that one has to dress a certain way, talk a certain way, and act according to their perfect, predetermined role. The repression of other musical modes restricts possibilities of existence. What is someone to do if a classical composition doesn't feel *right*, if their predestined gender role constricts their longing for more? The passage of time and progression of values (though notably not for all) brings us into the pop era. Pop music and artists are set apart by their subversion of classical traditions, and

² Throughout this paper, the word “swing” is italicized to identify its use in my main theory, whereas an unitalicized version indicates the colloquial usage of the term.

³ Making sure not to disregard the impact of earlier music from around the globe, the Western European tradition is often heralded specifically by western conservatives as the epitome of music, which feels like an appropriate parallel to the western gender binary (see Mikulski, “Misunderstanding Mahler: On classical and conservatism”).

yet remain bound to a new set of rules that seek to make any art palatable for the mainstream audience. Lyrics are to be clean, instruments should be limited to their intended uses, and you can use the same four chords to uniquely express your conformity. In the same way, a queer or trans subject can “subvert” the gender binary, yet continue to (possibly unawaredly) buy into its myth by following the rules it sets up. Pharmaceutical recommendations (that often don’t work, or are ill-informed), Euro-centric beauty standards that force trans people into a different ward of the same prison they sought to escape, and assimilationist tendencies — these are all ways in which subversion of the traditional gender binary can force queer and trans subjects into continued restriction through the creation of new rules. It is in the expulsion of these arbitrary rules that we find true musical liberation; in experimental music, queer art, pieces that defy genre in their musical multiplicities. Whereas there are rules about how to make pop music (in a studio and with certain gear), queer music is DIY; it’s punk, messy, loud. Parallel to this is queer existence. Queer people exist in vulgar,⁴ subversive ways, be it taking DIY HRT, dressing however they want, or being delusional enough to imagine a life for themselves.⁵ Unsatisfied with what comes from the arbitrary rules of classical and popular music, queer music invents itself to find the *groove*, the swing that makes everything click into place. In the same way, queer people use the tools at their disposal to forge a new existence on the path toward their very own queer *swing*.

I feel it appropriate to provide a proper definition of swing in a musical context so as to better get across my main theory. Interestingly, in a jazz context, swing is often defined by its lack of a definition. In his *Big Book of Swing* (1946), Bill Treadwell states that ““You can feel it, but you just can't explain it”” (10). In my own experience playing music with various ensembles,

⁴ See Vargas, “Ruminations on Lo Sucio as a Latino Queer Analytic.”

⁵ See Antillano and Macho, “Villano Antillano and Ana Macho Dream of Queer and Trans Futures.”

groups, and friends, swing is a moment in time where every part of the band clicks, and the music just feels *right*. I've felt swing across myriad genres, instruments, and songs, but haven't found the words to describe its quality to anyone who hasn't also felt it. My main theory centers the indescribably *right* nature of swing as the goal of existence, and how meaning is created in the constant search for one's unique *swing*. Specifically, I highlight how a *queer swing* is found through the use of queer tools and the subversion of hegemonic rules placed upon us.

When I came out to my parents as trans, I had been taking hormones for almost a year. I didn't tell anyone until six months after I started, when I told my best friend who already knew I was trans. When I did come out, I told my parents that I identify more with lesbianism than with being a girl; that my gender wasn't a big deal, it wasn't some large "death and rebirth" rigamarole.⁶ The stereotypically understood timeline of gender transition looks very different. People come out, then start hormones, and when they come out they come out as one specific thing.⁷ Finding my own *swing* required me to depart from the traditional path in significant ways and use queer tools to achieve such means. Among the tools I want to highlight is "delusion" as discussed in the podcast episode "Villano Antillano and Ana Macho Dream of Queer and Trans Futures" (2023). In the podcast, Antillano and Macho discuss how being trans forces them to be "delusional" about their life in order to imagine a future with them in it (18:40–18:53). The ability to take a bad situation and turn it into something fantastic is a tool used by queer and trans Latinas to get around the confines of the gender binary and create their own *swing*. This is further reinforced in the same podcast, when the musicians talk about "magical realism" in their art, and how it allows them to create a world that centers one's "queer power" (22:45–23:05). The magical element of *queer swing* is all too evident in queer music, where artists use new

⁶ See Stone, "The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto."

⁷ *ibid.*

technologies and new subversions of expectations to break millenia-long limits and traditions. The use of delusion and magical realism can be a helpful tool for queer people trying to find their *swing* in both music and life. Other rule-breaking tools that queer people can use to find their *swing* include using DIY HRT, following the temporal logic of queer time,⁸ or using whisper networks to stay alive in a world that demands our extermination.⁹

In the 2020 piece “Feeling Brown,” José Esteban Muñoz makes note to characterize Latina/o/x identity as an “affective excess” when compared to whiteness, which is characterized by its relative lack (11). Specifically, Muñoz highlights how this affective excess can be seized and “redirected... [toward] a liberationist politics” (11). Because whiteness claims affective normativity and neutrality, it defines itself as a lack: a flat and impoverished identity. The many facets of latina/o/x identity can therefore be a tool used to embody oneself in different ways depending on the audience. I think there is a clear parallel between the affective excess of Latina/o/x identity and a similar excess in trans and queer identity, as well as the potential to define cisness and heterosexuality as a lack similar to that of whiteness. Further, in her 2003 piece “Divas, Atrevidas, y Entendidas,” Juana María Rodríguez specifies that the multitude of identities we inhabit as queer Latina/o/xs allows us to perform our identities in myriad ways, and that our performance of identity becomes an act that creates new sites of cultural knowledge production (22). Performing identity in different ways can become an act of liberation, as well as a way to access affective normativity. For queer and trans Latinas, our construction as an excess is not only a tool that allows us to further our pursuit of *swing*, but a way to seek refuge in potentially harmful situations by aligning ourselves with affective normativity.

⁸ See Hopkins, “The Comfort of Queer Time Theory.”

⁹ See Santana, “Mais Viva!”

Performance as a concept is deeply intertwined with music, and our understanding of performance when it comes to music can inform the way we look at performance of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, as well as life in general. Having had experience playing music in a variety of settings, I know that the audience often controls how we perform, what we perform, how we look — nearly everything about our performances. When I would play in auditions I often took the time, much to my [sub]conscious dismay, to dress in a collared shirt, dress pants, dress shoes: an outfit that came across as put-together, professional, and squarely in fitting into the gender binary. When playing, I kept my eyes fixed on the music, performed every last bit of ink on the page with as much intention as possible: anything to make it clear that I had the technical skill required to do what was asked of me should I get the part. In this way, I access the normativity expected of a subject in a professional musical setting. The practices in these settings feel much like performances themselves, as spots are limited to those with enough skill and tenacity to *keep* being the best at what they do. The actual practice is done at home, and the official “practices” are messages to the conductor: assertions of belonging. It was this atmosphere that put me off collegiate-level music performance, though I sometimes wish it hadn’t. In many ways, these “professional” musical spaces reflect the experience of living in the gender binary. The rules and expectations of the environment suffocated me, and my personal pursuit of *swing* led me elsewhere. I should make a point to note that there is nothing inherently wrong with finding one’s *swing* in a non-queer environment (either in music or gender/sexuality), and my critiques of overarching systems are not critiques of individuals themselves. In contrast to stuffy rooms of perfect performance, I’ve found that small groups of like-minded peers make the best audience for musical validation. Jamming with a couple friends in a garage; yes, it has that *right* feeling. Showing my friends a messy, too-loud song I made on a pirated copy of *FL Studio* at 2am — that

is *swing*. I embody what makes my queer music swing in my queer existence — a DIY, punk-rock attitude that seizes your preconceived notions about me and transforms them into liberation.

Like the process of finding out what kind of music I like to listen to, make, and engage with, the process of finding out my own gender and sexuality was a complicated one that took many years and innumerable tries. The realization that I was unhappy with either my gender or sexuality was gut-wrenching, and it wasn't until years down the line that I began the process of trying to come to a definitive conclusion on what it meant. For a long time after I started that process, I thought I was a bisexual guy, but under closer scrutiny (taking the form of a heterosexual relationship) it became clear that my main strife was with my gender identity. The following years involved a myriad of presentations among countless different people: performing cisheterosexuality around my family, a loosely and undefined “queer” around my friends, a more definite “trans” among my closer friends, and others. The excess and differing implications of queer identity gave me room to work in different spaces in different ways. I could emphasize my perceived maleness in places where that benefitted me, say a job interview, or I could highlight the queer affect of my identity to be treated as such in safe spaces. Presently, as a trans lesbian who has pursued medical and social transition, I can perform straight, gay, cis, and trans identity in different ways depending on what I need. On the surface, the concept of finding one's *swing* and playing with the way one performs identity seem at odds with each other. Why divert from the pursuit of *swing* to give unnecessary concessions to the regimes we have fought so hard to get away from? I put forth the idea that these changes in performance, if they do in fact take us away from our personal *swing* (which they don't always) are necessary, temporary capitulations to the hegemonic status quo for the purpose of improving our material conditions and allow us to

more easily continue the pursuit of *swing*. For example, access to food, water, and housing should be guaranteed, but in our capitalist country, they are not.¹⁰ I take no trouble with the queer subject who hides their identity from their job for the purpose of not getting fired, or who hides from their family to continue having a roof over their head. I feel it is only in the permanent disregard of one's pursuit of *swing* that they become fully reliant on the regimes holding them back from what feels truly *right* and fail.

In music, swing is not permanent or unchanging. Chords progress, grooves shift, sound cuts out — it is normal not to be in a swing forever. Likewise, *swing* isn't a permanent state of being, but an ever-attainable goal. Something can feel good for a while, then stop *swinging* without being the end-all-be-all. *Swing* is personally and temporally unique just like every performance of music ever has been — no note, chord, or song played the same way twice. To me, *swing* feels like the rough pages of a riveting, old book. It smells like a rainstorm back in Oregon, tastes like a thermos of green tea and honey on a Winter morning. It looks like a home-video of a coastline, a digital recording where the camera goes out of focus just enough to elicit the nostalgia of a well-meaning but videographically-challenged family member, though not enough to obscure the coast's beauty, its resolve to last. It shifts like the tides, bringing new and unfamiliar experiences to a fixture that stands the test of time over and over again. It just feels *right*.

¹⁰ See DiFelice and Grant, "We Have a Right to Water. The U.S. Has Not Delivered."

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