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Emo Music and Youth Culture

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Emo, short for “emotional music”, is an evolving and complex American youth subculture that listens to a specific genre of music, which is characterized by feelings of vulnerability and a willingness to express heart-felt confessions about adolescence. Emo music draws from various genres of contemporary music including rock, rap, punk, indie, pop, and heavy metal by artists such as *Finch, Taking Back Sunday, Atmosphere, Slug, Coheed and Cambria, Snow Patrol, and Dash Board Confessional*. The behaviors, attitudes, and values expressed through the music involve emotionally turbulent themes often associated with adolescence such as despair, nostalgia, heartbreak, hope, and self-loathing. While these themes are not new to contemporary music, the various and sometimes conflicting social practices associated with Emo subculture contain valuable insights into what it means to be an adolescent today. For many youth, Emo subculture facilitates identity formation, social interactions, and emotional involvement. It is a place where many adolescents share their experiences about the world and express their feelings about life through music. Perhaps educators need to take notice of this cultural movement, in order to learn how their students are dealing with the difficult business of growing up in today’s world.

Emo, like many other music-centered cultural movements is difficult to define and even more difficult to narrow down to one all-encompassing narrative. The grunge, new-wave, punk, mod, gangsta rap, and hippie movements from prior decades carried different meanings for different people both inside and outside the music subculture. This is also the case for Emo in that meanings seem to evolve, replicate, and recombine so that Emo, which seemingly started as a somewhat “agreed-upon” collective subculture, has in fact become a highly contested set of meanings and collective practices. To some, it appears to be a cathartic experience through a genuinely outward release of painful emotions coupled with a sense of grace, self-pity, and hope. For others, it means rejecting the music industry hegemony for a DIY (Do It Yourself) lifestyle and following a band that seems like “your own little secret.” For many kids, it means behaving in a way that respects people’s feelings, and to others, it means striving to look like their favorite emo band’s lead singer while singing along at a concert. Unfortunately, for some participants in this music culture, the outward expression of feelings makes them a target for ridicule by peers and adults that find Emo melodramatic and trite.

What generally seems to be agreed upon is the origin of Emo music. In the 1980s, Washington, D.C. became a hot bed for the Emo scene, spawning groups such as *Minor Threat* with its leader Ian Mackaye and *Rites of Spring* featuring Guy Picciotto. The music emerged from punk rock roots to include themes such as rebellion, disdain for authority, and rejection of the mainstream music industry and culture. What made Emo separate from punk and hardcore

rock was the move away from angry songs of rebellion to more hear-felt introspective reflections by the artists. These pioneers of Emo were still rebellious but expressed their angst in a sensitive way through songs about self-loathing, dejection, and personal turmoil.

The Emo movement grew to other areas of the country to include bands with small, local, yet loyal followings like Seattle's *Sunny Day Real Estate*; however, somewhere along the way (some say it was in 1999 when Vagrant Records signed the Emo band *Jawbreaker*), the record industry took notice. This is where defining Emo subculture gets elusive. Like many other aspects of youth culture, the music and its associated practices and themes were appropriated for profit and turned into a product for mass consumption. Before long, Emo bands such as *Dashboard Confessional* and *Weezer* appeared on the cover of *Rolling Stone*, on the radio, and in the buzz bins of MTV. The slippery part of describing Emo lies in the contradiction that was inherently created when Emo started appearing in mainstream media outlets. The newfound popularity threatened the original intentions of Emo music participants, which focused on genuine feelings, grassroots sentiments, and a rejection of mainstream music through independent record labels and small, local music venues. As a result, Emo developed into a space of tension between independent authenticity and corporate mass media.

As Emo music worked its way into the popular media channels, it no longer appealed to many of the original participants. Hence, the evolution of Emo subculture split into two groups within the subculture: The first could be labeled as "Emo Independents"; those that reject the mainstream bands and styles

associated with Emo. The other group is often known as the “Emo mainstream”; the fragment of the subculture that embraces Emo despite its growing popularity and subsequent corporate product. These two groups are by no means definitive or absolute. In fact, most people probably fit somewhere in between these two categories and possibly within more than one group at the same time. At best, it is a messy distinction full of gaping contradictions. It is, however, one way of making sense out of what Emo means to the people that engage in the subculture.

Emo “independents” are the kids that get psyched because they make up a small group of early insiders and take great pride in being “in the know” about an emerging new Emo band. Much like people that follow punk music, they revel in alienation from the popular and seek out the unpopular. Emo “independents” are participants in the subculture that are loyal to the original intentions associated with the mid-eighties Emo scene in Washington D.C. They see Emo as a means for independence from the corporate dominated music industry. They love the raw emotion that comes from real expressions on issues that unite human beings and often create their own forms of Emo through their bands and zines. For these people, Emo was once pure, subsequently ruined by the corporate music industry, and is now dead. They are still committed to independent music by seeking out bands that have yet to sign with a major corporate record label, yet they do not like what Emo has become and have chosen to move on or reject the “Emo” label altogether. They oppose the multinational corporations who dominate the music industry thus offering fewer

and fewer choices for artistic expression. Emo “independents” make extraordinary efforts to reject the music industry by supporting Independent record labels, DIY (Do It Yourself) operations, and locally owned music venues and radio stations.

In an apparent contradiction to the Emo purist circle of participants, there are those in Emo culture that enjoy everything that Emo represents and associate strongly with bands that have been labeled Emo even if it is through popular channels. These participants are the second wave adapters in the subculture and are often known as the “Emo kids”. They are mostly white, suburban, high school and college kids that dress alike, watch MTV’s TRL, and attend mainstream Emo concerts like *Dashboard Confessional*, *The Get Up Kids*, and *New Found Glory*. It should be noted that some (especially Emo “independents”) might tend to look down at this subcategory of Emo culture as “sell-outs” and “wannabees”.

Dashboard Confessional is the most popular of the bands that “Emo kids” follow, and their music is characterized by songs (sometimes called screamo) that alternate between whispering and screaming intimate reflections. Often, *Dashboard Confessional* lyrics are about a relationship that has gone bad and the singer is trying to come to terms with the emotional fallout. The band has a section of their website called the Dashboard Confessional Community where fans can send web log entries for posting. This is one of the spaces in the subculture where “Emo kids” can interact with a social group of insiders centered on the music and lyrics of their favorite band. While the Dashboard Confessional

Community may be a marketing strategy for Vagrant Records, it represents a genuine place for youth interaction in that they are relating their own lives to the themes of *Dashboard Confessional's* songs. Evident in this community are some of the difficult feelings that often accompany adolescence and an openness to share these emotions with other fans of *Dashboard Confessional*, much in the same way the band does through their songs like “*Rapid Hope Loss*” or “*As Lovers Go*.” This is part of the “slippery nature” of Emo. *Dashboard Confessional* is the site of separation for many in the rift in Emo culture. The Emo “independents” see *Dashboard Confessional* as an insincere bastardization of their subculture and its sentiments due to their mainstream, corporate status on MTV, whereas Emo “mainstreamers” see *Dashboard Confessional* as a talented band (and community) that provides enjoyment and authentically addresses a difficult time in life. The distinction between the Emo “independents” and “mainstreamers” are important as we consider youth culture. It is indicative of the way in which music subcultures initiate, evolve, and are experienced by youth. It reminds us that we cannot place a single definition on youth culture. It also exemplifies an all-too-common phenomenon in our society whereby corporate interests seek to colonize youth culture.

There may be aspects of Emo that are relevant and important for educators. As literacy studies expand our definitions of text and what it means to be literate in today’s world, we might be wise to take notice of Emo music and other popular texts that permeate youth culture. The overt, genuine, manner of dealing with inner feelings in Emo has implications for learning, especially for

teaching adolescents. Unfortunately, many forms of school learning ignore the emotional nature of knowledge in favor of logical, factual content. This is exemplified by the mounting pressure placed on students to perform on standardized tests and the stress that goes with applying for acceptance into elite colleges.

Educators might also learn from the ways in which popular music convey contradictory messages about dealing with emotions. Take, for example, the rapper Marshall Mathers, aka Eminem, with his revelations of genuine feelings of emotional trauma through his lyrics one minute and then sarcastic lines about “bitches” and “beat downs” the next. This may indicate to adolescents that the best way to deal with emotions is to keep them inside, to react with violence, or to make a sarcastic joke about them. Perhaps schools could learn from Emo and incorporate these texts into curriculum as a way of helping students with the affective nature of knowledge and life. Perhaps a discourse in school centered on genuine feelings and emotions could address student violence in a world where Columbine-like shootings seem to be more and more prevalent. There is a convincing body of literature that makes claims for more “emotional intelligence” in schooling and Emo may be a bridge for making a connection between affect and intellect.

Another reason to consider the importance of Emo in teen’s lives is related to motivation towards schooling. Many educators are concerned with how increased pressure to perform in school has led to an overwhelming percentage of students that are bored, stressed-out, and all together disengaged in their own

intellectual development. Often, school curriculum is disconnected from some of the students' interests. Emo may have the ability to engage students in exploring their feelings and dealing with emotions because it relates so well to their inherent interests about relationships. Perhaps school leaders and teachers could learn from Emo music about how to engage students in exploring school related activities. For example, students might be more likely to engage in Shakespearean literature, like *Romeo and Juliet*, if the teacher were able to contextualize the experience in Emo music. It is possible that Emo subculture presents an opportunity to help students connect their personal narratives and out of school literacies with school-based literacies. By coupling contemporary culture with school culture, many students may feel more connected to the curriculum in school, thus more likely to see it as important and interesting. Many social psychologists and education researchers believe that it's imperative to learning to have students that engage in literature or other school related topics because they find it personally interesting. While it is important not to colonize youth culture for educational purposes, Emo might be one way to engage students in school while seeing the world from a youth perspective.

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