

E X P L A I N

T O T A L I T Y

(version 8)

Justin Allen

I first encountered punk music inside my family's suburban home at the bottom of a winding hill and the edge of the woods. Descending the hill, lined with other houses like it, the dark green trees rose like bath water to surround it.

My father's family migrated to Washington, D.C. from rural North Carolina in the 1930s, before a number of family members spread to surrounding suburbs in Maryland and Virginia in the 90s. I didn't fit in easily with most of the kids in the Northern Virginia town where I grew up. I could at times, but this required me to suppress my quirks and not discuss my artistic interests too frequently or passionately. In high school, I navigated MySpace, constructing a persona, meeting other music enthusiasts, MapQuesting directions to music venues in Northern Virginia and D.C. The Blood Brothers, Stiffed, Glassjaw. At the Drive-In, Bloc Party, AFI. I identified other people that also felt isolated by our environment, and we united with punk music as our soundtrack.

As I came of age in the aughts, the excesses of reality shows, celebrity culture, war, and upper middle class suburban life were heavily critiqued in the music I listened to. Punk bands complicated my understanding of my internal world, my immediate surroundings, and the world beyond the surrounding metro area which, at the time, I knew very little about outside of what I saw on TV. Punk showed me that my interest in art lied in pushing limits—challenging formal boundaries and conventions as an assertion that something else is possible.

In 2017, I noticed a melancholy to popular rap songs, usually by rappers in their 20s with production tying their sound to both trap, a hip-hop subgenre from Atlanta, and emo, a type of hardcore punk that emerged in D.C. in 1985 with a band called Rites of Spring. Distinct from the hypermasculine lyrics and performance of other hardcore punk bands, Rites of Spring paired the hardcore sound with emotional lyricism. I began a series of performances called *Explain Totality* to better understand the personal resonance this connection had for me, and to also better understand where I'm from and what parts of me I can attribute to my home.

Conceptually, I looked to Lorraine O'Grady's *The First and the Last of the Modernists* (2010), a series of diptychs in which the artist juxtaposes portraits of Michael Jackson and Charles Baudelaire at the same age and striking mirrored poses. O'Grady uses the diptych to spark associations between seemingly unrelated figures, a move to collapse the high-low hierarchy and disrupt the notion of white intellectual superiority<sup>1</sup>. I wondered: how can I perform a diptych? Can I push two music genres and types of movement together, side by side? Can a performed diptych draw connections between genres often presumed to be unrelated because of the races associated with them? How could this connection help me understand more about how intersections of race, class, and place show up in my own story?

*Explain Totality (version 1)* started with research on the band Orchid, from Amherst, Massachusetts, and their debut LP, *Chaos is Me*, released in 1999 and notable for its dissonance and abundant screaming vocals that helped shape the emo subgenre screamo. At the time I learned about Orchid, duo Rae Sremmurd's trap song *Black Beatles* was on the radio and stuck in my head.

I begin *Explain Totality (version 1)* and *Explain Totality*

(*version 2*) dancing to *Black Beatles*. The music then abruptly shifts to Orchid's song *Le Désordre, C'est Moi*, my movements shifting abruptly with it. Both versions feature improvised moshing movement, a type of dance audience members do at live performances, crowds swinging and cranking their limbs, tossing themselves through the air, kicking, and jabbing. When the music ends, I collapse and lay on the ground, out of breath and barely moving at all, as a recording of my voice fills the space. While (*version 1*) concludes with a recording of me reading a personal essay, (*version 2*) concludes with a short poem about racial dynamics at punk shows:

WHEN I SAY DMV I MEAN  
NORTHERN VIRGINIA

In a rec center court up in Sterling  
a Black boy skirts the mosh pit, timid where  
limbs cleave air, violent white boy ballet, windup—  
swing! Other arms shield, contain the surge like  
constriction or caution. Can you feel it?

For (*version 3*), I cycle movements. I skank, a move in which I kick out my legs one after the other while the opposite arm scoops forward; I windmill my arms; and I rock back and forth in a deep lunge. Simultaneously, I play a recording of my voice reading poems about my home, disillusionment with the American Dream, class identity, and the building of Levittown in Long Island, New York after WWII, the prototypical suburb where Black families like mine were prohibited from living. These histories are layered with an emo song I wrote about Northern Virginia. In the recording I sing the song, after which I sing the song live into a mic, and encourage the audience to sing with me. While I didn't realize it at the time I wrote it, the song is sung to the melody of *Black Beatles*:

Oak trees and whitetail deer in  
Abundances we tame  
Razed woods and ticky tacky  
TV dins with the fam  
Excess, the new convenience  
Tinged with work ethic shame  
Same teenage rage all summer  
Restraint, virtue or sham?  
Teens retreat into trees and  
Smoke cigarettes and claim  
Who's more hardcore than hardcore  
More rage sprouts from ho-hum

I titled the series *Explain Totality* by taking one word from *Black Beatles*'s lyrics and one from *Le Désordre*'s, similar to how cross-genre mash-ups on YouTube and SoundCloud are named. I liked this title because often in life, I have been called to explain myself—to explain how or why I could possibly be. This title is a dismissal, a challenge, and a slightly sarcastic proposition, an acknowledgement that none of us can be explained.

For *Explain Totality (version 4)* I worked with S\*an D. Henry-Smith (guitar), Taja Cheek (bass), and Savannah Harris (drums) to create covers representing the roots and shifting form of hardcore punk. We covered a trap, screamo, hardcore, proto-punk, and rock 'n' roll song, each altered with my original lyrics broken up and shifted around to fit their respective structures. In different versions of *Explain Totality*, I have rearranged, chopped up, and spliced these lyrics to custom-fit each performance, so that the song reappears much like a song on the radio. The oak trees, the deer, the summer, the shame, the hardcore echo throughout, a constant reminder of where I'm from.

1 Lorraine O'Grady, "the diptych vs. the triptych," 1998. [http://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady\\_The-Diptych-vs-The-Triptych\\_Unpublished.pdf](http://lorraineogrady.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Lorraine-OGrady_The-Diptych-vs-The-Triptych_Unpublished.pdf)

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