FROM “MARY” to “TERRY”: BUTCH BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN’S QUEER FANBASE

AN HONORS THESIS

SUBMITTED ON THE 3 DAY OF MAY, 2022

TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

OF THE HONORS PROGRAM

OF NEWCOMB-TULANE COLLEGE

TULANE UNIVERSITY

FOR THE DEGREE OF

BACHELOR OF ARTS

WITH HONORS IN ENGLISH

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This thesis examines Bruce Springsteen’s queer fandom, analyzing the ways in which Springsteen writes about and performs queerness while simultaneously unpacking why (and how) fans respond to these expressions. The thesis places LGBTQ+ Springsteen fanzines in conversation with Springsteen’s lyrics, image, and live performances, analyzing why queer listeners are so drawn to his particular brand of masculinity. The work is borne out of a desire to push back against the mainstream view of Springsteen’s gender performance as all-American patriarchy, arguing that Springsteen’s masculinity is so constructed and so overt that it borders on butchness. Chapter 1 focuses on queer characters, queer desire, and queer emotions in Springsteen’s narrative oeuvre and Chapter 2 breaks down Springsteen’s performance of queered masculinity both onstage and offstage. While Chapter 3 is explicitly centered on queer fan narratives and the ways in which LGBTQ+ listeners reckon with Springsteen, quotes and images from queer fanzines are utilized throughout the thesis. Ultimately, by understanding a star’s persona as a construction, fans can read their own hopes and desires into their icons, creating a fan-made Springsteen who is simultaneously a lesbian, a queer man, a sage, and an outcast. The thesis adds to the body of Springsteen scholarship by spotlighting marginalized voices and incorporating novel primary sources in the form of queer fanzines, prompting further inquiry into how people listen to and relate to pop-cultural figures.
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INTRODUCTION

To the casual viewer, American icon Bruce Springsteen is effortlessly masculine, wrapping the manual laborer’s muscled confidence up in blue jeans and a white tank top. But to queer fans, Springsteen’s masculinity is so constructed and so overt that it borders on butchness, undermining the mainstream interpretation of Springsteen’s gender performance as all-American patriarchy. Consequently, these fans analyze Springsteen’s lyrics, iconic album covers, stagecraft, and style through a queer lens, contextualizing Springsteen’s body of work and performance style within a larger LGBTQ+ tradition.

Bruce Springsteen has constructed a decades-long career by translating his working-class upbringing into music, and these expressions have earned him a diverse following spanning class and gender boundaries. This thesis will primarily engage with the evolution of Springsteen’s songwriting and all-American image through the eyes of his queer fans, putting queer fan narratives collected from fanzines in conversation with the dominant discourse. This project will break down Springsteen’s dual performance of masculinity and queer aesthetics, analyzing Springsteen’s own performance of traditional masculinity both onstage and offstage in order to understand how he reinforces and challenges dominant discourses surrounding machismo. By putting these analyses in conversation with queer fan narratives, I aim to analyze how and why these performances of queerness and masculinity resonate with Springsteen’s queer fanbase, exploring the politics of fandom and how queer identification with pop cultural representations can subvert the overtly masculine environment of the music industry.

In this thesis, queer functions as both an identity and a mode of analysis. As an identity, queerness is an umbrella term for a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities.
Historically, queer has often been used as a pejorative term for LGBTQ+ people. Though younger queer people have worked to reclaim the word as an affirming and positive identity label, not every member of the LGBTQ+ community is comfortable calling themselves or others queer. However, many people prefer the term because it encompasses their gender and sexual identity without relying on “binary presentation,” challenging the “assumed binary” of sexual and gender identity (Cheves, “9 LGBTQ+ People Explain How They Love, Hate, And Understand The Word ‘Queer’”). So while “queer” is not as specific as gay, lesbian, or nonbinary, its versatility allows it to transcend the either/or dichotomy, affording a greater degree of chosen ambiguity and freedom to its users.

However, queerness is as much a political and cultural stance as it is an identity, encompassing not only gender and sexual identity but embodying “non-normativity, creativity, and diversity far beyond homonormative culture” (Cheves). This connects to queerness as a mode of analysis, most often termed “queering.” Hubbs defines “queering” as an analytical approach that “allows audiences to enlist nonqueer stories and images in the production of queer meanings, pleasures and identifications,” thereby informing “newer, more fluid modes for reception” and identification (The Promised Land, 99).

Consequently, I will make use of queerness as an identity and an analytic in this thesis. This work is vital because, before now, Springsteen scholars have rarely analyzed Springsteen’s queer or otherwise marginalized fans in a substantial way. Fanshel, Smith, and Hubbs are the exceptions, and their foundational work on the queerness of Springsteen has been fundamental in the authoring of this thesis.
Despite their contributions, there is a lack of attention to queer voices in Springsteen scholarship overall. While the current literature thoroughly examines how Bruce Springsteen’s background informs his lyrical representations of working-classness and whether his performance of manliness challenges or bolsters traditional masculinity, there is a gap in the research regarding how each of these factors appeals to or alienates his queer fanbase. There has been extensive scholarship conducted about male Springsteen fans and the roots of their fanaticism and a handful of studies conducted about female Springsteen fans. However, few of these female-centric studies explicitly examine why both Springsteen’s lyrics and image appeal to his female fans, and none of them acknowledge or interrogate queerness or queer femininity in any capacity. Instead, the existing scholarship largely examines how and why female fans form prolonged attachments to Bruce Springsteen’s music, exploring the effect of Springsteen’s lyrics or image - rarely investigating both in tandem or connecting these factors explicitly to fandom.

While Fanshel, Smith, and Hubbs have performed their own queer readings of Springsteen, no one has analyzed queer fanzines as a primary source and a way of directly incorporating marginal voices into their scholarship. This makes my use of queer fanzines singular, constituting a new contribution to the existing body of Springsteen scholarship. The zine as a site of alternative meaning-making is especially important to my analyses, helping readers understand how queer people identify and disidentify with mainstream culture in order to create their own interpretations of stars.

In my thesis, I will be focusing on queer-identifying Springsteen fans working to queer Springsteen’s image, lyrics, and oeuvre as a mode of analysis. I will do this by analyzing queer fanzines, putting queer fan narratives in direct conversation with Springsteen’s lyrics, persona,
and autobiographical material. I will be focusing on eight fanzines, including: John Burn et al.’s *Jungleland: A Springzine*, Holly Casio’s *Looking for Bruce*, Casio’s *Me and Bruce #1*, Casio’s *Me and Bruce (And My Dad) #2*, Casio’s *Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town*, Alana Kumbier et al.’s *Because the Boss Belongs to Us: Queer Femmes on Bruce Springsteen*, Rebecca McCormick’s *You Ain’t A Beauty But Hey You’re Alright*, and CJ Reay’s *BUTT SPRINGSTEEN: A Celebration of Bruce Springsteen and His Beautiful Butt*. I will also make use of non-zine queer narratives, namely Naomi Gordon-Loeb’s article *The Queerness of Bruce Springsteen*. I will engage in literary analysis of these queer, Springsteen-centric zines in order to center the narratives of Springsteen’s marginalized fans, analyzing how and why LGBTQ+ people, especially queer women, form emotional and fanatical connections to a stereotypically masculine figure like Springsteen. Exploring queer desire and gender performance through the context of Springsteen and his music, these zines contribute an alternative reading of Springsteen’s lyrics and stage shows that challenge the cult of hyper-masculinity surrounding him and elucidate the disidentification strategies employed in queer fandom.

The first chapter will be a lyrical analysis, investigating how Springsteen’s lyrical representations of queerness serve to normalize marginalized figures. Portraying queer people and queer relationships with the same even-handed nostalgia he applies to his heterosexual characters, I argue that Springsteen’s representations of queerness fall into four distinct categories (1) story-driven songs populated by gender deviant and sexually divergent characters 2) first-person songs about a brotherly love that borders on homoeroticism 3) first-person songs alluding to romantic relationships with other men and 4) heterosexual narratives that utilize queer imagery. I will use queer fan narratives throughout this chapter, examining how queer
people relate to his depictions of small-town fatigue, alienation, and escape. By placing his narrators and their desires in the “Darkness on the Edge of Town” or on the highway to self-realization in “Born to Run,” Springsteen draws on loneliness and escapist fantasies that appeal to LGBTQ+ listeners in a uniquely queer way.

The second chapter will examine how Springsteen’s lyrical representations of these groups intersect with his own performance of traditional masculinity both onstage and offstage. In order to understand how he reinforces and challenges dominant discourses surrounding machismo, I’ll analyze his 2016 autobiography, *Born to Run*, and various interviews, relying on Butler’s theories of gender performance and, more generally, star studies in order to understand the rock ‘n’ roll icon as a mutable text. Ultimately, the Boss is a persona, and by putting pressure on the construction of his own stardom and blue-collar masculinity, Springsteen makes space for alternative (and, arguably, queer) readings of both his masculinity and his performances.

In chapter two, I’ll also examine Springsteen’s homoeroticism, looking specifically at his friendship with longtime E Street Band-mate Clarence Clemons. I examine their onstage performances, looking at how their stage kisses and performances of queer intimacy work to further undermine the superficial heterosexual narrative of songs like “Born to Run” and “Thunder Road.” I will also analyze his similar (though less openly or physically affectionate) relationship with guitarist Stevie Van Zandt. For both, I will make use of Sedgwick’s homosocial triangle, exploring how men, in literature or on stage, sublimate their desire for each other by competing over the same woman. But ultimately, by performing queerness and deconstructing his own masculinity, I will argue Springsteen deconstructs his own stardom, making space for queer readings of his star teext.
The last segment of my second chapter analyzes Springsteen’s physicality and fashion, arguing that his performance of masculinity is so studied and so overt that it borders on butchness. I will make direct comparisons to queer fashion movements and statements, examining how hallmarks of Springsteen’s working-class masculinity (such as his red bandana and denim-on-denim) can be interpreted through a queer lens. I will also spotlight queer readings of these sartorial signifiers, unpacking how and why queer fans are drawn to Springsteen and his aesthetic.

The third chapter will analyze how and why Springsteen’s representations of queerness and masculinity resonate with his queer fanbase, exploring the politics of fandom and how queer identification with pop-cultural representations can subvert the overtly masculine environment of the music industry. Dedicated entirely to the fanzines and fan culture itself, this chapter will explore the history of the zine as a medium and the ways in which zine writers can manufacture virtual Bohemias. I will make extensive use of Muñoz’s theory of disidentification, exploring how queer people (and, in this case, queer Springsteen fans) engage in disidentification to rework the cultural codes of the mainstream and read themselves into the dominant discourse as a process of identity-making. Disidentification and the queer fans that perform it not only expose the fallacy of one-dimensional stardom, they also make space for alternative readings of cultural icons like Bruce Springsteen.

My methodology will center around cultural analysis and various forms of textual analysis. I will begin with a lyrical analysis of select songs from Springsteen’s discography and a performance analysis of Springsteen’s aesthetics and physicality as presented in his live shows. I will incorporate a literary analysis of Springsteen’s autobiography, *Born to Run*, and a series of
interviews to examine the constructed nature of stardom, exploring how Springsteen himself
draws attention to the artifice inherent in “The Boss” persona. By calling attention to the
constructedness and artificiality of his own persona, Springsteen creates opportunities for
alternative readings of his stardom. Queer fans perform queer readings of Springsteen in this
space, further deconstructing Springsteen’s star text by queering his lyrics, image, and
performances.

Engaging in an explicitly feminist and queer analysis of Springsteen aided directly by the
narratives of queer fans (female, male, and gender nonconforming), this thesis is essential to
understanding how Springsteen’s songwriting and image endear him to his diverse fanbase in
ways not previously studied. By engaging in textual analysis of Springsteen’s lyrics and critical
analysis of his image, this project will break down Springsteen’s dual performance of
masculinity and queer aesthetics. This analysis, coupled with primary analysis of queer zines and
extensive citation of secondary sources, will help break down the monolith of straight male
Springsteen fans and allow for critical examination of Springsteen’s LGBTQ+ fandom. By
engaging in an in-depth analysis of Springsteen’s fandom, this study will illustrate that queer
people form connections to musicians that transcend sexual attraction or superficial fanaticism,
doing important political and cultural work and encouraging alternative readings of American
icons. What follows is a lyrical analysis of Springsteen’s songs, textual analysis of Springsteen’s
image combined with critical analysis of his performance of queer aesthetics, and a zine analysis
exploring how and why queer fans listen to, identify with, and idolize Springsteen.
Figure 1. Kumbier, Alana et al.; *Because the Boss Belongs to Us: Queer Femmes on Bruce Springsteen*. 2011.
CHAPTER ONE: LYRICAL ANALYSIS

While Springsteen’s representations of queerness became more explicit as his career progressed, Springsteen constructs even his earliest heterosexual epics using queer imagery, utilizing metaphors of liminality and escape to place his narrators and their desires in the “ Darkness on the Edge of Town” or on the highway to self-realization in “Born to Run.” These representations of love on the margins are tinged with small-town fatigue and loneliness, two emotions that resonate with queer fans. Using Hubbs’ “pliant reception frames” as a theoretical lens, queer listeners can (and do) envision themselves on the fringes alongside (or in place of) Springsteen’s characters. “Music allows listeners - regardless of their own biological, physiological, gendered, and sexual identifications - to occupy subject and object positions that are not necessarily their own,” scholars Kapurch and Everett assert. Though the events and circumstances of a Springsteen song may be “filtered through the male speaker’s subject position,” queer listeners can inhabit “subject and object positions” that they have not experienced themselves (The Blood Rushes In: Sex and Masculinity in Springsteen’s “Candy’s Room” and “Prove It All Night, 1).

Some queer listeners place themselves in Springsteen's (and his narrator’s) shoes, and others identify more with his characters. Gordon-Loebl had “plenty of karaoke fantasies about being the leather-jacketed tough guy whom the girl of my dreams would want to ‘case the promised land’ with,” she explains. Casio, in turn, saw herself as Springsteen:
“I was Bruce in *Born to Run* and *Thunder Road*, ready to break out of my small town and never look back. I was Bruce in *Dancing in the Dark*, staring in a mirror hating my clothes, my hair, my face” (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4*, 10; emphasis added).

And some queer listeners, like Maggie Cee, want to be both:

“I want to be the girl in a Springsteen song, putting my make up on and doing my hair up pretty. I want to be the girl you’ll do anything for, the one who makes the long lonely drive across state lines worth it….But I also want to be the adventurer…Maybe there’s a way to drive *and* wrap my legs round these velvet rims and strap my hands cross your engines” (Cee, *Because the Boss Belongs to Us: Queer Femmes on Bruce Springsteen*, 9-10; emphasis added).

And some take the “object” in object perspective literally. “If I could be anything in the world,” Emily Drabinski pines in figure 2, “I would be Bruce Springsteen’s car…Oh how I’d love to be up on his concrete blocks” (Drabinski, *Because the Boss Belongs to Us*, 16). But across all of these assumed positions, one thing is clear: Springsteen’s leather-clad truants, freshly perfumed girls, and muscle cars are no deterrent to queer listeners. Though the world at large may conceive of these symbols as hallmarks of heterosexual masculinity, Springsteen’s queer listeners are eager and willing to incorporate them into their world.
If I could be anything in the world, I would be Bruce Springsteen’s car. Listen to him in the opening stanza of “Open All Night”: I had the carburetor cleaned and checked/with her line blown out she’s hummin’ like a turbojet/Propped her up in the backyard on concrete blocks for a new clutch plate and a new set of shocks/Took her down to the carwash, check the plugs and points/I’m goin’ out tonight I’m gonna rock that joint. Oh how I’d love to be up on his concrete blocks.
The queer affinity for white working-class culture extends beyond Springsteen, and Hubbs argues that many signifiers from white working-class culture that seem steeped in heteronormativity are also hallmarks of a queer subcultural aesthetic. “Masculine or butch personas among queer women bear long associations…with working-class identity,” Hubbs notes in *Rednecks, Queers, and Country Music*, explaining how rural femininity is seen as rougher and more masculine than urban femininity (122). The “relative masculinity of rural gender norms” means that queer women are often “less conspicuous” in the country than they would be in the city, further linking queerness to working-classness (123). Consequently, Hubbs puts pressure on what she calls the middle-classing of queerness, exploring the “roots of LGBTQ activism” as they connect to the “nonorganizational, day-to-day gender transgression of working-class queers” (151).

Raechel Anne Jolie also explores the connections between her queerness and her rural, working-class background in *Rust Belt Femme*, exploring how hallmarks of working-classness like motorcycles and leather can be appropriated as queer symbols, too. Discussing how growing up "white trash" shaped her queer femme identity, Jolie explains that embracing the “white trash” aesthetic “already feels very queer because it’s so non-normative…It’s already not fitting inside the boxes of what’s ‘appropriate.’ Which is what queers have been doing forever.” In her small town, Jolie grew up around many of the working-class symbols Springsteen sings about, from hotrod “race car[s]” to “car grease.” And while some of the city dwellers she met in college interpreted those objects as symbols of hypermasculinity, “everything clicked into place” for Jolie when she “learned the working class roots of gay bars,” proving that her “white trash” and
queer femme identities did not have to exist in conflict (Parker, “Raechel Anne Jolie on Class, Gender and Being a Rust Belt Femme”).

Jolie is not a Springsteen fan, but the ways in which her working-classness created and facilitated her queer identity can help us understand how queer listeners engage with Springsteen’s music. His songs are filled with signifiers of white working-class masculinity, and with this added context we can better understand how queer fans engage with blue-collar cultural artifacts. But how does Springsteen contend with these symbols in his own narrative landscapes?

In “Darkness on the Edge of Town,” Springsteen establishes the “edge of town” as a liminal space akin to the “backstreets” of “Backstreets.” On the “edge of town,” under the cover of “darkness,” people can explore fantasies and enact passions that wilt in the light of day. Julia, the podcast editor at Autostraddle (an independent magazine for LGBTQ+ women and nonbinary people), elaborates on this queer liminality:

“This song (and the album, but this song specifically) is all about being weird and marginal and finally just saying, fuck it, that’s what I am. It’s a song about going to the dark places in yourself and looking at them straight on, accepting that they’re a part of you as much as the parts you’re less afraid of” (“Playlist and Roundtable: We’re Here and We’re Queering Bruce Springsteen”).

This sense of alienation and marginality is most present in the second verse. “Well everybody’s got a secret, son,” Springsteen sings, “Something that they just can't face / Some folks spend their whole lives trying to keep it / They carry it with them every step that they take”. This “secret” that people hide away from others, carrying its weight with “every step that they
take” just so they do not have to “face” it, bears strong resemblances to a repressed queer desire. This interpretation is also consistent with the narrator’s frequent visits to the “spot out ‘neath Abram's Bridge” in the “darkness on the edge of town,” representing a safe space on the margins of polite society in which the narrator can enact his desires more freely. The second chorus furthers this interpretation. “Till some day they just cut it loose / Cut it loose or let it drag ’em down / Where no one asks any questions / Or looks too long in your face / In the darkness on the edge of town / In the darkness on the edge of town”.

In “Born to Run,” Springsteen constructs one of his most popular heterosexual epics using queer imagery, admitting his vulnerability and overcoming his small town fatigue so he can get the hell out of dodge and find a freer existence. Ultimately, “‘Born to Run’ is Bruce singing about queers who get the fuck out of town to find happiness,” and this message thrives in the subtext (Gordon-Loebl, *The queerness of Bruce Springsteen*). Springsteen’s narrator yearns to escape the “death trap” of suburban life with Wendy alongside him. He invites Wendy to “walk with me out on the wire,” affording her a sense of agency and casting Wendy as a partner rather than a mere accessory. Female agency is rare in male-driven rock ’n’ roll, and Springsteen’s Wendy may be one reason that queer people, and queer women specifically, are easily able to read their own experiences into “Born to Run.”

Springsteen’s narrator is also a figure that queer listeners can relate to. He struggles openly with his masculinity, admitting that he’s “just a scared and lonely rider” who wants to know if “love is wild…if love is real.” He doesn’t fit in with the “girls [who] comb their hair in rearview mirrors” or the "boys [who] try to look so hard,” and their posturing, preening gender
performance spurs him on and away from his hometown. “Bruce minces no words about the brutality of the life he and his lover are living. But ‘Born to Run’ is no wallow,” Gordon-Loebl explains. “The song’s closing lines reinforce not resignation to the trap we find ourselves in, but the belief in life beyond it.” This triumphant reclamation of your own future and destiny, especially in contrast with past repression, is a distinctly queer emotion:

Oh, someday girl, I don't know when
We’re gonna get to that place
Where we really want to go, and we'll walk in the sun
But till then, tramps like us
Baby, we were born to run

This notion of “walk[ing] in the sun” with your partner in a place where you are free and safe to express your love projects a vision of romantic safety that appeals to queer people. The phrase “tramps like us” is also distinctly queer, following a long LGBTQ+ tradition of slur reclamation. Though “tramps” itself isn’t a slur, the impulse behind transforming a word meant to degrade you into a radical statement of belonging has definite queer undertones. And in a larger sense, the final verse “is a prayer, a salve, a reminder of what is possible” (Gordon-Loebl). Though the destination, the “place where we really want to go” may be far off in the distance, we will find our place in this world eventually. “But till then, tramps like us” will continue to dream of that future bliss.
Springsteen’s lyrical representations of queerness can be categorized into four primary classes, all of which I will explore below: 1) story-driven songs populated by gender deviant and sexually divergent characters 2) first-person songs about a brotherly love that borders on homoeroticism 3) first-person songs alluding to romantic relationships with other men and 4) heterosexual narratives that utilize queer imagery. Even Springsteen’s heterosexual epics employ queer imagery and liminality, tinged famous girl-and-a-car tracks like “Born to Run” with a hint of queer loneliness and transgression. By analyzing Springsteen’s narrative oeuvre through a queer lens, we can better understand precisely how and why Springsteen appeals so strongly to queer listeners.

Springsteen’s queer characters emerged early on in his career, roaming the boardwalks and alleyways of his first two albums, *Greetings From Asbury Park, N.J.* and *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*. Populated by drag queens and lip-locking gang members, Springsteen’s early tracks employ queerness as a world-building tool, symbolizing transgression and the sexual freedom characteristic of the after hours boardwalk scene. “Spirit in the Night,” the next to last track on Springsteen’s 1973 debut, follows a motley crew of six guys and one girl “all duded up for Saturday night” as they drive off for an evening of teenage fun at Greasy Lake. Crazy Janey, her “mission man,” Wild Billy, G-Man, Hazy Davy, Killer Joe, and the narrator get drunk off a bottle of wine and the dust that Billy shakes “out of his coonskin cap.” Once they’re loosened up, the gang of teenage misfits “dance all night to a soul fairy band” as the narrator and Crazy Janey tumble to the ground and make love.

Springsteen’s descriptions of Janey’s “soft[ness]” and and “heal[ing]” kisses “shoot through” the narrator, enveloping the listener in an atmosphere of erotic debauchery verging on
“hurt.” And just as the narrator is “too loose to fake” his attraction to Janey, the other boys also begin to give into their own sensual desires under the cover of inebriation and darkness. Nature illuminates the scene as the stars grow “bright” and throw “light” on Billy and Davy:

Dancin’ in the moonlight

They were down near the water in a stone mud fight

Killer Joe’d passed out on the lawn

Well Hazy Davy got really hurt

He crawled into the lake in just his socks and a shirt

Springsteen crafts an aura of “orgiastic mayhem” so potent that the listener need not wonder what kind of intimate dancing and dirty wrestling would leave Davy without his trousers, rinsing himself off in the lake (Fanshel, *Beyond blood brothers: Queer Bruce Springsteen* 362). The titular feeling in “Spirit in the Night,” according to Springsteen biographer David Marsh, is "the spirit of unity, whether sexual or otherwise” that exists among this gang of rock ’n’ roll Bohemians (Marsh, *Two hearts, the story* 65). Billy and Davy blur the lines between friends and lovers alongside Janey and the narrator, animating a narrative tension that Springsteen continues to build upon throughout his catalog.

Springsteen introduces another source of romantic and platonic tension in “Incident on 57th Street,” a track from his sophomore album centered around Johnny. A wide-eyed delinquent from Spanish Harlem, Johnny is caught between his devotion to a gang of young city boys and his blossoming love for “Puerto Rican” Jane. Though Johnny acts like a “cool Romeo,” Jane
knows “he’ll never be true,” and her fears are confirmed when Johnny prepares to leave her after the cops find “the vein” and his “barefoot boys” are in trouble. After this run-in with the police, the boys “left the corners, threw away all of their switchblade knives, and kissed each other goodbye,” adding an explicitly romantic dimension to the gang’s affections.

Springsteen hints at Johnny’s queer sensibilities when he offers to whisk Jane away to his own personal “paradise,” a place that happens to be teeming with drag queens. Johnny yearns to “drive [Jane] down” to “Shanty Lane,” an action-packed locale where “all them golden-heeled fairies in a real bitch fight / Pull .38s and kiss the girls good night.” The repetition of the phrase “kiss each other goodnight” (or “goodbye”) suggests a semi-amorous intimacy between Johnny and the members of this gang, a subtext which is heightened by the suggestion that to be with Jane, Johnny must “leave” his gang (or vice versa). This either/or dichotomy is further sexualized when Jane “moves over to share her pillow” with Johnny but sees him “up” and donning his clothes to go and join the gang. Jane herself confirms the amorous dimension of Johnny’s gang when she refers to them as “those romantic young boys.” The E Street Band echoes the phrase in the background, “sounding like an angelic choir” (Fanshel, 362). The “romantic” refrain can also be interpreted as a romanticism of the male gang and their lifestyle, removing the amorous dimension but reifying the dramatic idealization of life on the margins. So, in a sense, this alternative reading still draws on queerness by further romanticizing liminal spaces, much like “Darkness on the Edge of Town.”

Both “Spirit in the Night” and “Incident on 57th Street” paint a portrait of a cast of characters immersed in a group setting, placing the narrators at specific sites with specific groups of people. These group settings, dominated by males, are animated by “an almost erotic subtext”
This enveloping environment of “male-to-male intimacy” is equally as compelling as the traditional Johnny-and-Jane relationships at the center of the storyline, and Springsteen’s inclusion of these dynamics seem casual and natural (Fanshel, 363). In this sense, Springsteen normalizes queerness in his bands of misfits, using male gangs as a liaison between the platonic and the intimate. Springsteen will soon draw on these connotations in his construction of the E Street Band.

While the overwhelming majority of Springsteen’s early queer characters are immediately welcomed with open arms as members of the gang, Mary of “Mary Queen of Arkansas” is met with ambivalence. Mary blurs the line between male and female, regal and regional, lover and overseer, and Springsteen’s narrator occupies this liminal space alongside Mary. Both Mary and the narrator are circus workers and “big top” dreamers who aim to “take the circus all the way to the border,” and the uncertainty of a transitory life on the fringes is reflected in their romance. The narrator has trouble contextualizing himself in relation to Mary’s complexity. Mary is not “man enough for [him] to hate or woman enough for kissing,” illustrating the narrator’s own conflicts with gender. Harboring “hate” for his own gender and lust for the feminine, the narrator is unsure of how to objectify Mary (or whether he should), but embedded in these extremes is a latent critique of restrictive gender norms. This division between masculine and feminine forces the narrator to choose between hate or love instead of allowing him to exist in the middle like Mary can. The narrator is “revived” by Mary’s “soft hulk,” a paradox that complicates Mary’s gender but also allows Mary to serve as an intermediary. Mary embodies “soft” femininity and “hulk[ing]” masculinity simultaneously, transgressing gender norms and the narrator’s adherence to them. Mary meets the narrator with similar turbulence, pulling him close and pushing him
away in equal measure as she “hold[s]” him “so tight” and “love[s]” him “so damn loose.” However, the end of the song sees the narrator asking Mary to move to Mexico with him, running away so they can “start out all over again clean.” These last lines suggest a resolution of the narrator’s ambivalence as he decides to leave the circus life but bring Mary with him. By divorcing their romance from the instability of the sideshow, the narrator aims to create an environment in which he and Mary can find a “good job” and a “clean” slate (Fanshel, 361).

Though it is lyrically and musically analogous to “The Angel,” another track from Springsteen’s first album, “Mary Queen of Arkansas” is widely reviled among Springsteen fans, landing at the bottom of track rankings across the internet. Both tracks have no discernible rhythm and little wordplay, setting them apart from Springsteen’s rollicking anthems and mid-tempo ballads. And while “Mary Queen of Arkansas” and “The Angel” are, admittedly, a bit boring, why are fans so eager to vilify “Mary” but not “The Angel”? In her lyrical analysis, Fanshel argues that while the “group settings” and heterosexual frame narratives help to normalize deviant characters in other early Springsteen songs, Mary’s gender fluidity is irrefutable and undisguised (Fanshel, 363). And while there are valid critiques of “Mary,” particularly the critical race readings that problematize Mary’s southern “white skin” and the “shadow of a noose” hanging over the bed, a latent transphobia likely animates the overwhelming censure (Ken, *Roll of the Dice*). There are no rough and tumble street boys or moon-eyed Janes to detract from the narrator’s sexual feelings towards this transgressive character, and this threatens some fans’ conceptions of Springsteen as a heterosexual rock ’n’ roller.
Springsteen, however, seems to welcome this ambiguity. “I’m always somebody who has a lot of ambiguous feelings about, not necessarily what I want to do, but the style I want to do it in,” Springsteen says (Marsh, *Glory Days: Bruce Springsteen in the 1980s* 152). In his view, the world has never been simple - it’s “complex, and if you do not learn to interpret its complexities you’re going to be on the river without a paddle” (Gilmore, *Rolling Stone*).

In zine contributor and behavioral therapist Toby Chelms’ view, Springsteen’s authenticity stems from his willingness to recognize that the world is a “messed-up place” and that this ugliness is reflected in us, its inhabitants. Springsteen does not shy away from the darker aspects of life, depicting the thugs and pimps alongside the saints without placing judgment or blame on anyone. Springsteen “shows humanity for what it is: both good and bad,” allowing his characters to act out this duality in a way that is true to life (*Jungleland: A Springzine* 5). By acknowledging the murky complexities of life, friendship, and sexuality without judgment in his songs, Springsteen peddles an even-handed authenticity that speaks to the Johnnys, the Marys, and the Crazy Janeys.

Bruce Springsteen’s third album, *Born to Run*, marks his transition from Jersey boardwalk act to all-American everyman. While many of his characters still roam the Jersey Shore, they are now looking back on the past. Tinged with the nostalgia that would soon become his trademark, Springsteen and his narrators lament their bygone youth and the schoolyard gang-of-thieves intimacy they lost with it. Springsteen’s representations of queerness also reflect this shift from present to wistful past through his increased use of gender and name neutrality. Instead of binary Johnnys and Janeys, his listeners are introduced to agender Terrys, Sandys, Bobbys, and Rickys. In addition to “nam[ing] his beloveds in a most ambiguous fashion,” Springsteen serenades
various darlings and babies whose genders are never confirmed. Martha Nell Smith pointedly questions “To whom are Springsteen’s poetically professed passions directed anyway? What gender are all those beloveds he christens so indeterminately?” (Smith, *Sexual Mobilities in Bruce Springsteen: Performance as Commentary* 839).

The most hotly debated Springsteen protagonist from this era is the gender-ambiguous Terry at the heart of “Backstreets.” Detailing the relationship between an ostensibly male narrator and a cryptic Terry, “Backstreets” defies categorization by never addressing Terry’s gender or the essence of his/her relationship with the protagonist in explicit terms. The pronouns of the song are definitively neutral, but the thematic content of the lyrics suggest a tale of male-on-male betrayal. Using stereotypically masculine themes and hobbies to describe the protagonists relationship with Terry, Springsteen crafts an atmosphere of “self-conscious manhood,” blurring the line between boyhood friends and lovers once more (Fanshel 364).

Springsteen describes the “soft, infested summer” that found the narrator and Terry “sleeping in that old abandoned beach house / getting wasted in the heat,” living a life together that forces them into “hiding on the backstreets.” Forced to hide themselves and their “love…on the backstreets,” Springsteen speaks to a need for discretion and secrecy that is distinctly queer. Using charged language to describe a love “so hard” yet “filled with defeat,” Springsteen moves their blossoming bond beyond the realm of the platonic as Terry and the narrator transition from a “soft infested summer” of drunken heat to restless nights in the car “where desperate lovers park.”

Their romance seems doomed from the beginning, though “running for their lives” every night does nothing to quell their passion. Terry and the narrator continue on “slow dancing in the
dark,” living their lives away from the light of day. Springsteen alludes to the pair’s sexual
dynamic when he describes them “let[ting] loose of everything” in the “deep heart of the night,”
using a metaphor for climactic release that further cements their romantic connection. The
narrator dares Terry to blame the end of their relationship on “the lies that killed us” and “the
truth that ran us down,” deepening the tension between truth and fiction that plagues the duo.
Was it the “lie” of hiding their love in the darkness of the backstreets that lead to their passion’s
demise in the end? Did the “truth” of their queer desire weigh too heavily on the spirits of two
boys with small-town lives (and mentalities)? “You can blame it all on me Terry,” the narrator
begs, lamenting the midnight “breakdown” that prematurely ended their romance. And in the
end, Terry and the protagonist are “forced to confess” to “hiding on the backstreets,” suggesting
that their romance has been discovered and they are forced to out themselves.

“Backstreets” comes closest to revealing the gender of Terry in the third verse.

Emphasizing the theme of self-conscious manhood, the narrator thinks back on all of the films he
and Terry used to watch together, “trying to learn to walk like the heroes / we thought we had to
be.” This line brings to mind heroes of the silver screen like John Wayne, quintessential tough,
suave icons that modeled an ideal manhood for Terry and the narrator. Queer zine author and
Springsteen enthusiast Holly Casio singled this line out in her own analysis of “Backstreets”:

“Isn’t it comforting and thrilling to imagine Bruce and his boyfriend acting tough and copying
macho traits from a cowboy film or a gangster film or something in an attempt to cloak
queerness while also sealing their bond together?”
Figure 3. Casio, Holly. *Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the edge of town*. 2018.
Fig. 3 (continued).
Fig. 3 (continued).
Casio herself has a personal connection to this song (as illustrated in figure 3), associating “Backstreet”’s tale of doomed queer romance with her first “girlfriend/not girlfriend,” Amy. “We were Bruce and Terry in Backstreets,” she says, describing the epic highs and lows of the pairs’ secret romance as they transition from “fast close friends” to jilted lovers. “The blurred boundaries of friendship and romance and then the ultimate heartbreak at the end spoke to my teen emo soul,” she says, explaining how when she told Amy that she wanted to be more than friends, she “felt like Bruce in backstreets [sic].” Although their intense friendship and short-lived romance gave Casio the first true heartbreak of her life, it cemented her connection to Springsteen forever. “Bruce wrote Backstreets just for me and my teenage relationship/not relationship. He saw my pain and made it into one of the best songs about fucked up friendship of all time” (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the edge of town* 20).

Casio is not the only one to insert herself into Springsteen’s narratives. According to Hubbs, many queer listeners deploy what she calls a “pliant reception frame,” allowing them to inhabit the narrator’s character regardless of whether their gender aligns with the gender of the song’s protagonist. “A female-bodied listener,” for example, may “self-identif[y] with Springsteen’s backstreet Romeo” regardless of the narrator’s maleness. “Masculinity” can be “a lure” to the listener and their identification style, removing masculinity as a barrier to queer readings of Springsteen songs.

Hubbs distinguishes this mode of listening from that of the 1970s and 1980s due to a new understanding of gender identity. Today, we understand gender as distinct from anatomy (which is itself mutable), treating gender as a site for “self-determination and self-declaration.” Whether it falls within the binary or without, modern conceptions of gender prioritize an individual’s
“identifications and desires” and demonstrate that “physicality” no longer evidences a person’s gender (Hubbs, *The Promised Land: Springsteen’s Epic Heterosexuality, Late Capitalism, and Prospects for Queer Life* 100). However, gender has not disappeared entirely. Instead, it has undergone a detachment from biology. This detachment allows queer readings of Springsteen’s narratives to thrive, even in the tracks with dominant masculine and feminine archetypes.

Terry in “Backstreets” epitomizes this new conception. Terry is a “floating signifier of gender,” inviting listeners to explore the possibility of a “deeper love” between men. Whether that love is homosocial, homoerotic, or a mere romanticized friendship, Springsteen’s Terry makes space for every listener to explore their own unique identity through “Backstreets.” By permitting listeners to project their own unique gender identity onto and into narrators (and the objects of their affection), modern understandings of gender allow Bruce Springsteen’s catalog to soar to new queer heights.

Springsteen’s use of queer imagery and queer loneliness continued to develop throughout the late 1970s and early 1980s, particularly on 1978’s *Darkness on the Edge of Town* and 1982’s *Nebraska*. While 1975’s “Born to Run” and “Thunder Road” are anthems of adventure and escape, celebrating those who can leave their old life behind and find a brighter future elsewhere, *Darkness on the Edge of Town* honors those who must remain in place. As previously discussed, the very title of *Darkness on the Edge of Town* speaks to the queer loneliness that attends life and love on the margins, depicting the “edge of town” as a liminal space where one can explore fantasies that never see the light of day.

Springsteen explores this liminality further on “Racing in the Street,” paying homage to the people without the means to escape their small town fatigue. The song’s narrator blows off steam
after a hard day on the job with his “sixty-nine Chevy,” taking his car "racin’ in the street” in order to feel free. “Now, some guys, they just give up living / And start dying little by little, piece by piece,” the narrator laments, commiserating with the people stuck in dead-end jobs with no outlet or escape. And while the narrator himself hasn’t escaped either, he has a means of expression. Rather than giving up or giving in, people like him “come home from work and wash up / Then go racin’ in the street.” And while “Born to Run”’s narrator and his partner-in-crime ride all the way to the promised land, the narrator in “Racing in the Street” comes home every night when “the house is dark” only to get up, go to work, and do it all again the next day. “Racing in the Street is about how you might work a shitty job and feel trapped by a lifestyle that you never ever dreamed for yourself,” Casio explains, “but as long as you have this one thing in your life that you care about…then you justify it all and make it count, even if you do have to drive back home at the end of each day” (Me and Bruce #4, 16).

Springsteen further explores the tension between enduring and escaping on Nebraska. "Bruce recognizes that people in similar situations make different choices, and respects them on their own terms,” Alana Kumbier explains, and “part of what I love about Nebraska is the way its people wrestle with sticking it out or running away” (Because the Boss Belongs to Us, 23). The album is chock full of people teetering on the precipice of a better life who struggle to make that final move, but we see this tension manifest most clearly in “Reason to Believe,” Nebraska’s final track. In the opening lines, Springsteen sings about how his narrator

Seen a man standing over a dead dog

By a highway in a ditch

He’s looking down kinda puzzled
Poking that dog with a stick
Got his car door flung open
He's standing out on Highway 31
Like if he stood there long enough
That dog'd get up and run

And though the narrator, the men, and the listener know that the dead dog will never get back up
again, they can’t help but think of what would happen if it did. Exploring the possibility of
escape (whether that escape is from death, a dead-end job, or a small-town life) can give you a
“reason to believe” that somewhere out there things are better. Like the narrator of “Racing in the
Street,” the characters that populate Nebraska look for the light at the end of “every hard-earned
day,” searching for the thing that will give meaning to their existence. Whether that “thing” is
dreams of escape or drag racing, their off-hour passions serve as a reminder that life is not
defined by labor and strife. And while the Springsteen characters “who make good on plans to
get out of town” may not be queer themselves, “they're making a distinctly queer move [by]
migrating elsewhere in search of a better life” and by dreaming of those possibilities (Because
the Boss Belongs to Us, 24).

As Springsteen transformed from a misfit Jersey boy into the muscled-yet-sensitive
troubadour his fans know and love, Springsteen’s representations of queerness continued to
transform, too. Despite the unsolicited support of conservative leaders like Ronald Reagan,
Springsteen developed a queer aesthetic well into the Born in the U.S.A. period. The tone of his
songs continued to shift from “celebration to nostalgia,” trading matter-of-fact sketches of the
here and now for melancholic odes to how it used to be. Springsteen retains the homoerotic
undertones most strongly in the songs “No Surrender” and “Bobby Jean,” both of which are dedicated to Stevie Van Zandt, his close friend and E Street bandmate. After nearly 10 years in the E Street Band, “Bruce said his farewell along with a final ‘I love you’,” using “deliberately” gender neutral names to demonstrate his fraternal desire for Van Zandt and make space for queer readings of both tracks (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4* 11).

Dedicated in the album’s credit lines to “mio fratello, Little Steven,” both “No Surrender” and “Bobby Jean” mythologize rock ’n’ roll brotherhood, paying homage to a friendship that stands the test of time. Written in a wistful past tense, “No Surrender” is about “two best friends taking on the world together as teenagers and eventually growing old and in love together” as bandmates and “soulmates” (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4* 11). The narrator laments how their young faces turned old and their “hearts of fire [have] grow[n] cold,” mourning the loss of youth and passion. “No Surrender” also marks the first appearance of the phrase “blood brothers,” a lyrical trope that Springsteen would continue to expand on in other songs celebrating the E Street Band. Swearing “blood brothers against the wind,” the duo at the heart of “No Surrender” shout their devotion from the rooftops, vowing to stick together against the forces of time and nature. “It’s not a love song for a girl [because] he calls the recipient of the song his ‘blood brother’,” Casio explains. “[It’s] a real life love song for his best bro,” Stevie Van Zandt (Casio, *Is there anybody alive out there?*) 7).

Springsteen has recorded two alternative final verses for “No Surrender,” both of which have homoerotic undercurrents. In the first, which appears on *Born in the U.S.A.*, Springsteen sings: “I want to sleep beneath / Peaceful skies in my lover's bed / With a wide open country in
my eyes / And these romantic dreams in my head,” leaving the identity of the “lover” open to interpretation. Is it the childhood friend he’s grown old with, or a different partner altogether?

The alternative last verse from the *Live 1975-85* album resolves this issue. In this version, Springsteen sings: “We could sleep in the twilight / By the riverside / With a wide open country in our hearts / And these romantic dreams in our heads,” indicating that the person whom he wants to sleep beside is indeed his friend from the past. Whether or not “sleep[ing]” is meant sexually or platonically, the desire to share the “romantic dreams in [their] heads” with one another elevates their relationship beyond the platonic.

In Casio’s eyes, if “No Surrender” is the “ultimate love song,” then “Bobby Jean” is the “ultimate breakup song” (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4* 11). Written as a sendoff for Van Zandt alongside “No Surrender,” “Bobby Jean” is more of a bittersweet farewell than a nostalgic celebration. In both tracks, however, Springsteen repeatedly uses the endearment “baby” to refer to Steven, suggesting a lingering affection that is larger than life and stronger than heartbreak. The protagonist and Bobby Jean are practiced in hiding “the[ir] pain from the world,” but the narrator laments that “ain't nobody, nowhere, nohow / Gonna ever understand me the way you did” now that his friend is no longer around. Springsteen closes the song with his one and only use of the phrase “I miss you,” tinging his fraternal yearning with romantic sentiment. “I'm just calling one last time, not to change your mind / But just to say ‘I miss you baby. Good luck. Goodbye, Bobby Jean,’” he sings, falling short of an explicit “I love you” while describing all of the feelings that attend it. “The lyrics are already queered for us,” Casio explains. “There’s little appropriation for us to do.” And by placing “No Surrender” and “Bobby Jean” back to back on *Born in the U.S.A.*’s tracklist, Springsteen forges a thematic link between the songs that
heightens the romance narrative. “It felt like those kids in No Surrender grew up together, blood brothers forever and eventually became the two characters in Bobby Jean that Bruce sings about,” Casio says. “We go from young kids busting out of class, just starting out and openly declaring their love for each other, to grown men sadly parting ways” (Casio, Is there anybody alive out there? 7). And while some may read this love as homosocial rather than homosexual, Springsteen’s pure expression of love for another man is still revolutionary for male-driven rock ’n’ roll music.

Even if Springsteen’s Bobby Jean is read as a woman, she transcends traditional representations of women in rock music. Bobby Jean is not just a “baby” or a “darling” - she is wild and headstrong, unafraid to like the same “music,” “bands,” and “clothes” as the narrator. By painting a portrait of a rebel girl in boys’ clothes, the narrator suggests that a female Bobby Jean can also subvert gender norms. Bobby Jean is not just a beauty or a lover, but the “narrator’s equal” and his “cultural soulmate” (Hastings, “The Boss and His Girls.” Jungleland 11). This punky female Bobby Jean acknowledges and revels in the narrator’s outsider status, hanging out with him “when all the others turned away turned up their nose.” This, perhaps, is the queer Bobby Jean Casio envisioned when she lamented the fact that she and her “girlfriend/not girlfriend…never made it as far as Bobby Jean.” They lasted only as long as the summer holidays, but Casio still views Bobby Jean as a “queer love story” that everyone can relate to (Casio, Is there anybody alive out there? 7).

“No Surrender” and “Bobby Jean” are two early examples of the “blood brothers” trope, a signifier of fraternal intimacy that Springsteen continues to evoke and mythologize. Introduced in “No Surrender,” the phrase epitomizes, in Springsteen’s own words, “the bonding power of
rock” and friendship as a force of nature (*Born to Run*, 270). By continually expressing this brotherly love both lyrically and in his onstage performances, Springsteen has created a fraternal mythos surrounding the E Street Band. The mythical status of this brotherhood allows Springsteen to explore homosociality and homoeroticism in a space that exists between fact and fantasy, transforming the real lives and relationships of the E Street Band into lyrical fodder.

“Their bonds of friendship, tales of love and solidarity have been repeated in songs through monologues, in interviews, and [are] now part of the official Springsteen canon” (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4* 11).

Though the band has had its ups and downs, suffering a split in 1989, their reunion in the late 1990s inspired the song “Blood Brothers,” an ode to the E Street Band and the unbreakable ties that bind them. The title and the lyrics of the song expand on the erotic intersection between brother and lover that Springsteen initially explored in “No Surrender,” epitomized by the last line in the final verse where Springsteen promises to “keep moving through the dark with you in my heart / My blood brother.” Springsteen himself attests to the ways in which the song’s murky undercurrents blur the line between friend and lover, explaining that

“The song is filled with the ambivalence and deep affection of revisiting a relationship spanning twenty-five plus years. You hope the rough spots are balanced out by your common history, the unique experience you shared, and the love you have for one another” (Springsteen, *Songs* 252).
The “ambivalence” Springsteen describes is integral to blood brotherhood and is the central theme of the song’s final verse. “Now I don't know how I feel, I don't know how I feel tonight,” Springsteen laments, questioning “why [he] made this call” or whether “any of this matters anymore after all.” This ever-increasing distance from their boyhood connection makes it harder to reconnect on down the line, but the narrator’s promise to “keep moving through the dark” with his blood brother “in my heart” suggests that reconnection is still possible.

Though the narrator and his friends stand “side by side” and shoulder to shoulder defending each other against outsiders, the “hardness of this world” has slowly ground their “dreams away / Makin' a fool's joke out of the promises” they make. Their dreams are not only undermined but ridiculed, suggesting a transgressive edge to their boyhood antics that the world needed to quell. But with the promise of their fraternal connection worn away by societal pressures, a world that was once black and white “turns to so many shades of gray.” Adulthood pressures, much like the taunts of their peers, further estrange the blood brothers from one another as their love fades away in the face of “work to do” and “bills to pay.” And despite the narrator’s confusion about “how [he] feel[s]” and “why [he] made this call” in the first place, affection wins out over ambivalence. This resolution is clear because “the stars” continue “burning bright like some mystery uncovered,” suggesting that blood brotherhood is more powerful than the wash of time.

Casio herself relates to this ambivalence, again connecting Springsteen’s lyrics to her own complicated relationship with her “straight/not really/but sometimes” best friend Amy. “Bruce understood what that felt like because the brotherhood of Bruce and the E Street Band is nothing but an intense series of fucked up friendships” (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4* 10). This blood
brotherhood has carried Springsteen and the E Street Band through tough times, encompassing both the eternal friendship and intimacy of intense relationships, but Casio and Amy’s connection never ascended to such heights of steadfast devotion.

“Blood brotherhood” is shorthand for this complex erotic liminality, branching the space between friend and lover with the promise of eternal solidarity. Sociologists Hammarén and Johansson explore this liminality, delineating the distinctions and overlaps between homosexuality and homosociality. While both homosexual and homosocial relationships stem from emotional closeness and intimacy, a homosexual relationship has a sexual dimension (or the desire for one) while a homosocial relationship is more akin to a “bromance.” Though the term bromance does not have the critical or theoretical weight that homosociality does, the concepts are quite similar. Like homosociality, a bromance “emphasizes love, exclusive friendship, and intimacy,” a definition which also applies to Springsteen and the E Street Band (“Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy” 6). However, Springsteen’s “blood brotherhood” combines not only the emotional and intimate dimensions of homosociality but also the physicality of homosexuality. The phrase itself implies not just a soul connection but a bodily one, mythologizing a band of men connected not just by music but by their very “blood,” the hot, pulsing force of life.

This connection between blood and eroticism is reified on Nebraska’s “Highway Patrolman” when Springsteen uses intense, physical language to describe the relationship between actual brothers. “Me and Frankie laughing and drinking / Nothing feels better than blood on blood,” the chorus begins, forging a connection between drunken revelry and pleasure. This erotic connection is substantiated in the next line when we see the brothers “Taking turns
dancing with Maria” in what gender scholar Sedgwick would classify as a “homosocial triangle” (Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire). Sedgwick theorized the “homosocial triangle” to explain how, in literature, men often sublimate their desire for each other by competing over a woman. This woman, like Maria, functions as a conduit through which the men express their latent sexual desires for one another. This context helps to situate Springsteen’s lyrics and “blood brotherhood” on the homoerotic continuum.

Springsteen continues to employ the word “brother” in other, less autobiographical contexts, namely in “This Hard Land.” In this song, Springsteen portrays male love as an escape from the tedium of modern day America. The narrator explores the desolate plains of “this hard land” with a man named Frank by his side, looking for lost livestock as their feet keep “twistin' and churnin' up the sand.” Together, they search the barren countryside for “lost treasure,” though the narrator never confirms whether the riches they seek are earthly or spiritual in nature. The two men may very well be looking for love or fulfillment rather than gold, and Springsteen’s narrator reaps this emotional reward in the last verse:

Hey Frank, won't ya pack your bags
And meet me tonight down at Liberty Hall
Just one kiss from you my brother and we'll ride until we fall
We’ll sleep in the fields, we'll sleep by the rivers
And in the morning we'll make a plan
Well, if you can't make it
Stay hard, stay hungry, stay alive
If you can
And meet me in a dream of this hard land

Planning to run away together, Frank and the narrator share a kiss before falling asleep side by side in the stark landscape that brought them together. If all else fails, the pair vow to meet in the “dream of this hard land,” allowing their love to inhabit a space halfway between sleep and reality. Springsteen cites “This Hard Land” as one of his favorite and most important songs, epitomizing the intense friendships that rest at the heart of his catalog. “Those friendships always go hand in hand with the music and all the strong feelings that the music brought, feelings which were even stronger if you shared them with somebody. It was an essential part of what rock 'n' roll was about and I really tried to write songs that captured that. 'This Hard Land' was one of those [songs]” (Flannigan and Phillips, Backstreets Magazine 7).

In Springsteen’s world, these “strong” feelings for a fellow man can blossom into more than just friendship, especially if rock ’n’ roll is involved. But these themes are not restricted to Springsteen’s earlier work - they crossover into his more recent albums as well. One notable example is “Devils’ Arcade” from Springsteen’s 2007 album Magic. The song explores PTSD, the relationship between soldiers, and what happens after the war, blurring the boundaries between comrade and lover in traditional Springsteen fashion. “Remember the morning we dug up your gun,” the song begins:

The worms in the barrel, the hanging sun
Those first nervous evenings of perfume and gin
The lost smell on your breath as I helped you get it in
The rush of your lips, the feel of your name
The beat in your heart, the devil’s arcade

Though Springsteen could be writing from the perspective of a woman, none of the lyrics suggest an embodied femininity.

Springsteen shifts his thematic focus again in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, moving away from nostalgic brotherhood and blue collar heroism towards marriage, monogamy, and the emotional challenges of serious commitment. Though Springsteen’s catalog from this period largely focuses on his relationships with women, he uses these opportunities to interrogate his own masculinity. In tracks like “Two Faces,” we see Springsteen’s narrators striving for a new masculinity forged and strengthened by personal connections. However, they struggle to unlearn the regressive, anti-emotional masculinity they aped in adolescence.

Naomi Gordon-Loebl, a Springsteen fan and journalist, found her own pain reflected in this struggle as a young genderqueer person. Though Springsteen’s masculinity seems effortless at first glance, it was “in its own way, troubled. He sang with real pain about his contradictions, and though I might have envied his problems, I also found comfort in them.” The tension between identity and gender roles manifests most clearly in “Walk Like a Man” as Springsteen’s narrator learns from and strives to imitate his father’s blue collar masculinity. “All I can think of is being 5 years old / Following behind you at the beach / Tracing your footprints in the sand / Trying to walk like a man.” Gordon-Loebl saw her own identity struggle in these lines, explaining how “the words seemed to perfectly encapsulate my experience of growing up in a body out of
alignment with my gender, trying to walk a path that was not made for my feet and being
constantly, painfully aware of the dissonance” (The queerness of Bruce Springsteen). This
expression of dissonance between sex and gender illustrates how Springsteen’s oeuvre dovetails
with Judith Butler’s theory of gender performance. Butler characterizes gender as both a
performance and as performative. Gender is a performance in the same way that theater is; there
is an awareness of playing a role and of trying to produce a particular effect. Gender is also
performative. If gender was a fact of our being, we wouldn’t have to teach it or police it. But
instead, gender is learned, positively and negatively enforced, and socialized into a very specific
framework (Butler, Performative Acts and Gender Constitution). It is this restrictive framework
that Springsteen is fighting against when he describes his narrator as “trying” and “learn[ing]” to
walk like a man. If gender were innate, Springsteen’s narrator would not need to “try” or “learn”
how to be a man, he would simply be one.

Springsteen’s maturing approach to monogamous relationships is not limited to
heterosexuality, however. During this period, he penned two songs about explicitly gay
relationships: the critically acclaimed “Streets of Philadelphia” and the b-side “My Lover Man.”

Written for the 1993 film Philadelphia, “Streets of Philadelphia” is narrated by a gay man
dying of AIDS. Dark, atmospheric instrumentation underwrites the narrator’s farewell to his
lover, giving form to the vulnerability and loneliness he feels as death looms over him. “Ain't no
angel gonna greet me / It’s just you and I, my friend…I can feel myself fading away / So receive
me brother with your faithless kiss,” Springsteen sings, intertwining brotherhood with intimacy
once more. Both the song and the film universalize the lived experience of a queer person,
crafting a narrative that compels and guides potentially homophobic listeners through the story.
The effect was overwhelmingly successful, and Springsteen won both an Oscar and a Grammy for the title track.

Springsteen’s other queer relationship song is the lesser-known “My Lover Man,” recorded in 1990 but released in 1998 on *Tracks*, a collection of b-sides and demos. The lyrics themselves are explicitly and undeniably queer. “You treated me hard and made my heart ache,” the narrator begins, masculinizing his lover with the phrase “I know you're only human, and men they make mistakes” while urging his lover to “come into my arms and fall.” The only “she” present in this song is the lover man’s ex wife who made his life “turn to black,” suggesting that the lover man is either bisexual or has only recently coming to terms with his queerness. Though their relationship prior to this point was tinged with heartache and “foolish[ness],” now that the lover man has embraced his queerness the narrator “can see the change in [his] eyes.” This change marks an acceptance of a queer future and the rejection of a closeted past for which “There's no need to apologize.” Springsteen’s last line confirms this interpretation:

Come close and we'll begin
To find our beautiful selves again, my lover man
My lover man

In this reclamation of their “beautiful selves,” Springsteen makes use of queer-insider language. For a queer listener, this return to selfhood speaks to a rejection of heteronormativity and an acceptance of one’s true identity. The narrator and his lover man are redeemed by this
mutual acceptance as they help one another to “find [their] beautiful selves” in an explicitly queer relationship.

Musicologist and scholar Nadine Hubbs explores such instances of queer-insider language in Morrissey’s work, unpacking how certain phrases and codes signal a deeper meaning to queer listeners. And though Morrissey’s lyrics and performance style are more transparently queer and cannot be directly correlated to Springsteen’s, the terminology Hubbs uses and the queer identification modes she explores are helpful in understanding the work of both artists. “[Queer-insider] sign[s] are abundantly meaningful to other insiders,” Hubbs writes. “For queer listeners, Morrissey's work is about queer erotics and experience,” and the “ambiguity” he employs “is not something that tends to jam or erase well-formed ‘gaydar’ readings…[but] to reinforce positive readings” (Hubbs, *Music of the "Fourth Gender": Morrissey and the Sexual Politics of Melodic Contour* 11).

Though the codes present in Springsteen’s, as well as Morrissey’s, music may be clearly decipherable to queer listeners, they frequently go unnoticed by non-insiders. This capacity for misinterpretation is most clear in Flannigan and Phillips’ reading of “My Lover Man.” As the editors of *Backstreets*, a fan-published Springsteen magazine, Flannigan and Phillips insert their own commentary and “history” alongside each song on *Tracks*. But in a grievous misreading of “My Lover Man,” the queerness of which is apparent in both the title and content, Flannigan and Phillips assert that

“Springsteen is writing in the first person from a woman’s point of view. While *Tracks* shows that he had done this before with “Car Wash,” that *Born in the U.S.A.* outtake was little more
than a character sketch. ‘My Lover Man’ is a full-blown relationship song, told from the other side” (Flannigan and Phillips, Backstreets 10).

However, in “Car Wash,” Springsteen’s only song sung explicitly from a woman’s perspective, the narrator asserts her identity over and over again. “Well my name is Catherine LeFevre,” Springsteen begins, affirming the narrator’s femininity immediately. He ends the song with yet another mention of her name, effectively framing the narrative with these confirmations. Springsteen, however, employs none of these framing techniques in “My Lover Man.” The only remotely “female” descriptor is, from a heteronormative standpoint, the narrator’s liaison with the lover man. So, while a return to “our beautiful selves” may scream queer love and acceptance to LGBT+ fans, this coded language may be misinterpreted by cisgender or heterosexual fans.
CHAPTER TWO: IMAGE ANALYSIS

By openly dissecting his own masculinity and calling attention to the artifice of stardom, Springsteen helps fans to understand the star as a sign, prompting them to view celebrity as an image constructed through a network of intertexts. Comprising everything from paratextual queer fanzines to live performances and music videos, these intertexts all interact and overlap to produce meaning. And while one dominant reading may emerge and circulate more widely than the others, each and every viewer can construct their own unique interpretation of a star. “We tend to gravitate towards one-dimensional iconography as far as what it means to be a…man,” Springsteen explains, “And part of my onstage creation was someone trying to sort that out.” By inviting ambiguity into the creation of his persona, Springsteen makes space for a variety of different readings of his image, even (and, perhaps, especially) queer ones. And by analyzing Springsteen’s performances of queerness and adoption of queer aesthetics, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of how Springsteen and his queer fans challenge the hypermasculine working-class hero narrative, making space for more queer readings of Springsteen and other iconic figures.

Bruce Springsteen’s white, working-class masculinity is central to his persona, transforming him into a pop culture icon that ordinary people can both relate to and aspire towards. However, this blue-collar authenticity is, ultimately, a construction. In an interview with NPR, Springsteen himself admits to the gulf separating everyday Bruce from “The Boss,” explaining that “I had plenty of days where I'd go, ‘Man, I wish I could be that guy.’ And there's a big difference between what you see on stage and then my general daily, my daily existence.”
By opening up about the disconnect between stardom and reality in his 2016 memoir (and in countless interviews), Springsteen deconstructs his own image and paves the way for a freer dialogue surrounding authenticity and artifice.

But who is “that guy,” the version of Springsteen that fans applaud for night after night and the one that everyday Bruce wishes he could be? While fans in Cavicchi’s 1998 ethnography of Springsteen fandom describe Springsteen as the “last great white, male hero,” Springsteen dissents (Tramps Like Us: Music & Meaning Among Springsteen Fans, 143). In the opening line of his 2016 memoir Born to Run, Springsteen admits to and embraces his own artifice. “I come from a boardwalk town where almost everything is tinged with a bit of fraud. So am I.” Though “no race-car-driving rebel,” he began to mythologize his small-town existence in order to cope, to “lie” and myth-make “in service of the truth” (Born to Run, xv).

The mythical Springsteen (the all-American working-class hero) was based in part on Springsteen’s father and his performance of white, blue-collar masculinity. Douglas Springsteen was, at his core, a factory man. “Built like a bull” and “always in work clothes,” Douglas often turned his formidable strength and the force of his rage on a young Bruce Springsteen who didn’t conform to his father’s idea of what a man should be. “When my dad looked at me, he didn’t see what he needed to see.” Though Springsteen attests to the gentleness and kindness underlying his father’s tough exterior, Douglas worked hard to bury these feelings under layers of muscle, liquor, and factory grease, punishing his son for expressing the emotions that his insecurity wouldn’t let him address. “[The] gentleness, timidity, shyness and…dreamy insecurity” that lurked beneath Douglas’s rage were all qualities that a young Bruce “wore on the outside,” and this physical manifestation of his father’s latent “soft[ness]” made Springsteen the target of his
anger and antagonism (28-29). This softness manifested in Springsteen’s attitude towards his mother and little sister. Doting on his mom during her pregnancy and helping to care for baby Pam once she was born, a teenaged Springsteen “changed [his sister’s] diapers, rocked her to sleep, ran to her side if she cried, held her in my arms, and forged a bond that exists to this day” (30). Springsteen’s overt expressions of tenderness put pressure on our limited understanding of what teenage boys - especially young rock ’n roll misfits - can and should be allowed to be. While we often think of male rock stars as rebels and bad boys even in adolescence, a disaffected young Springsteen who fusses over his baby sister subverts this supposition.

Springsteen revealed the driving force behind his image when asked whether his stage persona draws more on his anger or his timidity. “I think I created my particular stage persona out of my dad's life and perhaps I even built it to suit him to some degree,” Springsteen admits (Gross, “Bruce Springsteen: On Jersey, Masculinity And Wishing To Be His Stage Persona”). As a young man on the cusp of adulthood who was still finding his voice and his look, Springsteen was drawn to his father’s blue-collar masculinity. “So I, who’d never done a week’s worth of manual labor in my life (hail, hail rock ’n’ roll!),” Springsteen jokes in Born to Run, “put on a factory worker’s clothes, my father’s clothes, and went to work” (414). This mimicry resulted from both a desire “to emulate him so I felt closer [to him]” and a drive “to be the reasonable voice of revenge for what I had seen his life come to” (Gross).

Though Springsteen’s image is, by his own admission, not entirely organic, it is true to life. And by admitting to the artifice of his persona, Springsteen sheds a light on superstardom and the inner workings of celebrity. “Most people's stage personas are created out of the flotsam and jetsam of their internal geography,” he explains. “They’re trying to create something that solves a
series of very complex problems inside of them or in their history,” and in Springsteen’s case, the central difficulty he had to integrate was his relationship with his father. Thus, by donning his father’s rough-hewn masculinity as both a coping mechanism and bid for righteous revenge, Bruce Springsteen connects his persona (and, consequently, his working-class virility) to his boyhood confrontations with idealized masculinity.

Another way in which Springsteen reckons with his boyhood and processes his relationship with his father is through therapy, a form of mental health treatment that Springsteen is very open about in *Born to Run*. “I walk in; look into the eyes of a kindly, white-haired, mustached complete stranger; sit down; and burst into tears,” Springsteen says of his first therapy visit, allowing both his therapist and his fans to witness this moment of vulnerability (*Born to Run*, 309). Springsteen’s mental health journey dovetailed with his father’s schizophrenia diagnosis, helping to contextualize the trauma he endured as a boy. Though it did not erase any of the heartache and strife, understanding more about where his father’s intense, seemingly irrational bouts of anger stemmed from benefitted their relationship during his father’s later years.

“Modern pharmacological medicine gave my father ten extra years of life and a peace he might never have had [otherwise],” Springsteen says, explaining how proper treatment transformed his father from the “lonely brooding man” he knew as a child to a fun-loving grandfather who was “easier to reach, to know and [to] love” (408).

However, Springsteen also acknowledges how his father’s toxic masculinity soured his own attitude towards women and family. In an interview with *Esquire*, Springsteen laments how his father’s regressive views tainted his own understanding of marriage and fatherhood, creating an internalized pattern of “destructive behavior” that Springsteen worked to resist. This imbued
Springsteen’s notion of home “with distrust and a bucketload of grief” that his wife, Patti, later helped him unpack (Hainey, “Beneath the Surface of Bruce Springsteen”). Consequently, Springsteen has been able to be a better father to his own children, giving them the love and validation that his father was too afraid to show him. By opening up about his depression and how it has impacted his relationship with his family, Springsteen helps to reduce the stigma around male mental illness, framing therapy as a tool for healthy self-discovery. Additionally, Springsteen’s mental health journey has helped him better understand his own identity, adding nuance to his conceptions of masculinity as he deconstructs his own shiny superstardom.

Springsteen also critiques his own persona in more lighthearted ways throughout Born to Run, taking the drugs out of “sex, drugs and rock ’n roll” by admitting that he’s never touched the stuff. Describing himself as a “straight-edge Jersey boy,” Springsteen explains that “Everybody wanted to give you drugs all the time,” but he “was a stubborn young man and set in my fearful ways” (130). And due to his father’s troubled relationship with alcohol, Springsteen did not take his first drink until well into his 20s. Luckily he discovers then that he is a "generally a merry drinker simply prone to foolish behavior and occasional sexual misadventure,” but he still maintains a careful relationship with liquor. “Sobriety became a religion of sorts to me…Maybe I’d worked too hard for stability and needed it more than free license,” Springsteen reflects, reflecting on both the missed opportunities and the “dumb and destructive shit” he endured at the hands of his wasted friends (283). And although there is a good bit of sex in Born to Run, Springsteen leaves his partners unnamed (aside from his first kiss and two wives), discussing his exploits with a shyness and reluctance that goes against his red-blooded American image. “Who cares what’s going on at the Playboy Mansion?!?” he remembers
as a young child, he took shelter in cars during thunder storms to cope with his fear of
lightning. “At the first sound of thunder, I caterwauled until my parents would take me in the car
until the storm subsided” Springsteen says, explaining that “I then proceeded to write about cars
for the rest of my life” (25-26). By depicting cars as an adolescent safe haven rather than a place
to score or a ticket to freedom, Springsteen’s tender, emotive backstory draws openly and
unselfconsciously on his boyhood fears. This speaks to the contradictory irony of his image,
revealing the man behind the myth as a sensitive romantic rather than a hard-living rock ’n roller.
And by exposing his recurrent car imagery as a manufactured fantasy, Springsteen speaks to the constructed nature of identity and persona, opening up his discography and performance style as texts to be read into and analyzed.

Springsteen opens himself and his work up to this ambiguity through his lyrics (as investigated in the first chapter), onstage performances, music videos, and physicality in what Smith terms “performance as commentary.” However, by performing queerness and adopting queer aesthetics onstage, Springsteen helps to resolve some of the ambiguity in tracks like “Backstreets” and makes space for new queer readings of tracks like “Born to Run” or “Thunder Road.” Consequently, Springsteen’s arguably homoerotic performances often demystify and make manifest the queerness lurking beneath the surface of his songs, bringing the subtext to the surface.

**Queer Aesthetics On Stage**

The primary way in which Springsteen performs queerness is through his onstage interactions with bandmates Clarence Clemons and Stevie Van Zandt. These interactions, whether staged or spontaneous, blur the line between homosociality and homoeroticism, epitomizing the erotic liminality of the E Street Band’s “blood brotherhood.”

Nicknamed “Big Man,” the late Clarence Clemons was the E Street Band’s saxophonist and Springsteen’s best friend. Towering over Springsteen and the other members of the band at 6’4”, Clemons is the only band member “who ever gets to be a bit more ‘boss’ than the Boss” (Fanshel, *Beyond blood brothers: Queer Bruce Springsteen* 372). In live performances, Springsteen exalts Clemons with larger-than-life titles like “Master of the Universe” and “King of the World” while simultaneously humbling himself, frequently leaning on, jumping around,
and falling to his knees before Clemons. They exchange adoring, moon-eyed gazes and are openly affectionate with one another. And while these public displays of intimacy began as gentle cheek kisses and delicate pecks during the late 1970s, their affections evolved into full fledged lip-locks by the *Born in the U.S.A.* tour of the mid-1980s.

By choreographing their stage kisses to escapist fantasy tracks like “Thunder Road,” “Born to Run,” and “Rosalita,” Springsteen and Clemons emphasize and visualize the queer narratives lurking in the subtexts, further queering Springsteen’s lyrics through performance. This subversion is especially apparent in Springsteen and Clemons’ “soul kiss.” At the end of every performance of “Thunder Road,” Springsteen falls to his knees and slides across the stage to kiss Clemons directly on the lips. Assuming what Martha Nell Smith refers to as “a feminine position,” Springsteen supplicates himself beneath Clemons, allowing his body to be gently cradled in the Big Man’s arms. This assumption of the “feminine” and display of homoeroticism puts pressure on the audience’s understanding of Springsteen as a hypermasculine icon, an act that seemed especially transgressive during the *Born in the U.S.A.* period (Smith, *Sexual Mobilities in Bruce Springsteen: Performance as Commentary* 841-2). So though Springsteen sings about breaking out of his small town alongside an obviously female Mary, the staging of “Thunder Road” makes manifest the subtextual queer escapism, working to disturb the deceptively heterosexual narrative.

Springsteen assumes a similar submissive position in live performances of “Born to Run” and “Rosalita,” both of which project a fantasy of mutual escapism similar to “Thunder Road.” In this sense, by sliding across the stage to meet Clemons’ pursed lips, Springsteen functions as the “climactic corporeal embodiment” of his lyrics (Fanshel, *Beyond blood brothers* 372). And
by subverting the gender of his beloveds, could Springsteen be suggesting that he wants to wrap his legs around Clemons’ “velvet” rims rather than Mary’s or Rosalita’s?

Springsteen and Clemons also enact their homoerotic desires during live performances of “Fire,” a song about sexual frustration during which the pair compete over an imaginary third person before ultimately embracing. Typically, Springsteen sings the first two verses solo before Clemons approaches for the last line of the bridge, crooning “But your heart stays cool” alongside Springsteen. During the next few verses, Springsteen and Clemons stage a face-off in which they compete over the same imaginary woman. Fake punches are often thrown to defend the honor of this invisible third in what gender scholar Sedgwick would classify as a “homosocial triangle.”

Sedgwick theorized the “homosocial triangle” to explain how, in literature, men often sublimate their desire for each other by competing over the same woman (Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire). But by “Fire”’s last verse, the mood has shifted and the woman has been forgotten as the pair begin to gently embrace one another in a true sublimation (and suggested consummation) of their latent desires for one another. And when Springsteen and Clarence look deeply into each other’s eyes, singing “Cause, when we kiss, ooh, fire,” queer fans cannot help but read this display as homoeroticism.

But how do the women in Springsteen’s lyrics fit into the tableau? Where do the Marys, Wendys, and unnamed beauties go when Springsteen overwrites their narratives with a performed queer desire? Fanshel argues, à la Sedgwick, that they become “abstract lyrical object[s]” that allow Springsteen to “get close to his male band mates.” This “double gendering” functions much like the parallel narratives of the “romantic young boys” and “Puerto Rican
Jane” in “Incident on 57th Street,” allowing Spanish Johnny to walk away with “both the girl and the boy(s)” by the end of the song (Fanshel, Beyond blood brothers 374).

And while these performances are, admittedly, staged (and therefore not entirely reflective of their offstage friendship), Springsteen and Clemons are often quoted speaking about one another in romantic and mythic terms that dovetail with their onstage intimacies. In his memoir, Clemons describes the night he met Springsteen and the eternal camaraderie to come:

At some point I turn and look over at him and he does the same thing at the same second, and there was this connection, and we both felt it and we both knew it was powerful and that our lives would be intertwined forever. I know it sounds like bullshit and it sounds faggy and all that shit, but it's as true as anything that I know in life (Clemons and Reo, Big Man: Real Life and Tall Tales 256).

This “connection,” the same one that Springsteen and Clemons payed homage to night after night with their soul kisses, “intertwined” them forever. And though Clemons admits that other people might call them “faggy,” he knows that their bond is real and true. “He looked at me, and I looked at him, and we fell in love,” Clemons says in another interview, describing their friendship in terms usually reserved for romantic attachments (Sisario, “Clarence Clemons, Springsteen’s Soulful Sideman, Dies at 69”). In this sense, Clemons acknowledges that their relationship transcends traditional male friendship, mythologizing their connection with explicit declarations of love and “forever” commitment. Springsteen speaks of Clemons in similar terms, acknowledging the deep love that bloomed between them.

Something happened when we stood side by side. Some ... energy, some unspoken story.

For fifteen years Clarence has been a source of myth and light and enormous strength for
me on stage. He has filled my heart...so many nights…and I love it when he wraps me in those arms at the end of the night… he always lifted me up. Way, way, way up. Together we told a story of the possibilities of friendship, a story older than the ones that I was writing and a story I could never have told without him at my side. I want to thank you, Big Man, and I love you so much. (Springsteen, Rock & Roll Hall of Fame).

Though perhaps more homosocial than homoerotic, these admissions of love illustrate another way in which Springsteen rejects toxic masculinity. By speaking honestly and openly about his affection for another man, Springsteen speaks to the transformative power of friendship, extending his and Clemons’ playful performative chemistry from the stage into real life. And by mythologizing their relationship with the grand, sweeping, metaphorical language we often reserve for romance, Springsteen puts pressure on our understanding of what male relationships can and should be.

Casio succinctly encapsulates a queer fan’s interpretation of Springsteen and Clemons’ relationship in her zine entry “Bruce and Clarence: a history of making out.” “This is Clarence - The Big Man - Clemons,” Casio writes, “[and] he was the heart and soul of the E Street [Band].” Casio goes on to describe Springsteen and Clemons' friendship as a “Big Deal” not only because they were bandmates and blood brothers, but because they “often hugged, embraced, and showered affection on each other on stage. And they also made out a lot” (Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the edge of town 23). This fan history is framed by magazine clippings and performance photos of Springsteen and Clemons embracing and kissing one another in a clearly intimate way.
Figure 4. Casio, Holly. *Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the edge of town*. 2018.
The next page (figure 4) is taken up entirely by a collage of such clippings united by a song lyric in the center reading “Just one kiss from you my brother”. Lifted from “This Hard Land” (as analyzed in the previous chapter), this lyric takes on an even more queer tone when paired with images of Springsteen and Clemons embracing. This artful rendering of both Springsteen’s lyrics and performance style helps to visually summarize why queer fans are so drawn to Springsteen as Casio transforms the subtext of Springsteen’s songs and shows into actual text.

But while Springsteen and Clemons’ relationship is empowering and boundary-pushing for its overt homoeroticism, there is another factor that must be addressed: race. As a white man and a black man standing and performing side by side, their relationship takes on political overtones. And during the 1980s, a time when MTV refused to broadcast black music videos due to a tunnel-vision commitment to “rock” music, Springsteen and Clemons’ friendship and blatant displays of affection were even more controversial and groundbreaking (Nittle, “How MTV Handled Accusations of Racism and Became More Inclusive”). But while their relationship did push boundaries, we must also examine the racial disparity between Springsteen and Clemons, interrogating the fetishization of Clemons’ blackness and Springsteen’s role in this spectacle.

As a performer, Springsteen draws largely on the African American soul tradition, utilizing tactics like call-and-response to involve his audience in his life-affirming and liberating musical ritual. Springsteen often makes Clemons the center of these rituals, zealously aggrandizing the saxophonist and encouraging the crowd to join in. And while Springsteen’s foregrounding of Clemons and his immense talent may not be inherently racially charged, the fact that he almost exclusively singles out Clemons during these rituals (rather than Stevie Van Zandt, for example) blurs the boundary between celebration and fetishization. Additionally, in translating the
stagecraft of this soul tradition into his own performance style, Springsteen obscures its African American roots, neglecting to credit forebears like James Brown (Dinerstein, “The Soul Roots of Bruce Springsteen’s American Dream”). So while Springsteen may not be consciously taking undue credit, these omissions (and his singular glorification of Clemons) are a testament to Springsteen’s white privilege.

However, in recent years, Springsteen has discussed his impressions of race and gender more openly, working to acknowledge and address his own privilege both through his podcast with former president Barack Obama and through his autobiography. In Springsteen and Obama’s podcast Renegades: Born in the USA, the former president prompts Springsteen to address the “complications” of an experienced black musician having to hitch his wagon to an up-and-coming white kid in order to achieve fame. “I don’t know if you guys ever talked about it,” Obama says, addressing Springsteen’s silence. Springsteen, in turn, begins to unpack the issue. “[Clemons] had to give a little more than I had to give in the sense that once our keyboardist and drummer left... he was the only Black man in the room a lot of the time,” Springsteen admits. “He had to swim in white culture for most of his work life.” Springsteen elaborated on this topic more thoroughly in his autobiography, explicitly discussing his relationship with Clemons in light of their racial disparity. “For a long time he was alone, and no matter how close we were, I was white. We had as deep a relationship as I can imagine, but we lived in the real world, where we’d experienced that nothing, not all the love in God’s heaven, obliterates race.”

By acknowledging his whiteness and its attendant privilege, Springsteen recognizes the ways in which this whiteness estranged him from Clemons. “It was a part of the given of our
relationship,” Springsteen continues, “[but] I believe it was also a part of its primal compellness for the both of us. We were incongruent, missing pieces to an old and unresolved puzzle, two longing halves of an eccentric and potent whole” (*Born to Run* 244). Clemons echoes this sentiment in his own autobiography, explaining how “From the outside I looked like a big black guy who was probably an athlete and probably dumb. That’s the way most white people saw me. Most black people, too. But there was a world of colors and ideas and music inside my head that seemed limitless,” and Springsteen acknowledged and honored those ideas (Clemons and Reo, *Big Man: Real Life and Tall Tales* 14).

So while Springsteen and Clemons’ relationship cannot be divorced from their racial disparity and the fetishization that sometimes attended it, seeing a black man standing next to a white man as friends and equals was empowering to many. “Being told that black people and white people were equal was one thing. Being shown it was something else,” writer Ben Mankiewicz explains (“Why Clarence Clemons Matters to Race Relations”). And one of the primary ways in which they showed their relationship and spotlighted a healthy intimacy between men was through their stage kisses. "I like the idea of [fans] seeing their Straight White Red Blooded All American Hero kissing another man,” Rebecca McCormick writes in her zine. “A straight white man kissing a black man in front of so many people is highly unusual and promotes the idea of closeness between men even if they’re both straight” (*You Ain’t A Beauty But Hey You’re Alright*, 13). It is this revolutionary closeness that helped Springsteen and Clemons’ relationship stand the test of time, just as their overt displays of male intimacy helped to generate a dialogue not only about race, but also about queerness.
Just as Springsteen normalizes queerness in his lyrics by incorporating queer characters into his narrative milieu, Springsteen also seamlessly incorporates LGBTQ+ people into his music videos in addition to performing queerness himself. In the video for “Tougher than the Rest,” Springsteen presents homosexual couples alongside heterosexual ones, incorporating both parties into his musical meditations on love and commitment. These representations stand “in contrast to Bowie- or Jaggeresque flamboyance,” allowing queer couples to stand alone as mere lovers rather than a contrived statement or a spectacle. In this sense, Springsteen pushes back against the “narrow-minded” people who try to “police desire” by flagging “homoerotic affections” as aberrant or sinful, instead working to incorporate all sexualities into his musical and visual landscapes (Smith, *Sexual Mobilities in Bruce Springsteen: Performance as Commentary* 846). “One of the problems in the United States is that ‘united in our prejudice we stand,’ you know? What unites people, very often, is their fear” Springsteen said in an interview, characterizing the prejudice and homophobia that he tries to push back against (Loder, *The Rolling Stone Interview: Bruce Springsteen on “Born in the U.S.A.”*). Perhaps this is why Springsteen consistently writes about queerness and adopts a queer aesthetic onstage: he is striving to disrupt old-fashioned views of sexuality and make space for positive representations of queerness.

Springsteen also performs queerness with guitarist Stevie Van Zandt, though in these interactions Springsteen maintains his hyper-masculine stage presence while Van Zandt plays the glorifying fanatical role. Playing the role of the “sidekick,” Van Zandt acts out his emotions in flamboyant physical displays, often throwing his arms around Springsteen and staring into his soul with a gaze that is both idolizing and challenging. Casio collages
photographic evidence of this closeness in figure 5, but we can see these expressions most clearly in 1985’s “Glory Days” music video as Van Zandt and Springsteen share the same microphone. Van Zandt positions himself partially behind Springsteen, and when Springsteen leans back into his outstretched arm, Van Zandt’s eyes roll back into his skull in an expression of “pure ecstasy” (Fanshel, *Beyond blood brothers: Queer Bruce Springsteen* 373-374).

While Springsteen assumes a “feminine” position in his onstage interactions with Clemons, Van Zandt takes on the “feminine” role in his interactions with Springsteen. Before he left the band in 1984 (inspiring the queer-coded tracks “No Surrender” and “Bobby Jean”), Van Zandt sang all of the high notes alongside Springsteen. But after his departure, Springsteen replaced him with both Nils Lofgren on the guitar and Patti Scialfa, Springsteen’s future wife, on the high vocal parts. Van Zandt has since rejoined the band, reassuming his spot beside Springsteen and their shared microphone. As they harmonize, they lean into one another, gazing intimately into each others’ eyes with lips mere inches away from grazing.

While Springsteen and Clemons stage their intimacy to emphasize queer readings of escapist fantasies, Springsteen and Van Zandt perform queerness in conjunction with tracks from *The River* (1980), highlighting the emotional depth that attends romantic relationships. Van Zandt sings backup on tracks like “Two Hearts” and “The Ties that Bind,” both of which speak to the transformative power of love. Van Zandt’s voice is vulnerable and emotive, contrasting with the heft and power of Springsteen’s ragged baritone. Their voices interweave as Van Zandt’s tenor seems to “plead for the connection that the lyrics bespeak,” emphasizing the emotional undercurrents of the track through his emotive delivery. This effect is heightened by their staged eroticisms as Van Zandt and Springsteen continue to lean into one another, almost “sing[ing] into
each other’s mouths” in their passion (Fanshel, *Beyond blood brothers: Queer Bruce Springsteen* 374).

Figure 5. Casio, Holly. *Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the edge of town*. 2018.
Queer Aesthetics in Springsteen’s Image

Springsteen’s album covers are also open to queer interpretation, serving as visual renderings of his lyrics’ latent subtext. The cover of *The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle*, for instance, finds a scruffy Bruce looking purposefully off into the distance with his hand resting against his parted lips. The back cover places Springsteen amongst the rest of the E Street Band in a portrait of unkempt young manhood. “As if winking to gay fans,” they gaze out chummily with “open shirts” and “bulging packages.” We can even see Clemons’ hand resting ever so slightly on Springsteen’s backside, making manifest the queer subtext of gang-of-brothers tracks like “Incident on 57th Street” (Fanshel, *Beyond blood brothers* 376).

The *Born to Run* full album cover (figure 6) shows Springsteen leaning provocatively on Clarence Clemons’ shoulder. Springsteen crinkles his eyes as he gazes lovingly at Clemons, draping his arm across Clemons’ body and raising his hand to his mouth as if trying to bridle his adoration. This cover draws on the lyrical iconography of “Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out,” mythologizing Springsteen and Clemons’ relationship in both written and visual forms. Side-by-side, they stare the world down (Dinerstein, “The Soul Roots of Bruce Springsteen’s American Dream”). When describing *Born to Run*, Springsteen asserts that Clemons’ presence is what makes the album and the cover significant.

I'm not on the cover by myself. I'm on the cover with Clarence. That was enormously significant I think as a message to send to our fans...that it was a record about friendship. 'Backstreets', that's what the entire song is about. That is the whole deal (Zimny, *Wings for Wheels: The Making of Born to Run*).
Figure 6. Meola, Eric. *Born to Run Album Cover*. 1975.
By explicitly linking the visual intimacy and borderline romance of the *Born to Run* album cover with “Backstreets” and its queer subtext, Springsteen further connects his relationship with Clemons to his lyrical representations of queerness. This may shine some light on Terry’s source material and gender identity, putting Springsteen’s visual performances of queerness in conversation with the subtext of his lyrics.

Springsteen also performs a softer, more effeminate version of masculinity on the *Darkness on the Edge of Town* cover. Posing against a delicate floral wallpaper, Springsteen strikes a “feminine earnest face in front of the blinds” (Smith, *Sexual Mobilities in Bruce Springsteen: Performance as Commentary* 835). With slightly parted lips and doe-like eyes, late 1970s Springsteen projects an aura of softness and grace that would later be overwritten by the athletic power of the *Born in the U.S.A.* era. But on the back cover of *Darkness*, Springsteen bares his still-lanky arms and pronounced collar bones in a plain white t-shirt. This sense of stripped-downedness makes the cover seem both natural and intimate, as if the viewer is observing Springsteen in a private (though still posed) moment. With his ego is laid bare, we feel as if we have peeled back the bravado and immediacy to expose a more meditative, softer Springsteen.

Springsteen begins to develop a more robust, traditionally masculine persona on the cover of *The River*. Though he still smolders intensely, his closed lips and heavy eyes give him a more morose, world-wearyed appearance that reflects the tragedy of the title track. The collar of his flannel flaring out from his neck gives him a working-class edge, hinting at the early stages of a blue collar masculinity that he would flesh out in the mid-80s. The inside record sleeves find Springsteen perched in the middle of his boys, further developing the E Street Band’s “blood brotherhood” in a more immediate and visual medium. They stand shoulder to shoulder against
the wash of time, harkening back to the chummy, scruffy intimacy of The Wild, the Innocent, and the E Street Shuffle.

Springsteen fine-tunes his hypermasculinity on 1984’s Born in the U.S.A., showing off his muscled backside on the album’s front cover. Silhouetted against the stripes of the flag (sans stars), the indigo of Springsteen’s blue jeans makes his all-American ass part of the red-white-and-blue. With a baseball cap tucked purposefully into his back right pocket and thickly-muscled arms framing his backside, Springsteen projects a carefully sculpted masculinity that is so overt it borders on butchness.

During this period, Springsteen reached the pinnacle of his mainstream fame, drawing misdirected acclaim from conservative pundits like Ronald Reagan and columnist George Will who interpreted his physique and anthemic choruses as hallmarks of an all-American, hypermasculine wholesomeness. “There is not a smidgen of androgyny in Springsteen,” Will writes in his Washington Post column, apparently having missed the last decade of Springsteen’s career. Will overwrites the doe-eyed feminine earnestness of Darkness on the Edge of Town and the onstage homoeroticism with a reductive, narrow-minded exaltation of Springsteen’s newly-buffed body and can-do attitude. “He is no whiner, and the recitation of closed factories and other problems always seems punctuated by a grand, cheerful affirmation: ‘Born in the U.S.A.!’” Will writes, grossly misreading the album’s title track (Will, “Bruce Springsteen’s U.S.A”). And while these misreadings of both Springsteen’s image and lyrics from the very pundits he is raging against are almost laughably ironic, it represents a larger issue and a hegemonic silencing of queer voices.
However, queer fans are hellbent on reclaiming the Boss, using zines and other mediums to offer counter-hegemonic readings of Springsteen’s persona and physicality. In their zine “BUTT SPRINGSTEEN: A Celebration of Bruce Springsteen and His Beautiful Butt,” Cj Reay offers a queer reading of the *Born in the U.S.A.* cover with a backstory to boot.

In the basement of my old house, we had the washing machine, an old pool table, and a giant poster flag of ‘Born in the USA,’ the Springsteen album cover with Bruce’s butt on it…I would see that image every I went down there, and even at that young age I always thought ‘I like that butt.’…I guess it was a good indicator that I wouldn’t grow up quite so straight…[but] It wasn’t just Bruce’s butt which I was a fan of though, I was also a huge fan of the music too. Born in the USA was my favorite song ever, and I even took to wearing a bandana just like Bruce…the lyrics of The River, Born to Run, Darkness of the Edge of Town [and] right up to his albums from the 90s were all cemented into my brain (Reay, 1).

In this testimony, Reay speaks to their distinctly queer enjoyment of Springsteen, drawing on the subtext of both his image and his lyrics to paint a more holistic portrait of the Boss and, in Reay’s words, “his magnificent butt.” This makes explicit Fanshel’s reading that, though “touted as heterosexual,” Springsteen’s image can just as easily be interpreted “from concurrent gay subcultural code.” She connects everything from his “work boots” to his “tight, bicep-emphasising sleeveless t-shirts” to the “idealised butch masculinity” of queer subcultures, linking Springsteen’s performance of working-class, flannel-clad masculinity to the “Castro Clone” look of the post-Stonewall 1970s as depicted in figure 7 (Fanshel, *Beyond blood brothers* 376). The look, which centered around “denim, plaid shirts, bomber jackets, and t-shirts, with a body-
conscious bent,” was hypermasculine but also hyper-stylized. *GQ* writer Nathan Tavares describes the style as “Like the Marlboro Man...if he happened to be into other Marlboro Men.” And at its core, the “Clone” style is all about “taking traditional masculinity and queering the hell out of it” (Tavares, “How the ’70s ‘Clone’ Look Paved the Way for the Queer Clothing of Today”).
We can see remnants of the Castro Clone subculture in Springsteen’s style, particularly in his butt-hugging Levis, worn-in flannels, and cutoff white t-shirts. And, somewhat ironically, Springsteen’s most queer-coded look appears in all of its skintight glory on the cover of *Born in the U.S.A.*, arguably his most misunderstood and misinterpreted work. With a slightly popped hip and an artfully tucked white tank top, Springsteen performs a stylized version of working-class masculinity that can easily be read as subversive but is often branded as regressively hyper-masculine. But as expressed by Reay in “BUTT SPRINGSTEEN,” Springsteen’s denim-clad behind was not only visually striking but also political. “Born in the USA [sic]…was the politics of the workers exploding with pop culture and it was pretty darn SEXY,” Reay writes, harkening back to the libidinal yet countercultural motivations of the Castro Clones and situating Springsteen within an explicitly queer tradition (9).

However, Springsteen’s carefully fitted blue jeans and wife-beater tank are not the only elements of the *Born in the U.S.A.* album cover that fans read as subversive. Casio and other queer devotees analyze the red baseball cap in Springsteen’s back-right pocket through “hanky code,” further situating Springsteen and his visual art within a queer tradition. The hanky code is a longstanding convention in the LGBTQ+ community that allows members to safely (and non-verbally) communicate their sexual orientation and sexual preferences by placing a color-coded hanky in their back pocket. As depicted in figure 8, placement matters as much as color, with left-pocketed hankies indicating the wearer’s top or dominant role and right-pocketed hankies indicating their bottom or submissive role (“Hanky Code Introduction”).
When Springsteen’s red baseball cap is interpreted via the hanky code, the subliminal messaging indicates that he is a “fisting bottom.” “Who amongst us hasn’t imagined it’s a red hanky rather than a red baseball hat peeking out of Bruce’s jeans,” Casio asks, explaining how she reads queerness into Springsteen’s red-blooded American image. Through the *Born in the U.S.A.* album cover, we see Springsteen as both an “All American Man” in “cut off denim” and a “queer in tight jeans,” donning (and subverting) the “costumes” of blue-collar manhood so he can better articulate his “pain and the struggles of masculinity.” Casio and other LGBTQ+ fans like her are “hungry” for this “version of Bruce,” the “dyke hero” that they have constructed out of subtext (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town*, 10). And when Springsteen
wears clothes like these and kisses his bandmates in showy displays of male intimacy, it's easy to see why queer fans find so much to love in this rock-n’-roller.

So, in a sense, George Will was right when he remarked that “there is not a smidgen of androgyny in Springsteen.” Because while he is indeed “rocketing around the stage in a T-shirt and headband,” those garments are styled and worn in a subtly queer manner, and that is the essence of the Castro Clone style (Will, “Bruce Springsteen’s U.S.A”). “A straight man wouldn’t style his jeans in that way. [He] wouldn’t wear that fit of a plaid shirt, wouldn’t wear that fit of a denim jacket. So it was drawing from the [workman’s] aesthetic but queering it through the fit, cut, and silhouette,” fashion scholar Ben Barry says. And while he is referring explicitly to the Clone style, the sentiment can be easily applied to Springsteen’s aesthetic, too (Tavares, “How the ’70s ‘Clone’ Look Paved the Way for the Queer Clothing of Today”).

The self-conscious buffing of both the Castro Clone style and Springsteen’s *Born in the U.S.A.* era further links Springsteen to subcultural queer aesthetics. While Springsteen is a naturally tall and rather lanky man, in the 1980s he began to bulk up, putting on the muscle that became synonymous with his all-American masculinity. Springsteen’s hyper-muscled arms, defined pectorals, and broad shoulders garnered comparisons to 1980s action stars like Sylvester Stallone, contextualizing his body within a tradition of “hegemonic masculinity” (Petkovski, 48). With a newly-buffed body that appears shaped by manual labor, Springsteen was able to extend his working-class ethos into his physique as well as his clothing.
However, Springsteen’s 1980s-era physique can also be viewed in the “body-conscious”
tradition of the Castro Clone. The subculture peddled a “fantasy” of working-classness that is
quite similar to Springsteen’s, recalling “American fashion lineages” as they relate to the manual
labor of “cowboys, sailors, lumberjacks, [or] mechanics” (Tavares, “How the ’70s ‘Clone’ Look
Paved the Way for the Queer Clothing of Today”). But these “fashion lineages” are not only
sartorial - they are also physical. By buffing their bodies and donning workmen’s clothes, Castro
Clone converts worked to queer traditional masculinity and its conventional vocations.
Springsteen adopts the aesthetic and physicality of the manual labor in a similar fashion,
explaining how “when I was looking for a voice to mix with my Bruce Springsteen voice, I put
on my father's work clothes…and I went to work” (Gross, “Bruce Springsteen: On Jersey, Masculinity And Wishing To Be His Stage Persona”). By donning his father’s clothes and, in the 1980s, his father’s work-toned physique, Springsteen rejects the lanky feminine softness of his *Darkness on the Edge of Town* era in favor of a super-buffed masculinity (figure 9). And by performing an idealized version of working-classness, Springsteen fits in seamlessly with the Castro Clone ethos.

While some scholars read Springsteen’s 1980s physique as the pinnacle of hyper-stylized masculinity, others acknowledge the queer subtext embedded in such an aesthetic. “To whom is [Springsteen’s] recent bodybuilding most appealing?” Smith questions, referring to Springsteen’s then-new aesthetic as “fit for a leather bar” (“Sexual Mobilities in Bruce Springsteen: Performance as Commentary,” 839). By linking Springsteen’s buffed body to LGBTQ+ subcultures, Smith expounds on the subversive potential of Springsteen’s physique.

Springsteen’s queer contemporaries also picked up on the signals. Writer Edmund Carlevale published a humorous ode to gay subtext called “Springsteen's Ass - and Why You Can't Tell the Straights from the Gays” in *The Advocate*, a popular queer magazine. “Who exactly is he trying to attract with a shot of his ass?” Carlevale asks, suggesting that Springsteen’s performance of hyper-masculinity not only appeals to women but also to members of the LGBTQ+ community who read this butchness as queer.

Springsteen’s masculinity is also read as subversive by queer Springsteen fans, many of whom describe his gender performance as so overt and so studied that it borders on butchness. “He was a walking Judith Butler text, and everything about his gender—from the sleeve roll on his white T-shirts to the tilt of his ass on the cover of Born in the USA—was somehow both
perfectly studied and completely natural,” Gordon-Loebl explains, going on to describe his aesthetic as so “essentially queer…he might as well have been a go-go boy at a bar.” She views Springsteen’s leather jacket and “just-tight-enough” jeans as queer signals, signifying a hyper-stylized masculinity that is both Clone-esque and butch (Gordon-Loebl, *The Queerness of Bruce Springsteen*).

Analyzing Springsteen’s hypermasculinity in both written and visual forms, the queer zinesters behind *Because the Boss Belongs to Us* took to the stage to perform their own version of Springsteen’s butch masculinity in *Queers Do The Boss: A cabaret celebrating the music of Bruce Springsteen*. The cabaret combined the world of drag performance and zine culture, offering free copies of their zine at the door. Performing as drag kings, the queer performance troupe the Femme Show animated the queerness lurking beneath Springsteen’s performance of masculinity by creating a “counterpublic space where white and heternormative masculinities can be contested” and reinterpreted. Halberstam argues that drag king culture produces a space “where minority masculinities can be produced, validated, fleshed out, and celebrated,” a definition that dovetails well with the ethos of the Femme Show troupe (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* 128). The troupe’s goal, as stated on their website, is to “bring deep, personal explorations of queer and subversive femininity and fem/femme identity to the stage,” and by giving Springsteen’s masculinity the Femme Show treatment, they draw out the butchness animating his performance of masculinity (“The Femme Show”). By “kinging” Springsteen (or, as the flyer reads, “Do[ing] The Boss”), the troupe performs an alternative reading of his “dominant male masculinity…explod[ing] its effects” through “exaggeration, parody, and earnest mimicry,” (Halberstam, 130).
Figure 10. Kumbier, Alana et al.; *Prove it All Night* flyer. 2011.
While no footage of the performance exists, we can look to the event flyer (figure 10) in order to understand how queer women king the Boss. On the flyer, a faceless woman does her best *Born in the U.S.A.* impression, cocking her hip just the way Springsteen does on the album cover. Wearing an artfully half-tucked tank top with butt-hugging jeans, the performer draws on the Castro Clone style in order to present an ultra-femme version of Springsteen’s masculinity. However, it is worth noting that this queer femme rendering of Springsteen’s masculinity is almost identical to the original album cover in figure 11, suggesting that Springsteen’s masculinity is already significantly butched. The flyer and the drag king performance are “earnest mimicry” at its finest, both honoring and poking fun at Springsteen’s blue-collar masculinity and its sartorial hallmarks. By changing the iconic bandana to a real silk handkerchief, the Femme Show performer further connects Springsteen’s style of dress to queer aesthetics, linking Springsteen’s back-pocket bandana to hanky code once again. And ultimately, by repurposing Springsteen’s aesthetic for explicitly queer ends, the Femme Show’s drag king performance and flyer emphasize the butchness that drew many queer female fans to Springsteen in the first place.

In *Because the Boss Belongs to Us: Queer Femmes on Bruce Springsteen*, Christine Bylund elaborates on how Springsteen’s carefully curated masculinity helped her “investigate a new sense of masculinity and power.” “Bruce has been my refuge,” Bylund writes, explaining how his “rugged black jeans and open shirts have been my idea of a well kept butchness inside of me…” (7). Bylund recognizes a kindred misfit spirit in Springsteen, describing how his unique blend of “vulnerability” and “strength” speaks to a deep-seated alienation that is as beautiful as it
is queer. “No one who hasn't felt small write[s] songs likes [sic] this,” Bylund explains, speaking to the unbelonging and small-town fatigue that undergirds Springsteen’s escapist fantasies (8).

And just as Springsteen fantasizes about the gender euphoria and belonging that “tramps like us” can find once they leave their small towns and chase after their bliss, some fans find their bliss in the notion of a queer Springsteen. Casio is one such fan, and she explores her fantasies of Springsteen in the following freeform poems.

I want Bruce to be queer. I want Bruce to be a hot butch girl. I’m thinking about Bruce in the 80s now with muscle tees and high waisted jeans. Plaid shirts tucked in, hair slicked back but curls breaking free. Bruce the mechanic as she slides out from underneath the car, grease stains on her overalls. Or I’m thinking of Tunnel of Love era Bruce with baggy blouses, tailored suits as Bruce abandoned the denim and plaid and embraced being 40 and handsome as fuck. Or Bruce as a silver fox, the hot older academic, smart jeans and a waistcoat and shirt and slicked back hair. Bruce is the butch girl of my dreams (Casio, Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town, 3).

In figure 12, the first half of this zine entry, Casio explores Springsteen’s queerness through a feminine lens. Using “she” and “her” pronouns for Springsteen, Casio interprets Springsteen’s clothes and body as signifiers of butchness. In this fantasy, Springsteen’s “muscle tees,” “plaid shirts,” and “tailored suits” are not symbols of masculinity. Rather than analyzing Springsteen’s aesthetic through a hyper-masculine or androcentric subcultural lens, Casio recasts what others would consider hallmarks of traditional masculinity as signifiers of a latent butchness. By reframing Springsteen as a lesbian, Casio suggests that Springsteen’s masculinity is more akin to a “butch girl[’s]” than a heterosexual man’s.
I want Bruce to be queer.

I want Bruce to be a hot butch girl. I’m thinking about Bruce in the 80s now with muscle tees and high waisted jeans. Plaid shirts tucked in, hair slicked back but curls breaking free.

Bruce the mechanic as she slides out from underneath the car, grease stains on her overalls.

Or I’m thinking of Tunnel of Love era Bruce with baggy blouses, tailored suits as Bruce abandoned the denim and plaid and embraced being 40 and handsome as fuck.

Or Bruce as a silver fox, the hot older academic, smart jeans and a waistcoat and shirt and slicked back hair.

Bruce is the butch girl of my dreams.
“I want Bruce to be a fag,” Casio continues in the second half of her fantasy (figure 13), describing how

I want him in his leather jacket and his tight scruffy jeans making out with all the boys.

Messy hair, messy beard, white vests, and tight black jeans, I’m thinking about 70s
Bruce, when he was at his most scruffy and most cheeky. Bruce dancing in the dark with
Clarence on stage, leaning back as Clarence pulls him in for a kiss. Or 80s Bruce when
his muscles were out of control. His super macho biceps bursting through his shirt,
demanding to be set free in tight white vests. Bruce grunting and leaning up against
Miami Steve on stage, playing guitar back to back and singing about being ‘blood
brothers.’ and singing of his one true lost love. Bruce is the queer boy of my dreams

(Casio, Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town, 4).

Here, Casio continues to track the evolution of Springsteen’s gender performance
throughout his career, but this time she analyzes Springsteen’s masculinity as she would a gay
man’s rather than a butch lesbian’s. Casio brings elements of Springsteen’s Castro Clone-esque
style to the forefront, drawing specific attention to his “leather jacket,” “tight..jeans,” and “super
macho biceps.” To Casio, these elements signify a distinctly homosexual performance of
masculinity. She reaffirms this connection by linking Springsteen’s sartorial choices to his
performance of queer aesthetics. Casio recalls Springsteen “dancing in the dark with Clarence”
and “leaning up against Miami Steve” as they perform both queerness and “blood brother[hood]”
simultaneously. In these excerpts, Casio frames Springsteen’s queerness as simultaneously
feminine and masculine, linking his butch masculinity to his performance of queerness to create
a holistic portrait of non-normative desire.
I want Bruce to be a fag.
I want him in his leather jacket and his tight scruffy jeans making out with all the boys.
Messy hair, messy beard, white vests, and tight black jeans.
I'm thinking about 70s Bruce, when he was at his most scruffy and most cheeky.

Bruce dancing in the dark with Clarence on stage.
leaning back as Clarence pulls him in for a kiss.

Or 80s Bruce when his muscles were out of control.
His super macho biceps bursting through his shirt, demanding to be set free in tight white vests. Bruce grunting and leaning up against Miami Steve on stage, playing guitar back to back and singing about being 'blood brothers.' and singing of his one true lost love.

Bruce is the queer boy of my dreams.
By analyzing signifiers of Springsteen’s masculinity through a queer subcultural lens, Casio paints a comprehensive portrait of queer Springsteen that illustrates why LGBTQ+ fans are so drawn to this hyper-masculine and all-American figure. And much like Alana Kumbier in the introduction of *Because the Boss Belongs to Us*, Casio also aims to help other queer Springsteen fans understand their love for The Boss. “I was surprised to learn how many of my femme friends had some sort of thing for Bruce,” Kumbier writes. “I was curious about our love for this straight white dude. I wanted to know more about the relationships we'd established between our queerness & Bruce & his music; I hoped that by exploring these affinities we could trace the complicated workings of identification and desire in our everyday lives, at least around this one object” (2). And while Casio herself is a self-described “diy queer fat punk” whose obsession with a “white heterosexual cis male millionaire stadium rockstar” makes “no sense,” she, like Kumbier and other queer zine writers, employ countercultural frameworks and modes of analysis to follow the trail of queer breadcrumbs Springsteen has left for them (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town*, 1). In this fashion, both Springsteen himself and his queer fans work to deconstruct the dominant discourse around Springsteen and his masculinity, putting pressure on one-sided conceptions of stardom and inviting alternative readings of a cultural icon.
CHAPTER THREE: ZINE SPRINGSTEEN

“My Bruce obsession feels at odds with who I am,” Casio writes in figure 14 (Looking for Bruce 3). Cataloging these incongruences on a “Bruce checklist,” she checks off the boxes for “straight, white, cis, millionaire, man, [and] friends with Bono” to enumerate how Springsteen’s public persona clashes with her identity as a queer feminist (3). In this panel, Casio speaks to the ways in which queer people identify and disidentify with pop culture figures, positioning fandom as a counter-public sphere in which fans can navigate contradictions and forge new visions of stardom.

Muñoz expands on these notions in his seminal work Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics. Exploring the process of identity-making, Muñoz argues that queer people engage in disidentification to rework the cultural codes of the mainstream and read themselves into the dominant discourse, “recycling and rethinking [the] encoded meaning” of a cultural text in order to expose the “machinations” of production. By legitimizing alternative interpretations of pop culture that are often ridiculed or “rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture,” disidentification and the queer people that practice it expose the fallacy of one-dimensional understandings of stardom and identity while also making space for alternative readings of cultural icons (31). Through disidentification, queer audiences situate themselves simultaneously within and against the discourses through which they are made to identify.

Butler also presents a theory of disidentification in her seminal work Bodies that Matter, defining disidentification as misrecognition, or a simultaneous identification and rejection. Disidentification is an “experience of misrecognition” because it manufactures “this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong.” By seeing at a slant and
performing negotiated readings of cultural objects, queer people disidentify in order to distill their identity through cultural products. This “slippage,” Butler argues, is the basis for a more “democratizing affirmation” of difference and can help us perform more complex readings of rhetorical signs and signifiers (219).

Disidentification necessitates a simultaneous adoption and critique, and Alexander and Rhodes explore how mid-century queer people engage with depictions of masculinity through 1950s men muscle magazines like *Physique Pictorial*. On one hand, *Physique Pictorial'*s glossy photos of muscled, near-naked men reinforce patriarchal notions of masculinity, framing physical strength and dominance as desirable. But on the other hand, *Physique Pictorial* was extremely popular among mid-century queer men who “fetishized” the images, allowing the magazine to function as an early iteration of gay pornography. In this sense, queer readers of *Physique Pictorial* performed disidentification, simultaneously identifying with the men in the magazine while also sexualizing that hyper-masculinity in service of homoeroticism. This runs “counter to the starkly heterosexist aims of most muscle magazines,” illustrating disidentification as a simultaneous adoption and rejection (“Queer Rhetoric and the Pleasures of the Archive”). We see a similar performance of disidentification in the Castro Clone style of the post-Stonewall 1970s as queer men refashioned working-class masculinity as a signifier of homosexuality. By tightening the blue jeans and flannels of manual labor to perform butch masculinity, Castro Clones repurpose signifiers of working-class masculinity to offer a counter-reading of hypermasculinity.
We also see strategies of disidentification at work in the Springsteen fandom as queer fans identify and disidentify with Springsteen simultaneously, complicating his persona and fans’ interpretations of it by introducing queer readings of Springsteen’s songs, performances, and image into the discourse. “Part of being a Bruce fan is getting to choose which myth or version of the truth I believe in,” Casio explains in figure 15, using disidentification to cherrypick the elements of Springsteen’s persona that speak to her while also making space for her alternative (and often queer) readings (Looking for Bruce, 24). “Bruce Springsteen can mean anything you want him to mean. Fuck critically acclaimed album lists and Serious Music Journalism,” Casio asserts, encouraging fellow queer fans to “ignore preconceived ideas [of]…what people *think* Springsteen is about” because “you can make him mean anything you like” (“Blinded by the Light”).

To push back against the dominant view of Springsteen perpetuated by “Serious Music Journalism,” Casio takes to the zine to manufacture her own version of the Boss. Whereas the mainstream interprets Springsteen as an all-American portrait of white masculinity, Casio and other zine authors interpret Springsteen through the lens of their lived queer experience, transforming him into an icon of queer masculinity bordering on butchness. Springsteen zines are chock-full of queer fans “mak[ing] [Springsteen] mean anything [they’d] like,” most notably in Casio’s ode to genderqueer Bruce (as explored in chapter 2). By transforming Springsteen into “the butch girl of [her] dreams,” Casio performs disidentification, underscoring the homoerotic elements of Springsteen’s all-American image to reforge Springsteen as her queer icon (Casio, Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town, 3).
Figure 15. Casio, Holly. *Looking for Bruce*. 2021.
So while “being obsessed with a straight white male middle-aged multi-millionaire stadium rockstar is kind of at odds with [her] queer/feminist DIY lifestyle,” Casio and other queer fans can’t help but love Springsteen because they have the power to make him mean whatever they want him to mean (Casio, *Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town*, 3). McCormick echoes this sentiment, commenting that “as for queer people, I think we take our representation where we find it and that’s fine” (*You Ain’t A Beauty But Hey You’re Alright* 12). By articulating the disjunction between Springsteen’s stardom and her interpretation of it, McCormick utilizes the language of disidentification. And by “tak[ing] [her] representation where [she can] find it,” McCormick speaks to the lack of strong queer representations in the media, gesturing to the complexities of identity and fanaticism queer people must negotiate.

To carve out a space for themselves in the cultural landscape, queer audiences must perform negotiated readings, identifying and disidentifying simultaneously. While McCormick speaks to this necessity as it relates to her love for Springsteen, Ladendorf expands on this in her analysis of the hit lesbian-cast show *The L Word*. She asserts that the lack of queer representations and role models on screen has created a “need for recognition” in the LGBTQ+ community, prompting queer audiences to perform queer readings of normative texts. Consequently, this has made “the non-heterosexual media audience” adept at “reading against the grain” and using their “imagination” when interacting with media (“Commercialization of Lesbian Identities in Showtime’s The L-word” 271).

While Ladendorf is a televisual scholar rather than a Springsteen scholar, by articulating how and why queer fans read against the grain in order to transform media texts into opportunities for adoration and representation, she also speaks to the ways in which queer fans
engage with Springsteen. While Springsteen might not be everyone’s queer icon, his stage kisses with Clarence and the echo of queer loneliness in his work are enough to inspire negotiated devotion in McCormick and other fans, exemplifying disidentification. Even though Springsteen is “straight and white and often really different from other stuff we listen to,” queer fans gravitate towards him, experiencing his music in their own unique way by both embracing and rejecting his constructed stardom (McCormick, You Ain’t A Beauty But Hey You’re Alright 12-13). “Bruce songs are a part of my psyche,” McCormick writes, describing her love for Springsteen as an integral part of herself (and, consequently her queerness). And while not everyone understands why she loves Springsteen, McCormick argues that “you don't have to be from mid 50s America to understand [Springsteen’s lyrics].” She and her fanaticism are a living testament to Springsteen’s cross-generational and cross-boundary appeal. Even though she’s a queer woman “from Yorkshire,” she “feel[s]” his lyrics “deeply” on her own terms (19).

To better explore complicated fanaticism, queer fans like Casio merge their love for “handmade…queer things,” like “zines,” with their love for the Boss, transforming the zine into a site of disidentification and negotiated adoration (Me and Bruce (And My Dad) #2, 1). Because the zine as a medium brings cultural materials together in revolutionary ways, it is uniquely suited for the work of disidentification. Repurposing the “ephemera of the mainstream culture” to try out “mechanisms for doing [and interpreting] things differently,” the zine operates within and without the mainstream to create alternative meaning (Piepmeier, Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism 191). This makes it the perfect vehicle for refashioning Springsteen into a queer icon. By “leveraging [artifacts of the mainstream] against one another,” zines and the people who make them “release meanings that challenge, contradict, and go beyond the cultural materials
themselves,” creating a fan-made Springsteen who is a lesbian, a queer man, a sage, and an outcast all at the same time (Piepmeier, 11).

Zines also create what Piepmeier refers to as a “virtual bohemia,” forging a sense of connection and identity in the “absence of a supportive in-person community” (21). This absence is what spurred Casio to begin making her own zines as a small-town teenager who felt that "all the queer culture was happening in cities far away from me.” Because “zines were [her] lifeline” in the pre-internet era, Casio made zines explicitly “to find my people and my communities” (“Doing It Yourself: Making Zines with Holly Casio”). Feeling “trapped in [her] bedroom” and far removed from a true queer community, Casio not only turned to zines but also to Springsteen to assuage her loneliness:

Nobody sings about loneliness and small-town fatigue like Bruce. Nobody can write so succinctly about the dark quiet emptiness when you are lonely and out of place and then wrap it up into a 3 minute pop song like Bruce can…I was tired and bored with myself and dreaming of getting out…[and] more than anything I just wanted queer friends to make me feel normal, and that just didn’t exist in my small town…[But] Bruce understood my pain (Casio, Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town, 9).

Hearing some of the earliest reflections of her small town fatigue and queer loneliness on tracks like “Darkness of the Edge of Town” and “Backstreets,” it’s no wonder that Springsteen and his music had such an impact on Casio. “My whole world was my bedroom,” Casio laments, but “[she] had Bruce” to soundtrack her queer escapism (8). And just as Casio heard her own queer sadness reflected in Springsteen’s music, Springsteen found his salvation in rock and roll. “Rock and roll came to my house where there seemed to be no way out. It just seemed like a dead-end
street, nothing I liked to do, nothing I wanted to do, except roll over and go to sleep . . . [but rock and roll] snuck in . . . and opened up a whole world of possibilities,” Springsteen explains, citing rock music as his escape just as it was Casio’s (Marsh, *Two Hearts* 86).

Gordon-Loebl also explores queer love for Springsteen in relation to the escapism undergirding much of his oeuvre, transforming Springsteen’s persona and lyrical canon into a site of disidentification. Describing Springsteen as “a straight icon who is disproportionately beloved by many queers,” Gordon-Loebl defines Springsteen as a queer icon and a straight icon simultaneously. And while those distinctions may seem contradictory, Gordon-Loebl argues that Springsteen’s universal appeal is “undeniabl[e]” and rooted in his anthemic renderings of escape. “Who hasn’t wanted to escape sometimes?” Gordon-Loebl asks, framing the “desire to run, to seek newness, to shed the feeling of stagnation and its companion, mortality” as a “fundamentally human set of emotions” and, more specifically, “a queer one” (*The queerness of Bruce Springsteen*).

Springsteen’s desire to break free is both emotional and geographic, and it especially resonates for queer fans who are stuck in small towns, isolated from an urban queer community. “Nothing is so fundamentally queer about Springsteen as the pervasive feeling of dislocation,” Gordon-Loebl argues, and his lyrics are animated by “the nagging sense that something has been plaguing him since birth, and that he’s dreaming of a place where he might finally fling it off his back” (*The queerness of Bruce Springsteen*).

Queer listeners, especially those who live in small-town or rural areas, connect to this sense of dislocation, feeling out of place in their communities. In *Out in the Country: Youth, Media and Queer Visibility in Rural America*, Gray explores the relationship between queerness
and geography, framing media as the channel through which rural queer youth distill their identity. Though places, and hometowns, in particular, are often framed as “passive backdrops,” Gray argues that they are central to both the “understanding” and “articulation” of identities (167). Because rural areas and small towns are more isolated from urban centers and their progressive social forces, queer youths’ sense of dislocation and removal intensifies, increasing their reliance on media as a form of education and escape. Gray suggests that youth who are isolated from urban areas use media and the internet to “manage the delicate calculus of gay visibility's benefits and risks,” producing and engaging in “social moments of gay visibility” through the media they consume and the online presence they curate. As 21st-century humans who constantly consume media, Gray argues that “we have no way to articulate our identities without drafting and redrafting narratives gleaned from others,” offering necessary context for queer fans’ identification with Springsteen (165-167).

We can see this articulation of identity through other’s narratives most clearly in Casio, a self-identified small-town loner who turned to media when she craved connection with a queer community “that just didn’t exist in [her] small town” (Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town, 9). While she felt isolated and alone, Springsteen and his lyrics spoke to that loneliness, offering her an escape and a means for understanding her dislocation. By combining her love for Springsteen and DIY culture through Springsteen zines, Casio was able to create a “virtual Bohemia” of her very own despite her small-town isolation (Piepmeier, 21). By expanding Gray’s theory to small-town Northern England, we can better understand how Casio distilled her queer identity through Springsteen and the other media she consumed. Even though Casio felt isolated without an immediate queer community, she kept a “secret scrapbook” full of photos of
her idols, ranging from “Gillian Anderson” to “Willow and Faith from Buffy” to Bruce Springsteen. These icons helped a “teen lesbian” Casio to escape from her immediate loneliness, and her love for “fanzines” helped her feel connected to other alternative and queer people (Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the Edge of Town, 8). Though she has now found the big-city “queer friends and culture and punk and art” she so craved as an isolated teen, she still creates Springsteen zines, generating her queer readings of Springsteen while also exposing other LGBTQ+ readers to her idol.

Younger zine writers like McCormick speak to the community of the Springsteen zine scene in their contributions, extending this virtual Bohemia beyond Casio. After the death of her father, McCormick began to gravitate towards her father’s music, becoming “so firmly a [Springsteen] fan” that she felt spurred to join “the queers who have gone before [her] and write this fucking zine” (You Ain’t A Beauty But Hey You’re Alright 3). By taking up the mantle of zine production and further contributing to the mass of queer Springsteen readings, McCormick forged connections with other queer Springsteen fans both on and offline. Notably, Casio and McCormick have since extended the virtual Bohemia of queer Springsteen zinedom onto Twitter, interacting with one another’s tweets and exchanging Springsteen photos. In a recent tweet, Casio posted four images of “My fave soft butch Springsteen looks.” McCormick was particularly drawn to the last image of Springsteen in a smart short-sleeve button-down and braided belt, replying that “That last one has ended me” (@HollyCasio).

But despite the lightheartedness of such fan-to-fan online interactions, queer Springsteen fans still must engage in disidentification on multiple levels, even within their own found communities. Casio not only had to push back against “Serious Music Journalism” to queer
Springsteen but also against her own DIY feminist roots in order to create her zines. In DIY circles, “being a fan is a dirty word.” “Being a fan means you are a passive consumer,” she explains, and “it feels even more of a dirty word within DIY queer feminist scenes when we are all supposed to be creating our own cultures and not putting others on pedestals as heroes to aspire to” (Me and Bruce (And My Dad) #2, 4). And while Casio acknowledges the irony of “getting into so much debt which I am incapable of paying back just so I can go see a millionaire sing songs about poor people,” she just “can’t help it” - Springsteen is her idol (5). But to fuse her love for Springsteen with her love for DIY culture and proudly display her fanaticism, Casio had to not only disidentify with Springsteen but also disidentify with zines.

Nevertheless, Casio has been able to reconcile her Springsteen fanaticism and her DIY queer feminism because she doesn’t think loving Springsteen makes her a “passive” consumer. On the contrary, her love for Springsteen is integral to her creativity and her identity. “I see being a fan as a super important part to my creative output,” no matter whether that creativity is expressed through the “pop songs I write” or the “zines that I make” (4). Through her zines, Casio proves you can be a “hardcore Bruce Springsteen fan” and a “northern queer working class feminist” at the same time, pushing back against limited notions of DIY feminism and fanaticism while also rethinking Springsteen’s position as a straight male icon (1, 4).

Casio is not the only queer Springsteen fan who once felt they had to hide their love for the Boss from other queer people. Milo Miller, a self-identified “femme-y queer boy” who was “able to avoid ‘macho’ by cranking up Erasure, swiping on some eyeliner, and redying [his] hair fuscia,” expressed his bisexuality through his New Wave music collection before he fell in love with Springsteen (Kumbier, Because the Boss Belongs to Us 29-30). But to learn to love the
Boss, Milo had to overwrite his previous assumptions and negative associations, divorcing Springsteen from the “popular, jock-y ‘cool’ boys [who] were into [Born in the U.S.A.-era Bruce]” in middle school. Without the analytical tools and knowledge of LGBTQ+ history needed to read Springsteen’s blue-collar masculinity as constructed, Milo struggled to separate Springsteen from the “masculine side of the 94 WKTI pop spectrum,” and it took an encounter with the work of Lester Bangs, iconic American music journalist and rock critic to change his mind (28). After reading Bangs’ review of Born to Run, Milo recognized the same “punk” spirit in Springsteen that he saw in his other heroes, a list including indie icons from the Smiths to the Velvet Underground. And by understanding that Springsteen, too, could be “‘my’ kind of music,” Milo had an epiphany:

Ultimately, [Bangs’] article got me thinking about categories and genres, my own likes and dislikes, and all the identity politics of being queer. As time moved on I began to accept myself and my increasingly more eclectic tastes more and more. It was (and is) very much a coming out process, I think (31).

By referring to his love for Springsteen as a “coming out process” that prompted him to rethink not only his tastes but also “all the identity politics of being queer,” Milo verbalizes the process of disidentification using queer insider language. To love Springsteen, Milo had to not only overwrite his past negative experiences with jocky middle school Van Halen fans but also rethink the ways in which we discover and define our identities through pop culture. And by realizing that his queerness and performance of non-traditional masculinity didn’t have to limit the music he loved, Milo began to “embrace a side of [himself] that [he] didn’t realize existed.” As a result, Milo has made room in his music collection not only for Springsteen, but also for “pseudo-
macho and/or hetero[sexual] elements of rock and roll like KISS, AC/DC, and even (gasp!) some Guns-N-Roses” (32). And while Milo felt he had to “come out publicly” as a fan for others to acknowledge and accept his love for “macho” rock, Milo can now love Springsteen, “whom [he] previously disregarded,” and Erasure in equal measure without compromising his queerness. “I think that my own closet doors have not just been cracked open but completely blown off” by this realization, Milo explains, “allowing sunlight and musical freedom to shine out illuminating my world and rose-tinting my queer lenses” (32).

But for queer fans to exist comfortably in fan spaces like Springsteen concerts and meet-and-greets, they must also disidentify with non-queer Springsteen fans, making space for themselves and their alternative reading of Springsteen in non-homogeneous spaces. Though Casio has been to dozens upon dozens of Springsteen concerts, she always feels the same blend of alienation and anticipation before each show:

I take a look around the football stadium I’m usually in. I’m mostly surrounded by men. Everyone here is white. Most of the crowd feel straight…I look around and it’s hard not to see a sea of straight white men chanting “Bruuuuuuuuuuce” en masse. Straight men in large groups downing pints and shouting in nowt but vowels…Drunk lads are everywhere, the kind of lads I would cross the street to avoid if I was walking home alone (Me and Bruce #4: Queers on the edge of town 5).

As a queer person (and a queer woman in particular), Casio doesn’t blend in with the typical crowd at Springsteen shows. And while “everyone is nothing but lovely to me” because “we are all united by our Springsteen obsession,” it is difficult to separate the “straight white men” at Springsteen shows from the ones who taunt and catcall her on the street, forcing her to “turn my
music up loud and ignore any comments” as she walks past (5). During these moments Casio “turn[s] around and take[s] a look at the crowd and…wonder[s] what I’m doing [here],” feeling alienated and alone in a sea of people who do not look, love, or listen to Springsteen in the same way that she does.

When attending Springsteen’s shows, Casio has to step outside of her queer bubble and enter a straight and male-dominated space, opening herself, her sexuality, and her interpretation of Springsteen up for scrutiny. But when “Bruce finally comes on stage and the crowd erupts and I feel like I’m gonna die and my heart beats so fast and Bruce chants ‘One, Two, Three, Four!’ into his opening song,” Casio continues, “I wonder where everyone else has gone because it’s just me now in that stadium. Everyone else has disappeared. Bruce is singing to me” (6). Experiencing that overwhelming and personal sense of joy is enough to keep Casio’s wariness at bay as the safety and security that she feels in her love for Springsteen overwhelms her alienation, affirming her understanding of Springsteen despite others’ views.

Casio performs disidentification in these spaces, internally leveraging her queerness and queer reading of Springsteen against the real Springsteen in front of her and the crowd he attracts. However, “I don’t think I’m better than anyone else in that stadium,” Casio explains. I don’t hate all Bruce fans, and I don’t feel superior. But I tend to go to Bruce shows on my own and that means stepping outside of my queer bubble and feeling out of place. In my non Bruce life I play in queer diy punk bans and the majority of the shows I go to are for queer punx and women. It’s not perfect, but it’s rare for me to venture out of my queer bubble to find myself alone in a mostly straight male audience. It’s
intimidating, uncomfortable, overwhelming, and has me on guard. But I do it for Bruce

(6, emphasis added).

Differentiating between her Bruce life and “non Bruce life,” Casio illustrates the disidentification she must perform to exist as a Springsteen fan and a queer punk simultaneously. And while forcing herself out of her “queer bubble” means “feeling out of place” and, at times, scared, Bruce Springsteen is worth the discomfort. “But I do it for Bruce,” Casio writes, explaining why she and other queer fans like her are willing to insert themselves into an overwhelmingly straight, white, and male space that feels worlds apart from the safety of their queer circle. And despite the fear and anxiety that often accompanies this move, it’s worth it to see Springsteen in the flesh and hear him sing about “the ache of loneliness and the longing for an unknown something” that “struck [their] teenage lesbian heart[s]” and helped them see the light at the end of the small-town tunnel. While no one besides Springsteen himself can ever understand the source or depths of his alienation, queer listeners come the closest, hearing the “unmistakable echo of queer loneliness in [Springsteen’s] work” in a way that other people cannot (Gordon-Loebl, *The queerness of Bruce Springsteen*). And in staking their claim to Springsteen at concerts, meet and greets, and in the scholarly discourse, queer fans reclaim the Boss to “recognise [his songs] as the queer love songs that they are meant to be.”

Doing this work of reclamation matters for Casio and other queer fans because Springsteen is more than a musician - he’s a religion. “I feel like I’m on a holy pilgrimage,” Casio writes when she travels from England all the way to New Jersey to meet Springsteen (*Looking for Bruce* 3). Lindemann, too, made the pilgrimage to New Jersey, traveling from Germany to New York to Asbury Park to find out for himself “what it was like there” and why
Springsteen “named an album after that place” (Jungleland: A Springzine 34). And while Casio wonders “what it’s like to just like things a normal amount,” she “can’t help it.” Springsteen “soundtracks [her] everyday,” helping her to process her emotions and get through the workweek (Looking for Bruce 5).

Casio and Lindemann are not alone in their overwhelming fanaticism - other queer fans feel not only intense devotion for Springsteen but also for their fellow fandom members.

“[There’s] something about a shared fan experience that is really emotional,” McCormick writes, explaining how Springsteen’s music and the virtual Bohemia she forged with other fans helped her embrace her own queerness (You Ain’t A Beauty But Hey You’re Alright 8). “I think there’s something about being a baby queer in a shitty town waiting to escape into something better, waiting to unfurl our wings and be the butterflies we can’t be, and finding that sense of longing in Bruce’s lyrics,” McCormick continues in figure 16, echoing Casio, Gordon-Loebl, and the other queer Springsteen fans that came before her in acknowledging the echoes of queer isolation and queer hope in Springsteen lyrics. And while Springsteen’s alienation may be the source of his working-class upbringing, troubled relationship with his father, or perhaps a latent queerness of his own, all that matters is that fans see something of themselves in his honesty. Springsteen’s music helps fans like McCormick “embrace my queer identity in a way that I never did as a confused, closeted teenager,” creating a space in which queer fans are permitted not only to yearn but also to imagine a brighter, more authentic future for themselves (14). That’s why songs about getting out and finding happiness like “Thunder Road” resonate so deeply with queer fans. As McCormick explains, “I think a lot of us identify with being the outsiders, and I think that’s one of the main reasons queers and Bruce seem to go hand in hand” (15).
I’ve thought a lot about why so many of us find something meaningful in Bruce’s music even though he is straight and white and often really different from other stuff we listen to. I think there’s something about being a baby queer in a shitty town waiting to escape into something better, waiting to unfurl our wings and be the butterflies we can’t be, and finding that sense of longing in Bruce’s lyrics. I definitely felt that way when I was a teenager. In some ways you could say that I never escaped from that life – I live in a different little somewhat shitty town and I’m not out to everyone in my life. But I feel more infinite than I ever did as a teen – I’ve had life experiences, I’ve driven down life’s highway in both good ways and bad, I’ve had fun singing along to stupid songs driving on motorways late at night. I feel like I’ve fulfilled some of my promise. I embrace my queer identity in a way that I never did as a confused, closeted teenager.

Figure 16. McCormick, Rebecca. *You Ain’t A Beauty But Hey You’re Alright*. 2018.
CONCLUSION

While on tour in April 2016, Bruce Springsteen had a decision to make. Set to play a show in Greensboro, North Carolina after the passage of HB2 (known officially as the Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act), Springsteen had to decide whether or not to cancel the show and stand in solidarity with his queer fans or stay the course. The law discriminated against LGBTQ+ people, dictating which restrooms transgender people were permitted to use and infringing upon the rights of queer citizens to sue if their rights were violated in the workplace. And while Springsteen has long been a sex symbol, style icon, and musical idol for many members of the queer community, he has never advocated for them as openly as he did when he canceled his show that night.

A powerful and passionate live performer, Springsteen doesn’t cancel shows lightly. Since 1978, he has only canceled five shows, all of which (with the exception of Greensboro) were due to bereavement or natural disaster (Casey, “Why Greensboro Matters: A Brief History of Springsteen Cancellations”). But in a display of solidarity and allyship that angered many closed-minded fans, Springsteen canceled the show and released a compelling statement, writing that the law was “an attempt by people who cannot stand the progress our country has made” to overturn the strides we’ve taken “in recognizing the human rights of all of our citizens.” Acknowledging the systemic forces that punish and legislate against queerness, Springsteen wrote that “No other group of North Carolinians faces such a burden” in recognition of their unique queer struggle. “I feel that this is a time for me and the band to show solidarity for those freedom fighters,” Springsteen writes, because “Some things are more important than a rock show.”
Esteeming the LGBTQ+ advocates pushing back against the discriminatory bill as “freedom fighters,” Springsteen uplifts and aligns himself with their resistance in “this fight against prejudice and bigotry.” And by using his platform to speak out against that very prejudice and bigotry, Springsteen explains that canceling his show “is the strongest means I have for raising my voice in opposition to those who continue to push us backwards instead of forwards” (Springsteen, “A Statement from Bruce Springsteen on North Carolina”). Advocating not only for his queer fans but for LGBTQ+ people across the nation, Springsteen actualizes the “Nobody Wins Unless Everybody Wins” chant that he often repeats at his shows.

This display of allyship is one example of the many reasons queer people love Bruce Springsteen. From his avid support of gay marriage to his inclusion of queer couples in music videos like “Tougher Than the Rest,” Springsteen not only acknowledges but embraces his appeal within the gay community. And though his queer allyship and advocacy help him make good on his commitment to equality, we can best understand Springsteen’s queer appeal through his music, image, and stagecraft.

By admitting that the working-class hero “Bruce Springsteen” persona is an act, the real Springsteen makes space for alternative readings of his persona, giving queer fans the freedom to riff off his image, lyrics, and performances in whatever way they please. The primary space in which queer fans take advantage of this ambiguity is through the zine, writing poems, making collages, and drawing cartoons of queer Springsteen and what he means to them. Zines function as a site of alternative meaning-making, constituting a major avenue through which queer people identify and disidentify with mainstream culture, creating their own interpretations of icons.
Through disidentification, queer Springsteen fans are able to cherrypick the elements of Springsteen’s persona they resonate with and run with them while leaving the rest.

By populating his songs with queer characters and ambiguously gendered beloveds, Springsteen offers alternative depictions of love on the margins. Writing about existence and desire on the edge of town, his music speaks to a “twin sense of longing and also alienation, a sense of wanting something - a really intense desire, but also feeling so isolated and so alone” (Brand and Gordon-Loebl, Bruce Springsteen’s Appeal to LGBTQ Women). By writing about the intense desire for a nameless something, Springsteen expresses what it feels like to be alienated and alone. It is this duality, this simultaneous longing and loneliness, that Gordon-Loebl argues is the queerest feature of Springsteen’s lyrics.

While Springsteen himself may not be queer, he appeals to the LGBTQ+ community through his lyrics, writing about isolation and desire in a way that resonates with queer listeners. In tracks like “Born to Run,” Springsteen struggles openly with his masculinity, admitting that he’s “just a scared and lonely rider” who doesn’t fit in with the “girls [who] comb their hair in rearview mirrors” or the "boys [who] try to look so hard.” This sense of confusion and in-betweenness resonates with queer listeners, and by recognizing masculinity as a construct, Springsteen makes space for alternative modes of gender expression.

While many people interpret Springsteen solely as a red-blooded all-American man, queer fans interpret his style and image differently, reading into his stage kisses and denim-on-denim in order to expose the queerness animating these performances. By performing queer aesthetics on stage, Springsteen brings the queer subtext of escapist fantasy tracks like “Thunder Road” to the surface. While watching Springsteen kiss and fawn over saxophonist Clarence
Clemons and guitarist Stevie Van Zandt in front of thousands of people night after night, it’s easy to see why queer fans read his songs and performances as transgressive.

This latent queerness (or, to be more specific, butchness), also extends to Springsteen’s wardrobe. Drawing on the working-class chic of the Castro Clone style, Springsteen dons his workwear in the same way 1970s queer men did, tightening his denim and flannel to the point of subversion. And while it dovetails with the blue-collar persona he constructed for himself, the body-conscious bent to his style and musculature projects a carefully structured masculinity that is so overt it borders on butchness.

Whether a person is conscious of it or not, the clothes they wear and the mannerisms they adopt are a way of performing gender, of branding themselves as male or female through certain signifiers. But when these signifiers are overemphasized, like the Castro Clone’s too-tight workwear or a drag queen’s bold makeup, it draws attention to the constructedness of gender itself. By interpreting Springsteen’s hypermasculinity in this tradition, we can understand his buffed body and artfully buttoned flannels as a performance, queering traditional masculinity rather than reinforcing it. This over-performance of maleness emphasizes the artificial nature of gender itself, an artificiality that Springsteen has openly acknowledged. By admitting that his blue-collar masculinity is a performance inspired by his father’s factory days, Springsteen not only makes space for queer readings of his gender but emphasizes the very artificiality of gender itself.

Queer readings, not only of Springsteen but other stars, are important because they acknowledge the performative aspect of gender. Queering an icon means looking for places where things such as gender, sexuality, and masculinity can be questioned or challenged,
working to destabilize straightness as the presumed default. By interpreting a star’s clothing choices, performance style, or song lyrics as queer narratives, fans not only challenge heteronormativity - they make space for themselves and their desires within the mainstream. So rather than doing mental gymnastics to frame Springsteen’s onstage kisses and lyrical male intimacies as hallmarks of an all-American masculinity, queer fans prompt us to consider those expressions as queer.

Ultimately, because both Springsteen’s songs and performances explore liminal spaces between confinedness and freedom, loneliness and desire, and masculine and feminine, Springsteen is able to embody the duality of lived experience, transforming himself into the perfect canvas for fans of all genders and sexualities to project their hopes and dreams onto. Because Springsteen openly deconstructs and subverts his own masculinity in his lyrics, performances, and writings, he makes space for queer fans to interpret his image and songs in their own unique way. When fans perform queer readings of both Springsteen’s lyrics and image, they create an alternative vision of masculinity, putting pressure on one-sided conceptions of gender and inviting alternative readings of an American icon.
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