Punk and Its Afterlives

Introduction

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Why punk? And why now? Surely those questions have as many answers as there are teenage bedrooms, suburban garages, and rock clubs with a lax or exploitative booking policy. Punk itself at this point needs little introduction: the museums, music retailers, bookstores, and documentary film channels groan under the weight of its archive. More challenging, at least to some, is the case for punk music as a continuing contributor to our political moment. Assuredly, a certain patina of respectability has settled around punk at middle age. Punk memoirs have been wreathed in Pulitzers, and punk musicals have made it to Broadway. Vivienne Westwood is in the V&A and stores in Los Angeles as well as London's Chelsea, and the Sex Pistols—willing or not—are in the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Collectors, profiteers, and eBay aficionados hound punk's vinyl and tape-recorded traces to the four corners of the globe, and digital trainspotters are diligently uploading every scrap of footage they can find. Young twenty-first-century radicals immersed in the anarchist and DIY ethos of movements like Occupy may roll their eyes skeptically at historical punk, even while punk as an ongoing, autonomous, international subculture rolls on.[1] But if punk can never quite give up the ghost, perhaps that's because we are still trawling through the political and economic wreckage that prompted its emergence in the first place, whether we locate its much-disputed origins in Detroit in the late 1960s, New York in the early to mid-1970s, or London and a score of British cities in 1975–1977. As the essays in this special issue of *Social Text* explore, if punk has an afterlife, it is because we are still sorting through the shards of history that cling to its edifice—and its ruins.

Almost four decades after its flamboyant self-declaration and its equally performative self-annihilation, punk continues to hold meaning in popular imagination and critical consciousness. The term resonates in both historical as well as affective registers; it oscillates between specifically located worldly practices and free-floating transhistorical associations. Its demise would seem greatly exaggerated, as punk has shown remarkable staying power, reformulating itself in new wave, postpunk, straight edge, hardcore, homocore, riot grrrl, grunge, Afro-punk, emo, and beyond. Origin stories continue to proliferate as successive generations of musicians and cultural critics seek to claim punk's sites of origin, "true legacies," privileged lineages, and creative energies. This special issue does not seek to recover any singular sense of the term or to settle questions of origins or authenticity, even if that were possible. Instead this issue seeks to disrupt linear histories of punk by following its lingering aftereffects, recognizing the unruly profligacy of its meanings both within music and popular culture, and outside and beyond genre. We seek the constant punk spirit of misbehavior, improvisation, disobedience, and deviance, through all its mercurial transformations, and in spite of the predictable naysaying as to its lack of political guarantees.

As a term, *punk* has a venerable etymology long predating the 1970s, and these disputed origins contribute to what Fiona Ngô and Elizabeth Stinson have recently called its "punk anteriors," by which they reference the historical contexts and plurality of contributory impulses to the singularity that was punk.[2] As an object of desire and target for revulsion, punk long stood for a range of outcast behaviors, individuals, and communities. "Punk" was a word to spit out through its hard vowel; an insult and expulsion. It was hurled at the petty thief and the vandal, at the young or weak prison inmate, and, in centuries past, at the prostitute. In black vernacular, it still carries the sting of "faggot." But punk has also occupied these conditions of degradation and rejection. This is a crucial strand within punk explored elsewhere by Tavia Nyong'o, as the references to his work across this special issue make clear.[3] Like *queer*, the adoption of *punk* as an individual and collective descriptor was a hand-to-hand struggle within and against violently demeaning language, against social and economic orders that marginalized and policed difference. This history that the word encodes continues to matter, insofar as it resonates within social spaces still striated with violent relations.

In the 1970s, punk was a space squatted by misfits, outsiders, miscreants, the strange and estranged. It defined itself through music, dress, and alternative modes of communication (the zine, the flyer, the cassette, small record labels, distribution networks). All were specifically performative expressions of defiance, disobedience, and rebellion. Despite its own assertions of continuity—designed to counter the homogenizing and seg-

regating logic of music industries—punk has always manifested in locally specific and singular ways, as each city, suburb, and town had its own punk scene, and its own bands, despite the typically imperious claims of New York or London. This issue also seeks to address the specific locations of punk, as well as its specifically local and generative obsessions. The fact that disco and hippiedom were more strongly rejected in certain dominant, white-boy run circles in the UK than in New York or Los Angeles, for example, had powerful musical and political consequences. It is only in retrospect, to take another brief example, that the North-South divide has become clear in critical accounts of British punk, decentering London's the Sex Pistols and the Clash in favor of Scottish or Irish punk, Mancunian inventiveness, or Sheffield's early techno. The powerful influence of these nodes of course reflected connections, through real and imagined linkages, and perhaps through more than the typical quotient of creative misreading.

Punk can be seen as no more, though certainly no less, than the sum total of its incompossibilities, which can make it as frustratingly inchoate an object of analysis as subjectively thrilling a feeling tone.[4] The impulse to name something or someone "punk" is surely insufficient by itself, and in this issue Drew Daniel tallies up the tolls that punk appropriation and minstrelizing can exact. But, as Jayna Brown, Jack Halberstam, and Deb Vargas variously show, the incompossibility of punk anteriors prevents any premature closing of the question of who can stake a claim in it or of the creative or critical potential of its afterlives.

At many of its sites, and in many of its iterations, punk was explicitly political, or at least lay claim to the political. It has served as one idiom for DIY politics, for anarchism, and for a vernacular anticapitalism rising up from within the belly of the beast. These valences of punk are perhaps the most familiar and attractive to *Social Text* readers. Yet in other places punk was only indirectly engaged with issues of inequality or oppression, and in yet others, its facets were ragingly reactionary: feeding into fascism, anti-Semitism, and white supremacy.[5] Seventies punk was sometimes nihilistic and angry, sometimes absurd, sometimes gimmicky and puerile. Sometimes it simpered and preened for the cameras, at the same time as it growled at the media to leave it alone. It was almost always self-conscious, foreshadowing the spirit of continuous self-invention that characterizes contemporary capitalism. But punk bands and their followers engaged from the get-go in an unstable interplay between authenticity and artifice, becoming deft media manipulators, as Patrick Deer notes in his coda to this issue, of what John Lydon would label the "Public Image" with all the suspect "pop" connotations the term implied. For that sin alone, punk risks damnation in the eyes of some, especially for those fans or critics for whom authenticity remains the ultimate measure of popular musical worth.[6] Yet as many artists, fans, and critics have demonstrated over the

decades, the interplay of authenticity and artifice in punk has always been intricate and unpredictable. Most of all, punk was everyday life; it was to be lived and, as such, contained the necessary admixtures and impurities that any lived politics includes.

Succumbing to the temptation to write off punk attitude as juvenile—as a form of revolt to be shed once more serious and mature forms of political organizing become available—produces severe political and historical myopia, as Shane Greene shows in his recent account of Peruvian *subtes*. Since we cannot know in advance what shape a revolutionary politics will take, it behooves us to take seriously all the myriad ways in which revolt is danced, drunk, spit, and sung. Perhaps unusually for an activist mass movement, the place of music in the Occupy movement took a while to emerge; it was only later in the extraordinary first year of Occupy that the "guitar army" became more central to its activities and demonstrations, and then as a deliberately retro and low-tech acoustic phenomenon.[7] The core of the Occupy assemblies was, of course, a kind of vocal/choral DIY performance, though without musical accompaniment. By contrast, music seems to have been an integral part of the Arab Spring throughout. While the Russian government's prosecution of feminist punk band Pussy Riot for "hooliganism" for their protest performances against the Putin regime ignited global controversy, music was only one element, and perhaps not the most important part, of their activist performance of their "Punk Prayer" in a Moscow cathedral. In responding to a now familiar skeptical response, "Why music as cultural politics?" this issue seeks to address a potential gap in our collective thinking as theorists of culture/cultural critics, given that to many people these days the question might tilt no less problematically in the other direction: "What other cultural politics is there apart from music?" As Shane Greene opines, "If the answer always returns us to the question of revolution in the classic Marxist Enlightenment sense, we are all deeply fucked."[8]

Despite its association with youth in revolt, or even because of it, perhaps the full complexity of punk is best approached in retrospect. Or, at least, in medias res, as many now middle-aged punks are increasingly revisiting and reflecting upon the aesthetic and affective commitments of their youth, as Zack Furness's new volume, *Punkademics*, evidences.[9] More than one punk scholar positions their writing, as José Muñoz writes in this issue, as a mode of "fidelity" to an event that is no longer here, no longer conscious, or that existed in a register not audible to the officiating dominant annals of a homogenizing punk history. Another contributor to this issue, Jack Halberstam, has written elsewhere about the possibility of punk and other queer subcultures affording "a perfect opportunity to depart from a normative model of youth cultures as stages on the way to adulthood; this allows us to map out different forms of adulthood, or

the refusal of adulthood and new modes of deliberate deviance."[10] This intersection between punk and queer politics is powerfully occupied in a number of our essays in this volume.

While recognized for its apocalyptic rhetoric and anti-intellectual ethos, punk practice has also produced enduring visions and strategies for alternative networks of distribution, activism, and theoretical and technological innovation. This commitment to exploring alternatives to the corporate music business in the era of media consolidation has only gained relevance now that the conventional business model has collapsed in the face of the digitization and file-sharing of music, and the gulf grows ever wider between a few elite star acts with very generous publishing contracts and the vast number of unsigned bands struggling to survive. Admittedly, in some versions, punk has ossified into a commodifiable icon of generational nostalgia and a range of premapped transgressions. But it has also continued to emanate meanings beyond these expectations. "Punk and Its Afterlives" seeks to keep open the range of its potential resonances.

As an intervention, this collection participates in a growing and important literature focusing on the stories and creative articulations of punk by women, people of color, and queers. The articles in "Punk and Its Afterlives" don't care about reforming a dominant history. They are not pleas for inclusion, squealing "we were there too." They don't move the margin to the center, to chide or correct. Instead they seek to move us off the grid entirely and make a linear master narrative impossible, in the spirit of the unruly and uncontrollable. They show that punk never was a bastion of straight, white masculinity. Collecting these essays, we don't ignore, or forgive, the racist and reactionary strands of punk. As Drew Daniel's opening essay on queer minstrelsy in punk suggests, we are interested in tackling tensions and contradictions rather than finessing them. We also seek to return the focus to the modalities of punk, as created by noncon-formists, misfits, and the alienated, which were—and are—inclusive, to those moments and spaces in which punk acts form an undercommons. These essays are listening to the music, moments, and spaces in which outsiders, those not embraced by dominant societal recognition, shape alternative affective territories and make us live history as dialogic.

Listening in this way points us to bands and scenes we need to remember, those that recognize alternative genealogies, and those that deform lineages. This issue's cover photo is of the all-black Philadelphia band Pure Hell, taken in front of Buckingham Palace in 1978. They are important in our formation of alternative genealogies but, despite their proximity to the Sex Pistols, are curiously absented from the dominant punk rock story.[11] Pure Hell—Kenny "Stinker" Gordon-Vox, Preston "Chip" Morris, Lenny "Steel" Boles, and Michael "Spider" Sanders —first formed in 1974 when four boys from West Philadelphia started playing

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music together, influenced by a range of artists, from Funkadelic to Alice Cooper. "We were really out there, I'm talking wigs, high heels," recalls Boles, "walking from Fifty-Ninth and Addison to Spruce to catch the bus through gang territory with high heels and a wig on."[12] Eventually they got on a bus to New York City and once there named themselves Pure Hell, as things there were "morphing from Glam into a more street vibe," according to Morris. Pure Hell was not, recalled Boles, "really a CBGB's kind of band" but a "Max's Kansas City, Chelsea Hotel, art scene, underground, spin-off Andy Warhol, Edie Sedgwick, transvestite trip." Their first New York City show was across from the Chelsea Hotel, where they met and played with Sid Vicious. From there they went to England, where they played with the Pistols and were highly publicized. They released a single, a remake of "These Boots Are Made for Walkin'," and have since recorded two albums. The point of this overly brief recollection of Pure Hell's work is not completism or contributionism, but a provocation to consider what the ongoing and multiple afterlives of the punk moment might sound like if they are not taken as monolithic. This point is reinforced forcefully in Jack Halberstam's contribution to this volume, where he revisits the "shadow feminism" of a scream released by Rhoda Dakar, fronting the Bodysnatchers in 1979, that echoes through subsequent performances of anarchism, from Grace Jones to Lady Gaga to Janelle Monáe.

The crucial question of punk's international reach is only partially surveyed in this special issue, and requires much further work of recovery and analysis. But we view going off the grid of the official punk narrative as opening the door to further stories that need to be told. In the current issue, for example, Matthew Carillo-Vincent traces the postpunk subcultural ethos of emo in the United States and Mexico. Deb Vargas offers a careful account of *pura pedo* in southwestern music that mixes postpunk with cojunto music, and pushes them into new directions at the same time. As scholars like Vargas and Carillo-Vincent show, the familiar center-periphery and diffusionist models of mapping the affective territories of punk are woefully insufficient to tell all the stories that could be told. In terms of the racial and transnational readings of punk, we are well beyond Dick Hebdige's formulation of a "frozen dialectic" between reggae and rap and punk, a point emphasized by Jayna Brown's essay for this volume, which explores the shared affective space of punk and dub musics and their intertwined genealogies. Brown shows the motility of these musico-political forms, rearticulated across differing historical moments, and finds in the concept of abjection a tie that binds punk, dub, and rap in the works of Tricky and the Bug.[13]

Punk's transnational histories and futures can only be gestured to in a single volume like this. Suffice to say that the Los Angeles–New York–

London axis along which many histories spin has now been permanently tilted. We aspire to be interventionist and diagnostic rather than encyclopedic or authoritative. There is much excellent work already out there. From Esteban Cavanna's work on Argentina's Los Violadores to Shane Greene's analysis of Peruvian *subtes* to the revelatory documentary *Punk in Africa*, the global story of punk is repaying close and critical assessment.[14] Once the myth of punk as exclusively a mode of "white riot" is abandoned, there can be room for the kind of alternative historiography proposed by Golnar Nikpour, who situates punk squarely within the global 1970s:

> It seems to me that punk—I am speaking here of its late '70s iteration—is a product of the 20th century movement of capital and peoples, insofar as it is one in a number of cultural (and subcultural) movements that are impossible to imagine without the prior two centuries of global urbanization and proletarianization. Thinking about punk in the context of urban space provides us with new methodological tools and questions, because the emergence of the cosmopolitan capitalist metropolis is a reality of both the colony and the metropole. This could explain why in 1976–78 we see punk scenes not only in London and New York but also in Istanbul, Sao Paulo, Tokyo, Mexico City, Stockholm, Warsaw, etc.[15]

In his coda, coeditor Patrick Deer takes up this call to think punk in relation to urban space, and connects it to both histories of imperial violence and punk's quixotic quest for authenticity in the face of the pop machine. Deer surveys punk's predilection for the soundscape of urban conflict and employs a tropology of burial and exhumation to argue for a more nuanced relation between punk and pop than is often deemed acceptable in purist conceptions of the music.

As Deer intimates, grasping the emergence of punk as a phenomenon of the global city may afford a new grasp on the transmutation of punk attitude and affect into other musical styles and, more generally, a better sense of punk's mercurial relation to pop. The explosive emergence of Pussy Riot and their "Punk Prayer" across news headlines in 2012, discussed by Barbara Browning in this issue, and the preceding years of radical activity in the arts collective Voina, is another crucial site of punk and its afterburns. Browning reflects upon her own entanglements in the acts of global solidarity around the trial of the Pussy Rioters, exploring the dissonance between Western sympathy for their anti-Putin politics and Western discomfort with their equally uncompromising anticlericism, and finding a performative source for this dissonance in the contested status of their protest as "music."

"Punk Studies" and Punk Study

Perhaps inevitably, "Punk and Its Afterlives" will find itself entangled in the emerging problematic of "punk studies." Punk has served to legitimate successive iterations of cultural criticism, demotic cultural studies, and independent music journalism. Recently an academic journal of punk studies has been launched. Scholar and self-described "old lady punk" Mimi Nguyen has outlined her own wariness regarding this nascent tendency:

> These are two reasons I have been reluctant in my own work to take punk as an object of study: I don't want to participate in its assimilation into something like capital (an "exotic" object to be traded in the academy), or a canon (not least because punk is such a sprawl), and I reject the idea that punk is not itself a scene for the rigorous production of knowledge.[16]

In a critical review of a recent punk anthology, Golnar Nikpour expresses a similar sentiment, arguing against the view of punk as "an intellectual little league" in need of academic valorization. "Punk," Nikpour reminds us, is "auto-archiving, self-aware, and interested in its own history [and] operates on the premise that everyone is an expert."[17] Against the assimilative thrust of "punk studies" as the latest object of cultural capital, against even the aim of employing punk tactics "within and against" the corporate academy, we are inspired by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney's vision of "study" as a "speculative practice" that can be "with and for" people where they are. As Moten suggests in an interview:

> I think we were committed to the idea that study is what you do with other people. It's talking and walking around with other people, working, dancing, suffering, some irreducible convergence of all three, held under the name of speculative practice. . . . The point of calling it "study" is to mark that the incessant and irreversible intellectuality of these activities was already there.[18]

Harney adds:

> When I say "with and for," I mean studying with people rather than teaching them, and when I say "for," I mean studying with people in service of a project, which in this case I think we could just say is more study. So, that with and for, the reason we move into more autonomous situations is that it grows, and we spend less time in the antagonism of within and against.[19]

Although Harney and Moten are describing a different project in another context, we think their words resonate with the project of punk study as practiced by Nguyen, Nikpour, Stinson, and Ngô. Punk study, in contrast

to punk studies, is the "rigorous production of knowledge" of an "auto-archiving, self-aware" scene or scenes, a conversation that is already going on before the self-styled intellectual enters, and one that continues after they leave. *Social Text* has over its history continuously contested its own autonomy from and antagonism toward academic disciplinarity. By no means are we styling "Punk and Its Afterlives" as a magical resolution to the actual contradictions we occupy as cultural workers in, but always of, the academy. Instead, disclaiming either comprehensiveness or authoritativeness, we offer this special issue as a contribution to a larger scene of study, play, and rebel music, a being-with rather than a speaking-for punk and its afterlives.

The articles in this issue range from discussions of the 1970s to the present day, and track punk affect and aesthetics across genre and location. Drew Daniel posits a queer minstrelsy at work and play in 1980s hardcore homophobia. Matthew Carrillo-Vincent tracks a particular style of recondite male affect through the postpunk musical style of emo, following its transnational migrations in the globalized present. Deborah R. Vargas explores the Tejas punk of the bands Girl in a Coma and Piñata Protest to argue punk's afterlife is a punk *puro pedo* temporality, situated in the space-time of the cantina. Jayna Brown thinks about the relationship between punk and dub music, from Lee Scratch Perry to Tricky and dubstep, which provided the dystopian sound track of the 2011 riots in the UK. José Esteban Muñoz unbraids the utopian and dystopian threads of collectivist and individualist impulse in the performances of Germs' frontman Darby Crash, offering a moving account of memory, fandom, and critical reflection. Challenging center-periphery and diffusionist models of mapping the affective territories of punk, Debra Rae Cohen and Michael Coyle argue that the Clash renovate the cover song and trace an alternative, politicizing play of citation in their version of Junior Murvin's "Police and Thieves" and work with producer Lee Scratch Perry that confronts the thorny question of punk's relations to Jamaican ska and dub music. Jack Halberstam offers an alternative to Lady Gaga's gestural gender politics in a vocal genealogy of "shadow feminism" that traces echoes of Rhoda Dakar's screams, as she fronted Two Tone ska band the Bodysnatchers in 1979, through performances of anarchism by Yoko Ono, Grace Jones, and Janelle Monáe. Barbara Browning explores the challenges to the theory and practice of advocacy, protest, and performance she has encountered in presenting public forums on the relationship between faith, feminism, and aesthetics in Pussy Riot's work. In his coda, Patrick Deer takes up the call to think punk in relation to pop and urban space, exploring the TV performance strategies of bands like PiL, the Clash, the Undertones, and Gang of Four as they confronted both histories of violence and punk's

quixotic quest for authenticity in the face of the miming required as the price of entry to the national pop media.

Notes

1. Willie Osterweill, "Punk Isn't," *New Inquiry*, 12 October 2012, thenewinquiry .com/essays/punk-isnt/.

2. Fiona I. B. Ngô and Elizabeth A. Stinson, "Introduction: Threads and Omissions," in "Punk Anteriors: Theory, Genealogy, and Performance," ed. Ngô and Stinson, special issue, *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 2–3 (2012).

3. See Tavia Nyong'o, "Punk'd Theory," *Social Text* 23 (2005): 19–34; and Tavia Nyong'o, "Do You Want Queer Theory (or Do You Want the Truth)? Inter-sections of Punk and Queer in the 1970s," *Radical History Review* 100 (2008): 103–19.

4. On incompossibility, see Gilles Deleuze, *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (London: Continuum, 2006), chapter 5.

5. See, for example, Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay, eds., *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (London: Verso, 2011).

6. Simon Frith diagnosed early on this tendency in Left valorizations of punk, in "Towards an Aesthetic of Popular Music," in *Music and Identity*, vol. 4 of *Popular Music: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 37–38.

7. This is not to say, of course, that musicians did not express widespread support for Occupy. See, for example, the letter of support signed by professional musicians on the Occupy Musicians First Year: September 2011–2012 website, www .occupymusicians.com/firstyear.

8. Shane Greene, "The Problem of Peru's Punk Underground: An Approach to Under-Fuck the System," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 24, no. 4 (2012): 584.

9. Zack Furness, ed., *Punkademics: The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower* (New York: Minor Compositions, 2012).

10. Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 174.

11. Detroit's uncompromising Death were similarly "disappeared," despite their coevalness with Iggy Pop. See Katherine E. Wadkins, "Freakin' Out: Remaking Masculinity through Punk Rock in Detroit," in Ngô and Stinson, "Punk Anteriors," 239–60.

12. These and subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from the documentary embedded on Pure Hell's website, www.purehellband.com (accessed 15 January 2013), site discontinued.

13. On punk and the abject, see also Tavia Nyong'o, "Brown Punk: Kalup Linzy's Musical Anticipations," *TDR: The Drama Review* 54, no. 3 (2010): 71–86.

14. Esteban Cavanna, *El Nacimiento del Punk en la Argentina y la Historia de los Violadores* (Buenos Aires: Interpress, 2001). *Punk in Africa* (documentary), dir. Keith Jones and Deon Maas, 2011, vimeo.com/user6741535 (Vimeo video clip, *Punk in Africa*, www.punkinafrica.co.za).

15. Golnar Nikpour, "*White Riot*: Another Failure," *Maximum Rocknroll*, February 2012, maximumrocknroll.com/white-riot-another-failure.

16. Mimi Nguyen, "On Punk Studies," *Slander* (zine) 8 (2012).

17. Nikpour, "*White Riot*: Another Failure."

18. Stevphen Shukaitis, "Studying through the Undercommons: Stefano Harney and Fred Moten—Interviewed by Stevphen Shukaitis," *Class War University* (blog), 12 November 2012, classwaru.org/2012/11/12/studying-through-the-undercommons-stefano-harney-fred-moten-interviewed-by-stevphen-shukaitis.

19. Ibid.