Notes: Music and the Education of Anger[1]

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The mosh pit: a vortex of sweaty bodies, anger, and joy, all swirling and colliding to the rhythm of the beat. Most often the mosh pit accompanies performances of "hard," music, such as punk and heavy metal: musical genres which play fast and loud, and which, sometimes draw upon anger. Some have suggested that the mosh pit and the musics which inspire it, can be breeding grounds for hatred and White supremacist ideas (Lakes 1999). But a close examination of these musics suggests that racist recruitment is an increasingly rare outcome of "hard" popular music. Indeed, in the case of contemporary punk music, quite the opposite type of education is at work.

Those educators who seek promote tolerance and sociable values, must recognize two crucial factors in young people's use of "hard" musics: (a) hard music offers a wide range of ideological positions, even within the same musical genre, and (b) young consumers of music are often critical of or indifferent to the politics of the music they listen to. Moreover, how students respond to the ideological content of music is strongly influenced by own values, and those of their parents, community, and teachers.

To some observers, punk rock, heavy metal, and Nazi-skinhead cultures may appear as part of a continuum of hatred, but a closer look reveals only the slightest phenotypic similarities. In seeking to understand White[2] supremacism as it relates to musical-social genres, it is first necessary to historicize the genres themselves. A brief genealogy of punk can help allay confusion about this complex subculture.[3] From its onset in the 1970s, punk was a movement staunchly opposed to the dominant culture and to the status quo; opposed, therefore, to the products and power corporate-capitalism. In its early days, like so many subcultures before it, punk articulated its dissent partly through styles which transgressed social norms, early punk sought to alarm the bourgeoisie. One adornment, popularized by Sid Vicious, bass player of the Sex Pistols,

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[1] This essay is an attempt to complement and correct parts of Richard Lakes' "Mosh Pit Politics: The Subcultural Style of Punk Rage" which appeared in this journal (Lakes 1999).

[2] In my work, I prefer to capitalize "White" as an ethnic term, so as to denaturalize it, and highlight its "ethnic" status, somewhat like, for example, Chicano or African-American. Whiteness is used here as a social construction, peculiar to the United States, with a very real membership and very real powers. A growing movement in punk, beginning in the 1990s, attempts to reject and disempower Whiteness, partly by calling attention to its unmarked, everyday power in many Western societies.

[3] One difficulty posed by punk research is the discontinuity in the subculture itself. Thus, writings on punk from the 1970s (cf. Hebdige 1979), 1980s (cf. Laing 1985) and 1990s (cf. Leblanc 1999) address divergent parts of the punk family tree. See O'Hara 1999 for a definitive look at the history of punk subcultures.

was the swastika—a symbol capable of offending almost everyone. The swastika could outrage everyone, except of course, White supremacists.[4]

By the early 1980s, "punk" was abandoned by the music industry, and it disappeared from the public eye. In the ever accelerated cycle of subcultural style, the "punk" fad—as it was commercially interpreted—was quickly supplanted by other musics. Punk was left for dead. But punk had never died, nor had it ever really become a teenage trend: the core of the subculture simmered underground, well below the radar of the mass media. In the1980s this core grew into several main strands: American and Canadian hardcore punk (which continued to use the symbols and musical style of commercial punk), something that might be called grunge, Oi, and lastly, the ostracized racist (or "Nazi") White skinheads.[5]

Over the years, racist skinheads have been no match for the fury of anti-racists in the subculture. Even at their apex , neo-Nazi punks were marginal, and were severely ostracized by other punks.[6] Yet for the greater punk *scene,* the proximity of neo-Nazis provoked a subcultural identity crisis during the 1980s, wherein punks discussed what was the essence of punk. The costumes and sound of punk rock had been commodified, and these looks and sounds were easily borrowed by people who donned the punk uniform and espoused racial hatreds, sexism, and violence. In the dialogue which followed (which left behind a rich material culture of zines, art, and music), punks all but excommunicated White supremacists from their ranks[7] and increasingly came to define themselves as *anarchists;* those who reject social hierarchies based on race, sexuality, sex, or creed, and those who tend to reject authority.

Richard Lakes shows that racist musicians have the potential to convert anger into human hatreds, but the inverse is true as well. Racists were often diverted to progressive and anarchist politics through the punk music and subculture. While neo-Nazis offered answers for young Whites' malaise, so too did anarchist punks: punks have long argued that boredom, economic hardships, and alienation—things troubling many young people—stem from corporate-capitalism, racism, and state oppression; from people dominating one another. In the punk marketplace of ideas, anarchist ideals won out. Anarcho-punk bands such as Chumbawamba and Fugazi have enormous popularity and have sold millions of recordings, while White supremacist bands such as Screwdriver are

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[4] While many saw ignorance and stupidity in Vicious' use of the swastika, others saw opportunity. Indeed England's National Front, a neo-fascist political party, began to vie with punk musicians for the ear of alienated White working class youths. In England (and later, in North America), neo-fascists tried to channel the anger of young Whites into a racialized anger which could be steered toward brown-skinned countrymen. But, the National Front and neo-fascism waned, both because Margaret Thatcher coöpted their politics (Marcus 1989: 117), and because the "punk" style began to vanish almost as quickly as it had begun, as teenagers moved onto the next trend (Harron 1988). See Marcus 1989 and Shank 1994 for a discussion of punk negation and use of Nazi accoutrements.

[5] Significantly, punk was also becoming an international movement.

[6] Punk fans and punk bands have regularly incited violence against Nazi-skinheads who appear at concerts, cleansing the scene of racism, to make it open to all. To wear a swastika among punks is to risk one's own safety: in a mostly peaceful subculture, few sights are more likely to invoke violence.

[7] What remains, as punks are quick to point out, is internalized racism; the racism that one learns and has difficulty unlearning. The punk subculture is still infused with unconscious forms of racism (Nguyen 1999). Most punks are committed, at least in theory, to critically examining their own racism and making the world a less racist place.

isolated and condemned to obscurity.   Punk subcultures, from Vancouver to Pensacola, are among the most outspoken proponents of an egalitarian society.

Lakes' point that the energies in slam dancing and mosh pits can be recruited for nefarious politics is belied by many other possibilities are at play in the frenzied mix of bodies. Leslie Roman's work (1988), for example, shows that women who slam dance do so for a variety of reasons, and take from the dance a variety of conclusions. The most-pit can be a joyous affair, even euphoric, in its "release" of energy, and in its intense sociality among strangers. The punk most-pit is a microcosm of punk itself: frightening to outsiders, apparently full of anger and chaos, but actually sociable and cooperative, usually carried out both in the name of fun and the spirit of an egalitarian society.

Because the sociable aspects of mosh-pits, punk rock, and heavy metal elude many observers, we are reminded of the importance of ethnography in studying youth subcultures. So too, we are reminded of the *agency* of consumers of popular culture; a point which has been forcefully made by countless scholars of popular culture, none more so than John Fiske (1989: 28): "the meanings of commodities do not lie in themselves as objects, and are not determined by their conditions of production or distribution, but are produced finally by the way they are consumed."

Richard Lakes' caution—that suburban angst and economic malaise can be channeled into racist sentiments—is well-worth remembering. But punks themselves have become virulently anti-racist: in their zines, music, and conversations, punks are proselytizing quite another message. Among all subcultures, punk is arguably the most committed to anti-racist ideals. Anger, as such, has been directed at the "System," (the powers-that-be) which is characterized by punks as sexist, homophobic, racist and ecocidal. Thus, at the turn of the millennium, the very definition of punk culture—that it is anti-hierarchical, non-violent, cooperative, and self-sustaining—is the *antithesis* of violent racism.

Lakes errs in conflating a variety of subcultures, from different times and places. By inadvertently fusing "heavy metal," "punk," "skinheads," Lakes' essay conflates these groups, and also makes each appear synchronic. These socio-musical genres are not only distinct from one another, each houses a great diversity of bands and fans. In terms of ideological orientation, heavy metal, for example, ranges from the leftist lyrics of bands such as Metallica and Sepultera to the thinly veiled racism of Guns N' Roses.[8] Indeed, the insidious racism of major-label artists such as Guns N' Roses and the neo-Nazism of obscure bands such as Screwdriver is cause for alarm. But White supremacist

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[8] Oddly, Lakes mentions the metal band GWAR, never known as a racist band. In fact, as All Music Guide says of the band, "GWAR (an acronym for God What an Awful Racket) is thrash metal's answer to the more mainstream satire of Spinal Tap. Gory, sexually perverse, and scatological in the extreme, GWAR was formed at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond as an experiment in marketing strategy by several musicians, art students, and dancers." (Huey 2000); "… GWAR is never genuinely scary, but rather humorous and goofy. …The whole thing is very tongue-in-cheek, and in fact, GWAR never intended to be anything more than a parody of thrash and death metal. But ironically, some headbangers actually took it seriously…" (Henderson 2000). GWAR, in short, is something of a joke, to itself and to some of its fans, and not a vehicle for fascist ideology. Heavy metal can often be characterized as a vehicle for teenage-male angst. See Walser 1993 for an outstanding and comprehensive discussion of this musical genre.

music is a generally a pariah of the music industry, untouched by major labels, MTV, and commercial radio.

Often ignored by educators is the routine misogyny and homophobia which saturate the musical marketplace, as exemplifed by pop stars such as Eminem, an artist who sings of hating and killing women, and of killing homosexuals (Boehlert 2000).[9] But even these attitudes, no matter how cruel, can only be understood in the context of their usage. As educators well know, young people are never the passive recipients of all that they see and hear. They resist, reinterpret, and ignore much of the information that approaches them. From television, to the classroom, to heavy metal music, young people filter what they receive. Indeed, learning to do so is a crucial task of living in the so-called Information Age. And that is precisely where educators must play a role: not in censorship or alarm, not in fear of mosh-pits, but in providing students with the intellectual tools to understand, critique, and improve the world themselves.

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[9] This celebrity has been celebrated by many of the most prominent institutions in mass media such as *Newsweek*. See Boehlert 2000.

[10] Thanks to David Muggleton for suggesting some of these sources on the Subcultural-Styles listserv.

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