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Punk is Dead: Notes Toward the Apocalyptic Tone Adopted by Punk Rock

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Philosophy, which once seemed passé, remains alive
because the moment of its realization was missed.

Theodor Adorno
Negative Dialectics

I WONDER WHICH CAME FIRST in 1979: Dick Hebdige's foundational analysis of the rise of punk rock, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, or the pronouncement by Crass, "Yes that's right, punk is dead," in their song "Punk is Dead"? The two events stand as memorials erected to mark the demise of punk even as they create some of the conditions that would prove essential for the survival of punk beyond its death. What does the pronouncement of death mean for punk culture and how might it be thought as a productive force that organizes the subculture in certain ways? What kinds of meaning and effects does it generate, and what ways of thinking and acting does it make more or less conceivable? Such questions become all the more pressing when one considers that punk has never quite ended, even if the death of punk has been proclaimed anew repeatedly since that time. Punk is powerfully attached to this rhetoric and its conceptual promise to do much more than simply pronounce its own demise. To what ends do punks speak about the death of punk? What

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desires does this tone represent? What does this apocalyptic rhetoric accomplish?

It might appear that to speak of the death of punk is an act of bad faith on my part or, worse, a failure to appreciate all of the ways it continues to inspire vibrant and strange expressions of music, community, and ethics. Punk remains alive and well globally in all sorts of local manifestations, and its effects continue to include the creation of identifiably punk music, even if what that sounds like changes for different times and places. It remains dangerous to be punk for some more than others, as the experiences of Pussy Riot in Russia show. Punk remains much more than music. It is an incubator, “a mechanism and a set of guiding principles” (Biel 3), that is as lively today as it ever was, with the audacity of Do It Yourself culture emboldening individuals to create the culture they want in creative and thoughtful ways that aspire to avoid exploitation and profit, appreciate community and strangeness, celebrate rebellion and newfound rituals, risk screwing up, and following one’s ideals. Punk has perhaps never looked less like a dead end. Punks like Shawna Potter support others to confront harassment and intimidation and create positive environments with her book *Making Spaces Safer* as well as her activities fronting the band War on Women; David Norman releases hand-dipped DIY cassette tapes and continues the tradition of truly independent non-commercial music distribution with Zegema Beach Records; and Reid Chancellor is expanding what it means to say “punk rock saved our lives” with his graphic novel *Hardcore Anxiety: A Graphic Guide to Punk Rock and Mental Health*. So, the question is not where did it go? How did it die? Punk never left, and it still provides a home for so many who might not find one elsewhere. Why, then, does punk so urgently and continually assert its demise?

From the beginning, there has been nothing but the end of punk. Crass is correct: punk was dead by 1979. In the UK, it had become mainstream with its dissident visual economy sublimated into fashion while its anti-commercial protest music became profit-generating discord for major record labels. Yet punk died too young and was never quite finished by this death. What continued in Europe, Canada, and the United States, and eventually all over the globe during the next forty years, distinguished itself from the birth and death of punk in the UK. When punk emigrated—if a spatial metaphor can be allowed for a transformation that involved much more than simple relocation and certainly none of the permanence this term might suggest—it was no longer rooted in the confrontational mode Dick Hebdige documented as a “resistance in which experienced contradictions and objections to ruling ideology are obliquely represented in

style” (133). The readily commercialized spectacle of style in punk culture had to go. As punk became more hardcore and more underground again, its sound was shorter, faster, and louder. Intellectually, it became suspicious of anything that aspired to the mainstream. Punk was no longer legible according to a confrontational visual politics that sought to be “directly offensive” (106) and the generations that followed claimed instead the mantle of punk’s Do It Yourself practice, its energetic and angry critique of dominant ideologies, and a feminist-inspired desire to explore how everyday life intersected with larger relations of power. Hardcore punk—a distinction without a difference in which “hardcore” identified a more dedicated version of punk—named a continuation and a survival after death.

Punk had died, but it was still alive and embraced by those who believed in its ongoing relevance and the anti-commercial aspirations of a decentred DIY community excited by the potential of bringing art, music, politics, and ethics together. As Stacy Thompson affirms, punk grew dramatically in this period of mourning:

[F]rom the late 70s and early-to-mid-80s English anarcho-punk scene to the early 80s California hardcore punk scene to the early 80s Washington, D.C. straight edge scene to the mid-80s New York City second-wave straight edge scene to the early 90s Northern California pop-punk scene to newly emerging genres such as crust, political hardcore, power violence, anarcho-punk, and fastcore, there is now more independently-produced punk than there has ever been. (307)

Punk was more vital than it ever had been before, but also less immediately recognizable because of the ways in which a mainstream image of a stylized punk culture associated with the Sex Pistols largely defined its existence in the popular imagination. But to say that punk survived its death as a minor commercial success is not the whole story because it never quite survives that death.

The death of punk continues to be affirmed by later generations. Punk has never exorcised the commercial threats that killed it the first time and which remain pressingly close at hand for a subculture that cannot fully separate itself from the capitalist world it opposes. So, when the prominent zine *Punk Planet* declared “Punk is Dead” on a 1994 cover, this reassuringly familiar claim to the end of punk affirmed the terms by which this community understood itself and referenced how punk bands had, once again, begun to move from the underground to the mainstream. This same

year, the longest running zine in the punk scene, *Maximum Rock N Roll*, proclaimed that the punk scene was “under attack” by corporations looking to profit from the next Nirvana (Yohannan) and depicted this threat on a cover that featured an individual with a gun in his mouth.

A rhetoric of the end of punk is not just a means of understanding and policing commercial practices in a largely DIY culture, however. It can also be a familiar set of codes lovingly deployed in a manner that is perversely celebratory. To be dead is to achieve a certain punk apotheosis. In 2006, Refused released a film posthumously recounting their final tour in 1998 entitled *Refused are Fucking Dead*. When writing a memoir of his life in punk and hardcore cultures in San Diego and beyond from the 1990s onwards, a life that includes starting the DIY label Three One G and performing in bands such as The Locust, Justin Pearson saw himself surrounded by “everything dead, done, and old” in *From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry*. The death of punk is nothing if not ongoing and a trope that remains compelling.

And what is appealingly familiar and just a little bit risqué might take on a different tone when death is no longer a far-away abstraction. Punks have become increasingly sensitive to the ways in which death might be less than rhetorical for those now in middle age, leading to new ways “in which older punks continue to articulate their attachment to and involvement with punk” (Bennet 233). The band Done Dying refashions a rhetoric of death by aligning so-called normal society with waiting to die and punk culture with vitality. As veterans of the punk scene for over twenty-five years, they embrace the perceived youthful energy and idealism of punk rock despite their ages and declare they are back and they are done dying.

If punk culture finds in death a way of understanding itself, this is equally true for academics writing on punk. Equal parts anxious, thoughtful, and aggrandizing, such research worries that academics might be powerful enough to inflict a death on punk. Thompson summarizes this perspective in a review of Roger Sabin’s edited collection *Punk Rock: So What?*, “the majority of punk’s theorists and critics harbor a sense that to ‘get punk right’ would be somehow to get it wrong, to kill it. Instead, they grant punk a Zen-like status, pointed toward but never actually described, experienced but not studied” (304). But the thought of loss that haunts many scholars fascinated by punk culture and the strange circulations of private and public memory that mediate its academic presence need not operate as a moral prescription regulating scholarship. Loss can be an impetus that guides thought and reflection.

A rhetoric of death may not be the only way to inscribe punk's attachment to loss and its curious conceptual promise, even if it is one of the most powerful ways of doing so. Consider, for example, the central importance of loss for Pussy Riot's decision to appear in balaclavas. As Rosi Braidotti explains at a 2014 symposium honoring the band's feminist punk practice as "a visceral scream of rebellion against the centralized master-code of sovereign power" and "a generous act of intervention upon our common world," she notes that young women in Russia—and elsewhere—confront social conditions that seek to annul singular individuals and replace them with gendered beings whose existence is defined by norms regarding how a woman should act and exist. To don a mask is, then, also to lose a social mask that has been imposed on women and to challenge the hyper-visibility and availability of women to the sight of men. By "putting on the balaclava you don't hide yourself but rather express another political subjectivity, which allows you to unveil and debunk the working of power and despotism. A despotic power that then tears away that mask from you, gives you back a public face, a name, a social location and proceeds to persecute you and punish you at will" (Braidotti). To lose one's social self, to lose the norms of appearance and propriety that police how one should exist in the world, can be a mode of surviving those conditions and document their effects. To be masked may reveal the social masks that can annul one's singularity. As masked individuals, Pussy Riot produce an understanding of existence grounded in loss rather than competing forms of proper or improper appearance. This is a brief example of what might come from thinking about how loss matters to punk and what it might be able to do.

What truth arrives when one proclaims punk is dead or hears this proclaimed? If saying punk is dead is plainly not true, then both the act of saying so and the vitality of this death are issues that bear some patient scrutiny. The phrase "punk is dead" does a number of things, not all of which I can take up on this occasion and not all of which makes sense together. In what follows, I offer a series of speculative considerations of the remarkable range of meanings and effects generated by these three short words delivered almost always in bad faith but with a clear sense of the potential of this declaration to reorganize reality in significant ways. This rhetoric of death embodies a number of desires and claims, and these complex attachments to mortality and temporality and loss reveal a number of opportunities for thought. My approach adapts what Sedgwick explained, in another context, as a mode of thinking that pursues "how certain categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and

what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially *mean*" (27). The goal of these reflections is to begin to understand the desires, meanings, and possibilities for thought these words carry and to signal some of the methodological opportunities that emerge with these new understandings for criticism of punk and of culture in the wake of punk.



The death of punk references an ongoing historical memory of punk going mainstream, eclipsing itself and becoming what it hated. This exists as both a memory and an ever-present possibility that operates as a guiding star and a disavowed desire, perversely nurtured in the form of a renunciation.



"Punk is dead" asserts and defies a lifespan, such that punk is dated and has ended just as it continues on, undead. The phrase speaks to a moment that is both anachronistic and timelessly ever-present. The declaration is always available, the death ready to be called again and again, annulling every previous pronouncement. What is the nature of this persistent and timeless present? How does one mourn a loss that has never quite taken place fully and finally? The death of punk, experienced like this, names the impossibility of mourning punk. Can one avoid being at least a little fixated upon it, perhaps in the manner Freud associated with melancholic mourners who cannot come to terms with loss?



The pronouncement "punk is dead" is a means by which punk cultures insulate themselves from loss and decay in the most extreme fashion imaginable by asserting and by claiming the right to define its destruction. This is both an exercise of power and powerlessness. What is gone cannot be taken away.



It is a wish that in death one might know that punk had been alive and ascribe some certainty to it: Punk. Is. Dead. It is a definitive and clear statement that simplifies punk's usually hazy and uncertain borders, vague reach, and complex membership. What is it? Where does it begin and end?

Is it personal? Is it political? Where did it happen? Who can be named punk and why? “Punk is not a homogeneous thing,” notes Zac Furness. It differs from itself at different eras and in different geographies, even in different cities, and its “various meanings, as any self-respecting punk knows all too well, are subject to wild fluctuation and widespread debate” (10). To say it is dead is a way to renounce at least some of these living uncertainties, even as the gesture expresses the impossibility of doing so. As if death or loss ever made things easier to comprehend.



The song “Dead among the Dead” by Ire from 1997 is just one of many instances in which punk culture uses the metaphor of death to describe unappealing forms of living. In this instance, it does so in order to critique itself, questioning just how different punks are from those living outside of the subculture. The claim that “punk is dead” can be a mode of stress-testing punk and considering what conditions it requires to survive.



Calling the time of death is also a means of asserting the right and authority to pronounce this death. If the body politic of a punk culture cannot prevent incursions from outside or unwelcome desires and activities within its ranks, it can insist on delivering the eulogy for what might have been. The right to inspect the body, the right to discover its passing, as well as the right to speak for the dead, emerge as powerful assertions of kinship, authority, and affinity. The powerful attachments that define participation in punk for many become especially visible in the face of death.



The history of punk is fundamentally migratory. Punk continues to appear in new locations and times, producing new frictions and providing new means of expression. Punk is always rooted in local iterations and explorations of what it can be and what it can do for that place and time. Yet the death of punk is often a universalizing declaration that ignores the local differences in punk. It is a declaration that rarely respects context. It is never a mode of saying that this version of punk, this politics of punk,

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punk in this time and place is dead. The absolute death of punk forgets all of the local manifestations and migrations of punk. The death of punk forgets that a death in one time and place is matched by survivals elsewhere. There is a nostalgic and universalizing force that emerges from this death that persistently threatens the possibility of recognizing all the ways punk remains powerful in specific and exact locations. Siddhartha Mitter testifies to these survivals when he writes of Muslim punk:

Amid this ongoing reinvention—which is partly about Islam, partly about migration, but mostly just individuals finding a path—Taqwacore blows in with its raucous sounds, eclectic supporters, and bizarre affinities. Its high-jinks aren't for everyone; nor is its irreverence and freedom. But that's punk rock, right? All noise and possibility. (241)

My punk might be dead; yours has yet to begin.



If punk is migratory, the reality of how one lives in punk remains an individual matter that is always contingent upon context and conditions that one neither chooses nor controls. Before starting the band Huasipungo in New York City, Esneider migrated from Colombia in order to escape the violence and warfare that enlisted too many young men there. He notes that while they could be DIY punks like anyone else—even if singing in Spanish and discussing Latin American politics “was a joke” to many punks who saw them—their reality was still different because he lived in the U.S. without documents:

[W]hen touring, we stayed away from the border, avoided towns even though we would do well there just so that we could avoid checkpoints. I stopped doing Critical Mass [bike demonstrations] when they started arresting people. The band members who were citizens always kept an eye on things. If we went through a checkpoint, only the white Americans would get in the driver and passenger seat; the rest of us would sit in the back. (337)

Punk rock may not be dead, but its survival does not promise the same level of “noise and possibility” for every individual, given the ways that individuals differ and encounter different unchosen circumstances.



To say that punk is dead is to acknowledge that what it means has become almost impossible to pin down. What is punk? As John Sussoeff notes, “ask a hundred punks, get a hundred answers” (Turcotte). Punk might have had its roots in the hippie movement, in Dada art, in the student movement, in Reggae, in garage rock, in folk music, or in situationist ideas. Its future is more international than ever before. The only thing that is absolutely certain is that if it was ever a singular movement, punk is no longer one thing, transformed as it has been by generations of punks who learn from and ignore the past as they make and remake it for the present in local, contingent, and idiosyncratic ways. What could be more punk than this refusal to let the dead govern the living?



If punk is anything, it is an endless negotiation with its own presence, coherence, possibility, and absence. As Alan O'Connor points out, this question of definition “is one of the key issues and conflicts within the scene itself” and thus cannot be resolved by the placement of academic boundaries that would begin, he rehearses, “for the purposes of this study punk is defined as ...” (“Maximumsocialscience” 95). The crisis in the definition of punk is not a problem to be solved; it is the crisis that punk names. This means that punk will always reference the ways in which meaning emerges as a contested matter, reflecting particular relations of power and shifting opportunities to define and decide on the meaning of punk. Punk is dead? Says who!?



If punk eludes death, it may be because its existence is realized by those individuals who define it with their actions and their inchoate desires, frustrations, and aspirations for what it might be. That punk survives as a viable designation for so many distinct and even unrelated activities, dreams, and disappointments is an affirmation of the power of individuals to grab hold of a legacy and a language and draw strength from it and sustain it in their own ways.



To say that punk can die is to recognize that it can do something, albeit with an especially low threshold for what counts as “doing” here. But it is worth hearing in the phrase “punk is dead” some sort of activity because it ascribes to punk a capacity rather than an essence. And while punk has done much more than just die, these accomplishments can be ignored by approaches that wish to see it as spectacular, shocking, and deviant. It has transformed individual lives by being hospitable to forms of artistic expression and community that might not have been possible otherwise. Punk has the capacity to wound and disappoint, as well as inspire. Punk activities can be ambitious, meager, threatening, sustaining, life-changing, radical, or normative, and sometimes all of these things at the same time. More, consider the ways in which doing and recognizing what counts as doing informs these comments on the significance of women in punk offered by Leslie Khan, an editor of *HeartattaCk* zine who helped to define hardcore in 1990s: “Always keep in mind there are a lot of women doing stuff. I constantly hear about the lack of women in punk, and the lack of active women, but there really are a ton of active women doing so much stuff. There may not be a ton of women in bands (though there certainly are several), but since when is punk supposed to be all about the bands?” (Martin 193). When punk is archived as something dead, the death of punk raises questions about how it is remembered and the power that such narratives always have to forget or only selectively remember some of the accomplishments of punk culture. Kahn comments remind us of how cultural memory is built and sustained as well as what is lost when one remembers punk primarily as an expression of music. The past twenty years contain so many examples of male punks getting the band back together one more time. I don’t see the same public recognition of all of the lives that have been forever altered thanks to the women who built their local and international punk scenes in such powerful ways, regardless of whether they were ever part of a band.



Punk has something to prove, a chip on its shoulder, thanks to a death it can’t quite shake. How much positive social energy and community building might have been lost were it not for the psychological effects

of wanting to show that punk is so much more than middle fingers and marketable sneers?



If there is death, there is inheritance. For generations, the death of punk has awakened individuals to the strange responsibility of living up to the legacy of punk and how one inherits traditions or alters them. Inheritance is a fundamental feature of how punk has survived its deaths, passing on knowledge and practices from one generation to another. Consider the creation and maintenance of punk institutions, such as DIY-run clubs or DIY record labels. Volunteers working at the punk-run club 924 Gilman speak about inheriting the activities of others who have come before them and the desire to help maintain this institution for present and future generations. As Lauren L. notes in the remarkable work of cultural history, *924 Gilman: The Story so Far*, “It’s a pretty incredible experience to be involved in a place where you get to see people grow up, to watch them become coordinators or bookers” (Edge 252). Such labour needs to be rewarding because it can just as readily lead to exhaustion. And both outcomes recognize that maintaining the DIY features of punk culture takes work and these sorts of alternatives to capitalism are vulnerable to decay and destruction precisely because they rely on human commitment.



Can the death of punk that was inflicted by commodity capitalism lead to more than yet another apotheosis to the centrality of economics? Consider how Dylan Clark’s assessment turns from economics to see the pressing psychological realities that emerge when he claims that punk “faked its own death” (234):

When punk was pronounced dead it bequeathed to its successors—to itself—a new subcultural discourse. The do-it-yourself culture had spawned independent record labels, specialty record stores, and music venues: in these places culture could be produced with less capitalism, more autonomy, and more anonymity... Many people who were still, in essence, punk did not know that they were inhabiting kinds of punk subjectivity. ... Punk can be hidden even to itself. (234)

The words
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dying”
transitions from
the front to back
labels of the
1978 EP from
Stiff Little
Fingers.



Some failures in punk get recognized as something that might kill the spirit and essence of punk, while others do not. As Mimi Nguyen noted in her 1998 call to fellow punks to participate in the “self-reflexive unpacking of privileges/poverties” (268) surrounding race in punk by first acknowledging the “whitestraightboy’ hegemony [that] organizes punk” (260), punks need to become “accountable to your social location. Interrogate and historicize your place in society, punk, whatever, and be aware of *how* you talk about race, gender, sexuality—it’s political. Examine all the categories you’re using at least twice for hidden assumptions, exclusions, erasures” (267–68). Some ideas have mattered more to punk than others. Some outside influences and social conventions have never threatened punk nearly as much as others. Nguyen wrote six years after Joel Olson wrote his “New Punk Manifesto,” published in a 1992 issue of the zine *Profane Existence*. He discerns substantial failures to address matters of domination within the punk scene and calls for a broader understanding of punk as a “rejection of our roots,” including inherited racial privilege: “we are the inheritors of the white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist world order” (191). Six years later, punks had done little to repudiate this inheritance; meanwhile even the smallest hint of capitalism was enough to get the death knells ringing. The actions of those who seek to challenge punk expressions of mainstream cultural norms as well as its unexamined privilege reveal the urgent reflexivity that makes punk such a powerful pedagogical cultural force. The capacity of punks to examine themselves and their culture critically is an institutional foundation and birthright that has kept punk alive even when its rebellion evidences an autoimmune attachment to conventional relations of domination and inequality.



The words “Punk is dead, but ... we’re still dying” transitions from the front to back labels of the 1978 EP from Stiff Little Fingers. They invite listeners to think about a key tension in punk culture between ideals and the concrete activities of individuals that makes punk what it is. The history of punk tends to emphasize the former over the latter, even if the fingerprints of the dying are all over that decision. Stiff Little Fingers sensed

early on that it is worth asking if punk culture has tended to care more for the life of punk than for the lives of punks, just as it is worth wondering what follows from asking such a question.



When Los Crudos wrote “We’re that Spic Band” in 1996—their first and only song with English language lyrics—they sought to address racism within punk and the unwelcome hospitality it had for some cultural norms of oppression and prejudice. They affirmed that racism was antithetical to punk culture (“You call yourself a punk? Bullshit! You are just a closet fucking nazi!”) and, even more importantly, they celebrated “a vibrant history of punks of color that is often sequestered to the shadows” (Duncombe and Tremblay 207). Racism remains a deadly force that could destroy so much of punk’s potential to offer a haven to the marginalized. Crudos not only called out punks for their racism but also insisted on seeing and taking stock of the survival of another version of punk by recognizing the contributions of punks around the world who were not white and did not identify punk with whiteness. The band dedicated their discography of recordings,

To all the punks and kids in the middle of America and on both coasts who sang along with us even though it was not in English, that fucking rules! But, we must thank all the people from our neighborhood back home [the southwest side of Chicago] or neighborhoods like it in Texas, Los Angeles, New York, New Mexico, and Arizona, who knew exactly what the hell we screamed about because it was about us all. (Los Crudos)



The death of punk can express a desire to not exist in ways that are recognized as living by the outside world. To be taken for dead, to be left for dead, to be the wrong person at the wrong time can be the basis for recognizing all the ways individuals exist beyond or outside of what is represented as viable or possible under capitalism. Consider those running a record label, an activity that might be understood elsewhere to be a profit-generating enterprise: Martin Sorrondeguy describes his lack of interest in promoting his label Lengua Armada and running it “like a business” when he notes he has no interest in it becoming “this serious

fucking record label” (O’Connor, *Punk* 113). “I think punks are drawn to it because of that. Because it is not this, I am not trying to sell you this record” (113). This means taking the label seriously artistically and as a means of documenting a scene and endorsing bands that matter to Sorrondeguy as well as something that brings people together. For instance, he recalls the labour that went into the DIY manufacture of six thousand copies of the *Crudos LP*, complete with three-colour screen-printed covers produced by hand, that involved “busting our asses” as well as “socializing” (112). Speaking of his label and bands, Pearson is even more blunt in his memoir: “[Y]ou just did what you did, lost your ass financially, and benefited in ways that had nothing to do with monetary success” (Pearson 82). Career suicide? Depends on what you consider to be suicide, I suppose.



By emphasizing its own death so loudly, punk always potentially trivializes loss and mourning even when it loudly exposes in words and images the violence and neglect that characterize the economies and military interventions of western nations that produce so much death globally. By not being especially attentive to the differences between real and rhetorical deaths, between the loss of independence and the loss of life, “punk is dead” can start to read like a manifesto for equivalence that fails to consider the real harm such equivalences can engender.



Death is not necessarily rhetorical and suicide may be an unintended consequence of a subculture that fetishizes and celebrates death, as if posthumously. “Save You” is a 1997 compilation EP released in the memory of Jonathan Hernandez “and all the other fallen children who have taken their lives before their lives had a chance to begin” (“Save You”). Lyrics and commentary from the bands included on the EP invite listeners to consider how suicide is romanticized as a form of public survival, an idea that goes back at least as far as Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). The writings throughout the record encourage punks to reject such norms by noting that “when life is equated with misery, living itself becomes rebellion” and staying alive becomes an act of courage to be celebrated (“Save You”). Amid these searching efforts to arm punks

with tailored arguments for living that draw on a naturalized punk opposition to conventional thought, “Save You” likewise includes a host of information such as suicide hotlines, warning signs of suicide, and passionate reminders to the listener of the value of his or her life: “If you are miserable in this world, you are the perfect person to help re-shape it. You know what hurts. We need you” (“Save You”). The inside cover surprises listeners with a gold foil fish-eye mirror in which one discovers a reflection of oneself below which are the words “you are unique, unprecedented and unrepeatable” (“Save You”).



Like “Save You,” which donated profits to suicide prevention groups in New York City, Lengua Armada’s “Vida—Life” is a compilation EP that financially supported live-saving community interventions and raised awareness of HIV/AIDS and prevention initiatives serving Chicago’s primarily Latino Little Village. The EP includes two substantial inserts and a pack of several condoms as well as information on anonymous HIV/AIDS testing in Chicago. One of the inserts documents song lyrics and the other is a primer from Sonia Munoz, a prevention specialist at Project VIDA, who explains what they do and notes that in 1997 some still refuse to believe HIV/AIDS exists and thus engage in higher-risk activities. Her words might directly reach those in the punk scene with similarly false impressions or inspire punks to develop similar forms of outreach in their communities. Next to her words is a brief and anonymous essay from someone coming to terms with what it will mean to live HIV positive. As a queer man, he discusses the challenges that can keep one from coming out within the Latino community in which he lives and encourages readers to “embrace what is okay for your specific situation” (“Vida—Life”). If for some punks, HIV/AIDS belongs to health class and sex-education films, here they are given the opportunity to hear from those living amid the pandemic. The remarkable care and effort that went into creating the package for this record—foil wrapped cardboard and acetate front and back images—is not just a remarkable instance of DIY creativity; it also powerfully conveys the importance of HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention as well demonstrating an attachment and respect for the lives of queer individuals who are often marginalized by expressions of hypermasculinity in punk. This is a forcefully punk affirmation that those living and dying amid the pandemic matter and deserve recogni-

tion and should be listened to is a powerful example of how confronting death can sometimes be a means for punks to recognize that not everyone is equally vulnerable or equally abandoned by the state or their communities during a pandemic.



Punk can absurdly invert concern into careless celebration, as In/Humanity does with their mercilessly ironic 1996 song, “Teenage Suicide—Do it!” Not only does it render ridiculous neoliberal claims toward personal sovereignty and freedom (“here’s to our friends that have embraced the ultimate expression of autonomy and personal choice”), it highlights and satirizes widespread forms of global neglect by redeploying the imploring tones of a World Vision infomercial: “Your sacrifice may save the life of a starving child” (In/Humanity). The death of punk may sometimes yield little meaning except the willingness to mock the seriousness of death, a position that is always at least a little radical in its potential to recognize the absurdity of a North American culture that worried over teen suicide while aggressively neglecting and sacrificing the lives of people of colour, the homeless, queers, those with inadequate health care, as well as those living with addiction and mental health challenges.



Is profiting off of punk a sign of its death? Or does this forget that punk may generate effects in excess of its resistance to capitalism and non-profit tendencies (non-profit in practice even if not by intention)? “If abolishing capitalism through punk rock is the ultimate aim of punk, and it is, then punk has so far failed, but as a process and a project committed to transforming consumers into producers, it succeeds on a daily basis” (Thompson, *Unfinished* 179).



Jude Davies notes that “while the Sex Pistols claimed no past—‘we have no influences, we hate everybody,’ sneered John Lydon—and no future, they became history that could be used by the second wave of punks” (9). There has always been a future for “no future” and Janice Radway’s recent work on the afterlife of *Riot Grrrl* zine producers demonstrates

just how much of a future can be wrought by those who walk paths first established in the wake of punk's ongoing death. Radway notes that an orientation toward the future offers new methodological possibilities because it is

surprisingly rare for cultural critique to take a long-term, prospective view. Scholarly analysis and analytic critique, especially in the humanities, tend to be retrospective, looking back at the history of evolving cultural traditions, knowledge of which constitutes the humanistic disciplines. Consequently, cultural critique, even that focused on popular culture, typically attempts to make sense of the situation at the time of writing by relating it to past canons and rarely seeks to trace emergent, gradually building effects over time. (143)

What she develops instead is an approach that notes how individuals were “profoundly changed by their zine-ing” over time, noting that the effects of participation in *Riot Grrrr!* may not be limited to the summer of 1991 and its immediate aftermath (144). How does one draw the line regarding what can be thought of as an effect of punk or any other subculture, I wonder, especially if one understands it to be an experience that operates with a structure akin to loss or grief in the sense that it may unpredictably transform an individual well beyond its initiating moment?



A rhetoric of revolution is in tension with a rhetoric of death, such that punk understands that it can revolutionize itself rather than die. The binary logic of a punk rock that was either living as it was or dead was powerfully rejected by DC punks in 1985 who challenged the most violent aspects of hardcore during what came to be known as Revolution Summer. In the words of Ian Mackaye, this was a moment that “showed them that there was a possibility to be into punk rock without being into guys stomping on your head” (Kuhn 29). Hardcore punk moved beyond spectacular expressions of aggression and began to articulate a social politics and principles that involved progressive positions on “gender issues, environmental issues, diet issues, and so on” (28). This was a moment in which punk failed to let itself die and instead “became a bold expansion of the emotional, musical, and political commitments implicit in the original hardcore scene, a re-creation of punk, more artistically open, while still defiantly anti-commercial” (Anderson 7–8). The notion that punk culture

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can change rather than die is an idea cemented by the rebirths of that revolutionary rhetoric, first with *Riot Grrrl's* 1991 pronouncement of a Revolution Girl Style, as well as albums entitled “Revolution Summer” by Reversal of Man (1998) and Muncie Girls (2012). These revolutions are vital events that want to see punk survive even as they are haunted by its mortality.



To be given up for dead might be most obviously a sign of worthlessness, but it also meant that punk can claim a freedom from the world that hated it. This was never more than a fantasy of separation, to be sure, but that may not make it less compelling and this proposition held the power to stir some to live on their own terms, as D.O.A. proclaimed in “Liar for Hire”: “Nobody wants you / Nobody needs you / Nobody’s gonna live for you.”



Jack Halberstam sees that punk culture is far from unique in its attachment to death and loss and that for too many “the politics of an explicitly political negativity” is an unchosen and devastating reality (824). These comments come as part of a comparison of the rallying cry of the Sex Pistols who find “no future” for punks like them in England and Lee Edelman’s book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* that examines how social norms discipline queer populations for their failure to adhere to heteronormative investments in reproductive futurity. Halberstam is well aware of the legacy of marginalization and callous disregard for queer lives that is baked into the epithet “punk” that referred first to queer lives before it ever named a genre of music and those who identified themselves with it. But such negativity appears in many more places as well, Halberstam notes, including among anti-colonial activists and critics of African slavery and its legacies in the Americas who “oppose the optimism of the colonial vision with a ferocious voice of despair, refusal, negation, and bleak pessimism” (824). Against assumptions that create a false choice between hope and survival over despair—as if these were a matter of one’s preference or outlook—Halberstam risks taking seriously the social negativity that animates the lives of some in order to consider how it can be a force for affiliation across very different

experiences of death and loss. Punk has rarely seen its vulnerability as something that might bring it into proximity with other outcast communities in the way Halberstam articulates. Instead of creating alliances with other cultures that are equally uninterested in maintaining social norms, punk emphasizes its antagonism with the world at large as if it cornered the market on such activity. What would punk criticism look like if it acknowledged allegiances present in but not always articulated by punk practices, ideals, and habits? Can punk criticism make these affiliations easier to discern and appreciate? For example, how is a trans punk band like the HIRS Collective restoring to punk a queer energy to nourish lives not adequately respected by dominant social norms? When the album “Pentagrams are Super!” was released by Gaytheist, one had to appreciate the space it claimed in loud music culture for queer folks who had always been part of punk’s death drive yet are less frequently recognized to be part of pentagram-laden death metal culture. Oppositional by nature, punk has never lived in a vacuum. And this means that it ought to be approached as one node in a larger web of discourses that can develop understandings of how culture is the product of intersecting activities, affiliations, histories, and opportunities. Discussions of punk can be a means of seeing how communities are sustained, just as it can be a means of highlighting distinct histories of discrimination and marginalization within and outside of punk. It can capture the local and tenuous ways this happens as well as record the support and resistance such efforts receive. But this might only be possible if one can break free of the urgently self-centred attention that the death of punk demands and begin to see the many attachments and separations made possible by punk. To focus only on punk is to lose so much of what it does in the world and why it matters to so many. Individuals and cultures are always shaped by attachments and losses, norms both chosen and unchosen, a social world, as well as so many familiar others. It would be a shame if the vital intersections of punk rock with a wider world are forgotten by those archiving and studying punk. As if one could ever study just that!



Punk’s fascination with death can be read as an expression of linguistic bravado meant to shield one from the realities of life and death by trying to make death rhetorical. But even in that context it is clear that one’s vulnerability to death has become *the* founding thought of punk

culture. The implications of this are important for a subculture that routinely seeks to model the sorts of social relations it sees as the basis for a more just world. Starting with precarity, or what Judith Butler calls the “bodily vulnerability” that we all share as finite beings and which attaches us as earthlings to all life on this planet and the social and environmental conditions that sustain life (*Notes* 130), means thinking about what is required for a “livable life” and how some lives have been made less livable than others (134). Punk zines, lyrics, and concerts often identify how life has become a differential category, structured according to social and political identifications of the more and less human that identify the importance of some while making others the object of neglect, abandonment, and violence. Punk’s attention to death orients it toward life without “positing a single or uniform ideal for that life” (134), and this is an important opportunity to see how individuals are living in ways that run counter to social norms that so readily value some lives over others.



Mourning can be a mode of violence if it involves transforming what has been lost into what one wants it to be. Confronting the death of punk can mean forgetting all of its differences. One individual may not have the power to rewrite what punk is and was, but, as the cultural history of punk already suggests, only some voices and some versions of punk culture are being actively remembered and recorded, and they are often doing so without acknowledging all that is being forgotten. As Gabriel Kuhn notes, for example, straight-edge culture has long been represented as a form of “extreme male dominance, violent behavior, intolerance, and [attached to] a moralistic puritan tradition” (14). This image is not wrong. “However, there has always been a ‘different edge’: engaged in political struggle and social transformation, but not judgmental, belligerent, or narrow minded” (14). Kuhn’s *Sober Living for the Revolution* remembers feminist and queer traditions of straight edge culture; in the oral history *Straight Edge: A Clear-Headed Hardcore Punk History*, Tony Rettman almost entirely ignores these traditions.



The possibility that punk can die can instill a sense of responsibility to keep it alive or identify symptoms that require aggressive treatment. As

Sarah Kirsch comments in *Burning Fight*, when hardcore began to attract the interest of corporate record labels, “it changes the whole culture around shows” and many

of the people and places I sought refuge from in the first place were starting to claim it as their own. To me, hardcore was a reaction to that. People realized it was going to take more than political slogans to really change stuff; it’s going to take long term commitment. And with that it’s like we have to go deeper underground—we have to take the stuff that matters about this and make it more relevant and more threatening and more on fire and part of who we are. (Peterson 16)



In the United States, death is never too far removed by a discussion of warfare. The 10” compilation entitled *Limited Options Sold as Noble Endeavors* explores how limited class mobility, poverty, and racism conscript individuals into what is notionally a volunteer army in the United States. The liner notes and the included zine, *ContraScience* #5.5, is nothing less than a critique of the fantasy of freedom in economic and social life in the United States and in the equally duplicitous presence of freedom as a primary goal of U.S. militarism globally. As a former soldier-turned-punk Mike Griffin writes, “for the privilege of going to college, or merely to escape the intimidating circumstances of America’s urban ghettos and rural areas, these kids were willing to risk their lives and take someone else’s” (*Limited Options*). For many high school and college-age punks in the United States, the promise of the G.I. bill may loom large. Griffin’s words are included in the record as part of a eulogy created after his suicide. Punk rock did not save him. As a work that aims to raise consciousness of limited options, the record hopes that it might save some lives from similarly debilitating circumstances and profits went to the Central Committee for Conscientious Objectors. What this record does most powerfully, perhaps, is mourn a life and celebrate a spirit of resistance in the face of a culture of death that is beguilingly wrapped in claims of opportunity and the glories of patriotism. Sometimes the loss of a punk means also confronting the social norms that make death routine and acceptable.



The grammar of the pronouncement “punk is dead” recalls the famous call of succession: “The King is dead, long live the King.” Yet punk has left the second half of this epanalepsis silent, with no successor named in the wake of punk’s demise. That successor has always existed, to be sure, but its ascension is silent and may even depend on a degree of invisibility rather than celebration. Those who know where to look will always discover that another generation is active in the name of punk. In this sense, the punk one knew and perhaps bore some responsibility for making possible can die and will be survived by punk carried on in the hands of others. Have we yet seen a criticism of punk that is interested in this inheritance and transmission? Is research too much bound to one’s own experience or recollection of punk? Is there a criticism that addresses succession? Like sovereignty, punk may require some historical amnesia. If the king can be replaced, and in fact depends on that prospect in order to be the king—in the sense that the role of the sovereign is always subject to succession and might be replaced by another—it suggests that one individual can never fully embody the role. Similarly, to say punk survives its death suggests that punk depends on exceeding the material activities of individual punks. Punk designates a capacity for survival beyond those who bring it to life. And there can be no reign of punk that defines it once and for all.



In Bryan Ray Turcotte’s 2007 collection of ephemera, *Punk is Dead, Punk is Everything*, the vocalist, writer, and artist Sam McPheeters writes of a gig poster he created that includes a news image of an African American murdered on a street corner:

The “Seasons Beatings” flyer really makes me cringe. I have a bad feeling I am going to be meeting this guy in the afterlife, and he’s not going to be pleased to see me. Who can blame him? You get beaten to death on a crowded street corner and some whiney college boys from New Jersey use a photo of your corpse to advertise their band? What the fuck is that? Oops. Sorry, guy. Sorry, world. (Turcotte)

To survive the death of punk also brings with it the opportunity to take responsibility for moments of thoughtlessness in the past. Making a spectacle of death, and in particular the death of another human being, by thoughtlessly repurposing images of the dead in self-serving ways occurs painfully often in punk culture.



Can images of death remain potential provocations, especially when they are used to shock individuals into thought rather than celebrate suffering and normalize violence? When *Struggle* used a 1991 photograph from the Highway of Death in Iraq on the cover of their self-titled 12" EP, they did so with little direct commentary, although the entire booklet by the artist and activist Seth Tobocman initiates a broader critique of American imperialism, warfare, patriarchy, and privilege. More directly attentive to what it means to package death and suffering as part of an effort to provoke thought is Jenny Piccolo's 12" EP entitled "Information Battle to Denounce the Genocide." The front cover features a map of Latin America and on the back is a photograph of skeletal remains in soil. Along with song lyrics inside, the insert includes the following reflections written by band member Al Ruel:

I have serious qualms about including pictures of dead people in record artwork. Don't confuse it for shock value space filler. Here's my main hangup: my mother wouldn't want a photograph of a mutilated corpse on some dumb rock band cover. However, photographs are an excellent means of exposing information and making a point. So what is the point? The photograph has to be taken in context and that can't be neglected. These pictures intend to address: "Militarism." Militarism has plagued policy in so many governments of this century: from the Holocaust, to Vietnam, to El Salvador, to Iraq, to the Balkans. Militarism in the United States is especially important because we have positioned ourselves as the core of the world, and have used militarism to protect it. Protection of our hegemony means protection and expansion of capitalism. (Jenny Piccolo)

Ruel hopes this discussion can "encourage people to find out about this stuff on their own so that our scene is not just about checking out the sickest new band." Death becomes part of a practice of critique in this instance that reaches after global politics but also visual economies of

journalistic and televisual mediations of war that inspire punk and death metal iconography. It is striking how Ruel stages responsibility here. He is uncomfortably responsible for the double function of photographs to reveal unwelcome truths and their potential to make that same reality disappear when they are used to sell records to people for whom images of death are safely risqué. Ruel's critique asks punks interacting with the record to think about what it means to consume such images and the reasons one might do so.



“Yo, Born Against, you better be extremely cautious about who you talk shit about” begins the answering machine message that starts the song “Born Against Are Fucking Dead,” reminding us that some pronouncements of death are like promissory notes for the future rather than documented facts.



Sometimes one declares “punk is dead” to identify a generational void, as if to say “I can never be punk like they were, like the older wiser more dangerous kids who were here when punk really meant something.” Every generation lives in the wake of this death.



Punk is composed of so many ephemeral moments that were the product of chance, sweat, friendship, passion, and music, and one cannot recapture them with any amount of paper, recordings, oral histories, or long-distance phone calls. Nothing brings it back.



“People are different from each other” writes Eve Sedgwick with characteristic clarity (22). It still remains “astonishing how few respectable conceptual tools we have for dealing with this self-evident fact” (22). For some, the death of punk is a serious anxiety; for others, it is a strident rhetoric. For some, the subject of death might be personal, abstract and distant for others. How any one individual lives in the wake of the death

of punk is no doubt shaped in part by a wider set of social and individual experiences that in turn leads to unpredictable forms of attachment, longing, disavowal, indifference, and so on. How a collective subculture handles this death and who gets to recognize what or when punk is, how it dies or survives, is a contested matter.



“Punk is dead” is a triumph of categorization in the face of its impossibility, affirming as it does the presence of something called punk stitched together out of so many singular instances of human activity, modes of dress, styles of music, forms of expression and attitude, ethics, social and political thought. Perhaps the death of punk is so quickly declared because it is an obliterating acknowledgement of the void at the centre of any discussion of punk. As a category, punk can only sacrifice all of the differences that make up its existence in individual punks.



The cover of Momentum’s 2013 *Herbivore* LP features an image of a human skull and the skull of a dog “looking” at one another. What kind of non-encounter is this, that stages the human animal and the non-human animal coming face to face in death? The title of the LP frames this encounter in terms of punk’s longstanding advocacy of vegetarian and vegan diets. Perhaps it is only in the death of the animal that one fully grasps the extent to which a notion of the human depends upon an exception that permits the non-criminal putting to death of non-human animals in slaughterhouses. Each of the songs on the record address topics related to the slaughter and consumption of animals, including a cover of Propagandhi’s seminal animal rights anthem from 1996, “Nailing Descartes to the Wall,” which Momentum retitles as “Punk Rock Saves Lives.” This is a provocative answer to a question almost asked by the death of punk: Can the thought of death become a practice of living? Punk culture’s turn to animal rights and its ongoing critique of human exceptionalism is a powerful way of encountering this question and transforming the task of living into a matter of how one lives with other beings on this planet. The LP includes a zine, *Vindication of a Vegan Diet* that dispels many conventional challenges raised against animal-free diets. The title references Thomas Paine’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Man* (1790) as well

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as Percy Bysshe Shelley's vegetarian tract, *A Vindication of Natural Diet* (1813). Even more, the zine highlights how punk has long been inspired by feminist claims that the personal is political—likewise citing Mary Wollstonecraft's famous *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—and how one eats is among the most personal and also the most political topics, guided as it is by ritualized social norms and conventions. Zine cookbooks such as *Soy not Oi* arm young punks with the knowledge of how to eat in new ways, while songs that celebrate plant-based diets and animal rights remind vegan punks they are not alone, regardless of how strange their diets might have once appeared to others. Momentum's *Herbivore* LP aspires to continue a tradition of knowledge and practice in which punk rock saves lives.

PURSUIING THE DEATH OF PUNK opens multiple horizons for thought that criticism interested in and affected by punk has yet to pursue. My goal has not been to discover the truth revealed by the death of punk. Instead, I have sought to trace some of what happens in the wake of death of punk and its many proclamations. Punk has always been premised on loss, whether that is the loss of innocence that leads one to elevate rejection into a virtue or the disappointment that punk accumulates in its failures to bring about its most profound re-organizations of social hierarchies and relations of power. "Punk is dead" might be a mournful rallying cry and an expression of critique that is always confident that, if nothing else, punk can deploy its full force to destroy itself, at least. But it is never only an exasperated celebration of powerlessness. This death is always also the starting point of a willingness to confront loss and the centrality of desire and longing to one's life. My sense is that if longing can become a starting point for thinking about what punk does and the areas of concern that it addresses, it might provoke new questions regarding how one lives on and survives in ways made possible or necessary by this loss. Rather than try to understand punk better or more adequately capture its essence and diversity, a criticism quickened by loss might hope to think about how individuals live and breathe in the wake of punk and recognize in punk a range of complex, intimate, ethical, emotional, social, and political attachments.

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