

Punkademics

The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower

Edited by Zack Furness
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ZACK FURNESS

**ATTEMPTED EDUCATION
AND RIGHTEOUS
ACCUSATIONS:
AN INTRODUCTION TO
PUNKADEMICS**

**THE POSITION BEING TAKEN IS NOT TO BE MISTAKEN
FOR ATTEMPTED EDUCATION OR RIGHTEOUS
ACCUSATION.**

-OPERATION IVY, "ROOM WITHOUT A WINDOW"

I THINK THE moment at which I realized I was actually turning into a college professor was not on the first day I taught a class in 1999, but when I was listening to an old Operation Ivy tape about a year later and found myself wanting to sit the band's singer, Jesse Michaels, down to have a frank discussion. Specifically, I wanted to ask him why, in a song written to both illuminate the politics of ideology (*"walls made of opinions through which we speak and never listen"*) and express the need for open-mindedness and self-reflexivity, would he choose to intentionally denounce the educational function of his lyrics from the outset? Not being a complete idiot nor unfamiliar with the band, I obviously realized that the song "Room Without a Window" (quoted above) was penned by Michaels when he was in his late teens, which is around the time when years of schooling and top-down authority have unfortunately succeeded at the task of turning education – or at least the compulsory, state-sanctioned version – into something

from which young people want to run; I imagine all the more so for the sizeable number of kids in the late '80s East Bay (California) punk scene whose parents, like Michael's dad, were college professors. But whether the lyric intentionally gestures in this direction or is self-consciously ironic is hardly the issue. Indeed, even if the first line just sounded cool when he wrote it, the point here is that I wasn't singing along, tapping out the beat (as ex-drummers are annoyingly prone to do), or even just engaging in the kind of run-of-the-mill lyrical analysis that has been the bread and butter for both punk fanzine writers and music journalists for over three decades. Rather, it's that I was busy concocting some bizarre scenario in my head that, if allowed to play out in real life, would have undoubtedly translated into the world's most boring and pedantic conversation with one of my punk heroes.

As if it didn't feel weird enough to catch myself pursuing this rather strange line of hypothetical inquiry at the breakfast table one morning, the sensation was heightened when I also realized, perhaps for the first time, that my own internal monologue was now being structured around concepts and jargon from my graduate seminars. Since when, I thought to myself, did I start to throw around – let alone *think with* – phrases like “illuminate the politics of ideology”? Was I becoming the kind of person who ends up nonchalantly remarking upon the “narrative tensions” in a Jawbreaker song? Or using the word *oeuvre* to describe Bad Brains's discography? Was I heading down a path where I would eventually not even be able to go for a bike ride without theorizing it? Just then, as if the universe wanted to accent the point in as cartoonish a manner as possible, I narrowly avoided stumbling over my cat while rising from the table, and I managed to spill half a mug of coffee onto the stack of student papers I had been grading. Muttering to one's self? Check. Coffee stained papers? Check. Analyzing one's music collection through the lenses of critical pedagogy and rhetorical theory? Check. Shabby outfit? Certainly. Disheveled hair and off kilter eyeglasses? Indeed. Exhibiting behaviors that one might objectively identify as ‘wacky’ or ‘nutty’? Check.

It was official. All I needed now, I thought to myself, was the kind of jacket where the patches are sewn nicely onto the elbows instead of silk screened and stitched across the back with dental floss.

ELBOW PATCHES AND BACK PATCHES

Twelve years later I still don't have one of those professorial tweed jackets, though I did manage to attain the job, the eccentricities, and the shock of salt-and-pepper hair that would compliment one quite nicely.

And despite my initial anxieties over the prospects of compromising my then-entrenched punk ethics by turning into a stuffy academic, I actually ended up spending more time playing in bands and participating in various aspects of DIY punk culture as a graduate student and eventual professor than I did when I was younger. While far from seamless, I've often seen the relationship between these two 'worlds' as dialectical, though at first this mainly consisted of scrutinizing every new set of readings and concepts I learned in school through my own increasingly politicized worldview: a punk subjectivity that I fancied as something of a "bullshit detector." But fairly quickly, though, my immersion in critical theory, cultural studies, feminism and political theory started to help me hold up a mirror to sub-/countercultural politics and to generally unpack some of the bullshit that is often embedded within our own bullshit detectors, as it were. Part of what facilitated this process, aside from personal experience and the guidance of some older friends, was getting exposed to the broader gamut of political punk and hardcore and to the range of writers, teachers, artists and activists who, in publications like *Bad Subjects*, *Punk Planet*, *Maximumrockroll (MRR)*, *Clamor* and *Stay Free!*, not only connected many of the issues and concerns I'd previously encountered within different spheres, they also complicated and problematized (in the good way) a lot of my taken for granted assumptions about punk and the proliferation of ideas in general. It was through these channels – DIY punk and DIY publishing – as opposed to the classroom, that the relationships between politics, popular culture, education, and everyday life first started to make sense to me.

As crucial as the composition of these ingredients was to my own development and positionality as a teacher, writer and 'musician' (a term I use *very* loosely), I am hardly the first person to test out the recipe and I'm certainly not one of the best cooks. Indeed, my real interest in punk/academic border transgressions was not borne of my own maneuverings, but from learning about and meeting punk musicians who had dual careers as professional nerds (I use the term lovingly; it is my job description after all) and reading sophisticated work from writers who seemed as equally sure footed in zine columns and basement shows as they did in a theory heavy journal publications, political organizing committees, or in front of podiums lecturing to graduate students at prestigious research universities. In addition to being generally interested in what other people have done (or aspired to do) with the kinds of energies, knowledges and tensions generated through their involvement with, or their reflections upon, both punk music and culture, I had a personal interest in wanting to meet more of these folks and to pick their brain about their

paths toward careers as nerdy rockers or punk professors (given that either one sounded ideal to me). I was also intensely curious about the ways in which people reconciled their interests and understood the dynamics between two very different ‘scenes.’ I wanted to hear what other people had to say about scholarship on punk, or their relationships to band mates and fans (if applicable). And broadly speaking, I wanted to know what kind of sense people made of their punk/academic situation; whether it was something they analyzed, disparaged, incorporated into their work, trumpeted, or simply took in stride. What kind of stories did they have? What kinds of insights about punk and teaching have they drawn from their experiences or analyses?

Unlike the prospects of time traveling to an Operation Ivy show in 1990, the possibilities for actually starting some conversations around these topics was quite real, and a few years ago I started the process with the aim of garnering essays for the book you are now reading. I asked people to contribute work that was either about punk specifically, or the intersections between punk and higher education, whether in the form of biographical pieces or chapters devoted to teaching and pedagogy. To keep things simple, I took the approach that punks of yore utilized when contacting bands they liked: sending letters. My interest was less in nostalgia (they were e-mails, after all) than in making contact with people whose work I admired and otherwise beginning what would become a long experiment. That is to say, part of my reason for doing the book was because, first and foremost, I wanted to see if it was possible. While I had long been attuned to the fact that there were some professors and many more graduate students who, like me (circa 2005, when I hatched the idea for this book), simultaneously played in bands while they taught classes and worked on their degrees, I often wondered about whether there are a lot of “us” out there. By “us” I mean *punkademics*, or the professors, graduate students, and other PhDs who, in some meaningful or substantive way, either once straddled or continue to bridge the worlds of punk and academia through their own personal experiences, their scholarship, or some combination thereof.

Part of the experiment was also to see if I could do the book without resorting to the preferred method that academics use to solicit contributions for an edited volume. This typically entails circulating an official ‘Call for Papers’ online, waiting for abstracts to trickle in, then sending out acceptance and rejection notices, and eventually waiting for the first drafts of essays to be submitted. Given the formalities and relative sterility of the whole process, it seemed much more organic (for lack of a less abused, greenwashed term) to try and find prospective contributors

by simply asking my initial list of contacts for the names of friends, or other suggestions for people to look up. In addition to my desire to keep things on a personal level, it also dawned on me quite early in planning the book that there was simply no other way to do it. That is to say, I realized that any official announcement aimed at soliciting contributors would not only have to include the obligatory list of suggested topics or questions for authors to address (which I had ready to go), it would also have to delineate some sort of criteria for the authors themselves, given the core premise of the book. Well, establishing that someone is a professor or PhD student is fairly straightforward, but what exactly was I going to do, ask people to send me an abstract and a *punk résumé*? Aside from all the vexing questions it immediately raises about what punk *is*, what it means to *be* punk, what the objective qualities of ‘punk-ness’ might be, and so on, I couldn’t imagine anything more obnoxious than the idea of asking people, even tacitly, to basically ‘prove’ that they were or are punks – let alone the awkwardness of someone having to actually write it up, or me having to read it. What the hell would that look like anyway? And more to the logistical point, how does one articulate that in a call for papers? Something like:

Along with your abstract and an updated copy of your CV, please provide evidence of past or present punk affiliations. Acceptable forms of documentation may include, but are not limited to, any *one or more* of the following:

- LP or 7-inch with legible recording credits on the insert (colored vinyl is a plus).
- Copies of your *print* fanzine.
- Notarized letter from a known punk who can vouch for your scene ‘cred.’
- Receipts for at least two previous years of annual subscriptions to *Maximumrockandroll*, *Punk Planet*, *HeartattaCk* or *Profane Existence* (PDF or low-res JPG files).
- Photos of you doing punk things (i.e. dumpstering baked goods, swimming drunk in an urban river) or simply being punk (i.e. sporting a sleeveless Nausea t-shirt, a nasty dreadhawk, and a dog on a rope).²

While in hindsight this approach may have actually yielded some fairly spectacular results, I was fortunately able to avoid such potentially unforgivable transgressions with help from this book’s authors and an ad hoc network of punkademics that, at times, I seemed to connect or

expand through the very process of seeking it out. While I have no empirical data regarding the actual size and scope of this disparate population, I can confidently speak to one of my initial curiosities underlying this project by noting that there are, in fact, many punkademics out there: far more than I could ever hope to accommodate in a single book, even if given the opportunity to do so.

So what is one to make of this collection, its shamelessly punning section headings, and the punk-centric assortment of essays, people, and ideas in the pages that follow? Simply put, why *Punkademics*? Well, despite the admittedly experimental nature of this collection, there are in fact a number of carefully formulated reasons as to why this collection was assembled and, I can only hope, a few contributions it might make to the ways in which we understand the cultural, political and aesthetic dimensions of both punk music and culture, academia, and the apparently fertile ground in between. I want to walk through some of them here briefly, as a way to provide additional context for this project and to introduce some of the specific themes with which the book is engaged.

PUNK DISCOURSES

Punk is neither a homogenous ‘thing’ nor is it reducible to a specific time, location, sound or a select number of vinyl records and live performances. Its various meanings, as any self-respecting punk knows all too well, are subject to wild fluctuation and widespread debate.³ One might say that it’s because punk shapes – and is also shaped by – specific kinds of question askers, music makers, thought provokers, organizers, shit talkers, writers, artists, and teachers. At their best, the combinations of people, places, cultural practices, social relationships, art and ideas that co-constitute punk are rife with possibilities: creating new kinds of music or reveling in the ecstatic moments at the best shows; forging bonds of group solidarity and personal identity; carving out non-commercial spaces for free expression and the staking out of positions; and pushing people toward a participatory, ‘bottom up’ view of culture. Through the often conflicting accounts and histories of punk, one can identify the ebb and flow of countless scenes, interwoven subcultures, and a broader ‘Do it Yourself’ (DIY) counterculture in which people put ethical and political ideas into practice by using music and other modes of cultural production/expression to highlight both the frustrations and banalities of everyday life, as well as the ideas and institutions that need to be battled if there is any hope of living in a less oppressive world. And crucially, people have a lot of fun doing it. Those lucky enough to have

experienced some of what I've just sketched out know what it feels like to sense that punk really can create something new in the shell of the old, to poach a phrase from the Wobblies.

At its worst, punk can be and has been a fashion show, a cultural ghetto, a minor league circuit for corporate entertainers, a merchandise peddling aggregate of aspiring capitalist hustlers, and a constellation of practices that perpetuate varying degrees of machismo, sexism, homophobia, white privilege, classism, hyper-individualism, anti-intellectualism, passive conformity, and at times, both conservative religious dogma and racist nationalism. And like the worst trends to emerge under the banner of cultural studies – the academic field in which I work – punk's incarnates have similarly been known to promote sloppy politics while championing 'resistance' in all of its self-styled affairs, regardless of whether such gestures (or fanciful arrangements of clothing, tattoos or words) bear a resemblance to anything like substantive political action, meaningful community engagement, or tangible social change. In this guise, 'resistance', 'rebellion', and of course, 'revolution', become just another set of buzzwords chirped in slogans, animated in bad songs and contrived writing, and emblazoned on t-shirts without a hint of Billy Bragg's sharp wit: "So join the struggle while you may, the revolution is just a t-shirt away."⁴

The various prospects and pitfalls associated with punk (I include hardcore in this designation throughout unless noted otherwise) are constant reminders that the stories we tell about it are always being folded into converging and often competing discourses about what punk *really* means, what it *does* or *doesn't* do, and why it *is* or *isn't* culturally significant, politically relevant, and so on. As both an academic and someone who spent roughly thirteen years drifting in and out of the punk scene (admittedly more 'out' in recent years), I'm invested in both the kinds of stories that get told about punk as well as the manner in they are put to work, as it were. Therefore, I think it is important to note from the outset that my interest in assembling *Punkademics* is neither to tell the grand story of punk (an impossibly arrogant and pointless task) nor to produce the scholarly cipher through which all of punk's secret meanings can be decrypted. Academics should not be seen as *the* authoritative voices capable of explaining punk to the masses, and I have no interest in presenting them as such. In fact, I have always been rather conflicted about how punk music and DIY punk culture get taken up by academics in the first place.

As a teacher, I tend to see punk – like all other cultural phenomena – as a messy but nonetheless fascinating cluster of things that can be

analyzed, dissected and debated. Depending on the specific course, I've incorporated aspects of punk in my lesson plans to talk about everything from the underground press and the political economy of the media industry, to the role that punk music – like hip hop – plays in cultivating meaningful narratives about “the city” and the importance of space and place in everyday life.⁵ And quite frequently, punk comes in handy when I need to give concrete examples to illustrate or clarify what certain social and cultural theorists mean when they throw around phrases like *cultural production*, *articulation*, *hegemony*, *resistance*, *commodification*, *cooptation*, and of course, *subculture*. In addition to being pedagogically useful, I also get a certain degree of satisfaction in knowing that members of the bands I discuss in class would be alternatively delighted or mortified by the idea.

However, my level of comfort with the melding of punk and academia decreases quite rapidly when punk becomes an object of study unto itself. As Roger Sabin notes in his introduction to *Punk Rock, So What?*, one of the main problems with scholarship on punk is the over-reliance on unquestioned assumptions about punk itself and, overall, the “narrowness of the frame of reference.”⁶ Along with what he describes as the “pressures to romanticize,” Sabin suggests that the impulses and trends in punk scholarship foster the development of certain kind of “orthodoxy” that structures what it is possible to say, or most likely not say, about punk's history, its conjunctures with other ideas and artistic practices, and, I would add, its current formations, and its possible future(s).⁷ Like many of the LP records that fit squarely and safely within the parameters of a punk's splintered subgenres, a number of the books and essays that fall under the umbrella of this ‘orthodoxy’ have their distinct merits.⁸ Nevertheless, his point about the constrictive qualities of scholarship on punk is well taken and, broadly speaking, rather understated.⁹ Because while there are plenty of exceptions (including excellent work published by this book's contributors), a significant amount of academic writing, conference presentations and the like are authored by people who – despite being fans of punk music and passionate about the topic – seem to have limited knowledge of punk music and DIY culture, and a level of engagement with punk scenes that is more akin to casual tourism than active participation. Nevertheless, this doesn't stop people from feeling entitled to make assumptions, lodge critiques, and draw conclusions based on what, more or less, amounts to an analysis of punk ‘texts.’ To be sure, there are a variety of things that broadcast this kind of work. Barring some notable exemptions, the telltale signs may include, but are certainly not limited to, any or all of the following features:

1. No interviews conducted with actual punks.
2. No ethnographic research done at any of the places where punks live, make music, work, play and see shows, hang out, ride bikes, get drunk, guzzle coffee, play kickball, raise a ruckus, stage protests, volunteer, cook food, and so on.
3. Little attention paid to punk scenes that fall outside the ostensibly holy quadrangle of New York – London – Los Angeles – Washington DC, despite the fact that in recent decades DIY punk and hardcore scenes have thrived in smaller, so-called second – or third-tier cities like Berkeley (CA), Asheville (NC), Portland (OR), Minneapolis (MN), Olympia (WA), Pittsburgh (PA), Bloomington (IN), Louisville (KY), Gainesville (FLA) and Richmond (VA), and this is just to name a few places in the US alone.¹⁰
4. Relatively little engagement with the vast amount of literature written by and about punks, whether in the form of zines, published essays, books, magazine columns, LP liner notes, blogs and so on.
5. The use of definite articles in places where they don't belong, as in "the Dillinger Four" instead of Dillinger Four, or "the Green Day band." Trivial? Absolutely. But it is the kind of mistake that a punk is not likely to make and thus suggests the likelihood of other mistakes, or a general lack of knowledge about the subject matter.¹¹ And moreover, it conveys an awkwardness on par with John McCain's reference to using "a Google," whilst ironically attempting to demonstrate his Internet savvy to US voters prior to the 2008 presidential election.
6. An almost obsessive fascination with the Sex Pistols and Malcolm McLaren.¹²
7. An obsessive fascination with the Sex Pistols and Malcolm McLaren.¹³
8. Any sustained, serious theoretical analysis of "moshing" or "slam dancing."¹⁴
9. Less space devoted to discussing what punks do, what they think, and why it matters, than the amount of space reserved for debating whether to call them a "subculture," a "post-subculture," a "youth culture," a "postmodern tribe," or a "neo-tribe." There are, in fact, many terms that are actively contested and discussed by punks: debates over what counts as 'punk', or what it means to *be* 'punk', are classic (if not exhausting) examples. But the merits of sociological/cultural studies nomenclature are

not part of the equation. To wit, the following exchange will *never* take place:

“Hey Zack, what are you doing this weekend?”

“Well, I’m busy on Friday, but on Saturday night I’m going to participate in a vigorous rock and roll performance with members of my cultural neo-tribe.”¹⁵

10. The conflation of punk with 100% pure authentic resistance to the culture industry/mainstream/system, or conversely, as 100% pure inauthentic commodified dissent in service of the culture industry/mainstream/system.

I recognize, of course, that this (partly tongue-in-cheek) assessment may sound like the expression of someone who is too emotionally invested in his subject matter, or perhaps too ensnared in punks’ own preoccupations with boundary-making and authenticity (“no outsider could *ever* know what it’s *really* like,” etc.) to make clear-headed judgments about scholarship, let alone the researchers responsible for producing it. It’s certainly possible.

My position, however, is not based on some naïve desire to preserve the sacredness of punk (*Hot Topic* put the final, pyramid-studded nail in that coffin years ago), nor do I think that people who are totally immersed in their activities or communities are necessarily in the best position to speak thoughtfully about their endeavors, or to critically reflect on the social or political significance of them; sometimes the exact opposite is true. Rather, my perspective is based upon what I see as a relatively uncontroversial point: whether due to shoddy research, distance from the punk scene, or harmless excitement for a topic tackled earnestly though wrong-headedly, the bottom line is that most academics simply miss the mark when it comes to punk music and culture. It would seem that I am good company on this point, even amongst fellow academics. John Charles Goshert, for example, argues that academic studies “tend toward the uninformed, if not careless, homogenizing of styles, personalities, and locales under the name ‘punk.’”¹⁶ David Muggleton expresses similar anxieties over the academicization of punk when, in the introduction to his own book, he describes his first encounter with Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*: “I fought my way through... and was left feeling that it had absolutely nothing to say about my life as I had once experienced it... The ‘problem’ lay not in myself and my failure

to recognize what had ostensibly been the reality of my situation, but in the way the book appropriated its subject matter.¹⁷

Here's the rub, though: appropriation is always a matter of perspective. As a case in point, when Muggleton organized the *No Future? Punk 2001* conference at the University of Wolverhampton ten years ago, it brought a wide range of academics and cultural critics together with some high profile punk speakers who weren't shy about airing their grievances when interviewed by the press. The ever-cantankerous writer/artist/author, Stewart Home, stated, "I think punk is hyped up as an ongoing cultural force by people who are nostalgic for their youth."¹⁸ Jordan (aka. Pamela Rooke), who was the former assistant at Vivienne Westwood's famed London SEX shop and one of the people who pioneered punk aesthetics/style, remarked that "the academic world reads more into punk than there probably was."¹⁹ And most pointedly, Penny Rimbaud, a poet and the drummer for the now legendary anarcho-punk band, Crass, exclaimed: "It irritated me beyond belief...academics sitting round talking about something so anti-academic. It's as absurd as the Hayward Gallery putting on a show of dada art."²⁰

Part of the reason I juxtapose these quotes and also call attention to the *No Future* conference is because at the same time I think academics should take criticism of their work seriously – particularly when its generated by human beings who unwittingly serve as their 'objects' of study – the notion of drawing a proverbial line in the sand between 'the punx' and 'the ivory tower' based on whether one's work is properly "academic" is somewhat amusing, especially if one has *ever* been privy to a conversation between collectors of obscure punk and hardcore records (musicology by other means, if there ever was such a thing), and even more so if one considers either Home's specific background as a historian of highly theoretical, avant-garde art movements or Rimbaud's own proclamation – leaving aside the militant seriousness with which Crass approached both politics as well as its aesthetic presentation of politics – that even his notion of *fun* has "always been more cerebral and intellectual."²¹ There are, of course, completely legitimate reasons why punks should be radically skeptical about the ways their music, ideas and cultural practices are documented by representatives of institutions (colleges & universities) that are, by design, the antithesis of DIY. But in general, staking one's claim on the grounds that punk is inherently "anti-academic" isn't to state an uncontested fact; it is rhetorical move that, in part, allows punks to avoid dealing with thorny questions or critiques raised by outsiders (some of whom, it is true, may be utterly clueless), just as it simultaneously reinforces academics' tendencies to chalk up hostile critiques of

their work (some lodged by people who may *also* be utterly clueless) to anti-intellectualism as opposed to taking them seriously. But more to the point, the perpetual debate over whether its acceptable to ‘intellectualize’ (the offense of academics) punk is a moot point: professors, music journalists and punks themselves have been doing it for well over thirty years.

While I have no doubt that the *No Future* conference, like any other event worthy of the designation, probably featured some obnoxious panel titles, a great many jargon-laced presentations, and more than a few cringe-worthy comments, the fact is that there were actually a number of people in attendance – including at least two of the contributors to this book – who had been playing in punk bands, living in punk squats, and being involved in local DIY music scenes years before they ever wore the unlikely moniker of Professor. Along with a few of their fellow “punkademics” – a term that, unbeknownst to me, was not only thrown around during the UK conference but also used by punk-turned-professor, Greta Snider (San Francisco State University), in a piece she wrote for *Maximumrockroll* in 1995 – both Alastair “Gords” Gordon and Helen Reddington (aka. Helen McCookerybook) have used their unique insights to challenge existing academic work on punk while fostering a broader reassessment of punk history and culture that has relevance far beyond the porous borders of the university. Indeed, Reddington cuts to the core of some of the key issues at stake when it comes to research on punk. In an essay that previews the material she would later develop in the book, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era*, she writes:

“There is perhaps no better example of male hegemonic control over popular cultural history than the rewrite of punk to exclude the very large and productive presence of young women in the subculture from its very beginning [...] The collective memory of punk recalls young men as spitting, spiky yobs with the occasional nod in the direction of political commitment (until the obligatory signing ceremony with the major label), and young women as fishnet-clad dominatrixes [...] From the writings of academics to the reports of the tabloid press, there is a whole history missing from accounts of punk during this period in Britain.”²²

Whether it’s the excising of women, people of color, and gay/queer-identified folks from punk history or, conversely, the way that punks have used film as a medium to re-write that history and re-think punk’s

dominant narratives, the process of documentation and analysis (not to mention debate) plays a discernable role in shaping how people understand what punk is, whom it is for, and why it is important.²³ Max Ward, a veteran hardcore musician as well as the founder/proprietor of *625 Thrashcore Records* and current Assistant Professor of History at Middlebury College, makes this point succinctly: “punk has a culture, and that culture is defined by how we try to remember our ‘past.’”²⁴

STORIES MATTER

Put simply, the stories we tell about punk matter. In the greater scheme of things, there is clearly much less at stake in the narration of punk than there is, for example, in the stories told about immigration, Indigenous land claims, prisons, or the philosophical and economic underpinnings of Neoliberalism. Nevertheless, they matter. Part of the reason why is because, like the stories told about other cultural practices and art forms, the relevant work on punk affects the ways we understand its specific histories, its present formations, and its possible future(s). Consequently, when the complexities and nuances of punk music, aesthetics and identities are ignored in lieu of sweeping claims and a reliance on problematic assumptions, this has a significant bearing on the ways in which people conceptualize, interpret and draw conclusions about the ‘politics of punk’, youth subcultures, and perhaps the social functions of art and music, as well. The concern here is thus not only the fidelity of the narratives – as in whether the accounts (of bands, scenes, events, etc.) are accurate and truthful – it is also a matter of *who gets to speak for whom*: whose stories are told and whose are silenced, and perhaps most importantly, who gets to shape public knowledge(s) that inform the ways in which we collectively remember people, events, institutions, ideas, cultural practices and cultural history. In addition, this body of knowledge is never *only* about punk in the first place: in academic research alone one finds discussions of punk situated within larger conversations about the music industry, the changing social status of ‘youth’ in the late 20th Century, the formation of identity, the nature of consumption, and the contentious dynamics of class, race, gender, sexuality and religion that are part of punks’ everyday relationships and also addressed within their own songs, musings, dialogues and debates.

My point here is that the story and mythology of punk get reified over the years as much in academic writing as elsewhere. And it is not just dedicated books and peer-reviewed articles that do this kind of cultural work; it is also the hundreds of casual references that academics

make to punk (for example in books on the 1970s or the Reagan Era) that simultaneously support the dominant narratives and constrain the possibilities of analyzing it without the compulsion to either validate its heroes or delineate its pure moment of inception.²⁵ Because what gets missed, for instance, in the habitual focus on punk's origins, its shining stars, its hottest locations, and its most obvious but nonetheless vital contributions – such as punks' amplification (with all that the term implies) of independent music and art – are the *everyday practices, processes, struggles, ruptures* and *people* that make it so interesting in the first place.

Like the work produced from music journalists, cultural critics, and punks themselves, academic scholarship plays a distinct role in both the cultivation and reproduction of knowledge about punk. While some of this work is admittedly fraught with problems, academics – or, rather, punkademics – have also done some of the best work at rethinking punk history, re-conceptualizing its present dynamics, taking issue with dominant scholarly readings of punk politics and punk scenes, and also expanding the parameters of research itself. While much of this research remains cloistered in academic journals and restricted access university libraries, a number of these stories – as well as the storytellers themselves – are widely read and have had an impact on both the ways in which punk is interpreted and the ways that punks see themselves. Notably, this has taken place both from within and outside of The Scene by people who have poked and prodded at the social significance of punk and DIY culture through a variety of different print and digital formats (sometimes concurrently). While by no means comprehensive, this book is a contribution to that broader effort.

UP THE NERDS!

One of my primary goals with *Punkademics* is to encourage a marked shift away from the punk-as-style paradigm that has become so commonplace in the wake of Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* but also from a number of the binary oppositions scholars have used to reduce 'punk' into a static, singular thing that can be mapped along an axis of success vs. failure, resistance vs. recuperation, authenticity vs. inauthenticity, and so on. Instead of producing another series of instrumental readings of punk that are strictly concerned with what it ultimately *does* or *does not* do, or what it definitively *means* or *doesn't mean* at one specific moment, or within the confines of one specific scene or musical recording, I'm more inclined to think about what possibilities

emerge within and through it. Scholarship on punk has sometimes pointed in this direction, though it's typically focused on which kinds of musical and stylistic hybrids become imaginable or possible through the production of punk music and culture, or somewhat differently, which aesthetic and artistic trends are rendered most visible in punk's history or that of its precursors. While I am interested in these linkages and the kind of work that, for example, contributors to the book *Punk Rock, So What?* take pains to highlight, I have always been much more curious about the kinds of *subjectivities, people and communities* that become imaginable or possible – or perhaps even probable – through DIY punk, i.e. the “vectors of punk that strive to escape models of production and consumption otherwise omnipresent in the entertainment industry.”²⁶

A fruitful way to approach these interrelationships, as I've tried to demonstrate with this very book, is to consider some of the ways that punk maps onto or even organizes certain constellations of cultural practice, artistic expression, ethics, and notions of community. But crucially, I think this begins by reframing punk as an object of study and asking some rather different questions about peoples' relationship to it. Through a combination of essays, interviews, biographical sketches, and artwork, one of the aims of this collection is to do this by way of example as opposed to merely stacking critique on top of critique. While not without its own limitations, *Punkademics* tries to offer more nuanced perspectives on various aspects of punk and hardcore – and in particular DIY punk music and culture – that stem from contributors' academic backgrounds as well as their collective participation within and experience of punk scenes.

But of equal importance is the attention focused in the opposite direction, which is back at the university, the classroom, and both the norms and ethics that get embedded into higher education. Given the fact that little research has been done about where punks end up or what their career paths and adventures (as well as struggles and failures) might tell us about punk or why it matters, this book offers some tangible examples that speak to these concerns, inasmuch as colleges and universities function as some of the places where people with 'punk' values can ostensibly thrive, or more accurately, where they can potentially put their ethics and ideas into practice; though not without great effort, considerable friction, and at times, complete train wrecks.²⁷ The idea behind *Punkademics* is thus not only to offer some different perspectives on punk, broadly speaking, but to also tell some entirely distinct stories about academics and punks themselves, and how their priorities and passions get reconfigured by and through their experiences as theorists, artists, activists,

educators and misfits working amidst the often tumultuous landscape of the modern university/edufactory.

1, 2, 3, 4, Go!

NOTES

- 1 See Zack Furness, *One Less Car: Bicycling and the Politics of Automobility* (Temple University Press, 2010).
- 2 Credit for the last line goes to the esteemed Willie Stein. (Sorry to disappoint you, Willie).
- 3 Any terms used to label specific assemblages of punks and/or punk practices are necessarily inadequate and bound to raise more issues than they resolve. Consequently, I use the terms ‘punk culture’, ‘DIY punk culture’, and ‘DIY punk scene’ interchangeably not out of laziness but because they are simply different ways of talking about the same clusters of non-corporate practices, independent institutions, and politicized people, however resistant to classification some of them might be. My primary reliance on ‘culture’ instead of ‘subculture’ is, however, deliberate because I don’t think the term ‘subculture’ can encompass both the punk practices as well as entire “way of life” that is sometimes cultivated around and through punk. Like the term ‘counterculture’, which I specifically use to designate self-consciously political/politicized cultural formations, I used the term subculture where it’s appropriate. Longtime zine writer and punk drummer Aaron Cometbus makes a nice point about the inaccuracy of labels as a point of pride: “I like that about punk and fanzines—that it’s a community that’s very ill-defined. As much as 90% of what we talk about is defining it, and still it’s very ill-defined.” In “Interview with Aaron Cometbus,” *Maximumrocknroll*, no. 200 (2000). For more on defining and naming punks and/or punk practices, see: Alan O’Connor, *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy: The Emergence of Diy* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2008), p. 3; Alan O’Connor “Local Scenes and Dangerous Crossroads: Punk and Theories of Cultural Hybridity,” *Popular Music*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2002): 226.
- 4 Billy Bragg, “Waiting for the Great Leap Forward,” *Workers Playtime* (Elektra, 1988), LP.
- 5 On the relationships between urban space and punk, see my discussion of ‘DIY Bike Culture’ in *One Less Car*, Chapter 6. On the dialectical spatialities of hip-hop, see Rashad Shabazz, “Hip-hop and the Black Geographical Imagination,” a talk delivered at Marlboro College, October 13, 2009. Online at <http://youtu.be/AJ4Ne-wbxDw>

- 6 Roger Sabin, "Introduction," *Punk Rock: So What?*, p. 2.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 For example, a book like *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* is often read against, if not held causally responsible for, the tidal wave of shoddy style-as-resistance themed critiques that followed its publication in 1979, and consequently, some of the more complex relationships that Hebdige actually does acknowledge between socioeconomic class, music, ideology and, yes, *style* receive the short shrift. His argument is problematic in a variety of ways, but certainly not on par with much of the work that reduces his analysis to a close reading of people's outfits; all the more so when one carefully reads his discussion of the twinned process of ideological and commodity 'recuperation'—a concept best defined by the Clash, or perhaps Crass (who used the slogan to critique the Clash), as "turning rebellion into money"—on pages 92-99, under the section heading "Two forms of incorporation."
- 9 In fact, one of the ironies regarding Sabin's book—aside from leading off with an essay on the Sex Pistols just pages after asking rhetorically, in his introduction, "*how many more times must we hear the Sex Pistols story?*"—is that despite the quality of the essays and the authors' successful effort to demonstrate that "punk was not an isolated, bounded phenomenon, but had an extensive impact on a variety of cultural and political fields," the book is simultaneously a reminder of some additional trappings that one could also attribute to the 'orthodoxy' structuring analyses of punk, such as methodological approaches based almost exclusively on textual analysis (no ethnographies, for example) and a perpetual overemphasis on both British punk and the years 1976-1979.
- 10 For an excellent corrective to this trend, see George Hurchalla, *Going Underground: American Punk 1979-1992* (Stuart, FL: Zuo Press, 2005).
- 11 Neil Nehring, "The Situationist International in American Hardcore Punk, 1982–2002," *Popular Music and Society*, Vol. 29, No. 5 (2006): 524; Lisa M. Chuang & John P. Hart, "Suburban American Punks and the Musical Rhetoric of Green Day's 'Jesus of Suburbia,'" *Communication Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 3, (2008): 183–201. Aside from the triviality of calling the band "the Dillinger Four," Nehring suggests that their sound "fairly distinctively crosses classic punk with sub-genres such as speed-core." First, 'speedcore' is a genre of electronic music (not punk) and, second, no punks have ever used this term to describe punk music, unless it was a joking reference to an all-tweaker (meth addict) rock-n-roll band haunting some dive bar on the outskirts of Portland, OR. These are among the smallest errors in an essay that largely misunderstands punk as well as its connections to situationist politics. Finally, I also found it

somewhat odd that in Nehring's attempt to find evidence of D4's situationist-inspired political and/or artistic critiques, he fails to mention the fact that Paddy – who is shirtless if not naked at every D4 show and in most pictures of the band – has the phrase HOW MUCH ART CAN YOU TAKE? tattooed across his entire chest. It doesn't get much clearer than that.

- 12 There are many examples from which to choose, including the following: Ruth Adams, "The Englishness of English Punk: Sex Pistols, Subcultures, and Nostalgia," *Popular Music & Society*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2008): 469-488; Sean Albiez, "Know History!: John Lydon, Cultural Capital and the Prog/Punk Dialectic," *Popular Music*, Vol. 22, No. 3 (2003): 357-374; Pete Lentini, "Punk's Origins: Anglo-American Syncretism," *Journal of Intercultural Studies*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (2003): 153-174; Geoffrey Sirc, "Never Mind the Tagmemics, Where's the Sex Pistols?" *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 48, No. 1 (1997): 9-29; Karen Pinkus, "Self-Representation in Futurism and Punk," *South Central Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2/3 (1996): 180-193; Neil Nehring, "Revolt into Style: Graham Greene Meets the Sex Pistols," *PMLA*, Vol. 106, No. 2 (1991): 222-237.
- 13 Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). Also see Jon Savage, *The England's Dreaming Tapes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), and especially Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (New York, Macmillan, 2001).
- 14 For example, see William Tsitsos, "Rules of Rebellion: Slam dancing, Moshing, and the American Alternative Scene," *Popular Music*, Vol. 18, No. 3 (Oct., 1999): 397-414; Bradford Scott Simon, "Entering the Pit: Slam-Dancing and Modernity," *The Journal of Popular Culture*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (1997): 149-176; Leslie Roman, "Intimacy, Labor, and Class: Ideologies of Feminine Sexuality in the Punk Slam Dance," in (eds.) Linda K. Christian-Smith and Leslie Roman, *Becoming Feminine: The Politics of Popular Culture*, (New York and Philadelphia: The Falmer Press, 1988), pp. 143-84. With all due and sincere respect to punkademics who have jumped, or rather *mashed*, their way into this analytic fray (particularly Prof. Tsitsos, who plays in bands and runs a DIY label), I would argue first and foremost for a thorough re-assessment of the problematic. Indeed, the set of kinetic practices under question (moshing, slam-dancing) are not physical performances as much as enigmatic expressions of latent potentialities/possibilities that simply transcend the boundaries of theory's utility. The 'wall of death', for example, is admittedly a fascinating spatio-corporeal phenomenon, if not an elegant, ludic/haptic realization

of what Henri Lefebvre calls a *moment*: “the attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility” (*Critique of Everyday Life, Vol I*, p. 348). But it is nonetheless an eruption of such primal force that, when bounded by the homoerotically charged protocols governing ‘the pit’, becomes wholly resistant to classification and can thus only empty the words used in such vain explanatory efforts from the very meanings which they are employed to signify. Only in its more practical applications elsewhere – for example, when the wall of death is deployed against “the system,” as a tactical/militant adjunct to the anarchist goals of achieving a society based on mutual aid, self-rule, non-hierarchical social relations, and the proliferation of fake meats – could one even begin to effectively grapple with its theoretical implications. See, R.A.M.B.O., *Wall of Death the System* (625 Thrashcore Records, 2001), LP. For more on the cultural/political logics of the moshing (“Fuck your individualist mosh / No neoliberals in the pit”) as well as the potential uses of the wall of death against Christian anti-abortion protestors, see Crucial Unit “Thrashaholics Unanimous,” and “Wall of Death the Chain of Life,” *Crucial Unit/ Municipal Waste, Split LP* (Six Weeks Records, 2002).

- 15 I have seen no clear evidence that subcultural researchers have ever asked – or even thought to ask – what their research “subjects” actually *do* call themselves, or what they would like to be called, or why it matters. Punks are creative and quirky; perhaps they would prefer to be known, in peer-reviewed journals, as a “pack,” or a “gaggle,” or even a “murder.” For an exhaustive/exhausting treatment of the politics of subcultural research terminology, see most essays from Andy Bennett and practically every monograph or edited collection published in the last fifteen years with variations of words “subculture,” “post-subculture” and also “youth culture” and “club culture” in the title.
- 16 John Goshert, p. 87. While I think his definition is insufficient, Goshert offers a notable description of punk (in contrast to singular phenomenon) as “a set of only loosely assimilable vectors and forms of expression.”
- 17 David Muggleton, *Inside Subculture*, p. 2. Also see, Andy Medhurst, “What Did I Get? Punk, Memory and Autobiography,” in (ed) Roger Sabin, *Punk Rock: So What?*, pp. 219-231.
- 18 Lucy O’Brien, “Academia in the UK,” *The Guardian*, September 27, 2001.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Andy Capper, “Anarchy and Peace, Litigated,” *Vice Magazine*, Vol. 17, No. 8 (2010), p. 99. Online at <http://www.vice.com/read/anarchy-and-peace-litigated-490-v17n8>

- 22 Helen Reddington, "Lady' Punks in Bands: A Subculturette?" in (eds.) David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl, *The Post-Subcultures Reader* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2003), p. 239.
- 23 These documentaries include Scott Treleaven, *Queercore: A Punk-U-Mentary* (Toronto: V-Tape, 1997), VHS; Martin Sorrondeguy *Beyond The Screams/Más Allá de los Gritos: A U.S. Latino Hardcore Punk Documentary* (Self-released, 1999), VHS; James Spooner, *Afro-Punk* (Los Angeles: Afro-Punk, 2003), DVD; and most recently, Amy Oden's film about women in the DIY punk scene, called *From the Back of the Room* (Self-released, 2011), Film.
- 24 Quoted in reference to the compilation, *Possessed to Skate Vol. II* (625 Productions, 2002), LP. Ward also suggests that the recurring theme of punks recycling 'old school' styles similarly relies upon a tenuous relationship to punk history: "Trends come and go...and it seems that every now and then the punk scene harks back to the 'good old days' for inspiration, which of course is good in some respects. It never is an exact copy of what was [...] because what is being copied is only what we construct from a few record covers, a couple myths, or for those of us old enough, a few fuzzy memories that aren't based in reality." See Scholastic Deth, "Lyrics and Explanations." Online at <http://www.geocities.ws/scholastic-deth/lyrics.html>
- 25 For examples of such references, see Bradford D. Martin, *The Other Eighties: A Secret History of America in the Age of Reagan* (New York: Macmillan, 2011), pp. 95-118; Bruce Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift In American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Cambridge, MA: De Capo, 2002), p. 153.
- 26 Goshert, p. 88.
- 27 It is possible that punkademics could be mapped onto what Linda Andes refers to as the "stages of punk." Linda Andes, "Growing Up Punk: Meaning and Commitment Careers in a Contemporary Youth Subculture," in ed. J.S. Epstein, *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), pp. 212-231. Andy Bennett has written one of the only pieces about 'old' punks, but it focuses rather narrowly on fans attending a concert. See "Punk's Not Dead: The Continuing Significance of Punk Rock for an Older Generation of Fans," *Sociology*, Vol. 40 No. 2 (2006): 219-235.