"Quaring" the Scene:

Negotiating Black Queer Identity in the Punk Community

At this stage in black queer discourse, the fact that black LGBTQ people are excluded and rendered invisible in society at large is almost taken for granted. But how are they portrayed and treated in communities that supposedly aim to subvert mainstream values and norms? Punk communities traditionally have aligned themselves with radical, progressive politics and sensibilities; however, borne primarily out of working class white male strife, punk activism often marginalizes and alienates groups – particularly women, non-white people, and queer/trans folks – in its very efforts to overthrow mainstream narratives of power.

In this paper, I focus on the ways in which the punk scene has failed to include black queer identified people, and how black queer people have responded to or resisted the dominant narrative within the subculture – most notably, by either trying to create a space for themselves in punk music or rejecting it entirely. First, I will briefly outline the history of punk to situate the context of its racism and sexism/heterosexism. Despite the interconnectedness of these issues, I will present them separately, as much of the literature does the same—and most of the offshoot movements that I explore originated from a single-issue standpoint. Next, I will discuss the implications of this invisibility/exclusivity in the scene from an intersectional standpoint, and explore potential solutions to creating alternate narratives and radical punk discourse.

The Kids Are All White

Cowie (2013) outlines a brief history of the emergence of punk in the late 1970s, focusing its roots in white male frustration and anti-disco sentiment. He argues that in the early

seventies, popular music started to become even further fragmented into "white rock" versus "black music," and that disco emerged as a seemingly inclusive solution to this musical segregation. Initially, disco represented the next step in the racial integration of social life. By the late seventies, however, the genre had moved "from an innovative art form to a fad and finally to a cultural volcano...taking over radio stations, clothing styes, and mating patterns" (p. 321). It was around this time that the "Disco Sucks!" movement came about, as white (male) America attempted to reclaim its distinctiveness:

> The anti-disco movement was less about the materiality of working-class identity than
> what white, male, blue-collar identity had morphed into: a populist grab bag of
> resentments based on region, race, economics, and sexuality. White guys, already
> insecure about their employment future, now faced threats to everything else they
> thought they could rely upon: racial identity, masculinity, and, what by then had
> become a safely white genre, rock 'n' roll. (p. 323)

This attempt on behalf of white America to reclaim its distinctiveness ultimately led to the establishment of the "Anglo-American punk movement," (Cowie 2013:324) catalyzed primarily by the Ramones, who emerged out of the underground anti-disco scene to bring rock music back to its DIY (do-it-yourself), white working class mentality.

Some, however, argue against the assumption that punk has always been an inherently white subcultural movement. Ensminger (2010), for example, claims that hegemonic notions of race have led to the erasure of black presence in punk history. He states that "African Americans have been an essential force shaping rock music," citing The Clash in particular as a punk band known for drawing influence from, and paying homage to, reggae and black culture in their music. He also envisions the punk and hardcore scene(s) as "a convergence culture that provided a space for participants … to reassert the flux and freedom of black identity in American music

and culture." Additionally, he depicts punks and black folks as sharing similar goals and ideologies, standing side-by-side in the fight for social and racial equality.

However, it is problematic to assert that the influence (and, in many cases, the appropriation) of black music and culture in punk equates to the presence of black people or the acceptance of blackness in punk. Second, the Clash, as an English band, emerged from a completely different context for race and class relations. Cowie, in fact, does address the Clash's "global" sound, in addition to their ideological alliance with class struggles and anti-racist messages. However, he notes that the Clash, along with the Sex Pistols, were a part of the UK punk movement, and provides sharp contrast between the American scene and the movement across the pond: "The limits of the American punk scene only make sense when compared with their UK equivalent, where the Clash and the Sex Pistols proved to be the driving forces of innovation" (p. 325). The American punk scene incorporated very little black influence into their sound, and, he argues, were less directly vocal about class warfare.

In addition, Traber (2001) argues against the idea that punk self-marginalization is comparable to "minority" status in its constructions of identity and authenticity. He criticizes the punk practice of rejecting mainstream culture as an "appropriation of otherness" (p. 31). In attempting to mark themselves as socially subordinate, punks unintentionally uphold preconceived notions about the social categories they are attempting to emulate, and in doing so reinforce hegemonic norms and culture, rather than subvert it. Thus, while the punk ethos supposedly represents a destabilizing of hegemonic norms, Traber claims that this type of resistance can perpetuate the very categories it is attempting to deconstruct. As a mostly white genre, the power dynamics inherent in the scene cannot – and should not – be ignored for the sake of generating an idealized image of the subculture and its politics.

Ensminger raises an important point, however, insofar as he claims that the notion of

punk as a white-dominated community should not serve to undermine or erase the presence or

the experiences of black people in the scene. The documentary *Afro-Punk* explores the

experience of being black in the scene through interviews with black punks – many of whom are

members of widely known punk and hardcore bands. Most of the people featured in the film

discuss feeling out of place in society – several of them report growing up in all-white

neighborhoods or suburbs – and trying to carve out a space for themselves at punk. Even when

the scene could provide a home for them, however, many people featured in the documentary

discuss the experience of always being the only black kid at shows; their marginalized social

status is replicated even in a community that claims to be "different," and that supposedly

"define[s] themselves against the majority" (Spooner 2003).

Some of the documentary's interviewees do speak to the supposed "self-marginalization"

of the punk community. One person claims that "being black and being a punk rocker are pretty

similar;" yet another says that the "true energy" of punk is "being caught in a system that you

can't identity with, that you don't support." Many people convey the idea that, for most of their

lives, the punk scene has been the only place where they feel accepted. Despite these feelings of

solidarity between them and their fellow punks, however, there still exists a wall between them

and the white kids that dominate every show. Many of them talk about their inability to fit in

with white punk culture and feeling tokenized and/or alienated by their white peers.

Several interviewees mention the indelible mark black culture and music has left on

punk; "punk is black music" is an oft-repeated sentiment, and Chuck Berry and Little Richard

are both cited almost ubiquitously as formative influences on rock 'n' roll. Seminal hardcore band

Bad Brains is mentioned by almost everyone in the documentary; several interviewees express

the feeling that the existence of a band like Bad Brains made them feel like they belong, that they are not alone in the scene. Although many people report feeling the need to conform to white ideals of punk aesthetic by straightening and dyeing their hair or adopting typical punk fashion, one person talks at length about "the direct influence [of African and indigenous people's aesthetic] on the punk prototype image," and the formation of "a contemporary Euro-centric version of what people in the bush were doing" (Spooner 2003).

These firsthand perspectives and experiences can shed much more light on the complexity of race dynamics within punk than impersonal and abstracted academic literature alone. Jewelle Gomez argues that holistic, humanizing narratives are a much more significant and meaningful way of gaining visibility; through merely theoretical study, black queer people "will not be represented as active, progressive members of society but will be merely examined under a discursive microscope" (2005:296). In addition, these firsthand narrative accounts demonstrate that the black punk experience is not generalizable or homogenous; although there are several pervasive themes that characterize most of the interviews featured in *Afro-Punk*, there are also a few people that reject the idea that their black identity is at odds in any way with their punk identity.

What is important to note here, however, is that almost none of the literature on black people in punk employs much of an intersectional view in terms of including gender and sexuality in their analysis. Even in the *Afro-Punk* documentary, only a few people mentioned gender, and virtually no one mentioned sexuality (except in terms of being sexualized or seen as homosexual based on personal punk aesthetic and style).

Dudefest

In addition to being foundationally white, punk has been similarly associated with hegemonic, heterosexual masculinity. The anti-disco movement that, Cowie (2013) claims, fueled the mainstream American punk scene as we know it was not simply about race: "The 'Disco Sucks' rallies and the various burnings, steamrollings, and smashing of disco records … seemed like the last stand of white blue-collar Midwestern males against all that was cosmopolitan, urbane, racially integrated and, most of all, gay" (p. 23). These white males, who "fetishized the phallic guitar solos of rock," resisted disco's challenge to their hegemonic straight masculinity just as much as they did for its racial inclusion.

Although the underground punk scene of the early seventies upheld feminist ideology for the most part, Rosenberg and Garofalo (1998) claim that " … as [punk] became commercialized around 1977, its ideals became assimilated into the mainstream patriarchal belief systems" (p. 809). Leblanc claims that the construction and performance of gender identity in punk has since been based around these patriarchal norms, leading to a somewhat hostile environment for girls and women in punk:

> Girls in male-dominated youth subcultures such as punk continually confront ideologies
> of gender that remain largely invisible, perhaps even tacitly accepted, in many young
> women's everyday lives. Punk girls struggle to construct their gender within the confines
> of a highly male-dominated and therefore "masculinist" context. The punk subculture
> highly valorized the norms of adolescent masculinity, celebrating displays of toughness,
> coolness, rebelliousness, and aggressiveness.... [P]unk girls must accommodate female
> gender within subcultural identities that are deliberately coded as male. How do they
> negotiate between these seemingly conflicting sets of norms? (p. 8)

The performance of certain punk norms is a pervasive theme in the discourse. Force (2009) emphasizes the importance of punk authenticity and identity, claiming that the punk community

is "a continuum of markedness" (p. 302). One of the most notable methods of performing punk identity involves performances and displays of esoteric knowledge as a tool to gain credibility and respect in the scene. He argues that scene members regularly engage in one-upmanship as an authenticity practice, competing for status through the use of trivial knowledge about music as well as flaunting consumption, i.e. the collection of rare or expensive vinyl (p. 305).

King complicates this idea of one-upmanship by approaching it from a gendered context. She describes punk as a "dudefest," and recollects: "I distinctly remember looking down on this one femininely-dressed girl at a show and wondering whose girlfriend *she* was. Didn't we all know the punk scene was a boys' game and you had to out-dude the dudes to win?" She claims that punk authenticity is often gained through meeting the masculine ideals that pervade the community; the ability to "hang with the boys" and exhibit characteristics of toughness and aggression are valued in punk women, and prized over femininity (King 2008). She similarly criticizes the scene for being exclusive of queer, trans, and gender non-conforming people. According to her testimony, it seems that the only way to earn punk "cred" is to emulate hegemonic white, straight, masculinity as closely as possible.

Despite the hetero-masculine nature of the scene, punk's roots in patriarchy have been challenged by those seeking to re-integrate feminist values into the punk ethos. Riot Grrrl, arguably the most notable of these movements, began in the summer of 1991 (Rosenberg & Garofalo 1998:809) and sought to provide a community for female punks to feel safe, support each other, and engage in discourse via music performances, zines, and consciousness-raising (CR) groups: "Riot Grrrl empowers girls to become angry and speak," (p. 811). Despite its very vocal goals of feminist empowerment, however, there have been many critiques of Riot Grrrl's ability to empower all girls equally. The following excerpt, which is from a "multifaceted and

open-ended exploration of Riot Grrrl," briefly touches on the problem of race in the community

– and demonstrates how members of the community failed to properly handle that problem:

> The fact that the vast majority of girls involved in Riot Grrrl are white and middle-to
> upper-class has caused outsiders to deride the movement and some of those involved to
> dissociate themselves from it. Although there has been much discussion recently of race
> as an issue within Riot Grrrl and society in general, no one seems to have conceived any
> viable solution to the racial homogeneity of Riot Grrrl (Rosenberg & Garofalo 1998:811).

The authors briefly acknowledge racial tensions in the movement, but stop short of forming a critical analysis or discussion, cutting off any avenues altogether for imagining a "viable solution" to the problem. Although its goal is to challenge punk ideals of masculinity, Riot Grrrl clearly falls short of doing so in any kind of racially equitable way. Additionally, like the second-wave feminist ideology that informed its goals, the movement has been criticized by many for excluding trans and queer women. In this way, despite its rejection of patriarchal norms within the punk scene, the movement supports and reinforces the gender binary and heteronormative ideals, and its limited in its non-intersectional approach and foundation.

However, there have been movements exclusively geared toward the inclusion and visibility of queer people in the scene. Before Riot Grrrl, a smaller and lesser known movement known as "queercore" (originally "homocore") sought to construct queer identity in opposition to mainstream straight and even LBGTQ communities. Queercore aimed to move toward a queer "counter-public sphere" in which both hetero- and homo-normativity were rejected. Du Plessis and Chapman (1997) emphasize the "us versus them" positionality that queercore claimed in order to separate themselves from hegemonic definitions of what it meant to be queer (p. 47). Unlike Riot Grrrl, which was unified by a particular sound and distinct community and eventually became a separate sub-genre of punk in its own right, queercore was more of a

subdivision of hardcore that became a very fleeting movement within the larger scene.

Proponents of queercore denounced the "masculine tendencies" of punk and hardcore, while

simultaneously performing alongside those masculine bands in order to truly "queer" the scene

(p. 52).

Mobilizing Tensions

     After exploring the history of race, gender, and sexuality in punk, the difficult but

necessary question is: where do they converge? Although several of the authors I have cited thus

far do touch on the interwoven nature of these issues, the majority of the literature does not

operate on a critical intersectional level. The fact that the scholarly discourse on the topic is

mostly about either race or gender or sexuality shows a fundamental inability to conceptualize or

validate black queer punk identity as holistic or concrete. So, how does one cope with this

combination of seemingly fundamentally incompatible overlapping identities?

     Johnson and Henderson (2005) seek to "mobiliz[e] the tensions embedded in the

conjunctions of 'black' and 'queer' … " (p. 6). An essential approach to this interanimation of

identities is the introduction of "quare" studies – *quare* being an African American vernacular

term for "queer," which " … not only speaks across identities, it *articulates* identities as well" (p.

127).

> ...to *quare* queer—to throw shade on its meaning in the spirit of extending its service to
>
> 'blackness.' Further, we believe that there are compelling social political reasons to lay
>
> claim to the modifier 'black' in 'black queer.' Both terms, of course, are markers or
>
> signifiers of difference: just as 'queer' challenges notions of heteronormativity and
>
> heterosexism, 'black' resists notions of assimilation and absorption. And so we endorse
>
> the double cross of affirming the inclusivity mobilized under the sign of 'queer' while

claiming the racial, historical, and cultural specificity attached to the marker 'black.'" (p.

7)

In light of this term and its implications for the broadening of black queer studies as a whole, I

ask: can punk be "quared?" Is it possible to open up a system of communities that have

maintained the invisibility of entire groups of people? Can black and queer identities ever be

fully and wholly incorporated into punk identity? And if they can, at what cost?

"I don't feel punk"

It is not always worth it for people to sacrifice parts of themselves to be involved in a

community that rejects the whole of who they are. As Rosenberg & Garofalo (1998) mention in

their brief analysis of black exclusion in the punk community, many punks choose to leave the

scene because of the identity harm done to them within it. Johnson (2005) speaks to the

structurally oppressive nature of being forced to choose one identity over the other: " … any

separation of 'black lesbian and gay' into two categories ('black' and 'lesbian and/or gay')

presumed to be autonomous can be effected only violently" (p. 217). In the case of black queer

punks, both their racial and sexual – and/or gender – identity are at risk of being violently

detached from their punk selves. There is often a pressure to suppress the parts of them that are

not in line with mainstream definitions of punk.

Nia King, prominent queer art activist of color, is one example of a person who grew up

as a punk but ultimately found that the scene was not for her. Her zine entry, "The First 7-Inch

Was Better: How I Became an Ex-Punk" explains the process of identity violence she underwent

that ultimately led to her voluntary exit from the community: "I think people with marginalized

or complex identities are asked to leave a part of themselves at the door when they enter white,

straight and male-dominated spaces … In this crucial way, punk counterculture is no better than

the dominant culture." Now, despite maintaining ties with members of the punk community –

and using a punk zine as an outlet for her narrative – she claims that she no longer "feel[s]

punk," as she feels alienated and silenced in punk spaces (2008).

Of course, there are other radical communities out there beyond punk, which are more

catered to marginalized experiences and narratives. Nia King purports to have found a queer

community that was more politically involved and racially diverse than the punk scene she grew

up in, and that validates and respects every aspect of her identity – not only in empty words or

meaningless ideological stance, but in actual practice. Though she credits punk for being a

formative influence in her life and introducing her to activism, she has been able to find a group

of people outside punk, whose priorities are more closely in line with hers.

Queering the Black (W)hole

Not everyone who experiences violence toward their identity rejects punk altogether,

however. For many, punk is another aspect to their identity – perhaps equally important to them

as blackness, queerness, or femininity. Many queer punks/punks of color highlight self and

collective care as methods of coping with identity violence and the structural harm inherent in

participating in environments that can be oppressive. These types of projects serve as forms of

resistance to the dominant punk narrative without dismissing punk altogether; by attempting to

create a community within a community, black queer punks can attempt to "quare" the scene.

There are many small organizations, groups, and collectives specifically catered to both

black and queer identities, that advocate for inclusion in punk and other alternative spaces.

Chicago's underground Black and Brown Punk Collective is one example of such an

organization. The project attempts to carve out spaces for queer, trans, and intersex people of

color (QTIPOC) within punk where they can feel safe, build solidarity, and create social support

networks. They organize punk shows in addition to anti-racism workshops, fundraisers that

benefit local social justice causes and charities, and a yearly summer festival. In an interview, the

two creators speak to the lack of inclusion and representation that spurred them to create this

space, in order to connect the black and brown youths they saw at punk shows and to empower

them. They talk about punk as survival – not just music, but a "DIY" (do-it-yourself) ethic that

many white punks take for granted but which marginalized people often need to employ just to

get by and be heard (Malsky 2015).

The DIY approach is something that is not only central to punk at its origin, but is also a

crucial tool for black queer empowerment. One *Afro-Punk* interviewee stresses its importance in

black punk communities: "DIY is the basis for everything … There's very few black-owned

stores in black neighborhoods. If we were more DIY conscious, it would be incredible" (Spooner

2003). This pro-DIY mentality seems to be common among queer punks of color. Ritzer and

Jurgenson (2010) echo this idea with their discussion of the emergence of "prosumer" capitalism

– a form of capitalism in which there is no distinction between production and consumption (p.

14). They argue that in prosumption, capitalists have less control over the production or

consumption of content, giving greater control to (and lessening the likelihood of exploitation of)

the prosumers themselves; in the same vein, prosumers are more likely to engage in resistance

against capitalist forces (p. 31). DIY punk music, patches, pins, and zines are all examples of

prosumption, and seek to eliminate the inherently oppressive and hierarchal relationship between

the capitalist, the worker, and the consumer.

In this way, prosumption can be seen as a radical alternative to capitalism, which

disproportionately subjugates black and queer people. Zines are one of the most frequently cited

form of prosumer capitalism in the punk scene, used most notably for communication and awareness-raising for and about marginalized people. Riot Grrrl is probably the most widely known for using zines in its activism: "The most common means of communication in the Riot Grrrl community is the zine … Riot Grrrl sees zine writing and publishing as a basic method of empowerment; zine production is self-motivated, political activism" (Rosenberg & Garofalo 1998:811). Du Plessis and Chapman (1997) also discuss the importance of the "queerzine," which is created and used by queercore activists as a tool for cultural production, and for naming and discussing queer identity (p. 47).

Zines have the unique ability to express narratives and show a variety of experience through a variety of forms (poetry, prose, art, comics, etc). Piepmeier (2008) speaks to the materiality of zines and the effect of a zine in its physical form, claiming that the messy, inky, DIY quality of zines – as opposed to, for example, an online blog or a glossy, professional magazine – is more conducive to an embodied experience and therefore a greater sense of connectedness between the creators and readers of zines. She claims zines possess a "reciprocal materiality," meaning that the embodied experience of the creation of the zine is translated, through the physicality and textural quality of the zine itself, to the reader (p. 216). In influencing the experience of the reader and connecting the consumption of the zine to its production, a community is formed between zine creators, distributers, and readers in the process (2008:220).

Shotgun Seamstress is a mixed-media zine/blog created by a black punk feminist activist with the purpose of "creating a psychic refuge" for "black kids isolated in white punk scenes." Atoe, the creator of this project, states that her initial and consistent goal has been to "resist stereotypical conceptions of blackness … [T]he desire to redefine ourselves, redefine blackness,

to surprise people with the scope of our self-expression, was always central to the project"
(2014-2015). The *Shotgun Seamstress* blog contains a plethora of posts: interviews, musings,
scanned copies of zine issues, and more – all with the combined purpose of chronicling black
feminist experiences in punk, representing inclusive and varying perspectives, and raising
awareness about particular issues, debates, up-and-coming bands, and the constantly shifting
state of the scene. Rather than reject the punk identity altogether (or reject her own black
identity), Atoe uses art, cultural knowledge, and political awareness to create a space for herself
wherein her own voice can be heard – in turn, giving a voice to others.

These reclamation projects are vehicles through which queer and female/femme punks of
color form a community ethos and empower themselves on an individual and collective level. By
continually building discourse and community and consistently introducing new ideas, black
queer punks can attempt to de-colonize the subculture, creating and maintaining a self-sustaining
and inclusive space. According to Stinson (2012), this type of process is integral for the "black
hole" in punk to instead become a "black (w)hole" (p. 275). She argues that punk is "a
supplemental system that reaches for meaning and origin that can never be fulfilled," drawing on
Derrida's concept of the *supplement* as "a system and force of continual correlation and
replacement" (p. 277). Punk strives for political and cultural relevance to a near-idealist extent,
and cannot help but fall short of being inclusive or non-problematic. Punk as a supplement, then,
presents a more ambiguous conceptualization of the term that allows for the constant
deconstruction of punk identity, as well as, the construction of marginalized sub-communities
(and, in turn, the deconstruction of them as well).

Conclusion: Toward a "Quare" Punk

This paper sought to explore the problematic and oppressive histories of punk in an effort to discover whether the subculture can ever be a truly inclusive and healing space for black queer people. While punk has been largely dominated by white, heterosexual masculinity, there have been many movements and organizations created in an effort to reject that narrative and create an alternative one; however, many of these movements have fallen short. Lack of inclusion, visibility, and intersectionality in punk and punk discourse leads to the violent separation of different – but interconnected – parts of oneself. The pursuit of identity wholeness often seems pointless; as a result, many people choose to leave the punk community.

How can punk be a space where holistic identity is affirmed and invalidated, if the subculture will always be just as oppressive as the mainstream cultural norms that sustain it? The DIY ethos, particularly in terms of community building and utilizing prosumer practices such as zines, offers some semblance of a solution. While dreams of an egalitarian punk utopia seem as far-fetched as imagining a perfectly equitable world, it is possible to aspire toward a queer black (w)hole, particularly in light of these radical reclamation projects, and through Stinson's notion of punk as a supplement. Ultimately, understanding punk as fluid and incomplete rather than as an immoveable set of fixed ideologies is crucial to not only resisting mainstream narratives of punk, but to deconstructing – and quaring – them.

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