Floorgasm: Queer(s), solidarity and resilience in punk

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**A B S T R A C T**

This article explores queer(ed) punk scenes, primarily in Australia. Queer ciswomen, transwomen and non-binary people aged 20–30 years are the informants here in a feminist-informed ethnographic study. They were found to engage strategies of resistance against cismale dominance at punk gigs and events in order to claim queer(ed) territory. In brief, they worked collectively to subvert the dominant patriarchal norms in punk spaces. They mobilised community-building through the politics of Do-It-Together (DIT) as a radical reshaping of the traditional punk ethos of DIY (Do-It-Yourself). They also worked to make gigs more queer-affirmative through mobilising the initiative of safe(r) spaces. We map some queer collective resilience in punk to authorise the expression of counter-hegemonic gender identities. The gig outcome was pleasurable queer solidarity enmeshed with music, a kind of metaphorical ‘floorgasm’. © 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Young queers continue to participate in punk scenes, despite the challenges of punk as defined cismale territory (Halberstam, 2005; Ciminni and Knox, 2005; Shoemaker, 2010; Wiedlack, 2011; Taylor, 2012, 2013). This includes queer cisgender women and transgender women and non-binary people. White, heterosexual cismen dominate at most punk gigs, on stage, in technical support, in front-of-house and in the audience. This is nothing new (see for example Haenfler, 2015; Sharp and Nilan, 2015; Avery-Natale, 2016). Yet some queers remain faithful fans and members of the punk scene, sometimes for many years (Taylor, 2012). So curiosity remains. Why do queer people continue to show up and enjoy themselves in often hostile punk spaces?

The first point to acknowledge is the enigma of discomfort.

Queer is not comfort-able, and neither is punk. We propose that the negative affect of discomfort drives the positive affect of solidarity. Ahmed (2004) identifies the pervasiveness of discomfort as queer feeling or affect, because queer people are compelled to embrace norms that do not fit them and hence live parts of their lives by narratives whose discourses they neither endorse nor embody. Yet because this kind of (queer) discomfort is pervasive, the punk scene does not necessarily stand out as particularly uncomfortable for queer people compared to more conservative arenas of life. Indeed, the loud iconoclastic music and the counter-normative DIY principles of punk may to some extent offset the formal ‘straight’ discomfort of everyday gendered interaction for young queer women and non-binary people. Moreover, the challenge of enjoying punk collectively, against the male heteronormativity of the scene, bonds and binds queer women and gender diverse people together.

The second point to acknowledge is the pleasure aspect of punk music itself - loud, expressive and anarchic in the broad sense. Notably, the first author has spent over ten years as a member of Australian punk scenes, yet has never heard a direct reason given for continued queer engagement with punk, except shared enthusiasm for the music; and of course the gender-affirmative peer bonding just mentioned. It is claimed ‘the cultural grounding’ for queer punk involvement remains ‘almost always the music’ (Dunn, 2016: 10). Yet punk also connects to something satisfyingly oppositional for young queers. Punk has long been a lingua franca for the marginal and a means of expressing resistance to ‘predatory capitalism’ (Avery-Natale, 2016: 23). As female lead singer Poly Styrene of early punk band Xray Spex sang discordantly so many years ago, ‘I am a

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1 Cisgender is a queer community term for an individual whose constructed gender aligns with physical/biological sex assigned at birth.

2 Transgender is a queer community term for an individual whose constructed gender does not align with their sex assigned at birth.

3 Non-binary is a queer community term for an individual who refuses gender categorisation.

4 Note: here we do not engage with experiences of cisgender males (gay or straight) nor with transgender males as their narratives were not shared explicitly with the authors.

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reject and I don’t care!’. We find that punk itself (as music and scene) is used by queers in the way that Taylor suggests, ‘to express their gender and sexual differences, empower and transform themselves, form queer social alliances and mobilise social protest’ (2012: 3). Avery-Natale’s (2016: 21–29) account of anarchist-punks in Philadelphia found that people were drawn to punk because of its ‘ethical subjectivity’, which promised to value any person in terms of equality, through ascription of ‘dignity and respect’. Anarcho-punks maintained this position in the scene even though ‘apolitical or nihilistic’ punks disagreed with their inclusive politics. In the case of queers in the punk scene, actively ‘doing’ queer in heteronormative, cis male-dominated spaces, elevates their status of counter-hegemonic legitimacy and even dominance at times. In this article we examine the ‘doing’ of queer resistance, of claim and counter-claim in punk scenes, to foreground queer punk as a site of collective authorisation and contestation. At the intersection of space and subjectivity, queer punx access silos of resilience and solidarity as legitimate punk praxis.

2. Methodology

The aim of the research project was to explore the construction and meanings of queer(ed) identities for young women and non-binary people engaged with punk subculture in Australia and the UK. This was a sociological investigation with a feminist orientation. Data was collected by the first author in Australia and the UK over a three year period using a combined ethnographic and interview approach, facilitated by immersion in local punk scenes. 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted with ciswomen and transwomen as well as non-binary punks and over 200 h of participant observation were recorded in field notes. The data used here is primarily from Australian informants and field notes. In this project the researcher (and first author) was an insider to the punk scene, and positioned in a similar way to informants, as a friend and audience member. During data collection, maintaining appropriate objectivity relevant to the research aim depended upon reflexive examination of possible bias and taken-for-granted assumptions. Ruokonen-Engler and Siouti (2016) recommend using a reflexive tool for insider research. They maintain that by using reflexivity, the embedded researcher can critically consider their personal entanglements with the field, and the possible influence on data.

A useful explanation of reflexivity in the sociological sense is offered by Threadgold and Nilan (2009: 51). They propose that reflexivity ‘embodies the idea of that which is self-referring, even self-constitutive in a continuous way – a kind of feedback loop of information and reinvention’. The first author employed that kind of reflexive process to clarify their dynamic researcher/audience/fan/friend roles in relation to an insider/outsider standpoint. Taylor (2011) points to the rich data-generating potential of an ‘intimate insider’, someone who has relationships and social investment within a music subculture; friends, lovers, family, band members and so on. We find that an insider position to the queer punk, which has been reconceptualised through the term ‘insighter’ (Hodkinson, 2005), affords possibilities unachievable to outsider researchers while simultaneously requiring ongoing reflective boundary work to negotiate the complex meaning of being inside subculture. The use of the term ‘insighter’ delineates between assumed positions of knowledge: while we may see inside, absolute insidership is not granted simply by virtue of the longevity of our subcultural membership. Techniques of insider researchers have been documented widely by scholars of music subcultures (see Bennett, 2002; Hodkinson, 2005; Taylor, 2011) and digital places (see Robards, 2013) to be beneficial for uncovering deeply embodied social formations. Like Hodkinson et al. (2013) argues that insider research can generate rich and complex analysis but that interpretation should always be approached with caution. The challenge in this case is to acknowledge and manage one’s own investment in the scene so that embedded proximity does not skew perception and result in biased arguments or a drift into advocacy. The data presented below flowed from the embedded proximity of the researcher as insider. That embedded position significantly enhanced our interpretation of vivid accounts from informants about how they collectively made queer space in punk scenes.

3. Space

In theorising the social spaces of punk and what happens there, we acknowledge Bourdieu’s (1986) concept of a metaphorical space, which may have a material and physical manifestation, but is not necessarily determined by it. Social spaces constitute a nexus of embodied cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1979). Thus entry into the physical spaces of punk such as bars and venues, and even shared houses, sees embodied capitals become part of the geography of the physical space. According to specific field configurations and struggles within the field of punk, they shift about, creating, increasing or decreasing the validity and viability of different capitals. Thus hierarchies of habitus and cultural taste may be supported or contested, since ‘matters of distinction are always context-based’ (Skeggs, 1999: 216). So certain embodied capitals are legitimised in specific places and times, yet may be seen as illegitimate elsewhere.

For example, in the research experience of the first author, walking into a bar as an academic studying punk points to some exclusive, institutionalised cultural capital which is not the kind desired atmospherically in a gig space. In contrast, walking into a bar as a member of the playing band would mobilise locally legitimated social, cultural and symbolic capital. Of course, this is only if most people in the bar understand that band to be ‘worthwhile’. Some accounts included in this article pointed to the taste distinction of ‘worthwhile’ rather than ‘good’ or ‘bad’. The term ‘worthwhile’ signifies a collective nod of appreciation for the politics of a group or individual, rather than signalling a style preference. The logic is that you might not really like the sound or style of a band, but you feel their message or contribution to the punk scene is important.

Extensive bodies of work comprehensively theorise non-heteronormative space and spatialities (see collections by Bell and Valentine, 1995; Ingram and Bouthillette, 1997; Brown, 2013 for an overview). For example, Nash and Bain (2013) highlight the complex relationality of queer space-making and homonormative discourse in Toronto’s queer bathhouses. They explain ‘while the label and concept of queer is arguably here to stay, it occupies a precarious and perhaps ironic position outside of, yet within, homonormative gay and lesbian communities’ (2007: 168). This insight is valuable for research in queer punx spaces where radical politics of the body, and expressions of sexuality through music, can often be written off as ‘too out there’ for even a self-identified, politically-progressive audience. Brown (2013), argues that rather than advocating for traditionally normalised marriage equality, radical queer activism supports the destabilisation of heteronormativity, and ultimately homonormativity, through rejecting social and political institutions of straightness.

Existing academic and non-academic research shows transgender people continue to face high levels of victimisation in everyday life (Namaste, 2000; Lombardi et al., 2002; Hill and Willoughby, 2005; Doan, 2007). Therefore, there is a particular nuance to space-making for transpeople in that embodied cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Skeggs et al., 2004; Stryker, 2006) is acquired through affective interactions which make transpeople
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