

I said I was a nerd, but I'm not a punk.
—N.E.R.D., *In Search Of* . . .

The political scientist Cathy Cohen has proposed that queer theory and politics be reconceptualized and made more relevant to the lives and struggles of “punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens.”¹ In speaking of—and on behalf of—punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens, and in asking where one might find them located within the political project of queer theory, Cohen does not simply challenge us to pay attention to previously ignored identities. Rather, in proposing the nonce taxonomy of “punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens,”² Cohen attempts to interrupt the litigious process through which subjects petition for admission to queer theoretical attention and political concern. She proposes instead an antiauthoritarian process of subject formation closer in spirit to what, on the punk scene, is called D.I.Y., or do it yourself.³

Cohen's discontent with the radical aspirations of queer politics (which I collate with queer theory for present purposes) registers an additional irony. As is now commonplace to observe, “queer” theory first emerged as a vernacular-tinged protest against the more rarified operations of “theory” as such. That queer theory should have in turn emerged as the target of vernacular scorn, one indexed by the alternative nomination of a series of street taxonomies that have not, like “queer,” been elevated to the status of an academic discipline but have instead been abandoned to the tender mercies of the neoliberal state, ought to give pause. That this perceived transformation of queer theory from “street” to “straight” theorizing (more on this contrast in a moment) should have come so rapidly—at times it seems as if queer theory was greeted at birth with castigations of academic insularity—ought to become the occasion for further sustained reflection. But at the same time, recent declarations of the death of theory, however dubious, do remind us not to take the permanency of such transformations for granted.⁴ The fate of the theorist today, wandering around unwilling to repent her or his irrelevancy, complicates any assumptions about academic privilege or security. In calling attention to such hostile framings of theorizing as irrelevant, exhausted, etc., I evoke a dimension

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of the punk experience with abjection that might be fruitful for theory to ponder.

In this essay I take up some implications and ironies of Cohen's critique by investigating the intersection of punk and queer. In contrast to the standard mode of intersectionality,⁵ I want to speculate upon another sort of intersection implied but not fully articulated in Cohen, one that is perhaps more phenomenological than sociological in nature. Cohen calls for an accounting within queer analysis for the simultaneity of racism and class oppression alongside sexism and homophobia. Such a call might be read as proposing the addition of further dimensions to the queer problematic, in an almost geometric effort to more accurately picture the social whole. I want to suggest, however, that the word *intersectional* might also point in another direction. What if we take "punks, bulldaggers, and welfare queens" as neither exhaustive nor programmatic, still less as a grand unifying theory of social oppression, but instead used this nonce taxonomy to express creative discontent with settled categories and an identification with the punk spirit? Might we theorize the intersection of punk and queer as an encounter between concepts both lacking in fixed identitarian referent, but which are nonetheless periodically caught up and frozen, as it were, within endemic modern crises of racialization? Might a reanimation of this other intersectionality better equip us to revivify both street and straight theorizing?

The figure of the punk in Anglo-American culture is a venerable but mercurial one, and to trace it fully would exceed my present effort. In my nonce proposal for a punk or punk'd theory, I do not take up the more expected sites of investigation. I do not, for instance, consider punk rock directly.⁶ Although in a longer treatment of this topic such a consideration would be essential, I begin here by focusing on some less-expected cultural moments at which punk has been figured. Such figurations of punk have more than a nominal relation to the canonical ones, and understanding something more of the connections between them—and the discourses of race and sex that simultaneously make and mask such connections—is an important part of the project of "punking" theory.

But what do punks and queers have in common, other than the obvious? And what might be the gain, for academic theory, and perhaps also for activism, in building upon this commonalty? Can we, as scholars, contribute to the cultivation of a punk spirit of anticapitalist subculture, art, and politics? It is with these questions in mind that I offer this preliminary and prospective mapping of an intellectual and perhaps political project.⁷ I broach this topic as a queer scholar and not at all, to be candid, as a current or former punk. In addition to this caveat, there are two other obvious objections to address. The first is that I have willfully misread

Cohen's use of *punk* as African American slang for a gay man. Her purpose is to distinguish a punk from a queer, the latter being racially unmarked and therefore presumptively white. Admitting this misreading, I defend it below through an etymological retangling of these two supposedly distinct types of punk. My aim here is to call attention to a preexisting conflation that I feel provides an intellectual opportunity.

The second objection is that, in commending punk to the attention of queer theorists, my terms of pop reference are out of date. Hip-hop surely, or rave culture, or the Internet, would all provide more relevant and timely sources for the kind of "street theorizing" that the queer studies scholar Kath Weston has argued for.⁸ But in an urbanized and overdeveloped culture that wants to live nowhere but at the cutting edge, a defiantly backward glance just might prove revivifying.⁹ And, ultimately, the two objections answer each other, for it is in the racialization of the figure of the punk that the question of its present currency is justified. Since Cohen wrote, the black inflection on punk has been mainstreamed in contemporary American culture to the point where it may possibly be eclipsing prior associations with the likes of Sid and Nancy. Let me begin, then, with this contemporary American "Africanization" of the meanings of punk.

"Punked" as American Africanism

Punked (v) : 1. When you make fun of someone so bad they have nothing else to say back. 2. When you hook up with a guy and he doesn't call you ever again. 3. While detained in a prison or jail, to be raped by a fellow inmate.

—UrbanDictionary.com

And of course, one can hardly afford to be put down too often, or one is beat, one has lost one's confidence, one has lost one's will, one is impotent in the world of action and so closer to the demeaning flip of becoming a queer.

—Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster"

The diverse usages of punk as verb and noun mark it as a folk variant of what Raymond Williams called a "keyword." In contrast to the keywords Williams discussed in his famous book of the same name, punk is folk culture and does not keep company with serious words like *folk* or *culture*.¹⁰ That punk nonetheless counts as "street theorizing" can be seen in the proposed homology that the above definitions for *punked*—drawn from the populist Web site UrbanDictionary.com¹¹—propose between the

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experiences of (1) being teased, (2) not being called after sex, and (3) being raped in prison. As Norman Mailer puts it in “The White Negro,”¹² punk is “a prime symbol” (225), cheerfully serving the lexicon with flexibility comparable to the word *fuck* and with some noticeable denotative overlap to that latter word as well.¹³ Although *punk* is not of central concern to Mailer, a related word, *beat*, is. The meaning Mailer ascribes to *beat*—“the demeaning flip of becoming a queer”—makes it perfectly clear that the homology drawn by street theorizing on punking and getting punked resembles the “situation beyond one’s experience, impossible to anticipate” (225) that is Mailer’s hipster’s prime symbol of dread.

The core meaning of getting “put down,” “flipped,” “ripped off,” or “punked”—from at least the late 1950s to the early 2000s—appears to be getting scapegoated within an erotic and masculinized economy of scarcity. In this economy, another’s pleasure comes at the cost of your pain. Ass fucking serves as a “prime symbol” of this economy. Sodomy, in the homophobic imagination, is the “situation beyond one’s experience, impossible to anticipate,” and is associated with extreme forms of unfreedom like imprisonment, slavery, and rape.¹⁴

It is not sufficient, however, to arrest our theorization of sodomy at the level of homophobia. Street theorizing around the word *punk* marks a discursive space in which the possibility of desiring sodomy, desiring to be sodomized, is unthinkable but, nevertheless, unavoidable. The very sexual practice, which serves as metaphor for almost any mundane humiliation, is itself intermittently exempted from its own connotational penumbra. Mailer, for instance, speaks not of the fear of being “put down” but rather of being “put down too often.” In similar fashion, UrbanDictionary.com inserts between two meanings of *punked* that indicate a dread of getting fucked a third meaning—a sort of etymological Lucky Pierre—signaling the dread of *not* getting fucked: “When you hook up with a guy and he doesn’t call you ever again.” One is punked in this case because, by not calling you afterward, the “guy” is retroactively minimizing your enjoyment of the mutual sex by making it clear that he was just “using” you. But this meaning of punked makes no sense unless you wanted the hookup in the first place and, indeed, were sort of looking forward to further hookups. That is, it makes no sense unless, in some sense, you wanted to get flipped.

Of course, it is precisely upon its ambiguity that the power of slang pivots. So I would be naive to imagine that deconstructing slang will in itself erode its force. What we need is thicker descriptions of the experiences that these ambiguities account for. Part of this thicker description entails grasping the racial dimension of the epithets “punk” and “punked.” I have mentioned that one of the several significances of Cohen’s essay

is its marking of “punk” as black vernacular for “faggot” or “queer.”¹⁵ Clarence Major’s authoritative compendium of black slang, *Juba to Five: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, defines *punk* as a “derogatory term for male homosexual” and a “male pejorative term for any other male without similar interest; a weak man; any male who gives in to anal intercourse in prison.”¹⁶ It is this American Africanism, I argue, that has been popularized on the practical joke television show *Punk’d* that has aired on the MTV network since the spring of 2003. On the show, the white actor Ashton Kutcher—a deodorized simulacrum of Mailer’s hipster—leads a gang who “punk” hapless celebrities. Their targets have included both male and female celebrities of many races.

In the context of contemporary U.S. mass culture, Kutcher’s use of “punk’d” has a specific frisson. It was made possible by the mainstreaming of hip-hop slang and the ensuing wave of new “white Negroes.”¹⁷ *Punk’d*, however, does not fit the model of a surreptitious African retention in English, such as *okay*.¹⁸ No source I consulted could definitively trace the origin of the word *punk*, but a representative etymology reports that “the word originated in British slang around the end of the 17th century when it was used to denote a *whore* and later a precursor to the modern *rent boy*.”¹⁹ Although this account does not preclude an African origin for the word, I read the evidence as indicating that *punk’d* emerges from within what Dick Hebdige has called the “frozen dialectic between black and white cultures,” that is, a word for which the memory of its English provenance has been surrogated by the imagination of a black resonance.²⁰ Telltale evidence of this faux-African origin is the use of “eye dialect,” ungrammatical spellings indistinguishable in audible speech from grammatical ones (e.g., “punk’d” for “punked”).²¹ Such a graphic practice has characterized white transcription of black speech since slavery times, so MTV’s eye dialect notifies us that we are in the presence of what the novelist Toni Morrison has termed an “American Africanism.”

Such usages, Morrison notes, make “a playground of the imagination” out of “the dramatic polarity created by skin color” and “impute African meanings—black meanings—as a way of simultaneously acknowledging and distancing a shared experience, state, or desire through spuriously ascribing it to black people.”²² Morrison’s central point—that “race” is produced out of an ongoing avoidance of an ongoing history of racist domination, rather than being the product of a benign diversity of “ethnic heritages”—is somewhat unfashionable today, despite the popularity of her novels. But it is this relational model of “race” and racism (which is not, I would say, reducible or equivalent to the bankrupt model “race relations”) that I want to argue is needed to unpack the cultural meanings of *punk* in contemporary U.S. and British cultures.

Only a dialectical approach can account for the incongruity of MTV endorsing Cohen's reclamation of punk as black language. That is to say, where in its early days MTV hysterically disavowed any black influence on the musical forms it marketed (it took no smaller a phenomenon than Michael Jackson to break the channel's color bar), black style has come to dominate the network's offerings, and proscriptive markings of blackness appear only to whet the mainstream appetite. Such a white embrace of ostensibly exclusionary black style is neither new nor specifically American. Speaking of the British punk scene in the late 1970s, Hebdige notes that "paradoxically it was here, in the exclusiveness of Black West Indian style, in the virtual impossibility of authentic white identification, that reggae's attraction for the punks was strongest. . . . Reggae's blackness was proscriptive. It was an alien essence, a foreign body which implicitly threatened British culture from within and as such it resonated with punk's adopted values" (64). In interpreting this passage, we should remember Paul Gilroy's critique of naturalizing such language of "foreign bodies" in "British culture."²³ But we should also note that, in the opening pages of *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Hebdige felt the need to apologize for the amount of attention his text on punk pays to "the largely neglected dimension of race and race relations." Remarkably, the same word that Cohen could assume circa 1997 would firmly connote blackness to her readers could, just two decades earlier, just as clearly mark a cultural style awaiting an overdue racial perspective. I believe this situation is not accidental. That is to say, and this is a major argument of my essay, I think Cohen and Hebdige are discussing a single, complex phenomena—frozen dialectically between black and white—and not two distinct topics. I think the linkage is deeper than just the reappearance of a word, but rather the reappearance of an experiential field that the word indexes.

The enduring strength of Hebdige's reading is the agility with which it pivots between the object of subcultural style and its meaning. He reads this object in terms of its historical context and, at the same time, how it revolts, through style, against that context. He is thereby able to read "race" into styles that conspicuously dismiss black style.²⁴ Most persuasively, he argues that punk "translated" the concept of a victimized "ethnicity" from a black to a white context, a move economically summarized in a quotation the punk rocker Richard Hell gave to the *New Musical Express* (as reported by Hebdige): "Punks are niggers."²⁵

But what kinds of "niggers" are punks, exactly? Apparently, they are "niggers" as opposed to "queers." According to Hebdige, "the scruffiness and earthiness of punk ran directly counter to the arrogance, elegance, and verbosity of the glam rock superstars" (63), above all, David Bowie.²⁶ Here is a point where a useful queer intervention can be made into Hebdige's

analysis. According to Hebdige, the punk-as-nigger identifies against the glamorous homosexual. Indeed, Hebdige associates the rise of “glam and glitter rock” (59) with both the musical “atrophy into vacuous disco-bounce and sugary ballads” (60) as well as the “segregation” of British youth culture into black-and-white camps (59). The “new sexually ambiguous image” (60) of Bowie, Hebdige reports, represented

a deliberate avoidance of the “real” world and the prosaic language in which that world was habitually described, experienced and reproduced. . . . Bowie’s meta-message was escape—from class, from sex, from personality, from obvious commitment—into a fantasy past (Isherwood’s Berlin peopled by a ghostly cast of doomed bohemians) or a science-fiction future. (61)

Such passages leave one with the impression that punk hostility to glam paid homage to an imagined black-white alliance. And yet Hebdige admits black-white solidarity was made possible “only by continually monitoring trouble spots (e.g., the distribution of white girls) and by scapegoating other alien groups (‘queers,’ hippies, and Asians)” (59). But why did the “extreme foppishness” of the queers block youth subcultures from unifying black and white working-class men? Why did “the prosaic language in which that world was habitually described, experienced and reproduced” exclude queer experience? Here a critique of masculinity—and its distortions of both language and culture—is needed.

In an odd and perhaps telling turn of phrase, Hebdige argues that punk was “designed to puncture glam rock’s extravagantly ornate style” (63). Hebdige does not explicitly endorse this puncturing—or punking—of the utopic and nostalgic dimensions of queer style, this phallic refusal of the political possibilities of “morbid pretensions to art and intellect” (62). But neither does he subject it to critical scrutiny. This is so despite the fact that queer objects are oddly central to his account. The work opens with an excerpt from Jean Genet’s *Thief’s Journal*, in which Hebdige locates the ideal-type for the subcultural object: Genet’s “tube of vaseline [. . . a] ‘dirty wretched object’” that “proclaim[s] his homosexuality to the world” (1). Hebdige’s choice is not unjustifiable in terms of actual punk object choices, such as “offensive” T-shirts of two naked cowboys kissing, or naming a band *The Homosexuals*, a name that was meant as a “fuck you” rather than an identification. But, ironically for a text that rigidly proscribes the “ornate style” of glam, such queer objects are purely ornamental to Hebdige’s main theoretical project. Much as a desire to be punked appears in the absent center of the vernacular horror of getting punked, a queer object appears in the absent center of an analysis largely devoted to explaining away the capacity of queer objects to revolt through style. It is through the eliding of queer affect, I suggest, that Hebdige’s analysis

reproduces the dominant figure of masculinity that constantly transmits the “racial” meanings Morrison critiqued and identified.

Punk City

This use of an underinterpreted contrast between the punk and the queer recurs in other examples of the “frozen dialectic” between black and white. In the Academy Award–winning U.S. documentary, *Scared Straight!* (1978), a group of adolescent men and women are “sentenced” to spend three hours in Rahway State Prison, during which they are berated and threatened by the Lifers, a group of long-term convicts. The filming portrays the youths as narcissistic and unrepentant. Because they do not respond to shame, they must instead be punked. They are abandoned to the topsy-turvy world of prison, where convicted criminals literally run the show. The documentary depicts prison as the way society itself might be without the protections of law and norm.²⁷ The punks, in being exposed to this truly anomic violence, will, it is hoped, revert to good behavior. The success or failure of this strategy provides the theme of the many and highly sentimental follow-up episodes appended to the documentary throughout the 1980s and 1990s. I focus here on the original documentary, as an example of a cultural text, contemporaneous to the emergence of punk rock, in which the American Africanist connotation of “punk” is already manifested. But *Scared Straight!* is also a transitional text, insofar as what is now seen as black slang was primarily understood then as prison slang. The film thus represents an early figuration of the rise of the prison-industrial complex within the distorting mirror of law-and-order ideology and its racializing imperatives. As a film it provides the template followed by popular shows of the 1990s like *Oz* and, more elliptically, by shows like *Punk’d*, which share *Scared Straight!*’s interest in exposing a zone of anomic violence—always figured with the “help” of unwilling black participants—underlying and threatening the social order.²⁸

The highly scripted character of the inmates’ conduct (and perhaps also the youths’ responses) makes the encounter feel ritualistic. In particular, the session resembles an ersatz initiation rite, in which the inmates play the role of adult male villagers, guiding the youths into responsible adulthood. A primary mode of that ritualized violence is, perhaps predictably, the threat to “do bodily harm to your asshole.” The articulation between this lawless behavior and the lawful future lives of heterosexual domesticity the documentary is intended to produce cries out for further exploration.

Scared Straight! maps a bifurcated society traversed by two forces: the silent power of the penal apparatus (which the documentary film crew identifies itself and its viewers with) and the loud, offensive sound of what the film calls “street talk.” The temporary disruption of the normal bounds of propriety (the profanity-laced film was broadcast unexpurgated on television) is marked by a slang figured as the only language that can reach the youth. The link that “street talk” establishes between prison and the street renders the latter a sort of extrusion of the former. The lawlessness of prison spills out into the streets, the site of crime. The film thus operates through the same voyeuristic technology of panopticism that the evening news continuously resorts to, in which we see crime but remain unseen to it.

The spectacle of street talk masks the surveillance of the penal apparatus. Prison guards are hardly depicted. At a key moment, an inmate histrionically yells at the camera, as if it were not his performance’s occasion. Street talk is enlisted to the work of penology. The street theorizing of the Lifers—don’t come to jail or you’re going to get punked—is rendered supplemental to disciplinary power, which is allowed to operate behind the scenes as a silent partner.²⁹ The Lifers present themselves as bogeyman images of the youths’ own dystopian futures. And the Lifers portray their desires to punk the youths in the universalizing terms of an animalistic state of nature. One (unnamed) inmate shouts, “Well, we got sexual desires too. We’re just like you. We’re made of flesh and blood. You tough guy, take a wild guess. When we got sexual desires, who do you think we kick, and don’t tell me each other! Who?” As he asks this question, the inmate sticks his face up close to that of one of the young men and then veers up again to answer it, in case there was any doubt: “I gotta tell you, I’ve been down here ten years, and I’m going to die in this stinking joint, and if they wanted to give me these three bitches right here [gestures toward the three women in the group] I would leap over them like a kangaroo, just to get to one pretty young fat butt boy.” His voice dropping nearly to a whisper as he ends that sentence, he leans again into the face of another of the young men. The other Lifers voice their agreement.

The concept of “situational homosexuality” (an oddly redundant term: what kind of homosexuality could occur outside a situation?) is especially ill equipped to theorize the deployment of sexuality in such disciplinary performances. What the inmate “confesses” to is his readiness to play the “masculine” role in prison society, and his readiness to feminize the youth, to turn them into women (which is one reason the inmates do not threaten the young women with rape: as women, they are already feminized, and the threat of rape upon them is not one restricted to the dystopian space of the prison but one that characterizes the osten-

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sibly “free” space outside the prison, which it is the function of the film to idealize). Male rape, along with “coarse street talk,” is called forth to supplement the social order.

What the film aptly calls “homosexual taunts” serve not to produce queer subjectivities but to deter them at all costs. The efficacy of scaring straight, negligible in terms of deterring street crime, seems to come rather in the production of sodomy without sodomites.³⁰ When both media and the state have been engaged in such practices of sexualized domination of the urbanized and racialized dispossessed since the 1970s, are we at least entitled to speak of the social construction of the punk? What would it mean to identify the authentic language of the street, its theorizing, not as some autonomous space that the law must at all costs come to dominate but rather as the active site of the law’s production, through the street’s supplemental provision of terror?³¹

There are no actual homosexuals in *Scared Straight!* except in one place: protective custody or, as the Lifers call it, “punk city.” Punk city exists because of a contradiction in the logic of imprisonment: where do you place the victim and agent of a crime that occurs in prison? It is not that the Lifers tell the youths that this is where they might go if they happen to be gay. No such “natural” gayness is even speculated upon by the film. Rather, punk city represents a kind of no-place or blind spot within the bifurcated theorization of the social, a place of unthinkability. Beyond the state of exception that the film maps and determines—the straight-street nexus—there is this third space that seems to exist beyond a relation to either form of knowledge or experience. In my conclusion, I revision this third space. But first, I want to take one step further back into the genealogy of punk, revisiting Mailer’s canonical performance of the frozen dialectic.

Punk’d Theory

The third space beyond the street-straight binary is both evoked and avoided in Mailer’s essay “The White Negro.” Here the homosexual appears as an example of a “condition of psychopathy” shared by “politicians, professional soldiers, newspaper columnists, entertainers, artists, jazz musicians, call girls, promiscuous homosexuals, and half the executives of Hollywood, television and advertising” (218). An alternative grouping of psychopaths Mailer provides is “the homosexual, the orgiast, the drug-addict, the rapist, the robber, and the murderer” (219). Such absurd lists of deviants share a surface resemblance to the “nonce taxonomies” through which, Eve Sedgwick suggests, “the precious, devalued

arts of gossip [refine the] necessary skills for making, testing, and using unrationalized and provisional hypotheses about what *kinds of people* there are to be found in one's world."³² This surface resemblance is mitigated by the leaden masculinism of the prose, which has its back up against the queer even as it proposes all sorts of queer-sounding scenarios (on which more in a moment). In Mailer's virtuosic prose, I suggest, a different configuration of street-straight fusion coagulates, as his effort to draw the cool of jazz into the prestigious orbit of psychoanalysis and sociology ultimately falls totally flat.

Just as Hebdige's punk "punctures" glam rock, Mailer's hip jazz acts like a cock: its "knifelike entrance into culture" has a "penetrating influence" (213). The figure of the black man stereotypically functions as the ultimate in macho, his "lifemanship" (223) providing the model for the hipster and for Mailer's style as well. But in its relentless pursuit of macho, Mailer's prose perpetually needs to cover its ass. In the very first pages Mailer describes hip as the product of a "ménage-à-trois" between "the Negro," the "bohemian," and the "juvenile delinquent" (213); just so we do not miss the point, he calls marijuana "the wedding ring" and reports that "the Negro . . . brought the cultural dowry" (213). Indeed, Mailer's inexplicable sprinklings of homosexuals (promiscuous and otherwise) among the people who possess the "new kind of personality" he champions can be interpreted as a slightly desperate attempt at keeping queerness at bay by condensing its meanings onto a socially marginal figure, permitting the very queer metaphors he deploys elsewhere in the text to escape untainted by embodied specificity. Employing a "street theorizing" still current in our usages of "getting punked," Mailer asserts that the hipster knows that "there is not nearly enough sweet for everyone" (221) and deploys his lifemanship to grasp what little he can at the cost of others. The virile figure of the black man functions in Mailer's economy as the catastrophic sign of the shattering of the street-straight nexus: "If the Negro can win his equality, he will possess a potential superiority, a superiority so feared that the fear itself has become the underground drama of domestic politics. . . . the Negro's equality would tear a profound shift into the psychology, the sexuality, and the moral imagination of every white alive" (228). Of course, wherever the words *fear* and *Negro* appear in one sentence, the word *miscegenation* is never far behind. And so it comes: "So, when it comes, miscegenation will be a terror" (228). But what could this possibly mean? How could the story of the U.S. racial formation, beginning in the forced labor and rape of black people, continuing apparently through the cultural ménage à trois of hip jazz in the 1950s, somehow produce miscegenation as a *future* terror? How does a discourse ostensibly about "the 'real' world and the prosaic language in which that world was habitually described,

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experienced and reproduced” manage to conjure up its own fantasy future in which, apparently, apocalyptically, the “races” mix?

No wonder that, in his commentary on his erstwhile friend Mailer, James Baldwin noted that “I could not, with the best will in the world, make any sense out of *The White Negro*.”³³ The danger of street-cum-straight theorizing in the idiom of a writer like Mailer is that at least part of the intense energy of its sophistication is directed at occluding entire dimensions of social experience. Among them, black men who are not walking phallic symbols or psychopaths; men or women of any race who are okay with being punk or beat, and so on. Baldwin’s essay “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy” constitutes a kind of diva reading of Mailer’s macho, an arch dismissal of a condescending theory of “race” that only perpetuates outmoded definitions of masculinity. Baldwin speaks of his “fury that so antique a vision of the blacks should, at this late hour, and in so many borrowed heirlooms, be stepping off the A train.”³⁴ Mailer’s essay represents for Baldwin the very figure of a totalizing and synthesizing theoretical project that reinscribes the very thought it was attempting to transcend: the stereotypical freezing of black masculinity that we still see, for example, in shows like *Punk’d*, or in any number of marketing campaigns for new hip-hop performers. “The White Negro” serves as an object lesson of how a keen eye on the gritty realities of the street can go deeply wrong. But it does not, of course, license us to retreat entirely into theoretical towers. How, then, to approach street theorizing differently?

I have argued that theory—of both the street variety spoken on *Scared Straight!* and the straight variety, literate, well read, culturally authoritative, that Mailer exemplifies—can present itself as being explicitly “about” race, class, and sexuality while continuing to serve the function of regulation and discipline. A major aspect of this regulation, I have argued, is the frozen dialectic between black and white, and, I should add, between straight and queer, that is produced and reproduced within cultural forms both sophisticated and otherwise. It is not enough, in other words, to take up the simultaneity of race, class, gender, and sexuality, which it is my argument that the vernacular does constantly in keywords like *punk* and *punked*. Rather, we must investigate the subject transformed by law that nevertheless exists nowhere within it, the figure of absolute abjection that is, paradoxically, part of our everyday experience.

Here, the very metaphor of intersectionality can provide us with its alternative. An intersection is also a meeting of two streets, and in a landscape long given over to automotivity, it is a place of particular hazard for the pedestrian. The discipline and surveillance of vernacular mobility at such intersections of course include such postmodern devices as the surveillance camera. But this discipline does not begin there but rather, I

would argue, in the very process of enclosure through which the space for walking has been given over to automotivity in the first place. The rights of the pedestrian (to cross with the light, etc.) balance the right of way of the automobile. Yet, as any streetwalker will tell you, enforcing any of these rights against the legal and illegal incursions of car culture requires continuous tactics of everyday resistance (try actually getting traffic to stop for you at a striped “zebra” crossing, for example). Additionally, over many acts of vernacular mobility hovers the nebulous crime of jaywalking, rarely enforced, but pregnant in its enforceability. So, in the practice of everyday life, the vernacularly mobile are required to demand both their rights and *more* than their rights, simply to preserve a portion of the mobility they had prior to enclosure. Examples proliferate: workers become illegal immigrants; poor mothers become welfare queens; protestors become potential terrorists. All must attack the presumption of their criminality merely to preserve their way of life from the ongoing incursions of disciplinary power. Our responses will by definition be manifold: the purpose of radical theory and politics is not to adjudicate among these responses but to nurture them. At the intersection, in the streets, we are all in punk city.

Notes

I want to thank David Eng, José Muñoz, and my anonymous reviewer for comments that helped sharpen this essay.

1. Cathy J. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” *GLQ* 3 (1997): 437–65.
2. On nonce taxonomies, see Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 22–27.
3. On D.I.Y. culture, see Craig O’Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk* (San Francisco: AK, 1999), 153–66.
4. See, for example, “Theory Is Finished,” *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, 14 December 2003, 94.
5. See Kimberlé Crenshaw, “The Intersection of Race and Gender,” in *Critical Race Theory: The Key Writings That Formed the Movement*, ed. Kimberlé Crenshaw, Neil Gotanda, Garry Peler, and Kendall Thomas (New York: New Press, 1995), 357–83.
6. On the history of punk rock, see the following accounts, uniformly partisan to their respective city and national contexts: Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989); Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Grove, 1996); Jon Savage, *England’s Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (New York: St. Martin’s, 2002); Marc Spitz and Brenden Mullen, *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*

(New York: Three Rivers, 2001). In reading these texts, it pays to be mindful of Judith Halberstam's caution against privileging white male punk rock as the only or the most important example of subcultural resistance. See Judith Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 165.

7. Halberstam is one queer theorist contributing to such a direction; see her new book of essays, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*. A classic queer analysis of youth culture still awaiting a contemporary readership is Paul Goodman, *Growing Up Absurd: Problems of Youth in the Organized System* (New York: Random House, 1960).

8. Weston contrasts street theory with straight theory, by which she means academic or intellectual theory. See Kath Weston, "Theory, Theory, Who's Got the Theory?" *GLQ* 2 (1995): 347–49.

9. An additional incentive to engage punk is that it has already been studied by at least one previous radical critical tendency—British cultural studies—and this study has produced at least one enduring classic, Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*. This book not only deserves a queer reading, it deserves to be queered. Furthermore, the historical arc of the cultural studies tendency, while of course not identical to that of queer theory, possesses some illuminating commonalities. Reflecting upon the combined and uneven trajectory of these disciplines may provide object lessons in the chances for politically attuned, culturally fluent, and activist-oriented scholarship today. The invitation to make the connection I am attempting was provided by *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* in 1993, which reprinted germinal essays from the British cultural studies tradition written by Stuart Hall, among others. See, for example, Stuart Hall, "Deviance, Politics, and the Media," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 62–90.

10. Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780–1950* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983); Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

11. The epigraph gives the three most popular definitions, based on Internet voting, at www.urbandictionary.com (accessed 23 January 2004).

12. Norman Mailer, "The White Negro: Superficial Reflections on the Hipster," in *The Time of Our Time* (New York: Random House, 1998), hereafter cited in text.

13. See the chapter on *punk* in Paul Dickson, *Words: A Connoisseur's Collection of Old and New, Weird and Wonderful, Useful and Outlandish Words* (New York: Delacorte, 1982), 228–35.

14. For a book that really runs away with this idea, see Richard C. Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

15. Similarly, Cohen marks *bulldagger* as black vernacular for *dyke*. These markings, I should note, are implicit: she does not define or discuss either term at length in the essay. From her context, it is clear that it is the black vernacular usage she intends.

16. Clarence Major, ed., *Juba to Five: A Dictionary of African-American Slang* (New York: Viking, 1994).

17. Greg Tate, ed., *Everything but the Burden: What White People Are Taking from Black Culture* (New York: Broadway, 2003).

18. Joseph E. Holloway, *Africanisms in American Culture, Blacks in the Diaspora* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990).

19. This definition also notes, “In the 20th century the term punk fell out of use in Britain, being reintroduced via the American media and later by way of the punk phenomenon of 1976 and 1977.” See Tony Thorne, ed., *Dictionary of Contemporary Slang* (New York: Pantheon, 1990), 408, emphasis in original. Dickson notes that this usage of punk appears twice in Shakespeare (*Words: A Connoisseur’s Collection*, 230). When Joey Ramone sang about “trying to turn a trick” on 53rd and 3rd, one sees that the connection between sex work punking and punk rock is quite direct (The Ramones, *Ramones*, music CD [1976]).

20. Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979; repr., London: Routledge, 2002), 70, hereafter cited in text.

21. Ira Berlin, Marc Favreau, and Steven F. Miller, eds., *Remembering Slavery* (New York: New Press, 1998), 1.

22. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 38. The recent banishing of *punked* from the English language by the Lake Superior State University Word Banishment selection committee provides odd confirmation of its status as an American Africanism. This annual list of new words that “annoy” its committee of stewards of what they call “the Queen’s English” very reliably catches Africanisms like *bling bling* (2004), *got game* (2003), *yo* (1990), and *chill out* (1980). The full archive is kept online at www.lssu.edu/banished.

23. Paul Gilroy, “*There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*”: *The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London: Hutchinson, 1987).

24. “The succession of white subcultural forms can be read as a series of deep-structural adaptations which symbolically accommodate or expunge the black presence from the host community” (44). James Spooner’s 2003 documentary, *Afro-Punk: The “Rock N Roll Nigger” Experience*, is another attempt to read this seeming deep-structural adaptation. It does so, however, fairly literally (interviewing black participants in the contemporary U.S. and Canadian punk scene) and does not go much further to analyze the centrality of “race” and black style to the construction of punk even in the absence of black participants. The redundancy of the word *afro-punk* signals this difficulty. See Spooner, *Afro-Punk*.

25. Hebdige, *Subculture*, 62. In 1978 Patti Smith released the song “Rock & Roll Nigger” on her LP *Easter*, comparing her place as a woman in rock to the plight of “niggers.” In 1995 the shock rocker Marilyn Manson released a cover of Smith’s song on the CD *Smells Like Children*.

26. Bowie was, ironically, even more directly influenced by black American music and performance than the white ethnicity of the punks. When he performed in San Francisco, Bowie apocryphally noted that they did not need him because they already had Sylvester, the influential openly gay African American R&B, rock, and disco performer.

27. André Carrington correctly points out the film’s Hobbesian logic: the prison society of Rahway is presented as a “state of nature” in which life is “nasty, brutish, and short” (Carrington, conversation with the author). I am grateful in general to the students in my class Punks and Divas for many of the insights about *Scared Straight!* that I make in the following paragraphs.

28. For those who have not seen the show, *Punk’d* specializes in getting celebrities to lose their cool on camera. While it does not exclusively target black celeb-

rities, there is in my view a preponderance of targets drawn from the world of hip-hop. Given the title of the show, I would argue that *Punk'd* takes the figure of the black male as its prototypical target, and its other targets exist in relation to this prototypical one. The white soul singer Justin Timberlake, for instance, is punked by revealing that, when the chips are down, he quickly drops his black affectations and performs whiteness to solicit empathy from law enforcement officials. Whether or not one accepts my view, the show undoubtedly charts the rise to prominence of a new cohort of black celebrities who are *equally* targeted alongside their white counterparts, and not studiously excluded, as many other forms of celebrity media often exclude black stars.

29. It almost goes without saying that recent criminologists have discredited such efforts at youth correction. See Anthony Petrosino, Carolyn Turpin-Petrosino, and James O. Finckenauer, "Well-Meaning Programs Can Have Harmful Effects! Lessons from Experiments of Programs Such as Scared Straight," *Crime and Delinquency* 46, no. 3 (2000): 354–79.

30. I am borrowing this phrasing from Sander L. Gilman, *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston: Hall, 1982).

31. Here the work of Giorgio Agamben on the state of exception is essential. See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998).

32. Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 23.

33. James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," in *Collected Essays* (New York: Library of America, 1998), 276.

34. *Ibid.*, 277.