A Blacker and Browner Shade of Pale: Reconstructing Punk Rock History

eingereicht von

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1 Introduction

Embedded in the transatlantic history of rock ‘n’ roll, punk rock has been considered as a particularly unruly and radical music-centered cultural phenomenon that aurally, visually, and morally disturbed the cultural status quo during the last half of the 1970s. In popular cultural history, punk rock has not only been regarded as a watershed moment in terms of music, aesthetics and music-related cultural practices, it has also been conceived of as one of the whitest subversive cultural phenomena. This paper sets out to challenge this widespread and shortsighted assumption by arguing that black and Latina/o youth have pro-actively contributed to punk’s evolution.

Examining why people of color, particularly black Americans and Britons and Latina/os are usually not linked with the punk rock genre and culture demands a consideration and interrogation of the areas and ways punk rock, as an umbrella term for a musical genre and a wide range of cultural practices has been conceived of. In order to account for the striking absence of black and Latina/o punks in punk rock history, it seems necessary to address the obvious racialization of (American) popular music. Therefore, in my attempt at reconstructing punk rock history in favor of an inclusion of black people and Latina/os, I will first pursue the question how rock ‘n’ roll, a truly American mixture of all kinds of diverse musical ingredients primarily forged by black Americans, has developed into racially segregated realms where certain musical styles have come to be associated with black musicians and tastes (rhythm and blues, soul, hip hop) and white ones (rock, punk rock, heavy metal), and where Latina/o participation, for instance, has often been obscured.

In the course of my research, I have realized that popular and academic writings about popular music need to be read not only as commenting on their subjects, but in fact creating genres and styles thus participating in the establishment of narrow boundaries and parameters that exclude those that do not fit them. In Chapter two, I will expound the problems of the forces behind the construction of racially discrete genre boundaries including divisive marketing structures, the roles and functions of music journalists in the discursive construction of these, particularly in regard to the rock genre, and in canonization processes. Another area of inquiry includes also the
forging of a black aesthetic that has likewise led to narrow definitions of ‘black’ popular music which apparently have shaped black people’s increasing distaste for ‘white’ rock music and thus also negatively affected black musicians’ inhabitation of the rock genre. This chapter shall therefore provide an understanding of the continuous racialization of popular music and its consequences for its historiography as much as it shall serve as a kind of theoretical framework for the subsequent chapter in which I will survey how the field of punk has been delimited by certain discourses about it, so that the presence of people of color and women in the creation of punk culture and style seems to have been erased.

In Chapter three, I will explore several areas in which punk has been dealt with both during its prime era in the 1970s and throughout the following decades. I have opted for a chronological approach, because the various areas of discourse have influenced each other. These areas include selected examples from the music press which have been crucial in the creation of punk. This examination of the contemporary music press discourse is followed by a survey of selected scholarly readings of punk in the UK and the US and their various ways of ignoring punk’s diversity. A case study of four influential histories of punk shall then illuminate the ways both ‘outsiders’ and participants of punk scenes have contributed to narrow and reductive presentations of punk’s past.

The final chapter will then offer selected readings of punk as a musical and social convergence culture by first countering common notions of punk as a monolithic self-contained musical genre. Afterwards, I will focus on some neglected areas and gaps the popular and academic accounts have left by exploring the fluid rather than stable dynamics between black and white youth in England and the diverse experience and contributions of Latina/o punks in Los Angeles during the late-1970s and early 1980s in order to not only show the flux of black and Latina/o identities but also to indicate the emergence of a popular and academic discourse that is more sensitive to these fluid but sometimes unstable dynamics.
2 Classification, Bifurcation, and Exclusion - Towards an Understanding of the Racialization of American Popular Music in the Twentieth Century

2.1. An Attempt at Making Sense of the Popular, Rock-'n'-Roll Past - How to Approach the Popular, Rock-'n'-Roll Past

Dissatisfied with the historical writing on discotheques in Britain, Sarah Thornton identified a number of strategies which historians generally employed to structure the “heterogeneous, informal and unofficial character” (87) of popular culture. In the case of popular music performance and consumption which is “accompanied by so much comment” in the form of a vast and diverse body of “books and magazines devoted to music and read by people without a professional investment” (87), historians face specific problems in terms of using these media as reliable sources. In the course of her research, Thornton detected that when it comes to assigning historical significance to a pop cultural event, four criteria tend to be employed: sales figures, biographical interest, critical acclaim or amount of media coverage. These criteria, in turn, support four strategies of bringing historical order to the popular past: listing, personalising, canonising and mediating. (87)

Accordingly, chart books, chronologies, almanacs and encyclopedias, for instance, base popularity and thus historical importance on sales figures indicated by popular music charts which are often “taken as a stable reflection […] of pop times.” Biographies, on the other hand, allow historical insight through the lives of individuals (e.g. musicians and bands) “held together by the idiosyncratic voice of their authors” and thus give meaning to the past by personalizing it. A third strategy (often underlying biographies as well) uses an “art historical approach” which “determines the significance of an ‘artist’ or ‘movement’ on political and aesthetic grounds” and thus contributes to the establishment of canons. The fourth way of bringing order into the disarrayed popular past deploys specific documents (e.g., music and trade magazines like Rolling Stone or Billboard) which are often used as “a window on – rather than an aspect of – the history of rock ‘n’ roll” (87-8).

Problematic about these common strategies of retaining the past was for Thornton that their respective foci tended to foreground only particular aspects that often did not
account or left unexplained more complex interrelations and developments. She recapitulated:

[i]f sales figures and personality (or biographical importance) are two main principles by which pop events are assigned historical significance, then products and people are more likely to be historicised than services and institutions. And if aesthetic/political radicalism and particular kinds of sustained media attention determine inclusion in histories, then the experiences of large parts of the population – not in tune with the tastes of music critics or not already represented in the music press – will be lost. Moreover, the formulae of listing, personalising, canonising and mediating organise their histories in such a way as to render irrelevant their omissions. (89)

Although Thornton’s description of the common methods of historicizing was, as she acknowledged, “reductive” and “hardly exhaustive” (89) since it undermined other techniques of historicizing and the intricacies and pertinence of existing works, it nevertheless continues to provide a useful frame for making sense of the ways the rock ‘n’ roll past and accordingly the punk rock past has been arrayed and understood in order to account for the striking absence of black people and Latina/os in the historical conception of punk rock. As Thornton points out, “to mark the difficulties of a particular history’s construction, to highlight its sources and its omissions could, paradoxically, bring us closer to the popular past” (94). An awareness of these common strategies that underlie most rock ‘n’ roll histories and, in terms of ‘canonizing,’ ‘personalizing,’ ‘mediating,’ also punk histories thus enables a critical interrogation of their constructedness and their sources which will be discussed in regard to the bifurcation of rock ‘n’ roll’s development.

2.2. Rock and Roll, Definition, Separation and the Vexing ‘Nature’ of Race

The explosion of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s signaled crucial changes in American popular culture that have reverberated beyond the nation’s borders and progressed towards the millennium. These changes are generally associated with an urban, working-class oriented, youthful rebellion against the middle-class values of the adult generation, an increasing interrelation of music with technological advances in the production,
recording, and dissemination of music, and a pivotal shift from European-derived aesthetics and values that had hitherto dominated mainstream popular music toward African American ones. Given this wide range of transformations the arrival of rock ‘n’ roll heralded, observers have often struggled with providing a narrow definition of rock ‘n’ roll. The term is, for instance, used to describe the specific music popular among young people in the 1950s and the predominant pattern of popular music in the following decades (Garofalo, Rockin’ Out), as a generic continuum that includes African American styles (Pacini Hernández 72), or to denote less a distinctive style than a culture in which musicians have access to an inexhaustible wealth of existing music regardless of stylistic boundaries (Palmer 8-9). While these observers generally conceive of rock ‘n’ roll as an inclusive term for a hybrid music that is rooted in African American musical culture, they are also aware that, by the late 1960s, rock ‘n’ roll in its shortened version “rock” was used by music critics to denote generic variations played by white musicians, ranging from folk rock, the British Invasion to progressive and art rock, which they thus differentiated from African American styles such as soul. This delineation has continued until the present with subsequently developing ‘white’ substyles such as hard rock, punk rock, and heavy metal coexisting, albeit separately, next to African American styles like funk, reggae, and hip hop (Garofalo, Rockin’ Out viii; Pacini Hernández 72; Palmer 8, 82).

Despite the musical elusiveness and the racial inclusiveness of the term rock ‘n’ roll, the shorthand ‘rock’ became a means of social construction and aesthetic valorization that divided U.S. popular music along racial (class, and gender) lines in an era of racial desegregation and still affect the general perception and conception of (American) popular music in a time when the concept of race is supposed to be transcended. The overwhelming popularity of rock ‘n’ roll among young, black and white audiences and the remarkable mainstream success of performers like Fats Domino, Chuck Berry, Little Richard, Bill Haley, and Elvis Presley in the 1950s has often been celebrated as a breakdown of racial barriers, especially in the wake of the 1954 landmark decision of Brown v. Board of Education that struck down the legal segregation of public school
facilities. However, this symbol of integration has become rife with a complex set of separation and exclusion which is based on the divisive marketing categories and entangled with the discursive establishment of genres and their relative naturalization through historiography by music journalists and popular music writers.

2.3. Segregation and the American Music Industry

Prior to 1954 and in accordance to the legal segregation of American society, the music industry had established three distinct marketing categories that divided performers along the lines of race and musical style which were assumed to draw discrete audiences. The section “Popular” indicated music produced by the dominant Tin Pan Alley for urban, white middle and upper social strata which constituted the economically and culturally dominant mainstream. In addition, smaller record companies often owned by major labels like Columbia, RCA, and Paramount covered the specialty markets of “Race” for African-American popular music catering to African Americans, “Hillbilly” directed towards rural southern whites, and “Mexican” covering a growing market for music in the West. Until the 1940s, the music industry’s foremost magazine *Billboard* charted music according to its popularity of the mainstream category only, but was prompted to establish charts for the specialty markets due to their rising popular potential in the early to mid-1940s (Potter 73-4; Shank 259-60).

In correlation to a compound interaction of a growing urbanization, multiculturalism, the rise of independent record companies and local radio stations after World War II, historians generally see the ‘crossover’ of the marginal and eclectic

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4 According to Roy Shuker, the contemporary music industry is a huge culture industry consisting of major and independent record companies and the retail sector which produce and sell recordings in their various formats, the music press, music hardware, merchandising, licensing agencies handling royalties and rights, and to some extend radio and television (*Key Concepts* 194-5, 246, 298).

5 The categories “Race” and “Hillbilly” were changed to “Rhythm and Blues” (R&B) and “Country and Western” in the late 1940s (Shank 261).

6 According to Shuker, ‘crossover’ denotes the “move of a record or performer from success in one genre or chart area to another, usually with a more mainstream audience” and is commonly related to “black music achieving more mainstream success,” which is, especially in the United States “predicated on the existence of discreet boundaries, and a hierarchy of racially distinct genres and audiences” (*Understanding* 76).
musical styles of R&B and C&W performers to mainstream America in a distinct constellation that disc jockey Alan Freed named ‘rock and roll’ in the mid-1950s as the birth of rock and roll as a marketing category that paved the way for black and white, working-class performers to enter the popular market (cf. Potter 75-6). The fact that black artists performing a wide range of musical styles ranked significantly on the pop charts and white artists enjoyed considerable success on the R&B chart from 1957 to 1964 culminated in *Billboard*’s suspension of the R&B chart in 1963, which has signified for Brian Ward the “most racially integrated popular music scene in American history” (124).

In 1965, however, the R&B chart was reinstalled under the name of “Soul.” The reason for the chart’s reintroduction has been linked generally to the breakthrough of British bands spearheaded by the Beatles on the American pop market in 1964, which despite rejuvenating rock ‘n’ roll caused, according to Garofalo, an actual decline of the number of African American artists on the pop charts (*Rockin’ Out* 10, 180). Similarly but more sharply, music and media scholar Russel A. Potter stressed that

> the [record] labels that were releasing R&B wanted to have a separate chart so that their sales figures could be sorted out from the burgeoning music marketplace, which was just then undergoing a ‘British Invasion’ [by, e.g., the Beatles, Rolling Stones and Animals] that denied most R&B recordings their top chart status. (77, emphasis in the original)

In his meticulous study of the charts from the 1940s to the 1970s, Ward has detected that as the British Invasion and the folk boom actually spurred and extended white American interest in black musical styles beyond doo wop, the girl groups and the nascent soul, the “principal reasons for the revival of a racially specific chart in January 1965 are to be found within the black community” whose “marked biracialism” in taste had “given way to more racially discreet musical preferences” that “reflected important political and psychological developments within black America, as the [Civil Rights] Movement entered a crucial phase of triumph and disappointment, continued progress and rising frustration” (176).

From these statements can be inferred that although the bands of the British Invasion fostered a broader appeal of rhythm and blues and their black originators to white Americans, the instant success of their white variations which moreover negatively
affected black artists’ status on the pop charts again evoked a symptomatic pattern pervading the history of American popular music - the white adaptation and imitation of black musical styles and a subsequent honoring and economic rewarding of white musicians. At a time within the accelerating Civil Rights Movement in which a general call for integration gradually gave way to matters of black pride and black self-determination, these aspects and the reinstallation of the R&B chart due to impulses from the black community contributed to the bifurcation of American popular music and a subsequent separate marketing and conception of musical styles in black (soul, funk, reggae and hip hop) and white terms (rock and its subgenres of punk and heavy metal). In her study that chronicles the efforts of the Black Rock Coalition (BRC) to challenge mainstream black and white assumptions of black authenticity and music, Maureen Mahon states that “twenty years after the apex of the Civil Rights Movement, popular music production continued to occur in a racially segregated fashion” (148) which had and continues to have profound consequences for black musicians and audiences drawn to musical genres like rock and especially punk rock which have come to be associated with white musicians and tastes.

The continuation of the R&B chart as a marketing category alongside a myriad of other categories and similarly racialized ones like “Latin,” distinct radio-station formatting (e.g. ‘Urban Contemporary’), and the division of most major record companies’ marketing and ‘Artists and Repertoire’ (A&R) departments along these lines reflect the “racially segregated fashion” of popular music production and that race remains a decisive factor in the marketing, and dissemination of popular music (cf. Potter 76-7). In this sense, Garofalo aptly concluded that the identification of music with race, which has tended to exclude African American artists and others from certain marketing structures in the music industry, makes the task of unearthing an accurate history of U.S. popular music quite difficult and encourages serious underestimates of the degree of cross-cultural collaboration that has taken place. (*Rockin’ Out* 11-2)

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7 Like many others, George Lipsitz, for instance, points to the “prominence of Euro-Americans in gaining rewards from cultural forms created by Blacks”, exemplified by the crowning of “Paul Whiteman as ‘the king of jazz,’ Benny Goodman as ‘the king of swing,’ or Elvis as ‘the king of rock ‘n’ roll’” (*Dangerous Crossroads* 54).
2.4. The Role of Anglo-American Rock Journalism in the Forging of a White, Male Rock Aesthetic

The historically shaped market categorization of popular music and performers along color lines (“R&B,” “Latin,” “Rock”) has been complemented by the journalistic practice of writing about Anglo-American popular music (i.e. in broad terms rock ‘n’ roll) which, especially since the 1960s, has both informed its conception and subsequent historization. Music journalism can be conceived of as writing about music mostly by reviewing a piece of music or a performance, and interviewing a musician or a band. According to Dave Laing, the “institutions of music journalism are the publications in which they appear” which predominantly comprise the “general press (daily and weekly newspapers and magazines), trade publications aimed at those working in the music industry, fanzines (now including weblogs and blogs), and the specialist music press” but also television and radio (“Music Journalism” 333). Music journalism, as Marion Leonard et al have stated, “has been important in the negotiation and ascription of popular music meanings, as well as integral to the marketing of popular music” (253). It is especially in the negotiation and ascription of meanings that popular music in general and punk rock in particular has been discursively constructed and where generic boundaries that operate along the lines of race have been established by a burgeoning institution of rock criticism.

Emerging from the 1960s counterculture, American alternative music magazines like Cheetah, Crawdaddy, Creem,8 Who Put the Bomp (Bomp) and the Rolling Stone, concentrated on the social and cultural significance of rock ‘n’ roll as a critique of the ‘straight,’ adult and mass society. These publications became the test ground for a variety of devoted rock fans like Robert Christgau, Dave Marsh, Greil Marcus, and Lester Bangs, who were to become highly acclaimed rock critics. The writing style of these rock critics was influenced particularly by ‘New Journalists’ like Hunter S. Thompson, Norman Mailer and Truman Capote, who fashioned a style where “personal involvement and immersion were indispensable to an authentic, full-blooded account of experience” (J.J. Pauly qtd. in Laing 336). Likewise emphasizing the subjectivity in their

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8 According to Bernard Gendron, Creem can be regarded as a leftist music magazine “initially bearing the ideology of John Sinclair’s White Panthers party” (230).
writing about music, Simon Frith pointed out that rock critics concentrated more on music as a “cultural phenomenon” rather than evaluating the music itself beyond “impressionistic” descriptions of sounds (12).

The emerging work of rock critics contributed to the forging of what Frith called the “ideology of rock” that devised rock music’s entitlement to a form of aesthetic autonomy which went along with a disdain and mistrust of commercially successful music (*Sound Effects* 168). Central to this ideology and important to rock musicians and critics alike was a concept of authenticity that rested on a romantic notion of individual and autonomous, artistic expression in opposition to conformist and standardized commercialism. Deena Weinstein argued in this regard that

> when ‘rock’ (as opposed to fifties rock ‘n’ roll) came into being, authenticity no longer meant a sincere appropriation of an authentic [particularly black and rural white] source but obedience to one’s own muse, to oneself. The Beatles, the Stones, Dylan and the Doors were not considered by themselves or their fans to be simply performers but auteurs, artists. [...] At the same moment that rock was constituted as an endogenously generated, self-conscious youth music, programmatically structured by the art-authenticity – commerce binary, rock criticism appeared and founded itself on this same binary. (32)

In the process of serious critical attention signaled by the 1967 release of the Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, the shortened term ‘rock’ came to denote “the mature form of rock ‘n’ roll” that captured both the romantic anti-establishment and anti-commercial sensibilities of the counterculture as well as the notion of rock as art (*Garofalo, Rockin’ Out* 248).

Significantly, this self-styled elite of rock critics’ judgment of rock music on the grounds of autonomous artistry versus standardized commercialism went along with a value distinction that in terms of sophistication and authenticity implicitly operated along the lines of race by considering criteria of artistic and aesthetic significance and meaning almost exclusively in regard to white musicians and bands while the work of rock ‘n’ roll and soul musicians were valued more for their functional and social qualities. In the words of Bernard Gendron,

> the institution of rock criticism, made up almost exclusively of white males, had from the beginning concentrated its accreditory attention to white music. [...] In their attempt to establish the cultural credentials of rock – its seriousness, meaningfulness, subversiveness, experimentalism – the early
critics invariably turned to Dylan, the Stones, the Beatles, the Beach Boys and so on. But they did create a minor pantheon for African American rock musicians as the venerable grandfathers, pioneers, the providers of roots (Robert Johnson, Chuck Berry, Little Richard), or as the contemporary sources of fun and escape (James Brown, Wilson Pickett). One listened to white rock for significance and one danced to black music for fun. (284, emphasis in the original)

While rock critics valued black blues and rock ‘n’ roll for their honest, emotionally and physically liberating sensuousness capable of expressing youth’s collective desires, they now assumed these qualities – conveyed via performance style, vocal and rhythmic skills – to conflict with the pensive ones required for rock’s progression to higher artistic grounds. The value distinction between black music as a direct, natural and essentially physical music and rock music’s claim to art which “is something deliberately created, self-consciously thought, and involves, by definition, complexity and development” (Frith, *Sound Effects* 21, emphasis in the original), carried notions of a long, European-derived tradition of white supremacy and essentialism. For Garofalo, these ideas conjured up “racist implications of homologies that suggest the superiority of European/art/mind over African/entertainment/body” (*Rockin’ Out* 257). Individual, artistic expression and technical proficiency addressing higher human sensibilities were privileged over spontaneity, and physical and emotional directness that had hitherto articulated the collective experience of young rock ‘n’ roll fans. Apart from black musicians Jimi Hendrix, Sly Stone and Stevie Wonder, who were accepted as “rock ‘artists,’” black music of the blues and gospel traditions “was, in this context, thought to be too direct; its very vocal qualities were what made it essentially incapable of artistic progression” (Frith, *Sound Effects* 21, emphasis in the original). Due to this value distinction and an almost exclusive emphasis on white ‘artists,’ ‘rock’ was discursively constructed by white critics as a white genre which thus distinguished itself from its black sources and contemporary black genres like ‘soul,’ a term that effectively conveys values of immediacy, sensuousness and intuition.

If ‘authentic’ rhythm and blues derived styles such as soul did not reach the complex, sophisticated, artistic dimensions, critics found in and established for ‘rock’ music, then the as pop regarded music of the girl groups, Motown and the softer soul of, e.g., Barry White, were considered too fabricated and tended to be deplored by white rock critics as commercial, trivial entertainment, a deprecation that came to a head when the
breakthrough of disco (developing from soul and funk in black, Latino and gay night clubs) was met with slogans like “Death to Disco” and “Disco Sucks” by rock purists in the second half of the 1970s (Frith Sound Effects 21-2; Garofalo, Rockin’ Out 257, 305, 344). What rock pundits often glossed over was the fact that rock itself was and has always been a commodity underlying the music industry’s strategies of production, marketing and dissemination. The rock press emerging in the late 1960s helped fostering the creation of a myth of rock as serious, anti-mass, authentic opposition to trivial, mass, commercial pop. Eventually, it aided the music industry by providing an effective means of identifying and targeting a particularly affluent middle-class, youth market. Media scholar Keir Kneightley argued in this regard that despite its claim to opposition to a commercial mainstream and mass society, rock music, from its inception, “has been a large-scale, industrially organized, mass-mediated, mainstream phenomenon operating at the very centre of society” (127).

This symbiotic relationship between the rock press and music industry consolidated with the commodification and appropriation of the counterculture and is aptly expressed in the Rolling Stone’s official announcement as a “capitalistic operation” in 1971 (Rolling Stone editor Jann Wenner qtd. in Garofalo, Rockin’ Out 248). While many American alternative and rock magazines did not openly follow Rolling Stone, which was to morph into the ‘establishment,’ rock criticism in general became an important institution for both audiences and the music industry from the early 1970s onwards. Popular music and media scholars have noticed the relationship between audience, music criticism and the industry, especially the role of music journalists as ‘gatekeepers,’ ‘cultural intermediaries’ and as ‘arbiters of taste:’ not only do music reviews give information on and shape the reception of musicians and bands for audiences, they construct audiences as consumers⁹ and also provide feedback for record companies (and musicians) as much as they can function as promotion of releases (Frith 165, Toynbee 290; Shuker Understanding 72).

Next to these functions and the discursive construction of generic categories that operate along the lines of race, rock critics have played a pivotal role as “arbiters of cultural history” by chronicling the development of rock ‘n’ roll in comprehensive

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⁹ This function of the music press is best epitomized in the “Consumer Guide” by acclaimed rock critic Robert Christgau, who was long-time music editor of the Village Voice (cf. Robertchristgau.com).
generic compartments complete with representative artists and outstanding innovators (Shuker *Understanding* 78). This is particularly evident e.g. in Jim Miller’s edited *Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll*, first published in 1976, in which a large body of rock critics elaborated on rock ‘n’ roll’s historical development in articles structured chronologically by solo artists and bands, or stylistic or regional genres (e.g. “The Instrumental Groups,” “The Sound of Philadelphia”) which thus contributed not only to rock ‘n’ roll’s legitimization, but also set the groundwork for its canonization. Observers have argued that such a legitimization has been fostered by a common consideration of criticism in general as autonomous which effectively masks that rock critics’ writing is characterized by personal immersion and a description of music in subjective terms (Laing 336; Leonard et al 255-6). A general consideration of criticism as autonomous has in turn influenced canonization processes because the work of rock critics (from reviews, articles, to general genre genealogies published in book form) has informed popular music encyclopedias, general and scholarly accounts of rock’s development, as well as academic analyses of various aspects of rock culture (cf. Shuker 74, 78).

The relative authority the work of rock critics has been imparted as reliable sources for tracing and making sense of the pop musical past has resulted in a normalization of a generic discourse of ‘rock’ which is inhabited almost exclusively by white musical protagonists. The rock discourse led by white rock critics and emerging in the late 1960s operated in demarcation to black genres such as soul on the grounds of different valorizations which have been perpetuated in subsequent rock histories and studies that use rock criticism as sources. In combination with segregated music industry categories, the popular music past has been chronicled in this way which contributed to its historization in black and white terms.

The purpose of this examination of the emergence of rock criticism, its methods, roles and functions in the discursive construction of genre boundaries, particularly in regard to ‘white’ rock ‘n’ roll derivates in demarcation to ‘black’ ones which have been normalized due to a legitimization of rock criticism was not only to demonstrate how rock has been constructed as a white genre, but also to explore the forces behind such a construction that are particularly evident in the discursive creation of punk rock and its
subsequent historiography and analysis. However, while this exploration suggests that it was an emerging white male-dominated institution of rock criticism that established a rock aesthetic that assigned cultural and artistic significance to white rock musicians and would lead to a subsequent conception and treatment of ‘authentic’ rock as the domain of white males – be it art rock, arena rock, glam rock, hard rock, punk rock – black artists and observers simultaneously furthered a black aesthetic in demarcation to Anglo-American culture which forcefully gained momentum within the burgeoning Black Power Movement and reflected a division of the races beginning in the late 1960s (cf. Garofalo, *Rockin’ Out* 249).

2.5. Black Power, Black Authenticity and Aesthetics

In the 1960s, the Black Arts Movement that developed in tandem with and was informed by the Black Power Movement sculpted a black aesthetics that emphasized black difference from the white mainstream within an emerging black cultural nationalism. Maureen Mahon summarizes the aesthetic principles propagated by black writers and poets like Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, who are associated with the Black Arts Movement that the cultural “productions of black Americans should follow a pro-black, socially engaged aesthetic [rooted in African American cultural traditions and Third World culture] unhampered by Western European-centered aesthetics that treat art as a privileged realm of production separate from the vicissitudes of the workaday world” (116). Central to this positioning was an elevation of black culture, including music as an art form central to black cultural production, as the main focus and the sincere creative resource for black artists in line with a general imperative that black people elucidate the world in their own terms, in separation from and against assimilation to an America which had historically denied them their humanity. On the basis of “fears that integration would undermine racial self-preservation and cultural autonomy”, cultural nationalists, then, stipulated an idea of authentic blackness that demanded uniform social and cultural differentiation from mainstream Anglo-America. In social terms, black liberation and, consequently, ‘real’ blackness meant an affiliation
with ‘the people’, i.e. poor and working-class blacks, and a distinction from middle-class white America, a view that consequently rendered middle-class or upwardly mobile blacks “assimilated, self-hating ‘Negroes’” (Mahon 11, 117).

In cultural and, especially, musical terms, a differentiation from mainstream white America manifested itself, by the late 1960s, in a clear rejection of rock music that since the British Invasion had come to be more explicitly associated, because mediated as such, with white people. The reception of countercultural icon and rock star Jimi Hendrix and his white, British band mates of the Jimi Hendrix Experience by both white and black people serve as a demonstrative example of the complex issues of race and rock. According to Mahon, many white fans, critics and musicians received him with a perspective like “not black, not white, just Jimi,” thus decontextualizing him from his skin color and downplaying his race which enabled them “to solve the problem of blackness that Hendrix’s undeniable ethnicity and racial background posed” figuring him “as something other than, better than, and less problematic than black” (235). Although Hendrix’s music had black roots, he “was too heavily identified with the white rock community to be accepted as authentically black by mainstream African American audiences” (Mahon 240). While Hendrix did not regard himself and his music as white, he was “whitened” as his white audience increased whereas he simultaneously did not fit the prevalent idea of “authentic blackness” (Mahon 248).

Furthermore, Hendrix biographer Charles Shaar Murray underlined that the racialized and unscientific methods of charting record sales were conducive to the perception that Hendrix had no black fans: because he ranked highly in the “Pop” charts which meant the tastes of ‘white’ America, his sales were construed as pop and thus white and although black people did buy his records, it was due to an absence in the “R&B” charts and accordingly a lack of black radio airplay that it was assumed he had no black audience (paraphrased in Mahon 242). On one hand, it can be inferred that ‘authentic’ blackness in music is not necessarily related to the black skin of a performer, but connected to the degree to which the music addresses and relates to the social and political concerns of the black community. On another, it shows that the racialized charting practices are problematic, because they are not necessarily accurate and do not thoroughly reflect audience tastes.
However, black people did listen to Hendrix and ‘white’ rock music (cf. Chapter 4.2.2.). According to Mahon, it was due to Hendrix’s in-betweenness – not fitting certain images and practices – and the uneasy relationship between Hendrix’s racial and musical identity that he has become a revered icon for members of the Black Rock Coalition because he represents for them the freedom of black identity in music, particularly in regard to the idea that playing rock including substyles such as hard rock, heavy-metal, punk does not compromise identifying as black (235). The fact that black rockers needed to form a coalition and explicitly prefix the term ‘black’ before rock to challenge mainstream white and black assumptions about authenticity in music shows the extent to which this bifurcation maintained by segregated marketing structures, discursively constructed and historiographically naturalized genre divisions by black and white music/culture critics has become deeply entrenched. It is also aptly expressed by black culture critic Greg Tate, who asserted in the 2004 book *Rip It Up* on the black experience in rock ‘n’ roll that “...I remain amazed that as simple an act as a young black man or woman deciding not to sing straight-up reggae, blues or hip-hop can still get people’s panties in a knot” (qtd. in Crazy Horse xi).

2.6. Rock and Roll Representation, Categorization, and Exclusion

The categorization of performers, bands and of musical styles along racial (ethnic and gender) lines devised by the music industry’s charting and marketing practices – whether R&B” and “Latin”, or “Pop” and “Rock” – that have been mediated through the music press and subsequently historicized resulted in the racialized classification of a (post-1950s American) popular music that has been characterized by hybridity, cross-cultural participation and constant cross-pollination and transformation which in the words of Robert Palmer proves to be “an All-American, multi-ethnic hybrid” (Robert Palmer qtd. in *Off the Charts* 118-20).

The segregating forces and narrow genre boundaries policed by the record industry, rock critics, and black cultural leaders have led to a predominant perception and historical discussion of twentieth-century popular music in black and white terms that
has often obscured pivotal Latin American influences and performers. Garofalo states in this regard that “[i]n the bipolar division of black and white, historians have tended either to render Latina/os invisible or simply to assign them rather indiscriminately to one or the other group, thus precluding consideration of Latin musical influences as a major contributor to the hybridity of rock-and-roll culture” (Off the Charts 120). These Latin musical influences ranged, among others, from Latin rhythms in rock-'n'-roll songs to the presence of Puerto Ricans in black or integrated doo-wop groups, and Mexican American rock-and-rollers like Ritchie Valens (nee Richard Valenzuela), who was often considered white (Garofalo, Off the Charts 120-3). Additionally, even if the incorporation of Latin musical influences into mainstream popular music and the classification of Latina/os to either black or white performers resulted in a certain degree of invisibility, many records or songs sung in Spanish (or in any language other than English) have, according to Garofalo, often failed to transgress the language barrier imposed by the music industry, if not even mainstream American society (Rockin’ Out 13).

Due to the considerable lack of Latina/o participation in writings on rock ‘n’ roll, a growing number of observers, often from Latino communities themselves, have begun to challenge the black-and-white emphasis of most rock-'n'-roll histories by illuminating the rich and complex nuances Latina/os have added to the usual binary color spectrum of American popular music and particularly to rock ‘n’ roll since its inception (e.g. Loza; Lipsitz, Land, Time Passages; Pacini Hernández; Reyes and Waldman). In their 1998 study of southern Californian Chicano rock ‘n’ roll, David Reyes and Tom Waldman, stated that “those unaware of the role of Chicanos have played in rock ‘n’ roll […] and R&B […] include rock historians and journalists in the United States” (xiii-iv). This condition compelled them to provide a narrative of Chicano fans’ all-embracing musical tastes and to fill in a historical void between Ritchie Valens and Los Lobos10 with a body of musicians who, often operating outside the radar of the major music industry, have worked freely across the bifurcated popular musical landscape including influences ranging from traditional corridos, rancheros, rock and roll, blues, funk, surf rock, hard rock to punk, and hip hop. Yet despite these

10 Ritchie Valens, Carlos Santana, and Los Lobos tend to be the only Chicano rockers mentioned in rock-and roll histories.
efforts by Latina/os and observers sensitive to the rich and diverse musical production, Anglo-American rock ‘n’ roll historiography that seeks to trace its development since the 1950s remains largely devoid of Latina/o presence and contribution (see e.g. Palmer; Szatmary).

Finally, the exclusivist and separatist practices of the music industry including the music press have not only affected matters of race and ethnicity, but intersect with gender as well. Success of women in popular music has more than often been determined by their compliance with socially and culturally prescribed stereotypes of femininity ranging from “angel and baby to earth mother and sex goddess to bitch and ‘ho’” and dictated by an overwhelmingly male-dominated music industry (Garofalo, Rockin’ Out 13). From the first blues recording of Mamie Smith in 1920 and in accordance with these male expectations of stereotypical femininity, female presence and success in the popular music realm was limited to that of vocalists rather than instrumentalists. While the eruption of rock ‘n’ roll even erased women from the popular charts which contributed to its ensuing demarcation as male terrain in which women “were only welcome on the sidelines […] as fans and groupies”, and in which, on occasion, “only the role of vocalist was truly open for women’s participation,” women performers continued to be marketed as vocalists rather than instrumentalists (Carson, Lewis, and Shaw 3).

With the exceptions of the women folk singer/songwriters of the 1960s, for instance, Suzi Quatro and the all-female rock band Fanny in the 1970s, women instrumentalists figured rarely in the mainstream and are rarely featured in generic descriptions of progressive rock, hard rock or even heavy-metal. However, with the advent of punk rock, women transgressed the stereotypical roles reserved for women in music-making by playing with gender roles, picking up electric guitars, basses, playing drums as well as playing alongside men and forming all-female bands. Nevertheless, the presence and contribution of rocking women in writings on rock ‘n’ roll and on punk is also subdued and has often been chronicled and carved out by women (cf. e.g. Carson, Lewis, and Shaw; Reddington).
3 Standard Punk Representations: The Popular and Academic Construction of Punk as a Homogeneous, White, Male, Music and Youth Culture

3.1. Introduction

‘[P]unk’ is a notoriously amorphous concept. [...] At a very basic level, we can say that punk was/is a subculture best characterized as being part youth rebellion, part artistic statement. It had its high point from 1976 to 1979, and was most visible in Britain and America. It had its primary manifestation in music - and specifically in the disaffected rock and roll of bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash. Philosophically, it had no ‘set agenda’ like the hippy [sic] movement that preceded it, but nevertheless stood for identifiable attitudes, among them: an emphasis on negationism (rather than nihilism); a consciousness of class-based politics (with a stress on ‘working-class credibility’); and a belief in spontaneity and ‘doing it yourself’. (Sabin 2)

Intending to criticize the “kind of orthodoxy” that had established itself in writings on punk by the late 1990s, Roger Sabin provides this working definition as a summary of “certain essentials” (2) that not only characterize a set of broad parameters within which punk has been dealt with, analyzed, historicized, and thus constructed, but also address some interconnected controversies surrounding punk. Despite a continuing, general disagreement among observers and participants on a definition of punk including its geographic origins, its life span, its stylistic elements, its political ideas and impact (cf., e.g., Leblanc 33-34; Sabin 3-5), punk has been conceived of generally as a controversial musical ‘youth rebellion’ and ‘artistic statement’ among music and cultural critics and subjected to readings of fashion, style, and musical dilettantism as notions of resistance, subversion, and radical politics. Whereas punk’s widely accepted prime of life between 1976 and 1979 is often associated with British bands, especially the Sex Pistols, which is due to the media hype they generated and which turned punk into a national (British) and global phenomenon, punk rock’s local origins, whether in the U.S. or the UK, have been subject to a continuous debate. Similar to the ongoing disagreement on what punk actually is (a musical genre, an attitude, a philosophy, a clothing style, ‘class-based politics,’ or an art movement), punk’s widely accepted demise in the late 1970s, partly due to its co-optation by the mainstream is likewise subject to disagreement since punk morphed into diverse substyles like hardcore, no wave, and 2 Tone at the end of the 1970s and beyond (cf. e.g. Clark 223-36).
Following Sabin’s working definition, his assessment of music, specifically the ‘disaffected rock and roll’ of the Sex Pistols and the Clash, as punk’s primary manifestation is significant for various reasons. First of all, his foregrounding of punk as a rebellious and artistic, youth subculture before acknowledging the centrality of music highlights the common way scholars working in the field of cultural studies have approached punk by focusing on the cultural and political impact of fashion, style, and music-related practices. Second, Sabin’s intentional equation of punk music with the Sex Pistols and the Clash points not only to a kind of canonical punk rock suspects, but also to a general conception of punk as a ‘predominantly’ male subculture and, significantly, as an overwhelmingly white subcultural phenomenon. While more recent academic and non-academic publications have challenged this standard occupation with the more publicly visible and notoriously ‘successful’ bands, and provided evidence of punk’s existence within and without British and U.S. American borders beyond the late 1970s, they have begun to address questions of gender and sexuality but continue to ignore and therefore misrepresent the presence and contributions of people of color within punk.

In the following chapter I will survey some key areas in which punk has been dealt with and will expose the predominantly journalistic and academic construction of punk rock as a white, male music and youth culture. The rock press developing in the late 1960s played a crucial role in the inception, if not aesthetic and social creation, of punk and has significantly shaped a discourse of punk rock as a white, predominantly male music and youth culture which has informed popular and academic writings chronicling and analyzing the Anglo-American development of punk.

3.2. Punk and the Pages – The Press and the Making of White (Male) Punk Rock

As much as rock magazines emerging in the late 1960s created notions of what and who counts as ‘folk’, ‘progressive’ and ‘art’ rock, ideas of ‘punk’ in rock were likewise constructed on the pages of American rock magazines. Bernard Gendron states that without the preexistence of a punk discourse in the rock press “there might never have been a mid-1970s movement conceptualized under the joint rubrics of punk and new
wave” (229). The beginnings of this punk discourse are generally associated with a small, dissident group of white, male rock fans who wrote professionally for rock magazines like Detroit-based Creem, in alliance with the Californian fanzine Bomp, and began applying the term ‘punk’ to 1960s bands venturing on the fringes of popular success and taste around 1970. According to Gendron, Dave Marsh of Creem may be among to first to induce ‘punk’ into rock discourse when he described a concert of the Mexican-American (my emphasis) band Question Mark and the Mysterians as a “landmark exposition of punk-rock” in a review in 1971, while Greg Shaw of Bomp furthermore deemed this band, along with others like the Troggs, Count Five and the Seeds as one of the original punk bands in a 1973 review (233).

Next to Marsh and Shaw, rock critic Lester Bangs, who wrote for Creem, Bomp, Rolling Stone, later NME and Village Voice, is often credited with formulating aesthetic principles that both ran counter to values of complexity and artistic mastery cherished by rock critics championing progressive and art rock, and provided the framework for the burgeoning punk/new wave movements of the 1970s and beyond. Forged in relation to the Stooges, the MC 5, Troggs and Count Five around 1971, Bangs’s punk aesthetics embraced, according to Gendron, an idea of authenticity that centered around three main themes including aggressiveness (noise, loudness and rawness of the music) and shock (assaultive performance), musical minimalism (‘take three chords’, a minimal instrumentation of guitar, bass and drums), and a “praise of ineptness and amateurism” (‘anyone can do it’) able to cursorily extend to free-form excursions of jazz avant-gardists like John Coltrane and Albert Ayler. During this time, Bangs also set out to save the by then largely neglected and disbanded Velvet Underground from obscurity by writing a major article in Creem that eventually secured them a place in the canon of the ‘hip’ (Gendron 233-9).

In line with the general function of rock critics as significant ‘gatekeepers’ and ‘arbiters of taste,’ critics like Bangs, Marsh, and Shaw articulated values like rawness, unpretentiousness, minimalism, or dark, avant-garde, bohemian qualities based on their personal preference of some bands like Question Mark and the Mysterians, the Stooges, the Troggs, or the Velvet Underground. As such, they stipulated reference points of direction which may have guided musicians and fans who felt that musical pomp and a
sense of complacency at the expense of revolutionary quality seemed to characterize early-1970s rock music and had diminished its energy.

The common acceptance of New York as the birthplace of ‘punk’ in the early 1970s featuring an eclectic set of precursors like the Velvet Underground, the Stooges, New York Dolls, Suicide, Wayne County & the Backstreet Boys, the Dictators and a heterogeneous rock scene\textsuperscript{11} including Television, the Patti Smith Group, Blondie, the Ramones, and the Talking Heads might stem from a confluence of some of these aspects, of which an entanglement of musicians and rock writing, among others, seems additionally pivotal. According to Gendron, New York bands like the New York Dolls, the Patti Smith Group, and Television found in magazines like \textit{Creem} and the local \textit{Village Voice} their “first source of publicity and legitimation.” While journalists including Bangs, artists as well as band managers were part of this burgeoning underground scene, musicians themselves like Patti Smith and Lenny Kaye of the Patti Smith Group, Richard Hell of Television, and Wayne County wrote or were to write for rock magazines (Gendron 246). In 1975, Legs McNeil, John Holmstrom, and Ged Dunn decided to call their self-published magazine \textit{Punk} in New York in 1975, to cover the underground New York scene. In the editorial of the first issue published in early 1976, Holmstrom announced “Death to Disco Shit! Long Live the Rock!,” later claiming that this statement was intended as a joke but initiated an anti-disco movement (Holmstrom 3, 8).

By the time news of the “first wave” bands ‘opened doors’ to record deals between 1973 and 1977, the punk discourse had spread beyond American borders due to the travel of records and magazines. In Britain, principal music magazines like \textit{NME}, \textit{Melody Maker} and \textit{Sounds}, which were increasingly influenced by the American rock magazines, the innovative writing style, stance and subject matter of rock critics like Bangs, became primary and instrumental media that shaped the punk discourse as well as the outlines of the labels ‘punk’ and ‘new wave.’ In Britain, as media scholar Jason Toynbee has noted, it was “within the established weeklies which were quick to recruit punk ideologues” that “the new movement’s discourse was generated” (291). In Britain, the term ‘punk’ appeared, according to Gendron, in the first half of 1976, e.g., in the

\textsuperscript{11} According to Hilly Kristal of CBGB’s, the music and the New York underground scene was called ‘street rock’ or ‘underground rock’ rather than ‘punk’ (CBGB.com).
*NME* to describe the Sex Pistols as “‘a quartet of spiky teenage misfits’ playing ‘60’s styled white punk rock’” (264). Next to professional writers like Lester Bangs, these included also young writers like Julie Burchill, Tony Parsons, Jon Savage, and Caroline Coon, who wrote about the New York bands, the new band formations and performances of, e.g., the Sex Pistols, the Clash, Eater, and Siouxsie and the Banshees featuring images of fashion statements, attitudes, and rituals (e.g. the pogo dance, audience spitting at performers) thus considerably molding the musical, stylistic, ideological, behavioral and local components of a crystallizing genre that still moved between the labels of ‘punk’ and ‘new wave’ (cf. Gendron 296-71). In so doing, these music magazines not only fulfilled their conventional function of contributing to the construction of an audience as consumers, but also helped establishing “the signifiers of a subculture, allowing to be learned and absorbed” (Deena Weinstein qtd. in Shuker, *Understanding* 78).

By the time the news of a flourishing British punk scene fueled by an increasing media sensation around the controversies of the Sex Pistols and punk culture filtered beyond British borders, the discourse on what bands count as punk had assumed a recognizable shape. Gendron concluded that the “emergence of a punk discourse in the early 1970s did much to shape a rock aesthetic defined almost exclusively in terms of white male music and the needs of white male teenagers” implying that “[p]robably not known and certainly not emphasized at this time was that a large number of garage band members were Hispanic [e.g. Question Mark and the Mysterians, the Premiers, Cannibal and the Headhunters, Thee Midnighters]” (284). These bands along with bands like the Seeds, the Sonics, and Standells moved into “definitional oblivion” to be categorized later as “garage bands” that were “[n]o longer punk … [but] now merely influences on punk” (266).

While this process significantly affected the obscuring of the Hispanic presence in rock diagnosed by Waldman and Reyes, the American “first wave” of punk was now clearly identified by critics especially in demarcation to the British “first wave” punk bands. A 1977 assessment of the punk explosion in the U.S. and England by self-
professed “Dean of American Rock Critics” Robert Christgau (Robertchristgau.com), shall serve as an example of the prevalent parameters of the contemporary punk discourse. In an article published in New York’s Village Voice, Christgau traced punk’s origins from the Velvet Underground, Detroit’s MC 5 and the Stooges, to Patti Smith, the New York Dolls, Television, Blondie, the Talking Heads, and the Ramones. Crucially, punk rock marked for him a form of “rock and roll that differentiates itself from its (fundamentally black and rural) sources by taking on the crude, ugly, perhaps brutal facts of the (white and urban) prevailing culture, rather than hiding behind its bland façade.” American punk rock differed in this sense and as an essentially “sophisticated art [movement]” from punk in Britain, where it represented for him a “creative misapprehension” by punk bands like the Sex Pistols, Eater, the Clash, and the Damned, whose energies were “political rather than aesthetic” and rooted “in a state of class warfare.” Christgau’s assessment reveals not only a decidedly white, predominantly male genealogy of punk rock, but also the insight that an emphasis on the uncomfortable downsides of white urban mainstream culture are the qualities that distinguish punk rock from rock ‘n’ roll’s black, rural roots and the glossing-over effect of contemporary pop music like the rising disco craze alluded to in the notion of “bland façade.” On the other hand, his evaluation reveals his biases towards British punk that threatened to vulgarize and denigrate a vanguard, artistic New York cult which is about to be transformed by a movement that distinguishes itself in its socio-political concerns.

Although he was not necessarily unsympathetic to British punk, he resented that it undermined the artistic qualities of the vanguard New York scene which was lumped together with British punks’ social and political agendas, “their inexperience, their threatened maleness, their potential for demagogy, their need to reconcile class identification with professional/artistic ambition, their inchoate politics of rebellion, and their ultimate vulnerability” making them “worthy of pity and awe as well as skepticism.” While he furthermore made clear that punk is, if anything, “consciously anti-fascist,” he cautioned that the ironic Nazi allusions that had been evident in the New York scene, but were now part of a new “candor” of wearing swastikas was in danger of being misread. An equally ironic, sexual allure, epitomized by Blondie’s (Debbie Harry’s) “bombshell image” that “turned [her] into a rockmag pinup,” a “hostile
sexuality projected by names like Vibrators, Sex Pistols, and [...] Buzzcocks,” and misogynist statements “barked” by the Stranglers and Dead Boys were furthermore indicators for him that the punk scene was “certainly no better place for women than any other rock scene and in crucial instances it’s worse” (Christgau, Robertchristgau.com). Although his arguments may certainly be justified, the absence of female protagonists in his evaluation, except for the mentioning of Patti Smith and Blondie’s Debbie Harry, tend to amplify punk’s image as a form of uncontrolled, sexist, misogynistic, male rebellion while rendering female protagonists invisible or doomed to a stereotypical reduction to sex objects. Significantly, this flattened and reduced image of punk that considerably downplayed the pro-active roles and contributions of women persisted in representations of punk and affected the subsequent development of punk.

This brief outline shows that punk emerged as a discourse in rock magazines in the early 1970s. Rock writers like Shaw, Marsh and Bangs brought the term ‘punk’ into the description of bands to capture ideas like minimalism, raucousness, amateurism, and experimentation that stood in contrast to prevalent ones of musical expertise and embellishment at the beginning of the 1970s. Thus ‘punk’ was gradually imbued with aesthetic meaning, musical connotation as well as a set of stylistic reference points (initially the obscure 1960s bands). Although there is no clear indication whether Bangs and his fellow critics had conceived of ‘punk’ rock as white on purpose or whether this had been important to them, but by applying the term to overwhelmingly white bands like the Stooges, the Troggs, and the Velvet Underground they had nevertheless set the racial and gender parameters for the subsequent transatlantic conception of punk rock that were already in place in the 1976 description of the Sex Pistols by the NME and confirmed in Christgau’s 1977 assessment.

The growing punk discourse in New York as well as London proliferated in the American rock magazines, British music weeklies and a the growing number of self-published fanzines like Punk (New York) and Sniffin’ Glue (London) stipulated the crystallization of scenes both in these cities as well as beyond, it was due to the larger circulation of the centralized British music weeklies that punk culture (music, dress, attitude, rituals) broke into national (and international) consciousness. It is especially due to this widespread exposure that punk rock became identified and eventually
historicized as a British phenomenon. At the same time, the media hype around the Sex Pistols (e.g. the swearing during the Bill Grundy’s prime-time broadcast *Today* show, the ban on their singles) as well as a growing moral panic around the loaded Nazi imagery and violence not only secured the Sex Pistols a firm place in media representations of punk, but also fostered a masculine image of punk. In her study of the erasure of transsexual and transgendered people in punk discourse, Viviane K. Namaste found out that non-normative sexualities and genders which were an integral part in punk’s initial formation disappeared both due to a domination of the Sex Pistols in the music press and the overarching emphasis on violence, which “became the lens through which all presentations of punk were filtered” (86).

Thus, whereas punk was not only discursively constructed as a white genre, the dominant emphasis on the Sex Pistols and violence that were furthermore nourished by the drug-induced death of bass player Sid Vicious shortly after the mysterious murder of his girlfriend in 1979 both sanctioned their myth as epitome of punk and created an image of punk as masculine and misogynist that already framed Christgau’s concerns in his assessment. Although punk had, in the words of Gendron, “won the critics’ war” (277) and many American and British bands of punk’s prime era were able to secure record deals with independent and major labels, it did not generate a mass attraction as progressive rock had done or as disco accomplished at the same time. Whereas the critical valorization of rock in the 1960s had facilitated the economic expansion of the music industry, the continuous controversies around ‘punk’ eventually inhibited its mass appeal and therefore its commercial success resulting in the music industry’s settling on the more neutral label “new wave” to market a combination of punk’s novelty status and style with less offensive, more palatable musical outfits. In the late 1970s, as some of the early ‘punk’ bands like Blondie, the Clash, the Stranglers had gone mainstream, punk rock spread in the U.S. and the UK, but became more underground as it morphed and fragmented into various substyles like no wave, hardcore, street punk, 2 Tone (cf. Gendron 276-7).
3.3. Selected Academically Mediated Punk Meanings and the Obfuscation of Punk’s Miscegenation

Punk’s image as a music culture of predominantly angry white young men constructed in the music press and general media in the 1970s has been perpetuated in subsequent publications on punk. While rock criticism gradually underwent a legitimization as a cultural institution, a number of scholars emerging from the young, rising field of cultural studies began committing themselves to analyzing and making sense of the punk phenomenon as well as assessing its cultural significance. Certainly due to the significant media hype punk generated both in the established British music press and the general media in contrast to its initial ‘alternative’ mediation in America, early analyses of punk have taken place in the UK and were subsequently taken up in the U.S. after scenes in American cities like Los Angeles had been fueled by the news of British punk as well as by traveling bands and the circulation of records. Characteristic of most of these studies was an examination of the meanings of aesthetic and stylistic features and their cultural and socio-political contextualization and a construction of an academic discourse of punk as the realm of white heterosexual young men. In the following section, I will survey particular British and American studies and the ways of their construction of such a discourse that went along with various instances of obscuration and neglect of punk as a musical and social convergence culture.

3.3.1. Subculture: The Meaning of Style – A Seminal Punk Reading

Since its mass-mediated explosion in the mid-1970s, punk has accumulated remarkable academic interest and affected the development of various academic fields particularly the rising fields of cultural studies and popular music studies. The Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) founded in 1964 was among the first institutions in Britain that produced a study on punk which can be seen as a source of punk’s academic construction as a white male subculture. Drawing on a combination of anthropology, history, literary criticism and theory, Marxism, media studies, semiotics,
structuralism, sociology and grounded in an understanding of culture as a way of life, a number of CCCS postgraduates produced studies of the most discernible postwar British youth subcultures characterized by distinct clothing styles, musical preferences and deviant, often violent behaviors like the teddy boys, mods, skinheads exemplified by the 1976 collective work *Resistance Through Rituals: Youth Subcultures in Post-War Britain* edited by Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, and a subsequent work including punks, Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* published in 1979 (cf. Pitre, Tagg.org).

Central to both of these studies was, as Chris Barker summarized, an emphasis on the styles of such youth subcultures as forms of resistance to both their working-class parent culture and the dominant, hegemonic culture. Subcultures like the 1950s teddy boys, and the 1960s mods and skinheads were marked by distinctive styles which they developed through their “active organization of objects with activities and attitudes through the modes of dress, music, ritual and argot” and which they accordingly re-ordered and re-contextualized to express new meanings by way of ‘bricolage.’ Thus they were said to create a new space “from the parent and dominant cultures through symbolic resolutions of class contradictions they face” (413-4). Working from these premises, Hebdige concentrated on a semiotic analysis of these youth styles with a primary focus on punk as a “revolting style” which dramatized the 1970s crisis of British decline characterized by unemployment, poverty and shifting moral standards (cf. 87). Punk style signified noise and disorder at every level by mixing elements of the previous youth subcultures with “objects from the most sordid of contexts” like trash bags, safety pins, bright hair dye, the swastika, extreme make-up, graffitied and deranged school uniforms, as well as sexual fetish gear like rubber and bondage clothes, belts, and fishnet stockings. Not restricted to a disturbance of garments, chaotic dancing, loud and cacophonous music, willfully desecrated lyrics, offensive language, and anarchic graphics “undermined every relevant discourse” (106-12).

Of crucial significance in the work of Hebdige and his colleagues was the presence of immigrants from former British colonies like the West Indies and South Asia who had responded to England’s labor need occurring within the rising economy of the 1950s and 60s. For Hebdige, post-war British youth cultures offered a “phantom history of race
relations since the war” (45) and could be read as “a succession of differential responses to the black immigrant presence in Britain” (29). Whereas e.g. the mods sought to copy the “cool”, subdued style of Jamaican ‘rude boys’ (neat tuxedos, pork-pie hats, and dark sunglasses) while investing in American soul music and Jamaican ska (cf. 52-4), and skinheads emulated dress items, argot, ska and reggae music from Jamaican rude boys while “bashing” Pakistanis (cf. 54-9), punks were drawn to reggae and black Rastafarian youth’s increasing exclusiveness and rejection of Britishness and authority. Although Hebdige acknowledged that punks openly encouraged contact and cultural exchange which manifested itself, e.g., in an inclusion of reggae songs in the repertoires of the Clash or the Slits, and culminated in joint political commitment exemplified by the Rock Against Racism (RAR) campaigns against the rise of the National Front in the second half of the 1970s, the languages of punk and reggae (dress, dance, speech, music, style, history) remained for him fundamentally incompatible because “at the heart of the punk subculture, forever arrested, lies this frozen dialectic between black and white cultures” (62-70).

Apart from deciphering the stylistic markers, Hebdige used punk to trace the development of subcultures which constituted a “symbolic challenge to the symbolic order,” an “Otherness” that caused a media hysteria alternating between “dread and fascination, outrage and amusement”. This paradoxical media furor lead to a “diffusion and defusion,” a transformation of subcultural signs (e.g. fashion and music) into mass-produced objects, and a domestication and trivialization of a subculture to eventually restore the symbolic order. At this point, subcultures “must invariably end by establishing new sets of conventions; by creating new commodities, new industries or rejuvenating old ones […]. (92-99).

The work of the Centre’s subcultural theorists like Hebdige has been regarded as pioneering and tremendously influencing the cultural study of youth. While the insights into the relationships between young people, their parent and dominant cultures have informed many subsequent studies of youth subcultures including punk, they have been criticized for a number of shortcomings. Among the foremost inadequacies that reduce the representativeness of these theories ranks the level of abstraction necessary for the textual interpretation of the subcultures’ styles that fails to
acknowledge degrees of agency and to account for the motivations and experiences of the youth who were, as Hebdige for instance readily acknowledged in his conclusion, unlikely to recognize themselves in the studies (cf. 139). Additionally, theorists have criticized the narrow social focus on postwar Britain’s ‘spectacular’ subcultures only which were read as ‘working-class,’ ‘male’ and moreover heterosexual thus forging an approach that excluded women, gays and lesbians and did not account for the dynamic processes intrinsic to any culture or subculture (cf. Halberstam 318-21; Hodkinson 6-7; Pitre, Tagg.org). In contrast to Hebdige’s assumption that authentic and subversive subcultures die due to their commodification and media sensation, Sarah Thornton argued that the media played an integral part in the development of subcultures and the articulation of young people’s activities which corresponds for instance to the emergence and proliferation of punk as a discourse on the pages of rock magazines illuminated in the previous subchapter (cf. Club Cultures 116).

A further major shortcoming of the CCCS studies with a significant impact on subsequent studies of youth cultures in general and punk in particular was the partial coverage of ethnic minorities and their relations to subcultures like punk. Although Hebdige, for instance, stressed the importance of the presence of West Indians in Britain and the influence of black music and West Indian youth culture on white British subcultures, he nevertheless prioritized the latter. Pitre suggested that Hebdige seemed to regard black and West Indian cultures as “transplanted parent cultures within British society.” Yet, if subcultures actually rework and reconfigure their parent cultures, then, in Pitre’s words, “Hebdige has completely forgone any exploration of the punk subculture’s ‘parental’ black/West Indian sources” (Tagg.org).

Hebdige’s understanding of the black British subcultures and his conception of the dialectic between them and white subcultures like punk seems often reductive and furthermore contradictory. Earlier in the book he posited, for instance, that “[…] although apparently separate and autonomous, punk and black British subcultures with which reggae is associated were connected at a deep structural level” (29). Not only is his conflation of black British subcultures with Rastafarians and reggae problematic in general, he actually saw a deep structural connection between punk and reggae that contradicts his hypothesis of a “frozen” dialectic between black and white cultures. It is
especially on the level of musical practice where this contradiction becomes particularly
apparent when he addressed for instance the incorporation of reggae slogans, themes,
and songs in repertoires of punk bands like the Clash and the (all-girl band) Slits, and
the emergence of a “new hybrid form – punk dub – [that] grew out of [this] liaison”
(67). At the same time, he overlooked contemporary British “2 Tone” bands like the
Specials, Madness, and Bad Manners which had black and white members and likewise
fused punk rock with ska and reggae (see Chapter 4.3.). So, while he on the one hand
actually provided instances where the languages of punk and reggae merged rather than
being incompatible and thus acknowledged a degree of cross-cultural collaboration that
even, as stated above, extended to joint political activity, his paramount emphasis on an
abstract deciphering of the grammar of style flattened and ignored the dynamic
processes and exchanges that took place among black and white, male and female youth.

Apart from a closer look at the actual make-up, motivations and experiences of youth
engaging in subcultures, the rather marginal reading of music as text in favor of extra-
musical elements such as style and speech, as exemplified by Hebdige illuminates also a
general and related problem among many scholars working in the field of Cultural
Studies who have also engaged in analyzing punk. Shawn Pitre shared Phillip Tagg’s and
Bob Clarida’s view that many “cult studs” engaged in a glut of “metacontextual
discourse” at the expense of discussing or treating music as text (qtd. in Pitre Tagg.com).
He argued that while, for instance, “ethnomusicologists, popular music scholars, and
other musicologists have repeatedly demonstrated that any given musical excerpt
contains an abundance of cultural and semiotic information,” it is “surprising and
disappointing that an examination of subcultural styles and expressive forms should
devote so little effort in the analysis of the music that inevitably permeates all aspects of
these very styles, forms and subcultures” (Tagg.com). Although this “lack of reciprocity”
(Tagg and Clarida qtd. in Pitre Tagg.com) has somewhat decreased since the 1990s, and
the reduced representativeness of Hebdige’s theory regarding non-white subcultural
practices has been criticized and countered by scholars examining, for instance, musical
hybrids such as bhangra (cf. Hodkinson 7), studies of punk in and outside the UK have
both prioritized extra-musical elements, practices, and contexts and have continued to
frame punk as a white music and subculture since the 1980s.
3.3.2. Selected Readings of Punk in the U.S.: The Case of L.A. Punk

By the end of the 1970s, punk in Britain had according to Hebdige demised due to its cooptation and trivialization by the mass culture industries, yet it had gathered momentum and media attention beyond British borders and especially in major American cities on the West Coast like Los Angeles. In the following section, I will explore articles by American scholars that deal with punk in the United States and especially Los Angeles in the 1980s. I have chosen two articles which were published in the 1980s. These works are significant in so far as they exemplify some aspects highlighted in the discussion of Hebdige whom both reference in several ways, and in so far as they have contributed to the perpetuation of punk as a white music-related subculture which in the case of L.A. meant a successive obscuration of people of color and especially of Latina/os in punk.

Written in 1983 and first published in 1984, David E. James’s article “Poetry/Punk/Production: Some Recent Writing in L.A.,” which appeared in E. Ann Kaplan’s 1988 anthology *Postmodernism and Its Discontents: Theories and Practices* dealt with punk in L.A. as a cultural phenomenon that had made itself felt by 1977 in correspondence to the British punk explosion and had, by the time of his writing, declined due to its inevitable appropriation by the culture industries (e.g. music, film, and fashion). Like Hebdige, James was concerned with investigating the ways in which punk acted out both the contradictions of society in general and its own role within it. For him, the polarized responses of rejection and endorsement that went along with a coincidence of aesthetic, social “resistance and dissent with exploitation and collusion” made “punk the exemplary postmodern cultural phenomenon” (167). In contrast to Hebdige’s conception of subcultures as working-class, James distinguished American punk culture for having more in common with middle-class countercultures, yet he likewise regarded punk as a manifestation of style (cf. 169, 184 n4). In spite of the inevitable cooptation of punk by the various culture industries, James unlike Hebdige, detected a degree of autonomy in punk cultural production which was the “ultimate intransient negation of its very mode of production” which offered such a non-industrialized aesthetic production some measure of protection from the “circuits of the
culture industries” and the “assimilative powers of hegemonic media” (183). Although James addressed the centrality of music, he focused more on the pattern and consequences of its industrial appropriation, and eventually concentrated his analysis, as the title implied, on some lyrics and writings appearing in publications ranging from punk fanzines to more or less alternative poetry magazines to develop his argument.

Despite mentioning music as the foremost form of punk production, James’s description remained brief, flattening and significantly devoid of evidence. He stated punk was “the most advanced in the country, the only white musical production that was both populist and avant-garde,” with lyrics that were “anti-authoritarian, anti-humanist or nihilist rants, detailing the grievances, the psychic hopelessness and rage of that group which was excluded from all the post-sixties social reform rhetoric: white, heterosexual, lower-middle class males (167, my emphases). Punk music was for him not only ‘white,’ he also generalized the lyrics as a disillusioned response of white, heterosexual, lower-middle-class men whose masculinity, status and concerns were undermined by the potent challenges of the women, non-white, and gay movements of the 1970s. While this assessment might certainly be applicable to some bands and their songs like Fear’s “I Love Living in the City,” which is cited in the article and in which the lyrical I lives in a house “full of shit and puke,” where “crabs are crawlin [sic] on my balls,” and he simply “wants to fuck some slut” (169-70), it is reductive and leaves out a great deal of diversity of punk musical production in terms of the bands, their social make-up and their impetus.

In his notes (cf. 185, n3), James referred to two important documents, Penelope Spheeris’s 1981 documentary The Decline of Western Civilization and Peter Belsito and Bob Davis’s 1983 illustrated insider history Hardcore California, that he recommended as accounts of L.A.’s punk’s musical landscape, yet which actually undermine his assertion of punk as white musical production expressing the rage of white, heterosexual, lower-middle class males. Filmed from December 1979 to May 1980, the documentary featured concerts by selected L.A. bands which contained women (Exene Cervenka of X, Alice Bag of the Bags, Phranc of Catholic Discipline, Lorna Doom of the Germs), people of color (Latina/os Alice Bag, Robert Lopez of Catholic Discipline and of the Zeros, Ron Reyes and Robo of Black Flag as well as Pat Smear of the Germs, who is
of African/Native American and German descent) and homosexuals (lesbian Phranc, Craig Lee of the Bags and Catholic Discipline, Bobby Pyn also known as Darby Crash of the Germs).

The history *Hardcore California* likewise offers a colorful insight into the diverse cultural landscape of the scenes in L.A. and San Francisco featuring for instance black lesbian drummer Carla Maddog of the Controllers, black drummer D.H. Peligro of the Dead Kennedys, Asian-American bassist Dianne Chai of the Alleycats, mixed-ethnic and mixed-gender outfit the Nuns, the all-girl band Contractions as well as Chicana/o bands the Brat, the Plugz, and the Zeros. Thus, these documents provide evidence that punk musical production was neither strictly white nor reflecting the frustrations of white, heterosexual males only, testimony which James referred to but basically elided. Whether he did so deliberately as a matter of convenience, unconsciously or out of ignorance is not clear. The pattern of relegating music-making as a social and cultural practice constitutive of musical production in general and elemental in punk in particular to the margins of cultural analysis that often went along with a consequent cover-up of evidence is symptomatic for a great deal for discussions of punk and runs like a red thread through subsequent examinations whether they focus on L.A. or (American) punk.

Partly drawing on James in his 1988 article “Punks in LA: It’s Kiss or Kill,” Jon Lewis situated L.A. punk as a “curious blend of anarchy and anomie – as one last attempt for white, urban, lower middle class youths to dramatically express their distaste for a society that had long since expressed its disinterest in them” (87). Lewis basically conceived of L.A punk as an “urban performance art form” which “unapologetically paraded a variety of misanthropic and misogynist tendencies: Nazism, fascism, racism and self-hate” (87). These tendencies were particularly evident for Lewis in Spheeris’s documentary, on which his argumentation rested to a large extent. Significantly, the documentary does not necessarily support his claim of punk as a ‘white’ cultural phenomenon. First, the footage of the slam-dancing, ‘pogoing’ crowd reveals the presence of black people in the audience (especially during X’s, Black Flag’s and the Circle Jerks’ performances). Second, a punk wearing a swastika t-shirt who told Spheeris “Like I’m not going to got out and kill some Jew […] C’mon – Maybe a hippie” (90),
which Lewis quoted to support his arguments on the misanthropy and violence that according to him abound in the film is very likely to be of Asian descent. Third, as pointed out above, the bands featured had Latina/o members.

His treatment of the film as a mere document of the L.A. scene is furthermore problematic because it downplays the fact that it is nevertheless a construction of the scene and particularly emphasized these ‘misanthropic and misogynistic’ tendencies by way of editing and the selection of particular interview statements, songs, and audience footage. Many participants in the L.A. punk scene and musicians featured in the movie voiced their concerns about the presentation of L.A. punk in Spheeris’s film, which is discussed in Marc Spitz and Brendan Mullan’s LA. Punk history (examined in Chapter 3.4.2.) published in 2001. Although most have considered it as an important artifact, some have criticized her methods and selections. For Jenny Lens, photographer and scenester, the film was “an interesting but unfortunate view of the scene that was nothing like the one I knew” (262). John Doe, singer and guitarist of X, said he didn’t realize Penelope Spheeris had an agenda until later. […] I think she got a good movie out of it, but she definitely supplied anybody and everybody with whatever kind of drug or alcohol they wanted, and I think she knew that she would get what she wanted by doing that. Get someone fucked up and roll the camera. (262)

His then wife and singer of X, Exene Cervenka thought

*Decline* is a really important movie, but I think that the things that aren’t in a movie are more important than the things that are. It makes me sad that you freeze a moment and that’s the whole extent of its reality. That’s what people believe it was. And it was just so limited […] A lot of stuff was left out … certainly a lot of bands. (263)

In a *Ben is Dead* magazine interview with Mikki Halpin, Craig Lee of Catholic Discipline and the Bags pondered on the depiction of violence in the film and maintained that the film was shot during a transitional period between Hollywood punk and hardcore and that Spheeris selected the “absolute most inarticulate, most exploitive people to interview” which for him was problematic in that there “definitely wasn’t any attempt at analyzing what was behind the violence, just to show the violence” (42).

These nuanced responses by protagonists show that Spheeris’s film was not merely an attempt at documenting the L.A. punk scene, but actually followed an agenda that
carved out elements that did not necessarily embrace a differentiated depiction and thus resulted in a rather limited inspection of L.A. punk which Lewis failed to critically interrogate and further analyze. The exclusions Cervenka mentioned and criticized affect particularly the East L.A. Chicana/o chapter of L.A. punk’s history which at the time of Spheeris’ film shootings was flourishing around the club Vex (see Chapter 4.2.).

In their articles, both James and Lewis did conceive of punk in L.A. as a ‘white’ musical and cultural production and movement, affirmations that were grounded in rather shortsighted and limited views of punk’s social make up and went along with a neglect and cover-up of actual evidence of punk’s social and musical diversity. Although both articles were written in the 1980s, the conception of punk and hardcore in L.A. and beyond as white in line with a disregard of the presence and contribution of Latina/o and black punks persisted well beyond the turn of the millennium and is evident, for instance, in an 1997 article by Dewar McLeod (127) and in a recent one by Konstantin Butz, published in 2008 (131). These socially and musically monolithic, academically mediated meanings and conceptions of punk as an angry white, predominantly male culture have been further consolidated by a wave of punk histories emerging in the late 1980s whose reductive historical constructions of punk will be under scrutiny in the following chapter.

3.4. Riding the Punk History Wave

While cultural analysts had begun assessing the cultural significance of the punk phenomenon early on, the rising institution of rock criticism which moreover became entangled with the young field of cultural studies committed itself to chronicling and legitimizing of punk’s cultural significance. Especially since 1990, there has been a growing and continuous wave of historical accounts dedicated to chronicling punk’s development, sources and significance which have not only contributed to a canonization within punk history, but also perpetuated and historicized the image of punk as a white, predominantly male genre by often marginalizing and ignoring the
presence and contribution of women and people of color in punk which I will survey in regard to four significant punk histories published both by ‘outsiders’ and ‘insiders’.

3.4.1. Reductive British and American Punk Canons

Among the first histories published in the wave of punk ‘revisionism’ starting in the early 1990s (cf. Sabin 2; Reddington 239) ranks, e.g., the continuously influential England’s Dreaming: Sex Pistols and Punk Rock, published in 1991, by Jon Savage, who had been immersed in London’s punk scene and had written for Sounds, Melody Maker as well as lifestyle magazine The Face in the last half of the 1970s and in the 1980s (cf. Savage, 3ammagazine.com). Critically lauded as “definite,” “flawless,” and “[e]ssential reading,” for which Savage received the Ralph-Gleason Music Book Award (cf. cover of Savage England’s Dreaming), the book, as its title implies, deems punk rock synonymous with the Sex Pistols and England. Punk accordingly developed under the aegis of Malcom McLaren, who by managing the Sex Pistols and as the owner of the clothing shop “Sex,” played a crucial role, together with Vivienne Westwood, in designating the punk aesthetic and style. This claim is supported by the overwhelming attention Savage dedicates to the careers of McLaren and the Sex Pistols in contrast to other protagonists (cf. Savage 3-130, 141-260). Beginning with a description of the cultural setting of the King’s Road (the vicinity where “Sex” was to be located) and Malcolm McLaren personal and occupational history, the narrative spans the period from 1971 to 1979 when punk rock supposedly collapsed before Margaret Thatcher’s conservative victory in 1979.

A comparatively brief section on punk’s emergence in America encompassed a focus on New York and Cleveland as seen through the lens of writers, a historian, and New York’s Punk magazine staff (cf. 130-40). For Savage, Punk was the medium that codified the New York scene and the impulses of “[u]rbanism, romantic nihilism, musical

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13 Founded in 1989 and sponsored by the Broadcast Music, Inc. (BMI), Rolling Stone and New York University, the award annually honors music books that “best exemplify the standard of passionate writing and scholarship set by the late Ralph J. Gleason, co-founder of Rolling Stone” (BMI.com).
simplicity [...]” that characterized punk in America/New York/Cleveland and England/London (124). He furthermore used the magazine and its creators’ comments to explore punk’s ambiguities towards Nazi imagery and race by quoting, e.g., from his interview with Eddie ‘Legs’ McNeil of Punk, who had moved from a smaller city to New York:

The Dictators came from Co-op City in Detroit [this is a misinformation since Co-op City is located in the Bronx, New York City, where the Dictators grew up], the Ramones came from Forest Hills [Queens, New York City], we came from Cheshire. [...] We all had the same reference points: White Castle hamburgers, muzak, malls. And we were all white: there were no black people involved with this. In the sixties hippies always wanted to be black. We were going: ‘Fuck the Blues; fuck the black experience. We had nothing in common with black people at that time: we’d have ten years of being politically correct and we were going to have fun, like kids are supposed to do. It was funny: you’d see guys going out to a Punk club, passing black people going into a disco, and they’d be looking at each other, not with disgust, but ‘Isn’t it weird that they want to go there.’ There were definitive right-wing undertones [like the day-glo swastikas by homosexual Mexican artist Arturo Vega, songs like “Blitzkrieg Bop” or “Today your Love, Tomorrow the World” by the Ramones], but we didn’t feel like, ‘Let’s go out and start a youth movement about fascism’ or anything. I don’t think anyone wanted to read too much depth into it: it was more emotional. When the imagery was used, it was more like ‘Look at these guys, isn’t it stupid?’ (qtd. in Savage 138)

While Savage was careful to include McNeil’s statement in a way that it retained a nuanced, if not self-critical quality concerning the right-wing undertones, he turned it into a rather generalized reading as an “element of polemic and put-on mask[ing] the real return of the repressed: a white, suburban, adolescent nihilism that had been forgotten since sixties Punk Rock.” Likewise, Savage seemed to use McNeil’s “fuck the blues; fuck the black experience” and the Ramones as templates for American punk rock by asserting that “[...] much of the music bled out any black influence in favour of a monolithic, unsyncopated sound [...]” (138). In 1996, however, McNeil offered a different stance in the oral history Please Kill Me, which he edited, by stating that seeing the Ramones live for the first time were for him the “best eighteen minutes of rock & roll” in which “[y]ou could hear the Chuck Berry in it, which was all I listened to, that and the Beatles second album with all the Chuck Berry covers on it” (Please Kill Me 206). So, it may well be that Savage utilized only selected passages from his
interview with McNeil and the Ramones creating a sense that particularly these fit his hearing and understanding of punk. What seems furthermore problematic in relation to this aspect, is that due to the relative scarcity of other protagonists’ statements, McNeil’s comments evoke a representativeness of American/New York punk, particularly in terms of the phrase “there were no black people involved with this,” which might be true for the Punk magazine environment but not necessarily for New York’s scene in general which included for instance mixed-race Ivan Julian of the Voidoids, mixed-race Neon Leon, and all-black Pure Hell.

The pattern of chronicling American punk predominantly through the voices of fanzine staff is continued later in the book, when Savage included a brief section on punk’s development in the U.S after 1976 (cf. 433-42) which can be read as a contextual preparation for his ensuing chronicling of the Sex Pistols’ 1978 American tour (cf. 443-69). Whereas he acknowledged punk’s spread throughout North America including Canada, he situated America’s “hardest-core” in Los Angeles and San Francisco where bands like the Germs and Weirdos as well as the Nuns, Crime and the Dils played “increasingly confident Punk mutations, with their own styles, hierarchies and clubs […]” and “magazines Slash (Los Angeles) and Search & Destroy (San Francisco) further developed the Punk aesthetic with an intelligence, obnoxiousness and passion no longer to be found in England” (437). Apart from these bands mentioned, the editors of Slash, Claude Bessy, and of Search & Destroy, Japanese-American V.Vale were the only spokesmen given a space to offer their insights into the developments of the respective scenes and their impetus behind their fanzines (cf. 437-40).

At the end of this section, however, Savage quoted Adele Bertei, organist of James Chance and the Contortions, to elucidate on New York’s experimental No Wave movement and its importance for women in participating as instrumentalists which emerged when the first New York scene petered out in the late 1970s:

[…] people like Patti Smith had all got major deals, and they weren’t playing at CBGB’S any more, and in the aftermath came people like Lydia Lunch [of Teenage Jesus and the Jerks]. She really intrigued me, she was so over the top. […] No wave was when women started playing instruments in bands. It was liberating: we were just like the boys, finally, we could do what the fuck we wanted to do, without any sexist bullshit. There was a woman in DNA, there were two women in Mars, Conny Burke, Nancy Arlen, and Lizzy Mercier was [sic] around […]. (qtd. in Savage 441-2)
Although Savage can be credited for acknowledging the mixed-gender No-Wave bands including Bertei’s view on female participation in this punk derivative, he nevertheless reduced the black influences on No Wave. Bertei stated that they “were all listening to Coltrane and Bird and old Stones, and James Brown too” and that her untrained percussive treatment of the organ was called, as she later discovered, “‘clusters’ in jazz, five or six keys together” (qtd. in Savage 442). Savage, however, concluded that “[d]espite the black references, nothing sounded whiter, less funky, than this maelstrom” (442, my emphases). So, in a way, this affirmation seems to be based as much on his own hearing impression as well as on a certain essentialist assumption that black music be funky or, as in the earlier example, syncopated.

These two explorations of punk in America as well as of punk stirrings and voices outside of the circle around McLaren’s and the Sex Pistols remain glimpsed and rather reduced events and protagonists to support and contextualize the main characters’ actions and agenda’s, if not Savage’s own conceptions and perceptions which, in the form of excerpts from his 1970s diary, are furthermore sprinkled throughout the text.

Savage’s prominent emphasis on punk’s development in England/London was countered when the American punk genealogy *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: The Birth of American Punk* by Briton Clinton Heylin was published in 1993. Written by a “formidable rock historian” and “[a]rguably the world’s greatest rock biographer” (back cover of Heylin *Babylon’s Burning*), this “detailed” history (back cover of Heylin *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*) contributed to the canonization of early American punk. Heylin distinguished several points of American punk’s roots in the raw rage of Detroit’s MC 5 and Stooges, the straight-forwardness of Boston’s Modern Lovers, and New York’s avant-garde around Andy Warhol and the Velvet Underground, which were to gather around the glamorous kitsch of the New York Dolls and Wayne County. He then identified two stages of American punk’s evolution, the first encompassing Television, Patti Smith, Blondie, the Ramones debuting in New York clubs like Max’s Kansas City and CBGB’s in 1973-1974, and Cleveland’s simultaneously developing Electric Eels and Rocket from the Tombs. Centering on New York, the second stage included the Talking Heads and later incarnations of first-stage bands like the Heartbreakers, Richard Hell and the Voidoids (New York) as well as Pere Ubu and the Dead Boys (Cleveland).
Similar to Savage’s history, Heylin’s narrative is divided into chronological segments and intermingled with the protagonists’ voices. However, whereas Savage had also conducted interviews, Heylin constructed his narrative exclusively from contemporary interviews published in rock/music magazines like *Creem*, *NME*, *Melody Maker*, *Trouser Press*, *Sounds*, and *New York Rocker* in addition to publications on some artists available at the time of his research which he wove together with his own writing (cf. 359-65). Like Savage, he also included a discography – a canonized soundtrack – but unlike Savage, he inserted a list of “Dramatis Personae,” 61 selected ‘key’ figures in the birth of punk, 10 of which are female and all of which are white (cf. 367-72).

Heylin continued this pattern in his 2007 sequel *Babylon’s Burning: From Punk to Grunge*, in which he continued an attempt at chronicling an overall history from punk’s birth in America, via stirrings in Australia around bands like the Saints and Radio Birdman, to punk in England, back to punk and hardcore on America’s East and West Coasts until punk broke again into the mainstream under the name of grunge in the early 1990s. His list of “Dramatis Personae” again contains ‘key’ figures ranging from musicians, record industry figures, journalists, and scenesters. Out of 346 listed protagonists, 42 are female, one is black (Don Letts), three are of mixed-race parentage (Poly Styrene, Pat Smear, Barry Jones), and two are Chicanos (Louis Perez, Robert Lopez)(cf. 647-51). Although he mentions bands with Latina/o and black members like the Plugz, the Zeros, Los Lobos, the Bags, the Nuns, Bad Brains, X-Ray Spex, and Germs briefly, he is neither interested in stressing their race nor ethnicity, nor does he rarely go beyond naming the bands.

There are several issues that unite both Savage’s (1991) and Heylin’s (1993, 2007) punk histories. As is often the case in rock histories, these punk histories contain extracts from interviews of musicians and ‘scenesters,’ the music press, and fanzines connected through the voices of their authors and provide selected lists of albums representative of their subjects. Their featured selections of punk protagonists and albums thus stipulated both a punk rock canon that promoted the image of punk rock as a white music genre marked by an overwhelming absence of black and Latino contemporaries and a conception of New York and London (except for *Babylon’s Burning*) as punk rock’s epicenters. In *England’s Dreaming* and *Babylon’s Burning*, e.g.,
black disc jockey and film maker Don Letts, biracial singer Poly Styrene, as well as black photographer and singer Dennis Morris were sporadically included or briefly mentioned, while the Zeros marked the singular instance of U.S. “Chicano Punks” mentioned in Savage’s book (613), and were named alongside the Chicano bands the Plugz and Los Lobos in *Babylon’s Burning* (505, 506). Although Heylin features, e.g., the Detroit-based MC 5 and the Stooges in *From the Velvets*, he overlooked Detroit’s all-black band Death probably caused by a growing media attention toward developments in New York City at the time of Death’s existence between 1973 an 1976 (cf. Rubin, *NYTimes.com*). In addition, Philadelphia-based all-black band Pure Hell, which relocated to Manhattan and furthermore toured England in the late 1970s (see Chapter 4.2.2.) receive no mentioning in both Savage’s and Heylin’s books. The same can be said of interracial Neon Leon and his mixed-gender band the Rainbow Press, who played with bands like the New York Dolls during 1973 and 1974, and went to London to found their own label with financial support of the Rolling Stones around 1976 (cf. Leon *Roctober.com*)

In terms of gender balance, female protagonists like Patti Smith, Debbie Harry, Tina Weymouth, Poly Styrene, the Slits, Chrissie Hynde, Pauline Murray, Adele Bertei and women of the No Wave movement own a place in these histories, but their significance tends to be overshadowed by the precedence given to their male counterparts. Whereas Heylin’s lists of “Dramatis Personae” are overwhelmingly male in both books, Savage’s interviewees are likewise overwhelmingly male (cf. 624-25). In 2003, musician and music lecturer Helen Reddington wrote in relation to British punk that “[t]here 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” (“Lady’ Punks in Bands” 239). Reddington’s sentiments concerning the scant historical presence of women can of course be extended to the almost exclusively absent coverage of people of color in these prominent examples of punk historiography.

Furthermore, some critics and protagonists have voiced their discontent in regard to these histories. Writer Stewart Home heavily criticized historical accounts on punk by rock critics like Heylin because of their limited frames of reference, the boundaries they
draw around punk as a genre and their “erroneous commentaries” (“Journalist Jive” Stewarthome.org). Sex Pistols’ singer John Lydon (also known as Johnny Rotten), for instance, repudiated, among other things, the idea of Malcolm McLaren as the overarching mastermind behind the Sex Pistols, which is stipulated in histories written by journalists like Savage, who in Lydon’s eyes “come with an agenda and they just fit everything around that preposition and the result is no relation at all whatsoever to the truth. It’s just fantasy or just historical inaccuracy” (Interviewsofrecordingartist.com). In the case of England’s Dreaming, protagonists like Andy Czezowski and Susan Carrington of London’s Roxy club raised their discontent with Jon Savage’s history in an interview with the online 3:AM Magazine:

AC: ... But Jon Savage… the guy’s a total wanker, constantly re-writing history to suit his own purposes.
SC: I remember seeing him at the Roxy one night. He’d been sacked as a solicitor that day and was crying his eyes out completely.
AC: That says it all really. At the end of the day he was one of the ‘McLarens’, or at least tried to be anyhow. Just a shallow journalist really.
SC: He was always on the periphery, never part of the action, that’s for sure.
AC: A few years ago he came out of the woodwork and sought me out for his book. I co-operated as he was a face from the past and I thought nothing of him really, I wish I hadn’t now as he just wrote a bunch of crap. As we said, totally peripheral guy. Always intellectualising. (Czezowski and Carrington 3ammagazine.com)

Apart from these critical voices, the general praise the work of Savage and Heylin has received as well as the authority they are generally ascribed to as rock historians have nevertheless affected the popular and the academic conception of the punk history. On one hand, the fact that both have been released in subsequent editions and that Savage’s history has also been translated into different languages including German, French, Polish, Italian, and Japanese (cf. Savage, “Punk” Jonsavage.com) since their first publication point to a considerable popularity and currency. On another, they have gained acknowledgement in the academy highlighted by the fact that they have informed scholarly work on punk across a variety of academic fields: these include for instance popular music histories (e.g. Garofalo Rockin’ Out, 351; Palmer 301-29;
and cultural analyses of punk with a variety of foci (e.g. Bradford 173-4; Leblanc 273; O'Connor 235; Shank *Dissonant Identities*, 165; MacLeod 145-6).

Rock critics like Savage and Heylin have tremendously shaped punk rock historiography in general, and the stipulation of punk rock as an overwhelmingly white, predominantly male musical genre and culture in particular. Not only have they drawn temporal and geographic boundaries around the ‘when’ and ‘where’ in punk rock, they have also determined the cultural significance of ‘who’ counts as milestone in punk rock history which were based to a great extend on rock press publications. The critical acclaim of both historians’ expertise and the large-scale circulation of their work have perpetuated the gaps they have left into a variety of fields. Although the reduced coverage of women in punk that applies to both books has been challenged and countered by critical observers like Reddington or Lauraine Leblanc, the overwhelming absence of people of color in punk has been largely accepted and rarely interrogated which is probably due to the books’ congruence if not sustenance of the image of rock and punk as white with historically shaped, dominant media representations and music industry categorizations that people of color are not assumed to musically and socially inhabit punk rock.

3.4.2. Two Pivotal ‘Insider’ Oral Punk Histories

Moreover, punk histories like *England’s Dreaming* and *From the Velvets to the Voidoids* published in the early 1990s triggered a punk historiographic conversation in with each subsequent publication intended to fill in, shed light on or correct gaps, partial, underrepresented or disregarded aspects of the predecessor. While Heylin’s 1993 history of American punk’s crystallizing in New York was an attempt at shifting the prevalent conception of punk’s birth in and synonymy with London/England pegged by previous accounts (cf. Heylin xi), punk scenesters themselves have responded to the

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14 Although rock critic Robert Palmer’s history, which served as the accompaniment to the 1995 PBS series *Rock & Roll*, cannot be characterized as a ‘scholarly’ analysis, it was nevertheless affiliated with an educational institution and mentored by scholars (cf. Palmer “Acknowledgements,” n.pag.).
efforts of “peripheral” observers or ‘outsiders’ by chronicling the development of punk from an ‘insider’ perspective. Among the first of these insider records published in the 1990s ranks *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* by former *Punk* magazine editor Legs McNeil together and co-author Gillian McCain, published in 1996, which was followed by Spitz’s and Mullen’s 2001 *We Got the Neutron Bomb: The Untold Story of L.A. Punk*. Whereas *Please Kill Me* basically ventured geographically on Heylin’s path in *From the Velvets* by cementing the birth of punk with the work of New York’s Velvet Underground via Detroit’s MC5 and Stooges to the 1970s New York scene crystallizing around clubs like the CBGB’s, *We Got the Neutron Bomb* countered the London and New York punk genealogies by shifting the focus to the development of punk in Los Angeles in the 1970s which had been largely elided in the previous accounts.

Central to both ‘insider’ histories is an oral history approach which let musicians, scenesters and other protagonists involved (e.g. record industry figures and filmmakers) entirely speak for themselves about their roles and experience in the respective scenes. In contrast to the histories by Savage and Heylin, in which the protagonists’ voices are woven together, interpreted, and contextualized by their authors, the oral history approach of both scenesters’ accounts offer multiple perspectives as well as reflect the participatory nature and populist stance of punk by leaving history at the hands of those who were actually ‘there.’ However, despite this more ‘democratic’ approach, an elementary question of who actually owns this history and how this informs the structure and content of the narrative still arises especially in regard to ‘who’ is eventually included and given voice.

In the case of *Please Kill Me*, there is neither an introduction nor a statement of the authors’ missions and agendas. The story is entirely left to the protagonists. However, it is on a structural level (the chronological and thematic organization of the chapters) as well as in terms of the selection of the characters in (New York) punk rock (i.e. who was interviewed) where an inclusive and generative “from below” approach turns into an exclusive ‘top-down’ one. Furthermore, neither included are the interview questions nor the methods according to which the authors turned the certainly patchy responses of the interviewees into a fluid and coherent narrative. Although female views and
voices regularly pervade the story, mixed-race Ivan Julian of Richard Hell’s Voidoids is the only non-white participant included to briefly present his view on the course of the band. At the end of the book, a “Cast of Characters” list of people involved in the New York punk story mentions next to Julian only mixed-race Neon Leon as “musician, scenemaker” and “[l]ead singer, guitarist: the Neon Leon Band” (417).

The approach and structural pattern pursued in Please Kill Me is emulated in We Got the Neutron Bomb. Like the former book, the L.A. history is divided by time periods, but also by genre or sub-scenes (e.g. glitter, the rise of punk, hardcore, rockabilly) and locales (e.g. the Masque, the Canterbury Apartments, Fullerton). Unlike Please Kill Me, Spitz and Mullen have included an introduction which clarifies their position and the mission of the book. At the outset, they stated that they were “not experts,” but “basically two record-collecting music geeks […]” (xv). The history’s goal, “to give Los Angeles punk rock the respect and consideration that it’s due,” was driven by a perception that all too often “the so-called founding punk scenes of New York and London have been autopsied, then crudely sewn and suited up for the big funeral ceremony, where everybody wants to be a pallbearer to seal their own legacy and sustain a quasi-mainstream career as ‘professional punk’” (xv). While there is no explicit reference to former punk history books, the title of the introduction “Let’s Get Rid of New York” suggests that their criticism was aimed at preceding New York-centered accounts like Please Kill Me and its co-author Legs McNeil, who was the “resident punk at Punk magazine” and later became senior editor of Spin magazine (Please Kill Me cover page, 204). With this in mind, the reasoning behind We Got the Neutron Bomb might well be grounded in a palpable localism that claims southern California, from the surf scene to the Doors, the glitter period to the Hollywood punk outcasts, as the legitimate harbinger of punk.

However, neither were Spitz and Mullen only “record-collecting geeks:” while Mullen was the founder and proprietor of the Hollywood’s punk club/rehearsal space the Masque in the 1970s, he and Spitz were both writers for LA Weekly and Spin magazine respectively which certainly provided them with professional skills, a degree of cultural authority and might have influenced sales-oriented motivations. In how far or whether these aspects have shaped their project remains open. Nevertheless, both
histories share the construction of a narrative, the selection of events, settings, protagonists, according to methods and criteria invisible to the reader. In terms of the representation of the diverse quality of the L.A punk scene, female voices are featured regularly throughout the book. Homosexuals like Phranc, the Screamers, Black Randy, and a few others are included. The same goes for people of color like mixed-race Pat Smear, Latina/os Robert Lopez, Margot Olaverra, Alice Bag, Louis Perez, Joe Vex, and Robo. However, the East L.A. punk chapter dealing with the Chicano punk club Vex was handled in only three pages (246-9) in the 286-page book. Their list of “Cast of Characters” contains 164 protagonists, out of which 45 are female, nine are Chicana/os and one (Pat Smear) is known to be of mixed-race parentage (cf. 290-6), thus featuring only an extremely small number of people of color excluding for instance black female drummer Carla Maddog, the predominantly black band the Warriors, bassist Dianne Chai and Chicana/o bands the Brat and the Odd Squad.

Despite both books’ insightful and valuable testimony of the New York and L.A. punk scenes, the exploration of these two oral histories co-authored by ‘insiders’ shows that they have shaped an overwhelmingly white punk history and continued to perpetuate gaps in regard of the relative absence of people of color in punk even if their intentions were driven by a desire to give credit and voice to a large number of participants, and to illuminate preceding partialities, disregards and underrepresentation. These aspects as well as the invisibility of the methods and criteria that underlay the structuring of their narratives and the selection of protagonists furthermore stir concerns in regard to questions of power relations and the roles of the insider authors as cultural arbiters.
4 Reading Punk Rock as a Diverse Social and Musical Convergence Culture

4.1. Introduction

An inherent need to classify and demarcate in order to make sense of the world in general and to describe an elusive form such as music in particular has resulted in the establishment of generic boundaries structuring Anglo-American rock-'n'-roll history along the lines of race, ethnicity, and gender. In regard to 1970s punk rock, from the contemporary assessments by rock critics like Christgau to the subsequently chronicled white, male-dominated punk rock canon and its firm delineation to what is considered black music, music histories have foreclosed the fleeting, cross-cultural, trans-racial, trans-historical and even trans-national dynamics that have always been central to rock ‘n’ roll and its derivates whether they are called garage, punk, or hip hop. Informed by Mikhail Bakhtin’s dialogic criticism, George Lipsitz stated that “[p]opular music is nothing if not dialogic, the product of an ongoing historical conversation in which no one has the first or the last word” (Time Passages 99). Accordingly, a more open conception of the development of punk rock that furthermore echoes Stewart Home’s suggestion of punk rock as a fluid rather than stable musical genre enables an imagination of punk as a social and musical convergence culture rooted in the heart of American music which is a heavily black-influenced, multi-ethnic hybrid (“Journalistic Jive,” Stewarthome.com). Thus, punk cannot be separated from its historical antecedents and parallels which are rife with a complex intermingling of races, eras, and genres.

The following chapters will offer readings of punk as a musical and social convergence culture: first, in regard to punk rock’s largely denied indebtedness to black musicians and black-derived musical styles; second, against the notion of a congealed dialectic between black and white youth during British punk’s prime years; third, by exploring the neglected presence and the prolific cultural legacy of Latina/o punks as well as their varied and nuanced experience especially in Los Angeles in the late 1970s and early 1980s.
4.2. “Blues is the Teacher. Punk is the Preacher”¹⁵

4.2.1. American (Proto-) Punk’s Dynamic, Black-Derived Musical Spine

“If disco had roots in black music, especially Motown, punk renounced black music - it was the whitest music ever” (Curtis 307).

In contrast to typically polarized and shortsighted assertions on punk’s antagonism to and abjuration of ‘black’-derived influences such as the pointed one made by rock historian Jim Curtis in 1987, punk has drawn from, fused and reworked a variety musical styles conventionally regarded as black since its 1960s stirrings. Generally considered proto-punks, Detroit-based bands MC 5 and the Stooges were profoundly inspired by black blues, jazz and rock ‘n’ roll musicians. In 1997, Iggy Pop, singer for the Stooges, explained the impulse behind the Detroit approach to rock, his band and the MC 5 followed: “[i]n Detroit, if you were a white kid, your dream would be to be a black thug with a guitar and play like one” (McNeil and McCain 48). The MC 5 revered a variety of black musical idioms which is reflected, e.g., on the band’s 1969 album *Kick Out the Jams* that contains a sped-up version of Ted Taylor’s 1965 soul track “Ramblin’ Rose,” the explorative Sun Ra homage “Starship” as well as the accelerated rock-‘n’-roll classics “Tutti Frutti” by Little Richard and Chuck Berry’s “Back in the USA” on the subsequent 1970 album of the same title.

In a similar albeit different way, the blues was also the driving impetus behind the Stooges’ Motor-City steel plant rock ‘n’ roll. In *Please Kill Me*, Iggy Pop said that “[o]nce I heard the Paul Butterfield Blues Band and John Lee Hooker and Muddy Waters, and even Chuck Berry playing his own tune, I couldn’t go back and listen to the British Invasion […]” (36). After drumming in high school rhythm-and-blues bands, the young Iggy even ventured to Chicago to acquire first-hand mentoring from Sam Lay, who was the percussionist for blues harmonica player James Cotton. Intrigued by his experience in Chicago yet realizing that aping the blues like many contemporary white rock bands did was both ridiculous and beyond his ability, Iggy sought to “play [his] own simple

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¹⁵ This phrase is taken from the website of the Californian mixed-race and mixed gender punk rock band the Bellrays ("About" Thebellrays.com).
blues” by appropriating, e.g., vocal forms and turns of phrases to be found in songs from the 1969 debut album *The Stooges* like “No Fun” or the punk staple “I Wanna Be Your Dog,” which is a line he culled from the 1947 song “Baby Please Don’t Go” by Big Joe Williams (McNeil and McCain 38).

In his 2007 article “Iggy’s Blues,” Thomas W. Sheehan established Pop’s rock approach during the Stooges era (1967-1974) as an inversion of the prevalent (and false) myth of rock as the meeting of black primitivism (the ‘authentic’ blues tradition and its influence on performance) with white technology (133; cf. also Chapter 2.5.). For Sheehan, it is in the singer’s kinetic and theatrical stage antics performed to “immediate and colloquial” blues-based idioms that are blown apart by a heavily amplified and distorted guitar drone that Pop fuses this “white primitivism with the so-called black primitivism [which] he turns into a technical blueprint” (138, 154). While Pop venerates the blues form, he is, according to Sheehan, unable to “master that form.” At the same time, Pop envies the sense of community the blues afforded black people, as he had witnessed in urban Chicago and Detroit, yet his “desire for community” is “present only as a wrenching absence in his work” (154). Thus, Iggy’s blues develops into a powerful “statement of self-affirmation and self-destruction” that through distortion and dissonance in the performance and music becomes a form of witnessing of what he cannot hope to attain (Sheehan 157).

In a *Left of the Dial* magazine interview with writer and folklorist David Ensminger in 2001, MC 5 guitarist Wayne Kramer offered a related yet more universalist view in regard of the power and effects of music and communication that he connected with black soul and free-jazz musicians:

> Music itself is a tool. Language is a tool. It’s all trying to carry a message, something about wherever I am at the moment. If I can be honest about that, then chances are someone else is at that moment. And if I do it right, and send a message to that message that you know, you are not alone, you’re not the only one that feels that way. That’s what great art has always done for me. That’s what great literature does for me, that’s what great painting does for me, that’s what great music has done for me. When I hear James Brown or John Coltrane, I don’t feel so alone. (*Leftofthedialmag.com*)

Whether through emulation and celebration or as a way of dealing with or expressing alienation or loneliness, a genre-crossing and cross-generational oeuvre of black musicians deeply affected the work of these Detroit proto-punk rockers.
On the East Coast, the flashy, cross-dressing New York Dolls meanwhile debunked contemporary progressive and art rock’s elaborate pomp and inflatedness by returning to the ‘classic’ rock-‘n’-roll 3-minute format infused with blues chord progressions and occasional blues harmonica elements. The musical recourse to rock ‘n’ roll and blues is explicitly evident, for instance, in the cover version of Bo Diddley’s “Pills” on their 1973 debut album *New York Dolls* or in a cover of the 1955 song “Don’t Start Me Talking” by blues singer and harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson II on their 1974 album *Too Much Too Soon*. On the latter album, the Dolls’ repertoire even extended to versions of doo-wop and soul tracks like the Cadets’ 1956 single “Stranded in the Jungle,” the Coasters’ 1964 single “Bad Detective” or Archie Bell and the Drells’ 1969 hit “Showdown.” Thus, if the MC 5, the Stooges and the New York Dolls generally count as proto-punks, then their recourse to and reworking of black musical styles not only turn these into punk’s building blocks but also represent an engagement in a musical conversation across genres, races, and eras which continued in various ways throughout and beyond punk’s transatlantic prime years in the 1970s.

In a 2008 *Left of the Dial* interview with Ensminger, singer and songwriter Peter Case, who was in the mid-1970s San Francisco pop punk band the Nerves and later in the mixed-ethnic Plimsouls challenged the common statement among rock experts of punk’s lack of connection to black music by summing up some of the links highlighted above:

> [t]he Talking Heads were [into black music], who weren’t really punk rock. But like Iggy and the Stooges man, that’s the connection that came up through the Ramones. Like Iggy is all about fucking black music. The Stooges were. They’re about the blues man. Like Iggy ran away and went to Chicago and got into music from watching blues guys in blues clubs. That’s where Iggy is coming from, from a really soulful place. Same with the MC5. Those were his heroes. The MC5, those guys were totally into black music. I mean they were like into James Brown and Sun Ra. Stuff like that. So that’s the influence on the Ramones, for one. On the other hand, the other influence on the Ramones is New York girl groups, and the start of that whole thing was black too [e.g. the Crystals and the Ronettes]. So the whole idea that there is no connection between punk rock and black music is a joke. There is no great music in the United States that doesn’t have a connection to black music, including country. So, is that a slightly racist statement, I’m not sure. I think it is. It’s at least deluded. Why they were so intent on there being no connection to black music, I can’t get, but I dug disco. And nobody dug disco back then, but I thought disco was fuckin’ rockin’.  

(*Leftofthedialmag.com*)
Not only does Case’s portrayal contest and disrupt the hegemonic view existent among journalists, academics and some punk rock pundits of punk as a white genre that evolved in a vacuum outside of America’s rich musical landscape, it also maps early punk’s embracing of black musics highlighted above which in his case even stretched out to punk’s alleged antagonist disco.

As exemplified by Jon Savage’s account of punk in New York in England’s Dreaming, the Ramones have often been taken as an epitome of American punk and its drainage of black musical influences. As Peter Case however indicated, “New York girl groups” some of which were black also played a role in the Ramones’ musical impetus. A direct reference to the girl groups can be found, e.g. on the 1980 album End of the Century, which contains a cover of the 1964 hit “Baby, I Love You” performed by the Ronettes, whom many consider the “original bad girls of rock ‘n’ roll” (Warner 440). This pattern was even reversed when Ronnie Spector (nee Veronica Bennett) of the Ronettes covered the Ramones 1987 song “Bye Bye Baby” and the 1995 song “She Talks to Rainbows” on her 1999 extended play album She Talks to Rainbows, which was co-produced by singer Joey Ramone.

Moreover, descriptions of the Ramones have often evoked comparisons with black musicians like Chuck Berry exemplified earlier by Legs McNeil’s comment made in Please Kill Me (cf. chapter 3.4.1.). In a 1983 Trouser Press review of their album Subterranean Jungle released the same year, Scott Isler wrote that guitarist Johnny Ramone “proves he’s as good a Chuck Berry disciple as the best of them” (37). Additionally, in his article on “Protopunk” that appeared in the 1980 edition of the Rolling Stone Illustrated History of Rock & Roll rock critic Lester Bangs situated the Ramones’ 1976 punk staple “Blitzkrieg Bop” within a cross-generational and transatlantic rock ‘n’ roll history that in terms of musical simplicity hearkened back to Mexican-American rock ‘n roller Ritchie Valens:

According to one theory, punk rock all goes back to Ritchie Valens’s “La Bamba.” Just consider Valens’s three-chord mariachi squawkup [sic] in the light of “Louie Louie” by the Kingsmen, then consider “Louie Louie” in the light of “You Really Got Me” by the [English] Kinks, then “You Really Got Me” in the light of “Blitzkreig Bop” [sic] by the Ramones, and finally note that “Blitzkreig Bop” [sic] sounds a lot like “La Bamba.” There: twenty years of rock & roll history in three chords, played more primitively each time they are recycled. (261, emphasis in original)
Despite the successive ‘roughening’ of rock ‘n’ roll’s characteristic “three chords” typified here by “La Bamba,” punk rock’s musical ‘primitivism’ exemplified by this Ramones song did, for Bangs, not differ from Valens’s 1950s hit because it was in the musical simplicity that allowed for “[…] the utopian dream of everyman an artist […] – the ultimate proof that rock & roll is the most democratic and all-American of art forms” (Bangs 261). So, in addition to the references to the girl groups and the cross-generational collaboration that has taken place between Joey Ramone and Spector, these exemplary evaluations of the Ramones’ work also show that in spite of its widespread reading as a back-to-basics approach devoid of black influences, observers have nevertheless found consistencies with rock ‘n’ roll’s prime integrated and multi-ethnic period.

4.2.2. Two Excavated Stories of Black Punk Trailblazers

Of course, it can be argued that the (proto-) punkers followed the typical pattern of white adaptation and imitation of black musical styles that has pervaded the evolution of popular music in the U.S. and beyond its borders. However, as the recent and growing interrogation of rock’s and by extension punk rock’s discursively constructed, mediated and marketed whiteness has gradually brought to attention, Jimi Hendrix was not the last black rocker and black people have neither abandoned rock ‘n’ roll nor withdrawn from a musical conversation across races, genres and eras. While the MC 5 and the Stooges celebrated, emulated and reworked black musical styles into a raunchy punk rock template in Detroit, three young black brothers from the city’s black neighborhood took a road back to rock ‘n’ roll’s frenetic energy and uncompromising straight-forwardness in combination with a distorted guitar under the name Death in the early 1970s. In a March 2009 New York Times article published shortly after Death’s release of recordings that had collected dust in one of the brother’s attic for more than 30 years, Mike Rubin shed some light on the band’s history, their musical inspirations, the disapproving responses they gathered from their black audience, and record
industry constraints that navigated the band to venture into genres conventionally reserved for black musicians.

According to Rubin, the released record *For the Whole World to See* by the three brothers Dannis, Bobby, and David Hackney “reveal a remarkable missing link between the high-energy hard rock of Detroit bands like the Stooges and MC5 from the late 1960s and early ’70s and the high-velocity assault of punk from its breakthrough years of 1976 and ’77 (*NYTimes.com*)*. Inspired by a concert of white shock rocker Alice Cooper to turn from R&B to playing hard rock in a basic instrumentation of drums, bass and a guitar-style furthermore informed by the Who guitarist Pete Townshend (cf. Rubin *NYTimes.com*), Death’s songs railed against the empty and false rhetoric of pretentious politicians and the wrongs of the Vietnam War (“Politicians in My Eyes”), called for a move on from what alludes to the shattered dreams of the Civil Rights Movement (“Let the World Turn”), and praised rock ‘n’ roll’s energy and liveliness (“Rock-N-Roll Victim”). In a May 2009 interview with Jay Hathaway of *Suicidegirls.com*, Bobby Hackney remembered “the old blues guys and rock n’ rollers” telling them when they grew up “that good rock ‘n’ roll could never die” (*Suicidegirls.com*).

Able to record their “heavy-duty rock ‘n’ roll” with the support of Don Davis, a producer of the famous Motown Stax Records among black funk and soul artists like George Clinton, the Dramatics and Gladys Knight at United Sound Recording Studios in 1975, the band eventually failed to secure a deal with the major Columbia Records supposedly due to their band name which executives thought too nihilistic and which the band refused to change (*NYTimes.com*). At the same time, their shows were often met with confused and derisive responses in their black neighborhood. As Bobby Hackney told Hathaway:

[w]e were ridiculed because at the time everybody in our community was listening to the Philadelphia sound, Earth, Wind & Fire, the Isley Brothers. […] People thought we were doing some weird stuff. We were pretty aggressive about playing rock ‘n’ roll because there were so many voices around us trying to get us to abandon it. (*Suicidegirls.com*)

These rebuffs from both the record industry and people in their community led the brothers to finally abandon Death in 1976 and to move into more conventionally ‘black’
genres with the funk-oriented band 4th Movement and, later, the reggae outfit Lambsbread, with which they have recorded eight albums since 1983. Reminded of the Death recordings by one of their sons a few years ago, Dannis and Bobby Hackney were eventually able to get them released on the small label Drag City in 2009, nine years after their brother David’s death in 2000. Meanwhile three of their sons have formed an integrated band, Rough Francis, both to pay tribute to and to further explore Death’s musical heritage (cf. NYTimes.com).

While Death were musically speaking clearly venturing on burgeoning punk paths, the Hackney brothers were probably not affiliated with a punk scene. However, Philadelphia’s all-black band Pure Hell was both musically and socially immersed in what would become historicized as punk’s place of birth. Entirely left out of punk histories, whether they focus on New York or London/England, the presence of Pure Hell has likewise gained attention only recently. Formed by four black teenagers under the name Pretty Poison in 1974, the band, as singer Kenney “Stinker” Gordon told me in an email, was influenced by “post glam, MC5, Stooges, Alice Cooper and New York Dolls.” A grandson of a Baptist minister, Gordon’s personal, musical inspirations came from “soul and spiritual music […] more so than blues” and comprised “James Brown, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, [Jimi] Hendrix, the Supremes, Chuck Berry, Syd Barrett [of Pink Floyd], Captain Beefheart and his Magik Band, Stepping Wolf [sic], Grand Funk [Railroad], the Yardbirds, Wilson Pickett.” Growing up during the Civil Rights Movement, “the merge of music, cultures, beliefs and genre's [sic]” were for Gordon “becoming a western civilization melting pot” (Appendix 81).

After renaming the band Pure Hell in 1975, the four members temporarily located to New York City where they began playing at Manhattan clubs like the gay bar Mother’s and Max’s Kansas City with bands like Wayne County and the Electric Chairs and which amounted also to a show with Sex Pistols’ Sid Vicious at Max’s in 1978. Not tied to New York only, Pure Hell played also with well-known punk bands the Nuns, the Stimulators, the Tuff Darts, the Fast, and the Dead Boys in Philadelphia as well as a show at Hollywood’s Masque with the Germs, the Cramps, the Dead Boys and the Mau Mau’s. A management contract with black musician Curtis Knight, who according to Swindle Magazine writer Yosuke Kitazawa “claimed to have discovered Jimi Hendrix”
secured the band the opportunities of two UK tours in 1978 and 1979 (the latter tour included a show with the UK Subs), which coincided with the recording of the Nancy Sinatra cover “These Boots Are Made for Walking” and the band’s original “No Rules” for a single that was released in the UK in 1979. Significantly, the single figured in charts of several music weeklies which contained also some articles on the band. Despite these evidences the existence of the band has been considerably ignored and obscured (Kitazawa Swindlemagazine.com).

Although the band made also recordings for a long-play album, it did not come into being due to a souring of Pure Hell’s relationship with Curtis Knight, who parted ways and kept the master tapes to himself for 28 years. While punk’s first wave petered out, the band broke up in 1980, re-united in Los Angeles in 1987 and collaborated with notable musicians like L.A Guns’ Mike Cripps, Nine Inch Nails’ Charley Clouser as well as Motörhead’s Lemmy Kilmister until the death of Pure Hell’s drummer Michael “Spider” Sanders in 2002. Due to the efforts of Welfare Records owner Mike Schneider, the original tapes of Noise Addiction were eventually released in 2007 (cf. Kitazawa Swindlemagazine.com).

These two excavated stories of black punk trailblazers reveal that black people have neither stopped playing rock music and were inspired by a wide range of musical styles that cross ‘racially discreet’ genres and were, in the case of Pure Hell, present and active during punk’s transatlantic prime years. Thus, musical conversations within a punk framework have not only taken place between white musicians and black musical styles, but also between black musicians and white ‘appropriations’ and ‘translations’ of black-derived idioms. Judging from the early existence of both bands, black musicians have been at the forefront of punk’s development which can also be said of the all-black Bad Brains from Washington D.C., who have both significantly furthered the development of hardcore in musical and social terms by playing ultra-fast, heavily distorted onslaughts in combination to reggae songs and by contributing to the emergence of a hardcore scene in the nation’s capital in the late 1970s and early 1980s (cf. Ensminger 256; Anderson and Jenkins 42-4).
4.2.3. British Punk Borrowings

Like its American counterpart, punk in Britain was heavily indebted to black-derived musical styles. These can be found for instance in its immediate mid-1970s predecessor pub rock\(^{16}\) which not only opposed contemporary mainstream rock’s (e.g. Genesis, Led Zeppelin, the Who) expansion to stadium-sized venues and its mutation into the music industry’s cash cow by returning to a small-sized pub circuit and releasing records on small independent labels (e.g. Chiswick and Stiff), but also reverted to 1950s and 1960s rhythm and blues as well as rock ‘n’ roll inspired songs and covers (cf. Friedlander 247). Next to bands associated with pub rock like Dr. Feelgood, Kilburn and the Highroads, the Count Bishops, Eddie and the Hot Rods, future punk bands like the UK Subs and the Clash had members who had started out in pub rock bands. Morphing from the pub-rock band the Subs, the UK Subs’ first album was called *Another Kind of Blues* (released 1979), which exhibited basic blues chord progressions on songs like “CID,” a harmonica on “I Couldn’t Be You” as well as sporadic bars with boogie-woogie-derived rolling bass lines on songs like “I Live in a Car,” “Tomorrow’s Girls,” and “Stranglehold.” In a 2002 *Left of the Dial* interview, David Ensminger adverted Subs and UK Subs singer Charlie Harper to these influences, who responded:

[i]t’s not done purposely by any means, because when Nicky [Garratt, UK Subs guitarist] came along he said, “You said you’ve got to drop all this rock ‘n’ roll shit.” But that’s part of me, you know what I mean? I can’t burn out of it. I tell you how it comes out, because Nicky will come up with a hell of a lot music for a song, then I’ll say look, this bits neat, you don’t want to just pass it, this bit could be the verse, or between the chorus, it needs to be played eight times over. That’s my kind of blues, r&b upbringing. We do everything in eight bars, twelve bars, or four bars. We repeat, we don’t just go across one bit of music. […] I do come from the 60s, twelve-bar thing, where you do something for twelve bars, or say you do a riff, then sing a line, and then play again.

(*Leftofthedialmag.com.*)

Not only do the explicit references to blues evident on the UK Subs album reveal British punk’s indebtedness to black musical styles via pub rock, Harper’s account shows also that they lingered on even when they were contested within a punk framework.

\(^{16}\) The term ‘pub’ rock refers to the more intimate locales of British public houses (pubs) in which rock musicians and some future punk rocker played shows.
On a structural level, connections to black music have been voiced in relation to British punk's notorious flagship the Sex Pistols. In 1996, Malcolm McLaren told Californian fanzine *Ben is Dead* in an interview that “I never really believed that anybody was gonna write anything better than 'Johnny B. Goode' […] [the Sex Pistols were] still in the very basic, raw, old-fashioned format, verse-chorus, middle-eight, blah blah blah, R&B, Chuck Berry chords” (qtd. in Ensminger 215). When analyzing the harmonic structure of Sex Pistols' 1976 anthems “Anarchy in the UK” and “God Save the Queen,” rock historian Paul Friedlander even suggested that “[t]he music was not simplistic three-chord or one-chord idiocy, as journalists painted it” (249). Both singles and the subsequent 1977 album *Never Mind the Bollocks: Here's the Sex Pistols* were, according to him, harmonically “more complex than most blues and classic rock” (250). In regard to the Clash’s 1979 album *London Calling*, Friedlander pointed out an eclectic set of black-derived musical influences like “swing ('Jimmy Jazz'), [Chuck] Berry-style classic rock ('Brand New Cadillac'), Bo Diddley beat ('Hateful'), reggae-influenced rock ('Guns of Brixton' and 'Revolution Rock') […]” (253).

From the American proto-punk years, via the obscured presence and activity of black punk forerunners, to punk in Britain, black musical styles and musicians have tremendously influenced punk rock by way of celebration, reworking, fusion, cross-references and collaboration. This exploration has shown that from the beginning punk rock has been a musical convergence culture that has engaged in a musical conversation across genres, races and eras which frays the (racially) discreet generic boundaries in general and punk rock as a white musical genre in particular.

4.3. The “Punky Reggae Party:” Melting the “Frozen” Dialectic

In *Subculture*, Dick Hebdige addressed the affinities between punk and reggae, the meeting of British white punks and black Rastafarian youth, but by restricting his reading to a decoding of abstract, extra-musical 'style' on the expenses of actual experience of these youths, he glossed over potential alliances that formed both in musical as well as social terms. For him the dialectic between punk and reggae was
“frozen.” In a different way but with a similar outcome, punk rock historians like Savage and Heylin acknowledged punk’s musical connection to reggae and ska and the platform punk rockers, reggae musicians and like-minded enthusiasts built to ‘rock against racism,’ yet they often offered little insight into the musical dynamics, the complex social and cultural exchanges as well as gave sparse voice to the people of color involved in the British punk scene.

Born in England to Jamaican immigrants, Don Letts is often credited for introducing punks to reggae by exposing his customers of the flamboyant second-hand shop Acme Attractions on London’s King’s Road to the dub and reggae music he played in the shop and by becoming the Disc Jockey (DJ) in London’s first punk club, the Roxy, which hosted punk concerts from about December 1976 to April 1978. At the Roxy, a former gay bar, Letts mostly played his reggae and dub discs due to a lack of records by existing bands like Generation X, Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Clash, and the Damned. (cf. Czezowski and Carrington, 3ammagazine.com). Although not necessarily sharing an enthusiasm for the punk music and initially reluctant to embrace the punk spirit, Letts, whose white girlfriend Jeanette Lee was already immersed in the stirring punk scene, increasingly realized a potential common ground:

At first I was reticent about the whole punk vibe [...] I’d got to know Paul Simonon, Mick Jones [both of the Clash], Johnny Rotten, Sid Vicious [of the Sex Pistols], so I got in at the high end and realized that there was something going on here, I couldn’t just write them off as a bunch of crazy white guys. They were turned on by the dub sounds that I was playing in the shop, so I realized we were turning each other on through our respective cultures. I was into their crazy antics and their public tactics, maybe more than the music. They were into the political content of the reggae music, the rhythms, the heavy bass, the ganja [marijuana]. In Jamaica, they placed a lot of emphasis on sloganeering, like [reggae musician and DJ] Tapper Zukie’s phrase ‘heavy-duty discipline’ that the Clash had stencilled [sic] onto their clothing. It was the language of the street – that’s all from Jamaica. We spoke in the currency that the punk rockers could relate to. (qtd. in Colgrave and Sullivan 137)

While Letts, who mixed his Rasta-style dreadlocks with punk gear like leatherjacket, bondage pants and combat boots, introduced punks to reggae, dub, and ganja either by playing his records or by taking punk mates like Rotten to black reggae clubs, he became also more directly involved with punk by managing for instance the all-girl punk-reggae band the Slits briefly in 1977 and by finding his own medium in film to
contribute and to express himself. In John Lydon’s (Johnny Rotten) autobiography, Letts contemplated on the impact of punk and Lydon on him:

[Punk] was about using what you had to get what you needed. [...] I couldn’t play anything, so I picked up a super-eight camera – inspired by John Lydon. [...] We’d go out and film these bands [at the Roxy] [...] Basically, I reinvented myself through my punk experience. Think about it. I was this guy in dark glasses managing a shop. Then punk came along and I thought, Fuck me, I’m going to have some of that! I had to feel like I was contributing. I picked up the camera, made The Punk Rock Movie, and documented all the events I thought were interesting and ridiculous. My movie was an example of the whole movement. I was inspired to do it. [...] I went on from there to make movies. But from punk, my experience came from John’s culture. At this time there wasn’t [sic] many black examples of alternative life-styles. It was magnetic; I felt an affiliation. (qtd. in Lydon 321-2)

For Letts, who has directed a variety of (punk) music-related movies since 1977, punk spoke in a currency which offered him a way to assert an alternative black lifestyle and assured him a sense of agency and autonomy which in a way supports a notion of a dynamic rather than congealed dialectic.

Significantly, the Roxy can be regarded not only as a space in which punk and reggae musically congregated and which allowed young blacks like Letts a sense of agency and autonomy, the club proves to be the fruit of an integrated effort that includes Don Letts on the turntables, his brother Des Letts, black friend and future bassist Leo “Ezkill” Williams and white Susan Carrington among the staff, as well as club founders Andy Czezowski and mixed-race, ex-art student Barry Jones, who also functioned as a booker and flyer designer. While Don Letts’ brother and black friends were initially suspicious of the punk goings-on at the club as well, they nevertheless joined in to help work at shows. For Barry Jones, who also played guitar in the punk outfit London Cowboys, which featured New York Dolls/Heartbreakers drummer Jerry Nolan, the Roxy was apparently the first place where he met other black people, as he remembered in the 2007 Roxy history The Roxy London Wc2:

[i]t was weird. Being black I never knew any black people because a white foster mom raised me. The only black people I knew were my family siblings who were also half and half. I didn’t know any Jamaicans. The first I came into contact with was Don and Leo. Des, Don’s brother, was actually half Pakistani which was great because these guys where also mixed blood like me. [...] They were intrigued with me because I was a black brother and I had very little black knowledge.
They would crack up about my ignorance and the fact that I had never smoked chronic [a type of marijuana] [...] they laughed at how it affected me. (qtd. in Marko 56-7)

Even if black knowledge in this case meant also the smoking of marijuana, the Roxy was not only the product of an integrated effort, but meant a musically and socially hybrid space in which cultural exchange took place both between black and white youth, as well as black and ‘mixed-race’ black youth who were not socialized in a British black environment and not fully aware of the recreational activities of the Rastafarian subculture.

For young black Dennis Morris, the kind of punk-reggae convergence that took place under the roof of the Roxy likewise seemed to resonate with a pursuit of an alternative black lifestyle and a desire for agency and autonomy. Being a reggae and ska fan before going to the Roxy, Morris was attracted to the club because the kind of musical exchange gave the club a vibe of its own:

> It was like a house party in a club. I was one of only three or four black kids down at the Roxy. I loved music. I loved reggae and ska. But I wanted something outside Hackney [an East London borough with a strong West-Indian community]. I never actually fitted into the stereotype that was expected of black people. (qtd. in Colgrave and Sullivan 199)

Although he did not elaborate on the stereotype of black people into which he never fit, his online biographical outline indicated that, as a youngster, he differed from his peers at least in terms of his preference for photography over football (soccer) which brought him the name “Mad Dennis” (“Introduction,” Dennismorris.com). In 2009, Morris told American reggae and ska bassist Marco that growing up in a 1970s London with bleak job opportunities and a lack of money was inspirational in a sense that it meant creating “our own identity (ie [sic]: clothes, find ways to make money...), we had to be inventive; opportunities were never given, we had to take them” (Morris, Marco On the Bass Blog). For Morris, an opportunity opened up through his photography, most notably through his images of Jamaican reggae icon Bob Marley, which were published in Time Out and Melody Maker even before Morris was 17 years old. These impressed avid reggae fan John Lydon, who asked Morris to become the Sex Pistols’ photographer. Not only are some of Marley’s most famous photos shot by Morris, many pictures taken by

So, whereas the motion picture became for Letts a kind of witnessing and capturing of and even speaking to a culture that seemingly attracted and welcomed him, the photographic picture became also for Morris a kind of witnessing and chronicling of something vigorous and significant that expressed the sentiments of young (white and non-white) people. In a 1998 BBC News feature on a then current exhibition of his Sex Pistols photos, Morris was quoted of saying “[t]hey were powerful and they were perfect for a generation, they captured the whole spirit of what everyone was thinking at the time and I felt it was important to document this” (“Shooting the Sex Pistols,” BBC News Online).

This kind of fluid negotiation between punk and reggae, between some British black and white youth that is exemplified here by the hybrid space of the Roxy, Don Letts and Dennis Morris can be furthermore extended to the white, all-girl punk-reggae band the Slits with whom both Letts and Morris were connected as well. While Letts and Morris were perhaps among only a handful of black kids at the house party-like Roxy club, punk rockers were often the only white people at black reggae, so-called blues parties which took place at people’s houses rather than at clubs. In the interview collection Totally Wired: Post-Punk Interviews and Overviews published in 2009, Ari Up (nee Arianna Forster), lead-singer for the Slits told music journalist Simon Reynolds about her experience as the often only white punk girl at these parties which in accordance with Rastafarian culture were a sexually conservative environment:

[i]n 1976, 1977, 1978, there were zero white people [at these parties]. [...] I was the only white girl. And definitely the only one with dreads [dreadlocks, which are part of the Rastafarian culture]. It was very strict Rasta then, and I got a lot of hostile attitude from guys for not being covered. I went there in my miniskirt. They had to deal with me. ‘Rasta or not, I don’t give a shit who you think I am.’ They weren’t into punk. [...] They hated punk because they thought it was devil worship! The make-up, the dyed hair, the miniskirts. That’s where I developed my attitude that I had later in Jamaica: they had to deal with me, they had to accept me. You know why I got away with it mostly? Because I was dancing the hell out of their blues parties! Back then it was more like African dancing, not dancehall stuff with hip movements and sexy movements. Back then the style was ‘steppers’ – leg movement. [...] Everywhere we went in the whole of London there were only three or four top steppers, and I was one of them, stepping in the circle. [...] That helped me survive as a
white girl with her locks out and her mini. Nobody could tell me shit because I was such a good dancer. (6-7)

Ari Up’s account is crucial on various levels. On one level, it reveals that according to her experience, punk was actually rejected to a great extent among black youth who revered reggae and identified with Rastafarian culture because of female punks’ transgression of sexual mores on the level of dress (‘make-up, dyed hair, and mini skirts’). On a stylistic level, she may represent another kind of punk-reggae fusion by combining dreadlocks and a mini skirt, thus extending the convergence from a racial to a gender level as well. However, her account also shows that punk likewise provided her with a sense of agency and autonomy in this sexually restrictive party realm to challenge and counter the hostile responses, to follow her passion for reggae and dancing which enabled her to eventually “step” her ground and to become accepted at these blues parties and among black youth antagonistic to punk.

Although the Slits were among the first British punk bands (formed in 1976), it was their early chaotic, barely musical live sets, their unpredictable explosiveness on and off stage, and their challenging of prescribed roles of femininity both in terms of dress and within music-making which despite resonating well with their peers and some sympathetic journalists prevented them from securing a record deal (cf. Pollitt, 3am magazine.com). In this regard, Ari Up told Reynolds,

[…] I’m talking about people in the music scene and the press who were outsiders. There was a male chauvinist element that said we looked terrible, we couldn’t be managed, we couldn’t be a commercial act. As soon as we had the name Slits, that took away a chance of radio play. I did Slits because of cutting up with the knife, but then we said, ‘Oh yeah, it’s got a double meaning too.’ (8)

In contrast to their male counterparts (with names like the Vibrators, Sex Pistols), the double-meaning of their band name, the nonconformity to marketable beauty standards, and their unwillingness to compromise these constraints foreclosed them opportunities at the hands of a male-dominated music industry.

While support and encouragement existed in the punk scene – the Clash, for instance, invited them and their then manager Letts to join them on their 1977 UK tour – it was not until 1978 that their first album Cut was released. Instrumental in arranging this record deal was Dennis Morris, who had been asked to work as Art Director for the
British independent label Island Records (on which Bob Marley’s records were also released). Morris told Marco that he would only accept the position if he was to sign and art-direct the Slits and black poet Linton Kwesi Johnson (LKJ). When asked by Marco what they had in common in his eyes, Morris responded “LKJ for me was the voice of the Youths of Black Britain. His poetry fused with Dennis Bowell’s [sic] Reggae beats captures the feelings of Black Britain of the time. The Slits were off the wall. I felt they would inspire other female artists to take up arms (ie [sic] instruments)” (Morris, Marco On the Bass Blog). It is noteworthy in my eyes that it was due to the insistence of a young black man that both a British Black Panther poet and a transgressive white all-girl band gained the opportunity to document and publish their work, to reach out both to young black Britons and women.

While these examples demonstrate a dynamic exchange, a negotiation and cross-cultural collaboration between some black and white youth more on the level of music-related cultural practices and activities (club operation, DJ-ing, film, photography, dress, dancing, management, and a record label deal), a fluid dialectic can of course be found on a musical level as well. When asked by Reynolds whether there really was an affinity, a kinship between Rastafarians and punks, Ari Up responded that the “musicians in reggae did see it […]” (6). This was for instance evident in reggae/dub artist Dennis Bovell’s musical production of the Slits record (cf. Reynolds 8), but it was pointedly captured in a song by Bob Marley. Although the Jamaican reggae legend was initially suspicious of if not outright scorning punk, he soon changed his mind, as Don Letts reminisced in Punk: A Life Apart:

I’d go round his place [during Marley’s longer London visit] and he used to take the piss out of my [bondage] trousers. He said I looked like a fucking mountaineer. I said, ‘This is the new look. This is punk rock.’ And he replied, What, them nasty people I’ve read about in the Daily Mirror? No, Bob,’ I said, ‘that’s the tabloid version of them. They’ve got something going on here. They’re not crazy bald heads. They’re my mates.’ ‘Get the fuck out of here,’ was his reply. ‘You’ll see,’ I said. Two months later Bob released ‘Punky Reggae Party.’ Of course, by then he’d been in London a while and got to know the vibe. He’d been speaking to various journalists and other people and realized there was something in this punk rock after all. (qtd. in Colgrave and Sullivan 199)

While reggae resonated with punks, it is in a song by a reggae icon that the “vibe” between punk and reggae is expressed, both in its title and on a lyrical level through
name-dropping punk bands, “the Damned, the Jam, the Clash,” as well as through an allusion to a similar situation the subcultures of Rastafarians and punks share: “rejected by society/ treated with impunity/ protected by their dignity” (Marley).

The currency in which Jamaican reggae and Rastafarian culture spoke, the music that carried messages of Jamaica’s social inequalities, calls of the disenfranchised to fight against an oppressive and decadent Western Civilization symbolized in “Babylon” resonated both with colored and white youth’s rising disenchantment and anger in a 1970s Britain of political, economic, social, if not musical bleakness. Despite their shared stance of disillusionment, it seems that the affinities between punks and Rastafarians did not transcend the level of mutual acknowledgement and collaboration on a production/recording level, i.e. punk-reggae musical fusions went in an overwhelmingly one-way direction with punk bands incorporating reggae elements rather than reggae musicians experimenting with sped-up rock elements. This pattern became more material when early punk bands began covering reggae songs or experimenting with reggae rhythms and phrases. Among the bands that ventured on these paths rank, e.g., the Slits, the Clash, the Members, Gang of Four, Stiff Little Fingers, the Police, the Newtown Neurotics, Public Image Limited (PIL, John Lydon’s post-Sex Pistols project), and the Ruts, who accentuated, for instance, punk-reggae hybrids both in song titles like “Babylon is Burning” and musically in songs like “Jah War” on their 1979 album The Crack (cf. Ensminger 209, 230).

However, it was Don Letts, who formed the predominantly black punk-dub-reggae band Basement 5 featuring Dennis Morris as singer, Leo “Ezkill” Williams on bass, J.R. on guitar and T. on drums (later briefly PIL drummer Richard Dudanski) in 1978. In the three years of the band’s existence, they played, e.g., with PIL and recorded one album 1965-1980 on Island Records in 1980, which contained slower dub songs but also faster punk-style numbers like “Riot” exhibiting a prominent ‘heavy’ bass, a straightforward rock rhythm, an amplified guitar sound, and angrily shouted vocals. Basement 5 was probably an exceptional attempt of black musicians at merging punk rock and reggae. It appeared that, on a music-structural level, punk rock’s distorted guitars, sped-up tempo, its typical accentuation on the first and third beats of the 4/4 rhythm seemed incongruous with reggae’s non-distorted sounds, slower and contemplative rhythm with
its characteristic accentuation on the second and fourth beats. While this might support Hebdige’s notion of the incompatibility of the (musical) languages of punk and reggae, black and white musicians found nevertheless a way to combine these seemingly disparate sign systems by updating reggae’s immediate and faster predecessor ska which mouthed in a late 1970s ska-revival, the so-called “2-Tone” movement in which black and white musicians formed bands producing an integrated, ‘punked-up’ ska soundtrack to the predominantly one-way musical punky-reggae party.

Crystallizing in the late 1970s, the 2-Tone movement included bands like the Specials, the Beat (known in the U.S. as the English Beat), Madness, Selecter (featuring female singer Pauline Black), and Bad Manners. Jerry Dammers, keyboardist for Coventry-based Specials and founder of 2 Tone Records (1979), explained the impetus behind the band’s musical fusion in a 1979 interview with *NME*:

> [w]hen we started off, we were trying to mix modern heavy reggae with punk rock, but the two styles were so different that they didn’t mix […] So we have gone back to ska because it’s much closer to R&B. [...] What we’re trying to do is form a new British beat music from the influences of British rock and Jamaican music. [...] In a way, it’s still part of punk. We’re not trying to get away from punk. We’re just trying to show some other direction. [Sometimes] you’ve got to go back to go forward. (qtd. in Heylin, *Babylon’s Burning* 513)

Dammers’ statement illustrates not only an establishing of a dialogue between these two seemingly disparate musical languages of reggae and punk rock by moving back to an early point of a hybrid conversation (between R&B and ska), but also that this 2-Tone musical talk points into a new direction of black and white alliances both in musical and social terms.

For black Ranking Roger, singer for the Birmingham band the Beat, this musical fusion seemed to carry a similar tone. Growing up with reggae, punk rock did not make sense to him at first. But it was the incorporation of reggae songs into a punk format by bands like the Clash as well as the same messages punk and reggae carried that he “got hooked” to punk. In the Beat, he was eventually able to combine both the messages and the musics, which became “the punky reggae thing which was my dream” (qtd. in Robb 457)

From the hybrid space of the Roxy, the pivotal roles and eclectic activities of Don Letts and Dennis Morris to the musical and music-related exchanges between and
fusions of between reggae, ska and punk, these examples demonstrate that there was a fluid rather than “frozen” dialectic, sometimes referred to as an ‘exchange’ or a ‘vibe,’ that existed between black and white youth and, despite suspicions and tensions, turned into a ‘punky reggae party.’

4.4. Exploring Punk and Hardcore’s Latina/o Underbelly: L.A. Punk Menudo

Although a Michigan-based Mexican-American band, Question Mark and the Mysterians, might have been among the first bands to be called ‘punk’ or considered among the 1960s proto-punk, garage bands by early ‘punk’ rock pundits like Dave Marsh and Greg Shaw (cf. chapter 3.2.), the presence and legacy of Latina/os in early punk rock and hardcore has been considerably elided or left unaddressed by Anglo-American punk historians, journalists, academics, filmmakers, and punks themselves. Despite the existence of historical documents like Belsito’s and Davis’s independently published *Hardcore California* and the 20 years of scholarly work on (East Los Angeles) Chicana/o punk by, e.g., Loza, Lipsitz, Reyes and Waldman, and recently Habell-Pallán and Ensminger, Latina/os have been pushed to the margins or out of punk history and lore. Yet, as I have demonstrated above in regard to punk in Britain, American punk and hardcore likewise prove to be realms of musical and social convergence that are rife with an enormous Latina/o presence to be found, for instance, in bands like the Zeros, the Bags, the Brat, the Odd Squad, the Go-Go’s, the Nuns, the Adolescents, the Huns, Black Flag, Agent Orange, the Plugz, Los Illegals, Los Lobos, the Plimsouls, the Stains, Agnostic Front, and Suicidal Tendencies (cf. Ensminger 147, 274).

Partly drawing on the scholars mentioned above in her 2005 book *Loca Motion: The Travels of Chicana and Latina Popular Culture*, Michelle Habell-Pallán located the

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17 Menudo is a Mexican soup, and Los Illegals’ bassist Jesus Velo used ‘menudo’ as a metaphor to describe Los Angeles as a melting pot in which the various influences of black, white and Chicano people living next to each other merged and shaped the music of Los Illegals: “[…] the music bouncing off the walls – everything from Marvin Gaye to Los Camperos, and everything […] forced it to be what it is. […] L.A. is nothing but, it’s like a big bowl of menudo with everything else in it. So we have no choice but to just absorb each other’s rhythms and patterns […]” (qtd. in Loza 224, emphasis in the original).
reasons for rebellious East Los Angeles Chicana/o youths attraction to punk in the late 1970s and early 1980s:

1. First, the D.I.Y. (Do-It-Yourself) sensibility at the core of punk musical subcultures found resonance with the practice of rasquache, a Chicana/o cultural practice of ‘making do’ with limited resources; in fact, Chicana/o youth had historically been at the forefront of formulating stylized statements via the fashion and youth subculture, beginning with the Pachucos and continuing with Chicana mods in the 1960s. Second, punk’s critique of the status quo, of poverty, of sexuality, of class inequality, of war, spoke directly to working-class East Los Angeles youth. (150)

Although Habell-Pallán (as well as the scholars mentioned above) focused on the punk musical practices and experience of Chicana/o youth in East Los Angeles’ ‘barrio,’ the attraction of punk can well be extended to Latina/os in other parts of California and the country since, e.g., the Zeros, before moving to Los Angeles, were founded in San Diego in 1976, and members of other punk bands came also from areas in greater Los Angeles and bordering counties like late-1970s, hardcore-inclined Black Flag (Hermosa Beach) and the Adolescents (Fullerton).

Within the history of southern Californian Chicano rock ‘n’ roll, Reyes and Waldman situated East L.A. punk bands like Los Illegals, the Plugz, the Brat and the Odd Squad as an unprecedented mix of the raw and energetic 1960s/early 1970s Chicano rock ‘n’ roll bands like the Premiers, Thee Midnighters, and Cannibal and the Headhunters with social commentary of politically-minded bands like Tierra and El Chicano, which were influenced by the Chicano movement. In contrast to earlier and contemporary barrio bands, the East L.A. punk bands were, according to Reyes and Waldman, moreover profoundly immersed in the wider Hollywood rock scene (135–6). As George Lipsitz stated “Chicano punk rock emerged from the *mestizaje* consciousness in its community of origin” (*Dangerous Crossroads* 86, emphasis in the original) which not only involves a mix of musical genealogies that influenced the bands but also points to various kinds of experience and impetus that shaped the work of Chicana/o punks which I will address subsequently in regard to selected examples.

For singer and keyboardist Willie Herron, Los Illegals became a vehicle to extend his work as renowned East L.A. muralist and part of the Chicano performance art group ASCO within a punk rock musical framework. Central to Los Illegals was combining (musical) cultures ranging from influences like James Brown to the British Invasion,
ideas and ways that seemed alien to each other which is vividly captured in bassist Jesus Velo’s description of Los Illegals upon listening to them for the first time: “[…] it was something totally new to me, it was like, [the Puerto Rican salsa musician] Tito Puente takes LSD and hangs out with the Clash […]” (qtd. in Loza 221). The combination of cultures within a provocative punk framework is also reflected in the bilingual name of the band and in bilingual songs like “El Lay,” which describes the situation of illegal alien’s journey to, work in, and deportation from Los Angeles (cf. Loza 230). Los Illegals, as Lipsitz observed, drew both parallels between racism towards and “historical oppression of Mexican Americans and the expression of alienation by punk rockers” in “El Lay” and songs like “We Don’t Need a Tan (We’re Already Copper)” and “The Mall” declaring “I hate the mall, I hate the(m)all” (Dangerous Crossroads 86-7).

Due to an absence of punk venues and a scene in East L.A. prior to 1980, punk bands like Los Illegals, the Plugz, and the Zeros played more outside of the barrio, touring in and out of Hollywood’s club circuit including the Roxy, the Starwood, the Whiskey, Elks Lodge, Madame Wong’s and L.A.’s first punk refuge the Masque. Booked to support PIL on their 1980 concert at the Los Angeles Olympic Auditorium, the Plugz, who were a fixture in L.A.’s punk rock scene and among the first bands to release their debut album Electrify Me on their own independent label Fatima Records in 1979, advocated the promoters to include another Chicano band from East L.A., Los Lobos, on the bill. Formed in 1973, Los Lobos confused both the parent and grandparent generations as well as their young peers by playing Mexican and Latin American folk songs including norteño, corrido, and conjunto tejano styles in jeans and flannel shirts, as Louis Perez, drummer and guitarist for Los Lobos wrote in his essay “Weird Hair Pendejolandia” published in Don Snowden’s 1997 anthology on L.A.’s punk scene Make the Music Go Bang (111). It was the Plugz frontman Tito Larriva, who, as Perez guessed, “must have convinced somebody that a bunch of unsuspecting Mexican folkies might be a laugh playing to a hall [the Olympic Auditorium] full of purple mohawks” (112).

Although greeted by the punk rockers with repulsion and waves of spit and waste, the show at the Auditorium left Los Lobos with a feeling of a beginning of a

18 Tito Larriva later formed the rock outfits Los Cruzados and Tito and Tarantula, who were featured e.g. in and on the soundtrack of Robert Rodriguez and Quentin Tarantino’s 1996 movie From Dusk Till Down.
transformational period, or in the words of Ensminger, “a kind of rites of passage that marked them as new participants in an edgy era that seemed to bridge two worlds, even as each side exhibited ethnocentric tendencies” (149). According to Perez,

[…] to some Chicanos we were doing it all wrong, we as Mexican-Americans had our own rebellion, our own concerns about equality and racial attitudes, but as musicians we had discovered a way to bring down walls and erase those imaginary boundaries that divide. [Eventually it] was in this music scene that we found acceptance for what we were – musicians, pure and simple. […] there was a camaraderie and sharing of experience that I have yet to feel again… for a brief period of time, we stood shoulder to shoulder forming a bridge between East and West [L.A.]. (113)

In 2006, Robert Lopez, also known as El Vez (the Mexican Elvis performer) and as a member of the Zeros and Catholic Discipline, offered Ensminger a similar view of an L.A. scene without borders in a Left of the Dial interview:

[t]hat was the nice thing about being in that period, because it didn’t break down into girl bands, guy bands, and Chicano bands. We’ve felt a part of the scene, the music scene, punk rock in whatever forms it was, like Deadbeats, or weird things, or non-guitar bands like the Screamers. You just felt part of a movement of the scene, rather than saying we’re Chicanos and we feel this way, or those are girls, and they feel this way. You felt like part of, yeah, this is all music that we like, this is all music that is different than what we hear on the radio or see on TV. So it wasn’t broken down into. Well, being Chicano wasn’t even a focal point or focus of the band, it was like, we’re another band. I think people may be pointed at the fact that we were younger than anyone else. It was a kind of nice thing, because it didn’t matter that we were Latinos, it was just that we were a band. It gave us a whole part of the scene, rather than having to feel we’re ‘this.’ (Leftofthedialmag.com)

In her online blog Diary of a Bad Housewife, East L.A. Chicana and singer for the L.A. band the Bags19 Alice Bag (Alicia Armendariz) echoed Lopez’ account by stating in 2005 that “the early punk scene (1977-1979) was a somewhat unique time in that race and gender roles were pretty much discarded. […] There was no one to say, ‘you can’t do this or that because you’re a) a woman b) a chicana [sic]’” (Diary of a Bad Housewife Blog). These accounts indicate that despite some ambiguous and initially hostile reactions that Los Lobos encountered, the late 1970s/early 1980s L.A punk scene meant a space not only for a musically eclectic blend but also a realm in which barriers and

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19 The Bags existed from 1977 to 1981.
roles – Latino and Anglo, female and male – were transgressed and obliterated, opening up new avenues and identities outside of narrow and established boundaries (cf. Ensminger 149).

While punk for bands like Los Illegals and Los Lobos fused or resonated with Chicano sensibilities, it provided a space and outlet for Chicanas like Alice Bag to escape from the past and a community she found, in the words of Habell-Pallán, “too judgmental in terms of ethnicity and sexuality” (157). In her blog, Bag described the early scene gathering at the Masque and at the nearby, run-down Canterbury Apartments, in which many punk scenesters lived and congregated, as a group of “accepting, like-minded peers” who were “unified by our sense of being ‘the other’ or ‘the outsider’ [...]” and “bonded over that shared experience […]” (Diary of a Bad Housewife Blog). Like many of her punk peers, adopting a punk name (Alice Bag) became both a means of creating a new identity and, as Bag wrote, a way that “leveled the playing field because nobody knew your ethnicity just from your name” (Diary of a Bad Housewife Blog). For Armendariz as well as many other punks like Poly Styrene and Pat Smear, punk names like identity itself are an act of performance, or in the words of Ensminger, “a guise that allows a sense of sovereignty to each ‘new person’” (242). Moreover, these punk names which evened the “ethnic playing field” may be one reason why, in some cases, punk’s multicultural ‘face’ was not visible.20

As a singer for the mixed-gender and mixed-ethnic band Bags alongside bassist Pat Bag (Patricia Rainone), Alice was soon regarded as a trailblazing part of a new group of women rockers (next to, e.g., Exene Cervenka of X, Dianne Chai of the Alleycats, Penelope Houston of the Avengers) who smashed dominant assumptions about women in music (embodied for instance by contemporary Linda Ronstadt) through her often aggressive singing style and “shock-level” explosive performances which sometimes resulted in outbreaks of a general mayhem at clubs and their subsequent closing to punk shows (Habell-Pallán 158; Belsito and Davis 31).

20 For instance, Pat Smear (nee George Ruthenberg is of German/African and Native American descent, Kickboy Face (nee Claude Bessy) was a French expatriate, and British Poly Styrene (nee Marion Elliot is of English/ Somali descent.
Part of the driving force behind Bag’s onstage outbursts was the violence that had surrounded her when growing up in East L.A., at school and at home which she explained in the article “Violence Girl” published on her website:

> when I finally found an outlet as lead singer of The Bags, all the violence that I’d stuffed down inside of me for years came screaming out. I would literally black out while onstage with The Bags; it was like "normal Alice" checked out and "violent Alice" checked in. All the anger I felt towards people who had treated me like an idiot as a young girl because I was the daughter of Mexican parents and spoke broken English, all the times I’d been picked on by peers because I was overweight and wore glasses, all the impotent rage that I had towards my father for beating my mother just exploded, and that’s what people saw onstage. ([Alicebag.com](http://www.alicebag.com))

This multi-layered experience that resulted in what Ensminger described as a “multiplying, disheartening Otherness – the sense of gender exclusion and disparity; the sense of domestic violence and family breakdown; the anguish of an imperfect body in a country manifesting plastic perfection; and the immigrant dream meeting prejudice heads-on” collided in Alicia Armendariz and was channeled and articulated through Alice Bag’s performance which she herself described in her blog in 2007 as “chaotic, aggressive, and therapeutic” in addition to “proto-hardcore” ([Diary of a Bad Housewife Blog](http://www.diaryofabadhousewifeblog.com)). In fact, her performance style together with the Bags’s music has been considered as pioneering the high-speed, no-frills, and in-your-face West-Coast hardcore style that later would be inhabited by ‘white’ males (cf. Ensminger 153; Habell-Pallán 157).

Although the impressions and experience of both Robert Lopez and Alice Bag draw a picture of L.A.’s punk scene as inclusive and welcoming in which matters of race, ethnicity and gender did not seem to play a big role or were not an issue, it was also a place in which racism and racial prejudices hovered. The wearing of swastikas, which was also fashionable in New York and London, was countered and discouraged, e.g., by Phranc, who penned the song “Take Off Your Swastikas” and began calling herself “the All-American Jewish Lesbian Folksinger” in 1979 (Mullen and Spitz 171). A further example was a racist woman who became the protagonist in X’s 1981 song “Los Angeles,” which Alice Bag remembered and restated in her 2005 blog:

> another infamous racist was Farrah Faucet Minor, the subject of X’s “Los Angeles”, who “had to leave” because she “had started to hate every nigger and Jew, every Mexican who gave her lotta shit
...” My guess is that she had always hated us and I’d like to think that maybe I was the Mexican who gave her a lot of shit. *(Diary of a Bad Housewife Blog)*

Sometimes, punk lyrics also projected flattened, pejorative and racist stereotypes like those of the 1979 song “I’m a Chollo” by the ‘comic punk band’ the Dickies, who were the first band that was signed to a major label, A&M Records, the same year and would become label mates with Los Illegals in 1980:

I’m a chollo what can I do  
I threw my life away now I’m a chollo…

I used to be a surferman  
Bought me an impala and I sold my van  
Got a pair of khakis and a penectan  
Now I’m a full-fledged Mexican

Well I’m a chollo man  
not a bit of Puerto Rican  
I’m a chollo man

I changed my name to Paco  
Went to the store and got a taco  
It made me feel real macho  
Now all my friends are gavacho.  
*(Dickies, Dawning of the Dickies)*

Despite these racist and derogatory elements, the accounts of Robert Lopez and Alice Bag suggest that they felt welcomed and part of the early L.A. punk scene which might stem from a less explicit emphasis on Chicana/o sensibilities as a driving force in the work of their bands and as a key focal point that navigated their participation and immersion in the early L.A. punk scene.

Although Alice Bag grew up in East L.A., she has not considered herself and the Bags a part of the East L.A. punk scene *(cf. Diary of a Bad Housewife Blog)*, which had gathered momentum with the blossoming of bands like Los Illegals, the Brat, Thee Undertakers, and the Odd Squad when Hollywood’s early punk scene was on the verge of dispersion and relocation around 1980. In the 1983 history *Hardcore California*, Craig Lee, writer as well as member of the Bags and Catholic Discipline wrote, “[t]he Vex, a new club in East L.A., opened and fast became, along with the Starwood, the cat’s meow
in punkarama. At the club, a strange and untimely Chicano punk scene formed, combining hardcore beach punk (Undertakers, Stains) and plop pop (Los Illegals, the Brat)” (50). Despite Lee’s lines in this early and important historical document, which moreover have a slightly ambivalent tone, East L.A.’s chapter in the city’s punk history in line with its general Latina/o underbelly remained hidden, neglected, and has only recently been brought into a public discourse that not only exposed ambivalent sentiments but also new vision of Los Angeles.

Ignored in Penelope Spheeris’ 1981 documentary of the L.A punk scene *The Decline of Western Civilization* and handled in three pages in Spitz and Mullen’s *We Got the Neutron Bomb*, the historical gap was more thoroughly filled by Josh Kun in his *Los Angeles Magazine* article on the Vex and its significance for the (East) L.A. punk scene in 2003:

> From March to November 1980, the Vex was an oasis for Eastside punk bands who were tired of hustling for gigs on the Westside. The punk scene was no different than L.A. itself. The L.A. River was a line. Cross it, and the rules changed. On the Eastside, the Chicanos were their own mayors. But travel over the 6th Street Bridge to the Westside, and you were always reminded just whose city this really was. (64)

Opened by beer distributor Joe Suquette (also known as Joe Vex) with the help of Los Illegals’ Willy Herron and the Catholic nun Sister Karen, who ran the community arts organization Self Help Graphics in the same building, the Vex was intended to offer those East L.A. punks a venue who felt that there were still borders of prejudice and exclusion, or in the words of Ensminger, a “racial ‘us versus them’ tension that pervaded Los Angeles even as cross-cultural punk music was surging across disparate neighborhoods” (154).

In contrast to Alice Bag, East L.A. Chicana Teresa Covarrubias, singer and songwriter for the Brat often felt as “an outsider” on the Westside, where a hint of racism was present though it “wasn’t always overt” (qtd. in Kun 66). Some East L.A. bands experienced rejection by (Westside) concert promoters for neither fitting into the stereotypical musical image expected of ‘barrio’ bands (e.g. playing rancheras) nor into a straight punk format which even left them few opportunities inside the barrio beyond backyard parties and disco dances. As Herron told Kun, “I always felt that our scene was
invisible and unrecognized. [...] We had to remain in the shadows. We couldn’t be ourselves and represent the East L.A. we knew. We couldn’t be white punkers, and we didn’t want to be white punkers. We were trying to come up with our sound” (64). This sense of exclusion and ‘in-betweenness’ mingled also with prejudices and fears of gang violence and murder that prevented punks to venture inside the barrio and resulted in the idea of opening the Vex in 1980.

According to Kun, the driving impetus behind Sister Karen’s, Suquette’s and Herron’s idea of the Vex was to “[g]ive East L.A. bands a chance to play somewhere on their home turf and prove to Westside bands that the myth wasn’t true. They could come east to play, have a great night, and not get killed” (68). From March to November 1980, the Vex consistently hosted a myriad of shows including East L.A. bands and (West) L.A. bands like X, the Gears, the Minutemen, Social Distortion, and the Adolescents which created a “‘Vex Spirit,’ the commitment to having crowds of mixed races from all sides of the city and mixed bands […] come together[…]” building an East L.A. scene that was, according to Kun, “West Coast punk’s first multicultural utopia” (68, 66). It was in this period at the Vex where ‘rasquache’ and punk musically, socially, and locally clashed to establish a hybrid free-zone in the barrio where “the city left its borders at the door” and where, upon attending, “[…] you weren’t just pledging allegiance to a new vision of punk, you were pledging allegiance to a new vision of L.A.” (Kun 68).

However, this promising era was short-lived and ended when the club was thrashed by an aggressive audience at a Black Flag show in November, one month after the Vex made it into the calendar section of the Los Angeles Times (cf. Kun 62). At the same time, the punk scene had begun to change as well including musical and local transitions.21 In addition to some bands like the Dickies and X, which were able to secure major label record deals and receive critical acclaim, Los Illegals were likewise able to produce and release their debut album Internal Exile on A&M in 1983. Even if the East L.A bands had made names in L.A.’s rock scene until the mid-1980s, their attempts to reach a wider audience held off because record companies did not know

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21 These stylistic changes ranged in very broad terms from forays into the darker, gothic/horror area (e.g. Christian Death), a roughening, sped-up and (musically) aggressive hardcore (e.g. Black Flag, TSOL, Circle Jerks that are associated with the growing scenes in the city’s suburban beach areas), rockabilly and country blues (e.g. the Blasters, Levi and the Rockats, Rank and File, Gun Club), to new wave-pop flirtations (e.g. the Go-Go’s).
how to market them. On the one hand, bands like the Brat, who penned e.g. the punkish rock song “The Wolf,” which decried U.S. oppression under the banner of democracy both in and outside its borders did not want to “Anglocize” their image to be marketed as a new wave band at the same time as they did not want to be reduced to fit a more conventional “Latino” rock format (Loza 190-1). In a different way, A&M believed that Los Illegals would be able to reach a wider Chicana/o audience, which they eventually failed to attract because, as A&M executive Bob Garcia said, “they were too rough and they were too political” (qtd. in Reyes and Waldman). Los Illegals were not able to release a second album, whereas bands like the Brat left only an EP (Extended Play) record, *Attitudes*, released on Tito Larriva’s Fatima Records in 1980 (cf. Reyes and Waldman 140).

Largely overlooked and unnoticed in historical and analytical accounts of punk, Latina/os have tremendously shaped punk cultural production in terms of music, art and the creation of prolific spaces of cross-cultural congregation. Not limited to L.A. or California, these dynamics can be found in other parts of the country as well. During the prime punk and hardcore eras, Texas, for instance, had, according to Ensminger a “near-perfect trio of Hispanic-operated punk clubs, including Raul’s in Austin, Tacoland in San Antonio, and The Island in Houston, followed later by the Axiom, one of Houston’s premier alternative rock venues” (156). Texas punk and hardcore has been shaped by Latina/os in bands like the Derailers, the Mydolls, Doomsday Massacre, the Guilloteens, Something Fierce, Vatos Locos, Magnetic 4, Flaming Hellcats, Los Skarneles, and Riverfenix/Fenix TX which produced hybrid mix of punk rock, garage rock, ska, and hardcore. Next to music and concert spaces, Latina/os have left ineffaceable traces in American punk’s aesthetic history of concert flyers and posters including the output of Texans J.R. Delgado (who co-founded the Derailers and the Houston club Axiom), Ric Cruz, Dana Somoza, and Charlie Esparza, Mike Trujillo from Colorado, Californians Jaime Hernandez, who later created the renowned comic *Love and Rockets*, and Victor Gastelum, who drew many flyers for Sluglord productions and later collaborated with Greg Ginn (Black Flag guitarist) at SST Records. Not only shaping a visual punk aesthetic, these flyers and posters promoted shows and helped attracting people to come to concerts. Thus, from bands, concert spaces to promotional
poster and flyer art, punk and hardcore history has been rife with an influential presence of Latina/os who have pro-actively contributed to a rich and diverse punk cultural production which, in the words of Ensminger, allows for an imagination of “punk and hardcore [as] a space for bands like the Plugz, the Bags, and others to reassert the flux and freedom of Hispanic identities in American music and culture” (174).
5 Conclusion

The image of punk rock as one of the whitest popular music genres and youth cultures has been shaped by racially distinct genre boundaries established and policed by media industries which have informed the perception of an inherently hybrid, heavily-black influenced American popular music in black and white terms. This racially polarized conception has been perpetuated and normalized in popular music literature which associates rock music with white people and discusses rhythm and blues, soul, and hip hop as black music. This bifurcation has resulted in the relative invisibility of Latina/o engagement in American popular music and thus in the obscuration of a rich and fecund music culture that has constantly and continuously crossed the boundaries of genres, races, genders and eras.

Embedded in the white pole of popular music, punk rock has been discursively constructed in the music press as a white, predominantly male music genre and culture and subsequently historicized and analyzed as such both in popular (journalistic) and academic publications which have failed to interrogate and highlight such constructions. At the same time, they have elided evidence of and thus ignored the presence of people of color, especially black people as well as Latina/os in punk rock culture. Because punk historians have not offered enough true voice and coverage of the diverse voices and groupings, historical discourse on punk has been fragmentary, uneven, and biased towards Anglo-American and English male participation thus contributing to a limited conception of punk. As a result, the presence of others - women, people of color, and queers - resides in the margins even within a discourse that has described punk as the realm of the alienated, disaffected and disenfranchised. Yet, people of color – in my limited case, black Americans and Britons and Latina/os – deserve visibility and inclusion in punk’s transatlantic history, because they have pro-actively shaped punk music culture whether in bands, concert spaces or by creating visual testimony and images of punk through film, photography, flyer and poster art.

This paper has shown the degree to which hegemonic ideas of white supremacy and heterosexual patriarchy have been perpetuated by culture industries and that these ideas have also permeated a punk culture driven by opposition to the status quo and by a
desire to offer up an alternative to hegemony. My examination of the various areas in which the punk discourse has taken place – the music press and the academy – has also carved out the power of music journalism and the role of music journalists as ‘gatekeepers’ and ‘cultural intermediaries’ in negotiating and shaping the meaning of popular music in general and punk rock in particular which in effect demonstrates the power of discourse, i.e. language. In regard to punk rock discourse, this has entailed that due to a limited presence or absence of women, people of color and queers and their voices in punk discourse they are less or not associated with punk thus inhibiting their existence in punk. This in turn means that women, people of color, and queers need to be brought into a discourse in order to account for their presence in punk. Whereas women and queers – musicians (from the riot grrl to queer edge hardcore movements), scholars and activists – have done this since the 1990s, people of color or people sensitive to matters of race and ethnicity have only recently begun to alter the punk discourse on a more public level which the recent nature of my sources in chapter four can attest.

In regard to black people in punk, the 2003 documentary Afropunk: The Rock and Roll Nigger Experience directed by James Spooner, which spawned a movement of the same name and which I have unfortunately not been unable to discuss in the limited frame of my paper, has achieved an interrogation of the prevalent punk discourse and triggered a wider discussion of the largely neglected but still prevalent mechanics of race in music, the music industry and popular music historiography. This has resulted in a more thorough quest for the black punks lost in punk history and is also part of a recent and growing interest and effort to trace this obscured chapter in black musical practice on an academic level which is reflected, e.g., in Maureen Mahon’s and David Ensminger’s work as well as in the November 2009 Black Rock Conference hosted by the Archives of African American Music and Culture at Indiana University in Bloomington. The same dynamics are evident in regard to Latino punk which has considerably grown since the early 1990s and has been chronicled and captured, for instance, in the 1999 documentary Mas Alla Los Gritos/ Beyond the Screams by Martin Sorrondeguy of seminal Latino hardcore band Los Crudos and queer edge hardcore band Limp Wrist. My sources in chapter four likewise indicate the growing public and
academic efforts to illuminate the varied Latina/o identities (and black identities) in American popular culture.

These trends indicate, in the words of Pure Hell’s Kenney Gordon, a “[c]hange that came along with a new century” in which the “lines dividing cultures in music are becoming less and less harsh” and hopefully mean “[i]t’s time for a new awakening” (Appendix 85). Whether this change will come about, remains to be seen. Meanwhile, there is still a need to highlight and explore constructions and omissions in order to come closer to the popular past.
Email questionnaire answered by Kenney “Stinker” Gordon, singer of Pure Hell, on March 3, 2010.

Franziska Pietschmann (FP): What is your background?

Kenney Gordon (KG): I was born ...Kenneth Leonard Gordon – March 29, 1956 – in Savannah, Georgia USA. The youngest of three siblings, and grandson of a Baptist minister who owns a 400 acre estate. Moved to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania during 1959, where I was raised in a modest middle class urban neighborhood. In elementary school I was part of the Glee Club Choir and performed in plays, along with minor musical and art classes. Continuing through middle school with academic Latin courses and then I got my first Paul McCartney violin style bass guitar instrument, and took tutor lessons from jazz musician, Mr. Schwartz. I dropped out of college preparatory school to take the early stages of my first band to New York.

FP: When and how did you get into making music?

KG: I am as they say, a born artist. I always thrived on television, movies and music. My fantasy, like many growing up through the television boom age of the sixties and seventies, was to be James Bond, Jimi Hendrix and go to England and marry Emma Peel (The Avengers) and be a star in the beautiful California sunset.

FP: What is your musical heritage? What/ who are / were your musical (or other) inspirations?

KG: Of course soul and spiritual music are in my make-up more so than blues that pre-dated the American culture of the sixties. By the time of my generation... civil, political, social and technical revolution was in full process. The merge of music, cultures, beliefs and genre's were becoming a western civilization melting pot. The path of my morals and intellect at that time comprised of influences ranging from - James Brown, the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Hendrix, the Supremes, Chuck Berry, Syd Barrett, Captain Beefheart and his Magik Band, Stepping Wolf, Grand Funk, the Yardbirds, Wilson Pickett, I Spy (television series), Children of the Damned (the movie)... Etc. etc. My first band circa 1974 was mainly influenced with the social scene we indulged, post.
glam, MC5, Stooges, Alice Cooper and New York Dolls. Being from an eastern coastal port city, we had an abundance of British and European imported products and news. Of course the mean streets of Philadelphia had it's influences too.

FP: When did Pure Hell get together? Did you have a record deal?

KG: We all grew up in the same neighborhood. We actually began practicing as a band around 1974, under a name I borrowed from a film featuring Anthony Perkins and Tuesday Weld entitled, 'Pretty Poison' (hence post glam). By 1975, I took a name of a fuel altered drag racing car, and named the band... 'Pure Hell'. No record deals came about until we met Curtis Knight in New York City approximately 1977.

FP: When and why did you move to New York? How long did you stay in New York?

KG: Late 1974 was my first trip to New York City, and by early 1975 we moved the band into the Chelsea Hotel briefly, eventually holding up at the New York Dolls' rehearsal loft, a couple of doors down 23rd street. We went to New York to will out our potential, and infiltrate Manhattan's social scene and the record/entertainment industry, where credible figures worked and lived. Philadelphia is only an hour's drive away, so there were various periods of time - days, weeks or months we would spend over the years (five initial band career years) in New York City.

FP: Where, when and with whom did you play in New York?

KG: During early 1975 we first played 'the late show', an antique thrift shop on St. Marks Place owned by an affiliate of the NY Dolls - "Frenchy" - before an official venue appearance at "Mothers", with Wayne County and the Electric Chairs. By 1978 - besides other venues - we were popular among the credible bands that drew crowds of attention to Max's Kansas City on favorable weekend nights. We shared bills with bands such as : 'the Nuns', 'the Stimulators', 'the Tuff Darts', 'the Fast', 'the Dead Boys (in Philadelphia's Hot Club) and climatically at Max's with Sid Vicious before our debut European tour. A trip to Los Angeles in 1979 before a second British tour, featured a line up at Brendan Mullen's 'the Masque' in Hollywood with: 'the Germs', 'the Cramps', 'the Dead Boys', 'Pure Hell' and 'the Mau Mau's' (pre-Wall of Voodoo).

FP: Did you tour a lot?
KG: Un-fortunately the atmosphere for the first tier of 'punk' allotted only two tours.

FP: When and why did Pure Hell break up? What have you done afterwards?

KG: After the second tour of England at the end of 1979, some of the pioneers of that genre' like 'the Sex Pistols', 'the Damned' and 'the Dead Boys', had dispersed - incinerated. After the death of Nancy Spungen, the 'punk' creation of Malcom McLaren's vision - who was assisting the New York Dolls when we arrived in 1975 - bands like 'Pure Hell' paid a toll from blazing the trail for a generation to come. A final show for the time at Max's Kansas City, which featured Cheetah Chrome joining us on guitar, was our last until our deceased drummer 'Spider' and I re-united in Los Angeles 1987. We began recording sessions produced and engineered by Mick Cripps of the L.A. Guns. Then during the early 90's sessions featuring on bass and back vocals - Lemmy Kilmister of Motorhead - who also produced and engineered, followed once again with sessions in New York with Mick Cripps and Charley Clouser of Nine Inch Nails.

FP: Judging from the places you went to (U.S., UK), how were the scenes made up in terms (racial, ethnic, gender) diversity? How integrated/segregated were they?

KG: As a whole... 'punk' was originally made up of the generation that grew up during the sixties and early seventies, sort of progeny of garage bands, fifties rock-n-roll, soul and hard rock music. As I fore-mentioned the age of technology networked out to the world of cultures. 'Punk' was / is pre-dominately a white populated rebellion but, for example... groups like 'the Clash' prove it was a multi-cultural revolution, with their West Indian Rastafarian laced method of making their point. This includes the female gender with an open field to go as far as they willed, as well as sexual preferences. It was about breaking any restraints not acceptable to modern common moral.

FP: Were race/ ethnicity/ gender ever an issue back then and now?

KG: There were issues before, and there are issues now - after, but evolution continues it's course.

FP: Greg Shaw of Bomp! wrote in 1977 that there is no hint of black derivation in punk rock? Do you agree in musical and cultural terms?
KG: Rock-n-roll 'is' a derivation of black anguish! Statements like Greg Shaw's only represent the exploitation of the label 'punk' seemingly to some advantage. Eminence front to the true cause of a movement.

FP: Have you seen punk rock as antagonistic to other musical genres/cultures like soul, disco, hip hop, jazz, blues ...?

KG: 'Punk's tool - weapon of choice - was discord in order to demand attention. Using music as a medium in making it's point. Out-side of contemporary, conservative, mediocre or main stream forms of musical art. Most up front (punk) antagonist preferred harmony. Lest life would be as they portrayed.

FP: Do you think punk rock was/ is multicultural? Was/ it inclusive or rather exclusive? What were/are your impressions?

KG: There were different segments of this genre': mods, rockers, skin-heads, gothic, electronic, rasta, alternative etc. I've seen Jimmy Cliff's audience half filled with Caucasian punks in London, as well as a confrontation between my audience and the 'National Front' in Leeds. People tend to use whatever they can when it comes to survival. Even if it strips them down to their bare race.

FP: What about racism in punk rock? Have you experienced or observed any discrimination?

KG: Of course, when you have supremest groups infiltrating the genre' in order to capitalize on the youth of the future.

FP: What kind of responses have you received from your family and other black people for playing punk rock?

KG: The same kind of response as any other person that either want to be part of a problem, or a solution. Frankly... People close to me understand exactly my point of vision in the world. The crucial problems on earth far out weigh my ambition to rant about a better place.

FP: When did you come across Afropunk? What is your position on it?
KG: During 2002 for a tribute show in memory of my friend and drummer Michael Sanders, James Spooner filmed the venue and interviewed the band for his Afro-punk movie. They were in pursuit of the band for a while for the film, being our history as one of the earliest credible bands of our genre. You don't have to be a 'punk' now to bring about change. Change that came along with a new century. The lines dividing cultures in music are becoming less and less harsh. It's time for a new awakening.

FP: What are your current musical projects?

KG: Recently participated in the cast of Alan Parker's movie, "Who Killed Nancy" and given numerous interviews and consults for books and documentaries like the soon to be released, "Curtis Knight- living in the shadow of Jimi Hendrix" and will continue to offer consultation and insight for various projects as a key member of the genre and culture. Also in the works, a book of the Pure Hell story that will hopefully capture film interest. Also the possibility of releasing more vaulted material featuring the collaborations with Lemmy Kilmister and Mick Cripps and recording new material with the other original members of Pure Hell. Various solo projects currently in the works as well. The stories of "Stinker" & "Pure Hell" are far from over! Art never dies!!

FP: What impact did punk rock have on your life?

KG: Not to be narcissistic but, 'punk' was my life.

FP: What does it mean to you today?

KG: It means I was not wrong for realizing that there's definitely reasons I didn't consume, what the powers that be automatically assume, they can dictate.
7 Discography


8 Works Cited


9 Works Consulted

