

Rereading American Hardcore: Intersectional Privilege and the Lyrics of Early Californian Hardcore Punk

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Abstract: In this article, I deal with the Californian youth subculture of hardcore punk. Despite the fact that the majority of the subculture's main protagonists were white male adolescents from the suburban middle class and thus occupied privileged social positions, they presented themselves as misfits, outcasts, and victims of society. In order to establish a critical approach to this movement, I effectively reverse the concept of Intersectionality as it is defined in Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix's essay "Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality" (2004) and move the focus to the interlocking privileges that reveal the hardcore punks' advantageous subject positions. I will then perform a contextual close reading of three exemplary song lyrics that helps to point out if or in how far the respective adolescents reflect on the privileged backgrounds they come from. Do they acknowledge the advantages that go along with their allegedly-normative status as white male Americans? How do they deal with them and do they succeed in establishing a credible contra-position?

This article deals with the Californian youth subculture of hardcore punk, which developed during the 1980s and still proves to be influential in American and international alternative music scenes. The fact that the writing phase of the "Magisterarbeit" (MA Thesis) on whose findings this text is primarily based fell into the year 2007 supported the thought of using it for a closer examination of punk and hardcore. In this year, numerous articles, reports, and retrospectives spoke of the thirtieth anniversary of punk. A look at the

founding days of punk and its subgenre hardcore punk thus seemed especially interesting. George Lipsitz's essay "Listening to Learn and Learning to Listen: Popular Culture, Cultural Theory, and American Studies" built the initial basis for a more scholarly or at least more theoretical approach, which helped to inscribe the topic into the realm of American Studies. In his text, Lipsitz asks for the insight and the knowledge one could win by looking at popular culture including songs of bands such as the Angry Samoans—an early hardcore punk band from Southern California. Considering academic ignorance towards bands such as the Angry Samoans, Lipsitz claims, "[w]e neglect them only at our peril" (321). Thus, he establishes a wonderful argument for a closer examination of the beginnings of American hardcore punk in California.

In order to avoid a mere retrospection that describes the hardcore punk movement too nostalgically, it is important to establish a scheme that critically questions the subculture and addresses its contradictions.¹ A brief look at the material that appeared to be relevant for this essay pointed out a circumstance whose importance and consequences should not be underestimated: almost all sources that were gathered displayed photos and pictures of young white males. In contrast to their British counterparts of the working class, the allegedly-rebellious hardcore punks in California predominantly grew up in the middle class and thus belonged to a privileged social stratum. In addition to their class position they were privileged as white males who came from a suburban, an explicitly white middle-class and therefore privileged environment (cf. Blush 13; MacLeod 127). The concept of Intersectionality helps to evaluate the Californian hardcore punks' social origins and their following privileges as it illustrates the fact that a valuable description cannot be reduced to just one category of analysis but needs to focus on a network of intersections in which social advantages take effect.

In their essay "Ain't I a Woman? Revisiting Intersectionality," Avtar Brah and Ann Phoenix initially define the concept of Intersectionality "as signifying the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation—economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective, and

1 Roger Sabin exemplarily asks: "[H]ow many more times must we hear the Sex Pistols story?" (2) And although the hardcore punk movement has not received as much attention as the British punk scene around the Sex Pistols, it is important to learn from previous mistakes and avoid the mere production of further pieces of repetitive rock memorabilia.

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experiential—intersect in historically specific contexts” (76). They add that they specifically deal with “simultaneously interlocking oppressions” (78).² Brah and Phoenix’s concept can be used for a closer examination of the hardcore punk movement by effectively reversing it and moving the focus to the interlocking privileges that reveal the hardcore punks’ advantageous subject positions. In doing so, it becomes possible to create four categories that have to be considered in order to describe and examine the intersectional privilege relevant in hardcore punk: race (respectively whiteness), class (respectively the middle class origin), gender (respectively masculinity), and suburbia. The reversion of the concept of Intersectionality thus provides a valuable instrument that incorporates findings of an originally African American and feminist approach and applies its critical stance to a realm of privileged subject positions.

Preceding approaches to subcultural youth movements oftentimes criticized the mass-medial absorption of their allegedly rebellious potential by referring to the Frankfurt School and Adorno and Horkheimer’s comments considering the *Kulturindustrie*, “culture industry,” or, alternatively, celebrated them as apparently counter-hegemonic movements, which operated from an “innocent” position before their mass-cultural incorporation. This essay aims at the establishment of a new critical approach, which focuses on teenagers’ positions of privilege. It is supposed to analyze whether the movement of hardcore punk really generates a critical and credible contra-position or if it merely conceals a further practice of manly-dominated empowerment by the white middle class. For that purpose it is important to see how the respective participants deal with their positions of privilege and if they are aware of their advantageous social origins.

In addition to the theoretical reference to the concept of Intersectionality, the methodical approach in this essay is characterized by an intensive close reading of exemplary song lyrics. Presumably, due to their ostentatious simplicity, the lyrics of hardcore punk have hardly been analyzed on such a detailed level as a close reading would guarantee. Thus, such an approach would provide a valuable basis for new critical insights into the subculture. With reference to the perception that culture and consequently subculture can be read as semiotic practice, in the

2 E.g.: Opposed to the allegedly normative position of a white male an African American woman would be affected by interlocking oppressions concerning her race and gender.

following three exemplary lyrics of Californian hardcore punk songs will provide the data for an in-depth examination, i.e. a close reading, of concrete textual products of the movement (cf. Bachmann-Medick 37).

The categories that were established on the basis of the reversed concept of Intersectionality help to specify the choice of the respective song lyrics: the song “Suburban Home” by the Descendents will be analyzed with concentration on the category of suburbia; the song “White Minority” by Black Flag will be approached with the focus on the category of race; and the song “Wrecking Crew” by the Adolescents will be examined with regards to the category of gender. Cross-references to the category of class will be included wherever possible³. Since all three bands were based in suburban areas around Los Angeles and since the respective songs all emerged at the beginning of the 1980s, or as Blush says the “peak years of American Hardcore” (9), a comparable insight into this very specific but highly influential scene can be established.⁴ The relatively small sample of only three songs guarantees an intensive context-bound close reading, which is highly uncommon in scholarly studies about punk and hardcore.⁵

SUBURBAN HOME: IDENTIFICATION AND IRONY IN SUBURBIA

I want to be stereotyped
I want to be classified
I want to be a clone
I want a suburban home
Suburban home
Suburban home
Suburban home
I want to be a statistic
I want to be masochistic

3 Due to space the category of class is not analyzed within a separate example of song lyrics in this article. The MA thesis on which this text is primarily based included the song “Home is Where” by the Orange County hardcore punk band Middle Class for that purpose.

4 Black Flag and the Descendents were based in the South Bay (Hermosa Beach and Manhattan Beach), The Adolescents in Orange County (Fullerton).

5 For a study that additionally operates quantitatively and works with a 291-song sample, see *Punk Rockers’ Revolution* by Malott and Peña (2004).

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I want to be a clone
I want a suburban home
Suburban home
Suburban home
Suburban home
I don't want no hippie pad
I want a house just
Like mom and dad
I want to be stereotyped
I want to be classified
I want to be a statistic
I want to be masochistic
I want to be a clone
I want a suburban home
Suburban home
Suburban home
Suburban home

Descendents. "Suburban Home." (*Milo Goes to College*. New Alliance, 1982)

In *Semiotics for Beginners* Daniel Chandler introduces a set of questions that can help to semiotically approach the most different objects of analysis. Initially, he states that "[d]econstructing and contesting the realities of signs can reveal whose realities are privileged and whose are suppressed," (n. pag.) which postulates that a critical close reading as it is intended in this article has to include an intensive search for signs. Therefore, the basic question, "What are the important signifiers and what do they signify?" (n. pag.) appears to be essential for an examination of concrete song lyrics. It is through signs that the lyrics create meaning and consequently semiotics builds an effective instrument for their analysis.

The noticeable repetitions of the term "suburban home" as well as its function as the song's title allow identifying it as an important signifier in the lyrics of the Descendents. Chandler assumes that such a signifier can only be read as a meaningful sign in combination with a connected code. He explains that "[s]ince the meaning of a sign depends on the code within which it is situated, codes provide a framework within which signs make sense. Indeed, we cannot grant something the status of a sign if it does not function within a code" (n. pag.). The question arises if in the textual surroundings of the term "suburban

home,” respectively in the lines of the song lyrics that begin with “I want,” a code can be found, which makes the signifier “suburban home” a meaningful sign.

In order to work with a more precise definition of the term code, it is useful to refer to the findings of Roland Barthes. In *The Semiotic Challenge* he describes codes as “essentially cultural: the codes are certain types of already-seen, of already-read, of already-done” (288) and thereby establishes a definition that justifies references between the song lyrics and the historical as well as cultural context of hardcore punk. Except for the lines that exclusively exist of the term “suburban home” each line begins with the phrase “I want” or in one case with the negated form “I don’t want.” From a contextual perspective this can be read as a cultural code for the so-called Gimme Decade, which emerged at the beginning of the 1980s (DeCurtis 2).⁶ Following this train of thought, it makes sense to read the “Gimme” attitude expressed through noticeable repetition of the words “I want” in the Descendents’ lyrics in connection with the social realities and everyday life experiences of the 1980s. The society in which hardcore punks (including the members of the Descendents) grew up is characterized by an “individualistic ethic of upward mobility” (Lipsitz 324-25) and can therefore be reduced to the concise statement “I want” or “Gimme.” In Barthes’s sense, the behavior in such a society can be regarded as “already-seen” or “already-done” (288).

In his essay “Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction,” Ryan Moore establishes a concrete parallel between social realities and the subculture of suburban hardcore punk. He defines the movement as the “fitting soundtrack to Proposition 13 and the tax ‘revolts’ of 1978, when homeowners in the valley and Orange County organized to rid themselves of responsibility for other people’s education and other people’s children” (317), which shows in how far experiences of the suburban teenagers’ everyday lives included the reckless enrichment policies of their parents. In the Descendents’ lyrics the phrase “I want” refers to the first person singular and can therefore be read as a contrast that points out what other people should not own or should not gain. Proposition 13 and the “Tax Payers’ Revolt” were meant to optimize the conditions for homeowners while simultaneously excluding

6 Anthony DeCurtis introduces the term “Gimme Decade” to describe “the pinched privatism, the smug selfishness, the glib pragmatism, the grim status consciousness, the greed masking in taste, the brutal superficiality of the 1980s” (2).

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minorities from the suburbs (cf. Baldassare). Thus, they institutionalize the statements “I want” and “I don’t want” and highlight that both attitudes were part of everyday suburban life in Southern California, which therefore is at least unconsciously marked as “already-seen.” The things the first-person narrator of the song wants to have respectively does not want to have as well as what he wants to be can therefore be semiotically interpreted as part of a cultural code: a code “of culture as it is transmitted . . . by the whole of sociality” (Barthes 289).⁷

Since the line “I want a suburban home” always appears as the last statement in the sequence of the lines that begin with “I want” and since it is the only statement that directly refers to a concrete object of possession (namely the suburban home), the remaining lines or statements can be regarded as a “framework” that helps to establish the signifier “suburban home” as a meaningful sign in a cultural code (cf. Chandler; Barthes). The question arises in how far the statements “I want to be stereotyped / classified / a clone / a statistic / masochistic” and “I don’t want no hippie pad / I want a house just like mom and dad” add to specify this signifier. In fact, the mentioned components that follow the phrase “I want” could also be regarded as single signifiers but it appears more logical to analyze them in their function as part of the overall framing for the specific signifier “suburban home.” This interpretation can particularly be retraced by looking at the arrangement of the lyrics which appears to express that the narrator expects to find everything he wants to have or wants to be in the “suburban home.”

The line “I want to be stereotyped” can initially be alluded to Daniel S. Traber’s idea of hardcore punk as a way of self-marginalization. What Traber describes as “playing dress ‘down’” (53) seems to respond to the first-person narrator’s desire for being stereotyped. The fact that a single person (namely the first-person narrator) explicitly wants to be stereotyped highlights exactly what Traber describes as an act of self-marginalization. In order to express their own individuality, the teenagers involved in hardcore punk use attributes that are usually associated with minorities. They want to be stereotyped as single

7 Since the majority of early Californian hardcore punks, including the singer and the members of the bands examined in this article, are male, the narrators of the respective song lyrics will also be referred to as male in the following.

individuals and thereby evoke connotations that are normally linked to marginal social groups.⁸

The statements “I want to be classified” and “I want to be a statistic” can be interpreted in a very similar context. White males of the middle class occupy a normative status in American society, which oftentimes renders them invisible.⁹ Sally Robinson argues that “[i]nvisibility is a privilege enjoyed by social groups who do not, thus, attract modes of surveillance and discipline,” (3) but with the rise of multiculturalism, the Civil Rights Movement, and feminism, in other words “a culture that appears to organize itself around the visibility of differences and the symbolic currency of identity politics,” invisibility “can also be felt as a burden” (3) and lead to an identity crisis among white men. However, classifications and statistics offer a way to highlight the existence of minorities and mark them in opposition to the (pseudo-)normative masses. The narrator’s wish to be classified and to be a statistic can therefore be read as a parallel to the attempt of marginalizing oneself by adopting stereotypes. Being classified and being a statistic means to become visible as a minority.

Within the causality between stereotype, classification, and statistic, the line “I want to be masochistic” introduces “the emblem of the current crisis in white masculinity,” namely the “white male victim” (Robinson 5). “[S]elf-destruction” and “violence against their [the participating youths’] own bodies” (Malott and Peña 30) are actions that constantly reoccur in hardcore punk and since “[w]hite masculinity most fully represents itself as victimized by inhabiting a wounded body” (Robinson 6) the hardcore punks’ acts can be read as part of a broader practice of masculine representation. “[I]njured by the denial of public representation,” white men of the middle class find a possibility in masochism to compensate and symbolize the underrepresentation they started to feel with the rise of 1970s and 1980s multiculturalism (Wiegman 116). Traber’s findings concerning the hardcore punks’ desire for self-marginalization are connected with and thus complemented by Wiegman and Robinson’s comments about the staging of injured masculinity at this point. The narrator of “Suburban Home”

8 The definition of a stereotype as a “set of beliefs about the personal attributes of a group of people” established in the anthology *Stereotyping and Prejudice* shows that stereotyping is regarded to refer to groups of people and not to single individuals (Stroebe and Insko 5).

9 Invisible not “in the sense of ‘hidden from history’ but, rather, as the self-evident standard against which all differences are measured: hidden by history” (Robinson 1).

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seems to withdraw from privileged intersectional positions by adopting the role of a marginalized victim. But how does the statement “I want to be a clone / I want a suburban home” fit this interpretation?

The chapter “Clone Story” in Jean Baudrillard’s *Simulacra and Simulation* helps to develop an interesting approach to the line “I want to be a clone.” Baudrillard develops this chapter with reference to the term “*simulacrum*,” which describes a copy without a corresponding original and which builds the basis for his theory of postmodernism. The usage of the word “clone” therefore allows a connection to be established between the Descendents’ song lyrics and what Moore calls the “Condition of Postmodernity” (305). As Moore already recapitulates, Baudrillard emphasizes the close link between his understanding of postmodernism and an economic and social development that is centered on consumerism. In *Simulacra and Simulation* the chapter “Hypermarket and Hypermodernity” concentrates on these aspects. It is especially relevant at this point since the concept of a consumerist “Hypermarket” perfectly matches the already-introduced description of the 1980s as a “Gimme Decade.” The “Hypermarket” is described as a place where “men and things” are brought together and where “a whole new sociality is elaborated” (Baudrillard 75-76). Baudrillard explains in how far “the hypermarket centralizes and redistributes a whole region and population, how it concentrates and rationalizes time, trajectories, practices—creating an immense to-and-fro movement totally similar to that of suburban *commuters*” (75) and thus establishes an explicit parallel to the category of suburbia. Considering the fact that he defines these surroundings as “homogeneous space” (76), it can be reasoned that the people living there themselves become homogeneous and therefore hold the characteristics of “clones” (76). Suburbia is characterized by a “core cultural value of consumerism” that makes its inhabitants appear to be conformist copies and therefore resemble Baudrillard’s idea of the *simulacrum* (Kling, Olin, and Poster “The Emergence” 8).

Following the preceding argument, the first-person narrator’s desire to be a “clone” can be read as the wish to be part of an ultimate conformity in which “the original no longer exists” (Baudrillard 99), and where “the whole loses its meaning” (97). The extension of this desire in the line “I want a suburban home” connects the terms “clone” and “suburban home” and thus establishes a causality between them, which hints at the fact that the suburban home is associated with

the conformist characteristics of the “clone.” The statement “I don’t want no hippie pad / I want a house just like mom and dad” uses a dichotomous comparison with the “hippie pad” to define the “suburban home” as “a house just like mom and dad.” The parents, “mom and dad,” thus, become a basic part of the signifier “suburban home” while simultaneously being subject to its conformist connotations. At this point, the first-person narrator acknowledges his suburban origin. His parents’ house is the “suburban home.”

The fact that ideas that are connected to the term “clone” were interlinked with the conformist world of suburbia appears extremely important since the first-person narrator seems to think of the “suburban home” as a place that satisfies his desire for being stereotyped. The lines that begin with “I want” build a framework which marks the signifier “suburban home” as the home of a subject that is stereotyped, classified, as well as stylized as a statistic and a masochistic victim. This interpretation is supported by the fact that the signifier “suburban home” always appears in the last and therefore in the resumptive line of the repetitive sequences. The Descendents’ lyrics seem to locate the marginality, which hardcore punks are looking for, in the conformist suburban home. It becomes evident that the lyrics reflect a contradictory break that develops from the obvious differences between the suburban position of privilege and the aspired marginality of hardcore punks.

Keeping the actual situations in mind in which concerts of hardcore punk bands—and therefore also the performance of the song “Suburban Home”—take place, provides a useful complementation of the close reading approach deployed in this essay. It helps to highlight the contradictions between the statement “I want a suburban home” and the environment in which it is expressed. It appears logical that an audience that stylizes itself through “dress down” and (at least seemingly) violent “slam dancing” can identify with statements such as “I want to be stereotyped / classified / a statistic / masochistic” because they reflect the participating youths’ desire for marginalization.¹⁰ The setting for such statements, however, seems to be a very unlikely situation for a dialog in which a band and

10 “Slam dancing” is a wild and violent way of dancing, which is usually associated with hardcore punk. During the beginnings of hardcore punk, the Southern Californian scene around Los Angeles was known for its extremely violent “slam dancers” (cf. e.g. Mullen and Spitz 199).

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its audience articulate the desire for a suburban home like the respective parents already own it.¹¹

Apparently, the medium of loud and aggressive punk music is used here to create a highly-ironic momentum, which is bound to the premise that the first-person narrator (who is personified not only by the singer and the members of the band but also by the audience that sings along) acknowledges his suburban origin. The fact that singer, band, and the audience are predominantly from suburban homes allows them to ironically deal with their origin and eventually receive the song's lyrics as a critique of their daily life. Simultaneously, the codes that build the textual framework for the signifier "Suburban Home" are extended by a musical aspect, which builds an equivalent to the "dress down" fashion of the hardcore punks. Just like the lyrical profoundness obviously expresses an intentional opposition to the intellectual abilities of the lyrics' author and singer Milo Auckerman, the accompanying punk music uses relative simplicity and aggression to communicate the impression of an audible contrast to the suburban environment the first-person narrator claims to long for.¹² The ironic momentum is thereby intensified.

The example of "Suburban Home" shows in how far hardcore punks identify themselves through marginalization. At the same time it proves that the participating teenagers are completely capable of ironically embracing their social, in this case suburban, origin and thus articulate aspects of the dominant ideology of suburbia. The "hippie pad," which actually would have fit the "dress down" fashion of the hardcore punks much better remains the direct contrast to the "suburban home" and thus highlights it as the signifier of a normative position. In the song lyrics the first-person narrator acknowledges this position. However, he does not question the privileges that he gains from it and that build the basis for the irony that is deployed here: only those who really come from a suburban home and benefit from the accompanying privileges can ironically distance themselves from it by screaming "I want a suburban home."¹³ The logic

11 MacLeod's statement that punk performance "broke down the barrier between performer and consumer" (131) summarizes the fact that band and audience heavily interacted.

12 Auckerman grew up in an academic environment and left the Descendents to study biochemistry at USC San Diego after recording the album with the fitting title *Milo Goes to College* (cf. Auckerman). The relatively simplistic form of "Suburban Home," thus, cannot simply be explained by lacking intellectual maturity of the singer.

13 Blush states that "[t]he first HC bands came out of suburban LA beach towns, probably

of the lyrics ignores that there are social minorities who actually feel this desire because they associate a way out of their underprivileged living conditions with it. The privileged positions of the hardcore punks that sing (along with) them therefore remain unquestioned.

WHITE MINORITY: RACE AS A SUBJECT POSITION IN HARDCORE PUNK

We're gonna be a white minority
We won't listen to the majority
We're gonna feel inferiority
We're gonna be white minority

White pride
You're an american
I'm gonna hide
Anywhere I can

Gonna be a white minority
We don't believe there's a possibility
Well you just wait and see
We're gonna be white minority

White pride
You're an american
I'm gonna hide
Anywhere I can

Gonna be a white minority
There's gonna be large cavity
Within my new territory
We're all gonna die

Black Flag. "White Minority." (*Jealous Again*. SST, 1980)

'cause there they lived as close to The American Dream as you could get. Born of a doomed ideal middle-class utopia, Punk juiced their nihilism" (13). He establishes a direct connection between the privileged environment of suburbia and the punk subculture and thereby gives more prove of the ironic momentum that is at work here. His statement proves that most hardcore punks did not have to "ask" for a suburban home; they were already living in it.

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The examination of the lyrics of “White Minority” allows two different approaches of analysis. At first, one can again refer to the findings of Traber, who also deals with this song’s lyrics but only concentrates on the first verse and the refrain. Furthermore, the second and third verse can be included in the analysis in order to draw conclusions from the lyrics that refer to the social and demographic development of California. Finally, both approaches have to be used to examine in how far the concept of white whiteness and the resulting positions of privilege are discussed within the song lyrics.

Inspired by Traber’s approach it can be claimed that the term “white minority” in the first verse is established as an opposition or contra-position to a “majority.” The potential of resistance, which becomes possible by the adoption of such a position, is revealed at this point. Directly following the line “We’re gonna be a white minority” it says: “We won’t listen to the majority.” The rejecting attitude that is hidden behind this statement can be connected with the allegedly oppositional and rebellious character of hardcore punk. The opposition to a “majority,” which is found in the position of the “minority” here, helps to symbolize an assumed alternative that the hardcore punks seek to establish in opposition to the “existing structure,” respectively the mainstream culture (Dukowski). This position of a minority enables the white teenagers to express their rejection of a system, which is mirrored in the concept of white whiteness as Adam Cornford defines it. For Cornford,

whiteness is a complex of unquestionable (because invisible) assumptions, behavioral norms, and power relations reproduced by and within all the major institutions of US society: the workplace, the school, the mall and other shopping/consumption sites, the private automobile/highway system, the suburb of detached single family houses, and of course the mass media. All these institutions teach possessive individualism; anxious competitiveness; rigid emotional control through “niceness”; narrow or instrumental rationality; ready acceptance of isolation, boredom, and meaninglessness; the sacrifice of a lifetime for merchandise and security. (n. pag.)

Apparently, in the lyrics the significance of the term minority is used to avoid the associations that are connected with the preceding word “white.” Following this logic, the line “We’re gonna feel inferiority” merely works as a confirmation of the successful adoption of a minority position. Referring to

Traber “inferiority” can be read as a sign of “rebel credibility,” which helps the hardcore punks to appear authentic (34). To feel inferior, in this context, means to adopt an oppositional position to the social center by taking the identity of an “Other” (33). Traber’s reference to the song’s refrain and the fact that the center is defined through “white pride” shows that such an interpretation assumes a white minority—namely the hardcore punks—which is positioned against a white majority—namely the mainstream. It becomes evident how teenagers of the middle class try to stylize themselves as a minority through self-marginalization.

In his interpretation of the song Traber does not explicitly include the second and third verse. The reference to Dale Maharidge’s book *The Coming White Minority—California, Multiculturalism, and America’s Future*, however, opens a helpful way to approach them while including demographic aspects, which describe the development of a supposed “White Minority” in California. Concerning the white population of the state Maharidge explains:

Between 1900 and 1970 California’s white population dropped from 90 percent to 78 percent of the total. But by 1980 the percentage of whites dropped as much as it had in the century’s first seven decades. Between 1980 and 1990 it plummeted another 10 percent—and has continued declining about 1 percent a year since then. (4)

Maharidge comments on this rapid decrease of white population numbers, which becomes especially evident at the end of the 1970s by connecting it with the fear felt by white citizens. He states that “[w]ith each drop in the white population, fear among white voters rose commensurately” (5) and thereby hints at the white middle class’s worries about losing its hegemonic status.

Keeping this information in mind, it becomes possible to read the line “We’re gonna be a white minority” on a second level of meaning. The fact that it does not claim that one *is* a white minority but that one *is gonna be* a white minority implies that at this point the song describes a future development. This development finds a parallel in Maharidge’s remarks. The lyrics take on a moment of social fear and therefore appear extremely provocative—at least in the ears of the inhabitants of an allegedly stable and secure middle-class environment.

Taking a closer look at the second and third verse may help to verify this train of thought and support the impression that the lyrics refer to a fear that is particular among members of the white middle class. The line “We don’t believe there’s a possibility” hints at the hopelessness of the development towards a

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white minority. The following demand “Well you just wait and see” holds the characteristics of a threatening prediction, which is directed at an opponent in the second person. The preceding line is thereby intensified in its hopeless character. The lyrics carry the message that a development towards a white minority is existent and that there is no way to escape it.

The third verse endorses this impression by claiming that “[t]here’s gonna be large cavity / Within my new territory.” The cavity or the gap that is predicted here, goes along with the development described by Maharidge and can be read as an analogy to the decrease in California’s white population. In addition, the localization in a “new territory” alludes to the specific situation in the Californian suburbs. Suburbia’s borders became more and more permeable in the aftermath of the 1970s Civil Rights Movement so that the white people living there were afraid of losing their supremacy (cf. Baldassare). The feared “cavity,” which appeared to spread in this changing—and therefore “new”—territory, is connected with an ultimate angst: the fear of one’s own extinction.

The song lyrics’ references to the demographic level show that the teenage hardcore punks could also feel the aforementioned fear. After several confrontations and conflicts between teenagers and the police that followed Black Flag concerts, their bass player Chuck Dukowski was asked why the police were against the band. Dukowski answered: “I think that it’s probably because they’re scared that it represents change. Change scares anybody who is part of the existing structure.” The statement proves that among hardcore punks there was not only awareness about society’s fears but also about these fear’s origin in (demographic) change. The change reflected in the song “White Minority” predicts a mere minority status for the white population and therefore emerges as a potential threat for white supremacy. Thus, the lyrics can be read as an allusion to the conservative fears of a threatened white society. By predicting this society’s end the lyrics stoke its fears.

In order to point out the important aspects of privileged subject positions that affect hardcore punk, in the following, a closer reading of the refrain and the song title itself will be performed. Traber already hints at the fact that the line “I’m gonna hide / Anywhere I can” in the refrain describes a distancing of the participating teenagers from society’s center. The identity of a minority that they try to adopt is based on the rejection of the identity of the white American, which is established as an opposing position by the term “White Pride” in the

preceding line. The addition “Anywhere I can” can be interpreted as an emphasis of the dislike that hardcore punks feel for the white center. It appears as if the existence in any hiding place was better than leading an average American life. At this point, it is tried to abolish aspects of race and reverse them in a way that the hardcore punks’ own identity stands in opposition to their social origin but adopts the marginal status of non-white others. Traber describes the contradictory element of the hardcore punks’ change of roles by explaining that, “without the Other they cease to exist” (33). He critically states that without the stereotypical and also racist idea of “inferior, violent, and criminal nonwhites” (49), an opposing position to the mainstream could not be established.

A reference to Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* can intensify this criticism. Her concept of the “parasitical nature of white freedom” (57) can be read as an analogy to the phenomena described by Traber. Independence, protest, opposition, and freedom of white hardcore punks are dependent on the existence and the persistence of suppressed positions of non-white minorities. Morrison states that “American means white” and by the line “You’re an American” the hardcore punks reject such a position for themselves. The address “you” establishes a supposed opponent and helps the participating teenagers to distance themselves from the mainstream connotations of the attribute “American.” In other words: they do not want to acknowledge their privileged white origin.

A closer look at the song’s title “White Minority” helps to understand in how far the lyrics implicitly deal with such positions of privilege. Relying on Barthes’s understanding of (cultural) codes and the established connection with Chandler’s conclusion that meaningful signs can only exist within them reveals that the significance of the title “White Minority” breaks with an existing cultural code (cf. Barthes 288; Chandler n. pag.). The demographic changes that take place in California may indicate a decrease in the number of white population but the hegemonic supremacy, which becomes manifest in “all the major institutions of US society” (Cornford n. pag.), is hardly affected by this. Maharidge explains:

Even now as the number of whites hovers around the 50 percent level, they are able to maintain political control because electoral power among the various ethnic groups has not reached parity. When California votes, it is largely a white vote, between 80 and 85 percent of the votes cast in any given election. (5)

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It becomes evident that whites possess the status of a majority on the level of political power. In contrast to “many nonwhites [who] live in a society isolated from the one in which they would vote and often struggle to survive in third-world conditions” (5), as members of the white middle class hardcore punks belong to a social stratum that legitimizes its privileged status through allegedly democratic elections. Therefore, the pairing of the adjective “white” with the noun “minority” takes on the characteristics of an oxymoron, which breaks with conventional codes due to the immanent contradictions. A white minority is something that has *not* been “already-seen,” “already-read,” or “already-done” so that the term “minority” cannot work as a meaningful sign in a code with the adjective “white.” In fact, it works rather as an expression of rejected and ignored positions of privilege.

The song title “White Minority” can either describe the hardcore punks’ desire for the position of a minority that can be distanced from the mainstream through the line “We won’t listen to the majority,” or it can express a prophecy that predicts the development of America’s and more precisely California’s white population. Whichever interpretation has an impact, e.g. during hardcore punk concerts, it can be stated that the lyrics lack a critical reflection of the real social circumstances. The growing multiculturalism and the Civil Rights Movement of the 1970s and 1980s may have created the impression of becoming a minority for white males of the middle class. Expressing such a development through the stylization as a “white minority,” however, does hardly question the own privileged supremacy but rather reveals the identity crisis that developed from the social changes of the decade.

Lines such as “Well you just wait and see / We’re gonna be a white minority” can in fact reflect the white population’s fear of becoming a minority in numbers, but the power-political positions of privilege, which make white Americans a majority on the hegemonic level, are not questioned here. The hardcore punks’ own origin in the intersectionally-privileged middle class remains unquestioned and thus the term “white minority” remains an ambivalent contradiction, especially if white teenagers from the suburbs try to use it to create a supposedly oppositional identity to the mainstream. Due to their self-imposed looks and appearances, they may have felt like a minority in their neighborhoods, high schools, and colleges, but the examination of the hardcore punks’ own ranks reveals that they were anything but a “white minority.” Just

like in the society they “claim to reject” (Traber 56), in hardcore punk it is white men of the middle class that enjoy a privileged status and think they have the exclusive right to decide about the development of the scene.

There is no doubt that especially the homogeneous and conformist suburbs of California in the 1970s and 1980s began to develop a more diversified structure that also changed the relation of whites to other ethnic groups. Nevertheless, during concerts a teenage hardcore punk merely had to take a look to the left and a look to the right to realize that still he belonged to a majority: a majority of white men.

WRECKING CREW: HARDCORE PUNKS OR BORED BOYS FROM SUBURBIA?

There's nothing to do
Excitement level zero
I can't find a girl
Cos they're all out chasing heros
We're just a wrecking crew bored boys with nothing to do

Alone in a corner of a room with a knife
Better ways out than taking your life
Home's not so bad don't need to run
Come join our primitive ways of fun
We're just a wrecking crew bored guys with nothing to do

Safety in numbers an enemy to beat
Let's overturn cars and rip up the street
I'm tired of being a peaceful citizen
Noise and destruction are in my vision
We're just a wrecking crew bored boys with nothing to do

You're not all by yourself
You've got a few friends
When we become one
The violence never ends
We're just a wrecking crew bored boys with nothing to do

Adolescents. “Wrecking Crew.” (*Adolescents*. Frontier, 1981)

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The Adolescents' song "Wrecking Crew" can be analyzed with the focus on the category of gender and accordingly masculinity. It is simultaneously predestined to work as a concluding example because it goes back to the preceding findings and thus highlights the aspect of Intersectionality. The first verse is already characterized by both the subject matter of gender and the category of suburbia. The introductory lines "There's nothing to do / Excitement level zero" build a parallel to the desolate and boring characteristics of a conformist suburb and its "paucity of public life" while the complaint "I can't find a girl / Cos they're all out chasing heroes" establishes a connection to the first-person narrator's frustration about his inability to find "a girl" or a girlfriend (Hansen and Ryan 184). On a textual level this mirrors the L.A. hardcore punk scene of "sexually frustrated teen boys," as Mullen describes it (159).

Particularly with regard to the following verses and the chorus line "We're just a wrecking crew bored boys with nothing to do," a new reference to Robinson can be established here, which deals with the interplay of frustration, masculinity, and violence. The actions of destruction and violence, which are suggested by the identification as a "Wrecking Crew," can be read in connection with an alleged blockade of masculinity that Robinson criticizes as an argument of "calls for 'male liberation'" (129). She explains:

The idea that men are emotionally blocked owes its sense and its dominance to a particular construction of male heterosexuality and the male body: male sexual energies are constantly flowing, sexual arousal "automatic" and uncontrollable, and any blockage of these energies, and the substance through which those energies are expressed, leads either to psychological and physical damage or to violent explosions. (136)

The conception of a "blocked masculinity" (135), which Robinson finds with authors who she calls "men's liberationists" (134), allows her to conclude that "the cure for what ails these men is not, as we might have hoped, the abolition of patriarchy, but rather the uninhibited release of emotional energies and 'natural' impulses" (139).

This uninhibited release of energies can be found in the song lyrics of "Wrecking Crew" as they establish an obvious coherence between sexual frustration and acts of violence. Robinson's remarks show that the foundation of

a “Wrecking Crew” can hardly be justified as a self-evident compensation of blocked emotions. On the contrary, it mirrors the reference to ideological conceptions of masculinity, which are “violently at odds with the spirit behind women’s demands that men ‘open up,’ express themselves honestly, and release their repressed emotions” (136). Like the arguments of “men’s liberationists,” the song lyrics of the Adolescents reduce the possibility of an open and honest demonstration of feelings to an uninhibited release of destructive energy. The juxtaposition of the first-person narrator to alleged “heros” who are blamed for the failure of a desired heterosexual relationship highlights the stylization as a victim that is likewise mentioned by Robinson. As already quoted, she assumes that “[t]he white male victim—personally, individually targeted—is the emblem of the current crisis in white masculinity” (5). The fact that the first-person narrator associates the reasons for the failure of a heterosexual relationship with the self-determined decisions of the respective girls and not with himself shows how he feels personally attacked and hurt and therefore takes on a role similar to that of a victim.

The emancipatory women’s movement adds to the identity crisis in which white men find themselves at the beginning of the 1970s by actively questioning the allegedly-normative status of the white heterosexual middle-class male. In accordance, the first verse of the Adolescents’ song constitutes an example for a way in which such a development and the additional solitude of suburbia is dealt with in the hardcore punk scene of the 1980s. The participating teenagers escape into a “Wrecking Crew.”

The second verse reflects on the matter of suburbia and the connected privileges in an astonishingly self-reflexive way. The line “Alone in a corner of a room with a knife” initially describes the hopeless situation of a suicidal person while the narrowness and the loneliness of the room can be read as a metaphor for the conformist suburbia. The consideration of escaping from this desolate but nevertheless privileged environment by suicide, however, appears rather exaggerated. In fact, the advantages of the suburban origin are listed in the following to put this exaggeration into perspective and prove that there are “[b]etter ways out than taking your life.” The personal home is characterized as “not so bad” at this point, which proves that a privileged origin is acknowledged. While hardcore punks’ experiences in “dysfunctional families and conformist suburban environments” (MacLeod 135) are oftentimes used to explain the

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teenagers' "nihilism" (Blush 13), the analysis of the Adolescents' song shows that their homes obviously were "not so bad" after all.

At this point, frequent (self-)descriptions of hardcore punk as a rebellious, insurgent, or even revolutionary movement are revealed as euphemisms that merely try to depict a special behavior and appearance as a way of radical agitation while actually representing not much more than "primitive ways of fun." The phrase "don't need to run" proves that the members of the "Wrecking Crew" in contrast to "real" revolutionaries did not have to fear serious or even life-threatening reactions to their movement in the respective neighborhoods.¹⁴ The awareness that the personal actions described in the lyrics are merely "primitive ways of fun" as well as the line "We're just a wrecking crew bored boys with nothing to do" highlight the fact that a self-reflexive statement is expressed at this point. It is "*just*" a "Wrecking Crew" that the Adolescents sing about. While this statement puts the group's importance self-reflectively into perspective, the added phrase "bored guys with nothing to do" declares boredom as part of its self-conception and, through the labeling as "guys," emphasizes the inherent male dominance.

The third verse is also characterized by self-reflexive insights, which comment on the described actions in a very honest way. In the first line, it is admitted that the members of the "Wrecking Crew" only act when they are superior in number. The impression that the feeling of "[s]afety in numbers" in hardcore punk goes back to a majority of white males that dominate the subculture has already been discussed on the basis of the Black Flag song. The lyrics of the Adolescents' song can be read as another proof for the fact that this group of young males personifies everything but the position of a "white minority."

14 In 1981, Greil Marcus already hinted at this fact in a very convincing way by comparing the L.A. punk scene to the founding Mississippi blues men who "used an attack on their wives and lovers to touch the hatred of their masters" (186). Marcus explains, "in 1910 a Mississippi blues man who called for the death of the man who ran his plantation would have found groundhogs delivering his mail" whereas teenage hardcore punks and the Adolescents could "say what they please" (186). The police brutality that many of the suburban hardcore punks actually suffered from should not be ignored and by no means justified at this point. In comparison with Marcus's example, however, it does not so much prove the rebellious credibility of hardcore punk as it reveals the extreme conservatism present in the Californian suburbs.

The lines “Let’s overturn cars and rip up the streets” and “I’m tired of being a peaceful citizen” express the way in which violence should be directed against an “enemy” who represents the ordinary middle-class existence. Cars and streets are meant to be destroyed, which equals a direct attack on the characteristic structures of the Californian suburbs and their “antipedestrianism” (Kling, Olin, and Poster “Beyond the Edge” x). The first-person narrator explains that he is “tired of being a peaceful citizen” and thus admits that he originally stems from this middle-class environment. “Noise and destruction” are his new objectives and a brief digression to Axel Honneth’s book *Kampf um Anerkennung*, “The Struggle for Recognition,” helps to criticize the pointlessness that is concealed behind them.

In his work, Honneth deals with the criminal act. He explains that in committing a crime or by carrying out a provocative act a subject tries to gain or more precisely struggles for the recognition of one or more others (cf. 89). Transferring this approach to the suburban riots of hardcore punks that are described in “Wrecking Crew” raises the question if these are struggling for recognition as well on the basis of provocative actions. Such an interpretation could help to justify the anger and the destructiveness of a “Wrecking Crew” and read them as rebellious reactions to an extremely ignorant and conservative environment. The song lyrics’ chorus line, however, shows that such a reading is rather unlikely and that violence is performed without any specific reason. The violent group formed because there was “nothing to do.” The fact that the participating teenagers do not act from a social necessity but rather from base motives such as boredom and sexual frustration highlights the impact of their privileged position. They are neither faced with hopeless situations nor do they have to fear or flee from any repercussions.

Keeping in mind the white men’s identity crisis that is examined by Robinson, the allegedly normative middle-class origin appears to be the only reason for a Struggle for Recognition in Honneth’s sense. With the upcoming Civil Rights Movement, multiculturalism, and feminism, young white males of the middle class start to feel invisible. In the case of the hardcore punk subculture, it seems as if they see “[n]oise and destruction” as the only way left to struggle for visibility and recognition.¹⁵

15 Aside from any preliminary objectives of the punk movement (if there are any at all), at

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The fourth verse adds to this train of thought and another quote by Robinson helps to follow it. She explains:

Wishing themselves out of the category, “straight/white/male,” [men] remake that category as itself in need of personal and political liberation. One way this is accomplished is by isolating white men from those others who have marked them as unfairly privileged; what emerges is men’s liberation as a kind of male bonding experience that, unsurprisingly, ends up indifferent, if not hostile, to women. (140)

The phrase “bored boys” already hinted at the fact that the “Wrecking Crew” is a male group whose unity is expressed in the fourth verse. It says “You’re not all by yourself / You’ve got a few friends” and thereby proves that—in accordance with Robinson’s quotation—there is actually an isolated group developing. The group only comes into existence “[w]hen we become one,” which shows that its members are really part of a “male bonding experience.” Robinson’s apprehension that this experience not only promotes indifference to women proves right. Within the “Wrecking Crew” hostility is promoted and the “violence never ends.”

The analysis of “Wrecking Crew” once again shows that despite the fact that the respective hardcore punks are aware of their advantageous social origins, the establishment of a critical and credible contra-position is hardly achieved. Gender-related hostility and violence for no relevant reason dominate the songs narrator’s thoughts and in combination with the findings from the other examinations in this article a very critical conclusion is inevitable.

CONCLUSION

The performed close reading of song lyrics in this article has shown that hardcore punks are absolutely able to recognize and reflect on their own social origin. They often just fail to develop a critical approach to the privileges that

this point one could raise the question if hardcore punk simply provided the basis for an institutionalized form of a general male identity crisis with violent symptoms. Further research would be necessary in order to analyze to what degree (hardcore) punk was representative of white middle-class males of the 1970s and 80s and if/what other (youth) subcultures were equally attractive for the respective men.

derive from it. The analysis of the three songs has pointed out that the respective hardcore punks know exactly that they are from a suburban home and therefore grew up in a “white, middle-class, family oriented and socially homogeneous” (Baldassare 467) environment, or in other words a “Bourgeois Utopia” (Fishman 24). The answer to the initial question of hardcore punk as a critical and credible contra-position therefore has to be even more pessimistic than one of Traber’s main conclusions. In his essay, he states that he does not believe that hardcore punks are “completely aware of the contradictions within which they move” because “[t]here is simply too much being invested in [their] public image that wants to be taken quite seriously as a cultural intervention” (50). The textual analyses in this article have shown that teenage hardcore punks should actually be very well-aware of the contradictions that result from their privileged origins. A youth subculture in which influential bands sing about suburban homes that are “not so bad” and from which they “don’t need to run” apparently proves to have enough self-reflexive potential to also recognize that social positions do not simply become marginal through fast music and allegedly-alternative clothing.

An ultra-conservative environment like the Californian suburbs at the dawn of the presidency of Ronald Reagan indeed deserves anything but a completely-assimilated and indifferent youth. However, an alleged “White Minority” from a “Suburban Home” that acts up in form of a “Wrecking Crew” hardly represents a credible contra-position. It rather resembles the blimpish attitudes of masculine suburbanites who play with the narrow-minded and racist ideas of their parents in order to be distinguished from them. As agents of an allegedly-critical subculture, the respective participants are not able to leave behind the structures of a society dominated by white men. The close reading in this essay has shown that they know who they are and where they come from. Nevertheless, their subculture too often resembles a profane amusement—an amusement of “bored boys with nothing to do.”

COMMENT

My examinations of the hardcore punk scene lead to very critical results and as a fan of the genre I had to force myself to approach the topic much more objectively than my personal experiences with punk and hardcore initially

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seemed to allow. After the findings I made, I have to ask myself how I will deal with the music or the lyrics and the contents of hardcore punk in the future. I would very much like to follow suit with John Fiske, who claims that as a fan he is able to appreciate popular culture while as an academic he looks at it from a critical distance (cf. Fiske 260). But even though there do not have to be any changes in my preference for loud and fast music, it is precisely the fact that I am a fan of the genre which makes it hard to ignore the findings that were gained from such a critical distance. Lots of the early hardcore punks from California may have developed a similar critical distance to the erstwhile scene or established entirely new ways and directions for their subculture. However, at least as long as people like Jack Grisham, singer of the early Californian hardcore punk band T.S.O.L. (True Sounds of Liberty), happily talk about their past in documentaries such as the 2006 *American Hardcore* in order to proudly claim: “Me being a violent, robbing, grave-digging rapist was part of my world. Like, this is what we do, man. Yeah, that chick passed out and I pissed in her face, so what?” (24:58 min), it appears rather contradictory to take such an easy way out as Jonathan Formula did in the preface of the 1983 book *Hardcore California*. He states:

I realize that I have no business writing about something which expresses itself so well through music, words and visual imagery. I have no business reinterpreting people’s lives, or their tastes, or their songs or their clothes. . . . No one needs to speak for, or apologize for, or be so foolish as to try to “explain” the people in this book. (5)

About twenty-five years later and in direct contrast to this statement, I still find reasons enough to do exactly what Formula rejected. I did not want to “speak for, or apologize for, or . . . ‘explain’” other people, but I hope I could prove in how far an ongoing examination of “music, words and visual imagery” (I concentrated on words) can provide useful insights into a subcultural movement that still is influential today.¹⁶

16 A peek at the social networking website myspace.com already proves that bands such as Black Flag, the Descendents, and the Adolescents are still highly influential. Countless American and international bands that label themselves punk or hardcore use the web page to list these early Californian hardcore punk groups as influences or idols.

In my opinion, one of the most important characteristics of punk in general is to be highly critical not only with the so-called mainstream but also (or especially) with itself. The close readings of the songs in this article suggest that culture and consequently subculture can be read as text or more accurately semiotic practice. Especially the members of an allegedly-critical subculture that looks back on a development of almost thirty years could make use of this assumption and actually try to critically read their own texts, their own codes, and their own signs. In any case, for present and future scenes of punk and hardcore, the ignorance of critical findings such as the contradictions deriving from many protagonists' positions of intersectional privilege would be fatal because these positions would remain unquestioned and persistent. George Lipsitz's initial statement therefore also applies for critical (re-)interpretations of music, lyrics, and signs of hardcore punk: "[W]e neglect them only at our peril" (321).

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