Gonna be a white minority
All the rest’ll be the majority
We’re gonna feel inferiority
I’m gonna be a white minority

White pride
You’re an American
I’m gonna hide anywhere I can

—Black Flag, “White Minority”

part of popular music’s allure is that it offers fans tools for identity construction. Lawrence Grossberg argues that musical choices open sites for people to negotiate their historical, social, and emotional relations to the world; the way fans define and understand themselves—what they believe and value—is intertwined with the varying codes and desires claimed by a taste culture associated with a specific genre (Grossberg, “Another,” 31). An example of claiming social and cultural difference through music occurs in Dissonant Identities, Barry Shank’s study of the Austin music scene. In explaining her impetus for joining the punk subculture, a fan states, “[I]t really had something to do with just wanting to do something different. With in a way being an outcast but then being accepted.... And you were sort of bound together because the other people hated you. I think that [sic] might be part of the attraction, too, is being in a minority. Being in a self-imposed minority” (122). This tactic of self-marginalization to articulate a politics of dissent is central to the Los Angeles punk scene from (roughly) 1977 to 1983.¹ To resist meta-narratives they found static and repressive, in order to form an
independent sense of self, a small fringe group of youth pursued a life based on that inner-city underclass denied access to the American dream, an identity I will call the "sub-urban."

The racial and class facets of the sub-urban identity are deployed by L.A. punks to re-create themselves in the image of street-smart kids who are skeptical about the trappings of bourgeois America. In doing this they hoped to tap into a more "authentic" lifestyle—equivalent to "real," "hard," "tough," all those qualities associated with a life on city streets—than the one they thought themselves being forced to replicate. However, it is the contradictions in punk's practice of tapping into the aura of the Other that will be the crux of this essay. Underpinning punk's appropriation of otherness is the theory that social categories are fluid constructs that can be accepted, rejected, or hybridized at will, and this belief disrupts the notion that identity is fixed, that there is anything natural or concrete about one's subjectivity. But in using markers classified as subordinate, this voluntarist self-exile is laden with the baggage of preconceived social categories. Punks unconsciously reinforce the dominant culture rather than escape it because their turn to the sub-urban reaffirms the negative stereotypes used in the center to define this space and its population. I consider punk rockers who move into the sub-urban site, but I am also interested in the general celebration of this identity by those who remain at home. While noting the specific positive effects of this border crossing, I analyze punk's lofty subversive goals as a paradoxical mixture of transgression and complicity for reasons the participants themselves overlook.

I will elaborate on the theory of the underclass later; for now, I want to address labeling this space as "sub-urban." The term is more than a pun on the word suburbia, for sub-urban denotes an existence unlike the typical depiction of city life's everyday difficulties. It is important at the onset to emphasize that the sub-urban is multiracial (poverty is not just a "nonwhite" problem), but it does constitute a very specific class position, one that must confront the utmost levels of poverty, hunger, inadequate housing, and the constant threat of physical danger and death. Sub-urbanites are forced to negotiate their environment simply by surviving it as best they can, and it is this "extreme" way of life that punks of the period chose for their hard-edged bohemianism. I do not wish to trivialize the circumstances
many of these kids faced, such as dysfunctional homes, being kicked out by their parents, or the economic downward mobility middle-class families suffered during this period; still, we will see that a good number of the earliest punks present themselves in a way that is rooted in the often romanticized existence of the down-and-out. The choice starts to lose its thrust as a commentary on the parent culture’s own litany of naturalized beliefs upon closer examination: that success is the result more of hard work than the privilege accorded to race and class (is it not such privileges that give them the option not to succeed?); that material wealth is synonymous with freedom (how can it be thought otherwise when these subjects have the freedom to come and go?); that their way of life constitutes the highest level of progress (then why else reject it by going “downward”?). Punk’s adoption of marginality as a way to experience “real life” proves to be a belief in something transparent, thus they manipulate their identities in the name of choosing one they situate as less contaminated by middle-class illusion and conformity. This dissent and social critique are further contradicted and weakened since L.A. punk remains complicit with America’s dominant social values by privileging the individual.2

Although problematizing L.A. punk’s strategy of rebellion, I want to emphasize that their self-marginalization is not lacking in subversive promise. The punk movement did not achieve an outright transformation of society’s dominant truths, but it did at least change the minds of many people. It established a permanent alternative to the corporate apparatus of the music industry by returning to a system of independent labels (originally used to distribute the postwar “race music” that influenced the white rockers of the 1950s). It also enabled a form of political community as witnessed by the numerous punk scenes throughout the world that share their music and ideas. Nonetheless, the foundations of L.A. punk’s politics are shaky, and its liberatory spirit needs to be reconsidered. This subculture claims to desire dissonance and destabilization, but it depends on boundaries and regulatory fictions staying in place to define itself as oppositional. This does not mean the subversive energy completely dissipates, but it cannot be theorized as a trouble-free dismantling of identity categories because it relies uncritically on the dominant for its difference and forces the subordinated into the role of being an
alternative. Punks are actually uninterested in abolishing those restrictive lines of cultural and social demarcation, and any act of denaturalization in this gesture starts to appear accidental. Instead of tearing down the boundaries, they use them to sustain a false sense of autonomy—like those in the center, without the Other they cease to exist.

In making this argument I do not strive to give an account of the way “it really was” in the L.A. punk scene. Instead, I aim to make sense of the way we are told it was by interrogating the narratives, discourses, and practices used to position Los Angeles in the punk movement by considering how participants and their supporters voice the merits of becoming like the sub-urban Other. To do this I turn to published interviews, historical reportage about the scene, and the music itself as a means for articulating shared ideas. What I have for evidence, then, is information culled from the punks’ own cultural production (music and fanzines), documentary films, academic texts, and general historical accounts that all attempt to theorize what punk “is” from its stated intentions and performed acts. In short, along with the music I have a collection of statements received secondhand that I want to piece together, analyze, and critique.

L.A. punks intend to transgress the fixed order of class and racial hierarchies by crossing the boundaries of their inherited subjectivities as privileged white youth. The animosity they direct toward straights is commonly traced to their socialization experience: “Many punks had come from social situations where they had been the outsiders. Having escaped suburbia, having been outcasts, they now had their own group from which they could sneer and deliver visual jolts to the unimaginative, dumb, suburban world” (Belsito and Davis, 17). For many kids, the subculture’s sense of anger and unrest came out of southern California communities where post-sixties children were searching for something to pierce the boredom of their lives and express their sense of social and political marginality. The ability to choose your own narrative, to live according to a worldview that you have authorized for yourself, is an act of self-empowerment, and the ideology of punk advocates just such a reinscription through an identity different from the majority. In Subculture Dick Hebdige describes how these subjects desire to annihilate their past: “the
punks dislocated themselves from the parent culture and were positioned instead on the outside . . . [where they] played up their Otherness” (120). L.A. punks react against the image-conscious mentality of Los Angeles by presenting a contrary image: celebrating ugliness in contrast to beauty, depression instead of joy, the sordid over the morally approved; in short, opting for the city’s gritty underbelly over its glamorous face. It is by using a version of L.A.’s own tricks (e.g., making themselves into something to be looked at, the logic of self-(re)construction, a belief that history can be erased and rewritten) that they attempt to open a space for social critique.

Their strategy of segregating themselves from the status quo in an antithetical style extended itself beyond fashion and music for the core L.A. fans. In early 1978 a run-down apartment complex named the Canterbury Arms became the living quarters for several punks. Craig Lee (guitarist for the Bags) lists a catalog of their new neighbors that relies on racial and class markers to indicate its stark difference from home: the hotel was “occupied by black pimps and drug dealers, displaced Southeast Asians living ten to a room, Chicano families, bikers from a halfway house, in addition to various bag ladies and shopping cart men” (Belsito and Davis, 22). In discussing the Canterbury with Jeff Spurrier, Trudie repeats Lee’s roster of marginal figures: “When we first moved there, the whole building was full of criminals, SSI people, hookers, bikers, and pimps” (122). This site constitutes a form of existence delegitimated in dominant American political discourses and the popular media. Greil Marcus’s review of X’s Los Angeles acknowledges punk’s interest in and sense of connection to the darker realms of urban life ignored by many white middle-class Americans. In his opinion, X’s songs express “an insistence that those horrors [of the urban down-and-out] have made the people who live them and who sing about them better than those who don’t: not just tougher and smarter but morally superior, if only because they’ve seen through the moralism other people only pretend to believe in anyway” (134). Particular signifiers of race and class are used, often mapped onto each other, in establishing this rebel credibility to invent an inner-city subjectivity denoting genuine otherness.

Land and location are central to L.A. politics as they maintain the spatial hierarchy that allows some people access to the “good
life" while keeping others out. For middle-class punks to banish themselves from "paradise" is a transgression of the American dream. Even as their parents fought battles over taxes, property values, and neighborhood boundaries to prevent the influx of inner-city populations, this subgroup of youth (who were the public justification for the parents' politics) rejected the planned utopias to live among the very people the folks back home claimed to be protecting them from. It is a choice about a certain way of life: immersing oneself in urban decay and the asceticism of harsh poverty. This border crossing becomes, quite literally, an act of deterritorialization (to use Deleuze and Guattari's term for escaping repressive social structures) in that changing one's physical environment facilitates a change in the ideological framework of one's personal psychic space. The lifestyle works as an inverse form of social mobility; in their own social formation punks earn status by becoming tougher and going "lower."

One L.A. punk divulges the code: "Everyone got called a poseur, but you could tell the difference: Did you live in a rat-hole and dye your hair pink and wreck every towel you owned and live hand-to-mouth on Olde English 800 and potato chips? Or did you live at home and do everything your mom told you and then sneak out?" (Spurrier, 126). Here austere living is configured as virtuous because it is a sign of honesty and devotion to the subculture's values. A similar example of this occurs in Penelope Spheeris's 1980 documentary The Decline of Western Civilization (hereafter Decline) when Chuck Dukowski, a college student, narrates becoming a punk as his "search" for an answer to the meaning of life: "I did this because I felt like to set myself aside and make myself different, maybe, maybe, [the answer] will just come to me." All the more suggestive is that he delivers this conversion narrative from a room brimming with signifiers of extreme poverty. As the camera pans to follow Ron Reyes (the Puerto Rican singer for Black Flag, adding a nonwhite subject to the picture) giving a tour of his apartment, we see the rest of the band and a few hangers-on (all of them white) lounging on decrepit furniture, drinking cheap beer, surrounded by walls covered with spray-painted band names and profane slogans. It turns out that Reyes pays $16 a month to sleep in a converted closet since he owes money to all the utility companies. This scene establishes a connection with
the “just getting by” life(style) of the suburban subject. Reyes’s attitude about his living conditions teeters between realizing there is something troublesome here—he shows how some people actually live in America—and exhibiting a resigned, dignified posture—this is how “we” live as compared to “you.”

Another voice on using self-marginalization to achieve a sense of hard “realness” comes from the eighties. From 1981 to 1986, Henry Rollins was the singer for Black Flag. In Get in the Van Rollins explains why he was attracted to the lifestyle of the band upon first meeting them:

They had no fixed income and they lived like dogs, but they were living life with a lot more guts than I was by a long shot. I had a steady income and an apartment and money in the bank…. The way they were living went against all the things I had been taught to believe were right. If I had listened to my father, I would have joined the Navy, served and gone into the straight world without a whimper. (8)

Rollins later describes his new life after joining the band and moving to Los Angeles:

I was learning a lot of things fast…. Now the next meal was not always a thing you could count on…. Slowly I came to realize that this was it and there was no place I’d rather be. As much as it sucked for all of us to be living on the floor on top of each other, it still was better than the job I had left in D.C. (11)

Rollins defines himself in terms of his origin in middle-class stability, but also as proudly contesting that existence to live a life beyond the wall the bourgeoisie has built around itself. By adopting a life in contradistinction to his natal social environment, this kind of punk articulates the discourse that autonomy can be achieved by dis-engaging from the ruling social order.

All this locates punk’s self-marginalization physically and philosophically, but where do they stand historically in relation to their identity as an Other? And how will that affect our reading of their attempt at transgression? The domestic and foreign battles of the late sixties were a difficult time for Americans trying to make sense of
their country’s future, but the post-Vietnam years saw the United States transform into a demoralized nation deeply wracked by uncertainty and instability. The historical record proves a daunting one indeed: a lost war, Watergate, feminism and Black Power’s continued attacks on the status quo, soaring inflation and interest rates, oil embargoes causing a decrease in real wages, deindustrialization and downsizing, and hostages in Iran. These are just a few of the problems leading to the feeling that America’s day was past. This was instrumental in the upsurge of neoconservativism from the New Right and the Moral Majority, culminating with Ronald Reagan sweeping into office on his antiliberal platform of laissez-faire economics, tax cuts, and anticommunism.

Research on the economic problems of the middle class in this period—such as Katherine Newman’s and Frederick Strobel’s—reveals the collapsing expectations experienced by late baby-boomer professionals as well as those of the lower class and lower middle class whose once secure manufacturing jobs were disappearing. The “median individual income declined 14 percent between 1972 and 1982” and inflation had affected over half the population as real wages decreased (Newman, Falling, 21). Additionally, postwar subsidies like the Federal Home Loan program and G.I. Bill, which enlarged a white middle class, had ended, and the tax burden had shifted from corporations to the lower and middle classes (Strobel, xiii). California, home of the 1978 tax revolt, was a key player in these events. Mike Davis reports that Reagan’s plan for helping the rich get richer was successful in Los Angeles, where affluence tripled, but “ensured an erosion of the quality of life for the middle classes in older suburbs as well as for the inner-city poor” (7).

Since punk emerged from this social matrix, it is tempting to trace the appropriation of a sub-urban identity to this story of decline and stagnation or to frame it as an act of negation meant to minimize the pain of lost suburban dreams by claiming not to want them. Such an interpretation is inaccurate.

L.A. punk’s common discourse, as expressed in the music and participants’ enunciations, presents a rationale grounded in privatized issues, e.g., feelings of personal alienation or repelling conservative attempts to control individual consciousness (there are exceptions, of course, like the Dils and the Minutemen who openly
voice Marxist ideas). Rick Gershon makes this case in stating (perhaps overstating), “Although people were doing their homework and reading their NMEs, clearly it wasn’t representative of any sort of economic or political situation in L.A.” (Hoskyns, 293). This is not to claim that punk was apolitical or quietist, for it was hardly interested in making nice with the pop masses and corporations. Certainly we can interpret the waning of the middle class as a catalyst thrusting some punks into an understanding of class politics, making their border crossing a response to the conditions of late capitalism; however, to draw a straight cause-and-effect line between these two is misguided. It is rare to find in L.A. punk anything like an outright lament for the loss of white privilege, while critiques of suburbia’s very values and desires are ubiquitous. These punks do not resolve their problems by deciding to work harder; instead, they say “fuck it” to the whole idea of desiring a suburban middle-class lifestyle. L.A. punk more often frames itself in language intimating they engage in this practice to rebel against the bourgeoisie, not to bemoan their dwindling opportunities to join it. We also cannot ignore how punk is commonly framed by its fans and performers alike as a response to the standard teen complaint of “nothing to do,” not as a voice demanding the reinstatement of lost privileges. The extreme conditions of a sub-urban life are not ones many of them are forced into by their parents’ financial problems, so by turning away from suburbia they challenge America’s cherished shibboleths of prosperity and progress.

Clearly there are political motivations behind self-marginalization in punk, but its initial and fundamental concern is that of a privatized quest to differentiate one’s self from the status quo, as a person free of any control outside him/herself. Of course, individualism and its attendant notion of freedom are not fixed. Eric Foner’s recent The Story of American Freedom examines how eras and groups have their own functioning definitions of what it means to be free and to have rights, and these meanings are thoroughly tied to the distinct needs and interests of historically placed people. Still, the most evident source for punk’s definition of individualism is classical liberalism’s defense of the sovereign individual: no person or institution has the right to determine what you can say, think, feel, or do as long as you do not inhibit another person’s freedom. This idea is one of the most
prevailent threads running through American literature and culture. Likewise, self-marginalization as a strategy to achieve this individualism is just as prominent. The crusade for individualism, for escaping the authority of society, is fulfilled by taking up residence in the forest or following Huck Finn's advice to light out for the West's unexplored frontier. In 1977—when punk had developed into a recognizable cultural event—there is no longer a frontier to which one can escape (as Californians know all too well) and the individualist is left searching for a new territory that will provide refuge from the structures of late capitalism. What punks want, then, what they need from their definition of freedom, is a way to understand themselves in relation to the larger social body.

References to one's necessary freedom from coercion are overwhelming in their number and variety in punk rock, but they are hardly deployed in the name of upholding the "free market" doctrines of competitive individualism. Rather, they are concerned with free will and autonomy in thought, values, and identity and being unencumbered by external constraints. In Decline Malissa tells the interviewer that punks are striving "to be accepted any way we want to." And Jennipher advises the audience that "everyone shouldn't be afraid to be as different as they want to be." This autonomy of conscience and action also gets distilled through a logic of artistic originality as the right to be unique instead of a conformist adhering to clichéd form. The earliest scene makers became disenchanted as the punk scene shifted to the hardcore style. The Weirdos' John Denny opines, "[Punk became] more macho, jock, aggressive. The whole individuality thing began to dissipate, and it just became more fascist" (Spurrier, 126). That is ultimately the passkey for grasping how individualism functions in punk subculture: one is either independent and unique, or acquiescent and ordinary.

Paul Fryer's critique of U.K. punk dissent mentions this "insistent championing of individuality," yet he foregoes a deeper analysis that would also complicate punk's pursuit of marginality as an act engaged in the negative impulses of liberal individualism (1). The paradox is that as punks maneuver to enhance their self-identity as autonomous beings their appropriation of otherness starts to resemble one of liberalism's guiding tenets of "property in the person," which characterizes what C. B. Macpherson calls possessive
individualism. The self becomes the property that they protect and aggrandize with the Other manipulated and objectified as a means to that end, thus, denied his/her own individuality and freedom. The ultimate implication of this negligence is that punk unwittingly repeats the ideological patterns of the dominant culture by privileging the importance of the self and self-interest, thus treating the Other as an object to be used for their own desires. Despite the call to be free from external influence, what L.A. punk shows is that without critically questioning our notions of the individual we take those discourses of the center with us everywhere we go. And this finally weakens punk's transgressive potential, for the individualism at punk's core forecloses the possibility of collective action that could more effectively challenge the problems they are protesting.

This spirit of resistance in L.A. punk quite befits the whole subculture's initial ethos of negation. They scream in the face of authority, be it for political justice or just to have fun, by using their music and style. The antiestablishment attitude toward musicianship (three chords being enough), audience participation (demolishing the boundary between performer and audience), and cultural production (the DIY ethic) is intent on positioning punk as the antithesis of corporate-controlled rock and pop as an extension of its social politics. There was also an interest in outsider cultures in English punk as expressed through its quasi-affiliation with black Rastafarian music. Reggae was taken up as the only genuine “rebel rock” of the time due to its focus on the oppression of a marginalized group. White London punks ground their kinship with Rastas in their shared enemies: unemployment, the police, and conservatives. The urban locale of the West Indian immigrants may also partly explain the affinity for city life voiced in U.K. punk. The city represents a space of possibility, both good and bad; it is exciting and dangerous, and one needs more than superficial manners or money to survive there. Iain Chambers notes that since the nineteenth century the English middle class has viewed the city as an alien place antithetical to “Britishness” (23). In violation of this code, as well as the hippie's (also critics of suburbia) reverence for nature as a place offering escape from the mechanistic world, punks come to valorize the urban experience to smash the false ideal of suburban contentment. So bands like the Sex Pistols and the Clash promoted themselves by
citing urban working-class backgrounds to validate their music as a political intervention.

Both Simon Frith and Fryer reveal this working-class narrative to be disingenuous. Fryer charts the strong middle-class influence on British punk by showing that many of the people who conceptualized its ideas and image, produced its cultural texts, and championed the movement as the "new thing" had roots in art schools or other kinds of "educated" middle-class backgrounds. The journalists praising punk were often either university educated or "literate" theorists whose explanations of punk gave the uninitiated outsiders a sociopolitical language. Fryer's target is the working-class rhetoric that, like past forms of rock, gives middle-class fans a rebellious stance through an alternative identity:

By trying to become a working-class expression ... punk allowed middle-class young adults to voice a temporary dissatisfaction with contemporary society through music, dress, and affiliation. Rock has always worked this way for the middle-class, allowing a brief respite from parental expectations and economic pressures; punk culture, as hippie culture had done before it, offered a brief rest from the pursuit of "career opportunities." (13)

This revisionist analysis of U.K. punk subjectivity as an appropriation of marginality allows us to see that the connection to Los Angeles's own middle-class rebellion is that much stronger. While Fryer criticizes punk's shortcomings in a way I find productive, it turns out that plenty of fans—in both the United Kingdom and the United States—were content to believe that punk represented an authentic working-class voice, regardless of the fact that their slogans and methods may have arrived through the intermediary of art school theorists. And as the U.K. variant of punk traveled back to America, Los Angeles is one of the places where the Clash's call to have a "white riot" is taken up enthusiastically, and it is by fitting themselves into public discourses surrounding nonwhites that they hope to realize their version of white insurgency.

The impulse behind this self-fashioning and its class politics is the rejection of a specifically conceived racial identity; namely, whiteness as a specific social, economic, and cultural formation. In denying the benefits of their race, these kids are in effect attempting
to critique the entire system upon which the United States was founded and truly functions. Elaine K. Ginsberg explains the political benefits whites gain by choosing nonwhite marginality in their identity construction: "the decision to 'pass' as [an Other], to self-construct an identity perceived by a white majority as less desirable, disrupts the assumptions of superiority that buttress white privilege and self-esteem. [Consequently,] challenging racial categories threatens those whose sense of self-worth depends on their racial identity and the social status that accompanies it" (15). Additionally, Eric Lott’s work on the racial logic of blackface minstrelsy as "love and theft"—simultaneously a desire for and racist disparagement of black culture—locates this form of entertainment in the “American tradition of class abdication through ... [a] cross-racial immersion which persists ... in historically differentiated ways, to our own day” (51). This situates L.A. punk as a link in that chain (see note 8), and by turning to the sub-urban this treason is amplified by going against the dominant white social class buttressing suburbia. But in setting its sights on this particular form of whiteness—based on a conflation of racial and class categories—an unintended contradiction develops as punk drifts toward essentializing both whiteness and nonwhiteness by ultimately situating a version of bourgeois middle-class whiteness as the norm against which all is compared (which also perpetuates a stereotype of whites), such that it is sustained as the nation’s dominant ideology. This paradox will be addressed more fully later; for now, I want to establish how whiteness is defined and deployed by these subjects.

In Another State of Mind, a 1983 documentary/tour film on L.A. hardcore, it is notable that during this later phase of the subculture’s history the kids interviewed all pick out preppies, rather than hippies (the earlier middle-class youth group punk targets), as the opposite that helps them grasp their identity as punks. In other words, preppiness is the alternate subjectivity open to them. Like punk, preppiness is itself a distinctive way of life—clothes, behavior, and worldview—but one immersed in a notion of affluent whiteness. Now, one can find nonwhite preppies and those who do not wholly subscribe to tenets of conservatism and elitism, but in punk’s social landscape it is a style thoroughly associated with “acting” and
“looking” white as well as “acting” and “looking” wealthy. In punk, whiteness is configured as the subject position of the center, and punk’s border crossing calls attention to its “invisible” ideology that permeates society and evaluates as an inferior “Other” all that does not meet its standards. By associating whiteness with the suburb, punk comments on the (mis)representation of white racial and class subjectivities, i.e., the invisibility of whiteness and the attendant privileges it is awarded.

This can be interpreted as a move toward fulfilling David Roediger’s claim that “consciousness of whiteness also contains elements of a critique of that consciousness and that we should encourage the growth of a politics based on hopeful signs of a popular giving up on whiteness” by “exposing, demystifying and demeaning [its] particular ideology” (3, 12). The Black Flag epigraph about being a “white minority” both labels whiteness as a specific race and resists the homogenizing pressures of that culture—to be bourgeois, mundane, conventional, in a word: uncool. As the lyrics propose, the only viable alternative for white kids uninterested in the American dream is to reject the privilege of their skin color by emulating the lifestyle of marginalized subjects—safe from outside control to the extent that they can remain hidden from and ignored by the larger society like other “oppressed” social groups.¹⁰ So if, as Roediger argues, the “very claiming of a place in the US legally involved … a claiming of whiteness,” punk’s cultural practice becomes even more politically weighted as a refusal of the ruling perception of legitimate Americanness itself (189). The rewards of whiteness are rejected in their new identity through a conscious “disaffiliation,” to use Marilyn Frye’s term, from the racial and class groups in which they are supposed to desire membership.

To implement this strategy, class and racial difference are sometimes conjoined by punks to distinguish how cut off from the mainstream they now are. There is a deep investment in the idea of difference (as well as white middle-class homogeneity) that easily lapses into essentialist formulations. The romanticized naturalization of marginality that slips into their understanding of the sub-urban is a primary element of the contradiction I discuss later, but I want to be clear on the matter of racial and class diversity in L.A. punk subculture.
As with preppies who break the stereotype, one finds nonwhites participating in the L.A. punk scene, paralleling Los Angeles's multicultural population as whites, blacks (Black Flag's producer Spot), Chicanos (the Zeros, the Plugz, and Suicidal Tendencies), Asian Americans (Dianne Chai, bass player for the Alleycats, and Kenny, a teenage fan interviewed in *Decline*), and others gather in the same social spaces. Yet, it must be conceded that the great majority of this subculture consists, quite overwhelmingly and without a hint of doubt, of white people.\textsuperscript{11}

It is more unwise, on the other hand, to generalize the subculture's class background (with the larger groups being lower and middle) because the audience not only was made up of suburban teenagers and runaways but included college students, artists, and older fans like Ray Manzarek of the Doors. In spite of this broad population, it is still the social space of suburbia that keeps drawing punk's contempt. To depict the suburbs as populated by only the middle class is incorrect, for the working class lives there, too (and many who joined the middle class retained working-class inflections after the rise in social status and real estate values). Still, suburban punks are raised seeing what they are supposed to envy and achieve with their lives. The clear visibility of economic divisions and the desires they produce are the means by which the middle class perpetuates itself. Punk uses one's geographical location to determine identity, reading one's presence in suburbia as a telltale of one's desire to climb the next rung of the social ladder. The common themes of the music and fans' enunciations are focused on the perceived threat of a petty bourgeois lifestyle and their consequent rejection of it. Even those white punks not from the middle class can be read as reacting to their race as the passport to such a life, rebelling against the very expectation that suburban comfort is what they desire.

The music reveals a strong discursive investment in depicting "true" fans as either coming from such a mainstream environment or refusing to compete for its dangled rewards. And this protest is repeatedly framed as a privatized concern with the self's personal desires and problems.\textsuperscript{12} The Descendents' "Suburban Home" does not express an overt class politics as much as a fear of losing to the forces of conformity. Similarly, the Adolescents ("Creatures"), Middle
Class ("Home is Where"), and Social Distortion ("Mommy's Little Monster") are just a few other groups dealing directly with the issue of one's relation to a suburban identity. These texts take a critical view of a culture people are born into but find hollow and unfulfilling. The appropriation of sub-urbanism becomes a powerful political statement given that the middle class wants to move up rather than down, indeed, that it treats that mobility as an unspoken birthright. Albeit not the central theme for every band or song, one can apply the anti-suburban discourse to L.A. punk since its general politics critique those who are not dispossessed.

Yet American punk was berated as "inauthentic" because it supposedly lacked the more "serious" political realities considered a necessary source for making a truly oppositional music. Los Angeles in particular is censured as the final promised land of hyperreality where false surface is treated as reality. But that surface image masks the desperate poverty of the underclass behind the stunning wealth of the entertainment industry. Despite having to go to the same kind of "dangerous" parts of town to see bands in Los Angeles, the negative characterization of Los Angeles as too plastic, too clean, too full of sunshine, and too intellectually vacuous was firmly in place outside the city limits as this scene started to develop. In 1981 Greil Marcus echoes the anti-L.A. rhetoric by describing its scene as "a U.K. punk spin-off that has ... jumped that track [of having a politically based music]; perhaps because those who make L.A. punk are so often tracked to become those in power, to enjoy money and mobility without purpose" (184). Such an assessment notes the predominant class background of the scene but obscures the political content of L.A. punk and ignores their actual sociocultural practice.

Exene Cervenka of X comments on Los Angeles's politics by framing it with a connection to racial marginality: "The scene was directly political; it was so political it didn't even know it was political. It was political like Rosa Parks, who didn't feel like getting up because her feet hurt, not because she was trying to start a civil-rights movement. It was a very honest and visceral reaction to things" (Spurrier, 126). Parks's political involvement with the NAACP makes this statement problematic, but it is useful for understanding the kind of transgressive energy some punks wish to depict themselves tapping into. Yet her rhetoric of an intuitive politics does
not tell the whole story. The fanzine *Search & Destroy* often quoted Tony Kinman of the Dils—the first outright political group in the early L.A. scene—in his repeated calls for bands to be more openly political. He chastises L.A. groups for a lack of commitment to making the music a vehicle for social change, as he does in 1978:

> America is pacified by irresponsible media distortions and falsifications, such as: “American punks aren’t political because there’s nothing wrong here.” (FALSE: When seen in an historical context, the rich STILL rule—power STILL lies in the hands of those who control the economy); and “Punks here are just middle-class, well educated kids.” (BUT that does not necessarily invalidate revolutionary integrity—you don’t have to be poor, black or on welfare to know it stinks!) (105)

I find it significant that Kinman does not dispute the media representation of American punks as middle class. Here is a figure deeply involved in the movement who acknowledges the privileged economic background of its members and attempts to prod them into political consciousness.

Nonetheless, one should not discount the underlying political impetus of this emerging culture. Rather than than being born into a life of poverty with nothing to lose, these malcontent descendants of the American dream made a conscious decision to experience a different sense of affect by joining the ranks of the disenfranchised “underclass.”

This is a debated term, coming into vogue in the 1980s (Jencks, 28; Morris, 107–10), but it is used commonly enough to suit our purposes. The concept categorizes poverty, and the cultural lifestyle associated with it, by splitting the poor into two groups: those who are either deserving or undeserving, worthy or unworthy. This division was central to conservative strategies for dismantling social programs they claimed had “created a culture of dependency in a population which explicitly denies the norms and values of the society to which they notionally belong” (Morris, 3). The undeserving poor are stigmatized as enemies of the state who neglect their civic duty and swindle decent citizens of their hard-earned money because they lack the moral fiber and self-motivation to help themselves. Here we have a group framed as so base they warrant no help
whatsoever. What is stubbornly ignored by the pundits manipulating this scapegoat portrait are the structural inequalities at the root of poverty—racism, unemployment, and dwindling employment opportunities for those unable to leave the urban centers for jobs relocated to outlying suburbs.

This inaccurate, malicious portrayal of poverty opens a way for thinking about the roots of L.A. punk’s political imagination. Conservatives represent the underclass as a counterculture “who stand—in terms of values, behavior or life style—in some sense outside ‘the collectivity’” (Morris, 79). Punks take this discourse of the underclass and turn it into a badge of honor. This attitude is central to statements Jeff Spurrier collected in his 1994 interviews with people from the original scene who lived in the sub-urban:

**GEZA X:** I was on SSI—about $600 a month. That was like the artist’s subsidy. Nobody worked, everybody was broke, but everybody just fed each other. It was like a tortilla-and-no-beans diet. (120)

**KK BENNETT:** They fed themselves by raiding an ice-cream truck that was parked in the alleyway. They stole about twenty gallons and ate it for weeks…. And there was a liquor store … that took our food stamps. (120, 122)

These statements encode the survival techniques of extreme poverty—living by one’s wits—as part of an alternate truth system, an ethic of living that rejects the standard patterns. These memories are layered with the rhetoric of community and improvisational negotiations of hardship, yet, ironically, they fit the dominant culture’s negative depiction of the underclass. Punks accede to and incorporate the racist assumptions of underclass theories by engaging in the “pathological” activities attributed to that group. Both Geza X and KK ennoble the kind of behavior conservatives brandish for their periodic inner-city witch hunts. Punks act this way because they think it is how the sub-urban Other is “supposed” to behave. What is revealed is the way L.A. punks rely on the center’s discourses for their sense of marginality. This dilemma should be read as a cultural negotiation—a practice and rhetoric built on the conflicting mixture of belief systems the punks are working through—but that
qualification must be accompanied by an attempt to critically theorize the contradiction arising when punks adopt a stereotype and posit it as sincere rebellion.

This will be my focus in the next section, but this incongruity signals that one should approach any interpretation of this social and cultural practice with caution. There is a hazard here of overlooking the way that those whom punks try to emulate are themselves engaged in performing a version of classed and raced (as well as gendered and sexed) identities as tactical moves to survive their lives. The discourse of many L.A. punks asserts the belief that they are tapping into an authentic existence. In doing this they deny the Other’s own ability to perform by treating the underclass identity as “real” instead of a possible role. It is also necessary to be aware of the different boundaries restricting how far certain people are allowed to go with any such performance. It is clear that those who are not living a sub-urban life as a self-conscious politics are more limited in their options than suburban white kids, even if one takes the decline in middle-class income during this period into consideration.

Still, we should also note how punk’s appropriation of otherness exhibits a significant transgressive shift in the ideological investments of this group. Their self-marginalization is enacted in opposition to the conservative vision of American life where people adhere to those values of the proper American: self-reliance and self-sacrifice directed toward material success. But punk’s desire for a disjuncture between dominant and subordinate cultures gets complicated when race enters the picture. The lower position most minorities are forced to hold prevents full participation in the nation’s politics or benefiting from its promises. This helps to account for why suburban punks were so drawn to the image of the sub-urban to spurn the complacent life of American conservatism: to be associated with a nonwhite underclass fulfills their logic of being disconnected from the norms and free from the direct control of institutional power. Barry Shank’s discussion of punk’s subterranean nature repeats the gesture of Cervenka by emphasizing the connection to marginalized racial groups a punk lifestyle opens:

This rock’n’roll truly challenged people. It was not safe to like it; you could get beat with a billy club; you could get arrested. The ability to
derive pleasure from punk rock gave an instant aura of danger, independence, and power to any individual.... [Being a fan of punk] seemed to produce momentary experiences for middle-class [whites] akin to the everyday life of Blacks or Hispanics. (110)

This circles us back to Black Flag's song, seeing how punk's strategy is to flip the binary of majority/minority. Minority status is the privileged element for this group as they valorize it into a condition to be appropriated. This recognizes the structural racism in American society, yet it does so by essentializing the nonwhite Other into a victim role—romanticizing nonwhites into all that is simultaneously threatening and threatened.

This is an act George Lipsitz criticizes as "the frequent invocation of people of color as sources of inspiration or forgiveness for whites, and the white fascination with certain notions of primitive authenticity among communities of color, [which] all testify to the white investment in images that whites themselves have created about people of color" (Possessive, 118). What aims to be a critique of repression in L.A. punk ends up an agent of it, for its rejection of the dominant culture relies on adopting the stereotypes of inferior, violent, and criminal nonwhites.15

Punks attempt to re-create themselves by slipping on their conception of the life(style) and appearance of a marginal group, and this new self is one that seemingly disrupts all certainty of an original core being.16 The suburban identity is revealed as just another ideological construct of normalcy imposed on its youth to contain them in the dominant symbolic order. By shifting identities and donning what they regard to be the image of the subordinate, they are engaged in an implicitly subversive act that transcends a simple disaffected teenage rebellion as it disrupts the entire system that has formed both themselves and the Other. In effect this act destroys the hierarchy of meaning so that binaries—the method by which bodies and products are judged, separated, and contained—are shown to be arbitrary and empty. Such a positive treatment of punk's control over identity formation neglects the problematic assumptions underlying how this subjectivity is actually achieved. In short, these "real" punks choose an existence based on poverty, addiction, and random sex and violence—what they consider to be the American reality
rather than the American dream. Ultimately, they are working from a particular *image* of that reality by playing out the authorized stereotypes they associate with that habitus and expect to find there.\(^{17}\)

This chosen life of social marginality depends on its relation to what the suburban bourgeoisie decides to include and exclude from the center. The cultural practice of punk’s subject formation comes to take on another quality: a colonial appropriation of the sub-urban life through a specific “look” and behavior. Punk’s border crossing can be read as a commodification of the Other that aestheticizes identity for capital in a symbolic economy of signification. Some are bothered that punk’s counterhegemonic power ultimately cannot escape co-optation in the material economic system, but the truth is they employ that same logic against those they intend to posit as the newly privileged element. They exploit the sub-urban to produce a product marketed through the channels of their own bodies and cultural production, and while I do not accuse them of a “failed rebellion” because they cannot get outside that system, I do reject treating this contestation as if the agents are completely aware of the contradictions within which they move. There is simply too much being invested in this public image that wants to be taken quite seriously as a cultural intervention.

The most obvious way to problematize this appropriation is by considering the option of (re)escape waiting for some participants back home. Although one must be wary of generalizing the disparate economic statuses and life options of white L.A. punks, we must also recall that this rebellion, as framed by middle-class punks, is a rejection of the desires and social values *causing* the sense of economic anxiety their parents and mainstream peers feel. These kids left a parent culture that believed their lifestyle could survive if the proper political steps were taken—hence the sweeping turn to conservatism—so there is still a sense of hope for the future. And those values that attempt to maintain a middle-class lifestyle, which punks ran from, are still waiting for them. Besides, any transition away from a sub-urban life will seem all that much easier because the next level appears all that less grim. Even the Chicana Alice Bag of the Bags, who left her east L.A. barrio to live in the Canterbury, has a better place to run as the first phase of L.A. punk is dying in late 1979.
Disheartened by the changes in the subculture, she “moved back home and had quit [the punk scene] and was getting ready to go back to school” (Spurrier, 124). By contrast, for “true” sub-urbans this life is one with very real threats of hunger, disease, and death that are firmly rooted in a systematized inequality from which they are unable to easily free themselves.

Admittedly, this border crossing increases the aura of “credibility” attached to punks because they are living this life, but that status is just another essentialist version of true identity. Postmodern parody and decontextualized signifiers cannot adequately account for this cultural practice because these subjects want context—they move into the sub-urban and are utterly invested in it, otherwise they are mere “poseurs.” This pursuit of authenticity, no matter how sincere, is as insulting a gesture as playacting when compared to those who cannot escape. That they would freely opt to live like oppressed groups formed by historical and social conditions they cannot claim says much about the political dedication of some punks, but it also speaks to how people of their social status understand their relationship to the notion of freedom. As Grossberg proposes, mobility and access can be configured spatially, for where one is placed on the map of the social totality “define[s] the forms of empowerment or agency … available to particular groups” (“Identity and Cultural Studies,” 102). Such places are constituted in a way that can offer either emancipation or further repression—a large number of punks enjoy the former. The crushing realities of racial and/or economic subjugation are trivialized in their search for autonomy. They become mere adornments for differentiation to be discarded when no longer useful to the new subjectivity—just one more brand in the supermarket of identities. Punks attempt to be associated with a group that is ignored and swept away from public acknowledgment, like Ralph Ellison’s “invisible man” (forced to disappear despite his very real presence, a condition the Black Flag epigraph treats positively), but that oppressed status is complicated by being presented in a way that requires, that begs for, the shocked gaze of the conservative masses.

If we return to the Canterbury apartments, that physical and social space chosen for its qualities of extreme otherness, only seven months after a contingent of punks moved in, we find a growing
tension between the “real” sub-urbans and the new initiates. Craig Lee describes the changing state of the hotel and the negative reaction of the non-punk residents to their neighbors:

The halls smelled like shit, someone constantly pissed in the elevator … one girl was raped at gunpoint, cockroaches were everywhere, and another girl had an angry neighbor throw a pot of boiling soup on her face. Racial tensions were high. The basement rehearsal room had been padlocked, little fires were breaking out and punks started to flee. What had been envisioned as L.A.’s equivalent of the Chelsea Hotel [in New York] was no longer hospitable to kids playing Wire and Sham 69 full blast at four in the morning. (Belsito, 31)

The punks treated the Canterbury the way they thought it deserved. They behaved like spoiled kids who refuse to clean up after themselves and showed no respect for a place some are forced to live in because they lack a choice. This is more than the “snotty teen” pose punks affected. Here we see them using the sub-urban identity but refusing the possible multiple desires of people in that habitus. The sub-urban subject is exoticized, forced into a preexisting stereotype that further stabilizes a monolithic view of marginality. Gayle Wald’s account of this problem (with reference to Janis Joplin) is accurate: it “borders on a reactionary romanticization … and a reification of the notion of racial [and class] difference” (158). The belief that this form of self-fashioning endows one with authenticity in contradistinction to the smiling mask of white middle-class life is based on the same uncritical acceptance of the racial logic found in Norman Mailer’s “The White Negro”: “the Negro knows more about the ugliness and danger of life than the White” (602). Lee does not elaborate on the cause of the “racial tensions” at the Canterbury, but one might assume they grew out of a feeling that the punks “don’t fit in” here and have no respect for “us.”

Any conceptualization of punk identity that equates the suburban and sub-urban as having comparable opportunities for subject (re)formation is problematic. “True” sub-urbans have considerably less control over their life choices, least of all over the identities they can afford to wear or the places where they can show them off. Punks ignore how some have the freedom to explore different identities while ontological mobility is restricted for others—“white subjectivity
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[is equated] with a social entitlement to experiment with identity” (Wald, 153). Denaturalizing both suburban and sub-urban identities is a worthy objective, but then what? This is not a plea for returning to a naive conception of authenticity, it simply acknowledges that suburban punks crossing racial and class lines come from a position where they are allowed to speak and act, where they have more options. All identities are performances of approved categories (ways we are either taught or adopt) so punks are trying on a particular subjectivity to accomplish a transgressive goal. Yet something lingers, something that intimates complicity, when kids coming from comfortable lives earn hipness by playing dress “down”—a version of symbolic capital acquisition in the economy of youth culture.

By framing these practices of signification within an economic metaphor, we see that punk exhibits a colonizing impulse in its border crossing. It exploits the condition of sub-urbans by mimicking a “way of life” others must negotiate in order to survive. What can be considered the sub-urban’s labor (i.e., what they “do”) in the economy of signification is to look and act “poor,” and this is turned into a form of prestige by punks: being different by acting poor, which is all the more troublesome since they believe there is such a way of behaving that is then totalized. Acquiring symbolic capital is how the appropriation of otherness “pays,” and it becomes the imperializing gesture in punk’s tactic of escape. Representing themselves as the same tears down the barriers of difference but as a by-product of self-aggrandizement. Punk’s immersion in social disenfranchisement belies the more problematic ramifications of self-marginalization when considered a subject position for less or nonmarginalized kids to don and denude at their leisure. This is a re-othering because those in the margin are made to conform to preconceptions that are a product of the center. Punks totalize their chosen marginal subjects according to their own narrative of honorable poverty; they force the Other into a fixed identity to empower themselves. The assumption that the life of the underclass is open to appropriation objectifies them in a model of emulation, while conveniently ignoring how these people may want to escape from the degradation of this life.

By treating them as an exploitable object enabling punks to achieve their own desires, this re-othering allows the center to continue speaking for the Other. By eliding the heterogeneous hopes
existing in the sub-urban, they silence the marginal subject’s own viewpoint on marginality. By proposing that they have joined a different cultural formation by adopting a certain lifestyle, punks further naturalize that subject position in a binary relationship to suburban life that is also (re)naturalized. The power of whiteness is recentered and buttressed as the norm through a logic of stereotyped racial and class difference—those sought-after characteristics of otherness that are actually products of dominant white discourses—to give a substantive meaning to their cultural practice. I wish to avoid duplicating the punks’ theft of voice, but it is highly dubious that anyone located in the sub-urban—for a reason other than free will—would consider this life a just and good consequence of the unequal distribution of wealth.

This incongruity between positive social intentions and negative ideological underpinnings rarely appears in the enunciations of L.A. punks. The result is that living on welfare becomes more like a game than a necessity, daily navigating danger is a source of excitement rather than terror. Although punk situated itself as a self-conscious reaction to the commodification ubiquitous in late capitalism—realizing that even as it berated corporate rock it could not sell its product without replicating its processes—it appears neither capable of, nor interested in extending, that critique to its own cultural practices at this level. Too many suburban L.A. punks seem to believe they can achieve an identity free of their past personal history by moving to this social space and positioning themselves as a taste culture on the boundaries of mainstream consumption. Ironically, it is this system of differentiation that limits the effectiveness of punk’s politics. Those subjects adopting a sub-urban “lifestyle” are, in essence, duplicating the methods of the group they publicly vilify to realize their rebellion. They leave the parent culture to form their own “lifestyle enclave” by producing an identity different from others according to certain patterns of belief, dress, and leisure activity, all framed as a vanguardist movement occurring in underground venues for people of the same inclination (Bellah, 335). To escape the group mentality, they build their own group; one purposefully designed to appeal to certain types of people while keeping others out. As a subculture of secret meanings and codes for dress, bodily movement (be it dancing, walking, or posing), and attitude,
the identity produced is an exclusionary one; therefore, in the end
they are not unlike their parents. Although intended to function as
a counterhegemonic alternative to the center, punk remains less
a threat to institutions of authority than merely another option
because it must maintain the center’s standards to position itself.

On a more directly political level, punk’s rejection of radical col-
lectivity—to limit any suppression of the individual—keeps its own
revolt locked within the very system it claims to be protesting. Of
course this critique is not utterly foreign to punk. A key theme in
the work of Crass is the call for a collective politics reaching beyond the
subculture, but their very demand for collective thinking signals its
overwhelming lack. Taking a hard anarcho-punk stance, Craig O’Hara
complains, “Many Punk anarchists have been content to stay within
their own circle and have rejected the possibility of widespread anar-
chy. This attitude is referred to as a conception of ‘personal’ anarchy.
… This idea echoes the epitome of bourgeois culture” (69). Yet it is
really “Punk” itself that replicates the dominant by using the same
basic ideology and social patterns as the parent culture. The trans-
gressive potential of their strategy for rejecting America’s reigning
ideologies is enervated since it is quite complicit with such beliefs.
And this is due to that stringent faith in the primacy of the individ-
ual—one of the key discourses America and Americans use to justify
coercive and oppressive acts—so central to punk’s conceptualization
of resistance. Any economic and social injustices punk rails against
are an effect of the logic of individualism. An ideology rationalizing
the withdrawal into private concerns—be it financial or spiritual or
aesthetic fulfillment—by advocating self-interest is the one taken up
as the foundational tenet of punk politics.

Punk’s discourse finally becomes an extension of the parent cul-
ture’s belief system; an unconscious affirmation of the materialism
and political self-interest this “counterculture” claims to oppose.
And it is in this light that punk’s ability to work as a form of dissent
needs to be reconfigured. Zygmunt Bauman’s critique of floating
identities proves apt. Such multiple subjects “favour and promote a
distance between the individual and the other and cast the other pri-
marily as the object of aesthetic, not moral, evaluation; as a matter of
taste, not responsibility” (33). The late capitalist alienation these
subjects feel is due to their investment in a version of autonomy that
perpetuates that sense of isolation by privileging an insular individuation over a collectivity that will allow the inclusion of non-punks. They force themselves into a solipsistic cocoon wherein they cannot affect the conditions they claim make them unhappy, and this adds the finishing touches to their sense of alienation. As a music and culture produced by postmodern subjects, punk may best be understood in terms of a Foucauldian micropolitics: the localized effect of crossing boundaries contains the potential to spread. This possibility is severely limited, though; punk is too far in the margin, due to its own actions and those of society at large, to be heard by the kind of mass audience a more subdued music can (or is allowed to) reach. Perhaps, however, that is all that can be asked of it.

My intention has not been to police ontological boundaries of race and class as they have been traditionally demarcated. The point is hardly that punks fail to achieve a thing called authenticity, a "true" and whole self; nor is it that they fail to meet an impossible injunction to exist in either "pure 'autonomy' or total encapsulation" (Hall, 447).19 The point is to ensure that people deploying "subversive" narratives and practices maintain the skepticism that initially prompted the decision to transgress. Punks prove themselves highly adept at criticism, including themselves, but more typically of those positioned as outside themselves. Yet I have shown the borderline that could not be crossed in Los Angeles, the discourse they refused to treat with critical vigor. For those punks who join the sub-urban and those simply celebrating it as the Other of suburbia, their means of self-construction remain entrenched in the logic of individuality as it is practiced by the enemy: the bourgeoisie they claim to reject. Despite the possibilities for engaging in denaturalization, their contrarian version of "reality" and the "good" succumbs to the illusion of a whole self, and the home where they choose to cultivate that subjectivity is based on stereotypes circulated by the dominant power formation. Although attempting to create a free self on their own terms, L.A. punks forgo critiquing their complicity in denying freedom, thus getting further entwined within the system they despise to the point that the paradox becomes so accepted—like the unseen whiteness in the center—that it is rendered all the more invisible to themselves.
Notes

1. My bookends encompass the points from which punk becomes a recognized scene in Los Angeles to its transformation into hardcore and final wane into cliché. There is typically a line drawn between punk and hardcore that places the latter in the 1980s, depicting it as faster, more violent, and less interested in the artistic motivations of the first phase. Hardcore is all of these in its different guises, but several of the so-called “later” punks had been interested and active in the scene well before any official demarcation was imposed. Black Flag is a band associated with hardcore who existed since the beginning; in fact, “White Minority” was first recorded in January 1978, well after the Germs’ first single but before Dangerhouse issued the Yes L.A. compilation of “properly” punk bands. Stories of the changing scene—that hardcore pushed out Hollywood art-rockers with younger, dumber, rougher suburban kids—rarely mention that the hardcore bands had been blocked out of the scene by the key clubs, so it did not occur as suddenly as historians tend to frame it. Thus hardcore is best understood as an emerging culture within an emerging culture.

2. In Resistance through Rituals John Clarke et al. establish a theory of subcultures as a symbolic response to social contradictions with political limits: “The problematic of [a subculture’s] experience can be ‘lived through,’ negotiated or resisted; but it cannot be resolved at that level or by those means” (47). The notion of the popular as an imagined solution to problems is limited; the actions of L.A. punks who moved to the sub-urban were influenced by the music and subculture. To expect no more of a subculture than that it be a symbolic reaction to social problems, and a realistic perception of the odds for failure, underestimates what can be achieved. In short, L.A. punk’s very material act deserves a critique that takes it more seriously.

3. That there are boundaries determining the kind of marginality one is allowed to pursue is another level of contradiction and complicity in L.A. punk rebellion. For a counterhistory of punk and racism see Roger Sabin’s essay. In terms of gender, the subculture remained determinedly masculine despite the increased opportunities for women to express their own critique of gender roles. The very interest in a life typified as “tough” is indicative of punks accepting the stereotype of virility attached to certain racial (most commonly African-American) and lower-class identities, which then posits suburban males as more feminized, domesticated, and sensually reserved; see Frith’s Sound Effects for a discussion of sexuality in punk in comparison to disco. See also Lauraine Leblanc’s Pretty in Punk for a fuller analysis of female participation in punk as a masculine subculture. Furthermore, there was a distinctly homophobic sensibility during this time; refer to Jeff Spurrier for some fans’ comments on this issue (124); also see Dechaine on how this changes with the later “queercore” movement.

4. See Mike Davis on the development and political mobilization of L.A.’s
suburbs, especially chapter 3. In The Possessive Investment in Whiteness George Lipsitz gives a detailed history of the Federal Housing Administration's racist practices in making home loans that resulted in the overwhelming white demographics of postwar suburbs.

5. See Edward Soja's "It All Comes Together in Los Angeles" for further discussion of the economic shifts during the 1970s and 1980s in Los Angeles and how these reflect and construct specific spatial sites that then affect the relationship between subjects and power.

6. In Sound Effects Simon Frith claims that punk "was about the relationship of individualism and collectivism," and while he does not discuss this point in detail it does open up the question of how these two forms of social interaction are configured in the punk ethos (267). Punk strives for a reconciliation between the individual and the group. It understands that a collectivity is necessary even to have a music scene, but this does not require a containment of the individual by or within that group. In terms of a political collectivity there are many instances of punk acting as part of a group: the antinuclear movement, the Rock against Racism concerts in England, and the D.C. punk scene of the 1980s, which often organized political events. A localized list could go on ad infinitum; still, I contend that the individual is the privileged element in the majority of punk rock and that it places more value on the ultimate freedom of that individual and his/her personal means of agency in and against society.

7. The details of punk as a style (fashion, music [form and performance], dancing, etc.) and approach to cultural production have been dealt with at length. See Hebdige, Henry, Laing, Nehring's Flowers in the Dustbin, and Shank as sources attending to this topic with more depth than I have space for here. For more general histories and commentaries on L.A. punk specifically, see Belsito and Davis, Hoskyns (291–330), James, and Lewis.

8. See Hebdige's Subculture for further discussion of the connection between punk and reggae. See Lipsitz's "Ain't Nobody Here" and "Against the Wind" on rock's postwar origins in black and white cultural mixing and working-class culture. See also Grossberg's "Rock, Territorialization, and Power" (90–93) for a counterargument to Lipsitz's narrative of middle-class transgression in the 1950s.

9. Similarly, albeit more positively, George Lipsitz describes American hippies' move to inner-city neighborhoods as "a real rebellion in dialogue with the traces of previous working-class cultures and urban life" ("Against," 129). Before them were others seeking to escape boredom by living out stereotypes of racial otherness: white jazz aficionados like Carl Van Vechten and Mezz Mezzrow, Beats dedicated to bebop and marijuana, and those middle-class whites from segregated suburbs who searched for "prestige from below" through the consumption of that emerging music called rock and roll ("Against," 120). Therefore, when situating punk in rock history (and today's white rap fans, for that matter), we find that its proclaimed break with the mainstream is quite a conventional and contradictory, though still politically significant, act of rebellion (see note 8).

10. Greil Marcus attacks "White Minority" as a song about hatred of the
Other, that person or thing which is the not-I (185). His censure is based on misunderstanding the song's lyrics: what he reads as "breed inferiority" is actually "feel inferiority" (184). This is not an attack on the Other, it is a call to become Other, to "hide anywhere" you can so as to escape that center legitimizing itself through "white pride." Discarding social centeredness for a life on the periphery allows one to sidestep the dominant power formations and to forestall being incorporated into their system of reality.

11. I am not offering the kind of history of L.A. punk that is well documented in Belsito and Davis's *Hardcore California*. Most of the bands I mention and people I quote are chosen because they signify the scene's discourses in their dominant mode. The politics of this representation—who is included in a documentary or compilation record, who gets their music reissued—can be criticized, but the fact is that bands like Black Flag, the Germs, and X are representative of L.A. groups. See Lipsitz's *Dangerous Crossroads* for an analysis of Chicano bands articulating their social critique to a white "alienated suburban youth" audience (85).

12. For a take on existence not explicitly concerned with suburban life, consider X's grim images of an urban landscape in "We're Desperate" and "Nausea," where life is a series of hardships and hassles. The elision of suburbia as the place one calls home also occurs in Fear's "I Love Livin' in the City" and the Circle Jerks' "Behind the Door," both of which rely on images of a seedy, noirish suburban environment involving dark and violent naturalistic imagery. Regardless of whether these bleak pictures are autobiographical or clichés of hard living, they erect a boundary between two ways of life: one is risky, painful, and exciting; the other is safe, unfeeling, and dull.

13. See also Micaela di Leonardo, and Piven and Cloward on the underclass debate. See Michael Katz for a history of welfare in America, including the tropes used to discuss it.

14. The idea that punks do not engage in hard work is a bit misleading. The energy musical communities put into establishing their own scenes is impressive. There is definitely a serious work ethic for the true believers as is witnessed in the strong DIY ethic of punk. In his journals Henry Rollins continually praises the people involved with Black Flag for their unwavering energy and diligence. Still, it must be conceded that in most music scenes the majority of people are satisfied playing the role of passive consumer.

15. Punk's challenge to whiteness is further conflicted by the music itself. Its investment in the label "whiteness" has been transformed, yet, in a sense, it calls attention to and plays up its race through the music. Michael Bérubé describes punk rock as "about as unfunky as music gets, so it's clearly not the kind of aspiration to blackness you find among blue-eyed soulsters from the Rolling Stones to Eric Clapton to Michael Bolton." Some imagine punk bleaching out rock's "blackness," but this should point us toward recognizing the problem of trying to attach the name "whiteness" to punk music: at its root it remains a style of rock and roll—indeed, a self-conscious bricolage of its very history—replete with the deep grounding in African-American culture that helped to give
birth to rock (see note 8). Punk may not be considered “black” music, but it is hardly as disconnected from African-American influence as might be assumed. Its own interests echo the attributes typically deployed to explain what rock learned from African-American traditions (and thereby naturalizing the cultural as racial difference): “honest” expression, energy and emotional passion, and articulating dissent through music.

16. One may consider Judith Butler’s work on performativity where she turns to Mary Douglas’s theory of the margins to propose that the “pollution” ingested by going there will “contaminate” normalized discursive practices inscribed in subjects (132). The sub-urban existence, with its status as the reviled, is chosen as a means for articulating opposition to the centralized discourses read as “white” by punks, with all that racial designation implies to them (often within essentialist paradigms) about social privilege and bland conformity. What Butler calls the “operation of repulsion” is capable of weakening the boundaries that are “tenuously maintained for the purposes of social regulation and control” (133). Crossing into the marginal territory is dangerous from the center’s viewpoint because it is a challenge to the stable narratives of the social order, and appropriating such an identity of a threatening otherness to produce their subjectivity is what punk thrives on. I argue against reading the appropriation of otherness as a success in this case, but I believe the L.A. punks move us a little closer to imagining what an alternative could look like; what we get from punk is a view into potentiality. We also see the possible danger in Butler’s theory, for punk’s rejection of the dominant culture relies on adopting the stereotyped connotations of inferior, violent, and criminal nonwhites invented by it. In Butler’s defense, I have left underdeveloped her idea of parody because the notion of parodic play in L.A. punk is untenable. Punks do “perform” differently, thereby opening the possibility of decentering subjectivity as a whole to reveal how all identities can be read as a form of costume and performance. Yet, they are not poor people acting “more” poor, nor “normal” people overdoing the conventions of normalcy. For the most part, punk would have to wait for the riot grrrls movement for anything resembling a truly parodic manipulation of regulatory identities (see Gottlieb and Wald; and Nehring’s Popular).

17. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of habitus conceptualizes how social space is a key factor in the socialization process influencing a group’s patterns of practices and beliefs—a system of seemingly unconscious dispositions that shape subjects’ particular actions, attitudes, and perceptions of the world. Identity is formed through distinguishing which group one belongs to by comparing it against the groups in which one is not a member. It is suggestive of the purported ease with which a person from outside a specific social space may assume they can join a different group through mimicry. But these differences are assigned specific meanings and are maintained by strict, yet unstated, rules within the group itself.

18. Stephen Duncombe raises similar concerns about the likelihood of collective action and enervated dissent in relation to zine publishers of the 1990s.
Like punk, zines privilege an ethos of individuality and otherness but entangle themselves in a logic of us versus them. They form a network based on a valorization of being “losers,” but a collective response to the systemic problems they critique becomes difficult since the publishers are often so preoccupied with avoiding co-optation that they descend ever further into cliques of obscurity.

19. Johan Fornäs argues that debating authenticity is pointless. Authenticity should be seen as an act of contextualized self-reflexivity such that it “appears as an option and a construction rather than as a given fact” (quoted in Nehring, Popular Music, 63). Identity is formed according to localized “rules” that create the boundaries defining authenticity, and sense is then freed from a romantic conception of “natural” origin or purity.

Works Cited


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