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PUNK LEGENDS: CULTURAL REPRESENTATION AND OSTENSION

Jeffrey S. Debies-Carl

Subcultures give rise to conflicting representations both in popular media and in scholarly investigations. Several interpretations have been offered to explain the great variety of descriptions and analyses. For example, this might simply be a product of changes over time,¹ but further explanation is needed when we consider that variation exists even when controlling for time and place. Even in the same nation, during the same time period, any particular subculture will frequently be depicted in diverse and conflicting ways. In fact, the descriptions and analyses can vary so much that some question the very idea of coherent subcultures. If there is so much diversity, it has been suggested, then perhaps there is no such thing as a stable and identifiable subculture at all.² Thus, while understanding the basic character of a subculture should in theory be relatively simple, in practice the attempt proves more difficult. In attempting to do so, one immediately encounters a range of diverse and conflicting claims that make a simple description all but impossible. However, these difficulties may be of unexpected value. Crucial insights can be gained by examining the conflicting accounts themselves—rather than treating them as obstacles barring the way to a fuller understanding of the subculture in question.

In this chapter, I propose an approach to understanding conflicting subcultural representations that is rooted in the nature of storytelling and retrospective accounts. This is premised on the idea that while facts matter, so do beliefs. The things people believe—whether tentatively or whole-heartedly—have real consequences regardless of whether the precipitating belief is based on fact. I therefore argue that representations of punk—whether found in the media or in scholarly reports³—can be fruitfully understood as a sort of ‘legend’. Among folklorists, legends are ‘accounts of past happenings’⁴ told as though they *could* be true

¹ For example, see J. Davies, ‘The Future of ‘No Future’: Punk Rock and Postmodern Theory’, *Journal of Popular Culture* 29:4 (1996), 3-25.

² A. Bennett, ‘Subcultures or Neo-Tribes? Rethinking the Relationship Between Youth, Style and Musical Taste’, *Sociology* 33:3 (1999), 599–617.

³ In the interest of informing future research, I emphasize scholarly truth claims in this discussion to understand how it plays a role in this process similar to more frequently criticized accounts from the media.

⁴ B. Ellis, *Aliens, Ghosts, and Cults: Legends We Live* (Jackson 2003), 167.

regardless of whether they actually are.⁵ Different legends can thus provide competing or even contradictory claims about the same subject. Legends—which typically contain secular content⁶—inspire engagement from the listener and debate over their veracity,⁷ distinguishing them from other narrative forms. Fairy tales and literature, for example, are understood to be fictitious, whereas myths are fully believed and contain sacred stories.⁸ Two further characteristics of legends help explain why legends can engage audiences and why they tend toward wide dissemination: 1) they express social values or concerns and 2) they can have real outcomes. Legends make compelling claims that resonate strongly with people’s concerns and worldviews. Because of this, some people may react to a legend as though it was true. This is a process called ostension.⁹ These imitative actions might be intended to mitigate a legend’s perceived threats, test its veracity, or even act it out and so enable the individual to become a part of the legend themselves. Because the legend sparked belief, the *outcomes* of that legend become real—become fact—through people’s actions. This can occur even if the legend itself was not true to begin with and even if there are contradictory versions of the same legend in circulation.

For example, in the United States during the 1970s, there was a growing fear regarding claims that sadistic adults were contaminating Halloween candy with poison or razor blades to harm children.¹⁰ Despite an absence of documented cases, these legends spread widely throughout the nation and their effects can still be felt today. Best and Horiuchi famously argued that this legend proliferated because it resonated with concerns that social research found to be increasing: crime was on the rise, strangers could not be trusted, and children were no longer safe.¹¹ The threat conveyed became more plausible because it invoked popular concerns. Listeners became engaged with the plausible danger, discussed it intensely, and took action in

⁵ L. Dégh, *Legend and Belief* (Bloomington 2001).

⁶ J.H. Brunvand, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends and their Meanings* (New York 1981).

⁷ Dégh, *Legend*.

⁸ W. Bascom, ‘The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narrative’, *Journal of American Folklore*, 78:307 (1965), 3-20. Outside of folklore, ‘myth’ has taken on a derogatory connotation as a definitively false fable. See D.E. Goldstein, S.A. Grider, and J.B. Thomas, *Haunting Experiences: Ghosts in Contemporary Folklore* (Logan 2007).

⁹ L. Dégh and A. Vázsonyi, ‘Does the Word ‘Dog’ Bite? Ostensive Action: A Means of Legend-Telling’, *Journal of Folklore Research* 20:1 (1983), 5-34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ J. Best and G. Horiuchi, ‘The Razor Blade in the Apple: The Social Construction of Urban Legends’, *Social Problems* 32:5 (1985), 488-499.

the form of x-raying candy, launching awareness campaigns, keeping children home on Halloween night, and so forth.

Responses to an imaginary threat imply that the legend is true. With so many people reacting, it looks like they are reacting to something real. Over the years these safety precautions have themselves become part of Halloween tradition. Yet, some people treat the legend as real by acting it out. Some children have tampered with their own treats¹² and at least one adult poisoned his son's candy after hearing the legends.¹³ These participants retell the legend through action, entering into the narrative and taking on the role of its various characters. Most participate as heroic defenders of children, but some children have chosen to act out the role of victim, and some adults opt for the villain. All serve to perpetuate the legend and bring it to life.

A tale of two 'punks'

Like many legendary subjects, the origins of punk are shrouded in mystery or, at least, considerable contestation. Depending on what source one turns to, punk may have started in the mid-1970s in New York¹⁴ the late 1970s in London¹⁵ or as a synthesis of regions, including less-frequently cited places like Australia.¹⁶ Even the origin of the name 'punk' is debated while its meaning is polysemic. According to Lentini, the name implies a number of characteristics including 'male homosexuality, violence, inexperience and prostitution',¹⁷ while Leblanc states that it indicated 'a young male hustler, a gangster, a hoodlum, or a ruffian'.¹⁸ Tellingly, even punk's death causes heated debate. Declarations that 'punk is dead' have been pronounced nearly since punk's inception.¹⁹ Savage declared that by 1979, 'Punk was over. Humpty Dumpty had

¹² B. Ellis, "'Safe' Spooks: New Halloween Traditions in Response to Sadism Legends', in: J. Santino (ed.), *Halloween and Other Festivals of Death and Life* (Knoxville 1994), 24-44.

¹³ Dégh and Vázsonyi, 'Does the Word.'

¹⁴ L. McNeil and G. McCain, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (London 1997).

¹⁵ R.D. Dixon and F.R. Ingram, 'The Cultural Diffusion of Punk Rock in the United States', *Popular Music and Society* 6:3 (1979), 210-218.

¹⁶ P. Lentini, 'Punk's Origins: Anglo-American Syncretism', *Journal of Intercultural Studies* 4:2 (2003), 154-174.

¹⁷ Lentini, 'Punk's Origins', 154.

¹⁸ L. Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (New Brunswick 2006), 35.

¹⁹ D. Clark, 'The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture', in: D. Muggleton and R. Weinzierl (eds.), *The Post-Subcultures Reader*. (New York 2003), 223-236.

fallen off the wall and there was no way of piecing him together'.²⁰ For Savage, it was clear: The *Sex Pistols* had disbanded, Sid Vicious was dead, and the election of Margaret Thatcher and her Conservative government marked the end of the cultural moment in time. Conversely, testaments to the continued survival of punk are nearly as old.²¹ One variant on a popular slogan documented by Leblanc in the mid-1990s quips: 'Punk's not dead, it just smells that way.'²² Meanwhile, more recent exposés²³ and studies²⁴ of punk continue to be regularly published.

Disagreements over punk come with the territory. Nonetheless, there is something approaching a consensus that something widely recognizable as 'punk' existed in mainstream awareness by the late-1970s that was especially evident in New York and London.²⁵ Another shared feature of most narratives is the conditions into which punk was born, kicking and screaming, on either side of the Atlantic. Punk's birth is 'almost universally linked [...] to a perceived deterioration of the English [or American?] economic structure'.²⁶ Punks were 'clearly a product of their times and a reaction to recession and unemployment'.²⁷ Similar conclusions were reached by ethnographic research that examines individual punks. Field reports typically indicate that punks were 'youth who do not have the experience [required] for better jobs and who do not wish to take [...] low-status, low-wage employment'.²⁸ Punk veterans themselves are in rare agreement over the conditions that led to the emergence of punk. Thus, 'The Proletariat',

²⁰ P.541 in J. Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (New York 1992).

²¹ J. Pareles, 'Critic's Notebook: Is Punk Rock's Obituary Premature?', *The New York Times* (24 April 1996), 18.

²² Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*, 33.

²³ See for example M. Diehl, *My So-Called Punk: Green Day, Fall Out Boy, The Distillers, Bad Religion—How Neo-Punk Stage-dived into the Mainstream* (New York 2007).

²⁴ See for example J.S. Debies-Carl, 'Print is Dead: The Promise and Peril of Online Media for Subcultural Resistance', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 44:6 (2015), 679-708. Indeed, an academic journal devoted exclusively to the study of punk—*Punk & Post-Punk*—was launched in 2012. See <https://www.intellectbooks.co.uk/journals/view-Journal.id=200/>. (accessed 4 September 2018).

²⁵ R. Sabin, 'Introduction.' In: R. Sabin (ed.), *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, (New York 1999), 1-13.

²⁶ R.H. Tillman, 'Punk Rock and the Construction of 'Pseudo-Political' Movements', *Popular Music and Society* 7:3 (1980), 165-175, 167.

²⁷ A. Burr, 'The Ideologies of Despair: A Symbolic Interpretation of Punks and Skinheads Usage of Barbiturates', *Social Science & Medicine* 19:9 (1984), 929-38, 932.

²⁸ S.W. Baron, 'Resistance and its Consequences: The Street Culture of Punks', *Youth & Society*, 21:2 (1989), 207-237, 233.

a Boston-based band, summed up punk attitudes towards future prospects in the song, ‘Options’: ‘Tell me the options: military service, factory employment, welfare assistance. Options, options.’²⁹

Readers may question even these modest claims, but that is the nature of legend: intense debate and contestation.³⁰ Issues of origins aside, to some it is important to understand exactly what punk was (or is) like: its essential characteristics. In attempting this, not surprisingly, we promptly encounter a mass of claims and counter-claims that rival the issue of origins in contentiousness. There is no shortage of seemingly historical, but often conflicting sources to draw on: ‘a plethora of books [...]; the quantity of documentaries on radio and TV [...] the number of articles in the press’.³¹ With this in mind, the next section will provide two synthetic, legendary accounts of what punk was. The first section considers legends that claim punks are ‘villains’: delinquents and criminals who *threaten* society. The second, by contrast, portrays punks as heroes, as noble non-conformists fighting for a *better* society. These portrayals of punk are particularly interesting to compare for two reasons. First, over the years these have been among the most popular representations of the subculture. Each is a readily available and culturally significant description of punk, garnered from popular culture, the media, and especially scholarship. Second, each portrayal makes claims about punk—and each claims to be true—yet the two portrayals are diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive. Despite this fact, by comparing these two accounts, we will see how contradictory representations can *both* be true, in a sense, through the process of ostension.

Punk villainy

What, exactly, is a punk? How can we recognize one in the wild? According to ‘villainous’ accounts, we can visually identify one. Scholarly accounts, among others frequently begin with vivid descriptions of punk fashion and emphasize the significance of style. They include laundry lists of now-familiar stereotypes. Punks sport ““freaky” multi-coloured hairstyles, torn tee-shirts, swastikas, bondage trousers and safety pins’.³² Hebdige’s description is worthy of a deranged Dr.

²⁹ Proletariat, ‘Options’, *This is Boston not L.A.*, Modern Method Records MM 012 (studio album; 1982).

³⁰ Dégh, *Legend and Belief*.

³¹ Sabin, *Punk Rock*, 1.

³² Burr, ‘The Ideologies’, 930.

Seuss: ‘There was a chaos of quiffs and leather jackets, brothel creepers and winkle pickers, plimsolls and paka macs, moddy crops and skinhead strides, drainpipes and vivid socks, bum freezers and bovver boots – all kept “in place” and “out of time” by the spectacular adhesives: the safety pins and plastic clothes pegs, the bondage straps and bits of string which attracted so much horrified and fascinated attention.’³³

Identifying a punk might be important because, according to villainous accounts, punks are known to cause many problems, ranging from the annoying to the deadly. Not all punks are equally deviant, but according to villainous accounts, those who are the *most* punk are considered so *because* they are the most deviant.³⁴ First, punk lifestyle involves a wide range of delinquent behaviors. Younger members of the subculture who should be in school are habitually truant. In one study, ‘[o]nly nine of the 24 members [studied] who gathered outside attended school. All but one had histories of dismissal and departure’.³⁵ Not only do punks avoid school, they also avoid work and tend toward homelessness. Sociologist Kathryn J. Fox’s much-cited investigation of a punk bar in the American southwest examined what it meant to be a ‘real’ punk. She noted that nearly all of the most dedicated punks, ‘the hardcores[,] were unemployed and live in old, abandoned houses or moved into the homes of friends for short periods of time’.³⁶ Indeed, ‘squatting’ on other people’s property is a common practice that causes considerable consternation to outsiders. Aggressive panhandling provides punks with income and entertainment. They frequently harass passersby for money or food: ‘Members requested bites of hamburgers, some French fries, or a “sip” of a soft drink from passersby.’³⁷ Other activities include selling drugs, ‘dumpster diving, [...] pan handling, stealing, hustling, and prostitution’.³⁸

Beyond selling drugs, punks are notorious for using them. Fox emphasizes sniffing glue, a drug that is as cheap and lowly as punk itself.³⁹ In their report on squatter punk communities,

³³ D. Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (London 1979), 26.

³⁴ Baron, ‘Resistance’; K.J. Fox, ‘Real Punks and Pretenders: The Social Organization of a Counterculture’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 16:3 (1987), 344-370.

³⁵ Baron, ‘Resistance’, 215.

³⁶ Fox, ‘Real Punks’, 354.

³⁷ Baron, ‘Resistance’, 220.

³⁸ C. Ranaghan and J.R. Breese, ‘Punks and Crusties: Analysis of the Squatter Community’, *Sociological Imagination* 40:1 (2004), 31-53.

³⁹ Fox, ‘Real Punks’.

sociologists Ranaghan and Breese discuss ‘cocaine and heroine’ but also ‘the primacy of alcohol’.⁴⁰ Psychiatrist A. Burr provides a colorful account in his exploration of punk drug use, discussing how barbiturate use is emblematic of the subculture since ‘[v]ery heavy users [become] oblivious to the world, commonly neglect themselves and their social relations’. The logical conclusion is that ‘[n]ot infrequently they overdose and die’.⁴¹ While the drug of choice may change, always we find that punks and drugs are inextricably linked within villainous accounts.

Aggression is one of the hallmarks of punk life according to villainous sources. ‘From the beginning [...] hostility and mayhem [...] became part of the punk image’⁴² and it has since been ‘continually linked’ with violence.⁴³ This image is so fundamental to portrayals of punk that, in their field study of a punk scene in a western Canadian city, sociologists Leslie W. Kennedy and Stephen W. Baron describe it as one of the first things researchers should notice:

On entry into the field it became immediately apparent that members were involved in a great deal of violence, both as victims and offenders. Interviews revealed that they rolled, or mugged, people for money and other attractive items, and were involved in violence with members of other delinquent groups and the general public. Most members carried weapons, usually knives or canes. Some boasted guns, but these were never carried. Instead, they were hidden back at a friend’s house. During the field study there were on average two violent incidents a week.⁴⁴

Ultimately, one primary claim underlies all such details: the claim that punks are violent and aggressive.

One last, indispensable component of villainous portrayals is ‘bondage and sexual fetishism’⁴⁵ or, more generally, ‘[p]unk’s glorification of sexual deviance.’⁴⁶ Indeed, drugs, violence, and deviant sexuality are commonly reported together as a sort of unholy trinity. The

⁴⁰ Ranaghan and Breese, ‘Punks and Crusties’, 42.

⁴¹ Burr, ‘The Ideologies’, 935.

⁴² H.G. Levine and S.H. Stumpf, ‘Statements of Fear Through Cultural Symbols: Punk Rock as Reflexive Subculture’, *Youth & Society* 14:4 (1983), 417-435, 423.

⁴³ Lentini, ‘Punk’s Origins’, 166.

⁴⁴ L.W. Kennedy and S.W. Baron, ‘Routine Activities and a Subculture of Violence: A Study of Violence on the Street’, *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 30:1 (1993), 88-112, 98-99.

⁴⁵ Levine and Stumpf, ‘Statements’, 422.

⁴⁶ Burr, ‘The Ideologies’, 935.

Oral History of Punk is something of a chronicle of punk dysfunction, including tales like the following told by former Ramones bassist Dee Dee Ramone:

Connie was very naughty, she had a thing about knives and broken bottles and she'd just go at anyone if she was in the wrong mood, and one night she went after me. I was with [Nancy Spungen] one night, and Connie came there and found me in bed with Nancy. So Connie stabbed me because I was fucking Nancy. But Connie didn't give a shit cause she just stole Nancy's collection of silver dollars and sold them to get some dope. Connie just said, 'Let's go get high.' I said, 'Alright.' So we left Nancy there.⁴⁷

This excerpt, with its added sense of authenticity owing to the narrator 'who was there', encapsulates in a nut shell a villainous portrayal of punk.

While scholarship was somewhat restrained in describing the dangers of punk, no such restraint was shown in popular culture. Television shows warned parents of the threat to children. During the 1980s, situation comedies like *Alice* or *Silver Spoons* aired episodes of families dealing with the embarrassment of children becoming punk. Like most shows of this sort, the 'crisis' is resolved when 'the character came back to his or her senses and returned to "normal"'.⁴⁸ More dramatic were films like *Sid and Nancy*,⁴⁹ which claims to be the true story of former *Sex Pistols* bassist, Sid Vicious, and his girlfriend, Nancy Spungen. It portrays participation in punk as a long descent to the bottom, a runaway train of misbehavior leading to death. Punks are out-of-control, constantly breaking things, spitting, fighting, and doing drugs. The film climaxes with Sid stabbing Nancy during a fight and, since he is so high, he does not even realize it. He ignores her cries for help and takes a nap. By the end of the film, both are dead, living on only as cautionary tales of punk's perils.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 269.

⁴⁸ C. O'Hara, *The Philosophy of Punk: More than Noise!* (San Francisco 1999), 42.

⁴⁹ A. Cox (dir), *Sid and Nancy* (1986).

⁵⁰ Whether this is actually what happened, appropriately, is itself hotly contested. See, for example, M. Brown, 'After 30 years, a new take on Sid, Nancy and a punk rock mystery, *The Guardian*, 19 January 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2009/jan/20/sid-vicious-film> (accessed 15 September 2017). Meanwhile, it seems legends give rise to more legends. The Chelsea hotel, where Nancy's death occurred, is now reputedly haunted by her ghost as well as that of Sid. See M. Montalvo, 'Nancy's Ghost?', *Love Kills*, <http://sidandnancylovekills.blogspot.com/2012/10/nancys-ghost.html> (accessed 15 September 2017).

Other visual portrayals of punk were outright apocalyptic. Television shows like *Chips* and *Quincy*, ‘portrayed young punk rockers as barbarian hordes seething with violence and rage, either destroying others or themselves. Punks were literally killers chased by good-guy cops’.⁵¹ Even more dramatic was the film *Class of 1984*. It tells a paranoid, cautionary tale about the new generation of kids, represented by punk, who have run amok and now threaten the very soul of civilization. With no respect for education or authority, they practice organized crime and commit all manner of deviant acts: theft, drugs, vandalism, prostitution rings, fighting, and sexual assault—often all at the same time.

Why do punks engage in such detestable behaviors? Villainous accounts explain that the outside matches the inside: punks are essentially empty and lack a moral compass. A typical observation states, ‘the researcher found no coherent ideology within the group. [...] The members were into “doing their own thing”, which meant no restrictions’.⁵² More colorfully, we learn that punk has not ‘developed an articulate coherent philosophy at the self-conscious level’.⁵³ They ‘embody total alienation from and rejection of conventional society’ since punks ‘lack the age, experience and education necessary to develop sophisticated systems of belief. Generally having only a limited vocabulary and command of language they tend to be inarticulate and unable [...] to express and deal with their problems verbally.’⁵⁴

We find nearly identical claims among moral crusaders against punk. Serena Dank, co-founder of ‘Parents of Punkers’, was a common media presence warning of the dangers punk posed. She cautioned that, ‘[w]ith hippies, the message was happiness, love, and peace. With punkers, it’s hopelessness and anger. It’s very destructive.’ She claimed: ‘The message of punk is, “I don’t care about me, I don’t care about you, we have a hopeless society, so what’s the point of going on?”’⁵⁵ Again, punk has no guiding philosophy beyond hatred and the desire to destroy.

Interestingly, similar diagnoses of punk are common even among some of the subculture’s proponents. A common trope portrays punks as the vanguard of the end of society.⁵⁶ Legs McNeil, co-founder of the seminal punk magazine *Punk*, stated that ‘punk wasn’t about

⁵¹ K. Mattson, ‘Did Punk Matter? Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture during the 1980s’, *American Studies* 42:1 (2001), 69-97, 70.

⁵² Kennedy and Baron, ‘Routine Activities’, 97.

⁵³ Burr, ‘The Ideologies’, 929.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Staff, ‘L.A. Group Helping Parents of Punkers’, *The Spokane Chronicle* (28 April 1982), 29.

⁵⁶ Davies, ‘The Future’.

decay, punk was about the apocalypse. Punk was about annihilation. Nothing worked, so let's get right to Armageddon.'⁵⁷ Hebdige similarly claimed: 'Apocalypse was in the air and the rhetoric of punk was drenched in apocalypse: in the stock imager of crisis and sudden change.'⁵⁸

In sum, villainous legends portray punks as parasites. They do not produce anything of their own (at least nothing of value), but instead leach off of others' hard work. When they consume others' products, they do not even do so correctly (e.g. chains and safety pins as clothing), nor do they even pay for these goods with money earned through honest labor. Instead they beg, scavenge, steal, or mug. They actively harm themselves, and others, and offer no compensatory value. While punk may be caused by social problems, like economic distress, it is not a constructive response to these, but merely a symptom or secondary infection. After all, punks 'presented themselves as the disease, not the cure'.⁵⁹ Like all diseases, punk needs to be treated. Burr recommends giving punks jobs and further 'suggests that it is necessary to also "treat" their subcultural beliefs and wean them off of these'.⁶⁰ Punk 'awareness' groups, like Back in Control, went even further, recommending that parents confiscate their children's records, posters, and punk clothing; take them to the barber for a normal cut; and warned that punk was like a cult 'whose followers must be "deprogrammed" within a "heavily structured environment"'.⁶¹ In short, as the British liberal weekly *New Statesman* concluded: 'Punks are singularly unsavory characters.'⁶²

Punk heroics

Or are they? A competing legend portrays punks as heroes striving against social ills and crusaders for a better world. In comparing heroic accounts to villainous ones, vast differences are apparent. First, these stories rarely emphasize style except to proclaim its insignificance.⁶³ Moreover, appearances can actually be deceiving. In a retrospective account, Andy Medhurst—a

⁵⁷ McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 318.

⁵⁸ Hebdige, *Subculture*, 27.

⁵⁹ D. Hinton, 'In These Times' (18 January 1978), as quoted in Tillman, 'Punk Rock and the Construction', 172.

⁶⁰ Burr, 'The Ideologies', 937.

⁶¹ R. Moore, *Anarchy in the United States of America: Capitalism, Postmodernity, and Punk Subculture Since the 1970s* (Dissertation) (San Diego 2000), 87.

⁶² M. Kidel, 'Punk Shop', *The New Statesman*, (17 December 1976), as quoted in Levine and Stumpf, 'Statements', 422.

⁶³ For example, C. O'Hara, *The Philosophy*.

former punk and now Senior Lecturer in Media, Film & Cultural Studies—recalls an incident from his college days in the 1970s. He and his equally un-punk-looking roommate were scolded by an excessively punk-looking co-ed in their residence hall for playing loud music:

Not just any loud music either—I was playing my tape of *Never Mind the Bullocks* [...]. There we were, me (side-parting and flares) and my mate Steve (collar-length hair and rugby shirt) enjoying ‘God Save the Queen’ and ‘Bodies’, getting yelled at by a head-to-toe punk to turn down the Pistols. [...] [H]ere, gift-wrapped with ribbons of irony, was proof [...] that dressing up in a subculture’s trappings can be the most superficial of engagements with its deeper possibilities of meaning.⁶⁴

Ironically, ‘looking’ like a punk might indicate that someone is actually anything but.

Punk has transcended style or ‘performance’ and has moved on to ‘practice.’⁶⁵ They have more important things to do.

Thus, the behaviors that heroic accounts report also diverge from villainous legends, but first we must examine what motivates this activity. These texts are replete with lists of punk values. We read that ‘punks idealize freedom, autonomy, and diversity’,⁶⁶ or ‘individualism, community, egalitarianism, antiauthoritarianism, and a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic.’⁶⁷ O’Hara’s *Philosophy of Punk* details beliefs at length, noting that punks question ‘mindless conformity and authority’, while believing in ‘women’s rights, racial equality, and gay rights’.⁶⁸ This identifies many causes punks fight for, and longer lists are common. Ranaghan and Breese claim punk has ‘an ideology that encourages equal rights between men and women, fosters environmental well-being, values vegetarianism, and acts as proponents of animal rights’.⁶⁹

Considerable space in heroic legends is dedicated to describing how punks pursue these noble goals. Some are pursued within the subculture itself. Among these, the way punks organize their show spaces is frequently cited, because here punk’s vision of an alternative society is enacted most intimately. Here, we find several practices intended to level hierarchies and

⁶⁴ A. Medhurst, ‘What did I get? Punk, Memory, and Autobiography’, in: R. Sabin (ed.), *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk* (New York 1999), 219-231, 224.

⁶⁵ Clark, ‘The Death’, 233.

⁶⁶ D. Clark, ‘The Raw and the Rotten: Punk Cuisine’, *Ethnology* 43:1 (2004), 19-31, 29.

⁶⁷ J.S. Debies-Carl, *Punk Rock and the Politics of Place: Building a Better Tomorrow* (New York 2014), 11.

⁶⁸ O’Hara, *The Philosophy*, 27-8, 78.

⁶⁹ Ranaghan and Breese, ‘Punks and Crusties’, 45.

promote something more democratic. Punks oppose age discrimination so, unlike conventional concert halls, their show spaces usually welcome people regardless of how old they are.⁷⁰ Compared to mainstream venues, punk shows provide a ‘more participatory performance style which blur[s] the boundaries between performers and audience members’,⁷¹ while the music itself traditionally emphasizes simple and accessible styles that anyone can play, thus ‘demystif[ying] artistic production’.⁷² Moreover, although it is not free from sexism, punk has ‘created unprecedented opportunities for the participation of young women’.⁷³ Thus, within punk ‘women were no longer ornaments, but served as lead singers, drummers, bassists, and guitarists in punk bands’.⁷⁴

Such ethical behaviors are not limited to the music venue, but become an integral part of all punk ventures, of which there are many. Indeed, heroic accounts stress that constant creative activity characterizes punk. Punks have ‘*created* culture by developing their own concrete institutional means of cultural production’,⁷⁵ including objects and social organizations such as records, fanzines, art, bands, radio programs, comics, record labels, concert venues, distribution systems, and support networks. All are produced according to the ‘do-it-yourself’ (DIY) ethic. This ‘exhorts that instead of being consumers and spectators’ of others’ products,⁷⁶ punks should produce their own goods and services, independent of greedy corporations or controlling government. Unlike conventional businesses, punk ventures, such as bands and record labels, are not motivated by profit, but by the desire to achieve something positive. ‘Lookout! Records’ was ‘founded on a profit-sharing basis between bands and the label’.⁷⁷ Dischord Records ‘has typified the possibilities for the creation of an independent and locally focused cottage industry in the punk scene’.⁷⁸ Working with artists they liked, not necessarily those with the greatest

⁷⁰ Mattson, ‘Did Punk Matter?’, 75.

⁷¹ Lentini, ‘Punk’s Origins’, 156.

⁷² Davies, ‘The Future’, 22.

⁷³ Moore, *Anarchy*, 18.

⁷⁴ Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*, 45.

⁷⁵ Mattson, ‘Did Punk Matter?’, 72.

⁷⁶ R. Moore, ‘Friends Don’t Let Friends Listen to Corporate Rock: Punk as a Field of Cultural Production’, *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 36:4 (2007), 438-474, 439.

⁷⁷ J.C. Goshert, ‘“Punk” after the Pistols: American Music, Economics, and Politics in the 1980s and 1990s’, 24:1 (2000), 85-106, 91.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, 89.

profit potential, they sold their records as cheaply as possible and reinvested profits into supporting additional bands and into progressive political causes.

The latter point draws the political dimension of punk into attention. Many members insist punk is inherently political. Writing in the fanzine *Maximumrocknroll*, 'Jim Filth' claims the subculture 'is a very effective and fun way to learn about politics [and] how to change things'.⁷⁹ Some journalists made similar claims. Writing about the Sex Pistols in *Melody Maker*, Caroline Coon argued: 'It was natural that if a group of deprived London street kids got together and formed a band it would be political. And that's what happened.'⁸⁰ Early punk is frequently associated with leftist organizations and events, like the Anti-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism.⁸¹ Later incarnations seem even more politically-involved. Punk music commonly deals with significant social issues and albums contain information for how to get involved. In 1991, for example, former Dead Kennedy's singer, Jello Biafra, released an album dealing with the Gulf War and US aggression in the Middle East entitled *Die for Oil Sucker*.⁸² Punks frequently engage in various protests. Mattson chronicles their involvement against nuclear proliferation and US meddling in Central America.⁸³ Community activism is also frequently cited and some organizations have a distinctive punk identity like 'Food Not Bombs', which has been collecting, preparing, and giving away food to the homeless since 1980.⁸⁴ Other groups, like Positive Force in Washington, D.C. and the Gilman Street Project are also commonly referenced as models of community-based action.⁸⁵

In summary, heroic legends tend to 'see punk as an essentially progressive movement articulating egalitarian, community-based, broadly leftist politics'.⁸⁶ Instead of an emphasis on fighting and violence, we see cooperation and mutual-support. Instead of nihilism and destruction, we see community-engagement, charity, and activism. Punks are not mindless

⁷⁹ Quoted in O'Hara, *The Philosophy*, 18.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Tillman, 'Punk Rock', 167.

⁸¹ Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*.

⁸² Goshert, 'Punk after the Pistols'.

⁸³ Mattson, 'Did Punk Matter?'.

⁸⁴ Clark, 'The Raw'.

⁸⁵ Mattson, 'Did Punk Matter?'; Goshert, 'Punk after the Pistols'.

⁸⁶ M. Phillipov, 'Haunted by the Spirit of '77: Punk Studies and the Persistence of Politics', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Culture* 20:3 (2006), 383-393, 386. It should be noted that Phillipov is herself critical of this perspective.

consumers or roving barbarians. Rather, they are ethically motivated producers of cultural goods and social reformers trying to make the world a better place.

Reading punk legends

Each of the preceding descriptions of punk presents a very different view of its subject. Instead of attempting to separate fact from fiction, it can be illustrated that by treating these accounts as legends—regardless of their validity—we can learn a great deal about what punk means to people and about its cultural significance. As we will see, the punk legend cycle—like any legend cycle—begins whenever a claim is told as though it might be true.⁸⁷ The legends about punk resonate with key social concerns and fascinate—or horrify—listeners. Despite their compelling nature, the meaning of such legends are far from self-evident. Listeners must interpret it and may debate these interpretations among themselves as they discuss what they have heard. For some, hearing and discussing the legend will not be enough. They will seek to act out the legend as though it were true and the way in which they do so will depend on their interpretation of that legend.⁸⁸ This ostensive behavior, in turn, will at some point be observed by other people who may tell about what they have seen. The ensuing narratives are legends in their own right and telling them will reinitiate the cycle in its entirety.

Stories about punk fascinate people when they hear them because, like all legends, they deal with core values and concerns. Levine and Stumpf identified punk as a ‘reflexive’ subculture because of its capacity to embody societal concerns.⁸⁹ It is no coincidence that anti-punk crusaders identified it as a sort of ‘folk devil’ threatening their values.⁹⁰ Citing its alleged connections to anarchism and Satanism, Darlyne Pettiniccio, founder of a parent-support group for out-of-control teens called ‘Back in Control Training Center’, (in)famously claimed punk was an assault ‘on everything we Americans hold dear’.⁹¹ Similarly punk in general, and the Sex Pistols in particular, ‘threatened “everything England stands for”’: patriotism, class hierarchy,

⁸⁷ Dégh, *Legend*.

⁸⁸ Dégh and Vázsonyi, ‘Does the Word.’

⁸⁹ Levine and Stumpf, ‘Statements’.

⁹⁰ S. Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers* (Oxford 1972).

⁹¹ Quoted in D. McLellan, ‘Spikes and Studs: Tipping the Scales Against Heavy Metal, Punk’, *The Los Angeles Times*, 21 February 1985, http://articles.latimes.com/1985-02-21/news/vw-803_1_punk (accessed: 8 August 2017).

“common decency” and “good taste”.⁹² Yet, a progressively-minded person might find cause for celebration in a movement that allegedly challenges, say, class hierarchy. Likewise, Fox claims that punks oppose ‘the conventional system [...]: bureaucracies, power structures, and competition for scarce goods’ and so on.⁹³ These claims give audiences a choice: whether to condemn or celebrate this opposition. Punk can be interpreted as threatening to cherished values or protective of similar values. This does not mean that punks actually *are* any of these things; simply that they are a canvass against which we project our concerns.

The exact meaning of punk, and whether it should be condemned or celebrated, have been the source of consistent and heated arguments over the years. Indeed, the intensity with which punk has been debated for decades is itself indicative of the legend process at work.⁹⁴ Intense discussion occurs partly because legends do not have fixed meanings. Some interpretations may be more likely given specific content and a legend-teller’s intentions, but ultimately the person who listens to (or reads) a legend does the interpreting.⁹⁵ Consequently, people might understand the same legend differently, perhaps emphasizing different parts, and coming to different conclusions about its meaning. Likewise, many of the sources cited above are not easily classifiable as simply narratives of punks as villains or heroes. For example, despite the many disagreements regarding punk, a common theme across sources is that punk involves ‘rejection of conventional society [and] antiestablishment lifestyles and beliefs’.⁹⁶ Does this mean that punk is a social problem to be combated or an attempt to combat social problems? This issue of interpretation helps explain why many accounts seem contradictory.

Following interpretation and debate, some people hearing punks legends will subsequently engage in ostension. Again, this is the phenomenon whereby people act out legends, ‘showing’ the story rather than simply telling it.⁹⁷ If someone exposed to punk legends is suitably fascinated by them, they may believe them and act accordingly. Legends themselves include blue-prints for how to behave.⁹⁸ As we have seen however, there are different versions of

⁹² Clark, ‘The Death’, 226.

⁹³ Fox, ‘Real Punks’, 353.

⁹⁴ Dégh, *Legend*.

⁹⁵ Ellis, *Aliens*.

⁹⁶ Fox, ‘Real Punks’, 353.

⁹⁷ Dégh and Vázsonyi, ‘Does the Word’.

⁹⁸ Ellis, *Aliens*.

punk legends circulating and different interpretations of their meaning. Consequently, we see a comparable range of ostensive responses inspired by different interpretations of the legends.

Perhaps the most common ostensive response to punk legends is ‘opposition’. Convinced that punk constitutes a threat, people mobilize to combat it. They take on the role of ‘hero’ and cast punks as ‘villain’. Legends include directions for how to behave or implied directions by describing how previous heroes acted. As early as the Sex Pistols, moral panic⁹⁹ over punk led to various efforts to combat its alleged threat. For example, it ‘stimulated labourers to hold work stoppages and refuse to handle their record company’s goods, and prompted local councils and university bodies to cancel their concerts.’¹⁰⁰ Later, the Back in Control Training Center recounted various tales of parents who successfully ‘cured’ their children of punk, offering prescriptions like: ‘If the child won’t [give up punk] on his own, the parents have to go into the child’s bedroom and remove the posters, the albums and the clothes [...]. Then they have to take him to the barber to get his hair cut, or the hairdresser to get the color changed.’¹⁰¹ As with other moral panics, parents, schools, and authorities became increasingly worried about the threat supposedly posed to their children. Action was prescribed, and taken, without evidence supporting credibility of either threat or solution. Among mental health institutions in southern California, 83% recommended that adolescents receive treatment based on displaying punk styles alone.¹⁰² When many people believe and behave as though something is true, it begins to look like evidence that their belief accurate.¹⁰³ In this case, popular and visible reactions to the threat posed by punk, however erroneous, looked like evidence supporting the existence of a threat. Thus, these reactions served to reinvigorate and validate legend claims and incited further ostensive responses in the form of other attempts to combat the punk threat.

Another basic response to hearing punk legends is ‘emulation’. Here, too, one can take the stories about punk seriously and enact them. Those who engage in emulation identify with punk instead of the institutions arrayed against it. Just as legends can provide guidelines for how to combat punk, so too can they offer ready guidelines for how to *be* punk. Detailed descriptions

⁹⁹ Cohen, *Folk Devils*.

¹⁰⁰ Lentini, ‘Punk’s Origins’, 166.

¹⁰¹ McLellan, ‘Spikes’, no pagination.

¹⁰² J.L. Rosenbaum and L. Prinsky, ‘The Presumption of Influence: Recent Responses to Popular Music Subcultures’, *Crime & Delinquency* 37:4 (1991), 528-535.

¹⁰³ R.B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice* (New York 2009).

or representations of style not only inform the reader that this is important, but exemplify how punks should dress. These sources also illustrate how a punk should behave. Again, however, interpretation of the legends affects the nature of ostensive emulation. One can still act out the role of hero. Society's institutions become villainous, corrupt, and the source of social problems. By becoming a punk, they align with heroic forces combating these evils. Conversely, one might identify with *delinquent* punk portrayals. As one writer opined in the *Toronto Star*: 'Punk may have become a victim of its own success. The vision of a volatile, rebellious, youth attracts a number of disaffected teens, drawn to the prospect of anti-social violence and rampant drug use.'¹⁰⁴ Rather than fighting the problem, such individuals become the problem.

Ostension can also explain *why* some changes in punk occur over time, such as its visual appearance, characteristic behaviors, and so forth. Ostension is fundamentally about acting out cultural scripts. Individuals adopt a pre-existing social status—in this case, the status of 'punk'—and attempt to act out the behavioral expectations they have learned are associated with it. In this case, the cultural script might be either a villainous or a heroic legend that has fascinated a listener sufficiently that they have internalized its message and wish to emulate it. However, it is easy to misinterpret a script or for the script itself to be in error. First, would-be punks may have actual punk role-models in their lives. In trying to emulate them, they might misinterpret their source. A common claim is that British punks mistakenly assumed New York punk was violent.¹⁰⁵ Mickey Leigh recounted such an incident when the Ramones met the Clash: '[S]tanding in the alley like a posse was the Clash. They were all wearing black leather jackets, and they were all trying to be real fucking tough and we were a little scared. [...] It was an act. They were acting punk, because that's how they figured bands in New York acted – tough.'¹⁰⁶

Emulation can also occur in the absence of real role-models. One can learn to be a punk without first-hand exposure. This is problematic, because what is being emulated is not a 'true' punk, not even a misinterpretation. More recent generations of youth read or hear about the punks of the now legendary past, listen to their music, and consume other folk representations of these cultural icons. Guided by a particular image or legend of punk—adopting its alleged demeanor or style and internalizing its imagined identity—they bring the legend to life through

¹⁰⁴ Quoted in Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*, 58.

¹⁰⁵ Lentini, 'Punk's Origins'.

¹⁰⁶ Quoted in McNeil and McCain, *Please Kill Me*, 287.

their own subsequent actions regardless of whether or not that image actually represents any flesh-and-blood punk that hitherto walked the earth. The legend made flesh, in turn, may give rise to its own subsequent representations and interpretations, thus perpetuating the cultural cycle for the next generation.

For example, aware of interest in punk, corporations market the idea that to be a punk, one must dress like one. Then, they sell spiked-bracelets and hair-dye as means of participating in the subculture. These ‘things could easily be marketed by the same corporations this youth subculture of the 1980s rebelled against’.¹⁰⁷ This marketing exerts an especially powerful influence over individuals who have no other substantial connection to punk, such as actual punk role-models they are personally acquainted with. Rather than learning how to be punk from other punks, they learn it from the marketplace. Other examples of ostensive emulation transforming punk abound. Punk scenester James Stark bemoans how a once peaceful and progressive San Francisco punk scene quickly became macho and violent as new members swarmed into the subculture informed by media accounts of an allegedly violent UK scene.¹⁰⁸ Interestingly, UK punk aggression was, itself, a mistaken emulation of New York. It is not only emulation of villainous characteristics that influence successive generations of punk though. Others have suggested that a range of characteristics were added to punk over the years that were misidentified as original. The same UK scene, for instance, may also have erroneously contributed politics.¹⁰⁹

The future of punk (research)

Fascination and argument over punk has persisted for many years and will continue. Roger Sabin argued that ‘the problem with all this debate around punk is that history is being rewritten’.¹¹⁰ No doubt, this is true. However, rather than lament this situation, it is well-worth studying that rewriting process itself. Understanding the legend process that informs these revisions could go a long way toward explaining why there are so many different and conflicting opinions over what a subculture like punk is or was really like. That being said, the arguments put forward in this

¹⁰⁷ Mattson, ‘Did Punk Matter?’, 88.

¹⁰⁸ J. Stark, *Punk ’77: An Insider’s Look at the San Francisco Rock n’ Roll Scene, 1977* (San Francisco 1992).

¹⁰⁹ Lentini, ‘Punk’s Origins’.

¹¹⁰ Sabin, *Punk Rock*, 2.

chapter do not necessarily invalidate or challenge existing perspectives or findings on subculture. They do, however, suggest new uses for prior work—however ‘outdated’ some may appear to be—and suggest possible trajectories for future inquiry.

First, existing work can be given new life as data: as cultural artifacts that tell the researcher something about the cultural milieu in which they were written. Legends do not typically present accurate portrayals of the real world, but they do provide a window into the minds of the people who share them. Legends about strangers poisoning children’s Halloween candy were objectively false. However, the fact that these tales disseminated so widely and so quickly indicates that they touched on real fears and concerns. In this case, worries about rising crime rates, growing suspicion of strangers, and concerns that children were no longer safe.¹¹¹ As we have seen, ethnographic accounts vary widely in terms of their portrayal of punk. This might be less indicative of real divergence in the subculture than in the perspectives of those studying it. Thus, analyzing and comparing these accounts will possibly tell us more about the ethnographer and their concerns or values than the target culture.

Content analysis of these ethnographies could consequently reveal significant findings about these concerns. These might, in turn, vary across time periods, regions, or disciplinary background in interesting ways that say little about punk—or any other subculture—but much about those who study it. Theoretical arguments can be put to similar ends. For many decades there was a heated debate in the subcultural literature over the exact nature of subculture. Without having to resurrect these debates, we can infer from them the spirit of the times. For example, older Chicago School perspectives tended to pathologize subcultures, much as villainous accounts do to punk, suggesting a conservative narrator concerned about social change and deviation from tradition. More recent post-subcultures approaches, conversely, tended to deny subcultures even existed, reflecting a perspective inimical to modernist ideas of social boundaries and inflexible identities.¹¹² These interpretations seem to reflect changes in scholarly thought over time—not necessarily changes in subculture. How much more revealing might observations of this sort be when the divergence in interpretation varies not just over time but, as in the case of punk, across narrators during the same time period as well? Such divergence might

¹¹¹ Best and Horiuchi, ‘The Razor Blade’.

¹¹² J.S. Debies-Carl, ‘Are the Kids Alright? A Critique and Agenda for Taking Youth Cultures Seriously’, *Social Science Information* 55:1 (2013), 110-133.

reveal important social cleavages. In punk's case, the simultaneous existence of both villainous and heroic accounts seems to indicate significant divisions in public opinion over the role of youth, the importance of tradition, and the general state of society.

Of course, we are not limited by the works of the past. New research can be conducted with the explicit goal of understanding the folkloric process at work. For instance, interviews can be conducted with punks, or other subculturalists, to understand how they learned about the subculture and what it means to be a member. The goal of such inquiry would not be to describe the culture itself, as prior work was intended to do, but to learn about the process through which claims about it are disseminated. Fieldwork can be similarly applied to see how these ideas are ostensibly enacted in subcultural spaces. To what extent, for example, are punks acting out legendary scripts they have learned versus innovating new ways of being punk?

The past may be rewritten, but analyzing punk as it is enacted now can also reveal how ostension is constantly rewriting the *future*. In other words, the future of punk or of any subculture can be tentatively predicted from the current ways in which it is acted out. In fact, the tendency for legends to become self-fulfilling—no matter how fallacious they may have been initially—is one of their most fascinating characteristics. Thus, while legends of doctored Halloween candy began as false but compelling claims, soon enough some people began to act them out in earnest through ostension. At least one man was inspired to poison his own son's candy by these legends,¹¹³ while many children have contaminated their own candy with pins or similar objects in apparent hoax imitations.¹¹⁴ Today, despite the nearly non-existent threat, precautions against the persistent legend have become an annual tradition. For example, each year official warnings are issued and inspection stations for x-raying candy are staffed. In a similar way, legends about punk—whether told or enacted—influence future action. These messages, of course, need not necessarily represent any historical reality and more than fears of Halloween candy. Rather, these modern interpretations serve as role models for the next generation of subculturalists, serving as examples that inform them of what the subculture is 'really' about and what it means to be a member. In the process, they change the character of the subculture. The legend becomes fact.

¹¹³ Dégh and Vázsonyi, 'Does the Word.'

¹¹⁴ Ellis, 'Safe Spooks.'

Crucially, there remain important comparisons to be made across the stories people tell about subcultures like punk and the context in which these are told. These include comparisons of: 1) how punk is portrayed across nations or across regions within the same nation, 2) how portrayals of punk vary within the same place over time, 3) how different types of texts portray punk within the same time and place (e.g. television versus books versus oral histories), and 4) how portrayals vary based on who is ‘doing’ the portraying (e.g. self-identified punks versus outsiders). Very little of this sort of work seems to have been hitherto conducted. What do these variations reveal about the sources that tell these legends or the contexts in which they occur? Once we understand *how* such accounts vary, we can take further steps toward understanding *why* they vary.

To some extent, future research will itself be contributing to the punk legend cycle. All future publications, for example, will make claims and can be read as legend. In pursuing research suggestions, such as these, researchers should nonetheless be cautious that they mitigate some of the more problematic aspects of that inevitability. First, when we use secondary sources, we should remember that they might represent the concerns of the writer more than the nature of the subject. Second, when we are engaged in first-hand study, our own perceptions of the truth can be biased in the same way: by expectations and preconceptions. If we observe female punks wearing black leather, bondage gear, fishnets, corsets and similarly ‘provocative’ clothing, how do we interpret it? Is this confirmation of punk sexual delinquency or is it, as Leblanc alleges, an attempt ‘to discredit their effect as fetishistic, sexually titillating items’?¹¹⁵ Finally, even asking questions to punks themselves may not yield ‘accurate’ answers. We may only learn what inspired them to ostensibly act out legends, an interpretation of a claim, and not what the symbols ‘really’ mean.

All this is not to say that we cannot know the ‘truth’ of punk. Only that, while legends might obscure their object, they simultaneously unveil the historical attitudes and concerns of those who tell or act on them. Punk, fittingly, persists, but not as some extinct entity with fixed characteristics that can be viewed safely in stasis within a museum exhibit. Punk continues to be a moving target and the stuff of legend.

¹¹⁵ Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*, 46.