

**“The First 7-inch Was Better:”  
How I Became an Ex-Punk,  
by Nia King**

I went to a punk show last night to pick up some zines from a friend. He asked if I intended to stay, and I replied jokingly, "Naw, I'm don't think I'm tough enough to roll with the punks anymore."

"Why?" his friend, standing with us, asked. "What do you think is going to happen?"

I was fifteen when punk first drew me in. Like many punks, I grew up in the suburbs, a middle-class, white, homophobic, predominantly Irish Catholic town outside Boston. I knew that I was different, but at the time I didn't attribute it to being queer or mixed race, I just knew that I didn't fit in.

After trying for years to be accepted and failing, I began asserting my difference by sewing patches on my clothing, dying my hair and expressing

distain for those who conformed to the dominant culture, who thought they were better than me.

I probably wouldn't have stayed a punk if it was all about fashion or proving I was different, but I found community through the music scene. When I turned 16, I started making trips to Boston by myself, and made a lot of friends who were punks. I felt like I had more in common with them than the kids I went to school with. They were against the war, which meant a lot at the time. I'd put up fliers for anti-war rallies in my school only to have them ripped down. The "alternative" kids at school (read: wore a lot of black and smoked a lot of pot) I played hackey-sack with became openly racist when the war with Afghanistan became imminent. The

school friends I had (who did not claim to be alternative) were people I had compatible personalities with, but we didn't share common values.

The kids from Boston spat on by the rules of conformity and I wanted to emulate them because of it. I went to the shows they went to even though I didn't like all of the bands. I spent nearly every weekend of my sophomore year watching them get drunk, snort pills and play with knives at the Fens even though I was straight-edge and put off by the nihilistic lifestyle. These were the kids I seemed to have the most in common with when I was 16.

Then I transferred to a progressive (queer-friendly, with a socially conscious student body) private high school. It was like this alternate

universe where people were appreciated for their unique interests and quirks rather than ostracized for caring about issues. My closest friend there was an anarchist and he converted me quickly. "The abolition of hierarchy" in my mind translated to the abolition of racism, classism, sexism, homophobia/heterosexism, so I dove head first into the philosophy and organizing. We started an anarchist student group, which quickly became the biggest student group on campus. We organized teach-ins on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), trips to anti-war protests, social justice discussions and joined other anarchist groups off campus. I believed so fully that punk and anarchism (closely linked in these activist circles) were the

answer. I was enamored by those around me who talked about "smashing" racism and patriarchy, given the conservative and apathetic environment I came from.

I graduated high school with a strong sense of accomplishment in Boston's punk activist community, (I had succeeded in getting important scenesters to acknowledge me at shows.) I'd organized against the DNC, booked shows and volunteered with Food Not Bombs for four years. I expected when I moved to Baltimore for the art school it would be easy to pick up where I left off. I was wrong. In Baltimore the nihilism was turned way the fuck up. Smashing half-full beer bottles on the basement floor of the friend who is hosting the show just for

the fuck of it? Not cute. Letting dogs get kicked in the mosh pit? Ditto. The punks at Baltimore Food Not Bombs told me they could count the number of political punks in the local scene on one hand. When we'd take FNB leftovers to the weekly "punk rock potlucks", no one would talk to us. One time we walked in and the punks were planted in front of a TV watching Robocop, and only looked up to try and figure what the hell we were doing there.

I hated art school and moved back to Boston, but most of my high school friends were gone. I relied on Food Not Bombs and anarcho-punk activist circles for community, and it worked for a while. My disillusionment may have begun when Food Not Bombs was in danger of going under, and all

the punks that appreciated when we catered their events and shows and came to our benefits couldn't be bothered to help save us.

It was furthered by trying to organize against the BioTerror Lab being built by Boston University. The level four "biosafety" lab will handle ebola and anthrax and is located in Roxbury, the most densely populated neighborhood of Boston, which just happens to be a neighborhood of color and one of Boston's poorest. Anarchists in Boston initially organized among themselves to decide how to most effectively use direct action to stop the BioLab, rather than deferring to the leadership (the dreaded L word!) of those most impacted and less privileged (who had already *been* organizing



against the lab). Organizers were later frustrated when they could not get many Roxbury residents to show up to their punk show benefits or risky direct actions. They failed to see how anarcho-punk organizing tactics might be alienating or dangerous for working class folks of color.

My faith in anarcho-punk took another devastating blow at the Radical Queer Community Space. I was so excited about the potential of this group, but crestfallen to see that this "radical" space was not welcoming of butches, femmes, transfolks, or people of color. At one point the group decided to we wanted to do an action to bring attention to the plight of queer prisoners. The founder of the group proposed street theater involving "dressing up as queer

prisoners who have been sexually assaulted." I am still at a loss for words when I think about how offensive this proposal was.

I also started to notice how competition and vying for status pervaded every anarcho-punk show and event. Everyone seemed out to prove how cool they were by how many (pseudo-famous) people they knew (more than you.) To prove how down they were by calling out others instead of challenging their own oppressive behaviors and exclusive organizing tactics. To prove how much more radical/puritanical their lifestyle politics were and how much more nuanced their analysis was than yours, thus making them better activists, punks, and human beings.

In a community that denounced capitalist competition, allegedly in favor of cooperation and mutual aid, we were constantly trying to one-up each other. Pervading punk culture was this pressure to prove how tough we were in this very masculinist way (prizing masculinity over femininity) while claiming to be feminist. I later found this to be both exhausting and a convincing explanation of why punk is such a dudefest, but for a time I was all about it. I'm tough, I can hang with the boys, I thought. I distinctly remember looking down on this one femininely-dressed girl at a show and wondering "whose girlfriend *she* was". Didn't we all know the punk scene was a boys' game and you had to out-dude the dudes to win? (You know, drink more, cuss more,

mosh harder.) She was definitely *not* dudely, and not even trying! When I grew tired of trying to outdude everyone, I wanted to be real with people, but didn't feel the "real" me would be valued as much. This may have been in part because our scene was almost entirely white and devalued the priorities and cultures of people of color while claiming to "smash racism." Gender non-conforming folks had very little visibility in punk spaces and they were not particularly welcoming to queer and transfolks.

Boston anarchist scene had a strong red-and-black (anarcho-syndicalist) bent, and I soon learned "no war but the class war" meant class oppression is more important than racism, misogyny or homophobia. You

have to look at class oppression with blinders on to not see the overlap with gender and race, but the projects these organizations chose allowed them not only to put race and gender on the backburner, but even to avoid confronting their own class privilege. Not having to examine one's own privilege was a recurring theme in the punk activism I witnessed and was involved in in Boston. We organized on behalf of immigrant rights without knowing any immigrants or even having friends of color. We facilitated workshops about consent but had no fucking clue how to handle community members coming forward about sexual assault perpetrated by other punks. We shout about class war and think that eating out of dumpsters and shoplifting absolves

us of class privilege. (It doesn't.) We were hypocrites who talked a good talk and didn't dig below the surface to the places that made us uncomfortable, where real change happens.

The redandblack anarchists told me racism and sexism were products of capitalism, so I should help them overturn the capitalist system and my liberation would come eventually. The greenandblack anarchists told me racism and sexism were products of civilization, so I should prepare for industrial collapse and oppression would collapse with it. No one seemed to be putting the issues which effect women, people of color and queers the most first, and thus people with marginalized identities were further marginalized within this "counterculture." I think some

of them may have seen me as a white woman in a straight relationship though I am mixed-race, POC-identified and militantly queer. Groups I was in felt that anti-oppression training wasn't important and some members of those groups believed in *reverse racism*, the same members who were trying to organize communities of color against the BioLab! I think I allowed aspects of my identity to take a back seat when I was in the punk scene, I don't think I could subject myself to the same erasure now.

When I moved to Denver I actively avoided the punk scene (see comic for a description of the one show I went to.) I instead fell in with the queer community, which was politically active and racially diverse (compared to the scene I was coming from.) I met a

number of other mixed race folks, folks of color and even white folks who validated my identity as a Black woman and pansexual queer with an ever-changing gender presentation.

I think people with marginalized or complex identities are asked to leave a part of themselves at the door when they enter white, straight and male-dominated spaces, which most of the anarchist/punk spaces I've experienced are. In this crucial way, punk counterculture is no better than the dominant culture which devalues queer, POC and feminine identities.

Sometimes, my initial reaction when I run into a punk on the street is still to seek recognition. "Your patches show me that you are a fan of the band WitchHunt. I enjoy WitchHunt as well,"



or "Nice Choking Victim T-shirt. You know, I saw their 9/11 reunion show at Tompkins Square Park." But I have wasted far too much time and energy vying for the acceptance of people whose piercings and dreadlocks gave them far more cred in the punk scene than my anti-oppression work will ever grant me. I couldn't get ahead in a scene where one's worth was proven by hopping trains, not showering, and being seen at the right shows, so I stopped trying. I no longer have the desire to be accepted by people who hide behind their "radical" lifestyle politics and aren't able to work with people who don't eat out of dumpsters and can't afford get arrested to make a point, to make real change happen. I've got something better now, a community

of queer activists and activists of color whose priorities are more like mine, who accept me for who I am.

Punk was an incredibly important formative influence in my life because it was my first activist community, where my politics grew up. I still like some of the music and see having come up in that scene as an integral part of who I am. But it shouldn't surprise anybody that I grew out of and grew alienated by the punk scene, then submitted to a punk zine to talk shit about it. In a culture where you prove how down you are by judging others, what could be more punk than biting the hand of your formative heroes?

\*I want to add that I disengaged from Boston's punk activist community a few years ago, and it's possible some things have changed and gotten better. There are some rad folks still fighting to make punk spaces safer and punk activism more effective in Boston (as I think that queer punks and punks of color are trying to do everywhere, and I have nothing but respect for those individuals and efforts.) Attempts to stop the BU BioLab are still ongoing and still important and I expect that they must have grown and changed a lot for the better since I dropped out of Boston activism. See [stopthebiolab.org](http://stopthebiolab.org) for more info.

I went to a show  
last night where  
one of the bands  
sold patches that  
read "Abolish the  
White Punk". The  
irony was like  
a slap in the  
face.

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