

The Raw and the Rotten: Punk Cuisine

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# THE RAW AND THE ROTTEN: PUNK CUISINE<sup>1</sup>

Black Cat Café



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**This article investigates the ideological content of punk cuisine, a subcultural food system with its own grammar, logic, exclusions, and symbolism. As a shared system of praxis, punk cuisine helps to articulate subcultural identity, purpose, and politics. In the case of Seattle punks in the late twentieth century, their cuisine served to critique Whiteness, corporate-capitalism, patriarchy, environmental destruction, and consumerism. (Subculture, food, capitalism, modernity, crime, Whiteness, veganism)**

Having been moved 2,000 miles to the north of its original home on the Rio Grande, a steel government sign was placed along the colorful fence of the Black Cat Café in Seattle, and there it retained something of its original meaning. It was a small white sign with black letters which announced, "U.S. Border." On one side, land administered by the United States; on the other, the sign implied, a space beyond the reach of the American state: an autonomous region.

For five years, this zone was a haven for people called punks and their kindred spirits,<sup>2</sup> an assortment of young adults who exercised and debated punk praxis in and through the premises. At the Cat, punks read, talked, smoked, and ate. They chewed ideas and articulated dietary practices, and rehashed their experiences with one another. Being punk is a way of critiquing privileges and challenging social hierarchies. Contemporary punks are generally inspired by anarchism, which they understand to be a way of life in favor of egalitarianism and environmentalism and against sexism, racism, and corporate domination. This ideology shows up in punk routines: in their conversations, their travels, and in their approach to food.

Food practices mark ideological moments: eating is a cauldron for the domination of states, races, genders, ideologies, and the practice through which these discourses are resisted. Indeed, as Weiss (1996:130) argues, "Certain qualities of food make it *the* most appropriate vehicle for describing alienation." The theory and practice of punk cuisine gain clarity when they are viewed through the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1969), who saw the process of cooking food as the quintessential means through which humans differentiate themselves from animals, and through which they make culture and civilization. Lévi-Strauss's tripolar gastronomic system defines raw, cooked, and rotten as categories basic to all human cuisines. This model is useful for analyzing punk cuisine, and thereby punk culture. Yet this article also toys with the model, using it to give voice to the ardent critics of "civilization." Many punks associate the "civilizing" process of producing and transforming food with the human domination of nature and with White, male, corporate supremacy. Punks believe that industrial food fills a person's body with the norms, rationales, and moral pollution of corporate capitalism and imperialism. Punks reject such "poisons" and do not want to be mistaken for being White or part of American mainstream society. A variety of practices, many dietary, provide a powerful critique against the status quo.

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## A PUNK CULINARY TRIANGLE

In the punk community, food serves to elaborate and structure ideologies about how the world works. Through a complex system of rules, suggestions, and arguments, punk cuisine is a code like those posited by Lévi-Strauss (1969, 1997). But punk cuisine is best discussed as a cultural mechanism responsible to its own logic, and in dialogue with what punks perceive to be the normative culture. Lévi-Strauss's ideas about food are insightful, especially when placed in a locally defined context (Douglas 1984). His culinary triangle (Fig. 1) provides a helpful way to think about how the transformations of food can be cognitively mapped. For example, American food geographies have shifted toward processing (or cooking) food. Industrial food products are milled, refined, butchered, baked, packaged, branded, and advertised. They are often composed of ingredients shipped from remote places, only to be processed and sent once more around the globe. From a Lévi-Strauss perspective, then, punks consider industrial food to be extraordinarily cooked. Punks, in turn, preferentially seek food that is more "raw"; i.e., closer to its wild, organic, uncultured state; and punks even enjoy food that has, from an American perspective, become rotten—disposed of or stolen.

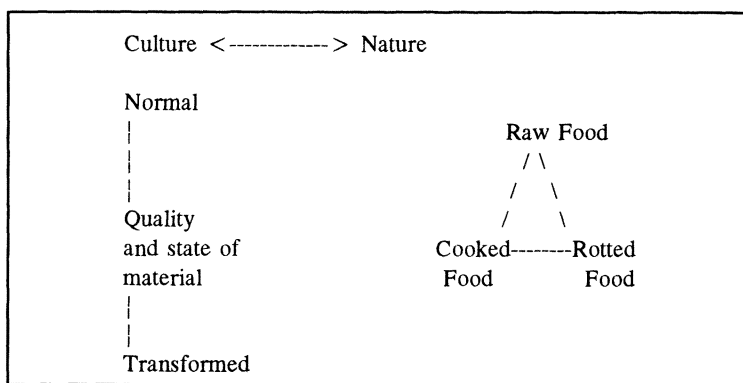


Figure 1: Lévi-Strauss's (1969) Culinary Triangle (Adopted from Wood [1995:11])

For punks, mainstream food is epitomized by corporate-capitalist "junk food." Punks regularly liken mainstream food geographies to colonialism because of their association with the Third World: destruction of rainforests (allegedly cleared for beef production), the creation of cash-cropping (to service World Bank debts), and cancer (in the use of banned pesticides on unprotected workers and water supplies). Furthermore, punks allege that large-scale stock-raising (cattle, chickens, pigs) and agribusiness destroy whole ecosystems. A representative of this point of view states, "Ultimately this vortex brings about the complete objectification of nature. Every relationship is increasingly instrumentalized and technicized. Mechanization and

industrialization have rapidly transformed the planet, exploding ecosystems and human communities with monoculture, industrial degradation, and mass markets" (Watson 1999:164; see also CrimethInc. Workers' Collective 2001:122).

Punk food attempts to break free from the fetishism of food as a commodity. As such, it is ideally purchased in brandless bulk or directly from farmers, self-made or home-grown, and otherwise less commodified, which is to say stolen or reclaimed from a garbage dumpster. By bathing corporate food in a dumpster or by stealing natural foods from an upscale grocery store, punk food is, in a sense, decommodified, stripped of its alienating qualities, and restored to a kind of pure use-value as bodily sustenance. In their organic, unmediated forms, such foods come closer to a "wild" diet, free of commodification and hierarchical relations of production, and closer to Lévi-Strauss's "raw" and "rotten" and further from his "cooked." Comments anarchist Bey (1991:54), "Food, cooked or raw, cannot escape from symbolism. . . . But in the airless vault of our civilization, where nearly every experience is mediated . . . we lose touch with food as nourishment; we begin to construct for ourselves personae based on what we consume, treating *products* as projections of our yearning for the authentic."

### THE ORDER OF SIGNS AT THE BLACK CAT CAFÉ

Hardly a quaint place sweetly nestled in a booming urban landscape, the Black Cat was a boxy structure enclosed by a jagged rampart of fencing and discarded materials. Part of the fence was topped with a tangled line of bicycle frames, reminiscent of a wall of thorns. It enclosed a café yard of scattered benches, tables, and cigarette butts. Against the side of the café a mass of bicycle frames and parts made a tangled mound of metal. To beautify the courtyard, scrap-wood planters held salvaged greenery. The place looked more like a junkyard than a restaurant, for it violated normal aesthetic conventions associated with dining. Unlike other restaurants, the café did not strive to declare sanitation and safety. If the space of modern authority is clean, empty, and clearly marked (Sennett 1990:38), the façade and decor of the Black Cat Café suggested the antithesis. The café was cluttered, soiled, its interior covered with posters, art, and canvas coffee sacks: packed with bulky, dilapidated furniture, it felt cramped.

This ambiance was precisely what drew punks to the Black Cat collective. On a dirty cement floor that would offend mainstream good taste, punks tossed their rucksacks holding all their worldly possessions. Where others were repelled by the body odors of the unwashed, punks recognized kindred spirits. Where others feared to eat food prepared by grimy, garishly pierced cooks, patrons appreciated the ambiance of food lovingly prepared.

Food itself was one of the centrally reversed signs here, perhaps because food was the ostensible *raison d'être* for the restaurant. Black Cat food, like the café itself, was a declaration of autonomy and organic creation, a rejection of commodification. Meat and dairy products were proudly excluded. Vegetables with peanut sauce, tofu

scrambles, and other vegan creations served as entrees. The place and the food rejected strict adherence to conventional conceptions of hygiene, where even the appearance of filth somehow infects the object or the body. Here hygiene was associated with bleached teeth, carcinogenic chemicals, and freshly waxed cars, and operated as a code for sterility, automation, and alienation. Hygiene meant “idiot box” sitcoms and suburban fears of dark bodies. At the café, hygiene was a projection of Whiteness, and rejected.<sup>3</sup>

In rejecting the image of sterility, the Black Cat collective scorned decades of market research, and refuted dominant mantras of modernity. Marketing doctrine in the United States urges restaurants to emphasize scrubbed surfaces, clarity, and predictability. As a rule, the food industry seeks to provide a product so clean and neat that its human creation is not readily apparent. In this sense, the commodity fetishism as a corporate mandate is more apparent to the senses than is the migrant laborer in the field or the minimum-wage dishwasher. For the greater punk community, interchangeability, consistency, and hygienic food represent food that is utterly cooked and gastronomically problematic: “When we accept their definition of ‘cleanliness,’ we are accepting their economic domination of our lives” (CrimethInc. Workers’ Collective 2001:123).

What to make, then, of a restaurant which rarely produces a tahini salad dressing the same way twice or a pile of home fries without a good many charred? What of a restaurant with spotty service, spotty dishes, where the roof leaks, and the bathroom reeks? For five years, the Black Cat found a way to thrive in spite of, or because of, its unorthodox practices. The workers and patrons of the café are a different breed who seek out what is “rotten” in mainstream society. One worker-owner, Ketan, talked about how the marginality of the Black Cat scared away many potential patrons, but noted with a laugh,

I hope . . . people realize that this not a café. This is not a café. This is not a restaurant. . . . That’s not what this place is about. This is a safe space. It is a haven for people who want to live their lives away from the bullshit of corporate oppression. That’s what this space is about. It’s not about anything else other than that. It’s for people who want to believe what they want to believe and not be ridiculed, and be free from control by governments or other forms of systematic, abusive power things.

### FOOD AS GENDER/POWER

As a site of resource allocation, food tends to recapitulate power relations. Around the globe, unequal allocations of food according to a patriarchal system are common. A working-class male comes of age in France when he is able to help himself to large volumes of food (Bourdieu 1984). Men, and sometimes boys, often receive larger amounts of food and have culinary choices catered to their taste (see Narotzky 1997:136-37; Mintz 1985:144-45; Appadurai 1981). Thus, food displays practices through which unequal gender power are acted out, resisted, and reproduced (Counihan 1999). Punks, too, play out gender/power relations in their diets. In recent years, the punk ethic has become more committed to anarchist,

egalitarian principles that celebrate and practice an antihierarchical social order, including one that prohibits a hierarchy of gender.

Feminist praxis in punk explicitly critiques food as a site of repression, using the Victorian age as an example of a discourse disciplining female bodies through food (Mennell 1985). This discourse was fostered in part by capitalist food and pharmaceutical industries eager to create new products for dieting and beauty (Bordo 1993; Chapkis 1986). Feminists identify this discourse as a form of control over women that at times leaves them malnourished, anorexic, or bulimic, and fixated on manipulating their body shape and diets. As a gendered and specifically American national project, by the early twentieth century, through women's magazines, newspapers, churches, cookbooks, and civic societies, native-born and immigrant women were educated in "home economics," a correlated set of technologies intended to produce an idealized femininity schooled in Whiteness, to produce the right kind of patriarchy and racial order of the U.S. nation-state. Such ideological uses of food are routinely referenced in punk food discourse, in everyday talk, by bands such as Tribe 8, and in "zines" (the popular broadsheets of punk) such as *Fat Girl*.

Thus, many punks identify the body as a place where hegemony is both made and resisted. Punks are critical of the beauty industry and of the commodification of the body. They argue that food is part of a disciplinary order in which women are taught to diet and manage their bodies so as to publicly communicate in the grammar of patriarchy. "Riot girl" punks, in particular, have produced a large volume of zines, music, conversations, and practices that challenge the sexist politics of food. In the ongoing evolution and critique of punk culture, diet is one of the many places where feminist ideas have been advanced and largely won out.

Indeed, vegetarianism for many punks is partly a feminist practice, but it also reveals ideological fissures within punk culture. Meat, with its prestige, caloric content, and proximity to physical violence, has been widely associated with masculinity (Adams 1990; Rifkin 1992). Yet even within punk culture, which is critical of both sexism and meat-eating (O'Hara 1999), some punks continue to produce an overtly sexist, masculine presence (Nguyen 1999) and one associated with eating meat. Meat for some punks is a way to challenge feminism in punk and to reassert masculine power. Other punk meat-eating falls into the categories of those who are apolitical about food, and those who flaunt meat-eating as a way of challenging punk orthodoxy.

For most punks, however, meat-eating is collaborative with an unjust social order, which punks typically portray as a patriarchy. Opposing social hierarchies, and living in staunchly patriarchal societies, they need to subvert male supremacy in everyday life, and vegetarianism, widely stigmatized as an oriental and feminine practice, helps to differentiate punks from the mainstream.

## PUNK VEGANISM

In punk veganism, the daily politics of consumption and the ethical quandaries of everyday life are intensified. In part, the decade-long struggle to make food and animal products overtly political was carried out by bands such as Vegan Reich and in zines. Zines regularly comment on animal rights, industrial food, and veganism. Often drawing upon Rifkin (1992) and Robbins (1987), many zines recount details of cruelty toward animals, contaminated meat, and the unhealthful effects of meat and dairy products on the human body. Other punk writing describes environmental consequences of industrial food production. "Even Punks who do not acknowledge the concept of animal rights and hold strong anthropocentric views have been known to change their diet purely for environmental reasons" (O'Hara 1999:135). In the daily praxis of punk, vegetarianism and veganism are strategies through which many punks combat corporate capitalism, patriarchy, and environmental collapse.

The emphasis on a radical diet was not always a dominant part of punk cultures. But by the 1990s, veganism was a rapidly ascending force within the greater punk landscape in North America. Led by the "straight edge" punk movement, veganism gained credence across the punk spectrum, including those who scorned the drug-abstaining politics of straight edge, as did most Seattle punks in this study.

At the Black Cat Café, punks said that to eat animal-based products was not only unhealthful, it participated in the bondage and murder of animals. Many punks were concerned about the cruel conditions of factory farms, where animals were kept in cramped quarters, pumped with hormones and antibiotics, and "tortured" in sundry ways. Near the middle of its tenure, the Black Cat discontinued its use of milk and eggs. A vegetarian café from its outset, the Cat became more orthodox when its menu was made completely vegan. The transition to a vegan menu marked a turning point for the collective. The original members had dropped out, and a younger, more militant membership had taken control. The café became less tolerant, less compromising, and more thoroughly punk in its clientele and ambiance. Ketan expressed the urgency that many punks feel about veganism:

There's this line that occurs with being vegan and being activist: at what point does the freedom of people who believe what they believe cross over to the point where people are being harmed? You know? Like, yeah: people are free to eat meat. But actually, in this day and age, they *can't* eat meat because it's killing animals. Because someone is eating meat, land that could potentially benefit all of us is being destroyed. I have a lot of problems with that line: I don't want to impede people's freedom, but what everyone does affects everyone else. . . . I honestly believe that people have to stop eating meat now. Now! I'm not gonna force anyone to stop eating meat, but they're hurting me, my children's future, my friends, my family—because they're eating meat. And they're hurting the Earth, which is most important of all.

Many punks around the nation were part of the growing politicization of the culture, with veganism at the forefront of the politics. To be vegan in America is to perpetually find oneself in the minority, chastised, excluded, challenged, and

reminded of one's difference. In this sense, veganism also served as an incessant critique of the mainstream, a maker of Otherness, and an enactment of punk.

### RAW AS A CRITIQUE OF COOKED

In punk cuisine, the degree to which food is processed, sterilized, brand named, and fetishized is the degree to which it is corrupted, distanced from nature, and "cooked." Punks describe a world under the assault of homogenized foods and culture, a world of vast monocropped cornfields and televisions lit with prefabricated corporate "infotainment." Whereas industrial agriculture is associated with genetic engineering, monocropping, pesticides, animal cages, chemical fertilizers, and commodification, "raw" food tends toward wildness and complexity.

Punks perceive in everyday American food an abject modernity, a synthetic destroyer of locality and diversity. The "cooking" of foods, to which punks vociferously object, is an outcome of the industrialization and commercialization of modern food production, which are made visible and critiqued through punk culinary practices. The following trends in modern food manufacture and consumption comprise the increasingly cooked qualities of food against which punks can be said to form their culinary triangle.

From a punk perspective, American food has reached an unprecedented and remarkable state: nearly all the food that Americans eat is received in the form of a commodity, and the fetishism of food goes far beyond the simple erasure of labor. Lears (1994:171) describes the emergence of the industrialization of eating:

By the 1920s and 1930s, advertisements for food displayed an almost panicky reassertion of culture over nature—an anxious impulse to extirpate all signs of biological life from one's immediate personal environment. That impulse has been spreading widely for decades, as methods of mass production were brought to food processing and distribution.

Such logics, for example, are apparent in the segregated meat products, in which the animal carcass is hidden. The animal's head, feet, and tongue (its recognizable body parts) have disappeared from most American butcher displays.

Through the most sophisticated branding, packaging, and advertising, American food commodities work hard to conceal the labor, spatial divides, and resources that went into making the food. Or, as Weiss (1996:131) shows, "the effects of encompassing transformations in political economy (colonialism, wage labor, commoditization and the like) . . . [have] their greatest and gravest consequences for food." In modern advertising, images of food often divert attention from the industrialized production of food, and draw attention to its consumption (DuPuis 2000). Rather than depict the mechanized dairy factory, ads show celebrities and athletes wearing smiles and milk mustaches. Notes Harvey (1989:300),

The whole world's cuisine is now assembled in one place. . . . The general implication is that through the experience of everything from food, to culinary habits, music, television, entertainment, and cinema, it is now possible to experience the world's geography vicariously, as a simulacrum. The interweaving

of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time. But it does so in such a way as to conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin, of the labour processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production.

Perhaps these postmodern geographies, along with relentless commodification, heighten the fetishism of the commodity, hiding as much as possible the making of a product; the alienating conditions of production, cooking in the extreme.

Punks see industrialized food production not as a desired convenience, but as one of the hallmarks of monoculture. The anarchist idea of monoculture plays on the "culture" part of the term, thus expanding it to cover not only modern industrial agriculture, but also mainstream culture. For punks, monoculture encapsulates the idea that societies around the world are being devoured and homogenized by consumerism; it invokes the idea that humans everywhere increasingly eat, dream, work, are gendered, and otherwise live according to a narrow and hegemonic culture sold to them by global capitalism. Across the globe, punks argue, humans are losing their cultural, ecological, temporal, and regional specificity. Among other things, this means that people are often eating foods grown and flavored elsewhere: people everywhere are increasingly alienated from that which keeps them alive.

"Raw" food, which is to say, organic, home-grown, bartered food, was one way punks resisted the spread of monoculture. At the Black Cat Café, customers could trade home-grown organic produce for meal credits, they could trade their dishwashing labor for meals, and they could drink "fair trade" coffee. Moreover, the café strove to subvert profiteering at every step in the food's production. At the Cat, people who might be called punks contrasted the synthetic, processed, and destructive diet of the mainstream with their own, and declared that their bodies and minds were healthier for it, unpolluted by toxic chemicals and capitalist culture.

### STEALING YUPPIE-NATURAL FOODS

Not far from the Black Cat Café, Seattle hosted a variety of natural-foods retailers, who attracted both the contempt and the palates of punks. Such places offered organically grown foods marketed to an upscale clientele. Indeed, the natural-foods industry in 1990s Seattle was part of a vast reconfiguration of food in America, which witnessed a hitherto unprecedented niche marketing of what punks saw as foods which fed egos more than bodies. The punk narrative critique of the natural-foods movement was extended by stealing, for by this the food was remade.

Punk discourses of food are partly a response to the heightening of identity marketing in foods over the last few decades of the twentieth century. Although locating identity and prestige in food is an ancient practice, it has historically been limited by income, tradition, and spatial divides. But in contemporary America, the bewildering array of food choices challenges the consumer, whose choices are understood to "express" or manufacture him- or herself. Americans have reached the point at which food as essential for survival has been sublimated under the ideology of food as self-gratification and consumer identity.

Such formulas were apparent to punks in the commercial discourse on natural foods. Punks regard these foods, while ostensibly pure and simple, as much commodities as the food products that preceded them, and derisively locate “yuppie,” “individualistic,” and “White” behavior in an expensive obsession about one’s own purity and health (see Bey 1991:53). The natural-foods industry, then, is a target of punk critical practices. In Seattle, the Puget Consumers’ Co-op (PCC) bore the brunt of the punk natural-foods critique. Fashionable, expensive, and allegedly catering to a mostly White and upscale clientele, the PCC was scorned by punks.

While commodified natural foods were repulsively overcooked, they were simultaneously closer to the raw forms of food that punks preferred: organic, bulk, and whole grain. So, while the PCC market offered the organic products that punks preferred (as well as a relatively tolerable and tolerant workplace for those who opted for wage labor), the high prices and upscale marketing represented the cooking of foods; the heightened state of gastronomic fetishism from which punks felt alienated. Cleansed of their commodification, these foods would be perfectly suited to the punk culinary system. Thus, many punks, whether as workers or customers, targeted natural-foods supermarkets for theft (c.f. Himmelstein and Schweser 1998:18-21, 24). In this manner, the kitchen of the Black Cat Café was routinely stocked with products stolen from chain supermarkets and natural-foods stores. This behavior suggests an axiom of punk culinary geometry: in the act of being stolen, heavily cooked food is transformed into a more nutritive, gustative state. Stolen foods are outlaw foods, contaminated or rotten to the mainstream, but a delicacy in punk cuisine.

### THE ROTTEN LOGIC OF DUMPSTER DIVING

Each night American supermarkets and restaurants fill their dumpsters with food, and each night punks arrive to claim some of it. A host of foods become rotten in corporate-capitalist food production: food with an advanced expiration date, cosmetically damaged produce, food in dented packaging, day-old baked goods, and the like. As punks saw it, people were hungry in Seattle, in America, and around the world. To punks it was obscene that businesses were trashing good food (Resist 2003:67).

Unlike raw foods, dumped food tends to be commercialized, nonorganic, and highly processed. Baked goods, donuts, produce, vegetables, pizza, and an array of junk foods are foraged by punks, who otherwise disdain such products. Yet in the process of passing through a dumpster, such foods are cleansed or rotted, as it were, and made nutritious and attractive to the punk being.

It was ironic to punks that people are hassled by security guards, store employees, and police merely for taking things out of a dumpster. Not only did the mainstream waste food, it protected its garbage with armed guards. Commented one punk: “There is the odd paradox—the casualness with which they will throw something into the dumpster, and the lengths they will go to protect it once it’s there.

How an innocent and harmless act—dumpster diving—will be confronted by greedy shopkeepers, store managers, and employees with scathing words, rage, and violence” (Anonymous 2001:72). Taken in tandem, the waste of food and the protection of waste were seen by punks as the avaricious gluttony of American society. Food in dumpsters is, for most Americans, garbage and repulsive. It goes beyond the pale of Whiteness to eat food classified as garbage: only untouchables, such as the homeless, eat trash. So for those punks who were raised White or middle class, dumpsters and dumped food dirty their bodies and tarnish their affiliation with a White, bourgeois power structure. In this sense, the downward descent into a dumpster is literally an act of downward mobility. Moreover, eating garbage (food deemed rotten) is a forceful condemnation of societal injustices. On an ecologically strained planet home to two billion hungry people, punks see their reclamation of rotten food as a profoundly radical act.

### GASTRO-POLITICS IN PUNK ACTIVISM

For its five years of existence, the Black Cat Café was the kitchen of Seattle’s punk scene. It was a decidedly anticorporate environment, where mainstream types were not always welcomed, and where there was always room for young wayfarers. As with many cultures, punk food practices helped shape community, symbolize values, and foster group solidarity. The Black Cat was a place where anarcho-punk “dis-organizations” could put up flyers, recruit members, and keep their limited dollars circulating. At the café, feelings of alienation from the mainstream were converted into punk sentiments and channeled into anarchist practices.

Various activist groups were associated with punk culture. One of the foremost was Food Not Bombs, an anarchist dis-organization. It served to collect, prepare, and distribute free food to the homeless and the hungry. The hostility of the Seattle City Council and Seattle police toward Food Not Bombs was received at the Cat as another sign of American class warfare and a coercive attempt to force even the homeless to turn to commodities for their survival (see also Narotzky 1997:114). When Food Not Bombs was cited for giving meals to the poor, this revealed the militancy of the ruling class to punks. Despite—and because of—the hassles from authorities, Food Not Bombs drew many volunteer hours from people who were affiliated with the Black Cat. Ketan mentioned Food Not Bombs as inspiring him to become a punk:

I think the reason I chose not to [be a part of the mainstream] is . . . empathy . . . empathy and recognition of . . . what we’re going through. I myself have been helping out with Food Not Bombs for a year straight, and [so] I’ve got a pretty good idea of what [poor] people go through. And I myself have [suffered] in the sense that I’ve not had my own space, and it’s drove me crazy—you know, not knowing where I was going to sleep the next night. . . . Certainly I can’t say that I know exactly what’s going on [with the homeless], but I’m just trying to say that I have some understanding of it, you know? Just knowing that [poverty’s] happening. And knowing that that’s happening in the midst of that CEO making 109 million dollars [a year] . . . just knowing that makes me not want to be a part of that

[wealth]. And that's happened with a lot of people here. I don't want to say what they believe, but—people here try to be as aware as they can of what's going on.

Another member of the scene, Karma, said that the “sense of family” drew her to the Cat.

I like the fact that it's not run to make money. It's run for people, not profit. There's always some cause happening, some flyer up about something to go to: Books to Prisoners or Food Not Bombs or the Art and Revolution thing. . . . I think [activism] has a lot to do with it—certainly not the majority of why people come here. I think the majority of why people come here is because there's cheap food that's damn good. But because the food is specifically vegan, and that on a level by itself is activism, a lot of activists are vegan so they end up coming here. [Laughs.] And that kind of spurs the whole activism-crowd thing. Because they're all coming here, leaving their flyers, more people are coming, they're seeing the flyers, “Oh yeah, look: this is going on.”

By making its political content explicit, food became a primary site of discussion and recruitment. In these movements, punk cuisine took shape and with it punks at the Black Cat concocted a daily life of meaningful situations, anarchist discourse, and resistance to “the System.”

## CONCLUSIONS

Contemporary punks—largely anarchist, antiracist, and feminist—use food as a medium to make themselves, and to theorize and contest the status quo. As an integral part of their daily practice, punks politicize food. For punks, everyday American food choices are not only nutritionally deficient, they are filled with a commodified, homogenous culture, and are based in White-male domination over nature, animals, and people around the world. Punk cuisine is one way punks critique these power relations, and one substance with which to remake themselves outside of those relations. Punk cuisine is a way to make punk ideas knowable, ritualized, and edible; a way to favor the less mediated anarchist food over the capitalist product: the raw over the cooked. From punk vantage points, modern American food is transformed to a cultural extreme; its origins in nature and labor are cooked away, leaving a fetishized byproduct. Punk cuisine aspires toward food that is free of brand names, pesticides, and exploited labor, and toward food that is as raw as possible. In punk poesis, raw is a metaphor for wild, and one of the most important tropes in punk culture. Where mainstream society is said to control, exploit, and homogenize foods and people, punks idealize freedom, autonomy, and diversity.

For five years, the Black Cat Café brought punks together in a cultural space where they critiqued modernity, capitalism, Whiteness, and mainstream America. In their cuisine, punks identify and challenge Fordism, sexism, greed, cruelty, and environmental destruction. They choose to avoid eating American cuisine, for they see the act of eating everyday American food as a complicit endorsement of White-male corporate power. Reared White and middle class, and raised on foods that are seemingly nonideological in American culture, punks come to reject their ethno-class

identities and cuisine, for they believe that mainstream American foods recapitulate a violent and unjust society. Mainstream American food, with its labor and natural components cooked beyond recognition, is countered with the raw and rotten foods of punks; foods that are ideally natural, home grown, stolen, discarded, and uncommodified. These foodways define punk cuisine and punks themselves.

## NOTES

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2. Research for this article stems from my participant-observation in the Black Cat Café in Seattle from 1993 to 1998. The café was owned and operated by people called "punk" in their culture for their anarchist philosophy. Punks are diverse, and though these punks might be called "anarcho-punks" (to distinguish them from gutter punks, straight-edge punks, and other types), all punk ideologies are related. The cuisine of punks is always changing, always being argued over, and always responding to new circumstances and ideologies.
3. The restaurant was never in violation of health codes except for minor offenses (once, for example, an inspector prohibited leaving rice in the rice cooker and the collective grudgingly had to buy a food warmer). Dishes, food, and hands were washed, and no customer ever reported suffering from food poisoning.

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