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"You'll Be the First to Go!": Violence, Punk Hypocrisy and the Subversion of Safe Space in Jeremy Saulnier's *Green Room*

Marko Djurdjić

Intro

Punk—as a genre and as a subculture—is supposedly meant to be inviting and inclusive. And yet, within many punk scenes and spaces, particularly those associated with hardcore punk, inclusivity often gives way to hypocrisy, testosterone-fuelled violence, and various exclusionary practices. In response, "safe(r) space" venues have been developed by marginalized punks to combat these uninviting spaces, thus connecting the notion of "safe spaces"—or more appropriately "safer spaces"—to punk.[1]

According to Condon, Lieber, and Maillochon, "'Feeling unsafe' is presented in the public and political sphere as [a] phenomenon that affects everyone the same way, regardless of social and gender differences."[2] And yet, there are certain bodies, markers, and demographics that experience *much* more aggression and violence than others; it is *not* a ubiquitous, general, or universal feeling of "unsafety" that pervades society, but rather, a limited one, a targeted one. Safe(r) spaces are thus "more than simply academic or intellectual concepts; instead, they necessitate a practical, real-world application, wherein safe spaces become sites of rebellion,

Marko Djurdjić (pronounced JOOR-JICH) is a PhD candidate in Cinema and Media Studies at York University. His work is rooted in film, media literacy, and embodiment. He has a BA from McGill University, a BEd from the University of Toronto, and an MA from York university. His wide-ranging research interests include "middle brow" entertainment, Football Sundays™, and complex carbohydrates. He currently writes for *Exclaim!,* a free cultural newspaper in Toronto, and *That Shelf,* an online entertainment publication. He also plays in a band with his partner. They rock...probably.

[1] Keenan & Darms, 2013; Sharp & Nilan, 2017; Hill & Megson, 2020; Hill, Hesmondhalgh & Megson, 2020.
[2] Condon, Lieber, & Maillochon, 101.

validation, and self-determination, free from surveillance, violence, or control by historically dominant groups."[3]

This paper examines the "spatial horror" of Jeremy Saulnier's 2015 grindhouse throwback, *Green Room*, which Saulnier develops through his subversion of the ambiguous, liminal, and oftentimes quite boring titular space[4]. *Green Room* tells the story of the Ain't Rights, an exhausted, perennially broke hardcore punk band from D.C., who run afoul of a group of neo-Nazi skinheads while playing a show in a remote warehouse venue in the Pacific Northwest. In their imposing warehouse venue, where they put on shows and rallies, the promise of a safe(r) community space where punks can congregate is nullified by the neo-Nazi skinhead klan and their gruesome form of white supremacy. Saulnier depicts the inherent lack of safety in punk for bodies that cannot or will not assimilate through the graphic violence exacted by the skinheads on the Ain't Rights. These are bodies deemed "deviant" or "subversive" by the dominant order, and they must be punished and eradicated.

And yet, because the green room is an open, ill-defined space that can be annexed by whatever new act occupies it, it is seemingly free from the oppressive, dangerous, and ideological effect imposed on the rest of the venue by the neo-Nazi "punks." Even within this antagonistic environment, the Ain't Rights are able to appropriate the blank space of the green room for themselves, turning it into a protective safe(r) space of hardcore rebellion.

[3] Patricia Hill Collins, 111.
[4] Film stills in this essay are from *Green Room.*

Safe(r) Spaces: A Brief History

As Shawna Potter summarizes it, the term "safe(r) space" has gone through many iterations: from the context of "sensitivity training" for corporate management in the 1940s, where individuals could feel "safe enough to express [their] opinions without being judged for them,"[5] through to the 90s, 2000s, and beyond, where such spaces allowed "room to take intellectual risks in order to encourage open dialogue."[6] Historically,

> the intention of implementing safer spaces has been to facilitate discussion and debate. Safer spaces have their conceptual origin in US anti-racist and feminist praxis in the 1960s and 1970s. They emerged in particular from the organising tactics of women of colour and were to become a typical aspect of 'second-wave' feminist groups around the world.[7]

These early practitioners and proponents of safe spaces formed small groups in private spaces, including living rooms, in order to provide a "'free space', in which women could examine the nature of their own oppression and share the growing knowledge that they were not alone. The qualities of intimacy, support, and virtual structurelessness made the small group a brilliant tool for spreading the movement."[8] These practices were further developed by queer groups in the 1970s in gay villages and neighbourhoods, such as London's Soho and San Francisco's Castro.[9] Considered "'undesirable' areas of the city populated by various marginalised groups, [these neighbourhoods] were gradually claimed as community spaces by those who lived or socialised in them."[10]

More specifically, the notion of a safe space in punk emerged from the Women's Liberation Movement, where it was viewed as "a key tool in enabling consciousness-raising. Underpinning the concept of safer spaces is a belief in social justice, which can be traced to Marxist, feminist, anti-racist and decolonial arguments about the structural nature of oppression."[11] Furthermore, "studies on the creation of safer spaces in riot grrrl and queer punk provide a basis for understanding the benefits of safer spaces for music-making."[12]

The riot grrrl movement had its genesis in the 90s in the Pacific Northwest and was associated with bands such as Bikini Kill, Heavens to Betsy, Sleater-Kinney and Bratmobile. This ideaology was championed by female-identifying

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[5] Potter 10-11.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Lohman, 2.
[8] Evans, 215.
[9] Lohman, 2.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Hill and Megson, 61.
[12] Hill & Megson, 60.

members of the Olympia, Washington punk community—many of whom played in the aforementioned bands—due to a *very* evident lack of safety in venues during shows. They felt that someone needed to speak up about the masculinization of punk and the danger felt by those who were not boys with shaved heads and ripped tees looking to expel their rage and frustration. Punk had become a subculture predominantly populated by white, cis, straight, heteronormative males, many of whom felt disenfranchised in some way and felt the need to barrel through each other and anyone else who stood in their way at shows. Thus, the concept of safe space became crucial "to the all-girl meetings, dance parties, and bands that formed the foundation of Riot Grrrl."[13]

Unfortunately, "boundaries erected for safety sometimes led to exclusion along lines of race, class, or gender identity,"[14] thus further enabling privileged and dominant members of the subculture to perpetuate exclusionary, unsafe, and even violent practices on uncooperative bodies.[15] While the riot grrrl movement championed inclusivity, putting "into practice the radical feminism of women of color who saw no way forward for women who relied on the establishment for support,"[16] it has also been accused of perpetuating its own exclusionary practices, ones that negated the bodies and histories of BIPOC individuals[17] and trans women.[18] As Mimi Nguyen writes, although she believes that riot grrrl "was—and is— the best thing that ever happened to punk [because it] critically interrogated how power, and specifically sexism, organized punk,"[19] she is also critical of the movement, noting how it

> often reproduced structures of racism, classism, and (less so) heterosexism in privileging a generalized "we" that primarily described the condition of mostly white, mostly middle-class women and girls. For students of feminist history, second wave feminism—also white-dominated—stumbled over the same short-sighted desire to universalize what weren't very universal definitions of "woman," "the female condition," and "women's needs."[20]

Thus, even within the "safest" of punk spaces, there is danger, violence, and/or exclusion. While

[13] Keenan and Darms, 55-56.
[14] Ibid, 56.
[15] Hill and Megson, 59.
[16] Williams, 61.
[17] Dawes, 2013.
[18] Gisto, 2023.
[19] Nguyen, 84.
[20] Nguyen, 84.

> safer spaces shape who feels welcome or unwelcome, and empower those who use them, [they] can never guarantee safety or comfort. […] The ability to provide safety across multiple/y marginalised groups remains patchy, and safety will always be unstable and unguaranteed.[21]

The use of the term **safe(r)** rather than safe when discussing punk spaces thus acknowledges that, while certain factions of punks may strive for the utopian "safe" space, "the purposeful addition of (r) recognises the collaborative work and emotional labour for those organising gigs as an ongoing process, while simultaneously highlighting the *limitations of safe*."[22]

In Saulnier's film, the influence of neo-Nazism and fascism on communal spaces occupied by punk(s) is taken to its horrific and inevitable conclusion. After the Ain't Rights take shelter from the skinhead gang in the titular green room—a nondescript, liminal, and seemingly safe(r) space housed in an otherwise *very* antagonistic environment—they must fight their way out of it and past the neo-Nazis. Unfortunately for the Ain't Rights, a safe(r) space for dissenting non-racist punks is an impossibility within a venue that has seen an influx of neo-Nazi and white supremacist imagery and ideology. This divide eventually turns the green room and the venue, including the grounds around it, into a site of gruesome, bone-snapping, gun-toting, box-cutter-employing violence, something hardcore–as a subculture and as a genre–is all too familiar with.

Neo-Nazis, Crews, and the Proliferation of Hardcore Violence in the Punk Scene

Punks, straight-edgers, and hardcore kids are all distinct yet similar subcultures that articulate "some form of resistance to the mainstream."[23] According to Williams (2011), while "hegemonic masculinity can be seen in practice in various music subcultures,"[24] including hip-hop and metal, punk and hardcore in particular have historically been recognized as "predominantly male, with distinctive practices that mark them as masculine, heterosexual zones characterized by the expression of physical power and emotional energy."[25]

> As Williams notes, in the late 1970s, there was a distinct shift from the almost farcical nihilism of early punk to the more politically informed and angry iteration of hardcore. Hardcore was a more aggressive, heavier music genre than punk. It borrowed musically from heavy metal while honing the

[21] Lohman, 16-17.
[22] Sharp and Nilan, 77, italics my own.
[23] Williams 102.
[24] Ibid, 58.
[25] Ibid.

> in-your-face, resistant rhetoric of punk, fueled by outrage at the conservative politics that were engulfing the West at the time. The anger espoused in hardcore lyrics was also practiced at gigs in the mosh pit, which was later appropriated by extreme metal subcultures.[26]

While moshing, slam dancing, and the pit in general have been recognized and described as inherently violent but largely performative—and not outwardly antagonistic or hostile—acts and spaces[27] governed by rules,[28] others have described how and why these practices mutate into consciously aggressive acts.[29]

Berger, examining the pit within a metal context, was clear to differentiate mosh pit violence from real violence, stating that the violence of a mosh pit is "accompanied by the subtle awareness that *this is a mosh pit and not a riot*."[30] There is "pit decorum," a semblance of responsibility between pit participants. When someone falls or needs help, you give them a hand; conversely, those that raise the ire of pit participants and do not follow the rules can and will be ejected. There is a sense of *etiquette*. And yet, although Palmer claims that "the *appearance* of a mosh pit as a violent fight is misleading,"[31] hardcore punk pits can turn into such frenzied, chaotic spaces that this etiquette, this sense of shared and altruistic responsibility, is often negated, and these violent "appearances" become realities. Impulse control and care both dissipate, and injury—whether accidental or intentional—often occurs.

As William Tsitsos (1999) writes, this change in dancing styles—from slam dancing and pogoing to moshing—originated in the New York Hardcore (NYHC) scene and perfectly "fit with the value that the NYHC scene placed on control, including over the physical body, rather than the chaotic *aesthetic* of slam dancing."[32] Importantly, "compared with slamming, the fundamental body movements of moshing, such as the more violent swinging of the arms, the more violent body contact, and the lack of group motion place even greater emphasis on individual territoriality over (comm)unity."[33] Moshing emphasized brutality, turning the pit into a wild, dangerous, and inherently individualistic space. Moreover, this new type of moshing "effectively banished most women from the pit, as average height differentials between men and women meant that when elbows flew backward, women were the ones who disproportionately wound up with broken noses."[34]

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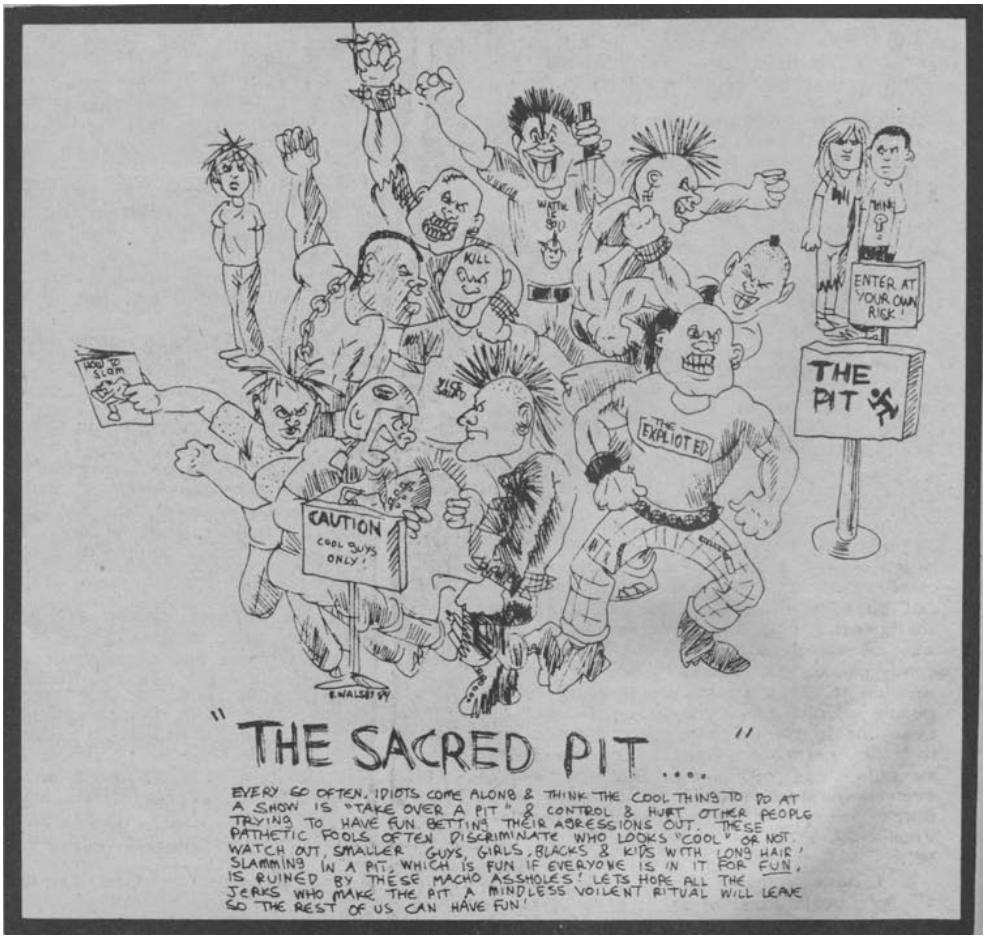
[26] Ibid, 60.
[27] Lull, 1987; Fonarow, 2006; Tsitsos, 1999; Palmer, 2005; Overell, 2010.
[28] Roman, 1988; Arnett, 1996; Palmer, 2005; Overell, 2010.
[29] Berger, 1999; Williams, 2011; Pearson, 2020.
[30] Berger, 72, emphasis my own.
[31] Palmer, 154, emphasis my own.
[32] Pearson, 25, emphasis my own.
[33] Tsitsos, 410.
[34] Pearson, 25.



Anonymous. "The Sacred Pit...." *Maximum Rocknroll* No. 18 ("Breaking the Silence on Gang Violence"), October 1984[35]

As punk transitioned from the rock n' roll influenced sound of the late 1970s into the more abrasive sounds of hardcore in the 1980s, "the US punk scene increasingly became the province of young suburban white males, both numerically and, perhaps more importantly, in its representations and constructions of subjectivity."[36] While there were exceptions to the norm—hardcore progenitors Bad Brains being the most well-known and influential—as Dewar MacLeod so succinctly puts it, "hardcore was white music. [He] can think of no better way to say

[35] https://cvltnation.com/maximum-rock-n-roll-covered-the-summer-of-hate/
[36] Ibid, 133.

it."[37] Although hardcore is not inherently racist, it should come as no surprise that this attitude—of hardcore as overwhelmingly white—would also be adopted by both out- and in-group members who saw punk as fertile ground for recruiting participants into groups promoting far right, racist, and white supremacist ideologies—and the practices that upheld and defended these beliefs. Although left-wing politics are often associated with the study and discussion of punk,

> from early in punk's history, the far right, including Nazi skinheads, have used it as a ground for recruiting disaffected white youth. Skrewdriver, a British punk band that started in 1976 and went on to ally itself with the far right National Front political party, was the most prominent example of this trend. In the late 1980s United States, Tom Metzger, leader of the White Aryan Resistance (WAR), began recruiting skinheads connected to the punk scene after a visit to Britain, during which he learned of the National Front's effectiveness in doing the same.[38]

In recognizing the rising tide of far right and neo-Nazi ideologies and the exclusionary and violent practices that followed in their wake, punks became determined to "confront organized white supremacists and fascistic violence inside and outside the punk scene, [willingly using] force when necessary."[39] These efforts resulted in the foundation of the Anti-Racist Action (ARA), an organization founded in 1988. "ARA recruited out of the punk scene, with a consistent presence of literature tables at shows. Its activities, including arrests for demonstrations against and fights with Nazis, were consistently reported in punk zines."[40] Groups like the ARA strove to combat the far right and white-supremacist scourge that had infiltrated punk, including boycotting stores that sold records by noted white-supremacist bands, and these activities unsurprisingly led to confrontations and physical altercations.

> What is crucial […] [for] understanding the burgeoning of brazenly (leftist) political punk [particularly] in the 1990s was the real, and often physical, battles that took place within punk to eliminate Nazis from the scene. Descriptions in zines make it clear that through the conscious activity of an increasingly unified, unequivocally anti-Nazi segment of the punk scene, the eradication effort had made substantial progress by the early 1990s.[41]

These activities and actions show the commendable but often limited anti-oppression policies and approaches enacted by punks and punk-influenced organizations, who took on a more micro-approach to combating racism while failing to

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[37] MacLeod, 131.
[38] Pearson, *44*.
[39] Pearson, 22.
[40] Ibid.
[41] Ibid.

meaningfully confront the inequalities and inadequacies that plague society as a whole. Nevertheless, while punks and punk organizations should always strive to combat *systems* of oppression and inequality, their efforts to detract oppressive practices through confrontation is nonetheless admirable, acting as a clear influence on Saulnier and the writing of *Green Room*.

At the onset of the 1990s, punk was forced to confront not just the Nazi infestation, but the "ubiquitous violence; […] macho culture of [New York Hardcore]; apathy in the face of as well as outright hostility to the enunciation of radical politics; and stagnation in musical style."[42] Here, it becomes imperative to further recognize the inherent influence of society at large, and avoid categorizing punk as an insular underground culture distanced and unaffected by

> the larger dynamics of society. […] Indeed, phenomena like the strong white supremacist presence were likely linked to the rightward turn in US politics throughout the 1980s—fringe fascistic elements flourished in part because of the climate created under the Reagan presidency.[43]

These isolationist beliefs and practices—that punk was or is somehow more "enlightened" than the rest of society—have been scrutinized by punk authors and zinesters (and to a lesser extent, scholars)—for their apparent lack of meaningful resistance to anti-oppressive politics and practices. Mimi Nguyen, writing for the zine *Punk Planet*, antagonized punk's failure to "account for privilege,"[44] resulting in an unethical and unproductive belief in the colorblindness of punk. Furthermore, punks often assume that punk—as an ideology and subculture—is somehow more inclusive and progressive than the systems and structures that surround it, all while failing to account for the ways in which the subculture participates in the same exclusionary practices perpetrated within and by the larger society, including institutional racism, sexism, and homophobia/transphobia. Nguyen writes:

> To get our official membership card, [BIPOC punks are] supposed to put certain parts of ourselves aside—or at least assign them to a secondary rung. Differences are seen as potentially divisive. Some—like race or gender—are seen as more divisive than others. The assumption is that somehow "we,"—because punk is *so* progressive, blah blah—have "gotten over" these things.[45]

She further calls attention to this issue, stating that,

> While *race everywhere but punk* is understood as institutional and structural, within the scene *it gets talked about in terms of isolated, individual attitudes*. So

[42] Ibid, 28.
[43] Ibid.
[44] Nguyen, 85.
[45] Nguyen, 82.

> racism in the scene is then commonly understood as something that irrational extremists (you know, good ol' boys in white sheets or marching around with shaved heads) and maybe the Big Bad State do, while "ordinary" people occasionally indulge in individual acts or attitudes of "prejudice." Racist, sexist or homophobic individuals are usually denounced as detractors from "real" punk principles, as if punk were inherently anti-racist, sexist or homophobic.[46]

Importantly, Nguyen argues that

> punk doesn't exist in a vacuum. Even on the most superficial level, recruitment, while fun, isn't a solution. Diversification of our membership roles is way different than affecting critical transformations at the analytic level—and in any case hardly addresses the people of color who are in or around punk now. (We're here, thanks. Banging our heads against the wall, maybe, but we're here.)"[47]

This failure to oppose and explicitly confront larger, society-wide structures of oppression[48] meant that,

> while opposition to Nazi skinheads, including a willingness to use violence against them, was one hallmark of the 1990s punk scene, *identifying and opposing the structural, everyday functioning of white supremacy rather than people who blatantly espoused racist views was a substantial shortcoming of the punk scene*. For example, Anti-Racist Action, an organization that many punks were involved in, focused on confronting avowed white-supremacist organizations and leaders *rather than mobilizing against the more structural expressions of white supremacy*, such as police brutality, mass incarceration, or anti-immigrant policies.[49]

Here, the *ease of conformity* in punk is of particular note, and this phenomenon—of punk as a subculture that draws in impressionable and easily swayed youth—was passionately antagonized and admonished by Steve Stiph in the zine *Outcry*, who, in a 1982 editorial, wrote:

> And why is it that certain assholes who are always fighting seem to have a following of people who think they're cool and look up to them. Could be because most of these "blind sheep" are wimps who need "gang mentality" to achieve a feeling of power. . . . There do seem to be some thickheads who think it's their call in life to control the action in "the pit" at local punk gigs. If you drive somebody off the dance floor or beat them up because they

[46] Ibid, 83, emphasis my own.
[47] Ibid, 85.
[48] Pearson 144.
[49] Pearson, 144, emphasis my own.

> don't "look cool," then you're not only a jerk—you're also a conformist! That's right—you can have a mohawk (or a skinhead, or blue hair or whatever . . .) and still be a conformist.[50]

As Pearson notes, "punk's history of confronting avowed white supremacists in its midst, as well as the practice of mosh pits, made participants in the punk scene no strangers to violence."[51] Yet simultaneously:

> The rather macho NYHC scene and the increasing presence of far right politics and Nazi skinheads in the later 1980s […] made the punk scene even more white and male, with the threat and use of violence keeping many nonwhites and women out.[52]

And it was hardcore punk, particularly in the California, Boston, and New York scenes, that consciously welcomed greater violence and *selective* protection into the scene. As demonstrated by the actions of the crowd at concerts and in the pit, and the rise of hardcore "crews," the scene embraced—even reveled in—violence. In the 1990s, it took the efforts of more radically political bands and the increasingly vocal participation of "gays, women, and immigrant and second-generation Latinos"[53] to combat these exclusionary practices. The diversity of the bands that fit into this category—Born Against, Los Crudos, Fugazi, Pansy Division, Reagan Youth, and the riot grrrl bands in the Pacific Northwest, just to name a few—demonstrates that a collective push from all fronts—regardless of region, affiliation, or musical approach—was necessary to contest oppressive groups and ideologies.

Thus, for anyone trying to take punk in a more radical, holistic, or political direction, "eschewing macho displays of male physical power [and] distancing themselves stylistically and socially from NYHC"[54] became essential practices for upholding a subversive, nonconformist stance. For example, the aforementioned riot grrrl movement—"the best-known alternative to the hegemonic masculinity of punk and hardcore"[55]—began as a "direct response to the tough-guy image of 1980s hardcore, […] a claim for women's right to be angry, to be sexy, and to be anything else they wanted to be without any need to defend their choices to men."[56] The riot grrrls attempted to subvert "the hypermasculine 'tough-guy' image"[57] that emerged in the punk, hardcore, and straightedge scenes in the 1980s and 1990s by sending testosterone-fueled boys to the back, in an attempt to give

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[50] Stiph, *Outcry*, No. 3 (1982), n.p.
[51] Pearson, 219.
[52] Ibid, 132-133.
[53] Ibid, 133.
[54] Pearson, 27.
[55] Williams, 60.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

women a more prominent spot at shows. As Mary Celeste Kearney (2006) notes, riot grrrl attempted to reclaim "girlhood as a form of social, cultural, and political agency, as well as its reconfiguration of feminist ideologies and practices through attention to age and generation."[58]

Although performative violence—moshing, slam dancing, etc.—is prevalent in other musical genres, particularly metal, the real-world violence associated with punk and, in particular, hardcore, is notable because the perpetrators were incredibly organized, political, and young. Even though hardcore violence is not exclusively associated with or determined by fascist beliefs or rhetoric, there is nevertheless something inherently militaristic, even authoritarian, about hardcore crews, particularly those associated with NYHC. The hierarchies, the look, the deeply ingrained beliefs, the use of violence to enforce said beliefs: these practices coincide not only closely but *perfectly* with those practiced by racist skinhead and white supremacist groups, cliques, and gangs.

While it would be redundant and deterministic to place the blame on *all* NYHC bands for this rise in scene violence,[59] the NYHC scene still helped spawn both the behaviours and beliefs that resulted in this increase in violence, and set a precedent for the development of hardcore crews that consciously upheld these exclusionary and violent beliefs and practices. In particular, the violence associated with the NYHC and Boston scenes stemmed from their appropriation of the straight edge ethos, which originated in the Washington D.C. hardcore scene, most notably through the band Minor Threat. This ethos preached (re: demanded) abstinence from drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex. In the NYHC and Boston scenes, straight edge practitioners took on a sinister, more violent approach to curtailing "undesired" behaviours, where "straight edge became an increasingly puritanical code that justified violence against those deviating from it."[60]

This need to police the scene led to the development of hardcore "crews," which were spawned by the Boston and New York scenes, and which enacted exclusionary practices—often in the form of violence—to detract dissenters who threatened the straight edge values permeating these scenes. While originally developed with protectionist morals in mind, these militant cliques, which started as groups of friends who hung out and regularly attended hardcore shows together,[61] later morphed into more organized and aggressive factions that imposed rules and ideologies on other members of the scene, discouraging and punishing—oftentimes violently—any participants who questioned, subverted, or antagonized their beliefs and systems.

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[58] Kearney, x.
[59] Pearson, 232.
[60] Ibid, 24.
[61] Purchla, 202.

These crews closely resembled what Sullivan called a "named gang."[62] Similar to organized gangs, they were identified by "specific group names;" tended to be hierarchically structured; were identified "by symbols of membership such as apparel, beads, or tattoos;" and were often seen patrolling their locales and neighbourhoods.[63] Even though crews may present properties similar to gangs—symbols, rankings, homogenized apparel, protection of in-members, etc.—they differed through their musical connection and support of "crew affiliated bands."[64] This distinction led Purchla to actively present these hardcore crews as "cliques" rather than "named gangs."[65]

Nevertheless, the "interaction processes amongst those in crews at large […] involve reification, the activity of making abstract notions of status and symbols more concrete."[66] Given this description, it is no surprise that the same (politically minded) punks who opposed fascist ideologies in punk were also intent on combating the rise of machismo and militant beliefs associated with hardcore crews. Much like neo-Nazi punks, hardcore crews adopted a uniform (consisting of branded clothing, oftentimes Champion brand sportswear) and shaved heads, and were predominantly young, white, male, and confrontational. In insular subcultures, such as punk,

> status and stability engender homogeneity within the group dynamic. Internal opinions of the elite operate as a regulatory mechanism of consciousness and conduct. The result of which is *ever-greater cohesion, extended uniformity, and more acute elaborations of established standards and practices*. Consent becomes constraint in ever "less disguised and indirect forms." (Gramsci, 1971) Policing is conducted by way of a shared "distinguishing code" (frame of reference) that differentiates insiders and outsiders of certain social tiers.[67]

While certain subcultures do not require the use of violence or threat of violence to uphold boundaries "because members' quiet resignation and pragmatic acceptance are encouraged by the dominant order,"[68] in the case of hardcore crews and neo-Nazi/white supremacist punk, order is *absolutely* maintained through the use of force on the dissenting bodies of both out- *and* in-group members. Opposition is routinely punished through acts of violence, with disciplinary acts encouraged by more concurrent members of these splinter groups.

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[62] Sullivan, 20.
[63] Purchla, 202.
[64] Ibid.
[65] Ibid, 203.
[66] Ibid.
[67] Wood (2020), 58-59, emphasis my own.
[68] Ibid, 59.

With the continued presence of neo-Nazi/white-supremacist groups, the development of hardcore crews in the mid-1980s and early 1990s, and the turn towards a more aggressive, "tough-guy" (re: meatheaded) version of hardcore, the scene began pushing punk spaces, particularly concert venues and pits, "in a more violent and male-dominated direction. NYHC crews [in particular] cultivated dance moves such as the windmill that featured flailing fists, jabbing elbows, and even karate kicks."[69] Even when pits became over-congested by homogenized members of the same subcultural group, as is the case with hardcore, violence was the norm. This overly and overtly "macho violence"[70] was no longer exclusively performative or fun: gone was the pogoing and playful pushing, replaced by behaviours and actions that were aggressive, self-serving, dangerous, and consciously exclusionary.

This was dancing with a blatantly destructive intent.

Nazi Punks: Whyyyyyy???

Punk's flirtation with Nazi imagery and paraphernalia has been well-documented, as has punk's association with Neo-Nazi, white supremacist, far right, and fascist movements and ideologies.[71] As "a movement staunchly opposed to the dominant culture and to the status quo,"[72] punk's early need to be transgressive was unsurprisingly—albeit unfortunately—coupled with its need to *look* transgressive. The nascent culture's desire for shock and anti-sociality translated to the clothes and imagery, which included prominent displays of a universally reviled symbol of hate and violence: the Nazi swastika.

Because punk was seen as an affront to traditional and dominant British values and mores, and a slight against the older generation,[73] many of the early punks and punk designers (most un-notably, Sid Vicious[74], Siouxsie Sioux, and Vivien Westwood) integrated the symbol into punk's imagery in order to agitate and provoke—which, in post-War Britain, it most certainly did.[75] And yet, while these fashion choices may have been little more than sneers against the aforementioned status quo, they became an early visual marker for the direct *political* link between punk and Nazi ideology, which would follow in the 80s and 90s.

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[69] Pearson, 25.
[70] Ibid.
[71] Hebdige, 1982; Lowles and Silver, 1998; Cotter, 1999; Wood, 1999; Brown, 2004; Corte & Edwards, 2008; Mott & Bestley, 2013; Vague, 2013; Forbes and Stampton, 2015; Shaffer, 2017; Weiner, 2018.
[72] Clark, 56.
[73] Cobley, 171.
[74] See, for example, https://steveemberton.com/gallery/celebrities-and-models/sid-and-nancy-2/
[75] Savage, 195.

Even at their apex, "neo-Nazi punks were marginal and were severely ostracized by other punks."[76] And yet, even though these practitioners were rejected by the majority of mainstream and underground punks, "the proximity of neo-Nazis provoked a subcultural identity crisis during the 1980s, wherein punks discussed what was the essence of punk."[77] These racist skinhead "punks" (not to be confused with anti-racist skinheads) embraced the look and sound of punk in order to espouse "racial hatreds, sexism, and violence," and they were prominent in various scenes, particularly in the US and UK[78]. In England, the far right, fascist, white nationalist political party the National Front even had its own punk "faction" called the Punk Front in Leeds.[79] Similarly, Rock Against Communism (RAC) was also launched in Leeds in 1979

> under the umbrella of the Young National Front, as a direct rebuttal to the widely supported Rock Against Racism campaign. While suspicion, or even antipathy, towards youth subcultures and rock 'n' roll music was widespread among senior figures in the National Front, Copsey and Worley later observed that 'blunt punk rock remained RAC's music of choice' (2017: 124), and attempts were made to draw punk groups and fans to the cause.[80]

As noted by Katz, "white supremacy supports an ideology encouraging violence, and in its most extreme forms, the eradication of people of color, Jews, and other minority groups. White power music has helped to support and advance these beliefs,"[81] with white power bands using merchandise, album covers, literature, and live shows to espouse and perpetuate white supremacy. Furthermore, while scholars, punk musicians, and punk aficionados would like to label R.A.C. simply as hijackers of

> punk music and symbols for right-wing purposes, […] this ignores the historical and current ties between R.A.C. and larger punk scenes (Brown, 2004; Kahn-Harris, 2003). The fact that R.A.C. is rooted in punk, particularly the Oi! subgenre, is critical as subcultural scenes incorporate a large variety of behaviors and practices to perpetuate the community beyond face-to-face interactions (Bennett, 2006; DeChaine, 1997; Fox, 1987). Individuals commit to communities, identities, and beliefs that can resist social forces rather than to movements (Haenfler, 2004; Willis, 2011). This means

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[76] Clark, 56.
[77] Ibid.
[78] For a visual example of this, see Chris Steel-Perkins' photo *Racists give Nazi salute in London. England. G.B.* 1980. https://www.magnumphotos.com/newsroom/society/short-hair-shorthand-far-right-uk-magnum-archive-chris-steele-perkins-robert-marlow-robert-capa/
[79] Reynolds, 175.
[80] Raposo & Bestley, 469.
[81] Katz, 1

> that in order to be willing participants in the R.A.C. scene, *individuals can be motivated by something other than white supremacy, notably the punk aesthetics and values*.[82]

While the efforts of organizations and concerts such as the aforementioned Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League attempted to combat the rise of white supremacy and white nationalism, it continued to spread and mutate through various geographical punk scenes, manifesting most prominently in the hardcore punk scene in California in the 80s and 90s. Neo-Nazi punks infiltrated the LA and Bay Area punk scenes and tried to wreak havoc on vulnerable individuals and populations, while also antagonizing the artists and bands that spoke out against their particular brand of assholery. Although MacLeod maintains that "many hardcore punks [simply] adopted the skinhead look, [and that] there was no organized fascism or white supremacy movement among Southern California punks,"[83] this naïve conclusion has repeatedly been challenged by other authors, researchers, scholars, artists, and scenesters. For example, as Simi notes:

> Several southern California youth subcultures played an important role in the initial formation of skinhead gangs, but none more important than the punks. Once certain dynamics were present within the punk subculture, the eventual transition from punk to skinhead became possible. […] In southern California, most of the skinheads that emerged in the 1980s trace their roots to the punk scene. Once they emerged, Los Angeles skinheads were akin to social gangs (Schneider 1999) primarily based upon fraternal relations, stylistic interests, and cafeteria-type delinquency (e.g. non-specialized violations that included graffiti, fighting, under-age drinking, theft etc.). As skinhead gangs developed, 'racial territoriality' became a 'focal concern' (Miller 1958), marking one of the most important changes in the subcultural career of the skinheads.[84]

Furthermore, according to Moore (1993), punk rock "provided the subcultural foundation for skinhead development."[85] More specifically, the late 70s punk scene

> provided a bounded climate of tolerance within its subcultural bubble for those who affronted and rejected traditional society and cultivated the bizarre, particularly if their style or manifestation signaled destructiveness. [...] Punk was alluring and accommodating for a time to skinheads because it was so open *to various strains of defiance*. […] [More specifically, punk was perceived as] fertile territory for skinheadism in England [and] America,

[82] Katz, 2, emphasis my own.
[83] MacLeod, 131.
[84] Simi, 57.
[85] Ibid.

> because it tolerated or even demanded displays of hostility to perceived middle and upper class standards, because it was often violent, and because generally it seemed at least in theory or observable stance to identify with lower or working class fashions and mannerism.[86]

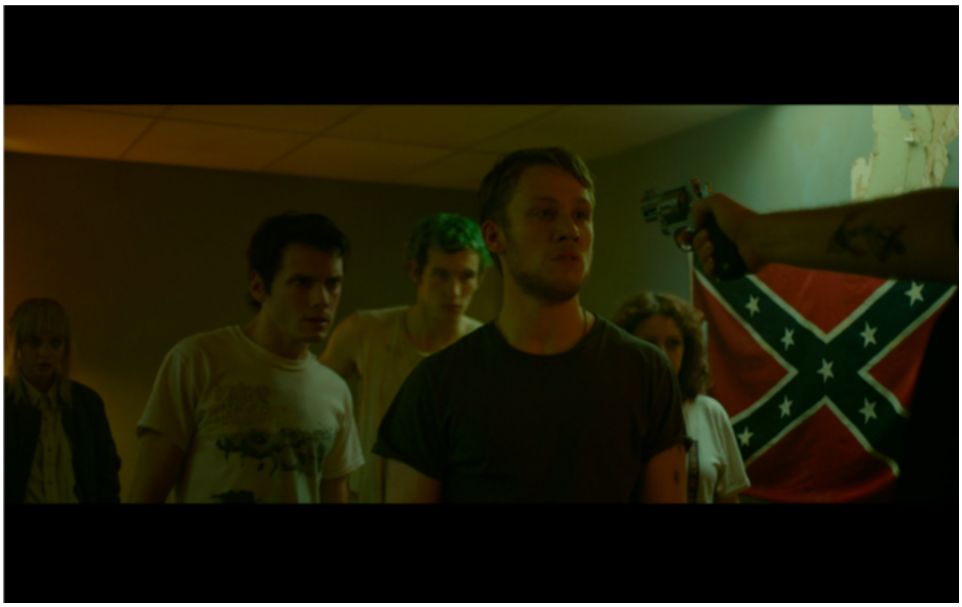
Although "skinheads are so widely and thinly distributed across [America], clustering more in the cities of some regions (Georgia, Florida, Texas, Oklahoma, California, for example) than in others (the New England northeast and southern border states),"[87] their repulsive exploits are nonetheless an intrinsic part of American punk rock and hardcore history. Their infiltration of these regional scenes led to confrontations and violence, and this tendency to destroy and antagonize is what Saulnier explores—and exploits—in *Green Room*. You cannot have a safe(r) space, let alone a safe space, in a venue created through—and for the proliferation of—violent, exclusive ideology, and unfortunately for the Ain't Rights, Saulnier knows this all too well.

The Green Room and the Horror of Space

Green rooms are supposed to be liminal spaces with little personality, places "of separation and a domain of transition."[88] While a green room is meant to be a place of respite and calm, of distraction from the masses and the outside world, the horror in *Green Room* is developed through the subversion of this traditionally passive space.

When the Ain't Rights arrive at a last-minute show in Oregon, they come to realize that the "boots and braces" they were told about points to the *very* neo-Nazi kind. After a particularly unsettling welcome, they get to the green room, where the white supremacist symbolism discomfits and angers the band. Graffiti and stickers promoting white power and white supremacy, including the SS lightning bolts and a giant confederate flag, cover every surface, crudely scrawled and overlapping, and it is these markers and signs that confirm the very opposing ethos between the Ain't Rights and the neo-Nazi skinheads.

[86] Moore, 52-53, italics my own.
[87] Moore, 169.
[88] Matthews, 102.



Although there is an "interdependency of shared musical tastes and a sense of [punk] belonging"[89] between these two factions, their connection is severed when ideological differences overcome the need, or even the desire, for association. While the Neo-Nazi punks in *Green Room* may enjoy hardcore and punk, they are also there for the antisocial and intolerant community their disturbing, oppressive ideology has created. In the brutal, militaristic space of the makeshift concert venue—built by, and thus perpetuating, hate—subcultural identity or belonging are diminished by neo-Nazi doctrine, which strives to appropriate subversive art for its own transgressive and nationalistic purposes. The skinheads' presence turns the venue itself into a space reserved for those who share their beliefs and maintain membership in their group, their dangerous, oppressive ideology "externalized onto the [very] space where it is experienced."[90] Thus, if you are outside that group, or if you try to leave that group, you are contesting its power and messing with the ecosystem, one that must not be tarnished by any outsiders, deserters, or dissenters. In *Green Room*, those who oppose the dominant group or its views, or antagonize its members or goals, are treated with disgust, then disdain, and ultimately, grisly—and often graphic—violence, which eventually infiltrates every faction of this space. Thus, a space rooted in hate cannot stay safe for very long for anyone, let alone intruders. There can be no safety because the very nature of their interaction is inherently fraught and hostile: The Ain't Rights simply

[89] Overell, 80.
[90] Ibid, 90.

do not belong here because they do not subscribe to the tenets of national socialism.

And so, the Ain't Rights decide to rebel. And how do punks rebel? By being antagonistic smartasses, that's how! The band provokes the neo-Nazi crowd by playing the blistering, anti-fascist diatribe, "Nazi Punks Fuck Off," as their opening track. The tension and animosity from the crowd is immediate—someone spits beer at the band and a flurry of middle fingers are sent their way—yet it dissipates as the band settles into their regular set. This whips the crowd into a frenzy, Saulnier's camera moving in super slow motion through the moshers, crowd killers, and dancers.

After the show, the band returns to the green room and sees that a girl has been murdered, which immediately turns the nondescript space of the green room into something much more dangerous, sinister, and evil. Now that violence—real violence—has breached this seemingly safe space, everything spirals, even if—ironically—*none* of the violence enacted on the bodies of the Ain't Rights occurs in the green room itself. For example, when Pat (the band's bassist, played by the late Anton Yelchin) is charged with handing over a weapon through the barely-opened threshold of the green room door, his arm is grabbed and horribly slashed, almost ripped off, by the neo-Nazis. Yet this brutal act happens on the other side of the door, *outside the green room*. Conversely, Reece (Joe Cole), the band's drummer, casually breaks a skinhead security guard's arm *inside* the green room, before choking him out when the former attempts to break free. Amber (a dissenting skinhead and friend of the murdered girl, played by Imogen Poots) then slices the security guard open very slowly through the midsection with a box cutter, killing him. This constitutes the group's first act of violence on a skinhead body, yet it is performed by someone who is not even a member of the band. Instead, it exemplifies the notion that a person (Amber) entrenched within this violent sub-subculture (the neo-Nazis) will perpetuate violence even after they have decided to leave the group; within the nihilistic context of *Green Room*, the decision to leave necessitates, and is achieved through, the use of violence.

Later, after their third failed escape attempt and the deaths of most of their members, Pat and Amber retreat back into the green room for safety, rest, and strategizing. When two skinheads breach the room, we see Pat, with camo designs Sharpied onto his face by Amber, don a bomber jacket and a shaved head, thus playing the part of the reverse radical, the aggressor. Minutes earlier, he had told Amber "You can't play real war." Now, he most certainly is.

Soon after, Amber kills four more neo-Nazis: she slits one's throat, shoots another in the head as he grapples with Pat, and shoots two more once her and Pat have escaped the facility in search of the terrifying leader of the neo-Nazi faction, Darcy (played chillingly by Patrick Stewart). Amber is thus the *only* person who kills a neo-Nazis, until the very end: in the final moments before the

credits, Pat shoots Darcy, becoming the only member of the Ain't Rights to commit a killing. The Ain't Rights, like most punks, *play* aggression, violence, and "war"; Amber, through her association with and previous membership in this violent political faction, embodies it.

Although many cultural and sociological studies focus on the "entwinement of music and sociality […] many of these studies [also] assume sociality is premised on a shared recognition of iconic signifiers: a knowledge of subcultural argot and aesthetics, and an encyclopedic savviness with scenic history."[91] And yet, as Overell contends, "while iconic signifiers remain important for scenic interaction, belonging, and the sociality it fosters, depends more on the 'sense'—or affect—that music generates."[92] Although belonging to a scene or subculture may elicit feelings of comfort and connection, even within particular spaces and groups, individuals will inevitably clash due to conflicting political, social, and ideological beliefs. Being in the same scene or space clearly does not equal tolerance, and within subcultural spaces, groups splinter across and due to these aforementioned beliefs. While Overell claims that "sociality depends on affective encounters between individuals in particular spaces [and that belonging] is always in relation to space,"[93] when subcultural belonging is confronted along contradicting politi-

[91] Overell, 90.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Ibid.

cal, social, or ideological lines, even a shared space within a "marginalized" musical scene cannot, and will not, perpetually elicit feelings of camaraderie, acceptance, and/or belonging.

Thus, throughout *Green Room*, Saulnier enthusiastically subverts the notion of a truly "safe" space by presenting punk violence as never entirely performative: slam dancing, stage diving, pogoing, circle pits and moshing are not simply visceral dances that look chaotic and dangerous. Although Lull (1987), in discussing mosh pits, describes the "feigned hostility in this ritual, [wherein] thrashers may push and shove each other, but the whole scene is a *parody of violence*,"[94] in many cases, violence upon dissenting bodies—like those who resisted and fought back against the exclusionary violence and posturing of the NYHC and neo-Nazi scenes—can move from the "parodic" performativity of the pit, to real, and very personal, hostility and violence.

Furthermore, Lull writes that punks "push and shove each other a lot, on the streat [sic] and in the pit, but they almost always mean no harm by it, and to perceive this activity as a fight is incorrect. Most of it is a mockery of machismo,"[95] yet for some, these hostile actions use the guise of the pit as a structured space for harming others. Lull takes a passive, even dismissive stance, against those who claim that punk pits and spaces are unsafe or hostile, claiming that

> punks are often insulting, even to their friends and others who claim membership in the subculture. But these verbal and physical aggressions *are typically not meant to hurt anyone*. [...] The most extreme cases of hostility can be viewed as *harmless, even positive cultural behavior*.[96]

In *Green Room*, Saulnier subverts this notion, where punk violence is simply iconic, representational, gestural, or abstract. Instead, in his film, violence is not expression or exultation; it is real, gruesome, and shocking, and most damningly, it is condoned and upheld by the status quo.

Ironically, all of the violence and mayhem that happens *inside* the green room actually happens to and upon the bodies of the neo-Nazi skinheads, not the band! Even the murdered girl, the catalyst for all the violence, was one of them, before trying to dissent. Furthermore, for the Ain't Rights, the safest space *is* the green room, the space they so desperately want to escape. All of their injuries and deaths happen outside the green room, in the concert space and on the grounds of the warehouse. From the outset, the green room itself is the safe(r)-est space for them. The skinheads cannot even enter the green room because the only set of keys are inside with the band.

Saulnier takes this idea of "green safety" even further by situating the band in other green spaces. The film opens on the band stuck in an overgrown field

[94] Lull, 242-243.
[95] Lull, 239.
[96] Lull, 245, emphasis my own.

after falling asleep at the wheel, their van dead and stranded. They could have crashed and been killed, and yet, it is this green space that keeps them, practically snuggles them, even in their shipwrecked state. Later, after Pat and Amber escape the warehouse and confront Darcy, they use the forest that surrounds his estate, its leaves and foliage, to shield themselves from the eyes of the skinheads. When they ambush Darcy and his crony, Darcy tries to walk away, but Amber and Pat shoot him repeatedly, riddling his body with bullets. He dies in a lush field surrounded by grass, trees, and dew, a green space once again signalling a violent death for a member of the neo-Nazi group. As light begins flooding through the trees, the scene takes on a warm yellow-green hue, and Pat and Amber sit in the natural space of the forest, an organic "green room." Here, they are bathed in the same warm yellowish-green palette we saw in the green room, the safety they found there reflected outdoors.

Similarly, the green room itself, warm and green/gold-hued, reflects the organic, protective space of the outdoors; the rest of the venue, all concrete and metal and tinted blue and grey, is cold, bleak, and uninviting. It is, like white supremacy and neo-Nazism, unnatural, inorganic, wrong. This blatant visual dichotomy—between the safety of green spaces and the brutality of the non-green spaces—is a cheeky move on the part of Saulnier, who, unbeknownst to the band, has placed them in the safest room all along. Thus, it is only in the aptly-name and literal "green rooms" that the band finds any real safety.

Punk and Social Space

As Hill and Megson contest, "safer spaces policies need to be backed up with practical measures which evidence punks' commitment to inclusion. In doing so they must prioritize the needs of marginalized groups and embrace the resulting shift in power and cultural formations."[97] In the case of *Green Room*, these shifts in power and cultural formation are not only nullified but are aggressively rejected in the face of neo-Nazi ideology and symbolism. Their beliefs are inherently exclusionary, and thus, the spaces they inhabit, whether they are punks or otherwise, will reflect these exclusionary beliefs and practices.

As Lohman writes, safer spaces rely on the belief that the collective will assume "responsibility to uphold the (sometimes unspoken) assumptions about the needs of marginalised people. This often works in practice, but tensions and disruption to safety can occur when attendees fail to act in accordance"[98] with the dominant principles of the space. When a group has no desire—nor impetus—to uphold these responsibilities or to protect the needs of marginalized individuals, or if their loyalties are directed towards a belief system for whom marginalized bodies are not only inconsequential but expendable, then the philosophy and practice of a *safer* space, let alone a *safe* space, is not only impractical, but absurd. The fact that the violence of the film is precipitated by violence on a woman is therefore unsurprising.

According to Bourdieu, "social spaces constitute a nexus of embodied cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital."[99] Within these social spaces, particularly in punk spaces, "hierarchies of habitus and cultural taste may be supported or contested,"[100] since "matters of distinction are always context-based."[101] Thus, in music scenes, sociality "is not solely dependent on a shared culture of representations. […] Sociality [is] a network of intensities generated through subjective interactions with other subjects, things and spaces,"[102] and in *Green Room*, the ideological gulf between the two warring factions—the Ain't Rights and the skinheads—is so immense that it inevitably results in violence. As members of various overlapping and discordant subcultural, ideological, political, and antisocial groups, both the Ain't Rights, and the skinheads "know the limits of their acceptability within the public domain and are prepared to test its boundaries."[103] While many punk houses/collectives/venues/etc. hold similar anti-oppression stances (particularly against various -isms, including fascism and neo-Nazism), when the

[97] Hill and Megson, 60.
[98] Lohman, 11-12.
[99] Sharp & Nilan, 72.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Skeggs, 216.
[102] Overell, 94.
[103] Matthews, 110.

space itself—in this case, the warehouse venue—is rooted in and dictated by an "ism," punks have the responsibility to enact anti-oppressive responses which, in this case, are necessarily violent.

Ironically, the skinheads run this venue just like any other DIY punk venue. For example, "at DIY Space for London, a collectively owned and run scene venue, organisers took a more explicitly prefigurative approach to safety. Instead of hiring external security staff, members of the collective—who shared the space's political values and community norms—trained as bouncers,"[104] thus avoiding the hiring or participation of outsiders. In *Green Room*, this exact same practice is employed by the skinheads: they take punk practices and pervert them, maintaining a sense of community and belonging but for a very insidious purpose. They are, for all intents and purposes, punks. And yet, while the group employs language and symbolism that celebrates punk's anti-authoritarian and antisocial behaviour, nothing could be further from the Ain't Rights.

Conclusion

In *Green Room*, spaces that are unconcerned with the safety of the scene's participants reflect the exclusionary practices of punk itself. While "safer spaces are sites of continual negotiation,"[105] for members of an ideologically rigid hate group, that negotiation is *not* up for negotiation. Unfortunately for the Ain't Rights, safety—the promise of it and who receives it—is entirely and absolutely controlled and determined by the dominant group, namely, the neo-Nazi skinheads. Predictably, "safety" is a relative term for the skinhead faction: they willingly jeopardize the safety of their own in-group members for the greater good of their detestable—and completely insincere—cause, forcing their members to endure injuries to distract the cops, sending them into knowingly dangerous situations, and giving them drugs to lower their inhibitions (for those committing the violence) and to silence them for good (no witnesses, regardless of allegiance). Is it any surprise that they care very little for the safety of some meddling outsiders?

As Francis Stewart writes, the notional inclusion of marginalized groups in punk—which she considers little more than "virtue signaling"[106]—indicates that, "[t]hey are not included on their own terms, or through their experiences but rather as a means of demonstrating the benevolence (or social awareness) of the already dominant."[107] In essence, outsiders are "allowed" to participate in the scene by the dominant, heterogenous group that is oftentimes white, male, and

[104] Lohman, 10.
[105] Lohman, 16-17.
[106] Stewart, 223.
[107] Ibid, 222.

heteronormative, which is brutally reflected in Saulnier's film. It is a hollow tolerance, which the neo-Nazis in *Green Room* enact very briefly. Once the group experiences outsider intrusion and insider dissent, it happily rejects inclusionary practices in favour of exclusionary aggression.

The historical violence inherent in hardcore punk spaces is manifest here first on the female body, and then on the bodies of characters who antagonize hate and exclusion. In this highly coded—and codified—space, dissenting opinions are not simply threatened but eradicated. A punk performance space created by neo-Nazi skinheads will never be empowering, liberating, or safe(r)—let alone safe—for those who challenge their racist, nationalistic doctrine. But that does not mean you should ever stop subverting, antagonizing, and fighting back, just like the Ain't Rights.

And so, altogether now: Nazi punks, *FUCK OFF*!

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