

Antifa, Autism, and The Border Wall Around Punk

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The disgusting, sticky fog of “Lebensunwerten Leben” still hangs over all of us disabled weirdos like teargas after a riot. “Life unworthy of life” was the Nazi philosophy that guided their hands to the first experiments in playing god by poisoning disabled children in their care, an expression of the underlying self-righteousness of eugenics which remains a bedrock of modern life. There’s a general air that we shouldn’t really be here, that our existence is an embarrassment to the body politic, and a truly strong volkskorp wouldn’t have us in it ruining the image (and the bloodlines). As a strange one under capitalism I have found that me and many people I love drive ourselves extremely hard trying desperately to prove ourselves worthy of existence. I’ve been with my kin on the front lines of antifascist street actions in what often amounts to a very public meltdown and seen all the ways our pain and our fear and our anger only register to the media and the public at large as spectacle. Stop being so dramatic. It’s only fascism. Be quiet. Calm down. Shut your mouth. Just die.

And we do.

I’ve never been particularly good at the social stuff. Punk has always appealed to me for that reason, but I’ve always been on the sidelines of punk looking in, unable to perform my own unintelligibility and rage in the proper way for acceptance. The signature hostility to outsiders which feels safe on the inside of the bubble is often directed my way. My applications are denied for reasons unintelligible to me, unclear on the criteria by which I am being judged and too anxious to even ask. And so I have ended up in the most violent spot of all: right outside the border. If it was just dismissiveness and suspicion I would be alright, but like any border, my exile makes me prey for traffickers. “I can get you in. Come back to this hotel with me.” (I declined; my heart shattered into a thousand knives.)

This is unfortunately a common story for people like me. Neurodivergents. Autistics. Having been made to deny our own needs and impulses throughout childhood means we tend not to understand the difference between the ‘reasonable’ social interactions and the unreasonable kinds, since what is expected of us in neurotypical society is already uncomfortable to begin with (if not downright abusive). Throughout my life any behavior from me other than quiet, helpful, distant, and most importantly compliant has often been perceived by the outside world as aggressive, disruptive, offensive, or even insane. Any hint of minor frustration is seen as a threat. Lack of eye contact is seen as a sign someone is lying or malicious, but also too much eye contact is invasive, suspicious, creepy, dangerous. There’s no way to win this game when the rule is that we are doing it wrong, and in a society with police this often amounts to injury, imprisonment, or death.

Even the few societal rules I have learned are completely inverted in punk. That is its beauty, but also can be difficult. Attempts at a lack of rules are often just a new set. This makes punk spaces stressful for me, where everyone is on high alert for suspicious behavior. Not understanding the social rules means I present as uncategorized so people place me in whatever role they can find in their head. When I’m lost or writing in my journal or eating alone I have been assumed to be a food critic, security, prostitute, waitress, unhoused, store clerk, etc. Being nondescript is a safety tactic, but punks and anarchists are highly

attuned to manipulation and infiltration and my personal defenses against violence clashed mightily with theirs. Most people pay less attention than they realize about who is around and a friendly aloof demeanor and walking with purpose gets me in a lot of doors, but not the ones I really want to be in. People see what they want to see, and a paranoid, ableist, misogynistic space saw a threat and a fraud.

My mom introduced me to punk rock as a child. I'd grown up with the Ramones and the Clash alongside PJ Harvey and Neil Young. One of my favorite songs was "Beat On The Brat," the pop beat and easily consumable repetitive riffs a perfect container for 7 year old rage. Very stimmy and fun, although apparently not appropriate for a school talent show. Not the first time I would get in trouble, and certainly not the last. I was born just as grunge was rising to significance and Courtney Love's voice peppered my childhood. Puberty was extremely traumatic for me in ways I would not understand for another 20 years when I came out as trans, and the Ramones got set aside for the intensity and rawness of Courtney as her pain became relevant to my experience.

She was my first experience of recognition in punk as well as glimmers of exclusion I would be subject to. My joy and relief of seeing my own angry, sexy, illegal, neurodivergent teenage girlhood in "Retard Girl" and "Doll Parts" was swiftly stamped on when mention of her brought out an intensity of venom and hatred I also recognized, but wasn't expecting from punks. I thought we were the weirdos? But not like that I guess. I was rediscovering her in the early 2000's, long after some consensus had apparently been reached that you could gain social points by trashing her. And those like her. Me. I wore Nirvana shirts out in public but listened to Hole alone in my room.

Courtney Love was diagnosed as possibly autistic as a child, and now that I can see it in myself it's easier to see it in others, a certain wildness in the eyes that both embarrasses and draws you in. People often say I have beautiful eyes, and there is something beautiful about them, but only if you find divergence beautiful. Courtney is very beautiful, in an illegal working class kind of way. The square jaw and raw intensity of her disqualifies her from any upper class type of refined beauty, even when skinny, white, blonde, and eventually rich. She tried to soften later in her career, but there's something innately out of control about Love, which is one of her best and most difficult qualities.

The parallels between her and me don't go far. I connected in some ways more with Kurt and his quiet, self-destructive nature, but there is something so intriguing and enviable about Courtney and by virtue of my assigned gender she was supposed to be my parallel. She is brash, and loud, and uninhibited. An actress. I am quiet, nervous, careful. A stagehand. But I also wished to be as liberated as her. I was deeply uncomfortable in my body, but she seized and worshipped and oozed everything I, and everyone else seemed to hate about me. Opposite ends of the same punk coin; her a rock star and me eventually an antifascist.

I need to be useful in a social situation or I panic. Hello! Can I take your coat! Can I help make you drinks! Can I help put out the food! Do you need furniture moved! Can I sort your clothing by color and sub sort by texture! Please for the love of God give me something to do that isn't small talk! I'm not the only person I've met who has a story about fixing a toilet at a party, and its always such a joy and relief when I meet these other people, which I finally have started doing. Other autistics and the socially anxious, generally. People who struggle with the intricacies of acting human in this society.

I've wondered sometimes if I'm human at all. Part of me wants to be seen as human but I also want all creatures to be seen as having value. Maybe I'm not human in the way that neurotypical people think of as human. Maybe they'll do genetic coding and find out that autistic people are a subset neurotype that goes back to neanderthals or some other hominid line that we killed and fucked out of existence. There's some fascinating research right now into the microbiome in the gut and how it may affect our brains, including research into autism. Terrifying because if they do find the scientific reason behind autism I don't want them to just finish the job the Nazis started. Bring me to heel. Life unworthy of life.

My favorite characters are robots and I never looked up to girl characters or saw myself in them. I loved robots so much but didn't recognize the feeling as representation because that doesn't make sense! They're not people like me, and besides that they were usually Boys. And then there was 7 of 9, a robot girl, but also a sex object. Not allowed to just be a robot girl, she also had to be really hot. Very confusing. So can I be a robot girl if I'm also really hot? No, that's an entire set of violence all it's own. People are a lot nicer to robots on TV than to autistics in real life. Part of the joy of watching sci-fi is how robots are a valued, cherished part of the team. Their social mistakes are seen as endearing and quirky and met with compassion instead of being yelled at, slapped, sanctioned, drugged, imprisoned, killed. As it was I spent a lot of my childhood feeling confused, guilty, traumatized, and deeply sad.

Of course, even in sci-fi any robot that has an emotional breakdown gets reset or scrapped. There's no such thing as an untraumatized autistic in this society, and it shows on us. I can't just be reset and the systems break down regularly. I'm like a robot with massive processing power but it's all gummed up by trauma so I stare at walls like how in movies robots freeze and blink weird when they're working out a problem, but my problem is everything. Punk rock is approximately what it sounds like inside my head when the gears are spinning and grinding and processing too much info with not enough engine oil. The perfect noise for drowning out pain and unnamed existential crisis.

Punk was a source of psychic relief as someone was able to express how I was feeling, but also a source of self harm as I learned how to use punk, along with grocery stores and matches, to overload my senses in order to force myself into a shutdown. I did this in order to bypass the shutdown's much more dangerous and consequential cousin, the meltdown. Learning how to avoid meltdowns undoubtedly kept me out of the way of the more severe violence our society uses against us- psychiatric hospitals, prison. But shutdowns are their own kind of violence. Punk helped protect me while also doing real damage.

Borders are political boundary lines that both exist and don't exist at the same time, and like all other laws can be moved, adjusted, ignored, or enforced at will. Their edges are full of conflict and legal grey areas exploited by the powerful. Protections are weaker and more easily discarded in the borderland jurisdictions full of desperations, hopes, deaths. Social boundaries and norms present a smaller scale version of the same phenomenon, social circles sometimes performing like mini nationalisms.

I liked punk events and anarchists but desperately needed a cool punk friend to vouch for me and bring me along to things, so I made friends with sound techs and roadies. I was ecstatic when I found out about antifa, because maybe I had found my own access point to the punk community. Fighting nazis has been part of punk culture from the very beginning, but in the internet era antifascists aren't only skinheads but also computer nerds. Sci-fi fans. Bookworms. Me. The sensory overload of punk rock shows, while intoxicating, is something I can only handle in small doses. However, I'm disabled and antisocial so I spend a lot of time on the computer, and fascism is fascinating. It was a new special interest I took to immediately.

Antifascism was the first time I could say definitely that I did not need scenester permission to be involved. There is no moral ground in cordoning off a fight like that and I have never been so sure of being in the right, even enough to override any social awkwardness or fear. Probably the most punk thing I've ever done is decide I didn't need other punks' permission to be punk. The internet interactions I had with antifa at the beginning were great! Maybe I had found my people. People often do not think I'm funny and find me off-putting or annoying and so it always feels really special when I feel seen as interesting and worthwhile. In antifa I found people with the same dark sense of humor, morbid interests, and analytical, thoughtful, passionate way of approaching life. The antifa subculture felt like home — for a little while.

The revolution has always been extremely queer and more than a little confusing and some people deal with this better than others. The uncomfortable reality of antifascism is that it's a strained co-relationship of reformed bullies and the bullied, of popular kids and weirdos. Revenge of the nerds — but also the jocks are part of the team and everyone's trying to get along. Many glow-ups of outcasts grown up into gym rats, or the opposite, frat bros finding a purpose and meaning to life. People finding their power and trying on new identities, including many trans people with a chance to totally recreate ourselves. Many of us are working to break cycles of abuse, not just on a systemic but also a personal level, which is a long painful process we're all at different stages of.

Some bullies aren't as reformed as they think and their vision of antifascism is still reliant on a cool, tough image and they don't like being associated with the rest of us. Some envision fighting fascism as if it's a soccer match on a grand scale. Our team versus their team. Our team needs to be stronger and more in shape and more agile and work better as a team than theirs and then we'll win. Right? No. This positions some of the people most targeted for fascist violence on the sidelines, relegated to cheering on the "more capable" or whatever the fuck. Truth is that we are on the field, and we're good at it not just regardless of differences, our disabilities, femininity, and weirdness, but because of them. Because it isn't soccer.

The common wisdom says autistics have communication problems, but new studies show that is a bias in the research and we talk just fine to each other; it's in-between neurotypes where it gets all fucked up (Crompton, 2020). There's just fewer neurodivergents. Many of us are queer, anarchists, and antifascists, so within those groups I have a higher likelihood of finding people I can speak with, but it isn't guaranteed. Also many who do speak the language choose not to because we all understand on some level that being able to speak to a clearly neurodivergent person means that there's something weird about you too.

When I was a phantasm over the internet, antifas getting along with me was just fine. Again, any desired quality could be projected onto me before I had a real face and body with their own set of biases to be contended with. I'll never know exactly what it was about me that was the nail in the coffin, but when time came to meet in real life I came head to head with the same wall as before. I had cultivated a whole new set of skills and thought for sure it would be enough this time. I know how to fight, I know the names of every well known fascist in the area, I've read every book available, I've been to a number of actions, I know all the symbols — I've got this. Let's get working! Nope. Denial on grounds of ... ? Being too much like Courtney Love, perhaps. I wonder if when I rolled up all bubbly and excited some of the hardened antiracist skinheads asked themselves ala Legally Blonde, "Do you think she just woke up one day and decided to fight nazis?" Well, pretty much, yeah. It's late capitalism, there's fascists everywhere. More people need to do that.

When I moved the antifa border line to encompass myself a lot of people were really upset. Angry and defensive of their identity, I got treated with ire, disgust, and dismissiveness. On paper there is no logical reason why I wouldn't be included — I dress up in all black and yell at cops and protect people from fascists. I will inevitably be bound in with them when the repression comes, or even by historians or journalists or any outside observer. This makes some of them deeply uncomfortable and even more inclined to reinforce the wall between us, leaving me with all the risk and only a fraction of the camaraderie. It wasn't everyone but I wasn't expecting it from anyone at all, so it came as an enormous shock and slap in the face.

It's hard to feel like the people you thought were your people are ashamed of you. Getting too close to me is getting too close to the hinterlands where it really does get weird and dangerous. People break in all kinds of strange and sad ways; from the mostly harmless, harmful only to themselves, to the truly horrific and dangerous for everyone. We're capable of doing all kinds of terrible things to each other and when talking about the edges of society, where the chaos of change and fighting for existence and ideas happens, you get close to these fringes, but must take care not to get too close or you get swallowed whole. That's the fear at least. Better the calm waters than the thrashing waves over rocks. Better to exclude me than risk the chaos of the change my presence may bring.

Eugenics is so sneaky. Due to Hitler's overexuberance they can't gather us all up and gas us, but if we're miserable enough we off ourselves for them. A lot of us punks are trash, dregs, outcasts, losers, nothings, no future, ready and waiting to die. Antifascism is hard. Excluded from whatever comforts lay inside the subcultural walls I have at times been forced to rely on the state and have spent many long days in mental health clinics as my brain and body collapsed beneath the trauma of antifascist work, mis-medication and autistic burnout.

Throughout my life my pain is often seen as fraudulent if it's seen at all. I have a much higher pain tolerance (physical and emotional) than I should because I've learned how fruitless it is to ask for help from people who don't see you as human. More often than not it will only get you attacked further. The struggle for survival is often chalked up as nothing more than drama by onlookers safe behind their walls. Unbelievable antics, bravery, and yes, spectacle occur every day in the fight against death. To be quiet is to die inside, to be quiet under attack is to die entirely, to go it alone, to give in, to not fight back. Be quiet. Stop trying to survive. Stop fighting back. Stop being so dramatic. Better to die quietly than make a scene.

The suicide rate for autistics may be as high as 10 times higher than the general population, with autistic girls especially affected at twice the rate of their male counterparts (Furfaro, 2019). We don't even have data for other genders, and the existing studies don't account for the trans experience. Most science is still very binary in nature, thanks in large part to the Nazis themselves and their very long shadow. Who knows where we would be if the Institut für Sexualwissenschaft, at the time the world's best repository on gender research hadn't been destroyed in 1933 (Wikipedia Contributors, 2019). There's more and more evidence of a sizable overlap between neurodivergent and trans people, both having massively elevated rates of poor life outcomes (Artz, A., Frazer, C., & Myers-Brooks, K. (2020) , and many people (including me) are part of both groups. Antifa have high numbers of both as well, as trans and neurodivergent people fight against the forces that resent not being able to kill us more efficiently.

There's a lot more attempted suicide by cop or nazi in our ranks than any one wants to admit, as suffering neurodivergents are looking for a way out with some semblance of dignity and martyrdom is still culturally on the table. Death is an ever present companion to punk rock. It seems many people respect Kurt more for dying than they respect Courtney for surviving, and even radical circles can't seem to shake the influence of Christianity on our worldview. Some part of our indoctrinated selves want to be like Jesus, dying so others can live, instead of fighting for all of our survival together.

In the midst of my recovery from the fray I took a workshop at an anarchist conference from a trans nonbinary person about ecotones that gave me a vision of existence I could grab onto help pull me out of despair. An ecotone is a place of tension between two ecologies, perfectly embodied by this beautiful gentle elder with long shiny hair and delicate features who spoke with a calm unwarranted for their work with Greek antifascists, a truly bloody and terrifying scene where the rise of Golden Dawn meant attacks and murders in

the streets for years on end. They encouraged us to look at the in-between spaces of identity and the richness that comes from appreciating the ways we bleed into each other like estuaries.

I've lived in the in-between places of social groupings for as long as I can remember. Many of the most interesting friends and lovers I have had the pleasure of knowing live on the edges. Some of those edges are dangerous, the strangest of us pushed to the limits of habitable spaces. Our metaphors for madness talk a lot about being on a precipice, but it can be more like a bog. People are afraid of bogs which can be deadly and strange, uninviting and maybe a little smelly, but they are a safe haven for their residents. The otherness and danger of a bog offer those who live there a certain amount of protection from the outside world, and the hostility to most of humanity has allowed for an abundance of hidden biological diversity.

Unable to see the beauty in bogs, people construct infinite new, shinier boxes and cages rather than risk freedom. As a nonbinary person I see this happening in real time as society tries to create a third gender category for what is meant to be an explosion destroying and defying categorization. My doctors keep pressuring me to change my name and gender identity in their charts but as an antifascist I understand what categorization leads to. I don't want slightly freer more easily inhabited boxes to be shoved in, I want total liberation and nothing short of it. I'm not going to change my legal name so the government can track me better or have an X on my ID. We shouldn't have to have gender on our ID's at all. We shouldn't have to have IDs.

My first glimmer of gender euphoria came from a sock puppet account who's gender I had not identified but was assumed male by both the twitter algorithm and the porn bots in my DMs. The freedom of being assumed an abled male was both a relief and the weight of understanding fully for the first time the social limitations of the biases against me. It's true that some use anonymity to hide from accountability, but it's incredibly freeing and informative to work anonymously as someone who faces multiple forms of bias normally. I cannot overstate what a privilege it is to be assumed competent. I've spent so much time expending huge amounts of energy and grief trying to get in doors to be given a chance at all, weighed down so heavily by negative expectations and assumed limitations that I am unable to even start the actual work I want to be doing. I didn't even know what I was capable of, and as it turns out I'm capable of changing the world. I started to realize that the walls weren't around other people as much as around my own mind. I don't want in their walls if they don't want me in them. Their walls aren't even real.

One of my favorite characters is Carrie. Watching Carrie for the first time brought up a lot of feelings for me. I had been introduced to this movie as a "horror" film in which Carrie is a monster, but the 1976 film is much more loving of the weird girl protagonist. It felt so good to watch her burn down that gym, so deeply cathartic for me, and other friends of mine who I have spoken to feel the same way. But most people don't see it like that at all, which is shocking and sad to me. This powerful magic figure is seen as a murderous freak who ruins

the life of a pretty girl that was trying to be nice to her. Well, fuck that girl too for lending out her boyfriend as some kind of demented act of charity, she can rot in hell with the others. Carrie can move objects with the power of her motherfucking mind; she doesn't need your second hand B-grade dick. If only Carrie could have seen that. If only she could have lived and escaped and found others like her.

Many antifa feel more like the jock kids than Carrie to me sometimes, but who would you rather have at your side fighting fash? I would take one Carrie over 100 jocks any day. Just let her loose in a National Socialist Black Metal concert and see how it goes. Anyone embarrassed by me and worried what will happen if the brand gets sullied by the proximity to a bunch of crazy retard girls (as if we're not the toughest motherfuckers around) can get bent. I'm an antifascist whether or not some self proclaimed arbiters of the brand claim me.

People are afraid of being categorized as violent and insane, but those are both politicized categories that encompass some of the worst of human nature alongside some of the most brilliant and brave. It's insane to fight back against such strong and entrenched systems with as much power they have. Saving lives is often a violent act. My violence and insanity have saved and improved many lives, including my own.

I read that traumatized dogs need to be physically pulled from cages in order to start healing (van der Kolk, 2014), which sounds a little too much like a vanguard, but I can say that self liberation is inspiring and punches holes in walls for others to see out and escape through. Many people don't actually hate me, they hate what I reflect back to themselves. They hate that I expose the inefficacy of their walls. My perceived weakness and experiences of harm symbolize the cracks, inadequacies, fears and injustices of modern society. I hated myself for this as well, but not any more. If the only choices are total invisibility or spectacle, I choose both. In the bloc I am an amalgam of the symphonic disparate experience of my life, and it freed me.

Punk rock has only been one tactic for survival I have used. I've needed a diversity of tactics and of people in my life to keep me here, other arts and genres and communities good at different types of support because living is complicated. The antifascist movement can't survive with only punk rock as it's sole cultural point of entry or care. Punks became the front line because that's where the nazis first appeared, but everyone under attack needs each other and the brilliance of difference, the weirdos, the awkward, the different, and the strange. I hope those who don't like what they see of themselves in me can find the freedom I have found and we can all find liberation together. They're trying to kill us and I want them to stop succeeding. Punk rock taught me to be out of control of these systems because to control me is to kill me, my first step towards freedom, but not my last. Through the cracks in the walls, into the border's abandoned places, where the guards aren't so vigilant the ecosystem begins to heal, movement resumes, beings escape into and out of confinement and exclusion, and new worlds arise.

In escaping my old limitations and embracing my way of being, the antifascists and anarchists I have ended up closest to are the ones comfortable in the hinterlands outside the

walls. I like the oogles and the prophets who prefer vagrancy to settling, who don't invert rules but destroy them. We are undefinable, angry, passionate queers most comfortable on the move and see safety not in the presence of walls, windows, whiteness, and gender because we know they are traps. We fight fascists and burn prisons. We are kind, curious, thoughtful, violent, and insane.

Break down the stories, break down the walls, defy definition, defy categorization, be everywhere and no where and everyone and no one. The bloc is a swarm of bees, no it's clowns with baseball bats, no it's ice cream and kids games, no its guns and hostility and anger and raw emotion, no it's all colors and sparkles and magic, no it's all black and stealth and ninjas — it's genderless, it's genderful, all everything, all nothing. It's part of the community, it's separate, its impossible to contain. It's an idea, it's a gang, it's an organization, it doesn't exist at all! It's weird as fuck. It's a big queer fuck. It's hilarious, it's devastating, it's an embodiment of the messiness of life itself. It's mountains, it's valley, it's river, it's ocean, it's swamp, it's ecotones and desert and air and molecules and quarks and the void of space and the center of the sun. It's ungovernable. It's punk rock, it's folk, it's jazz, it's rap, it's screaming wildly, it's tense silence, it's reverb, and grinding, and stomping and singing and crying. It's anything we want and need it to be. Death to fascism! Destroy the borders! Burn all prisons! We are not only worthy of life, but of a beautiful, rich, delicious, liberated life. We will build a life worthy of us.

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Submitted by the author. To be published in a forthcoming book on critical engagements between punk, anarchism and other radical politics and practices to be edited by Jim Donaghey, Caroline Kaltefleiter, Will Boisseau and to be published by Active Distribution.

Content warning: reclamation of ableist slurs, discussion of violence, harassment, genocide, and suicide

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