

YOUNG SCHOLARS IN FIRST-YEAR WRITING

LITERACY SPONSORS AND LEARNING: AN ETHNOGRAPHY OF PUNK LITERACY IN MID-1980S WACO

Eric Pleasant

Texas A&M University–Commerce

Literacy is primarily something people do; it is an activity, located in the space between thought and text. Literacy does not just reside in people's heads as a set of skills to be learned, and it does not just reside on paper, captured as texts to be analyzed. Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people.

—David Barton and Mary Hamilton

As you walk in, you instantly notice your surroundings. You are entering a dark room with an almost oppressive atmosphere. Animal bones hang from the ceiling. The walls are painted black. Flyers promoting upcoming shows have been pasted one on top of the other throughout the room. Artwork on the flyers consists of skeletons, monsters, and an array of unflattering caricatures of people such as Ronald Reagan, Hitler, and the pope. Band names upon the flyers are as brash as the images: Dead Kennedys, Millions of Dead Cops, Agent Orange, Marching Plague, and the Offenders. Phrases such as “There is no justice, just us” and “We’re just a minor threat” are graffitied across the walls, promoting a sense of unity outside the bounds of traditional societal values. At the opposite end of the room is a stage. Groups of kids are standing together looking at you with seeming tribal defiance. Most of these people have leather jackets adorned with spikes and band names or logos similar to the ones on the walls. Some have hair that has been spiked, shaved, or colored with Day-Glo hues that scream, “I am not a normal member of society!” You have just entered the netherworld of the Cave Club, Austin, Texas. The year is 1985 and you have come to see the psychedelic punk rock band the Butthole Surfers.

I am one of the people walking into the club. I look at my four best friends. We are five white adolescents aged fifteen to eighteen from Waco, Texas. How did we get here? How do we fit into this extremely closed group of people we see around us in the club? These other youths have a reputation of hating outsiders to the point of showing extreme aggression. All of a sudden, one of the people in the club sees and recognizes us. He nods and walks up. The band takes the stage and opens its set with crazy, insane-sounding rants that lead into straight-ahead, hard-driving drums and guitar—this is stripped-down, in-your-face music. The punk walking up grabs one of my friends. No words are spoken. He puts his arm around my friend’s shoulders and pulls him into a swirling pit of kids. The music picks up. The rest of us look at each other, grin, and run to join the human maelstrom. We do fit in here!

Punk as Literacy

Fitting in, in this case, means that we had acquired the requisite punk literacy necessary to survive or thrive in this environment. Acquiring the literacy of such a nontraditional, new, and relatively nonstudied or reported subculture necessitated nontraditional modes of learning. Traditional definitions of literacy are generally limited to the study of written text; such a definition limits this project to our reading of the verbal snapshot detailed above. But there is so much more going on here. As David Barton and Mary Hamilton's definition shows us, "Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people" (42). Within the context of traditional literacy, the words on the flyers, jackets, or walls are relatively meaningless. Within the bounds of the second and more relevant definition, my opening scene becomes a plethora of literacy. Every aspect of the room is a source of learning: the color of the walls, the art on the flyers, the bones on the ceiling, the interaction of the people. These things alone may not have meaning, but in this instance, the question becomes what kind of subculture would choose this setting for interaction.

In "Literacy, Discourse, and Linguistics," James Paul Gee defines what he means by "literacy studies" and pushes us beyond more traditional definitions of literacy.

At any moment we are using language we must say or write the right thing in the right way while playing the right social role and (appearing) to hold the right values, believes, and attitudes. Thus, what is important is not language, and surely not grammar, but saying (writing)-doing-being-valuing-believing combinations. These combinations I call "Discourses" with a capital "D." [. . .] Discourses are ways of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, believes, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. (6-7)

In regard to my project, Gee's concept of literacy provides a frame to consider the opening scene in this paper. What are the ideas, unifying concepts, and sources of self-identity among the people in the room? Every detail becomes something from which one can learn in order to blend within this unique subculture of attitudes, ideas, beliefs, and appearances. The words and art on the walls, flyers, and jackets begin to represent not just words, but the ideas and values of the culture creating them. The appearance of these groups of people in the room, from their clothing and hair to the way that they are standing, becomes a source of literacy in its own right. For those experienced in this scene, it is fairly simple to tell who is new, who is experienced, and eventually, who belongs within this group. After some time within the culture, appearance begins to assume less importance than mannerisms, slang, and ability to successfully interact.

Cultural Sponsors of Literacy

Like Lauren B. Resnik, I am examining "literacy as a set of cultural practices that people engage in" (117). This study explores literacy practices associated with punk culture, paying particular attention to the ways in which we, in Gee's words, "acquired the Discourses" of punk culture. How did these five middle-class teenagers from suburban, Baptist Waco manage to get to this point? What drew us together and what were the different forms of sponsorship from which we assimilated different aspects of punk literacy? Therefore, this project looks at a sub-subculture of punks in mid-1980s Waco, Texas, for the ways in which my friends and I, in the words of Deborah Brandt, "pursue[d] literacy" and how punk "literacy pursue[d]" us (33).

As Brandt discusses in “Sponsors of Literacy,” every aspect of our lives affects our literacy. Sponsors range from family, friends, and teachers to setting, family background, socioeconomic standing, and exposure to ideas. All forms of sponsorship direct us and influence our literacy development. Literacy itself influences the direction of further development. Sponsorship and literacy become the proverbial “snowball” within which we develop; its shape over time is dictated by the layers of learning, background, and exposure inside.

In order to study this sub-subculture, the Waco group of punks, I first detail the backgrounds of a group of five people within it: Eric (me), Matt, Harry, Judson, and Fred. Each received a survey that assessed their backgrounds, similarities, and differences—information that is invaluable in understanding the eventual development of the group. This group of friends is the direct result of the various forms of literacy sponsorship within our lives: people, setting, and backgrounds.

Family Backgrounds

Given the socioeconomic status of our families, we each consider ourselves to come from middle- or working-class backgrounds. Four of us have parents with college and postgraduate educations, and all our parents completed high school. We each view our parents as people who worked their way up to more economic stability and better social standing through their own efforts—pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, so to speak—and attained more comfortable lives by hard work and/or education. Our aspirations to attend a university were instilled in all of us by our parents. In essence, we grew up believing that hard work and education were the only ways to achieve and maintain a stable, fulfilling life. We were a fairly social group that was exposed and privy to the benefits of a decent education. Some of us attended public schools while others attended private schools, and all were active in student government, social, and academic groups in high school.

As complex and different as our family histories were, instability in our home and family life is something to which we were all exposed. Three of us came from families that were comprised of divorced and remarried parents. Matt and I were raised much of our lives by single mothers. Many of us were drawn to each other in an attempt to create our own family of friends.

Community Culture

One extremely influential force in our lives did not come from our schools, religions, or families, but from our geographical area: Waco, Texas. The significance of this location cannot be stressed enough. Waco is part of the “Southern Bible Belt”; it is very much a Southern Baptist town, dominated by Baylor University. Although only one of us was specifically raised Southern Baptist, for five adolescents beginning to develop their own identities and life philosophies, this community influence played a huge role. We were all dealing with the typical adolescent crises. The constant struggle to find our own voices often meant coming face-to-face with opposing beliefs that were generally much more conservative in nature than the beliefs we were developing on our own. As Barton and Hamilton explain, “literacy practices are purposeful and embedded in broader social goals and cultural practices” (44). Our family situations may have led us to one another, but it was the conservative climate of our hometown—a climate we found alienating—that provided the glue that held our group together and led us to punk.

Our personalities all reacted to this conservative setting with a sense of defiance and sometimes outright anger. When questioned about what attracted them to punk culture, survey respondents listed angst as a main factor. Punk was both a form of music and a collective that allowed and

encouraged its members to speak openly. Freedom of expression was, in 1980s punk, a defining element of the culture. We found this liberating and highly enticing. Anger and desire to change the world around us were easily expressed through the medium of punk music and were often reflected in dress and attitude, which placed importance on shock value.

Class Conflict

This leads to another prevalent answer to the question of what attracted us to the punk culture: class conflict with our peers. Many of us grew up exposed to a class structure in which we did not necessarily fit. All of our parents had achieved a certain level of success, but we still found ourselves in conflict with some of our peers. We all came from working, middle-class families that struggled to attain their class standing. While we may have reached some small level of privilege by our high school years, we were still painfully aware at times of the socioeconomic background from which we had come. The public schools some of us attended were in the more affluent parts of town. When I attended a college prep school, I was receiving financial aid for tuition from a scholarship. Essentially, we came from fairly financially comfortable families by this time, but we were still surrounded by peers from much more affluent families than ours. This basic conflict of social standing resulted in us feeling not quite part of the same society as our classmates. We chose a culture in which class was not an issue.

One reply to the question of what drew us into this culture differed from the others: “I do not know if anything necessarily ‘drew’ me to any scene; rather, it is simply where my life took me. I don’t think that I sought the scene; instead, the scene was secondary to the friendships. [. . .] Simply put, it was the friendships that brought me to the scene—the scene itself was merely a collateral aspect of the friendships.” I have since asked all those surveyed and each agrees with this answer. In short, our subculture was not necessarily defined by punk. Rather, it was defined by our group of friends—who happened to be punks.

Pop Culture

Our musical tastes prior to punk were similar: each of us listened to heavy metal and classic rock, and some listed classic country music as well. Most of us had been influenced by older siblings and parents. (Most of us had siblings who had come of age in the late ’70s.)

Other media that influenced our development included television and film. We were the quintessential “Pop Culture” generation. Everyone cited horror and science fiction as an influence: growing up with the electric babysitter (TV), we were inundated with campy horror and science fiction films of the ’50s, ’60s, and ’70s. Movies such as *Planet of the Apes*, *Forbidden Planet*, and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* were among our favorites; we were all seeing the *Star Wars* movies and watching *Star Trek* reruns after school. Collecting toys merchandised by these movies was also a common bond. “Disposable” entertainment such as plastic toys and low-budget B-movies were often the forms of media that we were drawn to and cherished.

We grew up reading the Bible and comic books, and as we grew older, we all became intrigued by authors such as Joseph Heller, Kurt Vonnegut, C. S. Lewis, Tolkien, and John Irving. It is evident that our early and middle childhood imaginations revolved around science fiction, camp, and horror. We were all relatively intelligent youths and had all made As and Bs in school to this point. Reading was a pastime that had fueled our imaginations and begun to shape our personalities.

These developments occurred independent of each other; none of us met until high school.

This taste for comic books, science fiction, horror, and ultimately our early outlook on life had developed of its own accord, free from each other's influence. Obviously, like people are drawn to like people. In our case, some of our likes and dislikes were so similar that it seems, in retrospect, inevitable that we would become close friends. Even in a town the size of Waco, it was only a matter of time until our paths crossed and we realized we were kindred spirits.

The pop culture we grew up with was as much an influence on us as the community and "place" in which we were raised, and it was also a significant influence on the subculture to which we later belonged. Our collective tastes and similar backgrounds encouraged a mutual respect for each other, which fueled a sense of belonging and family. The common thread that was stressed by each member of the group is that we were all seeking a family of our own making. We wanted to belong with people whom we had chosen and who had chosen us. We created our own stable environment that allowed us to exchange ideas, share perspectives, and nurture our individual personalities. We had grown up in a community that didn't understand us, in homes that were sometimes unstable and volatile. Within our group, we exchanged ideas and were receptive to new concepts. We frequently shared new books, new movies, and new thinking. Thus, our various early literacy sponsors were not merely people; they were the culture of our surroundings as well as the actual place we were raised. By the time we met and formed strong bonds of friendship, we were just waiting for something new and exciting or explosive to come into our lives. That something was punk.

Developing Punk Literacy

Sponsors are a tangible reminder that literacy learning throughout history has always required permission, sanction, assistance, coercion, or, at minimum, contact with existing trade routes. Sponsors are delivery systems for the economies of literacy, the means by which these forces present themselves to—and through—individual learners. They also represent the causes into which people's literacy usually gets recruited.

—Deborah Brandt

When studying a subculture (or, as Gee would call it, a Discourse), it is interesting to look at the origins of different behaviors, beliefs, terminology, and ultimately all of the different elements that define it. Where do people learn to behave in an acceptable manner among their peers? Various subcultures have their own social practices, which eventually become forms of literacy. Written texts, even the simplest ones, are translated into action and applied within the group, and one group's texts and practices may seem completely foreign to another. As noted at the beginning of this essay, I am attempting here to understand "the social conditions under which people actually engage in literate activities" (Resnick 117). Inasmuch as punk culture and music were hard for us to come by, it is important to understand literate activities involved in the perpetual cycle of discovery and introduction that sponsored and advanced our increasing punk literacies. That's just what I will do here. While our punk literacy was culturally sponsored, as I have analyzed, I want to look in particular at how my group of friends used different forms of sponsors and literacy in order to educate ourselves about the punk subculture and, eventually, how we became accepted into that tight-knit social environment.

We had each experienced limited exposure to punk music. One of my earliest sponsors was a friend from California who had introduced me to bands such as Black Flag, X, and Fear. Judson's early sponsorship came in the form of a radio show called *The Rock and Roll Alternative*. Matt was

already involved with new wave music. Harry and Fred were both exposed to punk by friends or family. Thus, we did not necessarily introduce each other to punk, but had some interest in the music prior to meeting. However, once we met, we became involved in a perpetual cycle of discovery and introduction. We shared every aspect of the music or culture that we learned about with each other. This perpetuated sharing of facets of the culture that we discovered produced a geometric learning curve. In a way, we became sponsors to ourselves.

One of our primary sources of information about punk culture and music came from its actual records. We would listen to *Rock and Roll Alternative* and hear a band we liked. Then we would special-order the band's records from the local music store. Most included sleeves with lyrics and occasionally pictures of the band. Listening to the band, we would read the lyrics, learning the songs and what the band was talking about. The pictures showed how the band dressed. As we eagerly exchanged records among ourselves, our own group literacy began to develop. We were learning the slang, the dress, and the fashion of another culture prior to direct, personal exposure. This gave us an advantage when we began going to see bands in Austin or Dallas, where there were established punk cultures. Because we went to see only bands we liked, we were already familiar with their music and knew most of the lyrics before we saw them perform. We were "punk literate," albeit without much real-life, direct exposure to the punk scene. We adapted our dress and style from the pictures on the records and learned a new language from the music.. Thus, the records were extremely influential sponsors.

Television was another sponsor for us. Although there was very little true exposure to punk culture on TV, we did manage to find a few programs, movies, documentaries, and late-night videos that gave us a glimpse into the world of punk rock. A late-night show called *Night Flight* played some of the more controversial, less commercial music videos. These were aired after midnight on Friday and Saturday. Some of these early music videos influenced the way we dressed and exposed us to some of the more obscure bands, whose records we could then order. The same program also offered documentaries that showed us what was going on in the larger cities on the West and East coasts. Interviews on the programs taught us about other bands and different music scenes. It was almost a continuous cycle of information from media and records leading back to more information from the same sources, all leading to more learned behavior that we put into practice within our subculture and, eventually, within the larger subcultures at the music venues.

One incredibly important factor in our development was exposure to other groups at shows. The records, lyric sheets, and media had provided us with the basic tools we needed to go to the show and not stick out. However, fully assimilating into the larger scenes of Austin and Dallas took a little longer. Anyone who attends live music venues knows that there are always different groups of people standing around talking. Attending the punk shows provided us with a good way to observe different mannerisms and types of dress, and to pick up some of the different slang terms. The more events we attended, the more people began to recognize us. Eventually, we began to feel that being the "Waco guys" was something we didn't need to hide. We began to make friends within the Austin and Dallas punk community. We were no longer singled out in a bad way. Simply stated, we established our credibility and earned respect. We had progressed to the point that we were comfortable and regarded as extended members of the community. The more we were exposed to the other music scenes, the more we were accepted by the punk community.

Punk Literacy in Practice (and in the Making)

Now that I have outlined our individual histories and different modes of learning and assimilation, I will review some of the characteristics of our Waco punk “sub-subculture.” During the mid-1980s, we were a relatively small group, initially very isolated from the active, direct persuasion of the larger punk culture in other cities. Accordingly, we developed some distinct unifying aspects.

Philosophically, we always tried to maintain an open-minded approach to other individuals and cultures. We felt that different ideas and culture should be treated with respect. The general rule in our early days was that we wanted to be introduced to and learn concepts that originally seemed foreign to us. Our reading material was often inclined to be political or subversive in nature. We traded books by authors such as Camus, Nietzsche, and Solzhenitsyn. *The Anarchist Cookbook* provided quite a bit of enjoyment and inspiration. We freely exchanged ideas and philosophies that melded with our pop culture past. The result was that our group was drawn together on a more cerebral level than some of the larger punk subcultures to which we were eventually exposed.

As punk culture developed within some of the larger cities, I at times witnessed a somewhat “testosterone”-driven form of punk. During the later 1980s, many of the people drawn to this culture were not attracted to it for the same reasons we were. As punk music and fashion became more popular, some of the people we encountered at larger music venues were like the ones who had, four years earlier, relished chasing us out of fast food establishments and trying to pick fights with us. Some had the stereotypical “jock” mentality and thought that a punk show was a great place to thrash around and beat up people. The mentality in the larger punk scene was not always similar to our much smaller and more isolated scene. Unfortunately, this mentality began to appear in scenes throughout the States. George Hurchalla observed the same thing, writing in his book *Going Underground*: “The core of people making the music and putting on the shows was tight. We all were kinda dorky kids into punk rock. We weren’t into all the violence and tough guy posturing [. . .] in other scenes” (279).

It pains me that this later form of punk is so often its main image. In contrast, we had been shaped by early sponsors into a group of young people drawn to this culture by intellectual and developmental desires. We wanted to feel our own voice and learn about others, in an open-minded and unrestricted manner. Nor was this motivation indigenous to Waco; these ideas were blossoming throughout the country. According to Mark Anderson of the Positive Force record label in 1985,

Punk is not [. . .] the latest cool trend or even a particular form of style or music, really—it is an idea that guides and motivates your life. The Punk community that exists, exists to support and realize that idea through music art, fanzines and other expressions of personal creativity. And what is this idea? Think for yourself, be yourself, don’t just take what society gives you, create your own rules, live your own life. (qtd. in O’Hara 36)

In the early days of our Waco subculture, we discovered the “do-it-yourself” attitude of punk. This part of the early punk culture encouraged us to make our own fashion, and, as our punk literacies increased, the relative inaccessibility of punk fashion further “sponsored” our do-it-yourself choices. At that time, it was nearly impossible to go into a store and purchase prefabricated punk-look fashion, so every aspect of our fashion was do-it-yourself. We discovered ways to buy regular, plain T-shirts and transform them into more suitable and desirable attire. We quickly learned that stencils could be made out of any material, such as paper or cardboard, and with spray paint, we were able to make shirts that said anything we wanted. Leather jackets originally came in the form

of motorcycle jackets, which we would decorate with ink pens and paint. We styled our hair in the backyard with pet-grooming clippers. While bright-colored hair dye wasn't readily accessible to us in Waco, we figured out that our hair could be bleached white and then colored with Kool-Aid drink powder in concentrated form. The spikes in our hair were made to stand up with Knox gelatin.

We also learned to go to new places. In the formative years of our subculture, we learned from some of the bigger scenes that mainstream clubs and bars were not receptive to punk rock shows. Instead, venues often came in the form of alternative "gay" bars. An early alliance was formed between much of the gay culture and the punks; because punk culture originally embraced open-mindedness, the gay culture of the time seemed a natural ally, as both were often viewed as outcasts and nonconformists. Thus, we were able to persuade proprietors of gay bars to allow "our" bands to play. Eventually, we persuaded a predominantly African American club to let us bring records in once a week to play our music. Our group's determination thus caused us to form somewhat unconventional associations with others with whom we might otherwise never have connected. In retrospect, these alliances and friendships seem logical; but at the time, we were merely doing what we felt we had to do to nurture our fledgling music scene. None of us knew or suspected that these actions would introduce us to cultures that would enrich our lives and lead us to a higher state of social consciousness as we became adults.

During these years, we were introduced to soul, jazz, dance, and hip-hop music. Our view of punk was that we should listen to anything we found enjoyable. At least for my group of friends, the punk culture was not defined by punk music. Classical, new wave, new age, jazz, metal, hardcore, hip-hop, etc. are all forms of music that have remained in our lives.

Another characteristic of the group from this period was the reemergence of the skateboard scene. Skateboarding had begun its resurgence in the late 1970s. Its new popularity had started on the West Coast at the same time as punk emerged there, and skate culture became interconnected with punk culture. One of our favorite pastimes was to skate drainage ditches. Eventually, we were able to acquire enough wood to build our own ramp, affording us an inexpensive way to entertain ourselves. The skate culture had great impact on our clothing fashion and slang.

Lasting Effects of Sponsored Literacy

The "do-it-yourself," or DIY, attitude of punk permeated every aspect of our sub-subculture. Will and determination were the means by which we had our fashion, our music, and our entertainment. This drive is still visible in each of our lives today: the entire group has gone on to realize educational and/or business success. The drive that was the catalyst to form our friendships and create our sub-subculture is the same drive that has allowed us to attain some of our goals.

Every aspect of our lives, friendships, and subculture has been a direct result of our early sponsors. The forces that drew us together—background, family, education, culture—were all aspects of sponsorship that had shaped us to that point. The tools we used to assimilate and educate ourselves on punk were further sponsors in our development. Variations of these same tools are still used today in our educational or professional endeavors. Our subculture—or, more importantly, every aspect of our lives—has been the culmination of every sponsor (positive or negative) and every action that has brought us to our current state. Such analysis makes clear why Barton and Hamilton conclude: "Like all human activity, literacy is essentially social, and it is located in the interaction between people" (42). Our group's developing punk literacy was a clear case in point.

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