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The Raw and the Rotten: Punk Cuisine¹

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Certain qualities of food make it
the most appropriate vehicle for
describing alienation.

—Brad Weiss (1996: 130)

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

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

For these people, food practices, in their everyday usage, mark consciously ideological moments: eating is a cauldron for the domination of states, races, genders, and ideologies and the practice through which these discourses are often resisted. Surprisingly, punk cuisine, the theory and practice of punk culture as expressed in food, gains clarity when it is held alongside the structuralist work of Claude Levi-Strauss.

Levi-Strauss (1964) saw the process of *cooking* food as the quintessential means through which humans differentiate themselves from animals, through which we manufacture culture and "civilization." The great French intellect was fascinated by the ways in which humans classify and transform and otherwise create culture in their interactions with food. Levi-Strauss' tri-polar gastronomic system defines raw, cooked, and rotten as categories basic to all human cuisines. Such poles, I propose, provide a useful template with which to analyze punk cuisine and, thereby, punk culture. The model may fall far short of Levi-Strauss' vast hopes, but it is still 'good to think with.'

And yet, this paper also toys with the model, and stands it on its head—appropriating the model and using it to give voice to “civilization’s” most ardent critics: in subverting the model, the barbarians speak, and the ‘savage mind’ thinks for itself. So move the punks, who associate the relentlessly “civilizing” process—including its means of producing and transforming food—with human domination of nature and with White-male corporate supremacy. Punks believe that industrial food fills a person’s body with the norms, rationale, and moral pollution of corporate-capitalism and imperialism. Punks do not want to ingest such poisons, nor do they want to be “mistaken” for being *White* or part of the normative “Mainstream.” A variety of practices, not the least of which are dietary ones, distinguish punks from these ethno-class positions and leverage a powerful critique against the status quo. Here, in the not so simple act of eating, punks made themselves and digested the world.

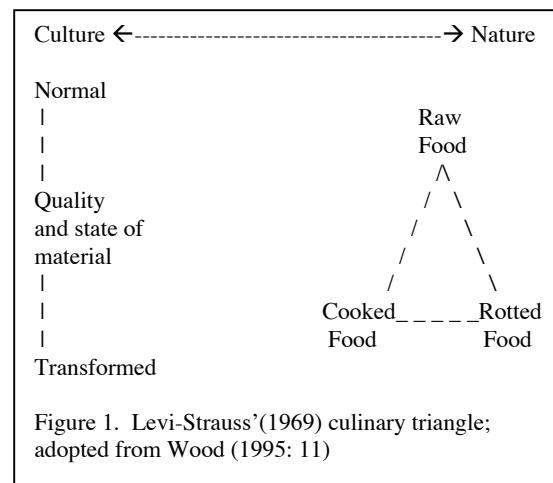
A Punk Culinary Triangle

Capitalism transforms the entire world from the organic (forests, swamps, deserts, rivers) to the inorganic (cities of concrete and steel, suburbs of asphalt and astroturf, wastelands that have been stripped of all natural resources, garbage dumps)...

—CrimethInc. Workers’ Collective (2001: 122)³

In the punk underground food serves to elaborate and structure ideologies about how the world works. Through a complex system of rules, suggestions, and arguments, punk cuisine spelled out on a plate its ideologies. Food, in this sense, is a code, not unlike the codes posited by Claude Levi-Strauss (1964, 1966). Yet punk cuisine is best discussed, not as part of some trans-human cultural system, but as a subcultural mechanism responsible to its own logic, and in dialogue with what punks perceive to be the normative culture.

Though Levi-Strauss’ attempt to define a universal grammar for food collapsed under the sheer weight of its own universalizing dreams, many of Levi-Strauss’ ideas about food remain insightful and stimulating, especially when placed in a locally defined context (Douglas 1984). His culinary triangle (figure 1) still provides a helpful way to think about food, wherein the transformations of food can be cognitively mapped. To begin with, one could say that American food geographies have shifted, in the extreme, toward processing (or *cooking*) food. Industrial food products are milled, butchered, advertised, baked, refined, packaged, and branded. And they are often composed of ingredients shipped from a multitude of remote places, only to be sent once more around the globe. We might, then, say that punks consider industrial food to be extraordinarily *cooked*. Punks, in turn, preferentially seek food which tends to be more *raw*; closer to its wild, “organic,” uncultured state; and punks even enjoy food which has, in American foodways, become *rotten*—disposed of and stolen.



For punks, Mainstream food is epitomized by corporate-capitalist “junk food” and the extraordinary geographies that come together in such products. Punks regularly liken Mainstream food geographies to colonialism, in their impacts on the 3rd World: destruction of rainforests (allegedly cleared for beef production), the creation of cash-cropping (to service World Bank debts), and cancer (in the use of banned pesticides on unprotected workers and water supplies). Furthermore, punks allege, rangeland and agribusiness plantations destroy whole ecosystems. A representative of this point of view states:

Ultimately this vortex brings about the complete objectification of nature. Every relationship is increasingly instrumentalized and technicized. Mechanization and industrialization have rapidly transformed the planet, exploding ecosystems and human communities with monoculture, industrial degradation, and mass markets (Watson 1991: 164).

Punk food attempts to break free from the commodification of food, from the fetishism of food as a commodity. As such, punk food is ideally *raw*—purchased in brandless bulk or directly from farmers, self-made or home-grown, and otherwise less fetishized; or it is *rotten*, which is to say stolen, or reclaimed from a dumpster. By bathing corporate food in a dumpster or by stealing “natural foods” from an upscale grocery store, punks food is, in a sense, de-commodified, stripped of its alienating qualities, and restored to a kind of pure use-value: food for bodily sustenance. As such, foods, in their organic, unmediated forms, come closer to a “wild” diet, free of commodification and hierarchical relations of production; closer to Levi-Strauss’ “raw” and “rotten” and further from his “cooked.” Comments anarchist Hakim Bey (1991: 54):

Food, cooked or raw, cannot escape from symbolism... ¶ But in the airless vault of our civilization, where nearly every experience is mediated... we lose touch with food as *nourishment*; we begin to construct for ourselves personae based on what we consume, treating *products* as projections of our yearning for the authentic.

The Order of Signs at The Black Cat Café

When we accept their definition of “cleanliness” we are accepting their economic domination of our lives.

—CrimethInc. Workers’ Collective (2001: 123)

Do not think that the Black Cat was a quaint, rosy café sweetly nestled in a booming urban landscape. Picture instead a boxy structure enclosed by a jagged rampart of colored fencing and discarded materials. Part of the fence was topped with a tangled line of bicycle frames, reminiscent of a wall of thorns. It enclosed the yard of the café, with its scattered benches, tables, and cigarette butts. Against the side of the café a great mass of bicycle frames and parts made a huge, tangled mound of metal. To beautify the courtyard, scrapwood planters held salvaged greenery stuck into dirt. One might imagine that the place was not a restaurant but a junkyard, or a building awaiting a wrecking ball. It might remind you of a scene from Appalachia, were it not for the urban expanse of gray pavement.

By the time you arrived at the threshold of the ‘Cat, it should have been apparent that the place was not meant to be attractive in any conventional sense. Unlike other restaurants, the café did not strive to declare sanitation and safety. If, as Richard Sennett (1990:38) suggests, the space of modern authority is clean, empty, and clearly marked, the facade and decor of the Black Cat Café suggested a den of iniquity. The café was cluttered and soiled, and its interiors splattered with posters, art, and canvas coffee sacks. The place was packed with bulky, trashed furniture, and it felt cramped with people and things. This place did not inspire the sense of generic familiarity that franchises strive so hard to achieve, nor did it seem to ask for anyone’s patronage. Like a rotting shack in the forest, it was uninviting and solitary. All turned away, except the vagabond who sought shelter from a cold rain.

These vagabonds, these *punks*, who made their way to the Black Cat, were drawn to something that others could not see. At the portal of the café, the signs were all reversed for them, like some queer, ongoing *carnival*. Where others were repulsed by a dirty cement floor, punks cast upon it their rucksacks, their worldly possessions. Where others were alarmed by body odors of the unwashed, punks recognized kindred spirits and friends. Where others feared to eat food prepared by grimy, garishly pierced cooks, patrons appreciated the ambiance of imperfect food lovingly made by fellow punks.

In fact food was one of the centrally reversed signs here, perhaps because food was the ostensible *raison d’être* for the restaurant. Black Cat food, like the place itself, was a declaration of autonomy and organic creation, a rejection of commodification. Meat and dairy were unapologetically excluded. Vegetables with peanut sauce, tofu scrambles, and other vegan creations served as entrées. The place and the food rejected strict adherence to conventional conceptions of hygiene, where even the *appearance* of filth somehow infects the object or the body. Here hygiene operated as a code for sterility, automation, and alienation. Hygiene was associated with bleached teeth, carcinogenic chemicals, and freshly waxed cars. Hygiene was Leave it to Beaver and suburban fears of Colored bodies and minds. At the café, hygiene meant *Whiteness*; hygiene, as such, along with the project of Whiteness, was rejected.⁴

In rejecting the image of sterility, the Black Cat collective scorned decades of market research, and refuted dominant mantras of modernity. Marketing doctrine in the United States urges restaurants to emphasize scrubbed surfaces, clarity, and predictability. As a rule, the food industry seeks to provide a product so *clean*, so neat, that its human creation is not readily apparent: *commodity fetishism is a corporate mandate*. In this sense, the commodification of food is more apparent to the senses, than is the migrant laborer in the field or the minimum wage dishwasher. The franchise restaurant makes its logo a part of every moment in the experience, from the menu to the foil to the mustard packet. Even the Home-Style Meals or Home Cooking of some franchises cannot be marred with the signature of the low wage cook who makes the food; it must be Home-Style, but never home-style. Corporate America is replete with magicians who skillfully divert attention with sleight of hand. Interchangeability, consistency, and hygiene: food must be completely transformed and utterly *cooked*.

What then of a restaurant which rarely produces a tahini salad dressing spiced the same way, or a pile of home fries without a good many charred? What of a restaurant with spotty service and spotty dishes? Where the roof leaks and the bathroom reeks? For five years the Black Cat found a way to thrive in spite—or because of—its unorthodox practices. The workers and patrons of the ‘Cat are a different breed of people who sometimes seek out what is *rotten* in the eyes of the Mainstream. For the most part, these are bottom feeders, surviving off the carrion

discarded by those “above” them. One worker-owner, Ketan, talked about how the marginality of the Black Cat scared away many potential clientele, but noted:

What I can say is I hope that... people realize that this not a café. This is not a café. This is not a restaurant—

It only looks like one! Ha ha ha!

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

As with Magritte’s pipe, so with the Black Cat: *ceci n'est pas un café*.

Food as (the Recapitulation or Redefinition of) Gender/Power

As a site of resource allocation, food tends to recapitulate power relations. Thus, we can routinely observe in food a wide set of practices through which unequal gender power is acted out, resisted, and reproduced (Counihan 1999).⁵ Punks, too, play out gender/power relations in their diets. In recent years, punk has become more committed to anarchist egalitarian principles that celebrate and practice an anti-hierarchical social order, including one that prohibits a hierarchy of gender. Feminist praxis in punk explicitly historicizes and critiques food as a site of repression.

Centuries of gastro-politics set the stage for punk dietary practices. We see by the Victorian age, if not sooner, a discourse disciplining female bodies through food (Mennell 1985). This discourse was fostered in part by capitalist food and pharmaceutical industries eager to create new products for dieting and beauty (Bordo 1993, Chapkis 1986). Feminists identified this discourse as a form of disciplinary control over women, one that at times leaves women malnourished, anorectic or bulimic, and fixated on manipulating their bodies and diets. As a gendered and specifically American national project, one sees, by the early 20th century, the increasing deployment of cuisine as a way of building the body of White America. Both native-born and immigrant women—through schools, women’s magazines, newspapers, churches, cookbooks, and civic societies—were educated in “home economics;” a correlated set of technologies intended to produce an idealized femininity. Thus schooled in Whiteness, qualified women would reproduce the right kind of patriarchy and racial order, and would so contribute to the project of the U.S. nation-state. Such ideological uses of food are routinely referenced in punk food discourse, in everyday talk, by bands such as Tribe 8, and in zines such as *Fat Girl*.

With the increasing hold of feminism in the punk *scene*, many punks identify the body as a place where hegemony is both made and resisted. Punks are critical of the beauty industry, and of the commodification of the body—they argue that food functions as a part of a disciplinary order in which women are taught to diet, sculpt, and manage their body so as to publicly communicate in the grammar of patriarchy. Riot grrl punks, in particular, have produced a large volume of zines, musics, conversations, and practices that challenge sexist politics of food. In

the ongoing evolution and critique of punk culture, diet is one of the many places where feminist ideas have been advanced and—for the most part—won out.

Indeed, vegetarianism is for many punks at least partly a feminist practice—as such it also reveals ideological fissures within punk culture. Meat, with its prestige and caloric content and proximity to physical violence, has been widely used in affiliation with masculinity (Adams 1990; Rifkin 1992). Yet even within the greater punk subculture, which has become critical of both sexism and meat-eating (O’Hara 1999), some punks continue to produce an overtly sexist, masculinist subculture (Nguyen 1999); one that is also more associated with eating meat. In other words, meat, for some punks, is a way to challenge feminism in punk and to reinsert masculine power. Other punk meat-eating falls into two categories: those who are apolitical about food, and those who flaunt meat-eating as a way of challenging punk orthodoxy.

For most punks, however, meat-eating is collaborative with an unjust social order, one punks typically define as a patriarchy. Given that punks oppose social hierarchies, and given that they locate themselves in staunchly patriarchal societies, they generally find the need to subvert male supremacy in everyday life. Vegetarianism, widely stigmatized as an Oriental and feminine practice, helps to differentiate punks from the Mainstream, neatly corresponds to punk egalitarian values, and offers a direct challenge to the gender relations perceived in meat.

Punk Veganism

The Punk philosophy tends to believe that the exploitation of animals is another step towards allowing the exploitation of people.

—Craig O’Hara (1999: 137)

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

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

At the Black Cat Café, punks said that to eat animal-based products was not only unhealthy, it was to participate in the bondage and murder of animals. Many people in the scene were concerned about the cruel conditions of “factory-farms,” wherein animals were kept in

small quarters, pumped with hormones and antibiotics, and “tortured” in various ways. For Cory, meat-eating was a part of the suburban Christian hypocrisy he grew up with:

Mostly it was just their concept of morality. ‘Cause I could see things that they had done that were obviously immoral in my eyes. Like for one thing, eating meat. It says right there in the Bible, it says, ‘Don’t kill.’ You know? It says ‘Don’t kill’, and then when they’re eating meat, they’re full of shit. They go out and hunt, eat slaughtered meat—meat from factory farms.

Near the middle of its tenure, the Black Cat discontinued its use of milk and eggs. A vegetarian café from its outset, the ‘Cat became more orthodox when its menu was made completely vegan.⁶ Ketan became a worker-owner of the café during its vegan years. His comments spell out the urgency that many punks feel about veganism:

There’s this line that occurs, with being vegan and being activist: at what point does the freedom of people who believe what they believe cross over to the point where people are being harmed? You know? Like, yeah: people are free to eat meat. But actually, in this day and age, they *can’t* eat meat because it’s killing animals. Because someone is eating meat, land that could potentially benefit all of us is being destroyed. I have a lot of problems with that line: I don’t want to impede people’s freedom, but what everyone does affects everyone else... I honestly believe that people have to stop eating meat now. Just: *now*. Like: no question about it—they *do*. I’m not gonna force anyone to stop eating meat, but they’re hurting me, my children’s future, my friends, my family—because they’re eating meat. And they’re hurting the Earth, which is most important of all.

Seattle punks, like so many punks around the nation, were part of the growing politicization of the subculture. Diet was a constant way of manifesting punk politics, with veganism at this forefront of these politics. To be vegan in America is to perpetually find oneself in the minority, chastised and excluded, challenged and reminded of one’s difference. In this sense, veganism also served as an incessant critique of the Mainstream, maker of Otherness, and enactment of punk.

When Raw is a Critique of Cooked

If we distinguish ourselves from barbarity by the cooking of meat it is hardly surprising that savages should be presumed to consume not cooked meat but raw vegetables.

—Nick Fiddes (1991:87)

In punk cuisine, the degree to which food is processed, sterilized, brand-named, and fetishized is the degree to which it is corrupted and removed from nature; the degree to which it is *cooked*. Punks describe a world under the assault of homogenized foods and culture, a world of vast monocropped cornfields and televisions lit with prefabricated corporate “infotainment.”

The two ideas are united in the borrowed agricultural word, *monoculture*, and resisted in many ways, including use of what we might call *raw* foods. Whereas industrial agriculture is associated with genetic engineering, monocropping, pesticides, cages, chemical fertilizers, and commodification, *raw* food tends toward wildness and complexity.

Punks perceive in everyday American food a kind of abject modernity, a synthetic destroyer of locality and diversity. The *cooking* of foods, to which punks so vociferously object, is an outcome of the industrialization and commercialization of food production. While an archeology of industrial food is well beyond the scope of this paper, some of its patterns are made visible and critiqued through punk culinary practices. The following trends in modern food manufacture and consumption comprise the increasingly *cooked* qualities of food against which punks can be said to form their culinary triangle.

From a punk perspective, American food has reached an unprecedented and remarkable state: nearly all of the food that nearly all Americans eat is received in the form of a *commodity*. And the fetishism of food goes far beyond the simple erasure of labor. Perhaps, then, we can bend Marx to say that food has become *more* fetishized than ever before. Fetishism, par excellence, might have become apparent to consumers after the first World War, if not much earlier: the symbolic erasure of handcrafted commodities—a cleansing of products of the labor that went into them and a merging of products with mechanized Progress, technology, rationality, and modernity. Jackson Lears (1994: 171) describes the emergence of ‘the industrialization of eating’:

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

Such logics, for example, are apparent in the segregated meat products, into which the animal carcass is hidden. The animal’s head, feet, and tongue—its recognizable body parts—have disappeared from most American butcher displays.⁷ Disappeared too, is the signature of what are often industrial farms. The hamburger has long concealed between its buns a jungle of meatpacking plants, where laborers receive low pay, animals are abused, and sanitation is neglected (Rifkin 1992).

Through the most sophisticated branding, packaging, and advertising, American food commodities work overtime to conceal the labor, spatial divides, and resources that went into making the food. In modern advertising images of food often divert attention from the industrialized production of food, and draw attention to the consumption of food (DuPuis 2000). Rather than depict the mechanized dairy factory, ads show celebrities and athletes wearing smiles and milk moustaches. Notes David Harvey (1989: 300):

The whole world’s cuisine is now assembled in one place... The general implication is that through the experience of everything from food, to culinary habits, music, television, entertainment, and cinema, it is now possible to experience the world’s geography vicariously, as a simulacrum. The interweaving of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time. But it does so in such a way as to

conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin, of the labour processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production.

Perhaps we can say, then, that postmodern geographies, along with relentless commodification, work to heighten the fetishism of the commodity, hiding as much as possible the making of a product; hiding, as it were, the alienating conditions of production—*cooking* food in the extreme.

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

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

Resisting White Bourgeois Subjectivity: Stealing Yuppie-Natural Foods

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

Punk discourses of food are partly a response to the heightening of identity marketing in foods over the last few decades of the 20th century. And though locating identity and prestige in food is an ancient practice, it has historically been limited by income, tradition, and spatial divides. But in present day America, the bewildering array of food choices reframes the eater as a *consumer*, one who has staggering options, and one whose choices are understood to “express” or manufacture herself. In what is perhaps the most obese nation in the history of the world, Americans have reached the point at which food as an essential for survival has been sublimated under the ideology of food as self-gratification and consumer identity. After a long process, food in America has today culminated in a condition in which identity-content of the food is sold over and beyond the nutritive value of the food.

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

The concept of LITE (in Situ-jargon) unfolds a complex of symbolism by which the Spectacle hopes to recuperate all revulsion against its commodification of desire. “Natural,” “organic,” “healthy” produce is designed for a market sector of mildly dissatisfied consumers with mild cases of future-shock & mild yearnings for a tepid authenticity (Bey 1991: 53).⁸

While commodified “natural foods” were repulsively *overcooked*, they were simultaneously closer to the *raw* forms of food that punks preferred: organic, bulk, and whole grain. So, while the PCC market offered the organic products that punks preferred (as well as a relatively tolerable and tolerant workplace for those who opted for wage labor), the high prices and upscale marketing represented the *cooking* of foods; the heightened state of gastronomic fetishism from which punks felt alienated. If these foods could somehow be cleansed of their commodification, they would be perfectly suited to the punk culinary system.

Thus, many punks, whether as workers or customers, targeted “natural foods” supermarkets for theft (c.f. Himmelstein and Schweser 1998: 18-21, 24). Indeed, the kitchen of the Black Cat Café was routinely stocked with products stolen from chain supermarkets and “natural foods” stores, as were the kitchens of many punk squats and homes. We might, then, declare an axiom of punk culinary geometry: in the act of being stolen heavily *cooked* food is transformed into a more nutritive, gustable state. Stolen foods are outlaw foods, contaminated or *rotten* to the Mainstream, a delicacy in punk cuisine.

Downward Mobility: The *Rotten* Logic of Dumpster Diving

By what logic was food deadly the moment it entered a trash bag, or passed through the back door? Food that had been on the shelf hours prior. It was a naïve faith in the purity of store-bought food, and a staunch sureness of trash as poison. Almost funny.

—an anonymous punk (Anonymous 2001: 65)⁹

Each night American supermarkets and restaurants fill their dumpsters with food, and each night punks arrive to claim some of it. Unlike *raw* foods, dumpstered food tends to be commercialized, non-organic, and highly-processed. Baked goods, donuts, produce, vegetables, pizza, and an array of “junk” food are snatched up by punks, who might otherwise disdain such foods. Yet in the process of passing through a dumpster, such foods are cleansed or *rotted*, as it were, and made nutritious to the punk being.

Supermarkets and restaurants fill their dumpsters with edible foodstuffs. A host of foods become *rotten* in corporate-capitalist food production: food with an advanced expiration date, cosmetically damaged produce, food in dented packaging, yesterday's baked goods, and the like. Nearly every American town discards an abundance of food in dumpsters every night. As punks saw it, people were hungry in Seattle, in America, and around the world—it was nothing short of obscene that businesses were trashing good food:

The SuperValu on 18th and Nicolett is... amazing and infuriating at the same time. Amazing because there is ALWAYS, on any given day, nearly a ton (literally) of perfectly clean, fresh, and edible vegetable matter in their 'food only' dumpster; infuriating because WHY THE HELL IS THIS STUFF BEING THROWN AWAY AND NOT BEING USED TO FEED HUNGRY PEOPLE?!?!? ... It's crazy, and every day it's like this!! ... What insanity, that this stuff is sitting here going to waste, and we go on about starvation in other countries... we could feed and clothe the entire Third World on our waste alone!! People wonder why I fucking hate this country, this culture, this civilization... THAT's why... I keep digging, the wonderful travesty never ends (Resist 2003: 67).

Ironically, people are hassled by security guards, store employees, and police merely for taking things out of a dumpster. So, not only did the Mainstream waste food, it protected its garbage with armed guards. Comments one punk:

There is the odd paradox—the casualness with which they will throw something into the dumpster, and the lengths they will go to protect it once it's there. How an innocent and harmless act—dumpster diving—will be confronted by greedy shopkeepers, store managers, and employees with scathing words, rage, and violence (Anonymous 2001: 72).

Taken in tandem, the waste of food and the protection of waste were seen by punks as the avaricious gluttony of the American status quo.

Eating food from dumpsters is, for a generalizable American whole, repulsive. Food in a trashcan becomes spiritually and materially *polluted*, and it is put there in a *rotten* state. It goes beyond the pale of Whiteness to eat food from the trash (only untouchables, such as the homeless, eat from trash). So for those punks who were raised White and/or "middle class," dumpsters and dumpstered food serve to dirty their bodies, to help tarnish their affiliation with a White bourgeois power structure. In this sense, *the downward descent into a dumpster is literally an act of downward mobility*. Moreover, the very act of eating food deemed *rotten* is, in this sense, a forceful critique of the powers-that-be. On an ecologically strained planet home to two billion hungry people, punks see their reclamation of *rotten* food as a profoundly radical act.

Gastro-Politics in Punkland: Food and Punk Activism

Eat the state!
—anarchist saying¹⁰

For its five years of existence, the Black Cat Café was the kitchen of Seattle's punk scene. It was a decidedly anti-corporate environment, where Mainstream types were not always

welcomed, and where there was always room for young wayfarers. As for so many cultures, food practices in the punk subculture help to shape community, symbolize values, and foster group solidarity. The ‘Cat was a place where anarcho-punk dis-organizations could put up flyers, recruit members, and keep their limited dollars circulating in the scene. At the café, feelings of alienation from the Mainstream were converted into punk sentiments and channeled into anarchist practices.

A variety of activist groups had a symbiotic relationship to punk culture. One of the foremost was Food Not Bombs. Like other anarchist dis-organizations, Food Not Bombs can be set up by anyone—anyone willing to collect, prepare, and distribute free food to the homeless and the hungry, and anyone willing to endure the ire of the local authorities. The hostility of the Seattle City Council and Seattle Police toward Food Not Bombs was received at the ‘Cat as another sign of American “class warfare” and a coercive attempt to force even the homeless to turn to commodities for their very survival (see also Narotzky 1997: 114).

The militancy of the ruling class, punk-folks said, was revealed when Food Not Bombs was cited for giving meals to the poor. Despite (and because of)¹¹ the hassles from authorities, Food Not Bombs drew considerable volunteer hours from people who were affiliated with the Black Cat. Ketan mentioned Food Not Bombs as being correlated to why he had become a part of the punk scene:

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

Another member of the scene, Karma, said that the “sense of family” drew her to the ‘Cat. I asked her what else appealed. She replied:

I like the fact that it’s not run to make money. It’s run for people not profit. There’s always some cause happening, some flyer up about something to go to: Books to Prisoners or Food Not Bombs or the Art and Revolution thing.

There’s a lot of activists or activist-inclined people here. It seems that’s part of what’s happening here.

I think that has a lot to do with it—certainly not the majority of why people come here. I think the majority of why people come here is because is because there’s cheap food that’s damn good. But because the food is specifically vegan, and that on a level by itself is activism, a lot of activists are vegan so they end up coming here {laughs}. And that kind of spurs the whole activism-crowd thing. Because they’re all coming here, leaving

their flyers, more people are coming, they're seeing the flyers, 'oh yeah, look: this is going on.' Then [the 'Cat] is part of the whole activism scene too.

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

Conclusions

I wondered who the barbarians were...
Those operating the machine, enslaving the
people and bleeding the Earth dry...
[p]roducing things only to throw them away,
digging a hole only to fill it up again. Or
those who saw the absurdity of it all, and
chose to humbly wait in the shadows of that
machine and pick up the crumbs.

—Anonymous 2001: 74

Contemporary punks—largely anarchist, anti-racist, and feminist—use food as a site to make themselves, and to theorize and contest the status quo. Many Americans, and particularly self-described “White” Americans, experience eating as banal. Punks do not. As an integral part of their daily practice, punks politicize food. For punks, everyday American food choices are not only nutritionally deficient, they are filled with a commodified, homogenous culture, and are based in White-male colonialism over nature, animals, and people around the world. Punk cuisine is one story with which punks critique these dominant power-relations, one realm in which punks understand how power operates, and one substance with which to remake themselves outside of those relations.

From punk vantage points, modern American food is transformed to a cultural extreme—its origins in nature and labor are *cooked* away, leaving only a fetishized byproduct. Punk cuisine, then, aspires toward food that is free of brand names, preparation, pesticides, and exploited labor; toward food that is as *raw* as possible. At the level of punk poesis, *raw* is a metaphor for *wild*, one of the most important tropes in punk culture. Where Mainstream society is said to control, colonize, and homogenize foods and people, punks idealize freedom, autonomy, and diversity. On the one side, “civilization,” with its relentless transformation of nature, on the other side the savage punks.

[It's New Year's Eve in Minneapolis]... the rest of the “civilized” world is a mess of revelry, and here I am, alone, eating frozen grapes inside a dumpster, and ... Happy. Happy and free... Walking into downtown, looking up at the skyscrapers, watching all the oblivious people move in and out of bars and trendy upscale restaurants, I say a little prayer: “God, bring this rotten mess of civilization to the ground” (Resist 2003: 68).

Punk cuisine is a way to make the subculture's ideas knowable, ritualized, and edible; a way to favor the less mediated anarchist food over the heavily commodified capitalist product—the *raw* over the *cooked*. And punks discovered too that even the most heavily *cooked* foods can be transformed into food that feeds their souls: such foods can be thought of as *rotten*, which is to say stolen or dumpstered.

For five years, the Black Cat Café helped to bring punks together in a subcultural space where they critiqued modernity, capitalism, Whiteness, and Mainstream America. In their cuisine punks identify and challenge corporatization, sexism, greed, cruelty, and environmental destruction. They choose not to *participate* in everyday American cuisine, for they see the act of eating everyday American food as a complicit endorsement of White-male corporate power. Many punks are reared White and “middle class,” and learn to eat foods that are normal, expected, and seemingly non-ideological for this culture. But punks come to reject such foods, just as they reject the ethno-class positions they grew up with, for they believe that Mainstream American foods recapitulate a violent and unjust society. Everyday American food, with its labor and natural components *cooked* beyond recognition, is countered by what we might call the *raw* and *rotten* foods of punks, by foods that are ideally natural, home-grown, stolen or trashed, and uncommodified; foods which define punk cuisine and punks themselves.

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² Most of the punks appearing in this article were studied during the lifespan of the Black Cat Café in Seattle, where I observed and participated from 1993 to 1998. The café was owned and operated by people who might be called *punk* in their subcultural cohesion and in their anarchist philosophy, the inheritors of many subcultural knowledges and practices. Punks are themselves very diverse, and though these punks might be called anarcho-punks—so as to distinguish them from gutter punks, straight edge punks, and other sub-types—their ideologies are related and are, in many ways, representative of the punk subculture taken as a whole. Hence, like O’Hara (1999), I will simply refer to them as punks, even though they themselves sometimes prefer to go unnamed (Clark n.d.). Like all cuisines, the cuisine of punks is an abstraction and a set of rules not always followed. It is always changing, always being argued over by punks themselves, and always responding to new circumstances and ideologies.

³ Emphasis added. The CrimethInc. collective is a well-published, highly influential source of anarcho-punk theory and practice. For further information see CrimethInc.com and CrimethInc.net.

⁴ Though the ‘Cat had its encounters with health inspectors, the restaurant was never seriously in violation of health codes (once, for example, an inspector prohibited leaving rice in the rice cooker and the collective grudgingly had to buy a food warmer). Dishes, food, and hands were washed, and no customer ever reported suffering from food poisoning.

⁵ Around the globe, it is quite common to discover differential allocations of food according to a patriarchal rendition. Men, and sometimes boys, often receive larger amounts of food and have culinary choices catered to their taste. Indeed, a male comes of age, in working-class France at least, when he is able to help himself to large volumes of food (Bourdieu 1984). Often this is explained as owing to higher male caloric requirements (*ibid*), whether or not he actually expends more energy on the job: “it is the ideology of the male ‘breadwinner’, irrespective of what his real-material energy requirements are *in relation to* those of the other family members, that seems to give priority access to food—quality and quantity—to male adults” (Narotzky 1997: 136–7; see also Mintz 1985: 144–5 and Appadurai 1981).

⁶ The transition to a vegan menu at the ‘Cat marked a turning point for the collective. The original members had dropped out, and a younger, more punk membership had taken control. The transition was crucial because the café became a somewhat less tolerant, less compromising place—and more thoroughly punk in its clientele and feel.

⁷ With the notable exception of skilled *carnecerías* appearing in supermarkets vying for Mexican-American dollars, and also the exception of fish and shellfish, which are sometimes displayed whole. The trend of disguising the animal is also observable in Britain (Fiddes 1991: chapter 7; Mennell 1985: 304–16—both authors cite Norbert Elias’ work at these points in their books).

⁸ The “Spectacle” is a term taken from Guy Debord’s writings. The idea of the Spectacle describes a hegemony, which relies on consumerism and entertainment industries to keep the populace content. Here, Bey is arguing that the Spectacle is vulnerable to its own excesses, and must offer seemingly un-Spectacular commodities as well, such that it may profit both from its excesses and from revulsion to its excesses. For more punk commentary on stealing “natural foods,” see Anonymous (2001: 144–5, 237, 244, 250, 267–8...).

⁹ This 300 page autobiographical zine, is written by an anonymous anarcho-punk, and published by CrimethInc.

¹⁰ *Eat the State!* is an anarchist newspaper in Seattle, which distributes free copies around the city, and is also available online (www.eatthestate.org). The phrase “eat the state” is a play off of the earlier and better known “eat the rich.”

¹¹ Some punk-folk sought out confrontations with authorities, as a way of making visible class antagonisms, and as a way of galvanizing their punk identities.