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From Belfast with Love[1]: the women and female presenting punks of Northern Ireland and their 'subculture'.

Keywords: Northern Ireland; Straight edge; gender; 'scenes'; spaces

The experiences of straight edge women and female identifying punks in Northern Ireland is a noticeable gap in the current histories of Northern Irish and UK punk accounts. The 30 + years of civil war in Northern Ireland has resulted in a constricting dual lens – that of the Troubles and that of the experiences of male participants who adhere to particular performative aspects of punk. This chapter aims to address this by focusing on the experiences of women and female identifying straight edge punks[2] post the Belfast Agreement (1998). Focusing on their lifestyles and choices, it will argue that the creation, sustaining and loss of punk spaces was vital in ensuring that the strict boundaries enforced during the Troubles (physically and psychically) could continue to be dismantled. This will lead to a consideration of whether the punk community in Northern Ireland could be considered a subculture (Hebdige: 1979, Haenfler: 2014, and Williams: 2011) or if they are more accurately a post subculture (Bennett: 2011, Nwalozie: 2015) given the radical changes that the Belfast Agreement heralds.

Introduction

Northern Ireland, 'Norn Iron[3]' or 'our wee country[4]' is emerging, slowly, from a bloody, prolonged civil war that has cast a very long shadow over a country less than a hundred years old at the time of writing. Within the arena of popular culture, in particular sport and music, there has been found an appetite for unity, and a capacity for shared spaces and experiences between the traditionally divided sides. For example, when Northern Ireland qualified for the Euros 2016, a football / soccer tournament, there was fear amongst the French police that fans would fight and riot with each other rather than just support their country. Those fears were unfounded, the Northern Irish fans did not fight with each other, instead they sang, drank, sang some more and danced together in the streets. Following their eventual defeat, and the conclusion of the tournament, the Mayor of Paris, Anne Hildago, thanked the Northern Irish fans for the "exemplary behaviour, sportsmanship and singing" before awarding them with the Medal for the City (Electronic resource: BBC News)

This expectation of the French police, and the response of the Northern Irish fans speaks to two important elements within this chapter. First, Northern Ireland has come to be defined by its civil war, by the violence, terror and bloodshed to which its citizens where both subjected and contributed to. 20 years after the emergence of a peace process and we are still seen on the world stage as troubled and troubling, volatile and potentially violent. Second, throughout its history, music, singing and dancing has been a key part of Northern Irish identity and during the worst decades of the civil war, it was punk that united some people in a way that, then, was thought impossible.

> Ah yeah (laughs) the p-stops[5], their faces when we used to reveal the places we lived. We'd crossed the divides, we didn't care so it was such a geg[6] that they did. (Deborah, 2011)

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[1] "From Belfast with Love", Stalag 17, 1985, Warzone Tapes

[2] The phrase 'female identifying punk' was specifically and explicitly requested as a descriptor by two interviewees.

[3] Local pronunciation

[4] Local affectionate phrasing designed to indicate a previously unheralded unity

[5] A colloquial term for the supposedly random 'stop and search' that was conducted by the British army.

[6] A colloquial term meaning a laugh or a joke. In this instance Deborah is referencing the humour found in the reaction of the British Army soldiers who conducted the stops.

The community that sprang up around punk was small but it enabled a transcendence of violently divided lives and homes at least for a few hours a night. It was a vital lifeline for many punks. However, it has also become a straightjacket because too often when Northern Ireland is mentioned in punk memorials, overviews, exhibits and academic writing it is in relation to The Troubles, and usually from the perspective of men. (McLoone, 2004; O'Neil & Trelford, 2003) We have not been allowed to move forward from a civil war that was not of our generation's making, and many of us have been forced to witness our stories being side-lined in favour of men's.

This chapter seeks to redress this balance a little by focusing on the experiences and narratives of women and female identifying punks from Northern Ireland who identify as Straight Edge (sXe), with a particular emphasis on their lives post the Belfast agreement in 1998. This chapter will speak briefly to methodology before giving a little background into the Belfast agreement. From there it will outline sXe within Northern Ireland before focusing on how the dismantling of borders and creation of spaces forces a consideration of whether this community is a subculture, post-subculture or scene and why that designation matters in Northern Ireland.

Methodology

This chapter is based upon multiple in-depth interviews with 17 sXe women and 9 former sXe women in Northern Ireland conducted between 2012 and 2018 for a range of different projects. All of the women are between the ages of 25 and 55 with varying degrees of educational attainment and employment status. Some of the women identify as LGBTQAI+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer / Questioning, Asexual, Intersex and individuals who do not identify as cisgendered heterosexual but also not as designated in these letters), some as disabled but none as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour). Most of the women identify as working class, with one woman identifying as middle class and another as "formerly working class now unhappily middle-class" (Emma, 2015).

As part of ensuring that their stories are told in their way, interview quotes, while admittedly selected, are not edited. Pauses, self-corrections, word repetitions and sometimes body language are all intentionally included in interview quotes as are subcultural argot, Northern Irish idioms and profanity. Interviewees all chose to have their own name used to retain ownership and responsibility for their voices and stories. Anonymizing interviewees is the default position in qualitative work, but can be interpreted by the participants as paternalistic (Moore 2012) or result in underlying power structures being unchallenged or even unacknowledged (Baez 2002). Interviewees were offered a choice, and all selected using their own name on the basis that they wanted ownership, acknowledgement, responsibility and visibility. This is compatible with the empowering effect that can be created or recaptured through participant identification by choice noted by Giordano et al. (2007) and Grinyer (2002). The only instances in which I have over-ridden the desire to have their own name used in when they have revealed information in the quote that could identify them and place them at risk. In those quotes the name is withheld but no pseudonym is given out of respect. That particular interviewee will find their name attributed, as requested, to other quotes utilised from their interview.

Due to the very small nature of the sXe community in Northern Ireland, and their insistence on using their own names I have not provided any details such as geographical location or age that could identify the interviewees. Only their first name and the year they were interviewed are included next to their quotes.

The Belfast Agreement

Northern Ireland was created in 1921 when the British government, coming under pressure to allow Home Rule in Ireland, created a border around the 6 north eastern counties of Ireland and named it as Northern Ireland. These 6 counties remain under the control of Britain today.[7] It was a country that ebbed and flowed in relation to violence until the 1960s, when, inspired by the American civil rights movement, the global turn in handing back former colonised lands, and easier access to weapons, it erupted into civil war. Daily life became saturated with bombings, shootings, punishment beatings, army checkpoints, house raids and internment[8]. Officially over 3,700 people died from a country with a population of almost a million, thousands more were injured, and hundreds simply disappeared, most of their bodies have never been recovered.

The Belfast Agreement, signed on Good Friday in April 1998, is often seen as the marker for the cessation of the violence. It was a multi-party negotiated agreement that was put to a referendum in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. It became effective in December 1999. The agreement is often misunderstood by outsiders as a creator of peace, it was an agreement to begin the process of finding a lasting means to peace. Since it became effective until April 2018, 158 people have died in what are officially termed "security related deaths."[9] Belfast in particular, but Northern Ireland as a whole, remains a very divided space that is not easy to navigate but is slowly moving forward.

<u>sXe in Northern Ireland</u>
sXe began in 1981 when Ian MacKaye of the DC hardcore punk band Minor Threat penned the song "Straight Edge" which outlined his personal code of behaviours and attitudes of abstinence in relation to alcohol, drugs, tobacco and sex outside of committed or loving relationships. Unintended by him, it gave rise to a movement that has since become a worldwide one which is estimated to number in the tens of thousands (Haenfler, 2006: 186; Stewart, 2017: 36). Adherents to sXe self-identify, and largely self-govern with no specific figurehead. Commitment is made to 'the edge' as a once in a lifetime 'vow', breaking edge is irreparable but seldom will it result is ostracism – especially in Northern Ireland where the community is so small. It is not uncommon for adherents to mark their commitment or identity through the now universal symbol of large X's drawn on the hands in marker pens – or sometimes tattooed. Initially a mark to prevent the selling of alcohol to underage patrons, it has become a symbol of community and unity.

Although the basic tenets of sXe are simple and largely uncontested, the emergence of bands in the 90s that emphasised veganism, animal rights, and a stronger anti-consumerist stance have led to a continual interpretation and reinterpretation of what constitutes a 'drug' (often in relation to caffeine or sugar, sometimes pharmaceuticals), whether veganism is integral to sXe, and how to live out an anti-consumerist stance in a subculture that has never been explicitly anarchist or anti-materialist. (Kuhn, 2019:7)

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[7] There is a lot of debate over whether Ireland and Northern Ireland can be considered colonised lands, and today the Republic of Ireland as post-colonial, which I am not going to outline or engage with here for the sake of brevity and focus. Interested readers can seek out work by Declan Kiberd (2010), Timothy J. White (2010), Michael Hechter (1975) and Edward Said (1988), details in the bibliography.
[8] These were mass arrests and imprisonment – without a trial – sometimes for years of over 1,900 people suspected of paramilitary involvement. As part of their internment they were subjected to stress positions for hours, white noise, sleep deprivation, beatings, and the deprivation of food and drink. The EU Court of Human Rights later concluded these were inhumane but did not amount to torture. https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/othelem/organ/ai/2014-11-24_ai_news.html
[9] https://www.irishtimes.com/news/crime-and-law/post-conflict-northern-ireland-is-still-plagued-by-political-violence-1.3470229

Within the context of Northern Ireland, sXe was and remains the smallest sub-group within punk. It ranged from standard hardcore bands such as XXX through to youth crew bands like Circle Again and Breakfall through to vegan sXe bands such as Clean Conscience. Like many sXe bands, these bands were strongly influenced by the North American scenes and bands. For example, as a participant in the scene, I observed how Circle Again (1999 – 2003) was formed by Melanie after she saw a Sick of it All and Ensign show, recruiting John, Mark and Tadgh to play with her. Northern Ireland is a politically volatile country and so bands had to decide whether to take overt stances on political issues and identities within a context in which doing so could either bring the attention of paramilitary groups or reinforce already deeply felt divisions and scars. Although a broad generalisation, youth crew style bands typically choose to focus on unity and positivity and thus avoid overt political statements, whilst standard hardcore and vegan sXe bands tended to be very politically outspoken, with the latter being consciously and deliberately so.

> We knew being overt about our politics, even things like animal rights and hunt sabing[10], could bring a load of trouble our way. We weren't naïve so we weren't, but we didn't think that was reason enough to not do it, you know. What we did give a lot, like loads, of discussion to, was being overt with politics about here, especially like we were worried about it kinda causing or reminding people about a division that people wanted away from for a night, you know. It got to the point we were even thinking about would the spelling of our names cause bother? (Niamh, 2018)

> Post the good Friday agreement we did have to give very careful thought to being overtly political. We didn't come up the Lagan in a bubble, we know that it's a difficult process and people are being asked to make huge changes and all. At the end of the day though we decided that this was a really important opportunity to shape our wee country and if we got flack for saying we wanted or stood for gay rights, animal rights, freedom from the church then fuck it, it's worth it. [Pauses] It's worth it 'cause at least we're saying this is what we want our country to be and what we don't want it to be. [Sighs] Who knows what impact that has on people listening, especially kids. (Julie, 2017)

A key factor in their decision to make overtly political statements is access to punk specific spaces and proximity to peace walls. Originally erected through communities as a simple barrier in 1969, the peace walls became permanent structures that are at least 25 feet high concrete walls with additional wire fencing on top of that. In some gardens close to these walls, additional security grating is placed around and above as seen in the images below. Most of the walls are in Belfast, but there are also some in Derry / Londonderry, Portadown and Lurgan which are all significant interface areas. Some 10 miles of the walls were erected post the Belfast agreement in 1998.

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[10] Intentionally sabotaging a hunt to save the lives of animals. It is usually carried out by making noises to distract riders and dogs, using your body to block access to fox holes and badger dens, or picking up the animal being chased and running it to safety or holding it out of the reach of the dogs.

Such barriers, as they have become increasingly aesthetically enhanced, with trees and shrubs planted along them, have increased in their sense of permanence and place within the urban landscape and thus mind set. All of the interviewees grew up with these walls already a part of their geographical and psychological mind map, they knew nothing else. Individuals living in the areas closest to the walls were not prepared to make overt political statement in their bands, nor wear any indication (t shirts, badges, patches) or support for bands who were overtly political. Instead they wanted to ensure their band stood for positivity, for integration by osmosis and happenstance rather than making it a direct call to action.

> Well really what good will come of constantly shouting about it? None. The reality is what it is. People need to feel safe, need to feel secure. We wanted our shows to be places where that happened, where no-one felt on edge or worried that it was gonna kick off. Why remind them about the shite out the door, why not just have fun and let it be that. (Claire, 2017)

> Political statements will just bring a load of bother and pain to people. Walking around with things on you that draw attention to political views can get you killed, can hurt people unintentionally. We, um, none of us know what others are carrying you know, so why drag that out. It's better to just have it as a bit of fun, maybe that will be enough. (Siobhán, 2016)

The second important element in regards to overt political statements was access to punk specific spaces. There are very few of these in general around Northern Ireland, but there is a small number of spaces that are supportive of punk gigs. Those who lived near peace walls, especially in interface areas often would have struggled to access those punk spaces as they tend to be in the city centre of places like Belfast and Derry / Londonderry and those interface areas are gated and locked at night - originally by the army, now by the PSNI - usually by 8pm, sometimes as early as 6pm during riots or searches. Similarly those who came from areas further up the coastline or more rural locales would have struggled to access punk spaces on a regular basis due to costs and practicalities - public transport can leave a lot to be desired in many of these areas, and insurance rates for cars are significantly higher in Northern Ireland than the rest of the UK in general, not to forget the standard extra costs for younger drivers.

> We would get so excited travelling into Belfast for a gig, especially if we thought it would be a decent sized crowd. We never got the guts or the invite, (laughs) to play Belfast ourselves, it was beyond us really, the ultimate dream (laughs). How sad are we? Anyway, yeah great craic but we were always very aware of our 'culchie' status and that was really intimidating, as much as we laughed it off. Reading through so many memoirs now that everyone and his dog has their book coming out, I've been struck by how many people got politicised and active through gigs and places like Warzone. I often wonder nowadays would I have been more politically overt if we had been able to regularly go to places like that? I also wonder if I would have stayed sXe, or at least stuck with it longer if we could have gotten there more regular like. (Tóireasa, 2018)

Although this section has focused on some of the more unique markers of sXe within Northern Ireland, it is worth noting that in many regards sXe punks followed similar trajectories in terms of commitment and identification as outlined by Haenfler (2006), Stewart (2017) and Wood (2006). Most claimed edge during their mid to late teens, with a smaller amount in adulthood following significant struggles with addiction issues. They would typically dress in a hardcore punk style of t-shirt, hoodies, jeans or, during the 90s, combat trousers, rather than leather jackets, spikes and back patches. Although many wore the X on their hands, this became less common as they aged and was either dropped as an important marker or shifted to tattoos in less prominent places such as forearms and lower legs. Those who broke edge typically did so in their early 20's, often around the final years of university attendance or settling into a serious relationship, again this is a common trend that Haenfler describes as the "true till 21" maxim in the USA (2006: 150). Where Northern Ireland's sXe communities varies from the UK mainland and USA communities is that it has a significantly higher proportion of women and female presenting punks within it, and they have a higher rate of retaining their edge into adulthood. Although research into this is ongoing by the author, some early findings will be shared in the section below, which directly engages with the question of what descriptor should be used for the sXe community of Northern Ireland - are they a subculture or a post-subculture?

Subculture or post-subculture?

Given the contextual situation of Northern Ireland it may seem a pedantic thing to focus on the question of whether sXe punk is a subculture, post-subculture or scene. However, to do so is to ask

questions that reveal what life is like for women and female identifying punks post the Belfast agreement. It will also enable a better understanding of their unique experiences today. Finally, it honours the considered thought they have often put into their sXe positionality within their everyday lives and choices. The sXe punks of Northern Ireland have not had the same experiences of those in Manchester, Liverpool, Glasgow or London. They live under different laws and social contexts despite still being a part of the UK, likewise they often have very different experiences from sXe (or punk) men in Northern Ireland – thinking through whether they are part of a subculture, post-subculture or scene enables those differences to be teased out and fore-fronted.

This section is driven by the understanding that "[a] concept is only useful if it offers some way of describing and distinguishing social phenomena from [one] another." (Haenfler, 2013: 16) Subculture is often academically understood as notable by being marginalised by or actively resisting a more powerful, dominant society that is often more conventional in outlook, behaviours and experiences, yet to which the subculture still retains a relationship. (Hall & Jefferson, 2006: 7) This has typically been analysed through lenses such as class, gender, age, race and deviance, and indeed the eagle-eyed reader will have noted that all of those categories have been explicitly mentioned within this chapter thus far.

> sXe for me is about resisting the message of society that you need to get blocked or out of your fucking tree to have a good time.[11] It is also about resisting the idea that pain is to be avoided. We lived through some awful times as you know, and we have to come to terms with that. The guy that shot my da got released early as part of the agreement.[12] Now I've a choice to make, do I block that pain out by blocking everything out, or do I live with it in a way that lets me, [sighs, wipes eyes, sighs] I dunno, lets me. I don't know the right word but d'ya know what I mean? It happened, its real. Taking that on lets me work with people who have come from far worse circumstances and trauma. I don't think I could do that if I didn't resist the social message of drown out pain, drown out everything. (Name withheld, 2015)

This interviewee is positioning themselves through their sXe as subcultural to mainstream society in relation to both a drinking culture within a society that has an alcoholism rate of three times the rest of the UK (Alcohol Change, 2020). They are also linking such a subcultural stance as resistant to the reason they assume for such an approach to alcohol - the trauma and pain legacy of The Troubles. A number of interviewees commented in various ways on resisting the alcohol culture through a sXe identity. This fits with Haenfler's understanding of sXe as "[s]traddling the boundary between subculture and social movement." (2004: 787) An understanding predicated upon the "intention of sXe, versus simply being drug free, is both personal and social; members seek to improve their own lives *and* issue a strong cultural challenge." (2004: 787, emphasis in original)

Yet an argument could be made that within the context of Northern Ireland, sXe actually seems to reflect and support the dominant cultural rather than resist it. This leads to the question of whether it can legitimately be described as a subculture or not? Northern Ireland is strongly rooted in different Christian traditions, the Free Presbyterian, Anglican and Catholic being the most powerful. Each of these traditions are conservative, with support for anti-abortion legislation and the removal or withholding of LGBT rights being common points of dogmatic principles. In addition, celibacy until marriage and abstaining from alcohol and drugs are expected and normalised behaviours within those communities. Given the lack of knowledge or awareness of sXe in the UK more generally, and

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[11] Blocked means drunk, out of your tree means to be on drugs
[12] A controversial part of the Belfast agreement was the early release of paramilitary prisoners if they were sentenced prior to April 1998. They were released by July 2000. This included those convicted of murder, including mass bombings, if the paramilitary group they belonged to was under an agreed ceasefire at the time of the Belfast Agreement being signed.

Northern Ireland more specifically, it is not difficult to see why sXe punks were often viewed as something of a misnomer - instead of rebelling, they seemed to be conforming. The concern for a lot of these women was that other punks would assume they agreed with the beliefs of the traditional religious communities whose behaviours were somewhat aligned with their own. They often felt they walked a tightrope, especially as they aged and tended to dress differently.

> It's not like I can go dandering about with an essay pinned to me is it. Like, I can't wear a t-shirt that says 'yes I avoid alcohol, drugs and causal sex but not I'm not fucking DUP or anti-abortion'. That's just not realistic. But I can't really be surprised that people here think or assume it's just a religious thing, that's what they know those things to be associated with. It worries me though, do they also assume I am anti-abortion or homophobic or against women working or whatever? It's a real fear so it is. (Louise, 2017)

> I've recently started wearing the X's on my hands again, at 48 year old. It's a conscious choice because in conversations with family, especially extended family, I came to realise how much what I was doing looked to them like I was just being 'normal', well normal for here anyway. They think the punk thing was just a phase and hadn't realised that my actions remained very much a part of that. So the X's are my way of showing why I am doing what I am, although I did get asked by a wee girl the other day if they were stigmata so I might need to rethink that [laughs]. (Sarah, 2015)

> I stopped going to gigs about 5, 6 years ago. I started getting really anxious that I would be misunderstood there because I wasn't drinking and I have such a Protestant name. I was worried that people would think I was either an evangelical or in the Orange Order. I can hear how ridiculous that sounds saying it out loud, but it's true. I've became afraid of other punks and what they must assume about me. Within this context such assumptions, especially for women, are dangerous and realistically how many drunk punks are actually likely to think about it in the moment. (Victoria, 2018)

A subculture is often understood or defined through a lens of deviance from the dominant culture, yet these women and female identifying punks are expressing very real concerns - some for their life or wellbeing - that their participation in or commitment to sXe places them in danger because they are no longer seen as oppositional. This is not just limited to how mainstream society in Northern Ireland understands them, but also how the punk community writ large does. They are not feeling a part of a larger whole, or in some cases welcomed in the punk space. Some have responded through withdrawal, others by modifying their outward appearance, each wanting to remain active within punk but unable to do so on their own terms. This is not a new phenomenon, nor is it unique to Northern Ireland, Hall, Jefferson and Roberts note:

> The dominant culture of a complex society is never a homogeneous structure. It is layered, reflecting different interests within the dominant class containing different traces from the past as well as emergent elements in the present. Subordinate cultures will not always be in open conflict with it. They may, for long periods, coexist with it, negotiate the spaces and gaps in it. (2006: 6)

What these interviewees are demonstrating is that, for them, they have noticed that while their sXe identity marks them out as different for ideological and affiliate reasons from mainstream culture, the behaviours that arise from it co-exist within that mainstream milieu's expectations. Yet that very negotiation or co-existence puts them potentially at risk within what they feel should be their subculture. The interviewees are careful to note that this is because of a lack of interrogation regarding why they are following the behavioural code that they adhere to. The tendency of female

sXe punks in Northern Ireland to eschew visible markers such as prominent tattoos, the X swatch watch or sXe t-shirts combined with micro level, covert resistance has resulted in a number of the interviewees expressing discontent at being labelled (Becker, 1963) both by mainstream society and by other, particularly non-sXe, punks as 'outwith' punk itself.

Becker's labelling theory will be returned to below, first it is important to consider if the women would feel more included and comfortable if punk in Northern Ireland was understood as post-subculture. Much ink has been spilt in debating the merits of subculture and post-subculture (McRobbie, 1994; Greener & Hollands, 2006; Hebdige, 2012; Bennett, 1999, 2011) and I don't intend to reproduce that here. Both the camps for subculture and post-subculture have been rightly criticised for being at best slow to acknowledge, and at worst ignoring the issue of aging within groups like punks (Bennett, 2006), particularly in relation to women's experiences as they age (Way, 2019a, 2019b). Post-subculture theory argues that identity, including subcultural, has become "more reflexive, fluid and fragmented due to an increasing flow of cultural commodities, images, and texts through which more individualised identity projects and notions of self could be fashioned." (Bennett, 2011: 493) As such then a range of conceptual frameworks emerged – neo-tribe, lifestyles, and scene – with the latter of the three being the most commonly applied to punk. Neo-tribe was first named by Maffesoli (1996) and as an approach focuses on the role of taste, aesthetics and affectivity as primary motivators for collective involvement (Bennett, 1999; Malbon, 1999). Lifestyles derives from the work of Weber, but has developed significantly and focuses on consumer competence and consumption as the basis for the construction of identity (Chaney, 1996). Scene focuses on commonality (often musical) and relational to enable cohesion and collective identity (Straw, 1991; Khan-Harris, 2004).

Subculture theory, it was argued had become too fixed or static because of the rigidity of focus on class and community that fails to account for gender and contextual norms and experiences. As the women and female identifying punks in this chapter have demonstrated, they have experienced a world in which they are often excluded when punk is considered through the lens of subculture because the gender expectations of Northern Ireland is such as to render them less able to access punk spaces and less noticed in accounts that want the spectacular – the focus on the Troubles and the violence.

Post-subculture theory takes the view that subcultures, as understood through the models of Chicago School and Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, no longer exist or do not provide sufficient difference from the mainstream culture – this was the reason why some of the interviewees were struggling to find a foothold within the broader grouping of punk as noted above. Mass consumption, diffusion of cultures through globalisation, and the overall interconnectedness of people, places, and products across the world transformed the ways subcultures manifest in the identities of individuals (Bennett 2011; Nwalozie 2015: 10) making it increasingly difficult to differentiate between subculture and mainstream culture due to the commodification and commercialisation of subcultural artefacts and identity markers. Does this hold true for the interviewees?

> There is something to be said about punk when you can walk into Primark and buy a Ramones t-Shirt you know. There's a dilution to the style side of it when kids are walking around in a T-shirt they don't even know is for a fucking band. But punk, sXe, it was never really about the style or at least not just the style for me. That was only ever a small part, probably the least important part you know. (Julie, 2017)

Punk for me was about resistance, fun and community in a way that I couldn't get anywhere else. When I got into sXe it gave me a moral compass, a way I wanted to be in the world. That world has massively changed in the last 20 years, so much has happened here – good and bad. I've lost that connection to a small community that gathered around specific spaces, and hung out in each other bedrooms. Yes, I can talk to punks wherever I want now in less than two clicks online but it's not the same, something has changed. I'm not sure punk would mean the same to me now if I was a kid these days, what are we really resisting anymore when everything is online, instant and just shite. We haven't even protested Stormont being closed for fucking years[13] what was the fucking point of what we all went through if we are like this now? (Carolyn, 2019)

Two very different views from interviewees, one aligning themselves with the perception that style is not the singular factor in determining subcultural or post-subcultural affiliation whilst the other feels that something fundamental has been lost through globalisation. They are also highlighting an important feature of post-subcultures, the diffuse sense of being a part of a group despite geographical distance. Both are highlighting the significance of what their sXe identity gave them as people – orientation to the world, community and a set of behaviours that enabled them to live as they wanted to at least to some degree. So while it may seem that post-subculture is a term and approach that better fits with the experiences of women and female identifying punks who belong to the sXe milieu of Northern Ireland, it doesn't comfortably sit with what they are experiencing because they remain to varying extents side-lined. As interviewees have noted throughout this chapter, this marginalisation is done to them, it is not voluntarily undertaken and therefore it would behove us to consider how that happens by focusing briefly on labelling theory before drawing some conclusions.

Labelling theory

Interviewees spoke passionately about how they felt locked out of punk because they didn't fit within an expected construct of what a punk is.

"Girls are always the supporting cast, never the star. That's how I've always felt about how punk was written about, talked about, shown and to be perfectly honest, how it seems now when you go to a gig. D'ya know I've actually started to feel more involved and passionate about the pride rallies and the equal marriage rallies than I have about any punk show these days. It feels like at them I can make a difference, I can belong and be a part of something just by being me. It's like what it used to be like with punk. Sad like. (Deb, 2016)

I've had too many men, well boys, no both really push me out of the way, stand on my feet, shove me and outright laugh at me to feel comfortable going to gigs unless I'm with a man now. That's a fucking step backwards right there, but it's what it has to be. Go up [anonyomised] and it's just a massive circle jerk or testosterone fuelled shitfest because it can be. I had a kid, couldn't have been more than 14, come up the other day and say that I shouldn't be wearing the X's that only men could do that. Little turd. He waited until the person I was with had gone to the bathroom as well. Wee gobshite. (Emma, 2015)

Although a sense of not fitting in, not being welcomed has become quite prevalent amongst the interviewees a number of them directly attribute it to how punk is thought about, recorded and promoted. Not being able to fit into those norms by virtue of not presenting as masculine nor as

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[13] 2017 to 2020 due to policy disagreements following the Renewable Heat Incentive Scandal, and a major disagreement over the Irish Language Act.

youthful, and for some because of their sXe status they are labelled as deviant or as outsiders within a community they consider themselves to have helped create and shape. Becker, one of the originators of labelling theory, notes that:

> Possession of one deviant trait may have a generalized symbolic value, so that people automatically assume that its bearer possesses other undesirable traits allegedly associated with it. (1963: 33)

Meaning arises in social interaction through communication, using language and symbols such that if a group is continually discussed, analysed, portrayed in specific ways those markers come to have a meaning of insider / outsider status, belonging / not belonging and in the context of Northern Ireland that has significance in relation to safety and trust, as well as multiple generations of division and inequality. Thus when these sXe women and female identifying punks are repeatedly eliminated from accounts of punk in Northern Ireland, when they are made to feel like they must perform their sXe identity in specific ways – wearing the X long after they had abandoned it or only attending gigs with a man – they eventually come to internalise that they are somehow deviant to punk itself, to the very thing that once gave them a coherent and vital identity. Some interviewees had accepted that internalised message of being deviant to punk:

> I am very aware that when I wear the X's, which I don't do very often now, or when I have my arms uncovered and so my sXe tattoos are visible that I get started at a lot, people kinda nudge, point, whatever. I don't really care about that. [Pauses] Well, clearly I do as I just talked about it, I've noticed it enough that it bothers me. To be honest it makes me feel a bit like a freak but not in a good way you know. (Niamh, 2018)

However, a very small but extremely self-reflexive number of interviewees, such as Sammie, had turned that internal message of deviance on its head. They had internalised it but they saw it as a positive, as a reminder or why they had become sXe in the first place.

> I was struck early on how fucked up the whole thing of getting wasted to the point of being unable to function was. I don't mean ordinary people, I mean the punks. Can't remember how it happened now, but somehow I got hold of a copy of Minor Threat's Discography and the whole sXe thing just made so much sense to me. It was a way to push back against an entire culture that was basically just mainstream culture with better haircuts and clothes. Taking on edge got me through my twenties intact. I'm not edge now, by choice, but I do think that I am able to have a much healthier relationship with other people and with alcohol for having been edge. I also think it stops me seeing punk through romantic eyes or the romance of nostalgia. (Sammie, 2016)

This very much fits with what Haenfler notes about sXe, that it "retained the punk ethos of resisting mainstream culture while seeking to counter counterculture as well." (2004: 787) sXe in general, regardless of the location, does not fit easily within punk because it is a social movement that is predicated upon behaviours that are viewed as conforming to mainstream ideals (real or imagined). While their sXe identity holds different levels of salience for the interviewees, it is an all or nothing approach that, within the context of Northern Ireland, serves to isolate a very small, geographically splintered group from their own sense of belonging within punk more broadly.

Conclusion

sXe in Northern Ireland is a very tiny minority group within a small punk subculture or post-subculture. As the interviews used above have revealed, the behaviours of many sXe women and female identifying punks matches the gendered behavioural expectations in many of the working

class, religious communities of Northern Ireland. Thus, the sXe identity in some regards helps them to navigate a context in which equity does not yet exist, where political stability is being built but remains fragile. The sXe identity has given some of the interviewees an opportunity to confront realities within punk and wider Northern Irish society that they are deeply unhappy with, and to find ways to resist it. It has given them, in more recent years, the capacity to reach across to new sXe communities and thus experience what it might be like. However the globalising capacity of technology has also brought it starkly home to them the extent to which they are being written out of their own subculture because of a persistent preference for the narratives of men, especially men who were punks during The Troubles – something many of the interviewees yearn to move on from and build something new upon.

This chapter outlined the cultural context of Northern Ireland and the role of women more generally within it. From there it considered the specific experiences of women and female identifying punks who are sXe within that culture, revealing the significance of living near the peace walls and access to punk spaces on their willingness to make and continue to make political statements. Building upon that, the chapter considered what is revealed about their experiences when one analyses sXe in Northern Ireland through the lens of subculture or post-subculture, demonstrating that each enabled a different facet of their narrative to come to the fore. Finally, the chapter considered the relevance of applying labelling theory to what the women and female identifying punks are encountering, which highlighted the significance of exclusion in developing a passive, withdrawn set of behaviours for most interviewees and a capacity to utilise it to directly challenge punk itself for a very small number of interviewees.

"Commitment to a meaningful identity is fundamental to a variety of forms of participation." (Haenfler, 2011: 797) That participation is increasingly coming or being curtailed at the say so of the privileged few who are mostly white, working class men. Within Northern Ireland that is leading to a very narrow view on what and who punk is that is having dangerous ramifications for women and female identifying sXe punks.

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