

CONTESTED TERRITORY 5: INDIVIDUALISMS OF HOPE AND DESPAIR

The final section explores the connections between individual life stories, affect, complex character studies, and collectivity. Without losing sight of the broader social implications and political forces influencing any given actor, these pieces focus more on the uniqueness of specific punk personalities, including a couple of not-punks along the way. There is an implicit transnational dialogue taking place around the term “straightedge” between the interview segment with Ian MacKaye and Jess Reia’s autobiographical scene report. MacKaye is well known as the coiner of this phrase, once the title of a song by the band Minor Threat. It has since come to mean developing a more positive attitude, if at times converting into a puritanical stance, and has inspired many to resist punk’s otherwise self-destructive and nihilistic dimensions. Reia is a younger Brazilian punk and academic whose firsthand experience relates how straightedge became a crucial concept for a hardcore scene they are a member of in contemporary Brazil. Representing various modes of writing, there’s a basic polarity of positivity and negativity happening between Shane Greene’s chapter and the writing selections from Giovanni Oquendo. Rather than engage a historicism defined by identity or subcultural politics, Greene chooses instead to revel in the cosmic worlds and far out words of two pioneering rock figures in the United States, both of whom reject various labels, punk among them. Oquendo’s apparent Third Worldist punk solidarity, a sentiment he developed during the height of Colombia’s drug war, is in fact deeply entwined with a singular strain of radically pessimistic reasoning communicated through his poetry, manifesto, and caustic review of the classic Colombian film *Rodrigo D No Futuro*.

19 NOT YOUR PUNK SHANE GREENE

Dear East Village Eye: So far in your pages I have at different times learned that both Richard Hell and John Holmstrom invented punk, presumably also at different times. So I figured I might as well put my two cents’ worth in: I invented punk. Everybody knows that. But I stole it from Greg Shaw, who also invented power pop. And he stole it from Dave Marsh, who actually saw Question Mark and the Mysterians live once. But he stole it from John Sinclair. Who stole it from Rob Tyner. Who stole it from Iggy. Who stole it from Lou Reed. Who stole it from Gene Vincent. Who stole it from James Dean. Who stole it from Marlon Brando. Who stole it from Robert Mitchum. The look on his face in the photo when he got busted for grass. And he stole it from Pretty Boy Floyd. Who stole it from Harry Crosby. Who stole it from Teddy Roosevelt. Who stole it from Billy the Kid. Who stole it from Mike Fink. Who stole it from Stonewall Jackson. Who stole it from Napoleon. Who stole it from Voltaire. Who stole it from an anonymous wino whose pocket he once picked while the man was lying comatose in a Paris gutter, you writers know how it gets when you’re waiting on those royalty checks. The wino stole it from his mother, a toothless hag who once turned tricks till she got too old and ugly whereupon she became a seamstress except she wasn’t very good.

—Lester Bangs (1988)

Who was the first punk? Where does punk come from? What about her? What about me? Will the real punk please stand up and yell something into the microphone?

This line of rhetorical reasoning seems increasingly B-O-R-I-N-G. But these questions are incessant in the reconstructions of P-U-N-K H-I-S-T-O-R-Y.

I don’t know exactly why. Perhaps it’s because punks can’t live without some idealized purity supposed to exist beyond all contaminating ideologies, the search for the “real punk” a virtual inevitability. Just do it yourself, the punks say, the magical “it” shrouded in the deep mysteries of “Do what exactly?” There’s certainly a drive to assert narrative control over punk history like all history, the distinct political stakes in differing punk stories adding up to that never-ending meta story of who has the power to define this or that as the official or unofficial versions. Rarely does anyone let us in on the dirty secret of when precisely the unofficial becomes the official narrative—or vice versa.

At any rate, this rhetorical search for the true punk is implicit when not explicit in many sacred accounts, starting with those legendary tales of a world that existed before and a world that existed after the Sex Pistols (see Marcus 1989; Savage 2002). It structures the linear chronology deemed editorially necessary in *Please Kill Me*, an otherwise messy and self-selecting series of raw testimonies made into punk bible stories by Legs McNeil and Gillian McCain (2006). Most recently, in March 2019, the Epix channel released a four-part docuseries with the ambitious one-word title *Punk*—the one story to rule them all—and it does the same thing with more nauseating results. Cue Iggy Pop’s stringy hair slinging about in slow motion. Still skinny but also 70-some years old, he sits on the von Rankean couch of History to tell us punk as it really was. But if Iggy and the others in this retirement age set are still what punk *is*, anyone under 30 shall repent and turn to Stravinsky or Beyoncé for better inspiration.

The ongoing search to identify the first punk, the original punk, the true punk, the other true punk still hidden to history and in need of identification is omnipresent. You also find it in those accounts that disrupt the structural problems surrounding punk’s “there-once-were-some-crazy-white-boys” narrative, the dominant story that neither Epix nor Iggy Pop is likely to solve.

Vivien Goldman’s (2019) thirst for feminist vengeance in *Revenge of the She Punks* is also an assertion that women have been identifiably punk—yes, that’s right boys—from the start. Her reassertion of control over the punk chronology is clear in the book’s subtitle, “A feminist music history from Poly Styrene to Pussy Riot,” and then painstakingly reiterated with the long list of “she-punk” songs she covers from the 1970s to the present.

The through line of documentaries that address punk’s race erasures, or its North Atlantic conceit to never care about anything beyond the Anglo world, relies on this rhetorical strategy of redoing history the right way as well. *A Band Called Death* from 2013 identifies a small Black trio from early 1970s Detroit, reinserting them into the center of punk origin stories as a strategy to combat the long-term whitening of rock, which relegated rhythm and blues to the past and artificially segregated “White” and “Black” music in the 1960s (Hamilton 2016). Sadly, this is also why punk has so little soul.

Saicomania from 2011 tells the story of a mid-1960s Lima band, Los Saicos, these days marketed as “the first punk band in the world” (see Brooks 2013; Kelly 2017; Manrique 2016). Likely, Peruvian rock fans didn’t need a reminder of their own history. But to construct a more global allure for Los Saicos as the true punks—and from the “country of the Incas” of all places—it required a concerted campaign that began on the cusp of the twenty-first century. In 1999, a small Spanish label reissued their mid-1960s singles, marketing them as “wild teen punk from Peru.” Years of media attention, reunion

shows, and elderly punk celebrity for the two living members, Edwin Flores and Papi Castrillón, have followed.

So constant is this redoing of punk history—to get it right, to do the true punk justice—that it takes on parodic forms. My favorite is Violencia Rivas, that geriatric trans-caricature brought to life on Argentine television by comic Peter Capusotto in 2009 (see Moglia 2013). Always a cigarette and whiskey in hand, quick to spontaneous outbursts of violence against house pets and domestic furniture, odious of state bureaucrats and ever ready with vile words of maternal regret toward her offspring, Violencia recounts her role as mid-1960s precursor to punk with anti-love songs like “Métete tu cariño en el culo” (Stick your love up your ass). It’s just one of her anti-system anthems aimed at normie Argentine society, burning inside her rickety but still raging body.

In all the hoopla to redo history—most often for reals and not often enough just for laughs—there is something that reigns supreme on the part of those constructing the ever-multiplying narratives, an assumption that punks want or need to be *identified* as such. More broadly, this seems linked to an assumption that as social actors trapped in this unfair political matrix called History, we must all become *identifiable*. So it is with the commandments of identification in the age of identity, the first of which almost surely says: “Be sure to identify yourself lest you remain solely subject to the identification of others.”

This identity imperative is something I wonder about here in an intentionally indirect manner. Is identification fully necessary, or even preferable, in the face of other stated desires, namely, the request not to be reduced to any particular identity, subcultural, social, or otherwise. I shall proceed with this open-ended inquiry by writing two short stories, separate in some of their more dramatic turns but conjoined in this grander gesture of a politics toward non-identification.

In reality, I came here to tell you stories of some things I learned from Question Mark (“Que” for short) of the Mysterians and Ed Sanders of the Fugs, each of them having unwittingly convoked me into this meeting of non-identifying minds. The encounter sent me on long trips, metaphorical and real, psychic and somatic, the twists and turns more stimulating if left articulated in their own terms or at least my best attempt to render them for you, my reader.

One might find here a certain nostalgia for landscapes of the small-town Midwest, an American setting I know well. In truth, the voyage Que and Sanders sent me on proved intergalactic and psycho-circuitous, stretching across and ultimately blasting off beyond the many Américas. Texas, Mexico, Michigan, Chicago, and New York: these were all stops along the way. But they are the least interesting places Que and Sanders suggested I visit. Instead, they proposed I dip into ancient Greek pasts and project out toward

distant telepathic futures. Earth is a tiny insignificant island in their great vertiginous sea of cosmic locations. We'll soon be thick on the hooves of the wildebeest, sputtering out magical thought-rays, salivating over vast expanses of anal sex with the divine.

Before the journey begins, I might list some influential events that led me down these curious pathways:

1. I too was a sucker. I admit it. I too felt seduced by the impulse to identify, to engage those rhetorical questions of the first punks, the real punks, the true punks. I too felt guided by the great imperative to identify. In Que and Sanders, I found a pair of persons who will not be your punks at all. This proved a provocative finding given each of their potential claims, perhaps so far as being the punkest punks of all the punks there ever was. Nope.

2. I consulted with Que and Sanders, and the evidence of their passionate if minimal responses to my pestering queries will be exhibited herein. Seeking more, I began to build my peculiar vision of their non-identifying universes, in pursuit of close encounters with their various and sundry non-identifying selves. The journey that transpires crosses through multiple terrains of song, poetry, and prose and meanders through interview, telepathic, and bodily communications.

Question Mark and the Wildebeest of Our Future

Society makes stars. I don't. But your lives do have something to do with the stars in general.

—Question Mark

There once was a band named after an old sci-fi movie from Saginaw, Michigan called Question Mark and the Mysterians. In 1966 they had a #1 Billboard hit with the song "96 Tears." The founding members initially adopted the personae of X, Y, and Z, and the group was fronted by a singer known as Question Mark. All of them were Mexican American, the children of poor families that seasonally migrated between Texas and Michigan until their fathers took on permanent jobs in the Midwest's soon-to-die industrial sector. In 1971, the rock writer Dave Marsh declared the band a "landmark exposition of punk rock" in *Creem* magazine, captivated by Question Mark's uncanny connection with the crowd and his dance groove, which he thought surpassed even Mick Jagger and Iggy Pop (Marsh 1971: 42). Lester Bangs (1988) ran with the idea further in the following issues of *Creem*, making Question Mark and the Mysterians central to tales of a 1960s proto-punk rawness that got lost amid rock's psychedelia and virtuosity at the turn of the 1970s:

A moment of honesty and confession. The above text, now violently struck through to represent thoughts *never* to be pursued again, is how this story began. If one wants to remain in Question Mark's good graces, as I do, such thoughts are a dead end. They pertain to a universe that Que, with his past lives, future lives not yet lived, and interplanetary cosmic trajectory still in motion, does not inhabit. If I'm to be honest again, it is Question Mark that first inspired this chapter and his very cosmic existence that set this book project into motion (just ask my coeditors).

Loyal to the inspiration but discarding the initial thoughts, I invite you instead to enter Que's universe. Welcome. You are among the stars.

After I pissed Que off in an e-mail, using a different name that shall no longer be mentioned, Susie Martin, his longtime publicist, clarified to me another important detail, "The thing that most pisses him off is the term Mexican-American." To put a finer point on it, one might look to Que's swift comeback to the Chicago journalist that dared compare his band to Los Lobos on the banal grounds of shared ethnicity, "The media never say, 'This is an all-white band playing rock n roll,' do they?" (in Jones 1997).

No, they don't. Point taken. Paths diverge.

I take the one that leads toward Que's stated ontology rather than lurk in that awkwardly transcendent position of speaking some truth about an identity space in which he chooses, decisively, not to participate. One method to resist being the marked category is to protest being marked as such, contributing with every clarifying gesture of self-identification to the slow, painful process of unmarking without any real guarantees. Another is to go around marking the unmarked category, calling attention to its presumptively universal status in an unyielding war of identification and counter-identification.



Figure 19.1: Digital drawing of Question Mark.
Courtesy of Samik Greene.

Que found a third path, the path to become the Question Mark (see Figure 19.1).

In certain older photos, you can see Que rocking the “?” symbol, that mysterious mark of interrogation with uncertain linguistic origins, hung on a large chain around his neck. On stage, the other band members, who never realized their potential as X, Y, and Z, are often found wearing black T-shirts with a big orange “?” printed on the front. They, therefore, are constantly indexing the front man, his living flesh now the embodiment of this peculiarly punctuating sign, no longer as arbitrary as it was before Question Mark’s earthly existence. Nowadays, Que often sports the orange “?” on a dark-colored Stetson hat, beaming straight at you from the center of his forehead. True to the sign’s quizzical nature, he has been confounding everyday interviewers and wannabe rock researchers for as long as they have approached him. He is the mark waiting at the end of all their queries; his puzzles and stories always leave them with more questions.

By more mundane musical accounts, the song that made the Mysterians famous is “96 Tears,” a tune with a catchy organ hook, no conventional chorus, and a bridge that dives into the dark world of E minor. The first recorded rendition was captured in Bay City, Michigan, in 1966 with a simple two track setup in the house of Art Shields, thanks to the promo efforts of Lillie Gonzalez of the San Antonio–based label Pa-Go-Go records. As the single began to rise dramatically in popularity in the Billboard rankings, Cameo-Parkway, a Philadelphia label, swooped in to appropriate the song and, of course, make it into their exclusive intellectual property (Stoller 2006).

The low-fi spontaneity and crazy danceability of “96 Tears” launched Question Mark and the Mysterians into a global rock’n’roll spotlight, back in the days when Michigan radio stations mattered more and Flint’s water was still drinkable. The band profited very little in economic terms in that familiar story of artistic exuberance gets bled dry by corporate music vampires and their radio middle men (see Cavanaugh 2001). Transcending continents, languages, genres, and time, its youthfulness now slotted into the “oldies” category, the song has been covered by an extraordinary list of fellow artists. They spread across national borders and speak multiple tongues, everyone from Aretha Franklin (United States) and the Stranglers (United Kingdom) to Los Shains (Peru) and Los Peyotes (Argentina).

Yet, to all the crude renderings of the song’s meaning, rife with references to petty revenge, broken hearts, and adolescent fascination with certain sex positions—some by original members of the band (see McNeil 2017)—Que knows them as just the same ole pathetic morass of never-ending naivete. Oh, how we do so love to reduce the great cosmic universe to such ordinary human affairs. He does not wish to ruin the magic behind the moment and instead sees it as the excess left behind after others have had their say.

All Que will really say is that “96 Tears,” much like his band, “was created.” The passive

phrasing is significant, something he elaborates on at times. Take this curious exchange in 1990 with Dave Underwood of the Specs Howard School of Broadcasting. He sat goofy and gawk-eyed during a remarkable 50-minute ungrasping of Question Mark’s deep vibes:

Dave Underwood: What groups have influenced you?

Question Mark: None.

Dave Underwood: [expressing disbelief] None?

Question Mark: Like I said, Question Mark and the Mysterians was created. Then, out of the creation, I made it. I made the moves that was created for me to do.
(in Crown 2013)

I mean, c’mon Dave, that’s how cosmos operates. Cosmos is the agent. We are simply the vessels made into subjects after cosmos reveals some, and not usually all, of its greater intentions. At that point, and only at that point, there is this creative energy that bubbles up inside us, and if we’re paying attention, we might do something with it. Good luck getting something as blissful as the magical number 96, Dave! You too would be crying: “Too many teardrops for one heart to carry on.”

Then, there’s the other Dave, surnamed Marsh, who for several decades wrote rock bands in and out of popularity, first in *Creem* and then in *Rolling Stone* magazines, and in and out of canonicity via his committee spot at the Rock’n’Roll Hall of Fame. This was the same Dave that deployed the phrase “punk rock” after catching Question Mark and the Mysterians at a show in Detroit in 1971 (Marsh 1971). At the time, it was a rather loose idea relative to how fixed it became post the *PUNK* magazine in early 1976, post the Sex Pistols on the Bill Grundy show in late 1976, post the birth of “hardcore” at the turn of the 1980s, post Bikini Kill and Green Day in the 1990s, and so on. The punk moniker is more than just misnomer. According to Que, it’s a vile distortion of rock’n’roll reality. The point is not simply that Que is not punk. More curiously still, it is Que, the not-punk who also hates being identified as Mexican American, that instructs us on the incessant overestimation of what punk constantly identifies itself to be.

By the time someone was talking to Que directly about punk rock, rather than labeling him unawares, the cosmos had already revealed punk for what it also is, just another bottom line in the same culture industry that had reduced his cosmic messages into the petty crocodile dealings of who is cashing in on the next underground:

Question Mark: As far as why I formed my own record company, there was a guy that had sixty-four gold albums [...] he wanted to sign me up. He said, “Hey,

punk rock is coming in. New Wave is coming in. They need somebody out there to promote it big. And we can make you. We can make you the next King of Punk Music and New Wave.” See, they can make you—

Dave Underwood: [matter-of-factly] Did you take advantage of it?

Question Mark: No, no, lemme tell you this. But see I just listened [...] and see, all this, all these things they pour on you, like limousines and all that kind of stuff [...] and snowball you with. [...] And they say, “Yeah, we’re God. We can either make you or break you.” [...] So, they said, “Why don’t you cut your hair? Why don’t you put pins in your ears, in your nose?’ Remember that look?” And I said, “Hey, I don’t need that. I don’t go for any kind of gimmicks. I’m myself. My music speaks for itself.” Like I said, I have many stories I can tell you. When we played in New York in ’81, they put us in front of a New Wave Punk group. [...] The promoter came out and said, “Hey, the audience is really kind of freaked out with this [...]” Whatever kind of trend was happening. “You guys are gonna get slaughtered if you don’t do something with your look. Do something right now, with your hair, just make it. [...] Just, be weird!” And I said, “Hey, we go up there. I don’t have to have an image.” I said, “My music is what is true.”

Dave Underwood: So, did you get slaughtered?

Question Mark: No. They liked us.

(in Crown 2013)

To be Question Mark involves neither weirdness, nor pins through the nose, nor a ritual cutting of the hair. Still those New York punks felt the cosmos that created them that night. They too cried their 96 tears.

With no apparent desire to succumb to the false promise of the metropolitan center, much less factor himself into the punk pantheon of lower Manhattan, Que was content to return to mid-Michigan. Last I checked public records, he has a PO Box 96 listed in Clio, population 2509. Send him a friendly letter or ask for advice on how to navigate the choppy waters of overidentification.

Like with his signature song, Que doesn’t reveal all the details of his past lives. Honestly who could? The cloudiness one encounters in trespassing life and death and life again, as a means to maneuver the vast expanse, is substantial. Here and there Que does reveal hints about our shared future, traces of a future human fate delivered to him by an anonymous and gender-neutral “they” that communicates with him from the beyond:

Question Mark: People from the future. I get into all these things. Cuz ya know, I’ve talked about them and things like that. Telepathically, they’ve been talking throughout my whole life, ya know, about my career and all. Because I was all the time getting these thoughts and I knew they weren’t my thoughts. For a while, I thought they were God, ya know, speaking to me. But they introduced themselves last year and they said, “Remember this thought, remember that thought.” And I said, “Yeah.” And they said, “Well, that was us talking to you.” They told me so many things. They told me so many things about the future. Even when I’m on stage, they’re telepathically communicating with me. And I have to like, “Stop it! I’m doing a show! Stop! I don’t wanna hear it no more.” Like, I wanna talk to the Pope, the President, scientists. They don’t tell me what things are gonna happen. But they’ve been telling me about how the racial thing is gonna be resolved, things like that. How man can resolve all its problems.

Katy Winn: How? Do you—

Question Mark: The wildebeest.

Katy Winn: [expressing curiosity] The wildebeest—

Question Mark: Right.

Katy Winn: Ok, would you be able to elaborate on that a little bit?

Question Mark: Like I said, we can talk forever on this kind of subject.

Katy Winn: I love it!

Question Mark: But the thing is with the wildebeest. And they were doing this. Telepathically, they said, “Start looking at Discovery.” So, I start looking at Discovery. Then, when they introduced themselves, they said, “Did you ever wonder about why you were looking at the wildebeest? And why you’re fascinated by it?” They let me talk to them, telepathically. I said, “Yeah, mm hmm, ok.” And they said, “Ok, now we’re gonna explain it to you.” He says, “Because, man, they can solve all their problems. But first they have to solve why they are letting the wildebeest get out of hand.” Now, you never thought of it. Have you seen the wildebeest on TV?

Katy Winn: No, I haven’t.

Question Mark: Ok, on Discovery, look at it next time they’re on there. But anyways, there’s over 1 million wildebeest. But, actually, there’s 4 million because

they have four hooves. So, you see, people don't look at it that way. That was their example. But they gave me many other examples of how to let mankind know how to resolve their problems.

Katy Winn: Do you think everybody can listen to those voices?

Question Mark: No. But they will be because they're tuning into me and I'm tuning into you guys now. So, now, see, when the time's ready—

Katy Winn: [with great affect] Oh, Question Mark!

Question Mark: Like I said, we're gonna be closing and tonight all we're gonna do right now is rock'n'roll.

Katy Winn: [speaking to the camera] Rock'n'roll! Oh, Question Mark, you rock! You're fantastic. And, oh my god, I really hope that you really caught on to this whole wildebeest situation because we really could learn something from Question Mark.

(in Kramer 2016)

You see, the two Daves don't get Que's groove but Katy Winn does, evidenced during her interview with him in 1998 during a show the Mysterians did at Coney Island.

The greatest of the great migraters; this seemingly tame mammal but also the most literal of the wild beasts; devil-faced and cursed with the four hooves that make the one the many; this black or blue *Connochaetes* forced to fend off the predations of the spotted *Acinonyx* and scaly *Crocodylus*: the wildebeest is always waiting on the rains and dreaming of a grass that somewhere is slightly greener.

All of these wildly bestial efforts of one species get expended in order to do what exactly?

To move precariously forward.

To follow blindly the leader of the pack.

To rush down the steep river bank of history.

To pitch, jump, squirm, dodge, and swim frantically across the treacherous waters of cold panic and impermanent pleasure.

To cover vast expanses of space and wander through time.

And why?

To return to the beginning and do it all over again.

In my own great and circular seeking, I aspire to more modest things. All I ever wanted was not to become just another Dave.

Punk is of no consequence, one's identity neither here nor there, so long as humanity keeps running around in circles, this wildebeest situation clearly out of control. Then, just as swiftly as the wildebeest descends the river bank, we move to another story, this one too a history of some other hapless mammals.

Ed Sanders and the Sexual Hieroglyphics of Redneck Sentimentality

No set of mammals in '68
yet had the strength,
the time, the grit
the genius, the vision
to open the door of America
to the structure of sharing.

—Ed Sanders (1997)

On December 3, 2018, I got up my gumption and just gave Ed Sanders a call. A writer of poetry, a walker of peace, a publisher familiar with construction paper, a soothsayer of sativa, an Egyptologist of the everyday: Sanders also founded a 1960s rock folk psychobabble exercise known as the Fugs. I located a phone number on the not-so-sleek-looking webpage of the *Woodstock Journal* that Sanders has edited from said upstate location since the 1990s. The phone rang and no human answered, only an old-school answering machine. Familiar with said technology, I left a message. "Hello, bla bla bla Shane Greene bla bla bla Indiana University bla bla bla book about punk."

Two days later I received an e-mail from Sanders. The word "call" was in the subject line. There was no "Dear Shane" and no sign-off. Verbatim it read:

You may have called my home number the other day about "Punk."
You may be referring to an interview from early 1970, about my album,
Sanders Truckstop
in which I seem to have been the first one to use the phrase, "punk rock."
But that's it.
I did record a song, "Street Punk" in late 1969.
But that's it.

That was it. I haven't heard from Sanders since. The spacing, punctuation, and repetition all seemed quite deliberate compared to your average e-mail. I, therefore, unilaterally declare this not to be a response at all. I think of it as a slightly grumpy poem I call "Call" written to me by one Ed Sanders.

Despite the documentable claim to being the very coiner of the phrase “punk rock”—all when the term “punk” still carried more connotations with petty street criminal, butt of someone’s joke, male prostitute, or prison bitch than it did with music or art—Sanders shows no investment whatsoever in being a punk rocker. In his 2011 memoir, he remarks satirically on said coinage, “No one sent a check for coming up with the term” (Sanders 2011: 404). He therefore shares an important sentiment with Question Mark, this notion that punk was just another stupid sellout waiting to happen. Punk suckers—the whole lot of them.

Following the 1969 breakup of the Fugs, Sanders released a solo album that same year. *Sanders Truckstop* was distinct from the Fugs’ avant-gardist sonic psychedelia, often laden with countercultural self-caricature. The cover shows Sanders in dusty cowboy boots standing in front of a nondescript roadside diner and trying to keep the sun out of his eyes. When asked to describe his first solo release by a *Chicago Tribune* writer in 1970, Sanders called it “punk rock—redneck sentimentality—my own past updated to present reality” (in Baker 1970: 4). If it were me, I would describe the record as bitter invective against rural and reactionary America, delivered ironically through some rather pleasing country sounds and a hilarious personification of hillbilly politics. The album’s central character is “Johnny Piss Off,” a persona Sanders began to construct while still with the Fugs and then translated into sardonic lyricism and camp voicing on *Truckstop*. Take, for example, “The Iliad” (1969):

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Johnny Piss Off Credo
 I, Jonathon Abner Tobias Piss Off
 In the presence of the universal God of Salvation
 Do solemnly affirm that I’ve been chosen to beat up queers
 I further affirm that although I’m a decent, God-fearing man with family and property
 I wanna kill, rape, ravage, plunder, pillage, stomp, devour, destroy, hack, smash,
 splash, splish and bash
 All queers, commies, sheenies, hallies, and hunkies
 All greaseballs, mockies, pollacks, lepers, and litbacks
 All pohunks, eggheads, fudge sickles, and high slants
 All poets, frogs, migs, queers, peace creeps, Cajuns, dwarfs, dipshits, and teenage
 loose women
 In the name of Jesus Christ, this I do affirm.

Given his own providence, Sanders possesses more rights than some to engage in rabid caricature of the intransigent impulses lurking in US provinces. He was born and raised in

Missouri football country only to migrate to New York’s lower east side as a young college student infatuated with Ginsberg and, eventually, the ancient Greeks. His relocation to “The City” (that deeply conceited nickname for New York) came just in time for a process of enrapture by 1960s revolutionary proposals, hallucinogenic mind expansion, anti-war walks, civil rights struggles, free love, and rock’n’roll.

Before forming the Fugs with Tuli Kupferberg in late 1964, Sanders had become a key figure in the so-called mimeo revolution. It was one of those Benjaminian exercises in appropriating any available means of mechanical reproduction in order to turn it to one’s own political-cum-aesthetic ends. The specific “it” in this particular DIY approach was focused on artisanal literary production, part of a motley plan to pervert the horrible pretention of mainstream literary culture, all those east coast elites that (even to this day!) publish in the *Atlantic*, the *New Yorker*, and other boring-as-all-hell literary rags.

In 1962, Sanders founded *Fuck You/A Magazine of the Arts* and, over the next three years, released thirteen issues of what is best described as poetic porno. This then fed into the founding of an anarchist bookstore and countercultural space known as Peace Eye, located on the lower east side from 1965 to 1970. Various maverick expressivists flowed in and out of the physical and figurative spaces Sanders facilitated, committing dirty thoughts to paper, film, and tape: William Burroughs, Spain Rodríguez, Diane di Prima, Jean Morton, Allen Ginsberg, Andy Warhol, Robert Crumb, and so on and so forth.

The venue, the mimeos, and the architect behind them became the object of police attention at various points over the decade. Sanders’s memoir tells of arrest on pornography charges, police raids on Peace Eye, an open FBI file on the Fugs, and other adventures with the emerging US police state as the 1960s grew hotter and the repression quicker (Sanders 2011). Sanders had openly communist sympathies and direct ties to the Yippies, and was one of the concert organizers for the 1968 “Chicago Festival of Life.” The event was timed with the Democratic National Convention in August. It was meant to consist of live rock bands like the MCS, smoking weed and chanting “ohms” in unison with Allen Ginsberg, having sex in the park, and a bit of political theater organized around “Pigassus,” the real live pig the Yippies offered up as candidate for president.

Not only did Richard Nixon and the Republicans go on to take the election and seal America’s notorious fate. History effectively repackaged the outcome of this “Festival of Life” as the “DNC riots,” the phrasing meant to suggest there was a greater libidinous desire for aggression on the part of long-haired, baggy-clothed, pot-smoking protestors than, say, the Chicago police and National Guard who descended on them in Lincoln Park and downtown Chicago with orders to dispense tear gas, smash heads, reduce hippies to rubble, and arrest the out-of-state organizers.

Just a few days after this Chicago festival of repression, and in one of the more bizarre US media events of the second half of the twentieth century, Sanders appeared on William F. Buckley Jr.'s *Firing Line*. Buckley stated the topic for the day as “the hippies, an understanding of whom we must, I guess, acquire or die painfully” (in Sanders 2011: 335). He declared it in that nauseatingly pedantic tone that only he had perfected. Sanders was there as part of a three-person panel, seated beside the visibly wasted and almost Nazi convert, Jack Kerouac, and a nerdy-looking professor named Lewis Jeblonksy, the invited “expert” on the hippie generation. As academics are wont to do, Jeblonksy did a lot of explaining. Sanders mostly played it cool, perhaps befuddled by sharing a stage with this once radical Beat writer who had arrived to demonstrate he was just another belligerent, near-death alcoholic. Kerouac interrupted time to time with obnoxious incoherencies and direct insults that no doubt sounded like profundities inside his own spinning head.

The opening remarks of Buckley, the conservative commentator eager to identify Sanders as the representative hippie he had allowed on his national platform, are worth quotation:

Buckley: Mr. Ed Sanders is a musician, a poet and a polemicist. He is one of The Fugs, a widely patronized combo. He has published four books of poetry and has vigorously preached pacifism for a number of years. I should like to begin by asking Mr. Sanders whether we have serious terminological problems. For instance, are you a hippie Mr. Sanders? And, if not, wherein not?

Sanders: Well, I'm not exactly a hippie. I have certain sentiments toward that, quote, hippie movement, unquote. I would say that I differ from hippies in that I would have a more radical political solution to the problems of this part of the century. And I have my roots more strongly in, say, the classical tradition and in poetry and literature rather than in dope and street sex.

Kerouac: [breaking in] And you published that magazine called what?

Sanders: Called *Gutter Expletive / A Magazine of the Arts*.

[Round of laughter from the audience]

(Sanders 2011: 335–36)

Not only is Sanders not your punk. He was also not Buckley's hippie. By any account of his poetry, Sanders was definitely into dope and street sex even if his literary references make constant gestures to the ancient world. In fact, this seems to be the point. Sanders draws

on an extraordinary range of sources, his Midwestern upbringing, a training in classics and linguistics at NYU, a fetish for hand-drawn hieroglyphics, active engagement in the peace movement, and that great utopian desire for a sexuality free from all repression.

His poems, like the hand-drawn illustrations that infuse the lines, are at times unmistakably phallic, a penis point of view eclipsing his otherwise more radical gesture to place a liberating pursuit of sexual pleasure into an uncanny dialogue with the broken promises of America. The sexualized hieroglyphics he inserts directly into the publications pornographize further an otherwise traditional presentation of the Poem on the Page. Recurrent illustrations include: the peace sign, the cock that speweth forth, disembodied feet, birds looking left, boat and paddle, buttocks poised to offer entry, sun that shines radiant, the Ouroboros, and other serpentine figurines.

In the first issue of *Fuck You/A Magazine of the Arts*, one finds a series titled “Soft Man” and in the poem “Soft Man IIII” the following passage:

The brain is a cock-phantom
 & the Machine puts on smear campaign
 gainst cock
 & wins the brain in a business Hustle;
 No erection needed when
 You fuck the mish system,
 Use wad technique;
 Unintelligible gibberish? Use your cock, motherfucker!
 Slash control grooves & the business Hustle.

(Sanders 1962)

The powerful machine that vomits propaganda, the traps that keep us caught up in the business hustle, the exclusive offers of minimal stimulation for the masses and maximal accumulation for the bosses—this is America. In his retrospective long-form poem to the upheaval of 1968, Sanders reveals the precise moment when the promise of America was revealed for the dirty backroom deal of non-sharing that it is. It was all laid bare right there on the ferocious streets of Chicago:

Barricades were built in Lincoln Park
 to defend the right to sleep there
 at 12:30 AM the police
 clubbed and attacked the barricades
 Jean Genet was in the park!
 He had no visa

and had sneaked in from Canada
 Allen Ginsberg was acting as
 his interpreter
 Genet had an assignment for
Esquire Magazine (along with Ginsberg,
 William Burroughs and Terry Southern)
 to cover the convention.
 All four had passes to attend the convention
 “Not if it means violence”
 Ginsberg said
 when someone asked if he
 intended to remain in the park
 It was just about time for
 the invasion of the fuzz
 Tonight they marched behind
 a street sweeper truck whose
 water nozzles had been
 converted to spray tear gas
 (These ghastly police state devices
 maybe gifts from Garden Plot or the CIA Chaos program?)
 To me this was the last mote of proof
 in 1968
 that the Nation was lost.
 (Sanders 1997: 189)

The sensory image of a militarized water nozzle orgasming its tear-inducing vapors on a protesting citizenry! This is such the phallic moment, as Chicago’s “Festival of Life” converted into just another unbeautiful spectacle of state brutality. Right there on that particular night of Monday, August 26, 1968, America revealed its truer self:

As slanderous machination.
 As bottom line manhandle.
 A missionary-industrial complex!
 A vast assembly for the ritual acts of non-sharing.
 That great skyline of carnal suppression, money shot of cracked heads on the horizon!

Before Sanders’s depressing 1968 epiphany, he had published a small poetry booklet titled

Fuck God in the Ass to promote “pornography through the concept of the street-frig,” as it says on the back cover (Sanders 1967). I held an original copy in my hands thanks to the archival efforts of Indiana University’s Kinsey Institute, where in the year 2019 advance appointments must be made, secure elevators ridden, IDs presented, and direct oversight endured in order to sit at a wooden table in full view of a librarian and read a few lines of dirty poetry on pink construction paper.

In this most controlling of the many other controlled spaces of academe, I read, I interpreted, and I wondered about the holiness of ass sex. It seemed like a crucial counterpoint to many things, even Sanders’s own tendency to imagine sexual release from political control a little too often from the perspective of hard cock. In the poem “Hymn to the Existential Hole,” it is the Hole that becomes the everything: “the Zero,” “the Zeus,” “the source,” “religious chasm,” “fiery cosmic Hole,” “the Calm Eye,” “the Created One,” “Truant Finality!,” and “whether asshole, mouth, or cunt” (Sanders 1967: 5–8).

Yet, we might admit there is something special about the Hole in the Ass. It is the one Hole we all share and the Hole least allowed to actively express its desire. Further, to want it in this Hole is also to relinquish one’s potential or real status as the Man. The Ass Hole is both a universal and a particular agent, an underlying cosmic force with the political voice that blasts through the Man’s structures of repressive control. In Sanders’s formulation, the Hole is a “lacuna demanding impletion” (Sanders 1967: 6). Its ostensible passivity, its apparent waiting, its supposed subjection to another’s will—these are the products of the Man’s political illusions.

The Ass Hole’s existential demands are potent enough to convince us of a final humility of the phallus:

I am a man puked out of
 youth by the process of change,
 frail as a frog dick,
 fearful of violence, wizened
 in knowledge, a flaccid ectomorph
 sliding into fat, unkempt, scorned of the law,
 penis shriveled up in fear of getting snuffed.

(Sanders 1967: 5)

By the poem’s conclusion, the Ass Hole that is also existential agent expresses delight in “All Misogynists Gobbled Forever” and unfolds into the figure of the Ouroboros (Sanders 1967: 8). Drawn onto the bottom of the page, the serpentine symbol turns on itself not in erection but in a circular introspection. It symbolizes the timeless

encompassment into a constant push and pull, giving and receiving, inflating and deflating, as the universal Hole acts right there from within its cosmic center.

In short, this particular poem might be read as a follow-up question to the title of Sanders's little booklet of pornographic poems to the divine. What if God likes it up the ass? The intent to hurl degradations, to dethrone the On High, to use the heightened poetic idiom only to suggest that God might become our punk, disappears the precise moment God arches his back and exclaims, "Yeah ... give it to me baby." In the giving and taking of God's Ass Hole, this structure of sharing in the filth in order to redistribute the possible freedoms, therein lies the meaning of the Ouroboros and its active Hole at the center of it all. The phallus is a pitiful little trophy by comparison.

This leads us back round to Sanders amid his post-1968 depressive American moment. By 1969, the Fugs were gone, Nixon was in office, Operation Condor was in motion, Vietnam was full-on quagmire, and Sanders was still waxing lyrical. The false promises of America made plain, Sanders began to compose a series of solo songs, perhaps a better means to communicate some lonely sentiments felt as America shattered into broken pieces. In a short demo track titled "Street Punk," a little acoustic ditty in E major and left unreleased until 2008, Sanders explored how tired he had become:

I left the Midwest to journey to the city
 To study, read and write and seek my peace
 And after 10 years of mimeographing
 10 years of peace walking
 10 years of visions of rock
 I'm just a tired lonesome street punk
 I'm just a tired lonesome punk
 I sought salvation in poetry
 I sought salvation in tender body
 I sought salvation in Egyptology
 I'm just a tired lonesome street punk
 I'm just a tired lonesome punk
 I never thought I'd wear again a football helmet
 As the cannisters of gas explode like fireflies in the mist
 And I watched the slippery wet sponges full of psilocybin bounce off the barricades
 I'm just a tired lonesome street punk
 I'm just a tired lonesome punk.

(The Fugs 2008)

There are of course many Américas, too many to name. But there is only one America that exists to make you into its punk, obliquely forcing you to buy into its business hustles amid the great marvel of penetrations unpleasurable and radical non-sharing.

If I end with Sanders's 1969 solo song in this here America of 2019, it's because I too wonder where we might locate more of his peculiar brand of redneck sentimentality. I'm not suggesting America needs more rednecks necessarily. But if there are rednecks, let's have them be rednecks with feelings.

Not Your Punk

Whatever else you do, friendly reader, I urge you to resist the sudden urge I felt when lurching toward the conclusion of this journey. There is enormous desire to land on an ironic ending, to flirt with the racy idea that, in their joint acts of refusal to be identified, Que and Sanders might just be the truest punks of all the true punks around. How does one resist the quiet compulsion to declare them the first punks to know that the label punk itself—much like the imperative to identify—is also worth rejection?

I conclude with nothing so seductive, nothing so sarcastic. All I found in the stories of Question Mark and Ed Sanders are the wildebeest of our future, this false promise called America, and the great existential expanse of an Ass Hole that desires. This desire not to be your punk.

Perhaps the more stimulating question of History is not who you are. Less still who they made you or what hustle you bought into? Maybe the better question is: Who are you not?

That's it.

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