

Robert A. Winkler

*Generation Reagan Youth*

Representing and Resisting White Neoliberal Forms of Life  
in the U.S. Hardcore Punk Scene (1979-1999)

Ansgar Nünning, Vera Nünning, Norbert Finzsch (Hg.)

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“This is my first book, and there is a temptation to thank everybody I’ve ever known.”  
Fellow first-time author in her acknowledgements

Writing a dissertation is like being in the mosh pit at a hardcore punk show – that liminal space where bodies meet and time stands still, where Heideggerian worlds collapse only to arise again the next moment. In the pit, you start out enthusiastically and go into the pogo to slam dance as if there was no tomorrow. At some point, you get tired and exhausted and you have to go to the back because you are no longer that young. You stand there and ask yourself “What am I doing here?” – but then, towards the end, you throw yourself into the pit again, you give everything you have, you transcend yourself. *You become it.*

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Salzburg, March 2021





FOR DENIZ



Still we sing with our heroes, 33 rounds per minute  
We're never going home until the sun says we're finished  
I'll love you forever if I ever love at all  
Wild hearts, blue jeans & white t-shirts  
With wild hearts, blue jeans & white t-shirts

The Gaslight Anthem, "Blue Jeans & White T-shirts"

Wo fing es an und wann? / Was hat Dich irritiert? / Was hat Dich bloss so ruiniert? [...] Wo  
fing es an? / Was ist passiert? / Hast Du denn niemals richtig rebelliert? / Kannst Du nicht  
richtig laufen? / Oder was lief schief? / Und sitzt die Wunde tief in Deinem Innern? / Kannst  
Du Dich nicht erinnern? / Bist Du nicht immer noch, Gott weiß wie, privilegiert?

Die Sterne, "Was hat dich bloß so ruiniert?"

Wie wenig gehört zum Glücke! Der Ton eines Dudelsacks. – Ohne Musik wäre das Leben ein  
Irrthum. [...] Damit es Kunst giebt, damit es irgend ein ästhetisches Thun und Schauen giebt,  
dazu ist eine physiologische Vorbedingung unumgänglich: der Rausch. Der Rausch muss erst  
die Erregbarkeit der ganzen Maschine gesteigert haben: eher kommt es zu keiner Kunst. Alle  
noch so verschieden bedingten Arten des Rausches haben dazu die Kraft: [...] Ingleichen der  
Rausch, der im Gefolge aller grossen Begierden, aller starken Affekte kommt[.]

Friedrich Nietzsche,  
*Götzen-Dämmerung oder Wie man mit dem Hammer philosophirt*

We all grow and learn in our lives. And I've learned that all kinds of people can get AIDS –  
even children. But it's the disease that's frightening, not the people who have it. You can't catch  
AIDS from hugging someone. I'm not asking you to send money, I'm asking for something  
more important, your understanding. Maybe it's time, we all learn something new.

Ronald Reagan, *Pediatric AIDS Foundation TV Add*



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 The Haunting and Haunted History of Hardcore

The past is never dead. It's not even past.  
William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*

On October 22, 2016, the hardcore punk band Racetractor had their comeback performance at the Cobra Lounge in Chicago.<sup>1</sup> In the middle of the set, singer Mani Mostofi addressed the audience regarding his take on the nature of hardcore punk:

Punk rock has never been a white-owned thing, but it's always been a white majority thing. And we have to admit that the demographics in this room – angry white men – looks a lot like a fucking Trump rally. So, what makes you fucking different? What makes us different?

Audience reaction: We watch out for each other.

Mostofi: And we have to watch out for others! We built a community in here.

Applause.

Mostofi: A community where we make our own art, our own language, our own images, our own songs. The band is just the rallying point, the show is out there. But if we keep it in this room it's selfish, if we keep it in this room we're afraid, if we keep it in this room we're leaning back on the little comfort we have. But if we take it out there, we listen to people, we join the movement, we go to that fucking Trump rally and say 'Fuck You!' ("Racetractor at Cobra Lounge in Chicago, IL" 2016: 7:17)

In the first ten days after Donald J. Trump had been elected 45<sup>th</sup> President of the USA on November 8, 2016, the Southern Poverty Law Center recorded 867 cases of hate crime accompanied by nation-wide "spray-painted signs that read, 'Black Lives Don't Matter and Neither Does Your Vote,' '#FuckNiggers, #FuckAllPorchMonkeys,' 'Heil Trump,' and 'Make America White Again.' Furthermore, there were spray-painted swastikas on buildings" (Yancy 2018: 49).

In both of these intertwined phenomena, it is the specters of the past coming back to haunt the present. In his 2017 *Haunting History: For a Deconstructive Approach to the Past*, the historian Ethan Kleinberg proposes a deconstructive approach to history to counter what he identifies as a dominant mode of contemporary historiography, namely "ontological realism." This mode of writing history conceives of events as fixed in a past space and a past time that can be observed and recorded. Consequently, the past is a collection of closed and unchangeable events which become accessible via the appropriate theories, methods, materials, and archives (cf. Kleinberg 2017: 1-3; 72-114). Kleinberg criticizes that in this mode of writing history, "[t]he current epistemological under-

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<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1996 and disbanding in 1999, Racetractor's lyrics, social practices, and influence on the politicization of the hardcore punk scene of the 1990s will be discussed in Chapter Five.

standing of the past is taken to be the ontological reality of the past” (ibid.: 2), which apparently can be ‘made present’ by the historian.

The approach of *Haunting History* engages with these epistemological and ontological uncertainties by acknowledging how past and present are not to be neatly separated but how, on the contrary, they are intertwined. *Hauntology* is a concept by Jacques Derrida which plays on the sonic resemblance with ontology, an affinity which also manifests itself on the level of content: hauntology replaces ontology’s focus on stable Being/beings and determined existence by an ever-deferred oscillation between presence and absence, the living and the dead, the fixed and the fluid (cf. ibid.: 2-3).<sup>2</sup>

In order to illustrate the use of hauntology for the study of history, Kleinberg allegorically draws upon Washington Irving’s famous 1820 short story “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow,” in which the schoolteacher Ichabod Crane is confronted with a series of events and is eventually kidnapped by the headless horseman of Sleepy Hollow. Kleinberg interrogates:

So what haunts Sleepy Hollow? [I]t is the past that haunts history—a past of American Indian dispossession, of the Revolutionary War, of the unspoken atrocity that took place at Major Andre’s tree, and countless other events great and small. Sleepy Hollow is laden with the ghosts of a past half remembered if remembered at all. This is the latent past beneath the ghosts that haunt the inhabitants. [...] It is a past that we cannot touch but that nonetheless touches us. The histories, the tales, the haunted spots are all partial reconfigurations, like a headless horseman. Now, the past, like a ghost, is by definition absent and thus has no ontological properties per se, or perhaps more accurately, it has a latent ontology. History is the presence of absence, and what we do have of it is that which presents itself to us or that we force on it. (ibid.: 135-136)

*Haunting History* aims to get a glimpse of the ghosts of the past which come back to haunt the present while acknowledging that their ephemeral being slips under the controlled and controlling gaze of the conventional historian. As presence of absence, the past is never dead, it is not even past, as William Faulkner has it; within Kleinberg’s framework, history is accordingly conceived as fluid and undeterminable, escaping closure while coming back to haunt on its own terms.<sup>3</sup>

So what haunted Racetractor to declare their return to hardcore punk in 2016, what haunted this musical form of life when it emerged in the late 1970s and what haunts the U.S. in the Age of Trump? When Racetractor re-united they were haunted by the specter

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<sup>2</sup> Haunted by the question of “[w]hy did the arrival of neoliberal, post-Fordist capitalism lead to a culture of retrospection and pastiche?” (Fisher 2014: 14), cultural critic Mark Fisher has applied the concept of hauntology to account for what he perceives as a “nostalgic mode” (ibid.: 11-13), structuring contemporary cultural artefacts.

<sup>3</sup> Speaking in Freudian terms, it is the ‘return of the repressed’ which comes back to haunt the present. In his brilliant sketch on Stanley Kubrick’s 1980 horror film *The Shining*, Mark Fisher reads “Jack’s [...] history of violence” (2014: 124) in the context of the haunting history of American patriarchal abuse which has always already structured the fate of Jack: “I’m sorry to differ with you, sir. But you are the caretaker. You’ve always been the caretaker. I should know, sir. I’ve always been here” (ibid.: 126).