
Waker Cells and Subcultural Resistance

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A back alley hovel amidst the glimmer of 1990s Seattle, the Black Cat Café proclaimed a disjunction with the space of “America.” Hidden amidst asphalt, painted black, and surrounded by junk, the Cat was uninviting to most passers-by. Like gargoyles meant to scare off demons, the Cat’s façade scared away most everyone but punks, and declared the space to be an autonomous zone; as if to say, “All Ye Who Enter, check your hierarchical, law-bound, regulated, capitalist ideas of domination at the door, for you are about to enter an *underground*.”

Here, in this underground, in this place lurking below the dominant landscape, punks practiced and elaborated a defiant culture, a life and politics steadfastly critical of “the System.” The sentiment here is based largely on my extensive experience at the Black Cat Café, a cooperatively owned and run restaurant, which thrived for five years (1993–1998) in Seattle. It was primarily a place defined by anarchopunks—those punks who adhere to anarchist principles and ways of being—and it was a powerful site for solidarity and resistance.

Indeed, the potency and tenor of the Black Cat Café starkly contrasts with the composition of many subcultural trends. Consider, if you will, the punks of the Cat in a context where youth subcultures are increasingly experienced through capitalist and internet mediations. Corporate music, fashions, and entertainment are ready-made with an “alternative” sales pitch. Meanwhile, electronic media are subsuming more interpersonal time; friendships and subcultures often rely on email more than on group outings. The neighborhood “hangout,” a site for subcultural activity, is on the wane, and internet “chat rooms” are encroaching on its territory. The neatly bounded subculture is more in doubt than ever before and cyberculture is increasingly central to many cultures.

There can be no doubt that subcultures are thriving through electronic media, but their characteristics are markedly divergent from those of classical youth subcultures. Subculture is practiced differently at a computer than when it is shared in a bed or a basement. Subcultural compromises, however, are not new to youth subcultures, which have often had to negotiate with the dominant culture. Subcultural resistance in wealthy nations has frequently depended upon capitalist institutions; subcultures can be, in this sense, parasites on capitalist businesses. Things such as music venues, the recording industry, bars, restaurants, and universities have long been used by subcultures, and this dependence upon capitalism has often compromised subcultural resistance. When a subculture is bathed in alcohol at a club, centered on reverence for musicians, or forced to endure constant surveillance, its ability to resist and be autonomous is in jeopardy.

At the same time, many subcultures are evolving tactics designed to circumvent as much as possible the stranglehold of corporate capitalism. A new zeitgeist is being interpreted and lived out by resistant subcultures around the world. In particular the “anti-globalization” movement (or the Global Justice movement) deserves attention for its salient ability to challenge global trade organizations, articulate critique, and practice anti-hierarchical cultures. A second, and interconnected, movement is that of the non-commodified rave—projects such as the Burning Man festival or San Francisco’s Rhythm Society create places defined more by autonomy than by profit. Third are the anarchic “dis-organizations” such as Reclaim the Streets and Food Not Bombs. Fourth (of many more) are anarchopunk squats and collectives—places such as Seattle’s Black Cat Café, Amsterdam’s Fort van Sjakoo bookstore, Washington, DC’s Dischord Records, and Berkeley’s Gilman Street club. Here I emphasize the importance of subcultural spaces and of place-based subcultural activity where physical activity helps to amplify and orchestrate resistance.

In such sites, people may comprise “waker cells” and plot spontaneity, life, communalism, anarchism, and autonomy. Waker cells—be they occupied streets or semi-permanent locales—create what Hakim Bey has called temporary autonomous zones: they appear and vanish again before calcifying with the crust of hegemony. Unlike violent “sleepers cells,” waker cells are mobilizations of Bey’s poetic terrorism; they are utterances of preposterous beauty that escape and undermine the language of hegemony. At a time when the geography of youth subcultures is rapidly changing and confronted by the might of multinational corporate capitalism, waker cells are emerging as a breathtaking way to organize and situate community and subversion.

Waker cells are a guerilla response to the changing terrain of culture and politics. The discourse of youth subcultures underwent substantial changes in the last decades of the twentieth century. In other words, the ways that “subculture” is practiced, understood, and experienced have undergone radical transformations. As never before, the idea of a rebellious youth subculture is accepted and incorporated into the hegemonic fold, and is the incessant target of commodification. At the same time, subcultures are more difficult to pin down; they are often trans-spatial in their manifestations, and cull ideas across time and space. They are influenced by transnational trends and phenomena, the internet, television, and the culture industry, and they morph with astonishing speed.

And so an interesting phenomenon arises: on the one hand more people have access to subcultural information, and on the other their praxis can be lost in the electronic ether. Even isolated individuals in “remote” areas can tap into music, styles, writing, zines, and other varieties of subcultural experience. In this sense, individuals are better able to discover subcultures that best appeal to their emotive and affective needs, and subcultures are reaching new people. Such linkages of subculture certainly exist in an electronic medium, where spatially isolated people converge.

Many resistant youth subcultures ground their action spatially around a locus of music. Musical consumption can serve as a site for identity and organization, and it offers a language capable of translating between migrant people and itinerant ideas. Music offers a shared practice, a shared vocabulary, activities, and modes of expression. The music that allows or invites local participation and production (such as punk and country) is particularly useful in articulating autonomous culture. But music-oriented subcultures can be restrained by the hierarchies of consumer and producer, especially when club owners, musicians, record companies, and the like have an inordinate control of subcultural discourse. And the same asymmetry is even more true of countless youths in North America and elsewhere whose hangouts are limited to convenience stores, gas stations, and fast food restaurants; their subcultural space is overdetermined by the corporations to which they are attached.

In this time of late capitalism, the world is beset with rampant commodification, imperial policing, and governmentality. Meanwhile, hybrid ideas and resistant cultures are disseminating far and wide. In these contexts, subcultural spaces are key to resistance: by offering spaces where such contact can thrive, a subculture can grow, develop, and exert power. In other words, physical sites have special significance in today's changing subcultural terrain. And that is especially true of spaces that are able to, if only momentarily, declare autonomy.

One way waker cells can emerge is to spatially segregate themselves. They can do so in fringe spaces such as squats, warehouses, and other "peripheral" spots, and they can do so by forging a non-commodified culture, concocting autonomous zones, and imagining autonomous community. For example, in the greater punk subculture the discursive idea of an island regularly appears. The awesome power and vast landscape of "mainstream" society are, in punk texts, countered by the construction of home amidst a vast, hostile sea. The punk place is similarly conceived of as an "oasis": water and life in a cultural desert. Countless participants described the Black Cat Café in these ways.

From its beginnings, the Cat was a proudly counter-hegemonic space: it welcomed deviants, punks, and leftists, and shunned all others. Its outside was painted black and topped with a snarling black cat (a traditional anarchist symbol), and its inside was adorned with radical posters. Zines, pamphlets, and progressive books invited people to read and learn. A "free box" was inside the café, filled with old clothes, shoes, books, and junk. Where other cafés shy away from a political stance and create a generic façade, the Cat was political to the core. Nearly everything about the Cat went against the practice of other restaurants. As a result many people disliked the place and said it was "scary," "dirty," or "weird." But for a select crowd the Cat was the friendliest and most natural place one could hope to find. Those looking for a restaurant were appalled; those looking for autonomy felt at home.

This punk crowd disliked mainstream places. They often felt out of sorts and

alienated by the sterile, apolitical face of corporate businesses. They complained about the chemical-cleanliness, corporate logos, and isolating aspects of Starbucks. These local communists, anarchists, and other leftists congregated at the Cat to see one another, to breathe the air of counter-hegemonic life, to support a worker-owned business, and to get a bite to eat. Together they created a place fueled with creative energy and alive with an ideological, intellectual spirit.

Despite their antipathy for high school, most were engrossed by books, political conversation, and earnest philosophical debate. They were bored by and contemptuous of most people's daily concerns: by television, brand names, celebrities, and who's dating whom. They were hungry to learn ways to think about their world. The Black Cat Café, along with zines, books, and music, gave structure and meaning to their discontent with America. They, in turn, added their own ingredients to the mix. Each person added chunks of conversation and experience, and the Cat was the pot in which it simmered. Moreover, the Cat was a place where ideas and group membership were made in action. While some subcultures center on music, dance, or drugs, the anarchopunks of the café made themselves and their subculture in political action. "Authenticity" in this subculture was born less of style and more of activism.

There is, in much of the world, little space or interaction that can be defined outside of the parameters of capitalism. Youth subcultures are thus subsumed; they are targeted for "alternative" merchandise and they often inhabit cities and spaces dominated by capitalism. When limited for their hangouts to the internet, the local burger restaurant, or the nearby mini-mart, youth subcultures are constrained and dependent. The ability to produce subculture is truncated and channeled when people can breathe only through the narrow straw provided to them. But when youth subcultures command and articulate space of their own they can achieve a fulcrum of resistance. With their own spaces, subcultures can serve as waker cells.

In local, subcultural space, non-local ideas are grounded, developed, and mobilized. The zeitgeist of Global Justice can be materialized, comprehended, and reshaped. And from subcultural spaces, imperial cultures can be challenged and eroded. Even if there is no space purely "outside" of commodity relations, such space can be imagined and requisitioned. Anarchopunk spaces in particular are remarkable in that they are often conceived, occupied, and experienced as oppositional spaces defended from governmentality and commodification, whether we are speaking of squats, collectively run businesses, or "dis-organizations" such as Critical Mass and Books to Prisoners. From all of these spaces, waker cells operate in self-styled autonomy, enacting subculture and fomenting resistance.

In 1998 the Black Cat Café passed away. In its aftermath, countless people carried on its tactics and ways of being. A year later, many of these people raised their voices at a seminal anti-globalization encounter now known as the Battle of Seattle. The Cat abetted the local articulation of a global structure of feeling: an imprecise, vast network of resistance was discussed, felt, and plotted. The Cat, for its part, helped to cultivate and orchestrate anarchist sentiments. It was

simultaneously a university of punk thought, where punk bodies and minds were nourished, and a place where friendships were forged. Some people recognize themselves in these places: where others hear noise, they hear and make music. Feeling this groove and attempting its instrumentation—such is membership in a waker cell. In an increasingly corporatized world replete with governmentality, places like the Cat are temporary autonomous zones that allow for the blossoming of free spirits and waker cells. At the dawn of the twenty-first century these zones and cells may be key parts of a global awakening.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

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