Living in the wake of punk

George C Grinnell
The University of British Columbia, Canada

Abstract
Almost since its inception, punk has been declared dead. What does it mean to live attached to something that is always, at least a little bit, gone? Examining how Justin Pearson merges personal accounts of death and mourning with a sense of punk that is rooted in loss in his memoir of his participation in a North American punk culture since the 1990s, *From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry*, this article considers how a focus on living in the wake of the death of punk might shift scholarly and popular narratives told about punk. Punk outlives its death in the 1970s with a redemptive rebirth in which it became the subject of an anti-capitalist narrative. The article considers how Pearson’s memoir explores a different framework by insisting that punk may not be able to separate itself from the wider world, and that while this might appear to deal a death blow to punk, it also names a persistent set of conditions that define punk. After placing the memoir in the context of this redemptive account of punk as well as among those who see its limits, the article offers an analysis of several scenes addressing personal losses that merge with Pearson’s attachment to punk-as-something-dead-and-gone. The deaths that Pearson associates with punk rock are personal, but they also register the larger significance of loss for a subculture that cannot stop declaring its own demise, including especially the loss of a fantasy that sees punk as a refuge from the world.

Keywords
1980s, 1990s, from the graveyard of the arousal industry, hardcore, Justin Pearson, memoir, Mourning, Punk, punk is dead

In 1979, the English punk band Crass declared ‘punk is dead’ within their song of the same name. This curious death has been insistently pronounced in the present tense in the years since, suggesting both that this death remains unfinished and that the

Corresponding author:
George C Grinnell, The University of British Columbia, Okanagan campus, Kelowna, BC, V1V 1V7, Canada.
Email: george.grinnell@ubc.ca
intersection of punk and its demise is a vital trope for those who continue to live in the wake of punk. What does it mean to live a life structured by this ‘graveyard full of everything dead, done, and old’ asks Justin Pearson’s (2010a: 186) memoir of punk culture in the 1990s and beyond, *From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry?* Justin Pearson is a prominent member of California’s Do It Yourself punk culture that confronted its own mortality when, to take just one example, ‘Punk Is Dead’ was again declared by the cover of a 1994 *Punk Planet* fanzine. The death of punk loomed as a continual threat for an underground community that increasingly defined itself in opposition to commercial success and the ‘bastardization of punk’ (Pearson, 2010a: 48) that was taking place throughout the 1990s in mainstream music culture. Pearson is a vocalist, lyricist and/or bass player in bands such as Swing Kids, The Locust, Retox, Dead Cross, Planet B and Deaf Club. He founded the label Three One G that he operated with Allysia Edwards and which was known for its anti-commercial experimentation and unusual do it yourself (DIY) productions that significantly raised the profile of punk as something that was ‘done for the sake of art’ (Pearson, 2010a: 82). As I will soon explore, the death of punk is a rhetoric and an unfinished event that is not defined by a sound or even a single moment in time. This article is an attempt to understand how this rhetoric is given new meaning in a memoir that merges personal accounts of death and mourning with a sense that punk is rooted in loss.

There are histories that would say 1970s punk in the United Kingdom was replaced by hardcore in the United States in the 1980s and then replaced again by an increasingly global post-punk in the 1990s. Across these variations in style, sound, place and historical context, there remains a common DIY spirit embraced consistently by all of these different individuals and communities who take the name of punk upon themselves and this article seeks to chart how Pearson understood himself to be among those punks, living in the wake of a death that is always looming, present and never quite reached. Pearson’s continued prominence in punk makes his memoir notable, especially given that it is one of the first to address punk in the 1990s. His memoir is a fascinating object for scholarship because it explores how a punk rhetoric of death might raise vexing questions that shift scholarly and popular narratives told about punk. What does it mean to live attached to something that is always, at least a little bit, gone? How have individual lives and experiences as well as entire punk communities and the stories told about them been structured by what it means to survive this death? I am interested to consider these matters by examining how Pearson brings together death and punk culture as matters that are central to his account of what it means to live a life forever altered by his attachments to punk and to fellow punks. In the pages that follow, I consider how punk outlived its death in the 1970s with a redemptive rebirth in which it became the subject of an anti-capitalist narrative that cast punk as a separate world built on DIY ethics that prioritized creative expression and community over economic exploitation. I then consider how this memoir explores another framework by insisting that punk may not be able to separate itself from the wider world, and that while this failure might appear to deal a death blow to punk, it also names a persistent set of conditions that define the subculture, which Pearson explores by noting how personal losses and attachments to punk-as-something-dead-and-gone mark his existence as a punk. The deaths that Pearson associates with punk rock are personal, but they also register the larger significance of loss for a
subculture that cannot stop declaring its own demise, including the loss of a fantasy that says punk is a refuge from the world.

Is punk dead?

By the end of the 1970s, punk was in the complicated position of surviving its own demise. Punk died as the Cold War began to expire and capitalism became increasingly unrivaled as a mediating force for social relations. When ‘the raw forces and ugliness of punk succumbed to corporate-capitalism within a few short years’ punk had ‘lost its battle of Waterloo’ (Clark, 2003: 226). Critics regularly tell a story of regeneration in the wake of that death, highlighting the entrenchment of anti-commercial ‘DIY politics’ and practices that reinvent punk in the 1980s in the United Kingdom and the United States as an underground culture that continues as a global phenomenon in the present (Raposo, 2016: 71). Such a story features a subculture so scarred by its brief presence in the mainstream that its opposition to future commodification is seared into its very DNA. As Stacy Thompson (2004) carefully notes in his account of more than 20 years spent creating alternatives to economic exploitation, punks

establish an aesthetic sphere that is not saturated with the logic of the commodity market to the degree that the commercial music industry is – a desire to supplant the capitalist commodity market with a more socialized and collectivized system of production and exchange. (p. 179)

When punk is said to desire economic revolution, it is not just a political insight but also a melancholic expression of attachment to its early death in the commercial mainstream of the 1970s. The lasting imprint left by the death of punk produces a persistent nostalgia and a yearning that is characteristic of modernity’s ongoing recognition of the uneven effects of capitalism and the remainders of anti-commercial cultural impulses. Just as Wordsworth’s poetry confronted the loss of a way of life for a population abandoned by mercantile capitalism around 1800, the death of punk romanticizes loss in ways that now make clear the persistence of such tropes as a means of understanding how commerce and culture intersect. As it was for the Romantics, the material realities of capital’s effects on social life are replayed in the tensions between the genius of the artist and the demands of a market economy that seek to commodify even art. Expressing a persistent feature of culture under capitalist modernity since Wordsworth’s day, punk romanticizes how artistic expression comes to be sacrificed by the market. Elizabeth Wilson (1999) explores similar tensions in another context when she notes how ‘the bohemian identity was forged from this perceived mismatch between creative ability and the market’ (p. 12). The death of punk at the hands of the market celebrates this long-standing tension and lays the foundation for its romantic return in the years following 1978 when the rise of persistently underground bands and labels such as Rough Trade, SST and Dischord redefine punk in opposition to a marketable, politically sanitized, mass-produced, vulgar public version of itself. Jude Davies (1994) refers to this period of afterlife as the future of no-future, noting how punk survives its death: ‘The punk subculture remains very healthy at gigs and in the fanzines of a D.I.Y. music scene with close links to unrespectable hard-left politics’ (p. 23). His comments come in 1994 and they remain just as true
today of a now global punk scene and of scholarship’s interest in mediating the presence and absence of the subculture. As Dylan Clark (2003) puts it, ‘punk faked its own death’ and in many ways ‘the threatening poses of punk’ in the 1970s were replaced by global DIY punk networks as well as by forms of political and economic activism undertaken by people who may not even know they are ‘inhabiting kinds of punk subjectivity’ (p. 234).

I like this story of the survival and redemption of an iconoclastic punk rock, maybe especially because of its romanticized opposition to capital and economic exploitation. It is an edifying story that helps one to believe that sweaty screaming in a basement in front of friends and strangers, making zines, or creating and distributing records is a worthwhile expression of culture that models the possibility of creating alternatives, albeit imperfectly, to capitalist priorities of profit, efficiency and enterprise. It is a story that celebrates creative freedom and finds punk worthy of appreciation because it expresses frustration at inequality and domination and because it showcases just how much individuals can do to build the world they want if they work hard in solidarity with one another.

Such a redemptive story sees that the death of punk is primarily an economic event that drove it back underground to discover its best artistic self, renewed by confronting the return of the operations and centrality of capital that had been repressed. But this redemptive narrative is not the whole story.

Taking the death of punk personally

Can one recognize the death of punk to be something other than a mode of surviving its early commercialization, more than an alarming rhetoric, more than the nostalgic choreographies of modernity, other than an amalgamation of disappointing ideals and failures to be as radical as it promises, and consider instead if the death of punk can also be the name given to a practice of individuals living together, attached to this uncertain thing called punk that is always a little bit lost? This question is at the heart of Pearson’s (2010a) memoir as he chronicles ‘the nasty punk ethics that would essentially raise me’ (p. ix) and all of the relationships with others that structure his life as a musician and co-owner of a record label. My suspicion is that the thought of death has long been appealing for punk culture precisely because participation in punk can often involve particularly knotted experiences of attachment, desire and loss. The death of punk, as a concept and a narrative, has long reduced such nebulous matters to the concrete failure of punk idealism to maintain a healthy separation from capital. My approach is focused on thinking through these matters differently by considering how Pearson’s memoir offers a new set of reflections on punk and death. This choice of archive poses limitations to my argument, including the possibility that the memoir’s engagement is exceptional and somehow insufficiently representative of punk culture. I offer two responses to such a concern, both of which draw upon my belief that this is not so, but which are different from that conviction as well. Pearson is a lifelong punk who has actively participated as an artist, musician, vocalist and co-owner of a prominent record label. Nonetheless, he is still only one person. Whether or not one voice can be representative is a foundational and ever-present question for punk criticism. What is punk? As Marc Bayard (1999) succinctly
replied, ‘put 100 punks in a room you’ll get 100 opinions’ (p. 12). I take such diversity as one of the frustrating-exciting features of studying punk. This is a subculture defined by tendencies rather than absolute essences. My sense is that participants and scholars understand what a punk like Bayard knows: that the enduring existence of punk for more than 40 years is indicative less of an agreed upon essence and more of an expression of attachment to what Sam McPheeters (2020) identifies, in the subtitle to Mutations, as the ‘many strange faces of hardcore punk’ that emerge in local geographies, particular eras, personalities, political commitments, as well as musical preferences. To cite just a few of his proliferating deconstructive mutations, punk can be ‘a lifestyle; cosplay; design element; powerful ideal, lazy cliché; magical realism; badge of authenticity, pantomime social movement; withering mockery; ironclad conviction; lucrative career; vow of slovenly poverty; incubator of brilliance and/or mediocrity’ (McPheeters, 2020: 17). Addressing punk always requires a nominalist and concrete approach, at least in part, as if to say, these punks, that expression of punk for that time and place. In what follows, I have no desire to lay claim to essences; but I also do not wish to abandon the power of speaking about punk. And so, my focus is on Pearson’s narrative reconstruction of punk culture that emerges from his memoir. What I offer here are a set of reflections, speculations and commentary on that specific expression of punk culture. And I remain convinced that the focused analysis of artistic expression is one methodological pillar among others for punk criticism given the power of a single narrative to provoke new and thoughtful ways of understanding the effects of punk for those attached to it. More, I believe that a sustained engagement with a single work from the always heterogenous archive of punk culture offers new opportunities to understand and debate the kind of strange attachments that structure punk, attachments that begin to explain how something so contradictory and internally different can sustain itself at all. Individual attachments to punk involve rich and complex relations with what is and is not punk and these are perhaps best captured with the methodological intimacy I pursue here.

In From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry, separating punk from the rest of the world is never possible for Pearson, and this was true because it would fail to be a properly radical space apart and because it would nourish and sustain his life in ways that extended far beyond his participation in a subculture. His attachment to a punk culture that is dead and dying becomes a means for thinking about living, mourning and surviving without redemption – without, in this case, elevating punk into something worthy and beneficial – and this offers an opportunity to gain an enlarged understanding of the effects of punk culture including how it comes to mediate and transform consequential life events that might otherwise have nothing directly to do with the central trappings of punk culture.

**Personal effects**

Asking what it means to live in the wake of the death of punk as this memoir does immediately shifts attention away from a rhetoric of death and focuses instead on how individuals come to be shaped by the attachments and losses that are experienced individually and broadly within punk culture. My analysis adapts an approach that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), in a different context, explained in terms of examining ‘how certain
categorizations work, what enactments they are performing and what relations they are creating, rather than what they essentially mean’ (p. 27, emphasis in original). Rather than determining what punk is or what the death of punk means, I want to ask, how might the thought of death organize particular attachments within Pearson’s memoir and punk culture more broadly? Strange as it sounds, pronouncements of the death of punk may also produce curious recognitions regarding how individual punks learn to live.

*From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry* is an episodic account of a life influenced by punk that is fascinated by the complexities that emerge from being attached to punk. The memoir recognizes what Lauren Berlant (2011), in another context, explores when noting that sometimes ‘such attachments are made not by will, after all, but by an intelligence after which we are always running’ (p. 125). I cite Berlant’s suggestion that one does not fully initiate or entirely understand one’s desires because the phrasing helps to defamiliarize a normally intelligible way of thinking about how and why one becomes attached to something. Pragmatically, this means that even a memoir may not be able to offer a full account of the author’s attachments to punk. Philosophically, this may mean that desire and loss are matters that cannot be skirted if one is to understand what it means to be attached to punk. *From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry* narrates an attachment to punk and recognizes the important place of longing in punk culture that can, I believe, shift scholarly and public impulses that wish to redeem punk culture, celebrate it and mourn it, all of which may likewise be pursuing an intelligence and an attachment they cannot quite identify.

As a personal account, Pearson’s memoir adds significantly to a growing archive of memory regarding punk culture. Many substantial oral histories of punk in the United States have been recorded – *American Hardcore* (Blush, 2010), *Burning Fight* (Peterson, 2009), *Straight Edge* (Rettman, 2017), as well as films such as ‘Salad Days’ (2014), ‘924 Gilman Street’ (2008) and ‘Taqwacore’ (2009) – in addition to academic accounts that rely on participant observation such as *Pretty in Punk* (LeBlanc, 1999), *Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy* (O’Connor, 2008) and *Straight-Edge* (Haenfler, 2006), all of which offer firsthand perspectives on punk’s various manifestations. But Pearson’s memoir belongs in another category too, because its object is never just punk culture but the ways in which his life is transformed by it. His memoir offers more than a recollection of punk culture and its essence and the result is, paradoxically, a more fulsome account of punk because it understands that punk is, for many, and himself especially, more than an escape from everyday existence. It is a subculture that is unavoidably enmeshed in the world it often claims to oppose.

The memoir is composed of short staccato bursts not unlike some of the most perplexingly lively, angry and challenging songs that Pearson’s bands have produced (one need only to listen to ‘Moth Eaten Deer Head’ by The Locust to begin to sense the confounding force of short-form expression). He details a difficult life growing up with abusive parents. He writes of the importance of this history in motivating him to find and create a home for himself and others within a sometimes more nurturing punk culture. The memoir’s vignettes form a narrative of passionate, difficult and rewarding relationships, tours embarked upon, growing as a musician and friend, reconciling with his mother and coming to understand his violent childhood, and the power of community to sustain the author. Pearson likewise thoughtfully examines how chosen and unchosen conditions
have shaped his life; the memoir levels powerful critiques against bourgeois norms of family that ring especially hollow amid ongoing domestic violence.

Equally important to the memoir are the joys and challenges that come with a life structured by the pursuit of art and expression in a fundamentally interactive environment. As an artist, he is fascinated by punk’s potential to break with aesthetic conventions. In addition to his contributions to punk music, Pearson joined with Edwards to produce visually fascinating releases for Three One G, including records that fit together like puzzle pieces, nostalgic recreations of childhood books that included an accompanying record held by a plastic flap at the end, or covers that had to be unglued to read the lyrics printed inside. ‘I wanted there to be more than just music when someone got a new record’ he notes, recalling the labor involved in individually ‘silk-screened vinyl’ that would occupy ‘every visible surface in the house’ so that it might dry before being packaged (Pearson, 2010b: 78–79). ‘I wanted Three One G to be an artistic platform, an artistic family and community’ (Pearson, 2010b: 78).

The most substantial moments of the memoir include several developed accounts of the difficult loss of his abusive father and, later, the loss of a close friend. Expressions of longing stitch together so much of the narrative, and these discrete losses converge in remarkable ways with the memoir’s ongoing interest in the death and decay of punk. Loss reverberates across the memoir, as if like the crackle of static on a record, etching into it a surviving trace of some of the most powerful conditions that have structured his life in punk.

Life, loss, punk rock

Recalling what it was like, at age 12, to attend his father’s funeral, Pearson (2010a) writes,

I absolutely hated it. I wanted to be by myself. I didn’t want pity from others. I felt sick to my stomach from the pressure, and confused from trying to figure out what was appropriate and expected of me. My mother didn’t really explain how or why my father had died, so I just thought about all the mean things that he did to her over the years. (p. 19)

The recollection now of this powerfully alienating experience is compounded by his recognition of how little he still understands about the circumstances of his father’s murder: ‘None of this makes sense to me. There are too many flaws in the story I was given’ (Pearson, 2010a: 17). Pearson shares the pain he felt growing up and it is tempting to see that he escapes this world by developing an alternative family out of a network of friends within the San Diego punk scene. His narrative is certainly interested in thinking carefully about the emotional and artistic support that this community offers, but it never pursues a redemptive structure in which a violent world is replaced by a creative and sustaining one. Instead, punk culture is perhaps best understood in his memoir as a mode of intimacy in which one cannot pretend life is free of loss and pain and violence any more than one could forget it is also a space of great love, friendship and creativity. Pearson (2010a) is genuinely unlikeable at many moments in the narrative, and there is a masculinist streak in the memoir, evident, for example, when he lashes out at an
ex-girlfriend while still claiming to ‘look back and see that I learned a lot from being with [Jesse]’ (p. 50). His abusive childhood is never far from view amid the violence of punk concerts, moreover, in which Pearson is regularly attacked while performing, sometimes verbally and sometimes physically. The results are less predictable than one might expect as Pearson (2010a) finds himself reflecting on the “‘supportive’ hostility” (p. 134) of audiences, the unsupportive actions of ‘fans’ who spray-paint “‘fuck cops’” on the back of the U-Haul trailer” (p. 100) during a tour, the aggression of punks who followed homophobic epithets up with sucker-punches (p. 101), as well as the realities of being unable to ‘seek medical attention’ for a rib fractured in a fight because ‘there was no way I could afford to see a doctor’ (p. 135). Such events can be difficult for readers to appreciate, so far removed are they from any idealistic or redemptive story of a progressive punk community.

Pearson shows a little interest in ‘punk’s origins, its shining stars, its hottest locations’ and is more attentive to what Zack Furness (2012) provocatively identifies as the ‘everyday practices, process, struggles, ruptures, and people that make [punk] so interesting in the first place’ (p. 18). This is a not a punk rock defined by a master narrative of heroic resistance to capital, or the transition from a hostile world to a supportive one. Pearson’s memoir emphasizes all the wonder and joy and heartbreak to be found living in the wake of punk and how these realities shape his life. This can be as simple as acknowledging ‘I fear being flat broke and deal with the uncertainty of my career decision’ (Pearson, 2010a: 78) or that ‘I realized politics were important to me and I was finally able to be opinionated and heard through my own music’ (p. 41). Pearson (2010a) appreciates that he and his friends could live haphazardly: ‘you just did what you did, lost your ass financially, and benefited in ways that had nothing to do with monetary success’ (p. 82). What I hear so loudly here is not the moral goodness or redeeming politics of punk, but instead an effort to chase after never fully named desires and all the rewards and aches that come with creating music, running a label, touring, forging community and living with others.

The key tension in the redemptive story of the death and resurgence of punk is a fantasized, worried, or imposed separation between punk culture and the so-called outside world of work, family, social norms and economic conventions that might once again kill it. To find out if punk really matters – a question that I am not sure punk asks with nearly the same frequency or anxiety as punk criticism – critics often approach it as a minority world set apart that comments on the larger world in some way, perhaps by rejecting its values or by modeling revolutionary change. Hebdige (1979) was the first to appreciate deviant punk style as an insurgent means to ‘disrupt and reorganize meaning’ (p. 106). And while this is not the entirety of his argument, his broader analysis consistently tries to think about how small pockets of culture can expose and mediate ‘the process of “normalization”’ that conceals the ‘ideological character’ of society broadly (Hebdige, 1979: 18). In Punk Productions: Unfinished Business, Stacy Thompson (2004) takes the argument in an economic direction and notes how ‘a desire to resist commercialization is one of the determinant desires’ (p. 81) of punk cultures. He helpfully documents how DIY practices developed in response to its death in 1978 offer ‘more than imaginary solutions to real problems’ (Thompson, 2004: 91) because they initiate not-for-profit models of producing and distributing music within punk cultures. There is so much that I admire
about Thompson’s thoughtful examination of how punks put their politics into economic practice and Hebdige’s work remains a stellar example of the value of reading punk slowly and recognizing the complexity of its meanings. But the future for such analysis may lie in recognizing that an emphasis on separation has become increasingly difficult to sustain as a number of critics are now showing.

Narratives that see punk primarily as a radical confrontation with mainstreams norms and values can forget the consequential ways in which punk culture fails to realize its radical ambitions, especially when it comes to its aggressive tendencies toward ‘creating and maintaining the masculinity’ (LeBlanc, 1999: 116) of punk. Sara Marcus’ (2010) account of the Riot Grrrl revolution of the early 1990s, Girls to the Front, notes how punk culture itself has been testing the validity of the notion that punk stands apart from a larger world by documenting how female punks addressed the ‘boyocracy’ (p. 72) of a DC punk scene that tended to reproduce the male dominance of the world it claimed to reject. In response, the first issue of the zine Riot Grrrl offered a new feminist expression of a long-standing ‘critique of the “failure” of punk to live up to its rhetoric’ (Bestley, 2016: 53), noting the gendered dimensions of that failure and identifying ‘the general lack of girl power in society as a whole, and in the punk rock underground specifically’ (Marcus, 2010: 82). Writing as a punk and not yet an academic, Mimi Nguyen (2011) examined another myth of separation in a 1998 issue of the zine Punk Planet when she identified the “whitestraightboy” hegemony that organizes punk:

So when Kathleen Hanna screamed, ‘SUCK MY LEFT ONE!’ and nailed the Punk Rock to the wall, and when the core soon after went queer, I jumped for joy because it was about time. But I am still waiting for my race riot. (p. 258)

The failure of punk to recognize Whiteness as a matter of power by ‘insisting that punk was more important than race’ (Duncombe and Tremblay, 2011: 10) meant practicing forms of colorblindness that made White privilege invisible. If punk can claim to be opposed to an outside world, its history has seen it nonetheless adopt many of the relations of domination of that world. Such failures usher in yet another death of punk, albeit in another key, in the sense that they insist that punk has not lost the wider world and its relations of power, however much it seeks to separate itself economically.

Punk may be attached to the wider world in more promising ways, as well. Janice Radway’s (2011) consideration of Riot Grrrl zine creators points toward the importance of thinking carefully about how one calibrates effects and judges the accomplishments of subcultural activity, accomplishments that are often assessed too punctually when one attends to archives and countable documents and their associated practices and semiotic codes. Where others have examined punk culture in its moment, she examines its life-long effects, thereby stretching out what it can be said to accomplish. Radway (2011: 143) proposes ‘a long-term, prospective view’ that involves what she calls ‘the afterlives of zines’, a method that importantly recognizes how

zines did not simply die in the early 1990s as their creators moved out of adolescence and young adulthood. Rather, they continued to live on in a number of different venues and forms,
as a result of the actions of a significant number of former zinesters who were profoundly changed by their zine-ing. (pp. 143–144)

Radway’s focus on the effects of punk participation that emerge later in life may still be too limiting a calculation, if these effects are expressed in concrete commitments and activities to be charted and documented. There is simply too much desire freighted into subcultural life, I suspect, for one to exclude the ambiguities of psychic life and social relations that are mingled into attachments to punk. In short, trying to separate what is part of one’s life in punk and what is not is an almost impossible task. And the implication of this for scholarship means unthinking the redemptive narrative that celebrates punk’s separation from a world that it opposes, however satisfying that story is. There is too much yearning, desire, social interference and raw dirty life for a narrative of separation to be viable. One cannot deny that punk subcultures have separated themselves in many ways from normative society, but never wholly and never entirely.

In From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry, punk does not name a separation from ordinary life but is instead a term that references the unchosen conditions of Pearson’s life, including the loss of close friends and loved ones. He recounts (Pearson, 2010a) being devastated by how ‘hopeless’ he felt confronting his dear friend and band-mate, Eric Allen, whose challenges with substance abuse had transformed their relationship: ‘Even paying him Swing Kids royalties was difficult because I knew he would just waste it on drugs. I could not physically or financially put him into rehab, and neither could anyone else’ (p. 88). Discussions of punk style or politics or even DIY practices have little to say about what it means to be helpless to forestall someone bent on slowly killing himself. Allen would later commit suicide and his death prompts some of the most developed and sustained reflections of the memoir. The human attachments of punk culture matter and nowhere are they clearer than in the complex ways in which the loss of Allen to suicide recalls Pearson’s earlier recollections of coping with life after the murder of his father.

At a loss

To represent loss involves wondering if one can express that loss and to whom one would do so. Writing of the death of his friend Sarah Kofman, Jacques Derrida (2001) lamented that ‘it has been impossible for me to speak as I knew I wanted to, impossible to speak to her, to her, as one does without pretending to friends who have disappeared, impossible also to speak of her’ (p. 172). But death can also prompt more than mourning and its characteristic impossibilities, if I can be allowed to scandalously restrict the boundaries and reach of mourning for a moment to better appreciate how loss shapes life. Death can also be a moment in which one confronts the limitations of one community and the need for another to provide what is missing from this one. As Butler (1997) notes, the ‘emergence of collective institutions for grieving are thus crucial to survival, to reassembling community, to rearticulating kinship, to reweaving sustaining relations’ (p. 148). Two distinct deaths are prominent in Pearson’s memoir, and they point to the need for punk culture to develop ways of acknowledging that death is not just rhetorical. During his recollection of his father’s funeral, Pearson (2010a) wished he had a better father, a
longing that is doubled by the impossibility of voicing these feelings at the time, and the impossibility of ever addressing them to the only person who needed to hear them:

I sat there in the front row and listened to all the speeches about how my father was a good man and how everyone should remember him. I wanted to relate to the words that were being spoken, and to also be able to get up there and say something grand about how my father was a true parent and how he did a great job raising me. Unfortunately, I was not able to do that. Even if I’d had the opportunity, I could not have said anything nice at that point. My father didn’t like me, or my mom; I had no kind words for him. (p. 19)

Later, receiving news of Allen’s death while on tour left Pearson (2010a) ‘instantly heartbroken’ (p. 89). Although they ‘were inseparable for almost ten years’, Pearson (2010a) offers only brief memories of Allen in the memoir, recognizing that what mattered most about their relationship is perhaps the hardest thing to render for his readers: ‘most importantly, Eric taught me about the unspoken connection that people can have when playing music’ (p. 91). Their bond ‘transcended all forms of conventional communication, and we found emotion in what we created together’ (Pearson, 2010a: 91). As different as these losses are for Pearson, they are united as points of tension in the narrative that the memoir cannot resolve, fully make sense of, or move past.

Where his father’s funeral made him feel the full force of social conventions of mourning that he could not bring himself to participate in, Allen’s death evokes a consistent ambivalence regarding such rituals as Pearson reflects at length on what such social practices can do. While he notes, ‘I had no need to see Eric’s body lying there glossy and well groomed’, the funeral was meaningful nonetheless because ‘the pastor recognized Eric’s beliefs as an atheist, and adapted them to the ceremony, so the sermon was about everyone who was there in honor of his life’ (Pearson, 2010a: 90). If one might be tempted to read Pearson’s discomfort with his father’s funeral as a nascent punk opposition to social convention and norms, his appreciation for Eric’s funeral suggests that matters are more complicated.

One of Allen’s bands, Unbroken, would reunite and play a show in San Diego to ‘raise money for a plaque in Balboa Park’s Rose Garden’ (Pearson, 2010a: 103). This memorial could not be more different from the formal funeral and raises the question of the importance for Pearson of the punk community and its rituals for recognizing the value of Allen’s life and the shared loss so many experienced with his passing. Despite plain differences between this memorial and the earlier funeral, Pearson’s account of this concert begins from the premise that this punk memorial is not definitively separated from or successfully opposed to mainstream culture any more than it is opposed to intimate matters of human existence.

While Pearson (2010a) played with Allen in Swing Kids, he performed at this event with The Crimson Curse, a band that perfectly expressed ‘the ethics . . . Eric subscribed to: being a punk, taking the piss out of people, and pushing buttons’ (pp. 103–104). What Pearson (2010a) describes next might not be what one would expect for a celebration of life:

As soon as we got there, the audience started throwing trash at us, booing and yelling typical crap. Here, alongside the followers of Unbroken [in which Allen had performed] with their
pseudo-greaser look and typical hardcore camouflage cargo-shorts and black t-shirts, you had The Crimson Curse in cowboy hats, glitter half-shirts, goggles, tight pants, high-heel boots, and makeup. To many we were complete ‘fags’ and we bummed out about fourteen hundred of the people there. The sleaze and the fact that we just didn’t give a shit about what was acceptable were perfect. As I stood there on stage, I realized having us on the bill that night was exactly what Eric would have wanted. It made me smile, and helped us push boundaries in that stale venue. (pp. 104–105)

He notes, ‘for me that night was a mix of sorrow and joy. It felt like a proper funeral’ and a way ‘to say goodbye to one of my best friends’ (Pearson, 2010a: 105). But this is also a moment at which a redemptive narrative in which punk institutions reassemble community meets its limits. The behavior of many in the audience at the ‘Unbroken funeral’ (Pearson, 2010a: 106) elicits a powerful disappointment with the punk culture that otherwise sustains him and provides him with meaningful ways to grieve. The normative power of expressions of homophobia on display here so decisively replicate and reiterate a history of violence and disgust Pearson knew well, echoing as it does the childhood taunts that instilled in him an emotional knowledge of the power of social norms to discipline. He knew his ‘father wanted a different son, one who was good at sports, had hot young girlfriends, and wore penny loafers and IZOD shirts’ (Pearson, 2010a: 12). His memories of his high school prom include being called a ‘faggot’ by the new boyfriend of an ex-girlfriend who ‘laughed at me while I tried to ignore them’ (Pearson, 2010a: 50). When the punk community reiterates the same homophobia he encountered growing up – a gesture that both caresses and disavows the pervasive homosociality of punk – it highlights just how readily punk culture reproduced the norms it often claimed to contest. Such moments represent more than just the loss of a supportive community. The persistent homophobia Pearson encounters, moreover, sits in complex relation to the dominance of masculinity in the memoir. As Butler (1997: 135) notes, heteronormative cultures have a way of ‘preempting the possibility of homosexual attachment’ that forecloses same-sex desire before it can be a possibility and thus generates a loss that appears to be ‘ungrievable’. Pearson’s sleazy queer punk rock emerges as if pressed into existence by heteronormative punk, seeming to generate the very impossibility of homosexuality that Butler considers. This is a moment that requires much more analysis than I can offer here. What this makes clear, however, is that the question of grief is a question of what losses will be acknowledged by Pearson’s efforts to preserve the memory of his friend. At this moment, the memoir raises the prospect that punk includes attachments never fully articulated, a yearning after sense rather than something fully realized, disavowed even in its inclusion. What does it mean, then, for Pearson to frame punk in terms of loss, as something that disappoints and something that contains confused and inarticulate desires, even and especially when it is sustaining? Or, to put it another way, how is the death of punk not just a rhetoric but also an abiding experience of living with others, with all the complexity that implies?

**Surviving loss**

How strange, this desire to insist that a celebration of life should be a means of schooling others and exercising forms of homophobic domination even over the dead. I suspect that
Pearson’s challenge to the presence at the memorial concert of homophobic violence is motivated by a desire to keep alive another understanding of Allen that is under direct threat by the assembled crowd’s reductive attempt to remember Allen only as an artistic spokesperson for their masculinist fantasy of punk. Accordingly, this scene provokes always uncertain questions regarding how to mourn:

After our set ended, we packed up and came back into the venue just in time to take part in Unbroken’s performance. Even though Gabe, Joey, and I all stripped down to our Speedos and nothing else, we were there to pay tribute to Eric, someone who we all loved and missed. For me, that night was a mix of sorrow and joy. It felt like a proper funeral. But it was also a time for people to enjoy themselves and during the entire night, Eric’s antics were alive within me. As I stage-dived time and time again with next to no clothing on, I bummed out many of the hetero, jock-type hardcore dudes. I cried and I laughed and at certain moments during Unbroken’s set, I got chills. Aside from the fights that broke out in the audience, the event was a success. The funds were raised for the memorial at the Rose Garden and some money was left over for Eric’s mother to ease the burden of the unexpected funeral costs. It was a proper event to say goodbye to one of my best friends. (Pearson, 2010a: 105)

There are several details to note here. First, Pearson’s narrative of mourning the death of Allen and celebrating his life ends not with a grand affirmation of who he was or what death can reveal about life, but instead with money, a topic that punk’s cooperative and anti-capitalist principles is almost impossibly allergic to discussing except as an instance of all that is wrong with contemporary social life. And yet, in this context, money matters. As Alan O’Connor (2012) notes when he addresses the larger realities within which punk exists, money cannot be avoided: ‘you need cheap rent. You need cheap places to hang out. For non-commercial music and art, it is essential that people are rewarded in ways other than immediate financial success’ (p. 102). It would be foolish, I think, to read this as some kind of submission to the logic of capital, as if to suggest that a purchased memorial in a public park becomes the ultimate sign of having lived and been remembered. Instead, this is a simple affirmation of the fact that indeed, at a moment like this, money matters. In the face of death, punk participates both in its own rituals and finds itself drawn, meaningfully, into the world of Allen’s surviving family and the community in which they live.

What is more difficult to think through in this passage are Pearson’s multiple suggestions that this lively memorial event was a proper funeral and a proper goodbye to Allen. One might not expect the language of normalization – of what is proper and improper – to follow so quickly after the crowd’s aggressive attempts to teach Pearson about acceptable expressions of sexuality during his live performance. Imperfect conditions are the most likely ones to be found when facing loss and Pearson finds those conditions to be the most proper ones imaginable. What this means, then, is forsaking the redeeming logic that sees punk culture as a space apart that offers something better. Pearson (2010a) comes to appreciate that ‘Eric was a part of me, and would live on in me’ (pp. 91–92) but also that there were so many here in the punk community who had little interest in knowing who he was beyond who they wanted him to be. What is proper about this moment was how conflicted it was: it was a celebration, a disappointment, a chance to get a rise
out of others, a lasting memory, a proper goodbye, violent and sustaining, an expression and disavowal of queer impulses, and yet another occasion to find out one is living wrong in the eyes of others. Against what Berlant and Edelman (2014) calls the ‘amnesiac hope’ (p. 89) of fantasy, Pearson grapples with the fundamental longing at the core of his attachment to punk, an attachment that is always a little bit disappointing, always a little bit gone.

For Pearson, living in the wake of punk means forgoing utopian fantasies and a redemptive horizon in which punk finally achieves its full significance or realizes its political, economic, social or aesthetic potential to transform the world and those who dwell within it. And it also means refusing to see only disappointments in that same reality. Pearson lives attached to a punk culture that has the power to disappoint, wound and never quite be enough or what it should be. And yet, punk is indispensable to his sense of self, especially at moments of impossible grief. Punk is disappointingly normative; it is stale and old and dead. And yet, it is part of what sends shivers down his spine at this difficult time in his life. It is the proper way to celebrate the life of a close friend and musician who touched many, even if it is never an escape from a damaged and damaging world, inflicting pain at a time when what he needs most is love and support.

The title, From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry, comes from the final page of the book in which he declares,

I have no idea when my time will be up. I often wish I knew what was next so I could at least hold tight and brace myself. But for now I’m soaking it all up (or maybe mopping it up) in a graveyard full of everything dead, done, and old. Learning from the past. I realize that in some way or another we all have to keep our heads high and get back to work in the arousal industry full of lies, laughs, scams, love, fear, mistakes, simplicity, confusion, risks, success, complexity, chance, emotion, fun, pain, and everything else that ties into being human on this planet. (Pearson, 2010a: 186)

What a vital world loss makes. This final expression of loss is different again, just as the loss of Allen cannot be the loss of his father or the loss that fills the void between him and his mother as they grow apart and then reconnect over the course of the book. Every loss is its own loss, and all of them are vital and quickening and heartbreaking, articulating forms of meaningful attachment to others and to ideals as well as the impossibility of those attachments ever becoming immutable, as if invulnerable to death. I am reminded of the lone photograph in the book, one that the reader encounters after these final words, and which features the author as if dead, rigidly lying on the ground with his head not quite in the frame. The death of punk is always a little bit personal with Pearson. It is rarely an abiding sorrow, but is instead the name given to an intimate mode of engagement with life and all of its joys and challenges. For Pearson, punk is never a safe sanctuary from the pain and heartbreak of the world but a passionate attachment to the raw and dirty human condition. To think with Pearson about how one lives in the shadow cast by this ‘graveyard full of everything dead, done, and old’ means thinking less about how punk should be appreciated according to this or that measuring stick, and more about an attachment to punk, perhaps one that never makes enough sense or one that might never be fully redeeming or redeemable. This attachment to punk may not be well explained
according to the terms and ideas associated with many of the existing critical models for analyzing punk that chart relations of power and what culture can do to draw attention to matters of injustice. And yet, I sense that the thought of attachment is never too far from thinking about power, ethics and justice, either, given punk’s yearning desire for another more livable world, a longing to sustain the romance of punk, or maybe even one’s loss of faith in punk’s cruel optimism.

One might be tempted to read punk as a space of refuge from so-called reality, temporarily experienced during a phase of adolescence, perhaps made possible via outside financial means, or something one occasionally opts into as if it were a mode of dress. From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry offers another perspective by insisting that punk is not the story of its ideals or aspirations of opposition, but a matter of those singular individuals who live, and die, within its orbit. To focus on a singular account of a life lived in punk as I have here is not to say that one can only know what punk means by experiencing it, for the very question of experience here comes to feel the weight of a social world that conditions punk cultures. Pearson shows that he cannot account for all that punk is and that he does not get to control its story, not even when he writes it. If punk can help to create the conditions by which he might imagine the world differently, he never knows how long it might last or just what the differences might be between soaking it all up and mopping it all up. Punk belongs to a time before him and to a time ahead of us all, to the desires and attachments of others, to moments of intimacy that he does not want or choose, to expressions of passionate and creative expression that he holds dear, and to survival in the face of grief and loss. Is the story of punk ever separate, for Pearson, from a story of his father’s abusiveness and death? Is it possible for Pearson to understand the loss of Allen without thinking of his father as well as all that he and Allen created together as musicians, even and especially if that means recognizing all of the differences between these different events? To live in the wake of punk is to begin to acknowledge how a life is structured by attachment and loss in ways that recall what Raymond Williams (1977) once called a ‘structure of feeling’, a term that acknowledges ‘social experiences’ that are present but not articulated as fully developed ‘social semantic formations’ (p. 377). For Pearson, punk involves a felt attachment to others and to what is beyond and outside oneself, experienced at the heart of oneself, never to be fully described or accounted for except, perhaps, according to a rhetoric of loss that might comprehend just how important and sustaining an absence can be.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The author received financial support for the research and authorship of this article from the Social Sciences and Humanities Council of Canada.

ORCID iD

George C Grinnell https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9530-233X

References

924 Gilman Street (2008) Directed by Curran J. USA: Scarred Films.
Bayard M (1999) Introduction. In: O’Hara C (ed.) The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise. London: AK Press, pp.8–13.
Berlant L (2011) Cruel Optimism. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Berlant L and Edelman L (2014) Sex: Or the Unbearable. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Bestley R (2016) Big a little A: the graphic language of anarchy. In: Dines M and Worley M (eds) The Aesthetic of Our Anger: Anarcho-punk, Politics, and Music. Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, pp.43–66.
Blush S (2010) American Hardcore: A Tribal History. Port Townsend: Feral House.
Butler J (1997) The Psychic Life of Power: Theories of Subjection. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
Clark D (2003) The death and life of punk, the last subculture. In Muggleton D and Weinzierl R (eds) The Post-Subcultures Reader. Oxford: Berg, pp.223–236.
Davies J (1994) The future of ‘no future’: punk rock and postmodern theory. The Journal of Popular Culture 29(4): 3–25.
Derrida J (2001) The Work of Mourning (trans. Brault P and Naas M). Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press.
Duncombe S and Tremblay M (2011) White Riot? In: Duncombe S and Tremblay M (eds) White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race. New York, Verso, pp.1–17.
Furness Z (2012) Introduction: attempted education and righteous accusations. In: Furness Z (ed.) Punkademics. Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, pp.5–24.
Haenfler R (2006) Straight Edge. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
Hebdige D (1979) Subculture: The Meaning of Style. London: Routledge.
LeBlanc L (1999) Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
McPheeters S (2020) Mutations: The Many Strange Faces of Hardcore Punk. Los Angeles, CA: Rare Bird Books.
Marcus S (2010) Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution. New York: Harper Collins.
Nguyen M (2011) It’s (not) a white world: looking for race in punk. In: Duncombe S and Tremblay M (eds) White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race. New York: Verso, pp.257–267.
O’Connor A (2008) Punk Record Labels and the Struggle for Autonomy. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.
O’Connor A (2012) Maximumsocialscience. In: Furness Z (ed.) Punkademics. Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, pp.91–104.
Pearson J (2010a) From the Graveyard of the Arousal Industry. Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press.
Pearson J (2010b) We shat in our hats, pulled it over our heads, and called it flowers. In: Roettinger B, Treff M and Hadis D (eds) Touchable Sound: A Collection of 7-Inch Records from the USA. New York: Soundscreen Designs, pp.76–80.
Petterson B (2009) Burning Fight: The Nineties Hardcore Revolution in Ethics, Politics, Spirit, and Sound. Huntington Beach, CA: Revelation Records.
Radway J (2011) Zines, half-lives, and afterlives: on the temporalities of social and political change. Publication of the Modern Language Association 126(1): 140–150.
Raposo A (2016) Rival tribal rebel revel: the anarcho punk movement and subcultural intercine rivalries. In: Dines M and Worley M (eds) The Aesthetic of Our Anger: Anarcho-punk, Politics, and Music. Brooklyn: Minor Compositions, pp.67–90.
Rettman T (2017) Straight Edge: A Clear Headed Hardcore Punk History. New York: Bazillion Points.
Salad Days (2014) Directed by Crawford S. USA: New Rose Films.
Sedgwick EK (2003) *Touching Feeling*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Taqwacore (2009) Directed by Majeed O. Canada: Eyesteelfilm.
Thompson S (2004) *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
Williams R (1977) *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Wilson E (1999) The bohemianization of mass culture. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2(1): 11–32.

**Biographical note**

George C Grinnell is Associate Professor in the Department of English and Cultural Studies at UBC, Okanagan Campus. He is the author of *The Social Life of Biometrics* (Rutgers UP, 2020) and *The Age of Hypochondria* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) and has published on technology from a humanities perspective as well as Romantic-era literature and theory in journals such as *Studies in Romanticism, European Romantic Review* and *CR: The New Centennial Review*. He received the Gustave O. Arlt Award in the Humanities in 2011 from the Council of Graduate Schools and was the 2015 recipient of the F.E.L. Priestley Prize. This article was initiated during a SSHRC Insight Development Grant.