The Filth and the Fury: An Essay on Punk Rock Heavy Metal Karaoke

Jason Lee Oakes

Lauren is a photographer who lives in New York City. The daughter of a urologist, she grew up in Westchester County and graduated *cum laude* from NYU. Lauren's master's degree in photography has served her well at Punk Rock Heavy Metal Karaoke (PMK), a live band karaoke night in New York City she attends almost every week.[1] The gaze of her camera is frequently trained on friends and strangers as they sing, scream, and pose onstage. With over one hundred of her photos posted online, this is still only a small portion of the thousand-plus PMK photos on the photo-sharing website flickr.com. In documenting this amateur event, Lauren is also joined by a host of videographers, including a number of professionals. PMK has inspired a documentary film that played the independent festival circuit, *Punk Rock Heavy Metal Karaoke: The Movie* (2001), and videos of individual singers have been uploaded on YouTube.[2] The joy found in looking and being looked at is a big part of PMK's appeal, and, as one might expect, hearing and being heard is also central to the event. Every week the voice is "gazed" upon by listeners much as the body is gazed upon by spectators. A great deal of attention focuses on how individual singers emulate the original vocalist of a song and the degree to which they stake out a vocal identity of their own, as well as how they present themselves in relation (or contrast) to familiar rock star visual codes.

The power of this bodily and vocal display is illustrated one Monday night as Lauren prepares to venture into the more aggressive reaches of the punk songlist. Having previously limited herself to a handful of pop-tinged songs—songs that are in keeping with her friendly offstage demeanor—Lauren has taken a bit of ribbing for her ever-present smile and what one PMK regular, Rico, calls her "aura of niceness." So when Rico dares her to sing "something with the words 'fuck,' 'cunt,' or 'abortion,'" whether intended as a joke or not, she decides to accept the challenge.

After the emcee calls Lauren's name, she nervously accepts the microphone and the beer-stained plastic-sheathed lyric sheet. As the band launches into a stampeding, overdriven two-note riff Lauren's eyes intensify and she spits out the words:

Current Musicology, No. 85 (Spring 2008)
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> I'VE FUCKED A SHEEP AND I'VE FUCKED A GOAT! I RAMMED MY COCK RIGHT DOWN ITS THROAT! SO WOT?! SO WOT?! SO WOT SO WOT YEW BORING LITTLE CUNT!

In the act of singing "So What" by Anti-Nowhere League ([1981] 1996),[3] Lauren's entire demeanor changes. The smile remains but there is a visible gleam of malice in her eye. On the small stage her body is propelled forward as she moves aggressively toward the audience. Likewise her voice is cast out of her body with a shrieking force that twists the simple melody of the song into new shapes. The reaction of the audience to Lauren's new persona is overwhelming positive. Those nearest the stage gaze up and scream the next lines together, ending with an accusatory "WHO CARES ABOUT YOU! YOU! YOU! YOU!" as they point alternately toward the stage and each other. At the song's end, after Lauren has sung about her further adventures "spewing up on a pint of piss," "jacking up until [she] bleed[s]," "suck[ing] an old man's cock," and "fuck[ing] a schoolgirl's crack," the audience breaks out into rapturous applause and approving catcalls.

By her own admission, singing "So What" for the first time destabilizes Lauren's sense of discrete selfhood. Afterwards, she describes feeling "momentarily possessed" by her newly discovered "dark side," letting out "a devilish fit of laughter" when she left the stage. Even a couple of years later, in a quote taken from her wedding announcement (she married the karaoke band's drummer), Lauren describes the PMK experience in similar terms: "it unleashed something I never knew existed." Drawing on imagery appropriate to a horror movie, she could just as easily be describing *The Exorcist* and its depiction of a young girl whose body and voice become instruments of the Devil. Still, despite such malevolent metaphors, Lauren uses them to frame the experience in affirmative terms: "I used to sing poorly on purpose, just because I didn't want people to know who I was. Your voice is just your *voice* for everything. What binds everybody at [PMK] is that everybody's doing that, letting their voices out, saying 'this is who I am.'" Shifting from being "momentarily possessed" to "this is who I am," and shifting from a discourse of horror to therapy-speak, PMK is alternatively portrayed as something akin to a satanic ritual and a particularly effective form of group psychotherapy, with voices "let out" like repressed memories on a therapist's couch. What can account for these seeming contradictions? How does a weekly regime of singing and screaming about humiliation, horror, and hate—deliberately disfiguring one's own voice and perhaps vocal chords in the process—come to be understood as "instant therapy" (or, in a neologism coined by Lauren, as "karaotharsis")? In this article I will attempt to unravel the power that Lauren and many others attribute to PMK. Drawing on my participation in the event from 2001 to the present, I examine the relationships between abjection, noise, karaoke, gender, and the genre of punk rock at PMK.

Jason Lee Oakes

The Karaoke Revolution: I'm Not OK, You're Not OK

> JT gets all fucked up in some karaoke bar.
> After two drinks he's a loser, after three drinks he's a star.
> Getting all nostalgic as he sings "I Will Survive."
> Hey baby can you bleed like me?
> C'mon baby can you bleed like me?
>
> —Garbage "Bleed Like Me" (2005)[4]

In one brief stanza, the lyrics of "Bleed Like Me" by pop collagists Garbage effectively capture the image of karaoke as it is portrayed in much of popular culture in the English-speaking world. In this setting, karaoke is an activity strongly associated with bars and with the excessive drinking that can provide "liquid courage" to those unaccustomed to singing in public. Much like bars themselves in societies where drinking is alternately encouraged and condemned, karaoke is met with a great deal of ambivalence. On the one hand, it is often portrayed as a debased form of expression catering to "fucked up . . . losers" prone to unseemly nostalgia, sentimentality, or narcissism. On the other hand, karaoke is often portrayed as a poignant and occasionally transcendent outlet for the common (wo)man who is merely trying to make their way through life, and consequently is beheld as a truly democratic art form where everyone gets their chance to be a "star" (if not for fifteen minutes as forecast by Andy Warhol, then at least for the three-to-four-minute duration of a pop song).[5] These seemingly contradictory representations are in keeping with what is perceived (implicitly or explicitly) to be the contradictory, boundary-blurring nature of karaoke itself. Taking place in liminal settings where many patrons use alcohol and music to achieve an altered state—to escape *and* to more fully inhabit "the self"—a fine line is negotiated between being a "loser" and being a "star," between expressing dignity and determination ("I Will Survive") or depression and desperation ("fucked up" and "nostalgic"). The core metaphor used throughout the Garbage song is self-induced bleeding—ambivalently positioned as both harmful and healing. In the song's lyrics, the penetration of stable boundaries (most prominently, the skin) brings to mind the medieval practice of healing by drawing blood, and the analogous psychoanalytic practice of "bleeding out" anxieties through controlled purging of repressed, debased desires.

The karaoke landscape is characterized by a tension negotiated between locally based scenes and global media conglomeration. For a practice that is unusually enthusiastic about popular music's status as a mass-mediated, commodified form, there is a common tendency for local, "grass roots" scenes to build up around regular karaoke nights (much more commonly than scenes build up around "original" live music scenes, in my experience). Sara Cohen defines "scene" as "a shared musical activity or taste . . . used to

describe situations in which distinctions between informal and formal music activity, and between the activities and roles of music audiences, producers, and performers, are blurred" (1999:239). Working from this definition, PMK easily meets the criteria for a "scene," given that many stable, established boundaries are violated at the event, most obviously in the fact that the audience *are* the performers. These are only a few of the distinctions that are blurred at PMK and other karaoke events—e.g., distinctions between live and mediated (Keil 1984), amateur and professional, public and private, global and local, and degradation and transcendence. In the realm of sound, the dividing line between music and noise is often challenged, given that novice singers routinely violate established boundaries of pitch and rhythm. At PMK, the timbral distortions of punk and metal music, and of voices pushed to their limits, further test the line between noise and music.

Furthermore, PMK challenges the categorical integrity of karaoke itself, as it inhabits a grey area between karaoke and not-karaoke. While karaoke is defined in large part by the use of pre-recorded musical accompaniment, at PMK the pre-recorded background music is dropped in favor of a live rock band. PMK is held at venues that otherwise host rock shows and other live music labeled as original—giving singers the experience of fronting an actual band at an actual rock club. These facts, taken together with a popular discourse that often disparages karaoke, leads some participants to claim that PMK is not "karaoke" at all, notwithstanding the inclusion of the word in the event's name. Yet despite these important distinctions, PMK is structured like a typical karaoke night: willing participants sign up to sing a song chosen from a list, and over the course of an evening they are called to perform by an emcee. Singers follow along with printed lyrics—although lyrics are read from a piece of paper rather than a video screen—and most make no pretense of being professional vocalists or aspiring to be.

The karaoke band's Monday-night residency at downtown nightclub Arlene Grocery—often referred to as "Arlene's" and located within walking distance of CBGB (aka CBGB's), the acknowledged birthplace of punk—lasted over five years. The long-running regular timeslot did much to nurture the scene, unlike other live music clubs that have largely dispensed with the practice of regular band residencies. In fact, the event has kicked off a national and to some extent global network of related music scenes. Inspired by PMK, other live karaoke nights have taken root elsewhere in New York City, in Chicago, Seattle, and Atlanta, and overseas (one Dutch event uses exactly the same name). Many strong social bonds have formed among individuals who have met at the event, and some seek out other live karaoke events in New York City and elsewhere. The bonds extend far beyond the karaoke gatherings and have been reinforced in the multiple discourses

that the "regulars" (as they call themselves) produce around the event. Since August 2002, a dedicated PMK Internet discussion board has tallied over one hundred thousand postings—divided into postings that deal directly with PMK ("Karaoke Chatter"), music more generally ("Rock and Roll . . . WHOOO!"), social happenings among group members ("Other Events"), and other topics ("General Discussion"), with a special category set aside for movies ("Cinematic Genius").[6]

In addition to the internally produced discourse on the scene, there is a substantial external discourse on PMK, including a plethora of journalistic pieces, radio segments, and tourist guidebook profiles of the event. As with the discourse around karaoke more generally, these profiles often portray the event in diametrically opposed terms. In 2002 *The Village Voice* included the event in its "Best of New York" issue, promising the reader they could "forget screens with silly music videos or the sinking sense of embarrassment that most karaoke events induce" and instead commune with "angry but loyal would-be stars" and "brave and talented singers" (Cole 2002). In the same year, the competing alternative weekly *New York Press* named PMK "the best reason to stay home on Mondays," bashing it because "it's in all the tourist guides . . . it attracts every yuppie dork from 96th to Houston . . . [and] it sucks" (*New York Press* 2002). Such commentary simply piggybacks on the contradictions embodied by the event itself, explicitly alluding to the "art vs. commerce" binary so frequently invoked in popular music (and especially rock music) criticism that finds no overlap or ambiguity between "authentic" or "inauthentic." According to *The Village Voice*, PMK is authentic because it plays host to "genuinely honest" forms of self-expression, whereas the *Press* links inauthenticity to an audience made up of tourists and "yuppies" who presumably treat music as just another consumer product. This perceived tension between art and commerce is heightened at PMK, given the self-proclaimed anti-commercialism of many punk/metal musicians and fans (notwithstanding the commercial success of key artists). In general, the genres are closely linked with a rebellious and anti-authoritarian image that is very much at odds with North American karaoke and the commercially successful "pop" music that makes up its repertoire.

This categorical confusion may arise in part from karaoke's relative novelty. Compared to a country such as Japan, which has a long tradition of public, non-professional singing (Mitsui 1998) and where karaoke is conceptualized more in terms of "participation" than of "performance" (Yano 1996:1), the US has no such tradition or contextualizing discourse except in isolated pockets and primarily among immigrants. In this setting, there is no well-defined ideological or social space for karaoke, which as a result is often viewed as one of the lowest among low-brow forms of entertainment.

From the "cheesy" canned music and accompanying videos to the bars full of the "drunk, desperate, and deluded," such clichés about karaoke position it as an abject form of music-making. Furthermore, karaoke is sometimes criticized for being a cheap form of entertainment that takes gigs away from "legitimate" musicians, with karaoke disc jockeys disparaged as "no-talents with a machine" whose musical knowledge does not extend beyond "pushing buttons and setting things up."[7] Even George H. W. Bush got into the act of karaoke-bashing during his failed 1992 reelection campaign, in one speech labeling Bill Clinton and Al Gore "the karaoke kids" for their willingness to "sing any tune they think will get them elected" (quoted in Drew 2001:18).

Closely related to the perceived violation of professional/amateur and authentic/inauthentic binaries, karaoke may also be considered debasing for blurring distinctions between originality and mimicry—a distinction that for many consumers organizes music aesthetically and in the marketplace (e.g., "original" songs versus "cover versions"). While karaoke is sometimes viewed as a way to express individuality, it is more often criticized for encouraging slavish imitation. Karaoke ethnographer Robert Drew notes that the word "karaoke" itself has become shorthand for any seemingly derivative form of expression:

> In the Anglo-American lexicon, karaoke often serves as a metaphor for anything deemed shopworn or soulless. A shot-for-shot remake of Hitchcock's *Psycho* is "the film equivalent of karaoke." An Italian designer's Japanese-influenced fashion line is "karaoke couture." And any musician whose live performances parrot her recordings, or who uses recorded material in her live shows, or who simply sounds too much like some other musician evokes instant comparisons to karaoke. (2001:21)

If an activity as seemingly innocuous as karaoke is frequently disparaged in such vehement terms—terms that focus on the integrity of discrete self-hood—perhaps karaoke poses a deeper threat to widely shared ontological distinctions that posit an unmistakable, inviolable boundary dividing "me" from "not-me" (and, in capitalist terms, between "mine" and "not-mine").

Such a threat can provoke anxiety even among karaoke devotees. While karaoke practitioners seem to take the uniqueness and distinctiveness of recording artists for granted (songs are typically listed by artist), at the same time they undermine these qualities by temporarily inhabiting or "renting out" the songs for the duration of a performance. In a posting to the Internet message board, one PMK regular poses a question in the subject line, "Persona or Reality?":

> I had a conversation with [another regular] a few weeks back . . . she was of the opinion that everyone on the stage wears a certain persona for the act, i.e. a contrived stage personality. I, on the other hand, feel the exact opposite: The three minutes a week I get on stage at Arlene's are the three minutes a week I get to lose all social inhibition and behave like a complete ass, i.e. myself, and not get judged for it. That's what I love about punk metal karaoke, you get to live out every little rock and roll impulse you have no matter how idiotic, and have the crowd love you for it.

Rather than wearing a facade at PMK, this individual sees it as the one place where he can remove the facade. Framing his argument in sociological terms as a loss of "social inhibition," and in psychological terms as a full inhabitation of (my)self, self-actualization is paradoxically effected through the fusing of one's own voice with the implied voice of the original singer. The framing of such experiences takes on a wider significance as PMK-like musicking has become common in the realm of virtual reality. The advent of live karaoke events served as a "real world" harbinger of hugely popular video games such as *Karaoke Revolution*, *Guitar Hero*, and *Rock Star* (Harmonix Music Systems) that are now played by millions worldwide.

In terms of Western popular music, this "karaoke revolution" can be traced back to the beginnings of punk rock and its much-heralded DIY (Do It Yourself) ideology. Whether framed in terms of amateurization, democratization, or co-optation, the fan-centered discourse around DIY encouraged musical novices to pick up instruments, form bands, and record songs—in effect learning in public and creating a network of venues and labels as they went. While these goals were realized to a greater or lesser extent in different settings, and in varying degrees of distinction to the "mainstream," the DIY mindset has only become more entrenched in the current era of MP3s, Myspace, and a financially unstable music industry. As a genre that anticipated emergent approaches to popular music-making more generally, punk rock began as a kind of "karaoke before karaoke." For example, in the mid-1970s, when nobody in the rock scene or the counterculture wore leather jackets or got bowl haircuts, the Ramones adapted this look as their uniform in a self-conscious nod to 1950s media images of rebels and hoods. The formalist rigor of the Ramones, regarded by many as the first punk rock band, turned pop into a twisted form of performance art. Joey Ramone's voice was an unlikely fusion of imitation British inflections and thick Queens dialect, and the band's music made reference to British Invasion and garage rock, early-1960s girl group melodicism, and Stooges-like primitivism. While the Ramones were certainly not the first to imitate their musical idols, they did help to popularize a newly reflexive approach to imitation—an approach that took the amateur enthusiasm, the unashamed

homage, the sense of irony, and the evident self-invention of "the fan" and placed them at the center not only of pop music consumption, but also of pop music production. In the UK, punk developed along similar lines that also presaged karaoke. Sid Vicious took up the bass and his new image in emulation of Dee Dee Ramone, and Johnny Rotten auditioned for the Sex Pistols by miming a manic, parodic version of Alice Cooper's "I'm Eighteen" played on a jukebox.

Given the strong link between punk rock and karaoke, and the positioning of PMK between the two, in the following pages I will briefly historicize punk as a genre culture before moving on to PMK itself and the ways that female regulars negotiate gender at the event. Given the breadth of these topics, however, it is first necessary to theorize an underlying architecture that links them together. In the following section, I will suggest that *abjection* provides a common conceptual framework that can be meaningfully applied to karaoke, punk rock, femininity, and their interaction at PMK.

Defining Abjection: Making a Mess of Surfaces

Much of the discourse around karaoke and PMK bears an uncanny resemblance to "the abject" as theorized by Julia Kristeva. In her formulation, the abject has an "almost-there" presence that "beseeches a discharge, a convulsion, a crying out" (1982:2) through ritual expulsion. Kristeva outlines three distinguishing traits of the abject. First, abjection is produced when a seemingly stable boundary is crossed and threatens to dissolve. It is this "collapse of the border between inside and outside" (1982:53) that "disturbs identity, system, order" (1982:4). The abject "does not respect borders, positions, rules," but rather "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (1982:4), where one sphere is penetrated, polluted, or possessed by the Other. Second, abjection stems less from an outside threat than a threat from within that confuses stable boundaries. In efforts to expel the abject, the danger is that one will only be partially successful, resulting in "something rejected from which one does not part" (1982:4). The half-expelled object then exists in an uncomfortable space of both One and the Other, challenging the clear distinction between inside and outside, between "me" and "not-me." Third, the abject manifests itself most literally in the physical realm—it is both of the body and discharged from the body. Viscous fluids occupy an uncertain space between liquid and solid and between containment and expulsion. Examples include feces, urine, blood, menstrual discharge, semen, vaginal secretions, mother's milk, pus, bile, and ultimately the body itself in the form of a decaying corpse. Revulsion, shame, and horror are the socially instilled responses to abject "waste" products—the muck, garbage, and refuse of

the body—that are labeled unclean. According to Kristeva, these expelled bodily substances are considered vile, degraded, and taboo not only for their surface messiness, but for the mess they make of surfaces themselves. Likewise, encounters with the abject are also known to confound either/or categorization, often provoking responses that sit uneasily between repulsion and attraction, or between experiences of pleasure and pain.

In many accounts, the voice is viewed as another of the abject "bodily secretions" that penetrates and potentially disrupts boundaries. In the act of singing, especially when electronically amplified, the voice is put on display both as sound that resides within the body, and as sound expelled from the body and projected into space. According to Elizabeth Tolbert, the voice is interpreted as abject when heard both as "a direct and unmediated expression" and as "a symbolic representation" (2004:108). In *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*, Carolyn Abbate explores how the voice crosses permeable boundaries, taking "audible flight from the continuum that embeds it" (1991:29). In a psychoanalytic analysis of music and its bodily and cultural effects, David Schwarz draws on Abbate in analyzing how "musical voices cross and enunciate thresholds" (1997:3). In the "audible gaze" (1997:17) of intensive listening, he describes instances where "the boundary separating the body from the external world seems dissolved or crossed in some way" (1997:7). While it is open to debate whether this sensation is a widely shared experience based in physiology or a unique culturally and discursively mediated phenomenon, the origins of abjection interest me less than its experiential component at PMK.

Critical and casual discourses around popular music include frequent reference to the crossing and enunciation of thresholds. "Good" music is often praised for taking the listener to a realm outside their own consciousness, and at the same time for helping listeners to better inhabit their own physical beings and personalities. As one PMK regular, Cindy, puts it, "we almost all do the same thing with music, including the guys in the band, where we use music to sort of connect with ourselves, and escape, and for protection and all those kinds of things." In the drawing and displacing of boundaries, there is a constant interplay between what Schwartz labels primary and secondary abjection: "primary abjections are produced when *boundaries are drawn.* Secondary abjection fantasizes a return back across these thresholds. These secondary abjections are produced when *boundaries are erased*" (1997:150). In the psychosexual stages of development outlined by Freud—a model disseminated through the medical establishment and widely filtered into popular culture—the first experience of abjection comes at the point where the infant recognizes him- or herself as an individual. At this point, they begin to differentiate between a discrete "me" that can be

distinguished from the "not-me" from which they emerged (i.e., the mother). From a Freudian perspective, if all primary abjections are framed in relation to this separation from the mother and the womb, then secondary abjections likewise act as a symbolic return to the womb and its "sonorous envelope" (Schwarz 1997). Thus, as Kristeva and others have noted, the abject is commonly gendered feminine. The abject is discursively linked to Otherness in terms quite similar to the traditional (and perjorative) representation of femininity—e.g., impurity, instability, irrationality, ambiguity, physicality, unfathomability, and so on. However, the feminine associations of primary abjection are complicated by the masculine, implicitly phallic penetration enacted in secondary abjection where borders are temporarily violated.

Taken together, there is an undeniable common theme of abject penetration at PMK, both literal and figurative, where one sphere is momentarily possessed by the Other. Consider the various types of threshold-crossing in Lauren's performance of "So What." The lyrics, in graphically (yet facetiously) depicting acts of bestiality, infections of crabs and lice, drug-and-alcohol induced vomiting and bleeding, and sex with underage girls and elderly men, focus on violating boundaries between human and animal, between old and young, and between bodily expulsions and infestations. In Lauren's performance, thresholds of sex and gender are also crossed when a woman sings about her various phallic adventures. In her own telling, Lauren describes her karaoke experience in terms of both primary and secondary abjection. She is "momentarily possessed" at the same time that she uses music to express "this is who I am"—as ontological boundaries (distinguishing "me" and "not-me") are dissolved and asserted at the same time. The music that accompanies Lauren's performance at PMK aurally mirrors this abjection, featuring "dirty" distorted guitar that is as much noise as music, a bass line that precisely mimics the guitar and thus blurs any distinction between the instruments' functions, and repetitive pummeling drums meant to penetrate the body as much as to keep the beat (at PMK and in other live rock settings the drums are often felt as much as they are heard).

A seismic explosion of sound is produced by the musicians at PMK who appear to physically attack their instruments, forcibly expelling the songs. Likewise, in "letting their voices out," Lauren portrays singers in the act of abject expulsion where voices are not merely activated but rather are unleashed. These kinds of descriptors, which appear to make direct reference to abjection, are echoed by many other regulars at PMK as well. For instance, a regular named Wellington gives this description of the cast of regulars at the event:

> It's just that there's something almost trapped in each one of them . . . I think each one of them has a certain—well, this isn't quite the right word—

> but a certain rage. Certainly for myself, there's something that I can get out there that I haven't felt anywhere else. I don't care if it's sex, or if it's hitting somebody playing hockey, there's just something not quite there.

Whether the semantic slippage is deliberate or not, there are a number of compelling categorical ambiguities in this statement. Wellington describes something that is only half-there that is nonetheless expelled—as witnessed in the ambiguity of something "not quite there" but still there, something that is "almost trapped" that one can still manage to "get out." Seemingly, the voice does not come forth willingly; it must be forcibly expelled. This effort is observable not only in verbal representations after the fact, but also in the singers' own voices and in the faces and bodies that are equally on display. Singers tug at their own clothing, pound their chests, or stab invisibly at the air, as if trying to pierce some unseen boundary, trying to let something out, and it is not always easy to tell if these faces and voices are contorted in pleasure or pain (figure 1).

The discourse of abjection utilized by many at PMK is not invoked at random, but rather draws on and extends a longstanding appropriation of the abject (and more broadly of psychoanalytic discourses) in the genre of rock and especially of punk rock. It is to this subject that I now turn.

The Powers of Punk: DIY and Musical Abjection

In this section, I consider the contribution of punk rock, as a musical genre, to themes of abjection at PMK. While in the interest of space I am neglecting the role of heavy metal at the event, there is a case to be made that PMK (which was inspired by and began as strictly a punk rock event) is aesthetically and ideologically rooted in punk rock much more than in metal. The best supporting argument to be made here is that PMK embraces the punk-derived DIY approach that prizes amateur inspiration over the virtuosity and grandiosity associated with cultures of heavy metal. Thus, in keeping with more recent theorizations of "genre," I am defining punk here less in terms of specific musical style than in terms of the genre's "implications for how, where, and with whom people make and experience music" (Holt 2007:2)—specifically, how punk has been aligned with abjection.

In *But Is It Garbage: On Rock and Trash*, Steven Hamelman delivers a treatise on the "trash trope" of rock 'n' roll, which "assumes the guises of trash, garbage, rubbish, waste, debris, junk, and other synonyms that describe the disposed-of products of a throwaway society" (2004:13). Expressed in "metaphors of waste" (2004:17), Hamelman finds garbage to be a common image and metaphor used in rock lyrics, criticism, consumerism, and culture; for instance, the book jacket refers to "throwaway tunes, wasted fans, crappy

Figure 1: Screaming at PMK. Photographs by the author.

Figure 1 (cont.)

reviews, [and] junk bins of remaindered albums." This fascination with waste is framed as both celebration and critique, perched on a boundary that is abject in its ambiguity. Hamelman argues that punk—"knee-deep in garbage, dreck, debris, waste, and junk" (2004:56)—amplified the "trashy" discourse of rock even beyond what had existed before.[8]

One of the most notorious pieces of writing on punk is a newspaper article titled "The Filth and the Fury!" which ran in the British tabloid paper *The Daily Mirror* on December 2, 1976. It opened with the following paragraph:

> A pop group shocked millions of viewers last night with the filthiest language heard on British television. The Sex Pistols, leaders of the new "punk rock" cult, hurled a string of obscenities at interviewer Bill Grundy on Thames TV's family teatime programme "Today." The Thames switchboard was flooded with protests . . . Lorry driver James Holmes, 47, was outraged that his eight-year-old son Lee heard the swearing . . . and kicked in the screen of his TV. "It blew up and I was knocked backwards," he said. "But I was so angry and disgusted with this filth that I took a swing with my boot. I can swear as well as anyone, but I don't want this sort of muck coming into my house at teatime." (Greig, McCarthy, and Peacock 1976, quoted in Vermorel and Vermorel [1978] 1987:32)

This article played a major role both in popularizing punk rock and in creating an instant backlash against the genre.[9] More important than the actual details of Grundy's "interview" is its iconic status and the lasting impact of the notorious headline on punk cultures (not to mention the indelible image of the lorry driver violently penetrating his television screen). Punk scholar Dave Laing maintains that "along with the Sex Pistols' 'God Save the Queen' record, [the Grundy interview] was the most effective piece of provocation of the punk era" (1985:35). Decades later, *The Filth and the Fury* (2002) was the title used for the definitive documentary on the Sex Pistols. In the UK, the purported "filth," "fury," and overall "muck" of punk rock struck a loud chord, creating a moral panic that sought to cast out the abject element from British society. Due to the on-air swearing and the publicity it created, the Sex Pistols were largely banned from most concert venues in the UK, and even in the US "punk" was turned into a dirty word that for many years guaranteed any band labeled as such a lack of radio airplay and major record label support.[10]

Following the Sex Pistols' brief existence, many punk acts carried on the tradition of abject shock tactics. Punk filth perhaps reached its apogee in the 1980s and early 1990s with GG Allin (whose song "Die When You Die" is included on the PMK songlist). Notorious for physical attacks against audience members, bloody self-mutilation, onstage defecation, and

invitations to fellate, urinate on, and brutalize his body, Allin usually ended shows covered in a thick layer of his own filth, giving him an appearance more like a creature from a horror movie than a human being. One PMK regular, Aaron, who was present at Allin's final show and the subsequent riot, describes it as the one time in his life that was even more frightening than being in downtown New York on 9/11.

While most punk musicians and fans do not approach the Grand Guignol excesses of GG Allin, the genre is still defined in large part by the linkage of obscenity (filth), anger (fury), and amateurism (noise). Of course, each of these three elements has been interpreted variously across different historical periods, locales, and subgenres, and by different individuals. Still, the constant negotiation of "filth and fury" expressed in music that borders on noise is central to how punk is produced and interpreted.[11] In fact, this grounding in filth and fury invites chaotic confusion and radically different interpretations of what punk "means" and who it stands for and belongs to. Notably, the word "muck," invoked by the lorry driver quoted in *The Daily Mirror*, is used not only to describe filth, dirt, or slime, but also a state of chaos or confusion (e.g., "to make a muck of things"). Along these lines, many have noted the confusing vacillation of punk cultures between far left and far right politics and outright nihilism that shuns political engagement. Punk historian Jon Savage highlights the "arresting ambiguities" of punk rock cultures in relation to race, class, gender, sexuality, and other markers of identity. Praising songs that jump "into the abyss" of lyrical contradiction, vocal glossolalia, and assaultive noise with "no tune just relentless punk" (1992:415), Savage explicitly heralds the genre in Freudian terms when he writes of punk's "real return of the repressed" (1992:138). While rock as a whole has long been alternately heralded or criticized in similarly pseudo-Freudian terms, before the advent of punk it had never been so unequivocally positioned as an expression of pure Id with no recourse made to rational explanations such as juvenile delinquency or clear political aims.

In *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (1995), Simon Reynolds and Joy Press devote an entire chapter to "Flirting With the Void: Abjection in Rock." In a book suffused with psychoanalytic readings of rock music in relation to gender, the chapter on abjection is devoted entirely to proto-punk, punk, and post-punk bands.[12] Positioned both as a wallowing-in and a "ritual exorcism" (1995:85) of abject muck (i.e., as both primary and secondary abjection), The Stooges' "lust for abasement" manifests itself in music that "rollick[s] in the primordial ooze" with its "turgid torrent of brackish guitars" (1995:87). Likewise Reynolds and Press describe the Sex Pistols' "ferocious confrontation with the realm of maternal horror" in their song "Bodies"—a "threatening and incoherent song" with "[Johnny] Rotten

practically gargling the imagery of gurgling discharges" (1995:90). Finally, they focus on Nirvana's final album *In Utero* and its first single "Heart-Shaped Box," which "oscillates between womb-nostalgia and dread of sexual/emotional engulfment." The suicide of Kurt Cobain is likewise ascribed to his "desire to retreat from the world into numbed-out sanctuary," eventually "blossom[ing] into a full-blown death wish" that had its roots in "what Freud called the nirvana principle, a tendency in all organic life to revert to the lowest possible level of irritation, to become inanimate" (1995:97).

With the consistent references to psychoanalytic notions of the abject in the discourse around punk rock, how might this abjection be communicated in musical terms? One common strategy is to translate the notion of "filth and fury" into music that sounds messy and angry—even if the resulting noise is produced in a deliberate, exacting manner. The deliberate amateurism of many early punk records—limited to a few chords, no solos, sloppy playing, and rough timbres—quickly became sonic signifiers of the DIY aesthetic, with its stated aim of transcending one's musical and personal limitations. This led to efforts by even trained and experienced musicians to try to sound unstudied, indifferent, or at the very least "spontaneous." This indifference and spontaneity is signified in part by the messy overspilling of established musical boundaries—playing out of tune, rushing ahead of the beat, singing outside the natural vocal register, and straining at the limitations of the human voice or instrumental technology—that signals abjection in the sonic realm.[13] For detractors, noise is likened to *pollution* in support of claims that punk (or metal, rap, etc.) is not music at all. For supporters, noise can serve as a sonic signifier of liberation from musical and social strictures, or even as a harbinger of emergent social formations where "what is noise to the old order is harmony to the new" (Attali [1977] 1985:35).

For singers in genres such as punk and heavy metal, the primary strategy of achieving the transcendence of noise is through screaming. Screaming is truly DIY par excellence in that anyone can do it, and it does not require anything outside the body. The scream, ambiguously positioned between musical expression and noise, is also perched on a bodily threshold. While the forceful expulsion of the voice makes the body audible across long distances, at the same time it is more rooted in the muck of the body's materiality. Once the voice crosses a certain threshold in screaming, the materiality of the vocal chords becomes audibly apparent. In the view of Allen Weiss, screaming serves as the "nonmaterial double of excrement, [which] may be both expression and expulsion, a sign of both creation and frustration" (1992:287). What's more, one can hear the inside of the body being disturbed, pushed beyond normal capacity, to the point where repeated crossings of this threshold may cause actual damage—mutilation of the vocal cords in

the form of polyps or nodules. For punk and metal singing, however, the vocal timbre such damage produces is often considered desirable,[14] and it is this abject physicality that makes the voice visceral, able to express strong emotion and especially emotional duress.

With its basis in filth and fury—and its emphasis on the materiality of the human body and the voice—punk rock has from early in its history drawn substantially on the "trash aesthetics" of horror and pornography. While even "mainstream" punk commonly draws on discourses of horror, this link is made even more explicit in the movement of "horror punk" bands who distill imagery, lyrics, and sounds from horrific films, literature, and fashion. Many horror film analyses—especially of the splatter variety that became dominant in the 1970s—could just as easily be discussing heavy metal or punk rock. For instance, Barbara Creed draws on Kristeva to explain the modern-day "ritual" of horror films—where ritual is "the means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element" (1993:1). Michael Grant—building on Creed's work—describes horror films as "a kind of modern defilement rite" that "bring about a confrontation with the abject such that the abject (the zombie, the vampire, etc.) is finally ejected and the boundaries of the symbolic, of the human, are re-established" (2004:179). Whereas many critics view horror movies as nothing more than ugly nihilism, others argue that horror movies serve as a meaningful index of the deepest fantasies and fears of a given time and place.[15]

In addition to horror, early punk culture was also directly inspired by the relative mainstreaming of pornography in the 1970s. The word "punk" itself was originally used to refer to young, male hustlers (usually homosexual prostitutes). In London, the nascent punk scene was centered at the King's Road boutique Sex run by Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood, notorious for selling fetish gear and other sexual paraphernalia, not for its functional component, but as a fashion statement and (arguably) social critique. In both horror and pornography, such ambiguities are highlighted in stock images that provoke simultaneous fascination and revulsion—the so-called "money shots" that feature the spewing of sexual fluids or the splatter of blood. In these scenes, abject bodily "wastes" penetrate the surface of the bodily container, accompanied by screams of pleasure or pain on the soundtrack (again, not always so easy to tell apart). Linda Williams notes with regard to pornography that "it was not until the early seventies, with the rise of the hard-core feature, that the money shot assumed the narrative function of signaling the climax of a genital event" ([1989] 1999:93). Interpreting this new convention as a contradictory sign of both abundance and lack, where "escalated visual evidence of pleasure suggests an uneasiness, a lack of belief in the previous standard for representation of pleasure,"

Williams suggests that the money shot was a highly ambivalent response to "the new challenge of a different clitoral pleasure" during the feminist era ([1989] 1999:119).

Such ambivalences are often associated with this particular historical period in the US and UK—a post–peace-and-love era marked by a mixture of growing political extremism and pop culture escapism, by unprecedented material excess and overall economic decline, and by feminist empowerment and a reassertion of male privilege and machismo (an era that in certain respects resembles our own post-9/11 world). Taken together, it appears more than coincidental that the newly explicit displays of bodily abjection in pornography and horror during the 1970s—where the body is literally turned inside out, and which both exercise a fixation on bodily pleasure and pain experienced by women—directly coincided with the dawn of punk rock and heavy metal. In a sense, these two genres turned musical aesthetics inside out at the same time they turned the voice inside out, expelled in the form of the scream, at the same time that the ideals of the Boomer generation were arguably turned inside out. Flashing forward about thirty years, at PMK everything from karaoke to punk rock are turned inside out, set against the backdrop of post–economic bubble New York where the city has grown both observably richer (in financial terms) and less affordable for the majority of its populace. In the following section, I trace the history of PMK and its participants in order to examine how and why abject discourses—often expressed through horrific and pornographic explicitness—may act as a response to a new era of uncertainty and contradiction.

Punk Rock Heavy Metal Karaoke: We Love You . . . But Not That Much

In 1997, guitarists Greg Hetson (Redd Cross, Circle Jerks, Bad Religion) and Eric Melvin (NOFX) spearheaded a group of West Coast punk luminaries who formed the first Punk Rock Karaoke band. An attendee at one of these shows described the idea to bassist Rob Kemp, who was playing casually in a non-career band with guitarist Devin Emke (both are originally from Louisville, Kentucky) and drummer David Richman (originally from suburban Ohio).[16] They decided to try a similar event in New York. In April 1999, having learned about twenty-five punk songs, they held the first Punk Rock Karaoke night at the Lower East Side nightclub Arlene Grocery. Stripped of its Hollywood invite-only glamour and all-star celebrity band, their version was considerably grungier but no less popular. In fact, it was soon more popular, and before long the band had garnered a core of regular attendees and write-ups in the local press.

Despite the event's punk pedigree, guitarist Devin Emke had not heard many of the punk songs before he learned them for PMK and made a habit of inserting heavy metal–style two-handed tapping and whammy-bar divebombs into the songs. Within a year there was a spin-off heavy metal night that was soon better attended than the punk rock night. Weekly gigs were then scheduled, alternating between punk and metal, and within a year the two nights were fused into Punk Rock Heavy Metal Karaoke—a name which hints at the abject violation of strict genre boundaries and associated audiences. In recent years, the band has treated the genre parameters of the event with ever-increasing looseness, adding "corporate rock" numbers by bands such as Journey and Styx (songs that briefly got their own "Corporate Rock Karaoke" night) and recent punk-influenced pop songs such as "Since U Been Gone" by Kelly Clarkson (which was met with a bit of controversy among some regulars). Although members of the band profess not to care about such labels, songs lists for punk and metal were kept separate until recently, and most singers still favor one genre over the other in their song selections. In this and other respects there is a constant erasing and redrawing of boundaries at PMK, as genre boundaries are continually elided and reinforced.

Related to this negotiation of labels, the karaoke band has never given itself an official name, despite playing together for nine years and counting; instead, regulars refer to them simply as the Karaoke Band or the Unnamed Band. Since naming practices are a central ontological strategy in rock and popular music—groups of musicians effectively become *bands* by taking on a name—the PMK band inhabits an uncertain, liminal space. Positioning themselves at the margins of the stage, their presence is marked by stoic expressions and a minimum of stage patter, all while taking aggressive songs and amping them up with faster tempos, increased distortion, and assaultive volume. Despite their obvious musical skill in appealing to an audience of discerning punk and metal fans, bassist Rob Kemp seems to view what they do as abject on some level when he confesses in the PMK documentary, "sometimes I have a little bit of trepidation about what we're doing. I mean, are we a real band? We don't write our own songs. We don't have a regular singer. That's why we don't have a name. I feel like we really shouldn't have a name if we're just sort of like a very brutal bar band or something."

Between 1999 and 2005, the de facto frontman of the Unnamed Band was the event's emcee, Owen Comaskey, who also worked as manager and booker at Arlene Grocery during this time. Raised in a council flat in Birmingham, Owen was a participant in the first-wave punk rock explosion in the UK, both as a fan and in a band called the Nervous Kind. An Internet review of PMK entitled "My Night in the Dirty Spotlight" describes Comaskey as

Figure 2: Emcee Owen Comaskey at PMK at the Continental (January 31, 2005). Photograph by the author.

"an abrasive clown, taunting the audience and wait-staff, in a straightedge suit and short hair, [and] full-on no-foolin' working class English accent" (Hoffman 2000). Judging from this and other similar portrayals, the "authenticity" of the event is established straightaway through Owen's punk background, appearance, and English working-class accent.

During the height of PMK's popularity from 2001 to 2004, Owen Comaskey consistently plays upon PMK's contradictions. Dressed in the same shiny matching-burgundy jacket and trousers week after week, with a T-shirt underneath that says "huge" in tiny letters (figure 2), Owen warms up the audience with intentionally painful comic banter and provocation. He then sings the first song—fronting the band in a performance of the Sex Pistol's "God Save the Queen" or Led Zeppelin's "Rock 'n' Roll" that is "stunningly urgent and unsentimental" (Hoffman 2000) following the preceding silliness. After the songlists are circulated, Owen calls songs in random order for the next three hours. When no one claims a song he mercilessly harangues the absentee or reticent singer ("don't fahkin' sign up if you're not gonna get up!") and moves on. If the singer is accounted for, he or she is handed a lyric sheet and the band counts off. One by one, the singers lurch around the stage and scream along to the band's sonic assault. At some point in the evening, Owen usually bestows the Unnamed Band

with a temporary name, which typically draws on some mixture of profanity, sacrilege, and sarcasm—e.g., God's Cock, Diane Sawyer's Underwear at 8:30 AM, Two Jew Bastards and One WASP Bastard, and (the week of Gregory Hines's death) Final Tap.

In keeping with the abject associations of punk and karaoke, Owen constantly introduces satiric, grotesque, and perverse humor into the proceedings. At the conclusion of a particularly effusive performance, he will exclaim (in a parody of a stoned hippie's voice), "It was just like a concert, maaaan!" Another regular quip apropos of nothing is, "I may have the smallest penis you've ever seen, but I've got the world's largest pair of balls. Imagine them, slapping against your thighs!" Sexual dysfunction, together with antidepressants, makes for another bawdy and irreverent source of humor: "Do you know that song [by Norah Jones], 'Don't know why I didn't come.' Well I'll tell you why . . . Zoloft!" Putting himself in the position of an audience member listening to one of his spiels, he asks "Is he gay? Or is he fey? No, just English!" Finally, following a performance that is particularly charged, Owen's patented response is to invoke the "playful hard-on" it gives him, always quick to emphasize it's not "a full rager" but more like "eh . . . maybe." In a final touch of ambiguity, after introducing the members of the band at the end of each week's show, he pronounces in a grand voice: "Remember, we love you—" (and the crowd joins him to shout the punchline) "—*but not that much*!"

Like the halfway erection described by Owen and the halfway camaraderie of his final address, journalistic portrayals of PMK highlight arresting ambiguities. An article in the entertainment section of the satirical weekly *The Onion* (Love 2007) demonstrates a fascination with boundaries and borders, and particularly with their violation. Individual performers are described as having one personality offstage and another onstage, where they are "possessed" by the song and the setting. For instance there is "a sweet-faced TV writer named Dan" who, taking the stage to sing Iron Maiden's "The Number of the Beast," seemingly transforms into the subject of the song, "practically belching flames as his eyes glowed in their sockets." Likewise, there is a description of "a pretty first timer" who "crank[s] Led Zeppelin's 'Whole Lotta Love' into a startlingly confident orgasmic crescendo." Following her performance, she is described in a state of post-coital languishment and slight embarrassment: "flushed beneath her floppy hat, she shyly thanked the crowd for 'letting me masturbate on stage.'" Consistent with this depiction of PMK as a staging ground for repressed desires and exhibitionist tendencies, the author describes the audience as "a particular subset of rabid dorks with a flair for the dramatic" and a "penchant for confession [and] yowls of pain." Likewise, a 2004 radio profile of PMK by John Flansburgh of the band They Might Be Giants that aired on local public radio station WNYC described the

event in similarly therapeutic terms: "I was fully expecting to find a sullen mob of faded rockers doing their wallflower routine. But it wasn't that at all. Instead, they had somehow replaced the ever-present fear of public shame with this kind of support group vibe. It was as unlikely a center of spiritual empowerment as I could have possibly imagined."[17]

Why might this "particular subset of rabid dorks" be in need of therapy? Are there abject circumstances in their daily lives that lead them to seek out the singing cure of PMK? Answering any such questions in broad strokes is impossible, seeing as each individual has different motivations and desires. Still, I will venture a few general observations given my own longstanding status as a PMK regular. First of all, many of the regulars paradoxically consider themselves "insiders" in the group due to their self-perceived status as "outsiders," "misfits," or "freaks" in their everyday existence. This perception comes across clearly in Cindy's description of the PMK crew, observing that many of the soon-to-be regulars first attended PMK alone or with a group of peers who did not return again: "All these people were sort of solo and just kept sort of going . . . I have this feeling that, and maybe I'm projecting here, but I have the feeling that almost all of us were outsiders. I mean, the joke now is that everybody was an outsider in high school, but I really have the feeling that this crowd were particular outsiders in high school." Designations that may be considered derogatory or debased in other contexts are welcomed. On the message board one regular describes a friend who will be attending PMK as "a total fucking freak (which is one reason we got along so well), so he'll fit riiiiight in." When another regular was recently called a "douchebag" by an unknown person in the crowd, the message board was split between those who felt this comment was insulting and those who merely saw it as consistent with "punk rock" (leading another regular to adopt "DOUCHEBAG" as his online tag).

While the abject status described above is often proudly owned, there are other sources of abjection at PMK that are not as welcome. Besides the personal rivalries and failed romances that inevitably occur in almost any tightly knit peer group, such everyday drama has had far less impact than the near-fatal blow PMK suffered several years ago—a blow that perhaps took the abject dissolution of boundaries at PMK too far. Despite the unanticipated success of PMK—for several years Arlene Grocery saw larger crowds on Monday nights than on most weekends; at PMK simply trying to push one's way to the bar and purchase a drink could be a thirty-minute undertaking—the karaoke band was dismissed by the club's management in late 2004. In short order they were replaced by another karaoke band that had "filled in" for them on a couple of previous occasions (rumor suggests that the new band was willing to take the gig for less money). There is an unfortunate irony here in a karaoke band being replaced by a facsimile who

"stole" their concept, their venue, some of their repertoire, and part of their audience. The more committed regulars took to calling them the "scab band" and vowed never to set foot in Arlene's again. They followed the original karaoke band to new residencies at Crash Mansion (2005) and Continental (2005–6), and to more recent venues such as Southpaw in Brooklyn and Midway (the current home of PMK, which as of this writing just changed its name to Rehab).

Despite continued efforts by band members and regulars to promote PMK, the audience has steadily dwindled during the past few years. After increasingly sporadic appearances at PMK in 2005 and 2006, Owen Comaskey has also departed the scene. Having lost his job at Arlene's at the same time that the band was let go, Comaskey went on to book occasional nights at Crash Mansion but had to leave his new job and his role as karaoke host due to health problems.[18] The emcee role is now filled by comedian Vadim Newquist. With an irreverent and free-associative sense of humor he ably continues the model established by Owen and is well received by both regulars and new attendees. However, some longtime regulars cannot help but feel a sense of loss with the departure of the man who epitomized PMK for over five years. This sense of loss is compounded by the fact that PMK currently attracts fewer and fewer first time attendees and has lost many of its younger regular attendees (during the apex of karaoke at Arlene's, audiences were remarkable for the unusually wide and relatively even dispersal of attendees from their early twenties to late thirties). Most of the remaining regulars are now well into their thirties and moving into their forties. While there were once scores of regulars at PMK and dozens who regularly posted on the discussion board, now these numbers are in the single digits. A recent posting on the board admitted that "there was a time back at Arlene's when we were a strong and large group of people but that heyday has long since passed and will not return no matter how we feel about it."

To the surprise and chagrin of the remaining PMK regulars, Monday nights at Arlene Grocery have flourished, and the "scab band" continues to this day. Shedding the Punk Metal tag, the event has been re-dubbed "World Famous Live Rock 'n' Roll Karaoke." The audience at Arlene's continues to be sizable on most Mondays, and overall it tends to be younger than the current PMK audience. Even if it has lost some of its underground buzz, the producers and the band have compensated by taking a more explicitly campy approach.[19] Furthermore many tourists and other attendees have no idea, and perhaps do not care, that the event was initiated by a different band (it is not a fact the club or the band readily volunteers).

To be sure, the abjection described here is pretty far removed from the abjection of first-wave punk rockers in New York City, but at the same time there are some striking and significant parallels that may help to

explain why the genre still finds vitality in PMK thirty years after its birth. During the initial CBGB's era, punk rockers in New York City (and soon elsewhere) responded to the pervasive abjection of their surroundings. The city, and especially the Lower East Side (LES), was economically depressed, crime-ridden, and overrun with the homeless, the drug-addicted, and self-marginalized dropouts. This marginality was in keeping with the long history of the LES as a haven for "outsiders," most specifically the waves of immigrants who called the neighborhood home through much of the nineteenth and twentieth century. More recently, however, the LES has become home to a very different, wealthier type of resident, and its topography has been rapidly and radically altered. CBGB's could not cover its rent and shut down in October 2006,[20] meeting the same fate as other Manhattan live music venues driven out of business by the real estate boom and the aggressive incursion of high-rise condos, chain stores, and luxury hotels plopped down incongruously in their new environment (Tonic, Sin-é, Luna Lounge, The Fez, Tramps, Brownies, and others).[21] In this climate, the East Village and Lower East Side are again described in terms of degradation and marginalization, but of a very different sort from the past. Abject revulsion stems from the "gentrification" of Manhattan's once-grungier reaches. Residents express a sense of violation, not by aggressive beggars or squeegee men, but by the penetration of their neighborhoods by the idle rich and the upwardly mobile (Berman and Berger 2007; Freeman 2006).

Driven by a rapacious real estate market and upwards-spiraling housing rates (the recent subprime mortgage collapse has yet to trickle down as cheaper rents for most New Yorkers), one can witness almost daily the shifting demographics and displacement of the lower and middle classes in Manhattan and in "outer" boroughs and suburbs, from Williamsburg and Park Slope in Brooklyn to Jersey City and Hoboken across the Hudson River. Suddenly, the threatened demographic of the East Village and LES is not only the immigrants and the indigents, the punks and the poor who were once labeled with the blanket moniker Bowery Bums, but also the bohemian and hipster middle-class who more recently moved into the neighborhood. The two-hundred-year legacy of the Bowery as a zone of alterity and abjection has been nearily erased in the span of ten years. Whereas first-wave punk at CBGB's was often rooted in primary abjection—alternately wallowing in and revolting against their abject surroundings—PMK follows a strategy of secondary abjection where individuals attempt to rejoin the abject milieu through "a kind of modern defilement rite." In both cases, although moving along opposite trajectories, the "therapy" of singing punk rock has responded at least in part to the anxieties created in attempting to "make it" (or simply to survive) in New York City.

Like most New Yorkers, many PMK regulars struggle to make ends meet (although their standards of living vary widely), and discussion of employment and unemployment woes are not unusual among regulars. For those at PMK who remain on the fringes of bourgeois lifestyles and remunerative jobs (those who do not self-deprecatingly label themselves "sell-outs" and "executive tools"), New York City forces the constant weighing of "alternative" identifications against financial security, a stable career, owning property, and starting families. Despite the wide variety of careers and personal aspirations among those at PMK, this struggle to balance unconventional lifestyles and nonconformist values with economic necessity is a common concern that bonds the PMK regulars together. Over the years, as some regulars have shifted their focus more to family and career, or simply moved out of the city, the core constituency of PMK has dwindled further. The decrease in PMK attendance has been especially severe among the women who once regularly attended the event—responding to a variety of factors that may include the pressure to "settle down" into domesticity before it is "too late," and the pressure applied by a genre culture that is not always welcoming to women who have passed a certain age.

Is PMK a form of resistance to these abject conditions—however effective? Many would not see performing karaoke as "resistance" under any circumstances, instead viewing the performance of someone else's songs strictly in terms of conformity. However, in a mass-media infused culture, individuals often develop a sense of ownership of recorded music, even if they are made to feel shame (and sense of violation) for doing so. This process of making a song one's own, and expressing the self through consumer choices and interpretations of shared cultural texts, is similar to what New York apartment-dwellers experience as they make a rented space "their own" and alter the space to meet their own desires—what Michel de Certeau has described as the "subtle art of 'renters' who know how to insinuate their countless differences into dominant texts" (1984:xvii). While these spaces may be fully occupied by their denizens, they still straddle a sometimes uncomfortable line dividing "mine" from "not-mine." Even individuals who are relatively far up the economic ladder in New York City commonly reside in rented apartments, and thus it is quite common for the middle-class to experience abjection—both in terms of encountering literal filth on a semi-regular basis (it is still New York) and occupying a liminal and abjected space which as a result has potential for transgression (e.g., potentially subversive of "ownership" itself). Linking this renter's existence directly to other types of resistance enacted through "productive consumption," Certeau theorizes a "tactics of consumption, the ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lend[ing] a political dimension

to everyday practice" (1984:xvii). One can see this linkage at PMK, as singers who "rent out" and "take over" songs for their own purposes, draw on tactics familiar to urban dwellers for whom renting is an ever more fraught yet still potentially subversive way of life.

Punk Rock Girl: Listening through the Male Gaze

One group who can well understanding the abjection of "renters" at PMK are women. Out of the roughly two hundred and fifty songs on the PMK karaoke list, only twenty-two were originally sung by female artists.[22] Of these, only six of the female-fronted songs include other women musicians on the record (and only two male-voiced songs are accompanied by a female instrumentalist—songs by The Cramps and The Velvet Underground). Perhaps unsurprisingly, male singers make up the majority of performers at PMK, but there is a sizable contingent of women who do not by and large limit themselves to the scant offering of female-voiced songs. Therefore, most female singers are put in the position of temporarily inhabiting songs written and originally voiced by men. Given that many of these songs contain lyrics that are not only *from* but also explicitly *about* a masculine subject position, it puts these women in the position of renting out sonic spaces with a masculine floorplan.

Phallocentrism is explicitly manifest in some of the lyrics heard at PMK. Women who perform songs such as Led Zeppelin's "Whole Lotta Love" ("gonna give you every inch of my love"), the Scorpions' "Rock You Like A Hurricane" ("give her inches and treat her well"), or Buzzcocks' "Orgasm Addict" ("now your mother wants to know what are those stains on your jeans") take on an imaginary phallus and effectively perform "in drag." This gendered crossover enacted by women at PMK extends far beyond the occasional lyric. In examining not only the words of rock but words about rock, it becomes apparent that there are also "phallic" musical codes and discourses associated with rock—a phallocentrism that is taken for granted to the point where "analysis of gender and rock has often begun with the premise that rock is created and performed by men or that it exemplifies a masculinist perspective" (Leonard 2007:1). Thus, anyone who seeks to critique this premise is compelled to first consider how rock and masculinity became so closely intertwined in popular, journalistic, and scholarly discourses (Leonard 2007:23–41; Fast 2001:159–202).

With the rare exception, this premise is accepted even when it is critiqued. For instance, there is a common argument that the electric guitar in rock is "virtually seen as an extension of the male body" where guitar players sometimes explicitly "mime masturbating their 'axes'" (Bayton 1997:275).

More generally, Reynolds and Press maintain that "rock is riddled with the idea of Phallus Power . . . penetration, self-aggrandizement, violation, acceleration and death-wish are conflated in a single existential THRUST" (1995:117). They go on to label punk rock as even more hyper-masculine than rock in general: with its "directionless aggression and unbridled velocity . . . there was an appetite for destruction in punk that has as much to do with the darkest recesses of the (male) psyche as with the specific social conditions of England in 1976" (1995:119). However, there is a dissonance here in that the punk movement is often credited with opening up rock to greater participation by women musicians (and not just singers). With a DIY perspective that encouraged and enabled women to bypass the male gatekeepers of rock culture (in theory at least, but certainly more than before), a unique opportunity was presented for women to engage with the anger and outrageousness of rock. This opportunity was seized, if one is to judge by the list of notable female punk musicians including Patti Smith, Deborah Harry, Tina Wehmouth, Penelope Houston, Siouxsie Sioux, X-Ray Spex, The Slits, The Raincoats, Exene Cervenka, Lorna Doom, Gayle Advert, Lydia Lunch, Poison Ivy, Wendy O. Williams, Kim Gordon, and their many inheritors. Not only is the list substantial, but it is also notable that some of the most adventurous, innovative, and experimental music within punk rock has been created by women musicians who took the notion of self-invention to heart, and who often directly confronted "gender trouble" in their lyrics, performances, and music.

With this relatively high level of participation, and with the female-centered creativity that pervades punk rock, why is it that fan-based event such as PMK is still overwhelmingly dominated by a masculinist orientation? While the genre of punk rock may have led to slightly more equitable practices of musical production, this was not necessarily the case for the music's consumption. Punk rock has often been analyzed as "subcultural" music par excellence, and the subcultures that form around the consumption of punk rock—and other subcultures ranging from mods to bikers—have overwhelmingly been assumed to be mostly if not entirely male enclaves. As early as 1980, Angela McRobbie took Dick Hebdige's classic subcultural exegesis to task—*Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), a book whose analysis of the "mess" of punk is still often cited—for his failure to engage with "subculture's best kept secret, its claiming of style as a male but never unambiguously masculine prerogative" ([1980] 1990:73). Diane Railton has observed how the rock/pop split is conceived in gendered terms, not in terms of who performs the music but in terms of how consumers (and the practices and spaces associated with consumption) are positioned in terms of gender (2001). In a study of female punk musicians, Helen Reddington observes that

"it is hardly surprising that girls are seen as consumers of pop whereas boys are seen as connoisseurs of rock . . . [where] male adolescence and deviance are often perceived to go hand-in-hand" (2007:3). As a result, any female participation in rock music and especially "hard" rock music—whether as fans or as musicians—still strikes many observers as paradoxical. Susan Fast confronts the supposedly exotic status of female fans of hard rock in her writing on Led Zeppelin—a band routinely and dismissively labeled as "cock rock." As an opening gambit, she recounts one scene in the Led Zeppelin concert film *The Song Remains the Same* (1976). The scene, a montage of various audience members listening to and looking at Led Zeppelin, includes one extended shot of a woman who stares intently at the band, "riveted" by the performance with an expression of "pleasurable wonder." This leads Fast to pose the question: "given the popular image of women fans of rock music as hysterical, how do we account for her composure, her controlled (controlling?) gaze?" (2001:159).

Framing the question of "women in rock" in terms of the visual and audile "gaze" of the fan engages longstanding debates in film scholarship, specifically Laura Mulvey's concept of the "male gaze" (1975). Mulvey argues that most films are shot from a point of view that is unambiguously masculine—stemming from the preponderance of male directors, cinematographers, and editors who determine where our "gaze" is focused, and who depict the gazes of various characters. If most films are indeed produced through a male gaze, the corollary to the argument is that viewers (from whatever subject position) can only view the film through the lens of this built-in male gaze and its attendant bias. This theory leaves the female film viewer in a somewhat untenable position. Film scholar Mary Ann Doane asks, "even if its is admitted that the woman is frequently the object of the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze in the cinema, what is there to prevent her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure?" One common answer is that the female spectator takes on the male gaze in drag—given that "the reversal itself remains locked in the same logic . . . and an essential attribute of that dominant system is the matching of male subjectivity with the agency of the look" ([1982] 2003:63).

Is there an equivalent to the "male gaze" for music? Or is the gaze a meaningful metaphor for certain types of listening? At PMK, the visual gaze is very much a part of the event, as audiences gaze at the singer much as they would gaze at a famous rock star, taking on the behavioral cues of rock audience behavior (including photography). There is likewise a concentrated focus of listening that takes place at PMK. The vast majority of those in attendance are intimately familiar with at least some of the songs they will hear—knowing the songs "inside out"—and they are highly attuned to how a singer adheres to or departs from the recorded version. This concentrated,

even voyeuristic, mode of listening shares much in common with the visual gaze. In the case of film—where women are increasingly prevalent as producers and screenwriters, and have always had a major presence as actresses—men still dominate the roles that allow the most direct mediation of the gaze (e.g., directors, cinematographers, camera operators). Similarly, in recorded popular music, women may be increasingly prevalent as musicians, songwriters, and music industry personnel. However, the roles most dominated by men are precisely those that most directly mediate how music is heard—sound engineers, record producers, and music critics (notably, these are the full-time careers pursued by the musicians in the PMK band). If most music is framed by this male-directed auditory gaze, how is possible for women to avoid hearing music from a masculinist perspective? At PMK, does the female fan of phallic hard rock unavoidably hear music "in drag," through the ears of the patriarchy?

A Scream of One's Own: The Women of PMK

When questions are posed in these terms, it leaves women fans of punk or heavy metal in a double bind. For if they enjoy the genres on their "own terms," they risk being accused of complicity with a patriarchal phallic perspective. But if they avoid rock (and especially if they lean towards "pop"), they only reinforce the stereotypical rock-is-to-masculine as pop-is-to-feminine equation. Either way, women musicians and fans of these genres are forced into confronting and positioning themselves in relation to their gender, whether they want to or not. This is a dilemma that is not faced by male rockers who occupy the default (and thus invisible) subject position. Just as with "women in rock" in general, the women regulars at PMK are marked off as "Other" in many subtle and not-so-subtle ways. Message board threads have been formed around the "ladies of PMK." Owen or Vadim sometimes specifically request or choose a female singer, or make a statement along the lines of "Ramones songs always sound best when women sing them and I don't know why" (Hoffman 2000). Among regulars, the presence of women is often noted in a way that it is not for men, even among the women themselves. To give one example, when asked exactly what sold her on PMK during her first visit, Cindy responds:

> The first person I remember seeing up onstage was this little four-foot-nothing Asian girl with pigtails. So cute, just absolutely adorable. And she kicks out [Motörhead's] "Ace of Spades" with a voice that *clearly* came from hell! Everybody was just like [jaw drops], and I don't think I've closed my mouth ever since. There was something about that, and then the way everybody was just like, "Yes, right on!"

It is questionable whether Cindy or the rest of the audience would have found the performance quite as compelling had it been given by a male singer, even if his appearance and demeanor were at odds with Motörhead's and lead singer Lemmy Kilmister's recorded performance ([1980] 1996). In this and other cases, the power that female singers may potentially wield is double-edged, as it is directly wedded to their disempowered status. The power associated with an abject violation of boundaries is instantly achievable by women who convincingly "cross over" to an aggressive, masculine subject position. However, this secondary abjection of border-penetration is dependent upon the preexisting primary abjection associated with the feminine, where women are assumed to be already lacking in clear boundaries—e.g., unstable, ambiguous, oceanic, and open to penetration. Thus, one might view the female singer's channeling of Motörhead as empowering for its break with expectations and stereotypes, or conversely one may argue that the performance is viewed as remarkable precisely because these stereotypes are still firmly in place and her Otherness is taken for granted. In this instance, dissonance was magnified through the double-Othering of gender and race, which made her performance of Motörhead perhaps even more powerful and appealing for those in the audience (and perhaps for herself as well).

Further complicating matters, punk and metal can be empowering for some women precisely because of the genres' association with hyper-masculinity and male consumership. Co-opting this masculine privilege is potentially more empowering than aligning oneself with the music of more "sensitive" or "enlightened" male performers or female performers. The day after Lauren's first performance of "So What," Cindy praised her performance and concluded that the song "has so much more force as done by a woman." When I asked her later to explain her comment, she clarifies, "I don't know that it's more powerful as it is empowering to sing 'I rammed my cock right down its throat.' It's the sometimes aggressive attitude towards oral sex on a man that is humiliating sometimes. You know, 'blow me' 'suck my cock' that sort of thing. It gives a girl a chance to send it back out there." This reversion to (and reversal of) the more extreme reaches of unequal gender roles makes the impact of their violation all the greater, and increases the level of dissonance that results. As argued in the opening sections of this article, "dissonance" is central to the aesthetics of karaoke, punk, and PMK: dissonant gender roles; dissonances between original and version, between star and fan, between live and mediated; and dissonant pitches, rhythms, and timbres.

At PMK, singers and other attendees seek out and even amplify this dissonance. Thus, what on the surface appears as a masculinist, phallocentric perspective may be intentionally reinforced and even exaggerated in order that it may be spectacularly torn down in "a kind of modern defilement

rite." When it comes to the ultimate "cock rock" band, PMK regular Allegra says that for her "it's always nice to see women sing Led Zeppelin songs . . . when women sing Zeppelin I'm *enthralled* by it, whereas when guys sing it, it's always a fucking mess. Like somebody hand me some hand sanitizer!" According to Allegra, in performance, where there is seemingly no violation of established gender roles, where male singers perform an exaggerated form of masculinity, the result is an obscene overkill that she equates to a sort of musical money shot (where overabundance suggests a doubt in its own reality). For women performers, however, there is little doubt that singing Led Zeppelin is a *performance* just as masculinity itself is a performance. Here, then, is an instance where the male gaze seems to lose its supposedly infallible power—subverted by women performers who do not simply inhabit the gaze or directly counter it, but instead magnify and intensify the gaze to a point where it becomes hyperreal. Whether this results in a unrealistically sharpened or an incoherently blurred depiction of phallocentric masculinity, the mediating role of the gaze is made obvious—so that it is not only the gazed upon and desired subject who is made apparent. When the gaze is reversed, turned inside out, the desiring viewer/voyeur is equally exposed.

In the realm of sound, the scream appears to be a primary strategy for flipping around the male gaze. As frequent karaoke singer Nina puts it: "When you scream you scream to be cathartic . . . it's genderless." Screaming is a hyperreal form of vocal production that is often used to sharpen and intensify whatever message or emotion is being carried by the voice, but it just as often blurs any potential message or emotional content into incoherency. While the abject ambiguity of the scream may for some offer an opportunity to escape the male auditory gaze, others have noted a gendered component when it comes to screaming in punk rock. For instance, PMK regular Bev is well known among her friends for what she calls her "very wild and screamy" vocal style. Her frequent straining at the confines of the voice, and the voices of punk singers familiar from recordings is matched by her movements onstage where she appears to be straining at the confines of her own body. In these respects, Bev's singing shares much in common with influential early female punk singers, many of whom introduced unusual singing techniques such as portamento slides beween and around pitches, disjunct melodies, and the use of an extremely wide ambitus—singers such as Ari Up of The Slits, Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex, Ana da Silva and Gina Birch of The Raincoats, and Exene Cervenka of X. Bev singles out Cervenka as a particularly strong influence. As co–lead singer of LA punk band X, Exene Cervenka's voice works in counterpoint to the voice of John Doe—his steady, throaty, and "cool" rockabilly delivery is contrasted against her vocal pyrotechnics. Referring to the X song "Los Angeles" on the PMK songlist, Bev says, "I really *really* admire Exene because you can sing that song and

it's one of the few times where it's perfectly acceptable to sing totally off-key and off-pitch and off-the-mark like she does. I don't think she really cared about being technical at all. I think she was just somebody who needed to put out *noise*."

How does Exene's "noise" differ from that of, say, Lemmy of Motörhead, another of Bev's favorite singers? While Lemmy sings in a noticeably lowered vocal register, within a narrow ambitus that is almost monotone, and using an open, guttural vocal timbre (common techniques used by many, although certainly by no means all, male punk rock singers), Exene Cervenka and many other female punk singers produce noise through vocal techniques that are almost directly the opposite. Their singing voices are often deliberately thin and shrill, sliding between pitches and bending pitches noticeably out of tune. As early as 1978, Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie noted that punk was unique in "allow[ing] female voices to be heard that are not often allowed expression on record, stage, or radio—shrill, assertive, impure individual voices" that expressed a "strident insistency" ([1978] 1990:384). Likewise, Caroline O'Meara has noted how "The Raincoats took advantage of punk's ideology of amateurism to shatter traditional (read: masculine) subjectivities in rock music" (2003:299). O'Meara locates their musical subversion of gender roles most clearly in their approach to the voice, and the unusual choice not to designate a single full-time lead singer. In one of their iconic songs, "Fairytale in the Supermarket," vocalist Ana da Silva does "not hold onto single declamatory pitches, in fact they resemble *Sprechstimme* at times in their seeming spontaneous bends and turns" (2003:308). While O'Meara acknowledges that this technique in grounded to some extent in the style of other punk singers—most specifically Johnny Rotten, who "used this technique to accent the ends of phrases and important words"—The Raincoats went a step further by moving the vocal technique from the margins to the center, "diffus[ing] it [and] making it the primary mode of signification" which "creates an effect of dizzy uncertainty" (2003:308).

In the next and final section I analyze a performance by one female regular at PMK, a singer who is well-grounded in the history of female punk rock and who deploys this vocal history in her own performances. In this discussion, I will consider how vocal style itself can serve as a commentary (although always open to different interpretations) on gender, punk rock, and abjection.

"Beat on the Brat": The Brat Strikes Back

Caroline teaches the third grade, and one of her favorite songs to sing at PMK is the Ramones 1976 punk classic "Beat on the Brat" ([1976] 2001).

In the Ramones original, Joey sings in his patented nasal inflection, "Beat on the brat, beat on the brat / beat on the brat with a baseball bat / Oh yeah / Oh yeah / Oh oh." The line is repeated throughout the A sections, with the only lyrical variation appearing in the B section: "What can you do? / what can you do? / with a brat like that always on your back / what can you lose?" Each individual phrase is confined to a limited ambitus and the articulation is clipped—to the point where the word "back" is reduced to an aspirated "b," and "yeah" is enunciated almost without vowel sounds. The A and B sections repeat in the same streamlined and precise fashion, with little discernable difference between each iteration. In terms of vocal timbre, there is nothing that remotely resembles screaming; Joey Ramone is known for producing melodicism rather than noise, in contrast with the overdriven guitars.

In a performance of the song that was recorded on June 14, 2004, Caroline breaks with many of the characteristics described above.[23] Her words are elongated rather than clipped; vowels are extended rather than omitted; her vocal ambitus is extremely wide rather than narrow; the noise of vocal distortion is introduced as she pushes her voice to its limits; and perhaps most striking, Caroline does not repeat a single vocal phrase in the same way twice—introducing new melodic variations, inflections, and accents each time she repeats a line. In her first iteration of "beat on the brat" she adds a slight trill to the "r" in "brat" that builds on, but departs from, Joey Ramone's discernable British inflections. In her second iteration of the phrase, she spits out "brat" in a growling low voice that suddenly and briefly registers a death metal vocal style, and finally her third repetition is sung in a more throaty style—thus taking on three distinctly different voices in the span of about eight seconds. She sings the "oh yeah" section fairly straight this first time through, though the final "oh oh" is more yelled than sung. In the second repetition of the "beat on the brat" section, Caroline introduces subtle variations on the melody and phrasing of the original verse, singing the second of the three with what sounds like a chiding inflection (whether aimed at the audience, or herself, or the child who is the subject of the song, or perhaps taking on the voice of the child, is uncertain). Then, in the final "oh oh" leading into the first B section, she elongates the final "Oh" into an anguished (or ecstatic?) downward-sliding portamento "Ohhhhhhhhuuuuggghhhhh!" This elongated guttural growl punctures the tightly woven fabric of the original song, just as it sounds like the vocal effect (a loose glottal closure) punctures the fabric of her singing voice and her vocal cords. The abject penetration effected here can be interpreted in the context of the song's lyrics (and Caroline's career as a schoolteacher), as it sounds as if she is being pulled slowly down into the

pits of hell by a demon child. Or it can be interpreted in the context of her performance, which is akin to a vocal form of graffiti—where she doesn't so much "sing" the song as offer a vocal commentary on the song, enacting a voiced dialogue *with* the song.

In the first B section, Caroline sings "what can you do?" slightly sharp—ironically since it already appears to be too high for her vocal range. Again in contrast to Joey Ramone's delivery, Caroline extends the vowel sounds rather than cutting them out ("WHAT CAN YOU DEEEEWWWW?"). The sharpness of the pitch and the strain of the voice lends the question an urgency, a desperation even, not present in the original version. The screaming, unsteady delivery also reorients the lyric, so that a song about a brat—petulant, whiny, alternately pleading and demanding—sounds like it was voiced by that very same brat. Moving through the B section, Caroline continues twisting her voice into new subjectivities—moving into a piercing upper register on the second iteration of "deeewww" and on the word "that" ("with a brat like *THAT*"), and then suddenly dropping into a sneering, half-spoken *Sprechstimme* ("*always on your back what can you deew-uuuh?*") redolent of classic UK punk vocal style. In the second run-through of the A and B sections, Caroline continues twisting each phrase into new shapes, with new implications for each inflection, in a virtuosic and galvanizing performance that collapses decades of punk singing style into two-and-a-half-minutes. The "seeming spontaneous bends and turns" of vocal timbre extend also to pitch, as Caroline rarely lands on a pitch and stays there. Rather, she constantly pulls stable pitches out of their orbit—e.g., the ascending portamento she applies to the final "*deew-uuuh*," the descending "Ohhhhhhhuuuuggghhhhh!," and again an ascending portamento when she repeats the A-to-B-section transition the second time through.

In effect, Caroline takes the Ramones' "Beat on the Brat" and turns it inside out. Drawing on a shifting array of vocal styles—her voice careening from Joey Ramone to Johnny Rotten, from a frustrated teacher to a third-grader throwing a temper tantrum—one can hear the collision of multiple subjectivities. While this may seem to be consistent with the abjection of punk rock as widely understood—the violation of stable categories of Self and Other—the very binary model that abjection depends upon is shattered in her performance. In other words, what we hear in Caroline's voice is not the trading of one voice for another and the interpenetration this implies, but rather a shattering of any notion of stable, consistent boundaries that are available to be violated (whether related to pitch, rhythm, timbre, or vocal identity). This multivocality dismantles the very idea of a norm existing at all. Furthermore, as with some of the female punk singers mentioned above, this multivocality does not reside on the margins but lies at the very center

of Caroline's vocal technique, creating "an effect of dizzy uncertainty." This can serve then as a strategy for becoming "ungendered" and for dispensing with the male auditory gaze. Instead of attempting the impossible task of removing gender from the picture, multiple genders and subject positions are overlaid to the point of confusion and breakdown. In creating this hyperreal vocal landscape, there is a blurring of stable boundaries that is instigated not only through exaggeration but also through a rapid-fire proliferation of multiple perspectives—which effectively shifts the emphasis from the subject of the auditory gaze (the "original" song) to the agency of the fan's auditory gaze (i.e., Caroline). Here, then, opposition to phallic domination rests not in a single unified position of resistance, but rather in a "multiplicity of force relations" (Foucault [1978] 1990:92).

Conclusion

As noted earlier, "musical voices cross and enunciate thresholds" (Schwarz 1991:3). Along these lines, I have attempted to map some of the thresholds that are crossed and enunciated by singers and other participants at PMK. These thresholds are diverse, with boundaries negotiated between and around musical genres, gender roles, ontological notions of subjectivity, and shifting geographic significances in New York City. To examine these boundary negotiations, I chose abjection as an interpretive frame for a number of reasons. First, the event is grounded in two performative lexicons—the genre of punk and the practice of karaoke—that are already discursively situated in terms of the abject. Also, given that abjection, as theorized by Kristeva, is centrally concerned with the body, and especially with horrific and sexualized experiences of the body, it provides a useful lens for analyzing the vocal and bodily display, and the bawdy humor and horrific imagery, found in abundance at PMK. Finally, and most importantly, the regular participants utilize the terms of the abject in their own speech and in their own interpretations of the event. Indicating their fluency in the psychoanalytic discourses that pervade modern subjectivity (and much of the discourse around rock music), participants describe the voice as something "almost trapped" that is "expelled," a conduit for releasing repressed rage and ecstatic/erotic potential, and a manifestation of abjections they experience in their everyday lives.

While different attendees find different pleasures in participating in PMK, they are nonetheless collectively informed by the specific musical, performative, generic, historical, and gendered configurations of abjection that I have outlined in this article. This "multiplicity of force relations" gives the event a richness and complexity that could be unraveled for many

more pages. While this multiplicity might sometimes lead to incoherence or "noise" (as with the subversion of gendered perspectives described here), it just as often leads to instances where multiple trajectories inform and build upon each other. The abjection of karaoke, of punk rock, of femininity, of fandom, of "amateur" performance, of economic marginality, of aging in a youth-oriented society, and of living in New York City are all intertwined at PMK. While the screams that result may be valued for their lack of literal meaning, the production of noise is never meaningless.

Notes

1. These opening paragraphs are written in the present tense but describe a period between 2004 and 2005.

2. Links to these photographs, videos, and information about the documentary film can all be found at http://www.punkmetalkaraoke.com.

3. "So What" first appeared on record in 1981 as the B-side to the Anti-Nowhere League's debut single, a cover of Ralph McTell's "Streets of London," released on WXYZ Records. However, the flip side proved more popular than the purported single, and it subsequently became the band's trademark song. The band's first full-length album, *We Are*... *The League,* was released in 1982 but did not include "So What." The song was appended on a CD reissue of the album in 1996. "So What" was exposed to a new and sizable audience when it was covered by Metallica—released as the B-side to the "Sad But True" single (1992) and on their covers compilation album, *Garage Inc.* (1998).

4. "Bleed Like Me" was written by the members of the band Garbage (Duke Erikson, Shirley Manson, Steve Marker, and Butch Vig) with lyrics by Shirley Manson.

5. Karaoke as a telling metaphor for the human condition has acted as the central conceit in theatrical films such as *Duets* (2000) and *Jackpot* (2001), and in pivotal scenes karaoke has fulfilled a similar function in major hit films such as *Lost In Translation* (2003) and *High School Musical* (2006).

6. Unfortunately many of these postings have been deleted to save disk space.

7. These statements are representative of the substantial anti-karaoke discourse one can find online. The specific quotations come from http://www.karaokesucks.net and http://www.pianoworld.com/ubb/cgi-bin/ultimatebb.cgi?ubb=get_topic;f=37;t=000173;p=0 (accessed April 6, 2008).

8. The label "punk rock" itself did not originate from a particular record or musician, but instead came from a mimeographed fanzine out of New York called *Punk.* Co-founder Legs McNeil explains: "On TV, if you watched the cop shows, *Kojak, Baretta,* when the cops finally catch the mass murderer, they'd say, 'you dirty punk.' It was what your teacher would call you. It meant that you were the lowest. All of us drop-outs and fuck-ups got together and started a movement" (Savage 1992:131). The founders of *Punk* saw their publication as "a combination of everything we were into—television reruns, drinking beer, getting laid, cheeseburgers, comics, grade-B movies, and this weird rock and roll that nobody but us seemed to like: the Velvets, the Stooges, the New York Dolls, and the Dictators" (McNeil and McCain 1996:203). In other words, they placed on a pedestal the lowest of low trash culture at the time, especially in light of the hippies' rejection of lowbrow American "junk culture" in favor of the folkies' idealization of "nature," the protest singers' "peace-and-love" politics,

and progressive rock's co-optation of "high art" musical aesthetics. The Velvets, Stooges, and Dolls were about as far from all of this as you could get, dragging rock 'n' roll back into the "muck" and getting thoroughly rejected in the process.

9. Never mind that television host Bill Grundy admitted on air he was drunk during the segment, that he provoked the "filthy" language by insisting that Johnny Rotten repeat a muttered four letter word and encouraging Steve Jones to "say something outrageous," or that he blatantly made sexual advances on Pistols' fan Siouxsie Sioux by suggesting "we'll meet after, shall we?" The interview is transcribed in Laing (1985:35–36) and can be found online at http://www.televisionpersonalities.co.uk/pistols.htm (accessed April 6, 2008).

10. In this respect, the actual roots of the genre in the diverse stable of CBGB's bands such as the Ramones, Blondie, and Television were of little consequence. After the Grundy interview, the association of punk rock with filth was further cemented by the continued outrageous behavior of the Sex Pistols, perhaps now playing to type, and especially bassist Sid Vicious. Viewed by many as the embodiment of punk, Vicious replaced original bassist and primary songwriter Glen Matlock in 1977. Addicted to heroin, Sid became notorious for acts such as beating up a music journalist with a bike chain, vomiting onstage and on a record company executive's desk, cutting himself with glass at concerts to the point of drawing blood, and allegedly murdering his girlfriend Nancy Spungen. In the musical realm, Vicious produced four minutes of vocal abjection in his karaoke-style version of "My Way." Gleefully defiling the self-aggrandizing anthem, he turned Paul Anka's lyrical message and Frank Sinatra's assured vocals inside out. Sung with an audible sneer, the song reemerges as an anthem of debasement with abject lyrical alternations: "my friend, I'll say it clear" becomes "you cunt, I'm not a queer"; "I ate it up" becomes "I shot it up"; "to think I did all that and . . . not in a shy way" becomes "to think I killed a cat and . . . not in a gay way"; and "the record shows I took all the blows" becomes "the record shows, I fucked a bloke" (seemingly contradicting his earlier statement). Meanwhile, the music behind Vicious seethes with its martial punk drum beat and out-of-tune guitar and string section, opening with an ascending portamento string figure that sounds like a cue from a horror movie. The song accompanies a set piece in the film *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle* (1980) with a tuxedo-sporting Vicious performing before a rapt audience that includes his mother ("I *can't* believe it's my Sid up there!") whom he shoots dead at the song's climax.

11. Likewise, it is these same qualities that have led to widespread criticism of "hard rock" genres, i.e., punk and metal. Tipper Gore, appearing before a 1985 Senate subcommittee as co-founder of the Parents Music Resource Center, gave a presentation titled "The Smut and Sadism of Rock," a rough paraphrase of "filth and fury" (US Congress 1985:83). The presentation can be read at http://www.joesapt.net/superlink/shrg99-529/p83.html (accessed April 6, 2008).

12. These include The Stooges, Sex Pistols, Throbbing Gristle, Birthday Party, Scratch Acid, Henry Rollins, Devo, The Smiths, Alice in Chains, and Nirvana.

13. Noise is a central element in the metal aesthetic as well. This noise however is usually based around extreme volume and a manicured approach to timbre—clean, white noise rather than rough, dirty noise. The overspilling of boundaries derives not from studied amateurism but instead from an effortless (in appearance, that is) virtuosity, the rush of finger-twisting figurations in a guitar solo, for example.

14. Entire subgenres are marked in part by the different types and techniques of screaming with which they are associated—for instance, the expulsive "barking" style of hardcore punk versus the guttural "cookie monster" growl of death metal.

15. Examples range from the Cold War paranoia that informed movies such as the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956) and *The Blob* (1958), to the internal "body horror" of AIDS-era films such as John Carpenter's remake of *The Thing* (1982) and David Cronenberg's remake of *The Fly* (1986), to current anxieties relating to terrorism and government-sponsored torture reflected in recent "torture porn" such as the *Saw* and *Hostel* series and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004).

16. Besides PMK, all three have professional careers in the music industry in New York City—respectively, as a music critic, audio engineer, and director at a record label specializing in retrospective releases—jobs based not in literal music-making, but in shaping how music is heard.

17. The audio and a full transcript of the segment is available at http://www.wnyc.org/music/articles/28694 (accessed April 6, 2008).

18. Comaskey currently resides in New Milford, Connecticut. In addition to working as a music mentor for Road Recovery, an organization that helps musicians and music industry personnel who struggle with addiction, Comaskey is currently performing with the Adam Roth Challenge, a stump-the-band show with a weekly residency in New York City.

19. With the stage shrouded in darkness, each week's show begins with a portentous recorded voice reciting the following monologue: "Welcome to Monday night at Arlene Grocery. You are about to enter a world of rock and/or roll. If you are pregnant, have heart conditions or a weak stomach, we are not responsible for your lost or stolen items. Rock 'n' roll karaoke may not be for everyone, so please consult your bartender before taking action. Side effects may include drunkenness, nudity, euphoric states of mind, delusions of grandeur, perspiration, anal bleeding, hoarseness or loss of vocal production, and all-out rock stardom." The accent and cadence of the voice are reminiscent of Vincent Price's prologue to Iron Maiden's "Number of the Beast." The monologue concludes with a "Karaoke Ten Commandments." The full recording can be heard at http://video.aol.com/video-detail/rock-n-roll-karaoke-commandments/925260000 (accessed April 6, 2008).

20. The space has been turned into a men's clothing boutique. Today, CBGB only survives as a brand of clothing and as a retail outlet on St. Mark's Place that sells items such as Ramones flip-flops and air freshener.

21. Just up the street from CBGB's is the Continental, host to PMK between 2005 and 2006. Having frequently hosted punk rock shows by the likes of Joey Ramone, Johnny Thunders, Murphy's Law, and countless no-name punk bands passing through town, the club ceased hosting live music in 2006. The decision was based on the impossibility of meeting rising rents, which were driven up by the Continental's new neighbors including McDonald's, Starbucks, and K-Mart. Remodeled as a NYU undergraduate bar, the owners now more easily cover their margins.

22. These include songs by Blondie, Bow Wow Wow, The Donnas, Elastica, Go-Go's, Heart, Joan Jett, Kelly Clarkson, Lita Ford, Pat Benatar, The Pretenders, Runaways, Scandal, X, and X-Ray Spex.

23. A recording of this performance in archived at http://www.punkmetalkaraoke.com/media/2004-06-14/beat_on_the_brat.mp3 (accessed April 6, 2008).

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