

ANAIS DUPLAN

from *Mount Carmel & The Blood of Parnassus*

I'm always too moody for the party. I talked to Ryan about this and we can talk about this endlessly. That is because Ryan is a good man with a good sense of the sentence. I told Ryan at the barbecue, "And so on and that's how it is." I said, "You've always got to keep on going until you're dead. And when you die some folks will give a hoot and some others will give great hoots. Still others will fall somewhere in the middle. You will possess no great works. Where does something fall when it falls in the middle? It falls all around us, at night, in strides. I had a feeling in the fingers the other day. They weren't my fingers. I told Dr. Adleson about it. I told him for the second or even the third time. I felt so dejected, I fell into a hole. At the bottom of the hole, my mother was there. She was peeling carrots. She was married to Rebecca, who had given her many great children."

—

I will have to be frank with you—we've already gotten this far. My mother left me and my father left me and my mother left me for a shorter period of time. You could debate whether that was her fault though that seems cruel to do here and—a mother is a mother—political unrest a history of instability personal errors, etc. Such is life. I can talk about you and I don't have to know you first. I get tired, I say, I want to tell the whole story. It's cumbersome. Who said this, who said that. My god, this is going to need so much editing. Which I say because I missed thinking about you. It would be misleading to end this paragraph here. I'm trying not to

ANNI LIU

Those Years

My mother and I got two plastic bags' worth of groceries from a church basement every other Thursday: Zip-locked baggies fat with sugar and flour, sagging loaves of white bread a week past their expiration (though never fit for human consumption), creased cartons of dried milk dusting everything else with a fine chalky silt, and dented 46oz cans stripped of their labels like the mystery flavor—sometimes pineapple juice, or, my favorite, pulpy yams in heavy syrup. My mother drove there without a license in the silver Mercury that eventually gave out on 75N, the steering wheel coming off in her hands. How she made it home, I never asked, just remember her coming in and standing there starting to sob while my boyfriend and I tried to find what to say after having each taken two tabs of acid not quite an hour before. When she had finished crying, we helped her put away the food pantry goods she somehow remembered to take out of the wrecked car. And this is what I remember: pushing the back things we'd gotten before further back into the cabinets, knowing we had little use for them, but thankful anyway for something to fill the space with.

that has and hasn't
and won't happen
like riding glass elevators

directionless
through the dark,
never arriving,

as in dreams,
where we meant
to send them.

Mother,
what a proud failure
it'd be to become you.

—

In your house, that is their house,
women sniff like exhausted dogs
for that trap door to crash through

to gulp finally the potential and certainty
that takes the form of some noble tone
we can't quite hear. And the men,

they see straight through us, through the house,
how gas moves through the earth,
breaking us easy into the delicious sip of sky.

I fall through another floor
finally to her room. Dreamcatchers
and mirrors hang in every corner,

and in each dim corner,
a mock path to another corner
another black mirror's



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WLS

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Our thoughts are with friends and comrades affected by the tragedy at the Ghost Ship Collective in Oakland. We are grateful for the power that those lost shared in life and for the strength of those grieving. We invite readers to lend support however able.

WLS

Mother Who Didn't

Mother who didn't.

My baby-frailty was not enough to bind you to my body.

Yellowed skin and eyes,

my sudden blurred cry, the hole

I made of you.

Mother who didn't.

Why'd you mix

a big screwdriver

in a thick

robin's-egg cup, gulp then fall sleeping

like a putrid angel, to a tangled blanket
in the den-floor?

I found you when I pecked open the door,
slunk past your rumped body and slurped the bitter juice.

Who do you talk DOS to?

Bathed in RGB-screen's flicker?

The computer's plastic shell is an off-white oyster.

You say he's down the street but now he's on the couch.

I don't let you talk to me.

Mother who didn't.

Why was this not the right place to land?

Why let the babies run through you like chicks through the kill-shoot?

Why did you slap me when I tried your perfume?

Why is this all I remember?

Mint and leather. I remember

your chest, sun-spotted and tan with small gold chain dangling.

How you must have held me there, loved me there sometimes.

Mother who didn't

take children to school.

Woke with phone's under-bed shout.

Chalk-mouthed, limped the house, found us gone, garage agape,

lunch money still on the counter where dad had left it.

You waited

on bent-knee in bathrobe

hang-wringing afront the bay window.

Our stomachs flipped

when you lunged headlong into the yard

Then beat us your worst.

MICHELLE GOTTSCHLICH

The House is a Wheel

—Alicia Ostriker

Do we mock our mothers? Is Paris a city?

I'm not sure how to begin.

It seems to have begun

before me. They say

we all become our mothers.

It's not an inability

to hook into free will, which

has been disproved. To look

at us from some enormous height,

to watch the whole thing

turning, I see it's not that,

I think, rather,

it's been disapproved.

She draws her hands up to her chin

and presses the skin, turns to white

the beds of her fingernails. The ring

is there with the faux emerald

I bought her for twelve dollars,

one Christmas, my birth stone or hers,

I can't remember. At the fair,

I catch her watching the giant wheel.

She's watching me.

—

We're both still. She looks so far

and I do it too: push the curb

of gums under the cheek

my four fingers

can't quite

grip around.

—

There is a comforting scent

that quickly spoils

when I think of her

going now through her sixties

how one might slip down

a flight of stairs—

darkness then bright glimpses
of things past, my face, perhaps,
a baby's pudgy hands.

her husband, and the ferris wheel
in Paris she never saw but gratefully
replaced with hundreds of parks

and country fairs.

The night keeps it all.

We pass by everything

matrilineal



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2 Cults, 1 Boy

MY LIVES AS A JEHOVAH’S WITNESS & DIY PUNK

JAMES PAYNE

For MHPQ's Matrilineal Issue, I'm contributing an excerpt from an essay about being raised by a single mother - a loving, generous woman, who is a dutiful parent and a Jehovah's Witness - in a working-class suburb of Columbus, Ohio. Growing up in a religious cult has made me simultaneously long for, and be wary of, the comfort found in ideological communities. With this wariness in mind, this excerpt outlines the structural similarities between the JW congregation I was raised in and the DIY Punk communities I've been apart of in the Midwest. Though I turned to DIY Punk to repudiate the socially conservative precepts of the JW organization, I've come to realize that what I really did was replace one cult with another. At least the music was better.

I’M EIGHT YEARS OLD and I’m addressing a room of thirty people, mostly adults, in the basement of a Kingdom Hall, which is the term Jehovah’s Witnesses use instead of “church.” My mother wrote my five-minute speech, and we rehearsed it in our kitchen, using the microwave’s timer function to make sure I wouldn’t go too long. I wasn’t asked to give this talk due to my oratorical precocity, or a specific idea I had to contribute - I had no idea. I gave the talk because everyone in the congregation has to give a talk.

All Witnesses participate in producing the content of Kingdom Hall meetings. Most Witnesses only give a seasonal talk, and the Elders - the JW term for the men who run Kingdom Halls - are certainly overrepresented. But all are involved over time.

Jehovah’s Witnesses’s socialization of the Kingdom Hall’s programming intentionally blurs the line between producer and consumer, between speech-giver and speech-listener. It activates the audience-object and turns it, if even for five minutes, once a season, into a producer-subject. This activation requires the Witness to publicly perform belief, which engenders a sense of having a stake in the proceedings, and in the belief, for the performer. After the talk, the Witness is hit with a wave of positive feedback for voicing a belief shared by the Witness’s like-minded audience of intimates, which confirms the rightness of the belief in the mind of the speaker. The experience of the talk is etched into the speaker’s memory because contemporary life offers the dispossessed few occasions for public-speaking. The speech’s content is then associated with the emboldened feeling gained from receiving such a large and rare display of public empathy - it’s a shot of power for the powerless. Having made a public testament, witnessed by spiritual and famlial kin, one is pushed to live up to it in the future. The speaker has become a site of belief.

Likewise, in between speakers at the Thursday and Sunday meetings, all JWs sing songs - not hymns - out of a songbook. That all congregants sing at JW meetings, as opposed to only a choir, is intentional. The peer pressure inherent in group-singing makes it easier to sing than to abstain. And when one does sing a JW song, one regurgitates the ideological content at the heart of the religion, e.g., “We Are Jehovah’s Witnesses / We Speak out in fearlessness / We are the ones of true prophecy / What we foretell comes to be” (Song 31). To joyously sing these words in public is not unlike a pledge of allegiance; it is a speech-act of ideological self-definition.

The experience of singing in a congregation, or in a crowd to one’s favorite band, can be a transcendent one in which the individual melts harmoniously into the group. Music, especially loud, live music, releases dopamine in the listener’s brain. The subconscious association of this dopamine-release with the Kingdom Hall and its congregants, or with the punk house and its social scene, attaches positive feelings to the site of the music. It’s a less intense version of how snorting molly bonds ones with the people one snorts it with, or how Oxytocin-release during sex creates a sense of trust with one’s sexual partner(s). Group-singing in church, or in the pit, is a pleasurable experience that creates and reaffirms social bonds. Acting in concert, one finds as much comfort in the group as one does in the self.

The cultist’s identification with the group is often made literal through the adoption of new names and titles that reflect their role in the cult. JW’s version of this tactic establishes a clear hierarchy and entrenches gender norms. The men - only men - who run each congregation are referred to as Elders. Congregants are referred to in a gender binary: *Brother* for “men,” and *Sister* for “women.” Therefore, my mother is known as “Sister Payne.” In punk, bands often drop their last names and are referred to by “First Name, Band Name” following the Ramones model: “Joey Ramone.” Also common are names that express a commitment to a punk aesthetic or a role in the production of the subculture: “Matt Tard,” “Jimmy Buttons.” To change one’s name or to adopt a group rank, signals a subordination of one’s old self to the group identity. Consider the statement Malcolm X made by replacing his “slave name” of “Little” with “X” to mark the theft of his African heritage by white men when he joined the Nation of Islam. Then, to signal his departure from the NOI, a politico-religious cult, and his subsequent embrace of Sunni Islam, Malcolm X became el-Hajj Malik el-Shabazz. The NOI then assassinated El-Shabazz for having the temerity to leave its order. To paraphrase Thoreau, beware enterprises that require new names.

A new identity, without new behavior, would be theory without praxis. To draw the cultist farther away from society, and into the fold of the group, many cults maintain social practices that oppose mainstream culture for no discernible ideological reason beyond social control. For instance, holidays cause a problem for JWs and DIY punks because they inculcate societal norms toward religion (Christmas, Easter), colonialism and racism (Columbus Day, Thanksgiving), patriotism (Independence Day, Veterans Day), secular, heteronormative love (Valentine’s Day), and conceptions of death and the afterlife (Halloween, Dia De Los Muertos). JWs, who do not celebrate any holidays, lean on ad-hoc anti-capitalism as a rationale against celebrating ostensibly Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter. On this issue, one could transpose JW text into *Adbusters* and none would be the wiser. In addition to a critique of commercialism, JWs argue against the dating of holy events and the historical

conflation of “pagan” holidays with Christian ones. But the holiday issue for JWs is not about anti-capitalism, a pagan past, or theological difference; rather it’s about social control because even holidays as innocuous as Mother’s Day are verboten. The real problem is that holidays are a time for family bonding and they create affinities with people and ideas outside of the JW organization.

As links to society are severed, cults offer replacement circuits. While punks make the pilgrimage to Gainesville each year for The Fest - and other multi-day convenings - JWs host regional conventions for many of the same reasons: to see acts - speakers, biblical plays, baptisms - and to debut new products and themes. The conventions are also an excuse to introduce JWs from one area to another, to meet dating prospects, and potentially start families. This happens twice a year. The conventions are grueling, all-day, multi-day events.

During the conventions, large banners are hung that express the year’s theme (2014: “Keep Seeking First God’s Kingdom!” 2015: “Imitate Jesus!” 2016:“Remain Loyal To Jehovah!”) or highlight scriptures. These hanging texts pervade the mass gatherings, asserting ideological unity among attendees. The JW signs recall the punk house I lived in, the Monster House, where one passed a Safe Space sign on the front door to enter a foyer where a 15-foot-long banner with the house’s manifesto hung. It read:

<div><p>We love music so we host shows. We want people to enjoy music while getting to know one another. We want a comfortable and safe space to share as equals. Sexism, racism, homophobia, classism and jerks have no place here. We collect donations, not for our benefit, but for performers who are on tour and need support to travel. This is not a stepping stone to a capitalistic idea of success. This is a link in a strong chain of independent culture. Respect this place. Respect each other. All shows are all ages.</p></div>

This type of messaging left the house in the form of online event pages, zines, and posters. DIY punks have a strong, fetishistic emphasis on posterimg, which intersects the punk subculture’s visual aesthetic and viewpoint into the public sphere while ostensibly also inviting people to its events. JWs use tracts in much the same manner. Tracts are one-page full-color zines with a simple fold down the middle of an 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper. They contain theological glosses on topical issues and contain contact information for the curious. JWs publish these tracts to increase membership, bring people to events, to leave as a calling card, and to espouse and advocate for their ideas. Witnesses leave tracts in the doors of absent “house-holders” who do not answer when JWs call on them and in public spaces frequented by the working-class: libraries, laundromats, doctors’ offices, and bus stations. I found my first copy of *Evasion* similarly - in a box of zines at a skatepark. Later, in the thick of my posterimg years, I’d carry flyers with me to hand out to anyone with interest, and I would drop them off on a well-worn circuit of houses I knew punks lived in.

JW tracts, books, music, and magazines are all self-published, free DIY products printed at collectively-run, vertically-integrated JW printeries. The Watchtower Society of the Jehovah’s Witnesses publishes two full-length magazines: *Awake!* and *The Watchtower*. Both magazines have print-runs of over 60 million copies per issue. Their magazines function as punk zines - circulating current topics, subcultural developments, dogma, and aesthetics. Often, they’re solely dedicated to the Sisyphean feat of projecting a positive image of JWs for the outside world. This theme is common to marginalized ideological communities that are caricatured in mainstream media: there’s a recurrent need to publish primers that rebrand and explain themselves in a more flattering light to the uninitiated.

JW’s profligate printing, as well as their Kingdom Halls, are funded, like true DIY shows, by donations. JWs have a less abrasive collecting strategy than DIY face-to-face asks: just a wooden box attached to the wall. It’s put in an inconspicuous spot so there isn’t an undue pressure on poorer congregants to donate more than they can afford, following Mark 12:41-43:

<div><p>41: As Jesus was sitting opposite the treasure, He watched the crowd placing money into it. And many rich people put in large amounts. 42: Then one poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amounted to a small fraction of a denarius. 43: Jesus called His disciples to Him and said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more than all the others into the treasury.</p></div>

Passive-aggressive pressure, though, is put on JWs to donate by announcing the state of the Kingdom Hall’s finances during meetings, if the belief that “Jehovah sees all” isn’t enough to rustle up some cash.

When the Monster House would debate our show door policy and whether or not to charge a flat \$5 fee, in part to screen people out who were only coming to shows to party, I would ask, “If you must pay, then what is punk about what we’re doing?” One reason this donation model seemed natural to me, and to many other punks, is the custom of tithing and the passing of the basket during Christian services many of us observed growing up.

The JW’s donations policy and their skepticism toward holidays are just a few of the many examples of their ambient anti-capitalism. An oft-invoked scripture, Matthew 19:24 hints at their underlying ethos:

<div><p>24: Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.</p></div>

This view is used to justify many JW policies. For instance, JWs are encouraged not to pursue higher education, because wealth isn’t necessary for salvation, and the world will end due to Armageddon before one could capitalize on one’s education anyway. In general, an eye is cast askew at any notion of luxury, or any plan for oneself that approaches a professional career. Most JWs, locked-out of white-collar industries by a lack of education, accordingly find employment in custodial services, food service, factories, carpentry, and clerical work. This is convenient for the JW organization because most working-class Americans are not taught critical reasoning skills until, or rather, unless, they go to college. This eases the process of ideological capture, but also makes JWs more dependent on their tight knit congregations for material support - housework, car repair, traded favors, homecare assistance - as they may lack the funds to comfortably purchase these services on the free market.

Punks, too, deter peers from career paths that could secure them material comfort; not just from pursuing white fields, like finance, government, or business - unless it’s their DIY business - but

from pursuing steps to career advancement, like graduate school, in punk-approved fields, like art or writing. The hatred punks exhibit toward students even in towns that are only economically viable due to universities, like Bloomington, Indiana, is confounding, especially when many punks have been students, or are the children of academics.

The DIY life model of part-time employment, a cheap punk house with many roommates, and as much time as possible working on your band, zine, or art, is not altogether different than the model for JW full-time pioneers, the term JWs use for door-to-door proselytizers. As the Watchtower Society explains on JW.org:

<div><p>A pioneer is a full-time evangelizer. All of Jehovah’s Witnesses are publishers of the good news. However, some have organized their life to serve as <i>regular pioneers</i>, spending 70 hours each month in the preaching work. To do this, many limit their secular work to part-time.</p></div>
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The Regular Pioneer’s 70 hours a month are in addition to attending JW meetings, which happen three times a week. The Tuesday meeting is an hour. The Thursday meeting is two hours. And the Sunday meeting is three hours. A large proportion of the congregation makes each meeting, while also managing to “go out in service” witnessing to the public.

At first appearance, the JW schedule is formidable, but it wasn’t uncommon for two or three shows to happen each week just at the Monster House. And the monthly calendar in Columbus, *Columbus Sucks Because You Suck*, often lists as many as twenty DIY events happening each month throughout the city. Obviously, attendance isn’t compulsory, but it’s worth noting that if you add in band practice, making posters, distributing posters, online promotion, producing records, making zines, keeping up with pen-pals, booking bands, and attending shows, that the average DIY head is likely putting in even more time than a JW Regular Pioneer.

Events for both JWs and DIY punks tend to occur in economically marginalized areas on the outskirts of accumulated capital and economic activity. (This is unlike, say, the Church of Scientology, which owns some of the most valuable real estate in Los Angeles, or The Vatican, which is more opulent than the Palace of Versailles.) JW Kingdom Halls are clandestine, volunteer-made buildings, cheaply constructed with collectively-raised funds. The exteriors and interiors of the buildings are pedestrian, though well kempt. The Watchtower Society buys and holds cheap land for many years, tracking population-growth trends to anticipate coming needs. While JWs predict futures, punks tend to capitalize on parts of town whose best times were in the past, where one can be loud (band practice), pay cheap rent (part-time job), and have a hands-off relationship with the landlord (DIY home improvements). Gentrification tends to affect both communities, but JWs profit from it. JWs, for instance, recently sold their iconic Brooklyn Heights headquarters for 340 million dollars to none other than Donald Trump’s son-in-law Jared Kushner. Punks, however, are pushed out by gentrification.

This ritual victimization only confirms punks’ existing perception of the world. Punk is an incubator of myriad anti-capitalist views that range from Defiance, Ohio’s, gentle socialism, “Share what ya got,” to the invocation of “bourgie” to deride anything that assaults a punk’s sense of social propriety, from wearing khakis to eating at restaurants, regardless of the punk’s actual economic position vis-à-vis the target of their opprobrium. The mix of political ideologies that punk attracts - FDR liberals, socialists, communists, anarchists, feminists, anti-fascists - all hold a critique of capitalism at their core. How this critique is expressed in practice, though, often veers into the performance of poverty. This may provide a fashionable lifestyle of temporary austerity for those from middle-class and wealthy backgrounds, whose parents are lawyers, doctors, engineers, and professors, but it does a disservice to those who come from precarity and are destined, in America, to die in it.

Punks who come from stable financial backgrounds can look forward to comfortable holidays with family, inheriting property later in life, and an implicit or explicit safety net at all other times, regardless of the education they secure. Punks of and in precarity, who are attracted to the message in punk not for its novelty, but for its lengthy correspondence to their lived experience, are all too aware such present and future economic privileges are not theirs, and that the only way for them to escape precarity is to secure economic means for themselves by any means necessary - punk, or not.

Unfortunately, pernicious attitudes for the precarious don’t end at decrying the tyranny of higher education - they extend to healthcare, in both the DIY and JW communities. Though I had left the religion years earlier, my mother - who loves me and was advising me with her best intentions - suggested I refuse blood transfusions for a major surgery, a spinal fusion I underwent at 17, regardless of complications. Jehovah’s Witnesses infamously refuse to receive blood transfusions due, ostensibly, to their reading of Acts 15:29:

<div><p>29: To keep abstaining from things sacrificed to idols, from blood, from what is strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you carefully keep yourselves from these things, you will prosper. Good health to you!</p></div>

This proscription of a modern treatment for no explicit reason other than a debatable reading of a scripture - even in the face of death - is ideology laid bare.

It’s also a strategy of establishing difference through resistance, no matter the consequence or logic. There is parallel in the skeptical attitudes many punks hold toward allopathic medicine. If a possible remedy or food regimen outside of mainstream medicine and nutrition exists, many punks prefer it. Examples include but are not limited to detoxification, crystal healing, oil pulling, anti-fluoride, anti-GMO, anti-vax, raw diets, and cleanses. Both JWs and DIY punks - as cults - demonstrate their need for difference from accepted convention by extending their ideological critique of society even onto fields that are existentially self-defeating.

The “in the world, but not of it” (John 15:19) mindset defies the institutions of the world whether or not they would be beneficial to accept. This mindset is solidified for JWs at an early age when - if they are not homeschooled - they are instructed not to say the Pledge of Allegiance. *I’ve never said the Pledge*. This, and the abstention from activities related to holidays, creates a gulf between JW children and the rest of the students. It also establishes that governmental authority - and authority in general, except Jehovah’s - is something to contest. For example, JWs protest the pledge, forbid voting in elections, and conscientiously object to every war. Even JW’s policy of “rendering to Caesar what is Caesar’s” (Mark 12:17) - in other words to pay taxes and observe laws when possible - refers to the government (Caesar) as an entity outside of themselves.

Many punks, similarly, decline to vote. Most wouldn’t dream of joining the army, and would likely dodge a draft if one were enacted. They feel nothing but negativity for the flag, unless it’s burning. But generally, punks still pay taxes and only disobey laws - like those regulating shoplifting, dumpster-diving, fire codes and permitting issues for shows - that impede their lifestyle. For punks, laws are optional, which is an option for some of them, due to youth and white privilege.

Punks and JWs are both correct in assuming the law, and the police, are their enemies, as they are the embodiment and enforcers of a capitalist hegemony that would prefer for them not to exist. JWs, rightly, make much of their historical persecution - the Communist suppression, the US

prosecution of JWs under the Espionage act during the Great War, and the almost fifteen hundred Witnesses executed by the German state during The Holocaust. The title of the JW-produced Holocaust video *Purple Triangles* comes from the symbol the Nazis devised for JWs to wear in concentration camps. On Tuesdays, Witnesses meet in the houses of fellow members, like a house show, in order to have a back-up plan for meeting in case of public persecution - to go underground, as it were. The use of private residential space for semi-public events is itself an aspect of what capitalist hegemony finds troubling about groups like JWs and DIY punks.

To the extent that JWs are currently “persecuted,” punks could make the same claim: their shows are shut down, activist and punk circles are often infiltrated and surveilled by law enforcement, and they are hassled because of their appearance or subject-positionality.

As Patti Smith, who was raised as a Jehovah’s Witness, sang: “Outside of society / that’s where you’ll find me.” But the tendency of both JWs and DIY punks to embrace viewing the outside world through a black and white, us and them lens due to this foundational difference, creates a blinkered social outlook with poor economic outcomes for those involved in both subcultures. Think of it: if you are not a punk, you are a “normie.” If you are not a JW, you are “worldly.” If you are a JW, the economic and political order is “The System.” If you’re a punk, it’s the same, or it’s “White Supremacist Capitalist Patriarchy.” The vision of paradise, of utopia, for JWs is “The New System,” and for punks it is “After the Rev;” if it’s not a nihilistic “No Future.” The ideological dismissal of the outside world and its stakes promotes a closed feedback loop within the subcultures where one’s views are rarely contradicted or developed.

Within culturally-oppositional groups, like JWs and DIY punks, not every member may know one another personally. Therefore, members signal ideological affinity with other members in outward signs of difference and resistance, e.g. through clothing and hygiene. Cults maintain a cohesive appearance by adopting DIY sumptuary laws - that is, having a proper, ritualized way to do everything, including eating food, drinking alcohol, wearing clothes, being entertained, having sex, being in relationships, and working. JWs wear bland, cheap, formal dress and shower every day in order to appear as model citizens, worthy of heeding; whereas, punks intentionally portray the opposite, not bathing, shirking gender norms, adopting new ones, and wearing the same clothes in the same ways as their friends do. Banal consumption patterns become sites of public differentiation and sectarian identification: Our clichés, ourselves.

But the strongest point of self-definition for the cult is in what it purges from itself. By purging, remainders cohere. Shirley Jackson’s short story *The Lottery* is an apt parable for the JW’s excommunication process called disfellowshipping, and for the way punks shun those who no longer meet the moral standards of the group. In *The Lottery*, villagers meet up for a long-running annual community lottery. Slips of paper are placed into a box and the head of each household draws a slip. One householder “wins,” and another lottery takes place with a slip of paper for each family member in the house. The mother of the winning house, Tessie, draws the slip with a black dot. Then the members of the community stone her to death. The village builds in-group cohesion by murdering one of their own, together.

JW’s disfellowshipping process isn’t too different. Disfellowshipping is a group policing of morality and behavior beyond legal means. One can be disfellowshipped for premarital or homosexual sex, abortion, adultery, smoking, drunkenness, drug abuse, blood transfusion, apostasy, and believing in other doctrines. Witnesses shun members who are disfellowshipped, even family. If they don’t, they too risk disfellowship. This complete social shunning, especially if you are raised in a JW community, results in total isolation - from friends, partners, family, and from support systems, emotional and material. The disfellowshipped are left in a state similar to how Argentine dictator Jorge Rafael Videla described his systematically murdered political opponents:

<div><p>The disappeared are just that: disappeared. They are neither alive nor dead. They are disappeared.</p></div>
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Guilt by any plausible association is deeply cultish. In describing the JW’s disfellowshipping process, I can’t help but picture the people I’ve banned from show spaces I’ve ran, the ones I’ve physically removed from shows for questionable behavior, and the people I’ve watched out for or condemned without personally knowing. Punks de facto disfellowship members based on rumors - perhaps one is creepy, one said something racist, another acted poorly in a relationship. In cases of sexual assault and rape, shunning fits; it seems impossible not to. Even if one goes through a reconciliation process, relationships in the group will never, and probably shouldn’t ever, return to a prior normalcy. But one thing I’ve noticed in Columbus, however, is the length in which even relatively minor situations contaminate other relationships no matter how far removed. In a cult, where insularity is the connective tissue, it doesn’t stop with “If you do something bad, it’s bad you did that,” but rather it becomes, “If you do something bad, you are bad, and anyone who talks to you is bad,” - which is bad, and logically consistent more with totalitarian regimes like the DPRK, where if one escapes the country, one’s family can be sentenced to its concentration camps, than any conception of politics that feels life-affirming.

Tightly-knit ideological communities can seem well-designed only in terms of how proficient they are in inflicting emotional trauma on their members. Whether positioned as utopian, revolutionary, or the religious Truth, cults all recreate the iniquities of the macro-world within their cloistered microcosms. Patriarchy is perhaps the most glaring example. At the age of eight, I could stand and address the congregation with my mother’s words, but my mother was only allowed to sit and perform scripted exchanges with other sisters. Female Jehovah’s Witnesses are barred from becoming elders and from serving on the select Governing Body - JW’s politburo. The oppression is not just public, but private as well: women are impelled to “...submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the lord.” (Colossians 3:18), to dress demurely, to not have premarital sex or an abortion unless the life of the mother is in danger. DIY punk may not have these rules written in stone, but even in a time when the most interesting things happening in punk, alt-lit, memes, art, and comics revolve around women, queers, and trans people, few would disagree that most punk shows are set-up by white men, in spaces run by white men, featuring bands predominantly consisting of white men, promoted with flyers designed by white men, and written about in zines predominantly published by white men - like this essay. The boys club - established for JWs by Charles Taze Russell in 1879, or by whichever power-seeking cishet white male labelhead, lead singer, or curator in 2016, watches out for itself, as any ruling class is wont to do.

The especial problem with the cult is that dispossessed people are drawn to it because it’s only within a society of peers cut off from a world that hates them that they can find agency and meaning. But meaning itself is oppressive when found within a hierarchical power structure that inevitably tends toward exploiting its members, whether that takes the form of a covered-up JW child molestation scandal, or the innumerable instances of sexual abuse in the punk community. Even a former JW who has escaped direct abuse, like me, must forever deal with two worlds of psychic pain afterwards: that of American capitalism, and that of its fun house mirror, the cult. Neither interior world solves the other, both magnify one another’s faults, and each is equally fruitless to reenact, except as trauma.