

You're Not Hardcore Unless You Live Hardcore

Annalina Benner

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Annalina.benner-1@anglistik.uni-giessen.de

Abstract:

In *Generation Reagan Youth*, Robert Winkler combines Rahel Jaeggi's *Critique of Forms of Life* (2018) with whiteness studies and new historicism. He uses these to contextualize the U.S. hardcore punk scene's stances on neoliberalism and its key concepts from the emergence of first-generation hardcore in the 1970s through the 1990s. Winkler not only constructs one concept of what hardcore is but points out the diversification of the scene to include countermovements such as *Riot Grrrl*, *Queercore*, and *Latino Punk*, providing a compelling read to scholars and hardcore kids.

Du bist nicht Hardcore, wenn du nicht Hardcore lebst

German Abstract:

In *Generation Reagan Youth* kombiniert Robert Winkler Rahel Jaeggis *Kritik der Lebensformen* mit Weißseinsforschung und New Historicism. Auf diese Weise kontextualisiert er die Positionen der US-amerikanischen Hardcore Punk Szene zum Neoliberalismus sowie ihre Schlüsselkonzepte von der Entstehung des Hardcore der ersten Generation in den 1970er bis in die 1990er Jahre. Da Winkler nicht auf eine Definition von Hardcore Punk besteht, sondern auch die Diversifizierung der Szene aufzeigt, die Gegenbewegungen wie *Riot Grrrl*, *Queercore* und *Latino Punk* einschließt, bietet er eine fesselnde Lektüre für Wissenschaftler_innen und ‚Hardcore Kids‘.

How to cite:

Benner, Annalina: "You're Not Hardcore Unless You Live Hardcore [Review of: Winkler, Robert A.: *Generation Reagan Youth: Representing and Resisting White Neoliberal Forms of Life in the U.S. Hardcore Punk Scene (1979–1999)*. Trier: WVT, 2021.].“ In: KULT_online 65 (2022).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22029/ko.2022.1272>



You're Not Hardcore Unless You Live Hardcore

Annalina Benner

Justus Liebig University Giessen

Winkler, Robert A. *Generation Reagan Youth. Representing and Resisting White Neoliberal Forms of Life in the U.S. Hardcore Punk Scene (1979–1999)*. Trier: WVT, 2021. 224 pages, 32,50 EUR. ISBN: 978-3-86821-897-8.

Like Jack Black's character in *School of Rock*, who teaches his students that "you're not hardcore unless you live hardcore," Robert Winkler takes his readers by the hand and introduces them to the *School of Hardcore*. In the first chapter, Winkler introduces not only the key features of the hardcore scene but also his main working concepts and research questions. With this, his first research question builds on an understanding of Ethan Kleinberg's *Haunting History: For A Deconstructive Approach to the Past* (Redwood City 2017). Consequently, Winkler provides a brief introduction to Kleinberg's concept which is based on the assumption that past and present cannot be separated, but have to be considered as interconnected entities (cf. p. 2). With that in mind, Winkler formulates his guiding question that runs through the book as a common thread: "[W]hat haunted [the hardcore] form of life when it emerged in the late 1970s and what haunts the U.S. [today]?" (p. 2). Set out on a quest to answer this question and to elaborate on whether hardcore can be established as a successful form of life by the standards of Rahel Jaeggi as formulated in her *Critique of Forms of Life* (Cambridge 2018), Winkler situates his research on the hardcore scene "within the broader historical context of neoliberal, racial, and gender discourses, dispositifs, and social practices" (p. 10).

By doing so, he brings together the concepts of Kleinberg's haunting history and Jaeggi's concept of forms of life as he looks into the social practices as well as specific systems of social behaviors found in the hardcore scene (cf. *ibid.*). Winkler then compares these to the values of Reagan's America to understand whether hardcore punk "has always [...] been haunted by the history of white privilege and patriarchy?" (p. 4). As he continues to frame the characteristic hardcore kid as white, male, and suburban, the hardcore scene's struggle to

resist hegemonic masculinity becomes apparent in light of the dangers of “merely *represent[ing]* mainstream negotiations of white masculinity” (p. 20). With that, Winkler uncovers the first crucial element of neoliberalism as hegemonic masculinity and further complements this with colorblindness as another significant characteristic in a temporal classification of hardcore.

In the second chapter, Winkler draws attention to the identity of the hardcore kid and to the “glorification of and reliance on strong and self-determined male subjects” (p. 26) which applies to both neoliberalism as well as the hardcore scene in its early years. Thus, he finds the hardcore kids guilty of a representation of neoliberalism’s stances on hegemonic masculinity, while at the same time acknowledging the hardcore scene’s resistance to “the propagation of heteronormativity and colorblindness” (p. 39) under the Reagan administration. Hence, Winkler explains how hardcore punk emerges as not only caught between resisting and representing neoliberalism but in a position where it can thrive as a form of life capable of immanent criticism of neoliberalism. This insight is once again based on Jaeggi, who argues that forms of life are capable of immanent criticism which in turn can serve as a catalyst for societal transformations. As this immanent criticism includes both internal and external criticism, the concept fits Winkler’s question about the representative and resistant nature of the hardcore scene (cf. p. 39).

To provide examples for the performance of the hardcore scene’s capability to express immanent criticism, Winkler further employs Judith Butler’s concept of gender performativity and Rosalyn Diprose’s reflection on the impact of the other. Thus, he describes the hardcore kid to be both the embodiment of neoliberalism and hardcore whose “bodily performance [is capable of] transgressing and transforming this very regime” (p. 45). The here mentioned bodily performance and alteration of the established system, however, cannot be achieved by slam-dancing alone but requires the hardcore scene members to defy neoliberal concepts. In order to transform society, Winkler suggests the hardcore scene become gay in the sense of “confronting the subject” (p. 51) of hegemonic masculinity and, thus, neoliberalism which he bases on Nibert Finzsch’s text “Becoming Gay: Deleuze, Feminism and Queer Theory” (in: *Zetesis: International Journal for Fine Art, Philosophy and the Wild Sciences*, 1 (1) 2013, pp. 47–

57). Similarly, he introduces George Yancy's idea of becoming 'un-sutured' (2015) in order to raise awareness of racial problems within neoliberalism as well as the hardcore scene. To this end, the process of becoming un-sutured requires the white person to become aware of their whiteness, and the resulting implicit co-operation "in the perpetuation of the white racist system which causes [...] damage among all 'non-white' subjects" (p. 53). Hence, Winkler claims that "the hardcore form of life can be deemed as a successful learning process only when it provides its white male members with the possibility to [...] *unlearn being male and being white*" (p. 48).

As Winkler establishes his theoretical framework in the second chapter, he dedicates the third through fifth chapter to the definition, analysis, and comparison of the hardcore skinhead scene, the straight edge scene, the hardcore punk scene, and their respective countermovements. In chapter three, he introduces the hardcore skinhead community and its origins in and overlap with the U.S. working-class. Furthermore, Winkler contextualizes skinheads' views with the U.S. welfare reform and the aftermath of losing the Vietnam War by analyzing song lyrics and album covers. Nevertheless, countermovements such as *Skinheads Against Racial Prejudice* (SHARP) and *Read and Anarchist Skinheads* (RASH) are also represented in this book, providing an example of resisting violent and nationalistic tendencies in early hardcore (cf. p. 55–103). In the next chapter, Robert Winkler introduces his readers to another sub-genre of hardcore, the straight edge scene with its principles of soberness and sexual abstinence, which he contextualized with the U.S.' fight against the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Once again, Winkler finds that the radicalization of the straight edge scene in the form of the hardline ideology is countered by new emerging sub-genres such as posicore or antifa straight edge (cf. p. 104–136). In the fifth chapter dedicated to the analysis of neoliberal forms of life in the U.S. hardcore scene, Winkler analyzes the broader hardcore punk scene as he discusses white privilege and racial ambiguity in the early hardcore punk scene by conducting three case studies through the use of close-reading, interpretation, and contextualization of song lyrics (cf. p. 137–182).

In the final chapter, Robert Winkler summarizes that broad "parts of the skinhead straight edge, and hardcore punk scenes [...] represented and epitomized hegemonic masculinity,

heteronormativity, and white privilege” (p. 186), and, thus, exposes the hardcore lifestyle as dysfunctional by Jaeggi’s definition. However, he also draws attention to countermovements such as *Queercore*, *Riot Grrrl*, and *Latino Punk* to which he attributes the ability to successfully express “immanent criticism of sexism, misogyny, homophobia, heteronormativity, hegemonic masculinity, white privilege, and racism” (p. 188). Therefore, the countermovements allow hardcore to remain intact as a form of life by the definition of Jaeggi, as they do not merely represent neoliberalism but address and resist “societal crises and transformations” (p. 29) emerging from neoliberalism. Thus, Winkler concludes that hardcore can both be classified as resistance against as well as a representation of neoliberalism.

In his book, Robert Winkler provides his readers with interesting insights into the forms and functions of different hardcore communities by locating them in the historical-political context of Reagan’s America. However, as neither the title of his work nor the abstract of the book provides an explicit reference to his strong focus on whiteness studies and new historicism, readers less familiar with neoliberalism may not immediately be able to follow his argumentation without consulting further sources. Nevertheless, Winkler’s utilization of Diprose’s concept of the creation of body identity through the other opens up interesting discussions on the formation of identity through music and within music scenes. Finally, *Generation Reagan Youth* should provide advanced hardcore kids with the right equipment to graduate from the *School of Hardcore*, while it might inspire those new to the scene to explore their place in the pit.