

2017

Revisiting a Safe Space

Pieter Hoekstra
Pomona College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay>

Recommended Citation

Hoekstra, Pieter (2017) "Revisiting a Safe Space," *essay: critical writing at pomona college*: Vol. 1: Iss. 1, Article 5.
Available at: <https://scholarship.claremont.edu/essay/vol1/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Claremont at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in *essay: critical writing at pomona college* by an authorized editor of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@cuc.claremont.edu.

Revisiting a Safe Space.

BY **Pieter Hoekstra '17**

Corners' drummer plays right in the pocket; every up-beat feels like another collision as I get my first taste of a mosh pit in a few months, my first ever in Los Angeles. A "standard" hardcore beat, when executed precisely, a sweaty, stumbling thing, excites fans like no house music can. Our shape is that of a frenetic, volatile circle surrounded by calmer, more predictable bystanders; an inverted hurricane. The vocals tear through the snare pulse, right until a break, and then they cut to half time. That's the moment where the energy in a mosh pit tends to *woosh* out like air from a balloon, so I head toward the edge of the circle.

Some of the pit keeps going, which is fine, of course—that's their prerogative. As I make my way out, I spot this lanky blonde kid out of the corner of my eye. He shoves me back into the pit. It is common at shows for those standing outside a mosh pit to defend themselves—to push those who come flailing out of the circle back in—but there is a huge difference between self-defense and risk-free participation in the mayhem. What he does is the latter: though I'm walking slowly to the perimeter, he feels compelled to push me as hard as he can. What's more, from his position at the edge of the circle, he has the means to do so while avoiding any danger himself. There's no reason for me to collide at high speed, face-to-face with some girl, but I do, because the blonde guy thought it would be fun. But maybe it was a mistake, I think as I reorient myself. Maybe he really meant to simply steer me back towards the pit—maybe he really thought I was going to slam into him, spoiling his decision not to be involved in our dancing. Maybe, except...he's *laughing*. He's taking pleasure from launching defenseless persons while putting himself in no real danger, for surely if I were to grab his arm and fling him into the pit he would appear the "victim." But to me, he's just a coward. I hope he enjoys it as I press my sweaty middle finger into his face.

There are some basic ethical principles that must be followed in such

a crowd to actually make it “fun.” For the most part, they’ve been uniform across the shows and venues I’ve attended. If someone falls, pick them up; if someone is being too aggressive, you can return the favor until they back off. In most punk settings, it isn’t considered acceptable to be intentionally throwing punches at people who are just trying to slamdance. I say this all the while understanding that ultimately, a mosh pit is still a designated area for people to be more violent with each other than they can be elsewhere, and not everybody is going to come into the pit with the same perspective on what is or isn’t okay. Still, most people would agree that the point of a mosh pit is to have a good time while dancing in a way that feels cohesive with the tone and message of the music the band is playing—not to get hurt. And all would agree that if you’re dishing it out, you’re going to have to take it.

I want to put my feelings about this subject into some context. Punk shows were my favorite nights of high school. They were where I learned to come out of my shell, the first thing I ever did that a teenager might call “going out,” and in that sense punk shows helped me grow. I started high school as a heavily introverted music geek who spent most of his free time at home. I finished as someone who was, admittedly, still a huge dork, but one that could, in fact, *socialize*. My first show was on September 12th, 2009, the first Saturday of 9th grade. I remember the date because I have a growing collection of ticket stubs thumbtacked to my wall in New York. My older brother went with me to see Streetlight Manifesto, a poppy, commercially successful ska-punk band with a remarkable knack for catchy hooks and tight horn lines. There are two things I very clearly remember seeing on the subway ride home. One, the soles of my Converse had separated from the cloth all the way around the heel. And two, nothing had ever left me with that kind of elation before in my life. Never had I felt so intimately connected with the music that I loved as I did that night, screaming lyrics and trying to keep my feet under me in my first mosh pit. Though my tastes shifted over the next four years, across all varieties of shows I felt an important connection with the power of live music and the sense of comfort and companionship

present in an engaged crowd.

I don't want to give the impression that a mosh pit offender in some way ruined that connection when I went to see *Corners*. But it frustrates me when people take a setting that's supposed to be about freedom and release and turn it into a power trip. It's like popping someone's playground ball because you're too afraid to play a game of four-square. It occurs to me as the least punk thing a crowdmember can do because it subjects others to your own fancies while disrespecting theirs. That said, I'm glad it happened, if only because it created an opportunity for reflection. If I find myself in similar circumstances again, I hope I'll have the time and composure to confront the mosh pit "bully" rather than throwing a middle finger as I walk away. I have seen it done, and I can't help but feel respect for the people I've watched defend those around them. "Free space" or not, punk shows have a code of conduct. It may be the most bare-bones code of conduct imaginable, but it's important—as Fat Mike puts it in "The Plan": "I don't fuck with you, don't fuck with me."

This sort of consideration is something I haven't previously afforded a punk show. Looking at punk with a more critical eye, I'm starting to better understand why it's so important to me. One of punk's most novel concepts, to me, is that it seem to attract people who hold Fat Mike's ever-so-eloquently stated ideology. The weirdness of social interactions in middle school had left me somewhat socially jaded. It seemed so senseless to me that kids to whom I'd done no wrong would go out of their way to be cruel to me. Punk created an environment where I could release some of that frustration in a way that was acceptable to the people I was with. It was an environment that always excited and entertained; it still does. Even though this first L.A. show wasn't put on by a band I knew or cared much about, and even though I have a lot less social frustration now than I used to, it made me think about why I got into punk—to have a place where I wouldn't have to deal with things that put me on edge. It wasn't about the violence; it was about feeling safe. That's why I felt so angry toward the smug kid shoving people around. He was violating the sanctity of my safe space. If that had been my experience at the start

of 9th grade, punk shows would have seemed no better than middle school. I wouldn't have been as enthralled with the crowd or the music, I wouldn't have found that release, and I wouldn't be as comfortable with myself.

PIETER HOEKSTRA wrote this piece for Professor Lisa Anne Auerbach's ID1, Punk: Poetics, Politics, and Provocation in Fall 2013. It was one of two prize-winning papers for that year's seminars. Pieter is currently a graduate student at the University of Chicago Divinity School.