

LISTENING TO WHAT IS/N'T: FIELDWORK CONTRADICTIONS IN JAPANESE PUNK SCENES

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Contradiction: contra meaning against, and diction relating to speech. A word often used to point out logical fallacy or inconsistency. Encounters with contradictions are unavoidable facts of ethnographic fieldwork, and though never wholly unexpected, they can frustrate conceptions of research questions or force the researcher to reevaluate their positionality within the field and impact the process of crafting descriptive or analytic prose. Drawing on highly-subjective knowledge forms such as music, personal experience, or memory inevitably leads to contradictory encounters and ethnographic tensions to be navigated. Notwithstanding, these selfsame tensions offer salient inroads toward refining research agendas and ethnographic frames. Instead of addressing contradiction as something to be resolved, I offer that researchers can utilize contradiction as an inquisitorial tool and ever-present aspect of the narratives we draft and which allow deeper inroads into our research agendas.

This paper draws on examples of contradictions encountered over several years of fieldwork exploring punk music and culture in Japan. Below, I define contradiction as a mode of discursive and experiential co-presence in pursuing research and outline how it used throughout this paper, followed by contextualized individual examples with exploratory analysis. Finally, I ask how researchers can come to value contradiction as a meaningful avenue for listening to, and not just hearing, our research partners.

My thinking on contradiction is influenced by Anthony Giddens' differentiations between Marxist understandings of conflict as "struggle," versus contradiction as "disjunction," and it is this discursive juncture I draw on (Giddens 1979: 131). Giddens formulates contradiction specifically in terms of social theory, as relating to, "the structural components of social systems, but at the same time ... differentiated from any version of 'functional incompatibility'." I shall define social contradiction as an, "*opposition or disjunction of structural principles of social systems, where those principles operate in terms of each other but at the same time contravene one another,*" (Giddens 1979: 141, italics author's own). A contradiction then is an incongruency where one position is askance of another related position. In terms of this paper, these positions are inhabited by locutors, each holding what Harris Berger offers as a "stance," or "the valual qualities of the relationship that a person has to a text, performance, practice, or item of expressive culture." Stances are, "frequently the pivot of meaning, the point around which turn the interpretations of expressive culture," and so the stance a producer and receiver occupy are what allows for the discursive formation of a contradiction (Berger 2009, 5). In musical terms, a contradiction as conflict coincides with a dissonance where two or more sounds fail to meet in sonic accord (or where two stance positions are unable to reconcile). These dissonances are the aural equivalent of Mary Douglas' conception of "dirt" as "matter out of place" – it becomes, "sound out of place,"

(Pickering and Rice 2017). There is an implied value proposition at work: “in” position is or “out” of position, correctly and incorrectly placed. Contradiction as conflict asks for a preferencing of positionality instead of a recognition of it.

Instead, aligning with Giddens I offer contradiction as “discursive counterpoint”: two or more topics of differing but related material interacting synchronically to provide new information from their adjacency. The “counterpoint” even echoes the earlier etymological breakdown: “counter/contra” derive from the Latin *contra*, while “point” illustrates a particular position – a stance. For example, contradictions in inter-personal taste on the basis of sonic aesthetic are myriad. Like many parents of the 2000s, my mother described any song featuring harsh vocals as “screamo,” a flat description of the aesthetics of non-pop singing which collapses variations of performance into a single frame – disapproval. This description alone raises the specter of conflict, where one listener dismisses the possibility of knowledge by another. Input my lived and experienced performance knowledge as a counterpoint and tension appears: knowledge of this music is required to differentiate and digest it. Critically, the counterpoint offers a way for both positions to remain felicitous by not asking for reconciliation, but for an examination of the information drawn from between them.

Carrying the contrapuntal metaphor forward, how it applies in the cases raised here are indebted to the fieldwork I have conducted and the experiences I bear. I am the point where the awareness of this contradiction lives. As Michelle Kisliuk notes, the writing of ethnography is a tripartite joiner of conversation levels: first in the field between researcher and those they work with, then at the second level between researchers and the “material of performance” they encounter, which includes discursive formations. These two levels are then remediated in the writing of ethnographic prose (Kisliuk 1997: 41). I posit that contradictions arise in the space straddling experience with the material and the writing into ethnography. They are not merely passively heard, but must be listened for and acknowledged. Establishing this device and framing, how these contradictions play out and what they offer is equally important as understanding the theoretical space they occupy.

A key concern for interpreting contradictions is positionality within the field through which one comes to data. While I have spent the better part of twenty years listening to punk music produced in Japan, and now live, work, and attend shows there, this is impossible to tell on sight. For all intents and purposes I could just be a misplaced white tourist. My presence as outside the norm has been commented on by performers from onstage several times! Especially given my habit of comporting in comfortable dress or male academic standard (khakis and a button-down shirt) when teaching, I rarely fit the part of a punk either. Furthermore, in the encounters discussed below I am not conducting interviews, but merely chatting in colloquial Japanese. These vignettes are places where my observations and conversations in real life reveal the contours of thinking relating to punk rather than in more formalized relationships of field interview. Suffice it to say, my place in offering these personally generated contradictions is one transmitted through my own stance as a knowledgeable actor within punk scenes in Tokyo, but also as an always-outside element.

Japan as a culture region is often depicted uncritically in mass media, partially the result of decades of techno-orientalist descriptions from without as, “a cold, calculating country populated by soulless workers, consumed by mathematical efficiency and overwhelming bureaucracy while being obsessed with technology,” with people “often still viewed as being stifled under layers of regimented formality while individuality and imagination is discouraged in the service of the greater

good of the country or the company,” (McLeod 2013: 260). Within this frame, punk music seems out of place given its often raucous sounds, energetic dancing, and whiff (or more) of anarchy. For 45 years it has skirted the realms of the popular, with a strong enough following to have a separate section in some large music shops and its own music festivals in the present, but not so broadly known as to have entered the realm of “J-Pop” during the boom years of the 00s. Occasionally punk enters the popular conscious, but these tend to be individual performers, such as the Blue Hearts, Phew, Michirō Endō, Hi-Standard, or the Asian Kung-Fu Generation, as opposed to the scene these performers may represent. The vignettes below are indebted to this history and notions but tend to persist alongside the understanding found in what little academic literature on punk there is: It represents a mostly underground form of performance bound up with the “everyday” and resistances within it.¹ Perhaps it is fitting that the largest scale histories of hardcore punk in Japan are written mostly as personal memoir.²

Assertions of the right to claim punk as a description are sometimes also bound up in particularities of stance. Punks, and those writing about punk, often embraced the struggle of defining punk, offering personal definitions just as often as formal definitions, and thus also exclusions. Countless zines have debated it, and academics continue to suggest new conceptualizations. Alan O’Connor echoes this sentiment, writing in his 2016 call for developing a field theory of punk that, “most people who write about punk think about it in a substantive way. Punk is this; punk is that. Punk questions authority. Punk is a category of goods in a record shop. Punk is unstable. Punk is nihilistic. Punk is a way of dressing and behaving. And then writers on punk get into disagreements with each other’s definitions of punk,” (O’Connor 2016, 63). I am not writing to define punk here. Definitions shift over time, space, between scenes, and, crucially, between individuals. The attempt to impose a finite definition of punk is therefore in itself contradictory – but in its encounter, it speaks.

The contradictions I highlight next align with circulating discourses on punk encountered in Japan and echoing globally: the current state of punk’s vitality, and what constitutes punk. They are encountered at people scale where direct field observations at odds with interlocutor reports provides a window onto ideologies about other or more local concerns. This example is not limited to studying punk, although the term is used here as a locus around which discourses circulate in the field and whose usefulness lies not in what it *is* but what searching for it *elicits*.

Not Quite a Punk Place

By the time I climb the tight concrete spiral stairs up to the third floor, the sun is already beginning to dip between the other buildings to the East of Shinjuku station. Three years after my last, pre-COVID, visit, I am once again able to tentatively venture out into the field in Tokyo searching material items which speak with the voice of punks. I arrive at the Irregular Rhythm Asylum, an Anarchist Infoshop near the heart of Tokyo. When last there I noted not only the assortment of punk music for sale, but also zines and material items produced by or with punks from across Japan. Anarchy as a political philosophy may be considered a natural part of punk music and culture, though not all punk’s adherents desire or make use of it.³ Nevertheless, punk is cited by some scholars and practitioners as carrying the flame of anarchism forward into the world, resuscitating it or even reimporting it as an ideology (Donaghey, Bouisseau, and Kaltefleiter 2022, xxiii). In my previous visit there were copies of *ELZine*, a long running punk zines in Japan, and I intended to seek out present and back issues – but there are none to be found.

The owner, Narita Kei, came to operate the shop through punk and zine making over twenty years previous.⁴ When I asked him about *El Zine* he mentioned that they had stocked it intermittently, like many of their offerings, but were not carrying it at the moment. I asked if there was much of a punk influence to be found at the shop and was told of course, but that the shop itself did not focus on it, a relationship more closely akin to fellow travelers. Probing a bit further, I wondered if maybe he had anything to do with punk still, or if punks ever came by. “Well, I don’t,” he said, but then motions toward two late-20s men working busily at a photocopier in the corner, “but they’re punks.” The two were printing fliers for an upcoming recording release show that weekend and immediately gave me one, inviting me to come out.

Probing Narita’s identification of the shop as not punk alongside my experience of active encounters with punks there rises a contradiction. What it reveals is a straightforward tension: not all places used by punks or even formed by (former-)punks are necessarily punk places. The presence or not of punk material culture and activity may designate a *genba* (現場), “a place something happens, appears, or is made,” but this type of place is always contingent upon interaction (Condry 2006: 89, 225).⁵ A hint toward how a place may become punk is also present here: allowances made for punk sociability can mark a place as surely as show flyers papering a wall or scribbled graffiti on bathroom stalls.

Punk is Old, but Punk Lives!

The night before a research conference I am attending in Osaka, I spend time wandering about the central city and visiting record stores and locales usually too far-flung from my perch in Tokyo. Osaka carries a long history of punk, avant-garde, and noise, so of course I also make plans to attend an event at the famed Namba Bears live house. I make a final stop before heading to the venue, a one-room record store hidden in a non-descript office building filled with the usual records and CDs as well as zines and flyers for shows. After a brief perusal I chat with the clerk who, in the process of our conversation, states, “punk is old music.” The familiarity of the phrase “punk is dead,” is one thing, but punk is *old* feels somehow foreign. Our conversation ends, and I drift out the door to the show, a pre-festival event put on by bands affiliated with Bears. Entering the venue via staircase from the street, the place is at or beyond its small capacity of fifty or so, and performers mingle in the crowd as they take turns mounting the stage to set up equipment. The crowd is mixed, but every performing group joining the stage is somewhere around or just South of the age of 30. One of the youngest seeming sports a several inch full mohawk, and I would learn later that he has been an active performer for several years.

Nonetheless, the comment from the record shop stuck with me: is punk old? The encounter at Namba Bears, as well as that noted above in discussing IRA, both feature younger performers, and surveying audiences at live shows routinely yields audiences in their 20s and 30s. Perhaps the record shop attendant meant his words as a throwaway comment, but it still offers a brief look into an ideology which motivated his thinking. Did he mean to differentiate between music style or the people performing it? After all, punk music as a sonic aesthetic in Japan certainly is ageing – its first wave came about in the end of the 1970s with groups like Friction, Lizard, and S-KEN under the moniker “Tokyo Rockers,” and largely played a recognizable riff on punk music aligning similarly with British and US trends. Furthermore, looking at the personages gracing the cover of *Punk Rock Issue Bollocks*, the leading glossy magazine on punk in Japan, and a graying trend is visible.⁶

The tension at the heart of this contradiction offers the recognition that punk music, its audience, and audience expectations are changing. Punk may be ageing, but it is still alive at the very least.

Punk Isn't Here Anymore

Running across the metropolis, the Chuo train line has long played a role in the punk scene in Tokyo. The areas around train stations often provide definition for their respective neighborhoods, and several stops along the Chuo line west of Shinjuku station have developed particular live music cultures thanks to lower rents and slightly older building stock than more central locations. Books drawing on the connection have been published, and Ian Martin, who runs Call and Response Records, comments directly on it in describing a certain type of band he encounters in booking events as “Chuo bands.”⁷ Among the stations extending along the line as it passes through the western suburbs of the 23 special wards of Tokyo prefecture sits Koenji station. Most of all however, is Koenji's renown in music circles as a haven of live music clubs (“live houses”) its amicable stance toward the “roadside live performance” (*rojō raibu*). On weekends, sometimes dozens of performers can be found in the station's surrounds playing freely for passers-by. The first time I visited Koenji however, I was only vaguely familiar with these topics and was working purely off an interlocutor suggestion and vague memories of Jennifer Milioto-Matsue's 2008 ethnography of underground music based in the neighborhood.

Strolling through the covered shopping street that stretches South from the station I took in the atmosphere. On that warm weekday afternoon in July there was hardly anyone around, so I left it to my eyes to pick and choose places to explore, eventually stopping first at a vintage clothing store. Through its front window, I could see a jean jacket emblazoned with “Sex Pistols,” on it, which seemed as good a sign as any. Stepping inside, I greeted the proprietor and struck up a conversation about the jacket and punk. After a few minutes I asked a mainstay question of snowball sampling questions: do you have any recommendations for other places around here? In answer: “No, no, things like that aren't around here anymore”). We then finished our conversation, and I exited the building somewhat beleaguered to resume my walking. As if to dispel my uncertainties however, only a few blocks removed from the clothing store I encountered Record Store Base, a key component of the punk record shop scene in Tokyo. Only later would I realize I had also walked right past Record BOY, a shop founded in the halcyon early days of punk in Japan. Later still, I would find myself time and again in Koenji to attend live performances.

Of the contradictions presented in this paper, this is the most straightforward. A short discussion on a field visit yields disjuncture. Considered as a felicitous statement though, what does the contradiction of my experiences with the shopkeeper's statement provide? I offer that her assertion of a lack of punk may address the topic she was involved in: fashion. Vintage stores are common around Koenji, but few carry the kind of clothing that is stereotypically associated with punks. In all my visits to the area as well, the number of people in punk fashion has been consistently low. While punk in a broad form is available, this particular instance demonstrates that even those who may know of it may not actually have a stake in continuing to acknowledge it.

Concluding Thoughts

These examples are only some of the contradictions which could have been raised and explored. I chose to present these vignettes of encounter and briefly explore what ideas can be gleaned from their contrapuntal tension due to the discursive immediacy of my interaction with them and their

everyday nature. While not certainties, the conclusions reveal that the gap between two stances can provide fieldworkers with further insight when in the process of transitioning thinking with the materials of fieldwork into the writing of ethnography. Research in the semantically unstable realm of punk music and culture also makes it an interesting proving ground for testing how a counterpoint conception of contradiction works. Taking contradiction as a type of resistance to straightforward encounter, perhaps it makes sense that punk in Japan is considered through the lens of everyday interaction here.⁸ Further, much like a definition of punk, the interpretations made above are ambiguous and rely on a degree of interpretation on the part of the ethnographer and their own experience. How we listen to that experience in the voices of partners matters.

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Endnotes

¹ For some academic literature on punk in Japan see: Milioto-Matsue (2008); Inoue (2009); Letson (2021); Letson (2022), and Kawakami (2024).

² See reference items by ISHIYA. Not referenced are two smaller volumes by the same author labeled as “histories” of the Kansai region of Japan and of Shizuoka prefecture, but comprised of interviews and photos instead of prose.

³ As noted by Dunn (202, 2012), “[t]o be clear, not all punks are anarcho-punks, just like not all anarchists are punks.”

⁴ Randy Swank, "Shy Revolutionaries," TABlog, *Tokyo Art Beat*, July 28, 2009. <https://www.tokyoartbeat.com/en/articles/-/shy-revolutionaries>.

⁵ The English language analog to “genba” offered by Condry is “focus location.”

⁶ Though unpublished at present, in the course of my dissertation research I found an increase in the age of persons appearing on the cover trend steadily upward in the almost 13 years *Bollocks* has been in print, increasing from just over 40 to the mid-50s.

⁷ For example Martin (143-145, 2016) references these bands in particular, while Milioto-Matsue (54-55, 2008) and Inui (2020) both do so by highlighting the Chuo Line itself.

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