

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

ROBERT T. WOOD, *Straightedge Youth: Complexity and Contradictions of a Subculture*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2006, 180 p., index.

No alcohol. No smoking. No drugs. No sex. While this list of prohibitions is likely to conjure images of right-wing conservative religion, it is also the wellspring of a subsection of punk culture. Hardcore and radically sober, straightedge youth embody a resistance to materialistic culture and the “unthinking” pleasures that are believed by straightedgers to dull one’s senses and show a lack of personal control.

With his book *Straightedge Youth*, Robert T. Wood paints a clear picture of a seemingly contradictory aspect of punk subculture. As a youth subculture, straightedge defies many of the usual stereotypes assigned to youth. While youth are often presumed to be “out of control” and involved in the risky bacchanalia of drinking, drug use and promiscuity, straightedge reacts against these practices (and the assumptions of punk youth involvement in these practices) and proclaims deviance through self control and in-your-face abstinence. What is fascinating and counterintuitive here is that the deviance of straightedge comes through embracing and proclaiming “purity.”

In fact, as his title suggests, the apparent contradictions in straightedge culture are part of what allow Wood to more cleanly grasp and articulate the intricacies of how identity and subcultural affiliation are connected. These connections clarify the variation of meanings possible in claiming straightedge identity, and while Wood’s work provides insight into the “scene” of straightedge, it also brings empirical substance and example to theoretical work on how subculture and identity connect and feed one another through everyday interactions. Not only do we find here a window to a possibly foreign world, but a clear example to help us better understand the mutually regenerating roles that subculture and identity have through everyday interactions.

Wood provides a thorough documentation of the rise of straightedge culture in the 1980s and outlines how straightedge emerged and became recognizable as a distinct subculture around the punk band Minor Threat. Indeed, the lyrics to their song “Out of Step” provide an anthem and explanation of this subculture’s core values: “[I] Don’t smoke/ Don’t drink/ Don’t fuck/ At least I can fucking think.” In addition to this historical tracing of how this community came into being, Wood also documents the

ways it has shifted as people have taken up this identity, shaping and being shaped by the definitions of straightedge as they move through their daily lives. For example, in addition to the commitment to stay clean, sober, and sexually abstinent (or at least monogamous) veganism, too, was eventually taken up by some straightedgers as a development of staying true to straightedge values.

Wood is able to articulate practices within this subculture, as well as in-depth analysis of its symbolic context and historical progression by conceiving of straightedge as a case study, and therefore using a variety of data sources and research methods. He draws from interviews with self-proclaimed straightedge participants and includes both founding members from the 1980s and contemporary youth who are affiliated with the subculture as part of his sample. Paired with the data collected from in-depth interviews, Wood takes up an analysis of the symbols, entertainment, and material culture used within straightedge subculture. Here he provides content analysis of straightedge lyrics, zines, and the dominant straightedge symbols. By connecting the ways that lyrics and symbols have been and are currently used to the practices and understandings of those he interviews, Wood avoids making static assessments and simplistic formulations that reify identity. He thereby successfully highlights the centrality of ongoing practice and negotiation in the maintenance of subcultural identity and community.

While Wood's conclusions that identity is an ongoing practice, or that an individual may inhabit multiple subcultural identities may seem obvious, these observations are still important to make, particularly when dealing with a subculture that is often stigmatized in the way that punk youth are. For with a stigmatized group, we often see practice metamorphosed into fixed characteristics – it is the transition from participating in deviant behaviour to the ascription of deviance as a category with presumably clear boundaries. And perhaps most interestingly, by analyzing what it means to straightedgers themselves to take up the identity of this subculture, Wood shows us how that transition from practice to identity is manifested internally as well as through external assumptions or ascription.

The exploration of meanings and practices within this subculture could be further enriched by providing analysis that takes gender and constructions of masculinity more fully into account. While women do participate in straightedge (and Wood's interviews do include some female members), most participants have been and continue to be male. It seems odd, however, that so little attention is paid to issues of gender in this case study given the predominance of male involvement. It is true that Wood points out the male-oriented bias of straightedge and briefly mentions the phrase "No clit in the pit" as an example of sexism within straightedge culture. "Clit" is, of course, short for "clitoris," and here acts as a metonym for women, and "pit" refers to the space immediately in front of the stage: the "mosh pit" where audience members engage in highly physical, symbolically violent (and sometimes actually violent), full contact dance. Not only is the sentiment of exclusion in this phrase sexist, but there is also

the problematic choice to refer to women by one component of their genitalia – particularly when the clitoris is so central to female sexual pleasure. Indeed, the phrase “No clit in the pit” conveys that the pleasures of the mosh pit are masculine pleasures and that in this common straightedge practice there is no place for female desire or physical expression. However, Wood bypasses this point, and by claiming that expressions of sexism in straightedge subculture are occasional and unfortunate (76) he thereby obfuscates the androcentric nature of the culture instead of opening his work to a more nuanced analysis of masculinity as an important theme and symbolic resource employed by straightedgers.

Nonetheless, Wood’s data is rich, and his writing accessible. This book would be an excellent choice for teaching courses in cultural studies or deviance, in part because the structure and writing of the book are open and clear – but more importantly because it encourages discussion and thought about larger issues of subcultural formation and maintenance, and of the connections between identity, subcultural affiliation, mundane practice and symbols in everyday life. Indeed, even the weakness that I have mentioned regarding Wood’s treatment of gendered dynamics could contribute to this book being useful for stimulating engaged and critical class discussions.

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