

"Oi! Skins": Trans-Atlantic Gay Skinhead Discourse on the Internet

James Haines

University of Oulu, Finland

Abstract

For about a year and a half now I have been studying non-racist and anti-racist skinheads and their look-alike neo-nazi "bonehead" cousins, using skin websites, e-mail lists and newsgroups as my primary source of data. As I have had no face-to-face contact with my informants, my approach might be called discourse-centered ethnography. At a Cultural Studies conference in June 1998(1) I reported on an ether community of US and Canadian gay skins that I have been monitoring since November 1997, the *Queer Skinhead Brotherhood* [QSB]. That report had its origins in a longer ethnography which was based on data gleaned from the QSB website, (2) a QSB e-mail list, the home pages of several QSB list subscribers, and e-mail interviews and personal correspondence with a little over a tenth of the QSB membership. This ethnography is available on the web (3) and has been linked to from the QSB website, which suggests that QSB members find it a fairly accurate report.

Keywords: Skinheads, QSB website, discourse-centered ethnography.

The profile of QSB list subscribers that emerged may be somewhat surprising both to straight skinheads on both sides of the Atlantic and to those who follow the gay skinhead movement in Europe: though QSB skins are on average older than straight skins who are still active in the cult, they share with straight skins a loyalty to traditional skinhead culture and ideology: Like other skinheads, QSB skins find it important to signal their skinhead status by keeping hair at a #3 cut or shorter and regularly wearing some version of skinhead gear. They socialize with other skinheads -- whether straight of gay, male or Chelsies (female) -- particularly for the consumption of beer (though not everyone drinks: some QSB skins are sXe (4) or below the legal drinking age). Like other skins, they value loyalty to skin mates and encourage self-pride, self-reliance and hard work (rather than relying on a helping hand from the government, the police or welfare agencies). They know and discuss skinhead history and above all music, and of course mix with straight skins at Oi!/ska music shows -- and watch each other's backs there if there is trouble. (5)

In addition, QSB skins reject the mainstream *gay* community as being too commercial, too middle-class and too centered round youthful good looks. They also downplay the importance of sexuality -- both on the web and in public -- subordinating, but not suppressing, their homosexuality to a public skinhead identity. A good example of this is to be found in a notice from the home page of the QSB affiliated San Francisco crew which reads: "*LISTEN!* If you show up at skinhead shows, go ahead and rant about gay pride and try to shag the straight skins if you want to, but I, for one, am not hangin [sic] out with you! my advice: be cool, don't ask, don't tell...but *don't* lie." (6)

To give this paper a cross-cultural dimension, I want to compare the Internet discourse of North American gay skinheads to that of European gay skins. My primary sources of data will be the North American QSB's *OI* e-mail list and a European list which I have been monitoring since January 1998 and will call the *SKINS* list (since messages appear there with *SKINS*- before the name of the poster). The *SKINS* list (7) is sent from a server in the United Kingdom, but functions as a channel of communication for a wider group of European gay skinheads. *OI* is the younger of the two e-mail lists; the QSB began as a web community in 1996 and is currently evolving into an association of on-the-ground crews who

socialize together. *SKINS*, on the other hand, is an ether communication link whose nucleus was a group of London gay skins who had been socializing together. It is the e-mail list loosely associated with the IRC chat group #*GAY-SKINHEADS*. (8)

According to the list owners, both lists currently have just short of 200 subscribers. But *OI* is a much more "heavy traffic" list than *SKINS*. The number of postings on both lists has varied widely during the time I have been monitoring, but typically there are more than 10 posts per week on *OI* and perhaps a third as many on *SKINS*. Not surprisingly, since the Internet allows easy international communication, there are a handful of gay skins who post regularly on one list but occasionally send a post to the other list as well, and their number has been growing recently. (9)

A convenient place to begin comparison of the two lists is with the choice of language in which messages are sent. Both *OI* and *SKINS* are *de facto* English-language lists. All of the posts on *OI* and the great majority of posts on *SKINS* -- even those from subscribers whose native language is not English -- are in English, and the introductory materials sent to new members of both lists are in English only. When a Stockholm subscriber sent a message in Swedish containing information of interest to other Scandinavians on *SKINS* in November 1998, it was a Dutch subscriber who complained about posting in unintelligible languages. Earlier the list owner of *SKINS* did seem to be inviting the use of other languages when he suggested after a post appeared in German only that an English translation be included with future posts. But no bilingual posts have appeared. So the English-only language policy is one which has developed to facilitate communication, not one imposed by the owner of either list.

Even using a common language does not necessarily guarantee ease of communication. The first skinheads were working-class British youth, and the working-class ethos of skinheads is something that today's skins point to with pride -- both those with working-class backgrounds and those from middle-class families who are happy to adopt what is perceived as the "harder", more masculine, behavior of the working class. Threads attempting to define "working class" have erupted several times on *OI* since I began monitoring the list, but even American and Canadian posters do not seem to be able to come to agreement about what the defining characteristics of working class are. When a British skin joined the debate, things became even more confused. Judging from the various posts, it appears that when North American skinheads think of working class, they are focusing on economic and job description criteria while in Britain working class is more likely to call to mind a particular type of after-work social interaction in the neighborhood -- a way of life which the British poster notes is now only a nostalgic memory.

We have already shifted our attention from language choice to choice of topics, and it is what is discussed on the two lists that will now be the focus of our consideration. Both *OI* and *SKINS* function as communication lists for gay skinheads from a broad spectrum of ethnic and racial backgrounds and with a variety of political views. In skinhead circles politics means not only the familiar capitalist, neo-nazi or "redskin" positions, but also a non-racist, anti-racist or "white power" stance. For these reasons politics is a potentially explosive topic whenever skinheads meet.

The North American *OI* list deals with this by having an official "no politics" policy and making a "sister" *AGGRO* list available specifically for political debate and discussion. In spite of this, the *AGGRO* list has remained fairly dormant throughout its existence, while politics does enter the discourse of the *OI* list with surprisingly frequency. On *OI*, quite openly (anti-racist) SHARP- and ARA posts are much less likely to draw flames than are posts given a neo-nazi- or "white power"-flavor by the inclusion of a small amount of political rhetoric or coded language.

The European *SKINS* list has adopted a more lenient policy according to which "discussing politics on this list should be avoided as much as possible". (10) Only one discussion string on politics has occurred on *SKINS* during the time that I have been monitoring the list: In November 1998 a Stockholm gayskin posted on both *OI* and *SKINS* that he had been receiving threatening guest-book entries and e-mails from Swedish and Norwegian neo-nazi "boneheads". This called forth a handful of anti-neo-nazi posts on the

SKINS list as well two posts in support of "white power", which were quickly countered. But the controversy seems to have died down and posters returned to their normal non-political discourse after less than a week.

Both the North American *OI* list and the European *SKINS* list function as places where travelling skins can announce their itineraries and link with skins who can serve as hosts at local skinhead venues in the areas they are planning to visit. Both lists function regularly as channels for spreading news of upcoming events of interest to gay skinheads and reports on past events. On the North American *OI* list these are likely to be Oi!/ska shows, while on the European *SKINS* list they are more likely to be gay skinhead weekend gatherings in Britain or on the continent. There are other topic differences between the lists as well: Threads on skinhead history, skinheads and "boneheads" in the news, skinheads in films, and skinhead music are common on *OI* but rare on the European *SKINS* list. Since forums for discussing these matters are no more available in Europe than in North America, it is tempting to "read" this as suggesting that North American gay skins are more interested in broader skinhead culture than are European gay skins, whose interest seems to be in a unique gay skinhead subculture.

Within the skinhead cult as a whole there is a good deal of anxiety over who is the true inheritor of the original skinhead tradition. This is apparent not only in much of the straight and gay skinhead and "bonehead" rhetoric on the Internet but also in on-the-ground clashes between (anti-racist) SHARP, RASH, ARA (11) skinheads and "boneheads" such as those that resulted in the murder of two anti-racist skinheads in the Nevada desert in July 1998 and the many other less violent clashes at Oi!/ska shows and elsewhere which constitute what is sometimes referred to as the ongoing "skinhead civil war". Not surprisingly given the working class masculine origins of the cult, there are those who claim that no homosexuals can be skinheads. So what may seem odd is that gay skinheads themselves are reluctant to accept everyone who claims to be a gay skin as a true skinhead.

There is some evidence that the gay skins who post on the North American *OI* list understand being a skinhead differently than do those who post on the European *SKINS*. It is common for North American skinheads who post on *OI* to speak -- either in their posts or on their homepages -- of *claiming skin*. Both British skins and North American skins who spent their youth in Britain have commented in personal correspondence on the oddity of this term, noting that in Britain one typically becomes a skinhead through the rather natural process of doing what slightly older friends are doing and being accepted by them. The use of the phrase "claiming skin" in North America suggests that for Americans becoming a skinhead is a much more conscious decision, and one that is likely to be taken in isolation rather than with the support of a skinhead peer group. Since for the North American gay skinhead, skin is something you "claim" there is also the suggestion of a good deal of pride in one's skinhead status and a willingness to defend that status if it is challenged.

Perhaps related to this, skins who post on the North American *OI* list -- more often than those who post on the European *SKINS* -- make a distinction between skinheads of long standing and *freshcuts* who have only recently become skinheads and are therefore still learning about skinhead culture. In addition, the North American QSB, to which the *OI* list is linked, makes use of differential access to discourse to separate "core" members from "periphery" gay skins in a way that is totally unknown in Europe: only members of on-the-ground QSB-affiliated crews are invited to subscribe to a closed QSB e-mail list.

On the basis of personal communication supported by a good deal of anecdotal net evidence, it can safely be suggested that North American gay skins -- at least those who post on *OI* and are associated with QSB -- are likely to view many Europeans who claim to be gay skinheads as not skinheads at all, but rather as "*fashion skins*" whose main interest is in skinhead gear as a sexual fetish. (12) On the other hand, personal communication from British gay skins suggests that European gay skinheads are likely to view QSB, with its large website, its separate e-mail lists for general discussion and for political rants, its closed list for on-the-ground crew members only and its at times rather heavy-handed "refereeing" by the list owner as being far too structured to be truly anarchically skinhead, and -- a typical European charge against America -- as too sex negative. In this respect, the appearance on the WWW of Kweer Skin

Canada in spring 1999 is of interest as the group's home page notes: "Gayskin groups in Europe tend to be overtly sexual, American Gayskin groups tend to be more of a brotherhood as TYPICAL Canadians... we are a combination of both worlds." (13)

Indeed it is precisely in the treatment of the topic of sex that the North American *OI* and European *SKINS* lists are at their most divergent. Since I began monitoring it, *OI* has been a consistently hostile forum for posts that mention sex, either openly or implicitly. In contrast, new subscriber introductory posts to *SKINS* often contain quite open references to sex without drawing flames. In a lengthy post to *SKINS* in November 1998, a British gay skinhead related the history of his over-a-decade-long involvement in the gay SM community. Even though the post had nothing whatsoever to do with skinhead culture, it passed without comment. It would be hard to imagine anything similar on the *OI* list, where even a post passing on the URL of a gay watersports (14) website attracted a rash of flaming.

Looking beyond the two e-mail lists discussed here to the websites of other European gay skinhead groups such as the British Gay Skinhead Group, (15) the Belgian Fenix Gay Skinhead Nation, (16) the French European Gay Skinhead Association; (17) to the home pages of individual European gay skinheads; or to the IRC chat channel #*GAY-SKINHEADS* only strengthens the impression that though gay skins on both sides of the Atlantic may crop their hair and wear skin gear, there is a considerable gap in understanding what being a gay skinhead is all about between European gay skinheads, for whom sex is of primary importance, and North American gay skinheads, for whom it is skinhead culture – in particular ska and Oi! music -- which is basic to skinhead identity. (18)

The comparison of the *OI* and *SKINS* lists began with a consideration of language, and it is to language that we shall return because there is good reason to believe that the Internet is playing a part in the development of an international skinhead register of English. No matter what language they are writing in, it is notable that neo-nazi "boneheads" are fond of peppering their Internet postings with the numbers 14 and – especially as part of a nick or as a closing – 88. (19) This numerological code has its origin in neo-nazi discourse, but the meaning of these numbers is well enough understood in skinhead circles to allow *OI* posters to flame anyone who uses them in an introductory post to the list for introducing politics.

In terms of the English language itself, what is remarkable on the North American *OI* list is the frequency with which British words are used to refer to aspects of skinhead culture when perfectly serviceable American expressions are available. This can be seen in the sentences quoted above from the webpage of the QSB's San Francisco affiliate crew about not trying to *shag* straight skins. Similarly, skinhead gear is generally referred to on *OI* as *boots and braces*, only occasionally by the American term *boots and suspenders*. Posters on the list refer to each other as *mates* rather than *pals* or *buddies*. Groups of posters who meet in the flesh form *crews*, not *gangs* or *posses* (though this is only a narrow selection of the British terms available; there are no QSB *firms*, though these are common enough among straight Swedish skinheads). *OI* posters still occasionally end their messages with "*Cheers*". This was becoming regular practice on the list until one subscriber pointed out that *cheers* is not a very American closing. Of course what is most striking is the frequency with which posts begin with the Cockney "*Oi!*" This is rarely used on the British-based *SKINS* list, perhaps because these days in Britain, as one London skin infuriated by the practice on the *OI* list wrote in a private e-mail, "'Oi!' is not a greeting."

It is hardly surprising that North American skins should adopt British expressions; the skinhead cult is itself an import from Britain, after all. But imports either take root or die, so it should hardly surprise us if North American skins adopt British vocabulary but begin to use it in ways unfamiliar in Britain. That is exactly what happened to the other Oi!, skinhead punk rock, a musical genre that many would say is moribund in its homeland today but is flourishing in the US through the work of bands such as the *Anti-Heros*, *Dropkick Murphy's* and *The Templars*.

NOTES:

1. See James Haines, "Gay Skinheads, 'Isn't That a Contradiction?': Fighting to Claim an Identity That Fits," pp. 84-5 in Pekka Rantanen (ed.) *Abstracts: Crossroads in Cultural Studies*, June 28-July 1, 1998, Tampere, Finland (University of Tampere, Finland: Department of Sociology and Social Psychology. Series B:39, 1998).
2. Queer Skinhead Brotherhood, Homepage. <http://www.io.com/~qsb/> Unless otherwise stated, all URL addresses are those current in mid May 1999.
3. James Haines, "'Skinning the Queer': An Internet Ethnography of the Queer Skinhead Brotherhood," <http://www.ekl.oulu.fi/staff/james/paper7.htm>
4. The "Straightedge" movement, with which some skinheads are affiliated. Straightedgers do not use drugs or intoxicants and refrain from sex until marriage (or, in the case of gay sXe, entering a committed relationship).
5. While this paper was being revised the San Francisco QSB affiliated crew split because some members refused to back other members up in a parking lot fight following an Oi! show.
6. QSBay Area. Homepage. http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/6163/QSBay_area.html 8 April 1998. This page is no longer on the web.
7. See "Welcome to the gay-skinheads" at <http://public.diversity.org.uk/guides/london/gay-skin.html>
8. There is an introduction to the #GAY-SKINHEADS chat channel at <http://public.diversity.org.uk/gay-skinheads/> In principle any topic may be discussed on this channel. In practice it appears quite frequently to serve as a cruising ground. Since those who are logged on can enter into private discussions, any language might be used. The most frequent language for initial posts (to the channel as a whole) is English, though posts in German and Dutch are not rare.
9. It might be added that the list owner of SKINS lives for the greater part of the year in New York and while there is an active member of QSB's New York crew, as is the list owner of OI, who also keeps the QSB website.
10. "Welcome to gay-skinheads", <http://public.diversity.org.uk/guides/london/gay-skin.html> 11 May 1999.
11. SHARP (Skinheads against Racial Prejudice) and ARA (Anti-Racist Action) are skinhead organizations founded in the United States in 1986 to combat racism and wrestle the skinhead image away from the neo-nazi "boneheads". RASH is Red and Anarchist Skinheads. There are SHARP and RASH affiliated skinheads in Sweden and several other European countries.
12. Many gay skinheads on both sides of the Atlantic are also members of the S/M community, though a good number of gay skins on both continents prefer "vanilla" sex. Both the existence of S/M identified males who dress as skinheads without taking part in other aspects of skinhead culture and of non-skinhead men who seek out gay skinheads for S/M sex are sources of irritation to the majority of gay skins on both sides of the Atlantic.
13. KweerSkinCanada, <http://gay.sexhound.net/kweerskincanada/index.html> 11 May 1999. I have not been monitoring this website, but gay skinheads from the United States who have visited events arranged by the group in Toronto have commented on the relaxed atmosphere.
14. Watersports refers to the use of urine in sexual play.
15. Gay Skinhead Group, home page: <http://homepage.virgin.net/gsg.skins> The GSG website is fairly "tame". I am also basing my assessment on the group's zine *Skinhead Nation*. About half of each issue

might be called “one-hand reading” material.

16. Fenix Gay Skinhead Nation, <http://www.ping.be/fenix/>

17. European Gay Skinhead Association, “Bienvenue sur le site...”
<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/4010/> This website appears no longer to be being updated.

18. Although it does devote space to sex, the Gay Skinhead Movement - Sektion Deutschland website (<http://www.geocities.com/WestHollywood/Heights/2618/index.html>) is closer to the North American pattern in emphasizing skinhead history and music.

19. This is a coded in which the numbers stand for letters of the alphabet so that 1 = 2, 8 = H.

Author's address: James Haines
Department of English
University of Oulu
90571 Oulu
Finland

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