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‘The Opposite of the Band’: Fangrrrling, Feminism and Sexual Dissidence

Laura Cofield and Lucy Robinson

Introduction

From around 1992 riot grrrl was a form of feminism organised around cultural production: music, zines, films, photography, street style as performance, not for profit promotion, distribution and PR, documentary and the politics of the spaces in which they were distributed and consumed.¹ Like other 90s expressions of youthful feminism: Girl Power; Hello Kitty Girlies; ‘ladettes’; riot grrrl was transatlantic and generationally specific but it was also locally rooted and self-consciously DIY.² It worked in the faultlines of subculture; it challenged male dominance of the punk scene, and simultaneously used that scene to criticise wider patriarchal norms. The zines that riot grrrl’s produced built, reflected on and critiqued the possibilities of a feminist DIY community across geographical boundaries and prefigures current debates around feminism and the role of the organic intellectual.

Alan’s methodological work suggests uncovering riot grrrl’s voices does two things: it documents oppression and simultaneously records resistance. His work has helped us think about the meanings of community voices, how they are recorded, held and edited.³ He helps us think about subculture as a way of politicising a variety of collective experiences beyond the usually straight male examples of mods, rockers and punk. *Gay and After* uses subcultures as a way beyond the safe incorporation of the ‘gay community’.⁴ Subcultures therefore offer a way to maintain, rather than distract from, dissidence in a variety of forms. His institutional work mapped the possibilities of islands of dissent within the mainstream, within the Sex Diss programme and through the idea of

teaching and learning as a shared, collaborative and ultimately political process.⁵ He helps us think about the faultlines in our lives, our institutions and our work as potentially liberating and creative frictions.⁶ There is a cultural practice beyond inverting or subverting the existing rules and hierarchies. We can instead be dissident, twisting the outcomes we engage with.

Recently the academic world has become increasingly engaged with retrospective reclamation of riot grrrl and investment in its possible resonances today.⁷ The existence of a specifically designated riot grrrl archive in the New York University's Fales Library may jar with the ephemeral nature of the movement; nevertheless it has meant that riot grrrl remains both accessible and politically poignant.⁸ This has been significant particularly for those exploring the historiography of feminist activism, and who have attempted to situate riot grrrl as a bridge between Second and Third generational waves of feminism. The status of feminism after the 1980s has been problematic for historians to define and understand: with terms such as 'postfeminism' suggestive of an end to feminism, and others like 'Third Wave feminism' created outside of the academy in popular non-academic works such as Baumgardner and Richard's *ManifestA*.⁹ Riot grrrl was not necessarily conscious of its position within the history of feminist organisation at the time, often focussing on its subcultural genealogy, but that does not mean it wasn't such a juncture. It certainly had a historical awareness, reworked and re-experienced many of the central contradictions within feminism as an emotional bond, a theory and a practice.

In the main body of this chapter we will analyse the meanings of celebrity, popular culture, sisterhood and feminism found in the Riot Grrrl archives at the Fales Library, New York and in the DC Punk Archive. The zines and personal collections that we worked on together provide a level of individual and

collective reflexivity around the politics of being a fan, being fangirled and around the relationship between subculture and identity politics.

Although she explicitly resists the label, Kathleen Hanna is the queen of riot grrrl.¹⁰ Her career also highlights the erotics and politics of fandom. We know Hanna doesn't want us to fan girl her – but we just can't stop ourselves. Her biography, discography and musical style map the late history of feminism from her post-punk band Bikini Kill (1989-97) to Le Tigre's dance music, (1999-2005) and her current band, The Julie Ruin (2010 to present). In terms of music genre and subcultural aesthetic Bikini Kill spoke to and critiqued Punk Rock from within, the same could be said about Le Tigre in terms of dance music. Her journey also maps the tensions of feminism more generally. Imagined as feminist performance art, Bikini kill were didactic aimed at the 'asshole male' but encouraging other women in the audience to watch his discomfort. After Bikini Kill, Hanna began a solo project, named The Julie Ruin. Through her solo work she aimed to speak women directly.¹¹ Le Tigre celebrated intersectionality. Finally, Hanna returned to the name, The Julie Ruin, this time as a 5-piece. This incarnations was designed to validate women's authority, particularly around silences about feminism and invisible disability.¹²

Looking at the tensions and creativities mapped by the archive shines light on Alan's work on cultural materialism, community and the politics of pedagogy. There are two strands of Alan's work that we will pick up on in the main body of the chapter in order to think about what counts as dissidence. The first is methodological through his work on cultural materialism and his understanding of the role of individual testimony and experience in community histories. The second strand is the politics of pedagogy; that what happens in the room, is, acutely political.

Lucy's reflexive introduction

From 1995-1997, I took the MA in Sexual Dissidence as a part-time mature student. Having read one chapter of Political Shakespeare as part of my undergraduate degree, I tried to find out as much as I could about Sinfield's work and eventually packed up my ten year old daughter, moved to Brighton, enrolled on the MA, and started to think. It changed who I am and how I see the world in the most fundamental ways possible.

Amongst the numerous discussions, arguments and essay crises there is one conversation during this time which comes back to me over and over again. Or rather, there is one conversation that I had over and over again that comes back to me. I took two of Alan's courses, taught in his office. As a seminar teacher today, I'm ashamed to say that I think I might have been a nightmare student. I was keen, I was enthusiastic, and I was quite often wrong. I was quite often wrong when I insisted that what we were doing 'in the room', academic discussion, did not count as 'real politics'. For me, if I wasn't (wo)manning the barricades it probably didn't count. Alan would gently and patiently nudge me along, to take the implications of the texts we read, and let them filter into how I saw the politics of my own life. I should already have known, from his writing, that what happened in that room challenged what constituted politics in a way that we have probably never needed as much as we do now.

Nearly twenty years after meeting Alan I was funded by Santander to go to New York so I could teach Laura archival methodology in the riot grrrl archives at Fales Library, when we got there she taught me about her feminism and about Taylor Swift. If nothing else, this disrupts the model of feminists coming in waves in which one generation is set up against another. If Alan summed up an intellectual and political field for me, Kathleen Hanna, original riot grrrl, singer in Bikini Kill, Le Tigre and The Julie Ruin, also embodied my feminism.

We were really in New York because since 1993 I have had a massive fan girl crush on Kathleen Hanna. All the time I was defending my rigid view of public politics to Alan, I was listening to, watching gigs reading and talking about popular cultural performances that have since begun to be celebrated as heralding a new wave of personal politics.

Laura's Reflexive Introduction

From my recent experience approaching highly-acclaimed historians to be my PhD supervisor, the act of 'being a fan' seems to me to be a central and unavoidable exercise of academic life. The daunting task of writing my first introductory email to a potential supervisor, whose work I not just admired but had had life-changing impact, took me over two days to write and rewrite. The only way I can describe the process of PhD application is in comparison to those television singing contests in which after getting through the first few challenges you have the opportunity to duet with your singing idol: If I'm Alexandra Burke circa X Factor 2008 – then Lucy is my Beyoncé. Lucy, and the legacies of Sussex as an institution, have inspired me in wonderful ways during my first year as a PhD student. I have discovered that my reality-television-watching, celebrity-gossip-mongering, pop-music-listening ways are not something I should ashamedly detach from my 'academic' persona. On the contrary, it has prompted me to question what these discourses might signify on a macro-level regarding gender, race, sexuality and class, and recognize how we might use theoretical frameworks from Foucault, Sinfield, Hall, or Butler to understand for instance a riot grrrl fanzine or a song lyric. Working collaboratively, in the capacity as student and teacher, but also as two feminists in dialogue with each other, allowed me to contribute to discussions of female agency in the production of history, and in true riot grrrl spirit, add another individual voice into the collective.

Being an academic fan

Alan pioneered taking popular culture seriously.¹³ His legacy not only recorded in his texts, or in the institutional records that relate to Alan as part of the Sussex Collection, or even his own papers included in the Ourstory Project (both held at The Keep). He taught Lucy, and changed how she sees the world, anyone who has been taught by her since, has in effect, been taught by him. Heteronomic as generational models might be, when Laura is being supervised by Lucy she is the product of Alan's teaching. If it isn't quite clear yet, we are massive Sinfield fans. We don't say that enough as academics, fandom is something that we might occasionally study but it isn't something that we do. We hide behind allying ourselves with schools of thought, waves of theory, or methodological styles. But when Alan referenced Lucy in an article, she cried.

We don't tend to take fans very seriously; especially girl fans who are associated with mass, easy consumption and typically written off as hysterical parasitic seat-wetters. This is made even more uneasy in a context that struggles with any construction of the sexual adult child. It is generally assumed that being a fan adds up to an abdication of power on girls' part. We want to use riot grrrl to explore some of the 'faultlines' around fandom. Riot grrrl is one of those rare occasions where girl fans get to be seen as political. This helps us to understand the tensions around our feminism; where are the lines around the personal and the political? We want to celebrate our feminism, but we also want to talk about how difficult it can be.

Hot Topic and Re-writing Histrory

The reclaiming of lost voices has long been a feminist tactic; finding and documenting agency in the past, whilst re-writing a historical injustice as

women have been marginalised or misrepresented. Riot grrrls wanted to rewrite their history through their community building, zines, art and songs. Their new histories claimed heroines of the past as the maternal lineage of a movement.¹⁴ We are going to look at two examples: one lyrical and one zine based, which pull together an alternative riot grrrl history centred on historical icons before looking at the ways in which zines helped complicate ideas of inspiration, production and consumption.

Le Tigre's *Hot Topic* from 1999 built a canon of new icons and provided an alternative historical syllabus. The song reached number 5 in the Billboard charts and number 3 in the Indie Charts. The lyrics fused a curriculum of angry sisterhood based around a celebration of individual icons and inspirations. These icons were claimed as sisters and in return the sisterhood could be relied up to unleash its anger in their defence. They ranged from key players in the riot grrrl scene like, Tammy Rae Carland and Mr Lady Records, to UK punk musicians like The Slits, to recognisable feminist cultural performers like Yoko Ono and established public figures like Angela Davis, Gertrude Stein, Billie Jean King, and James Baldwin. This montage of figures says a lot about riot grrrls breadth of engagement and about its cut and paste approach to political thought.¹⁵

If Hanna exemplifies the individual icon within riot grrrl, another icon exemplifies riot grrrls' dissident reclamation: Yoko Ono. Le Tigre's inclusion of Ono in the list of Hot Topics gets to the double role of recovery – prove women have been marginalised and prove we can do something about it. But Le Tigre weren't the only ones to build a list of heroines in the past in order to inspire an affective collectivity in the present. Bikini Kill's Tobi Vail, who coined the spelling of 'grrrl', understood the possibility of challenging historical narratives using heroines and icons. She wrote:

And a lot of guys give their girlfriends rock lessons so that they can learn and memorize the important details for future reference. Don't get me wrong, talking about bands is one of my favorite pass times, I just think that a lot of times it is done in a way that makes other people feel left out and that all too often its us girls who feel like we don't have anything worthy of mention ... --- um ... and well it all comes down to YOKO ONO. You see, part of the revolution (GIRL STYLE NOW) is about rescuing our true heroines from obscurity, or in Yoko's case, from disgrace.

Ono epitomises women as the 'opposite of the band' - her historical significance has been posed through her negation: she split the Beatles. Vail continued:

Its that whole western duality thang about women and also about forbidden fruit and all that bullshit and when you are being made into the opposite of his band you are sort of being relegated to the audience and it takes that much longer for it to become a real idea that you could participate instead of just watch.¹⁶

Claiming Ono is therefore an act of cross generational feminist justice. Rather than a negation, Ono was the real political actor in the story: 'She provided an alternative to the corporate bullshit John Lennon was faced with in the Beatles at the time. Not to mention that the Plastic Ono Band was totally subversive politically, in form and content'. Ono was not a subversion of male success, she demonstrated its faultlines with her dissidence.¹⁷

Didactics and organic intellectuals: Evan Dando and Amy Carter

It is perhaps in the faultlines around the voice, form and structure of activist education and academia that the synergies between Sinfield's work and riot grrrl were most striking, in retrospect. Riot grrrl networks grew out of college shared houses and university courses in women's studies and feminist theory. These extended beyond the university campus in poetry readings, zine collectives and grass-roots engagement particularly around homelessness, domestic violence and drug addiction. The same ideas and practices slipped between the university, community building and identity work, picking up new nuances and layers of reflexivity with every move.

Sinfield's argument for a re-invigorated Gramscian 'organic intellectual', cognisant of the specific political and institutional demands of his or her historical context, strikes a chords with riot grrrls theoretical engaged grass-roots didactics¹⁸. At the heart of the battles over AIDS and public funding of the 'promotion of homosexuality' Sinfield, and colleagues set up the Masters in Sexual Dissidence and Cultural Change at Sussex. The careful critical engagement with the meanings of the curriculum brought together a politics of language, experience and grass-roots connection.

As Sinfield and riot grrrl teach us however, some faultlines are hard to own. Both riot grrrl and the Sex Diss programme blurred the lines around theory, practice and experience, and both were met with blunt edged responses from the mainstream media and press. *The Daily Mirror* reported 'Tory MP Terry Dicks', statement that 'it was a waste of taxpayers' subsidy. Sussex University should, Dicks argued 'be shut down and disinfected'.¹⁹ Hanna also learnt, there is a limit to the defences of critical analysis whilst under attack. By 1998 in *Gay and After* Sinfield called for the lesbian and gay organic intellectual 'to retreat for sometime into single-issue politics', to focus on looking after

themselves as a community.²⁰ This need of self-defence, focus on resilience and community self-care acts well as a metaphor for later movements engaged in identity politics.

More recent work on subcultures has tried to move beyond hang ups about style, spectacle, authenticity and resistance to think about how subculture works as a structure of feeling. Rather than asking is it or isn't it political, subcultural work now engages with every day enactment of a range of cultural practices that takes the interpersonal or 'affective bonds' of subcultures seriously. These bonds don't just exist amongst a particular scene or place; they also connect across time, recognised in the recent work of Pilkington on Soviet punks and in emerging work on 'punkademics'.²¹ Two zines in particular explore what it is like to look at yourself by looking at an other; Kathleen Hanna's *My Life with Evan Dando Popstar*, and Tammy Rae Carland's *I (heart) Amy Carter*. They show the overlap, horizontality and affective bonds of riot grrrl as a subcultural feminism, but they also show the difficult theoretical thinking that was being done in DIY form.

In 1994 Hanna produced a zine *My life with Evan Dando Popstar*.²² Dando was the male lead singer of The Lemonheads, formed in 1986. They delivered Punk informed covers of easy listeners and lots of songs about drugs. Hanna's Dando zine is difficult to get a grip on. In it she both identified with and objectified Dando. Photocopied in red blue and black, the zine moves through her obsession with Dando as both a product of objectified pop culture and a distraction from resolving the contradictions thrown up by finding a voice. As a researcher then, this text is contradictory. But then so is feminism. She criticised the kudos rock boys got for appropriating the trappings of femininity that are used to criticise women – clothes, jewellery, hair, slutpower. She described her

writing as ‘all very smart... the whole thing has to do with how Evan totally signifies the myth of the transcendent artist’.²³

Hanna reverses the gaze: ‘He should be happy I have chosen him to stalk. He asked for it by looking like he does’. But she does more than identify with or against him – she negates him, she shows the power of being the opposite of the band. The zine was a way of ‘mass murdering all rockstars in [Hanna’s] head.’ Simultaneously, Hanna reads herself as Dando by ‘staging songs about an elusive society that is fucking me over into an expensive microphone. I am doing the lowest common denominator thing cuz I am singing to a bunch of rich people who I hate’.²⁴ The anger directed at Dando is the anger of the contradictions of performing female rage. She points out the challenge of fandom that encompasses agency; ‘I am’ she wrote, ‘what I am not supposed to be – a female stalker’.²⁵ Women are the victims, not the stalkers. Hanna, had worked in a strip bar and used the experience to politicise the meaning of looking at women on stage. But when Hanna looked at Dando, could she do so without stepping in the male position, and putting him in her own objectified place in return? What potential was there beyond oppositionality?

Feminism is contradictory. The hope was that sisterhood could overcome the contractions. Riot grrrl wanted ‘to negate male-centred forms of pleasure’ with the pleasure of displacing traditional objectification. There is ‘an intensely pleasurable and empowering process’ in criticising mundane pleasures. Isaacson has labelled this ‘a politics of expressive negation’.²⁶ Butler called it ‘subversive repetition’.²⁷ We could see this as the erotics of screwing around with other peoples’ erotic codes.

The *I (Heart) Amy Carter* was a fanzine produced by Tammy Rae Carland between 1992-1995 following the break-up of “Amy Carter”, the punk band consisting of Carland, Hanna and Heidi Arbogast. It can be understood as an example of the riot grrrl queercore zine scene. In a similar way to Hanna’s Dando zine, Carland used her idealisation of the public figure of Carter, as a vehicle allowing her to explore her own sexuality and gendered identity and on a broader scale, sociological issues to do with race and the portrayal of homosexuality in the media. Carland, who is included in *Hot Topics* list of inspirations, is explicit in her exploration of the faultlines of feminist fandom.

Carland was 12 years old when she first discovered Carter, and she writes she had an ‘instant crush on her only the crush had more to do with wanting to be her’.²⁸ Amy Carter is the only child of United States president Jimmy Carter, she went on to attend Tennessee Art School and became what Carland describes as a ‘politically active geeky girl artist’.²⁹ She was both identifiable to Carland, who had similar artistic interests and passions, and an inspiration – Carland is now an artist, filmmaker and owner of independent lesbian music label Mr Lady Records. Carter was referred to in the media as a ‘rebel daughter’, for her artwork and political activism which she frequently combined. As Bikini Kill’s song *Rebel Girl* shows, riot grrrl disrupted the negative connotations of being a rebel, instead the band encouraged girls to celebrate women who incite revolution through different thinking. Amy Carter was the Rebel Girl. In her zine, Carland mixed personal writing with fan letters, cuttings from articles, and artwork about homosexuality and, erotic knowledge and girl-girl intimacy. As Nguyen suggests this called attention to ‘encounters, feelings and memories that appear to be personal and self-referential, [but] are also ideological and social.’³⁰

Carland described her relationship with Carter as an ‘interest/obsession/crush/wanna-be COMPLEX’³¹ – and it is a complex relationship. Carland shifts between alluding to a sexual desire for Carter and the innocent childish fantasy of friendship. Erotic inferences are made for example, in the two full page images of Carter at different ages holding a cat with the caption ‘Amy then holding her pussy’ ‘Amy now holding her pussy’ written underneath, and the admission that ‘I did want her to be queer, but I guess she’s not and that’s all I’m gonna say for now’.³²

In the third issue of the zine however she writes:

Besides my whole thing about Amy, and for Amy, should never be manifested as a possibility or even a reality, that would spoil it. Amy is an idea, a concept, a token of geek love, a hero, and more specifically she is safe and unknown... Amy is a leftover from my childhood... She is who I wanted to be, or wanted to love, or wanted to know – depending on any given day. She is also a reminder of my first crush and/or heroizing another girl.

Through Carland’s own admission, she acknowledges that her love for Amy is less about Amy herself and more to do with how she relates to developing her own sexual identity. The ‘I (Heart) Amy Carter’ zine explores her desire for escapism as a teenager, and disrupts the fixity between reality and imagination. Additionally, it is about redefining the notion of a fan’s ‘crush’ and what it signifies. Traditionally a ‘crush’ is culturally insignificant. It carries the implications of being feminine, girly and concerned with ideas of whimsical romantic love; a shadow left by the productive process. Carland re-appropriates it to describe a broader and more meaningful concept of love.³³ It expanded the possibilities of what it meant to be a girl who is devoted to someone or something.

The riot grrrl Sisterhood: Horizontal Fandom

Past the Billboards and the Magazines

I dream about being with you

We can't hear a word they say

Let's pretend we own the world today³⁴

Carland fangirled Amy Carter from afar, Hanna's affective bonds also blurred the lines between girl love, fangirling and sisterhood. Without contextualisation, many riot grrrl lyrics are hard to pin down in terms of the continuum between sisterhood and erotic connection. You would be forgiven for thinking for example that this lyric was written to a long-lost lover. In fact the words form the first verse of the Bikini Kill song 'For Tammy Rae' from the 1993 album *Pussywhipped*, written by Hanna to her friend. Hanna has described the way in which Carland was 'a friend who had turned me on to so many things and changed my life'.³⁵ By also listing Carland in the song *Hot Topic*, she surpasses friend status to idolised heroine. An ambiguity of meaning in the lyrics, like Carland's reconceptualization of 'crush' and Hanna's 'stalking' of Dando, illustrates the subversive nature of riot grrrl's negotiation of fangirling and friendship. In the face to face world, it was Tammy Rae who provided Hanna with a haven when the press furore around riot grrrl became too much and she left Bikini Kill. These affective bonds were encapsulated in the notion of 'Girl Love'.

'Girl Love' signified the importance of friendship within riot grrrl as a horizontal movement: the idea of a non-geographically located community which shares, supports and teaches each other. In many respects this can be perceived as a continuation of the 1970s second wave feminist notion of 'sisterhood' which denoted a sense of collective identity and belonging, however this terminology was seldom used by the riot grrrls. Ideas of

subcultures as ‘affective bonds’ help to illuminate the cross-overs and tensions between riot grrrl as both a feminist and a subcultural practice. Riot grrrl ‘girl love’ recognised the importance of individual experience in the collective –riot grrrls emphasised self-empowerment through self-expression. Whilst the movement organised a social bond focused around the slogan ‘Every Girl is a riot grrrl’ this was in contention with the notion of individual self-representation. Consequently, the relationship between the grrrls was complicated, and often resulted in a preoccupation with emotional expression that was intimate and rested on ideas of authenticity in order to be legitimated. The boundary between being a sisterhood and being a fandom was often blurred, as the movement felt pressure to fulfil the multiple roles of self-help therapeutic community, creative outlet, political conscious-raising group and remain a site for music fans.

The horizontal collective aspect of riot grrrl was encouraged in a number of ways. Firstly, through a reluctance to define itself or identity a leader, whilst claiming that their icons and heroines could be anyone, allowing an extensive range of girls to find relevance in it. Riot grrrls’ various delineations were described in a double-page article titled ‘What riot grrrl means to me’ in Riot Grrrl NYC fanzine #5. Responses ranged from: “‘A support network” --Polly O; “a place where I feel safe” --S; “a state of mind” --S.W; “a place where I can meet other women interested in doing creative things together” --Anon; “we also work on having fun” --Elena’.³⁶ Much emphasis was also put on the importance of equality, and grrrls debated how a non-hierarchical structure and keeping the meetings grrrl-only spaces would cultivate an alternative culture which was inherently feminist.³⁷ Freedom to tailor the movement to their individual needs and expectations meant that participation was personal: as one sixteen-year old grrrl put it “Riot Grrrl is about me”.³⁸ In this way riot grrrl fully embraced the feminist notion of ‘the personal is political’.

Secondly, a sense of collectivity was experienced in a physical context, through a shared fan presence at gigs showing support to each other's bands. Signs of girlhood were both embraced and subverted by wearing short skirts, cute hair clips and using lunch boxes as handbags. But the aesthetic jarred with rough guitar and drums. A softer feminised vocal would at any moment shift tone into a scream in anger about systems of power. Akin to earlier women singers associated with punk like Patti Smith, or Poly Styrene, the riot grrrl voice was not just a lone cathartic scream, it was a collective 'identification of perhaps unsolvable conditions'.³⁹ The body was site of struggle and resistance – 'politically loaded' labels were written on their bodies, badges, backpacks or t-shirts – slut, rape, prophet.⁴⁰ The words were written on the body to 'publicly confront[] the viewer with the very terms designed to prohibit female display and curtail sexual activity.'⁴¹ Co-ordinated styles and the privileging of girls 'to the front' became not only an expression of fandom but a political strategy: in her popular history of riot grrrl, Sara Marcus described it as 'a defiant embrace of fandom... by going wild when Bikini Kill or Bratmobile played, the girls were making a promise to one another that as soon as any of *they* got a project going, there would be an adoring passel of girls up front, dancing like crazy.'⁴²

Thirdly, the circulation and consumption of zines produced by riot grrrls encouraged the creation of transatlantic 'textual communities'.⁴³ Their cheaply produced zines mapped out the networks of shared interests in order to build a community, as they were posted to home addresses, sold at gigs or passed hand to hand. Through the zine networks riot grrrl became 'an underground with no Mecca, built of paper' locally enacted but imagined as a global movement.⁴⁴ Zine-making became a central part of communicating ideas and musical interests as well as raising awareness of personal issues therefore inextricably

linking their music with their politics and allowing the grrrls to become their own agents and producers as well as listeners and fans.⁴⁵

A culture of intimacy developed between the grrrls, expanding perceived notions of fandom simply as a consumptive past time or a form of collective identity. In so doing, an anxiety for authenticity, being ‘real’, and expressing your true self through your work and politics evolved. Grrrls were encouraged to self-examine, confess and articulate personal sometimes traumatic experiences as a way to validate the subjects’ importance and raise awareness for other girls.⁴⁶ In Foucauldian terms we can conceive the process of confession as also part of self-healing: Nikolas Rose argues engaging with one’s authentic self through the means of self-inspection has become key to contemporary modern living.⁴⁷ One riot grrrl commented on zine-writing: ‘It keeps your sanity; it’s therapeutic...zines are a way of typing how you feel, letting it out. It’s another form of crying.’⁴⁸ This demonstrates the consciously psychoanalytic aspect of being a riot grrrl: the expression of emotion as a form of liberation and empowerment. The real revolution therefore is on a psychological level, as discussed by the testimonies in Rosenbergs and Garofalo’s research:

‘The revolutions are revolutions from within.’⁴⁹

‘Zines are a way to get into other people’s heads’⁵⁰

‘They’re not filtered, not trying to be dignified’.⁵¹

Affective bonds and emotional intimacy also proved challenging for the movement however. Nguyen has prompted us to question the consequences of riot grrrls confusing ‘intimacy with reciprocity, experience for expertise,’ and disguising an emotional aesthetic as authentic knowledge points to the challenges faced by the organic intellectual.⁵² The focus on the individual stories often undermined the collective. The limits of personalising the political through experience alone magnified the constituency of the network as white

and largely university-educated. Collective subjectivity can be an echo chamber. There was also the danger that having close friendships also gave the appearance of a clique forming within riot grrrl, subsequently alienating some peripheral members.⁵³

Marcus has described how treating the movement like a self-help group made many girls feel uncomfortable, sometimes trying to outperform each other, and other times feeling unable to deal with the issues that were brought up through lack of professional expertise.⁵⁴ Consequently, despite riot grrrls emphasis on horizontal structures, competition was promoted through a desire to show the most authentic emotions and the most 'awareness'. In Kathleen Hanna's personal papers, she has written how this eventually led to her disillusion with the riot grrrl movement by the late 1990s:

Similar press accounts came out claiming that riot grrrl was all white and middle class, and I watched, at a very slight distance, as many white middle class grrrls publically wallowed in guilt and self hate or simply shifted the blame to others... As a result, several small groups of white middle class women ended up arguing amongst themselves about race and class (and being competitive over who was more or less racist and classist) and a lot of people, including me, got really grossed out.⁵⁵

Inspiring as she may be, the icon disrupts horizontal sisterhood. Consequently, in many ways this embrace of individuality contradicted and undermined the collective. The hopes that horizontal fandom could combine both subcultural affective bonds and the collective subjectivity of sisterhood shrunk instead into 'horizontal hostility'.⁵⁶

Hanna herself struggled with being identified as the leader of riot grrrl. It turned out that a collective experience of marginalisation or oppression did not equip individual figureheads or icons; demanding a voice was one thing, but ‘[n]othing in [their] upbringing or ... experience with the “outside world” had taught [riot grrrls] what it was like to be *listened to*’.⁵⁷ Projected as the riot grrrl mouthpiece and ‘the crisis counselor’, she was also the most criticized and victimized by the media.⁵⁸

Having Fans

Riot grrrl didn’t just think about what it meant to be a fan and see a possibility for horizontal mutual fandom as sisterhood, it had to acknowledge that riot grrrls could have fans in the traditional sense too. Often framed around ideas of role models, riot grrrls’ relationship with their fans threw up some of the contradictions around extrapolating from an individual’s agency to a collective response. Having explored the possibilities of dissent within fan structures, riot grrrl were forced to retreat from dissidence to a more binary response of subversion and negation. Riot grrrl’s biggest organised event was the 1992 riot grrrl convention in Olympia. The tension around a collective of individuals woven together through their everyday practices, shared pick and mix theory, and affective bonds reached a tipping point in terms of scale and profile.⁵⁹

The press caught onto riot grrrl in the *New York Times*, *Ms*, *Rolling Stone*, *LA Weekly* and *Newsweek* as well as in British publications *The Daily Star*, *The Wire*, *Guardian* and *Melody Maker*⁶⁰. The girls music press, particularly in *Sassy* and *Seventeen Magazine*, recognised riot grrrl as a potential new market and ultimately riot grrrl was unable to protect itself from the roles, structures and investments of commercial fandom. Marketed at ‘alternative teenage girls’, *Sassy* included tattooed models, feminist buzzworded articles and an indie aesthetic but still it translated rather than challenged the gendered expectations

of the wider girls' magazine market. 'Let it be known that I, [wrote Quit Whining zine] Margaret Rooks DO NOT like *Sassy Magazine*, and am annoyed at its attempts to infiltrate the underground music scene. Although it is not as bad as say *Teen* or *Tiger Beat*. I do not appreciate *Sassy* latching onto something they think is hip, then spoon feeding it to the mainstream'⁶¹ *Sassy* was, in Hebdige's terms, textbook re-incorporation, picking up the marketable elements of a resistant subculture and selling it in a watered down depoliticised version.⁶²

Newsweek, meanwhile, reduced Hanna to 'a former stripper who sings and writes about being a victim of rape and child abuse'.⁶³ Riot grrrl stopped talking to the press.⁶⁴ They maintained their own press fuelled by anxieties about girls magazines and the possibilities of being 'stitched up' in the music press, particularly by female journalists who riot grrrls had trusted. However this was not just a top down reversion of commercial structures. Audiences have the agency to re-incorporate too. Riot grrrl didn't get to decide if its audience wanted to be fans or not.

We can see this descent in Hanna's own papers. In her study of girl cultures, Harris has described riot grrrls' decision to shun mainstream media channels and create their own alternative riot grrrl press worked to both create subcultural resistance, but also silence the riot grrrl message.⁶⁵ Explanation for the mainstream media blackout was given in the 1994 *Riot Grrrl Press Catalogue*. It stated that:

We need to make ourselves visible without using mainstream media as a tool. Under the guise of helping us spread the word, corporate media has co-opted and trivialized a movement of angry girls that could be truly threatening and revolutionary. Even besides that it has distorted our views of each other, and created hostility, tension and jealousy in a movement

supposedly about girl support and girl love. In a time when riot grrrl has become the next big trend, we need to take back control and find our own voices again.⁶⁶

In order to keep their authenticity, riot grrrl risked going unheard. Harris describes this as a ‘fugitive culture’ in which zines become a deliberately secretive ‘hideout’.⁶⁷ This demonstrates the liminality of riot grrrl culture, remaining both public and private. It invites us to question how successful a form of protest it really was, how fandoms and political movements organise in both spheres, and what happens when they cross too far over the threshold into one or the other. DIY production may have the potential to change the relationships, but does it therefore change the expectations?

By 1996 Kathleen Hanna would no longer hold and play with the contradictions. Her personal letters and personal zines were replaced with a newsletter 23 Wishes. Hanna described this official newsletter as a letter/booklet. The archive acknowledges the shift in function and tone. It was catalogued as ‘a blanket response to questions commonly asked in her deluge of fan mail’.⁶⁸ The collective individuality of riot grrrl could not cope when all those selves coalesced around a template. She thanked the fans for writing and promised that she would read all the letters she received. Unable to retreat into rock star exclusion, what she really wanted was to stop the letters coming. She ‘didn’t have to answer the boring questions’.⁶⁹ Which were now so familiar that she could put together a list of the most likely questions – none of them were about singing or lyrics.

Furthermore Hanna had come, like Dando, to signify, ‘the myth of the transcendent artist’. She had to ask fans to stop investing their pain in her politics: ‘Okay, so a lot of girls/ladies/women write to me and tell me their

stories (like having to do with rape/incest/sexual assault/verbal harassment... And I really do not want to seem like a jerk or anything but I cannot possibly keep trying to counsel people through the mail/shows/etc... it is just too much for me to take on right now'.⁷⁰ As a replacement for personal contact, she suggests some reading and professional agencies instead. However much she had resisted icon status – personalising her political had made her a receptor of all the pain that bound the grrrls together.

Conclusion

There has been a growth in academic concern with riot grrrl, perhaps motivated by the quest for a version of subcultural punk affiliation less implicated in flirtations with fascist imagery and uncritical engagement with pornography's shock value. Despite this and the current success of *The Punk Singer* documentary about Hanna's life and a National Riot Grrrl day in Boston, we should be careful not to take riot grrrl nostalgia on its own terms. Now when young feminists contact Hanna to tell them how much they love her music and they wish they'd been around twenty years ago - she tells them 'No you don't. It kind of sucked'.⁷¹ We might recognise the reasons why: marginalisation of trans women's experience, the politics of S&M posited against violence and pornography, and failure to recognise (or check) its own privilege as white and predominantly middle class. In this way riot grrrl could be seen as a bridge that links and marks the boundaries between second and third wave feminism.⁷² But it also disrupts the construct of generational waves by building a 'stability and durably [that] depends on its [heterogeneity] and capacity for revision and development'.⁷³

These are the daughters of 'seventies women's libbers'; the 'rebellious daughters who refuse[d] to conform to the rule book of their second wave mothers'.⁷⁴ But, riot grrrl is what joins the Freedom Trash Can and the Ruskin

Conference to Roller Derby and Slut Walks.⁷⁵ It is also stuck between a rock and a hard place. If the Spice Girls point to market saturation of feminism as a brand, then riot grrrl's reliance on the existing 'punk underground' meant it replicated that underground's silences and marginalisations.⁷⁶ The tensions between empowerment and agency in riot grrrl replicate those of engaged activist academia and 'the organic intellectual' more generally through the tensions of both voice and silence. Riot grrrl can and has been criticised for its contradictions, but the contradictions are the point.⁷⁷ When we blur the lines and let go of the divisions between ideas of activist organisation, identity politics and fandom we can take advantage of the faultlines, but what happens in the room, after all, always matters.

¹ Politics as a process of communication is evident in the Bikini Kill declaration cited in Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo, 'Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from within' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 23, 3 (1998), pp. 809-841; For further discussion of zines as 'writerly text' see Feona Attwood, 'Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency', *Journal of Gender Studies*, 16, 3 (2007), p. 236.

² Attwood, 'Sluts and Riot Grrrls'; Ellen Riordan, 'Commodified Agents and Empowered Girls: Consuming and Producing Feminism', *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 25, 3 (2001), pp.279-297. See also Patrick Califia-Rice, *Macho Sluts: Erotic Fiction* (Boston: Alyson, 1988) for discussion of Madonna as a 'postmodern icon and material girl'.

³ Alan Sinfield, 'Queerstories in Brighton', *New Formations*, 67 (2009), pp. 110-119.

⁴ Alan Sinfield, *Gay and after* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1998). P. 199.

⁵ Alan Sinfield, 'Literary theory and the 'crisis' in English studies." *Critical Quarterly*, 25, 3 (1983), pp. 35-47; Alan Sinfield, 'Playing the System: The Sussex MA, and an Anxiety', *The Radical Teacher*, 45 (1994), pp. 20-22.

⁶ Alan Sinfield, *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading*. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992)

⁷ See for example Kevin Dunn, 'Pussy Rioting: The Nine Lives of the Riot Grrrl Revolution' *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 16, 2 (2014), pp.317-334; Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth, ' "We are the Revolution": Riot Grrrl Press Girl Empowerment, and DIY Self-Publishing' *Women's Studies*, 41 (2012), pp.136-157.

⁸ Kate Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism: Outrage in Order*, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014), p. 4

⁹ Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards (ed.) *ManifestA: Young women, feminism and the future* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000)

¹⁰ Kathleen Hanna, 'Gen X Survivor: From Riot Grrrl Rock Star to Feminist Artist', in Robin Morgan (ed.) *Sisterhood Is Forever: The Women's Anthology for the New Millennium*, (New York: Washington Square Press, 2003) p. 134

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- ¹¹ Kathleen Hanna interviewed by Mark Bazer, ‘#19 Kathleen Hanna’, *The Interview Show*, (Brooklyn, NY: 2013)
- ¹² See Sini Anderson’s (dir.) film, *The Punk Singer* (2013)
- ¹³ Alan Sinfield (ed.), *Society and Literature 1945–1970*, (London: Methuen, 1983).
- ¹⁴ The Suffragettes were claimed as ‘VICTORIAN RIOT GRRRLS’ for example. DC Punk Archive, District of Columbia Public Library. Small Zines, Folder 6.
- ¹⁵ Anderson, *The Punk Singer*.
- ¹⁶ *Bikini Kill Zine #1*, (1990), Kathleen Hanna Papers, MSS 271, 1, 10 (Fales Library NYU)
- ¹⁷ Tobi Vail *Jigsaw..* (1991) DC Punk Archive, District of Columbia Public Library. Small Zines Folder 6.
- ¹⁸ Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994), p. 74
- ¹⁹ Sinfield, ‘Playing the System’, p. 20
- ²⁰ Sinfield, *Gay and after*, p. 199
- ²¹ Ivan Gololobov, et al. *Punk in Russia: Cultural Mutation from the “useless” to the “moronic”*, (Oxon: Routledge, 2014) pp. 196-7; Stella Moss, “‘A Harmonizing Whole?’: Music, Mass Observation and the Interwar Public House’, in The Subcultures Network (ed) *Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014) , pp. 105-120; Zachary Mooradian Furness, *Punkademics : The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower*, (New York: Autonomedia, Edinburgh: Compass Academic distributor, 2012); Maria-Elena Buszek, ‘Punkademia’, *American Quarterly*, 65, 2 (2013), pp. 413-423.
- ²² Kathleen Hanna, *My Life with Evan Dando Popstar* (1994), Kathleen Hanna Papers, MSS 271, 2, 17, (Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries)
- ²³ *Riot Grrrl Press Catalogue* (1994), Kathleen Hanna Papers, MSS 271, 2, 23 (Fales Library and Special Collections)
- ²⁴ Hanna, *My Life with Evan Dando Popstar*
- ²⁵ Ibid
- ²⁶ Johanna Isaacson, ‘From Riot Grrrl to CrimethInc: A Lineage of Expressive Negation in Feminist Punk and Queercore’, *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 7, 4 (2011), pp. 1-18.
- ²⁷ Attwood, ‘Sluts and Riot Grrrls’ p. 239
- ²⁸ Tammy Rae Carland, *I (Heart) Amy Carter #1* (1992), Tammy Rae Carland Riot Grrrl Collection, MSS 290, 1, 98 (Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries).
- ²⁹ Ibid
- ³⁰ Mimi Thi Nguyen, ‘Riot Grrrl, Race and Revival’, *Women and Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory*, 22, 2-3 (2012), p. 177
- ³¹ Carland, *I (Heart) Amy Carter #1*
- ³² Ibid
- ³³ Nguyen, ‘Riot Grrrl, Race and Revival’, pp. 177
- ³⁴ Lyrics from ‘For Tammy Rae’ by Bikini Kill *Pussywhipped* LP first released 1993
- ³⁵ Cited in Baumgardner and Richards, *ManfestA* p. 90
- ³⁶ *Riot Grrrl NYC no.5* (March 1993), Kathleen Hanna Papers, MSS 271, 2, 23 (Fales Library NYU).
- ³⁷ See Rosenberg and Garofalo, ‘Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within’.
- ³⁸ Ibid, p. 817
- ³⁹ Jayna Brown, “‘Brown Girl in the Ring’: Poly Styrene, Annabella Lwin, and the Politics of Anger’, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 23, 4 (2011), p. 461
- ⁴⁰ Alison Jacques, ‘You Can Run but You Can't Hide: The Incorporation of Riot Grrrl into Mainstream Culture’, *Canadian Woman Studies*, 21, 4 (2001), p. 49; Califia-Rice, *Macho sluts*.

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- ⁴¹ Marion Leonard, 'Paper Planes: Travelling the new grrrl geographies' in Skelton, Tracey and Valentine (ed.) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 235
- ⁴² S. Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York and London: Harper Perennial, 2010).
- ⁴³ Eichhorn, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*.
- ⁴⁴ Emily White quoted in Rosenberg and Garofalo, 'Revolutions from within', p. 811
- ⁴⁵ Matthew Worley, 'Punk, Politics and British (fan)zines, 1976-1984: "While the world was dying, did you wonder why?"', *History Workshop Journal*, 79, (1): 76-106.
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- ⁴⁷ Nikolas Rose, *Governing the Soul: The Shaping of the Private Self*, (London: Routledge, 1989)
- ⁴⁸ Erin A. McCarley quoted in Rosenberg and Garofalo, 'Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within', p. 823
- ⁴⁹ Lailah Hanit Bragin quoted in *Ibid*, p.841
- ⁵⁰ Madhu Krishnan quoted in *Ibid*, p. 822
- ⁵¹ Lindsay Oxford quoted in *Ibid*, p. 822
- ⁵² Nguyen, 'Riot Grrrl, Race and Revival'
- ⁵³ Marcus, *Girls to the Front* p. 128; Nguyen, 'Riot Grrrl, Race and Revival'; Dunn and Farnsworth, "We are the Revolution".
- ⁵⁴ Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, p.122
- ⁵⁵ Kathleen Hanna, *Ideas [1 of 2]*, Kathleen Hanna Papers, MSS 271, I, 14 (Fales Library NYU)
- ⁵⁶ Hanna, 'Gen X Survivor' p. 136.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid*, p. 13
- ⁵⁸ Hanna refers to herself as 'crisis counsellor' in her personal papers. See *Ideas [1 of 2]* (Fales Library)
- ⁵⁹ Hanna, 'Gen X Survivor', p. 134.
- ⁶⁰ Kim France, 'Grrrls at War...', *Rolling Stone* (8-22 July 1993), pp. 24-25; Ann Japenga, 'Punk's Girls Groups are Putting the Self Back in Self-Esteem', *New York Times*, (15 November 1995), p. 30; Nadya Labi, 'Girl Power', *Time* (29 June 1998), pp. 54-56; Nina Malkin, 'It's a Grrrl Thing', *Seventeen*, (May 1993), pp. 80-82; 'Revolution, Girl Style' *Newsweek* (22 November 1992); Leonard, 'Paper Planes'; The television sitcom *Roseanne* name checked riot grrrl in a 1995 episode 'The Getaway, Almost'.
- ⁶¹ Rooks, M. (1994). Quit Whining! D C Punk Archive. *Small Zines*. Folder 2.
- ⁶² Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1979)
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- ⁶⁴ Lindsay Zoladz, 'Not Every Girl is a Riot Grrrl', *Pitchfork*, (16 November 2011) <http://pitchfork.com/features/articles/8710-not-every-girl-is-a-riot-grrrl/> [Date accessed 25 June 2015]. Rosenberg and Garofalo 'Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from within', p. 828.
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- ⁶⁹ *Ibid*.
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- ⁷² Wilson 2008; McDonnell 1994; Isaacson, 'From Riot Grrrl to CrimethInc', p. 10.

⁷³ Schwickart (1995) p.235

⁷⁴ Baumgardner and Richards, *ManifestA*, p.176.

⁷⁵ Adele Pavlidis, 'From Riot Grrrls to roller derby? Exploring the relations between gender, music and sport,' *Leisure Studies*, 31, 2 (2012), pp.165-176.

⁷⁶ Rosenberg and Garofalo, 'Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from within', p. 811; Riordan, 'Commodified agents and empowered girls', p.292.

⁷⁷ Jacques, 'You Can Run but You Can't Hide'; Riordan, 'Commodified agents and empowered girls'; Janice Lynn Ristock and Joan Pennell, *Community Research as Empowerment: Feminist Links, Postmodern Interruptions* (Oxford University Press, 1996).