

Successes and Failures of Punk Rhetoric and Practices: A look into Gender and Representation in Contemporary Punk Music Scenes

Laura Sislen

Introduction: How I Came to Know Punk

When I was 21 years old, I was uncertain of my ability to integrate into any music scene after a struggle with drug addiction. So, I armed myself with several friends and we hopped into my partner's spray-painted, 1999 Plymouth Voyager to see the Pennsylvanian folk-punk heroes, Mischief Brew, at a local dive bar. Self-conscious about how I looked and if I belonged there, I had no idea what I was getting into. There was no relief from the nearly debilitating jitter in my stomach until the band went on, and an immense weight was instantaneously lifted from my spirit. As the late Eric Peterson started belting rally songs against police brutality, war, and oppressive power structures, the crowd of die-hard fans and inebriated fools formed a mosh pit. I jumped right into it, and suddenly my insecurities were gone. I felt an energy in the pit where we shared our sweat, and occasionally blood, that was incomparable to any musical experience I have had. Our aggressive "dancing" was a mesmerizing form of comradeship. The people, music, lyrics, and energy are stained into my memory as a defining moment that sparked my desire to seek out more music.

The punk music and image drew me in, but it was the *content* that made it resonate. The genre's ideology consists of social justice, nonconformity, and resistance that is informed, angry, and loud. I discovered powerful, unapologetic women and gender nonconforming folks, like those in California's short-lived hardcore-punk band G.L.O.S.S (Girls Living Outside Society's Shit), more of Laura Jane Grace from the renowned punk band Against Me!, L7 and Bikini Kill from the 1990s riot grrrl via online streaming services. These bands inspired a self-confidence I didn't know existed. Suddenly the "punk" thing seemed accessible, that I could be a part of it even though I'm not another hetero-cis-white male who I've seen dominate so many spaces.

Methods

My research for this autoethnography comes from the respect I have for the women and gender nonconforming folks in this scene who ignited a spark within me to think for myself, stand for what I believe in, and be unapologetically me as a queer, non-binary, female-at-birth, Asian-American adoptee. I began research on *Google* to formulate an idea of the conversations surrounding “punk” and gender which has been regarded by scholars, critics, and participants as another exclusive, hetero-cis-white-male dominated scene. I realized that my idealistic view of punk inclusion in the formative years of my “punk identity” was rather naive. Just like any countercultural group, regardless of the rhetoric and aims, there will always be gaps in the *practice* of an ideology, and the punk community is no exception to this. This is by no means a condemnation of the punk music scene. In this paper I explore scholarship and participants’ understanding of punk, who respectively claim that the music scene has been both diverse and exclusive, and I synthesize these accounts to claim a “pendulum shift” that swings between various levels of inclusion. Specifically, I will extend the conversation to the importance of non-binary and trans people of color in the punk music scene, as well as the importance of the scene for them within this new “shift.”

My findings are limited by the geographically small pool of informants and concerts attended over a short period of time. I have also analyzed numerous scholarly sources and magazine articles on punk, gender, sexism and feminism using *Proquest*, *EBSCO*, and American University Search-Box from February 2018 to April 2018. The primary sources consist of my personal experiences, attending two post-punk concerts, taking notes on how people inhabited that space, and interviewing five female musicians from three bands in the D.C. and Baltimore area who actively create music and play shows in punk and hardcore scenes. The semi-structured interviews were approximately 25 to 40 minutes long via internet video call platforms. The lack of information from informants and scholarship on nonbinary and trans people of color in punk experiences is filled by my authority as a non-binary POC in an autoethnographic approach.

What is “Punk”?

A brief definition of “punk” as it pertains to this project is necessary. Alice Bag, a former member of “The Bags,” one of L.A.’s first punk bands, claims that punk lives “in the planned actions and protests of anti war organizations, in local organic farming co-ops who demand the right to take back control of their food supply, in the anarchic ideals of hacktivists who target corrupt governments and corporations under the flag of Anonymous” (234). Bag frames punk as a *mentality* and *way of interacting* against power structures to reclaim agency over our bodies and resources. The scholars Dunn and Farnsworth discuss punk’s European musical origins, in which young punks gathered in Britain as a response to working class culture and class politics (137). They believe this evolved into a more generalized rejection of the status quo, utilization of the do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude and diverse group of participants (137). In early UK and US punk, *everyone* was encouraged to seize the means of producing music (although not limited to it) and challenge traditional exclusionary practices and politics of the mainstream (Dunn and Farnsworth 137).

Similar to Bag, Shawna Potter, one of the musicians interviewed from Baltimore hardcore band War on Women, describes “punk” as an *ethos*. Angie, an informant from Baltimore’s post-punk band Post Pink, says it’s “nonconforming, very much ‘do your own thing’, it gives you a way to talk about what people don’t talk about.” Punk *music* has been described loosely by a scholarly source as “generally characterised by fast, aggressive tones and often politically charged” (Griffin 67). Punk musical culture emphasizes the lack of importance of musical expertise. People of all levels are encouraged to play. These musical methods and broad generalized similarities (considering the variation within the music) manifest powerful feelings among those who participate on both sides of the stage. But before the musical genre, the *mentality* of punk was born from political and social unrest and frustration. According to Bag’s definition, more people are “punk” than would likely identify with the term. The music scene that developed in the early 1970s as a vehicle to express frustrations quickly became a home for the misfits who were rejected from society at the same time as they were rejecting it (Bag 236).

As a bisexual woman, first generation child of Mexican immigrants, who attended an English-immersion school that wanted to erase her identity, who witnessed the toxicity of the gendered power imbalance

between her mother and father, Alice Bag was always “othered” (235). The lack of space for marginalized and rejected folks and social turmoil created the foundation of the punk rock music scene. She claims that in its earliest days there were no gender roles, race, or class, “the earliest participants and movers behind the scene were united only in the sense of having been identified as ‘outcasts,’ either by society or by themselves” (Bag 236). In fact, “punk was very gay in the beginning” claims Kid Congo, another musician from the punk frontier on the West Coast and gay Chicano man from the band The Cramps (Jackson).

These diverse origins of punk, where identity and “labels” didn’t shape a person’s validity or access to the scene diverge from the whitewashed history that many scholars and critics have depicted throughout my research. The real history of punk isn’t as inclusive or exclusive as described, it has had several shifts throughout time. An *entirely* homogeneous scene never existed and subcultures within punk have risen as a response to the lack of space for marginalized folks, like Afro-punk and queercore.

Punk’s Struggle with Inclusivity

Critics’ discussion of the hetero-cis-white-male dominance in punk primarily refers to the scene in the 1980s. Regarding concert spaces, women “didn’t even go because it was so violent and so macho that it was repulsive. Women just got squeezed out,” recalls Jennifer Miro from the early West Coast punk band, The Nuns (Dunn and Farnworth 138). In “Rock Against Gender Roles: Performing Femininities and Doing Feminism Among Women Punk Performers in the Netherlands, 1976–1982,” Pauwke Berkers’ female informants, who participated in the 80s Netherlands punk scene, were able to enter the scene as musicians and were relatively accepted due to the punk rhetoric that promotes the DIY ideology (155). They primarily experienced sexism through objectification and other barriers that hindered the *full* privileges and accessibility men had to the punk scene.

A response to the exclusive macho-hardcore scene from the 80s was the 1990s riot grrrl movement (Dunn and Farnsworth 138). By using DIY feminist zines, Allison Wolfe, Molly Neuman, and Kathleen Hanna became several key players in the movement. With zines, music, and even a convention, punk women discussed topics of sexual identity, self-preservation, surviving sexual abuse, self-defense, and female

empowerment (Dunn and Farnsworth 139). Reclaiming the female body, under female terms, against mainstream media, patriarchal, and capitalist standards, was their main goal. Other dominant concepts in the movement included *girls* seizing the means of production, *girls* creating their own cultural capital, and *girls* empowering themselves (Dunn and Farnsworth 141). *Girls* were tired of their lack of representation. They were reclaiming punk as a space for anti-oppressive tactics and utilized this platform to challenge the status quo and empower themselves. Many of the bands mocked sexist rhetoric, called women to the front of mosh pits, and advocated for nontraditional performances of femininities and taboo professions, like sex-work (Dunn and Farnsworth 141).

This kind of rhetoric, energy, and solidarity solidified my draw to punk, when I heard *my* voice and saw *my* face. It was about holding sisters up, girl power, and loud, unapologetic existences. But my biggest disconnect to riot grrrl, a scene I did not directly live through, is this concept of “girl” power. I’m a female at birth, with a uterus and vagina, but I rarely identify as a “girl” and I’m not the only person who felt left out or was unsatisfied with the verbiage. Riot grrrl failed to effectively include women and gender nonconforming folks of color. The movement as it existed in the 90s was a space for cis-white women.

Many riot grrrl participants would not address their own “white upper middle-class girl mentality” when dismantling “white boy mentality,” according to scholar and former zinester Mimi Thi Nguyen (180). They wanted to address the patriarchy, but failed to address racism which ironically reinforced punk spaces as exclusionary. Riot grrrl demanded the emotional labor of POC to “reveal themselves, to bear the burden of representation (‘you are here as an example’) and the weight of pedagogy (‘teach us about your people’)” because at the core of the movement was the concept of “intimacy” and the “personal experience as political” (Thi Nguyen 180). POC were reduced to the roles of “teacher” and examples as token characters in a sea of “allies” (Thi Nguyen 180). They were used to enhance the punk progressive rhetoric through friendship and proximity, more of a symbolic gesture or meeting a “quota” than a meaningful act of inclusion or diversity. Ironically, riot grrrl ended up exploited and commodified by one of the forces they were opposing: the mainstream media.

Bacchae, Post Pink, and War On Women on Representation in Punk

This is not to claim riot grrrl as an entirely negative movement. Katie, an informant from the D.C. post-punk band Bacchae, identifies as a “post-riot grrrl band” because they address similar issues, like anti-capitalism and harassment. The music from that time heavily influenced me to challenge the status quo, have stronger convictions, and live an unapologetic existence:

I wish for a new [riot grrrl] every day, it was necessary and powerful for the people who felt included in it. A way to process anger and frustration over inequality. It was important for me, but I felt a little too young at the time and it had been co-opted by the mainstream, it felt like what should have happened is that women would have become more equal, but were instead tokenized, it felt like it took another 10 more years for women to show up on the scene again (Potter).

This is proof that the pendulum is swinging toward diversity. Shawna adds, “it’s okay that we (women) progress and do better than riot grrrl. Let’s not let it limit us, we are allowed to be different” (Potter). This sentiment, Nguyen’s article, many folks of color, and my personal experiences, all call for a “new” riot grrrl, one that moves beyond the limits of the 90s movement. If a *new* riot grrrl means the reclamation of a scene that practices the rhetoric of nonconforming, anti-oppressive, D.I.Y., and strong community of *all* people, then that could propel punk to a new and non-condescending state.

“Representation is in an upswing!” excitedly claims Rena Hagins, also from the band Bacchae, in reference to the participation of transgender folks, people of color, women, and combinations of the three. She describes, “growing up as a teenager it seemed like a ‘boys club,’ not welcoming to women, ‘you’re there to gain social capital and seem cool.’ Like no we are here because we enjoy the music. I’m not here to serve a purpose for you” (Hagins). Sam, from Baltimore’s post-punk band Post Pink, also reflects on attending shows when she was 16, recalling that “it was all dudes” (Whitelaw). But according to Rena, Sam, and Angie, the toxic mentality, that keeps women away and contributes to the lack of

participation, has notably shifted in Baltimore and D.C. over the last several years.

They claim this shift is due, in part, through accessibility to the means of production via Internet, recording equipment, and sites like Bandcamp, where people can stream and sell their music and merch. This access gives marginalized folks, who may not be put on a punk show bill, agency from the people who have traditionally dictated “who’s in” or “qualifies.” Sam believes the “upswing” is because people are getting “bored of the same ‘ol dynamic of a band, I want to see people more like me doing what I like to do” (Whitelaw). Shawna believes the scene isn’t specifically in need of “women” so much as it is in need of *differences* and *variety* saying, “I don’t think I write things so differently because I’m a woman it’s just something that’s different” (Potter). Every informant notices that the participation and representation of people from different backgrounds, does, in fact, produce a momentum of marginalized folks stepping toward the creation of music and being a part of the scene, like Rena (a woman of color).

Despite the progression the informants are excited about, the scene is far from perfect. Sexism is still prevalent, although it isn’t as overt as it once was. Laura Jane Grace, the front woman of the famed band Against Me!, who had a very public gender confirmation transition, says “punk was supposed to be so open and accepting, but when it came down to it, it was still hard to be queer in any way and not face judgment for it” (Farber). “Most of the harassment is verbal, dismissive, not being taken seriously, and the assumption that you don’t know what you are doing or how your gear works,” explains Shawna (Potter). It’s confirmed by both Rena and Katie, that men, sound guys in particular, have assumed that they don’t know the technical side of their instruments and amps. Verbal harassment occurs on sites like *YouTube* with comments like “she is just a stupid woman who sucks at singing and is just straight up angry.” CITATION

Harassment and critique is less prevalent and harsh as the pendulum gains momentum and more folks get involved, because their people are already there. Sam has been compared to another drummer she respects *without* the notoriously attached “you play well, *for a girl*” to the statement. The Post Punk show I attended had four bands on the bill, three out of four were mixed-gendered and two of four had more than one member who was not male. The audience, regardless of the gender I

perceived via presentation (which is admittedly a poor measure), inhabited the space evenly, and no perceived sex had a dominant presence. There were a handful of people of color and the women seemed to ditch the “girlfriend” or “to seem cool” image.

Now What?

The step necessary for the punk music scene right now is the inclusion of nonbinary and trans people of color. That is how punk can stay true to its rhetoric, live the practices of the ideologies it promotes, and possibly prevent the pendulum from a dramatic shift back to homogeneity. There’s a whole breadth of angry and oppressed voices who could benefit from the community and platform of punk music. It’s the perfect medium to discuss taboo subjects that feminists like Shawna have done. Nonbinary, trans gender, and people of color voices are notoriously silenced, manipulated, and erased. Punk is a (broad) type of music and space where folks can effectively express their contempt for society, challenge cultural norms, expose oppressive rhetoric, and, hopefully, do so safely. Along with Alice Bag’s concept of “punk” as a mentality and way of living outside of and challenging society’s conventions that transcends a musical scene, then nonbinary and trans people of color are *already punk*.

The ways to include nonbinary and trans people of color is similar to the actions for inclusion of (white) women. Shawna actively works with a Baltimore chapter that promotes bystander intervention, which she explains is reducing or preventing harm by stepping into scenarios of harassment. She believes that “communities need to hold harassers and abusers accountable through education, and mediators can help them find the tools to stop harassing and abusing rather than just shunning them. Take care of our own which include victims and abusers. We *can* do it, so let’s do it” (Potter). Just because the scene’s rhetoric calls for a crowd against any oppressive structure doesn’t mean that every person that participates in that space will actualize it. Even the punk community, which was born from anti-oppressive standards, has bigots, and it’s up to the community to call them out and *actively create* an inclusive space. This kind of action will create safer spaces.

All of the informants use their agency to support audience members and other musicians in the punk community. Members of Post Pink like to engage with the crowd and help them feel welcomed by hanging out and chatting, Bacchae promotes and supports other performers by posting

about their shows and attending, Shawna calms down the mosh pit from the stage if it gets too violent. In order to prove there is a demand for marginalized folks' voices, the consumers need "to put their money where their mouths are" (Potter). This means financially supporting nonbinary and trans people of color bands. If we want to see nonbinary and trans people of color create music and play shows, then there has to be fiscal proof; they need the financial support that is also moral support.

Safety, accountability, and financially supporting these acts proves there is a demand for their inclusion and music. And it is more than a demand, it's a *need*. It's fighting for the right to be yourself. It's more than a performance. Nonbinary and trans people of color do not take off their identity at the end of the day; it is who they are, it's their lives. Including nonbinary and trans people of color is vital to a platform that preaches non-conformity, difference, and resistance. Punk needs diversity and diversity needs punk. I feel valid when I see one of my identities represented on the stage. I feel empowered when I see myself represented on the stage challenging oppressive power structures. Visibility is proof of existence and a resistance against the systems that reduce transgender people to research subjects, manipulate representations of people of color and erase nonbinary experiences.

Conclusion: Up the Punx!

I started questioning whether punk *music* ever did anything to change anything they sing about. There's an anarcho-folk-punk band, Wingnut Dishwashers Union, who sings the lyrics, "a punk rock song won't ever change the world! But I can tell you about a couple that changed me!" ("Fuck Shit Up"). And with that, I can see that the music, people, and productive rage built up by the vehicle of punk music *will* change the world. If these songs have the power to change me, *and* inspire enough individuals, *and* we harness the energy to create real, withstanding change within ourselves and our communities, then a punk rock song *could* change the world.

Punk can transcend the image of some vapid challenge against the status quo, rooted in angst and nonconformity, performed by so many "punks." My non-binary existence as a queer person of color is highly personal and is almost inseparable from the political. The rhetoric that riot grrrl and Kid Congo believed in, and that Nguyen disagreed with, is that the personal *is* political. Living in the American society that preaches a pseudo-

individualism and freedom, that prefers its citizens to color within the lines, that decides who is the “in-group” and the “out-group,” the decision to be myself to the best of my ability *is* political. If punk is going to speak with the anti-oppressive, “fuck the man” mentality against “society,” then this counter-cultural movement needs to practice what it preaches, keep people accountable, put money where their mouths are, be active in their communities, and start from the bottom up with interpersonal relationships. They need to hand the mic over to transgender and nonbinary people of color and keep the upswing going.

Works Cited

- Bag, Alice. "Work That Hoe: Tilling the Soil of Punk Feminism." *Women & Performance*, vol. 22, no. 2/3, July 2012, pp. 233-238. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/0740770X.2012.721079.
- Berkers, Pauwke, "Rock Against Gender Roles: Performing Femininities and Doing Feminism Among Women Punk Performers in the Netherlands, 1976–1982." *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, vol. 24, 2012, pp 155–175. doi:10.1111/j.1533-1598.2012.01323.x
- Farber, Jim. "Laura Jane Grace: Punk Was More Close-Minded Than Church." *The Guardian*. November 10, 2016.
- Griffin, Naomi. "Gendered Performance and Performing Gender in the DIY Punk and Hardcore Music Scene." *Journal of International Women's Studies*, vol. 13, no. 2, 2012, pp. 66-81, ProQuest.
- Hagins, Rena & Katie McDermott. Personal Interview. March 23, 2018.
- Jackson, Johni. "Punk Was Always Gay: Kid Congo Powers on the Genre's Queer Beginnings." *Remezcla.com*. June 30, 2016.
- Potter, Shawna. Personal interview. February 14, 2018.
- Schneeweis, Pat. "Fuck Shit Up." *Burn the Earth! Leave it Behind!* DIY Bandits. 2010.
- Thi Nguyen, Mimi. "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival." *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, vol.22, No. 2-3, 2012, pp. 173-196, Taylor and Francis Online, DOI: 10.1080/0740770X.2012.721082
- "We ARE the Revolution': Riot Grrrl Press, Girl Empowerment, and DIY Self-Publishing." *Women's Studies*, vol. 41, no. 2, Mar. 2012, pp. 136-157. EBSCOhost, doi:10.1080/00497878.2012.636334.
- Whitelaw, Sam & Angie Swiecicki. Personal Interview. March 22, 2018.