

The Politics and Aesthetics of 1990s Punk Women's  
Writing: Reading Riot Grrrl after Kathy Acker and against  
the anti-feminist backlash

by

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## Abstract

Riot Grrrl, a hardcore feminist punk movement that emerged in the early 1990s in America, is often contemplated through a subcultural studies lens. As a result, its status as a political movement and social phenomenon still overshadows its status as an artistic movement in its scholarship. This thesis applies a literary studies lens to Riot Grrrl, examining specific devices employed in the movement's literature and tracing these back to an experimental literary avant-garde, to fortify its status as an artistic movement. I argue that Riot Grrrl practitioners appropriate much of their artistic investments from American punk-feminist writer and postmodernist, Kathy Acker, who is frequently cited as a precursor to Riot Grrrl. Building on recent studies that have begun to demystify Acker's influence as manifest in Riot Grrrl zine writing, I ask: to what ends do Riot Grrrls incorporate devices from Acker's literary critique of patriarchal culture in the 1980s into their later critique of patriarchal culture in the 1990s? Following the successes of second wave feminism in gaining women's liberation, their art responds to the media-driven backlash *against* feminism that emerged in the 1980s, which resulted in the concept of 'post-feminism' gaining traction in the 1990s. Two key manifestations of this backlash were the discrediting of working women, as well as attempts to reassert control over female sexuality, which mutated into postfeminist trends in the 1990s that similarly hinged upon the themes of work and sex: 'New Traditionalism' and 'Do-Me' feminism.

I focus on Acker's 1980s novels that influenced Riot Grrrl writing, such as *Great Expectations* (1983), *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978; published in 1984), and *Don Quixote, Which Was a Dream* (1986), tracing her ideological and aesthetic influence into Grrrl zines sourced from *The Riot Grrrl Collection* archive at New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections. This



analysis reveals how the critical function of avant-garde literary devices, inherited from Acker by Riot Grrrl zinesters, shifts according to gender developments being made in the 1990s that posited a stratification of feminist definitions.

## Preface

One of the more frequent questions I get asked when presenting my research on Riot Grrrl is: how did you get into this material? In other words, what was my entry point into Riot Grrrl? This is probably because, now in my late twenties, I would have barely been two years old when 'Revolution Girl Style Now!' fully hit its stride in the early 1990s. Despite this fact, I still somehow feel a sort of perverse nostalgia for Riot Grrrl, and upon deeper introspection, I can come up with three credible reasons for this.

Firstly, as a movement, Riot Grrrl bears all the hallmarks of a 'pre-internet boom' society – a time when the world would have arguably seemed like a much bigger place and, pending the emergence of sites like Facebook and Twitter, people's lives were certainly lived more privately. Though I can see the many benefits of the Internet for advancing a feminist agenda (instant encyclopaedic access to feminist ideas and literature, as well as platforms that showcase a diverse range of female voices and provide easy access to online feminist communities), there is also a sense that something deeply personal and sentimental was lost with this shift to an online social realm. The intimacy cultivated through pre-digital self-published literary channels, such as the making and exchanging of zines, for example, is arguably drained of its potency when moved into the blogosphere. This is perhaps because zines, unlike blogs, constitute a highly embodied literature. They retain the hallmarks of human idiosyncrasy in a culture increasingly shaped by consumer capitalism and its requisite for slick production values and 'the professional finish'.

The second reason for my perverse nostalgia for Riot Grrrl is perhaps linked to its persistent aesthetic resonance in mainstream popular culture, hence the frequent flickering exposure I had to its messages of 'girl-love' and

self-acceptance as a pre-teen. Flickers that were always, for me, waiting to be traced back to their uncommodified, undiluted form. Kristen Schilt also identifies the residual presence of Riot Grrrl in mainstream popular culture and traces its manifestations. Schilt notes that a new group of mainstream female musicians emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s dubbed the “angry women in rock” by the popular music press (2003, 5). This group – which included the likes of Alanis Morissette, Meredith Brooks, and Fiona Apple, amongst others – appropriated key concepts from the Riot Grrrl movement in a commercial context and “turned them into a million-dollar enterprise” (Schilt 2003, 6). She attests to how even English pop-band the Spice Girls, a group I enjoyed as a pre-teen, co-opted Riot Grrrl’s ‘revolution girl-style now’ slogan to create their own popular slogan: ‘girl power’. Whilst I enjoyed these commodified flashes of Riot Grrrl as a pre-teen, and whilst I can still see the positive aspects of making girls feel empowered through popular music (even if it is just the brief three minutes it takes to listen to a song like ‘Wannabe’ by the Spice Girls), with age and an increasing awareness of feminist arguments, these mainstream nods to radical feminism no longer satisfied my budding feminist self. Discovering Riot Grrrl and its message of female-empowerment – not only its *message*, but also this principle put into practice through activism and by encouraging young women to become cultural producers – felt like a wholly more satisfying response to patriarchal culture.

Finally, and on a still more personal note, my interest in punk feminism and Riot Grrrl also undoubtedly stems from childhood memories of my three older cousins. While I was still listening to the Spice Girls, they were learning bass guitar, donning floral dresses with army boots, and blasting out what I eventually came to recognise as Bikini Kill from their chaotic bedrooms. They were wild, confident, and fun, and I aspired to be just like them. In this sense my entry point into Riot Grrrl was perhaps similar to many girls in the 1990s:

I was initially intrigued by the movement's music and fashion. Later though, and with an increasing interest in literature and literary studies, my focus turned to the movement's zine-making culture. This was not an easy avenue to pursue due to the self-published, ephemeral nature of zines (as those who study punk zines will know), but this research project has opened doors to archives that have enabled me to understand the Riot Grrrl movement more holistically. By gaining access to a large collection of Riot Grrrl's literature via *The Riot Grrrl Collection* at Fales Library, I unearthed its rich and diverse artistic investment, which had previously been overshadowed for me by its status as a political movement and social phenomenon – a status that is still reflected in its scholarship. Rooting through the archive at NYU deepened my resolve to highlight the importance of this work and the significance of zines as important artistic creations worthy of comprehensive scholarly enquiry.

## Introduction

My intention with this thesis is to apply a literary studies model to Riot Grrrl, thus resituating Riot Grrrl as a *literary* artistic movement. Riot Grrrl was a hardcore feminist punk movement that emerged in Washington State in the summer of 1991 and spread its ideology across the greater Pacific Northwest, eventually appearing in states across the US and Canada.<sup>1</sup> Riot Grrrl, which is typically considered a manifestation of third wave feminism, sought to combat androcentricism in the punk scene and in American culture more broadly by encouraging young women to embrace its DIY ethos and become cultural creators: forming their own bands and writing/distributing their own publications in the form of zines.<sup>2</sup> Riot Grrrl literature takes many of its artistic cues from the literary avant-garde. Specifically, it is indebted to the American punk-feminist writer, Kathy Acker, who emerged out of the downtown New York avant-garde scene in the 1970s, and rose to mainstream attention in the mid-1980s with her 'breakthrough' novel: *Blood and Guts in High School* (1978).<sup>3</sup>

Given Acker's lauded status as a prominent figure of the late twentieth century literary avant-garde, I argue that tracing Riot Grrrl's artistic lineage to Acker will fortify its status as an artistic movement, and combat its overshadowing critical status as a political movement and social phenomenon. The overarching purpose of foregrounding Riot Grrrl as an artistic movement is to facilitate a better understanding of how art functions in feminist critique: a potential for understanding that is passed over if we do not embrace Riot Grrrl's artistic credentials. The shifting landscape of feminist

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<sup>1</sup> The movement also had roots in Washington DC.

<sup>2</sup> The term 'zines' is subcultural argot for homemade, self-published magazines, or 'fanzines'.

<sup>3</sup> Grove Press formally published *Blood and Guts in High School* in 1984.

discourse encapsulated in this literary trajectory, from Acker to Riot Grrrl – from the media-driven backlash against feminism in the 1980s, to the emergence of third wave feminism and the concept of ‘post-feminism’ gaining traction in the 1990s – demonstrates the malleable function of experimental literary and aesthetic devices for feminist critique.

Riot Grrrl has most commonly been read within the realm of subcultural studies. This is a point that Kate Eichhorn makes in her book, *The Archival Turn in Feminism* (2016), in which she profiles *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, which is held at New York University’s Fales Library and Special Collections. Eichhorn argues that the subcultural studies model that is most commonly brought to bear in scholarship on Riot Grrrl obscures other aspects of the movement. In support of her assertion, she quotes an online interview in 2010 with Johanna Fateman, a prominent figure in the 1990s punk-feminist scene whose papers also reside in *The Riot Grrrl Collection* at NYU. Fateman observes that:

[Riot Grrrl’s] status as a political movement and social phenomenon still seems to overshadow its status as an artistic movement. Its products still aren’t discussed much *as art*. (Fateman qtd. in Eichhorn, 112)

My research leads me to agree with these assessments. While critics frequently nod to Riot Grrrl’s artistic merit, little scholarship exists that examines the precise details of its artistic features. The key to illuminating this aspect of Riot Grrrl zines, besides drawing out specific literary techniques used, requires tracing its aesthetic, intellectual, and ideological influences to other ‘legitimate’ artistic movements, which in turn, highlights the movement’s deep artistic investment.

I argue one of the more credible points of access in this respect lies with Riot Grrrl’s oft-cited connection with Kathy Acker. Acker’s work is renowned

for its postmodern and poststructuralist literary techniques, its feminist critique of patriarchal capitalism, as well as its philosophical and aesthetic allegiances to punk. Dubbed a “[t]heoretical [g]rrrl” and “a riot girl ahead of her time”, Acker is primarily linked to the movement through Riot Grrrl founding member, Kathleen Hanna, who cites Acker as a key influence for her work.<sup>4</sup> Though the connection between Kathy Acker and Kathleen Hanna is frequently referenced in literature surrounding both artists, the specifics of this connection as manifest in their writing remains obscure. Given Hanna’s (albeit debated) status as the movement’s figurehead, I propose that illuminating the influence of Acker in Hanna’s writing will, in turn, reveal ways in which this connection has influenced Riot Grrrl literature more broadly. Therefore, in this thesis, I begin by conducting a focused analysis of Acker’s writing, her ideological, intellectual, and aesthetic concerns. Having established an aesthetic and philosophical characterisation of Acker’s literary critique, I then map this onto Hanna’s writing, noting points of coherency and specific literary techniques Hanna appropriates from Acker’s prose. I then follow this with an enquiry into how this influence filtered more pervasively into other Riot Grrrl literary productions.

The second fundamental aspect of this research then, having demonstrated Riot Grrrl’s rich artistic investment, examines Riot Grrrl’s *artistic* response to the ‘feminist moment’. I argue that Riot Grrrls appropriate artistic devices from Acker’s literary critique in their zines, to negotiate the social and political conditions pertinent to women’s rights in the 1990s.

Following the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which saw women enter the work force en masse, as well as a vigorous push for female sexual liberation, a backlash against the advancements made by

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<sup>4</sup> Cynthia Carr. ‘Theoretical Grrrl’. *The Village Voice*. 5 Nov 2002. <https://www.villagevoice.com/2002/11/05/theoretical-grrrl/>. Accessed 27 Feb 2019.

second wave feminists took hold. This was famously documented by Susan Faludi in her seminal 1991 text, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*. Two key manifestations of this backlash, Faludi observes, saw working women being discredited in the mainstream media, as well as attempts being made to reassert control over female sexuality. I propose that Acker's radical feminist critique of patriarchal capitalism, which she expresses both narratively and aesthetically in her texts, undercuts the logical basis upon which these manifestations of the anti-feminist backlash were formed. Acker maintained a revolutionary form of feminism in a literary context, at a time when the American women's movement was moderating under this attack from the mainstream press. Riot Grrrls co-opt Acker's radical feminist critique and response to the backlash in the 1980s in order to negotiate mutations of these backlash currents in the 1990s in the form of postfeminist trends that similarly centred on the themes of work and sex, such as 'New Traditionalism' and 'Do-Me' feminism. Ultimately, I argue that the philosophical cues and aesthetic devices that Riot Grrrls lift from Acker's literary response to anti-feminism in the 1980s shift function when co-opted by grrrl zine-makers in the 1990s. Such functional shifts correspond with gender developments being made at the turn of the decade, and the perceivable overlaps between third wave feminism and postfeminist trends being negotiated.

### ***Feminism in the 1990s: Somewhere Between the Backlash, Third Wave Feminism, and Post-Feminism***

Feminism in the 1990s is characterised through two concurrent yet conflicting discourses: the backlash against second wave feminism in dominant culture that resulted in the 1990s being labelled the so-called 'post-feminist age', and a renewed sense of feminist vigour and thought in response to dominant



culture, known as third wave feminism. The arrival of third wave feminism is often linked to the emergence of punk feminism in the early 1990s and the appearance of feminist collectives such as Riot Grrrl. Using Riot Grrrl as exemplar of third wave feminism, we can begin to identify characteristics of this new 'wave'. Riot Grrrl self-consciously defines itself through its connection with previous feminist movements, evidenced by its continuation of second wave feminist efforts to sexually liberate women. Benjamin A. Brabon and Stéphanie Genz support this characterisation when distinguishing the third wave from other mutations of feminism emerging at this time, such as 'post-feminism', writing: "third wave feminism defines itself as a budding political movement with strong affiliations to second wave feminist theory and activism" (156). Simultaneously, the third wave distinguishes itself from these previous waves by foregrounding ideas such as intersectional feminism (the intersection of class and race with gender), demonstrating a deeper consideration for and more integrated relationship with popular culture, as well as grappling with rising theoretical perspectives: postmodernism and poststructuralism.

Firstly, though, it is important to establish what the backlash against feminism in the 1980s and 1990s really entailed, its key manifestations, and its relationship to the social and political climate in which third wave feminism and Riot Grrrl emerges. The 1970s saw the achievements of second wave feminism manifest on a revolutionary scale. Ignited, in part, in response to women's re-confinement to the domestic sphere after World War II, second wave feminism brought about women's mass entry into the work sphere. It also saw unprecedented progress made in relation to women's reproductive rights and sexual freedoms, assisted by the introduction of the contraceptive

pill in 1961 and consolidated by the ruling of *Roe v. Wade* in 1973.<sup>5</sup> Following an initial decade of progress and consolidations, the 1980s saw the movement splinter around a number of issues, including debates over the divisive issues of sex and pornography. A vigorous anti-pornography movement, spearheaded by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, alienated sex-positive feminist groups, and vice versa. This waning of the women's movement in the 1980s was also prompted, in part, by a period of renewed conservatism in American politics and culture, and a corresponding media-driven backlash against feminism. This was the subject of Faludi's groundbreaking exposé, *Backlash*, in which she identifies an insidious smear campaign being waged against American women in the mainstream media, beginning in the early 1980s, which threatened to undo the progress made by second wave feminism for women's rights. In order to drain the movement of its legitimacy as a social project, the New Right paradoxically blamed feminism for the hardships that newly liberated women then faced.

According to Faludi's book, these reports commonly centred on the themes of work and sex, and considered collectively, represented an impulse in American society and politics to reassert control over women's sexuality, as well as to undermine women's entry into the work sphere. In her book, Faludi examines the rise of the 'foetal rights' movement in America in the 1980s, and the threat this posed to women's rights over their own bodies, as well as any other hard-won sexual freedoms. Faludi suggests that the 'pro-life' campaign was deceptively fuelled by patriarchal "anxiety over the sexual freedoms women had begun to exercise", evidenced by the "rhetoric of puritanical outrage" campaigners developed (439). To this effect, Faludi cites "anti-abortion iconography in the last decade [that] featured the foetus but never

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<sup>5</sup> *Roe V. Wade* was a landmark court ruling that alleviated state control over a woman's right to terminate a pregnancy.

the mother”, indicating that those campaigning for foetal rights “had trouble envisaging [...] women as full and live persons” (459; 466). Faludi identifies misogynistic pro-life rhetoric – the dehumanizing separation of the reproductive value of women’s bodies from their sexual subjectivity – as that which provides rationale for the reassertion of state control over female bodies. *Backlash* introduced the notion that these logics were being mobilised in the 1980s to quash women’s newfound sexual freedoms.

As for the media’s attempt to undermine working women, Faludi cites the press’s condemnation of ‘career woman’ Anita Hill during her 1991 case against Supreme Justice Clarence Thomas, in which Hill accused Thomas of sexual harassment. As if this very public castigation of Hill was not enough to send a message of condemnation to all working women, other scaremongering reports had been circulating for nearly a decade prior to the Anita Hill trial that told of women’s profound misery due to their new ‘overwhelming’ responsibilities in the work sphere. These, Faludi argues, were a veiled attempt to dissuade women from their professional pursuits and encourage a return to hearth and family. They included trend stories of career women’s stress-induced “burnout”, a new female “identity crisis” due to women’s “defeminizing” roles in the workplace, as well as the emergence of a supposed “infertility epidemic” caused by professional women postponing childbearing (Faludi, 1; 2; 216). Secondly, and paradoxically, reports also circulated that bolstered women’s outstanding success in the work sphere, disguising the dire state of affairs that working women were up against. These cover-up stories concealed the multitude of ways “women’s opportunities for employment, promotion and better pay” were being impeded (395). So, whilst reports extolled women’s unprecedented breaching of the labour hierarchy at *all* levels, a diminishing gender pay gap, as well as a marked decrease in cases of sexual harassment on the job, these trend stories concealed the truth: that women were in fact pouring into “low-paid female

work ghettos” and not the high-powered positions promulgated in the press; the pay gap was exactly the same as it had been in the 1950s; and sexual discrimination in the workplace had increased (398).

Although Faludi’s text played a major role in illuminating a media-driven backlash against feminism for a wide audience, her exposé was not the only feminist-engaged publication garnering lots of attention in the early 1990s. The conservative media backlash that Faludi described arguably continued into this decade with a younger generation of female writers adding their voices to the supposed smear campaign against feminism with their scathing critiques of the women’s movement. Writers like Katie Roiphe and Rene Denfeld published polemics in the 1990s that announced a disconnection between the women’s movement and a new generation of would-be feminists. In *The Morning After* (1994), Roiphe suggested that reports of date rape on college campuses were inaccurate, and such inflated claims of sexual misconduct were born of second wave feminism’s commodification of victimhood. She writes of how “this [women’s] movement propels women backward to a time when sexual attention was universally thought to offend” and when women were assumed to have no sexual agency to speak of (Roiphe, 103). In *The New Victorians* (1995), Denfeld conjures a similarly negative vision of second wave feminism, suggesting that younger women were being alienated by the women’s movement and its veiled puritanical stance on sex. She rejects Faludi’s backlash theory as a “fashionable” and “convenient” argument employed by feminists to explain why young women in the 1990s were shirking the ‘feminist’ label (Denfeld, 3; 4). Instead, Denfeld blames the women’s movement’s “extremist antimale and antisex” ideology, which threatened to take women “back to the nineteenth-century values of sexual morality, spiritual purity, and political helplessness”, as the real reason for feminism’s dwindling (34; 10). It is also important at this point to note that, since the publication of *Backlash* in 1991, other critics have

come to question the legitimacy of Faludi's claims that a backlash against feminism really occurred in the 1980s and 1990s. Elaine J. Hall and Marnie Salupo Rodriguez, for instance, argue that, "While popularly recognized [...] Faludi's backlash argument [is] limited" (880). They take issue with the scope of articles Faludi uses to support her claims, as well as the assumption that negative portrayals of feminism swelled in the 1980s more so than in the 1960s and 1970s, which they attest is misleading, given the "persistent pattern of negative portrayals" brought to bear on feminism from the 1960s onwards (Hall and Rodriguez, 880).

In spite of these damning critiques of Faludi's backlash theory, other seminal texts emerged in the 1990s that held up the backlash thesis and sought to further unearth the depths of this assumed conservative media backlash against feminism and women in general. Focusing on the proliferation of female beauty images, Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (1991) also identified an insidious assault being waged against women in the media based on impossible standards for female beauty. Wolf writes of how "inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret 'underlife' poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty" (10). She argues that the sustained demand for women to uphold the narrative of beauty associated with their sex – a narrative reinforced and perpetuated by the media via the proliferation of female beauty images – keeps women physically, psychologically, economically, socially, and politically oppressed.

The backlash against feminism in the 1980s also supposedly paved the way for the popularisation of the term 'post-feminism' in the 1990s. Although iterations and interpretations of post-feminism or 'postfeminism' are multiple – as exemplified by deliberations over critics' use or non-use of the prefix – in some mainstream media reports in the 1990s, post-feminism proffered the 'past-ness' of the women's movement due to its supposed irrelevancy, and

signalled the end of feminism as a social project.<sup>6</sup> Reports that offered up the 1990s as the so-called 'post-feminist age' either prematurely celebrated that feminism had fully achieved its aims, or suggested that feminism had in some way failed. In one such article for *Newsweek*, Kay Ebeling declared that feminism had already "served [its] purpose" and had left many "casualties [...] frenzied and overworked women" in its wake (9). The circulation of such mainstream considerations, dubbing feminism as "The Great Experiment That Failed", propelled some critics to observe that reports of feminism's demise were merely another face of the backlash (Ebeling, 9). They argued that post-feminism's endeavour to supplant second wave feminism rendered it not merely a symptom of an anti-feminist backlash, but rather, "[p]ost-feminism is the backlash", as Brenda Polan resolved in a 1988 article for *The Guardian* (Polan qtd. in Faludi, 15; emphasis added).

Angela McRobbie suggests that what post-feminism actually posits is a "[c]omplexification of Backlash" (255). She understands post-feminism "to refer to an active process by which feminist gains of the 1970s and 80s come to be undermined [...] through an array of machinations" in contemporary popular culture, that are "effective in regards to this undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism" (McRobbie, 255). McRobbie highlights the "double entanglement" inherent in post-feminist culture, that encompasses feminism as "a form of Gramscian common sense", whilst tacitly undermining feminist gains (262; 256). She uses the 2001 film *Bridget*

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<sup>6</sup> The use of the 'post' prefix in the spelling of the terms is deliberated by critics, with some suggesting that the hyphenated version of the term communicates a fixed reading of post-feminism as a concept that is determinedly antithetical to feminism. Other critics purposefully omit the hyphen from their spelling to avoid any predetermined interpretations of the term, and to acknowledge the potential for discovery in our understanding of 'postfeminism' as a conceptual entity.

*Jones's Diary*, as an exemplar of manifestations of post-feminism in popular culture, illuminating how the film “normalise[s] post-feminist gender anxieties so as to re-regulate young women by means of the language of personal choice” (McRobbie, 262). Extending Polan’s indictment, McRobbie’s discussion, and other such studies that consider manifestations of post-feminism in popular culture, move the concept of post-feminism out of its media origins as merely a ‘buzzword’ for backlash, into a cultural category with a stratification of displays and interpretations.

Other critics support McRobbie’s interpretation of post-feminism as a neoliberal discourse that subsumes and neutralises feminist politics, but have sought to further our understanding of its workings, identifying how iterations of post-feminism tellingly bolster a socioeconomic system of patriarchal capitalism. Such studies reveal how post-feminist scripts are largely underpinned by consumerist logics. In *Interrogating Postfeminism* (2007), Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra compile a collection of essays that conduct such a critique, taking into account post-feminist culture’s transatlantic reach, as well as its realisation in multiple popular media forms (film, television, magazines). Tasker and Negra reveal how, in postfeminist culture, female liberation is often linked to one’s status as a consumer. They advocate that this is evidenced by “[p]ostfeminist culture’s centralization of an affluent elite”, and include an essay by Suzanne Leonard citing the character Carrie Bradshaw in the hit US television series *Sex in the City*, whose “enjoyment of myriad consumer pleasures” rationalises her “implied economic freedom” (Leonard in Tasker and Negra, 104). They contend that post-feminist scripts naturalise aspects of feminism, and significantly *commodify* it “via the figure of woman as empowered consumer” (Tasker and Negra, 2). Ultimately, the essays in their collection illuminate post-feminism as an exclusionary category, negating considerations of race, class, and age by assuming that the “themes, pleasures, values, and lifestyles with which it

[post-feminism] is associated are somehow universally shared and, perhaps even more significant, universally accessible" (Tasker and Negra, 2). Thus, Tasker and Negra offer a broadly applicable characterisation of post-feminism as a "limited vision" of gender equality (2).

Other important explorations into post-feminism establish certain trends that have emerged from this cultural field, some of which are directly relevant to this study, which focuses on the themes of work and sex, such as New Traditionalist discourse and Do-Me feminism. Understanding such post-feminist trends from a backlash perspective, New Traditionalism essentially continues the work of undermining the contributions of working women by attempting to entice women back into the home and out of the work sphere.<sup>7</sup> It constitutes a revival of traditional gender roles, and a rebranding of domesticity as an aspirational pursuit for women. According to Faludi:

[This] so-called new social trend in which the *Good Housekeeping*-created 'New Traditionalist' gladly retreats to her domestic shell [...] is little more than a resurgence of the 1950s 'back-to-the-home movement', itself a creation of advertisers and, in turn, a recycled version of the Victorian fantasy that a new 'cult of domesticity' was bringing droves of women home. (77)

Even Genz, who adopts a less pessimistic stance on New Traditionalism, framing this as the potential route to a "new domesticity", outlines the same anti-feminist concerns as Faludi:

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<sup>7</sup> Although it is unclear who coined the phrase 'New Traditionalism', critics such as Faludi and Marcy Darnovski both cite an ad copy for *Good Housekeeping* magazine in the late 1980s as the source of its usage: "the New Traditionalist was the star of a major promotional effort by *Good Housekeeping* magazine" (Darnovski, 72).



New traditionalism centralises women's apparently fully knowledgeable choice to abstain from paid work in favour of family values. The domestic sphere is rebranded as a domain of female autonomy and independence, far removed from its previous connotations of drudgery and confinement. (Genz "I Am Not A Housewife", 59; 54)

Whereas New Traditionalism supposedly threatens to catapult women back into a by-gone era of domestic imprisonment, removing women from the work sphere and diminishing their economic independence, other post-feminist trends, such as Do-Me feminism, focused on sex.<sup>8</sup> Brabon and Genz define Do-Me feminism as "a highly sexualised version of power feminism [...] heralding sexually provocative appearance and behaviour [...] as acts of female empowerment" (91). In *Post-Backlash Feminism* (2007), Kellie Bean defines Do-Me feminism as a "sexed-up feminism" that equates female empowerment with a sexuality that "takes its cue from pornography and regressive notions of female sexuality" (1). The Do-Me feminist, in Bean's estimation, "attempts to achieve social parity through a sexualized submission not only to male fantasy, but also to male aggression" (1). According to this interpretation, Do-Me feminism represents a continuation of the backlash and its attempts to reassert control over female sexuality, by reinstating a female sexuality that is defined by patriarchal ideals, under the guise of feminism and using its languages of empowerment and sexual liberation.

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<sup>8</sup> Tad Friend coined the term 'Do-Me Feminism' in an article called 'Yes.' (1994) for *Esquire* magazine to describe the politics of some of the prominent feminists featured in the piece, including Naomi Wolf, Camille Paglia and Katie Roiphe, amongst others.

Hitherto, I have outlined critical perspectives that rely heavily on a backlash reading of post-feminism: the notion that this concept is, at its core, antithetical to feminism. However, other critics have adopted a less pessimistic stance on post-feminism. Genz, for instance, embraces “a more flexible and open-ended model” of “postfeminism”, suggesting that it “entwines backlash and innovation, complicity and critique” (*Postfemininities*, 92). She rejects the notion often assumed by critics that post-feminism constitutes an aggressive and insidious agenda to do away with feminist politics, and instead, acknowledges post-feminism’s plurality, interpreting this as a sign of its neutrality with regards to eradicating feminism. Alternatively, Genz offers this diagnosis:

Postfeminism responds to the challenging qualities of female/feminine/feminist experiences in the context of a late liberal society in which feminist concerns have entered the mainstream and are articulated in a politically contradictory manner. (*Postfemininities*, 24)

Genz states that her intention is not to argue the case for post-feminism “as either a new utopia *or* the trap of nostalgia” but to illuminate postfeminist liminalities that push us towards a more inclusionary, ‘both/and’, understanding of the concept (*Postfemininities*, 24; emphasis added). The more open-ended stance that Genz assumes is reflected in her choice *not* to hyphenate the term ‘postfeminism’, which avoids any “predetermined readings of the term that imply a semantic rift between feminism and postfeminism, instantly casting the latter as a negation and sabotage of the former”, as she proposes (*Postfemininities*, 18).

As previously stated, one of the fundamental objectives of this research investigates Riot Grrrl’s response to manifestations of contemporary

feminism. In so doing, I embrace the various critical perspectives on post-feminism outlined above that offer *both* condemnatory *and* neutral arguments for the conceptual field. Therefore, from this point onwards, I will also omit the hyphen from my own spelling of the term so as to account for the various interpretations of postfeminism and postfeminist trends explored in this thesis, with the understanding that an unhyphenated version of the term more suitably accounts for the range of critical perspectives I engage with. Simply put, I hold Riot Grrrl up against interpretations of postfeminism and postfeminist trends (Do-Me feminism and New Traditionalism) that interpret it as a continuation of the anti-feminist backlash, *and* those that offer a more neutral stance on postfeminism as a concept that holds the potential for innovation as much as it does threaten backlash.

Another significant motivation for embracing a more neutral stance on postfeminism is because of its perceivable overlaps with third wave feminism: a field that is still largely contested by critics. The concept of third wave feminism emerged in the early 1990s in response to the backlash, proclaiming that a period of renewed feminist vigour and thought had finally arrived to quash anti-feminism once and for all. At a glance, certain sympathies between third wave feminism and postfeminism are manifest in their non-academic discourse, their confluence with popular culture, their embrace of contradiction and strategic use of irony, as well as their implied aim to supplant a previous feminist wave. Despite this, as Stacy Gillis and Rebecca Munford compellingly argue, third wave feminism and postfeminism have “too often been conflated” within the academy without due care, which has perhaps resulted in a rushed indictment of the innovative potentialities of post-1970s feminist display (166). They deduce that “[t]he slippage between the two terms” may account for the caution with which the academy regards the possibility of a ‘new’ kind of feminism (Gillis and Munford, 167).

Other critics, like Genz, who offer a more undetermined appraisal of postfeminism, embrace slippages between the two discourses:

I maintain that there is an overlap between third wave feminism and postfeminism, and, unlike other critics, I do not interpret this as a “dangerous and deceptive slippage” but rather an unavoidable consequence of the contradiction prone social, political and cultural environment in the contemporary West (Munford 150).

*(Postfemininities, 92)*

Given this research takes into account both condemnatory and neutral perspectives on postfeminism, I investigate the specificities of presumed overlaps, as well as perceivable differences, between a self-proclaimed third wave feminist movement like Riot Grrrl and postfeminist trends that emerged in the 1990s, embracing the possibility that a rushed indictment of postfeminism as being vehemently antithetical to feminism has also been assumed within the academy.

However, it is important to acknowledge that literature in the 1990s dedicated to establishing the existence of a third wave feminism did so by positioning itself in direct opposition to postfeminism. In *Third Wave Agenda* (1997), Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake present a collection of essays by various writers – cultural critics, activists, and teachers – with a mind to distancing third wavers from conservative feminists like Roiphe and Denfeld, “who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave” (1). They characterise the third wave as being in no sort of contention with second wave feminism, highlighting the third wave’s embrace of “second wave critiques of the cult of beauty and male dominance”, whilst also drawing out the pleasurable aspects of some of these sites to inspire feminist activism (Heywood and Drake, 4). Similarly, in *Catching a Wave*

(2003), Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier define the third wave as grounded by second wave theory, which they suggest it incorporates as well as critiques:

At its best, the third wave engages with a diverse spectrum of issues in ways that are passionate as well as playful, inclusive as well as rigorous, making use of the best of second wave theory and strategy as well as critiques of second wave feminism. (10)

The 'playful' reputation of the third wave that Dicker and Piepmerier describe, indulging in the pleasures of sites traditionally cast as antithetical to feminism in second wave discourse, can be seen in manifestations of third wave feminism like the Riot Grrrl movement. Riot Grrrl incorporated sites associated with conventional femininity, such as beauty culture, into their aesthetic and feminist praxis. The movement embraced feminine iconography and 'girl culture', reclaiming these domains from their misogynistic and disparaging representations in dominant culture. In this sense, third wavers sought to shift the conversation from second wave feminists, who shunned the label 'girl' for its derogatory associations, to a more fundamental reconsideration of the societal association between 'girl' and 'bad'. Their punk-feminist zines posited a reclamation of mainstream magazines aimed at young women – publications often dismissed as trivial, such as *Sassy* and *Seventeen* – recognising these as important (if also problematic in their mainstream forms) spaces for fostering female identification. The Riot Grrrls also saw the potential of such sites for inspiring feminist activism once such discussions were removed from their commercial, mainstream origins. Other third wave feminist publications of similar bent included the likes of *Bitch* and *BUST Magazine*, the latter of which grew itself out of the "guilty pleasure" associated with reading *Sassy* magazine, according to Marcelle Karp and

Debbie Stoller in *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order* (1999) (x). Despite the superficial status typically ascribed to magazines like *Sassy*, Karp and Stoller also recognised the significance of such publications for providing a space for young women to convene around “that shared set of female experiences that includes Barbies and blowjobs, sexism and shoplifting. *Vogue* and vaginas.” (Karp and Stoller, xv). Like Karp and Stoller, Riot Grrrls recognised the teen girl magazine as a vehicle through which young women were collectively examining female identity and experience, and sought to harness this function from a feminist viewpoint.

Relying on anecdote and confessional styles of writing to outline the issues pertinent to the third wave, zines and other such publications established the third wave as a non-academic discourse. This is reflected in one of the most well known texts on third wave feminism, Rebecca Walker’s *To Be Real* (1995), in which she provides a rationale for the personal nature of the essays featured: “I prefer personal testimonies because they build empathy and compassion, are infinitely more accessible than more academic tracts” (xxxvii).<sup>9</sup> While useful for feminist consciousness raising, the anecdotal discourse that formed the basis of the third wave in its early days led to accusations of the third wave’s lack of political involvement, or worse still, its political apathy, by the media and some older feminists. Such critics saw that, whilst the third wave might have effectively embraced the first part of the popular second wave slogan, ‘the *personal* is political’, they had perhaps fallen short of the latter part: transforming feminist consciousness-raising into political action.

Although texts like *Third Wave Agenda* and *Catching a Wave* offered some progression from the third wave’s dominant anecdotal forms – the

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<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Walker coined the term ‘third wave feminism’ in her article for *Ms. Magazine* in 1992: ‘Becoming the Third Wave’.

former framing personal experiences within cultural analysis, and the latter defining itself as “a bridge to larger political and theoretical explorations of the third wave” – *Third Wave Feminism* (2007) by Gillis, Gillian Howie, and Munford, published in 2004, marked the first contemplation of the third wave as an academic discipline. The essays in their collection attend to third wave innovations, as well as its limitations, in constructions of sex and gender, popular culture, and genealogies. Importantly, *Third Wave Feminism* transcends a preoccupation in third wave feminist literature to provide a definitional account of the third wave – a pursuit encapsulated in the 2006 release of Heywood’s (albeit useful) text: *The Women’s Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third Wave Feminism*. Alternatively, Gillis, Howie and Munford’s collection addresses *how* contemporary feminisms contribute to existing theoretical perspectives, and significantly, *whether* the concept of a ‘new’ wave supports feminism as an on-going social project, as well as a subject for academic enquiry:

This collection is not asking so much what *is* the third wave; rather, through an exploration of the versions of the third wave that are circulating in Anglo-American feminist discourse, is it asking how and whether another wave contributes to the future of feminism. (xxxii; emphasis in original)

As such, they confront the problem inherent to a generational model of feminism that a ‘new’ wave, a *third* wave of feminism implies. They contend that dividing feminism into generations “reduces the complexity of each of these three waves”, and leads to an unhelpful “model of conflict” that fosters a culture of “resistance and closure being imposed on a rich and diverse intellectual and cultural terrain” (Gillis et al., xxii; xxx). In short, the generational model threatens to diminish our comprehension of feminism.

Although, in this study I adopt the analogy of feminist ‘waves’ to signal a broad shift in feminist perspectives and to describe a reinvigoration of feminism in the 1990s with the emergence of punk feminism, I also recognise the limitations of this generational model and the threat it poses to ambiguity. This was the theme of Jo Reger’s empirical study of contemporary feminist communities, *Different Wavelengths* (2005): a collection of essays aimed at complicating the analogy of feminist ‘waves’. Reger resolves that, whilst useful for teaching and developing a general understanding of feminism, the generational model “leaves out activists and forms of activism that do not fit neatly into this model” (xxii). *Different Wavelengths* presents arguments that obfuscate the image of puritanical second wave mothers and dissenting third wave daughters that is often brought to bear on historical accounts of the women’s movement.

In one such essay from Reger’s collection (and in direct relevance to this study), Kristen Schilt explores the effectiveness of third wave productions like Riot Grrrl zines in addressing issues of race. Schilt concludes that zines were not always successful in fostering race cognizance, bringing former criticisms of second wave feminism over issues of inclusivity to the forefront of third wave debates. She writes:

Like the radical feminists of the 1960s, white girls involved in Riot Grrrl, while aware of white privilege, often were not able to move past being defensive or apologetic about their whiteness. The few who did gain race cognizance often were unable to find ways to form multi-racial coalitions. Thus, it is possible to see Riot Grrrl as another white-dominated feminist movement that failed. (Schilt 2005, 53)

Despite recent debates over the success with which the third wave incorporated diversity into its feminist praxis, self-proclaimed third wavers



presented its embrace of intersectional politics as a distinguishing feature of its feminism. As Dicker and Piepmeier posited: “Many of the goals of the third wave are similar to those of the second wave, though some, such as its insistence on women’s diversity, are new” (10). Whilst writers of the third wave presented their feminism as a continuation of the second wave, they sought to eschew a perceived emphasis on white middle-class women’s experiences in second wave feminist discourse. Feminist women of colour in the 1970s and 1980s, some of whom came to define themselves as U.S. third world feminists, paved the way for third wave feminism and its emphasis on intersectional identity politics, adding their marginalised voices to the mainstream women’s movement.<sup>10</sup> In addition to the anecdotal third wave texts I have already mentioned, Brenda Findlen’s 1995 collection, *Listen Up*, illuminates the various forms of oppression that coalesce when gender, class, race, sexuality, and ethnicity intertwine, through a series of self-reflexive examinations. As one contributor, Sonja D. Curry-Johnson, so concisely puts it: “As an educated, married, monogamous, feminist, Christian, African American mother, I suffer from an acute case of multiplicity” (Curry-Johnson in Findlen, 51-52). The centralisation of such intersectional voices in these key texts destabilised a monolithic conception of ‘woman’ – a philosophical component of third wave discourse that was accompanied by emergent postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives brought to bear on feminist theory in the 1990s.

Much as postmodernism sought to deconstruct the Cartesian notion of the essential subject and human agency, so postmodern feminist analyses, such as the one put forward by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990), stressed the constructedness of the subject category ‘woman’ and the essentialist

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<sup>10</sup> Chela Sandoval proposed the formulation ‘U.S. third world feminism’ in her pioneering 1991 essay: ‘US Third World Feminism: The Theory and Method of Oppositional Consciousness in the Postmodern World’.

notion of the 'female subject' that much second wave discourse had hitherto relied upon. Butler argued that not only was gender a social construct (a well-established concept in feminist discourse by the early 1990s), but that sex was also constructed, arguably throwing into turmoil feminism's unpinning argument as to the systematic oppression of 'women' as a subject category. Other deconstructive philosophical positions mapped onto feminism in the late twentieth century and shaped feminist discourse in the 1990s, encapsulated by the strain of French feminist literary theory: *écriture féminine*. Emerging in the 1970s with the publication of a series of prominent essays by poststructuralist feminists such as Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, amongst others, *écriture féminine* critiqued the androcentric construction of language, contesting the limits imposed on female representation and access by linguistically masculine language and patriarchally encoded literature. Founded on the psychoanalytic understanding of language as being key to one's understanding of 'self', as well as one's social role, *écriture féminine* advocates that women write themselves into being, and into history – reclaiming both their experiences and bodies – by adopting a new, experimental, linguistically feminine style of writing. By the early 1990s, these poststructuralist feminist perspectives had gained traction in Anglo-American feminist discourse with the publication of Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron's *New French Feminisms* (1981).

Beginning her writing career in the 1970s, Acker's work, as is often noted, frequently betrays the influence of French feminist literary theory. Tracing Acker's influence in Riot Grrrl zines, I argue that Riot Grrrls follow suit, embracing the essential tenets of poststructural feminist theory in their creative writing. I also examine how Riot Grrrls responded to the mapping of postmodern and poststructuralist theory onto feminism in the early 1990s in their zines, with the understanding that it remains one of Riot Grrrl's central philosophical conundrums. Situating Riot Grrrl into this history more

broadly, though, the aim of this research is not to use Riot Grrrl as a model for securing a stable definition of third wave feminism, as many early third wave texts I have mentioned attempt to do, but to assess to what ends, as an *artistic* movement, Riot Grrrl in the 1990s negotiates these competing feminist discourses in its literature.

### ***Kathy Acker***

Kathy Acker's place in feminist history from the 1970s to the 1990s, as I have just described it, is significant not least because her work spans all three decades. First rising to prominence in the New York literary avant-garde scene of the 1970s, Acker published extensively from her first book in 1972, *Politics*, to her final full-length novel in 1996, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*. She became renowned for her transgressive narratives, covering subjects ranging from incest to pornography, sadomasochism to terrorism: all of which she explores thorough her signature unorthodox approach to literary form. Earning her the epithet of 'literary terrorist', Acker purposefully breached professional literary ethics and moral strictures.<sup>11</sup> Taking an axe to canonical literature, her plagiaristic incorporation of other authors' work into her texts, which she jams together with elements of (auto)biography, as well as her own narratives, produced novels that are something akin to 'Frankenstein texts'. Beyond merely grappling with taboo subjects, her radical and oftentimes scathing indictment of contemporary American society, politics and culture have helped cement her status as one of the most prominent writers to emerge from that downtown avant-garde scene.

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<sup>11</sup> Whilst it remains unclear who first ascribed Acker the epithet of "literary terrorist", critics of Acker's work, such as Joseph Conte in *Design and Debris: A Chaotics of Postmodern Fiction* (2002), continue to use the label to describe the controversial author (61).

Acker's legacy is also significant in a feminist context, although the feminism of her work was contested by some second wave anti-pornography feminists due to the pornographic, sex-positive nature of her writing. Acker's texts often cover themes relating to female sexuality and conduct a radical feminist critique of patriarchal capitalism, exposing the complexity of female relationships in a culture where power dynamics are gendered and unequal, and women's experiences of oppressions are multiform and layered. Aside from frequently centralising the female protagonist in her novels, the experimental quality of her prose has also been credited for its feminist potential. Larry McCaffery positions Acker amongst the "most important women writers of the past 100 years" for her cultivation of a 'new' *female* language (226). Embracing the tenets of *écriture féminine*, her experimentations with language hold the potential to eschew patriarchal inscriptions that are embedded in conventional language and reasserted through traditional literary forms. However, Emily Spiers complicates this characterisation slightly, arguing that, whilst Acker was greatly influenced by "the work of Cixous, in particular", the avant-garde writer does not fully subscribe to the notion of *écriture féminine*, rejecting the idea of "the body's essential and irreducible materiality" (79). Nonetheless, Acker did, at least in part, concern herself with the premise of Cixous' theory, summarising the extent of its influence in her 1995 essay 'Seeing Gender': "I am looking for the body, my body, which exists outside of patriarchal definitions. Of course, this is not possible. But who is any longer interested in the possible?" (166). In her recent biography, *After Kathy Acker* (2018), Chris Kraus also reflects on the compositional legacy of Acker's work for women's writing, stating that, "contemporary texts owe a great debt to the candor and formal inventiveness of Acker's work" (279). Her "discursive first-person fiction" communicates the idea that women's experiences are too complicated to be told through traditional narrative means, whilst simultaneously betraying the influence of

postmodernism on feminist thinking by challenging the notion of an essential female subject or female 'self' (Kraus, 279).

Other critics have analysed the feminist capacity of Acker's writing in relation to how it responds to the historical 'moment' in which her novels appear – a line of enquiry I pursue in this study. In 'Kathy Acker's Punk Feminism' (2016), Margret Henderson argues that Acker maintained, from the 1970s onwards, a revolutionary style of language typically associated with radical feminism of the late 1960s, at a time when "the American women's movement and its languages of protest are moderating and weakening" (201). She describes Acker's writing as "a plague that attempts to purify a now moderating, if not declining, US feminism", effective because it is better able to resist the appropriating effects of a homogenising social order (Henderson, 218). In a similar tack to Henderson, I also advocate that Acker continues something revolutionary with her writing at a time when feminism is being forced to narrow its critical scope in the face of more immediate threats being waged against the women's movement via anti-feminist backlash rhetoric in the 1980s, which centred on the themes of work and sex. Through her expression of anti-work politics and by rejecting the construction of female sexuality according to patriarchal ideals, Acker's texts undercut the ideological basis upon which these two manifestations of the anti-feminist backlash – the discrediting of working women, as well as attempts to reassert control over female sexuality – were formed.

Acker's work defies these manifestations of the backlash in both content and form. In *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (2016), Georgina Colby analyses the aesthetic and compositional strategies present in Acker's work. Using archival material – unpublished notebooks, manuscripts, and essays – Colby reveals the multidimensional form taken by Acker's texts. In one of the most significant lines of enquiry from her study, she highlights how Acker's texts are aesthetically constructed to evoke the sensual through erotic literary

montages and sexual imagery, transforming the text itself into the 'place' of desire. I mobilise this aspect of Colby's compositional analysis of Acker's work, assessing the feminist potential of Acker's texts that elicit a sexual response from readers at a time when attempts were being made to moderate women's hard-won sexual freedoms. This is one important way in which Acker's artistic choices speak to the social and political moment, and is a compositional strategy I trace into Riot Grrrl zines, assessing their appropriation of Acker's devices to serve their own feminist critique of sex in the early 1990s.

Now widely regarded a key figure in late twentieth century experimental literature, critics have not however always agreed on the artistic merit of Acker's work. In a 1984 review for Acker's most widely circulated text to date, *Blood and Guts in High School*, critic Peter Brickbank dismissed her work as "puerile fiction" undeserving of print (1769). Other publications, such as *Publishers Weekly*, characterised her work as "pornobabble", taking aim at Acker's highly explicit sex writing, which is a staple in all of her novels (*Publishers Weekly*, 70). Acker's notable status within the late twentieth century literary avant-garde, and the implicit artistic quality ascribed to her writing, is a characterisation that only seemed to gain significant traction retrospectively and was arguably overlooked earlier in her publishing career. In Joe Moran's book chapter on Acker's literary celebrity, he attributes the punk writer's rising literary stardom in the mid-1980s onwards to "the increasing diversity of the American cultural marketplace", as well as the British publication of *Blood and Guts* by Picador in 1984, which he marks as her major breakthrough into the literary mainstream (132).

Despite contention over the artistic value of Acker's work, her major influences illuminate the avant-garde writer's artistic and intellectual investments, as well as the origins of her literary aesthetic. Acker was interested in transgressive authors and artists – from Jean Genet, Arthur

Rimbaud, and Marquis de Sade, to the American electronic musician, Prince – artists who explore taboos (particularly sexual) and give form to the notion that “identity sits on a sexual or desiring ground”.<sup>12</sup> Other influences included a host of twentieth century French philosophers – from Michel Foucault, to Georges Bataille and Jean Baudrillard, amongst others – who gave rise to postmodern and poststructuralist ideas and critiqued Western socio-political economic systems of late-capitalism and consumerism. Acker’s novels, which are frequently set in capitalist wastelands and challenge metanarratives synonymous with Western society and culture, draw on modern French philosophy.

Acker was also significantly influenced by the punk subculture of the late 1970s, and punk aesthetics are evident in her literary style, which involves pastiche, as well as a cut-up technique also widely attributed to renowned postmodern writer, William S. Burroughs. Her violent, grotesque, pornographic, and uncanny prose reflect punk’s core aesthetic ideals, as well as its nihilistic and apocalyptic worldview. Acker’s ties to the punk scene were also methodological, evidenced in the self-published beginnings of her literary career, as much of her “early work was either self-published or appeared with underground publishers and small presses” (Moran, 132). She also tellingly performed her work with a collective that she formed of other avant-garde authors, in venues like “CBGB’s (the punk club which discovered Patti Smith, Blondie and Talking Heads)”, illustrating the ease with which Acker’s work slotted into the aesthetic and ideological concerns of the punk movement (Moran, 132). Aside from these geographical connections to punk, other critics, such as Henderson, examine the nature of Acker’s assumed punk feminism “in terms of its content and impetus” (201). She resolves that, in congruence with punk’s pessimistic worldview, Acker’s is a feminism of

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<sup>12</sup> Kathy Acker. *Bodies of Work*. Serpent’s Tail, 1997, p. 57.

cruelty and excess, “basing its philosophy on Sadeian laws of cruelty” and embracing the notion of excess in relation to literary consumption to communicate an anti-capitalist politics: another crucial component of punk’s social critique (Henderson, 217).

Incorporating such a range of influences into her writing, Acker’s work is notable for merging feminist theory with punk aesthetics, the academic with the non-academic, the intellectual with the carnal, the canonical with the experimental, and the underground with the mainstream. Given third wave feminism’s efforts to move feminism out of the academy in its discourse, it is perhaps unsurprising that Acker is identified as a key influence for manifestations of the third wave, in particular, for the 1990s punk-feminist Riot Grrrl movement. Acker is often cited as a precursor for Riot Grrrl – a connection that is perhaps corroborated by the archiving of both Acker’s unpublished writing and Riot Grrrl zines in Fales Library’s special collections. Although in this study I centralise Acker’s *published* novels (given that these would have presumably been the only works Riot Grrrls would have had access to), I nevertheless delve into some unpublished material from Acker’s archival collection, the *Kathy Acker Notebooks, 1968-1974*, to reinforce a deeper understanding of Acker’s ideological, intellectual, and aesthetics concerns, as well as draw out specific literary devices Acker was developing in her notebooks.

### ***What is Punk Feminism?***

Connected not only by their embrace of certain avant-garde devices and intellectual resources in their literature, Kathy Acker and Riot Grrrl are also drawn together by their mutual expression of punk feminism. Punk feminism is a subcultural phenomenon whereby punk aesthetics, practices, and punk ethos merge with feminist ideals, and punk is mobilised to serve the feminist



project (and vice versa) to liberate women from gender oppression, both in the punk scene and beyond. As an ideology, punk feminism combines punk's activist impulse and critique of late capitalism and consumer culture, with a critique of patriarchal culture, and grew out of a feminist pessimism for the 1960s 'free love' movement that coincided with the burgeoning second wave women's movement. Matthew Worley usefully summarises this origin story when he writes:

As the limits of the 1960s 'social revolution' became clear, and as misogynist tendencies revealed themselves beneath the banner of 'free love', so feminists began to dissect the gender politics of both the counterculture and wider society. (176)

First emerging in the UK (the birthplace of punk) in the late 1970s, bands like The Raincoats and Poison Girls approached punk from a feminist perspective, responding to the male-dominated music industry and the use of misogyny as provocative fodder for punk culture. As Worley crucially points out though, "the term 'feminist' was not necessarily embraced by those whose actions warranted its use", and therefore the notion of a cohesive punk-feminist *movement* would be an inaccurate characterisation of these early expressions of punk feminism – that would come later in the 1990s with the emergence of Riot Grrrl in the US (178).

The confluence between punk and feminism was also realised artistically, which is perhaps unsurprising given punk's deep aesthetic concerns. In Dick Hebdige's pioneering study on the symbolic resonance of punk style, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Hebdige began the important work of foregrounding punk as an artistic movement, which later studies have built upon in an attempt to define punk's distinctive aesthetic. Jesse Prinz, for example, argues that punk has three core aesthetic ideals that

coalesce to form a distinctly punk aesthetic –“irreverence, nihilism, and amateurism” – and that this formula “can be applied to persons as well to works of art” (590). I agree with Hebdige’s and Prinz’s assertion that punk should be contemplated as an artistic gesture as well as a political or social movement, and apply this to my understanding of punk feminism here. As an artistic gesture, punk feminism generally combines punk’s postmodern aesthetic ideals (nihilism, amateurism, and irreverence) with twentieth century symbols of socially constructed femininity, often resulting in transgressive reconceptualisations of femininity and womanhood.

McCaffery explores the flourishes of punk feminism in its earlier 1970s forms, and situates Acker within this lineage of early female punk artists. He writes:

Reacting to and playing with societal expectations about the ‘proper’ nature of women artists and their work, punkers like Patti Smith, Acker, and Poly Styrene created a space where alternate, often androgynous identities could be discovered and expressed and where women could openly explore passions (even ugly, violent, sexually perverse passions). [...] [W]hen [punk] women began to examine the sources of their separation from love and fulfilment by dramatizing violence, sexual oppression, and hidden desires, they were making an assertive, defiant break with restrictive cultural and aesthetic assumptions. (McCaffery, 222)

McCaffery’s assessment of these early examples of women in punk highlights arguably the most significant contribution of punk women in a feminist context: their defiant response to oppressive femininity and undoing of gender stereotypes that associate women with beauty, passivity, and chastity.

Though female punk musicians like Patti Smith and Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex had been expressing punk-feminist ideas since punk's inception in the late 1970s, Riot Grrrl marked the first of what I consider to be a semi-cohesive punk-feminist *movement*. In Heywood's encyclopedia of third wave feminism, *The Women's Movement Today*, contributor Drake perhaps inadvertently supports this understanding of Riot Grrrl, writing:

[F]ollowing in the footsteps of 1970s and 1980s women punk revolutionaries such as Patti Smith, Deborah Harry of Blondie, Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex, Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth, Kim Deal of the Pixies, and Exene Cervenka of X [...] Riot Grrrls got loud *together* and proclaimed girl love. (226; emphasis added)

Drake's description highlights how these early pockets of punk feminism, occurring by way of individual female punk acts in the first wave of punk, were brought together in the early 1990s by Riot Grrrl. Riot Grrrl aimed to cultivate a more defined punk-feminist scene and alternative feminist movement to the mainstream women's movement. With this more coherent punk-feminist vision also came a distinct punk-feminist aesthetic. The Riot Grrrl aesthetic combines punk's core aesthetic ideals (nihilism, irreverence, and amateurism) with symbols of socially constructed femininity, but with a particular emphasis on symbols of twentieth century *girlhood* and *girl* culture.

In more recent times, critics cite Riot Grrrl as an exemplar of punk feminism, looking to the movement as a means by which to cultivate a more secure definition of punk feminism. In her work on Riot Grrrl zines, Rebekah J. Buchanan suggests that punk feminism constitutes a sub-branch of feminism that is specifically geared towards critiquing gender oppression in the punk scene. She contends that, "riot grrrl zine creators were using their work to argue that not only do women exist within punk, but that their

practices in punk should be normalised” (Buchanan, xxvii). Whilst I agree with Buchanan that part of Riot Grrrl’s punk-feminist critique centres on fighting against the misogynistic elements of their scene specifically, I think this definition is not fully representative of punk feminism’s critical scope. It suggests that punk feminism constitutes a relatively inward looking, scene-specific feminist critique, which is somewhat undermined by the punk-feminist artists that I embrace in this thesis. For instance, Acker’s punk-feminist novels, which merge punk ideology and aesthetics with radical feminist ideas, are distinctly outward looking and non-community specific as they rarely focus on critiquing the punk scene specifically. Rather, Acker’s novels utilise punk aesthetics and philosophy to assist her feminist critique of modern American culture. Riot Grrrl flits between conducting intensely localised and community specific feminist critiques of the punk scene, with more comprehensive assessments of patriarchalism and misogyny in dominant culture. Punk feminism, then, as a critique, is characterised by *both* of these functions: the utilisation of feminist ideas to assist a gendered critique of punk culture, as well as the utilisation of punk aesthetics to assist a feminist critique of mainstream culture.

### ***Riot Grrrl***

In addition to its contribution as the first semi-cohesive punk-feminist *movement* with a distinct aesthetic identity, Riot Grrrl had specific aims and motivations for its existence. Erupting in Washington State in 1991, the hardcore feminist punk movement spread its ideology across the greater Pacific Northwest. Origin stories generally circle around Washington D.C. and Washington State, where many like-minded young women and founders of the movement attended college. As one of the more infamous accounts goes, it was coined ‘Riot Grrrl’ following a race riot in Washington D.C. in the

spring of 1991. Mimi Thi Nguyen details how, following “the shooting death of a Salvadorian man by a rookie police officer”, which sparked “two days of rioting by black and Latino youth in the Mount Pleasant neighborhood in Washington D.C.”, musician Jennifer Smith wrote to Allison Wolf of the band Bratmobile: “we need to start a girl riot” (173). Kathleen Hanna, who would later form arguably the most far-reaching Riot Grrrl export with her band, Bikini Kill, attended Evergreen State college in Olympia, WA in 1989. Both Washington State and Washington D.C. already boasted vibrant (albeit, male-dominated) punk scenes in the 1980s and 1990s, and were fertile ground for the burgeoning Riot Grrrl movement, which comprised of punk music, punk shows, meetings, and zine creation and distribution. The Riot Grrrl Press, a service dedicated to assisting the production, distribution, and promotion of the movement’s literature, was set up in Washington D.C. in 1992 by Erika Reinstein and May Summer, and later migrated to Olympia, WA and then Chicago, IL.

One of the key motivators for Riot Grrrl was to encourage young women to become cultural creators by forming their own bands, and writing and distributing their own zines. They saw this as a means by which to not only interrupt a patriarchal canon of cultural creation, but also to co-opt the means by which women are represented (or rather, not represented) in the mainstream media. By adopting punk’s DIY ethos and controlling the means of production, Riot Grrrl activists were able to transcend traditional, mainstream media platforms and promote a radical feminist agenda. Their productions promoted ‘girl love’ – a concept designed to combat the insidious ways in which women and girls are kept psychically isolated from one another. ‘Girl love’ also aimed to address the manner in which girls are crucially pitted against *themselves* by an oppressive femininity and unrealistic beauty standards that encourage punishing acts of self-regulation: developing eating disorders, suppressing sexual desire, and modifying behaviours and

impulses to appear more idealistically passive (read 'feminine'). The meetings held by Riot Grrrl chapters, which emulated the consciousness-raising meetings cultivated by second wave feminists, were aimed at breaking down these walls of female isolation in order to find commonality in their shared and often silenced experiences of the world. Aside from their cathartic power – often girls would air their experiences of childhood sexual abuse, sexual violence and the threat of sexual violence, eating disorders, and everyday instances of gender discrimination – Riot Grrrl meetings were also used as women-friendly 'safe spaces' in which to strategise ways to overcome the problems they shared. For instance, some chapters ran self-defence workshops to combat the threat of sexual violence and street harassment, as well as rallying around external activist efforts such as the *Take Back the Night* march and abortion rights demonstrations in the capital.

According to Sara Marcus in her book, *Girls to the Front* (2010) – the most definitive history of Riot Grrrl to date – the movement had splintered by 1996: “most chapters had stopped holding regular meetings” and “out of the three bands that had sparked the whole thing, Bratmobile and Heavens to Betsy had broken up, and Bikini Kill was on unofficial hiatus” (325). Despite its short lifespan, for many critics, the emergence of Riot Grrrl marks the beginning of third wave feminism, and its feminist significance and cultural resonance has been increasingly acknowledged in recent years. This is evidenced by its 2010 archiving at New York University's Fales Library and Special Collections.

Curated by Lisa Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection* contains artifacts donated from the personal collections of prominent participants or associates of the movement: Kathleen Hanna, Laura Splan, Molly Newman, Ramdasha Birkceem, Mimi Thi Nguyen, Tammy Rae Carland, Johanna Fateman, Zan Gibbs, amongst others. It contains zines, journals, artwork, videos, cassette tapes, and flyers, amongst other objects. Following her call for donations from

ex-Riot Grrrl affiliates, senior archivist Lisa Darms brought the collection to an even wider audience in 2013 by publishing a selection of extracts from the collection (mostly zines and flyers) in her book, *The Riot Grrrl Collection*. Certain tensions arise from Riot Grrrl's archiving, due to punk's anti-institutional impulse and the movement's messages of inclusivity; nevertheless, the archive at least positions Riot Grrrl's products in an artistic context. Housed beside *The Downtown Collection* at Fales – a collection dedicated to documenting the downtown art scene in New York (musical and literary) from the 1960s onwards – Riot Grrrl sits alongside work by renowned avant-garde and postmodern artists, theorists, and writers. Most significantly, *The Riot Grrrl Collection* sits beside entries such as *The Kathy Acker Notebooks, 1979-1987*, as well as the *Sylvère Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive 1960-2000*.<sup>13</sup> The avant-garde status ascribed to Acker's papers and the Semiotext(e) collection point to an artistic trajectory that is continued by more recent entries that are geographically situated beside them in the archive, like *The Riot Grrrl Collection*. It provides clues for researchers as to where, and crucially *who* to look to, to unearth Riot Grrrl's artistic origins and major influences.

### ***Kathleen Hanna***

As previously mentioned, Kathleen Hanna was one of the founding members of Riot Grrrl and is widely considered the movement's figurehead – a status that Hanna rebuffed at the time and that critics have since challenged. Yet

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<sup>13</sup> Sylvère Lotringer was a literary critic and cultural theorist. He founded the independent publisher, Semiotext(e). As a press, Semiotext(e) is renowned for introducing cutting-edge cultural theory and emergent French theory to a Anglo-American audience, as well as publishing avant-garde literature. Semiotext(e) authors include Kathy Acker, Jean Baudrillard, William Burroughs, Michel Foucault, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva, amongst others.

Hanna undoubtedly played a key role in the formation of Riot Grrrl, pioneering arguably its most popular export in the form of Bikini Kill, the band she fronted in the 1990s to spread her message of ‘girl love’, ‘revolution girl style now!’, and ‘girls to the front’. Hanna’s significance for Riot Grrrl is reflected in recent retrospective accounts. In Sini Anderson’s 2013 documentary, *The Punk Singer*, Anderson focuses on Hanna’s life, career, and lasting influence in relation to the emergence of Riot Grrrl and the re-energisation of feminism in the early 1990s. While considerations of Hanna mainly centre on her musical pursuits and cultivation of Riot Grrrl philosophy and activism, my work centralises Hanna’s literary legacy. I use material from her archival collection, the *Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2005* – which includes zines, personal essays, academic articles, notebooks, and flyers – to assess Hanna’s literary influence. In particular, I use these to connect Hanna’s writing with previous artistic literary movements via Hanna’s fascination with Acker.

Although the connection between Acker and Hanna is frequently referenced in critical literature on both artists, little scholarship exists that demystifies the specifics of this connection as manifest in their writing.<sup>14</sup> In *Girls to the Front*, Marcus describes how Hanna developed a fascination with Acker’s “insolent, demanding fictions [that] tackled female sexuality” and “took an ax to literary form” to suggest that “women’s lives, especially with regard to sexuality and abuse, were too complicated to be told through typical narrative” (32). Foremost, though, Marcus’s book accounts for their personal encounters. Hanna attended a two-day writing workshop led by Acker at Seattle’s Center on Contemporary Art in May 1989. At the event,

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<sup>14</sup> References to Kathy Acker appear more in literature surrounding Kathleen Hanna and Riot Grrrl than they do vice versa. This is because it is unlikely that Hanna had much notable influence on Acker, given Acker’s loose status as an artistic precursor for Hanna and Riot Grrrl.



Hanna presented Acker with a copy of her zine, *Fuck Me Blind* (1988), and was even selected by Acker to be “her opening act at the reading the following evening” (Marcus, 33). She also managed to obtain a one-on-one interview with Acker during her visit by falsely claiming to be a magazine journalist. Hanna’s interview with the celebrated avant-garde writer unearthed significant ideological differences between them, which centred upon their disparate views on feminism and how sexism affected men. Where “Kathleen felt they benefited from it [...] Acker argued with force that it harmed them emotionally too” and that “Kathleen was making an intellectual and political mistake by viewing sexism as an us-versus-them game”, according to Marcus (33-34).

In a 2014 interview for *Rumpus*, Hanna reflected on this fraught experience of meeting and interviewing her literary idol, remarking, “Kathy did not have a maternal bone in her body towards me. She challenged everything I said in the brief time that I spent with her”.<sup>15</sup> Despite their disparate views on feminism, Hanna nonetheless touts their aesthetic and intellectual compatibility, crediting Acker’s non-linear, Burroughs-style narratives as being a corroborating influence on her own writing, which is similarly fragmented and told from “all different kinds of identities”.<sup>16</sup> Reading Acker’s work validated Hanna in her unorthodox approach to narrative form.

Evidence of Hanna studying Acker is clear from her archival collection, which features two reviews of Acker’s *Blood & Guts in High School* from *The New York Times Book Review* (Dec 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1984) and *Library Journal* (Sept 15, 1984). There are also two reviews of Acker’s *Literal Madness* (1987) from *The New*

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<sup>15</sup> Kathleen Hanna. ‘The Rumpus Interview with Kathleen Hanna’. Interview by Katy Henriksen. *Rumpus*, 6 Jan 2014. <https://therumpus.net/2014/01/the-rumpus-interview-with-Kathleen-Hanna>. Accessed 23 Aug 2019.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

*York Times Book Review* (Jan 17<sup>th</sup>, 1988) and *Publishers Weekly* (Nov 27, 1987). As well as newspaper reviews of Acker's novels, Hanna's collection also contains a first page extract from Acker's essay, 'Realism for the Cause of Future Revolution',<sup>17</sup> which was first published in Brian Wallis's book on art criticism and theory, *Art After Modernism* (1984).<sup>18</sup> In the essay, Acker provides descriptions of paintings by Francisco Goya, and later Caravaggio. Acker's interest in Goya's *Black Paintings* (1819-1923) and Caravaggio's work centre on their pre-emptive expression of realism, as well as their conveyance of sexuality and desire. There is also a print copy of Acker's long essay/short story, 'Dead Doll Humility', which was first published in the academic journal, *Postmodern Culture* (Sept. 1990). 'Dead Doll Humility' presents the trauma and humiliation of a writer whose artistic motives are misunderstood, and her resulting struggle to remain faithful to her artistic vision after the fact.

Hanna's archival collection also includes a rather surreal item, given the line of enquiry pursued in this thesis: an anonymous, undated, and unpublished short essay that briefly draws together Acker, Hanna, and Riot Grrrl. Titled, 'Kathy Acker – An Elegy For Living', the unnamed author conducts a literary analysis of some of the main themes at work in Acker's novels. Near the end of the essay, he or she writes:

It is not by accident that I could immediately identify Acker's influence in the superb punk band Bikini Kill. Later I would learn that Kathleen Hanna, Bikini Kill's front woman singer had first been prompted to start a band by speaking with Acker at a writing conference. Bikini Kill would go on to form the vanguard of the mid 90s 'riot girl' movement,

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<sup>17</sup> See bibliography: *Bodies of Work* by Kathy Acker.

<sup>18</sup> Articles [1 of 11]. [Kathy Acker article extract]. Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, *Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015*. New York City.

and all of those girls would be (at least partly) bastard children of Acker's art. ('Kathy Acker – An Elegy For Living', n.d.)<sup>19</sup>

The author refers to a now famous moment in Riot Grrrl history when Acker allegedly told a pre-Riot Grrrl Hanna, who was writing spoken word pieces at that time, that she “should be in a band” instead (Marcus, 34). Acker rationalised that the small audiences attracted by spoken word conflicted with Hanna's professed desire to be heard. Arguably, Hanna's resolve to memorialise the anonymously authored essay in her archival papers at Fales Library – an item which, aside from the brief connection the author makes between the artists, reads like a standard undergraduate literature essay on Acker – hints at Hanna's consensus with the unnamed author, as well as her approval of being recognised as ‘Acker-influenced’.

Eichhorn also briefly contemplates the influence that Acker's writing had on Hanna, as well as the influence that avant-garde literature and art had on Riot Grrrl more broadly. She suggests that the aesthetic and intellectual impact of this is so significant that it actually warrants a re-evaluation of the subcultural studies model most commonly brought to bear on the movement. Eichhorn argues that many early Riot Grrrls, “like Acker and her contemporaries in the avant-garde writing scenes” were “committed to creating a textual space where competing tendencies, narratives, truths, styles, and aesthetics could coexist”, but that this aspect has largely been neglected in Riot Grrrl scholarship (117). Although Eichhorn does not pursue this line of enquiry in detail herself, which is understandable given the scope and aim of her book, she nonetheless points to Hanna's reading inventory to

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<sup>19</sup> Articles [6 of 11]. [Anonymous Essay]. Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, *Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015*. New York City.

support her assertion as to the significance of the avant-garde for Riot Grrrl's key players.

Hanna's personal reading inventory from her archival collection suggests a fascination with the literary avant-garde and its postmodern, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist strategies. For example, Hanna's inventory includes a chapter from Judith Butler's *Bodies that Matter* (1995), a book review of Jacques Derrida's *Glas* (1974), and a chapter from Terry Eagleton's *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (1996).<sup>20</sup> Her reading of Butler suggests familiarity with postmodern feminism and its undoing of the notion of an essential female subjectivity, whereas Derrida's *Glas* points towards her investment in deconstructionist literary theory, as well as her awareness of transgressive writers like Genet with whom Acker was fascinated. When drawing together Hanna and Acker in an avant-garde literary context, though, the most pertinent sources arguably derive from their unifying readings of Burroughs and poststructuralist French theorist, Michel Foucault. In the pages that follow, I demonstrate how Foucault's theory of 'life writing' furthers our understanding of the confessional style of writing that Riot Grrrls adopted in their zines. I also contemplate how Burroughsian literary devices, such as his signature literary vignettes and other such tangential inserts, are adopted in Acker's and Riot Grrrl productions, and similarly challenge Hegelian notions of rationality that map onto traditional literary forms.

Though I maintain that further scholarly enquiry is needed to demystify the connection between Acker's fiction and Riot Grrrl zine writing, this is not to say that the topic has received no critical attention at all. A recent study by Anna Ioanes marks the beginning of scholars attending to this line of enquiry. In 'Shock and Consent in a Feminist Avant-Garde' (2016), Ioanes

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<sup>20</sup> Eichhorn also uses some of these articles in her study to suggest Hanna's familiarity with postmodern, poststructuralist, and deconstructionist perspectives.

traces a formal strategy used by both artists, who deploy a "feminist aesthetic of shock" (176). Ioanes suggests that Acker and Hanna utilise shock in a unifying, unorthodox way to comment on familiar ideas about consent that circle around the deadlock between female sexual agency and sexist cultural coercion. For example, Ioanes argues that, while tactics of shock in avant-garde literature commonly work to alienate or numb readers, in Acker's fictions, instead, shock works to draw readers *in*. She further contends that Hanna mobilises Acker's idiosyncratic use of shock aesthetics in her Riot Grrrl productions in order to create intimacy between her young female readers. Ioanes resolves that their distinctive 'feminist aesthetic of shock' was conceived in response to a burgeoning anti-pornography movement that oversimplified the impasse between female sexual agency and sexist cultural coercion in its discourse.

In addition to Ioanes' study, in *Pop-Feminist Narratives* (2018), Spiers traces the "transgressive feminist gesture" offered by authors Acker and Mary Gaitskill, and mobilised by the Riot Grrrl movement in the 1990s, to its eventual commodification into commercial popular culture in the UK, America, and later, in Germany (12). Directing her attention towards "similar tropes and aesthetic strategies", Spiers observes that, "Hanna's experimental prose narratives exist in a dialogic relationship with Acker's fiction" in terms of "their form and interest in language as both a determiner and challenger of identity" (65; 109). This, she suggests, is likely the result of Hanna drawing from the same "theoretical sources Acker draws on in her fiction and essays", which includes postmodern, as well as poststructuralist theory (Spiers, 106).

Building on Ioanes' and Spiers' important work, I similarly contextualise Acker's and Hanna's writing as responding to the re-energisation of conservatism in US politics and culture in the 1980s and 1990s. I demonstrate how the function of some of the literary devices and theoretical perspectives Hanna draws from Acker's 1980s fiction shift according to

developments being made in feminist discourse in the 1990s: specifically, the emergence of postfeminism as a cultural entity and field.

### *Zines*

As this research applies a literary studies lens to the Riot Grrrl movement, it is important to take into account the medium through which Riot Grrrl writing appears. Zines or 'fanzines' are self-published magazines typically associated with alternative political movements and subcultures. The zine medium has deep-rooted associations with both feminist and punk histories, given that the medium enables activists to transcend traditional mainstream media platforms and articulate more transgressive socio-political agendas. Stephen Duncombe published the first definitive academic study on zines in 1997, *Notes From the Underground*, in which he explores the origins of zines, citing various prominent zine-making cultures (including punk), as well as contemplating the political efficacy of zines as ideologically utopic creations. His study provides a crucial foundation for much of my work here on Riot Grrrl zines – in particular, his insight into the reconceptualisation of work and leisure that occurs with zine-making. Duncombe explores the contradiction between zines as labour-intensive productions and their role within 'slacker' communities (punks and hippies rejecting the capitalist work sphere). I apply Duncombe's theory of the seemingly contradictory nature of zines to Riot Grrrl zines, assessing their formal and aesthetic rejection of the Puritan work ethic as a response to backlash rhetoric that sought to discredit women from the perspective of work.

In the context of Riot Grrrl, zines were imperative in conveying what Nguyen has called Riot Grrrl's 'aesthetics of access' – meaning, aesthetics that worked to promote Riot Grrrl's inclusive ethos that 'every girl is a Riot Grrrl'. This cultivated the "scene of intimacy", which, according to Nguyen, is the

“semi-secret heart of riot grrrl’s resonance” (174). Nguyen’s “aesthetics of access” correlates to the DIY production values and aesthetics that the zine form presents, as zines are typically self-published, handcrafted, and emblematic of bedroom culture (a space to which young girls are customarily restricted in terms of tangible resources for creative production) (174). Significantly, however, the phrase also extends to include aesthetics that serve Riot Grrrl’s continuation of the second wave feminist philosophy that the ‘personal is political’ – a sentiment that saw a confessional style of writing dominate in Riot Grrrl zines. With confessional zine writing, creators “sought to extend true love and intimate self-knowledge to all girls, all persons” by sharing their experiences of identity-based prejudice: sexism, racism and homophobia (Nguyen, 178). Zines not only played a major role in the formation of the community by spreading the movement’s philosophy of ‘girl love’, they also played a major part in generating and fortifying the Riot Grrrl aesthetic, which, as noted, combined punk visual art with aesthetics associated with femininity and girl culture.

In one of the first extensive studies of zines made specifically by girls, *Girl Zines* (2009), Piepmeier positions girl zines as primary evidence of a third wave feminist praxis, and does much to raise the status of girl zines as important feminist artifacts. Notably, Mary Celeste Kearney also assigns greater significance to girl zines than is custom in *Girls Make Media* (2006), identifying them as sites for the radical reclamation of social, cultural, and political female agency and autonomy. Similarly, Piepmeier advocates that zines by girls “are often offering serious reconceptualizations of gender, race, sexuality, and identity” and are usually operating on multiple “levels of signification”, such is their complexity as artifacts (4). Whilst Piepmeier’s study is dedicated to drawing out the complexity of feminist discussion and the significance of materiality in girl zines, I focus on the postmodern and

avant-garde literary aesthetics and devices operating in zines in order to highlight their artistic sophistication and complexity as feminist artifacts.

Whilst Piepmeier does analyse a number of Riot Grrrl zines in her book – *I'm So Fucking Beautiful*, *Jigsaw*, and *Mend My Dress*, amongst others – she is careful to distinguish Riot Grrrl zines from other types of zines by girls.<sup>21</sup> I also recognise that not all zines by girls constitute Riot Grrrl zines. The latter – I state for clarity – are zines that are specifically, purposefully associated with the Riot Grrrl movement. Admittedly, even this distinction is difficult to implement given that many zines that I and other scholars associate with the Riot Grrrl movement do not directly refer to Riot Grrrl in their pages. Therefore, for this study, I used a process of elimination to identify a zine's credibility as literature associable with the Riot Grrrl movement; firstly, I refer only to zines sourced from *The Riot Grrrl Collection* at NYU, on the basis that the collection is comprised of donations from self-proclaimed ex-Riot Grrrls and Riot Grrrl associates; and secondly, from this selection, I prioritise zines that present a distinctly Riot Grrrl punk-feminist aesthetic.<sup>22</sup> I also look to zines that communicate Riot Grrrl's core ethos of 'girl love', as well as zines from *The Riot Grrrl Collection* that present the postmodernist, avant-garde literary devices that I have come to recognise as characteristic of Riot Grrrl creative writing and literary productions.

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<sup>21</sup> In the book, Piepmeier discusses other types of girl zines such as 'mama zines': "a subset of zines created by women, often in their thirties, who have children" (19). She cites *The Future Generation* by China Martens, and *The East Village Inky* by Ayun Halliday, as examples of 'mama zines'.

<sup>22</sup> In the previous subsection, '*What is Punk Feminism?*', I defined the punk-feminist aesthetic as that which combines punk's postmodern aesthetic ideals (nihilism, amateurism, and irreverence) with twentieth century symbols of socially constructed, conventional femininity. The *Riot Grrrl* punk-feminist aesthetic has a particular emphasis on combining the punk aesthetic with symbols of girl culture.



In one of the most recent studies on Riot Grrrl zines, *Writing a Riot* (2018), Buchanan foregrounds zine-ing as a complex literary practice that is appropriate for creating radical sites for feminist resistance. Defining literary practice as a social practice – the behaviour surrounding one’s performance of literacy as a means by which to situate oneself in wider social contexts – her work looks at how “individuals involved in Riot Grrrl used literacies to define and make meaning of their lives and experiences as part of a social context” (Buchanan, xxvi). It addresses how “larger groups work to construct and define themselves through the use of combining literacy acts” (Buchanan, xxvi). Buchanan also argues that Riot Grrrl needs to be resituated in a punk context, which she claims has been somewhat neglected in other studies on Riot Grrrl zines (citing Piepmeier’s *Girl Zines*). I build upon aspects of Buchanan’s study, similarly drawing out devices such as ‘life writing’ (or ‘self writing’) in zines. Unlike Buchanan though, my work connects such devices to the literary avant-garde and emergent cultural theoretical perspectives, foregrounding Riot Grrrl as an artistic movement, as opposed to focussing on resituating it in a punk context.

In Eichhorn’s aforementioned text, *The Archival Turn in Feminism*, she explores how entry into the archive “hold[s] the potential to *retroactively* align previously unconsecrated cultural works with avant-garde movements”, applying this conceptual framework to Riot Grrrl’s archiving at NYU libraries in 2010 (88; emphasis in original). In essence, my study of Riot Grrrl zines aims to fill the kind of gaps in the field that Eichhorn observes when reflecting on the *Kathleen Hanna Papers*. She writes:

While Hanna’s papers at the Riot Grrrl Collection paint a deeply complex picture of Riot Grrrl’s relationship to hard-core, punk, feminism, popular culture, critical theory, and avant-garde literature and art, to date, few scholars of Riot Grrrl have accounted for this

complexity. (Eichhorn, 110)

My consideration of Riot Grrrl zines aims to account for this complexity by foregrounding Riot Grrrl's relationship to critical theory and avant-garde literature and art as manifest in its writing, understanding this to be the least explored relationship in scholarship surrounding the movement.

### *Chapter Summaries*

The thesis is divided into three large chapters to demonstrate the three main components of this research. 'Chapter One: Kathy Acker' generates a profile of Acker's writing; 'Chapter Two: Kathleen Hanna Reads Kathy Acker' traces Acker's influence in Hanna's writing; and 'Chapter Three: Riot Grrrl Zines' examines Acker's influence in Riot Grrrl writing more broadly. Situated in chronological order, the chapters reflect Acker's status as a precursor of Riot Grrrl, as well as the degree to which her influence is apparent. Hanna's reading of Acker is situated immediately after the Acker chapter because the Bikini Kill frontwoman has admitted to being greatly influenced by Acker's avant-garde writings – a fascination that is clearly reflected in Hanna's work. While in other Riot Grrrl zines, Acker's influence is perhaps more subtle and the zines are less directly tethered to the original source material of Acker's prose than they are a consequence of these aesthetic and intellectual ideas filtering down from pioneers like Hanna to the wider zine writing community. The three main chapters of the thesis are further divided into subsections that each deal with either a specific narrative theme or formal component. Considered collectively, the subsections in this thesis will illuminate certain thematic and aesthetic consistencies between Acker and the Riot Grrrls.

In 'Chapter One: Kathy Acker', I reveal how Acker's punk-feminist novels pose a radical disidentification with core logics underpinning an

interdependent system of patriarchal capitalism. These logics provided, in the 1980s, the rationale for two key manifestations of the anti-feminist backlash: the discrediting of working women and an attempt to reassert control over female sexuality. I draw heavily upon Kathi Weeks's theory in *The Problem with Work* (2011), in which she poses a bold challenge to the overvaluation of work in late-capitalist Western cultures, and suggest that Acker puts forward a similar critique in her novels. I reveal how Acker's narratives and postmodern literary devices express her anti-work politics and rebel against a system (work) that is particularly inhospitable to women. I do so to demonstrate that Acker's radical critique of the Puritan work ethic in her fictions undercuts anti-feminist backlash rhetoric in the 1980s, which capitalised on this cultural overvaluation of work in modern America in order to undermine women from the perspective of work and in their newly acquired roles in the work sphere.

Furthermore, I also reveal how Acker's sex writing – the other cornerstone of Acker's radical feminist critique – undercuts anti-feminist backlash rhetoric, which sought to reassert control over female sexuality. I contend that Acker mobilises her aim to restore liberated female sexual desire – which is under threat in the 1980s with the rise of the 'foetal rights' movement – in two distinct ways. Firstly, Acker *envisages* excessive displays of female sexual desire in narratives that follow female protagonists in their quests to realise their carnal, sexually desiring selves. Applying the theoretical principals of *écriture féminine*, I argue that Acker writes female sexual desire into existence at a time when it is being obscured in public discourse. Secondly, I reveal how Acker produces texts that are aesthetically constructed to evoke the sensual, therefore eliciting a sexualised response from readers. In this last function, the text itself becomes a utopia for liberated female sexual desire. I start with Acker, and examine her in this way, in order to demonstrate specifically *how* she incorporates art into her feminist critique,

and how her art responds to manifestations of the 1980s backlash against feminism. In essence, this chapter sets the stage for the following two chapters in which I trace Acker's literary devices and artistic flourishes into Riot Grrrl literary productions.

In Chapter Two, I map the ideological, intellectual, and aesthetic influence of Acker in the writing of Hanna. Using material from Hanna's unpublished archival collection, the *Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2005*, I aim to demystify the connection between Acker and Hanna as manifest in their writing – a connection that, despite being frequently referenced in the literature surrounding both artists, remains obscure. In this sense, I build on important contributions to the field made by Ioanes, in which she traces the formal strategies used by both Hanna and Acker to deploy a 'feminist aesthetic of shock'. I similarly contextualise Acker's and Hanna's writing as responding to the re-energisation of conservatism in US politics and culture in the 1980s and 1990s, arguing that this is manifest in their unifying expression of a punk-feminist anti-work politics. I argue that Hanna appropriates Acker's literary devices and artistic methods to express a repudiation of the Puritan work ethic, as well as to write liberated female sexual desire into existence, and that this is set against a backdrop of increasing anti-feminist hostility (with the concept of 'post-feminism' gaining traction in the early 1990s), centring on the themes of work and sex. Ultimately, this chapter illustrates how Acker's artistic influence, by way of postmodern literary devices and aesthetics, appears in Hanna's work, and highlights the artistic investment in Hanna's writing – an understanding that moves towards confirming Riot Grrrl as an artistic movement. I pursue this in the understanding that Hanna's role as a figurehead of Riot Grrrl means that her artistic influences (Acker) permeated the movement's literature more pervasively – a hypothesis I prove in the final chapter of the thesis.

In 'Chapter Three: Riot Grrrl Zines', I examine literary devices in Riot Grrrl zines, performing close readings of a selection of zines sourced from *The Riot Grrrl Collection*. I identify artistic flourishes observable in both Acker's and Hanna's writing – punk aesthetics, *écriture féminine*, erotic splicing, literary vignettes, amongst other avant-garde and postmodern literary devices – that are also traceable in other Riot Grrrl writings examined here. I focus on the rare creative writing pieces in Riot Grrrl productions, observing these as the most revealing in terms of Riot Grrrl's connection to the literary avant-garde that Acker represents. I conduct this analysis to establish two things: firstly, to demonstrate Riot Grrrl's artistic investment, further cementing its status as an artistic movement, and secondly, to show how Riot Grrrl responded *artistically* to manifestations of contemporary feminism in the 1990s that had evolved from the backlash in the 1980s.

By bringing all this together, I hope to illuminate how art functions as feminist critique and as part of feminist praxis in periods of reinvigorated conservatism in politics and culture. Operating in an age of acute hostility towards women's rights in America in the 1980s and 1990s, Acker's and Riot Grrrl's productions provide fertile ground for study in this respect. With the assistance of punk aesthetics, all the artists I draw upon in this thesis continue a radical form of feminist critique harking back to the 1960s, even if their feminist concerns have evolved at this point. Crucially, this thesis attends to original archival material from both the *Kathy Acker Notebooks, 1968-1974* and *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, some of which has never been analysed in any detail before. By exploring some of these unexamined artifacts, this thesis forges a clearer picture of both Acker's and Riot Grrrl's ideological and artistic investments, leading us towards more nuanced understandings of the critical scope and power of their art.

## Chapter One: Kathy Acker

This portion of my thesis is dedicated to providing a comprehensive review of Kathy Acker's writing, which is initially required in order to trace the extent of her influence in Riot Grrrl zine writing later on. The purpose of this extended chapter is to demonstrate how Acker rails against two pillars of the anti-feminist backlash in the 1980s that targeted women in the arenas of work and sex. I argue that Acker expresses her objection to these attacks both narratively and formally in her texts. Hence, the following chapter is organised into five interconnected subsections, each examining a different aspect of Acker's critique according to the backlash themes of 'work' and 'sex', as well as the primarily 'narrative' or 'formal' means of her expression.

In the first subsection, '*Acker's Anti-Work Narratives: Disidentifying with the Puritan Work Ethic and the Logics of Patriarchal Capitalism*', I introduce and examine Acker's anti-work politics as expressed through narrative in her fictions. In '*Acker's Anti-Work Literary Devices: Textual Bricolage, Tangential Drawings and the Amoral Text*', I discuss her use of connected formal techniques of repetition, collage, and digressive textual and visual inserts, to support her narrative expression of anti-work politics. In the third subsection, '*Acker's Anti-Work Aesthetic: Punk's Aesthetics of Amateurism*', I reveal how Acker's embrace of one of punk's core aesthetic ideals in her texts, the aesthetics of amateurism, further assists her narrative expression of anti-work politics. The fourth subsection, '*Acker's Sex Narratives: Representing Autonomous Female Sexual Desire*', introduces and examines the other cornerstone of Acker's radical feminist critique via her sex writing. Acker's sexually explicit prose revolts against a culture of renewed sexual conservatism in America, which sought to reinstate control over female sexuality. In the final subsection, '*Acker's Erotic Splicing and Écriture Féminine*:'

*The Text as the Place of Desire*, I demonstrate how Acker's interpretation and expression of *écriture féminine*, as well as a formal device I define as 'erotic splicing' (a form of sensual montage), supports her narrative representation of autonomous female sexual desire. Considered collectively, these subsections demonstrate Acker's anti-work, pro-sex position, employing both narrative and formal techniques to support these meanings. Ultimately, I present the avant-garde writer's radical *artistic* feminist response to the media-driven anti-feminism of the 1980s. Her critique cuts to the core of modern American culture, positing a fundamental reevaluation of patriarchal capitalism through which backlash rhetoric ultimately assumes its logical power. I argue that by rejecting the construction of work as aspirational, as well as the construction of female sexuality according to patriarchal ideals, Acker undermines 'of the moment' anti-feminist attacks in a literary context. In so doing, she provides an artistic template for future punk-feminist artists, such as the Riot Grrrls, who would continue throughout the 1990s to negotiate the effects of backlash rhetoric and hostility towards women in dominant culture in their zines.

## 1.1 Acker's Anti-Work Narratives: Disidentifying with the Puritan Work Ethic and the Logics of Patriarchal Capitalism

Work all day work all night. Until nothing's left of the world but work.

Nothing left in this endlessly lightless reality that can be called *life*.

– Kathy Acker, *Pussy, King of the Pirates*

In this subsection, I begin to explore Acker's expression of anti-work politics. I identify narratives in Acker's novels that pose a challenge to the Puritan work ethic and the sustained influence of this in late twentieth century American culture – specifically, the *overvaluation* of work in modern America. The purpose of this analysis in relation to wider arguments in this thesis is to demonstrate Acker's radical critique of work as a repressive social construct. Crucially, Acker's literary expression of anti-work politics also highlights how the construct of work maintains and perpetuates gender oppression, which was particularly significant in the 1980s when Acker was writing and when women were being discredited in the mainstream press from the perspective of work. By performing a more fundamental revaluation of work and attitudes towards work, Acker's anti-work narratives undercut these attacks, tearing them apart at their logical source. Rather than simply disputing current backlash rhetoric suggesting women's ineptitude as workers, as well as a vaguely implied incompatibility between women and a late-capitalist work sphere, Acker's poststructuralist narratives challenge the underlying cultural valuation of work as aspirational. By presenting work as pointless and deadening, Acker's narratives drain anti-feminist attacks of their authority, not least their psychological sting – a characterising feature of the backlash, which relied on psychological manipulation, or as Faludi describes it, "encoded and *internalized*" methods of attack (16; emphasis added). I argue



that Acker's punk representation of work as an essentially futile pursuit forces critical distance between readers and work-related backlash rhetoric that heavily relied on the cultural association of work as a signifier of human value.

### **The Puritan work ethic**

As a set of logics, the Puritan work ethic generally denotes the reconceptualisation of work as a moral and ethical activity, emphasising values such as hard work, self-discipline and industry. Max Weber first coined the phrase 'the Protestant work ethic' in 1905 in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, identifying a crucial shift in attitudes towards work influenced by the mapping of protestant doctrine onto developing capitalist societies in sixteenth and seventeenth century Northern Europe and North America.<sup>23</sup> By ascribing moral and ethical significance to work, the Puritan work ethic ensures that work is "performed as if it were an absolute end in itself, a calling" (Weber, 20). It sees a reversal of what Weber has called a 'natural relationship' with work, whereby subjects work to exist, instead inciting an arrangement whereby subjects exist for the sake of industry. This reframing of work as a moral and ethical duty, according to Weber, fostered an "absolutely irrational" commitment to work "from the standpoint of purely eudaemonistic self interest", which is evidenced by expressions of subjectivity in capitalist cultures: the impulse to increase one's capital beyond individual utility and even to the detriment of one's own happiness (14; 32). Weber argues that the Puritan work ethic incited an overvaluation of work in early developing capitalist societies which has continued to inform Western culture ever since.

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<sup>23</sup> Although Weber uses 'the Protestant work ethic' in his study, these phrases are generally used interchangeably: 'the Protestant work ethic', 'the Puritan work ethic' and 'the Calvinist work ethic'.

Embracing Weber's theory, Weeks attests to the sustained influence of the Puritan work ethic in late-capitalist Western culture as evidenced by the high status position that work still occupies in modern America:

The value of work, along with its centrality to our lives, is one of the most stubbornly naturalized and apparently self-evident elements of modern and late, or postmodern, capitalist societies. (43)

Weeks' study also highlights how rationalising such an unnatural relationship with work has evolved for late-capitalist audiences. Whereas in the early developing capitalist societies that Weber attends to, religious doctrine was employed to rationalise self-sacrifice for the sake of industry, in modern American culture, work is framed as "an essential source of individual growth, self-fulfillment, social recognition, and status" (Weeks, 11). Weeks argues that those who continue to preach the moral value and self-aggrandising properties of work "continue to be effective in encouraging and rationalizing the long hours US workers are supposed to dedicate to waged work and the identities they are expected to invest there", highlighting the gruelling reality of this logic when played out in US culture today (11).

In one of her early novels first published in 1978, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* (1987), Acker exposes the illogicality of the Puritan work ethic and the resulting overvaluation of work in American culture. In a narrative that is more linear than those of her later novels, *Kathy Goes to Haiti* follows a "middle-class, though she has no money, American white girl" Kathy (a character who closely resembles Acker) on a trip to Haiti (Acker, 5). On Kathy's tour of the once US-occupied Caribbean country, she finds herself in an increasingly intense pursuit of love and sex with various Haitian men, in a setting that imbues her pursuit with undercurrents of both danger and humour: gang culture, violence, extreme poverty, voodooism and subtle

meanings that are lost in translation. After being dropped off at a “godforsaken motel” near Port-au-Prince, Kathy meets a “short-haired robust woman” called Marguerite at the motel bar (Acker, 28; 26). After Kathy accepts Marguerite’s offer to stay with her in her home, Kathy is curious about what life is like for Haitian women like Marguerite: “What’s your life like? Are you able to do what you want?” (Acker, 32). To which Marguerite responds:

I have a good life. I don’t have to work too much: I only go to work three days a week I only work in the mornings. I only want to work as much as I have to. I would rather do what I want and be poor, than work. (Acker, 32)

Framing the quality of her life in relation to how little she works, Marguerite’s perspective represents Weber’s ‘natural relationship’ with work, whereby subjects work to exist. Marguerite’s comments betray a ‘pre-capitalistic subjectivity’, as the association between hard work and human worth, a logic instilled by the Puritan work ethic, is still foreign to Marguerite. The illogicality of the Puritan work ethic is highlighted by the concise reasonableness of Marguerite’s argument – ‘I only want to work as much as I have to’ – as well as Kathy’s response: “I’m the same way. Work’s the worst thing that can happen to someone” (Acker, 32). Kathy’s framing of work as a terrible endeavour from a eudaemonistic standpoint exposes the irrationality of overworking to the detriment of one’s own happiness, and undermines the Puritan ethic’s false promises of self-fulfilment through hard work. That Kathy agrees with Marguerite is also significant due to her American citizenship, which *should* ensure her subscription to the Puritan work ethic, given that American culture is deeply influence by this set of logics. Through this exchange, Acker narratively represents an American cultural

*disidentification* with the Puritan work ethic, which is communicated through Kathy's professed hatred of work.

However, the anti-work aspect of the novel is not straightforward. Fantasising about Haiti as a utopian 'other' space, a place where work is minimised, is in danger of exoticising non-Western societies and cultures. This point is picked up by Terry Engebretsen, who argues that in such instances where Kathy makes complimentary assumptions and sweeping generalisations, like that all Haitians are "gentle and good", Acker is actually deriding representations of Western primitivism (Acker, 29). He proposes that the text "does both install primitivist ideas and call them into question" and forces readers to "question the function and ideology of primitivism today" as a destructive form of utopian thinking (Engebretsen, 116; 108). Applying this lens to the aforementioned exchange about work between Marguerite and Kathy, Acker is then mocking Kathy's fetishisation of pre-capitalistic life, which is an understanding of the novel reinforced by other passages that allude to the socioeconomic problems that otherwise plague Haiti. As Kathy travels through Port-au-Prince by taxi, the narrator describes the protagonist's surroundings, revealing the deeply inequitable distribution of wealth in the country: "One moves from the mansions hidden in the mountainous luxuriant foliage [...] down to the slums where shacks are piled on shacks." (Acker, 8). Such a passage, which highlights the issues in Haitian society, infuses Kathy's romanticisation of Marguerite's minimalist working life with dramatic irony, demonstrating how Kathy conveniently turns her attention away from the more problematic aspects of life in the Caribbean country. Kathy's resolve that 'work is the worst thing that can happen to someone', therefore takes on a layer of absurdity in the face of the degradation and poverty that surrounds her on her trip.

### **Alienated labour in *Don Quixote***

The notion that reading *Kathy Goes to Haiti* as a critique of Western primitivism offsets Acker's critique of the Puritan work ethic, though, would be to ignore the polysemic quality of her narratives. Engebresten also takes care to incorporate this feature of Acker's writing into his nuanced discussion by suggesting that her texts *both* fortify primitivist ideas *and* challenge them. With this understanding, and considering the anti-work messages in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, the novel *both* lauds a pre-capitalistic ideal of work *and* calls into question the assumption that this represents a better arrangement.

While *Kathy Goes to Haiti* may betray some ambiguities with regards to her critique of the Puritan work ethic, later Acker texts more certainly express an anti-work politics. In *Don Quixote* (1986), for instance, Acker similarly undermines the messages at the core of the Puritan work ethic in the context of a dystopian New York of decaying capitalist grandeur. Acker's *Don Quixote* provides a very loose rewriting of Miguel de Cervantes's 1605 classic Spanish novel of the same name, in which a noble man, roused by impractical notions of chivalrous deeds and romantic gestures, becomes a knight-errant. Following the protagonist's traversing across Spain on his imagined knightly quest, Cervantes's novel deals with themes of madness, systems of morality, as well as the relationship between class and human value. Similarly, Acker's *Don Quixote* follows the "night-knight", a female Quixote, as she traverses across American history on a formidable quest to find love and realise her desire in a society that places constraints on her gender, and where human affect has all but dried up (10). "I'm the only one who has feelings", she declares (Acker, 121).

Told in a series of loosely connected entries, in an episode entitled 'Don Quixote Destroys Nuclear Power', the female knight assumes the role of an office worker in a near-future New York ravaged by "hellish capitalism" (Acker, 115). She sets out to get in contact with her millionaire boss,

compelled by vague capitalistic anxiety over her status as a worker: “I have no reason to be scared because I’m a very good subject” (Acker, 121). The nightmarish quality of this Wall Street-esque dystopian workplace is ensured through hyper-vigilance surrounding timekeeping, as the knight scrambles to her office, afraid to be so much as “a minute late” (Acker, 121). She reveals that if she is even just one minute late, she will “set back all their clocks” to avoid detection (Acker, 121). As the pressure mounts to get in touch with her boss, the knight’s identity becomes merged with her workplace’s requisite for extreme punctuality: “I’m not on time: I am time” (Acker, 122). By depicting the knight’s metaphorical lobotomy – her absolute identification with work to the point that her identity is obscured – Acker narratively brings the Puritan work ethic to its most logical conclusion. The centrality of work in late-capitalist American culture is such that subjects are entirely defined in relation to work and the conditions of the work sphere. This message is reinforced again near the end of the novel, in a passage where the dispossessed poor, tellingly reimagined as a pack of dogs rather than human beings, sing in unison: “I don’t want to lose my job, for I have no other meaning in life” (Acker, 197). Acker brings the ludicrousness of this arrangement to the fore by conceiving of the masses as animals, so devoid are they of human consciousness, which she connects to their shaping of their lives around industry.

Acker’s *Don Quixote* also gives narrative form to Marx’s theory of alienated labour within capitalist systems of production. Marx defines alienated work, or ‘estranged labour’, as the result of a capitalist system of production that is not compatible with the essential properties of human consciousness, or one’s ‘*species-being*’.<sup>24</sup> He writes that, “[m]an makes his life

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<sup>24</sup> ‘*Species-being*’ or ‘*Guttenungswesen*’ refers to human nature, as well as the essence of humanity as a whole. In Marxian terms, it describes the properties

activity itself the object of his will and of his consciousness” but that “[e]stranged labour reverses this relationship”, making one’s will and consciousness the object of life activity (73). In other words, a capitalist arrangement of work stipulates that one’s will is shaped around society’s demand for labour, rather than labour being the natural product of one’s essential will. The worker’s alienation in this configuration, as Marx suggests, comes from a severing of one’s will and consciousness from one’s natural human impulse towards productivity. His theory of alienated labour points to the dehumanization of workers under capitalist systems of production: a concept encapsulated by philosopher Erich Fromm in *The Fear of Freedom* (1941), in which he compares the capitalist worker to “a cog in the vast economic machine” (95). Fromm’s analogy imagines the worker as an object, no longer human at all, functioning solely for the sake of production within a vast network of other pieces.

The knight’s dehumanization as an office worker is illuminated through her internal monologue and the need she feels to disguise her emotions in the workplace:

I have started to cry. [...]. I’m crying because I have too many feelings: feelings must be evidences of dissatisfaction. Since dissatisfaction’s an appearance, I have to get rid of this dissatisfaction before I appear to the Boss. (Acker, 122)

The pressure the knight feels to suppress intensely human sensations, *her feelings*, in the workplace, is illustrative of Marx’s theory of the unnatural mediation that takes place between one’s internal will and one’s outward

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of consciousness that humans possess that distinguishes the species from other (animal) species.

behaviours under capitalist systems of production. Acker draws out the horror of this arrangement with the knight's reasoning that she just has 'too many feelings', highlighting how within this system, human idiosyncrasy is reframed as a source of self-contempt and shame. Furthermore, the knight's very matter-of-fact, affectless way of announcing her emotional overflow, 'I have started to cry', tonally supports this idea, demonstrating her detachment from her own distress.

The affect-deadening effects of alienated labour are also encapsulated in moments when the knight equates working in the office with a ceasing to exist: "In a few minutes I'll be no longer existing up in the Boss's office [...]. I have to stop existing" (Acker, 122). Her resolve that in order to work in the office, she must leave all humanness at the door to the extent that she no longer really *exists*, brings Marx's theory of alienated labour to its most logical conclusion. And whilst Michael Clune might argue that Acker is not opposed to a capitalist free market per se, he nonetheless cites the suppression of humanness as a driving force in Acker's narratives: "Acker's aim is to rescue the individual from what she sees as the oppressive, *deadening* effects of society" (488; 510; emphasis added). Acker mocks the absurdity of this configuration in which the worker is expected to renounce their humanness, when the knight muses: "The Boss'll begin to recognize and respect me. Once I'm dead, I'll be someone" (122). Acker reveals the illogicality of the Puritan work ethic, which has made figuratively dying in one sense by renouncing qualities distinct to human consciousness, seem like a good idea, if it means succeeding in the capitalist work sphere.

In the final episode to this subplot, titled simply 'The Office', Acker literalises this association between work and the death of the 'self' by depicting the knight's suicide – a demise that appears somewhat inevitable owing to foreboding hints in the previous section: "If the office isn't there, I'll just throw myself out of the window" (Acker, 122). Finally, though, the



female knight “who was ticking because the Boss wasn’t able to see her, threw herself, ticking or time, a bomb, out the window” (Acker, 122). Acker uses the analogy of the ‘ticking time bomb scenario’ – an ethics debate over whether torture is ever a justifiable action – to suggest that the knight’s suicide is the result of sustained and intolerable torture in the work sphere. The knight’s suicide in *Don Quixote* highlights the irony of the Puritan work ethic’s framing of work as a signifier of one’s humanity with a narrative where work spells the *literal* death of the protagonist.

What’s more, near the end of the ‘The Office’, echoes of Japanese work culture extends the close focus on the specifically American phenomenon of the Puritan work ethic beyond cultural borders, recognising the global spread of capitalism and its resulting alienated labour on humanity en masse: “The bloody outline of a head on every desk in the world. The bloody outline of alienated work” (Acker, 122). This final paragraph conjures imagery of *Karōshi* or ‘overwork death’: the Japanese phenomenon of widespread and sudden mortality linked to occupational stress. Although the concept of *Karōshi* is not explicitly raised by Acker in this section of the text, such imagery is conjured by other references to Japanese culture that permeate *Don Quixote* and that subtly map onto the subnarrative of the suicidal female office worker, which ends in the mass death of office workers the world over. For example, Acker’s loose retelling of Ishirō Honda’s 1954 film, *Godzilla*, earlier in the novel, corroborates the parallel that Acker draws between Japanese and American culture based on a shared, fatal dedication to work.

By bringing Marx’s theory of alienated labour to a climax with the mass suicide of office workers in *Don Quixote*, Acker presents the bleakness of a world in which capitalism increasingly shapes attitudes towards work. She highlights its potentially morbid repercussions for human beings, exposing the falsity of the Puritan work ethic’s work-as-marker-of-human-value construction. The subnarrative of the female knight as an office worker who

succumbs to the pressures of the work sphere and commits suicide, acts as a warning for working women in the 1980s to reevaluate the centrality of work in their lives. Such a warning, as we shall uncover next, directly undermines anti-feminist backlash rhetoric that attacked women from the perspective of work – a psychological assault that relied for its logical premise on the American cultural valuation of work as a prestigious and worthwhile pursuit.

*Don Quixote* was published at the height of the backlash, emerging in the mid-1980s at the same time that a slew of pop-psychology and health advice books were promulgating the myth that a new social crisis was on the rise: career women's 'burnout'. Supposedly causing a "wide range of mental and physical illnesses from dizzy spells to heart attacks", burnout was said to be plaguing professional women overwhelmed by the stresses of their working lives (Faludi, 55). In their health advice manual, *Women Under Stress* (1982), Donald Roy Morse and Merrick Lawrence Furst argued that working women were suffering from unhealthy levels of stress due to an overestimation of their capabilities as workers, brought about by the teachings of second wave feminism. They reasoned that, "[s]ometimes some women get so enthused with women's liberation that they accept jobs for which they are not completely qualified" (Morse and Furst, 261). In *Women's Burnout* (1985), Herbert J. Freudenberger and Gail North presented a similar thesis, identifying a crisis in women's stress levels due to the overbearing demands placed on them at work and at home. In *The Type E\* Woman* published in 1986 (the same year as Acker's *Don Quixote*), Harriet B. Baiker added more fuel to the proverbial fire – this best encapsulated in her expressed motivation for writing her self-help book:

Working with women who strive to excel in both their personal and working lives has led me to construct a psychological profile of the overstressed, high-achieving woman who I believe, in an analogous

way to the Type A man, is at high risk for stress-related physical/emotional illnesses. (Baiker, xii)

Significantly, whilst the link that these books made between women's burnout being caused by work was unfounded, given that "[w]orking women are less susceptible [...] to mental disorders" than their unemployed counterparts, as Faludi maintains, such mainstream publications also tellingly failed to consider systemic causes for the supposed 'epidemic' (59). Ignoring a chasmic gender pay gap, as well as a gendered imbalance in domestic and child-rearing responsibilities – problems that, ironically, feminism had sought to remedy – the onus was instead put on working women *themselves* for their assumed psychological struggles, suggesting a lack of mental fortitude on their parts, or an oversight in their own capabilities as workers. In Marjorie Shaevitz's 1984 'pop-psychology' book, *The Superwomen Syndrome* (1984), for instance – another guide essentially offering solutions to the problem of professional women's burnout – she writes: "More and more I hear about women pushing *themselves* to the point of physical and/or psychological collapse" (37; emphasis added). Shaevitz's diagnosis encapsulates the message underpinning all of these books promulgating the myth of career women's burnout: fix yourself, not the system.

This backlash script functioned on two levels in terms of its psychological method of attack. Firstly, it encouraged women to doubt their *value* as workers: an attack that heavily relies on the construction of work as aspirational, and the association between work and human value. Secondly, it slyly implied that women, in some undisclosed way, lacked the mental fortitude of their male counterparts to withstand the demands of a work sphere that second wave feminists had so fervently fought for women to join.

Acker's narrative of the female office worker in *Don Quixote* undercuts these backlash messages by redirecting blame away from the individual

woman to 'fix herself', and placing this back onto the system and a culture of overworking in capitalist societies. Her Wall Street-esque setting is punctuated with details that highlight the absurdity of the demands placed on the modern American worker. This is expressed in the text through an almost farcical vigilance surrounding timekeeping, which the knight-night seemingly lives in fear of and that she eventually comes to base her whole identity around ('I'm not on time: I am time'). *Don Quixote* also challenges the sexist assumption at the heart of the career women's burnout trend: the idea that *women* in particular are unable to 'keep up' with the demands of a late-capitalist work sphere because they lack mental robustness. Conversely, Acker highlights how the neurosis-inducing effects of alienated labour affect *all* those who toil under a capitalist arrangement of work, regardless of gender. This is consolidated by the parting image to this subplot, which depicts office workers around the globe, whose genders are not specified, committing suicide en masse ('the bloody outline of a head on *every* desk in the world'). The subtext to this ending reads: it is not *only* women who are struggling to 'keep up'.

### **Rejecting the moralisation of work in *Blood and Guts in High School***

In other texts, Acker pierces further myths incited by the Puritan work ethic that assign moral and ethical meaning to work. In this configuration, work is rebranded as an activity that promises to bestow its practitioners with "social recognition, and status", as well as being conducive to one's personal growth and sense of self-fulfilment (Weeks, 11). The moralisation of work secures individuals' deep investment in and identification with work, cementing its collective importance in the American cultural imagination. Acker brutally subverts this formula in her 1984 'breakthrough' novel, *Blood and Guts in High School*, by presenting narratives in which work overwhelmingly spells degradation, dissatisfaction, and exploitation for her female characters.

*Blood and Guts* follows the story of a ten-year-old American girl called Janey, who leaves her home in Mexico and an incestuous relationship with her father to live on her own in New York City. Once in New York and needing money, Janey gets a job at a 'hippie bakery' in the East Village, selling goods to customers on the front counter. In her diary, she details her exchanges with fellow employees and customers in the bakery in the form of a script, ascribing herself the job title of **Lousy Mindless Salesgirl**, reflecting the low-status social perception of her role.<sup>25</sup> She precedes the script with the notice: "I am nobody because I work, I have to pretend I like the customers and love giving them cookies no matter how they treat me", suggesting that they do not treat her well, which is confirmed as the dialogue unfolds (Acker, 37).

Despite rushing around fulfilling her duties, neither the customers, her co-workers, nor her boss treat her with respect or acknowledge her efforts. Her boss, the baker, "*comes out of the kitchen and tells the salesgirl [Janey] she's not working hard enough*" (Acker, 38; emphasis in original). The customers steal, "*grabbing cookies*" behind her back whenever she is busy serving other customers (Acker, 38; emphasis in original). Her co-worker, **Parisian Hippy Girl**, condescendingly accuses her of "acting hypocritically" when Janey smiles at customers, despite her disdain for them (Acker, 39). Perplexingly, when Janey is finally honest about her contempt for the job, **Parisian Hippy Girl** accuses her of being "*rude*" and ungrateful (Acker, 40; emphasis in original). Acker narratively presents work as a degrading experience, as Janey is systematically insulted, accused, and unacknowledged in her sales role, undermining the Puritan ethic's positive framing of work as a means by which to acquire social recognition and status.

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<sup>25</sup> The character names in this paragraph are emboldened to replicate Acker's typography.

There is another crucial point to be made here about the centralisation of *waged* work as a means to social recognition, ignoring unwaged work, since it is only waged work that supports a capitalist system of remuneration. Janey's relegation to a low-paid sales assistant role highlights the reality of waged work for the majority of working women in America in the 1980s who, as Faludi argues, were not snapping up the high powered, white collar roles as advertised in the media, but were in fact pouring into various "low-paid female work ghettos" (398). Faludi observes that, by "the late 1980s the proportion of women consigned to the traditionally female service industries had grown" (398). A long list of low paying jobs included sales-assistanting and food preparation work, amongst other so-called 'pink-collar' roles. The 'hippie bakery' in *Blood and Guts* reflects the gender bias of the labour hierarchy, with both lower rung sales assistant roles occupied by female characters, and the proprietor role occupied by a male character: "[h]e hired her to WORK" (Acker, 38; emphasis in original). Acker's narrative reflects how the association between work and social status is a particularly illusory prospect for women, who are excluded from higher rung positions that are more *likely* (if anything) to spell social recognition.

Continuing this theme of female relegation on the labour hierarchy, it is also significant that sex work is the primary industry in which we observe the working woman in Acker's texts: the 'female artist' who closely resembles Acker in *Great Expectations* works the 42<sup>nd</sup> street sex show in New York; Janey is forced into prostitution after being human trafficked by the Persian slave trader in *Blood and Guts*; following the revolution in Paris by Algerian rebels in *Empire of the Senseless* (1988), rebel-pirate, Thivia, tells of how "[a]ll the women in Paris were now whores"; in *In Memoriam to Identity*, Airplane works the sex show at Fun City; of the various lovers portrayed in *My Mother: Demonology* (1994), Dante's lover, Beatrice, having run out of money, begins working at the 'cathouse'; and finally, O begins her pirate voyage from the

whorehouse in Alexandria where she works at the beginning of *Pussy, King of the Pirates* (141).<sup>26</sup>

Given that her texts often take place in late-capitalist wastelands, Acker's female sex worker narratives reflect the relegation of working women in a real world context. Not only that, but they also highlight how closely female *sexuality* is tied into this oppression. Acker's focus on female sex work facilitates her commentary on power structures more broadly, illuminating both the literal and figurative sexual subjugation of *all* women, as necessitated by a patriarchal-capitalist economy and social order. And whilst Acker's writing is determinedly sex-positive and by no means condemning of the female sex worker, her critiques in these moments function to expose the ways in which the effects of capitalism map onto these scenarios to the chief detriment of women. As Susan Hawkins similarly observes: "For Acker, the brothel constitutes a space utterly emblematic of the conflation between sexuality and capital." (653). In other words, the brothel exists as a tangible expression of male sexuality and economic dominance, occupying space in the real world because men possess more of the world's capital. For instance, in *Blood and Guts*, Janey escapes sex slavery and travels to North Africa with French poet, Jean Genet. Once in Alexandria, the narrator describes the scene: "All the women's houses in the Arab section are brothels, so to speak [...]. In Alexandria women are low and these are the lowest there are. [...]. All the men own all the money." (Acker, 129). Acker connects the abundance of brothels in the city to the distribution of capital, which is disproportionately in the hands of men.

Through the rubric of the female sex worker narrative, Acker also pierces through logics incited by the Puritan work ethic that associate waged

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<sup>26</sup> *My Mother: Demonology* features various famous historical or literary lovers, who appear as interchangeable narrators in the text: Dante and Beatrice, Cathy and Heathcliff, Laure and Bataille, amongst others.

work with individual growth and self-fulfillment, demonstrating the falsity of this equation for women. In these narratives, working women (prostitutes) are often robbed of their meagre capital by patriarchal forces. In *Blood and Guts*, Janey is trafficked out of New York into sex slavery by a Persian slave trader, who tells her: "When you are ready to be a real whore, I will let you out of this room and you will bring all of the money you have earned back to me" (Acker, 61). A similar scenario occurs in *Great Expectations*, in a section where Acker appropriates Anne Desclos's 1954 erotic novel, *Story of O*, in which a female Parisian photographer, O, enters a secret sadomasochistic society, becomes a sex slave, and falls in love with a master there called Sir Stephen.<sup>27</sup> In Acker's rewrite, O is told: "Sir S wants you to prostitute to bring him money" and "If Sir S wants you to go to bed for money, he's certainly free to do so" (1983, 49). In these narratives, in *Blood and Guts* and *Great Expectations* where female characters are depicted handing over the fruits of their labour to male characters, Acker challenges the Puritan work ethic's underlying assumption of the working 'self', or that an autonomous working self even exists to supposedly benefit from work. The notion that individual growth and self-fulfillment are certain by-products of work is debunked in these scenes, where the women's labour is seen to benefit external patriarchal forces, pimps and masters, not the women themselves. Essentially, Acker's female sex worker narratives pose the question: how can work enrich the 'self', particularly the female 'self', when coercion and oppression play such a major role in one's 'call to work'?

Acker uses sex work as a metaphor for *all* work – an exaggerated amplification of the way in which we all essentially prostitute our time and labour for money. Additionally, she adds a gendered lens to her critique of work-as-prostitution, highlighting the *literality* of this sentiment for women,

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<sup>27</sup> Anne Desclos published *Story of O* under the pen name, Pauline Réage.



who are disproportionately familiar with this idea in its most basal form via the commodification of female bodies. In this sense, the figure of the female sex worker acts as a symbol for women's more rudimentary subscription to the trade-off of work, which is often directly tied to their sexuality and indicative of women's low socio-economic position in society more broadly.

Moreover, by consistently presenting female characters failing to receive proper financial compensation for their labour, Acker cuts through the deeply inequitable nature of the assumed 'exchange' involved in work for women. Hence, Acker ultimately calls for a feminist disidentification with the Puritan work ethic's moralisation of work. She rejects the idea of work as a means for women to self-aggrandise and acquire social power, unveiling this as one of the most widely accepted untruths permeating modern American culture. And whilst mainstream second wave feminism may have embraced logics instilled by the Puritan work ethic, bolstering work as a key to women's liberation and to achieving social parity with men, Acker's radical feminist message is more anarchistic, more 'punk', than this. It calls this defining feature of mainstream second wave feminism into question by asking: how can women hope to free themselves from oppression by throwing themselves at the altar of work – another oppressive social construct?

Acker's calls for women to shun the notion that work is somehow a signifier of their humanity and integral to their value as human beings, cuts to the heart of anti-feminist backlash rhetoric and its methods of psychological manipulation, ripping it apart from the inside. For instance, one significant backlash trend suggested that a new female "identity crisis" was on the rise due to women's new 'defeminising' roles in the work sphere (Faludi, 2). Evidence of work impinging on other traditional 'womanly' duties, such as childbearing and marriage, stood as proof that "female professionalism and independence were defeminizing women" (Faludi, 216). Focusing on women who had postponed childbearing for career building, Georgia Dullea's article

for *The New York Times* described scores of “panicky”, “anxious” professional women, feeling confused over when/whether to become mothers (1). In another article for *Newsweek*, Eloise Salholz issued the hyperbolic warning that the college-educated, professional woman was “more likely to be killed by a terrorist” than married if she was single and over the age of thirty (55).

The subtext to these trend stories essentially positioned ‘woman’ and ‘worker’ as two inherently conflicting identities. The impact of this attack, declaring working women were becoming *less* ‘womanly’, hinged upon its ability to psychologically torment women by framing work as being fundamentally at odds with female gender identity. It sought to foster an internal conflict in the working woman between the identity she is expected to invest in the performance of her gender, and the identity late-capitalist subjects are expected to invest in their roles as workers. The effectiveness of such a psychological attack is predicated on the cultural importance we assign to both of these sites, work and gender, which gave the supposed ‘female identity crisis’ its urgent and irresolvable quality. How can one be both worker and identify as a woman when these identities are antithetical to one another? Its ability to hurt women psychologically relies on their subscription to the Puritan work ethic, as well as their subscription to conventional femininity, placing their human value in both of these arenas: work and gender.

While the conservative press go round in circles wondering if one can be woman *and* a worker, Acker undermines the whole notion of work. She challenges the idea that we should invest *any* of our identities in our roles as workers at all, given that work is a largely valueless and fruitless pursuit – especially for women. Conversely, Acker’s narratives shun an identification with work incited by the Puritan work ethic, and the cultural expectation that women *should* invest any of their identities in their roles as workers. Her anti-work narratives posit a radical punk-feminist resistance to the anti-feminist

backlash. Rejecting the cultural assumption that human value is in any way related to work, Acker drains backlash trend stories like the 'female identity crisis' and career women's 'burnout' of their psychological sting. In essence, whilst the mainstream media in the 1980s was slyly undermining women from the perspective of work, doubting their credentials and capacity for hard work, Acker was screaming: why do we care so much about work anyway?

## ***1.2 Acker's Anti-Work Literary Devices: Textual Bricolage, Tangential Drawings and the Amoral Text***

In this subsection, I reveal how Acker's avant-garde literary devices support her narrative critique of work. Using techniques such as repetition, textual bricolage, and tangential drawings, Acker posits a symbolic rejection of middle-class economic conservatism and moral probity that are infused with notions of the Puritan work ethic. As such, Acker formally extends her anti-work sentiment, undermining backlash rhetoric that relied on the Puritan ethic to uphold a metanarrative about the value and prestige of work, in order to attack women from this perspective.

Acker rejects the core values and moral strictures impressed by a capitalist-bourgeoisie to ensure their own economic supremacy: values such as rationality, frugality and utility for the non-bourgeoisie masses, as theorized by Bataille (whose ideas I discuss later in this subsection). By championing irrational, excessive, and non-productive literary devices in her work, Acker rails against this repressive economic and moral code, which subsumes and reinstates the Puritan work ethic. Some of these values, particularly rationality, are also translatable in patriarchal culture through scripts of masculinity, and as such, her irrational aesthetic flourishes add a feminist dimension to her formal critique of work. This is perhaps an unsurprising consequence of her anti-work productions, given the intersecting role of work in patriarchal-capitalist culture, as evidenced by the way in which "the traditional *patriarchal* nuclear family is fundamental to economic success", and the way that romanticised notions of 'family values' continue to haunt late twentieth century American politics and culture (Weeks, 64; emphasis added). This goes to the very heart of Acker's anti-work politics and her feminist critique of patriarchal capitalism, which is a system bound up in 'family values' and the idea of the family as a stable consuming

unit: “I would like the whole apparatus – family and memory – to go to hell” (Acker 1988, 52). Ultimately, I propose that Acker’s formal choices are equally disruptive to the logics of work and patriarchal-capitalist culture as her narratives. Hence, her literary devices *also* undermine anti-feminist backlash rhetoric by eroding its logical premise.

### **Bataille and the notion of expenditure**

In his 1933 essay, ‘The Notion of Expenditure’, Bataille argues that, in the modern bourgeois era, “humanity recognizes the right to acquire, to conserve, and to consume rationally”, but excludes the principle of ‘non-productive expenditure’ as necessary to the vitality of human society. Literature, to Bataille – like non-reproductive sexual acts, war, festivities and games – are ‘unproductive’ forms because they “have no end beyond themselves” (118). Thus, in such a culture shaped by bourgeois anxieties over maintaining economic dominance, the *symbolic* expenditure of literature is characterised in terms of loss, as ‘waste’, according to the “economic principle of balanced accounts” (Bataille, 118). He resolves that bourgeois-capitalist culture overstates this principle that any social activity “must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation” (117). His theory of non-productive expenditure exposes the set of values impressed on the cultural economy by the middle classes by way of sensible, practical, and careful spending. It also highlights the radical potential of ‘excess’ to counteract the hatred of expenditure that is “the *raison d’être* of and the justification for the bourgeoisie”, as well as the “universal meanness” that this economic ideology inspires (Bataille, 124; 125; emphasis in original).

Acker’s interest in these wider issues stems, at least in part, from her evident interest in Bataille’s work. In a 1994 interview with Laurence A. Rickels, Acker revealed that her fascination with Bataille’s anthropological work from the thirties had a lot to do with his attending to the social function

of 'sacrifice' to create a new social model by which "irrationality would not be just a matter of mental functions", but a cultural and economic principle (Acker qtd in Scholder and Martin, 165). She viewed his work as being relevant to the "situation today with regards to [...] democracy", or lack thereof, and her lavish approach to literary form takes its cues from Bataille's theory (Acker qtd. in Scholder and Martin, 165).

The element of excess we will observe in Acker's writing, which communicates an ideal of irrationality, can also be usefully read against the theory of *écriture féminine* developed by Cixous. Similar to Bataille, in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' (1976), Cixous explores how scripts of masculinity map onto the cultural economy, as seen through literature: "[W]riting has been run by a libidinal and cultural – hence political and typically masculine – economy." (879). She proposes that masculinity is embedded in literature through the "logic of the text": the *rational* performance of articulation by way of linear narrative progression, antiquated literary forms, and objectivity (881). By contrast, *écriture féminine*, or 'feminine writing', is inherently irrational, realised via the non-linear, the abstract, and the holistic constitution of a text. I argue that by formally eschewing the principle of rationality in her texts, which she expresses through a disregard for textual frugality and narrative utility, Acker poses a symbolic resistance, not only to bourgeois-capitalist culture but also to patriarchal culture and its requisite for logicity and reason.

Henderson makes a similar point in 'Kathy Acker's Punk Feminism', in which she also applies Bataille's understanding of excess and of literature as 'non-productive expenditure' to Acker's writing. She argues that Acker's "literary excess" – her non-productive use of language, excessive use of genres, and extravagant 'spending' of other people's texts – posits "an oppositional literary and cultural economy in the context of late capitalism" (Henderson, 205; 206). Henderson demonstrates this excessive and non-

productive literary expenditure using a section from Acker's 1975 novel, *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec* (1998), where, in the space of just one page, Acker switches discourses three times and 'spends' words "anarchically" as they "tumble forth for no apparent reason" (206).<sup>28</sup> Acker's extravagant and unrestrained use of literary resources (language, genres, discourses, other texts) poses a symbolic resistance to a bourgeois-capitalist cultural economy and its requisite for moderate and rational expenditure.

### **Repetition**

One significant way Acker conveys an excessive approach to literary expenditure is through the device of repetition. For instance, in *Don Quixote*, in a section entitled '2. Reading: I Dream My Schooling', whole paragraphs are repeated as many as four times, one set after the other:

'My teacher told me it wasn't enough for me to know that my body (me) reacted this way. I had to know more precisely all my complex reactions. Did I feel or react more strongly in my asshole or in my cunt?

My teacher told me it wasn't enough for me to know that my body (me) reacted this way. [...]

My teacher told me it wasn't enough for me to know that my body (me) reacted this way. [...]

My teacher told me it wasn't enough for me to know that my body (me) reacted this way. [...]

' "I can't tell you because I'm reacting so fiercely," I answered.

"I can tell you that a combination of fear that isn't so intense it loses its

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<sup>28</sup> Henderson refers to page 280 from Acker's novel.

pleasure and emotional need and physical delight is the combination that causes ungovernable exploding reactions in me.”

“I can’t tell you because I’m reacting so fiercely,” I answered.

[...]

“I can’t tell you because I’m reacting so fiercely,” I answered.

[...]

“I can’t tell you because I’m reacting so fiercely,” I answered.

[...].

(Acker, 168; 169)

This large section of repetition, which spans across five whole pages, demonstrates Acker’s excessive textual expenditure. The use of words here is ‘wasteful’ because it stalls the progression of the narrative, thus posing a radical oppositional stance to the bourgeois realist novel “with its carefully controlled narratives and sentences” (Henderson, 205). The fact that three out of four paragraphs on each of these pages do not advance the narrative in any way puts them in conflict with the bourgeois novel and its ethics of restraint, which demands that words be ‘spent’ pragmatically. By “wasting bourgeois language and the bourgeois novel to benefit the nonbourgeoisie”, Acker counteracts the symbolic meanness of bourgeois capitalism (Henderson, 206-207).

Repetition, as a prominent avant-garde device, also has the added function of draining language of its meaning and forcing critical distance between readers, language, and sentiment. Sianne Ngai analyses the function of repetition in modernist literature, citing Gertrude Stein and late works by Samuel Beckett as examples, arguing that the affect of boredom incited by repetition is the counterpoint to a modernist affect of shock. Ngai argues that, whilst “the temporalities of shock and boredom are inarguably antithetical”, both are responses that confront us with our subjective limitations:



“astonishment and boredom ask us to ask what ways of responding our culture makes available to us, and under what conditions” (*Ugly Feelings*, 261; 262). She illuminates that repetition causes a temporary paralysis in readers as “the mind struggles to establish a connection – a sequence of cause and effect”, and thus “poses a challenge to dominant systems of sense-making” (Ngai *Ugly Feelings*, 254; 251). Ngai also attests to how, though at once dulling and irritating, “repeating is also the dynamic force by which new beginnings, histories, and genres are produced and organized” (*Ugly Feelings*, 262). In other words, repetition can be a catalyst for change.

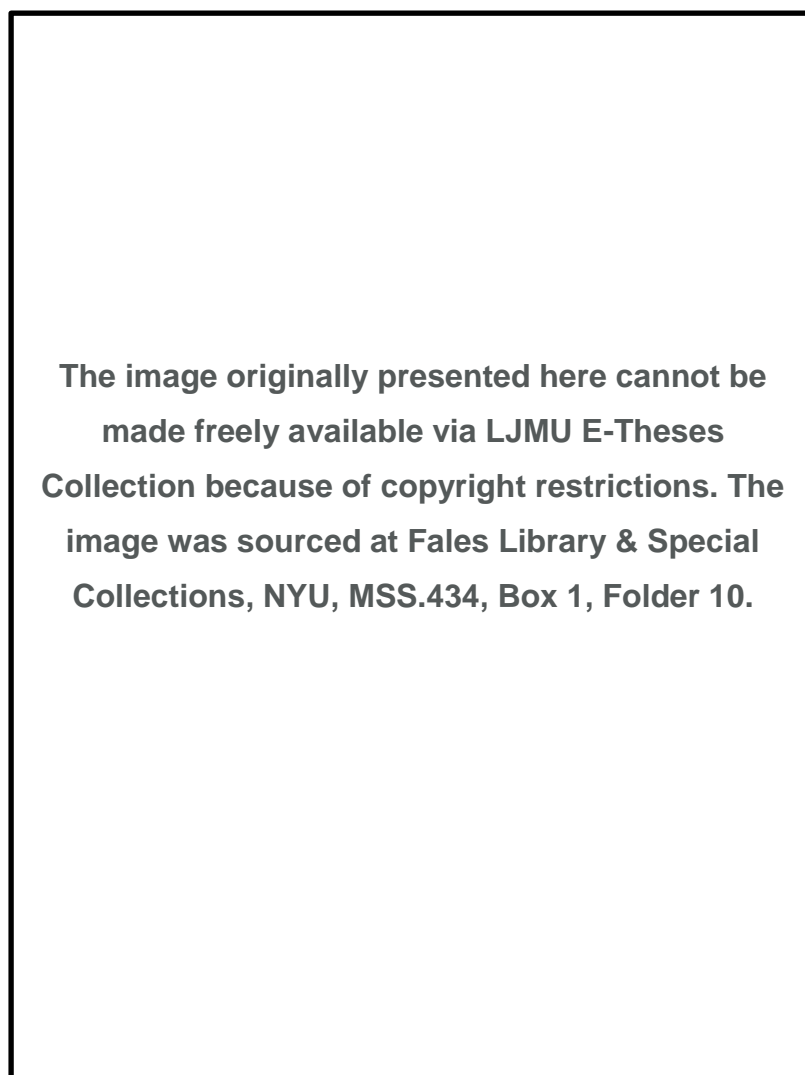


Fig. 1. 'If you work hard enough you'll make it' (1972) by Kathy Acker, Kathy Acker Notebooks 1968-1974, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Repetition in Acker's writing can be understood in relation to Ngai's theory of the politics of boredom and in direct congruence with her expressed anti-work politics. The phrase Acker repeats in her unpublished notebook, pictured above, 'if you work hard enough you'll make it', is essentially the message underpinning the Puritan work ethic, which promises abstract and unqualified benefits to those who subscribe to work and apply themselves with sufficient vigour. This sentiment is also a trope that is deeply embedded in the American cultural imagination and speaks to the national ethos of 'the American Dream': the idea that American society is a meritocracy and that individuals can move up the social ladder if they are talented or hard working enough. When readers first encounter the phrase, the meaning is fully intact and its sentiment resonates as it is intended to in dominant culture: to rouse subjects like a claxon to hard work. However, by the ninth or tenth time, the phrase no longer carries the same vitality. By repeating the already well-worn sentiment over and over, Acker, in Ngai's words, "stylistically enacts a form of discursive fatigue", draining the words of their meaning along with any residual, transcendental affective repercussions that might inspire awe or embolden addressees (*Ngai Ugly Feelings*, 258). Acker spends the phrase excessively by repeating it many times, to the point at which the words lose all their expressive value. Applying this technique to a phrase that encompasses the Puritan work ethic, Acker employs the affect of boredom in order to 'temporarily immobilise' the reader. She creates critical distance between the addressee and the commonly used slogan – a space wide enough, perhaps, to contemplate the perceivable truth of such a statement. In so doing, Acker disrupts our uncritical acceptance and thoughtless regurgitation of a phrase that encapsulates the Puritan work ethic, expressing her anti-work politics in both form and meaning here, through the device of repetition and the affective response it evokes: boredom.

### **Baudrillard and the aristocratic spirit**

Not only does Acker's reckless textual 'spending' (repetition) articulate a symbolic rejection of middle-class economic parsimony, it also raises questions about the author's own literary values. Her excessive expenditure of words, genres, and other authors' texts, reveal an autonomous cultivation of literary ethics. With her lavish approach to literary expenditure, I argue that Acker invokes a Baudrillardian critique of bourgeois capitalism in a literary context, which is manifest in her 'aristocratic' approach to form. Baudrillard's 'aristocratic critique' is, in many ways, a logical extension of Bataille's anthropological position that humans inherently derive pleasure from excess and expenditure – a constitution that is at odds with bourgeois capitalism and its prescribed moral code of resource conservation, hard labour, and self-preservation. Similar to Nietzsche's 'master morality', Baudrillard's aristocratic critique invites individuals to cultivate their own morals and values according to an assumed superiority, and thus live out existences of excess in line with our inherent pleasure drives. Baudrillard's critique offers a radical counterpoint to a cultural economy defined by frugality and a condition of self-denial, by advocating that all subjects should adopt an 'aristocratic spirit': the sense of entitlement that comes with aristocratic status to be self-governing. And although, in an interview with McCaffery in 1991, Acker admitted that she never really "took to Baudrillard's work", her excessive expenditure of language and impractical approach to form manifests Baudrillard's 'aristocratic critique' of the political and cultural economy in a literary context (Acker, 89). Its radical potential lies primarily in its invitation to disidentify with a bourgeois-capitalist sense of morality (morality that is conceived in support of the current economic system where the bourgeoisie assume economic supremacy). Tellingly, the Puritan work ethic also speaks to this upholding of the current socio-

economic system, where work is presented as a moral activity, transforming subjects into acquiescent workers to support a capitalist system of production.

Acker expresses her Baudrillardian critique of morality as prescribed by the middle classes in both form and meaning in her texts. In *Don Quixote*, in an authorial aside signposted 'INSERT', she puts forward the case: "I think Prince should be president of the United States" (Acker, 21). Acker's reference to Prince, the flamboyant American electronic musician who steals his stage name from real aristocracy, is a public figure that arguably embodies Baudrillard's aristocratic spirit. He lives out an existence of excess, indulging in errant eroticism, "screwing, sharing, and tying up girls" (Acker, 22). He also represents an overflow of creative energy and is an individual primarily concerned with the pursuit of pleasure, according to Acker: "Prince believes in feelings, fucking, and fame" (21). Acker reflects on the musician positively, as a beacon of *amorality* – "Prince doesn't have any morals" – whose very public expression of Baudrillard's aristocratic spirit provides a crucial symbolic disruption to bourgeois-capitalist American culture, which is propped by a metanarrative of morality (21).

More specifically, Acker's aristocratic approach to form also functions to dismantle the assumed relationship between work and morality incited by the Puritan work ethic. Weber cites founding father, Benjamin Franklin, to illuminate the moral characteristics associated with work according to the Puritan work ethic, demonstrating how these supported a growing capitalist economy. He writes:

Now all Franklin's moral attitudes are colored with utilitarianism. Honesty is useful, because it assures credit; so are punctuality, industry, frugality, and that is the reason they are virtues. (Weber, 13)

Acker rejects these moral attributes in a literary context by constructing texts that rail against frugality and productivity – moral characteristics instilled by the Puritan work ethic to initiate an over-commitment to work. By rejecting these moral characteristics in her writing, Acker also formally rejects a bourgeois-capitalistic construction of morality. Rather, her writing is *amoral* in that it does not conform to the ethical expectations of the bourgeois novel. With her excessive (read amoral) expenditure of literary resources, Acker's formal choices invite readers to question the function of morality in society more broadly. From a feminist perspective, the autonomous set of literary ethics Acker cultivates in her texts is significant because it represents a woman who has broken away from society: not only a bourgeois-capitalist system but patriarchal one too. Eschewing the expectations of the bourgeois novel translates to a rejection of a history of traditional (androcentric) literature and patriarchally encoded writing. Embracing a lavish, irrational approach to literary expenditure not only posits a symbolic rejection of middle-class propriety, but patriarchal moral authority too – this consolidated by the way in which rationality doubles up as both a trait of masculine writing *and* the traditional bourgeois novel.

### **The amoral text as critique of work**

Acker also critiques the social function of morality in *Don Quixote*, mocking the moral value ascribed to work and the cultural valuation of work as “the essence of moral conduct” (Weber, 30). In a subchapter headed ‘A DOG’S LIFE, cont.:’, Acker’s ever-shifting version of Sancho Panza, Quixote’s squire in Cervante’s text, who appears as an indistinguishable series of dogs in Acker’s retelling, continues to relate the story of her life, reflecting on various encounters:

Workers are the people who, though they still have jobs, unlike half the people in this country, think they're the lowest of the low and the most despised. For this reason they're rigidly moralistic. (Acker, 157)

Acker exposes the disciplinary function of morality in a work society, which is to mould individuals into co-operative and dedicated workers. In contrast to messages instilled by the Puritan work ethic, she suggests that their feelings of low self-worth and rigid sense of morality are connected and consolidated in their identities as workers. The passage hints at the idea that morality manipulates individuals into accepting their exploitation and believing that the bad feelings that arise from being exploited, are not in any way connected to work. Acker's aristocratic approach to form, the amoral construction of her texts, presents readers with an author who has ostensibly freed herself from the shackles of morality in a literary context.

Though, as Walt Hunter argues, Acker's novels "have little to do with individual moral psychology" in that they are not concerned with "teach[ing] us something about how to live", questions of amorality are a significant thematic and aesthetic feature in her texts (86). In Acker's aforementioned autobiographical short story/long essay, 'Dead Doll Humility', she contemplates literary ethics and questions of morality in a narrative about an author who is accused of plagiarism. The story mirrors Acker's real life experience of being accused of plagiarism for 'appropriating' a Harold Robbins novel in *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec*, and the ethical dilemma that ensued when the writer was asked to sign a public apology to Robbins.<sup>29</sup> The narrator, detailing her methods for writing, explains:

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<sup>29</sup> *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec* was first published in 1975, but it was only after its re-release in an omnibus of Acker's work in 1989, *Young Lust*, that she was accused of plagiarising Robbins's 1974 novel, *The Pirate*.

Decided to use or to write both good literature and schlock. To mix them up in terms of content and formally, offended everyone.

Writing in which all kinds of writing mingled seemed, not immoral, but amoral, even to the masses. (Acker)

Here, the narrator connects her writing technique, her unorthodox approach to literary form, with her own amorality. The significance of Acker representing amorality in both form and meaning in her texts, in relation to her expressed anti-work politics, is that it symbolically undermines the whole basis of our 'call to work': the notion of work as a moral activity. Without a bourgeois-capitalistic sense of morality, or rather, without any moral code of which to speak of, the value of work, which is bound up in questions of morality, also comes into question.

### **Textual bricolage**

Acker's excessive 'spending' of literary resources is also encapsulated in her narrative collage technique – what Colby calls her "textual bricolage" (112). Bricolage generally describes the drawing together of parts from a diverse range of sources (objects, images, text, and sounds) to create something 'new'. Bricolage constitutes a form of what Mark Dery has called "Guerrilla Semiotics", whereby symbols from dominant culture are jammed together to subversive effect (53). It is a practice often used by activists to critique consumer culture, and "reclaim the public space ceded to the chimeras of Hollywood and Madison Avenue" (Dery, 54). Vandalising a system of cultural symbols, punk's guerrilla semiotics are best understood in relation to postmodern semiotic theory, in particular, Baudrillard's concept of 'hyperreality'. In *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Baudrillard argues that our so-called social 'reality' is created, or rather simulated, through a series of reproduced symbols that have no origin in reality – they do not really *exist*.

As such, Baudrillard subscribes to the somewhat depressing notion that “[w]e live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning” (79). He resolves that:

Today abstraction is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror, or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being, or a substance. It is the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. (Baudrillard, 1)

What Baudrillard’s theory describes, and often through the lens of media images in an age of late-capitalism and hyper-consumerism (advertisements), is essentially a ‘hall of mirrors’ effect, whereby reality is lost in a series of reflections of reality to such an extent that reality is now lost forever, indistinguishable from these reproductions of it.

Bricolage constitutes a sort of performative expression of ‘hyperreality’ as bricoleurs purposefully act out the ‘hyperreal’ by layering images upon images, texts upon texts, symbols upon symbols, exposing the malleability of their meaning and highlighting how their ‘original’ symbolic resonance is obscured and changed through this process. Reading bricolage as a key aspect of punk style, Hebdige argues that whilst punk bricoleurs juxtaposed seemingly incompatible symbols (for example, images of the monarchy juxtaposed with criminal iconography, as seen on the cover of the Sex Pistols’ 1977 single ‘God Save the Queen’), the result was nonetheless homologous, reflecting the “focal concerns, activities, group structure and collective self-image” of the movement (114).

Acker’s textual bricolage is manifest in her ever-shifting approach to form and genre, her juxtaposition of seemingly incompatible imagery, her ceaseless flitting between different discourses, as well as her plagiaristic incorporation of other authors’ texts, which she layers up anarchically in her



novels. Greatly influenced by Burroughs, Acker's textual bricolage is largely attributable to her reading the celebrated postmodern writer and darling of the avant-garde, who popularized the style in late 1950s with *Naked Lunch*. Amy Nolan directly connects Acker's 'cut n paste' narrative collage to the influence of Burroughs, observing that, like Burroughs, "Acker treats language and literature as such objects to be collected, dismantled, and restructured" (203). In conversation with Ellen G. Friedman in 1989, Acker reveals that she "was very influenced by Burroughs", and attests to how the formal construction and characteristics of her writing, the "schizophrenia and plagiarism" as Friedman describes it, came from her reading of Burroughs (13). In the interview, Acker also alludes to her motivation for co-opting Burroughs' style, suggesting that these were primarily political: "He was considering how language is used and abused within a political context" (14). Rob Latham elaborates on how collage functions politically in both Burroughs' and Acker's writing:

[C]ollage operates both critically and creatively – as a critique of normative representation and the social order it supports, and as a mechanism or invention generating alternative orders. (46)

Latham illuminates the political ramifications of Acker's and Burroughs' style, suggesting it poses an oppositional stance to traditional means of representation and the dominant social order, as well as presenting alternative visions for ways of being in society.

A typical example of Acker's textual bricolage can be seen in *Don Quixote* in a subchapter headed: 'TEXT 1: RUSSIAN CONSTRUCTIVISM'. Acker interrupts her rewriting of the prologue to Andrei Bely's 1913 modernist text, *Petersburg*, with a mock newspaper cutting entitled 'City of Passion':

A newspaper below her fallen body:

CITY OF PASSION

<p>a non-achiever non-leader, non- a non-romantic, ' former classmate lentine. he was 18, George stined to end up a then a horrifying</p>	<p>George was totally wrapp up in the fantasy world comic books. 'He was also cons with TV _ especiall ture shows,' said By high scho had withdrawn (Acker, 43)<sup>30</sup></p>
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This sudden interruption in form, from plagiaristic prose to mock newspaper article, is accompanied by a shift in discourses. The passage preceding this section reads like a textbook with its statistical and factually informative bent: "The languages are less than 50% Russian, then, (heard less often in this order), Spanish, French, and German" (Acker, 42). This is juxtaposed with the newspaper clipping's more sensual imagery concerning the 'body' and 'passion', as well as an altogether more colloquial discourse: "George was totally wrapp[ed] up in the fantasy world of comic books." (43). The discourse of rationality represented by the textbook-like prose is abruptly cut off by the more 'irrational', informal language of the newspaper clipping. The inclusion of the newspaper article frustrates a bourgeois conception of the novel (why waste textual space including a clipping that interrupts, as oppose to

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<sup>30</sup> The layout of this quote mirrors Acker's arrangement in *Don Quixote*, which replicates the remains of a half-torn newspaper article.

progresses the narrative?). It is these spaces forged in between the fragmented narratives, forms, discourses, authorial voices and genres in Acker's textual bricolage that constitute the text's primary function with regards to form. Such liminal literary spaces represent "the site of a new language" which is manifest in the unwritten – what is being communicated *in between* what is written on the page (Colby, 117). Acker's 'non-language' language attempts to eschew patriarchal-capitalist inscriptions (rationality, frugality, utility) – a function that Nolan corroborates when describing the unexpected utopian quality of Acker's writing:

In seeking a realm beyond language, Acker's narratives draw the dreaming body, the fragmented ruins that Western patriarchal culture leaves in its wake. (203)

These 'fragmented ruins' – liminal literary spaces prised open by the aesthetics of punk via textual bricolage – transform the text itself into a post-patriarchal post-capitalist utopian artifact. Through the splicing of different textual forms and discourses, the text *itself* constitutes a realm beyond patriarchal capitalism for readers who are invited to disidentify with its logics and imagine new ways of being.

### **Tangential drawings: Acker's non-productive 'dream maps'**

Acker's formal rejection of bourgeois-capitalistic values of rationality, frugality, and utility are also manifest in her tangential drawings: non-productive drawings that interrupt as opposed to assist with the telling of the story, which is the typical function of illustrations in the traditional bourgeois novel. Acker's tangential drawings reject utility and instead 'waste' narrative time. For instance, in *Blood and Guts*, Janey's narrative is occasionally

interrupted by the intrusion of 'dream maps' that appear to bear very little relevance to the plot:

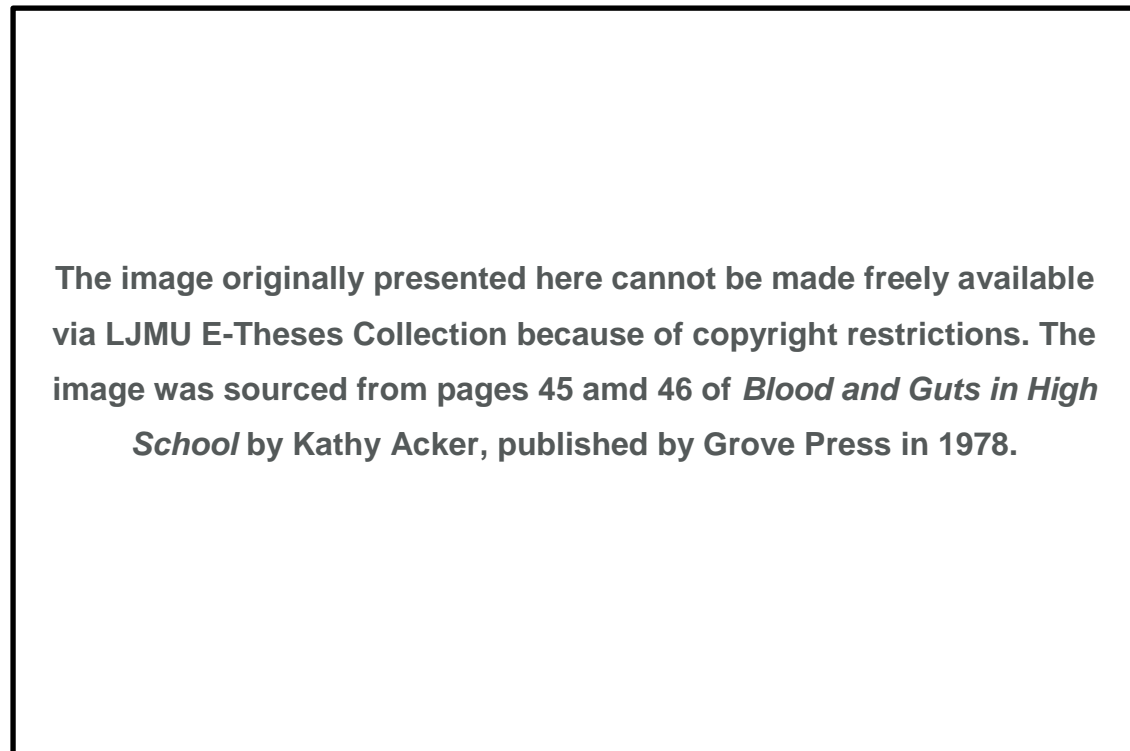


Fig. 2. 'A Map of My Dreams' illustration from *Blood and Guts in High School* by Kathy Acker, copyright © 1978.

Acker's tangential drawings posit a radical disidentification with the Puritan work ethic. They constitute another formal expression of her anti-work politics that is best understood through her ideological and aesthetic allegiance to punk. At its core, the punk subculture poses a symbolic opposition to the Puritan time-valuation: the shaping of time around industry. As Weeks highlights:

This history of disidentification with the work ethic might also include various youth subcultures, from beatniks to hippies, punks, and

slackers, all constituted in opposition to what E. P. Thompson calls “the Puritan time-valuation” (1991, 401). (80)<sup>31</sup>

Being a subculture that “operates exclusively in the leisure sphere” as Hebdige argues, punk railed against the Puritan time-valuation’s construction of time around industry and the subsequent compulsive productivity that this arrangement incites (95). Acker expresses a punk rejection of the Puritan time-valuation with her tangential drawings, as not only do her ‘dream maps’ waste narrative time, they also reveal her authorial allegiance to the leisure sphere in a textual form. The evidently time-consuming intricacy of these ‘non-productive’ drawings betrays the author’s excessive *undirected* time – time that is not dedicated to industry and therefore does not fit into a capitalist narrative of progress. Acker mocks the Puritan time-valuation’s rebranding of time as industry commodity by seeming to revel in her own undirected time, as evidenced by the map above that is highly detailed and ostensibly time-consuming to produce. With this, Acker flaunts her free time, drawing attention to her industriousness in a non-productive, non-industry focused context. She dissociates with the Puritan time-valuation’s conceptualisation of time as an industry commodity by presenting readers with a glorified image of what ‘free time’ looks like in a literary context.

It is arguable that the published status of Acker’s novels negates their capacity as genuinely anarchistic artifacts (unlike, for instance, the unpublished punk zine). The tension that seemingly arises from this contradiction is, at least in part, rationalised by punk’s *modus operandi*, which is largely symbolic. For instance, punk’s symbolic embrace of a slacker

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<sup>31</sup> In E.P.Thompson’s article, ‘Time, Work-Discipline, and Industrial Capitalism’ (1967), the Puritan time-valuation describes the ethic’s conceptualisation of time as a commodity to be “put to *use*”, as well as how time is conceived around and exploited for the sake of industry (95).

ethic and figurative expression of an anti-work politics is encapsulated in the following quote by one punk, as recorded by Hebdige: "I wouldn't wear my punk outfit for work – there's a time and a place for everything" (95). In this sense, punk's main contribution with regards to disrupting mainstream society and its systems (work) lies in its *symbolic* resonance, as opposed to *actually* delivering on the all promises it makes. In the context of the subculture's anti-work stance, punks communicated this primarily through style, rather than, say, boycotting their individual jobs. The same is true of Acker's illustrations that appear in a published book, demonstrating that, in true punk style, Acker was primarily concerned with representing an anti-work politics via the aesthetic content in her novel, rather than, say, staging a revolt against the commoditization of her own writing.

Overall, Acker's formal disassociation with bourgeois capitalism's prescribed values of rationality, frugality, and utility announces her rebellion against a conservative cultural economy and dominant social order. This is articulated through the device of repetition in her texts, which advocates a liberal approach to literary expenditure; her unprincipled 'spending' of literary resources via the device of textual bricolage; and finally, her tangential drawings that 'waste' narrative time and refuse the Puritan time-valuation (the construction of time around industry). All of these devices in some way undermine the set of principles that infuse mainstream society, which is, due to the sustained influence of the Puritan work ethic, predominantly a work society. Acker's 'amoral' texts formally eschew an ethical code that goes to the heart of modern American culture and all that comes with it, including an oversubscription to work.

In relation to 1980s anti-feminist rhetoric that relied on a collective cultural lauding of work, Acker's formal choices support her disavowal of this too. Where Acker's narratives undermine the assumption that women

should invest any of their identity or human value in work, Acker's literary devices articulate a more fundamental disassociation with the moral principles that underpin a work society. Cultivating her own set of literary ethics, her writing shuns a moral code based on an ideal of economic conservatism prescribed by an anxious middle-class, which promotes rational spending and hard labour for the non-bourgeoisie and fortifies a cultural obsession with work. Whilst anti-feminism in the media in the 1980s was discrediting working women, questioning their mental fortitude as workers and subtly undermining their aptitude to work, Acker was aesthetically attacking the moral universe in which we live and in which work assumes its authority, tearing the ideological bases of such backlash attacks apart at their seams.

### 1.3 Acker's Anti-Work Aesthetic: Punk's Aesthetics of Amateurism

Acker's aesthetics of amateurism, a key fact of punk style, poses a symbolic resistance to a modern manifestation of the Puritan work ethic that embraces the ethos of '*professionalism*'.<sup>32</sup> Acker's plagiarism, her irreverent juxtaposition of high and low culture, as well as her transparency with regards to the construction of the text, demonstrates an essential resistance to this 'new' cultural ethos of '*professionalism*' by embracing the antonym of professionalism in a literary context: the aesthetics of amateurism.

Weeks provides a definition for '*professionalism*', framing this as a mutation of Weber's Puritan work ethic for a late twentieth century, post-Fordist work force.<sup>33</sup> She writes:

To recall Weber's description of the Protestant work ethic, according to which all waged workers were expected to approach their work industriously as if it were a calling, those in low-waged service-sector jobs under post-Fordism are asked to approach their work professionally as if it were a '*career*'. (Weeks, 73)

Weeks describes a shift in attitudes towards work, whereby workers, including those on the lower rungs of the labour hierarchy (for example, service workers), are encouraged to "act like a professional" (74). To 'act like a

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<sup>32</sup> See page 42 in introduction for Prinz's definition of the punk aesthetic, in which he cites three core aesthetic ideals that coalesce to form a distinctly punk aesthetic: irreverence, nihilism, and amateurism.

<sup>33</sup> Post-Fordism describes the dominant system of economic production and consumption adopted by highly industrialised civilisations in the late twentieth century. It denotes a shift in consumption demands that turned away from mass production in favour of more small-scale, specialised modes of production. It is characterised by the rise of the service and white-collar worker, as well as more abstract forms of labour.



professional' requires from subjects a much deeper "investment in and identification with work [...] a deeper commitment of the self, an immersion in and identification not just with work, but with work discipline", according to Weeks (75).

Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello similarly allude to this shift towards professionalism when tracing ideological changes in the organisation of work in an age of late capital.<sup>34</sup> Analysing the reconceptualisation of labour hierarchies, they argue that a new "logic of transversal flows has replaced a more hierarchical one", which is more "geared towards the *internal* realisation of activities" (Boltanski and Chiapello, 165; emphasis added). They contend that this shift from a hierarchical arrangement of labour to a more horizontal one injects an "autonomous moral dimension" into the performance of labour, and places more emphasis on employee initiative (Boltanski and Chiapello, 173). This more 'autonomous' engagement with work encapsulates professionalism, as it requires a much deeper identification with work typically associated with the white-collar professional, but at all levels of the labour hierarchy.

What's more, Valérie Fournier examines the *function* of the professionalisation of work. She contends that professionalism serves to mould acquiescent workers to advance capitalist modes of production by penetrating workers' affective subjectivities:

The appeal to professionalism serves to 'responsibilise' autonomy by delineating the 'competence' of the 'professional employee', by

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<sup>34</sup> Although Boltanski and Chiapello's study traces the reorganisation and rationalisation of labour in France from 1960 to 1990, they attest to the likelihood "that relatively similar processes have marked the development of ideologies that have accompanied capitalism's redeployment in other industrialised countries" (162).

instilling 'professional like' norms and work ethics which govern not simply productive behaviour but more fundamentally employees' subjectivities. (Fournier, 293)

Here, Fournier argues that professionalism shapes worker subjectivities by instilling the characteristics of professionals, which act as a self-disciplinary mechanism. Professionalism relieves a managerial class of its regulatory duties, which are, in the age of post-Fordism, stretched thin as production shifts to more specialised pockets of industry and more abstract forms of labour emerge. Professionalism, then, is essentially a labour saving technology.

### **Plagiarism**

This culture of professionalism in late-capitalist America translates into a literary context in a number of ways. Firstly, professionalism in a literary context is manifest in the cultural lauding of the well-made bourgeois novel with its slick production values, high moral content, and polished prose. Notions of professionalism also pervade authorship, with professional writers expected to adhere to a strict code of ethics that prohibits plagiarism. Acker demonstrates an essential resistance to literary professionalism by embracing the aesthetics of amateurism in her writing. If amateurism is defined as an art or study that perceivably lacks the skill or characteristics of professional artists or writers, then one significant way this is realised in Acker's text is through her penchant for plagiarism.

Although critics such as Hawkins rightly argue that Acker's intentions with plagiarism were to dismantle the "tradition and privilege of the textual fathers", another consequence of Acker's plagiarising was that it posed a timely challenge to a real world, late-capitalist championing of professionalism in a literary context (640). Acker breaks the fundamental rule

of 'professional' writing by 'stealing' from other writer's works. In true punk style, she does so unashamedly by copying the titles of famous novels word for word: *Great Expectations*, *Don Quixote*, and *Wuthering Heights*.<sup>35</sup> Acker eschews professionalism's tacit function to 'responsibilise autonomy' by purposefully breaching canonical literary ethics.

Acker's plagiarism appears even more irresponsible when we consider the profane elements of her re-workings, which are often realised through crossing together fragments of the original text with obscene language, irreverent imagery, and pornography. For instance, on the first page of *Great Expectations*, in a section goadingly titled 'PLAGIARISM', the first paragraph reads almost word for word as it does in Charles Dickens' original text:

My father's name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue could make of both names nothing longer or more explicit than Peter. [...].

I give Pirrip as my father's family name on the authority of his tombstone and my sister – Mrs. Joe Gargery, who married the blacksmith.

(Acker, 5)

The only deviation from Dickens' text is the replacement of the name "Pip" with 'Peter' (Dickens, 1). The paragraph immediately following contains what appears to be an autobiographical account of Christmas 1978, the year Acker's mother killed herself: "On Christmas Eve 1978 my mother committed

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<sup>35</sup> Whilst *Great Expectations* and *Don Quixote* are the titles of Acker's novels, *Wuthering Heights* appears as a subchapter title in *My Mother: Demonology*.

suicide" (Acker 1983, 5).<sup>36</sup> Her account then suddenly skips forward to ten days before Christmas 1979 and a Tarot card reading during which she asks the cards about future relationships: "Would the guy who fucked me so well in France be in love with me?" (Acker 1983, 5). In just the first page of the novel, Acker crosses Dickens' text with themes of suicide and then vulgar, autobiographical musings about being 'fucked well'. By crossing such images, themes and genres together unexpectedly, Acker's plagiarism transforms culturally revered texts into what McCaffery calls, "blasphemous metatexts" (McCaffery, 221).

Acker's irreverent juxtaposition technique is also manifest in her merging of supposedly 'high culture' and 'low culture' literary genres. In her aforementioned autobiographical short story/long essay, 'Dead Doll Humility', Acker categorises these as 'good literature' and 'schlock': "Novels which won literary prizes were good literature; science fiction and horror novels, pornography were schlock" (Acker 1990). Acker blends canonical texts with horror and pornography in *My Mother: Demonology*, where her reimagining of Emily Brontë's Victorian classic, *Wuthering Heights*, is permeated with crude pornographic descriptions and sandwiched between Acker's textual interpretation of Dario Argento's 1977 Italian horror film, *Suspiria*. In Acker's retelling of *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff describes the moment Cathy returns from Thrushcross Grange a more civilised version of herself:

But, as soon as she saw me, Cathy threw her finery into a bathroom and climbed on me until her lips became my skin. Because it was

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<sup>36</sup> In her authorised biography, *After Kathy Acker*, Kraus writes of how Acker set out to write *Great Expectations* in "December 1979 [...] in the wake of her mother's suicide" (153).

thirsty, her pussy rubbed me. I knew that I will always hold her cunt in the palm of my hand. (1994, 127)

The merging of *Wuthering Heights* with such crude pornographic details is profane in the context of the Victorian novel, which serves as a symbol for the era's social mores of strict modesty and sexual chastity. In Brontë's version, the romantic passion and smouldering sexual tension between Cathy and Heathcliff is implied with merely "a quick glance now and then" (Brontë, 92). Acker's overtly pornographic account of Cathy and Heathcliff's relationship conflicts with the integrity of the original novel, in which sexual connections between characters are suggested with subtle, almost imperceptible gestures.

Acker's retelling of *Wuthering Heights* is also irreverently sandwiched between her loose textual interpretation of Argento's *Suspiria*, in which an American ballet student transfers to an eminent dance academy in Germany, where a series of murders are committed by a supernatural presence. Acker describes the violent murder of one of the students at the dance academy:

Francesca's body hung from a long Tampax string attached to the bathroom ceiling, all the way down to the luxurious tiled vestibule below. Her blood streamed out of every part of her and made all of the apartment smell like bleeding cunt.

A jagged piece of glass had cut her hymen, or identity, into two parts. (Acker 1994, 47)

Francesca's murder is deliberately crude and obscene, as Acker recounts in graphic detail the sexualised aspects of her murder. Here, Acker recreates horror's clichéd fetishisation of the female victim, as well as the genre's commentary on female sexuality as dangerous and the body as abject. She emphasises arguably the less sophisticated elements of the horror genre via

its well-worn tropes, to ensure that this element, which presumably contributes to horror's status as 'schlock', are foregrounded in the text.

### **Eschewing professionalism in a literary context**

By playing up her ethical irresponsibility as a writer – irreverently plagiarising canonical texts and merging these with 'schlock' – Acker's novels aggravate a late-capitalist subjectivity that condemns overt displays of amateurism. In a literary context, Acker eschews professionalism's tacit function to responsabilise autonomy (responsibilise the autonomy of the writer), by acting outside of established ethical codes for 'professional' writers. Acker's intention to aggravate a late-capitalist 'professional' subjectivity is also corroborated in other moments where she flagrantly announces her amateurism, like in *Don Quixote*, in which she signposts a passage: 'Intrusion Of A Badly Written Section' (190). Acker demonstrates the purposefulness with which she rejects 'professional' literacy and its requisite for 'good', 'well written' prose, by acknowledging her own amateurism as an *intrusion* to this standard.

As well as Acker's writing, the aesthetics of amateurism also imbue her illustrations. In the same way "punks rejected slick production values" in their music, so Acker rejects slick production values in her drawings, which are often unrealistic, ill-scaled, and intentionally basic in their attempts at representation (Prinz, 586). In *Blood and Guts*, for example, a sequence of genitalia drawings punctuate the novel. The pubic hair on Figure 3 consists of a series of squiggly lines. With a perceivable lack of consideration for 'quality' by way of proportional accuracy and detail, these illustrations encapsulate the 'in-your-face' "makeshift immediacy of punk amateurism" (Prinz, 587). The roughness of her drawings evokes a similar quality to that of the typical punk song – "loud, fast, and short" – given that these drawings could be reproduced at a similar 'fast' speed, quickly scribbled onto the page (Prinz,

587). The pornographic content of the drawings also speaks to punk's embrace of the vulgar, and the intrusion of such crude images are what may have inspired some of her critics to dismiss her work as "pornobabble" (*Publishers Weekly*, 70). The pornographic drawings are a further incursion of 'schlock' on the literary text: deemed 'low culture' and therefore inherently amateurish.

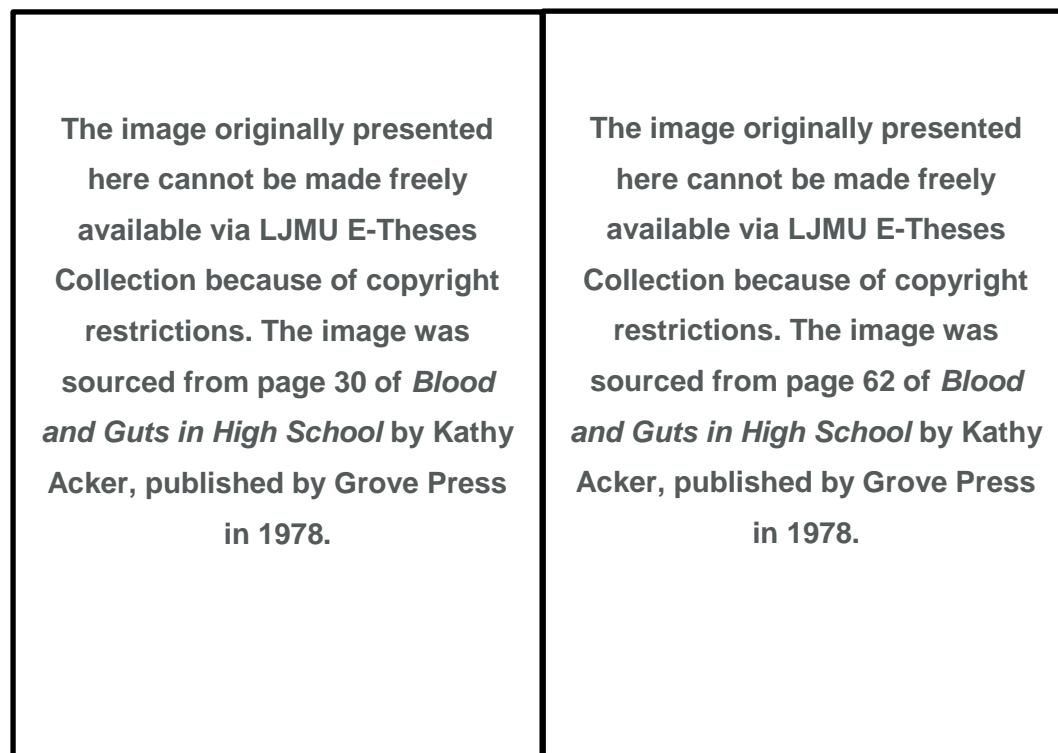


Fig. 3. & 4. 'TURN MY EYES INSANE' and 'GIRLS WILL DO ANYTHING FOR LOVE' illustrations from *Blood and Guts in High School* by Kathy Acker, copyright © 1978.

The aesthetics of amateurism in Acker's texts are also expressed through moments in which she reveals the *mechanics* of the text: moments where Acker 'draws back the curtain' on artistic production by leaving in unfinished sections, unpolished writing, and 'errors'. For example, in *My Mother: Demonology*, Acker interweaves her autobiographical account of going on an 'American writers' tour in Germany with her sex writing. In a section called,

'Bits From the Diary I Wrote In Germany – I Was Just Copying Porn Novels', Acker immediately exposes the construction of the text by revealing the primary sources for her textual bricolage, which comprises of fragments from her travel diaries merged with appropriated porn novels:

The cheap hotel that the promoters had booked for me. One  
towel so thin that it had already disappeared between someone's  
hands . . .  
.....  
.....  
(My French ex-boyfriend keeps saying that, according to history, here  
is the culture of nightmares.) . . .  
.....  
.....

When I turned over, there was a male body . . .

(Acker, 218)

The long strands of ellipses not only imbue the passage with a lucid dream-like quality that is in keeping with this section of the narrative about the writers' tour, but it also makes her piecing together of various sources intentionally clunky, and thus transparent. Whereas Acker's textual bricolage in other sections of *My Mother: Demonology*, and indeed much of Acker's writing, is more thoroughly woven together to the point at which appropriated texts and autobiographical hints are often indistinguishable, here, the ellipses signal the mechanics of her technique. By purposefully failing to weave her textual bricolage more tightly together in this section, Acker intentionally performs unfinished, unpolished writing: the dots flagrantly announce the absence of connecting parts. A prominent tactic in postmodern literature, Acker's use of ellipsis here shatters the reader's



submersion into the narrative by foregrounding her artistic process in a way that is both metafictional and self-referential, given that Acker was renowned for her plagiaristic, pornographic texts. As she declares: 'I Was Just Copying Porn Novels'.

In *Blood and Guts*, Acker also purposefully leaves in 'errors' in the following illustration:

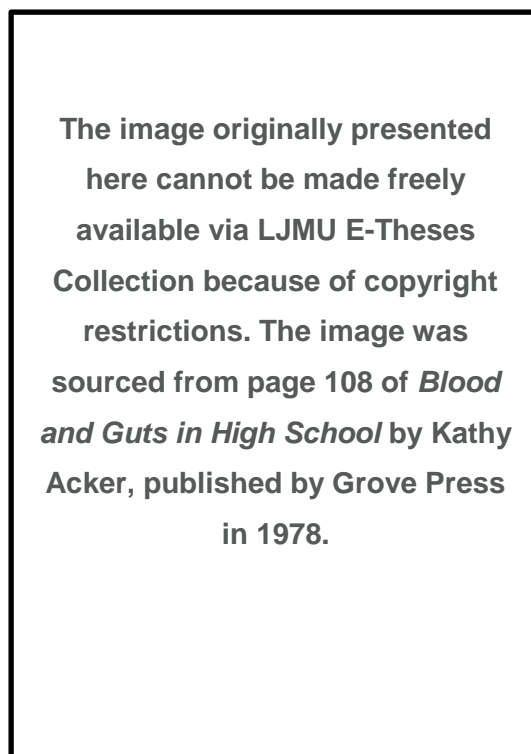


Fig. 5. 'I CAN SCRAWL AND I CAN CRAWL' illustration from *Blood and Guts in High School* by Kathy Acker, copyright © 1978.

Janey's spelling mistakes or misplaced words are crossed out rather than redrafted out of the piece. Although, in these moments, Acker is replicating the handwritten diary entries of her ten-year-old protagonist, Janey, the characteristics of the piece are nonetheless in keeping with her overall authorial allegiance to the aesthetics of amateurism, which also has deep-rooted associations with childhood and youth. If the aesthetics of professionalism involve the conveyance of high skill, then maturity has its

role in this too. It takes time to become highly skilled at an activity, and as such, professionalism excludes the child practitioner for the most part. Acker's child-like typography and hand spun, erroneous drawings in *Blood and Guts* carry the aesthetics of amateurism across the text as a whole.

The aesthetics of amateurism in Acker's texts and their oppositional stance in a culture of professionalism, are perhaps best encapsulated in this 1984 review of *Blood and Guts* by Bricklebank:

But the real offence is the book itself: it is infantile, lacking even the skill to be shocking, despite the continual use of four-letter words. Throughout, dialogue is in dramatic form – to no discernible effect but annoyance. Illustrations and 'Dream Maps' are neither well drawn nor imaginative [...]. Despite the author's underground reputation, this puerile fiction does not deserve print, let alone a library shelf. (1769)

Bricklebank's phrasing here is significant – 'lacking even the skill', 'neither drawn well or imaginative', 'puerile' – as the reviewer's denunciation of Acker's work centres upon accusations of amateurism that are symptomatic of a late-capitalist 'professional' subjectivity that repudiates such displays of unprofessionalism.

Overall, as a feminist project, Acker's aesthetics of amateurism contest the rising emphasis on 'professionalism' in modern American culture that subsumes and perpetuates pre-existing, misogynistic scripts that equate masculinity with mastery and femininity with incompetence. Anti-feminism in the media in the 1980s capitalised on the gendered implications of this 'new' culture of professionalism, and the professionalisation of work, in its campaign to manipulate women into questioning their place in an increasingly highly skilled work sphere. Backlash publications that trumpeted the spike in professional women's burnout slyly suggested that women were

somehow unable to 'keep up' with the demands of an increasingly efficient, skilful, and dedicated work force. It did so by underhandedly exploiting a well-worn gender stereotype that associates femininity with amateurism in its discourse. For instance, in *The Type E\* Woman*, Braiker directs the professional woman towards "recognizing her own limitations", and rejoices in a case study of a woman who realised her own "management shortcomings" (146; 144). Under the guise of a self-help book, Braiker insidiously blames working women and their "unbounded expectations and ambition[s]" in the corporate sphere, for the swelling rates in stress-induced physical and mental ailments (4). Arguably, *The Type E\* Woman* hints at the idea that women are not *naturally* suited to operating as professionals, and that their attempts to 'act like a professional' takes too much energy out of them both physically and emotionally, resulting in women contracting an array of stress-related health problems.

In the context of late-capitalist America, where work is all-important, women's implied lack of professionalism is a significant detriment to their perceivable human value. Acker rebels against this valuation, purposefully eschewing the markers of professionalism in a literary context by way of slick production values, polished prose, and original writing (no plagiarism). Instead of attempting to distance herself from the accusations of amateurism associated with her sex that were being mobilised in anti-feminist backlash rhetoric, Acker radically embraces the association, instead asking: what is wrong with amateurism anyway? In a pre-emptive act of third wave feminism, Acker alternatively seeks to raise the social status of amateurism associated with female gender identity, holding amateurism up as a valuable act of non-conformity. Her performance of amateurism exposes professionalism's tacit function to responsabilise autonomy, flaunting her authorial irresponsibility through plagiarism and irreverent juxtapositions: pairing culturally revered texts with 'schlock'. To follow the principles of

professional literary aesthetics and standards, in Acker's estimation, is to reveal oneself a dupe of the Puritan work ethic and the culture of 'professionalism' it has inspired – a culture that, in the 1980s, was also being weaponised against women in anti-feminist discourse.

## 1.4 Acker's Sex Narratives: Representing Autonomous Female Sexual Desire

In this subsection, I reveal how Acker's sex writing – the other cornerstone of her critique of patriarchal capitalism – undercuts the ideological foundations of the anti-feminist backlash in its attempts to reassert control over female sexuality. Acker's graphic sexual writing constitutes a deliberate resistance tactic to anti-feminist cultural movements in the 1980s, encapsulated in the growing anti-abortion campaign in America. As Colin Harrison attests, one of the key signs that the 1980s represented a period of backlash came in the form of attempts to reduce women's sexual freedoms, as evidenced by the "rise of the 'foetal rights' movement" (17). Faludi crucially unpicks *how* foetal rights groups succeeded "[t]o a remarkable degree" by the end of the 1980s, using rhetoric that separated the reproductive value of women's bodies from their subjectivities (459). In *Backlash*, she writes, "anti-abortion iconography in the last decade featured the foetus but never the mother", indicating that those campaigning for foetal rights "had trouble envisaging [...] women as full and live persons" (Faludi, 459; 466). Acker writes against anti-abortion discourse that separated the functionality of women's bodies and prioritised this above female subjectivity in order to justify a reassertion of state control over women's bodies. In her novels, *Blood and Guts* and *Don Quixote*, Acker contests the dangerous devaluation of female sexual subjectivity being promulgated by anti-abortion groups and reinserted into the American cultural imagination at this time.

I argue that Acker narratively resists this rhetorical deprioritisation of female sexual desire in two ways. Firstly, in *Blood and Guts*, Acker mocks the sexual Puritanism underpinning this strand of anti-feminism, linking it to seventeenth century Puritan New England. She exposes how a lingering puritanical influence from this period continues to

shape attitudes towards female sexuality in late twentieth century American culture. Secondly, Acker centralises female sexual subjectivity in her narratives by depicting female characters doggedly pursuing and realising their desire. She does so in *Don Quixote* by making this the primary motivation for her night-knight's quest: "I fantasize I desire and know what desire is" (53). Moreover, by explicitly describing female sexual pleasure and female-centric sex acts in her writing, Acker represents a sexuality that is *not* mysterious: an obscurity that has historically plagued female sexuality and that arguably contributes to the ease with which women are separated from their bodies in public discourse. Symbolically, Acker liberates female sexuality during a period of renewed sexual conservatism in America by writing novels where the pursuit and realisation of sexual pleasure takes precedent over other traditionally 'womanly' concerns i.e. childbearing.

### **Sexual Puritanism in *Blood and Guts***

*Blood and Guts* best demonstrates Acker's rebellion against cultural attempts to repress female sexuality, by exposing the sexual Puritanism underpinning 1980s backlash rhetoric and rendering it absurd. Acker identifies the Puritan influence as a pervasive, logic-forming factor in shaping attitudes towards female sexuality in late twentieth century America, in a passage where Janey writes a book report.

In her book report, Janey muses on Nathaniel Hawthorne's 1850 novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, and the story of Hester Prynne: a woman castigated by her Puritan neighbours in 1600s Boston for her supposed sexual promiscuity. Janey explains how Hester, who "challenged the society by fucking a guy who wasn't her husband", is subsequently punished by her community with public disgrace and excommunication from the church (Acker, 66). In another part of her report, Janey reflects on the relationship between the past as represented in Hawthorne's text and present day society:

He set his story in the time of the first Puritans: the first people who came to the northern North American shore and created the society Hawthorne lived in, the society that created the one we live in today. (Acker, 66)

Here, Acker alludes to the concept of an ideological hangover in modern American culture from the introduction of Puritanism into North America in the seventeenth century, when Hawthorne's novel is set. As the passage progresses, Janey draws comparisons between Hester Prynne's narrative and her own experiences: "Hester Prynne, Hawthorne tells us, had wanted to be a good girl. I remember I wanted to be a good girl for my father" (Acker, 67). Reflecting on her own incestuous relationship with her father, she identifies with Hester Prynne based on their shared, perceived sexual transgressiveness.

Nolan argues that in these moments where Janey draws parallels between herself and Hester Prynne, Acker shrinks the "historical distance" between them, emphasising "how little has changed in the way of Puritan influence and repression in American culture" (207). Rod Phillips comes to a similar conclusion when he suggests that Acker is "using the borrowed [Hawthorne] text as a touchstone for Janey's present reality" (175). The primary function of Acker's appropriation of *The Scarlet Letter*, then, is to highlight that social progress for women, particularly with regards to female sexuality, has not advanced much since these early Puritan days.

Acker tethers the sexual chastisement of Hester Prynne to the sexual repression of modern American women en masse when Janey describes how Hester was punished because she "wouldn't be quiet and hide her freakishness like a bloody Kotex" (Acker, 65). Framing Hester's desire as a 'freakish' abnormality in 1600s Puritan New England, Acker reveals how female sexuality is *still* constructed as being abnormal in modern American

culture. Kotex, a feminine hygiene brand created in the early twentieth century in the US, acts as a symbolic reference to the modern American woman. Acker draws parallels between the societal expectations on Hester to hide the fact of her sexual desire to the way in which modern American women are expected to hide the fact of their menstruation: a signifier of female sexual maturity.

Acker again reinforces her message that female sexual repression has not much changed later in the passage, when Janey attempts to identify differences between the society in which Hester Prynne's story takes place and her present: "Nowadays most women fuck around [...]. Women today don't get put in gaol [...] they just starve to death and everybody hates them" (66). Acker reveals her morbid sense of humour by having Janey present the modern-day consequence for female sexual promiscuity (death and loathing) as if it signifies a healthy progression from the former, early Puritan model (prison). Janey's inability to perceive the dire state of modern women's sexual repression is a testament to how such puritanical constructions of female sexuality have endured into the late twentieth century by subscribing to a capitalist metanarrative of progress:

You see, things are much better nowadays than in those old dark repressed Puritan days: anybody can say anything today; progress does occur. (Acker, 66)

Janey is unable to recognise the falsity of this sentiment, despite having just disproved it with her earlier admission that modern American women are still punished for expressing their desire. This statement also reads more like a regurgitation of a phrase Janey has heard in passing, rather than her own thoughts, which is a reading supported by its positioning on the page as a stand-alone sentence, demarcating it from the rest of Janey's stream of



consciousness-style prose. It speaks to how a capitalist myth of progress is passed down like an old wives' tale and uncritically regurgitated in modern US culture. By framing female sexual liberation within a capitalist narrative of 'progress' in Janey's book report, Acker exposes how female sexual repression is actually subsumed and reinstated in American culture without due critique. Rejecting the idea of steady social progress for women, Acker instead pierces through a capitalist false consciousness that prevents women, like Janey in *Blood and Guts*, from perceiving the true state of their sexual repression, and, in turn, the real threat that current backlash discourse poses to women's sexual freedoms.

### **Contesting Cartesian dualism in *Don Quixote***

Acker's narrative in *Don Quixote* posits a feminist resistance to Cartesian dualism: the contemplation of the immaterial mind and material body as distinct entities. A long history of feminist thought exists on how Cartesian dualism has significantly shaped gender relations in Western culture. As Ian Burkitt explores, this is manifest in the binary dualism assumed between male and female, according to which "women [...] are often equated with the dangerous, irrational, bodily forces", and men are associated with "the disembodied mind and with reason" (90; 99). Feminists argued that Western thought is based on superior male/mind and inferior female/body dualism – a dichotomy that provides rationale for women's exclusion from systems of power and control. Acker opposes this separation on the basis that it perpetuates sexist valuations of the female body to the detriment of female subjectivity, as evidenced in 1980s anti-abortion discourse that championed the reproductive value of women's bodies above their desiring minds.

She also rails against the Puritan work ethic on the basis that it reinstates Cartesian dualism, with all its gendered connotations, as evidenced by the way in which it encourages subjects to separate their individualistic

desires and pursuits (their rational minds) from their actual life activity, as realised through the physical performance of hard labour (the irrational body). Weber alludes to the way in which Cartesian dualism underpins the Puritan work ethic, explaining this in terms of how a mind-body split supports a capitalist system of production. A capitalist arrangement requires subjects to renounce all notions of work's utility (how much work do I need to perform in order to live?), in order to instate an excessive commitment to the performance of labour and to facilitate a booming system of production.

In *Don Quixote*, Acker narratively rebels against Cartesian dualism, identifying this as a weapon of patriarchal-capitalist culture. The question the female knight asks at the beginning of *Don Quixote* – “Can a soul exist without a body? Is physical separate from mental?” – positions the mind-body split as a central philosophical conundrum in the text (Acker, 10). Acker reiterates her position that the “physical and the mental *aren't* separate” consistently throughout the novel (153; emphasis added). For example, in the chapter ‘Don Quixote in America: The Land of Freedom’, Acker’s protagonist reasons that, “without I’s, the I is nothing. Or without feeling the body’s dead.” (Acker, 101). Near the end of the novel too, the knight resolves that she must learn how to control her “own mind *and* body”, if she is to reclaim her life from “evil enchanters” in the form of politicians and thinkers that uphold the dominant (patriarchal-capitalist) social order (Acker, 101; 130; emphasis added).

In a feminist context, Acker rails against Cartesian dualism as it impinges on modern Western women’s sexual freedoms through the confluence of capitalist scripts with misogynistic culture. Burkitt usefully summarises the connection between the development of industry and female sexual oppression in Western societies that coalesce with, and hinge upon mind-body dualism, when he writes of how, in the nineteenth century:

The body began to be understood along the lines of the industrial system, a metaphor with particular implications for women's bodies that are directly productive when giving birth. [...]. Because a healthy, adult female body was understood as a productive system, anything thought of as a failure in production was categorized as pathological.

(102)

According to this understanding of the female body as a (re)productive system, questions of non-reproductive sex that arise with a prioritisation of female sexual *pleasure* represent pathology in women, with pregnancy terminations representing something of a peak in this respect. Acker champions abortion in the beginning of *Don Quixote* in a short passage called, 'Don Quixote's Abortion'. She observes pregnancy termination as the ultimate symbol of female agency and a remarriage of the female body with the female mind that has been thwarted by patriarchal-capitalist culture. The narrative begins: "When she was finally crazy because she was about to have an abortion, she conceived of the most insane idea that any woman can think of. Which is to love." (Acker, 9). Framing the abortion as an act of insanity, Acker introduces the knight's abortion through the condemning lens of misogynistic society. Though she is able to have the abortion through established, legal channels in a medical clinic, she is nonetheless ostracised from respectable society by the accusation of her assumed mental derangement.

From such a position of assumed individual and social irresponsibility, the protagonist is able to conceive of possibilities that have hitherto seemed off limits to her as a woman in oppressive patriarchal culture: that is to love another person. With this, Acker sets up the quest that drives the rest of the knight's narrative in the novel, which is to live a life in pursuit of real human connection and the realisation of her own desire. Acker presents her abortion

as the process through which she acquires her knighthood and assumes an identity:

From her neck to her knees she wore a pale or puke green paper. This was her armor. [...]. She decided that since she was setting out on the greatest adventure any person can take, that of the Holy Grail, she ought to have a name (identity). (9)

Her knighthood status is justified through the 'brave' act of getting an abortion: practicing ultimate autonomy over her own body in an otherwise disapproving culture. Moreover, the night-knight foregrounds the body over preoccupations of the socialised mind: "blessedly, you let go of your mind" (9). Liberated from a mind shaped by misogynistic ideals, the knight begins "a new life" where the "the mind *is* the body", and the physical and mental are reconciled in a manner that manifests full subjectivity, which she connects to her ability to feel and express love in an otherwise affectless society: "This's why I'm having an abortion. So I can love" (Acker, 10; emphasis added). From this position of newly-acquired full subjectivity, the knight also broadens the scope of her quest to not only rescue herself from the oppressive shackles of society, but the rest of the world too:

But now that she had achieved knighthood, and thought and acted as she wanted and decided, for one has to act in this way in order to save this world, she neither noticed nor cared that all the people around her thought she was insane. (Acker, 13)

It is only after the knight acts as she *chooses*, after she has reconciled her mind with her body, that her adventure truly begins. Acker presents the act of having an abortion, of practicing autonomy over one's body, as fundamental

to women's liberation. This is because it demonstrates a refusal of patriarchal scripts that separate women from their bodies – scripts that ensure patriarchal socio-political-economic dominance. Near the end of the novel, Acker directly connects women having abortions to rectifying a gendered imbalance of power in society, declaring that women “have to get abortions” to redress “the proper balance of human power” (178). After her abortion, the knight is no longer inhibited by the condemning glare of society because she has become self-governing. From such a position of power, she is able to act boldly and live out a worthy existence: “she would right every manner of political, social, and individual wrong: she would put herself in those situations so perilous the glory of her name would resound” (Acker, 9). Acker advocates for a feminist mind-body reconciliation by showcasing female characters acting out their bodily autonomy in defiance of conservative attempts to legislate women's reproductive freedoms.

Extending this aim to reconcile women's minds and bodies, Acker also writes graphic passages depicting female characters indulging in their sexualities. In *Don Quixote*, in a passage called ‘2. Reading: I Dream My School’, Acker visualises a schooling in which the female knight and her classmates – Delbène, Volmar, Flavie, and Juliette – are taught a class on sexual pleasure, using their own bodies as learning aids. The scene is reminiscent of a cliché in mainstream pornography of schoolgirls getting ‘educated’ in sexual pleasure. At the same time, it defines feminist aims of defying conservative moralism that confines and suffocates female sexual expression. Acker, in true punk fashion, knowingly treads this fine line between being political and just bad taste. She refuses to be feminist in the ‘correct’ way, reinstating a trope of mainstream, male-created pornography, whilst at the same time, subverting it by making it female-centric.

The aim of this lesson, the teacher tells the knight, is to rid the students of their “false education” (Acker, 166). In other words, to reverse their

absorption of patriarchal-capitalist logics which separate the body from the mind and assist the suppression of female sexuality. Acker acknowledges the political resonance of women realising their sexual subjectivities, suggesting that acting out female sexual desire poses an essential resistance to patriarchal-capitalist culture. The teacher explains that:

All the accepted forms of education in this country, rather than teaching the child to know who she is or to know, dictate to the child who she is. [...]. Since these educators train the mind rather than the body, we can start with the physical body. (Acker, 165-166)

She cites the body as the primary site through which to revolutionise misogynistic patriarchal-capitalist culture, suggesting that the body is the place through which we still glimpse a version of ourselves free from the shackles of society; the material body, being “the place of shitting, eating”, represents a base humanness (Acker, 166). It is also important to note here that Acker’s inverted version of mainstream, male-created pornography embraces the *abject* body, transforming her appropriation of a conventional porno cliché of sexed up school girls into something far less straightforwardly compliant with the desiring male gaze.

Foregrounding the body, with its primal urges – urges that can never be fully erased by society – provides a point from which we might more accurately observe the true state of our oppression. This is why, as Nolan attests, “the body in Acker’s work is always at the center of the protagonists’ search: it could be a center of pleasure, pain, absence, love” (204). From a feminist perspective, the sexually desiring female body in Acker’s texts holds the key to her female characters activating a ‘self’ that is usually obfuscated by patriarchal-capitalist culture, and which keeps women in a state of despair. The teacher implores the knight to “[h]ave the courage of your sex, a sex that

has endured unendurable pain: be a young knight, for, tonight, you'll learn something", thus framing her body as the key to female liberation en masse (Acker, 163).

What proceeds is a sequence of paragraphs depicting the knight's guided masturbation:

Since the body is the first ground of knowledge, my teacher made me take off my clothes. A mouth touched and licked my ass. A finger stuck into my asshole. A dildo thrust into my asshole and a dildo thrust into my cunt. Both dildoes squirted liquid into me which I saw was white. I was so over-the-top excited, I came. The main thing for me was my body's uncontrolled reactions. (Acker, 167-168)

These passages encompass another vital part of Acker's sex writing: not only does the narrative depict the girls realising their autonomous sexualities, Acker also describes their pleasure in deeply explicit and graphic terms. By *demystifying* female sexuality, Acker's pornographic and lengthy portrayal of the night-knight and her classmates' journey into sexual gratification counteracts the devaluation of female pleasure being promulgated in 1980s anti-abortion discourse. Richard Walsh argues that Acker rages against a female sexuality characterised by a condition of denial – a sexuality that “has been defined by male religion and is the cause and result of misogyny” (156). Walsh's critique alludes to how female sexuality has historically been mythologised by white male religious image-making, encapsulated in the icon of the virgin Madonna. Acker's explicit sex writing presents a female sexuality that cannot be so easily mythologised, denied, or dismissed, bringing areas of ambiguity pertaining to the actualities of female desire that have been left open to patriarchal interpretation into crude and unflinching focus. In essence, the explicit quality of Acker's sex writing leaves no room for

coy titillation or androcentric manipulations of female desire. Her refusal of mere flirtation with the notion of female sexuality results in a pure, unadulterated, female-centric vision of desire that does not compromise with the male libido or patriarchal culture.

Acker presents the female knight's sexuality in aggressive terms – 'a dildo *thrust* into my cunt' – thereby railing against the assumed universal sexual characteristics of women as passive and chaste: characteristics that have historically plagued female sexuality by undermining its multi-dimensionality. Acker's sex writing provides a sort of corrective to what Germaine Greer diagnosed as women's figurative castration in her 1970 book, *The Female Eunuch*, by way of socially prescribed femininity and its characteristics mapping onto female sexuality: "timidity", "languor", "delicacy", and "preciosity" (17). These traits, Greer argued in the early 1970s, work to diminish, to confine, and to sterilise female sexuality. Conversely, Acker's depictions portray a robust, vulgar, and sometimes aggressive female sexuality, which conflicts with these suppressing scripts prescribed by conventional femininity.

Later in the passage, Acker suggest that it is not enough for the knight to simply experience sexual pleasure, rather she must develop sexual preferences and cultivate a self-determined sexuality:

My teacher told me it wasn't enough for me to know that my body (me) reacted this way. I had to know more precisely all my complex reactions. Did I feel or react more strongly in my asshole or in my cunt? (Acker, 168)

Cultivating an autonomous female sexuality ensures that it cannot easily be co-opted by patriarchal forces. Acker's advocacy of an *autonomous* female sexuality, as opposed to merely a more liberated one, is a direct result of her



writing from the perspective of punk and its pessimism for the countercultural 'hippie' movement that preceded it. Crucially, Acker's writing in the 1970s and 1980s is reacting against the sexual politics of the 1960s and the so-called 'free love' movement, where female sexual promiscuity was made permissible, even celebrated, but had the unfortunate adverse effect of still dictating women's sexual behaviours.

Although seemingly at odds with the strand of anti-pornography feminism for which radical American feminist Andrea Dworkin is renowned, Acker and Dworkin shared a cynicism for the 'free love' movement of the 1960s. As Dworkin argued in her book, *Right-Wing Women* (1983), 'hippie' culture spawned a newly coercive requisite for female sexuality that demanded women's sexual promiscuity, where if women were "not in conformity with the [sexual] wills of their brother-lovers [...] they were threatened or humiliated or thrown out" (93). Dworkin contends that sexual promiscuity was the new condition placed on women by a counterculture no less misogynistic and coercive than its mainstream counterpart, still effective as it was, in disregarding women's "limits, preferences, tastes" and desire for sex with some men and not others (93).

Acker's emphasis on the cultivation of an *autonomous* sexuality, as opposed to merely a more liberated one, speaks to Dworkin's feminist critique of the coercive effects of the sexual revolution on female sexuality. Both Acker and Dworkin understand the countercultural movement of the 1960s and the sexual liberation for women it supposedly brought with it, as little more than a rebranding of male desire mapping onto female sexuality. To both writers, it put a fresh face on misogyny and female sexual oppression, but in reverse, now demanding that unchaste be the new sexual standard for women. Despite this crosscurrent in their perspectives, Acker and Dworkin are otherwise polarised in their views on sex and pornography.

When Acker references Dworkin in *Don Quixote*, she scathingly speaks of: “Evil enchanters [...] like Andrea Dworkin, who control the nexus of government and culture” (102). Acker castigates Dworkin for her perceived sexual Puritanism that, despite Dworkin’s radical reputation, inadvertently upholds patriarchal culture by diminishing female sexual agency. Conversely, Acker’s sex writing exposes the patriarchal subjugation of female sexuality whilst simultaneously reimagining the female body as a vehicle for *autonomous* joy and pleasure: “What we do in this room is be happy. With our bodies.” (165). Her female-centric, pornographic narratives provide a stark departure from discourses on female sexuality circulating in dominant culture in the 1980s via anti-abortion groups, as well as a vigorous anti-pornography movement that Dworkin spearheaded alongside MacKinnon, where the female body was discussed primarily as a site of trauma and political dispute. It offers readers a means by which to disengage with the logics underpinning these discourses that subtly deny female sexual agency, or, as in ‘foetal rights’ rhetoric, instil the idea that women’s sexual pleasure is a nonentity.

### 1.5 Acker's Erotic Splicing and *Écriture Féminine*: The Text as the Place of Desire

Acker's linguistic and aesthetic choices support her narrative aim to reacquaint the female subject with her autonomous sexual desires. Her texts are aesthetically constructed to evoke the sensual through a combination of *écriture féminine* and erotic splicing, transforming the text itself into the *place* of desire. Her sensual novels provide a space for female sexuality to flourish at a time when attempts were being made in 1980s mainstream culture to suppress women's sexual freedoms. Aesthetically constructed to evoke the sensual, Acker's texts hold the potential to elicit a sexual response from readers, and thus reacquaint female readers with their desire, posing an oppositional stance to real world anti-feminist backlash rhetoric, in which female sexual pleasure is being devalued in relation to the reproductive value of women's bodies.

As previously detailed in the introduction to this thesis, *écriture féminine* critiques the limits imposed on female representation by patriarchally coded language and literature. Cixous advocates that woman must write for herself in order to "put herself into the text" and counteract a male tradition of writing that "obscures women or reproduces classic representations of women" (1976, 875; 878). She argues that the cultivation of a 'feminine practice of writing' that breaks patriarchal literary automatisms is key to woman's psychic realisation of her *self*, and essential to woman gaining access to things that have "been more than confiscated from her": she can realise her body and desire (Cixous 1976, 880). By adopting a linguistically different style of writing, woman may bring her difference, her 'otherness', into existence. In a similar vein to Cixous, Irigaray advocates that woman must write about her sexual pleasure, or *jouissance*, in a way that is linguistically feminine and experimental, so that she may liberate herself from a sexuality that "has

always been theorized within masculine parameters” (Irigaray, 99). Irigaray understands that, in order to write female sexual desire into existence, woman must adopt a style of literacy that “goes off in all directions”, so that it accurately represents and manifests her pleasure, which is “much more diversified, more multiple in its differences, more complex, more subtle”, than is assumed (103).

Significantly, this strand of French feminist literary theory first came to Anglophone attention in the early 1980s, when Marks and Courtivron compiled English translations of the essays in *New French Feminism*. Acker’s linguistically experimental sex writing follows the tenets of *écriture féminine*, and her personal notebooks even reveal pre-emptive flashes of it before its uptake in popular Anglo-American theoretical discourse in the 1980s.

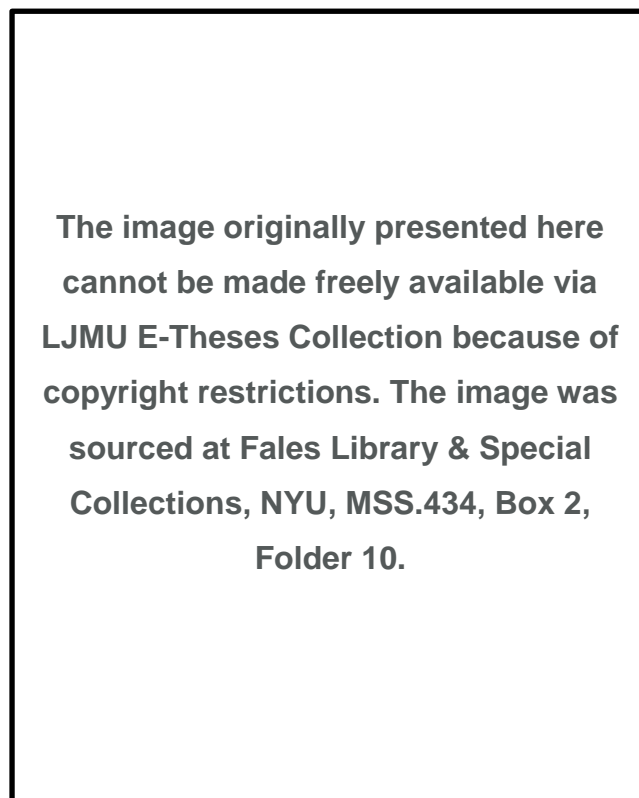


Fig. 6. ‘Exercise #3 Destruction of Own Writing (Sensuality Results?)’ (1972) by Kathy Acker, Kathy Acker Notebooks 1968-1974, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

For example, in the notebook pictured, Acker conducts writing experiments, playing with both language and form. In 'Exercise #3 Destruction of Own Writing (Sensuality Results?)', Acker cuts up a sentence, repositions words in the sentence, adding and taking away words, as well as repositioning the text on the page from a single vertical block of text in the first sequence, to the final sequence and three smaller blocks of text positioned horizontally on the page, gradually sloping downwards with each set. The words featured in the piece are important. The words 'jewel' and 'gold' conjure notions of noble attire, luxury and lives of excess (read erotic). They also imbue the piece with sensual undertones through colour association; deep jewel colours, ruby reds and amethyst purples, have deep erotic connotations, associated with passion, desire, and mystery. The colour gold has an erotic resonance for Acker too, as she affirms on the previous page in her notebook: "SEX IS GOLD" (Acker, 1972). Other subtleties in Acker's writing experiment make for a linguistically sensual piece of text. The repetition of words 'I' and 'slow' as well as the blocks of repeated text, when surrounded by the erotic words and imagery, evoke notions of sensual activity, mimicking the rhythm of the body in the throes of sexual passion and thus embodying the text with a sexual 'pulse' of sorts.

Acker's aim with her writing experiment is most clearly revealed in the title to this exercise, 'Destruction of Own Writing (Sensuality Results?)'. She clearly connects the evocation of sensuality in a literary context to a need to destroy traditional, 'learnt' patterns of literacy. Acker suggests that she must first deconstruct her own writing and any patriarchal automatisms therein, in order to manifest 'otherness' – her real *female* sexuality. In essence, Acker's exercise books demonstrate the essential principals of *écriture féminine*, which advocates that women write experimentally and with a mind to bringing sensuality, female sexual desire and pleasure, into the text and thus into existence.

Colby similarly attests to how Acker's texts are aesthetically constructed to evoke the sensual. Studying the compositional practices adopted in Acker's work, Colby explores how "repetition, metaphor, and metonymic patterning" conjure sexual associations that coalesce so that the text itself becomes "the place of desire" (193). Using *My Mother: Demonology* as a case study for this, she writes:

Through creative cutting and juxtaposition, the montage apparatus of Acker's *My Mother: Demonology* can be read as creating a textual site for the confluence of human intercourses, and thereby manifesting the sexual realm. (Colby, 188)

Colby elaborates on this, observing how two separate subnarratives in the text repeat similar imagery of a flushed red face, foregrounding body heat and associations of sensual activity, to carry the theme of sexual desire across the text as a whole. Like myself, Colby also makes the connection between Acker's sensual writing as a symbolic "resistance to the corralling of sexual desire by rationality and sexual censorship" in 1980s and 1990s US political discourse, which had arguably peaked in the 1990s when *My Mother: Demonology* was published, and when the culture wars in America had reached something of a climax (Colby, 194).

### **Erotic Splicing**

I would like to incorporate the sensual 'associational montage' that Colby describes within my own umbrella term, 'erotic splicing': the fragmentary injection of eroticism or sensuality, textual or otherwise, into the text. The term, erotic splicing, encapsulates the influence of punk style in Acker's sex writing: the confluence of bricolage as a methodology (the constructing and layering of fragments), with Colby's sensual 'associational montage' and what

Suzette Henke calls Acker's "pornographic Pastiche" (91). Erotic splicing encompasses both Acker's interweaving of explicitly pornographic pastiche and subtle sensual imagery into the text, as well as the insertion of *actual* images, both graphically sexual and subtly erotic, into the text. It is characterised by its fragmentary construction and somewhat cohesive resulting effect. Flitting wildly between the explicitly sexual and subtly erotic, Acker's erotic splicing has the overarching function of carrying desire across the text as Colby argues, but more specifically, desire in its multiple forms and in its varying degrees of vigour, from "ungovernable exploding reactions" to the timid "leakages of pleasure", as she writes in *Don Quixote* (Acker, 169; 174).

Aside from the highly explicit sequence of genitalia drawings that permeates *Blood and Guts*, Acker's erotic splicing also occurs in a slightly subtler capacity in *In Memoriam to Identity*. Acker infuses the novel with undertones of sadomasochistic and homosexual eroticism, weaving desire into the text with her Japanese-style illustrations. In the part of the novel in question, a section called 'Easter', Acker combines the narrative she has been telling thus far of French modernist poet Arthur Rimbaud, and his love affair with French poet, Paul Verlaine – which she tells through a rewriting of "poems [...] and biographical texts on Arthur Rimbaud" – with a surrealist Japanese fable (Acker, 265). Acker begins 'Easter' with a section from Rimbaud's 1872 poem, 'Song from the Tallest Tower' – a reference that historically situates the narrative at the beginning of Rimbaud and Verlaine's love affair:

R:

Idle youth enslaved to everything  
let the time come when hearts feel love

V met R at one of the Parisian train stations, took him home to meet his wife and her parents. (Acker, 26)<sup>37</sup>

Each of the drawings that follow give illustrative form to a line from the Japanese fable: 'He Sees Two Men Who Might Not Be Real Fighting' and 'The Fighter and the Girl Fucked'. The intertwining of R and V's narrative with the surrealist Japanese fable functions to highlight the absurdity of the 'reality' assumed in biographical texts about Rimbaud, and the traditional bourgeois novel in general. As such, Acker formally articulates Rimbaud's modernist perspective and his role as a precursor for the surrealist movement that would follow, for which he is cited as a catalyst. The intertwining of the two narratives also injects passion into the narrative of R and V's love affair, which is otherwise devoid of all passion in Acker's abrupt and affectless retelling: "V told R to get out. R wandered down dog-shitted streets; R had nowhere to stay" (26). The Japanese-style illustrations provide the emotional and sexual expressiveness that is deliberately missing from her account of R and V's relationship.

In the part of Acker's retelling of Rimbaud and Verlaine's love affair, when the poets encounter conflicts in their relationship over ideological differences – "V preferred odious bourgeois existence" – the below image appears (32). Whilst the drawing is initially striking for its deeply violent content, depicting the Japanese warrior drinking the blood from the neck wound of his beheaded foe, there are, nevertheless, erotic undertones embedded in the image. The warrior's blood-lust becomes indistinguishable from other kinds of lust through the construction of the illustration and its undulating lines that meld their bodies together in a blur of passion and rage,

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<sup>37</sup> Acker refers to Rimbaud and Verlaine by their full names only once each and in the first section of the novel, 'The Beginning of the Life of Rimbaud', after which she refer to them only by their initials, 'R' and 'V'.



echoing 'R' and 'V's conflict. The Japanese fighter sucking the tubular (read phallic) remains of his victim's neck also has a deeply sexual resonance, emulating the act of giving oral pleasure, which speaks to the themes of homosexual desire that are present through the intertwining of Rimbaud's narrative with the Japanese story. The narrator moves unceremoniously between the two accounts – "V wrote R's skunky mother a letter describing every detail of her son's dirty that is *homosexual* behaviour. [...] In the Japanese story, now" – tethering the homoeroticism in the Japanese warrior illustration to R and V's narrative (Acker, 32; emphasis in original).

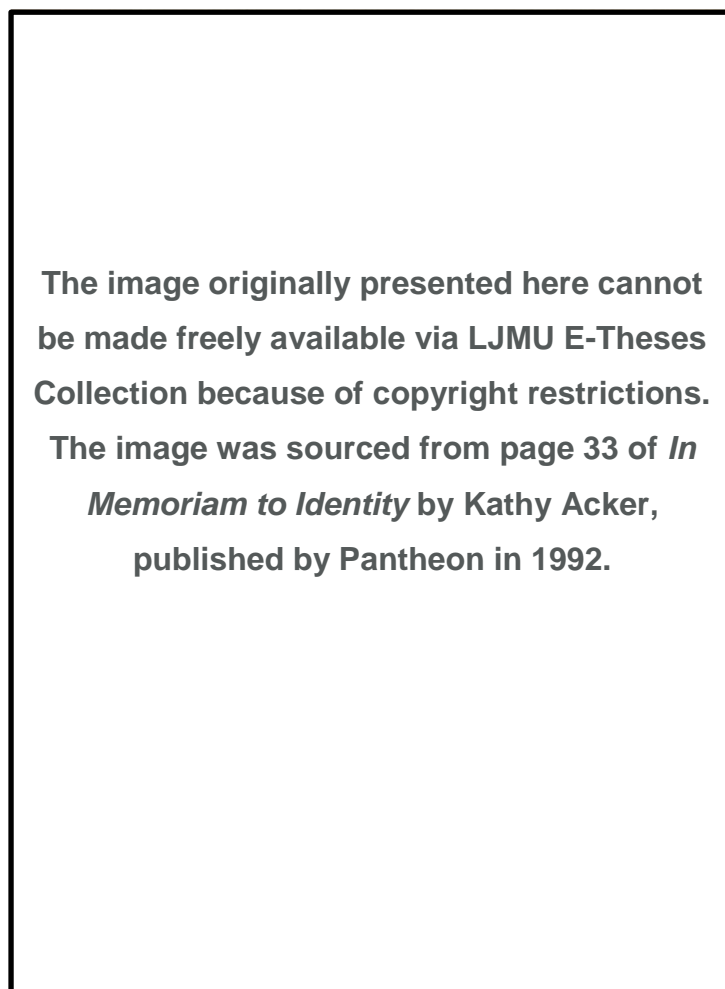


Fig. 7. 'He Sees Two Men Who Might Not Be Real Fighting' illustration from *In Memoriam to Identity* by Kathy Acker, copyright © 1990.

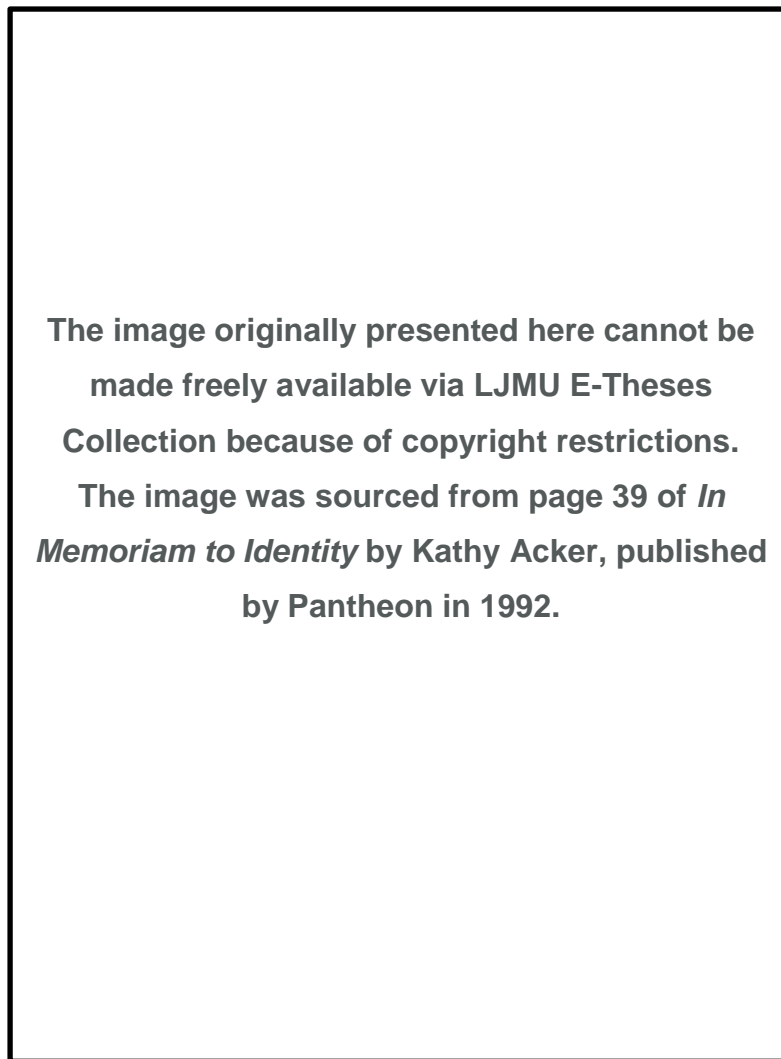


Fig. 8. 'The Fighter and the Girl Fucked' illustration from *In Memoriam to Identity* by Kathy Acker, copyright © 1990.

Later in the passage, another Japanese illustration splices Rimbaud's narrative and imbues it with subtle eroticism. The abstract lines of the drawing that seamlessly curve and swell and delve between the two forms emulate the fleshy folds of the body and infuse the image with corporeality. The aesthetic construction of the drawing, along with its depiction of carnal lust and animalistic violence, imbue the piece with a heightened (sexual) tension associated with sadistic sex and the homogenous experiences of sex and pain: "Hurt me, baby. Show me what love is." (Acker, 6). Here, Acker's erotic

splicing functions through both text and image, expressing varying degrees of sexual vigour and desire, from the subtle eroticism embedded in the Japanese drawing, to the candid text underneath it: 'The fighter and the girl fucked' (39).

The power of Acker's erotic splicing, in terms of eliciting a sensual response from readers, is best understood in relation to the affective repercussions of the punk aesthetic for onlookers. This is because Acker's erotic splicing manifests punk style in a literary context and with a mind to expressing desire: the fragmentary bricolage of sexual images, combined with the irreverent juxtaposition between subtle eroticism and graphic pornographic pastiche in her work.

McCaffery uses the metaphor of a live punk show to describe Acker's writing. He argues that one of the most valuable functions of live punk shows lies in the "brief moment of transcendence" they offer audiences: moments when both artist and audience enter a liminal space between "dull rationality" and "blind adherence" (McCaffery, 212). What McCaffery essentially describes is punk's invitation for a Dionysian experience: a moment when social responsibility and critical thinking fall prey to frenzied sensual pleasure and recklessness. He characterises Acker's writing as "an extended effort to produce such moments of liberation" (McCaffery, 212). The punk style embedded in Acker's texts, manifest in her erotic splicing, opens up transcendental *literary* spaces similar to those observable in McCaffery's description of the punk show. This characterisation of Acker's writing as transcendental, as creating a Dionysian experience for readers, is corroborated by Nolan's assessment of Acker's writing from her perspective as reader: "I tend to read Acker when I can take the pen out of my hand and let the narrative wash over me, like music" (204). Nolan's response to Acker's prose highlights the secondary nature of the narrative to other transcendental affective features of her texts, such as the sensual experience of reading it. The

hypnotic, rhythmic quality of her writing is like the driving beat in a piece of music or the pulsating throb of the desiring body in coitus.

Nolan reinforces this feature of Acker's writing when she describes a passage from *Blood and Guts* as "imbued with a Dionysian embrace of the abject, prelanguage state" (207). She reveals the feminist significance of the Dionysian quality of Acker's writing – its ability to elicit a sexual response from readers – when she writes about how this "interruption to life, enables a subjectivity that cannot exist in life" (Nolan, 208). An impossible subjectivity (female sexuality) requires such liminal literary spaces that Acker prises open with her erotic splicing and *écriture féminine* to break through patriarchal barriers and escape the limits placed on female representation that prevent female sexuality from manifesting onto the page.

In essence, by creating texts that are aesthetically constructed to evoke the sensual, Acker transforms the text itself into an artifactual utopia for female sexuality in an otherwise hostile world, where women's sexual subjectivities are being devalued in relation to the reproductive value of their bodies in 1980s 'foetal rights' discourse. Her sex writing has the 'both/and' function of narratively exposing the patriarchal subjugation of female sexuality, as in her appropriation of Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* in *Blood and Guts*, whilst simultaneously liberating it from this arrangement by representing female characters realising their autonomous sexual desires, like the night-knight in *Don Quixote*. Formally, where Acker's main concerns usually are, her erotic splicing and *écriture féminine* coalesce to elicit a sexual response from readers, reacquainting female readers with their suppressed sexual desires and positing a palpable reprioritisation of female sexual pleasure at a time when it was being written out of existence in dominant culture.

In this chapter, I have created a profile of Acker's writing, demonstrating how her overarching critique of patriarchal capitalism subsumes the arenas of work and sex – issues pertinent to the anti-feminist backlash of the 1980s. Aside from Acker's narrative portrayal of work as exploitative and fruitless (especially for women), she also symbolically rejects logics that infuse and uphold a modern U.S. work society through her formal and aesthetic choices: repetition, textual bricolage, tangential drawings, and punk's aesthetics of amateurism. Moreover, Acker's sex writing contests a growing anti-abortion movement and its implicit anti-feminist rhetoric, by narratively advocating for the realisation of an autonomous female sexuality. She supports this aim formally through her interpretation and realisation of *écriture féminine*, as well as through her 'sensual montages' that designate female sexual pleasure as a foremost concern and ever-present feature of the text and the reader's experience. These elements will go on to influence Hanna and Riot Grrrl zine writers in the 1990s who were forming their own artistic responses to anti-feminism in America, as well as other manifestations of contemporary feminism.

## *Chapter Two: Kathleen Hanna Reads Kathy Acker*

In this chapter, I argue that Hanna appropriates aspects of Acker's critique to rail against the anti-feminist backlash in the 1990s, which at this point, has evolved into the concept of postfeminism that is gaining traction. I read Hanna's writing with an understanding of postfeminism offered by some critics as a *continuation* of the 1980s backlash. Therefore, I consider manifestations of postfeminism that correspondingly centre on the themes of work and sex – Do-Me feminism and New Traditionalism – considering ways in which these trends similarly pose a threat to feminist politics, but in new ways. I demonstrate how Hanna negotiates these manifestations of postfeminism in both her Riot Grrrl zines and unpublished papers, using a writing style that is indebted to Acker.

In a broader sense, this chapter also begins the work of illuminating a lineage of punk-feminist literary praxis that is notably concerned with mainstream women's issues. This aspect is often overlooked when assessing punk feminism and Riot Grrrl, which are primarily discussed in terms of cultivating a somewhat separatist feminist politics. By this, I mean that Riot Grrrl and punk feminism occupy a subcultural status, underpinned by punk's radical anti-capitalist philosophy, as well as its foregrounding of issues pertinent to youth culture. Such philosophical leanings are evident in Riot Grrrl's core aims, which were to raise the status of girl culture and inspire girl-led, DIY cultural production. These aspects often separate the likes of Riot Grrrl from mainstream feminism in critical accounts of the movement. As Denfeld wrote in 1995, when Riot Grrrl was still active: "[Riot Grrrls] don't want anything to do with [...] mainstream organising" (263). Even in her own unpublished archival papers, Hanna attests to how, in her mind, Riot Grrrl was "never really a political movement, it was a musical one that cared about

politics [...] it raised consciousness but did not make policy, or protest much outside of its parameters".<sup>38</sup> Whilst this conception of Riot Grrrl is not without merit due to the movement's philosophical constitution, as well as Hanna's own expressed aims for the movement, I propose that Hanna still negotiates issues pertinent to women's rights in mainstream US culture in the 1990s. She does so not only via the content in her zines, but artistically too.

I connect Hanna's artistic, literary approach to articulating a feminist politics with Riot Grrrl, to the influence of *écriture féminine* and the uptake of this theory in Anglophone feminist discourse in the 1980s. And although the notion that art is political – that art reflects the politics of the culture in which it is produced – was by no means a discussion introduced by or exclusive to the emergence of *écriture féminine*, it nonetheless constitutes a contemporaneous feminist re-articulation of this idea for a late twentieth century audience. The revival of this concept heavily influenced Hanna's approach, as well as that of her peers, to communicating their feminist critique in zines. In the subsections that follow, I reveal how Hanna embraces the radical potential of female-created art and writing as a means by which to undermine patriarchal culture and 'work through' iterations of postfeminism in the 1990s.

Though I focus on Hanna's reaction to postfeminist trends, it is important to note that the thematic scope of Hanna's zines stretch far beyond the mainstream media's 'post-ing' of feminism in the 1990s. *April Fools Day #1* (1995), for example, deals with recovery from addiction, whilst *The Saddest Day in the Whole World* (n.d.) documents the loss of a close friend. Nevertheless, Hanna cites the media's declaration of feminism's passing as a specific source of bewilderment, writing in one of her unpublished papers:

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<sup>38</sup> Kathleen Hanna. Unpublished essay. *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, "The Scene" [1 of 5]*, Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 4, folder 7.

Feminism is Dead (check the actual headline) That was the headline I read in the magazine. From where I stood it was completely alive, thriving even.<sup>39, 40</sup>

Responding to the concept of postfeminism that she encounters here in a magazine, Hanna dismisses the idea as antithetical to the position that she supposedly represents: feminist, activist and politically engaged. Her statement reveals her intention, which is to rebel against this new cultural entity with Riot Grrrl.

Mirroring the structure of the previous chapter on Acker, the following subsections are each set up to deal with either a narrative theme or a formal component. The structure of this chapter loosely follows the same format as before: anti-work politics expressed via meaning; anti-work politics expressed via formal devices; representations of female sexuality via content; and representations of female sexuality via formal devices. For instance, the first subsection, *'Hanna's Sex Work Confessionals: Disidentifying with the Puritan Work Ethic's Moralisation of Work'*, attends to Hanna's 'writing through' of her experience of working in the sex industry and the anti-work politics that these confessionals reveal. The following subsection, *'Forging an Alternate 'Work Sphere' with Riot Grrrl Production'*, looks at how Hanna's anti-work politics are realised in Riot Grrrl culture more broadly, measuring this up against the postfeminist trend of New Traditionalism. The third subsection, *'Hanna's Anti-Work Literary Devices: Textual Collage, Doodling, and the Unproductive Text'*,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> From this point onwards, I omit the use of 'sic' from all primary source quotations, as to identify these as erroneous undermines the politics of protest extant in this language. All quotations appear exactly as found in the source texts.



attends to aesthetic components in Hanna's zines that support her anti-work critique. The next subsection also deals with formal manifestations of Hanna's anti-work politics; in *'The Problem with Professionalism: A Feminist Reclamation of Amateurism with Riot Grrrl'*, I demonstrate how, like Acker, Hanna embraces the aesthetics of amateurism in her zines to contest a rising culture of professionalism in America as a result of the sustained influence of the Puritan work ethic. Moving on to the theme of sex, in the fifth subsection, *'Representing Female Sexuality: Reading Hanna's The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl in the 'Postfeminist Age''*, I review Hanna's representation of female sexuality in one of her novella-length creative writing zines and hold this up against postfeminist mediations of female sexuality. Finally, in *'Grrrls on an Erotic Mission to Restore Female Sexual Desire: Hanna's Erotic Splicing and 'Feminine Writing''*, I review Hanna's writing in connection with *écriture féminine* and identify her attempts to incorporate a linguistically 'feminine' style of writing into her sex writing. In this subsection, I also trace the device of erotic splicing in Hanna's zines: a formal technique lifted from Acker's texts, which she uses to unite her young female readers in their sexual alienation. Considered collectively, these subsections reveal ideological and aesthetic consistencies between the two artists, which evolve with Hanna's writing as she grapples with 'new' postfeminist logics in the 1990s.

## 2.1 *Hanna's Sex Work Confessionals: Disidentifying with the Puritan Work Ethic's Moralisation of Work*

In this subsection, I explore Hanna's expression of anti-work politics. I propose that, like some of Acker's narratives, Hanna articulates this through the rubric of sex work and conveys a disidentification with the Puritan work ethic's moralisation of work. I consider this within the context of a rising awareness in US culture of the issue of sexual harassment for women in the workplace, brought about, in part, by the Anita Hill trial.<sup>41</sup> Whilst Acker undercuts the conceptualisation of work as a moral activity in her postmodern narratives, Hanna does so through personal reflections in her papers and zines, adopting Riot Grrrl's signature confessional rhetoric.

This focus on sex work when thinking through attitudes towards work from a feminist perspective, no doubt stems from both writers' first hand experiences of working in the sex industry. In her posthumous Acker biography, Kraus recounts Acker's time at Fun City in New York's Times Square where Acker performed in live sex shows in the early 1970s to support herself as a struggling artist. In an interview with literary critic Sylvère Lotringer, years after the fact, Acker would attest that this experience had a significant and lasting effect on her, stating: "It pretty radically changed my view of the world [...] especially [about] power relationships in society...And I think that never left me" (Acker qtd. in Kraus, 65). Likewise, in *Girls to the Front*, Marcus recounts Hanna's experience of working as a stripper in Washington DC in the early 1990s to support her touring with her then fledgling band, Bikini Kill: "Kathleen picked up shifts dancing at the Royal Palace, a strip club just north of Dupont Circle" (78). The theme of stripping and the politics surrounding sex work feature regularly in Hanna's zines and other unpublished writing from her collection. For example, *Bikini Kill #2*

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<sup>41</sup> See introduction for full description of the Anita Hill trial.

(1991) features a commentary by Hanna advocating for sex worker rights called 'Lots of Girls Get Bad Reputations'. Furthermore, in one of her extended creative writing pieces, the zine *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* (1994), the narrative is told in a diary-like format from the perspective of a female stripper/stalker who details her murderous and sexual fantasies about The Lemonheads frontman, Evan Dando. I analyse both of these examples in detail below.

Firstly, though, I want to outline the two categories that Hanna's writing about sex work fall into in relation to how she undermines modern attitudes towards work, and from a feminist perspective. The first construction is writing where Hanna foregrounds the monetary aspect of sex work. For example, in a draft response letter to *Puncture* magazine, 'Dear Puncture' (n.d.), Hanna takes umbrage with a journalist for suggesting that her own participation in the sex industry was anything but financially motivated. Furthermore, in her creative writing zine, *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar*, the narrator expresses her furious contempt for ungenerous patrons of the strip club she works at.

Highlighting the economic fact of sex work, while simultaneously exposing the dehumanisation of sex workers, Hanna successfully undermines societal myths instilled by the Puritan work ethic that presents waged work as "an essential source of individual growth, self-fulfillment, social recognition, and status" (Weeks, 11). Hanna's writing reveals how this conceptualisation of waged work as having morally redemptive qualities and social benefits for practitioners is not true for the female sex worker, and therefore, is not based on any fundamental or universal truth. What's more, by foregrounding the economic fact of sex work, Hanna disrupts emergent postfeminist scripts that obscure women's low socio-economic position to present sex work as a non-coercive 'choice'. Her writing pushes back against a rising neoliberal discourse, 'raunch culture', and its over-simplistic

representation of sex work as a source of female empowerment, inviting women to capitalise on how they already exist as a sexualised construct in the American cultural imagination. Whilst Hanna's critique advocates that sex work be decriminalised and de-stigmatised, she nonetheless rejects raunch culture, framing female sex work as a symptom of women's low socio-economic status. In this sense, her attempts to raise the social status of sex work differentiates from that of some second wave feminist camps that mobilised the Puritan work ethic to preach the moral credentials of sex work. The shift in terminology from 'prostitution' to 'sex work', introduced by sex-worker rights camps intervening in the second wave feminist sex wars, claimed the "title of work" to make use of "the legitimacy conferred by its dominant ethic" (Weeks, 67). According to Weeks, these advocacy groups "uncritically" incorporated the Puritan work ethic into their discourse in an effort to associate prostitution with traditional working values, insisting on the essential value and dignity of sex work (67). Conversely, Hanna's advocacy for better conditions for sex workers comes from a more pessimistic, more punk philosophical position. She puts forward the notion that *no* work is moral and therefore sex work is no more morally bankrupt than any other more traditional form of labour, and that this should be reflected in how sex workers are regarded both socially and politically: that is, like any other worker.

The second construction is writing where Hanna parallels sex work with more traditional forms of labour for women in terms of gendered exploitation. She gives narrative form, through the rubric of sex work, to Marx's theory of alienated labour in a short piece of autofiction titled 'Customers' (n.d.), in which she parallels stripping with more traditional forms of labour in terms of their exploitative quality. Hanna also frames her sex work confessionals within a broader commentary on the issue of female sexual harassment in the work place – an issue brought to America's attention

in the wake of the 1991 Anita Hill trial, which Hanna references in her unpublished papers. Paralleling the sexually exploitative nature of female sex work with rampant sexual harassment in the traditional work sphere, Hanna undermines the Puritan work ethic by presenting work as a ubiquitously *demoralising* experience for women across all labour sectors. Continuing Acker's 'all jobs suck (especially for women)' ethos into her punk-feminist writings on sex work in the 1990s, Hanna's confessionals defy a neoliberal postfeminist discourse, 'raunch culture', that obscures women's low socio-economic status and ignores the continued existence of female sexual exploitation.

### **Contextualising Hanna's critique of sex work**

The nuances of Hanna's feminist critique of sex work in the 1990s only becomes clear when assessed in relation to existing feminist debates on sex work. Hanna enters into a landscape of pro/anti sex work debates with her own idiosyncratic position. Influenced by Acker in her stance, Hanna embraces a pro-sex feminism that is underpinned by punk's cynical worldview and overarching critique of human exploitation in capitalist societies. However, moving this perspective forward from Acker's critique in the 1980s to address similar debates in the 1990s, Hanna also confronts new arguments. She attends to emergent postfeminist trends that seemingly erase female sexual victimisation from its pro-sex discourse in a way that is, according to some anti-postfeminist critics, deeply problematic.

First, though, it is useful to review the feminist terrain Hanna enters with her sex work writing in the 1990s. The 'sex war' debates of the late 1970s divided many second wave feminists, arguably weakening the movement by splintering many of its members into 'sex-positive' and abolitionist camps with regards to women's participation in the sex industry: mainly these debates centred around the sites of pornography and prostitution. Andrea

Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon famously spearheaded an anti-pornography campaign seeking to impose legislative limits on the pornography industry, which they view as deeply harmful to women. They denounced pornography as a facilitator of violence perpetrated against women and a normalising device for the degradation of women in society more broadly. In her 1981 publication, *Pornography*, Dworkin wrote of how the misogyny embedded in pornography manifests itself via prostitution, echoing the anti-pornography movement's implicit anti-prostitution stance:

[P]ornography is the orchestrated destruction of women's bodies and souls [...] prostitution animate[s] it [...] it is a war on women, serial assaults on dignity, identity, and human worth; it is tyranny. (xxvii).

While anti-sex-industry feminists like Dworkin were calling for abolition, sex-positive feminists and pro-prostitution activists were fighting what they saw as a new wave of sexual Puritanism threatening to impose new limits on women's sexual behaviours, as well as their economic empowerment. In the same year Dworkin published *Pornography*, sex-positive journalist, Ellen Willis, wrote an article for *The Village Voice* that described how puritanical prohibition camps undermine women's sexual agency, and strongly argued that "authoritarian moralism has no place in a movement for social change" (208).<sup>42</sup> Pro-prostitution activists groups like C.O.Y.O.T.E, set up in San Francisco in 1973 by Margo St. James, sought to decriminalise sex work, as well as eliminate the stigma associated with it, with the aim of cultivating

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<sup>42</sup> Ellen Willis went on to set up the Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce (FACT) in 1984, in response to the Dworkin-MacKinnon Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance.

better conditions for sex workers.<sup>43</sup> C.O.Y.O.T.E's guiding philosophy was that sex work should be considered equivalent to any other form of labour where worker rights are concerned, and that to make a distinction between sex work and more traditional forms of labour is a culturally fabricated distinction.

Wendy Chapkis writes about how, in the 1970s, a reconceptualisation of prostitution began to emerge, which "repositioned the prostitute as [...] engaged in legitimate service work" (70). Weeks also contemplates this strand of sex-positive second wave feminism, and attempts to legitimise sex work as an economic practice equal to any other waged work. Specifically, she cites the rewording of 'prostitution' to 'sex work' by these second wave feminist activists as demonstrative of this attempt at rebranding, arguing that "the category [sex work] helps to shift the terms of discussion from the dilemmas posed by a social problem to questions of economic practice" (Weeks, 67). She suggests that these attempts to validate sex work insisted on the "essential worth, dignity, and legitimacy" of the practice, moralising sex work in alignment with other traditional labour practices (Weeks, 67). Though this revaluation of sex work was in part devised in opposition to an aggressively puritanical and morally condemning discourse being proffered by some prohibitionist camps, it also produced some problematic representations of sex work "as a site of voluntary choice" and of "equitable exchange and individual agency", according to Weeks (67).

Hanna's conceptualisation of sex work in her confessionals incorporates aspects from both sides of these debates. Whilst Hanna advances a second wave sex-positive revaluation of sex work as an economic practice, foregrounding the waged aspect of her stripping in her writings, she rejects

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<sup>43</sup> C.O.Y.O.T.E is an acronym for the organization: Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics.

some accompanying representations of sex work as a dignified activity and a non-coercive practice of equitable exchange. She cites women's low-socio economic position as directly connected to her own 'choice' to perform sex work and does not shy away from expressing the degrading and sexually exploitative nature of female sex work – a sentiment proffered by some radical prohibitionist feminists, such as Dworkin and MacKinnon.

Furthermore, Hanna's disidentification with the Puritan work ethic and its moralisation of paid work infuses her critique with a punk sense of pessimism. Whereas some pro-sex-work feminists relied on the Puritan work ethic's scripts, preaching the essential worth, dignity, and legitimacy of sex work in their attempts to decriminalise and de-stigmatise the practice on par with regular forms of labour, Hanna inverts this formulation. Instead, she pierces through the Puritan work ethic's conceptualisation of regular work as a moral activity, revealing how traditional forms of labour are equally as devoid of moral value as sex work. She does so to argue that sex work is equal to regular forms of labour and therefore should be recognised as such. Like Acker, she unites sex work and non-sex work in terms of its ubiquitously exploitative quality, especially for women operating in a capitalist-patriarchy. Additionally, Hanna's 'pro-sex-work (even though it sucks)' viewpoint constitutes an important oppositional stance to postfeminist iterations emerging in the 1990s. Her voice provides much-needed context and nuance to the rise of raunch culture, which, some critics argue, reductively subsumes pro-sex-work feminist debates into its discourse to equate the sexual commodification of women's bodies with female empowerment. In the pages that follow, I provide evidence for these assertions, illuminating Hanna's idiosyncratic position.



### Foregrounding sex work as economic practice

In a 2014 interview for *The Guardian*, Hanna reflects on her past employment in the sex industry. She expresses her fear that this was misconstrued in Riot Grrrl circles at the time and is still being misread retrospectively in today's histories of Riot Grrrl, as a tokenistic statement about female sexual liberation, rather than a financially motivated action:

It [stripping] was a crappy job. I feel really offended when people act like it was some sort of feminist statement. I don't feel that way at all. There's a frankenstein monster that came out of the riot grrrl scene, which has always bothered me, which is that sex work is a) eroticised, b) exoticised. 'I'm going to write my masters thesis on sex work.'

I didn't do it because I thought it was funny.<sup>44</sup>

Hanna reveals a deep disdain for any suggestion that her stripping career was at all politically motivated, and presents the work itself as entirely undesirable: a “crappy job”.<sup>45</sup> Incidentally, Acker was met with similar questions pertaining to the potential political motivations for her ‘choice’ to work the sex show on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street. In the aforementioned interview with Ellen G. Friedman in 1989, Friedman asked Acker: “What attracted to you to 42<sup>nd</sup> Street? Was it the political aspect you’ve been talking about?” to which Acker responds, “Oh, no. I just needed money” (14). Both artists stress the financial motivation for their personal participations in the sex industry – a perspective that is traceable in Hanna’s unpublished archival papers.

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<sup>44</sup> Kathleen Hanna. ‘What happens when a riot grrrl grows up?’. Interview by Emma Brockes. *The Guardian*, 9 May 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/may/09/kathleen-hanna-the-julie-ruin-bikini-kill-interview>. Accessed 21 June 2019.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

One such item where Hanna expresses this resolve is in a drafted letter of response to a despised *Puncture* magazine journalist, who she refers to as simply 'Ms. Cowan', who according to Hanna's letter, wrote a review for Bikini Kill's then recently released 1993 album, *Pussy Whipped*. She explains her gripe with Cowan's review, writing:

So, the first half of the review was about our lyrics, music whatever...but then the second half was used to personally attack me on the basis of my occupation. (I have worked in the sex industry, on and off, for almost seven years).<sup>46</sup>

Hanna goes on to describe how the journalist's review is underpinned by the assumption that "everyone who strips does so out of some weird white middle class fantasy/quest for adventure and not ECONOMIC NECESSITY", foregrounding her own motivation for pursuing sex work as being purely financial.<sup>47</sup> She then utilises her draft response letter to Ms. Cowan to comment on women's low socioeconomic status more broadly in relation to sex work, writing:

Instead of talking shit from yr ass about how its really sex trade workers who have all the power in this world, why not start asking IN WHAT CONTEXT certain women make choices in.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Kathleen Hanna. 'Dear Puncture' letter. *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, "The Scene" [1 of 5]*, Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 4, folder 7.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Hanna contends that Ms. Cowan's review and commentary on the Riot Grrrl figurehead's supposed "pseudo-career as a stripper" highlights the cultural ignorance that surrounds female sex work, which she suggests is bound up in a misleading narrative of choice without considering other socioeconomic factors that impinge on women's autonomy in a labour context.<sup>49</sup>

Hanna also gives narrative form to this foregrounding of the economic fact of sex work in one of her rare creative writing zines, *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar*. A complex merging of autofiction and cultural critique, *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* is a 'faux-confessional' narrative told from the perspective of a young female stalker who closely resembles Hanna – "did i mention i am a punk [star symbol]" – and details her sexual and violent fantasies about The Lemonheads frontman.<sup>50</sup> The zine also comprises a feminist reclamation of a history of misogynistic hate crime perpetrated against women, as the narrator sets out to "become the murderer" and "kill pretty boys",<sup>51</sup> referencing the likes of Marc Lépine and Ted Bundy as male counterparts to herself.<sup>52</sup> In the part of the zine in question, the female stalker narrator, who biographically resembles Hanna, laments her job as a stripper:

I hate the stripbar customer who jacks off under the table and then gives me 50 bucks for it LESS THAN i hate the guy on the bus who

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* [zine master]. 1994. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 11, folder 8.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Marc Lépine was the perpetrator of the 1989 'Montreal Massacre', in which he shot and killed fourteen women at the École Polytechnique de Montréal with the professed aim of 'fighting feminism'.

jacks off under his Reader's Digest bookbag and then pays me nothing for it.<sup>53</sup>

The narrator stresses monetary accretion as the primary motivation for her participation in the sex industry, expressing contempt for moments when she feels she is not being properly financially compensated for what she perceives as unrecognised sex work in the form of her sexualisation in the minds of the men she encounters in her day-to-day life. Foregrounding the crucially *waged* aspect of sex work positions her stripper job in alignment with the Puritan ethic's requisite for *paid* work to reap the rewards of work in the form of dignity, self-fulfilment, social recognition, and status. However, the illustrations that accompany her account expose the falsity of this promise, revealing the sense of dehumanisation she experiences in her role, as manifest in her faceless self-portraits:

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<sup>53</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* [zine master]. 1994. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 11, folder 8.

Fig. 9. 'Stripbar Customer' illustration from *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* (1994) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

On the page pictured, the illustrations in 'Stripbar Customer' depict Hanna's alter ego narrator in her place of work, performing a striptease in the club. The page features a series of headless self-portraits, showing just her naked body dancing to a sea of similarly faceless onlookers, as well as one ugly, gawping figure in the last frame. The drawings circle a cut-out image of Evan Dando's piercing eyes, centralising the male gaze in the piece and representing the lens through which her self-portraits are conceived. The fact that she draws herself without a face points to the loss of identity that she experiences in her role. If 'the eyes are the windows to the soul', as the old adage goes, then these self-portraits, which lack the distinguishing characteristics of a human face, the eyes, indicate the sense of soullessness she feels whilst stripping. She suggests her dehumanisation is manifest both in the gaze of the men watching, as well as in her own mind, as their sexual objectification of her translates to how she perceives and thus draws herself here. Her debased self-portraits conflict with the Puritan work ethic's moralisation of paid work, exposing the impossibility of her acquiring self-fulfilment and social recognition in a job where her sense of 'self' is obscured and where she is made figuratively unrecognisable (read faceless) through her work. The way Hanna represents female sex work in her writing – foregrounding the economic principle of sex work whilst highlighting its distinct lack of social or moral benefits for practitioners – exposes how the Puritan ethic's moralisation of *paid* work is not based on any fundamental or universal truth.

### Sex work as alienated labour

In another unpublished confessional/short story from her archival collection, 'Customers', Hanna brings this dehumanisation of the female sex worker to its most logical conclusion, using an analogy we have previously observed in Acker's anti-work narratives, by which she equates the performance of work in an age of late-capitalism with a death of the 'self'. In 1982, MacKinnon argued that "[s]exuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away" (515). Much as MacKinnon parallels female sexuality with man's labour, suggesting that both involve a similar process of alienating bodily services from the individual, Hanna expresses a similar sentiment in her stripping confessionals.

In the previous chapter, I argued that Acker gives narrative form to Marx's theory of alienated labour: the separation of one's labour from one's subjective will and consciousness for the benefit of industry. In addition to the female office worker who succumbs to the psychosis-inducing effects of alienated labour and commits suicide in *Don Quixote*, Acker uses this analogy, specifically in the context of female sex work, in *Great Expectations*, in a part of the novel where a couple enter a brothel together. The narrator describes the internal monologue of the woman in the couple, who distinguishes herself from the sex workers in the following terms: "I'm not like HER? I'm a person [...] unlike these HOLES who DON'T EXIST" (Acker 1983, 52). Comparatively, in 'Customers', Hanna describes in vivid detail some of the customers she encounters in the strip club she works at: "One of my first customers at the royal palace was Frank [...] He is short and chubby and had a round head [...] He is extremely unremarkable, except for his stocking fetish and his wife story".<sup>54</sup> She goes on to explain that when she is working in the strip club, she

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<sup>54</sup> Kathleen Hanna. 'Customers'. *Writings [2 of 2]*. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 26.

pretends to be absent: "I act like i don't exist when I'm in the club".<sup>55</sup> Hanna implies that she renounces parts of her 'self' in order to carry out her work, figuratively ceasing to exist in one sense (as a human being) in order to survive in another: as a worker in the strip club. Hanna's 'Customers' echoes Acker's narrative expression of alienated labour by using the analogy of work as a form of death for human beings, *literally* stripping away her autonomy and the will to "[c]onscious life activity" that defines her as a human being (Marx, 73). Through the rubric of sex work, Hanna similarly exposes the falsity of the Puritan work ethic's construction of paid work as the expression of an "essential humanity", revealing how the complete opposite is true for her, where her paid work spells the figurative death of the self (Weeks, 89).

Crucially, though, Hanna also makes an important distinction here about the power she feels over her loss of autonomy as a sex worker. She writes: "When I leave the doors of the club, i am mine. You can not make me do anything i don't want".<sup>56</sup> Her perspective in this regard is best understood in relation to Hallie Rose Liberto's theory that prostitution constitutes "a 'weak' waiving of rights" over one's sexual autonomy, with the understanding that the sex worker, like other workers, "may effectually choose to stop at any time" foregoing benefits (141; 142). It is important to acknowledge that Hanna's 'sex work as alienated labour' construction is based on her consenting to putting on a *display* of alienated sexuality and to experiencing *feelings* of alienation in her performance of sex work, than it is her *actually* surrendering her sexual rights. Her resolve that, ultimately, her will is her own and that her stripping constitutes a temporary, 'weak' waiving of rights, flies in the face of some radical second wave feminist arguments that fervently defended women's rights to sexual autonomy with the

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

understanding that prostitution and other forms of sex work strongly undermine this.

Despite this subtle defence of her sexual autonomy, Hanna's 'writing through' of her experience of sex work is nonetheless infused with moments that highlight the more degrading elements of such work. In these moments, she exposes the falsity of the Puritan ethic's 'dignity of paid labour' configuration. In 'Customers', she describes her demoralising interaction with "another really twisted pervert" who likes to talk to her like a dad talking to a baby: "Don't you have the cutest little perky girl breasts?" and "[a]ren't you just the cutest little little baby?" he tells her, before buying her another drink and tipping her five dollars.<sup>57</sup> Whilst this is not with the intention to present sex work as any more undignified than other more traditional forms of labour, as "[t]heres nothing wrong with being a whore that there isn't with being a milkman", it does add nuance to (post)feminist discourse in the 1990s.<sup>58</sup> Crucially, the more degrading aspects of her sex work confessionals complicate emergent postfeminist trends that sought to reconceptualise sex work, stripping, and other forms of so-called 'sexploitation' as wells of female empowerment.

This was, in part, the topic of Ariel Levy's punchy polemic, *Female Chauvinist Pigs* (2005), in which Levy identifies the rise of 'raunch culture' in America at the turn of the century. For Levy, raunch culture is a neoliberal, postfeminist discourse that rebranded the sexual commodification of women's bodies as a symbol of female empowerment, which, she argues, encouraged women to be complicit in their own sexual exploitation and 'join in' with misogynistic culture. She writes of how "[i]n this new formulation of raunch feminism, stripping is as valuable to elevating womankind as gaining

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.



an education or supporting rape victims" (Levy, 75). And whilst Levy takes care to add the disclaimer that her book "is not about the sex *industry*", it is, however, "about what we have decided the sex industry means...how we have held it up, cleaned it off, and distorted it" (198; 199; emphasis added). In other words, *Female Chauvinist Pigs* addresses how an idealised vision of the sex industry has become synonymous with women's liberation in dominant culture.

Hanna's journaling of her experience in the sex industry arguably provides much needed modulation to this postfeminist rebranding of the sex industry as the pinnacle of female liberation and empowerment. She does so by detailing her squeamish interactions with men in 'Customers', and by illuminating the sense of dehumanisation that her stripper narrator in *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* experiences via her faceless self-portraits. In other unpublished confessional writing from her collection, she confirms her anti-raunch culture perspective, writing: "since when have I ever claimed that stripping empowered me?"<sup>59</sup> Furthermore, by foregrounding the crucially waged aspect of sex work as her primary motivation for working in the sex industry in her response letter to *Puncture*, Hanna's account recentralises the relationship between women's low socio-economic status and female sex work. Despite postfeminist culture's emphasis on commercialism and consumer power, questions of women's low socio-economic position are perversely obscured in raunch culture where the narrative surrounding female sex work is shifted from 'she does it for money' to 'she does it because it's sexy and empowering'. Hanna's sex work confessionals provide opposition to this reconceptualisation of the sex industry and the shifting of discussion away from economic practice to female empowerment.

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<sup>59</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, "The Scene"* [2 of 5]. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 4, folder 8.

What's more, by paralleling her stripping job with more traditional jobs in terms of their monotonous quality, Hanna further distances stripping from discourses of empowerment. To a certain extent, this aspect of Hanna's sex work writing is best understood in relation to the following quote by prostitute and writer, Kari Kesler, where she laments her own struggles with writing about her experience of sex work:

Trying to journal the whoring experience would have meant overcoming the deep schism between dominant representations of sex work as either degrading or titillating and the everyday reality of prostitution as far more similar to most 'regular' jobs than non-prostitutes generally want to admit. (235)

Kesler suggests that the reality of female sex work exists in the space *between* degradation and titillation, and more accurately mirrors more traditional forms of labour when it comes to the mundanities of everyday working life. By paralleling her stripping with regular jobs, Hanna infuses her account of sex work with this sense of the mundane associated with regular jobs that Kesler describes. For instance, in *Bikini Kill #2* (1991) – a collaborative zine Hanna made with her Bikini Kill bandmates, Tobi Vail and Kathi Wilcox – she writes of her stripping: “it's a fucking job and like all jobs it sucks”.<sup>60</sup> Her tone is despondent – you can almost hear a tired sigh exuding from the page when she admits how stripping ‘sucks’ as much as any other job, as though fatigued with the dramatization of her work.

Hanna unites all forms of labour on the basis of its ubiquitously demoralising quality, writing in another part of *Bikini Kill #2*: “i feel a lot less

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<sup>60</sup> Kathleen Hanna, et al. *Bikini Kill #2*. 1991. The Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 12.

exploited making \$20 an hour for dancing around naked than i do as a waitress or burgerslinger".<sup>61</sup> Hanna reasons that the only variation between sex work and regular work in terms of exploitation for women comes from the degree of transparency involved in one's exploitation: "[W]anna penalise me for choosing an obvious form of exploitation instead of a subtle, lower paying one?".<sup>62</sup> Contesting a Dworkin/MacKinnon tradition that seeks abolition on the basis of such gendered exploitation, in these moments Hanna expresses something nearing appreciation for the 'honesty' of the exchange involved in sex work. She emphasises the clear alienation of bodily services that sex work denotes, which she argues is a feature of *all* work, as well as the better financial rewards it affords her in comparison to other low paying jobs.

### **Sexual harassment**

One significant and timely way Hanna equates the demoralising aspects of sex work with more traditional forms of work is by highlighting the sector-pervasive issue of sexual harassment for working women, exposing the falsity of the Puritan ethic's 'dignity of paid labour' construction, particularly for female practitioners. Closely echoing her sex work commentary in *Bikini Kill* #2, in her unpublished papers, Hanna writes:

I personally decided to be a sex trade worker cuz i feel a lot less exploited dancing around naked for twenty dollars an hour than i do getting paid \$4.25 (and getting psychically, physically and sometimes sexually exploited) as a waitress or a burger slinger.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Writings [1 of 2]*. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 25.

Hanna introduces the concept that even in other more traditional service roles the threat of sexual harassment is omnipresent for women. She reiterates this in another unpublished confessional essay from her collection, writing:

Because a woman who refuses to get paid five dollars an hour as a waitress and get totally sexually harassed but instead decides to take her clothes off and get paid like 25 dollars an hour is not supposed to have it together enough to fight back, QWell I am, and I do.<sup>64</sup>

By equating the sexual exploitation manifest in female sex work with rampant sexual harassment in the traditional work sphere, Hanna's confessionals pierce through backlash reports that sought to conceal the true plight of working women in the 1980s and 1990s. In *Backlash*, Faludi argued that whilst the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission's public relations office were releasing reports claiming that "sexual harassment in corporate America was falling", its own figures demonstrated that sexual harassment had in fact "nearly doubled between 1981 and 1989" and that "reports of sexual discrimination and sexual harassment in the USA had reached record highs" in the 1980s (402; 401). Hanna comments on this masking of female sexual harassment and the general discrediting of working women in public discourse, citing the groundbreaking 1991 Anita Hill trial and the cultural aftermath surrounding this case. She writes:

Like look at all the women like Anita Hill have done towards educating americans about sexual harassment in the workplace and then think of how many times fucking stew pid straight white guys

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<sup>64</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, "The Scene" [2 of 5]*. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 4, folder 8.

make jokes or actually use their clout to claim a woman has sexually harassed them, just to make a point, aka it didn't really happen.<sup>65</sup>

Hanna presents the Anita Hill trial as an event that brought the widespread discrediting of working women via sexual harassment in the workplace to the forefront of public discourse, and illustrates how the cultural disdain and contempt surrounding Hill and her case is emblematic of a wider social problem of misogyny that merely maps onto working relations. Hanna's comments also reveal a distinctly third wave agenda that sought to embrace identity politics and incorporate issues of intersectionality into their feminist critique, which Erika Feigenbaum attests, was pertinent to "[t]hird wave feminism's contribution to work on the issue of sexual harassment", considering factors "such as race, positionality, and class" (Feigenbaum, 302; 303). Hanna situates 'stew pid straight white guys' as the hegemonic force presiding over an identity-based hierarchical capitalist arrangement of labour. This is a perspective she echoes in another passage from her unpublished papers, writing: "Every job under capitalism reinforces sexism, racism, homophobia, and especially classism because all jobs [...] are all about hierarchy".<sup>66</sup> Hanna essentially introduces a metric for the demoralisation individuals experience in the work sphere, suggesting that this is merely a reflection of existing socioeconomic hierarchies and barriers of discrimination intersectional identities, women, and minorities already face.

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<sup>65</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Writings [2 of 2]*. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 26.

<sup>66</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, "The Scene" [2 of 5]*. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 4, folder 8.

## ***2.2 Forging an Alternate 'Work Sphere' with Riot Grrrl Production***

In this subsection, I reveal how Hanna creates an alternate reality with her zines, transporting readers away from their current social world, which is indelibly marked by the logics of patriarchal capitalism. As such, Hanna forges another ideal of work by way of non-alienated labour with Riot Grrrl production. I propose that these liminal literary spaces are best understood in relation to Foucault's conception of the 'heterotopia', as elaborated in his 1967 essay, 'Of Other Spaces'.

### **Foucault's 'heterotopia'**

Unsurprisingly, the term 'heterotopia' has been subject to various interpretations and applied in a range of contexts due to the ambiguity of Foucault's writing on the idea; in his essay he concedes that "no one absolutely universal form of heterotopia" exists (Foucault, 24). That being said, Foucault does outline six principles for the heterotopia in his essay that are useful for thinking about the literary spaces cultivated in Hanna's Riot Grrrl zines. Before elaborating on these in more detail, generally the heterotopia in my reading of the term constitutes a subversive space that at once has its footing in a real world context, but presents another vision of an alternate space: a subversive world *within* the real world. The analogy Foucault uses for the heterotopia's perverse relationship to the real world and its simultaneous representation of 'otherness', is the mirror. The mirror functions as a heterotopia, being a "virtual space [...] at once absolutely real, connected with all the space that surrounds it, and absolutely unreal, since in order to be perceived it has to pass through this virtual point which is over there" (Foucault, 24). Foucault also clarifies heterotopias by distinguishing them from utopias, which "present society itself in a perfect form" but "are fundamentally unreal spaces" (24). In contrast, heterotopias are absolutely

real 'counter-sites' that possess a disruptive, transformative and often contradictory quality.

The first principle in Foucault's account describes the heterotopia's connection to the human environment and human life stages. For instance, what he calls "heterotopias of crisis" are reserved for individuals who, in relation to society, are in a state of crisis: "adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, the elderly" (Foucault, 25; 24). In this context, the heterotopia is manifest in "privileged or sacred or forbidden places" that provide shelter to the individual in crisis.

The second of Foucault's principles essentially illuminates the heterotopias changeable function as cultures and societies evolve. However, Foucault also attests to how heterotopic sites, despite their multi-functionality, retain a "precise and determined function within a society" (25). He uses the example of "the strange heterotopia of the cemetery" to illuminate this concept (Foucault, 25). The cemetery's functionality and geography changes according to society's evolving discourse surrounding death from one of immortality and resurrection, to one of death and disease in the nineteenth century onwards.

For his third principle, Foucault describes how the layers of meaning embedded in heterotopias result in sites that encompass contradiction: "The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (25). Foucault also links heterotopias to "slices in time" in his fourth principle, which he terms 'heterochronies' (26). He writes of how the heterotopia "begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time" (Foucault, 26). This can be in the form of sites that accumulate time, such as museums or libraries, or those that manifest ephemerality, for which Foucault cites the festival for its flowing temporariness. In his fifth principle, Foucault asserts that heterotopias always "presuppose a system of opening

and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable" (26). The opening and closing of these spaces are often subject to rites of passage, like in some religious spaces.

Foucault's final trait in his description of heterotopias is that "they have a function in relation to all the space that remains" (27). In other words, heterotopias reflect the space around them. Some heterotopias, what he calls 'heterotopias of compensation', embrace utopianism's vision for a space that is as "perfect, as meticulous, as well arranged as ours is messy, ill constructed, and jumbled", but in a real world context (Foucault, 27).

With these constructs in mind, I explore how some of Foucault's ideas are useful for thinking about Hanna's Grrrl zine writing. I also consider the Riot Grrrl movement more broadly as manifesting a subversive otherworld *within* the real world and demonstrate how, as a heterotopic entity, it eschews a traditional work society with Riot Grrrl production.

### **Heterotopias in Riot Grrrl zines**

Exploring how Riot Grrrl zines manifest a heterotopic space is productive for understanding how the movement creates critical distance between its followers and their current social reality. Divorcing readers from reality and cultural norms, including a conventional understanding of what constitutes work, Riot Grrrl creates a world in which work has new definitional markers that are conveniently geared towards the interests of the movement.

Much as Foucault's heterotopia has a perverse and distorting relationship to the real world, so Riot Grrrl zines manifest this heterotopic balancing act through their material reality and constitution. Firstly, zines – particularly Grrrl zines – are usually made from everyday household items that you would typically find in girls' bedrooms. The material fact of Grrrl zines tethers the movement to the real world by incorporating the material space that surrounds them. At the same time, the punk zine as a site



articulates 'otherness'. It provides a disruption to the everyday by transforming these 'absolutely real' materials into subversive symbols. Hebdige illuminates this heterotopic function of punk products using the iconic punk safety pin as an example. He writes about how these mundane real world objects transform into "paradigms of crisis" when pierced through the punk's skin in rows (Hebdige, 65). In the alternate site that is the punk body, the safety pin functions as something that is "at once fictional *and* real" (Hebdige, 65; emphasis added). Similarly, the use of girlish bedroom items in the material construction of Hanna's zines – like the cat sticker on the folder cover for *23 Wishes* (1996), pictured below – performs a similar heterotopic function.<sup>67</sup> The sticker manifests the real world that surrounds it, embodying the girlhood bedroom, whilst at the same time, articulating the part-fictional and subversive world of Riot Grrrl with its radical feminist aesthetic and tongue-in-cheek self-presentation as a revolutionary political movement led by young women.

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<sup>67</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *23 Wishes [Folder]*. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 2, folder 26.

Fig. 10. Folder for *23 Wishes* (1996) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Riot Grrrl zines also manifest Foucault's 'heterotopias of crisis', providing a literary safe space for adolescent girls in a transitional stage in their lives. Full of writings about feminist awakenings, the Grrrl zine creates a sacred space for budding ideologies and forbidden female subjectivities to manifest in an otherwise disapproving, patriarchal culture. Zine creation also disrupts a conventional relationship to time in Western society, positing a break with the Puritan time-valuation: the construction of time around industry in capitalist cultures.<sup>68</sup> Riot Grrrl zines are not-for-profit, leisure sphere creations and as such, the time spent making and reading zines involves a disidentification with one's current social reality, which is indelibly marked by capitalism's time-as-industry-commodity arrangement.

The Riot Grrrl zine, like the heterotopia, also contains rites of passage and curious exclusions as manifest in its distinct aesthetic composition – a style that Riot Grrrl zinesters adhered to, in addition to its dominant confessional rhetoric.<sup>69</sup> The 'culture of confession' Riot Grrrl fostered, though designed to make girls feel connected and included, also has the dual function of isolating the community from other non-Riot Grrrl sites. And whilst Riot Grrrl professed that 'every girl is a riot grrrl', making access into Riot Grrrl appear straightforward for individuals, such a culture of exchanging deeply personal information still acts as an initiation process into the Riot Grrrl community. Confessional culture also works to deepen individuals' identification with, and personal investment in the movement, making those

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<sup>68</sup> See previous subsection, '*Acker's Anti-Work Literary Devices: Textual Bricolage, Tangential Drawings and the Amoral Text*', for full description of the Puritan time-valuation.

<sup>69</sup> See introduction for full description of the Riot Grrrl aesthetic.

who 'dare to share' even more receptive to Riot Grrrls ideas. The significance of this becomes evident later, when I discuss Riot Grrrl's reconceptualisation of what constitutes work.

Finally, as for the utopian quality of heterotopic spaces, the Riot Grrrl zines constitutes a 'heterotopia of compensation' by creating an alternative, more idealistic site for girls in relation to patriarchal society, but *still* in a real world context. Riot Grrrl zines are fused to the real world by engaging in discussions about real world happenings via popular culture, news reports, and political events, whilst also approximating utopia by way of 'The Riot Grrrl Revolution': an abstract concept that implicates all girls and young women in a sort of worldwide feminist uprising. For example, in Hanna's manifesto/flyer, 'The Revolution Starts Here' (1990), she creates a virtual world in which a political uprising of young women is taking place en masse:

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Fig. 11. 'The Revolution Starts Here and Now' Flyer (1990) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The manifesto – an established political literary form – immediately tethers Hanna’s ‘Riot Grrrl Revolution’ to the absolutely real. Simultaneously, the absolutely unreal element of Hanna’s heterotopia is ensured by the intense ‘otherness’ of some of its more trivial demands, like “[b]e a dork, tell your friends you love them”, the vagueness of which arguably puts it at odds with manifestos published by bona fide political movements.<sup>70</sup> In the collectively authored zine, *Bikini Kill #1* (1990), Hanna and her band mates present a utopian image in which ‘The Riot Grrrl Revolution’, as a mass operation, is currently taking place the world over. They begin their zine with the following statement: “Bikini Kill is a band and this is our little thing to give out at shows etc . . . AND THEN THERE’S THE REVOLUTION”, elaborating that, “Bikini Kill is more than just a band or zine or an idea, it’s a part of the revolution”.<sup>71</sup> In other Riot Grrrl zines, the ‘The Riot Grrrl Revolution’ is framed as a secret society, at once existing in the real world and simultaneously placeless. As one anonymous writer for the Riot Grrrl Olympia collective puts it in their pamphlet, *What is Riot Grrrl Anyway?* (n.d.): “Riot Grrrl is a girl gang with secret plans to destroy Olympia. you don’t have to know me to be in a girl gang with me”.<sup>72</sup> The so-called ‘Riot Grrrl Revolution’ envisioned in zines functions as a heterotopic site, simultaneously real yet absolutely unreal in its vision of a feminist utopia where young women are revolting against patriarchal society the world over.

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<sup>70</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *The Revolution Starts Here and Now [Flyer]*. 1990. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 2, folder 13.

<sup>71</sup> Kathleen Hanna, et al. *Bikini Kill #2*. 1990. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 2, folder 4.

<sup>72</sup> *What is Riot Grrrl Anyway? [Pamphlet]*. Becca Albee Riot Grrrl Papers ca.1992-1996, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.273, box 1, folder 8.

### Reconceptualising work with Riot Grrrl production

Within these heterotopic literary spaces, Hanna reimagines an existing capitalist conception of work and production. The new definition of work that Hanna expresses in her writing is a philosophy that underpins Riot Grrrl production more broadly, culminating in an alternate work sphere in the way of the Riot Grrrl Press.

In an essay where Hanna rants about the public criticism she faces for working as a stripper, as seen in her aforementioned response to the *Puncture* magazine article, Hanna expresses a disidentification with a capitalistic conception of work as being that which is strictly waged. She writes: “I’m sorry but I’ve used the money I made from stripping to support myself, my work, and the work of other radical/queer artists”.<sup>73</sup> Here, she reveals that she does not consider her paid work as a stripper her ‘real work’, but rather a *means* by which to perform her ‘real work’. Real work, in Hanna’s estimation, includes volunteering at a “Domestic Violence/Rape Relief shelter”, participating in “benefits for Rock 4 Choice and other women’s groups”, being “in a fucking band”, and presumably other Riot Grrrl based activities including zine-making.<sup>74</sup> Notably, all Hanna’s ‘real work’ is unwaged and does not conform to a capitalist system of remuneration. She echoes this sentiment in another piece from her unpublished papers, dated 1995, expressing contempt for times when she feels she is forced to play up to a “bullshit tokenist status within the ‘legitimate’ world in order to get the money and access that [she] need[s] to create and maintain [her] work”.<sup>75</sup> Hanna’s comments redefine work as that which does not necessarily happen

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<sup>73</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, "The Scene" [2 of 5]*. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 4, folder 8.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

within the strict limits of monetary accretion – a characteristic that is fundamental to work's constitution and our recognition of work in capitalist societies.

Hanna's comments also reveal that she only performs waged work as much as is financially necessary to support other pursuits, demonstrating her rejection of the Puritan work ethic and its illogical call to increase one's capital beyond individual utility (much like Acker's Haitian character Marguerite in *Kathy Goes to Haiti*). Her self-determined definition of work as that which is not strictly paid, but rather that which makes a meaningful contribution to society (helping rape victims) or produces art (making music and writing zines), exposes the arbitrariness of the signifiers by which we recognise work and measure the value of work in modern US culture. Hanna's reinterpretation of work presents an alternate vision of the labour market that is arguably more proportionate to work's 'real' value. Perhaps even more significantly, though, Hanna's unconventional definition of work in her unpublished writings illuminate the philosophical foundations for Riot Grrrl production. The Riot Grrrl Press, for example, was an institution that arguably represented a utopian vision of the traditional capitalist work sphere – one inversely characterised by non-alienated labour.

Dedicated to assisting the production and distribution of Riot Grrrl zines, Riot Grrrl Press was initiated by D.C. Riot Grrrls, Erika Reinstein and May Summer. It was designed to relieve ill-equipped zine makers of both financial and logistical duties. In Kevin Dunn and May Summer Farnsworth's study on the aims and processes of Riot Grrrl Press, they inadvertently give credence to my conceptualisation of Riot Grrrl Press as an alternate work sphere, as opposed to merely a substantial project of the leisure sphere. They do this particularly when discussing how the Riot Grrrl Press acted as a parasite on the traditional work sphere:

Riot Grrrl Press soon discovered a way to obtain free photocopies in Chicago; a friend with the key to an office building allowed Riot Grrrl Press to sneak in to the copy room and use it for reproducing zines after work hours. (Dunn and Farnsworth, 154)

Illegally using the tools of the office workplace tethers Riot Grrrl Press to the same processes, organisation, and requirements of a traditional work sphere, whilst at the same time, eschewing its associated system of remuneration and connection to the marketplace. The only money exchanged for their services came in the form of “a couple of dollars and a stamp” that “left no money for the Press’s workers” (Dunn and Farnsworth, 153). Though Hanna was not directly involved with the running of Riot Grrrl Press, her redefinition of work as that which is not strictly financially compensated, is traceable in the Riot Grrrl Press’s organisation and processes.

The fact that Riot Grrrl Press required the office workplace and its tools to meet their production demands also betrays the sizeable scale of their operation. This conflicts with a dominant perception of Riot Grrrl literature as forged solely through individualised pockets of production, in girls’ bedrooms, rather than in multi-person collectives in larger spaces. Therefore, the idea of Riot Grrrl Press as being an alternate work *sphere* is perhaps more befitting its operational scale. The terminology that Dunn and Farnsworth use in their study is also significant: “zine work”, “the Press’s workers”, “products”, etcetera, connects their arrangement to a traditional work sphere (153). They create a heterotopia – a working world *within* the real working world – where work is not primarily an economic practice but a question of producing what one feels compelled to produce based on a self-determined judgement about the value of one’s labour. This, in Marxian terms, unites one’s “life activity” with one’s subjective will and consciousness, mobilising an ideal of non-alienated labour (Marx, 73).

### New Traditionalism

The anti-work politics Hanna expresses in her sex work confessionals, along with the alternate work sphere manifest in Riot Grrrl production, as described above, both encourage women to disidentify with a system of work that is ultimately hostile towards them. Hanna expresses her disdain for work's female-directed antagonisms in her writing by posing revealing questions, such as: "Why aren't their better, more profitable, flexible jobs available to women".<sup>76</sup> In spite of this, Hanna's anti-work position in the 1990s also reveals some inconvenient sympathies with an anti-feminist conservative position. Such contradictions in Hanna's writing are best understood in relation to her punk principles. Her punk realisation of heterotopic spaces with Riot Grrrl also enable her to work through some of these tensions.

First, though, it is important to understand how Hanna's anti-work perspective holds up against emergent postfeminist trends. By severing the association between work and monetary accretion, for instance, Hanna presents women with an alternative to the traditional work sphere and the torments endured therein, from alienated labour to sexual harassment. She rejects an established capitalist conception of work, instead making self-determined judgements about what constitutes work based on labour's 'real value'. This is a significant contribution to the problem of work for women in the 1990s because it invites them to disidentify with a system that does not appear to value them. Furthermore, and in a similar vein to Acker's anti-work critique, it drains the media-driven devaluation of working women of its psychological sting. In short, if women do not identify as readily with work, or place as much value on their roles as workers, then reports that discredit

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<sup>76</sup> Kathleen Hanna. Unpublished essay. *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, "The Scene" [1 of 5]*, Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 4, folder 7.



them from the perspective of work hold less power to torment them psychologically.

Whilst Hanna's response and Riot Grrrl's redefinition of work in the 1990s might initially seem like a reasonable and effective response to anti-feminism of the 1980s and its attacks against working women, it is not without its drawbacks. This is because her separatist vision for a female-led alternative to the patriarchal-capitalist work sphere with Riot Grrrl production paradoxically yields to emergent postfeminist trends that were already calling for women to retreat from public life.

In *Backlash*, Faludi identifies 'cocooning' as "the national trend for the eighties" whereby domesticity was rebranded as aspirational for women (107; emphasis in original). She argues that cocooning, a media-invented trend, used imagery that equated women's return to domesticity as a return to a more comfortable "gestational stage", promoting a retreat from female adulthood (77). It mapped "the road back from the feminist journey", encouraging women to become like little girls again, hence reversing second wave feminist efforts to represent women as fully-functioning adults in the fight for equality (Faludi, 77). Similarly, the trend New Traditionalism was also intent on resituating women in home, but this time, by presenting traditional family life as aspirational for women. Brabon and Genz assert that New Traditionalism reimagined the domestic sphere as "a domain of female autonomy and independence" and crucially rationalised "women's apparently fully knowledgeable choice to abstain from paid work in favour of hearth and family" (52; 51).

Hanna's reconceptualisation of work with Riot Grrrl production counter-intuitively supports New Traditionalist discourse in this respect. Her redefinition of work as that which is not necessarily paid and that can be performed in the domestic sphere assists these media attempts to entice women back into the home and rationalise unpaid female labour. Zine-

making, a dominant form of Riot Grrrl production, is a pertinent example of this. With its roots firmly embedded in the domestic sphere (aside from the Riot Grrrl Press, Grrrl zines are largely bedroom creations), zine-making requires women and girls to retreat to their bedrooms. Zinesters also capitalise on the medium's self-published status to explore highly specialised themes and radical political perspectives, further separating the creator from mainstream culture and public life, which is corroborated by the medium's uptake in historical countercultural movements and youth subcultures. Primarily used by not-for-profit groups to spread their messages, zine production also crucially requires unpaid labour. And whilst scholars like Piepmeier and Kearney have done much to raise the status of girl/grrrl zines as more than merely "girlish bedroom play", their place within bedroom culture and the domestic sphere is nonetheless problematic in the context of the anti-feminist backlash (Piepmeier, 4). This is because of the medium's requisite for unpaid female labour and domestic sphere-based production, which speaks to New Traditionalism's 'cocooning' rhetoric and its tacit function to rationalise women's rejection of public life and paid work.

Hanna's cultivation of a heterotopic work sphere with Riot Grrrl production unwittingly feeds into this postfeminist trend, as evidenced by this fan letter addressed to Hanna, which is included in the *Bikini Kill #2* zine. The fan describes how she rationalises her unemployment by working on Riot Grrrl products, writing:

See I'm here trying to live in the mundane world of commerce and  
bLindness; they call it 'real', but my heart is with you and what you're

doing. I feel ashamed for not working. For getting unemployment checks, but I am working in my little womb-room.<sup>77</sup>

The fan echoes Hanna's rejection of work in a traditional sense, for which she vaguely cites mundane commerce and resolves to follow Hanna in her Riot Grrrl pursuits. The fan rationalises her abstinence from paid work using Hanna's template for 'real work' as that which includes making Riot Grrrl products (zines, music, artwork). Aside from the obvious parallels with gestational cocooning that the fan's word choice exhibits, it also reveals how Hanna's redefinition of work under Riot Grrrl rationalises unpaid domestic sphere-based female labour for her followers and arguably justifies women's infantilising retreat into their "little womb-room[s]", as this fan puts it.<sup>78</sup>

Whilst Hanna's response to postfeminist New Traditionalist discourse might be dismissed as unhelpful, offering young women only an 'out' from a world of work that the conservative media were already calling for, it is important to situate Hanna's feminist critique of work within the punk tradition and its anarchistic tendencies. Hanna's anti-work politics do not come with an underlying intention to renovate an existing arrangement of labour to assist women into corporate America, but rather, aspire to a total abolition of an established capitalist system of production and labour. Hanna corroborates this in a recent 2016 interview for *Vice*. When explaining her reasoning for abandoning a 'Learning Racism' workshop she was co-running in DC, Hanna cites her reluctance to use her feminism to assist women into a hierarchical capitalist work sphere:

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<sup>77</sup> Kathleen Hanna, et al. 'Dearest Kathleen' [letter]. *Bikini Kill #2*. 1991. The Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 12.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

If this is going to be another creepy branch of the feminist movement that is only about like, white women gaining access to corporate America, like, I don't want to be a part of it.<sup>79</sup>

Hanna reveals that she is wholly unconcerned with correcting a current capitalist arrangement of labour for the benefit of women, instead advancing an anarchistic punk-feminist approach that involves a complete rejection of this system. Overall, whilst Hanna's position might express some unintended overlaps with New Traditionalist discourse by inviting women to reject work, her punk-feminism takes this concept to its most logical conclusion, drastically changing the sentiment. As opposed to women merely abdicating their position in the work sphere, therefore leaving it intact for the acquisition of men, Hanna's feminist solution to the problem of work is more accurately aligned with the all-encompassing punk slogan: 'fuck the system'. She views work in its traditional, capitalist, hierarchical sense as an arrangement that *everyone* should reject, not just women, leaving nothing intact for any one group to stand over.

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<sup>79</sup> Kathleen Hanna. 'Kathleen Hanna on Tokenism, Therapy, and Where Riot Grrrl Went Wrong' by Kim Taylor Bennett. [Online video]. *Vice*, 21 Oct 2016. [https://www.vice.com/en\\_us/article/znmzze/kathleen-hanna-on-tokenism-therapy-and-where-riot-grrrl-went-wrong](https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/znmzze/kathleen-hanna-on-tokenism-therapy-and-where-riot-grrrl-went-wrong). Accessed 10 July. 2019.

### ***2.3 Hanna's Anti-Work Literary Devices: Textual Collage, Doodling, and the Unproductive Text***

In this subsection, I reveal how Hanna's literary devices support the anti-work politics she expresses in her confessionals. I argue that Hanna inherits these devices from Acker's texts and that they function in a similar way to undermine the sustained influence of the Puritan work ethic and the centrality of work in modern American culture.

#### **Destroying family values with textual collage in *Dear Daddy***

In *The Problem with Work*, Weeks explores the relationship between the Puritan work ethic and 'the family ethic'. She suggests that the family ethic acted as a supplement to the work ethic, emerging in the Fordist industrial period to "manage the consumption-production nexus" (63; 64). Like the Puritan work ethic, the family ethic operated as a disciplinary mechanism to support and uphold a gendered division of labour in a patriarchal-capitalist economy. The traditional nuclear family idealised the male breadwinner and rationalised women's unpaid domestic labour, which functioned to support the male worker in peripheral non-industry based sites (the home), as well as providing a conveyor belt of acquiescent workers through the labour of child rearing. Significantly, the family unit was also integral to the strength of a growing capitalist economy by providing a stable consuming unit, as well as being a basis for rational and consistent spending habits. And although, as Weeks attests, the family institution has "undergone dramatic changes since the period of high Fordism", these romanticised notions of family values have endured in modern American society (64). Hanna not only rejects notions of the traditional, patriarchal family by way of *meaning* in her texts, but she does so in form too. Hanna's irrational and inconsistent approach to expending

language and consuming literary resources in her textual collages posits a symbolic, oppositional stance to ‘family values’ in a literary context.

Both Hanna and Acker denounce the patriarchal family institution by writing narratives about incest and the valorisation of the girl child who escapes this configuration, spelling the dissolution of the family unit and discontinuation of capitalist reproduction. As previously discussed, at the beginning of *Blood and Guts*, Acker clearly sets out the aim of her narrative with the subtitle, ‘**Parents stink**’, signposting her critique of the nuclear family. The narrative unravels, following Acker’s ten-year-old protagonist as she escapes an incestuous relationship with her father, who she “depended on [...] for everything [...] money” (7). With this, Acker makes the connection between the family and capital, and Janey’s fleeing from her father signifies a repudiation of a normative (read patriarchal) social order and capitalist economic system.

Hanna expresses a similar sentiment in her mini zine, *Dear Daddy* (n.d.) – a collage of fragmented poems, images, and words – setting out the family unit as the target of her feminist critique in the first few pages.

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Fig. 12. & 13. Extract pages 'Dear daddy' and 'Motherfucker' from *Dear Daddy* [master zine] (n.d.) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The narrator's initially childlike, benevolent address to the paternal figure in *Dear Daddy* is juxtaposed with the pejorative "motherfucker" on the following page, introducing a rift between the girl child and the patriarchal family unit, which becomes more transparent as the narrative progresses and themes of incest are introduced.<sup>80</sup> For example, in the zine's centrefold, the following collage appears featuring an image of a bikini-clad woman plastered with the words: 'Baby', 'Princess', 'Pumpkin', and 'Angel'.

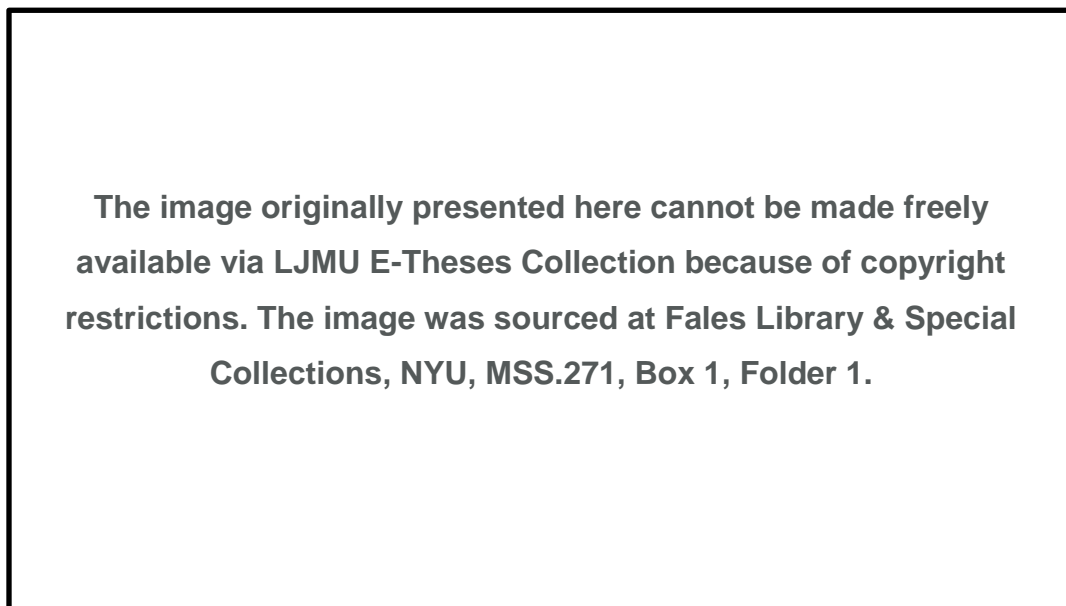


Fig. 14. Extract page 'Princess, Pumpkin, Baby, Angel' from *Dear Daddy* [master zine] (n.d.) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

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<sup>80</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Dear Daddy* [zine master]. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 1, folder 1.

The collage insinuates an incestuous relationship between the father figure addressed in the title of the zine and the female narrator. The words scattered over the image, that would otherwise constitute somewhat innocuous terms of endearment spoken from father to daughter, take on a more sinister, sexually inappropriate connotation when positioned atop the half-naked woman's torso. Analysed in relation to the reoccurring theme of stripping in Hanna's writing more broadly, the collage simultaneously conveys the trope of the runaway teenage stripper: a narrative that hinges upon the girl's escape from the family unit with its steady economic benefits, into the underbelly of society and economic instability.<sup>81</sup> Like Acker's *Blood and Guts, Dear Daddy* critiques the patriarchal family unit, formally rejecting its habits of rational consumption and steady production.

Conversely, Hanna manifests a chaotic, unsteady approach to literary consumption (expenditure of words) and production (narrative creation), in the following instances. In the same way that Acker wastes narrative time with tangential inserts and spends words anarchically, so Hanna spends words inconsistently: sometimes too sparingly, sometimes excessively.<sup>82</sup> The words she uses in the collage above, for instance – "Princess", "Pumpkin", "Baby", "Angel" – are excessive, given each word is repeated multiple times and all the words convey a similar meaning.<sup>83</sup> In contrast, the aforementioned page that contains only the word "motherfucker", which is in small thin type and is disproportionately surrounded by vast blank margins, demonstrates a

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<sup>81</sup> Incidentally, Hanna identifies this trope in her aforementioned autofiction piece, 'Customers', when describing an interaction with a strip bar customer she refers to as 'Satan': "So this guy is into the "teen runaway" thing. He likes girls who have been abused".

<sup>82</sup> See Chapter One, 'Acker's Anti-Work Literary Devices: Textual Bricolage, Tangential Drawings and the Amoral Text', for more on Acker's textual bricolage.

<sup>83</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Dear Daddy* [zine master]. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 1, folder 1.



too sparing approach to using textual space. This is further emphasised by the preceding page, where the words “Dear Daddy” appear in thick bold type and take up the whole of the page. The font is excessively big and then disproportionately small, conveying Hanna’s erratic writing practice.

Hanna also expresses an inconsistent approach to literary production in the following two-page spread:

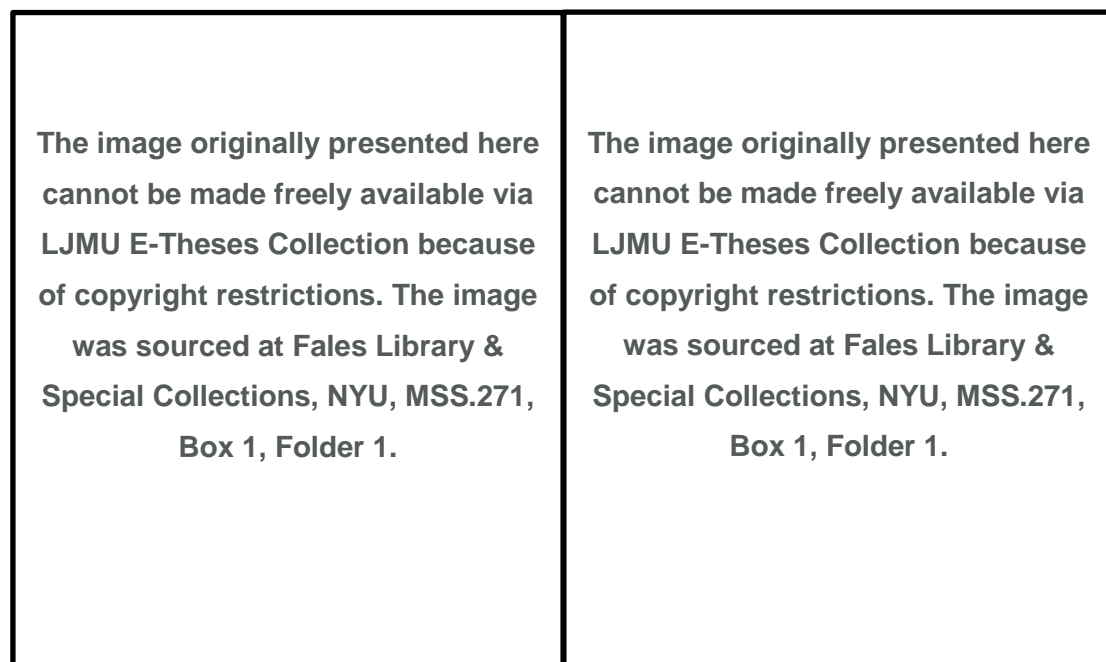


Fig. 15. & 16. Extract pages ‘Motherfucker’ and ‘The Blue Vein Runs Like Lead’ poem from *Dear Daddy* [master zine] (n.d.) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The one word piece on the first page, ‘motherfucker’, leaves a lot to be desired in terms of producing a full narrative, leaving the reader to fill in the narrative gaps about incest from the zine’s title: *Dear Daddy*. This is juxtaposed by the poem on the following page, which produces a rich and penetrating impression of the character and the zine’s overarching narrative about patriarchal oppression:

The blue vein runs like lead  
 an old pencil injury from school  
 This vein is filled with things you  
 taught me about myself.

It is filled with your shit and piss and scum  
 It is filled with your see thru desires  
 it is filled i am stuffed  
 Overflowing with your lies

I wanna scrape a razor on it  
 I wanna burn my skin  
 Push thru it with a thorn  
 purge the bile.  
 Wring this bloody bandage out  
 I wanna puke it out all over you  
 I wanna puke all over you <sup>84</sup>

The poem is told from the perspective of the adult narrator reminiscing on her girlhood – a stage of life that marks the beginning of her cultural indoctrination into oppressive femininity. Her ‘education’ in this respect fills her with visceral anger, which she expresses using violent imagery of self-harm to purge these cultural teachings. Her determined use of slang – “wanna”, “thru”, “puke” – functions to lower the tone of civility of the discourse into something potentially far more threatening, reflecting the narrator’s gut-wrenching rage.<sup>85</sup> More broadly, the poem conveys the notion

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

that her perception of herself has been shaped by patriarchal forces as manifest in language and monolithic institutional mechanisms, such as a traditional school education. This is corroborated by the poignant imagery she uses in the poem of the school-aged girl being injured by the instrument she uses for regurgitating (phallogentric) language, “a pencil”, which has filled her mind and body with limiting, male-defined concepts pertaining to her ‘self’.<sup>86</sup> This narrative is reinforced by other images in her collage mini zine, such as the front cover, which depicts a school-aged girl in a classroom at her writing desk.

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Fig. 17. Front cover from *Dear Daddy* [master zine] (n.d.) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Hanna’s textual collage in *Dear Daddy* casts her as an unsteady ‘anti-unit’ in terms of literary consumption and production. This is manifest in her flitting

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

between an excessive consumption and too sparing expenditure of words, as well as her inconsistency in terms of narrative production, shifting from fully formed narrative products on one page, a poem, to a singular word on the next. Her non-habits in terms of literary consumption and production pose an oppositional stance to the traditional patriarchal family unit in a literary context, eschewing its ideals of steady consumption and consistent narrative production in her zine. Her textual collages support her previously discussed anti-work confessionals. They posit a formal, symbolic rejection of values that underpin a late-capitalist work society still haunted by the spectre of the nuclear family.

### **Doodling and the Puritan time-valuation**

In the previous chapter on Acker, I argued that she constructs texts that are indicative of a “leisure sphere” through a combination of tangential narratives and drawings (‘dream maps’), revealing an authorial dissociation with a Puritan time-valuation and its construction of time around industry (Hebdige, 95). In the pages that follow, I reveal how Hanna similarly constructs texts that are indicative of a leisure sphere through doodles that are akin to Acker’s ‘dream maps’, as well as through the intrinsic qualities of the zine as a medium.

Reviewing the zine as a medium is important in this discussion, given that zines have deep cultural associations with the leisure sphere and hold the potential to communicate a politics irrespective of content or formal devices therein. Hebdige defines the 1970s punk subculture as being that which operated exclusively in the leisure sphere – “I wouldn’t wear my punk outfit for work”, he quotes one punk as saying, evidencing the hard line between work and leisure that punk supposedly draws and that imbricates its literature too, i.e., zines (94). Of some of the earliest UK punk fanzines (*Sniffin Glue, Ripped and Torn*, etc.), he notes that, “[t]he prose was littered with

references to ‘fat business men’ and ‘lard-ass capitalists’”, rebranding the work sphere as a hub for the passive consumption and apathy typically associated with the leisure sphere. The content of these early fanzines implied a wider aim of punk zine production, which was to rewrite a bourgeois capitalist conception of leisure. Additionally, the zine’s dominant use by non-industry groups to communicate subversive or radical political agendas, historically tethers the medium *itself* to the leisure sphere. Feminists, environmentalists, communists, so-called ‘slacker’ communities (punks, hippies, beatniks), and LGBTQ+ groups are amongst those who have adopted the medium to evade mainstream barriers of literary production. It is because of this history of the medium’s association with not-for-profit collectives and its inevitable production outside of work that the medium immediately evokes the leisure sphere.

Duncombe elaborates on the leisure status of zines, focusing on the centrality of the medium within ‘slacker’ communities: a subsection of society living outside of “bourgeois ideals of hard work, material success, and boundless consumption, implicitly setting up an alternative model of the good life” (97). Punks are situated in this grouping, operating solely in the leisure sphere and ideologically positioning themselves in opposition to the ‘white-picket-fence’ All-American lifestyle. In his study, Duncombe also insightfully reviews the complicated trade-off between labour and leisure that zine production implies. He writes:

There is an important exception to slack ethic of zero work in the zine world, for the zines that carry these articulate arguments against work are themselves products of intensive labors. (100)

He argues that zine production obscures an assumed hard line between work and leisure associated with ‘slacker’ communities like punk. Despite being a

product of the leisure sphere, zine-making is often a laboursome practice and zines themselves constitute a purposeful approach to consumption, repurposing everyday household items in their construction. Simply through her chosen medium and its capacity to prise open a traditional understanding of work and leisure, Hanna reimagines a bourgeois capitalist definition of leisure as a state of passivity and a site of limitless consumption

In *Bikini Kill #2*, Hanna extends the zine's inherent capacity to disrupt a traditional conception of work and leisure with the inclusion of doodles in her texts. Like Acker's 'A Map of My Dreams' in *Blood and Guts*, Hanna's doodles pose a symbolic resistance to the Puritan time-valuation's rebranding of time as industry commodity.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> See 'Acker's Anti-Work Literary Devices: Textual Bricolage, Tangential Drawings and the Amoral Text' for Acker's 'A Map of My Dreams'.

Fig. 18. 'Lots of Girls Get Bad Reputations' from *Bikini Kill #2* (1991) by Kathleen Hanna, et al., Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

In 'Lots of Girls Get Bad Reputations', Hanna makes a case for legalising sex work. Though a collaborative creation, this part of the zine betrays Hanna's authorship specifically, describing her first-hand experience of the sex industry and mirroring other unpublished commentaries on sex work from her archival collection, as previously discussed. Her commentary is accompanied by a diagram/doodle in the bottom left-hand margins instructing readers on how to construct a spray paint device for defacing public billboards.

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Fig. 19. 'Fight the Power' from *Bikini Kill #2* (1991) by Kathleen Hanna, et al., Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Hanna's 'Fight the Power' drawing is best understood as a doodle as opposed to an illustration because it bears little direct relevance to the commentary on sex work that surrounds it. Whereas illustrations imply a strong relationship with the text, often providing a visual interpretation of its content, doodles

are roughly drawn scrawls produced somewhat absent-mindedly and without obligation to the text. In the same way that Acker's 'A Map of My Dreams' is tangential in that it does not assist the progression of the narrative, thus flaunting the author's undirected time (time not dedicated industry), Hanna's 'Fight the Power' has a similar function. The intricate, time-consuming quality of her tangential doodle conflicts with the Puritan time-valuation by showcasing the author revelling in her leisure time (zine-making). It also parades a lack of industriousness on the part of the author in terms of producing a linear narrative – a feature of the bourgeois novel that is bound up in a capitalistic metanarrative of social and economic 'progress'.

Doodles also have important political connotations that are relevant to Hanna's formal critique of the Puritan time-valuation and that are usefully explored by Ernst Gombrich in *The Uses of Images* (1999). Gombrich analyses the social function of various art and visual communications, resolving that doodling has two main functions: "to enliven the hours of boredom or to relax our tensions" (225). Both of these functions speak to the specific leisure critique of work that punk mobilised – straddling the line between relaxation and enlivenment demonstrates the kind of non-passive, purposeful leisure that punks sought to initiate. The function of relaxation speaks to punk's anti-capitalist revolt against a culture of hyper-productivity incited by the Puritan work ethic, whilst enlivenment speaks to punk activism and non-industry focused production in the leisure sphere (zine, music, and garment making).

Not only does the mere presence of doodles in Hanna's zines incite this sort of leisure critique, the narrative encapsulated in this particular doodle also supports this. The young woman defacing the billboard wears a bikini top – a garment associated with swimming pools and sunbathing – arguably manifesting the leisure sphere at its peak: the vacation. What's more, it firmly situates her *outside* the traditional work sphere (what garment could be less appropriate for work than a bikini?). The moon above the mountains in the



background of the picture further cements the character within the leisure sphere, with night-time representing traditionally non-working hours (American business hours are 9am to 5pm). Simultaneously, the adjacent diagram of the homespun spray-can device that the girl is using to deface the billboard reveals a highly intricate, seemingly labour-intensive design. The “rollerball from deodorant can” part of the device evidences the homespun status of the contraption, revealing that it is constructed from recycled household items, conveying a purposeful approach to consumption. The rabble-rousing message she is graffitiing onto the billboard, “FIGHT THE POWER”, in combination with the sophisticated spray paint device communicates her non-passive approach to leisure: the sphere in which she exists.

The defacing of the billboard depicted in this doodle is also significant for its invocation of the *Situationists* (1957–1972): a predominantly European group of avant-garde artists, intellectuals, and political theorists who developed techniques to critique advanced capitalism in the mid-twentieth century, with a mind to social revolution. In Latham’s aforementioned study, he observes how “Situationist extrapolations of collage have involved the defacement [...] of public billboards in ways calculated to encourage critical engagement with the discourse of consumerism” (56). Hanna harks to this specific Situationist tradition of defacing public billboards in her doodle to consolidate the picture’s association with the Situationist’s Marxist critique of advanced capitalism and consumerism in the twentieth century. It links Hanna’s work with an anti-capitalist tradition, pre-dating the birth of punk, upon which punk’s leisure critique and anti-work politics stand.

### **The unproductive text**

In *The Mirror of Production* (1975), Jean Baudrillard critiques Marxism on the basis that it does not adequately challenge the fetishization of labour in

capitalist societies, and argues that individuals are not only alienated by the commodification of their labour, but also by the very *idea* of themselves as 'labour power'. He proposes that late-capitalist culture is characterised by "an unbridled romanticism of productivity" and challenges the cultural valuation of productivity as itself a form of value (Baudrillard, 17). Following a Puritan work ethic thesis, Baudrillard embraces the notion that individuals' illogical and excessive commitment to producing and performing labour, barring the actual utility of said labour, is a defining characteristic of capitalist culture. Hanna's revolt against excessive productivity, which she expresses via the aesthetic construction of her zines, is usefully read against Baudrillard's critique of hyper-productivity in an age of late-capitalism.

Hanna challenges this fetishization of productivity at the end of *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar*, in a list of writing aims for other Riot Grrrl zine makers. For aim number ten, she writes:

10. Challenge obsessive 'Product' making by publishing both prepared and unprepared work (journal pages and letters) Allowing both 'the finished' and the 'unfinished' to occupy the same space successfully.<sup>88</sup>

Hanna advocates that zine makers challenge the illogic of rampant productivity where a less all-consuming approach would suffice, suggesting that both finished and unfinished writing adds value to the page.

Hanna takes her own advice in the mini version of her early fanzine *Fuck Me Blind* (1988), purposefully lowering production values by chopping up whole, complete pages and collating them to display incomplete

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<sup>88</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* [zine master]. 1994. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 11, folder 8.

sentences, half images, and a generally ‘unpolished’ look. She also leaves in page numbers that reveal how her mini zine has been put together.

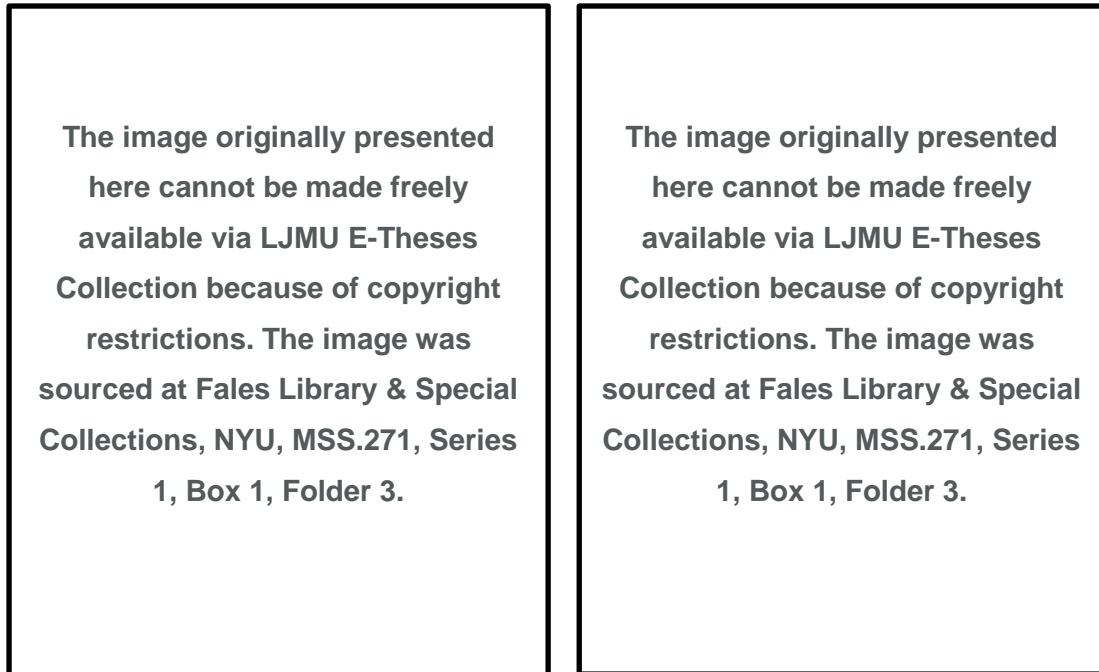


Fig. 20. & 21. ‘I Think I Am A Martyr’ and ‘I Think I Am A Martyr [cut up]’ from *Fuck Me Blind* [Master 1 of 3] (1988) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

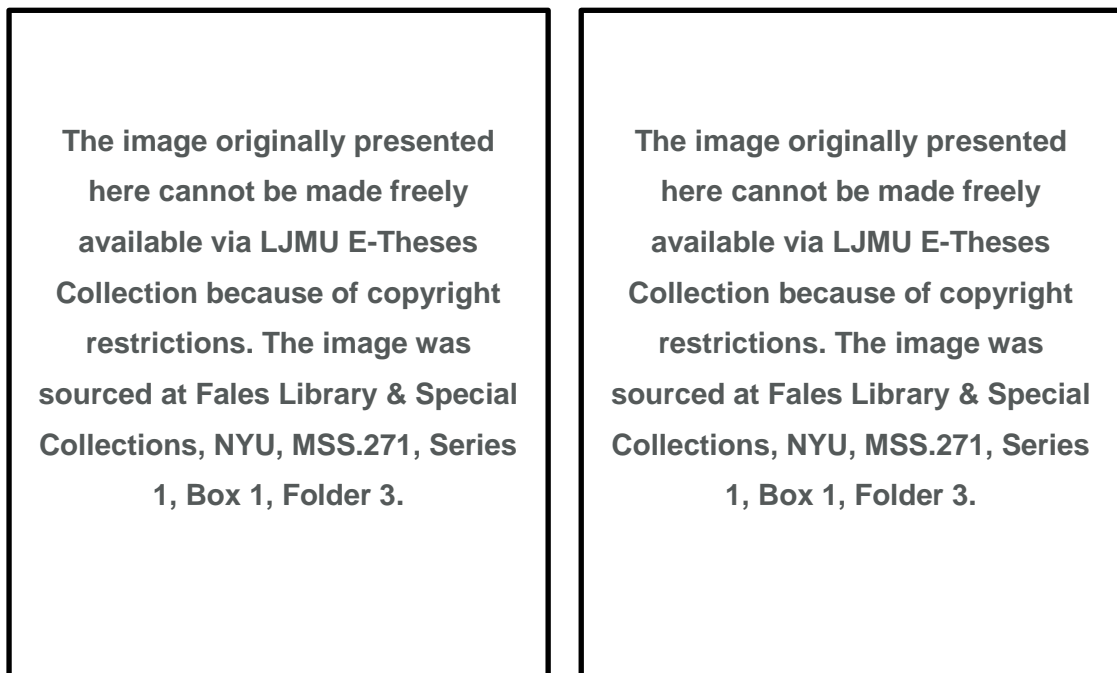


Fig. 22. & 23. 'Gas Mask Man' and 'Gas Mask Man [cut up]' from *Fuck Me Blind* (1988) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The two sets of images above first show the full pages, and opposite, their eventual cut-up in the form of the mini zine. Although it is not stated in Hanna's archival notes whether both versions of *Fuck Me Blind* – the full page edition and the cut-up mini zine – were produced and circulated together, critics generally refer to the content in the full-length version. Here, though, I focus on the mini zine for its deliberate degrading of the full-length version in terms of articulation and production aesthetics.

In the first set, 'I Think I Am A Martyr', finished sentences are purposefully reduced to half-finished sentences. In the second set, the 'Gas Mask Man' image is almost undecipherable when reduced to only a small section, showing only the man's fingers and a corner of the mask. Just as Acker's tangential drawings in *Blood and Guts* fail to advance the narrative, and therefore put her text at odds with the bourgeois novel and a capitalistic metanarrative of 'progress', Hanna's cut-up aesthetic functions in a similar way. By splicing complete pages into fragmented mini pages, Hanna renders the meaning of the original pieces indecipherable. In so doing, she intentionally creates 'unproductive texts': texts that are less effective at communicating meaning than their original forms. The numbers Hanna scrawls on each page marking the mechanics of the zine's construction also flaunt her rejection of production values that exceed the bare minimum.

Significantly, this purposeful resistance to the 'glossy commercial finish' in Hanna's texts also translates, in turn, to a symbolic resistance to excessive literary consumption. By erasing the illogical impulse to produce polished literary products and lots of them, Hanna also reduces the need to consume literary resources. In the most basic terms possible, this extends to the material constitution of zines, as the "unfinished" prose that she

encourages her fellow Riot Grrrl writers to share requires fewer words, less ink, and less paper.<sup>89</sup> Hanna's symbolic resistance to traditional capitalistic ideals of excessive production and consumption take on additional layers of feminist significance when understood in relation to emergent postfeminist scripts that sought to rebrand female empowerment in relation to women's roles as consumers.

As Martin Roberts asserts, fashion and lifestyle TV shows that became popular in the early 2000's (such as the BBC series, *What Not to Wear*) inverted feminism's historically anti-consumerist, anti-capitalist politics to propound a central postfeminist logic, linking female empowerment and liberation to how 'good' a consumer one is. He writes:

If feminism has historically aligned itself with the Marxist critique of consumer society [...] the discourse of postfeminism has proceeded to stand this critique on its head, articulating a model of feminine identity unthinkable outside consumption and constructing a logic in which 'empowerment' – perhaps the central tenet of postfeminist ideology [...] must be purchased. (Roberts, 229)

Contrastingly, Hanna rejects that notion that consumerism is empowering for women by sharing strong messages of female empowerment in her not-for-profit literary products: "REVOLUTION GIRL STYLE", "FIGHT THE POWER", and "[b]urn down the walls that say you can't".<sup>90</sup> Furthermore, these Grrrl zines – wells of female empowerment according to Riot Grrrl – are not purchased but are passed around at shows, are sent via post in exchange

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Kathleen Hanna, et al. *Bikini Kill #2*. 1991. The Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 12.

for a postage stamp, and are fashioned together from recycled everyday household items, challenging the underpinning postfeminist logic that female empowerment 'must be purchased'. As a result, and perhaps inspired by the rampant materialism of 1980s America, Hanna diagnoses a trend in the late 1980s/early 1990s in her zines that would later become a central feature of postfeminist culture in the early 2000s.

## ***2.4 The Problem with Professionalism: Understanding Power with Foucault and Reclaiming Amateurism with Riot Grrrl***

In this subsection, I demonstrate how Hanna's reading of Foucault, specifically his theory of how power manifests, provides crucial context for how she interprets a professional/amateur hierarchy in an age of late capital. I argue that Hanna offers a Foucauldian rereading of professionalism as an industry weapon with inherent gender biases, moulding individuals into acquiescent workers, and perpetuating women's subordination in dominant culture. Ultimately, I reveal the feminist significance of Hanna fostering a culture in which amateurism is celebrated under the auspices of Riot Grrrl.

In her aforementioned zine, *Fuck Me Blind*, Hanna critiques a late-capitalist culture of professionalism and explores how this configuration is particularly damning for women who are often deemed amateurs by default. In a literary context, she contemplates the association between authority, mastery, competency and male-authored writing. Correspondingly, she also outlines the inverse of this scenario, and the gender stereotypes that pigeonhole women's writing as being inferior, lower quality, and less effective, writing:

Women are scum, they're not human or at least/most they're not "good" humans. Good humans are independent and separate, they write well cuz they know structure and how to separate ideas into nice clean paragraphs. Because women aren't good and goodness is independence and separateness, women're the opposite. Women're

dependants who're connected. Connections're bad cuz they threaten productivity, which is good.<sup>91</sup>

Hanna mocks a “least/most” cultural valuation that maps onto gender, with men possessing the most value and women possessing the least. She exposes the absurdity of this formula by stripping it down to its logical premise and communicating this in the most basic terms possible: men are “good” and women are “bad”.<sup>92</sup> She connects the assumed universal characteristics of women – dependant, irrational – with an inability to write well. Conversely, she implies through suggested gender binaries that the assumed universal characteristics of men – independent, separate – enable them to write well according to established bourgeois literary values and tastes. Hanna uses this stereotype of male writers being more competent, skilled and more ‘professional’ than their female counterparts, who are considered ‘amateurs’ by comparison, to demonstrate how a cultural lauding of professionalism discriminates against women. What’s more, the distinction between ‘male professional’ and ‘female amateur’ Hanna alludes to in her zine is more directly tethered to her feminist critique of work in the final sentence, where she suggests that women are demonised as innately ‘amateurish’ because they threaten a late-capitalist ideal of hyper-productivity. Professionalism, on the other hand, supports a capitalistic ideal of excessive productivity by encouraging a strong identification with work.

Hanna’s understanding of professionalism as a disciplinary mechanism, moulding individuals for the sake of industry, is made all the more plausible by her reading inventory, which betrays a Foucauldian

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<sup>91</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Fuck Me Blind* [Master 2 of 3]. 1988. The Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 4.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.



understanding of how power is wielded. In the essay, 'The Subject and the Power' (1982), a copy of which is archived in Hanna's personal collection, Foucault summarises the overarching purpose of his work, which is to "create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects" (777). He argues that power is exerted through the transformation of human beings into 'subjects' as determined by larger power structures. In this aim, he looks at the objectification of individuals according to certain "modes of inquiry" mapping onto human life: biology, philology, economics, as well as fundamental human experiences such as madness, illness and death, and finally, according to our own self-identifying categories, such as sexuality and gender (Foucault, 777). Fundamental to Foucault's understanding of power is that it is disseminated through the manufacturing of individuals into subjects, as opposed to more hierarchical means of oppression. He invites us to seek out "new forms of subjectivity" in order to liberate ourselves from this kind of manufactured individualisation and the control that is wielded through this process (Foucault, 785).

Hanna demonstrates a Foucauldian understanding of professionalism as a power play with inherent gender biases, in the aforementioned passage from *Fuck Me Blind*. She exposes how the universal characteristics traditionally attributed to men that make them 'good' professionals, are actually only conceived as attributes in late-capitalist culture because they function to benefit industry. She also articulates a Foucauldian understanding of power at the beginning of *Bikini Kill #2*, advancing Foucault's suggestion that individuals should resist such manufactured individualisation in her list of pointers for readers: "Resist the internalization of capitalism, the reducing of people + oneself to commodities, meant to be consumed".<sup>93</sup> In a specifically

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<sup>93</sup> Kathleen Hanna, et al. *Bikini Kill #2*. 1991. The Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 12.

industry focused context, Hanna uses the analogy of people being transformed into commodities for consumption to illustrate Foucault's theory of the objectification of individuals in an age of advanced capitalism.

Not only does Hanna critique the fetishisation of professionalism in modern US culture by exposing it as a disciplinary mechanism for the sake of industry, she also subverts the implicit cultural valuation of amateurism as being in some way undesirable. Rather than attempting to sever the deeply ingrained cultural association between 'female' and 'amateur', insinuating women's *lack* of professionalism, Hanna instead seeks to raise the social status of amateurism and amateur contribution with Riot Grrrl. A prime example of this happens at the end of *Bikini Kill #2*, when she writes about how "girls need to start bands right now or make zines or something [...] we've just gotta gotta gotta take over. GirLs Must rule all Towns".<sup>94</sup> Hanna implores her readers to produce content and products for Riot Grrrl with a sense of immediacy, thereby rebuffing considerations of competency and skill.

If women are amateurs by default, then raising the social status of amateurism implicitly removes the cultural devaluation of female cultural production and contribution. Hanna's critique is therefore distinctly third wave in its approach. Whilst third wave feminism continued second wave critiques of traditionally female sites and feminine stereotypes, it also embraced the more pleasurable aspects of some of these to inspire activism, challenging the cultural devaluation of traditionally 'female' or 'feminine' activities and qualities. Much as "second wave feminists [...] challenged the application of 'girl' to adult women because of its implications of infantilisation and belittlement", as Gillis and Munford argue, some third wavers recuperated the application of 'girl' and other female stereotypes as an act of resistance to patriarchal culture that assigns negative value to these

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

terms, practices, and characteristics (170). Accordingly, Hanna's championing of amateurism in her Riot Grrrl zine imbues girl-led amateur cultural production with a sense of urgency and excitement. She embraces amateurism as an act of feminist resistance to patriarchal culture that both devalues amateurism and considers women amateurs by default.

## 2.5 Representing Female Sexuality: Reading Hanna's *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl in the 'Postfeminist Age'*

In this subsection, I explore Hanna's narrative representation of female sexuality in her zine, *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl* (n.d.), in relation to two 1990s postfeminist trends pertaining to female sexuality: Do-Me feminism and 'Girlie' feminism. I argue that Hanna expresses a typically third wave sensibility when it comes to female sexuality, which is based on a politics of contradiction, and is effective to varying degrees at undermining postfeminist logics that repacked a retrogressive conception of female sexuality and sexual liberation as a source of empowerment for women.

### *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl*

It has something to do with disease

– Kathleen Hanna, *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl*

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Fig. 24. Front cover from *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl* (n.d.) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Hanna's *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl* is essentially a zine/novella: a self-published text that is mostly made up of narrative prose fiction and is the same length as a novella. It deals with the overarching themes of conventional femininity and male-defined female sexuality and explores how these map onto the experiences of a multiform female protagonist. Shifting grammatical persons and identities, Hanna's female protagonist[s] navigate being female in a society that rewards their complicity with patriarchal exploitation and various modes of female abuse: from the trappings of oppressive femininity to incest. This is signposted in the zine's title, where the accolade of 'the most beautiful girl' is awarded to the girl who represents the most extreme and logical conclusion of misogynistic society and patriarchal violence: a dead girl. Julia Downes supports this reading, and crucially cites the zine for its thematic connection to Acker's narratives, writing:

Hanna engages with experiences of incest, abuse and violence, exploring the woman/daughter/girl-as-martyr whose complicity with abuse is rewarded with social power and popularity. [...] Acker's influence alerts us to the ugly, oppressive and violent aspects of girlhood and patriarchal characters that thread through Hanna's early written and spoken work. (Downes, 95-96)

Such patriarchal characters in *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl* unsurprisingly appear in the form of father figures and boyfriends, but also significantly in the form of doctors and surgeons. Much like Acker's narrative fascination with the construction of female-desire-as-disease, Hanna similarly makes use of this analogy.<sup>95</sup> Female subjectivity and desire is framed as a

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<sup>95</sup> In Acker's *Don Quixote*, the female knight's desire is indicative of her diseased mind: "She's a very sick girl" (16).

sickness that is medicated by one's socialisation: "You are taught to believe that how you are is sick and that you must rid yourself of your disease, your instincts".<sup>96</sup> This metaphor is literalised in Hanna's zine by a duel narrative in which a female patient is undergoing a surgical procedure, which is told through a series of images of doctors and nurses in 1960s-style medical uniforms that are distributed evenly throughout the text.

<p>The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library &amp; Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 6.</p>	<p>The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library &amp; Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 6.</p>	<p>The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library &amp; Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 6.</p>
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Fig. 25. & 26. & 27. Extract pages from *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl* (n.d.) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The novella begins with a parable about "the daughter of a wealthy land merchant" whose father does not want her to marry Chase, the man she loves, because "[t]o marry means to fuck", and her father insists that "all fucking be done by him".<sup>97</sup> The domineering father in the story illustrates the centrality and insistence of male desire, which is also depressingly accompanied by Chase, her lover's, perspective: "I choose the daughter of wealthy land

<sup>96</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl*. The Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 6.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

merchant to do all the things I secretly want to do and then condemn her for doing them".<sup>98</sup> The land merchant's daughter is trapped between her father's incestuous desire to control her sexuality, and lover's perspective, which wills her sexual complicity whilst also condemning her for it. The daughter expresses how breaking the unspoken "anti-fuck rule" associated with her gender will result in her being ostracised from "polite society", which embraces a female sexuality that is based on a condition of "denial".<sup>99</sup> The parable harks back to the medieval period and strongly echoes Acker's *Don Quixote*, in which her protagonist's quest to realise her desire similarly emphasises the condition of denial imposed on female sexuality according to a history of male-defined religion and misogynistic image making.

Hanna's story then jumps forward to more recent times, and tells the story of when "the treatments began", linking the prose with the series of surgical images threaded throughout.<sup>100</sup> These 'treatments' take the form of seemingly innocuous social interactions that reveal how girls are insidiously socialised to fulfil a gender stereotype: "It started with a woman on a train who said to me, my aren't you a pretty little angel".<sup>101</sup> Indoctrinated into the cult of female beauty as a girl, the narrator then goes on to describe how these social cues increased as she entered adolescence:

The treatments came closer together like contractions, ready to split my little girl lips at the seam, ready to kill me for my moving my legs too far apart. I had a small chest now and knew that the only way i was allowed to get power was from my father and his friends.<sup>102</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

The harmful and oppressive aspects of this process of female socialisation are highlighted by the violent imagery that accompanies her description: her 'split' lips and fear of being killed if she does not close her legs tightly enough to protect her modesty encapsulates the mounting pressure of the girl-adolescent to conform to gendered codes of behaviour. The passage also underscores one of the key conundrums explored in the zine: the idea that complicity in one's abuse/socialisation/objectification/exploitation is rewarded with social power by patriarchal forces. Having entered puberty, the girl-adolescent learns that the only power she can acquire is that which is bestowed on her by the men in her life: "He can ruin my life, He can make me famous, He can hurt me".<sup>103</sup> The 'he' is always capitalised to symbolise the God-like status that men possess over her life, and in patriarchal culture more broadly, where social power is doled out by men and taken away by men.

Later in the novella, the narrative voice shifts to the second person, and the narrator uses the 'you' pronoun to recount her own experiences, signifying the dissociation she feels from her own narrative and sexuality. In one section of the passage, she describes herself as an adolescent masturbating in her childhood bedroom: "You wind up your musical jewelry box and flop, face down again, on your bed. [...]. Your hand reaches down into your underwear".<sup>104</sup> She then describes what she imagines while she masturbates:

My awake sexual fantasy goes something like this: I am laying in bed and my mind is horny so I'm beautiful, even under these lights, which're bright. [...] There's a girl whose a woman whose real tan with

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.



brown cunt and head hairs and big breasts. She looks like me only more ideal. She looks like me with Miss America hair. [...] I'm cut short by a man in the lower left hand corner of the frame. he's watching me. His mouth's an oval and he's drooling. I can't come while looking at him.<sup>105</sup>

The passage reveals how her sexual fantasy takes its cues from male-created pornography, as suggested by the 'more ideal than her' Miss America type character who enters the scene in her head, and proceeds to add very little to the protagonist's sexual pleasure in the fantasy – her presence is more a regurgitation of a pornographic cliché than representative of her own desires. This concept is consolidated by the images of the drooling male voyeur in the corner of the frame who watches the two women touch themselves, and tellingly prevents the protagonist from reaching sexual climax. The story reveals how the male libidinal economy suppresses female sexual pleasure, as she is unable to separate her own desires from a narrowly-defined, male-centric conception of sexuality that is represented in pornography. The introduction to this part, '*My awake sexual fantasy*', is ironic because the sexual fantasy she proceeds to describe is anything but hers.

In other parts of the zine, the female protagonist is financially rewarded for her complicity in her own sexual objectification. For instance, a series of "greasy" male photographers take pictures of the protagonist who, "needing the money", moulds herself into whatever vision of femininity they want to capture; she becomes "a girl whose sole ambition in life is to fit herself into someone else's fantasy".<sup>106</sup> In another section of the zine, the protagonist takes her mother's engagement ring to be pawned. The

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

proprietor, Leon, offers to pay her more than the measly eighty-five dollars he initially offers her if she'll agree to also give him a lap dance in the back of the shop: "I'll give you 125 for that piece of shit if you do a little dance show for me in the backroom".<sup>107</sup> In these moments, complicity in her own sexual objectification is rewarded with money that is invariably doled out by male characters.

In another part of her novella, Hanna brings attention to the constructedness of the narrative: "In the beginning of the story, we have, me, a character that's the idealized version of me but i leave in gory details to mask the fact".<sup>108</sup> In the context of Hanna's critique of androcentric culture, this metafictional reflection breaks down literary conventions associated with a history of male-authored writing that dominates the literary canon. Appropriately, the narrative then describes what happens when the female narrator breaks down the codes of conventional femininity:

I am a girl whose bald headed. This makes me a creature whose despised and not human at all to all passers by.

And also I'm incredibly powerful sexually and my hair tells them, i'm not afraid. It's a symbol designed by some-one other than me, about hair being really sexy on girls. I've cut off all your voyear sex, there's nothing left for you to imagine dragging me by.<sup>109</sup>

The narrator cuts off her hair, eschewing a prominent symbol of conventional femininity and ideals associated with it, such as sexual passivity. She contemplates her lack of hair as a statement of her domineering sexual presence, threatening to displace the male voyeur at the centre of the libidinal

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<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

economy. Failing to comply with patriarchal ideals of her gender, the narrator suffers a loss of social power and popularity, which is manifest in her dehumanisation to a 'creature-like' status, as well as the degrading verbal abuse she receives from the men she encounters: "i'm twenty feet out the house when it starts. "You've got an ugly haircut, but your body's okay" says the boy in the car with long greasy hair".<sup>110</sup> Her shaved head also evokes an earlier manifestation of the punk aesthetic (predating Riot Grrrl's more girlish aesthetic) that embraced androgynous identities to accompany their exploration of 'unfeminine' passions and behaviours – in particular, sexual perversities and domineering or even aggressive sexual personalities. Incidentally, Acker herself was renowned for her shaved head look, and in Kraus' biography, she even notes how this was worked into Acker's sex show act: "They worked her shaved head into the act: she's become Joan of Arc, she's completely delusional" (28). Tellingly, Acker's shaved head was used as a symbol for her sexual power *and* her perversion in the sex show, transforming her into the powerful figure of the girl-martyr, Joan of Arc, but also supposedly signalling her sexual wildness. Hanna's narrative description of the bald headed protagonist provides a commentary on conventional femininity, and the cultural association between women with shaved heads and a perverse female sexuality.

At the end of *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl*, the narrator reflects on her experience of resisting the urge to sexually self-exploit to attain scraps of social power in patriarchal culture:

I trained myself to be unsexy, i cut off my hair, stop shaving, tried to kill her. The hair fell, the shrapnel, the definition, in silence. I thought

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<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

that once i stopped being cute, stopped dancing for their eyes, that they, that they'd, stop looking. They didn't stop.

There's no reason for her to be dead anymore, it doesn't matter. We begin to speak together, through my lips.<sup>111</sup>

Depressingly, the narrator resolves that there is no point avoiding objectification, because her attempts to do so fail regardless. She resolves that what little social power she acquires by 'dancing for their eyes' she may as well take, and thus the performative feminine identity she tried to kill by shaving her head may as well live on in her. In essence, the ending is also a response to the uncredited quote on the back cover of the zine, in which an unnamed author puts the onus on girls for the way they are treated sexually by boys:

Maybe there should be absolute equality between boys and girls but there isn't and you girls must face it. [...] Boys are physically more impulsive. It is YOU. It is YOU that encourages them in heavy petting.<sup>112</sup>

Hanna's narrative, in combination with this quote, highlights the double bind of female sexuality, which circles back to the parable at the beginning of the zine where Chase, the merchant's daughter's lover, wills her sexual complicity whilst simultaneously condemning her for it. The zine showcases the various distressing and impossible situations girls and women find themselves in as they negotiate their sexualities in a culture that rewards complicity in their sexual exploitation.

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

### **Do-Me feminism and Girlie feminism**

In *Post-Backlash Feminism*, Bean argues that the backlash against feminism in Reagan-era America sparked an age of media-driven 'prefix feminisms' – Do-Me feminism, post-feminism, power-feminism, Girlie-feminism, and even third wave feminism – all of which weakened the movement "by parsing its concerns into narrow, personal rationales for, basically, behavioural choices" (5). Encompassing the backlash's tacit function to divide and conquer the women's movement, these prefixes all in some way "call for women to embrace domesticity, sexual display, the production of children, marriage, fashion and/or sex work as empowering or definitive of feminist politics" (Bean, 5). The two trends most directly connected to female sexuality that Bean explores in depth include Do-Me feminism and Girlie feminism.

In Bean's estimation, so-called Do-Me feminism encourages women to explicitly express their desire for sex with men, and interprets this behaviour as a symbol of female empowerment, as well as a positive progression from second wave feminism and its assumed puritanical stance on sex. Bean argues that: "[T]he Do-Me feminist props up masculine authority by subordinating politics to sex, substituting titillation for viable political goals" (26). Ideologically similar, yet more focused on embracing the symbols of twenty-first century conventional femininity, Girlie feminism is based on the premise that "enculturation acts as a boon to women" and "build[s] an ideology of empowerment upon fashion and consumer tastes" (Bean, 94; 96). Girlies, broadly speaking, are a group of younger women who, still believing in the values of feminism and using its languages of liberation and empowerment, stage a reclamation of traditionally feminine arenas and rituals: fashion, make-up, baking, and other such 'girly stuff'. In Bean's estimation, Girlie feminism, like Do-Me feminism, proffers a monolithic and reductive understanding of critical second wave debates on sex, femininity, and beauty culture, relying on a narrative of second wave feminism as sexless and dull,

from which to launch its retrogressive agenda. She argues that, through a faux progressive rhetoric, these postfeminist iterations actually purport familiar patriarchal ideals and counterintuitively uphold masculine authority. Essentially, in Bean's view, these 'pre-fix feminisms' are all subsets of 'post-feminism', connected by their unifying aim to supplant second wave feminism on the basis of its irrelevancy. Interestingly, Bean also includes third wave feminism in this subset of 'pre-fix feminisms' – a characterisation that some pro-third wave feminist critics would contest, arguing that the third wave genuinely embraces second wave critiques, and therefore constitutes more of an evolution from, rather than a straightforward 'doing away with', feminist politics.

Bean not only critiques third wave feminism for its reading of second wave feminism as being in some way irrelevant, but also for its movement towards a more individualistic politics and focus on women's behaviour, as opposed to social policy. She also contends that the third wave, like Do-Me feminism, Girlie feminism, and "[f]eminisms of the 1990s" in general, "embraced highly sexualised notions of female empowerment" (Bean, 101). Consequently, it brought about a diminished conception of feminism, overly concerned with sexual expression and tending not to include "the kinds of hardships with which feminism traditionally concerns itself" (Bean, 66). Despite Bean's rather damning assessment of the third wave, she does note its slight ideological disparity with other post-backlash iterations such as Girlie: "While Girlie is often associated with the Third Wave, indeed defined as a derivative of that brand of feminism, in fact, ideologically Girlies share more with Do-Me feminists." (Bean, 96). If nothing more, and according to Bean's own logic, the third wave's arguably overstated focus on sexual expression as a means to female empowerment at least provides a point of contrast in the 1990s to the more uncritical and insipid postfeminist trends of Do-Me feminism and Girlie feminism. I contend that, for this reason alone, and

despite what Bean argues is the third wave's misrepresentation of the second wave as in need of replacement, it is an important oppositional stance to these seriously anti-feminist trends, as Bean understands them. This distinction is also observable in Hanna's *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl*.

Whilst, for instance, the "Do-me rhetoric uncritically embraces both sex work and pornography as liberating choices for women", Hanna's representation of female sexuality in her zine demonstrates how mainstream (heteronormative, male-centric) pornography actually damages female desire and disempowers women sexually (Bean, 28). In the previously discussed passage, 'My awake sexual fantasy', we observe how the female narrator's masturbatory fantasy is disrupted by tropes taken from this dominant mode of pornography, which panders solely to male desire and prevents her from reaching sexual climax. What's more, when the multiform female protagonist is most complicit in her own sexual exploitation (as Do-Me feminism encourages her to be, according to Bean) – posing suggestively for male photographers, lap dancing for Leon in the pawnshop, and generally "identifying herself according to her sexual availability to men" – she is rewarded with money (Bean, 26). However, contesting Do-Me feminism, the scene is devoid of a sense of the protagonist's *empowerment*. Ultimately, *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl* destroys the logic that underpins Do-Me feminism, which suggests that the social power one might acquire through "[f]ellating [p]atriarchy" as Bean puts it, is satisfactory (Bean, 15). The small bursts of social power the protagonist acquires by flaunting her sexuality are quickly undermined by moments of intense degradation, presenting male-bestowed social power as fundamentally unsatisfying and transitory.

As for Girlie feminism, the narrative in *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl* presents a more ambiguous relationship with this postfeminist trend. Although the narrator shaves her head, eschewing patriarchal ideals of conventional female beauty, the feminist politics/activism expressed in this

scene are nonetheless bound up with questions of *style*, arguably subordinating feminist politics to fashion as per the Girlie tradition, according to Bean. However, Hanna is also perhaps too critical of these sites for her feminism to be easily located within Bean's understanding of Girlie feminism, considering she acknowledges the oppressive function of fashion and beauty culture for women *whilst* also exploring the potential of these sites for feminist innovation, female bonding, and pleasure. For instance, near the beginning of the zine, Hanna gives narrative form to the idea that young girls are culturally indoctrinated into oppressive femininity via these traditionally feminine sites. Echoing some radical second wave critiques of the oppressive function of make-up for women, for instance, the following passage is imbued with violent imagery:

The lipstick, reddish burgundy like a hurted twat, like the inside of a berry, like me. And the eyeshadow they'd sprayed in rabbit's eyes, i wore as a sign of my special girlness.<sup>113</sup>

There is, then, a negotiation of contradictions at play in Hanna's narrative where certain fashion and stylistic choices are presented as oppressive (lipstick and eyeshadow), whereas others are presented as political and feminist (shaved head). Hanna's narrative 'writing through' of such contradictions is emblematic of the third wave, which embraced a politics of contradiction and that, rightly or wrongly (wrongly according to Bean), sought to move feminist discussion in a different direction and negotiate the boundaries of female agency, self-determination, and individualisation.

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.



## 2.6 *Grrrls on an Erotic Mission to Restore Female Sexual Desire: Hanna's Erotic Splicing and 'Feminine Writing'*

### 5. Write about fucking

– Kathleen Hanna, *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar*

In the following pages, I argue that Hanna aesthetically constructs texts to evoke the sensual through Acker-esque erotic splicing and associational montage. Furthermore, I suggest that Hanna extends Acker's invitation to write authentic female sexual desire into existence in her zines by arming her Riot Grrrl readers with the essential tenets of *écriture féminine*, as well as encouraging them to write about sex and their own desire. This is significant when we consider previously discussed postfeminist manifestations, such as the rise of raunch culture and Do-Me feminism, that preached sexual liberation based on a monolithic and potentially patriarchy-reinforcing conception of female sexuality. By encouraging readers to seek out a self-determined sexuality through writing, Hanna's zines resist these postfeminist logics in the 1990s.

### **Erotic splicing**

In the previously discussed zine, *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar*, the narrator's violent sexual fantasies about The Lemonheads frontman, which speaks to a broader feminist critique of the underhanded misogyny Dando supposedly represents – “white, male, pseudo liberal, promulgating the myth

of the transcendent artist” – are intercut with Xeroxed magazine and hand-drawn images of the rock star.<sup>114</sup>



Fig. 28. Extract pages from *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* (1994) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

In these, Dando is always naked or engaging in a sexual act of some description. While in one sense, these pictures accompany the stalker’s depraved narrative and feminist critique of Dando’s cultural status, which is

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<sup>114</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* [zine master]. 1994. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 11, folder 8.

underpinned by misogynistic scripts, they nonetheless carry the theme of sexual desire across the text, making the zine itself into a site of desire for readers. Hanna subverts the male gaze by appropriating Dando's image according to the whims of her desiring female narrator. The narrator corroborates this aim in the narrative when she states: "Feeling so spectated myself. I get pleasure from looking at this bare chested boychild".<sup>115</sup> The image in the top right-hand corner encapsulates the narrator's sexual objectification of Dando. His hand cups his bare chest and his index and forefinger spread to reveal a nipple. His long hair dangles sensually around the tip of his thumb and his head is cropped out of the image entirely, directing our attention solely towards his body. The sensual montage Hanna achieves with this splicing of erotic images of Dando is reinforced by more subtle associational montage using red: the colour of desire. Like in Acker's *My Mother: Demonology*, wherein Acker repeatedly references the colour red in her imagery to carry a sexual connotation across two disparate narratives, Hanna literalises this by printing some of the images of Dando in red and dispersing these throughout the zine.

In other zines, this sort of erotic splicing is more abstract. In this extract from *Bikini Kill #1*, the image at the bottom of the page is of folds of material, emulating the fleshy folds of external female genitalia. This sexual connotation is cemented by the subtitle accompanying the image, 'My Pussy Life', which seems to suggest a centralisation of the sexually desiring female body, not only in the 'pussy life' of the author, but also in the text itself with the image dominating the page.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 4.

Fig. 29. 'My Pussy Life' from *Bikini Kill #1* (1990) by Kathleen Hanna et al., Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Again, in *Fuck Me Blind*, this more abstract approach to erotic splicing is taken, carrying the suggestion of sexual desire across a text. At a glance, the image pictured below appears to be merely a series of circular shapes, but on closer inspection, the pen drawing is actually of naked male and female bodies of varying proportions and depth on the page. The curves and mounds of the bodies meld together in a way that is impressionistic and subtly sensual.

The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 4.

Fig. 30. Abstract drawing of bodies from *Fuck Me Blind* [Master 2 of 3] (1988) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales

Although Hanna's erotic splicing and associational montage function, as in Acker's work, to transform the text into the place of desire, it is important to acknowledge that in Hanna's zines, these erotic images are often accompanied by complex discussions about consent and female sexuality as it is negatively constructed in the American cultural imagination, as well as the sexual tyrannies inflicted on women and girls: rape, incest, molestation and paedophilia. In *Bikini Kill #2*, for instance, in a creative writing piece called 'There's Something Inside Her That No One Wants To See', the girl narrator gives a brief yet rich impression of her character and the topic of budding, adolescent female sexuality is explored in the passage. In her interior monologue, the girl narrator remarks: "If there is nothing natural about me, might as well be the best construct ever [...] a Farah Fawcett poster that comes to life, tearing the swimsuit down below my tit".<sup>116</sup> The narrator decides to sexualise herself, reasoning that she already exists as a sexual construct in the American cultural imagination. She resolves to capitalise on her inevitable sexual objectification, forming a sexuality based on male desire as depicted in a pin-up poster, thus renouncing a self-defined sexuality. The short story highlights how a predetermined vision of female sexuality, as constructed in the American cultural imagination, stifles both female sexual subjectivity and the potential for female sexual pleasure. In other zines, like the previously discussed *Dear Daddy*, the theme of father-daughter incest permeates the collage.

Arguably, this changes the nature of some of the erotic splicing into something far more sinister for readers, perhaps evoking feelings of anger, alienation, and despair, as opposed to uncomplicated sexual desire. A prime example of this happens in *Fuck Me Blind* in the extract pictured here. The

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<sup>116</sup> Kathleen Hanna, et al. *Bikini Kill #2*. 1991. The Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 12.

image is of a bare-chested woman smiling at a man who is pressing his lips to her naked hip. The desirability and erotic potential of the image is shattered by the words pasted over it – ‘my father treats me like a dog’, ‘I am a social construct’ and ‘abuse is love’ – intimating the tyrannies inflicted on female sexuality by patriarchal forces.

**The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, Series 1, Box 2, Folder 3.**

Fig. 31. Naked women collage from *Fuck Me Blind* [Master 1 of 3] (1988) by Kathleen Hanna, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The image and words combined imply the smiling naked woman’s silent pain, which is linked to her sexuality as the image suggests, transforming how we receive the eroticism in the picture by inciting conflicting feelings of desire, arousal, contempt, anger, and alienation.

The erotic splicing in Hanna’s zines has a dual function then. On the one hand, it supports her critique of women’s sexual subjugation, whilst at the same time, inciting genuine arousal, encouraging us to think about how we receive eroticism. Hanna best summarises how her literary exploration of female sexuality holds pro-sex feminism in contention with some second wave critiques of female sexual oppression in an unpublished essay from her

collection, in which she states: “This writing is meant to exist in the space between alienation and hope”.<sup>117</sup> Although Hanna is referring to her Riot Grrrl writing in general here, this quote is particularly useful for thinking about the significance of her sex writing. The erotic splicing in her zines holds the potential to both unite her young female readers in their sense of sexual alienation in patriarchal culture, as well as elicit a sexual response and encourage them to explore their sexualities, despite patriarchal assaults on them.

The perverse function of erotic splicing to unite young female readers in their sexual alienation speaks to a broader and distinctive use of aesthetics in Hanna’s and Acker’s writing, and one that reveals a lineage between the artists – a line of enquiry that Ioanes similarly attends to. Ioanes argues that both writers mobilise a “feminist aesthetics of shock” that functions unusually in their writing to inspire “an ethic of identification and attachment”, as opposed to its typical function in a traditional avant-garde context, which is characterised by a “numbing and foreclosing of audience response” (176). She argues that Hanna and Acker employ “a modified form of shock” to complicate the concept of consent, and “work through complex, contradictory emotional responses to sexual violence” (Ioanes, 175; 176). In the same way that “shock provides an entry point into multiple responses”, the aesthetics of sexual desire manifest in Hanna and Acker’s texts also create opportunities for complex affective responses to be held in tension (arousal, pleasure, pain, anger), and encourages unifying affective experiences between readers that would form the basis of the Riot Grrrl community (Ioanes, 177).

### **Hanna’s linguistically ‘feminine’ sex writing**

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<sup>117</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Writings about Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl, “The Scene”* [2 of 5]. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 4, folder 8.

In addition to using the device of erotic splicing to evoke a complicated sexuality, Hanna also foregrounds writing about female desire as a key objective for herself and other Riot Grrrl zine makers. At the end of *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar*, for example, she includes in her list of instructions for writing, simply: "5. Write about fucking".<sup>118</sup> In an unpublished creative writing piece from her collection, Hanna elaborates on the need to 'write about fucking', and so expresses her affinity with the essential tenets of *écriture féminine*. In the untitled short story, the narrator describes a scene in which an anonymous male voyeur has violent sex with her sister, during which she contemplates the state of her own desire:

My hands cupped my ears when you hit my sister when you fucked her with yr fists and i pretend not to notice because looking opened up the possibility that i'd be next and desire, my desire, is not allowed within this economy because the desire, my desire, which is a privelage i am to enjoy, like two lesbians fucking in front of you, is only allowed in small doses at certain times when you desire my face to seem flush and wanting when you desire my desire to come forth and usher you up, THEN my desire may trickle out, like a baby bird crushed and uttering under the magnifying lens.<sup>119</sup>

The narrator explores how her sexual desire is constructed through the male gaze and is conceived as an auxiliary to male sexual desire, only permitted to 'trickle out' as and when it is required to rouse male lust. She perceives her

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<sup>118</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar* [zine master]. 1994. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, box 11, folder 8.

<sup>119</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Writings [1 of 2]*. Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 25.



own desire as that which is deeply suppressed by various patriarchal forces – a concept that is consolidated by the image of the faceless male voyeur in the story, who is bestowed no distinguishing features aside from his gender and his penchant for ‘fucking’. Notably in the passage, the narrator also connects her stifled desire to a male libidinal ‘economy’, in which her desire is framed in terms of capitalistic gain and profit motives, fortified through the confluence of patriarchalism and capitalism. She also crucially hints at her own forbidden idiosyncratic and unorthodox sexual preferences. In the first sentence of the paragraph, she watches her sister being struck and vigorously penetrated with fists, which, she confesses, threatens to awaken her own desire should she continue to watch, implying her own sadomasochistic tendencies.

Later in the narrator’s interior monologue, she reflects on the significance of writing for liberating herself sexually from the stifling effects of a patriarchal-capitalist libidinal economy. She writes: “I thought the best place to start was paper because the only way i could destroy you was by taking back language”.<sup>120</sup> Echoing a similar sentiment to Acker’s “destroy language which normalizes and controls”, spoken by half-human half-robot woman Abhor in *Empire of the Senseless*, the female author in Hanna’s short story similarly introduces the core logic that underpins *écriture féminine* (Acker, 134). She articulates the notion that language is a source of female oppression that women writers must co-opt, transforming it into something that is linguistically feminine and subversive, in order to eschew patriarchal dominance and control. Hanna’s short story, in which she highlights the impossibility of female desire in a masculine libidinal economy and connects this with a need for ‘taking back language’, essentially gives narrative form to Cixous’s position. Cixous argues that “woman’s libidinal economy is neither

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

identifiable by a man nor referable to the masculine economy”, and that such a male/female binary, which excludes female desire, translates into literary representation both poetically and philosophically (1975, 95). In part, she blames Freudian psychoanalysis for women’s “reduced symbolic activity” in the sexual economy (Cixous 1975, 95). She cites Freud’s representation of the ‘feminine Oedipus complex’ (the passage from pre-Oedipal sexuality to ‘normal’ sexuality) as neither a “primary process” nor a process from which “she ever recovers”, as a key contribution to the phallogentric tradition (Cixous 1975, 95).

Unlike Acker’s sex writing, which is often overtly experimental, breaking down patriarchal automatisms – traditional, learnt patterns of literacy – Hanna’s sex writing constitutes a far more subtle study in practicing the linguistically experimental style attributed to *écriture féminine*. For instance, in the passage above, words are shortened from ‘your’ to ‘yr’, as well as de-capitalised, ‘I’ to ‘i’. Shortening of words and de-capitalisation is a common characteristic in Riot Grrrl writing, as will be discussed in the following chapter on Riot Grrrl zines. Whilst these linguistic features could be easily dismissed as merely the consequence of the makeshift immediacy of punk zine writing and the punk aesthetic in general, they nonetheless take on additional layers of significance when used in the context of Riot Grrrl’s feminist critique and Hanna’s narrative denunciation of the suppressing effects of patriarchally encoded language on female desire.

To understand the feminist, political implications of such a diminutive form of language, it is helpful to refer to Ngai’s theory of ‘cute’. In her study, Ngai explores how the minor aesthetic category of ‘cute’ speaks more to a postmodern culture than that of its canonically major (patriarchal) aesthetics rivals: the beautiful and the sublime. She explores how avant-garde artists have increasingly employed ‘cute’ as a gesture of resistance to late-capitalist

consumer culture and, importantly for this study, attests to its strong alignment with culturally constructed femininity:

Cute objects have no edge to speak of, usually being soft, round, and deeply associated with the infantile and the feminine [...] cuteness also becomes identified with a 'twittering' use or style of language, marked as feminine. (Ngai 'The Cuteness', 814)

In her book *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012), Ngai expands on how the aesthetics of 'cute' manifest in language through a "process of verbal cutification", whereby a word is "reduced to an even more diminutive version of itself" increasingly emulating the infantilised speech of a baby's "murmur or a coo" (87). The 'deverbalizing', or rather 'cutified', form of language observable in Hanna's writing via shortened words and de-capitalisation manifests the aesthetic 'cute' and evokes femininity, railing against canonical literary aesthetics and a linguistically masculine style.

Finally, in *Fuck Me Blind*, Hanna alludes to how the "[s]ubordination of the feminine to the masculine order" necessitates "the abasement of woman", as Cixous puts it (1975, 92). She expresses the idea that female sexuality has been demonised according to this hierarchical arrangement, exposing how female sexuality has not only been obscured, but also characterised as 'bad' in order to uphold the righteousness of a male libidinal economy:

Because no one wants to admit that badness exists, women doubt their existence. Once something is written down, it's more true than it was

before it was written. [...]. Writing is a way for people who're told they're bad and that badness doesn't exist to validate their existence.<sup>121</sup>

She resolves that by writing about one's 'badness', one's desire, woman writes herself into existence. Evoking the essential tenets of *écriture féminine* for her Riot Grrrl readership, Hanna's zines are an important point of reference for how Acker's linguistically experimental writing style and intellectual influence is traceable in Riot Grrrl zine writing via *écriture féminine*.

In this chapter, I have illuminated the ideological, intellectual, and aesthetic influence of Acker on the writing of Hanna. Like Acker, Hanna similarly expresses her anti-work politics by undermining logics instilled by the Puritan work ethic in her sex work confessionals. Not only that, but Hanna uses literary devices and aesthetics inherited from Acker's writing to support her anti-work discussions. For example, her textual collage is akin to Acker's textual bricolage in that it posits a symbolic rejection of a patriarchal-capitalist economy: the foundation of the modern labour market. Similarly, Hanna's doodles are akin to Acker's tangential drawings in that they present an oppositional stance to the Puritan time-valuation (the construction of time around industry). Finally, with regard to anti-work literary devices, Hanna's aesthetic embrace of punk amateurism continues Acker's critique of the rising culture of professionalism in America, into the 1990s. Hanna co-opts these elements from Acker's anti-work critique of the backlash in the 1980s, to negotiate a related trend in the 1990s: New Traditionalism. Unlike Acker, though, Hanna's anarchistic punk-feminist rejection of work reveals some

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<sup>121</sup> Kathleen Hanna. *Fuck Me Blind* [Master 2 of 3]. 1988. The Kathleen Hanna Papers, 1988-2015, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.271, series 1, box 1, folder 4.

unintended overlaps with New Traditionalist discourse by rationalising a retreat from the work sphere, as well as unpaid home-based labour, for women.

Furthermore, like Acker, Hanna also assigns herself the task of writing about sex. However, in contrast to Acker's specific motivation to undercut 1980s pro-life rhetoric, Hanna aims to add nuance to the postfeminist trend, Do-Me feminism, representing female sexuality as a source of *both* oppression *and* empowerment. Embracing the same intellectual resources as Acker, Hanna interprets and manifests her own expression of *écriture féminine* when writing about sex, adopting the aesthetics of 'cute' in her language to eschew patriarchal inscription. What's more, Hanna also aesthetically constructs her zines to evoke the sensual, using the same sensual montage technique as Acker does in her novels. She uses erotic splicing to hold serious discussions of female sexual victimisation in tandem with joyous accounts of female sexual pleasure, thus revealing a distinctly third wave mediation on female sexuality. Ultimately, these features combined betray the influence of Acker in Hanna's writing, illuminating a punk-feminist literary lineage that I extend and reinforce further in the next chapter on Riot Grrrl zines.

### *Chapter Three: Riot Grrrl Zines*

In the discussion that follows, I examine several original Riot Grrrl zines from *The Riot Grrrl Collection* archive at Fales library. I propose that, like Hanna, Riot Grrrls co-opt literary devices from Acker's feminist critique in the 1980s to negotiate the backlash as it appears in its more advanced forms in the 1990s with the emergence of postfeminist trends: New Traditionalism and Do-Me feminism. However, in this chapter, I also consider the possibility that postfeminist trends hold the potential for innovation as much as they threaten anti-feminism, and therefore, to characterise postfeminism as a straightforward progression from the backlash is perhaps too reductive an assessment of postfeminism as a cultural field.

### 3.1 *The Literary Avant-Garde and Écriture Féminine in Riot Grrrl Zines: Impossible Schizoid Girl and Pirate Jenny*

This subsection is dedicated to drawing out Riot Grrrl's connection to the literary avant-garde, of which Acker was a part. I demonstrate the strong interest that some Riot Grrrl writers show in experimental literary forms and their engagement with a history of both modernist and postmodernist literature and ideas. Focusing on two zines in particular, *Impossible Schizoid Girl* by Kelly Spivey and *Pirate Jenny* by P.J. Goodman, I read these texts within a tradition of disruptive (punk) women's writing that extended feminist political literary methods from the 1970s – specifically, French feminism's practice of *écriture féminine* – into new modes of feminist discourse in the 1990s. In part, this subsection provides justification for my foregrounding of Riot Grrrl writing as an artistic movement, as well as forming the basis for later subsections that explore Riot Grrrl's artistic response to postfeminist logics.

#### *Impossible Schizoid Girl*

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Fig. 32. & 33. Front covers of pink issue and orange issue from *Impossible Schizoid Girl* (n.d.) by Kelly Spivey, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

*Impossible Schizoid Girl* is a zine by Kelly Spivey published in Portland, Oregon. As is commonly found with self-published punk zines, details such as publication dates and issue numbers are uncertain. However, these copies of the zine reside in the archival collection of Zan Gibbs: a Riot Grrrl and avid zine collector in the early to mid-1990s, who was involved with the burgeoning movement in Oregon and Washington, DC, before moving to Canada where she started up the Canadian faction of Riot Grrrl press. Her collection notes state that the bulk of the material in her collection is dated between 1992 and 1997, indicating that Gibbs did most of her collecting during this period, and that *Impossible Schizoid Girl* was likely circulating somewhere between 1992 and 1997 too. Archivists at Fales library also advise that the pink cover zine (pictured above left) is probably issue one and the orange cover zine (above right) issue two, based on length and structure. As its title suggests, the series is loosely based on the theme of mental illness. In the orange issue, Spivey provides definitions for psychiatric terms such as 'schizophrenia' and the now disused term 'dementia praecox' – "[a] common form of insanity, developing usually in late adolescence or early adult life" – corroborating the zine's overarching theme of psychological disorder.<sup>122</sup>

*Impossible Schizoid Girl* is one of the most remarkable zines I sourced from the Riot Grrrl archive due to its pronounced literary concerns. Zines like this, which show a direct and sustained concern for literature and literary form, force us to re-evaluate the subcultural studies model most commonly applied to Riot Grrrl. In other words, the significant artistic investments and

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<sup>122</sup> Kelly Spivey. *Impossible Schizoid Girl* [orange issue] Zan Gibbs Riot Grrrl Zine Collection 1987-2003 [bulk 1992-1997], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.364, series 1, box 4, folder 8.



innovations made in zines like *Impossible Schizoid Girl* appear to transcend a reading of Riot Grrrl zines as subcultural artifacts – as minor literary forms, rather than art. Zines like this one suggest that some Riot Grrrl creations are closer to Literature (with a capital ‘L’) than might be assumed, both engaging in literary criticism of ‘highbrow’ art and culture, as well as actually *producing* pieces of postmodern fiction. For example, in her zine, Spivey writes a reading inventory/list of recommended books:

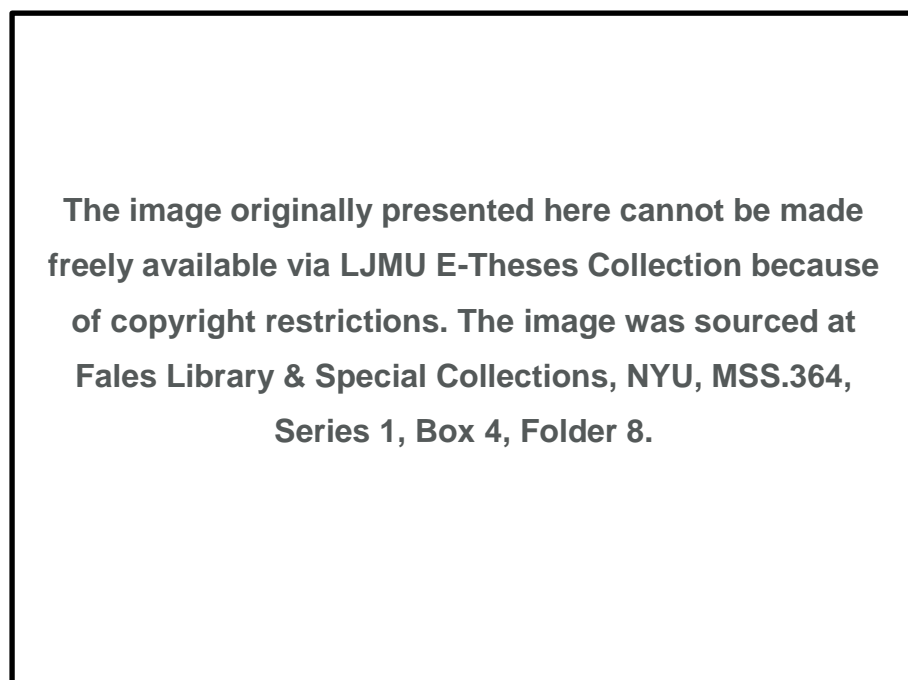


Fig. 34. ‘I Love Virginia Woolf’s Style’ from *Impossible Schizoid Girl* [pink issue] (n.d.) by Kelly Spivey, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

- *The Plague* by Albert Camus
- *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf
- *Boating for Beginners* by Jeanette Winterson
- *Kathy Goes to Haiti* by Kathy Acker
- *Lust for Life* by Irving Stone
- *The Stranger* by Albert Camus
- *The Road from Coorain* by Jill Ker Conway

Spivey's inclusion of this list of books points both to her own self-conscious awareness of the literary heritage within which she is working, and demonstrates an assumption that her readers are also interested in modernist texts. She also explicitly declares her love for Virginia Woolf's literary *style*, which is characterised by stream-of-consciousness prose and interior monologues: features that also coalesce in Riot Grrrl's customary confessional style of writing in zines. It is also significant that she refers specifically to Woolf's *Orlando*: a novel that both reveals the constructedness of gender and demonstrates the malleability of literary genre and form to accommodate developing arguments and interpretations of the world. As a work of literary pastiche, *Orlando* is also notable for its parody of biography and points towards the impossibility of autobiography as a literary form: a subject that Acker was similarly fascinated by and that Riot Grrrl also explores through performative 'self-writing' in zines.

Crucially, Spivey also reveals her familiarity with Acker's early work with the inclusion of *Kathy Goes to Haiti* in this list. This differentiates *Impossible Schizoid Girl* from other Riot Grrrl zines I review in this section that, while embracing Acker's techniques, do not explicitly cite the author as Spivey does here. Drawing a connection to Acker's early work, Spivey aligns her writing with one of Acker's more linear novels, the previously discussed *Kathy Goes to Haiti*, wherein the autobiographical narrator constitutes a parody of the travelling American subject. Acker's experiments with the travel writing genre in *Kathy Goes to Haiti* speak to Spivey's own interests in exploring the parameters of genre in her zine. In particular, Spivey subverts genres that she sees as being especially guilty of normalising an androcentric position or perpetuating misogyny, as I discuss in greater detail below.

Not only does Spivey reference Acker on stylistic grounds in the orange issue of *Impossible Schizoid Girl*, she also considers Acker's legacy and

philosophical perspectives. Specifically, she reproduces Acker's sentiment on language: the need for women to destroy language in order to liberate themselves from a system that limits and excludes them.

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Fig. 35. 'ADVERTISEMENT: CREATE YOUR OWN LANGUAGE' from *Impossible Schizoid Girl* [orange issue] (n.d.) by Kelly Spivey, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

On the first page, Spivey writes: "If this doesn't make sense, it's cuz it's in a different language" and "ADVERTISEMENT: CREATE YOUR OWN LANGUAGE OUT OF AN EXISTING ONE + CALL YOURSELF A POET OR A TERRORIST".<sup>123</sup> Like Acker, Spivey articulates an anarchistic desire to dismantle language. In the context of her feminist zine, it is safe to assume that Spivey concedes with Acker's position, understanding conventional language as a vehicle for gender oppression, amongst other forms of oppression. She implores her Grrrl readers to create something 'new' from the

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

wreckage of Standard English that they leave in their wake. Aside from echoing Acker's sentiment in *Blood and Guts* to destroy language and create a "NEW LANGUAGE [...]. A LANGUAGE THAT MEANS SOMETHING TO ME" (Acker, 96), she also draws familiar comparisons between being a poet and being a terrorist, paying homage to Acker and the epithet she was awarded during her writing career of being a 'literary terrorist'.

Spivey uses the term 'terrorist' deliberately to draw a lineage between herself and the avant-garde writer specifically. Their ideological compatibility on the problem with language is encapsulated in the French feminist literary theory, *écriture féminine*, which identifies the inadequacies of traditional language for female expression and representation. This belief drives much of Acker's experimentations with language, as manifest in her illogical (read 'feminine') linguistic constructions, not to mention her co-opting of canonical texts from their male authors. Correspondingly, Spivey also performs her own interpretation of *écriture féminine* in *Impossible Schizoid Girl*. She does so by producing a feminist rewriting of the modern classic (phallogocentric) novel, as well as performing a critique of the pulp fiction genre: a literary genre renowned for indulging in misogynistic fantasies and promulgating anti-woman ideals.

### **Practicing *écriture féminine*: rewriting Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita***

Having first come to Anglophone attention in the 1980s through Marks and Courtivron's anthology, by the 1990s, *écriture féminine* was a familiar critical concept within academic discourse. Applying, like Acker, the principals of *écriture féminine* to their postmodern fictions, Riot Grrrl zinesters produced feminist rewritings of well-known male-authored texts, observable in Spivey's reimagining of Vladimir Nabokov's 1955 novel, *Lolita*. As such, the highly conceptual writings of theorists such as Irigaray and Cixous were

reproduced in arguably more accessible forms and for a wider (non-academic) audience through this punk-feminist literary lineage.

For Cixous, a lineage of male-authored literature has excluded authentic female representation, and to rectify this, “Woman must write herself [...] must put herself into text – as into the world and history” (1976, 875). Plainly, women must write themselves into literature in order to correct this exclusion from art and culture and, consequently, from society and politics too. Male-authored writing, she argues, either “obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women” (Cixous 1976, 878). By putting herself into literature, woman may gain access to things that have “been more than confiscated from her” through patriarchal representations of her body, her desire, and the assumed impossibility of authentic female subjectivity (Cixous 1976, 880).

In her zines, Spivey can be seen as responding to Cixous’s exhortation to women writers to address their absence in literature. In the orange issue of *Impossible Schizoid Girl*, Spivey subverts the way in which male-authored writing obscures women or propagates uncomplicated and monolithic representations of women, which, as Spivey emphasises, are often deeply misogynistic. The middle section of the zine involves a contemplation of misogynistic 1950s pulp magazines, which is intertwined with a rewriting of Nabokov’s *Lolita*.<sup>124</sup> Titled, ‘WHY I HATE PULP-FICTION = A CONVERSATION BETWEEN LOLITA AND PULP FICTION MAN’, the piece is best described as a disruptive, interrogative work of postmodern fiction. It imagines an exchange between Nabokov’s girl child, Lolita, and a

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<sup>124</sup> Pulp magazines were cheaply produced periodicals published predominantly in the early to mid-twentieth century. They typically contained lowbrow genre fiction, sensational and melodramatic content, and were often heavily illustrated. Pulp fiction is also renowned for its prominent soft pornographic element, and has been criticized for its misogynistic and sexualised portrayal of women.

male author of pulp fiction magazines. Spivey provides an example of pulp fiction in her Riot Grrrl zine, reproducing a page from 'Love Trap for Murder' (n.d.) by Tom Higgins, pictured below.

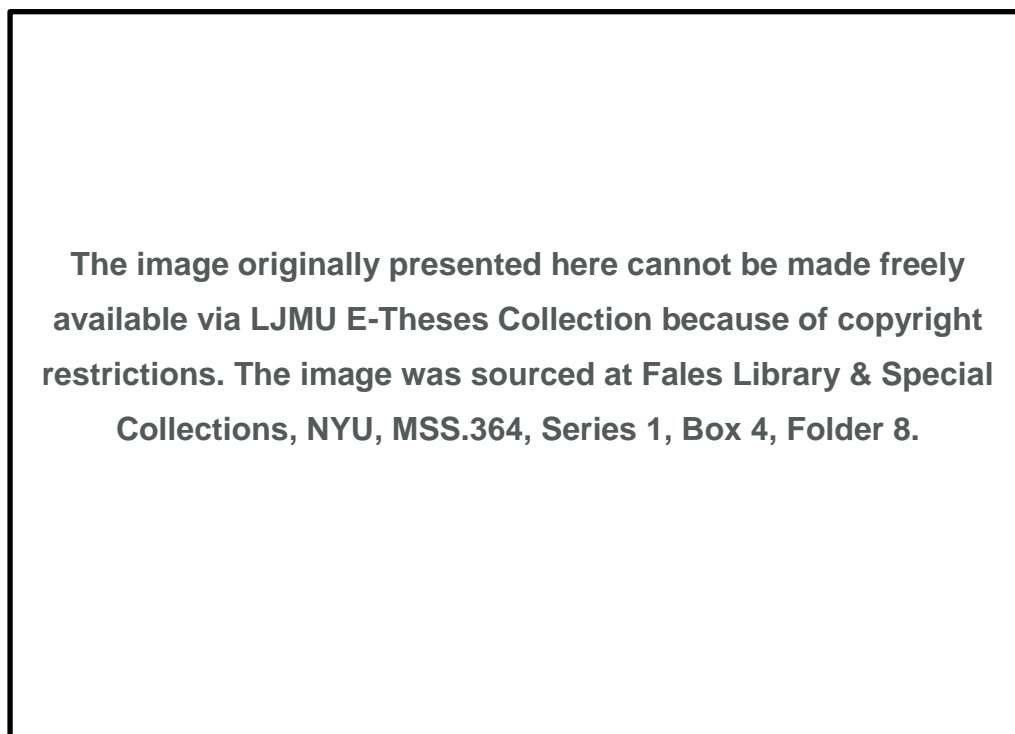


Fig. 36. 'WHY I HATE PULP FICTION' from *Impossible Schizoid Girl* [orange issue] (n.d.) by Kelly Spivey, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The fact that the headshot of Pulp Fiction Man appears as a young boy is significant. By imagining the pulp fiction writer as an inexperienced boy, rather than a worldly looking man, Spivey subverts a trope in male-authored writing where the all-powerful, all-knowing male author exercises complete authority over female characters, who are frequently silenced, killed off, raped, objectified, hurt or dismissed in some other way. It points to a power imbalance in literature that Spivey seeks to address with her gendered critique of pulp fiction, as well as her rewriting of Nabokov's *Lolita* – a narrative where the adult male character presides over the young female character in a disturbing and sexually predatory fashion.

Ventriloquising the voices of both the pulp fiction writer and Lolita, Spivey critiques misogynistic representations of women in literature that are rationalised as merely ‘entertainment’. In their exchange, Lolita begins to challenge the male pulp fiction writer’s lust for female suffering, sexual degradation and violence against women in his novels, to which he responds: “NOT TO BE CONFUSED WITH REALITY MY SWEET NYMPHET”.<sup>125</sup> Pulp Fiction Man defends this feature of his texts as merely fiction and thus distinct from reality. Spivey’s rewriting challenges the notion that misogynistic depictions of women in literature – such as the paedophilic sexualisation of the girl in Nabokov’s *Lolita* – can be explained away as merely entertainment and do not translate into real life or serve a pre-existing cultural impulse to hurt or degrade women and girls.

Spivey subverts the way in which the female voice is obscured in Nabokov’s novel, which is told entirely from the perspective of the middle-aged Humbert Humbert, by writing from Lolita’s point of view in her zine. Lolita’s perspective exposes the cruelties that she, here representing all women in art and literature, suffers in the name of entertainment when she asks: “HOW CAN I, NYMPHET HERSELF, BE GAGGING, CRYING, SQUIRMING, WINSING, IN THE SAME RAPE SCENE EVERYONE ELSE SEES AND NEVER MISSES A BITE OF POPCORN?”.<sup>126</sup> Lolita expresses her disdain for male writers – from Pulp Fiction Man to her revered creator, Vladimir Nabokov – for the way in which their representations of women are canonised in both literature and history:

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<sup>125</sup> Kelly Spivey. *Impossible Schizoid Girl* [orange issue] Zan Gibbs Riot Grrrl Zine Collection 1987-2003 [bulk 1992-1997], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.364, series 1, box 4, folder 8.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*

L [Lolita]: AH YES, JUST LIKE VLADIMIR. SO CAUGHT BETWEEN YOUR DICK AND YOUR EGO, ALL YOU CAN DO IS FEEL SORRY FOR YOURSELF AS YOU SLIME YOU[R] PRIVILEGED LITTLE SKINS INTO THE PAGES OF HISTORY.<sup>127</sup>

Spivey exposes how androcentric writing has defined our conception of, and values pertaining to, entertainment. Lolita protests that our perception of entertainment is “CREATED BY THE ALMIGHTY ‘HIM’ WHO PROFESSES IT IS THE WAY OF THE ‘HUMAN’ MIND – THE WAY OF WHAT INTERESTS IT – WHAT’S ENTERTAINING”.<sup>128</sup> Spivey invites us to challenge established cultural valuations about what entertainment *is*, and what is entertaining, suggesting that these are shaped by male desire to the exclusion of women. By merging the pulp fiction magazine with Nabokov’s *Lolita*, Spivey collapses the distinction between high art and supposedly lowbrow genres, performing the same kind of irreverent juxtaposition of ‘Literature’ and ‘schlock’ seen in Acker’s novels.<sup>129</sup> This particular juxtaposition functions to jolt us out of any feminist complacency when dealing with the canonical text. She demonstrates that, while the trashy pulp fiction magazine might be more overt in its expressed misogyny, high art is no less guilty of perpetuating misogynistic ideals, and is perhaps even more insidious due to its superficial associations with bourgeois civility.

Later in this section of her zine, Spivey turns her attention towards the significance of girlhood and the languages of childhood in her rewriting of *Lolita*. It is useful to read this part of Spivey’s narrative using Cixous’s theory of *écriture féminine* – in particularly, moments where Cixous uses imagery of

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> See Chapter One, ‘Acker’s Anti-Work Aesthetic: Punk’s Aesthetics of Amateurism’, for more on Acker’s irreverent juxtapositions.



pre-linguistic childhood to describe a period of acute female experimentation.<sup>130</sup> Given the focus on girlhood in Riot Grrrl zines in general, it is important that Cixous refers specifically to childhood as the stage at which the girl child “others herself” (1976, 882). She tellingly refers to childhood as that which “men have been trying desperately to make them [women] forget”, being a period that is marked by their indoctrination into phallogocentric culture (Cixous 1976, 877). Cixous advocates that women writers should look even further back than childhood, to a pre-linguistic life stage, where bodily functions predominate. Writing from such an embodied position, the writer stands to radically alter and expand the linguistic system of signification that currently excludes her. Cixous even refers to a description a woman once gave her of “a world all her own which she had been secretly haunting since childhood” – where she engaged in a process of “systematic experimentation with the bodily functions” – as exemplar for the realisation of *écriture féminine* (Cixous 1976, 876). Framing these nods to early childhood within her wider argument for a feminist reclamation of language, Cixous’s essay implicates this period of ambiguity and innovation as a useful point of reference for accessing linguistically experimental modes. And whilst the likes of Lacan would argue that inscription *occurs* in infancy, Cixous’s polemic embraces a conception of pre-oedipal childhood as the root of “[a] world of searching, the elaboration of knowledge” and experimentation (1976, 876).

To a certain extent, Spivey gives narrative form to this concept in a short passage in which Lolita appears to be in the middling stages of language development (despite having been speaking in full, coherent sentences earlier in the piece). In what follows, Lolita says goodbye to the pulp fiction writer and the patriarchal presence in the text, replacing him with

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<sup>130</sup> Cixous uses the term ‘automatisms’ in her essay to describe the regurgitation of patriarchal encoded language and literary patterns without conscious thought or critique.

a matriarchal figure, her mother: "L: BYE DADDY, NO NEVER, NEVER DADDY.....HI MOMMY".<sup>131</sup> The dialogue that proceeds between Lolita and her mother sees Lolita using language in an illogical and experimental way, having not quite grasped the correct order of words for expressing her meaning:

L: YEAH AND MOMMY? LOOK – LOOK AT THE WIRES IN The SKY  
– LOOK, THEY STRING ALL OVER TOWN, DON'T THEY MOM? *tO*  
*WHERE FROM THE TELEPHONE THEY COME?*

M: WHAT'S THAT SWEET PEA? IT DIDN'T MAKE SENSE THE WAY  
YOU SAID IT!

[...]

M: I LOVE THE WAY YOU TALK – SO SLIPPERY, SO JUICY AND  
RIPE, SO ALIVE. WE LIVE DON'T WE LOVE? WE REALLY LIVE.  
(emphasis added)<sup>132</sup>

Lolita's mother praises her daughter for her use of language, which is "so slippery, so juicy and ripe", and suggests that its experimental and fertile quality connects her and Lolita to a sense of vitality – the feeling of being "so alive".<sup>133</sup> In the exchange, we see a reversal of the traditional educational apparatus, whereby the child is praised for demonstrating his or her ability to

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<sup>131</sup> Kelly Spivey. *Impossible Schizoid Girl* [orange issue]. Zan Gibbs Riot Grrrl Zine Collection 1987-2003 [bulk 1992-1997], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.364, series 1, box 4, folder 8.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*

form logical and coherent sentences. Lolita's mother instead praises her daughter for her ungrammatical constructions, telling her: "I *love* the way you talk" (emphasis added).<sup>134</sup> Spivey subverts the lauding of reason and logic as signifiers of literacy: qualities that have "been one with the phallogentric tradition", as Cixous puts it (1976, 879).

Aside from these narrative manifestations, Spivey also invokes the "ephemeral" and "never simple or linear" flourishes of *écriture féminine* in the formal construction of her zine (Cixous 1976, 879; 881). For example, the non-linear structure of *Impossible Schizoid Girl* as a whole suggests that Spivey's meaning cannot be fully or accurately expressed through traditional (patriarchal) literary forms.

**The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.364, Series 1, Box 4, Folder 8.**

Fig. 37. 'Cannon Clone' poem from *Impossible Schizoid Girl* [orange issue] (n.d.) by Kelly Spivey, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

For example, the poem pictured above is unrelated to the rewriting of *Lolita* yet is situated in the middle of the *Lolita* segment, interrupting the dialogue between Pulp Fiction Man, Lolita and Lolita's mother. A tangential insert, the poem is based on the dissolution of a relationship between the poem's narrator and a character she nicknames 'Canon Clone': a male-centred woman because "she learned everything she knew from a man, + hurt me very much".<sup>135</sup> The writer assumes the perspective of this person, Canon Clone – a character who is simultaneously "a man hater" and a misogynist who likes to "mess with rich little white girls" and psychologically torment them.<sup>136</sup>

Not only is the 'Canon Clone' piece significant because it breaks up the linear structure of the zine as a whole, thereby "breaking the codes" of patriarchal literary forms, but also because the interruption is presented in the form of a poem. Cixous suggests that poetry is the medium through which the female voice most frequently escapes in literature. She defines poetry as "an ephemeral wildness [that] sweeps away order", creating a liminal space in which the poet "slips by something, for a brief span, of woman" (Cixous 1976, 879). Cixous goes on to reinforce her case for the superiority of poetry for the realisation of *écriture féminine*:

Because poetry involves gaining strength through the unconscious and because the unconscious, that other limitless country, is the place where the repressed managed to survive: women. (1976, 879-880)

Poetry is apt for conveying the unconscious, the repressed, the unspeakable, and therefore, the as-of-yet unspoken: the *female* voice. Poetry, Cixous

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

suggests, being a form more conducive to experimentation, should be woman's primary site for writing her 'self'. Spivey's 'Cannon Clone' piece demonstrates how poetry assists the female writer in inserting herself into the text. The rhythmic patterning in Spivey's poem infuses the stanzas with the resonance of a pulse, of blood pumping through veins, thus inserting her body into the text. This suggestion is further reinforced by the reference to 'blood' in the following section of the poem:

I only want,  
I only want you if,  
I only want you if.....to fear me...  
and then I will show you love

[...]

I suck your love like blood.... for my life....

and you get back

jack shit..... <sup>137</sup>

The frequent use of ellipses in Spivey's poem also alludes to the unquantifiable female presence in the text. Where the voice of Cannon Clone (the author's male-centered ex-partner) is impeded by ellipses, we are invited to imagine what has been omitted from the text: the narrator's thoughts, her voice, her desires, as she attempts to write through experiences that appear to transcend the capabilities of written language to express. The ellipses in Spivey's poem are symbolic of the void in literature and language that exists

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

as a result of a history of female exclusion. In essence, Spivey attempts to remedy this female-shaped void with her rewriting of *Lolita* by inserting Lolita's voice into Nabokov's classic in her Grrrl zine.

### *Pirate Jenny*

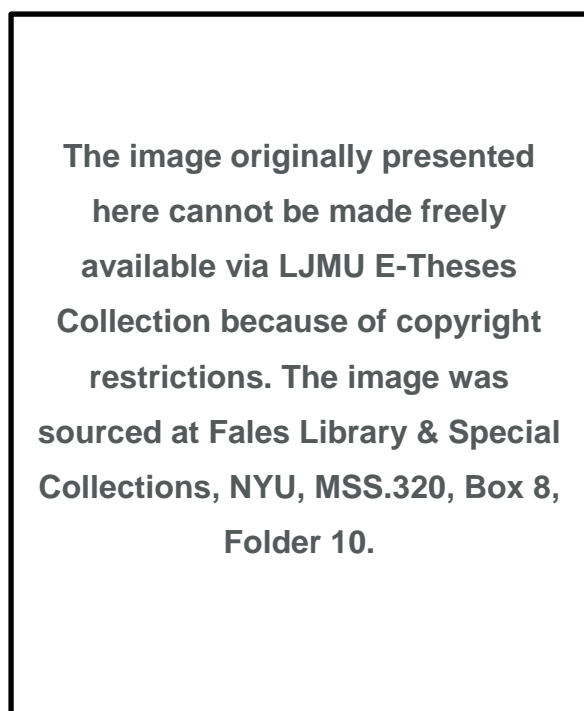


Fig. 38. Front cover from *Pirate Jenny* #1 (1999) by P. J. Goodman, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Like *Impossible Schizoid Girl*, *Pirate Jenny* (1999) by P.J. Goodman is an especially literary Riot Grrrl zine, and similarly bridges the gap between Acker's avant-garde writing and other Riot Grrrl productions. The first issue of *Pirate Jenny*, pictured above, was published in 1999.<sup>138</sup> Although, as Marcus suggests, Riot Grrrl had "largely petered out by 1996", with meetings slowing to a halt and its three core bands – Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy – all disbanding by 1997, zines like *Pirate Jenny* demonstrate that Riot Grrrl clung on into the late 1990s, primarily through its literature (326). The

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<sup>138</sup> Presumably the author's initials, P.J. Goodman, stand for 'Pirate Jenny'. It is also noted by archivists at Fales library that Rebecca Prather helped co-create a lot of the content for this first issue of the zine.

Riot Grrrl Zine Collection at Fales library supports this assumption, with a number of zines dating post-1996: *The Bakery* (1997), *Utopia Roaming* (1998), and *How I Learned To Do It Bloody Murder* (1998), amongst others. This issue of *Pirate Jenny* was sourced from the Tammy Rae Carland Collection. Carland attended Evergreen State College alongside Kathleen Hanna, and was a member of the band, Amy Carter. Carland also produced her own zine series, *I (Heart) Amy Carter!* (1992-1994), which I discuss in greater detail below.

*Pirate Jenny* showcases feminist creative writing – poetry, prose, essays – and is of a distinctly literary/academic bent, with references ranging from bell hooks, to Cixous, Charlotte Gilman Perkins, and mid-twentieth century American horror writer, Shirley Jackson. For instance, in a poem by Vernon Mauksbury, featured in the zine, called ‘Unguarded Moments’, Mauksbury writes: “Like a Shirley Jackson character, I know the horror of this desire”.<sup>139</sup> In the context of Riot Grrrl literature – which ranges vastly in terms of quality and intellectual prowess (probably due to the age range of contributors spanning from early teens to twenty-somethings) – *Pirate Jenny* demonstrates a more profound concern for a lineage of women’s literature and feminist theory than that typically seen in Riot Grrrl zines. That said, the zine’s creator is nonetheless self-conscious and critical of the publication’s own academic roots, which she mocks on the final page of the issue:

And finally...Pirate Jenny is proud to sponsor the ‘Big Lusty Academic Whore Award’ to any individual submitting a street level lingua franca paper packed with academic Insight and reverie in regards to female sexuality. Papers should be single spaced on 100% cotton paper with margins 1.675877655 Inches on all sides [...]. It should be less than five

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<sup>139</sup> P.J. Goodman. *Pirate Jenny*. 1999. Tammy Rae Carland Riot Grrrl Zine Collection 1988-2002, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.320, box 8, folder 10.

pages long and contain a bibliography, a biographical note, acknowledgements, thank you's, a disclaimer, a desert recipe, and a frank confession with a genuine desire for redemption. Papers will be judged according to my whim. The winner will receive the good feeling of having an academic paper published in this zine, a Lipton tea bag I just found under my desk, and a personal letter acknowledging your soon to be revered and worshipped intellect from Helene Cixous [...].<sup>140</sup>

Pirate Jenny's farcical 'call for papers' mocks the requirements for submissions to academic journals, suggesting they are overly pedantic and unreasonable. Moreover, this passage takes aim at a culture of exclusivity and elitism supposedly fostered by academia and academic publishers. Goodman emphasises this in the passage by requiring that papers be submitted in *lingua franca*: an auxiliary language sometimes used by scholars who do not share a common language. This sort of embrace of academic ideas yet simultaneous denunciation of its institutional status is emblematic of Riot Grrrl's paradoxical relationship with the academy. As Eichhorn compellingly argues, "Riot Grrrl has always operated as a parasitic presence on the academy, never colonizing its host but consistently deploying its resources (intellectual and material) to further its own agenda" (106). *Pirate Jenny* typifies this by using academic intellectual resources to contemplate feminist issues in its pages, then mocking its administrative processes in its tailpiece.

Another important paratextual feature of *Pirate Jenny*, before we explore its contents in detail, is the image used on the front cover: 'We don't need another hero' by Barbara Kruger. To understand the significance of this,

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.



it is at first useful to refer to Gérard Genette definition of the function of the paratext:

[T]he paratext in all its forms is a discourse that is fundamentally heteronomous, auxiliary, and dedicated to the service of something other than itself that constitutes its *raison d'être*. This something is the text. (12)

The paratext intervenes and shapes the complex relationship between book, author, and reader. Although Genette's study focuses on the *textual* paratext (as opposed to illustrations or images – visual paratextual elements), the Kruger image used on the front cover functions in a way that services the rest of the text by expressing a politics with regards to artistic and intellectual appropriation. The politics that Kruger's work represents functions on the front cover of *Pirate Jenny* to frame the creative writing pieces featured in her zine, some of which appropriate and pay homage to a lineage of female-created art.

Kruger is an American conceptual artist who rose to prominence in the 1980s for her collages: combinations consisting of appropriated media images in black and white, pasted over with bold font text. Her work is renowned for disrupting the conventions of representation in the media, and from a feminist perspective, attending to the ways in which gender is constructed and reinforced through media images in an age of hyper-consumerism. Kruger's work is often cited as an artistic precursor for Riot Grrrl's distinctive aesthetic, which often uses 'cut n paste' or sees text scrawled onto appropriated media images, with a mind to interrupting conventional displays of femininity. Marion Leonard elaborates on this, writing that "[t]he project of questioning connotations of female display was a focus of many of the zines", which involved "detournements of images from fashion

magazines, comic strips and advertising posters” and “taking texts from mass culture and endowing them with a new and subversive meaning” (236).

Hence, it is unsurprising that Riot Grrrl embraced Kruger’s aesthetic in their zines, given their homologous aims to disrupt the mainstream media’s depiction and reinforcement of traditional femininity.

Interestingly, in this issue of *Pirate Jenny*, it is not only Kruger’s artistic aesthetic that is appropriated but an *actual* image by Kruger. The creator announces her plagiarism of the piece with the accompanying caption: “this pirated photo is by Barbara Kruger and is probably copyright protected”.<sup>141</sup> Here, Goodman is directly addressing Riot Grrrl’s appropriation of Kruger’s work to raise questions about the ethics of appropriation in art: when is appropriation permissible and when is it not? Is legislation surrounding art, as well as our attitudes towards artistic appropriation, grounded by logic?

Kruger’s images are apt for raising these questions because the images she uses are themselves appropriated from advertisements and magazines. Preemptively, Goodman highlights the absurdity of a scenario whereby Riot Grrrl’s theft of an already stolen image might be considered non-permissible according to copyright protection laws. Her flagrant disregard for this legislative and ethical system surrounding art is revealing of Goodman’s position on appropriation, which she views as an inevitable element of artistic creation. The ‘appropriated image within an appropriated image’ front cover to *Pirate Jenny* conveys the notion that *all* art contains elements of plagiarism, and therefore declaring ownership over images and ideas is a redundant practice. It also aligns her zine with a foundational concept in punk: the deterritorialization of images as a form of social critique.<sup>142</sup> Goodman

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> The term ‘deterritorialization’ is taken from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus* (1972), wherein they use it to describe the ‘decoding’ of a space: a landscape or community. For instance, in their critique of capitalism, they

expresses the punk notion that plagiarism in art is not truly what we understand as plagiarism – the practice of taking someone’s ideas or images verbatim and claiming them as one’s own – because the *meaning* is always altered upon reuse. Linda Hutcheon also writes about this, when she contemplates how postmodernism “is not a nostalgic return; it is a critical revisiting, an ironic dialogue with the past of both art and history” (4). In other words, postmodern reproduction in the forms of pastiche, parody, and so-called ‘plagiarism’ – the likes of which we see in Goodman’s exaggerated and humorous appropriation of Kruger’s image on the front cover of her Riot Grrrl zine – is not a straightforward return to Kruger’s work. It is intentionally ironic, highlighting the absurdity of artistic ownership, as well as demonstrating Goodman’s self-reflexivity with regards to Riot Grrrl’s aesthetic parallels with Kruger’s artwork.

### **The short story: an intertextual embrace of Gilman’s ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’**

One of the most significant creative writing pieces in *Pirate Jenny* is a short story by Goodman called ‘The Institute’, which pays homage to Charlotte

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attest to how the “deterritorialization of the socius [...] constitutes the most characteristic and the most important tendency of capitalism”, sweeping away a local culture and its value system and replacing it with a capitalist set of codes (Deleuze and Guattari, 36). The term has since gone on to be used in a more general capacity to signal that something has been removed from its territorial origins and therefore a process of decoding has taken place. For example, Emilia Borowska uses it in ‘Transgressing Capitalism in Kathy Acker and Marilyn Manson’s Punk and Goth Aesthetics’ (2012) to describe how Acker and Punk in general enacted a “literary deterritorialization”, removing grand narratives from “familiar territory” and stealing the language of capitalism from its “regime of signification and turn[ing] it against itself” (13). I use the term here to describe how Punk also removes images from their territorial origins to rebel against capitalistic ideals regarding property and ownership.

Perkins Gilman's seminal 1892 short story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. The literary nature of *Pirate Jenny* is cemented through creative writing pieces like this one, which demonstrates Goodman's intellectual engagement with a tradition of women's writing dating back to the late nineteenth century. 'The Institute' repays the kind of close analysis we give to short form fiction, but which risks being overlooked here due to the self-published status of Riot Grrrl zines. The intertextual references to 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in Goodman's story both enshrine the canonical feminist short story, whilst at the same time, provide the "constant ironic signaling", characteristic of postmodern fiction, to extend Gilman's feminist critique of Victorian society to women in America in the 1990s (Hutcheon, 124). Goodman incorporates 'The Yellow Wallpaper' into her own zine to suggest two things: firstly, that social progress for women has not progressed as much as modern audiences might like to think it has. Secondly, it intimates that important feminist works are *still* in danger of being 'lost', as 'The Yellow Wallpaper' was for many years before second wave feminist critics unearthed it and assigned it authority in the 1970s.

Following the story of a woman's gradual descent into insanity, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is considered an important early feminist entry into the American literary canon. It is renowned for its feminist critique of a male-dominated medical profession and its attitude towards women's health in the late nineteenth century. Narrated in the first person and told through a series of diary entries, it is revealed that the narrator is loosely confined to a room at the top of a colonial mansion that her physician husband has rented for the summer to soothe her "temporary nervous depression" (Gilman, 4). Her fascination with the yellow wallpaper in the room becomes a symbol for her entrapment and for her deteriorating mental state.

Some critics have also read Gilman's story as a critique of middle-class Victorian women's exclusion from the work sphere. Gilman actually

confirmed this as central motivation for writing 'The Yellow Wallpaper' in a reflection originally published in *The Forerunner* in 1913: 'Why I Wrote *The Yellow Wallpaper?*'. Having suffered from "a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia" herself, the author was advised by a physician "never to touch pen, brush or pencil again" (Gilman 1913, 26). Prohibited to work, the experience forced Gilman to consider the importance of work for human vitality, declaring it a source of "joy and growth and service, without which one is a pauper and a parasite" (Gilman 1913, 265). The narrator's prescribed idleness in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' acts as a catalyst for her mental decline, reflecting Gilman's own position on the value of work.

Mirroring the autobiographical rhetoric employed by Gilman, Goodman's 'The Institute' is similarly narrated in the first person and told through a series of diary entries, following an unnamed narrator as she goes about her working day in an unspecified institution. Ambiguities form as to whether the institute is in fact a mental hospital and the narrator an inpatient, as opposed to a worker there.

Fig. 39. 'The Institute' from *Pirate Jenny* (1999) by P. J. Goodman, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

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The narrator's deranged personification of the colour yellow in 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is echoed in 'The Institute', in which the colour increasingly becomes synonymous with mental illness. For example, at the end of Goodman's story, the narrator, in the full swings of a psychotic episode, describes how one of the yellow elevators outside her 'office' opened and "belched an inferno".<sup>143</sup> This anthropomorphisation of the colour yellow in 'The Institute' takes its cues from Gilman's short story, where yellow assumes human-like status and is employed to conjure associations of sickness and disease. As Goodman's story unfolds, suspicions that the narrator is actually an inpatient are reinforced by her peculiar confinement to the yellow parts of the building:

When I first arrived here at The Institute I noticed there were four sets of elevators. A voice on the phone told me I must only take the yellow ones, I work in the yellow part of the Institute and mussn't take any other color of elevator because it will take me to a different building entirely. So I have never crossed my own yellow boarders<sup>144</sup>

Another striking resemblance between the two texts, which the above quote also highlights, is their heavy reliance on dramatic irony to make readers doubt the robustness of their narrators. In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the narrator misinterprets her surroundings, presuming that the suicide-prevention measures, such as the bars on the windows and the "rings and things in the walls", are remnants of a nursery or a gymnasium (Gilman, 5). A

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<sup>143</sup> P.J. Goodman. *Pirate Jenny*. 1999. Tammy Rae Carland Riot Grrrl Zine Collection 1988-2002, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.320, box 8, folder 10.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

comparable moment occurs in 'The Institute', when the narrator explains how she got her so-called 'job' in the particular building she 'works' in:

Each institute from the inside is indistinguishable from the next except by colour. Which explained the components of the psychiatric interview I had to apply for this job. A psychiatrist asked me some rather simple questions like what colour I associated with my mother. I said blue. I work, as I said, in the Institute which is yellow.<sup>145</sup>

At this point, we suspect that the narrator's 'psychiatric interview' was in fact a mental health assessment for admission to the institution. The plausibility of this reading is reinforced by the narrator's subsequent placement in the yellow building (there are three buildings: green, blue, and yellow): the colour associated with sickness and disease.

Both Gilman and Goodman's short stories attend to two lines of feminist enquiry simultaneously: a critique of patriarchal control over women in a medical context, and a feminist critique of work (or lack thereof, as in the case of 'The Yellow Wallpaper'). Much as, through its narrator's prescribed idleness, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' exposed the masculine bias of a medical profession that denied women autonomy and limited their freedom to work, 'The Institute' similarly decries patriarchal control over female autonomy. The locking system to the narrator's 'office' in 'The Institute' is operated externally by a male supervisor. On the morning in question, she arrives after the door has been locked: "I must go then and find the superintendent of the building, who if he is not knitting, will take up his needles and set to work on my lock".<sup>146</sup> The narrator's access to her 'office' is ruled according to the

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

whims of the male superintendent who, it is suggested, does not regard her access as a matter of urgency. And so begins a pattern in the narrator's story whereby male characters are seen to exercise control over her, either in an employment context, with her as a worker in the institute, or in a medical context, with her as a patient. At the very beginning of the story, Goodman's narrator describes how she is restricted to the same cramped, psychosis-inducing conditions as the narrator in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. She writes:

In these first few weeks I was able to absorb about three minutes of sunshine before the grey shade, by what means I do not know, folded itself over my window like a grey eyelid and took a nap. For the rest of the day I worked in fair darkness, if I worked at all.<sup>147</sup>

As it becomes increasingly likely that the narrator is an inpatient, her encounters with the professor – her 'boss', or rather, the chief medical personnel – take on layers of dramatic irony. When the professor hands her "a yellow folder of papers [...] half of them are blank", it suggests that the professor is supplying her with imaginary, or at the very least, menial, secretarial tasks to keep her occupied.<sup>148</sup> This idea is reinforced again at the end of the story, when the professor and his colleagues walk the narrator back to her room and "stand back in a row as if they are waiting to witness something".<sup>149</sup> The parting image of the group of men dressed in white lab coats standing at her door, watching her in her room, confirms the narrator's patient status, as well as the professor's relationship to her as the person in charge of her psychiatric care. Aside from this subtle critique of women's subordination in a male-dominated medical sphere, in which the narrator is

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.



patronised with imaginary work tasks and seemingly kept in the dark about her own condition, Goodman's short story also critiques women's unfulfillment in the work sphere.

Whereas Gilman's short story critiques a middle-class Victorian ideal of woman as the 'angel in the house', prohibited to work, Goodman's short story comes from a position of women having entered the work force en masse in the late twentieth century. Goodman reimagines the sense of alienation and disempowerment that Gilman applies to woman in the home in 'The Yellow Wallpaper', but addresses it to the modern day working woman. Consistently straddling the line between delusion and reality, the narrator's experience of work in the narrative, whether imagined or real, is nonetheless demoralising. Throughout, the narrator complains that she does not understand the purpose of her work: "I have never quite figured out what exactly my job is", and, "I have yet to acquire knowledge of what exactly my work is".<sup>150</sup> This imbues all her diary entries, which center upon her 'working' days in the institute, with a melancholic aimlessness. When she visits the professor's office to collect her 'work', he is literally unable to see her owing to the magnifying goggles he is wearing to inspect "some infinite crack in the tile".<sup>151</sup> The professor's "inability to recognize [...] his own research assistant", literalises her feelings of being unacknowledged in her role.<sup>152</sup> These hints at the narrator's dissatisfaction in her working life reflect a wider social issue pertinent to a post-backlash female audience. It speaks to *internal* hostilities faced by women in the work sphere – the disappointments to be found from *within* – such as relegation to jobs considered low-rung on the labour hierarchy, as well as persistent pay inequities.

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

Susan S. Lanser usefully summarises why the rediscovery of Gilman's 'lost' feminist work in the early 1970s was important to feminist critical theory at that time, and provides context for why Goodman's intertextual reimagining of the story in her 1990s Riot Grrrl zine is significant. Lanser observes that the enthusiastic recuperation of Gilman's story, which for a long time had been "denounced, ignored, or suppressed", served for second wave feminists as "virtual proof of the claim that literature, criticism, and history were political" (417). It seemed to prove the feminist argument that "a complex system of conventional (androcentric) tropes" maps onto our reading of literature and history, and that literature is not in fact "a privileged medium for universal truths" (Lanser, 417). By embracing Gilman's classic in her 1990s zine, Goodman evokes this history, which is bound up in questions of female authorship and the suppressed female voice in art and literature. In so doing, Goodman draws attention to the 'lost' status of her own short story, and the comparable near-absence of criticism her own writing has and will likely receive, as proof of the continued androcentric system of value that maps onto literature. Essentially, Goodman extends the second wave theoretical position that literature, criticism and history have always been political by suggesting that these forms are *still* political in her Riot Grrrl zine. The bleak irony of Goodman's intertextual embrace comes from the distinct similarities between the two female protagonist's experiences, despite their stories being set decades apart, thus mocking the concept of social progress for women in America.

### 3.2 *Burroughsian Vignettes and the Problem with Postmodernism:*

#### **Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens #3-4 and Double Bill #1-2**

A key literary influence that unites Acker with some Riot Grrrl writing is that of postmodernist author, William Burroughs. In this subsection, I argue that Riot Grrrl zinesters adopt a Burroughsian technique in the form of literary vignettes such as those in *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens*, while also, in zines such as *Double Bill*, challenging the perceived masculinist, misogynistic ideals Burroughs represents. I further argue that Riot Grrrl's simultaneous embrace and rejection of Burroughs speaks to third wave feminist anxieties regarding the merging of feminism with postmodernism that arose in the early 1990s.

#### *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens #3-4*

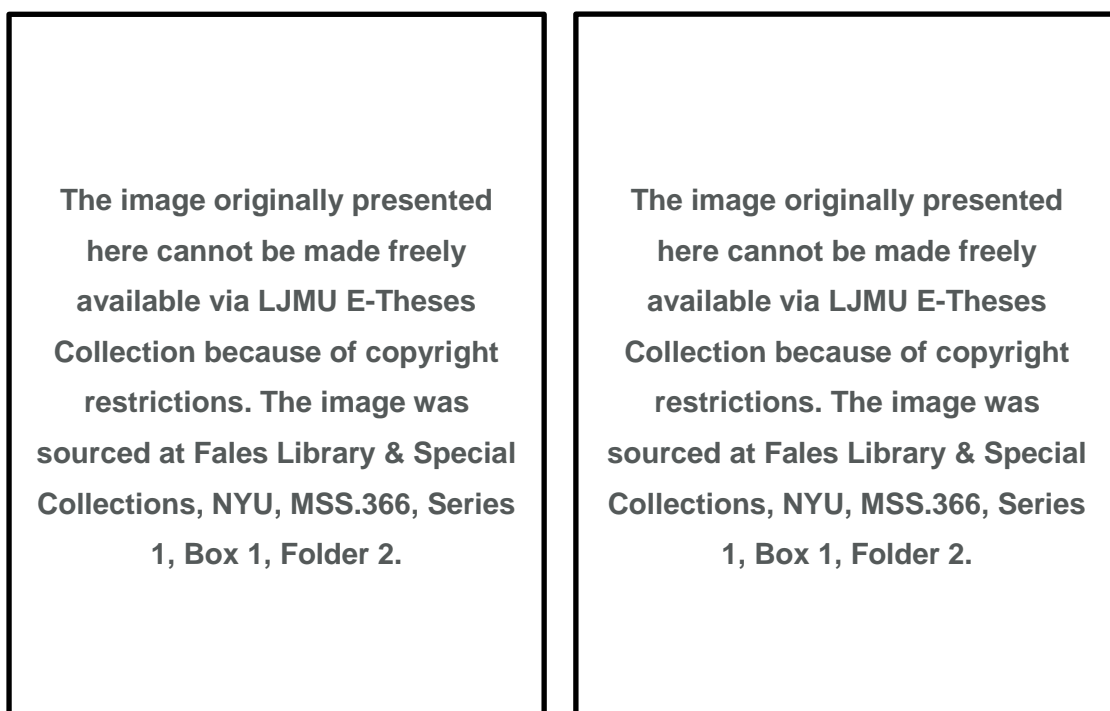


Fig. 40. & 41. Front covers of issues three and four from *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens* (1995) by Andrea Lambert, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

*Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens* is a zine series by Andrea Lambert; issues three and four, pictured above, were both published in 1995. Lambert originally hailed from San Diego, CA, although she presumably attended college in Portland, as stated in the correspondence address she provides for readers at the end of issue four: “During the school year [...] Woodstock Blvd Portland”, placing her in one of the central hubs for the movement (the other being Washington DC).<sup>153</sup> The zine itself is made up almost entirely of Lambert’s creative writing pieces, a combination of prose and poetry, which all appear to sit atop various collated images. Together, they comprise a loosely connected series of vignettes: short impressionistic scenes that give a rich impression of either a scenario, an idea, a setting, or a character, without obligation to narrative progression or plot. Burroughs popularized this style of literary vignettes in *Naked Lunch*. Intended to give an impression of the fractured sense of time experienced by his heroin-addicted protagonist, William Lee, the passage at the beginning of the novel gives a rich portrayal of Lee’s appearance, his “dirt junky fingers” and “his sharkskin sleeve”, before moving unceremoniously between other vaguely related scenes and character studies (Burroughs, 3).

Lambert uses Burroughsian vignettes to carry the theme of alienation across her zine series as a whole. A prime example can be seen in a piece called ‘30C’:

30C

On the airplane,

All strapped into digitized plastic slicks,

they assigned me a seat which did not exist.

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<sup>153</sup> Andrea Lambert. *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens* #4. 1995. Sheila Heti Riot Grrrl Collection 1994-1997, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.366, series 1, box 3, folder 2.

30C pen-proclaimed the tag that I proffered,  
 which was taken and given and sent me back  
     to a new seat and  
     a hope for aluminium-wrapped peanuts to come.  
 Sighs of dozing businessmen passed,  
     and the flimsy ruffling of supermarket page-turners,  
     and the squeak of the brat that spilled my orange juice.  
 But reassigned or not I knew  
     lost things I wanted were hiding at seat 30C.<sup>154</sup>

This piece gives a trenchant impression of its aeroplane setting, which is made vivid by highly specific details such as the 'aluminium wrapped peanuts' and 'digitized plastic slicks' for boarding cards. Aside from the rich impression of setting, the primary focus of the story is the feeling of alienation experienced by the narrator, encapsulated in the idea that the 'lost things' he or she desires are just out of reach, 'hiding at seat 30C' – a seat which does not exist. Being assigned a non-existent seat allegorises the narrator's sense of detachment from the microcosm of the aircraft. Alienation provides the loosely connecting element to all subsequent vignettes in the zine, such as 'The Joys of Maybelline for Little Ones', in which the narrator highlights the alienating effects of beauty culture on young girls, who are imagined "glueing false eyelashes long as desperation".<sup>155</sup> The piece warns against indoctrinating girls into the cult of beauty at a very young age, suggesting that this leads to a general sense of anguish and unease later in life.

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<sup>154</sup> Andrea Lambert. *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens #3*. 1995. Sheila Heti Riot Grrrl Collection 1994-1997, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.366, series 1, box 3, folder 2.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

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Fig. 42. 'Calm at the bus stop' from *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens* #3 (1995) by Andrea Lambert, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The images underneath these literary vignettes reinforce the recurrent theme of alienation. For instance, in issue four, in 'Calm at the bus stop' – an ambiguous, poetic piece of prose with themes concerning time, place, and grief – the background features an image of an unoccupied road and footpath.

Images of desolate landscapes appear frequently in both issues of *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens*, as demonstrated in the two extracts pictured below, also from issue four. The first image shows an unoccupied train track in a semi-rural landscape, under an unembellished stone bridge. The second image is of a diner – a place typically associated with nomadic types: truckers and travellers passing through rural areas in America – set in the distance of an otherwise flat and barren landscape. The feelings of melancholia incited by these sterile places is ensured by the black and white colouring of the images, which drains any lingering vitality from their constitution. There is also

something implicitly dystopian about the settings Lambert selects, which could easily double up as post-apocalyptic wastelands.

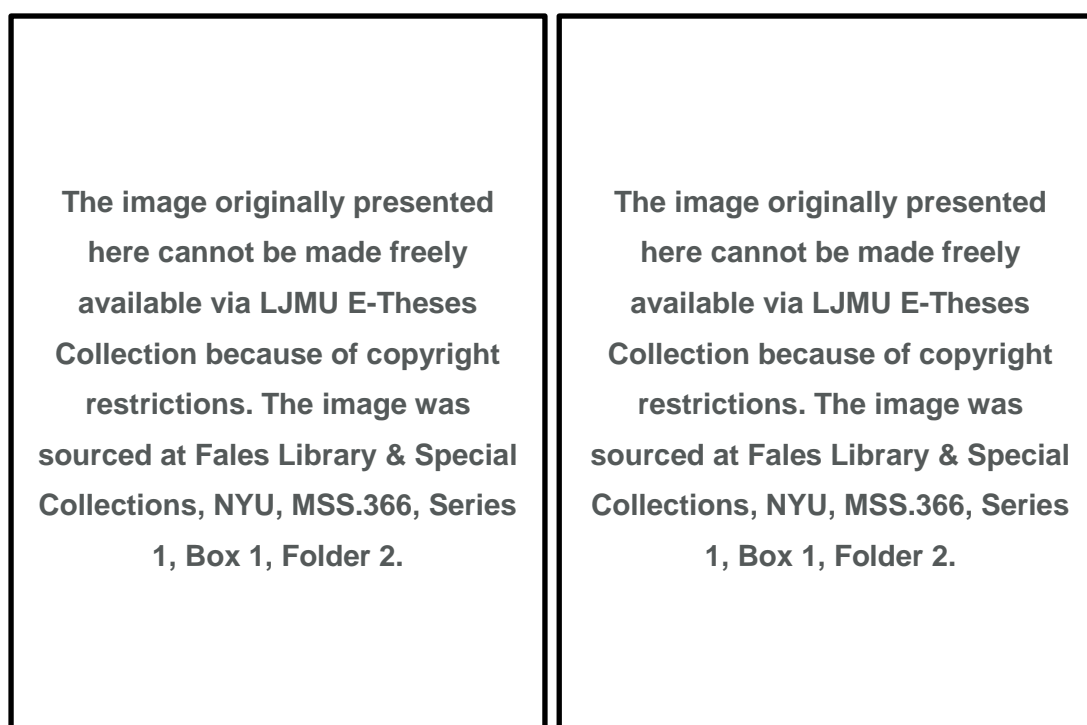


Fig. 43. & 44. 'My Lavender Failure' from *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens #4* (1995) by Andrea Lambert, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Like Burroughs, Lambert's vignettes, which are set to images, embrace the apocalyptic potential of placelessness for opening up avenues for social critique. In Michael Bolton's study of Burroughs' narrative techniques, he argues that Burroughs' atemporal vignettes disintegrate "the material contexts of time and place" (53). The significance of this, according to Bolton, is that Burroughs' worlds, "un-locatable yet familiar" like the landscapes in Lambert's zine, give "no predetermined context, no ideological frame, by which to assign meaning to the texts" (76). As such, "readers are challenged to engage the texts in a more personal as well as active manner, negotiating unique and ever-changing meanings during each reading" (Bolton, 76). In other words, readers are not only liberated from existing ideologies, but in

this liberated state, are invited to participate more intimately in the formation of the text, reconstructing meaning and means of representation therein.

Assessing this function in relation to Lambert's vignettes, which are produced under the auspices of the Riot Grrrl movement – the survival of which depended on its ability to intimately engage young women in its processes – it is perhaps unsurprising that we see vignettes adopted in zines. By employing a Burroughsian literary technique that demands a deeper engagement from readers, Lambert's vignettes stimulate identification and participation with her text, inviting readers to imagine new meanings and means of representation therein, and subsequently, hopefully, stimulate identification with the Riot Grrrl movement too. The literary devices in *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens* support the movement's method of recruitment, which hinged upon the incitement of a shared intimacy.

### *Double Bill #1-2*

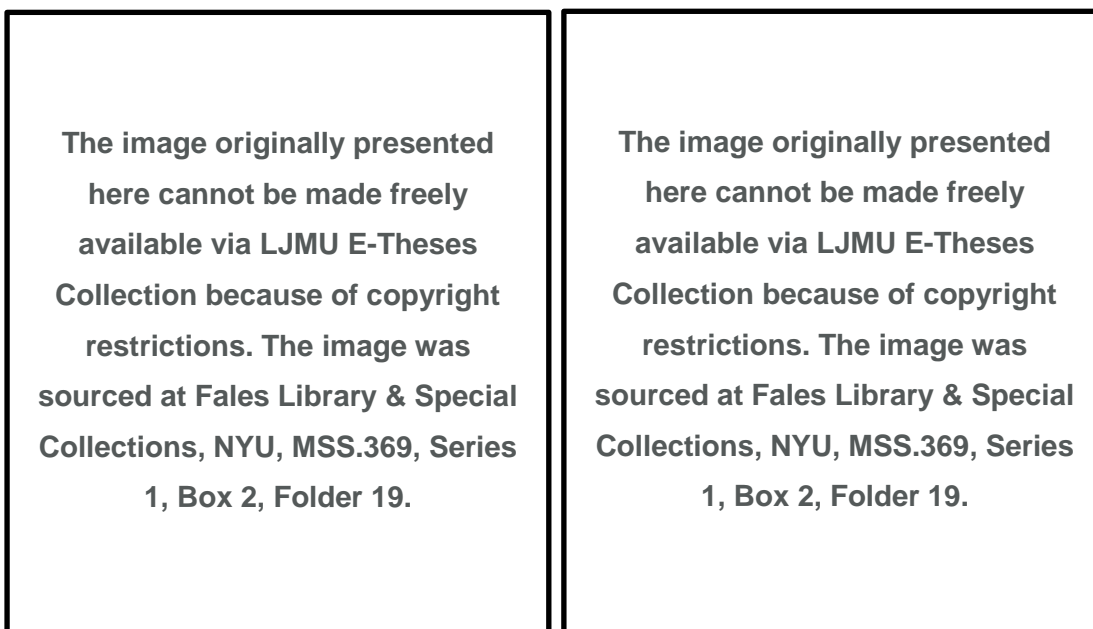


Fig. 45. & 46. Front covers of issues one and two from *Double Bill* (1991, 1992) by Caroline Azar, Jena Von Brucker, G.B. Jones, Johnny Noxzema, and Rex, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.



While the literary vignettes in *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens* demonstrate an aesthetic embrace of Burroughs' work, *Double Bill* castigates the masculinist tradition that the celebrated writer supposedly upholds. A collective creation by Caroline Azar, Jena Von Brucker, G.B. Jones, Johnny Noxzema, and Rex, issues one and two of *Double Bill*, pictured above, were published from the zine's headquarters in Toronto, Canada in 1991 and 1992 respectively. The zine continued to run until 2001 and produced a total of five issues. In contrast to many Riot Grrrl-associated productions that emphasised girl love, *Double Bill* is more accurately classified as a 'hatezine' (rather than a 'fanzine'), which is cemented by its premise. *Double Bill* is dedicated to comparing two celebrity Bills: writer William Burroughs, and actor renowned for his expanding waistline, William Conrad. The comparison foregrounds Burroughs as a pederast and misogynist by highlighting biographical facts, such as Burroughs' shooting and killing of his then-wife, Joan Vollmer, in a drunken game of William Tell in 1951. The comic strip, 'THE FAKE AND THE FAT MAN', from *Double Bill* #1 features an illustration of Burroughs' wife with a bullet passing through her head and the caption: "JUST HOLD STILL, JOAN. THIS WON'T HURT A BIT".<sup>156</sup> The zine also denounces Burroughs' status as an important literary figure and representative of the American counterculture, understanding this cultural lauding of the writer and his work as a veiled embrace of misogynistic values. The comic contains a group of topless men, one declaring "Mr Burroughs you're so brilliant", which is juxtaposed by the creator's authorial aside: "SHUN THE WOMAN-HATING ORGY OF BURROUGHSIAN SHIT-EATERS".<sup>157</sup> It suggests that

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<sup>156</sup> Caroline Azar, et al. *Double Bill* #1. 1991. Kelly Marie Martin Riot Grrrl Collection 1977-2001, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.369, series 1, box 2, folder 19.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

Burroughs' fan base predominantly consists of angry young white men with similarly misogynistic views.

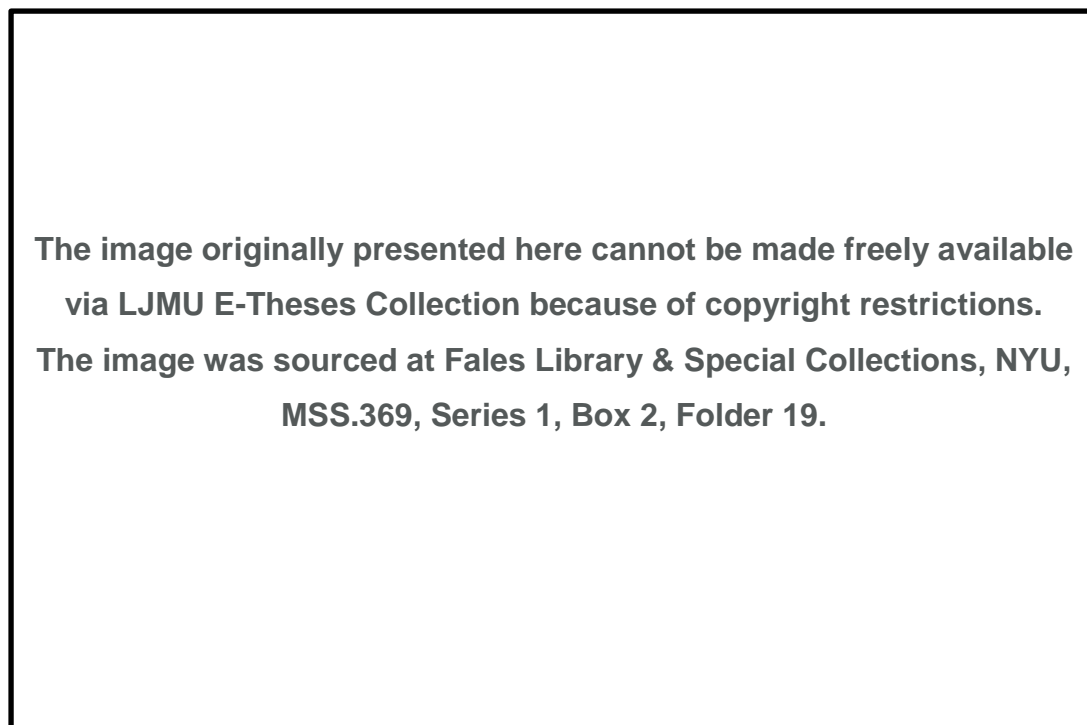


Fig. 47. 'THE FAKE AND THE FAT MAN' comic strip from *Double Bill #1* (1991) by Caroline Azar, Jena Von Brucker, G.B. Jones, Johnny Noxzema, and Rex, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

This comic strip by Johnny Noxzema also derides Burroughs' celebrated status in American culture as reflected in the media. He includes satirized magazine covers, one of which envisages a more accurate subtitle for a feature on Burroughs that takes into account his misogynistic tendencies: "*The Advocate*. William Burroughs: All Women Are Bitches".<sup>158</sup> It is also of some significance that the creator of this comic strip, Noxzema, is male. This conflicts with the primary authorship of Riot Grrrl zines and further differentiates this (hate)zine from other zines I unearthed from *The Riot Grrrl*

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

*Collection*, perhaps even positioning it on the periphery of what can reasonably be classified as a Riot Grrrl zine.<sup>159</sup>

In spite of *Double Bill*'s suspected loose associations with the movement, positioning these two zine series side-by-side – *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens* #3-4 and *Double Bill* #1-2 – is nonetheless useful for demonstrating Riot Grrrl's complex and contradictory embrace of the postmodern author and postmodernism in general. In *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens*, Lambert adopts Burroughsian literary techniques in her feminist zine, evading the material contexts of time and place to challenge essentialist notions of 'woman'; Lambert's vignettes, like in '30 C', often leave out details concerning the narrator's gender. On the other hand, *Double Bill* castigates Burroughs for the misogyny he exhibits in both his personal life and in his work. I contend that the fraught relationship Riot Grrrl had with Burroughs' work, encapsulated in these two zine series, is actually emblematic of the philosophical tensions that arose with emergent postmodern and poststructuralist ideas merging with feminism's third wave, which resulted in a widespread rejection of homogenising and essentialist assertions about women.

As Alison Stone pinpoints, the "central problem facing third wave feminist theory" is that its "anti-essentialism risks fragmenting women as a social group, thereby dissolving the possibility of feminist politics" (26). If feminism is founded on the idea that women constitute a group of oppressed subjects, with unifying commonalities and shared goals, then by delegitimizing the subject category of 'women', postmodern theory holds the

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<sup>159</sup> Noxzema's contribution in *Double Bill* also raises questions about the involvement of male contributors in Riot Grrrl culture more broadly. Despite accusations from critics at the time that Riot Grrrls were largely "antimale militants", many prominent Riot Grrrl bands included male musicians: Billy Karen from Bikini Kill, as well as Chris Rawley and Jon Slade of the band Huggy Bear (Marcus, 237).

potential to invalidate the ideological premise that underpins feminism as a valid social project.

Feminist theorists writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s, most notably Butler, articulated this anti-essentialist feminist critique. Building on second wave feminist theory that identified gender as a social construct, postmodern feminism in the 1990s sought to destabilise the stubbornly naturalised fact of sex too, recognising the fallibility of biological characteristics as a justification for the category 'female'. As Butler argues, "the distinction between gender and sex turns out to be no distinction at all" (10). Butler maintains that sexed embodiment is as much the result of cultural and social constraints as gender is, and therefore no unifying definition of woman can be based on sex. Consequently, Butler's feminist critique hints at new ways to think about the concept of women as "a personal/cultural history of received meanings subject to a set of imitative practices which [...] construct the illusion of a primary and interior gendered self" (188). Here, Butler introduces a similar genealogical conception of 'woman' as that proffered by Stone in her defence of anti-essentialist third wave feminism, whereby a grouping is established by overlapping "chains of interpretation" that comprise a distinctive history within which all women are situated (Stone, 26).

Despite the promising genealogical solution implied by Butler and directly offered up by Stones, the complex and problematic confluence of postmodernism with feminism in the late 1980s and early 1990s is traceable in Riot Grrrl's anxious embrace of postmodern literary devices and simultaneous rejection of some its most renowned figures, such as Burroughs. In my view, anti-essentialism constitutes one of Riot Grrrl's most fundamental philosophical conundrums. If one of its core aims was to raise the social status of girls and girl culture, then this is initially at odds with postmodern ideas that work to invalidate 'girl' as a legitimate subject

category. According to some critics, including Denfeld, Riot Grrrl's grappling with the contradictions posed by anti-essentialism was detrimental to the influence and longevity of the movement. The movement's intermittent flirtation with attempts at rejecting essentialist notions of 'woman', 'gender', and 'sex' likely contributed to its struggle for a secure position from which to politically galvanize around in any significant manner. This, at least, was one of the main criticisms of the movement offered up by Denfeld in her 1990s polemic, *The New Victorians*. Though otherwise complimentary of Riot Grrrl for its enthusiastic display of youthful feminist outrage, Denfeld doubts whether Riot Grrrl can even "be called a *movement*", owing to its lack of a distinct subject position and political agenda (263; emphasis added).

In light of such philosophical tensions, *Double Bill*'s hate campaign against Burroughs can be read as a contemptuous foreboding of the potential hazards posed by postmodernism for feminism's third wave, including Riot Grrrl. Whilst *Bedtime Stories for Trivial Teens*, amongst other Riot Grrrl zines, embraced postmodern literary aesthetics and ideas in their production of literary vignettes and non-essentialist narratives, *Double Bill* decries Burroughs for his misogyny. Azar et al.'s zine perhaps reflects a burgeoning anxiety in Riot Grrrl culture about the problems presented by postmodernism for feminism. Problems which, as they suggest with their 'hatezine' targeting Burroughs, lie in the fact that embracing postmodernism could at any moment give way to an unregulated misogyny. By threatening to delegitimize the subject category, 'women', postmodernism holds the potential to jeopardise the social project of feminism, which is, at least in part, dedicated to keeping misogyny and masculinist assumptions in check.

### 3.3 Aesthetics of Amateurism in I (Heart) Amy Carter! #1-5

In this subsection, I explore how Riot Grrrl zinester, Tammy Rae Carland, embraces the aesthetics of amateurism in similar ways to Acker in her zine series: *I (heart) Amy Carter!*. I contend that Carland uses the aesthetics of amateurism to create highly embodied literary productions, nurturing a sense of familiarity between herself and her readers and thereby ultimately fostering a community under the auspices of Riot Grrrl.

#### *I (Heart) Amy Carter! #1-5*

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Fig. 48. Front cover from *I (heart) Amy Carter! #1*, (1992) by Tammy Rae Carland, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

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Fig. 49. 50. 51. & 52. Front covers of *I (heart) Amy Carter!* #2, #3, #4, #5 [Masters], (1993, 93, 94, 94) by Tammy Rae Carland, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

*I (heart) Amy Carter!* is a zine by Carland – an Evergreen State College photography student in the late 1980s alongside Kathleen Hanna. Her zine, which echoes the name of her then band, Amy Carter, details Carland's fascination with and desire for the former U.S. first daughter. Aside from this basic premise, in a broader sense the zine deals with homosexual awakenings and offers serious revisions of gender and sexuality, both as they are constructed in the media, and as they manifest in newspaper and magazine articles written specifically about Carter. With all master copies of *I (heart) Amy Carter!* available at Fales library, this zine series stands as one of the most useful in terms of analysing the handspun materialism of Riot Grrrl zines, containing many of the aesthetics of amateurism previously discussed in this thesis: low production values, plagiarism, and irreverent juxtapositions (the merging of 'high culture' with 'schlock', to use Acker's words).

In *I (heart) Amy Carter!* #4, Carland defines her zine as a study in merging discourses: "It's part Dear Diary, part National Inquirer, part International Girl Conspiracy and part whatever the fuck I feel like".<sup>160</sup> Carland identifies her zine as a blending of competing discourses, from the highly personal and cathartic 'Dear Diary' format, to the American supermarket tabloid (*National Enquirer*), to a political pamphlet detailing the so-called 'International Girl Conspiracy'. Arguably, these discourses manifest a merging of 'high' and 'low' culture in literary form. The diary format implicates the personal and biographical, whilst the tabloid format implies

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<sup>160</sup> Tammy Rae Carland. *I (heart) Amy Carter!* #4 [Master]. 1994. Tammy Rae Carland "I (heart) Amy Carter!" Riot Grrrl Collection 1989-1996, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.290, series 2, box 1, folder 106.

gossip, both conjuring associations of a decidedly trivial nature. The 'International Girl Conspiracy' pamphlet, however, implies an urgent sociopolitical critique with a serious and important aim to inspire feminist revolt.

In the same issue, evidence of low production values manifest materially in various ways.

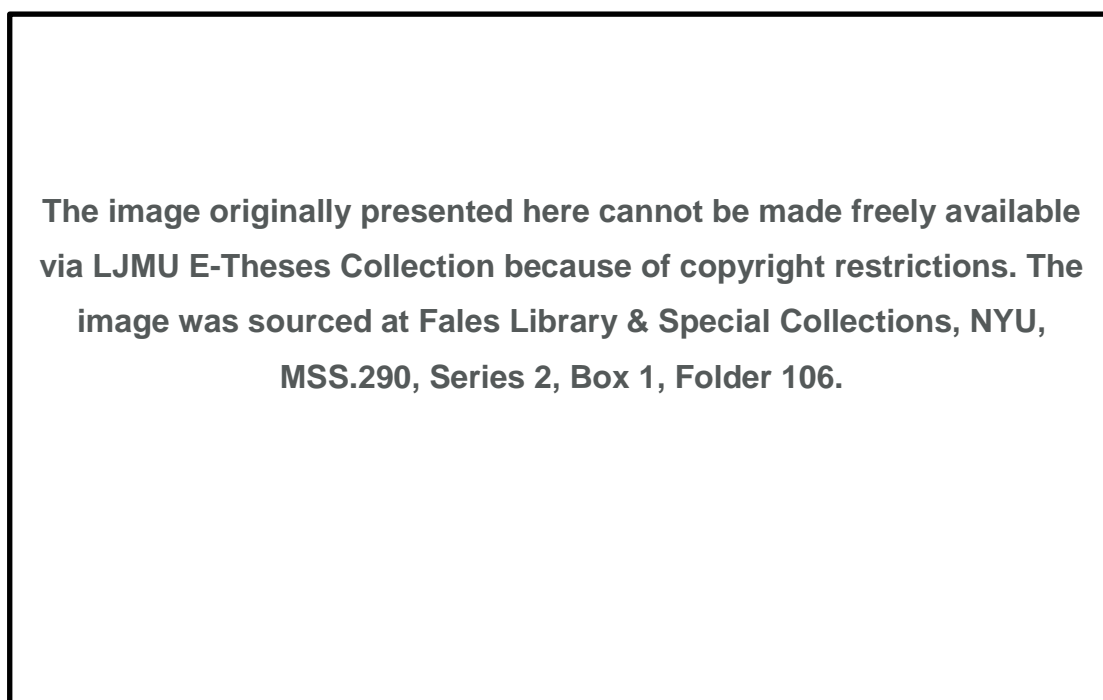


Fig. 53. Extract page from *I (heart) Amy Carter! #4* [Master] (1994) by Tammy Rae Carland, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

For example, clippings of articles, images, bold typed text in various fonts, and postage stamps are messily pasted onto the page. The edges of the clippings cut from other sources are jagged and their margins disproportionate (see in particular: 'How do I drag my son out of cross-dressing habit?'), creating an overall asymmetrical appearance on the page. Because this page includes scraps from various sources with differing qualities of paper (the thin flimsiness of newspaper paper alongside the substantial thickness of a tarot card), the surface of the page is also



significantly uneven to the touch. In the margins in the bottom left hand corner on the first page, Carland has scrawled in her own handwriting: 'My debut as a pin-up girl'. This add-on is squeezed vertically into the margins. All these elements contrast the slick, professional finish found in books and other mainstream publications, in which font is mostly consistent, the surface of the page is smooth (sometimes glossy) to the touch, and symmetry is assumed when positioning text and images onto the page (105).

Piepmeier analyses the effect of low production values in Riot Grrrl zines, claiming that the "sheer unprofessional appearance" of them – their scrappy, messy materiality – "serves to humanize the creator and the zine" (57; 67). *I (heart) Amy Carter!* is imprinted with 'errors' symptomatic of the human hand: the jagged, unevenly cut edges of the pasted articles, as well as the asymmetrical handwriting awkwardly squeezed into the margins embody the unsteady hand of the creator. Piepmeier resolves that zines constitute a significantly *embodied* literature, which breeds a sense of familiarity between readers, the zine, and the zine creator, making readers feel personally invited to participate in its discourse. I further contend that readers gravitate towards these highly embodied productions because they represent something that is lost, or at least suppressed, in an age of late-capitalism and hyper-consumerism. In such a culture, where emphasis is increasingly placed on high production values, Riot Grrrl zines like *I (heart) Amy Carter!* resist the uniforming effects of consumer capitalism on human idiosyncrasy.

These features also expose the mechanics of the text, encapsulating postmodernism's deconstructive impulse, and manifesting what Ryan Moore has called punk's "quest for authenticity" (307). The aesthetics of amateurism in Carland's punk zine position it in direct opposition to "the prevailing culture of media, image, and hypercommercialism" with its air of superficiality, and instead, aligns it with cultures of authenticity (Moore, 307). In other words, the aesthetics of amateurism in *I (heart) Amy Carter!* stimulate

associations with sincerity in an otherwise insincere media economy – an inviting prospect for feminist and would-be feminist audiences, who either already are, or are perhaps becoming increasingly distrusting of the media and its representation of women.

Furthermore, Carland's appropriation of pieces from other zines also demonstrates the sharing relationship between Riot Grrrl zine makers. In issue three, Carland includes the piece, 'Films take deadly shot at gay characters', which is taken from another fanzine called SWERVE.

**The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.290, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 105.**

Fig. 54. 'Films take deadly shot at gay characters' from *I (heart) Amy Carter! #3* [Master] (1993) by Tammy Rae Carland, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Carland is brazen in her declaration that the piece is: "Lifted from the zine SWERVE – thanks".<sup>161</sup> The tone of Carland's handwritten appended note is

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<sup>161</sup> Tammy Rae Carland. *I (heart) Amy Carter! #3* [Master]. 1993. Tammy Rae Carland "I (heart) Amy Carter!" Riot Grrrl Collection 1989-1996, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.290, series 2, box 1, folder 105.

telling of the free-flowing approach to plagiarism in Riot Grrrl literature, and in the punk zine-making community in general. Carland's blasé admission that the work is 'lifted' suggests a greater ease with appropriating work from other writers than is traditionally accepted in mainstream literary channels; note how the creator of SWERVE's permission is assumed with a flippant 'thanks'. This comfortable exchange also establishes familiarity between readers and other zines circulating in the community. Referencing each other in such a way brings a sense of manageable scale to the operation, which might otherwise seem like a vast and fragmented body of unpublished literature for readers to somehow source and wade through. Carland solves this problem for her readers by pointing them in the direction of specific titles.

### 3.4 “*Sitting in a cubicle for eight hours a day is not living*”: A Punk-Feminist Critique of Work in *Bulldozer #1*

Hitherto, I have discussed Riot Grrrl zines in terms of their artistic devices, suggesting that many of these are inherited from Acker’s avant-garde writing, and that such devices communicate Riot Grrrl’s third wave feminist critique in the 1990s. In this subsection, I analyse a zine by Rebecca Bulldozer called *Bulldozer #1* (1995) predominantly for its thematic content, which centres on the subject of work. Though it does contain some of the artistic literary devices previously discussed, this zine is particularly important because it reveals a rare ideological consideration in Riot Grrrl literature of women in the work sphere, which, as previously observed, has been a significant thematic consideration in both Acker’s and Hanna’s writing. Firstly, I argue that Bulldozer’s feminist critique of work, like Acker’s and Hanna’s, rejects the overvaluation of work in modern American culture. Secondly, I suggest that Bulldozer’s anti-work politics support the postfeminist trend, New Traditionalism, and its tacit function to remove women from the work sphere, and I connect this to Hanna’s reconceptualisation of work with Riot Grrrl production. Extending this discussion, I examine Bulldozer’s rejection of work against more nuanced critical perspectives on postfeminism and its rebranding of domesticity for women.

#### *Bulldozer #1*

*Bulldozer* is a zine series by Rebecca Bulldozer. Its first issue, pictured below, features a foreword explaining the zine’s central anti-corporate narrative, as well as the context in which it was conceived:

Bulldozer began as a concept over the summer when I had to dress in spiffy office clothes and sit at a desk for hours with not much to do

with my mind but plot random destruction. Thinking about Bulldozer was the only way I could get through the day and stay sane.<sup>162</sup>

The image originally presented here cannot be made freely available via LJMU E-Theses Collection because of copyright restrictions. The image was sourced at Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.524, Box 1, Folder 14.

Fig. 55. Front cover from *Bulldozer #1* (1995) by Rebecca Bulldozer, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The zine is grounded by anti-corporatism, which Bulldozer expresses in an extended autobiographical prose piece at the beginning, connecting her experience of temping in an office in between college semesters to a more extensive critique of the corporate sphere. She begins by describing the function of the environmental health and occupational hazards consultancy firm that she works for: “Basically they defend the big chemical companies whose poisoned workers try to sue them”.<sup>163</sup> In the same way that feminist awakenings are arguably the dominant discourse articulated in Grrrl zines, *Bulldozer #1* describes a sort of corporate awakening, examining, for the first time, what it means to work for a living in an increasingly globalized economy and workforce. As Bulldozer observes: “These are the masses of the *professional* class. I learned first-hand what it’s like to be among their ranks

<sup>162</sup> Rebecca Bulldozer. *Bulldozer #1*. 1995. Gina Johnson Riot Grrrl Zines, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.524, box 1, folder 14.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

when I took a corporate office job last summer” (emphasis in original).<sup>164</sup> Bulldozer presents herself as a sort of double agent, gathering intelligence from the front lines of corporate America and feeding it to her uninitiated Riot Grrrl comrades. She explains that, though forced to take the undesirable office job because she “needed the money”, whilst there, she also intended to garner “a different perspective on things”, as well as “do a bit of monkey wrenching” from within.<sup>165</sup>

Later in her account, when describing her role – “to do the shitwork for the marketing department” – she also reflects on her impression of the marketing director and her assistant: “they were constantly stressed out”.<sup>166</sup> She analyses their behavior in more detail later, writing:

They spent so much energy turning the worries of the firm into their own worries, when really, their life had nothing to do with this at all. They had become slaves, and ceased to live. Sitting in a cubicle for eight hours a day is not living. I was surrounded by death and by people who had sacrificed themselves to their jobs.<sup>167</sup>

Bulldozer dramatizes her colleagues’ excessive *psychic* investment in work, comparing this to voluntary slavery. Her account emphasises the absurdity of their investment in work by highlighting the nature of the firm, which she frames as fundamentally counterintuitive to human interests: “The firm’s list of clients include many of the most offensive exploiters of humanity”.<sup>168</sup> Though she does not directly cite the Puritan work ethic as the source of her

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.

co-workers' irrational and excessive commitment to their jobs, Bulldozer's narrative nonetheless poses an existentialist challenge to a cultural overvaluation of work. Her account questions the validity of 'sitting in a cubicle for eight hours a day' and embodying the issues of the firm, particularly when these are in direct conflict with humanity and human vitality, according to Bulldozer.

The material elements of *Bulldozer #1* support her rejection of the Puritan work ethic and refine Bulldozer's expressed anti-work politics. For instance, whilst her polemic challenges a cultural overvaluation of work as manifest in her 'stressed out' co-workers, the material elements of her zine complicate this message. Much as both Acker and Hanna communicate an anti-work politics that is not opposed to hard work in and of itself, Bulldozer makes a similar distinction in her zine. The labour-intensive, handcrafted materiality of *Bulldozer #1* suggests that her repudiation of hard work is specifically geared towards the corporate sphere, and not, for instance, hard work in a not-for-profit, activist capacity.

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Fig. 56. Extract page from *Bulldozer #1* (1995) by Rebecca Bulldozer, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The zine predominantly consists of large sections of tightly bound text, as if squeezed onto the page, like on the first page pictured above. These blocks of text are pasted onto collages of images, with some sections of text even cut and pasted individually, sentence-by-sentence (as on page two, pictured above). The culmination of these elements – the overflowing reams of prose, the carefully selected and collated images in the background, the cutting and pasting of individual sentences – all point towards a labour-intensive production. These material features refine the meaning at the heart of Bulldozer's narrative critique of the Puritan work ethic, changing it from a straightforward rejection of hard work, to a more nuanced rejection of hard work in a specifically corporate capacity, with a mind to redirecting that energy towards personal projects and grassroots activism.

Later in her reflection, Bulldozer writes about the feelings of alienation she experienced in her office temp role:

I felt like I was from a different planet than everyone around me. I couldn't show my real self in the office. I had to wear office clothes and leave my identity at home. So every morning I put on my disguise and boarded the subway, to join the flow of zombies [...].<sup>169</sup>

She equates assuming her role as an office worker with a loss of identity. Her uniform functions as a disguise, a suppression of her 'true' self, adopted to blend in and infiltrate the scores of corporate drones. Describing fellow commuters on the subway as 'zombies', Bulldozer gives narrative form to

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid.



Marx's theory of the dehumanizing effects of estranged labour within capitalist systems of production (previously outlined in Chapter One of this thesis). Despite its human-like appearance, the zombie lacks full human consciousness. Drawing Marx's theory to a dramatic yet coherent conclusion, Bulldozer's analogy of commuting workers as zombies literalises the *deadening* effects of alienated labour on human beings.

In many ways, the attitude towards work Bulldozer expresses in her zine is emblematic of a third wave feminist perspective on work and the labour economy in which the third wave exists. For example, Bulldozer reveals that she does not invest her identity in work; to the contrary, she is anxious about preserving her identity *in spite* of work: "the thought of being sucked into a career like that is really frightening".<sup>170</sup> In "It's All About the Benjamins" (2007), Heywood and Drake posit that: "women and men of the third wave tend not to locate meaning and identity in one place, particularly not in a job or profession" (117). One reason they cite for this is "corporate downsizing and the shift to the service sector", meaning that third wavers do not expect to remain in one role for their entire lives, steadily acquiring benefits over time (Heywood and Drake, 117). Not only does this sort of instability incite more "flexible and multifaceted, even contradictory" worker identities, but, "the satisfaction that work offers is most often diminished" (Heywood and Drake, 118; 117). All the hallmarks of a third wave attitude towards work that Heywood and Drake describe are observable in Bulldozer's reflection. She frequently reminds us of the temporariness of her work ("I held on and did my time"); the contradictions she embodies as a punk-feminist worker ("at least the money they were paying me would mostly be diverted away from financing more corporate McCulture"); as well

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

as her general dissatisfaction with work (“My own power was being diverted towards purposeless and unimportant work”).<sup>171</sup>

Finally, in her polemic, and returning to the subject of office attire, Bulldozer dissects women's work clothes to demonstrate how “[p]atriarchy thrives in this climate”.<sup>172</sup> She argues that, “While office clothes for men are designed to make them look dignified, office clothes for women subject them to pain and objectification”, using high heels as a prime example of this.<sup>173</sup> Bulldozer’s commentary on women’s work attire echoes Wolf’s argument in *The Beauty Myth*, where she identifies the sustained demand for women to uphold an ideal of extreme beauty, even in their roles as professionals: “inside the majority of the West’s controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret ‘underlife’ poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty” (Wolf, 10). Wolf advocates that the cultural demand for women to embody oppressive beauty ideals, even in the workplace – recognizable in their “working clothes – high heels, stockings, makeup, jewelry” – is emblematic of sustained patriarchal dominance in the work sphere (45). Bulldozer also makes this comparison in her reflection, following her discussion about the oppressive aspects of women’s work uniforms with a closing statement about the more overt expressions of patriarchal dominance in her office: “The firm where I worked was run by a husband and wife team. But it was George, not Susan, whose name was on the letterhead”.<sup>174</sup> By presenting the office as a place where “the men are patronizing and the women water the plants”, Bulldozer’s zine highlights how the corporate

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<sup>171</sup> Ibid.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

sphere is insidiously hostile towards women through its reinforcement of stereotypical gender roles.<sup>175</sup>

### **Assessing Bulldozer's critique of work in the 'postfeminist age'**

In the previous chapter, I suggested that Hanna's rejection of the work sphere via Riot Grrrl production inadvertently plays into the postfeminist trend, New Traditionalism, by rationalising unpaid home-based labour for women. Arguably, Bulldozer's expressed anti-work politics in her feminist zine similarly supports New Traditionalism's tacit function to encourage women to turn their efforts away from professional pursuits and entice them back into the domestic sphere. Now I want to extend this reading slightly by considering other critical perspectives on New Traditionalism and the rebranding of domesticity in the 'postfeminist age'. I contemplate perspectives that uproot the conception of New Traditionalism I have used thus far, which relies on what Gillis and Hollows call "the 'backlash' thesis": the idea that postfeminist trends are inherently "antithetical to the ideals of feminism" (2). I consider Bulldozer's rejection of the work sphere and simultaneous embrace of the domestic sphere with her handcrafted, bedroom creation (her Riot Grrrl zine), in relation to Genz's more neutral conception of postfeminism and postfeminist domesticity:

Postfeminism is neither a simple rebirth of feminism nor a straightforward abortion [...] but a complex resignification that harbours within itself the threat of backlash as well as the potential for innovation. ("I Am Not a Housewife", 53)

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

Genz's less sceptical stance on postfeminism suggests that trends like New Traditionalism can potentially encompass *both* anti-feminist logics *and* explorations into possible 'new' femininities, including a revaluation of the pleasures of home and domesticity. This changes how we might read the anti-work politics in *Bulldozer #1*, the 'cocooning' aspects of Riot Grrrl zine-making, as well as Hanna's revaluation of work with Riot Grrrl production as that which can be performed at home and is not necessarily paid. It introduces the idea that Riot Grrrl's domestic roots, with its production primarily taking place in girls' bedrooms, forces a reassessment of the home as a site of "agency and self-determination" that does not automatically exclude women from taking part in "gender developments" (Genz "'I Am Not a Housewife'", 51). Accordingly, *Bulldozer* presents the work sphere as the arena in which her agency is suppressed, rather than her home life, where she is free to wear the clothes she wants and put together the zine she has only been able to think about whilst in work.

Admittedly, this potential reimagining of the domestic sphere as a site for female agency and a hub for feminist activism encapsulated in Riot Grrrl's production methods is complicated by its status as a youth movement. Genz tellingly positions the figure of the mother/housewife at the centre of her study on domesticity, because the supposed drudgery and enforced patriarchal domesticity that second wave feminists and a 'backlash thesis' opposed are not represented in the figure of the young punk woman making feminist creations in her bedroom. Gillis and Hollows remind us of this too, proposing that in popular culture, "youthful femininities and/or protagonists" often preclude questions about domesticity, because they are "primarily identified by their roles in the public sphere" (2). This is certainly true of Riot Grrrl, where its cultural influence in the public sphere is its primary point of identification, evidenced by the likes of Hanna, who as the lead singer of Bikini Kill, is primarily identifiable as a public figure.

In light of this, Riot Grrrl's modest revival of the domestic, with what might reasonably be thought of as feminist-inspired crafting (Riot Grrrl zine-making), again collapses into postfeminism's compromised 'feminist' politics. Riot Grrrl's contribution to the 'domestic/non-domestic' or the 'private/public' binary in feminist discourse is somewhat negated by its status as a youth movement. By centralising "the girl or the young woman – rather than the housewife, mother or older woman", its critiques waver in relation to domesticity in the same place where most postfeminist scripts fall down: its fetishization of youth (Gillis and Hollows, 2-3).

### **Beyond *Bulldozer* #1: considerations of work in Riot Grrrl culture**

Though in this subsection, I have foregrounded a Riot Grrrl zine that performs an extended critique of work from a feminist perspective, admittedly this sort of dedication to discussing the subject of work is a rarity in Riot Grrrl zines I encountered in *The Riot Grrrl Collection*. I can see two reasons for this. Firstly, the influence of punk philosophy in Riot Grrrl and its anarchistic approach to matters of the corporate sphere and mainstream culture. Punk's approach to the problem of work, which advocates for an anarchistic *refusal* of work via anti-corporate activism and embracing a slacker ethos, means that discussions of work tend not to move into more comprehensive feminist analyses of the work sphere – the kind of analyses that would be required if a feminist reformation of the work sphere was an objective. This is reflected in Riot Grrrl's literature, where the rare critiques of work tend to focus on anti-corporate activism and rejecting the work sphere entirely, as opposed to discussions about assisting women into corporate America and tackling the hostilities women faced internally. *Bulldozer* encapsulates this sentiment in her polemic when she writes: "I really didn't

want an office job. [...] My ultimate goal is to refuse to participate".<sup>176</sup> She reveals that her long-term objective is to shun the work sphere entirely, rather than attempting to better it for the benefit and acquisition of women.

Secondly, Riot Grrrl's youth subculture status has a role to play in this too. As Schilt argues in her study on the lack of racial cognizance exhibited in Riot Grrrl zines: "Riot Grrrl was a feminist movement that attracted girls as young as twelve, so the majority of the zines fell into the feminist *awakening* pattern" (45; emphasis added). To this majority of very young zine-makers, presumably, the world of work would have been of very little concern. And despite the fact that pioneers of the Riot Grrrl movement were predominantly college-aged or recent college graduates (like Bulldozer), Buchanan reminds us that the Riot Grrrl scene was "defined by the *participants* and not by the media or even those women viewed by most as the founders" (xiii; emphasis added).

Considering the Riot Grrrl zine collection at NYU specifically, and despite critiques of work being a rarity in these, some of the collectors' reading inventories nonetheless reveal concern for working women in the 1990s. For instance, in Kelly Marie Martin's collection, Martin, co-founder of the prominent Riot Grrrl zine, *Thorn*, has preserved a 1992-93 edition of '9 to 5: Profile of Working Women': an informative, four-page pamphlet reviewing conditions for working women in the early 1990s. The pamphlet includes national U.S. statistics on subjects such as: 'Women in the Workforce', 'Earnings of Working Women', 'The Wage Gap', 'Child Care', 'Health Care', 'Sexual Harassment', and 'Older Women and Pensions', amongst others.

Furthermore, Joanna Fateman's Riot Grrrl collection includes a copy of the *SCUM Manifesto* by radical feminist Valerie Solanas, originally published in 1968. The manifesto, primarily known for its advocacy of eliminating all

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<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

men from society, crucially contains a radical feminist critique of work: “There is no human reason for money or for anyone to work more than two or three hours a week at the very most.” (Solanas, 41). If these founding members were not overwhelmingly writing critiques of work in their Riot Grrrl zines, they were nevertheless reading about it and were aware of work’s significance in feminist discourse. The influence of this awareness occasionally manifests itself in Riot Grrrl zines, as with *Bulldozer #1*.

Fig. 57. Front cover  
from ‘9 to 5: Profile of  
Working Women’  
(1992-93) by National  
Association of Working  
Women, Fales Library  
& Special Collections,  
NYU.

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Collections, NYU, MSS.349, Series 1,  
Box 1, Folder 2.**

### 3.5 *Language, Self-Writing and Identity: Confessional Poetry #2 and I'm So Fucking Beautiful #1-2*

In this subsection, I consider two Riot Grrrl zines that centralise discourses of the 'self'. Besides their experimental preoccupation with identity that connects Acker's writing with some Riot Grrrl zine writing, I argue that zines like *Confessional Poetry #2* and *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* demonstrate a lineage with, and in some cases a deep concern for, a history of confessional women's writing. I also explore how Riot Grrrl zines that centralise issues of identity and 'self' contemplate a key third wave theoretical perspective: intersectionality.

#### *Confessional Poetry #2*

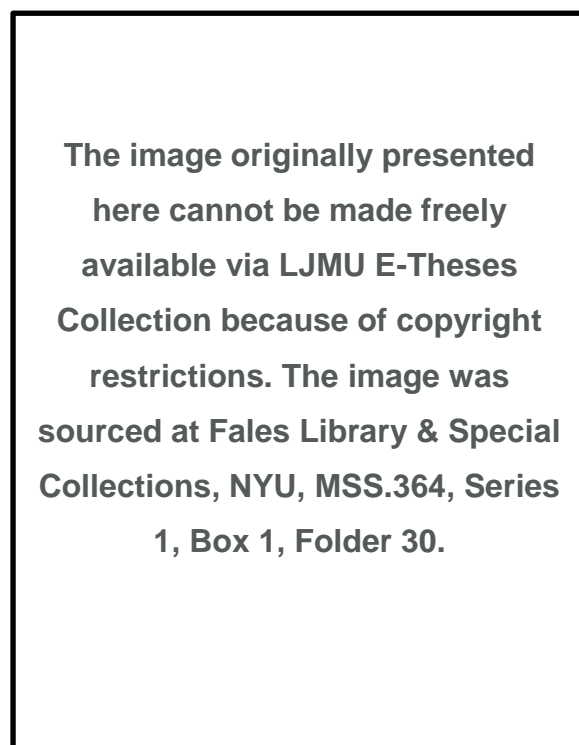


Fig. 58. Front cover from *Confessional Poetry #2* (n.d.), by geneva gano, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.



*Confessional Poetry #2* is a zine consisting of prose, poetry, and short critical essays all by geneva gano.<sup>177</sup> The zine is housed in Zan Gibbs' Riot Grrrl collection at Fales library and although the date of publication is unknown, it is likely the zine was published sometime between 1992 and 1997, given that the bulk of Gibbs' collection was sourced in these years. The zine explores the limitations of language for self-expression, as well as the anxiety of self-description within the constraints of oppressive language. It also introduces the basic tenets of intersectionality discourse, which gano conveys in the form of a parable. *Confessional Poetry #2* is as much a fundamental exploration of the function of identity discourse in hegemonic culture as it is a personal working-through of the author's understanding of her own identity, which she signals in her acknowledgements: "for me".<sup>178</sup> Near the beginning of her zine, gano cites the limitations of language as a key motivation for her work when she writes:

This is all about language.

The words I am writing,  
**right now,**  
 are never going to express  
 everything I have to say ,  
 everything I mean to say .  
 It's not possible.

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<sup>177</sup> The author purposefully decapitalises her name. I unpack this detail later in this subsection.

<sup>178</sup> geneva gano. *Confessional Poetry #2*. n.d. Zan Gibbs Riot Grrrl Collection Zine Collection 1987-2003 [bulk 1992-1997], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.364, series 1, box 1, folder 30.

It will never be possible.

That's the most significant limitation of language.

Written language I mean.<sup>179</sup>

With her formal and typographical choices, Gano emphasizes her sentiment that words cannot ever fully convey meaning. The words '**right now**' are emboldened to communicate something that the words alone cannot. This typography impresses the perversity of the scenario in which the author finds herself: using language to articulate the limitations of language, and fully understanding this limitation whilst *still* trying to convey meaning using language. The realisation that the words she is using 'right now' are inadequate in a multitude of ways to express her meaning encapsulates the innately maddening quality of language. Furthermore, the way that the text is arranged on the page in the form of a poem is significant. The sentence is broken up into individual lines: 'The words I am writing/**right now**/are never going to express/everything I have to say/everything I mean to say'. This disrupts the flow of the sentence, highlighting the stunted nature of language and the author's struggle for free-flowing expression because of this. The gap between the very last sentence and the rest of the piece highlights the infuriating aspects of using conventional language for the writer. Written as a corrective to the main body of the piece, the gap before the last sentence ('Written language I mean') conveys Gano's continual dissatisfaction with what has and has not been expressed. It conjures the image of the writer, having finished writing and momentarily satisfied that she has conveyed her meaning in full, suddenly noticing a gap in her expression, something unsaid,

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<sup>179</sup> Ibid.

and who therefore must continue to write and amend. The implied ceaselessness of this process speaks to the writer's unending struggle for expression when using a tool as inadequate as language.

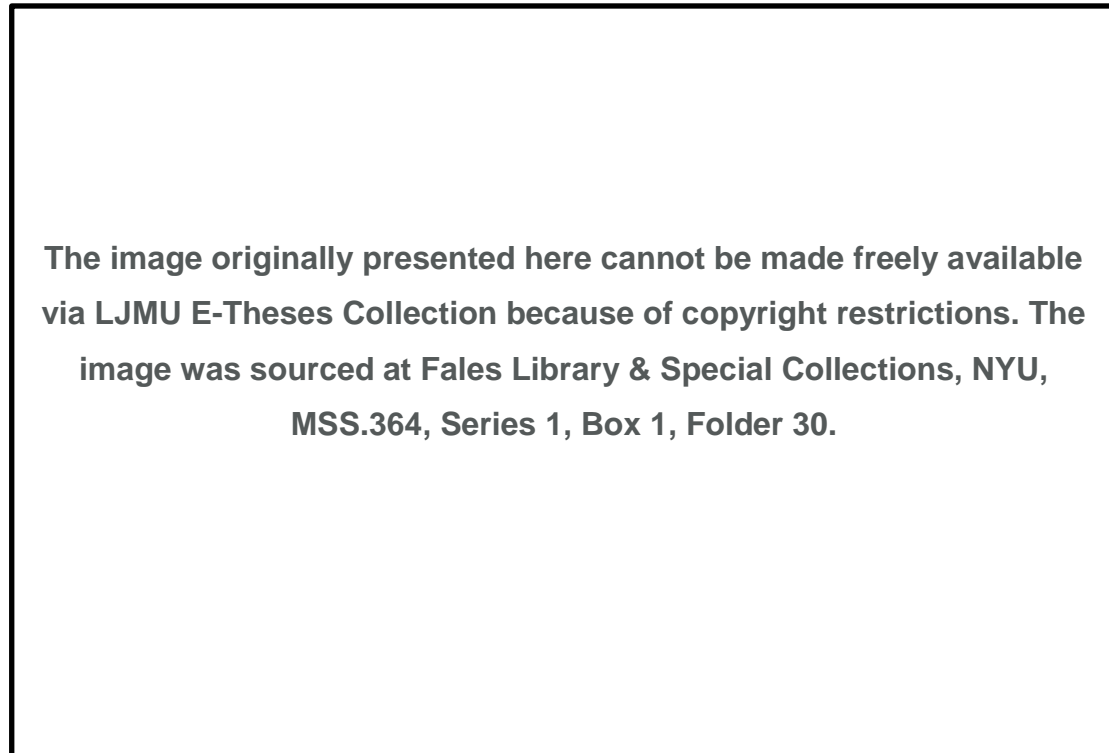


Fig. 59. 'My Name is geneva' from *Confessional Poetry #2* (n.d.) by genevago, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

In the following pages (pictured above), gano demonstrates how her identity is corralled and confined within language. She contemplates how it is conceived of within the categories of gender, race, class, religion, age, location, and sexuality. Underneath each marker on her 'identity checklist' she has added retorts that destabilise these classifications:

- I am a girl.

**What!?!?**

[...]

- I am white.

**No I'm not.**

[...]

- I am middle class.

**What's that?**<sup>180</sup>

gano's asides reveal her sense of detachment from these identifying categories that do not encapsulate the wholeness of her person. From a feminist perspective, gano's inability to perceive herself in the identity checklist ('I am a girl/ **What!!?!'**) gives textual form to Irigaray's theory of the impossibility of women's full symbolic existence in a masculine symbolic order. In *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1985), originally published in French in 1974, Irigaray proposes that within the masculine symbolic order, woman "remains in unrealized potentiality" and that her ontological status alone "makes her incomplete and uncompletable [...] [s]he can *never* achieve the *wholeness* of her form" (165; emphasis in original). Where gano's retorts are repeatedly cut-off mid-sentence – or rather, where her *subjective* voice is consistently suppressed by the interruption of yet another bullet point – the piece as a whole reflects the impossibility of female self-actualisation within the masculine symbolic order:

- I am a vegetarian.

**But what about \_\_\_\_\_?**

- I am middle class.<sup>181</sup>

gano's voice is quashed by the tyrannous identity checklist, which denies multiplicity and is representative of a masculine symbolic order. What's

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid.

more, the colour scheme of this piece supports gano's feminist critique of the homogenising effects of a masculine symbolic order. Her reversal of the standard 'black text on white background' layout purposely draws our attention to this colour scheme. It is visually representative of a masculine symbolic order, which is arguably dichotomous as opposed to multiplicitous.

gano reinforces this concept on the following two-page spread:

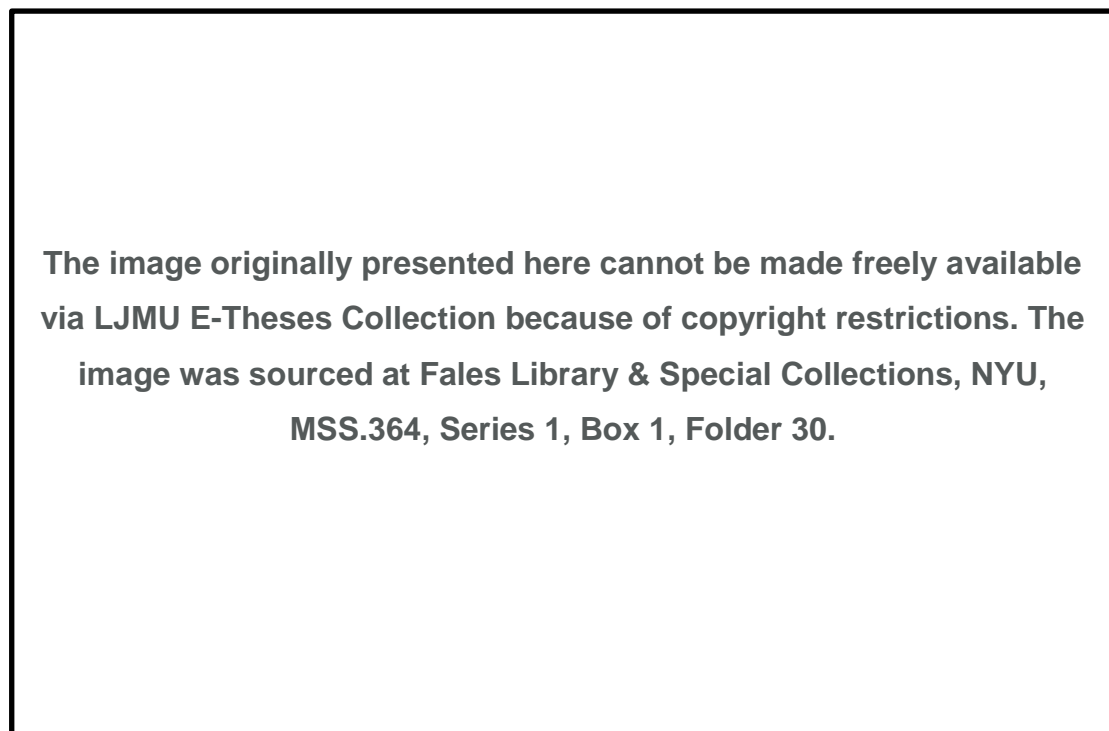


Fig. 60. 'IT'S ALL SO BLACK AND WHITE' from *Confessional Poetry #2* (n.d.) by geneva gano, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The statement in bold black font on the second page – 'IT'S ALL SO BLACK AND WHITE' – highlights the absurdity of binary thinking in relation to identity, which, as gano suggests, requires multiplicity if women are to exist within its discourses. There is also a racial implication emanating from this statement. Binary thinking in relation to identity undermines intersectionality, which, according to Piepmeier, is "one of the key theoretical

ideas of contemporary feminism” and a hallmark of third wave feminist literature, as we see in geno’s Riot Grrrl zine (126).

Intersectionality becomes a more central feature of *Confessional Poetry* #2 later on, with geno’s idiosyncratic take on the famous, ancient Indian parable about three visually impaired men who all imagine something different when touching part of an elephant. Titled simply ‘the elephant’, the narrative begins when “[s]even blind human beings who had absolutely nothing in common with each other except being blind” go on a safari together.<sup>182</sup> The group stumbles across an elephant. Their guide, rather than telling them what is before them, lets them figure it out for themselves. The story then splits into a series of parts describing each person’s encounter with the elephant. The first, a “middle-aged middle-class middle values kind of white man [...] a professor of astrophysics in the top school for the blind in England”, imagines the elephant is a rocket.<sup>183</sup> The second, a young gay man and dishwasher at an upscale NYC restaurant who has “[a]nglo features, including light blue eyes, molasses-colored skin, and thick, nappy African hair”, imagines his lover, Arnold.<sup>184</sup> The third, a widowed Puerto Rican woman who also recently lost her four-year-old daughter to pneumonia and is not “adept at expressing herself in English”, feels the elephant’s tail swatting her and thinks that someone is whipping her.<sup>185</sup> In essence, geno’s short story gives narrative form to the concept of intersectionality by demonstrating how the characters’ class, race, education, sexuality, and gender intersect to alter their experience, as well as their perception of the world around them.

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid.

<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

After the final character, gano abruptly abandons this narrative to address the audience directly: "I could go on, but I think we all know the story and how it turns out".<sup>186</sup> This distinctly postmodern tactic of exposing the fictionality of the text via direct address to the reader, demonstrates what Piepmeier considers to be the most significant contribution to third wave discourses on intersectionality in Grrrl zines. She argues that by "joining the abstract with the intensely personal", Grrrl zines bring an "analytical perspective into third wave discourse in ways different from those in more traditional publications" (Piepmeier, 130). In other words, gano and other zinesters contemplate intersectional theory through the added lens of the personal and lived experience, exploring its logical parameters when played out in real life. gano does this when reflecting on her fable, contemplating the potential challenges that arise from practicing a progressive intersectional politics. She writes: "who does the arguing, or how is the arguing done is ALSO socio-culturally informed and GEEZ, that makes it hard to draw any conclusions or figure out exactly **what you are** or **where you belong**".<sup>187</sup> Essentially, gano expresses a concern that intersectionality impacts on activism and makes politic galvanising more complicated. This chimes in with Wolf's 1993 polemic *Fire With Fire* (1994), in which she argues that feminists might overcome the issues presented by intersectional theory by grouping around specific sociopolitical aims and policies. gano's zine encapsulates this third wave predicament by excitedly embracing intersectional politics in her zine whilst simultaneously expressing anxieties over its potential impact on feminist praxis.

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<sup>186</sup> Ibid.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

### The bell hooks influence

*Confessional Poetry #2* takes much of its philosophical and stylistic cues from black American feminist and author, hooks, who is renowned for her work on intersectionality and who coined the phrase ‘white supremacist capitalist patriarchy’. gano makes this influence clear in her zine, writing:

bell hooks does not buy into this conspiracy between the English language and capitalism and bell hooks is one of my sister-idols and this is one way I can show my appreciation for the works she has offered me .<sup>188</sup>

gano refers to hooks’ critique of the English language as a construct that has been weaponised by ‘the oppressor’ and that reinforces racism, sexism, and classism. hooks writes about this in *Teaching to Transgress* (1994), in which she seeks to revive a pleasure in teaching and learning that she claims has been lost in the academy. One of the central aims of the collection, hooks attests, is to distinguish between “education as the practice of freedom and education that merely strives to reinforce domination”, and she argues that we must strive to assert the former (hooks, 4). In the book, hooks also makes a case for the oppressive function of language on minorities – “[s]tandard English [...] is the language of conquest and domination” – and proposes that by rupturing its grammatical and linguistic conventions, the oppressed transform language into a tool of resistance (168).

hooks’ decapitalization of her own (pen) name encapsulates this idea of resisting Standard English and grammatical conventions. In a 2013 article for the Rollins College newspaper, *The Sandspur*, she expresses her belief that what is most important is the “substance of books, not who I am” (hooks qtd.

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.



in Williams, 1). Decapitalization also reflects her rejection of bourgeois-capitalistic ideals around ownership and intellectual property – a motivation she confirms in an interview for *BOMB* (1994), when she attests to how seeing oneself as a “worker for freedom” involves the challenge “to sacrifice [...] bourgeois models of self and identity” (hooks, 26). Plainly, hooks’ decapitalization of her name is a means by to remove a stamp of ownership over her writing, thus demoncratising her ideas for the non-bourgeoisie masses.

Like hooks, gano similarly makes a point of decapitalizing her name throughout her zine but particularly in the page pictured below:

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Fig. 61. ‘I spell my name’ from *Confessional Poetry* #2 (n.d.) by geneva gano, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

gano insists that her name be spelt in lower case – ‘little g, little m, little g,’ – citing the same philosophical reasoning that hooks offers. She proposes that we need to “move away from the self-important way the (E)nglish language wants us all to CAPITALIZE” because “CAPITALISATION = OWNERSHIP”,

and because “specific names imply fame and fortune”.<sup>189</sup> Like hooks, gano’s “well-educated revolution against the conventions of the english language”, communicate an anti-bourgeois-capitalist politics.<sup>190</sup> The grammatical ruptures in gano’s zine translate as her attempt to liberate herself from the constraints imposed on her identity by conventional language that fortifies racism, sexism, and capitalism, starting with her own name.<sup>191</sup>

gano’s lauding of hooks in her Riot Grrrl zine is also significant because of the confessional style of writing for which hooks was renowned, and notably criticized for, in the academic community. In the previously mentioned *BOMB* interview, hooks addresses one of the most common critiques she receives about her work, which pertains to the “level of confession” in her writing (26). She responds by reasoning that her style has everything to do with inclusivity and with bridging the assumed gaps between the academy and the general public, between theory and practice:

I had to give people something that allowed them to identify with what I was saying, and not just offer them some abstract idea that might not have any relevance to their lives. (hooks, 26)

This was essentially the subject of her essay, ‘Theory as Liberatory Practice’ (1991), in which hooks argues that the assumed “gap [...] between theory and practice” is resolved when theorizing is linked to our lived experience (2). In the article, hooks explains the political motivations for her confessional style in no uncertain terms: “my decision about writing style, about not using conventional academic formats, are political decisions motivated by the desire to be inclusive” (9). hooks’ guiding philosophy with regards to her

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

confessional style of writing was to move academic theory and intellectual work out of the academy and into public discourse. This speaks to Riot Grrrl's parasitic relationship with the academy, whereby its college-educated instigators repackaged feminist theoretical perspectives in their confessional zines to relocate these ideas into more accessible domains.

In *Confessional Poetry* #2, gano gives a history of confessional writing that provides a sort of theoretical underpinning for the criticism hooks faced by her academic peers:

there was this thing that the critics called 'confessional poetry', which is, of course, a slur. Because REAL poetry is something so learned, so technical that it has nothing to do with anyone's life. So 'confessional poetry' became a big slur in the academic (read: old, conservative white men) community in the 50's [to] 70's, when a lot of writers were being published who never would have been published before. WOMEN, people of color, queers...and since OFCOURSE they had little to offer the well-educated white males in the universities, except of course a piece of their own personal history (and why would the English professors want to be bothered with that?) 'confessional poetry' it was. But to the artists themselves, the very act of speaking their own history was an act of REVOLUTION. The fact that they were alive and just telling about it meant that they existed, that they weren't just invisible pretend-people. Writing as an act of revolution.

I exist.<sup>192</sup>

Echoing hooks, gano's account expresses contempt for a history of writing fostered by the academy that negates lived experiences. She argues that the

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<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

devaluation of confessional poetry and confessional writing in general is symptomatic of white supremacist patriarchal logics in the academy, which form the basis of our literary value system. gano points out that for minorities and women, the very practice of writing one's lived experience is a revolutionary act. The fact that the title of her zine is *Confessional Poetry* addresses this history of exclusion and the subsequent devaluation of confessional writing, and can be read as a sort of reclamation of a style of writing that is inherently anti-'white supremacist capitalist patriarchy', to use hooks' phrase.

*I'm So Fucking Beautiful* #1-2

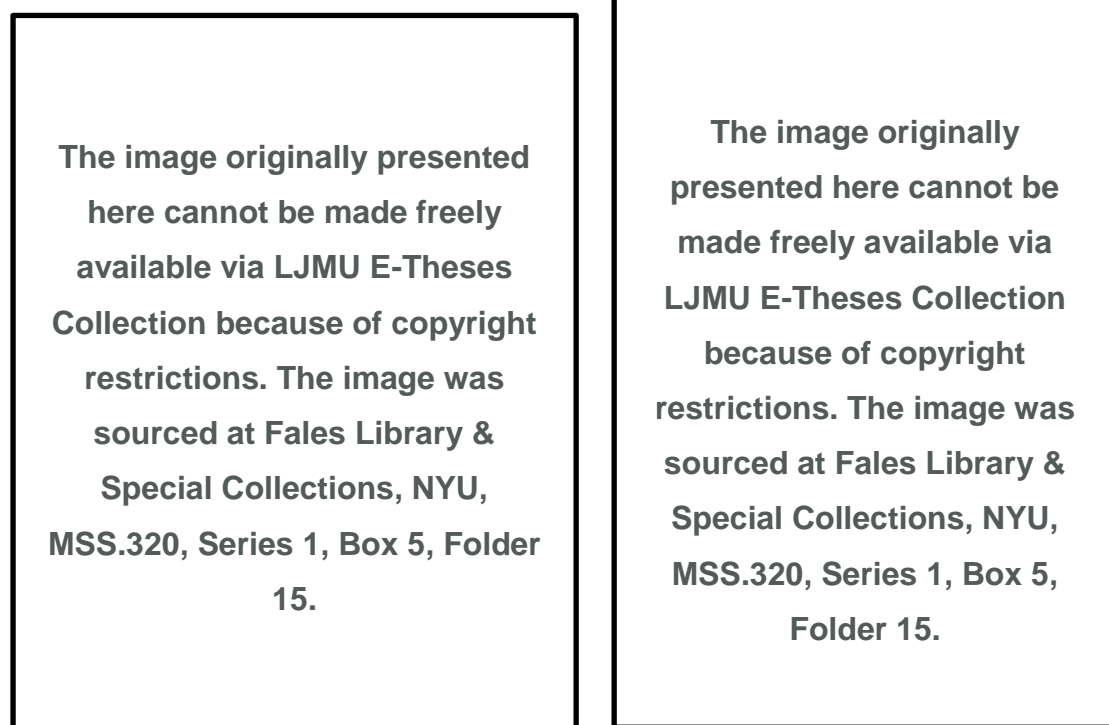


Fig. 62. & 63. Front covers of issues one and two from *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* (n.d.) by Nomy Lamm, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

*I'm So Fucking Beautiful* is a zine by Nomy Lamm, which centers on Lamm's personal journey towards self-acceptance and her fight against fat oppression in a culture obsessed with diets and female thinness. She calls this the "fat

grrrl revolution".<sup>193</sup> As with many Riot Grrrl zines, the dates of publication of these zines are sketchy. Piepmeier writes that "Lamm produced three issues of the zine in 1991, when she was seventeen" (59). However, Buchanan's study of the zine series conflicts with this, situating issue two of Lamm's zine in 1994 (a date supported by a self-portrait featured in issue two, dated: 'February 7<sup>th</sup> 1994') (93). Intermediate issues of the zine further complicate matters, such as *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* #2.5, which Piepmeier also situates in 1991. Though it is probably safe to say all issues of *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* were published in the early 1990s, somewhere between 1991 and 1994, I will reference these zines in the same way that they are referenced in Tammy Rae Carland's Riot Grrrl Zine Collection at NYU as undated. Studying issues one and two of *I'm So Fucking Beautiful*, I consider how Lamm constructs identity through a combination of reflective life writing and hand-drawn self-portraiture.

Buchanan proposes that, "[l]ife writing is an important aspect of zines which present memory, creation, and production in ways rarely seen in autobiographical forms which are written for public consumption" (7). Inge Stockburger also considers the reflective quality of life writing, suggesting that the telling and retelling of autobiographical stories allows zine writers to inquire into "not only the significance of those experiences, but also how they link up to a longer-term sense of our self and lived life" (330). In other words, the practice of life writing in zines has a consolidating effect on one's identity and personal history.

This function of reflective life writing can be observed taking place in *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* #1, when Lamm recounts a story of being sexually harassed by a male acquaintance. Titled simply, 'harassment', she tells of how

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<sup>193</sup> Nomy Lamm. *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* #2. n.d. Tammy Rae Carland Zine Collection 1988-2002, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.320, series 1, box 5, folder 15.

this person persistently catcalled her: “like ‘hey hot stuff’ and ‘whoo foxy mama’ etc, everytime i saw him”.<sup>194</sup> We are privy to Lamm’s embarrassment at this scenario – “anybody within twenty feet could hear” – as she explains how she discretely pleaded and tried to “nicely explain” to him why this made her feel uncomfortable and why he should desist.<sup>195</sup> Later, during this retelling, Lamm’s story gives way to her retrospective rage at the situation: “fuck i’m mad. GRRRRRRRRR!!!!

FUCKTHEMIWANTTOFUCKINGKILLTHEM!!!! !”.<sup>196</sup> The contrast between Lamm’s timidity towards her perpetrator during these events, compared to the rage she later expresses in her zine, demonstrates how reflecting on those experiences imbue them with renewed significance. Lamm’s written reflection also allows her to express a part of herself, her rage and distress, that she otherwise feels unable to express in a fat intolerant society: “the moral of the story is that fat women have no right to be upset when they are harassed”.<sup>197</sup> Thus, life writing in *I’m So Fucking Beautiful* #1 presents a fuller picture of Lamm’s identity – one that she is otherwise unable to express freely in her day-to-day life: a fat woman who is both vulnerable *and* powerful, compassionate *and* vengeful, proud *and* ashamed.

In the same way Lamm reflects on her autobiographical stories, she also reflects on past zine issues on her quest to construct a more accurate representation of herself for her readers. In *I’m So Fucking Beautiful* #2, Lamm issues a corrective to her previous issue:

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<sup>194</sup> Nomy Lamm. *I’m So Fucking Beautiful* #1. n.d Tammy Rae Carland Zine Collection 1988-2002, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.320, series 1, box 5, folder 15.

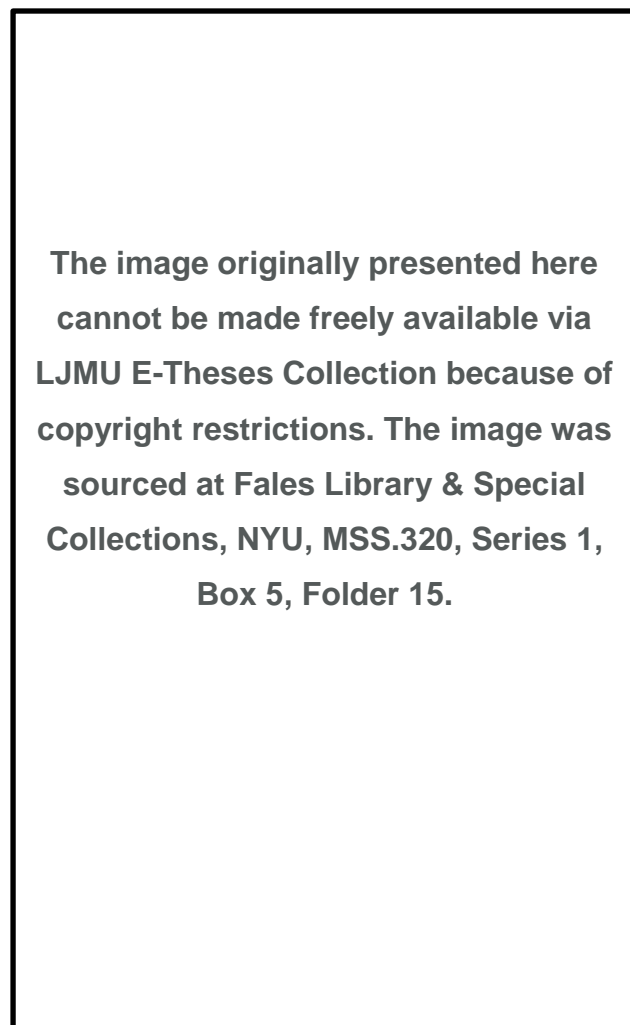
<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

i don't mean to dwell on the past, but i want to point out a critique i have of isfb#1 [*I'm So Fucking Beautiful #1*]. [...] none of the drawings i did looked anything like me. none of them were as fat as i am.<sup>198</sup>

She resolves to draw herself in more accurate proportions rather than minimize her image so as not to alienate other fat women, as well as to promote her own self-acceptance.



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Fig. 64. Self-portrait  
'Sacred' from *I'm So  
Fucking Beautiful #2*  
(n.d.) by Nomy  
Lamm, Fales Library  
& Special  
Collections, NYU.

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<sup>198</sup> Nomy Lamm. *I'm So Fucking Beautiful #2*. n.d Tammy Rae Carland Zine Collection 1988-2002, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.320, series 1, box 5, folder 15.

Issue two features a total of four self-portraits, and the hand-drawn materiality of these are crucial. Piepmeier argues for the embodiedness of zines through their hand-crafted materialism, understanding zines as “site[s] of physical interaction” where “the fingers of one person respond to the traces of the handwriting of the other” (63). The materiality of zines, the very paper these images are impressed on, constitute “a technology that mediates connections not just of ‘people’ but of bodies”, she concludes (Piepmeier, 63).

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Fig. 65. Self-portrait  
‘February 7 1994’  
from *I’m So Fucking Beautiful* #2 (n.d.) by  
Nomy Lamm, Fales  
Library & Special  
Collections, NYU.

The embodied quality of Lamm’s self-portraits assists the aim of her zine, which fights for both societal acceptance and self-acceptance of her body. In a sense, these hand-drawn pictures of her naked self *forces* her socially unacceptable body into the public sphere.



Perhaps even more significantly though, Lamm's self-writing in *I'm So Fucking Beautiful* functions to fortify her own beliefs about the value of her fat body in a culture that undermines this belief. In an essay entitled 'Self Writing' in his book *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth* (1997), Foucault proposes that writing is the process by which we transform discourses into ethos:

[W]riting constitutes an essential stage in the process [...] the fashioning of accepted discourses, recognized as true, into rational principals of action. As an element of self-training, writing has [...] an *ethopoietic* function: it is an agent of the transformation of truth into *ethos*. (209; emphasis in original)

Plainly, writing converts what we perceive as truth into the fundamental constitution of our character, our principals, which in turn dictate our actions. Thus, Lamm's self-writing in her Riot Grrrl zine can be understood as a means by which to transform suspected truths about the value of fat bodies, that have been distorted by thin culture, into core principals. Her aim towards self-acceptance is aided by her zine writing, converting suspected truths about the adequateness of her own body into ethos.

### 3.6 *Black Identities and the Aesthetics of 'Cute' in Riot Grrrl*

#### **Zines: Gunk #4**

In this subsection, I continue my exploration into how the minor aesthetic 'cute' – an aesthetic that has increasingly been adopted by avant-garde artists as a symbolic resistance to commodity culture – functions in Riot Grrrl zines. Having demonstrated its purpose in Hanna's *Fuck Me Blind*, I extend this inquiry here by examining how 'cute' operates in non-white Riot Grrrl zines. I argue that the function of cute in Grrrl zines becomes even more complicated and various when non-white zinesters explore their experiences within this aesthetic framework.

#### **Race in Riot Grrrl culture**

In her frequently cited study, Nguyen tells a story that deviates from the typical Riot Grrrl origin story and significantly complicates "that scene of intimacy that is the semi-secret heart of riot grrrl's resonance" (174). Instead, hers is a story "about the violence of girl-girl intimacy, the force of smothering love, [and] the menace of liberal subjecthood" on non-white participants operating in a predominantly white feminist punk scene (Nguyen, 186). She contends that for women of colour, the aesthetic convention of intimacy "fostered a troubling politics" for non-white Riot Grrrls in a number of ways (Nguyen, 179). Firstly, this desire for closeness with the racial or colonial 'other' played out in a culture whereby oppression was a form of commodity. This spawned a "possessive investment in antiracist whiteness" and resulted in a culture where "intimacy with the racial other becomes a prophylactic property for the 'good' person" (Nguyen, 186). Secondly, the desire for intimacy manifest in Riot Grrrl's signature confessional style of writing forced a few non-white participants into burdensome roles as educators on race and racism. And finally, such lauding

of antiracist whiteness in Riot Grrrl culture fostered a superficial engagement with and responses to issues of race and racism. It sparked a culture where to merely “enunciate the *hope* for intimacy or love” with the racial and colonial ‘other’ was enough “for the speaker’s sense of her own flourishing” – responses that required no real reciprocity (Nguyen, 183; emphasis in original).

I want to extend Nguyen’s insightful counter-story of Riot Grrrl by studying a specific aesthetic that helped foster this culture of intimacy in zines and examine non-white uses of this. Specifically, I consider one of the lesser-discussed aesthetics traceable in all Riot Grrrl productions to varying degrees – the aesthetics of ‘cute’ – that function to incite familiarity, warmth, and intimacy between readers and zinesters. I argue that non-white zine creators employ the aesthetics of ‘cute’ in more nuanced ways, responding to the ‘violence of girl-girl intimacy’ on Riot Grrrls of colour in a scene where the dominant experience was whiteness.

### **The function of ‘cute’ in Riot Grrrl zines**

I see the minor aesthetic of ‘cute’ as manifest in Riot Grrrl zines through their persistent use of doll imagery, childhood/girlhood iconography, in the confessional modes of writing (childlike ‘dear diary’ entries), blob-like doodles, the handcrafted materialism of zines (evidence of bedroom play), as well as a grammatically diminutive style of language we have previously observed in Hanna’s zine, *Fuck Me Blind*.<sup>199</sup> In Ngai’s aforementioned study, she dissects the visual properties of ‘cute’ as well as the textual and verbal. Though Ngai focuses on the more surprising affective responses to ‘cute’, which she suggests can inspire “ugly or aggressive feelings”, her work is

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<sup>199</sup> See Chapter Two, ‘Grrrls on an Erotic Mission to Restore Female Sexual Desire: Hanna’s Erotic Splicing and ‘Feminine Writing’, for full discussion of this.

nonetheless useful for reaffirming typical responses to ‘cute’ (‘The Cuteness’, 816). The minor aesthetic evokes “tender and maternal” feelings, “invites physical touching” when present in objects, as well as verbal mimesis when present in language (Ngai ‘The Cuteness’, 816; 815). Ngai draws our attention to the cooing or murmuring of babies and puppies, suggesting that these solicit a mirrored response from subjects and demonstrate the deverbalizing effect of cute, as well as its “ability to infantilize the language of its infantilizer” (Ngai ‘The Cuteness’, 827). Considering these typical affective responses to cute – its ability to inspire tenderness, mimesis, and closeness in subjects – it is perhaps unsurprising that the aesthetic features prominently in Riot Grrrl productions. The minor aesthetic supports a ‘culture of intimacy’ that Riot Grrrl sought to cultivate.

*Gunk #4*

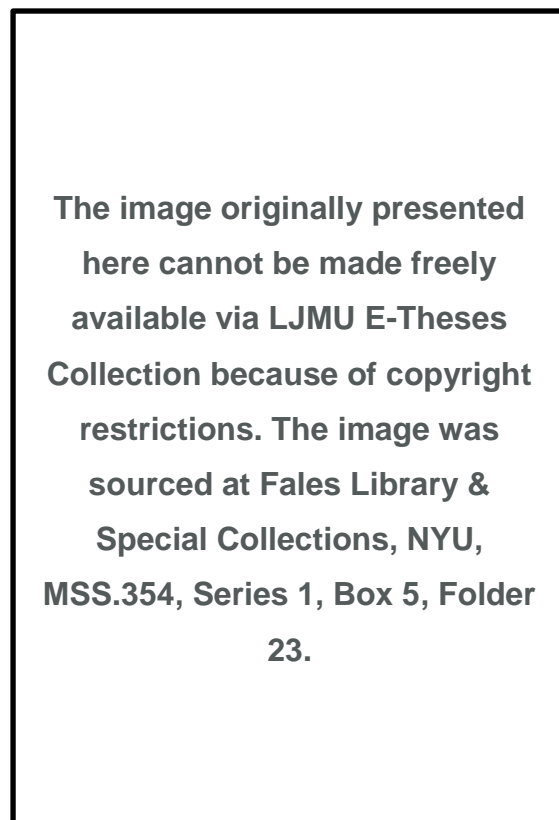


Fig. 66. Front cover from *Gunk #4* (1993) by Ramdasha Birkceem, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Ramdasha Birkceem's zine, *Gunk*, centers on two things: Birkceem's experience as a young woman of colour in the punk scene in the 1990s and her love of skateboarding. For this section, I am going to be referring specifically to *Gunk #4* (1993), pictured above, sourced from Birkceem's Riot Grrrl Collection at NYU. On the front cover, Birkceem has featured a picture of herself as a child: "that's me on the front cover when I was about 8 or 9".<sup>200</sup> The image of Birkceem as a child with softly defined features – wide-eyes, chubby-cheeks and rounded face – calls forth the aesthetic 'cute' that is closely associated with properties of the infantile: "smallness, compactness, softness, simplicity, and pliancy" (Ngai 'The Cuteness', 816). Even Birkceem's pout and furrowed brow add to the image's projection of cuteness by highlighting the child's helplessness and vulnerability, as we are reminded that even when angered, the child is helpless to affect any real harm.

Initially, the 'cute' front cover projects a non-threatening image, invoking a tender affective response from readers and inviting them closer. It is only when we take into account the text atop of the image, "What Degenerate Created this Abortion?", that Birkceem shatters cute's function to draw subjects in.<sup>201</sup> She complicates the way in which white Riot Grrrls typically use the aesthetics of 'cute' to inspire intimacy, instead pairing cuteness with an otherwise jarringly racist, repellant statement. Having drawn the reader in with the 'cute' image of her as a child, the front cover now pushes the white reader away and into the role of the oppressor. It forces a sudden distance between Birkceem and her predominantly white Riot Grrrl audience, as opposed to merely inviting white Riot Grrrls in to co-opt her oppression. Crucially, this is something Nguyen suggests was happening in

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<sup>200</sup> Ramdasha Birkceem. *Gunk #4*. 1993. Ramdasha Birkceem Riot Grrrl Collection 1974-1998 [bulk 1991-1995], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.354, series 1, box 5, folder 23.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*

the movement, where “intimate experiences with racial, colonial others” were “collected [by white subjects] for the express purpose of gaining value” in the forms of knowledge and a feeling of self-possession (183). In this front cover, Birkceem expresses a sharp refusal of the culture of intimacy that Riot Grrrl sought to cultivate through using the aesthetics of ‘cute’, denying white Grrrl’s closeness by reminding them of their ties with white oppression. It challenges the movement’s simplistic approach to issues of race, which implied that such issues could be resolved by mere proximity to the racial or colonial ‘other’.

Later in *Gunk #4*, in a confessional piece called ‘Amerikkan GURL’, Birkceem reflects on an experience she once had cleaning for an elderly woman. The account reveals the shocking racism that Birkceem endures at the hands of her belligerent white employer, who treats her with increasing disdain as the narrative unfolds, culminating in the old lady “going into hysterics about how I [Birkceem] wasn’t an American girl” and shooing her out of her house.<sup>202</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

Fig. 67. 'Amerikkan GURL' from *Gunk #4* (1993) by Ramdasha Birkceem, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The aesthetics of 'cute' are embedded in the language Birkceem uses to tell her story, complying with Riot Grrrl's signature diminutive, colloquial and deeply personal rhetoric. Like Hanna's language in *Fuck Me Blind*, it involves the diminution of words like 'because' to 'cuz', as well as colloquialisms we might closely associate with girlhood and youth culture: "sk8boarders project negative images. Duh!".<sup>203</sup> Ngai remarks how, "making a word smaller, more compact", as well as "dissolving syntactic divisions and reducing one's lexicon to onomatopia", is a way to manifest cuteness in language ('The Cuteness', 827). Arguably, we see this latter configuration – spelling words how they sound – manifest in the various ways zinesters spell the movement's name: 'riot grrrl' or 'riot gurl', both variations of which are present in the above extract from Birkceem's zine.

The 'cutified' language in *Gunk #4* has a similar effect as the 'cute' images. It assumes familiarity and closeness between Birkceem and readers – a key function of Riot Grrrl's signature rhetoric. It is used to foster a culture of intimacy, as well as signal one's allegiance to the scene. Significantly, Ngai also attests to the "undeniably trivial" status of the aesthetic 'cute', which "revolves around a kind of inconsequentiality" (2012, 18). I argue that the presence of the aesthetic 'cute' in Riot Grrrl writing ties the movement's literature to the trivial – perhaps a rationalisation for the low-status position Riot Grrrl zines occupy in mainstream literary culture and the lack of literary criticism bestowed on zines.

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<sup>203</sup> Ibid.

The sense of triviality fostered by Birkceem's 'cutesy' rhetoric feels jarring against the seriousness of the racial discrimination she describes in her confessional:

she screamed at me out her window sputtering nonsense about how I better learn how to clean toilets & exteriors of refrigerators before I can call myself an American Girl [...].

**moral of this story:** jobs suck [...].<sup>204</sup>

Birkceem's account of racial discrimination sits uncomfortably within this trivial style of writing. I would suggest that this collision between Riot Grrrl's 'trivial' aesthetic and critiques of race by non-white Riot Grrrls effectively produce critiques of the scene from within. Birkceem's trivial and blasé language mirrors the normalisation of racism in American culture, as well as the apathetic approach of her scene towards issues of race. The shocking juxtaposition between her 'cutesy' aesthetic and the sentiment expressed in this piece functions to jolt audiences out of any white complicity or apathy with regards to her racial discrimination. In this way, it could also be said that Birkceem's discussion of race in her Riot Grrrl zine simultaneously complies with Riot Grrrl's culture of intimacy *whilst* critiquing it from within. The fact that the moral of Birkceem's story is that 'jobs suck' as opposed to 'racism sucks' highlights how racism is insidiously diminished and normalised in American culture and in their scene too. Birkceem uses dry irony here, purposefully misreading the key issue at work in her own story to reveal how what is shocking to the white reader is merely the wearisome norm to the black writer. As a result, her confessional piece becomes less about shocking racism – a concept that the white reader can easily comprehend and thus

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid.



'collect' for their own sense of enlightenment on these issues – and more about a kind of resigned familiarity to racism shared by black and ethnic subjects. Birkceem takes care *not* to appease the white reader with tales of her oppression and outrage, instead writing a more nuanced account of racism that is more geared towards uniting her fellow black readers in their alienation.

The images accompanying the writing in 'Amerikkan Gurl' also reverberate with significance. Birkceem writes her story *around* the image of a young white girl with carefully waved hair and beaming smile, holding a glass of milk. Birkceem has hand-written, "100% White", on the glass of milk.<sup>205</sup> In the context of the piece, the image represents the stereotypical 'all-American girl': a young woman in possession of all the qualities celebrated in mainstream American culture. Seemingly plucked from a kitsch advertisement from a bygone era, it conjures notions of admiss and America in the 1950s – an era characterised by its emphasis on traditional family values, conservative politics, hyper-consumerism, as well as a deeply inequitable and overtly white supremacist society, pending the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Birkceem highlights how this image with its embedded celebration of whiteness is still relevant to American culture in the 1990s, when her account takes place: "why don't you dress like an *American girl*?" her employer remarks (emphasis added).<sup>206</sup> She demonstrates how this image of the 'all-American girl' – an image Riot Grrrl sought to disrupt owing to its connotations with uncomplicated femininity and conventional girlhood – does not even *include* Birkceem. Thus, whilst other Riot Grrrls may have at least been able to see a part of themselves represented in this image – a young white American girl – Birkceem shows how she is alienated from this

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

configuration entirely, and Riot Grrrl's subsequent critique of this image, by her blackness.

Overall, the aesthetics of 'cute' in non-white Riot Grrrl zines complicate the scene's 'culture of intimacy'. That being said, and as Nguyen rightly suggests, critics should be wary of positioning non-white zinesters as obstructers in the movement's struggle to achieve true reciprocity with women of colour. I agree with Nguyen's argument that this holds the potential to make scapegoats of non-white Riot Grrrls, pushing them into contemptible roles as disruptors of the movement, who are then ultimately responsible for its demise. I contend that many zinesters of colour attempted to comply with and construct themselves *within* Riot Grrrl's culture of intimacy, as seen in Birkceem's employment of the aesthetics of 'cute'. At the same time, by merely talking about race within said aesthetic framework, more unexpected and unconventional affective repercussions naturally arise. Like all Riot Grrrls, non-white zinesters also capitalised on the performative quality of the confessional style to expose the alienating aspects of American culture for young women. Not only this, but black writers like Birkceem also used the performative power of the confessional mode to dissect their own scene too, exposing the limitations of Riot Grrrl's approach to issues of race, which naively rested on the assumption that mere proximity and shared intimacy with black or ethnic subjects would resolve all racial tensions. Rather than observing zines like *Gunk #4* as an attempt to rip the movement apart from the inside, I contend that black and ethnic Riot Grrrls who critiqued their own scene did so with the fundamental and authentic desire to progress the movement by expanding its critical scope.

### **3.7 Sex Writing and Erotic Splicing: Riot Grrrl NYC #1, 3-6 and Luna**

Here, I continue to explore representations of female sexuality in Riot Grrrl zines. I also trace Acker's technique of 'erotic splicing' into these productions, revealing how this device functions in Grrrl zines in the 1990s. I assess how Riot Grrrl's aesthetic and narrative representation of female sexuality collides with the postfeminist trend of Do-Me feminism. I extend this argument a little further in this subsection, holding Riot Grrrl's portrayal of female sexuality up against more nuanced critical perspectives on postfeminist sexualities.

#### **Third wave considerations of female sexuality in Riot Grrrl zines**

In the introduction to *Jane Sexes It Up* (2002) – a collection of highly personal, confessional essays by so-called 'Gen-X feminists' about sex and desire – Merri Lisa Johnson writes: "Our writing *is* play, but it is play *despite* and in *resistance* to a context of danger and prohibition, *not* a result of imagining there is none" (2; emphasis in original). In my view, Johnson's statement encapsulates third wave feminist representations of female sexuality.

Centralising sex in its discourse, the third wave combines sex-positivity – celebratory accounts of female sexual pleasure, liberation, and agency – with critiques of the tyranny of patriarchal violence on female sexuality. It at once acknowledges a history of patriarchal oppression and the continuing impact of this on female sexuality, whilst simultaneously seeking to transcend this configuration with exuberant displays of female sexual autonomy and subjectivity.

This characterisation of third wave considerations of female sexuality is traceable in Riot Grrrl zines. Not only is sex a central discussion in Riot Grrrl literature, but erotic stories and playful sexual fantasies are often situated alongside serious discussions about rape, sexual abuse, and incest.

Rather than attempting to neatly resolve the problem of female sexuality in misogynistic culture, sex writing in Riot Grrrl zines often holds these conflicting discourses in tension.

Perhaps following Hanna's instruction to 'write about fucking' at the end of *My Life with Evan Dando, Popstar*, Riot Grrrl sex writing often functions to dispel misogynistic myths that surround female sexuality and that have historically been used to suppress female desire and control women's sexual behaviours. For instance, the creator of the zine *Candles For Girls* (n.d.) positions her zine in direct opposition to a culture of shame, which she suggests plagues and stunts women's sexual pleasure: "In this zine, I've tried to make a point of abolishing shame. Our shame that we feel over our sex, our bodies, and our fantasies" and "I want to talk about the importance for us to shove our fat dildos down the throats of society".<sup>207</sup> She positions this alongside confessionals about the "depletion" and "suppression" of her sexuality as a result of growing up in a "very religious family".<sup>208</sup> In the pages that follow, I demonstrate how this approach to sex writing – holding celebrations of female sexual agency in tension with critiques of patriarchal oppression – is a consistent formula adopted in Riot Grrrl zines when attending to the issue of sex.

### ***Riot Grrrl NYC #1, 3-6***

*Riot Grrrl NYC* is a collectively authored zine by participants in the New York faction of the Riot Grrrl movement. Though the foreword to issue one is written and signed by Kathleen Hanna, the zine has no discernible core writers and instead features pieces by various contributors, some using

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<sup>207</sup> *Candles For Girls*. n.d. Zane Gibbs Riot Grrrl Collection 1987-2003 [bulk 1992-1997], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.364, series 1, box 1, folder 25.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

pseudonyms. *Riot Grrrl NYC* is essentially a local beacon for this faction and therefore is broadly representative of the Riot Grrrl movement, its literature, and its aims. This is why I have selected this series to explore how female sexuality is contemplated in Riot Grrrl zines. In lieu of more sex-focused zines, of which there were a few in *The Riot Grrrl Collection* at Fales Library – *Whorezine*, *Smut Peddler*, *Teenage Whore Book*, amongst others – *Riot Grrrl NYC* offers a more balanced view of both the centrality that discussions of female sexuality occupy in Riot Grrrl’s feminism, and of the manner in which female sexuality is typically contemplated in its literature.

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Fig. 68. Front cover from *Riot Grrrl NYC* #1 (1992) by collective authors, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

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Fig. 69. 70. 71. & 72. Front covers from *Riot Grrrl NYC* #3, #4, #5, #6, (1992, 93, 93, 93) by collective authors, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

*Riot Grrrl NYC* #1 (1992) – an issue subtitled ‘Rape & Rituals’ – centres on the theme of religion. Echoing Acker’s narrative in *Don Quixote*, ‘Rape & Rituals’ explores how female sexuality has been conceived according to male-defined religion. In an untitled poem near the beginning of the zine, the anonymous author writes: “I don’t want to/ fuck/ like a good christian girl/ should./ I will not get on my knees/ everyday to suck your/ hard, demanding cock”.<sup>209</sup> Here, the author connects values associated with being a ‘good Christian girl’ to her suppressed sexuality, conjuring imagery that connects the act of getting on one’s knees to pray with performing oral sex. The author rejects a nonreciprocal worshipping of the phallus, which as her poem suggests, is woven into religious doctrine.

The following pages feature two creative writing pieces by contributor Jill Wienbrock. In the first piece, Weinbrock uses Christian symbolism of the lamb to indicate her rejection of Christianity: “I am no soft and bleating lamb [...] I’ll not praise you, martyr of men”.<sup>210</sup> The lamb imagery here speaks to both a Christ-like figure of sacrifice, meekness, and forgiveness, and the role of the Christian congregation as vulnerable lambs to be shepherded towards God and salvation by Christ. At the end of the poem, Weinbrock resolves that her “chastity will not be offered to you [God]”, indicating her refusal to renounce her sexuality in the name of religion.<sup>211</sup> She also proclaims that, “Eve was framed”, and signs off with the powerful image: “Take your fucking rib

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<sup>209</sup> *Riot Grrrl NYC* #1. 1992. Elena Humphreys Riot Grrrl Collection 1972-1998 [bulk 1991-1996], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.394, series 1, box 1, folder 13.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

back!"<sup>212</sup> Here Weinbrock makes reference to the embedded misogyny in the bible story 'Genesis', where Eve's creation is presented as auxiliary to Adam's, fulfilling *his* need for a companion. Her rebuke, 'take your fucking rib back!', expresses her rejection of this biblical representation of woman as adjunct to man, and her revision of this story that 'Eve was framed' rebuffs the misogyny embedded in the narrative of Eve succumbing to the temptation of forbidden fruit, implying that she, a woman, is responsible for humanity's expulsion from the Garden of Eden.

In a second poem by Weinbrock, she describes incestuous rape between a girl and her father. The girl screams out in "sheer fucking panty hose terror" for help from God, who melds together with the image of her sexually abusive father: "Maybe if you're on your knees/ When you beg for help/ Just like with daddy"<sup>213</sup> In the last two lines of the poem, Weinbrock shows how the Christian teachings that are alluded to throughout the poem – to be grateful, meek and mild – are harmful to the girl. Weinbrock's poem illustrates how these supposedly 'good' Christian qualities actually have the tacit function of making the girl complicit with her own sexual exploitation: "God's given you your life/ And you gotta be thankful for that"<sup>214</sup> The girl is taught to be thankful for her life despite suffering sexual abuse at the hands of her father. In this issue of *Riot Grrrl NYC*, we observe strong critiques of the tyrannies of patriarchal violence and misogynistic culture on female sexuality.

In *Riot Grrrl NYC* #3 and #6, however, some of the creative writing pieces about sex are more focused on the pleasure of sex. They are imbued with eroticism, describe sexual fantasies, and illuminate the multiplicity of female sexual desire in a literary context. *Riot Grrrl NYC* #3, for instance, features a poem by an author who goes by the name g.spot. Titled, 'Her

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<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.

Knees', it describes the desire and sexual excitement that the narrator feels when she thinks about a certain other woman's knees: "her knees her knees excited me/ her knees they keep exciting me".<sup>215</sup> As well as the poem's title, 'Her Knees' is infused with other desiring contemplations of the body. The line, "eating my desires like bread to calm my bilious stomach", carries the theme of carnal desire across the text. The repetition of certain words, such as "deeper deeper deeper", support the poem's sensual connotations, mirroring the repeated motions of the body engaged in sexual acts.<sup>216</sup>

In *Riot Grrrl NYC #6*, an author who goes by the name Wonderwoman also gives narrative form to female sexual desire in her untitled short story. The female narrator remembers being an adolescent and her first sexual experience with her friend, Sara:

you will remember lying with Sara in her bed that dawn [...].

You felt her quivering breasts beneath you and brought them fully erect with the silent touch of your own

you took her with your eyes and hands, exploring the undulant curves of her form, tasting the goosebumps that prickled on her skin, beads of moisture that dotted her forehead, all the time wondering what rich and fecund world lay within, between the soft diaphanous membranes of her trembling pubis.<sup>217</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> *Riot Grrrl NYC #3*. 1992. Elena Humphreys Riot Grrrl Collection 1972-1998 [bulk 1991-1996], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.394, series 1, box 1, folder 13.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>217</sup> *Riot Grrrl NYC #6*. 1993. Elena Humphreys Riot Grrrl Collection 1972-1998 [bulk 1991-1996], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.394, series 1, box 1, folder 13.



The author's sex writing reverberates with feminist significance on a number of fronts. Firstly, the sex is told from the perspective of the *female* narrator, in which her own pleasure and desire is foregrounded, transgressing the tendency in patriarchal culture to relegate women to the role of sexual accessory and to negate women's sexual pleasure. Secondly, the *explicitness* of Wonderwoman's writing is significant. It demystifies what is so often shrouded in cultural mystery by describing in graphic detail the actualities of the female narrator's desire.

In typical Riot Grrrl style, though, this memory of the narrator enjoying sex with her friend Sara appears within a larger narrative about the narrator's rape, as it emerges that Sara's boyfriend, Juan, took the narrator by force after her birthday party: "She did not think that night, night of her birthday celebration, that Juan would stay afterwards [...] he crept in, like a panther, black eyes glistening".<sup>218</sup> The fact that the narrator's positive experience of sexual pleasure is framed within another narrative about her rape typifies Riot Grrrl's approach to representing female sexuality in zines. It depicts female sexual subjectivity and exuberant sexual pleasure, whilst at the same time, acknowledging and representing the patriarchal violence and hostilities that this sexuality is conceived 'despite and in resistance to', to borrow Johnson's phrase.

### **Aesthetic constructions of female sexuality in Riot Grrrl zines: erotic splicing**

In previous chapters of this thesis, I demonstrated how both Acker and Hanna aesthetically construct texts to evoke the sensual through the device of 'erotic splicing': the fragmentary injection of eroticism into a text via sensual imagery or actual images, or a combination of both. Here, I suggest that other

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

Riot Grrrls use erotic splicing in their zines to manifest a distinctly third wave representation of female sexuality as a source of both joy and pain in patriarchal culture.

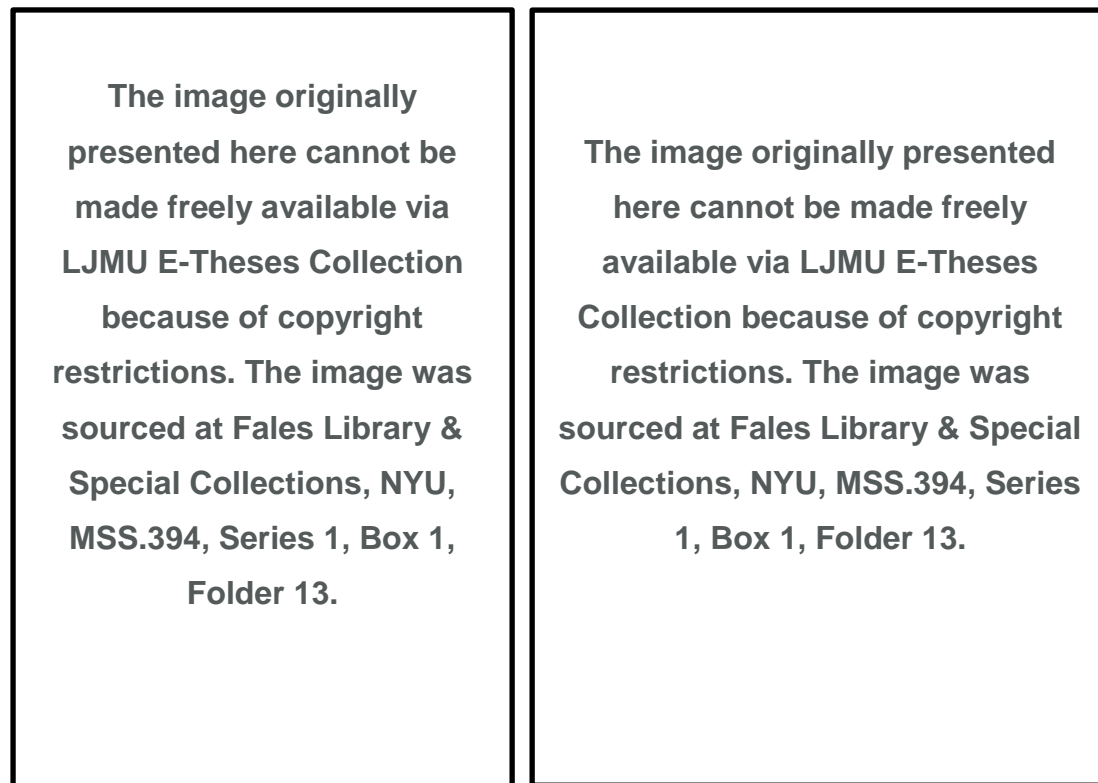


Fig. 73. Image 'Arched Back Woman' from *Riot Grrrl NYC #4* (1993) by collective authors, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

Fig. 74. Image 'Pen-drawn Women Legs Spread' from *Riot Grrrl NYC #6* (1993) by collective authors, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

The two extracts pictured above, from issues four and six of *Riot Grrrl NYC*, evidence erotic splicing. Inserted unceremoniously into these issues, the sudden interruption of erotic or pornographic images carries the theme of sexual desire across the zine series as a whole. The image in issue four of the half-naked woman arching her back, eyes closed, head drawn back in a moment of what looks like pure ecstasy is immediately preceded by a contributor's commentary on incest. Specifically, how incest is contemplated

in public discourse in the piece entitled 'All In The Family' by an author who goes only by Kate. In her essay, Kate responds to comments made by Republican, Jay Dickey, suggesting that incest is an issue that can be handled within the family unit. She vehemently condemns Dickey, declaring that his comments show "BY FAR THE MOST IGNORANT & SHAMELESS DISPLAY OF A LACK OF UNDERSTANDING, COMPASSION & FORETHOUGHT ON THESE ISSUES!"<sup>219</sup> Kate's serious and urgent critique of the culture of sexual hostility that surrounds predominantly girls – "ONE IN THREE GIRLS AND ONE IN EIGHT BOYS are victims of incest" – is framed by the image of the arch backed woman presumably in the throes of sexual passion.<sup>220</sup>

In the second image pictured above on the right-hand side from *Riot Grrrl NYC #6*, the creator has hand-drawn a series of pictures of a naked female body with legs spread so that the genitals are exposed. The sensual potentiality of these explicit illustrations is emphasised by their hand-drawn aesthetic. As Piepmeier observes, the handcrafted materialism of zines makes them viscerally embodied productions:

A number of factors foster this sense of embodiment in the grrrl zine phenomenon, including the physical efforts that go into creating zines and that are often made visible in the finished product, along with the recipient's physical interactions with the zine, which then may lead to acts of reciprocal materiality. (78)

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<sup>219</sup> *Riot Grrrl NYC #4*. 1993. Elena Humphreys Riot Grrrl Collection 1972-1998 [bulk 1991-1996], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.394, series 1, box 1, folder 13.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*

According to Piepmeier's theory, indications of the human touch inherent to the materialism of zines adds to this sense of embodiment and inspires exchanges of a similar embodied nature. This is important when we consider the eroticism contained within these highly embodied productions, as it arguably means that the medium amplifies any erotic intentions on the part of the creator. The ability of zines to carry 'sensory information' and inspire 'acts of reciprocal materiality' is particularly significant for uniting female readers in their aims to manifest autonomous female sexualities. The series of female genitalia drawings are perhaps a physical attempt on the part of the creator to reconnect with the sexually desiring body, invoking female sexual embodiment through material realism. What's more, any pleasure that the creator derives from drawing these erotic images is figuratively pressed into the pages and passed on to recipients. By this logic – the idea that the Riot Grrrl zine network constitutes an "embodied community" – the erotic splicing in zines means that it also represents something of a *sexual* community. Riot Grrrl zines are *places* of desire for creators and readers alike. They are spaces where desire is both expressed and impressed, as well as received materially. The function of materialism to inspire reciprocity makes it reasonable to consider the idea that zine exchange constitutes a kind of experience where zinesters are engaging in acts of mutually felt sensuality and sexual arousal. And whilst the majority of zines circulating would have been Xeroxed copies of the master, the embodied quality is nonetheless a dominant feature of these photocopies. Xeroxed copies manifest other traces of human idiosyncrasy: the smell of the creator's bedroom, the wonky stapling holding the pages together, the one yellow page in the middle of the zine because they ran out of white paper to print on. These features all contribute to the embodied quality of these erotic productions.

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Fig. 75. Front cover from *Luna* (n.d.) by unknown author, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

To illustrate the pervasiveness of erotic splicing in Riot Grrrl Zines, I also want to consider briefly *Luna* (n.d.): an anonymously authored zine from Zan Gibbs' Riot Grrrl Zine Collection. The zine is comprised of a small collection of creative writing pieces, mostly poems, on the theme of joyous female desire. Equally, the author juxtaposes these jubilant descriptions of desire with a cathartic account of her experience of acquaintance rape. She considers her zine a medium through which to work through "[a] lot of trauma" associated with her rape.<sup>221</sup> One means by which she appears to do this is by writing soft-core erotic lesbian poetry, which she positions alongside images of female nakedness and lesbian sex.

The poem below, which describes a scene of careful caressing between the narrator and a woman – "Her kiss was/ gentle/ sincere/ We talked/ and caressed/ for hours" – is accompanied by what appears to be two pornographic photos from the 1920s (judging by the fashions of the women

<sup>221</sup> *Luna*. n.d. Zan Gibbs Riot Grrrl Collection 1987-2003 [bulk 1992-1997], Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU, MSS.364, series 1, box 4, folder 30.

depicted).<sup>222</sup> Underneath both the poem and the images is a collage of words and phrases : “when she touched my”, “pleasure”, “suck”, and “nipple”.<sup>223</sup> In this instance, the splicing of erotic words underneath mirrors the eroticism in the images themselves.

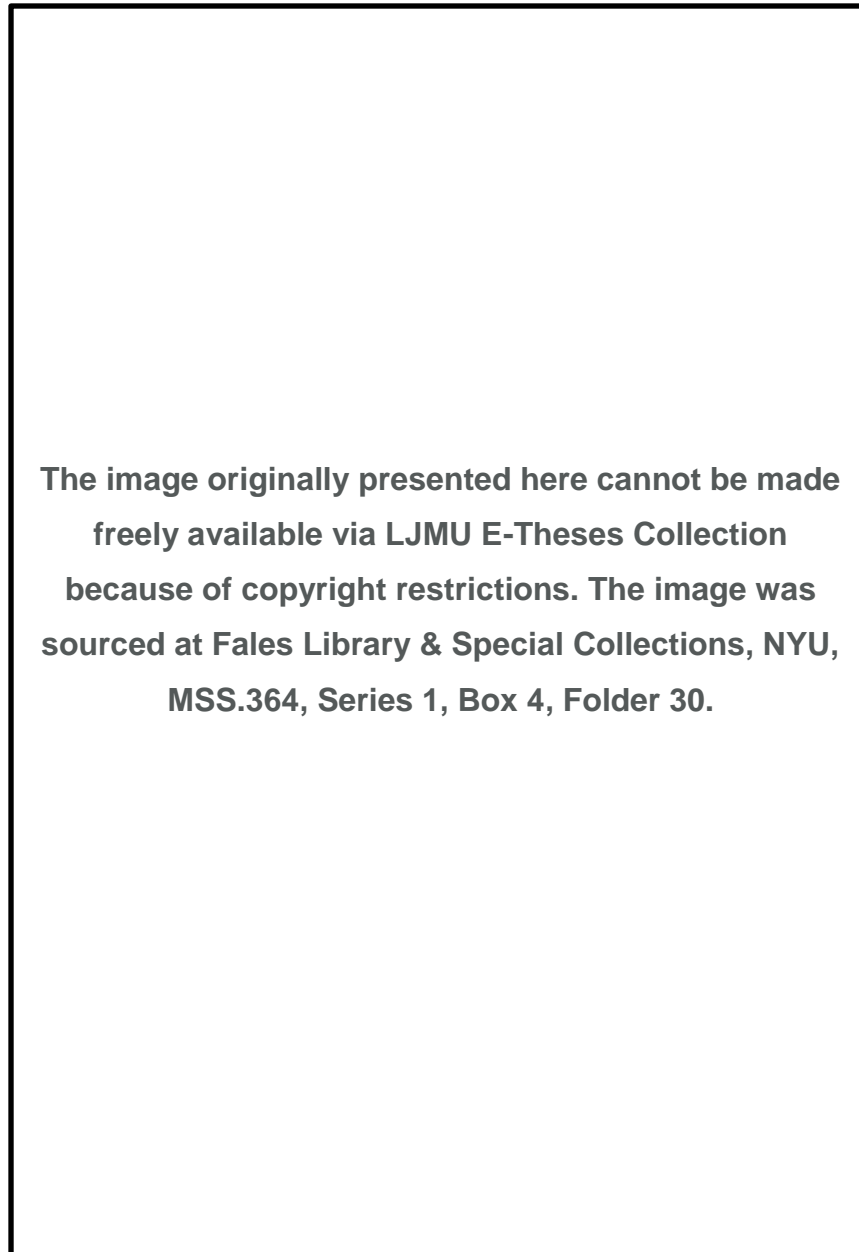


Fig. 76. Poem ‘That Night I Touched Her’ from *Luna*, (n.d.) by unknown author, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

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Fig. 77. Extract two-page spread from *Luna* (n.d.) by unknown author, Fales Library & Special Collections, NYU.

In the two-page spread pictured above, the creator of *Luna* sculpts her handwritten foreword around an image of a naked woman – it is possible that the photograph is of herself, given the deeply personal nature of her foreword. The poem on the right describes her sexual fantasies – “I dream of (you)/ the atmosphere is warm [...] there is sense of/ relaxation, pleasure [...] Your body, you/ are beautiful, strong” – and is accompanied by another image of two naked women wrapped around each other in a sensual embrace.<sup>224</sup> The splicing of erotic words and images throughout *Luna* supports the zines’ central narrative, in which the author writes through her own complicated relationship with her sexuality.

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<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

### Assessing representations of female sexuality in Riot Grrrl zines in the 'postfeminist age'

Previously, I assessed Hanna's representation of female sexuality in her Riot Grrrl zine, *The Most Beautiful Girl is a Dead Girl*, in relation to the postfeminist trend, Do-Me feminism. I did so through a lens that assumes that postfeminism, and subsequently Do-Me feminism, is a mutation of the anti-feminist backlash for a 'post-backlash' audience, as Bean describes it. Here, I want to consider the centralisation of sexuality observable in Riot Grrrl zines, which might be read as a manifestation of Do-Me feminism, through a more nuanced lens that does not rely solely on the 'backlash thesis'.

Genz offers an understanding of postfeminism as a "paradoxical construction" that "at its core [...] effects a double movement of empowerment and subordination" (*Postfemininities*, 31). She suggests that postfeminist femininity "achieves a state of polysemy, or historically and culturally overlapping meanings" and that it might be more useful to think about postfemininity as a "site of contest that brings various layers of feminine meanings into contact and conflict" (Genz *Postfemininities*, 31). Whereas a continuation of the backlash thesis implies that trends like Do-Me feminism are merely a construct of a conservative media hell-bent on catapulting women back into 'pre-feminist' modes of being by which women are primarily identifiable according to their sexual value, other critics offer characterisations that are neither 'pre-feminist' (trapped in femininity) or 'feminist' (reject femininity). Whilst this equation is of course problematic, resting on the assumption that feminism is definable by a simple rejection of femininity, it is nonetheless useful for thinking about the liminal space that some critics believe postfeminism occupies as a cultural field.

Ruth Shalit illuminates this liminality in her characterisation of the Do-Me feminist in her 1998 article reviewing popular TV manifestations of postfeminist femininities for *New Republic*. She writes of how "[t]he do-me



feminist is plucky, confident, upwardly mobile, and extremely horny”, “savvy yet vulnerable, fallible yet likeable, feminist yet not” (27). The characterisation of Do-Me feminism that Shalit offers relies heavily on playful irony in relation to expressions of female sexuality, as well as an acceptance of ambiguity with regards to competing discourses: specifically, the impasse between female sexual subjecthood and the tyranny of patriarchal violence on female sexuality. Whilst Shalit’s description of the ‘feminist yet not’ Do-Me feminist again relies on a monolithic understanding of feminism based on stereotypes – the ‘anti-sex feminist’ versus the ‘pro-sex non-feminist’ – it nonetheless parades a specific contradiction that maps onto female sexuality. In so doing, Do-Me feminism arguably constitutes an attempt to forge new ways of being sexual in the post-second wave feminist age, where a deeper awareness of women’s sexual victimisation rubs up against the desire to act upon new-found sexual freedoms and express ownership over one’s sexuality. Whether the vision of female sexuality that Do-Me feminism extends is useful or not is another question entirely and one I unpack later in this discussion.

Representations of female sexuality in Riot Grrrl zines also tread this line between ‘extremely horny’ and sexually ‘vulnerable’, to use Shalit’s phrasing. Where playful descriptions of sexual fantasies and erotic images are unceremoniously sandwiched between serious accounts of sexual violence and critiques of conventional femininity, Riot Grrrl echoes postfeminism’s embracement of ambiguity in its discourse. For instance, as we observed in *Riot Grrrl NYC #4*, Kate’s scathing response to Jay Dickey’s comments about incest are preceded by the image of the woman with her head drawn back in the throes of sexual ecstasy. Instead of attempting to rectify the conflict between sexual agency and sexual oppression that arise from these narratives, Riot Grrrl resolves to hold these discourses in tension, placing them side by side without explanation.

Of course, it is not enough to merely point to the co-existence of conflicting discourses. What is more significant is deducing what holding such discourses in tension means for feminist politics and femininity as a cultural entity and social construct. Considering expressions of female sexuality in zines, one action that Riot Grrrl shares with Do-Me feminism, albeit to varying ends, is an attempt to reclaim femininity. As Genz attests, Do-Me feminism constitutes an intermingling of “feminist-inspired notions of freedom, liberation and empowerment with (hetero)sexuality, embodiment and fashion that have traditionally been associated with femininity” (*Postfemininities*, 83). I argue that there is a small cross-over here between Do-Me feminism and Riot Grrrl in that they both subsume conventional femininity to some extent in their articulation of a female sexuality. Just as the Riot Grrrls distinguished themselves from their second wave feminist forbearers by reclaiming the word ‘girl’ as well as traditionally feminine sites such as beauty, their articulation of female sexuality also incorporates symbols of twenty-first century conventional female sexuality. The image of the ‘Arched Back Woman’ from *Riot Grrrl NYC #4*, for instance, arguably bears all the hallmarks of conventionally male-defined female sexuality. The woman is acceptably feminine in her sexuality donning long-flowing yet perfectly tamed locks, she wears lipstick, is white, slim, sports a cleavage-enhancing bra and is posing in such a way to suggest her compliancy with the male-gaze (her eyes are closed, making her the ogled as opposed to the ogler).

Like Acker’s appropriation of the ‘schoolgirls getting educated in sexual pleasure’ trope taken from mainstream male-created pornography in *Don Quixote*, the image in question may have just as easily been lifted from a men’s magazine. And whilst that is not to say that, like Acker, Riot Grrrl does not then distort the easy consumption of this image by positioning it next to critiques of male-perpetrated sexual violence against women, it nonetheless

holds the potential to reinstate the same vision of conventional female sexuality that it simultaneously critiques.

There is also something to be said here about the use of strategic irony that unites Acker's and Riot Grrrl's mediations on female sexuality with postfeminist iterations like Do-Me feminism, all of which heavily rely on tongue-in-cheek paradoxes to negotiate the competing discourses of sexual victimisation and sexual agency. In the same way that the so-called Do-Me feminist might wear a t-shirt "emblazoned with the Playboy bunny or [that might] say PORN STAR across the chest" to signal an anarchistic re-embrace of sites associated with female sexual oppression, Riot Grrrl and Acker similarly stage an anarchistic re-embrace of mainstream, heteronormative pornography in their texts (Levy, 2). Notably, some Riot Grrrls infamously scrawled the words 'SLUT' and 'WHORE' across their bodies at punk shows, constituting an ever-so-slightly more jarring evocation of the Do-Me feminist parading the word 'Porn Star' across her chest. Debatably, the function of irony in such cases is at once to signal an awareness of the history of female sexual exploitation that accompanies these terms and sites, whilst also searching for new ways to transcend feminism's "previous signifying link with female victimization" (Genz *Postfemininities*, 83). However, some critics remain sceptical of the use of this rhetorical device in expressions of 1990s feminism. They question whether irony is employed to justify a return to sexist behaviour and insidiously reinstate misogynistic scripts, asking: when does postmodern irony merely collapse into reinstating that which it supposedly mocks?

Despite the fact that Do-Me feminism and to some extent Riot Grrrl both playfully subsume a narrowly conceived vision of female sexuality that takes its cues from mainstream pornography – what Levy scathingly dismisses as a "tawdry, tarty, cartoonlike version of female sexuality" – Do-Me and Riot Grrrl discourses divert in terms of their assumed *heterosexuality*

(5). Plainly, Do-Me feminism assumes heterosexuality where Riot Grrrl does not. This is evidenced by the likes of the zine *Luna*, which constitutes a 'writing through' of the author's homosexual desire, as well as the poem 'Her Knees' in *Riot Grrrl NYC #3*, and finally, the narrative in *Riot Grrrl NYC #6* where Wonderwoman describes her first sexual experience with her best friend, Sara. The queering of female sexuality in Riot Grrrl zines complicates the otherwise occasional flashes of conventional femininity and oppressive female sexuality that Riot Grrrl otherwise incorporates into its aesthetic. This ultimately differentiates it from Do-Me feminism where heterosexuality is presumed and hence enforced. To some anti-postfeminist critics, the heterosexual assumption that underpins Do-Me feminism corroborates postfeminism's status as a neoliberal, "politically conservative" discourse (Genz *Postfemininities*, 21).

However, there are other compatibilities between Do-Me feminism and representations of female sexuality in Riot Grrrl zines that are manifest in their approach to sexual empowerment and agency which, progressing from "second wave notions of collective, activist struggle", replace these with "more individualistic assertions of (consumer) choice and self-rule" (Genz *Postfemininities*, 85). Although Riot Grrrl's punk roots conflict with the overt consumerism of postfeminism, as manifest in the movement's anti-capitalist politics and DIY ethos, Do-Me feminism and Riot Grrrl do arguably place more emphasis on personal taste and agency in matters of sex and sexuality than previous feminist waves. The dominant confessional mode of writing adopted in Riot Grrrl zines lends itself to this centralisation of the individual, wherein discussions of sex and sexuality are primarily articulated through the lens of personal experience. Tellingly, some of the most popular postfeminist texts, such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), also adopt a faux-autobiographical model: Bridget's narrative is told through a series of self-reflexive diary entries that document her sex life amongst other things. Some

critics have dismissed the autobiographical rhetoric embraced by 1990s feminisms for fostering an egocentric discourse and an individualised politics that fails to make the crucial leap into social critique. Expanding this rather damning assessment, I would also like to consider the possibility that such “personalized narratives [that] depict the struggles and efforts of contemporary womanhood”, actually constitute feminist inroads into the future, providing templates, or at least a ‘writing through’, of ways of being in the modern world (Genz *Postfemininities*, 138).

Perhaps the biggest downfall of Do-Me feminism though, even according to less pessimistic critics like Genz, lies in its too narrow conception of empowerment, which is seemingly *only* tethered to rearticulating female sexuality. Or rather, as Genz herself puts it, in the case of Do-Me feminism “there appears to be an unproblematic correspondence whereby [...] sexuality is understood as a feminist statement” (*Postfemininities*, 83). And while the connection that both Do-Me feminism, and to some extent Riot Grrrl, make between sexual agency and empowerment is not entirely without merit – given the history of oppression brought to bear on female sexuality – this equation is too limited in its conception of liberation. In Riot Grrrl’s defence, the movement does transcend this aspect of its ‘feminist statement’ and understanding of female empowerment, moreso than the Do-Me feminist who is seemingly reluctant to acknowledge the continued existence of patriarchal sexual oppression. In addition to the space in zines that is dedicated to critiquing patriarchal culture and uniting girls in their sexual alienation, unlike Do-Me feminism, Riot Grrrl also offers other means to female empowerment beyond sexuality, as evidenced by its significant media-making culture. Ultimately, Riot Grrrl does share some important commonalities with Do-Me feminism. These appear in the forms of observing one’s individual sexual expression as a form of female empowerment, as well as using the rhetorical device of irony to negotiate the impasse between

sexual agency and victimisation. However, I believe that Riot Grrrl simply offers *more* in terms of its feminist statement and conception of female empowerment beyond the parameters of sexuality, as the other subsections in this chapter on Riot Grrrl zines attest.

Considered collectively, the zines in this chapter highlight Acker's influence on Riot Grrrl literature. Features such as the aesthetics of amateurism, the feminist rewritings of culturally revered texts, the erotic splicing, the non-linear constructions, the attempts to manifest a 'feminine' style of writing, the merging of autobiography with fiction, the critiques of patriarchal-capitalist culture, amongst other features, culminate to produce a body of work that is distinctly Acker-esque. The function of these techniques shift from Acker's writing in the 1980s with the evolution of feminism in the 1990s, and postfeminist trends gaining traction. For example, where Acker uses the device of erotic splicing to revolt against the backlash and its attempts to re-establish control over female sexuality in the 1980s – an aim encapsulated in 'foetal rights' rhetoric – the erotic splicing in Grrrl zines is directed towards negotiating postfeminist trends like Do-Me feminism. In these 1990s creations, erotic splicing is used to negotiate the impasse between sexual victimisation and sexual agency that Do-Me feminism rouses by weightily championing sexual agency as the new standard for female sexuality. Where Acker's anti-work narratives and aesthetics undermine the backlash's attacks against working women in the 1980s, considerations of work in Riot Grrrl zines mediate the difficult trade-off between a complete punk-feminist rejection of work and a rebranding of domesticity for women via the postfeminist trend: New Traditionalism. In typical third wave fashion, Riot Grrrl flirts with postfeminism's revival of the domestic sphere, excavating this traditionally feminine site for its feminist potential by using it as a base for feminist product-making and strategising. Perhaps above all though, the

zines I have analysed demonstrate Riot Grrrl's rich artistic investment, drawing inspiration not only from Acker, but also Burroughs, Gilman, Cixous, Kruger, Nabokov and Woolf, to name but a few, thus revealing Riot Grrrl as a movement that was fundamentally concerned with art, literature, and artistic production.

## Conclusion

STOP

AND THINK

ABOUT WHAT YOU DO

ABOUT WHY YOU DO WHAT YOU DO

ABOUT HOW IT AFFECTS OTHER PEOPLE

ABOUT HOW IT AFFECTS YOU

*– riot grrrl: a free weekly mini-zine*

Resituating Riot Grrrl as an artistic movement, comparable to the downtown literary avant-garde scene of which Acker was a part, pushes us towards more nuanced understandings of how feminist movements can incorporate art into their feminist critique and praxis today. Counteracting Riot Grrrl's overshadowing status as a political movement and social phenomenon, this study provides something of a corrective to a history of women being obscured as artists and producers of culture. It holds the potential to disrupt misogynistic assumptions about women's auxiliary role in the shaping of culture, which, in turn, also forces a broader re-examination of women's subsidiary status in a socio-political context. By employing artistic devices inherited from the literary avant-garde, as well as appropriating a lineage of women's creative writing in zines, Riot Grrrl responds artistically to a particularly tumultuous moment in feminism's history in the 1990s. For today's Anglo-American feminist collectives who similarly find themselves in an age of renewed conservatism, in which profound developments in gender politics are still occurring, as evidenced by the rise of the #MeToo movement,



Riot Grrrl's artistic response provides a useful framework for how art supports a gendered critique of society. Riot Grrrl is a strong exemplar for enabling a literature that effectively holds competing discourses in tension whilst still pursuing various feminist and activist aims.

One of the key objectives of this research was to demystify the frequently cited connection between Kathy Acker and Riot Grrrl as manifest in their writing. I proposed that this would provide legitimacy for my foregrounding of Riot Grrrl as an artistic movement. I traced Acker's ideological, intellectual, and aesthetic influence on Riot Grrrl, first into Kathleen Hanna's writing, and then into various other Riot Grrrl zines from *The Riot Grrrl Collection* archive. I found that certain devices and ideas are traceable all the way through from Acker's 1980s novels to Riot Grrrl zines in the 1990s. These include but are not restricted to: the use of 'erotic splicing', punk's aesthetics of amateurism, attempts to manifest *écriture féminine*, blending fiction with autobiography, a unifying preoccupation with Burroughs, as well as traces of Acker's radical punk-feminist critique of patriarchal capitalism. Generally, though, the connection between Acker and Riot Grrrl writing comes down to a dedicated writing of women's experiences through experimental forms in order to demonstrate the complexity of women's experiences in late-patriarchal-capitalist culture.

Although I found these Ackeresque literary features traceable in Riot Grrrl zines, the critical function of these devices shifted according to gender developments that evolved from the anti-feminist backlash in the 1980s, through to the 1990s and the emergence of third wave feminism, as well as postfeminist trends gaining traction. For instance, where Acker was writing against a growing anti-abortion movement with her use of 'erotic splicing' in her 1980s novels, the same device in 1990s Grrrl zines facilitates a *writing through* of pro-sex feminism, and postfeminist trends such as Do-Me feminism.

Furthermore, I found that Riot Grrrl literature not only takes its artistic cues from Acker, but also from a much longer lineage of creative women's writing, as evidenced by the intertextual embrace of Gilman's Victorian short story, 'The Yellow Wallpaper', in the zine *Pirate Jenny*. This deep concern for a lineage of women's creative writing in some Grrrl zines not only fortifies Riot Grrrl's status as an artistic movement but exposes how female-generated art has historically been obfuscated in patriarchal culture. In retuning to 'The Yellow Wallpaper', a 'lost' text rediscovered by second wave feminists, Goodman's *Pirate Jenny* brings an awareness of a history of patriarchal censoring of female literary voices to a 'new' audience of young women in the 1990s. Riot Grrrl's highlighting of the dismissal of women's artistic contribution speaks to the movement's *raison d'être* to inspire more female-led production and displace androcentricism in the punk scene, in American culture, and in a wider socio-political context.

The other fundamental aim of this research was to assess how the Riot Grrrl movement responded to manifestations of contemporary feminism. I proposed that Riot Grrrl appropriates Acker's radical punk-feminist critique of the anti-feminist backlash in the 1980s to counteract advanced mutations of the backlash in the 1990s. These mutations of 1980s backlash rhetoric are observable in postfeminist trends that similarly centred on the themes of work and sex: Do-Me feminism and New Traditionalism. And although prolonged discussions about work were a rarity in Riot Grrrl zines, Acker's rejection of the Puritan work ethic and the overvaluation of work in American culture are ideas that are adopted and expressed in both form and meaning in Hanna's writing, as well as in other Riot Grrrl zines such as *Bulldozer #1*.

Following Acker's lead, Riot Grrrl zinesters also attempt to manifest an autonomous female sexuality in their texts through a combination of narrative representations of liberated female desire, as well as *écriture féminine*. I found Riot Grrrl's response less straightforwardly oppositional to postfeminist

trends in the 1990s than Acker's critical response to manifestations of the backlash in the 1980s. This was particularly so when I removed the 'backlash thesis' from our understanding of postfeminism and considered more nuanced perspectives on postfeminist currents. Riot Grrrl's ideological overlaps with postfeminist logics force us to reconsider how we delineate between the two discourses of third wave feminism and postfeminism. It undermines oversimplifications of both discourses and straightforward distinctions between the two that rely on narratives such as: 'one is political and one is apolitical', or, 'one seeks to supplant a feminist movement whereas the other does not', and even, 'one is conservative and the other is not'. These were, understandably, binaries employed by feminists and critics searching in the 1990s for a definition of the third wave – critics such as Heywood and Drake, who in 1997 wrote in the introduction to *Third Wave Agenda*:

In the perpetual battle of representation and definitional clout, the slippage from "third wave feminism" to "postfeminist" is important, because many of us working in the "third wave" by no means define our feminism as a groovier alternative to an over-and-done feminist movement. Let us be clear: "postfeminist" characterizes a group of young, conservative feminists who explicitly define themselves against and criticize feminists of the second wave. (1)

The slippages between Riot Grrrl and postfeminist trends I have illuminated with this research are significant due to Riot Grrrl's status within the third wave, and the complication of this category that these findings exacerbate. I would like to suggest that this does not spell the depressing collapse of the third wave into the unflattering umbrella category offered by Bean of 'post-backlash feminisms': the idea that all feminisms that emerged post-second wave are similarly reductive in their conceptualisation of feminism and

contribution to feminist discourse. Rather, I hope that this more complex reading of Riot Grrrl, a movement that is often held up as emblematic of a radical, politically engaged and activist third wave feminism, provides support for Genz's assertion of the innovative potentialities of postfeminism: potentialities that she claims we are yet to fully comprehend.

As findings from my research suggest, studies investigating intersections between manifestations of third wave feminism such as the Riot Grrrl movement and postfeminist culture facilitate a greater apprehension of postfeminism as a field. Armed with a greater understanding of postfeminism – its whys, wherefores, and potentialities – future generations stand to harness its more radical capabilities for feminist advancements. This is where a continuation of my research becomes important. Further explorations into Riot Grrrl and other such manifestations of third wave feminism might reveal even more nuanced and various overlaps with postfeminist culture, thereby highlighting postfeminism's radical potential as a theoretical category. We have observed how Riot Grrrl literature responds to New Traditionalism and Do-Me feminism, but how does it negotiate other postfeminist iterations and currents, such as: micro-politics and enterprise culture, cyber-postfeminism, queer postfeminism, as well as representations of women of colour in postfeminist culture?

Another aspect of my research that invites further scholarly enquiry involves building on the scope of the material discussed. Securing Riot Grrrl's status as an artistic movement requires even *more* critics to apply a literary studies model to a broader sample of zines. With this thesis, I have sought to compose a more comprehensive study of the artistic credentials of Riot Grrrl zines than currently exists. To meet this aim, I incorporated some lesser discussed zines from the Riot Grrrl archive into my study: *Confessional Poetry #2*, *Luna*, and *Bulldozer #1*. The expansiveness of the collection, however, means that there are many more zines that remain relatively hidden, having

received little to no critical attention. Without analysing these zines, the full picture of Riot Grrrl's artistic credentials – its devices, influences, and origins – remains incomplete.

My study focused on demystifying the artistic influence of Kathy Acker on Riot Grrrl writing. In the process of pursuing this very specific line of enquiry, I unearthed literary origins and influences for Riot Grrrl beyond Acker that, due to the scope of this project, I was unable to fully unpack. Some of these were more surprising than others; they include, but are not restricted to, the influence of Shirley Jackson, Virginia Woolf, Jeanette Winterson, Irving Stone, and Albert Camus. In addition to these influences, I would also point to the aesthetic influence of Barbara Kruger, as well as the Burroughs connection, as potentially fruitful avenues of further enquiry that are only touched on in this study. Doing this work would provide even more support for counteracting Riot Grrrl's overshadowing status as a predominantly social and political phenomenon rather than as an artistic movement.

In the introduction to this study, I identified an oversight in scholarship surrounding Riot Grrrl, the majority of which contemplates the movement through a subcultural studies lens, resulting in a distinct lack of discussion on Riot Grrrl from an artistic perspective. I noted other critics who have made a similar observation, including ex-Riot Grrrl Fateman, as well as Eichhorn, who practically directs scholars towards conducting this research in *The Archival Turn in Feminism*. Eichhorn rightly advocates that the archiving of Riot Grrrl at Fales Library in 2010 serves to “validate the materials as cultural products with a particular lineage in an urban twentieth century North American artistic and literary avant-garde” (Eichhorn, 91). Since this, some recent studies, such as Buchanan's *Writing a Riot*, have begun the important work of foregrounding Riot Grrrl zine writing as a literary practice, but due to the scope of her book and its intended audience (not

necessarily academic), Buchanan understandably gives an overview of Grrrl zine writing and does not dissect specific literary devices or influences inherited from the avant-garde. This is where my research enhances existing scholarship on Riot Grrrl. By drawing out specific avant-garde and postmodern literary devices in Riot Grrrl zines – fragmented/non-linear narratives, intertextuality, linguistically experimental styles of writing (*écriture féminine*), revealing the mechanics of the text, the use of minor aesthetics, and so forth – my research essentially fills in the details of Riot Grrrl’s assumed avant-garde artistic credentials. Aside from explaining how these function in Riot Grrrl texts, I have traced these devices to the writers they were likely inherited from, which leads me to the next original contribution I make to the field of knowledge on 1990s punk women’s writing.

In the second chapter of my thesis, ‘Kathleen Hanna Reads Kathy Acker’, I traced the ideological, intellectual, and aesthetic influence of Acker in the writing of Hanna. While many critics cite Acker as a key influence for Hanna, the details of this connection as manifest in their writing has largely, up to now, remained obscure. This gap has recently been addressed in part by Ioanes in ‘Shock and Consent in a Feminist Avant-Garde’, in which she traces a lineage between Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* and Hanna’s Riot Grrrl writing. Ioanes concludes that both writers express a unifying “feminist aesthetic of shock” to critique the impasse of consent – the double bind between female sexual autonomy and sexist cultural coercion – and to rage against a prevailing anti-pornography movement that oversimplified this impasse in its discourse (176). Her article marks the beginning of studies unpicking the intricacies of this connection, which my work extends.

Expanding on Ioanes’ contribution to the field, I argue that Acker and Hanna both express a unifying punk-feminist anti-work politics, which they express in both form and meaning in their texts to critique anti-feminist

backlash currents that sought to discredit working women. Acker and Hanna both perform a narrative critique of work, presenting work as un-aspirational and dissociating with logics instilled by the Puritan work ethic: specifically, the moralisation and overvaluation of work in American culture. Both writers formally support their feminist critiques of work by embracing punk's aesthetics of amateurism. They posit a symbolic rejection of a culture of professionalism in modern America born of the sustained influence of the Puritan work ethic. The punk-feminist anti-work politics that Acker and Hanna both mobilise in their texts undercuts the ideological basis from which working women were being discredited in the 1980s and 1990s – an attack that evolved as the supposed backlash against feminism progressed from one decade to the next.

In addition to their unifying expression of anti-work politics, Hanna and Acker also utilise the technique of 'erotic splicing' in their work: a conceptual framework developed in this thesis to illuminate both writers' nuanced pro-sex feminist positions. Differing from Henke's 'pornographic pastiche', which describes Acker's parody of pornographic tropes, erotic splicing describes the fragmentary injection of eroticism or sensuality, textual or visual, into the text. It encompasses both the overtly sexual and subtly erotic aesthetic construction of their work, and transforms their texts into *places of desire*, to borrow Colby's phrase. Such literary spaces enable them and their readers to explore their sexual desires *as well as* their unifying feelings of sexual alienation in patriarchal culture. The device also functions to uphold female sexual pleasure as a priority in the text, even as both writers conduct scathing critiques of female sexual coercion in misogynistic society, enabling them to hold these ideas in tandem. Ultimately, and in congruence with Ioanes' 'feminist aesthetic of shock', erotic splicing facilitates a *writing through* of the complexities and liminal dimensions associated with female sexuality, uniting themselves and their readers in both their hope *and* their

victimisation. I was able to trace this device into the Riot Grrrl zine, *Luna*, as well as the zine series, *Riot Grrrl NYC*, demonstrating Acker's aesthetic reach in Riot Grrrl writing more broadly. Considering Acker's significant literary legacy, though, it is possible that the concept has the potential for usage beyond the specific punk-feminist context in which it is conceived in this thesis, and can be applied to other manifestations of experimental women's writing that similarly attend to female sexuality.

The final point at which this research contributes to existing scholarship in the field is in relation to Acker, and specifically in relation to Henderson's article, 'Kathy Acker's Punk Feminism'. She argues that, in the 1970s onwards, Acker continues a revolutionary style of language attributed to radical second wave feminists of the late 1960s, and does so at a time when the women's movement and its languages of protest were waning. Henderson resolves that Acker's punk literary critique of patriarchal capitalism and the bourgeois novel, through its excessive and illogical syntactical and narrative structures, contests a growing US liberal feminism and its rhetorical appeal to reasonableness.

I extend Henderson's study by offering other ways in which Acker's punk texts maintained a radical style of feminist critique, contesting the fundamental logics of patriarchal capitalism in the 1980s, at a time when the women's movement was under attack from a conservative media backlash. For instance, Acker formally dissociates with capitalist logics that infuse an overvaluation of work in modern America. She uses devices such as repetition to drain well-known phrases that support this metanarrative (e.g. 'if you work hard enough you'll make it') of their poignancy. As a result, her texts undercut a 1980s anti-feminist backlash rhetoric that was underpinned by capitalist logics, as well as other methods of psychological manipulation, and which sought to discredit working women. Thus, Acker continues a radical feminist critique of patriarchal capitalism at a time when feminism is



being forced to narrow its critical scope in the face of more immediate threats being waged against the women's movement. On a fundamental and revolutionary level, Acker addresses the devaluation of feminist politics as manifest in a renewed emphasis on female sexual conservatism and traditional family life, challenging the socio-political economic system in which these attacks assume their logical authority.

As for Riot Grrrl's literary legacy, the archive at Fales Library yields crucial insights into the politics of the movement that cannot otherwise be acquired through published works only. For instance, the *materiality* of zines contributes significantly to their meaning, and without assessing them as artifacts, our understanding of zines is limited to their content (the majority of which remains unpublished). For me, the archive provided nuance to Riot Grrrl's predictably anti-capitalist, anti-work punk stance – something that is difficult to discern unless faced with the labour-intensive material construction of zines. This altered the anti-work messages expressed therein, shifting these from a straightforward rejection of hard work in and of itself, to a more precise rejection of hard work in various contexts. For example, through the material construction of *Bulldozer #1*, it was revealed that the creator's repudiation of hard work was geared towards the corporate sphere specifically, and not, say, in an activist capacity. Despite contention over whether a movement like Riot Grrrl *should* be archived, owing to its purported anti-institutionalism, the collection at Fales Library at least ensures that these insights are not lost and that its complexities as a movement are less likely to be overlooked in Riot Grrrl scholarship.

Revaluating Riot Grrrl zines from an artistic perspective has, for me, also highlighted the non-recognition of female artists and female-led production that still haunts our culture. Despite having had a keen interest in this topic for many years prior to pursuing doctoral study, I was still, in retrospect, very much in the dark about the artistic investment, sophistication,

and prowess of Grrrl zines and their creators. And whilst it might be said that Riot Grrrl's musical reach has already achieved what this project sets out to do with its literature, which is to call attention to the movement's cultural contribution, this does not alter the fact that a good proportion of Riot Grrrl's artistry is overlooked if we do not fully embrace its literature. It also fails to account for the various artistic influences that informed the movement, and that can only be fully understood through attending to its literature. So, whilst we might see glimpses of punk bands like The Slits, The Raincoats, The Runaways, and X-Ray Specs when we listen to Bikini Kill's *Pussywhipped*, it is much more difficult to discern a glimpse of Acker, Burroughs, Foucault, Perkins, Cixous, and hooks, without looking to the movement's literature. My hope for this research, as well as any future research that may build upon this study, is that it inspires other young women to make artistic contributions to culture with the knowledge that correctives are being made to a history that continues to dismiss them.

Over the past ten years, interest in Acker's work has surged, both in academia, as exemplified by Colby's *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible*, and in mainstream culture, sustained in part by the 2017 publication of Kraus's biography, as well as Olivia Lang's novel *Crudo* (2018), in which Lang assumes the persona of Acker in her experimental autofiction debut. This should serve as reassurance that we will continue to unearth and reinstate a lineage of revolutionary women's writing, to look to experimental female artists of the past to inspire future radical feminist critiques and creations, and that, in our art, we will continue to blaze the trails that they started for us.

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