

## **Queer and Feminist punk in the UK**

**Kirsty Lohman**

### **Abstract**

This chapter focuses on contemporary 'do it yourself' (DIY) queer and feminist punk scenes in the UK. It traces a lineage from queercore, Riot Grrrl, and punk, noting transatlantic influence and exchange between North American and UK scenes. It delves into issues of identity and inclusion/exclusion, aesthetics and economic practices. The chapter situates queer and feminist punk as part of wider DIY creative cultures of inclusion and opportunity, with distinct political and organisational modes.

### **Introduction**

Punk has long been an area for the culturally disenfranchised to experiment. Subcultural possibility has been shifted by a 'do it yourself' (DIY) ethos, artistic norms that do not necessarily require high levels of proficiency, and an emphasis on participation over consumption. This is particularly important for groups such as women and queer people, subject to systems of oppression, who are marginalised in everyday life and in their subcultural endeavours.

This chapter focuses on contemporary DIY queer and feminist punk scenes in the UK to illuminate shifting cultural and subcultural norms. It builds on the works of Julia Downes (2009; 2012) to understand how queer and feminist punk scenes in the UK have – and have not – changed since her study took place. This chapter is based on formal ethnographic fieldwork (2017-19), in addition to informal autoethnographic reflections (2013-2019) as part of my own participation in the scenes. It situates these scenes as part of a continuum of punk, particularly influenced by queercore and Riot Grrrl, but also as part of wider DIY creative cultures of inclusion and opportunity. Discussions, framed around the politics of inclusion, of musical and clothing aesthetics, and of punk economics, will uncover a trajectory of punk that centres around the inclusion of those otherwise marginalised in cultural production.

### **Queer and feminist punk, 1976-c.2010**

Prior to punk, women and LGBTQ+ people had struggled to gain prominent roles in music-based youth subcultures in the UK, usually participating through style and fandom rather than as musicians, artists or key scene innovators. Punk, however, had always provided space for punk women and queer people to be involved, often in prominent ways. Bands and musicians included X-Ray Spex, Tom Robinson Band, Jayne County, Buzzcocks, The Slits, and Poison Girls, to name but a few; Vivienne Westwood designed key elements of punk styles, and Jordan ensured that they were seen; Caroline Coon published about the subculture in the music press; Linder Sterling pushed artistic boundaries (O'Brien 2012; Reddington 2012; Worley 2017). Early punk played with gender, sex and sexuality. This was most notable through the (at the

time, shocking) use of bondage gear which was worn by punks regardless of gender or sexual identity and also manifested in English punks socialised in gay clubs across the country (Wilkinson 2015). The presence within punk of so many people who broke the mould of other (cisgender, heterosexual) male-dominated scenes, enabled the empowerment of those who might otherwise feel marginalised in wider society (Downes 2012; Dunn 2016).

Whilst the early punk scene in the UK did offer freedom of expression, it also replicated wider structural inequalities and oppressions. David Wilkinson (2015) details punk that harboured homophobic attitudes, and Helen Reddington (2012) discusses the sexism that women in punk had to navigate. Early punk remained dominated by white, heterosexual, cisgender men, and those who deviated from this were at risk of abuse and assault inside and outside the scene.

By the time punk had 'gone underground' with anarcho- and hardcore punk in the 1980s (Clark 2003), patriarchal norms, deep-rooted homophobia, and misogyny solidified in the many scenes, particularly in North America (LeBlanc 1999). Women might not explicitly have been excluded from these more macho hardcore punk scenes; they were, however, placed in a situation where if they wanted to participate, they had to deal with a 'trebled reflexivity':

[a]s punks, they counter the sartorial, vocational, and behavioural norms of the mainstream culture; as female punks, they counter the norms of feminine propriety, beauty and behaviour; as punk girls, in combining the discourses of punk and femininity, the[y] subvert the punk subversion, challenging the masculinist norms of the subculture (LeBlanc 1999, 160).

Anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic discourses of 'punk ideology' (see, for example, O'Hara, 1999), were not necessarily actualised in many punk scenes, with bigotry and abuse experienced by many (Wald and Gottlieb 1993; Reddington 2012; Ensminger 2010). Women and/or queer peoples' broader subcultural participation and inclusion became more minimal and marginalised.

It was in North America that prominent breaking points were reached: in 1985 by LG(BTQ) people with queercore, and in 1991 by women and girls with Riot Grrrl. Participants and organisers in both scenes spoke and wrote about how they felt that their community was marginalised in wider punk scenes – targeted by homophobia and/or sexism. New communities would enable space for mutual support, and for queer and/or female punks to make connections with each other that were harder to find otherwise.

The queercore scene has its origins in Toronto, Canada (Nault, 2018). In 1985, G.B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce launched the fanzine *J.D.s*, which critiqued both Toronto's macho punk scene and its liberal, assimilationist gay community. Neither of these scenes were welcoming to a wider spectrum of queer bodies (in terms of gender, sexuality, ability and/or race). Jones and LaBruce later explained:

The only difference is that at the fag bar, females have been almost completely banished, while at the punk club, they've just been relegated to the periphery, but allowed a pretense of participation (i.e. girlfriend, groupie, go-fer, or post-show pussy). In this highly masculinized world, the focus is doubly male, the boys on stage controlling the 'meaning' of the event (the style of music, political message, etc.) and the boys in the pit determining the extent of the exchange between audience and performer (Jones and LaBruce 1989, 27; see also Nault 2018, 19).

The fanzine started an underground buzz in Toronto which soon spread, first across North America, and then beyond. The queercore scene combined the radical anti-establishment

politics of punk with the radical anti-heteronormative (and anti-homonormative) politics of queer (DeChaine 1997), to create a subcultural space for those who were unwelcome and unwilling to be part of other normative spaces and scenes.

Initially queercore was fanzine-led, opening up communication between queer punks locally and translocally. Importantly, *J.D.s* released a cassette tape with international contributions from queer punk bands, *J.D.s Top Ten Homocore Hit Parade Tape*, in 1990. Queer punks and their bands came out of the woodwork, coalescing, where numbers were greatest, into physical community-led scenes in larger metropolises, each taking on a different shape in their different contexts. In Toronto, queercore manifested a new queer (post-)punk scene; in San Francisco, USA, the fanzine *Homocore* pushed for space for queers within the wider hardcore punk scene (Fenster 1993). A proliferation of fanzines and compilation records inspired yet more queercore punk activity. These scenes were most active in the late 1980s and 1990s, yet their tendrils can be seen in events such as transnational Queeruption festivals (Brown 2007).

Riot Grrrl emerged around 1991 when groups of grrrls, many based in and around Olympia, Washington, USA, coalesced around fanzine writing, activist organising, art and punk music. Networks between 'Riot Grrrl chapters' soon extended across the United States and beyond as more grrrls took up the methods of DIY punk organising to create their own subcultural spaces. The infamous and influential Riot Grrrl manifesto explained their motivations:

BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US, that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways. ... BECAUSE we don't want to assimilate to someone else's (Boy) standards of what is or isn't 'good' music or punk rock or 'good' writing AND THUS need to create forums where we can recreate, destroy and define our own visions. ... BECAUSE i believe with my holeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will, change the world for real (Riot Grrrl Manifesto, 1991).

Riot Grrrl's politics, aesthetics, and approach sparked a media frenzy, antithetical to the 'ambiguous-by-design' approach of artists, bands, fanzine writers and promoters (Schilt 2004, 124). Ultimately this scrutiny, pressure, and misrepresentation was responsible for many of the original wave of bands splitting up (Schilt 2004). However, as with punk and queercore, the original Riot Grrrl movement had lasting global impacts: by the mid-1990s many women and girls who had never previously felt welcome or able to participate in punk, politics or DIY subcultures, were inspired to do just that.

Queercore and Riot Grrrl had global effects, drawing in more and more queer people and/or women. Amy Spencer (2008) has traced queercore's influences in the UK, from the first alternative gay club night Rock 'n' Doris held in Newcastle in 1989, through to the early 1990s when club nights spread across England: from Manchester (Homocult) to London (Up To The Elbow, Vaseline which later became Club V, and Homocrime). London was also the site of the world's first Queeruption in 1998.

The band Huggy Bear formed in Brighton, UK in 1991. With a lack of easy access or information on what exactly American Riot Grrrls were doing, Huggy Bear shaped UK Riot Grrrl in a distinctly British way (Downes 2009). By 1992, the transatlantic gap narrowed: Huggy Bear collaborated with the most well-known of the Riot Grrrl bands from Olympia, joining Bikini Kill on tours and shared record releases. Rumours of the activities of the American Riot Grrrls spread across the UK with Riot Grrrl 'gangs' emerging in Leeds/Bradford, Aberdeen, Birmingham, Portsmouth and London, amongst others (Ablaze! 2012).

In North America, queercore and Riot Grrrl were connected to punk and hardcore scenes through broader subcultural networks: influences manifested in aesthetics. Each scene's broader context gave rise to its own distinct flavour: Toronto queercore was more punk/post-punk; San Francisco homocore was more hardcore; and Riot Grrrls in Olympia had links to the grunge scene in nearby Seattle. Queercore and Riot Grrrl were also connected to each other through overlapping rationales and audiences; and some bands described themselves as part of both scenes. Fifth Column and Team Dresch, for example, had members who identified as queer women and had access to queercore and Riot Grrrl (Nault 2017).

In the UK, these networks figured differently. Spencer (2008) explains how UK queercore was connected to the British indie scene, at a time that Britpop was rising to prominence. This was distinct from the more radical queer punk political networks of American and Canadian queercore – although those influences can be seen in the first Queeruption in London which sat firmly within punk and squatting subcultures (Brown 2007). UK Riot Grrrl was distinct from UK queercore, lacking the overlaps seen in the North American scenes. Aesthetically, however, UK Riot Grrrl – like UK queercore – was also heavily influenced by DIY indie and indie-pop scenes. Julia Downes explains that this was due to the more accepting and inclusive nature of indie-pop.

Indie-pop audiences and bands tended to be more gender-balanced in relation to crust and anarcho punk music culture. Low key knowledge of riot grrrl circulated within these indie-pop communities and inspired young men and women to disrupt the everyday constitution of gender and sexuality in their immediate subcultural contexts (2012, 211).

Riot Grrrl in the UK therefore manifested less as a reactionary response specifically to sexism and marginalisation in (hardcore) punk, and more an opportunity for greater girl gang focused opportunities for (sub)cultural production.

The influence of Riot Grrrl can clearly be seen in the trajectory of UK scenes in the late 1990s, 2000s, and through to today, particularly in the proliferation of Ladyfest events and mentoring programs such as Rock Camps for Girls (Schilt and Zobl 2008; O'Shea 2014). The first Ladyfest in the UK was Ladyfest Scotland, held in Glasgow in 2001, one year after the first ever Ladyfest event in Olympia, served as a 'Riot Grrrl reunion' of sorts. Ladyfests (sometimes LaDIYfests) are women-focused DIY festivals that centre art, creative and political workshops, and music, often with an aim to fundraise for women-focused charities. The structure is otherwise open and Ladyfest collectives have emerged wherever there is an appetite to run an event. Between 2000 and 2010, thirty-two Ladyfests/LaDIYfests were held across the UK (O'Shea 2014). In their remit, ethos, and approach, Ladyfests sit within a feminist and Riot Grrrl paradigm.

More recent UK scenes draw on the aesthetics of both UK and US original Riot Grrrl, with some lighter indie-pop and other bands that have harder punk edges. We also see the (sometimes partial) erosion of divides between queercore and Riot Grrrl with greater overlaps between aesthetics, bands, promoters, networks, and audiences: the emergence in the 2000s of 'DIY queer feminist (sub)cultures' (Downes 2009).

### **Who the scenes are for: identity politics, boundaries, and multiplicity**

There are now a myriad of contemporary punk scenes in the UK. Many of these scenes are queer, feminist and/or people of colour-focused, seeking to promote inclusion of people from social groups that might feel marginalised in broader punk scenes. Groups and collectives often

focus on particular marginalised identities in order to push the boundaries for inclusion and participation in punk scenes. These include groups such as Decolonise Fest (London), Girl Gang Sheffield (and Leeds, Manchester, and Edinburgh), Femrock (Brighton), and Queerfest Nottingham (and Leeds). Other collectives are broader in terms of identity-orientation, for example First Timers (London) which is for people who face any form of oppression within punk. The emphasis on people's identities (and their marginalisations) as a nexus of cultural organisation is part of wider cultural trends that affect young people's self-perception, identities and politics, as well as culture (see, for example, Lohman and Pearce 2020).

This emphasis on promoting the inclusion of marginalised identities is also a reflection of shifts in contemporary feminist understandings and praxis. Contemporary feminist thought is rooted in a recognition of previous movements' shortcomings, drawing particularly on black feminist critiques of middle-class, white-dominated approaches within second wave feminism (Collins 1991; Davis 1983). Crenshaw's (1991) conceptualisation of intersectionality, which recognises the compounding effect of multiple forms of marginalisation, has become common parlance amongst younger generations of feminists. Indeed, feminists in the UK now often firmly embed issues of identity and marginality within their terminology, defining themselves as 'radical feminists, Marxist or socialist feminists, black feminists, trans-feminists and queer [feminists]' (Charles and Wadia 2018, 176).

There have also been demographic changes in the UK that affect notions of identity. Young people are increasingly likely to identify beyond normative cisgender and/or straight categories of gender and sexuality, and are also increasingly likely to dismiss more binary and monosexual forms of sexual and gendered identities (e.g. lesbian, gay, straight, transsexual) in favour of looser or more fluid identity (or anti-identity) labels (e.g. bisexual, queer, trans, non-binary) (Pearce et al 2019). In these shifts we see a mainstreaming of the approaches to queer identities, politics, and theory that informed queercore in the 1980s:

[t]hese focuses of queer theory and identity politics—of deconstructing oppositional binaries and social categories of gender, sexuality, and heteronormativity; and of undercutting identity politics by instead focusing on the permeability and opening allowed by difference—underpin the strategies of subversion and resistance which queers employ in their everyday lives (DeChaine 1997, 22).

The relationship between contemporary identity construction and politically-informed cultural activities is therefore inherently linked to political understandings and activism. Even in the names of many contemporary events (such as Loud Women, Bent Fest, and Decolonise Fest), identity is deeply integrated into the function of and rationale for many of the activities of queer and/or feminist punks today, raising questions around who these events are for (and who they are *not* for), as well as how the boundaries of identity are managed. This is a key context in which we see the continued influences of Riot Grrrl and queercore today. As explored above, early punk provided a particularly 'open' space, for society's outsiders and misfits, however this 'space' narrowed as hardcore and some strands of anarcho-punk solidified hyper-masculine punk norms. Riot Grrrl and homocore were both responses to this, for different (sometimes overlapping) audiences.

Queercore, was – in the original Toronto scene – created by and for the queer punks who felt excluded from mainstream gay *and* punk scenes. The scene that grew around the *Homocore* zine in San Francisco, took a broader approach, laid out in their manifesto:

You don't have to be gay; being different at all, like straight guys who aren't macho shiteheads, women who don't want to be a punk rock fashion accessory, or any other

personal decision that makes you an outcast is enough. Sexuality is an important part of it, but only part (Jennings 1988).

This followed in the spirit of early punk scenes, promoting an explicit 'openness'; identifying as a sexual minority isn't required for participation. However, there were further *unintended* marginalisations in terms of those who did not feel that queercore was initially welcoming to them:

Despite socially conscious and inclusive policies ... queercore was, at least initially, white-centered.... Despite its blanched beginnings, queers of color eventually made inroads into the subculture, leaving a (b)lasting impact,... forcing the subculture to expand beyond its white, cisgender, able-bodied bubble. Exclusions continue to exist, but minority participants have not let them go unchallenged (Nault 2018, 27).

Riot Grrrl, in some of its earliest incarnations, was radically *closed* rather than radically open: with many original US collectives and meetings 'girl-only' (Marcus 2010). While Riot Grrrl and queercore both emerged in reaction to marginalisation, many Riot Grrrls distinguished themselves by seeking an entirely separatist space, in which feminist discussions could safely take place away from any disruptive male presence. This was in keeping with a long history of 'safe' woman-only spaces in Western feminist history, particularly the organising tactics of women of colour (Evans 1979). A number of US Riot Grrrl scenes were less prescriptive with some male involvement in bands and in the scene: this occasionally caused tensions when bands with male members such as Bikini Kill and Excuse 17 played in cities with a woman-only approach (Brownstein 2015). In the UK, Riot Grrrl was inclusive rather than exclusive. Many prominent UK Riot Grrrl bands such as Huggy Bear, Comet Gain and Coping Saw had male members, and given the overlaps between Riot Grrrl and indie scenes, Riot Grrrl events were rarely closed to men, indeed often were explicitly mixed gender spaces (Downes 2012).

As Riot Grrrls felt the pressure of media scrutiny in the mid/late 1990s, critiques and tensions within the scene, as well as from outside, became more acute (Marcus 2010). Where it was ideally intended to be a space for all women and girls to feel safe to be creative and political, in practice a variety of aspects of how scenes operated were exclusionary and marginalising. Riot Grrrl has been critiqued for both actively and passively excluding a variety of groups of people, for example: working-class women with less time/money to participate, women with disabilities whose access needs were not necessarily taken into account, and trans people kept away by gender essentialist and exclusive practices (Schilt 2003; Marcus 2010; Pearce 2012).

There has also been criticism of the approach to race and overwhelming whiteness in many Riot Grrrl scenes. Mimi Nguyen (2012) locates in this the particular influence of a (white) liberal feminism and its understanding of race 'that define[s] racism as ignorance, and ignorance as the absence of intimacy.... [W]e also know this in the familiar disavowal, "I'm not racist, I have black friends," which suggests that proximity is a social prophylactic against virulent racism' (181). This approach enabled 'anti-racist' white Riot Grrrls to avoid examining and challenging their own dominance, so long as there was a degree of tokenistic diversity. Indeed, some white grrrls laid the 'blame' for disruption and disbanding of original Riot Grrrl scenes with vocal Riot Grrrls of colour (Nguyen 2012).

As later generations of feminist punks investigated the history of Riot Grrrl, they learnt of and came to understand the failures of Riot Grrrl's – and queercore's – politics of inclusion/exclusion, with these critiques becoming common currency (Marcus 2010; Nguyen 2012). This dovetailed with rising awareness of theories of intersectionality as an analytical lens to understand how these scenes perpetuated marginalisation. In contemporary queer and feminist punk scenes, there is an appetite to avoid these pitfalls recurring. In the naming of the

collectives and events, we see how these are often targeted towards particular groups of queer and/or feminist punks: be they loud women or grrrl gangs; bent or queer; or seeking to decolonise punk. However, the spaces that these collectives create usually *also* deliberately challenge the silo-ing of identities, instead seeking to pay attention to a range of marginalised experiences, their intersections and the compounding effect of these. This work is done in different ways, including, first, through booking bands, and second, through safe(r) spaces policies.

Organisers of contemporary UK DIY queer and/or feminist punk festivals often book a range of bands across a day or weekend, whose members represent a variety of marginalised identities. This ensures that representation, participation and inclusion is front and centre, which is intended to encourage marginalised punks to attend, and possibly also be inspired to take a more active role in cultural participation and production. This booking strategy often further encompasses a range of musical and aesthetic influences which will be discussed below.

Moreover, event organisers explicitly work to ensure that a range of people can feel welcome in the audience. 'Safe(r)' is used, rather than 'safe' as a recognition that no space can be oppression free. Safety work is undertaken in part through the use of safe(r) spaces policies that regulate event spaces. These policies usually set out a list of behaviours that will not be tolerated. Some DIY venues including DIY Space for London and Wharf Chambers in Leeds have their own safe(r) space policies and accountability processes, and where venues do not, often the event promoters will institute one at the location for that night. The use of safe(r) spaces policies fits with a long tradition of organising by marginalised groups. Over the last decade, the use of safe(r) spaces policies has become standard practice among younger generations of feminists. They work on multiple levels: by regulating who feels welcome in the scene; by explicitly communicating to members of various marginalised identities that they are welcome and should hope to feel safe here; by regulating behaviour in the space; by empowering users of the space to challenge oppressive behaviours in the space; and by communicating to scene 'outsiders' who disagree with the value of safe(r) spaces that this space is run differently to their subcultural norms.

Whilst each space/promoter will institute their own policies, examples from Decolonise Fest and FemRock Fest are representative of many of the safe(r) spaces policies that are instituted: 'We will not tolerate racism, sexism, transphobia, classism, ableism, homophobia or fatphobia' (Decolonise Fest 2017), and 'FemRock has a safer spaces policy against sexism, racism, homophobia, biphobia, queerphobia, transphobia and ableism. Any instances of the above will not be tolerated and you may be asked to leave the event' (Femrock 2018). Through doing this, the promoters note a range of potential forms of oppression that work to marginalise their attendees (predominantly punks of colour at Decolonise Fest and mostly (largely white) women at FemRock), and recognise that action is needed to ensure that punks of colour or women who face multiple forms of marginalisation feel welcome: an enactment of intersectional politics. Decolonise Fest moreover use their policy to explicitly extend space to punks who may be marginalised in one or multiple of the ways outlined, while still centring their primary aims: 'White allies are welcome but remember this event will focus on people of colour' (Decolonise Fest, 2017: n.p.), and FemRock says: 'we believe gigs are something everyone should enjoy, so we say grrrls to the front /// accessible venues for all' (Femrock, 2018: n.p.).

However, safe(r) spaces policies do not always achieve what they aim for; the policy alone is not adequate. Indeed, the very existence of Decolonise Fest, and of the broader DIY Diaspora Punx collective that run this annual event, is itself a reaction to an enduring hold of liberal (white) feminism over (white) feminist and queer punk scenes. Whilst intersectionality is often discussed in queer and feminist punk spaces, the attempted enactment of intersectional

politics does not always move beyond tokenism. There are still fewer opportunities for punks of colour to perform or be otherwise involved in events than for white punks, and racist microaggressions (Sue 2010) are still common in white-dominated queer and feminist spaces. Nguyen wrote in 2012 of her fears that later generations of feminist punks had not learnt from Riot Grrrl's racial failings, and we see that this continues to be the case.

With queer and feminist punk scenes, particularly those with a politics of challenging marginalisation, there is an ongoing cycle of new scenes emerging in reaction to established scenes. This is evident with older 'waves' of queercore and Riot Grrrl, contemporary queer and feminist scenes, and most recently with scenes that focus on decolonisation. Rather than a siloing of culture based on identity, however, these scenes often exist alongside each other allowing a greater variety of opportunity for marginalised groups. Queer folks were rarely explicitly *excluded* from 1980s hardcore punk, but with queercore could additionally have access to a scene where they had more safety and more supportive opportunity. Similarly, punks of colours are welcome throughout queer and feminist scenes, but are also entitled to their own, safe(r) subcultural spaces.

### **Aesthetics of the scenes**

Contemporary queer and feminist punk scenes in the UK mesh a variety of aesthetic influences. Subcultural aesthetics are expressed in a range of formats, including the graphic design of posters; record sleeves and logos; fanzines; art; poetry; and spoken word. This section will focus on two major aspects of aesthetic importance: music and clothing styles. Musically, the contemporary scene draws on a broad range of aesthetics, with bands playing in a wide variety of styles. While some events might have a (musical) genre-specific focus, as with Synth Punk Fest LDN 2017, the majority of all-day or weekend events held within the queer and feminist punk scenes take a broader approach, showcasing a variety of genres. Clothing styles vary from scene to scene, and can be influenced as much by musical subcultural identities as by subcultural communication of social identity categories such as 'queer'.

### ***Musical aesthetics***

The original Riot Grrrl and queercore scenes were shaped by their proximity and reaction to broader contemporaneous American hardcore punk scenes. Queercore, initially a disparate group of international punk bands connected by their queerness through fanzines, encompassed a range of punk/post-punk/hardcore aesthetics. Toronto's queercore scene was more broadly connected around post-punk, whereas San Francisco's homocore scene was embedded in hardcore punk. Original Riot Grrrl bands often drew on punk and rock in their musical aesthetics. In the UK both queercore and Riot Grrrl were shaped by influences from their North American originators in addition to their relationship to wider UK indie scenes, as Julia Downes has noted: 'In Britain, Riot Grrrl tended to draw more influence and inspiration from indie-pop music culture ... [and] typically infused optimistic 1960s pop elements into a fun, colourful and childish aesthetic' (Downes 2012, 211).

Music remains a driving force for contemporary UK queer and feminist punk scenes, although as with previous scenes creative involvement also includes a far broader range of mediums, including zines, poetry/spoken word, art and film. In line with other punk and DIY scenes, there is a strong emphasis on cultural participation, rather than passive consumption, as a means of attaining subcultural capital (Thornton 1995; Lohman 2017). Indeed, these scenes exist largely *in order to* provide the space, encouragement, and tools for anyone who wants to,



to be able to create. The DIY ethos combines with an understanding that standards of musical proficiency are – even within punk – used as patriarchal gatekeeping, with female musicians held to a higher standard than male musicians (Moore 2007). Therefore, the *form* that the music (or other artistic endeavour) takes, is often a secondary consideration to the fact of its creation. This increases the reliance on a DIY approach within these scenes, exhibited both in musical style and in scene ‘economics’ (see below).

This DIY style and approach is most prominently exhibited by groups such as First Timers, a London-based collective that organises an annual programme of workshops and jam sessions, culminating in a festival at which new bands play. First Timers is part of a lineage of other Riot Grrrl-inspired movements such as Rock / Rock ‘n’ Roll Camp for Girls, however with a broader focus for targeted identities (Dougher and Keenan 2012). The aim is to demystify music, help people form bands, and provide a supportive, first live performance experience. First Timers emphasises first-time involvement particularly for those with marginalised identities, specifically

people who are disabled (visible or non-visible), LGBTQIA+ folk, people of colour, and women. As well, we are here to support people who have never played in a band before // never played the instrument they’ve always wanted to learn before because of their class, race, gender, mental health, etc. (First Timers Fest, 2019: n.p.)

Bands that form through First Timers may then receive bookings from the promoters of other queer and/or feminist events, which can lead to success beyond DIY scenes. For example, Big Joanie formed and played their first gig at First Timers 2013. They have performed regularly at many events within the UK’s queer and feminist punk scenes, and at the time of writing receive regular national radio play on BBC Radio 6 and were featured by BBC Introducing at SXSW 2019, in the United States.

The kinds of music played within the UK’s queer and/or feminist punk scenes can be varied. Events often feature a broad range of acts. For example, Decolonise Fest 2017 featured bands with labels such as grunge soul, psychedelic, post-punk, jazz, doom, no wave, and experimental folk. Bent Fest 2017 included wonk pop, lo-fi synth, Riot Grrrl, d-beat, shoegaze, and anarcho-noise. While DIY approaches skew towards the lack of polish associated with guitar-based punk, they can also lead to musical diversity (Dunn 2008). This is heightened where queer and feminist identity politics bring together people with a range of different musical tastes, experiences, and proficiencies.

The events that form focal points for the scenes are typically curated less in relation to the musical cohesiveness of the gig, instead foregrounding the politics of inclusion: providing a platform to bands whose members have identities that are marginalised within broader punk, DIY and indie music scenes. This is similar to the UK’s ‘trans music scene’ of the early 2010s: a subset of broader queer and feminist punk scenes that focused on trans identities, where events might include punk, opera, rock, hip hop, comedy, burlesque, and spoken word. In this context, the multiplicity of identities present in the scenes can be linked to the multiplicity of musical styles. The ‘deconstruction’ of identity norms (in terms of gender in the trans music scene, but equally applicable to other identity categories in broader queer/feminist music), is replicated in the ‘deconstruction’ of subcultural norms of event organisation and musical form (Pearce and Lohman 2019).

Contemporary queer and feminist punk and DIY scenes are certainly inspired by all that went before, in both the UK and North America. The majority of bands coalesce around punk and/or indie styles, playing with hardcore, post-punk and/or poppier influences. However, the

scenes contain musical aesthetics that span a wider genre-spectrum, making it harder to pin down a specific musical aesthetic.

### ***The aesthetics of (queer) style***

Aesthetic norms vary between different sections of the scenes, particularly in terms of style and clothing. Style provides an(other) opportunity to trace the influence of prior scenes, given there is some degree of normalisation coalescing around particular stylistic markers. Given the importance and complexity of style and clothing to aspects of gender presentation (especially with regards to queer genders and/or queer sexualities) it is useful to address the more feminist- and queer-leaning aspects of the scenes separately, despite the overlaps that exist in terms of bands, artists and attendees, in order to better understand differences as well as similarities between them.

Feminist punk scenes coalesce around events such as Loud Women, Femrock, and the Girl Gangs of North England, and include bands such as Dream Nails, Charmpit, Skinny Girl Diet, the Ethical Debating Society, and ILL. Aesthetically, these scenes tend towards a style that exhibits an unabashed, aggressive femininity. Most often this takes the form of more normatively feminine clothing for musicians and audiences alike (skirts and dresses, with colour palettes often using pink, red, and purple), with subcultural flair added through (fitted) band t-shirts, Dr Marten boots, and the use of especially bright or dark shades in makeup. Performers also occasionally play with some of the more sexualised imagery and styles of early punk, and sometimes too the explicit subversions of Riot Grrrl (for example, writing feminist messages on exposed parts of the body, such as arms, legs, breasts, and stomachs).

Stylistically these *feminine* punk presentations overlap with *queer femme* punk presentations (which can also commonly be found in contemporary UK scenes). Queer femme styles have the political goal of 'failure or refusal to approximate patriarchal norms of femininity that [reserve] this gender expression for the sole use of cisgender, female-bodied, white heterosexual and able-bodied women' (Blair and Hoskin 2015, 231). However, such a reading risks reinforcing a binary distinction between queer and straight feminine-presenting punks, imbuing political agency only to the queers. Instead, and in line with a contemporary broadening of understandings of femme identity beyond white, cisgender lesbians, we can similarly see how feminine punk presentations can operate as a subcultural, political, feminist intervention that resists culturally sanctioned gender norms (Blair and Hoskin, 2015). This is a femininity intended not for the male gaze, but rather for a predominantly feminist, female, subcultural gaze.

The aesthetics of queer punk scenes is a complex arena, tied to specific cultural and individual aspects of gender-presentation and sexuality-presentation, in which the gendered nature of a person's clothing may or may not directly communicate something about their gender and/or their sexuality (or indeed, the absence of either of these things). It is important to note that cisgender gay and bisexual men are in a minority within these scenes. Instead, the queer punks are predominantly lesbian and bisexual cisgender women; plus trans men, trans women and nonbinary individuals who may or may not also identify as queer regarding their sexuality.

Norms of cisgender lesbian identity/presentation have shifted significantly since the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century when a butch/femme dichotomy predominated within many – particularly working-class – Anglophone contexts (Feinberg 1993; Kennedy and Davis 2014; Rothblum 2010). This dichotomy seemingly stemmed from an inter-reliance between butches and femmes and an assumption that they only formed relationships with one another in a 'mimicking' of

heterosexual relationships, although experiences were more nuanced than this stereotype would suggest (Rifkin 2002). Contemporary lesbian identities and presentations are far more nebulous, with a broader spectrum of gender-presentation possible, moreover there is more possibility of fluidity between 'points' on the presentation-continuum (Walker et al 2012; Mackay 2019). There is further a shift towards the recognition of gendered presentation being an expression of an individual identity rather than linked to one's partner (Blair and Hoskin 2015). However, within the UK's queer punk scenes there are far more punks who present in butch-leaning and/or masculine-of-centre styles, with styles commonly understood as 'androgynous' typically coded as masculine. These queer punk styles are particularly influenced by hardcore punk, with (baggy) band t-shirts; denim, leather or pleather jackets or vests often covered with band patches; doc martens; and a 'colour' palette dominated by black.

Trans attendees within queer punk scenes are similarly predominantly transmasculine (trans men and/or transmasculine nonbinary people), rather than transfeminine (trans women and/or transfeminine nonbinary people). This echoes a long history of marginalisation for transfeminine people within Riot Grrrl (Pearce 2012) as well as within punk more generally (Namaste 2000). In this way, these queer punk scenes also propagate wider homonormative (and indeed, heteronormative) cultural norms in which masculinities are privileged, and femininities pushed aside (Levitt et al.2003; Serano 2007; Blair and Hoskin 2015). As previously described, more feminist-leaning events consciously provide space for women and femininity, sometimes explicitly stating that this includes trans women. However, they tend also to be cisnormative, providing a less welcoming space for transfeminine people to enter. As a consequence, transfeminine people remain underrepresented despite the intersectional political approaches common across these queer *and* feminist punk scenes.

### **Economics of the scenes**

The intersection of DIY, punk, indie, and feminist influences in queer and feminist punk scenes makes for an approach to subcultural economics that is wrought with tension. The DIY politics of punk, especially when filtered through years of anarchopunk and hardcore organising, can result in particularly strict dictums regarding the importance of doing everything 'yourself' – from learning instruments, to putting on shows, to releasing records. This approach also comes with a strong anti-capitalist emphasis, in which money and economics are 'bad', profit-making is particularly heinous (and loss-making acceptable), and those who 'sell out' are no longer part of the scene (O'Hara 1999; Carella and Wymer 2019). These politics can be unworkable for many bands, unless they are able to rely on already having access to a degree of economic capital that can be 'lost' to the scene; that is, enough money to pay for their own fuel or public transport, practice room hire, and recording costs which often will not be recouped. Subcultural activity can never be a wholly distinct world, and therefore requires some interaction with the capitalist system. This is especially the case today in the neo-liberal Global North, where widespread attacks on squatting and alternative lifestyles mean that 'living outside the system' has become increasingly difficult (Lohman, 2017).

Consequently, the politics of DIY scenes often rely on privilege and are less accessible to already marginalised people. Taking an 'active' role in subculture requires time to be spent on leisure and creative activities: away from the pressures of work and/or caring responsibilities (Bennet and Hodgkinson 2012). Within Riot Grrrl circles of the 1990s there was an awareness of and feminist challenge to how male-dominated hardcore punk operated to privilege those with existing financial means. This was particularly acute where the majority of shows were fundraisers, at which it was expected that bands and artists would not recoup their costs for

performing in order to maximise charitable donations. Riot Grrrl events were still often fundraisers, but ensured that bands be reimbursed for their performances (Marcus 2010).

Contemporary queer and feminist punk scenes include people with various economic worldviews and politics. There are certainly anti-capitalist and anarchist punks who organise in line with hardcore punk norms, with a preference for anti-profit DIY models. These influences in the scenes are solidified through the regular hosting of events in anarchist spaces such as the Cowley Club in Brighton, and Wharf Chambers (previously The Common Place) in Leeds. Others involved with queer and feminist scenes call for the fair payment of artists, creatives, and those working to support the scene. These demands usually are argued from a position that, in following the logic of queer and feminist practices of inclusion, scenes should recognise and work against the exclusionary effects of economic marginalisation. The argument follows that by holding to particular (patriarchal) approaches to putting anti-capitalist ideals into practice, the scene further exploits these individuals by relying on their time and free labour. Moreover, through providing payment for work within scenes, it provides 'safety' from having to seek work outside the scenes in order to support living costs.

There are tensions around implementing the economics of feminist and queer politics within these scenes, with social media often operating as a battleground for 'debate'. However, there are also commonalities in how radical economic justice is sought at events. For example, entrance fees are usually held as low as possible, with many promoters offering 'pay what you can' or free entry to those who otherwise can't afford it, operating on the basis of trust. Benefit shows and fundraisers are still key to the scene. For example, Loud Women shows raise money for women's charities, and multiple events have been held to support the Solidarity Not Silence campaign, raising legal costs for a group of women to 'defend themselves against defamation claim made by [a] man in [the] music industry for statements that they made concerning his treatment of women' (Solidarity Not Silence, n.d.).

Contemporary queer and feminist punk scenes therefore continue in a long lineage of punk economics that practise DIY organising, fundraising, and anti-capitalism. However, their approach is interwoven with feminist- and queer-influenced notions of economic justice that critique patriarchal anti-capitalist punk movements without necessarily forming a clear conclusion of how best to operationalise these politics.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has illustrated the many ways in which contemporary queer and/or feminist punk scenes in the UK are part of a long punk lineage, including important transatlantic influences. The focus on the politics of inclusion, of aesthetics, and of economics, has been central to punk organising practices throughout, but are particularly key to the trajectory of punk by and for queer people, and/or punk by and for women. This chapter has illustrated how queer and feminist punk scenes are an attempt to turn political ideology into political action through the medium of punk. Punk has always been about creating a space for the marginalised; we see here how the details of this have changed over time as more groups demand inclusion in punk, and create punk scenes that value and welcome, rather than exclude, them. No scene that aims for inclusion and diversity has been entirely successful on those terms, but with each new development nuanced critiques of previous 'failures' push the evolution of punk towards something better.

## References

- Ablaze!, K. 2012. *The City is Ablaze! The Story of a Post-punk Popzine 1984-1994*. Leeds: Mittens On.
- Bennett, A., and Hodkinson, P. 2012. *Ageing and Youth Cultures*. London: Berg.
- Blair, K.L., and Hoskin, R.A. 2015. 'Experiences of femme identity: coming out, invisibility and femmephobia.' *Psychology & Sexuality*, 6(3): 229-244.
- Brown, G. 2007. 'Mutinous eruptions: autonomous spaces of radical queer activism.' *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space*, 39(11): 2685-2698.
- Brownstein, C. 2015. *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl: A Memoir*. London: Virago.
- Carella, K., and Wymer, K. 2019. "You want me to surrender my identity?": Laura Jane Grace, transition, and selling out'. *Punk & Post-Punk*, 8(2): 193-207.
- Charles, N., and Wadia, K. 2018. 'New British feminisms, UK Feminista and young women's activism.' *Feminist Theory*, 19(2): 165-181.
- Clark, D. 2003. 'The death and life of punk, the last subculture.' In D. Muggleton and R. Weinzierl, eds. *The Postsubcultures Reader*, Oxford: Berg, 223-236.
- Collins, P.H. 1991. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Crenshaw, K. 1991. 'Mapping the margins: intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color.' *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6): 1241-1299.
- Davis, A.Y. 1983. *Women, Race, & Class*. New York: Vintage, 2011.
- DeChaine, D.R. 1997. 'Mapping subversion: queercore music's playful discourse of resistance'. *Popular Music & Society*, 21(4): 7-37.
- Decolonise Fest. 2017. *Facebook: Decolonise Fest 2017*.  
<https://www.facebook.com/events/129571150913030/> Accessed 15 March 2019.
- Dougher, S. and Keenan, E.K. 2012. 'Riot Grrrl, Ladyfest and rock camps for girls.' In J. Downes, ed., *Women Make Noise: Girl Bands from Motown to the Modern*. Twickenham: Supernova, 259-291.
- Downes, J. 2009. *DIY Queer Feminist (Sub)cultural Resistance in the UK*. PhD Thesis, University of Leeds.
- Downes, J. 2012. 'The expansion of punk rock: riot grrrl challenges to gender power relations in British indie music subcultures.' *Women's Studies*, 41(2): 204-237.
- Dunn, K.C. 2008. 'Never mind the bollocks: the punk rock politics of global communication.' *Review of International Studies*, 34(S1): 193-210.
- Dunn, K. 2016. *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Ensminger, D. 2010. 'Redefining the body electric: queering punk and hardcore'. *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, 22(1): 50-67.
- Evans, S.M. 1979. *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Feinberg, L. 1993. *Stone Butch Blues: A Novel*. Los Angeles: Alyson Books, 2003.

- FemRock. 2018. *Facebook: FemRock Fest 2018*  
<https://www.facebook.com/events/166128007417505/> Accessed 15 March 2019.
- Fenster, M. 1993. 'Queer punk fanzines: identity, community, and the articulation of homosexuality and hardcore'. *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 17(1): 73-94.
- First Timers Fest 2019. 'DIY Space for London.' <https://diyspaceforlondon.org/first-timers-fest-2019/> Accessed 1 March 2019.
- Griffin, N. 2012. 'Gendered performance performing gender in the DIY Punk and Hardcore music scene.' *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 13(2): 66-81.
- Jennings, T. 1988. 'What the Fuck is HOMOCORE?' *Homocore #1*.
- Jones, G.B., and LaBruce, B. 1989. 'Don't be gay or, How I learned to stop worrying and fuck punk in the ass.' *Maximumrockroll*, 69: 27.
- Kennedy, E.L., and Davis, M.D. 2014. *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community*. New York: Routledge.
- Leblanc, L. 1999. *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Levitt, H.M., Gerrish, E.A. and Hiestand, K.R. 2003. 'The misunderstood gender: a model of modern femme identity.' *Sex Roles*, 48(3-4): 99-113.
- Lohman, K. 2017. *The Connected Lives of Dutch Punks: Contesting Subcultural Boundaries*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lohman, K. and Pearce, R. 2020. 'Queering community development in DIY punk spaces.' In R. Meade and M. Shaw, eds. *Arts, Culture and Community Development*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Mackay, F. 2019. 'No woman's land? Revisiting border zone denizens.' *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, DOI: 10.1080/10894160.2019.1565521.
- Marcus, S. 2010. *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*. New York: Harper.
- Moore, R. 2007. 'Friends don't let friends listen to corporate rock: punk as a field of cultural production.' *Journal of Contemporary ethnography*, 36(4): 438-474.
- Namaste, V. 2000. *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Nault, C. 2017. *Queercore: Queer Punk Media Subculture*. New York: Routledge.
- Nguyen, M.T. 2012. 'Riot grrrl, race, and revival.' *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 22(2-3): 173-196.
- O'Shea, S. 2014. 'Embracing difference in feminist music worlds: a Ladyfest case study.' In N. Crossley, S. McAndrew and P. Widdop, eds. *Social Networks and Music Worlds*. New York: Routledge, 146-168.
- O'Brien, L. 2012. *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul*. Third Edition, London: Jawbone.
- O'Hara, C. 1999. *The Philosophy of Punk: More Than Noise!* Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Pearce, R. 2012. *Trans Grrrl Riot, Part 1: Was Riot Grrrl Transphobic?*  
<https://ruthpearce.net/2012/08/22/trans-grrrl-riot-part-1-was-riot-grrrl-transphobic/> Accessed 25 March 2019.

- Pearce, R. and Lohman, K. 2019. 'De/constructing DIY identities in a trans music scene.' *Sexualities*, 22(1-2): 97-113.
- Pearce, R., Steinberg, D.L. and Moon, I. 2019. 'Introduction: The emergence of "trans."' *Sexualities*, 22(1-2): 3-12.
- Reddington, H. 2012. *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era*. Second edition, Bristol: Equinox.
- Rifkin, L. 2002. 'The suit suits whom?' *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 6(2): 157-17.
- Riot Grrrl Manifesto. 1991. *Bikini Kill #2*.
- Rothblum, E.D. 2010. 'The complexity of butch and femme among sexual minority women in the 21st century.' *Psychology of Sexualities Review*, 1(1): 29-42.
- Schilt, K. 2003. 'A little too ironic': the appropriation and packaging of Riot Grrrl politics by mainstream female musicians.' *Popular Music & Society*, 26(1): 5-16.
- Schilt, K. 2004. "'Riot Grrrl is...": contestation over meaning in a music scene.' In A. Bennett and R.A. Peterson, eds. *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal and Virtual*. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 115-130.
- Schilt, K., and Zobl, E. 2008. 'Connecting the dots: Riot Grrrls, Ladyfests, and the International Grrrl Zine Network.' In A. Harris, ed. *New Wave Cultures: Feminism, Subcultures, Activism*. London: Routledge, 39-56.
- Serano, J. 2007. *Whipping Girl: A Transsexual Woman on Sexism and the Scapegoating of Femininity*. New York: Seal.
- Solidarity Not Silence. No date. 'Women facing defamation case for speaking up.' <https://www.crowdjustice.com/case/solidaritynotsilence/> Accessed 15 March 2019.
- Sue, D.W. 2010. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. New Jersey: John Wiley.
- Spencer, A. 2008. *DIY: The Rise of Lo-Fi Culture*. London: Marion Boyars.
- Thornton, S. 1995. *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Wald, G. and Gottlieb, J. 1993. 'Smells like teen spirit: Riot grrrls, revolution, and women in independent rock.' *Critical Matrix*, 7(2): 11.
- Walker, J.J., Golub, S.A., Bimbi, D.S., and Parsons, J.T. 2012. 'Butch bottom-femme top? An exploration of lesbian stereotypes.' *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 16(1): 90-107.
- Wilkinson, D. 2015. 'Ever fallen in love (with someone you shouldn't have?): punk, politics and same-sex passion.' *Keywords*, 13: 57-76.
- Worley, M. 2017. *No Future: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976-1984*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.