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The Riot Continues: The Problematic Westernization of Pussy Riot

“We’re gonna take over the punk scene for feminists” -Kathleen Hanna

Although they share feminist ideals, the Russian art collective Pussy Riot distinguishes themselves from the U.S.-based Riot Grrrl Movement, as exemplified by the band Bikini Kill, because of their location-specific protest work in Moscow. Understanding how Pussy Riot is both similar to and different from Riot Grrrl is important for contextualizing the way we think about diverse, transnational feminisms so that we may develop more inclusive and nuanced ways in conceptualizing these feminisms in the future. While Pussy Riot shares similar ideals championed by Bikini Kill in the Riot Grrrl movement, they have temporal and location-specific activisms and each group has their own ways of protesting injustices against women and achieving their unique goals.

Politics & Place

The Riot Grrrl revolution was an underground American punk movement in the 1990s about women creating spaces for themselves by protesting the male-dominated American punk culture. Many credit Kathleen Hanna for starting the movement with her band Bikini Kill and their radical performance protest strategies. Ambrosch argues, “Bikini Kill . . . represented . . . riot grrrl, which inspired many punks to become feminists and challenge the patriarchy. . . . [T]his movement encouraged young women to pick up instruments, form bands, and, literally, make their voices heard” (2016, 254). Bikini Kill outlines specific goals regarding the Riot Grrrl movement in the Riot Grrrl Manifesto, published in the *Bikini Kill Zine 2*, in which they aim to

“save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms” (Bikini Kill 1991).

Bikini Kill focuses on making space for women within the underground American punk scene, while Pussy Riot has a broader, more modern focus. Pussy Riot, an anonymous, feminist art collective of Russian women, advocates LGBTQIA+ rights, anti-authoritarianism, and openly protests Vladimir Putin’s regime through public intervention. Officials violently arrested three members of the group, Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich, as a result of their protest performance “Virgin Mary Please Get Rid of Putin” in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior on February 21, 2012. Example 1 shows authorities forcibly removing Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina, and Samutsevich from Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior (screenshot from Pussy Riot-Punk Prayer.mp4 by user imjustevil666, 2012). For Pussy Riot, the cathedral symbolizes the ultimate union of church and state because the leaders of the church openly support Putin and his oppressive regime. However, a large number of Moscow residents are firm believers and frequent the church as their sacred place of worship. For these folks, Pussy Riot’s protest was nothing more than a blasphemous attack on their faith. One Russian citizen gave their scathing review of Pussy Riot’s church protest: “They came into the heart of Russia and took a shit” (Pozdorovkin 2013).

Example 1



This ideological misunderstanding is not too surprising since Pussy Riot went onto a sacred altar, traditionally forbidden for women, and righteously sang “Shit! Shit! It’s God shit!” Explaining the lyric in a court appeal, Alyokhina assures that the line was a direct criticism of the relationship between the church and the state and assuredly not an attack on any religion (Pozdorovkin 2013). On August 17, 2012, the court convicted them of “hooliganism motivated by religious hatred” and sentenced them two years in prison each. Upon an appeal, the court relieved Samutsevich on probation, but the other two maintained their original sentence. Their convictions were only the beginning of their punishment, however, as their families received several death threats over the phone (Pozdorovkin 2013). Moreover, the prison camp eventually hospitalized Tolokonnikova for exhaustion due to its horrific physical labor conditions (Fissiak 2013). Tolokonnikova reveals that prison officials forced inmates to work 16–19 hours a day seven days a week and frequently beat them if they did not work hard or fast enough. On her first day the de facto leader of the camp told her she could expect a “Stalinist” style of punishment (Fissiak 2013).

Their story gained national attention and many U.S. pop artists expressed their solidarity, in sometimes problematic, U.S.-centralized ways. For example, in her July 2012 blog, Kathleen Hanna expressed her anger regarding the jailing of some members of Pussy Riot. Comparing their situation with her experience of the Riot Grrrl movement, Hanna revealed that she never feared being jailed for her protests (Wiedlack 2016, 417). Wiedlack argues that by highlighting the “severity of the Russian situation and its difference in relation to the USA,” Kathleen Hanna reconfirms U.S. hegemony by supporting the stereotype that “Russia is lagging behind civilization, in a constant state of development” (2016, 417).

Wiedlack further argues that the westernization of Pussy Riot as Riot Grrrls is a problematic oversimplification of Pussy Riot's complex and nuanced politics and performance. Wiedlack reveals that Pussy Riot does not identify themselves as a part of the movement as they emphasize public intervention rather than punk music like Riot Grrrl. Furthermore, she asserts that even though Pussy Riot uses Riot Grrrl protest strategies, they are fundamentally different from the Riot Grrrl movement and should not be conflated with it (Wiedlack 2016, 2).

Methods of Resistance

“Pussy Riot is a form of oppositional art . . . civic activism against a corporate political system that uses its power against basic human rights.” -Nadezhda Tolokonnikova

In addition to their unique cultural backgrounds, Bikini Kill and Pussy Riot also have different protest strategies. Bikini Kill promoted their causes through their own underground feminist “zines.” Riot Grrrls made these special homemade magazines to include taboo topics such as rape, incest, and eating disorders, that mainstream media seldom addressed (Schilt 2003, 6). Kathleen Hanna recalls passing out her zines to women that showed up at her concerts. This started an entire underground culture where bands and fans alike would create feminist zines and share them with each other at concerts. The acts of creating and sharing feminist zines became forms of protest against the male-dominated punk culture of the time, which made women's voices visible to each other.

One of the issues with the punk scene in the 1990s was that the locations of punk shows were often quite dangerous for women. Ambrosch affirms, “Heterosexual men have always dominated the scene, reflecting, to a certain extent, the patriarchal social structure of society at large—the very culture many punks perceive themselves to be in conflict with” (2016, 249). Billy Karren, the guitarist from Bikini Kill, says, “The problem with our shows, a lot of times, is that

guys would get really out of control and start, like, beating everybody up” (Anderson 2013).

Another fan angrily expresses her gross dissatisfaction with the punk scene: “I’m sick to death of going to gigs and coming back with bruises and broken ribs. It’s not fair, ‘cause lads get everything. They’re allowed to do what they want and we have to stand in the background” (Anderson 2013).

Acutely aware of the danger women experience, Hanna regularly called the women to the front in order to protect them from the violent men in the audience: “All girls to the front! I’m not kidding. All boys be cool for once in your lives. Go back” (Anderson 2013). By speaking directly to the audience and prioritizing young women's safety, Hanna changed the punk scene at her shows so young women could be physically safe and validated while being included into the culture. Many learn that it is against social code for women to express anger because it is a “masculine” emotion, and Hanna furiously protested this through her music and performance. Crucially, by presenting herself as angry, Hanna created space for and validated the feelings of other women. She showed other women that they were right to be angry and that they should show it.

Bikini Kill received a lot of hate from the press which called their movement too extreme (Schilt 2003, 9). So when the press tried to contact Bikini Kill, the band chose to do a media blackout so the press could not co-opt the movement. Foremost, Riot Grrrl was an underground resource for women, not the press. Citing Bikini Kill’s Toby Vail, Schilt reveals that the press often misrepresented the band and took them out of context, which made them look immature and ridiculous (2003, 9). Marion Leonard highlights the paradoxical nature of the Riot Grrrl movement: “the goal of many of those involved [in Riot Grrrl] was not to gain mass attention but to encourage girls and women to communicate with each other” (Schilt 2003, 9). Bikini Kill had

to walk a fine line because, on one hand, they wanted to spread their messages of women's empowerment to as many women as they could, but, on the other hand, they could not rely on mainstream media to accurately send their message, even if many more women had access to it.

In contrast to underground Riot Grrrl performances, Pussy Riot focuses on large-scale, attention-grabbing protests that disrupt authority. In addition to their famous church protest, Pussy Riot has also performed public protests atop trolley cars, prison rooftops, among other places. For example, on February 19, 2014, Pussy Riot began publicly performing under a large sign advertising the Winter Olympics in Sochi where Cossacks violently attacked them with tear gas and horsewhips (Euronews). The main difference between their performances and those of Bikini Kill and the Riot Grrrl movement is that Pussy Riot performs in the public sphere and, therefore, the police and other armed forces commonly become violently involved.

Lyrical and Song Analysis

“Modern punks have to redefine what it means to behave like a punk.” -Nadezhda

Tolokonnikova

This section will analyze the lyrical and visual political messages contained in the music of Bikini Kill and Pussy Riot and further reveal their unique cultural positions. The song “Rebel Girl” by Bikini Kill tells a story about a girl noticing how much another girl thinks highly of herself, and then, instead of antagonizing her (as Hanna's initial “Valley Girl,” judgmental tone portrays), wanting to become her best friend. The lyrics of the song highlight this “women supporting women” mentality: “That girl thinks she's the queen of the neighborhood / She's got the hottest trike in town / That girl, she holds her head up so high / I think I wanna be her best friend, yeah.” The unexpected turn, Hanna wanting to be her best friend, prompts the listener to think about their own expectations of how girls can see and interact with each other. The

narrative of the story almost begs the question, “Why are so many relationships between powerful women antagonistic in mainstream media?” Then the chorus underscores the love Hanna has for this neighborhood girl: “Rebel girl you are the queen of my world / Rebel girl, rebel girl / I think I wanna take you home / I wanna try on your clothes, uh.” By referring to her as a queen, Hanna highlights that women can view other women as powerful with positive connotations rather than antagonistic, competitive ones. Furthermore, the lines “I wanna take you home / I wanna try on your clothes, uh” advocate for gay/bisexual normalization in society. Hanna further emphasizes her support for gayness right before the chorus when she screams: “In her kiss, I taste the revolution.” This is followed by: “That girl thinks she’s the queen of the neighborhood / Well I got news for you, SHE IS!” This line is powerful because of the attitude in Hanna’s voice as she fiercely defends this other woman who is confident in her own body. This song is a “wake-up call” to reevaluate the way we think about relationships between women and how women should be allowed to view themselves.

In “Feels Blind” by Bikini Kill, the band tackles eating disorders and the self-hatred that can come with it with lyrics, “As a woman I was taught to always be hungry / yeah women are well acquainted with thirst / we could eat just about anything / we could even eat your hate up like love.” Schilt has also pointed to how the lyrics can also be interpreted as speaking to the self-hatred that can come from staying in an abusive relationship (Schilt 2003, 8). In the chorus of the song, Hanna angrily sings “How does it feel? It feels blind / How does it feel? Well, it feels fucking blind / What have you taught me? Nothing! / Look at what you have taught me / Your world has taught me nothing.” Hanna uses her lyrics to express her disillusionment with society and the gender expectations that come with being a woman. Importantly, the lyrics portray a universal experience that young women have all around the world and can thus relate

to. “Feels Blind” is a song about recognizing the ridiculous expectations society puts on women and how it is a common experience among women to “feel blind” when navigating a society without knowing about the gender constructions being imposed on them.

While the two groups perform to share their political messages, Pussy Riot has access to technology that Bikini Kill did not. For example, in their video for “Make America Great Again,” Pussy Riot uses lots of powerful imagery: white American cops arresting, repeatedly branding, and otherwise torturing a Pussy Riot member as if they were livestock. This imagery is juxtaposed with the chorus lyrics “Let other people in / Listen to your women / Stop killing black children / Make America great again.” The lyrics highlight their demand for justice in America. One of the words that the police brands on the victim says “outsider.” This imagery is powerful because it underlines how America strips outsiders of their rights and their humanity. This Pussy Riot song and video are a cry for justice in a dystopian America that has become a reality. In another music video, “Police State,” the group addresses issues of police violence/power and authoritarianism, among many other societal problems. The video opens with two cops doing doughnuts in the middle of the street, a display of unchecked power, followed by a shot where an officer violently takes a stuffed animal from a Pussy Riot member and proceeds to beat it with their baton, as shown in Example 2 (screenshot from Police State by user wearepussyriot, 2017).

Example 2



This scene is paired with the lyrics, “Big smile for the camera, it’s always on / It’s all in the protocol, they tapped my phone / Golden idols holding rifles, take my body, anybody / I’m your trophy, make my nose bleed, now you own me.” Soon after, there is a shot of officers forcing a peaceful protester, played by Tolokonnikova, to her knees and holding a baton up against her chest. This scene is accompanied with the chorus, “Oh my God, I’m so happy I could die / Oh my God, I’m so happy I could cry.” These lyrics combined with violent visuals prompt discussion and demand action concerning the violence/power of police (authoritarianism) and how it disproportionately affects oppressed communities internationally. This song is a call for global riot in the wake of continued worldwide injustice.

Through this examination of their distinct politics & place, varying protest strategies and unique musical deliveries, and while both aim to empower women and create change, Pussy Riot artistically, historically, and culturally differs from Riot Grrrl and Bikini Kill. Each movement must remain in their own political and cultural context, and by conflating the two, one risks an oversimplification of these nuanced and significant instances of female empowerment. Understanding this cultural difference and the history behind it is important because it informs how we can navigate more inclusive, progressive feminisms in the future while avoiding exclusionary, harmful trends of the past.

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