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# Criticism as punctuation in the riot grrrl backlash

**ABSTRACT**

*This article argues that music criticism from the early 1990s was central to media backlash against feminism in this period. As Daphne A. Brooks has noted, music criticism remains widely untheorized, despite being so entangled with the sustainability of popular music. In this article, I give focused attention to a small body of critical writing, exploring the relationship between recordings and the reviews that describe and evaluate the music. I present a reading of backlash against the riot grrrl band Bratmobile from 1993 to 1994, including reviews from the zines Cake, Snipe Hunt, trust kill and Genetic Disorder as well as from Artforum, SPIN and Option. I apply Janice A. Radway's concept of 'rhetorical containment' to this set of criticism, highlighting shared critical manoeuvres evident in the reviews. This builds on Peter Szendy's idea of 'punctuation' as that which shapes phrasing in a dialogue; on one level, criticism of Bratmobile punctuated the musical releases by legitimizing them and by reinforcing key themes in the music. But the critics also undermined the band in ways both subtle and explicit. I conclude by suggesting that critical backlash against riot grrrl can be understood as a matter of power and solidarity, with every critical utterance containing elements of both.*

**KEYWORDS**

music journalism  
1990s  
zines  
popular music  
feminism  
Bratmobile  
amateurism  
lo-fi

**INTRODUCTION**

Susan Faludi, in her 1991 book *Backlash*, argues that the 1980s were characterized by widespread backlash against women's socio-economic and political progress in the previous decade. Faludi points to a 'steady stream of indictments against the women's movement', coming from publications throughout

1. Tobi Vail, drummer for Bikini Kill, discusses the spelling of 'riot grr[r]l' in a 2010 post on the blog Jigsaw:

Riot Grrl would not have happened without Bikini Kill for example, but I identified as a riot grrl for only a short time, when it had two 'R's instead of 3 maybe. Who added the third 'R'? This is a real question?! Riot Grrl/Grrrl started in Washington DC in June 1991. But it really started the year before that in Olympia, WA. *Girls To The Front* [by Sara Marcus] explains that history really well I thought. I moved back to Olympia (from DC) at the end of 1992 and the third 'R' had been firmly established. [...] I had been going to shows in Olympia since 1983, so when Riot Grrl was formulating pre-Nirvana success story-we were still thinking in that 80's mindset. The 90's hadn't happened yet. We were living in an underground culture that was being turned into a commodity and sold back to us, which was really disorienting.

(2010: par. 3)

the 1980s (1991: x–xi). In this article, I discuss manifestations of this tendency among feminist (and anti-feminist) music scenes of the late 1980s and 1990s.

Two years after *Backlash* was published, in 1993, the music fan David Tatnall wrote his own angry letter to the editor, printed in an issue of the British music magazine *Melody Maker*. In the letter, Tatnall requests that the editor stop publishing so many features about riot grrrl. At that very moment, the riot grrrl movement was sweeping the globe, mainly through print news, radio and the avant-garde internet. What follows is an excerpt from Tatnall's complaint:

Look, a joke's a joke. Enough is enough. Suede and the so-called Riot Grrrl movement are in very great danger of completely taking over your paper. [...] As for Riot Grrrl, while I totally applaud the basic philosophy of more females getting involved in making music, many of the bands cited as forerunners of this genre (Huggy Bear, Bikini Kill, etc) are, to be brutally frank, utter shite. They can't carry a tune in a bucket.

(1993: 41)

Tatnall's letter is a textbook example of the type of backlash described by Faludi. The letter operates on multiple levels to criticize so-called female art and to quiet the creators' voices. In particular, Tatnall disparages the bands' amateurism, implying that the girls' fame, as illustrated by their exposure in the magazine, is unmerited, especially given the poor quality of the bands' music. Further, we can see within this complaint his fear that riot grrrls might 'take over' the music press, presumably occupying the places of men. Tatnall was, to paint his character uncharitably, irascible and power-hungry, using this public platform to convince others to exclude artists on account of their gender politics – all amid trends of unprecedented attention and resources being devoted to women's music, arguably like never before in history. And yet, we would be remiss to overlook a key clause in Tatnall's letter: '[W]hile I totally applaud the basic philosophy of more females getting involved in making music', he writes, distinguishing himself from critics who expressed pure loathing for women or feminist music. In this article, I want to articulate a framework for better understanding this dynamic of backlash, by which critical statements are driven by feminist principles even as they articulate anti-feminism or work to undermine feminist music.

Among different media, popular music's place in backlash politics is little understood. Backlash dynamics are difficult to pin down, in part because they suffuse multiple layers of the social fabric (Browne 2013). As Faludi writes in her book, rhetoric against feminism was diffuse and chameleonic, 'at once sophisticated and banal' (1991: xviii). Among discussions of backlash in beauty, TV and fashion, Faludi rarely mentions music. I wish to build on her argument by more carefully considering the realm of popular music, and specifically criticism of popular music, amid the era's backlash tendency, which although little studied was a widespread phenomenon. Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill (bands Tatnall targeted with his letter) are but two examples of hundreds of riot grrrl bands who were active worldwide in the early 1990s and who were targets of disdain. In the movement, feminists used the musical styles of hardcore punk, folk and grunge to produce recordings that would be described as 'riot grrl', in the late 1980s, as Tobi Vail tells it, and then around 1991 the idea would soon start circulating as 'riot grrrl' (Vail 2010).<sup>1</sup> Teenage girls and young women in distant cities used networks of mail correspondence to communicate and organize events – an 'international postal salon', in

Maria L. La Ganga's words (1994: A1) – and to encourage each other to learn instruments, form bands and record their own music. In years since, this body of music and art has become a symbol in history of feminine empowerment and independence, which has prompted large volumes of critical response and which remains active today.

Among scholars of music and culture, music criticism has been undertheorized. Riot grrrl broadly has received significant attention, widely analysed in diverse registers: in terms of its feminist aspects (Marcus 2010), its centrality to zine culture (Radway 2001), its manifestos (Lusty 2017), race and racism in the movements (Nguyen 2012; Shrodes 2012), riot grrrl archives and remembrance (Eichhorn 2013; Strong 2011; Keenan and Darms 2013) and other formations. But with regard to music criticism, in particular, prior scholars have only noted and briefly discussed the printed backlash against riot grrrl recordings and live shows (Downes 2007; Zeisler 2016; Griffiths 2020). As Downes has summarized the phenomenon, with emphasis on UK riot grrrl scenes, '[t]he tabloid's moral panic rhetoric cast riot grrrl as an anarchic girl gang bent on inflicting brutal revenge against men' (2007: 33). Such tabloid writers used the riot grrrls' forthright declarations as warrant for suppression of their expression.

In general, as Daphne A. Brooks notes, this criticism of popular music has received very little theoretical attention, despite being so 'closely entangled with the social and cultural economy and sustainability of popular music culture' (2021: 5). Brooks and other scholars have begun to address this (e.g. White 2016; Supper 2018), but still little has been written on music reviews as a genre or format. It makes sense, then, that riot grrrl criticism, as a minoritarian subset of popular music, would have likewise received little theoretical attention. Here I hope to contribute to a deeper understanding of the role played by written criticism within dynamics of backlash.

## BACKLASH AGAINST BRATMOBILE

One of the earliest widespread objects of critical attention in the riot grrrl backlash was Bratmobile's 1993 release *Pottymouth*. The album includes seventeen very short songs, all recorded in a bracing punk style. Bratmobile was comprised of vocalist Allison Wolfe, guitarist Erin Smith and drummer Molly Neuman. An alto voice (Wolfe) sings of affection for her friends and yells out at men, emotional liars and the world, performed over drums, guitar and various sampled material. These short songs with minimal instrumentation were recorded by Tim Green of the punk band Nation of Ulysses, who, according to Sara Marcus, 'wouldn't accept any payment except a bottle of black hair dye and a slice of cheese pizza from an Italian joint he loved' (2010: 163). Bratmobile and their collaborators created artful recordings that expressed outrage and ambivalence, using a noisy, energetic, fragmented style of music to sing explicitly about abjection, violence, desire and suffering from systemic inequalities. The collection of songs, called *Pottymouth*, is often considered the first full-length album released by a riot grrrl group, and Bratmobile went on to be one of the most cherished groups – as well as one of the most widely disparaged.

Responses to Bratmobile varied widely, from puzzlement, dismay and scorn to worship; the band and their music were dismissed in print as 'talentless' and 'nothing but rant', but also appreciated as 'ultra-lo-fi, feral' and 'raw, murky, but hook-driven'. Indeed, in some regards, *Pottymouth* was highly acclaimed. In the January 1994 issue of *Artforum*, Greil Marcus listed the

album third on his top ten list, a prestigious column for an educated readership in which he recognized those who he considered the greatest musicians and artists of the day. In the case of *Pottymouth*, he praises the music for its energy: '[I]t's not individual tunes that stick in the mind but the thrill of making them all carry' (1994: 12). Similarly, in a 1993 issue of the zine *Snipe Hunt*, an author signed only as L. A. describes the album as '[s]imple music that doesn't get old because it has motion and ideas involved'.

Critics of riot grrrl were given to strong reaction, and some may have felt that their very musical livelihoods were under threat. In response, they stridently condemned riot grrrl music and spared few words in disparaging it. As demonstrated by David Tatnall's letter above, the embrace of riot grrrl bands among some critics, despite the bands' seeming incompetence, frustrated many an onlooker to the point that he got out his art supply box, crafted some strongly worded reviews and sat down with a stack of SASEs (self-addressed, stamped envelopes) – a crucial tool for any zinemaker – to mail his words around the world.

Many of Bratmobile's critics showed in their criticism that they were at once jealous and admiring of what they noticed about the music, much like in old-school gender rivalry, or sports culture. Inside of this mode, criticism serves to slow down, minimize or neutralize what is powerful about the music by emphasizing its weaknesses and missteps. We see many instances of this across the zine issues from 1992 until 1994 or 1995.

In particular, critics dismissed Bratmobile's music – and that of riot grrrl bands more broadly – because it was immature, amateur or otherwise unserious. In an August 1993 issue of *Maximum Rockroll*, the writer S. S. argues that the songs on *Pottymouth* 'often lack the requisite focus to make this ["garagey"] style work' (S. S. 1993). The band's 1994 *Peel Sessions*, from a 1993 recording session for the BBC, was anonymously reviewed in the zine *trust kill* in similar terms: 'Four songs that I just cannot get into. It has sort of that "talentless" sound to it musically which I know they are going for, but I just don't dig it' (Anon. c.1994). In an issue of *10 Things* fanzine, three staff writers unanimously pan Bratmobile's split release with Tiger Trap: Charlie writes that Bratmobile 'can't pull it off', Dan calls the two bands 'boring with a capital B', and Parker offers only one word: 'Shitmobile' (Various authors c.1993). In the same vein, Matt Votel's review of Bratmobile's 1994 album *The Real Janelle* published in *Cake* fanzine was titled 'Bratmobile – Clever minimalists or rank amateurs?', the title suggesting that the band's minimalism, embraced by some listeners as its own type of technique, was better understood as a lack of talent. Votel adds that Bratmobile's 'lo-fi sound isn't really anything special, featuring primitive guitar lines and sparse drum beats', and he then concludes: 'Considering that all three members currently live in different states, you have to wonder how serious they are about the band' (Votel c.1994: n.pag.). Elsewhere, the writer J. K. trashes the band in *Spleen* fanzine as follows: "'Love Thing" isn't much of a tune – and tunes are sort of important when you can't play your instrument' (J. K. c.1993: n.pag.). At least a dozen reviews, if not more, criticized Bratmobile for their lack of technique, their poor musical training or their lackadaisical approach to the music.

These accusations of amateurism are interesting, given that amateurism as a principle pervaded the underground scenes in which Bratmobile participated. In fact, some critics regarded these qualities as positive attributes. For example, in a 1992 issue of *Option*, Mark Kemp characterizes a Kill Rock Stars compilation containing Bratmobile's 'Girl Germs' ('raw, murky, but

hook-driven') as representative of the 'incompetent-punk aesthetic' (1992: 123), including the band in this lineage. Among these scenes, critics often focused their evaluations on the contested terrain of audio quality; in the zine *Molasses Soulkiss*, one critic defined the indie record label K Records by its bands' bad sound: 'Again, that K bathroom recording studio sound' (Anon. c.1995), they wrote of Bratmobile's 7" split release with Heavens to Betsy. The association of their 'sound' with the intimacy of the bathroom deserves more attention, but in any case, this sound united the girl bands with other contemporary artists. For some critics, poor sound fit the riot grrrl message; as Mike Burma writes of Bikini Kill's 'Outta Me', 'the lo-fi recording actually accentuates the frustration in the lyrics' (1993: 26). In fact, the critic Brooke, writing in the zine *alice the camel*, panned Bratmobile's album *The Real Janelle* because it sounded *too* polished when compared to *Pottymouth*:

Hurts my heart, I tell ya. I'd rather talk about how much I liked *Pottymouth* than tell you what I think of this but I guess I must. There's nothing magical here. It's just sort of generic. A friend said it sounds corporate or polished, but whatever word she used she hit it on the mark.

(Brooke c.1994: n.pag.)

Throughout this era, depending on the author's stance, the word 'lo-fi' was alternately used as a mark of authenticity or as a term of dismissal (Newton 2020: 26–32). For this reason, it is hard to know whether John Dougan intended to praise or criticize Bratmobile when he writes of their 'ultra-lo-fi' sound (1994: 94).

In any case, while the riot grrrl bands were in many ways aligned with their male punk peers, who held in common an appreciation for the unrefined in art, their music was treated very differently by the critics. While Dougan might have appreciated Bratmobile's raw sound as authentic or cool, subsequent comments in the same review reveal a biased slant to his analysis: when reviewing *Pottymouth*, he writes that vocalist Allison Wolfe 'does nothing but rant', 'which she seems to depend on when she runs out of meaningful things to say' (1994: 94), and he thus repeats a trope within the backlash – the reduction of women's opinions to hysterical tirades, the content of which is best ignored as illogical or mere emotion. For contrast, we can look to reviews of guy bands on the same label, K Records. This is how Beat Happening were framed in *Option* three years earlier by Gina Arnold, who writes of 'Calvin [Johnson]'s own immensely charming band, the powerful Beat Happening' (1991: 41). Bratmobile and Beat Happening sounded very similar in style and aesthetic. But while vocabulary for the girl band runs from 'primitive' and 'unserious' to 'feral', the guy band garners 'charming' and 'powerful'. Further, critic and editor Craig Marks, in a 1994 issue of *SPIN*, defines Bratmobile as 'ridiculously indebted' to Beat Happening, adding that Erin Smith 'can't write (or steal) a bad guitar line' (1994: 42), thus qualifying his recommendation of Bratmobile with this perhaps snide, perhaps playful claim that Smith's best work belongs to someone else – as though all of Calvin Johnson's guitar lines, on the other hand, are entirely original. But while Beat Happening were praised for being powerful, Bratmobile were depicted in *CMJ* as 'almost overconfident' (Anon. 1992) and in *Melody Maker* as 'too cool by half' (True 1993).

The riot grrrls were aware of these tropes, and in their own written criticism, they fought ferociously to dismantle them. Backlash against riot grrrl coincided with, and was partly enabled by, the amateur music criticism

in which the grrrls themselves participated. In the early 1990s, music criticism flourished among the zines, short for ‘fanzines’, an outgrowth of earlier twentieth-century publications that published for small, localized audiences or specialized groups of hobbyists or fans (Duncombe 1997). Zines were an important part of the riot grrrl scenes, enabling communication among girls in distant cities, with Washington, DC, and Olympia, Washington, the twin centres of riot grrrl activity. Wolfe and Neuman, members of Bratmobile, were known in the scene through publication of their zine *Girl Germs* (1990–92), and Smith also published her own DC-based zine called *Teenage Gang Zebs*. Stephen Duncombe has estimated that, in the United States alone, there were about 10,000 zine titles in print by 1997 (perhaps as many as 50,000), with an average circulation of 250 copies per issue, and approximately 500,000–750,000 distinct zine consumers (1997: 14). A large number of these were zines by or for girls. According to Sarah Dyer’s *Action Girl Guide*, a compendium of so-called girl zines in circulation, at least 133 different titles were available as of 1993–94. Given that Dyer’s list is missing many highly demanded zines – such as Ramdasha Bikceem’s *Gunk* and Tobi Vail’s *Jigsaw* – there must have been many more.

In 2016, the writer Andi Zeisler reflected on her years creating zines with her friends in the mid-1990s. As she recounts, she and her peers were shaped by backlash politics. ‘Born in the 1970s’, she writes of her generation, ‘we came of ideological age during the backlash, seeing and hearing feminism dismissed as, at best, a vexing political incident that had come and gone’ (Zeisler 2016: x).

Although the growth of zine culture was a positive development, expanding access to musical discourse, the music criticism fostered by zine culture has also been a site for the reproduction of biases of the culture at large. For women and other marginalized musicians, for example, criticism has often been a site where social inequalities are reproduced in print via stereotypes, unfairly harsh evaluations and other mechanisms, such that not only musicians but also critics are marginalized, as writers like Jessica Hopper and Daphne A. Brooks have shown (Hopper 2015; Brooks 2021). Brooks writes about ‘the stakes involved in confronting white male-dominated rock and blues criticism’ (2021: 34). What might be at stake is the extent to which, from a feminist perspective, critics should engage with music at all.

On this point, the riot grrrls, in their own manifestos, left no doubt: keep writing. Even among suggestions that it was only White supremacy that enabled the (White) riot grrrls to be so forthcoming, many still insisted on this key principle of openness. They drew on the backlash to form an ethos of personal expression that was distinctly brash, uncensored and outspoken. For example, an anonymous, undated manifesto in the zine *Riot Grrrl DC*, titled ‘Style for the soul: RIOT GRRRL fashion doctrine corollary’, articulates the ethos by which girls encouraged each other to unapologetically publicize their inner misgivings:

Wear your blood, guts, and tears on the outside, for we are not mannequins and they shall be spilled at some point in time unexpected and beyond our control. We must illustrate, leaving no doubt the violence and threat of violence in our lives. We must confront our oppressors/assailants by letting them know that we know that they think our spilt blood is becoming. Because the private is public (especially as a function of marginalization) and the personal is political, we refuse to hide the

realities of life in this oppressive system. This doctrine refuses to allow the privatization, individualization, minimalization and covering-up of tear/bloodletting in the bedroom, on the street, in the heart.

(c.1991: n.pag.)

With this ethos in mind, the backlash against riot grrrl itself becomes more readily understood. Many male critics of the girl bands might have attempted to correspond with the riot grrrls by appropriating the grrrls' own frankness and courage, maybe in ways that they thought were in a spirit of camaraderie, or even emulating the principles of honesty and directness in the artists' work, thus indirectly paying homage. This raises questions about the role of music criticism and criteria for proper dialogue between artists and critics.

## A THEORY OF PUNCTUATION

Following Peter Szendy, I want to suggest that the backlash reviews might be thought to *punctuate* the music they respond to. In *Of Stigmatology* (2018), Szendy views punctuation in a loose, metaphorical sense as something that has power to enforce phrasing, or something that shows the form of something else. In this way, we can understand the riot grrrls' critics, even when negative, as providing weight or legitimacy to the grrrls' projects. In a basic sense, reviews legitimized the music by giving it any attention at all, in that 'all press is good press'. Arguably, even the most disparaging critics of riot grrrl, if they had simply ignored the bands, would have given the girls less. The space given to the girl bands in the zines, however clumsy or ignorant of feminist issues, did thus function to legitimize the bands as worthy of discussion, maybe even persuading fans to buy the music.

Criticism does more, though, than simply promote musical products. While discussing the composer Robert Schumann, Szendy goes so far as to suggest that literature (and music) of the late nineteenth century was 'awaiting criticism for its very achievement' (2001: 148). In other words, criticism as both a profession and a genre of writing had become nearly as important as the artistic performances themselves, and indeed critical analyses function as extensions of not only literary but also musical artworks. Here, I want to consider the extent to which punctuation can be a useful framework for understanding riot grrrl recordings and their critical reviews – what happens when we think of the riot grrrls as awaiting criticism for their completion or fulfilment? As I will suggest below, the punctuation of riot grrrl recordings functioned on two levels: (1) to reinforce the points made by riot grrrls and (2) to contain or limit their impact. First, I will elaborate briefly on how critics punctuated musical releases by lending them weight and also by enacting the gender antagonism that riot grrrls addressed in their music. I will then discuss containment in the following section, specifically focusing on what I call, after Janice A. Radway, *rhetorical containment*, a mode that uses gestures of assimilation to ultimately minimize the impact of the riot grrrls' music.

First, punctuation can be thought of as a mode of reinforcement. This mode involves the relationship between Bratmobile's music and their critics, whose opinions often exemplified the structural and interpersonal problems that riot grrrls worked to address in the first place – for better or for worse. In other words, many of these backlash responses, through their very misogyny, functioned to highlight or evoke notable themes in the girls' music. The precise dynamics of this dialogue differed greatly by context, but here is an

example to illustrate the idea. Many critics seemed to respond to the narrative voice of the band's songs, by which they punctuate musical works not so much by evaluating the work's content from a critical distance, but by directly engaging with it, playing the role of an interlocutor.

What might have given critics license to respond to the girls the way they did, at least in part, was the fact that riot grrrls, in their writing and lyrics, explicitly addressed enemies and oppressors through the use of second-person pronouns in their lyrics. This mode of address is exemplified by the band Bikini Kill on their song 'Don't Need You'. Kathleen Hanna sings, 'Don't need you to say we're good / Don't need you to tell us we suck / Don't need your atti-fuckin'-tude boy / Don't need your dick to fuck'. It seems clear that these lines can be heard as addressing not only boyish aggressors in general, but hostile music writers in particular. Bratmobile songs use a similar mode of address. For example, in the first line of the opening track of *Pottymouth*, 'Love Thing', Wolfe introduces a dynamic that then shapes much of the album – that of a young girl addressing a man. Wolfe sings: 'Admit it / Innocent little girls turn you on, don't they?', which seems designed to provoke listeners. A similar dynamic takes shape on 'Stab', also from *Pottymouth*. The guitar, recorded in stereo, enters in the left channel first, with the same material entering the right channel about five seconds after, layered over the already-present noise. The guitar draws the listener's attention to the layered material as it sustains throughout the remainder of the track. Over these double-tracked guitars and Neuman's drumming, Wolfe repeats a refrain on loop, in which she addresses someone, presumably an aggressor, with the second-person singular 'you':

You'd like to stab me  
and fuck the wound  
stab me  
and fuck the wound.

These lines directly echo the riot grrrl manifesto's assertion, given above, that the girl punks 'know that they [aggressors] think our spilt blood is becoming', intertwining the imagery of violence with sexuality. The other songs explore gendered dynamics in a variety of ways, alternating between affection and contempt for the songs' addressees.

The riot grrrl repertoire was distinct, perhaps, in how directly the interlocutors *within* the worlds of the songs aligned with the (largely amateur) critics who would evaluate, in real life, the releases as art. In response, whether appropriately or not, many critics willingly occupied the role of adversary, rebuking a professional voice in order to step into the dramatic world of the story. This was typical of zine culture more broadly. As Janice A. Radway has said, these zines 'stage a tense cacophony of contending voices; they ventriloquize subject positions that jostle for control and dominance. [...] They perform endlessly' (2001: 18). We are thus compelled to ask, what exactly is the performance enacted by writers of the backlash?

Some critics seemed to be aware of their own performance. The by-then-established critic Robert Christgau, in a fashion typical of his reviews, gave a pithy, wry assessment of *Pottymouth*: 'adolescent petulance, tingling clits, no bass player', he writes, assigning the album three stars out of five (Christgau 1993). His three factors neatly summarize male backlash to the riot grrrls, in general: men dismissed the girls as childish or immature, sexualized them nonetheless and were eager to point out perceived lack in the music. A



generous read of Christgau's review is that he was, in an elevated way, parroting the reactions to Bratmobile that were being lobbed by other critics, since, as demonstrated above, he was not alone (as John Dougan [1994] wrote of *Pottymouth*: 'It's all chaos and pissy attitude, but it works'). Christgau and Dougan were, it could even be argued, reinforcing the branding of the band's album – titled *Pottymouth*, with petulance in the name – and thus assisting the artists in marketing their release, dishing back to the world what the girls had, through their music, suggested they wanted.

While it might be tempting to paint critical backlash reactions with a broad brush of 1990s-style misogyny – and the era's elitism, transphobia, violence and inequality – this sort of rivalry is not unique to this body of criticism; it is a convention found throughout the history of pop music. As Eric Weisbard writes, in the opening to his book about musical literatures: 'Popular music, that oddity of capitalism and the democratic rabble, has long made writers bend taste, language, and professional standards – anything to ping-pong back the relentless flow of smashes and spins' (2021: 1). Throughout recent history, critics have indeed desecrated all kinds of music, and not only for misogynist reasons. Jazz criticism, hip hop criticism and many other genres of writing have involved male critics holding musicians of all genders to high standards, criticizing them vehemently when the music fails to meet critical expectations.

That said, while by the 1990s some sort of sportsman-like rivalry had been integral to the pop music industry for decades, the riot grrrl backlash, in light of the historical context, was unique. In part, this was because the moment was structured by violence in so many respects, which has often been minimized or exempted from scholarly discussions of the milieu. The violence that comes up in riot grrrl art is a symbolic violence both rooted in real-life violence and authenticated by it; the archives are filled with accounts of workplace discrimination, sexual assault at concert venues, domestic abuse from family members or partners and the effects of laws both official and de facto that punish women, and all of these experiences shaped the music.

That White male critics responded so intently, and often so ruthlessly to musical expression amid that real-life violence, thus constitutes a double violence. While it is reasonable to dismiss or move past this double violence in the interest of platforming other, more constructive work, there is also insight to be found in more deeply understanding the contours of this criticism, particularly insofar as some of this material was more sympathetic to the riot grrrl project than has perhaps been considered.

## RHETORICAL CONTAINMENT

Backlash against riot grrrl, as suggested above, often operated through the legitimization of the musical objects that it discussed by reinforcing or enacting important themes in the riot grrrl movement, such as antagonism along gendered lines. The second form of punctuation builds on the first, operating not so much as emphasis but as a type of enclosure. In a phenomenon that Janice A. Radway has identified as *rhetorical containment*, critics and journalists trivialized, minimized or belittled the work of riot grrrls, even when purporting to support them; she gestures towards a range of discursive tactics that 'contained the significance' of riot grrrls by treating them as 'cute and spunky but ineffective' (2013: 243). David Tatnall's letter to the editor at the top of this article illustrates one manifestation of this mode, where the author requested

that the editor limit coverage of bands in the paper's pages. There are also other ways of dampening the music indirectly. Let us think of containment as a mode of discourse that stifles or otherwise undermines its subjects even when expressing praise. As discussed above, some critics of the riot grrrls took a hostile stance, while others adopted a more friendly rivalry towards the grrrls' art and music. Now I would like to discuss reviews that operated on a slightly different level, with critics writing not as participatory interlocutors but in the respectable voice of the art critic. Whether amateur or professional, these reviews take on a more 'objective' tone when analysing the riot grrrls, thus making the object of critique – the music – seem more legitimate; some critics perhaps sought to bring the riot grrrls legitimacy through assimilation. We are thus confronted with the possibility that even reviews that took the riot grrrls seriously might have also enclosed them when understood within a broader view.

Within this body of criticism, we can trace the repetition of two rhetorical-critical moves by which some writers exercised critical mastery over the riot grrrls, in part because they took them so seriously: (1) inclusion of riot grrrls in a lineage, bestowing them legitimacy through induction into a canon, and (2) close analysis of the music, showing implicitly that the music is complex, well-built, elegant or otherwise impressive enough to warrant the time and attention of a professional taste-maker, such as the critic.

In the first approach, men applied the rhetorical moves of conventional music criticism by comparing artists to forerunners of the genre. John Dougan, writing about *Pottymouth* in *Option* magazine, situates the band in a longer lineage of female bands:

Riot grrrls, sure, but I thought of the Slits and Raincoats as songs such as 'Cool Schmool' and 'Panik' danced my fevered little brain. Although B'mobile has none of the former's reggae leanings, nor any of the latter's seductive, folky artiness, these three women do share an anarchic sense of glee and an almost avant-garde approach to the rock thang as did their punk-era antecedents.

(1994: 94)

Dougan shows that he takes the music seriously, and he also demonstrates his own critical authority by drawing connections to the music of the Slits and the Raincoats. He appreciates many elements of the band's music, even as he concludes his review with a textbook example of the containment that Radway describes:

[T]his ultra-lo-fi, feral, post-feminist feminism works like a charm for riot grrrls, boys and men. After all, you've gotta love a band that can pen a tune called 'Juswanna (Fuk U)' that's a kiss-off rather than a come-on. Go on Grrls! But remember, there's life after you're done yelling 'fuck you', and I'll be waiting for those songs.

(1994: 94)

By positioning himself as a manager or talent agent, more so than as a critic, Dougan's stance ultimately exemplifies the sort of male dominance that riot grrrls repeatedly tried to escape in their art and in their movement. Thus, even a reviewer who seems, more than many critics quoted above, to appreciate Bratmobile's 'almost avant-garde approach', situating it in history, still

delivers his analysis in a tone enacting that which Bratmobile sought to undermine.<sup>2</sup> To encourage the artists, but only if they heed his reminder of how life really works, is itself a type of containment. In fact, comparison of riot grrrl bands to a lineage was just as often used as a means of trivializing or dismissing them. Around the same time, Matt Votel, in a negative review, implies that Bratmobile's sound is derivative, dismissing Wolfe as 'a singer who just graduated from the Kim Gordon School of Vocal Training' (Votel c.1994: n.pag.), comparing Wolfe's performance to Gordon, whose primary role in Sonic Youth was not even as a singer, but as bassist. Thus, among backlash critics, comparison was a tool of containment as much as it was a means of legitimization.

The second mode of containment operates through serious engagement with the artists' music, enacting a classical approach to criticism as engaging an artwork 'itself'. This mode of containment calls into question the very purpose of music criticism: is it possible to respond to music without in some way trying to master or control it? A few of Bratmobile's critics demonstrated elevated respect for their releases, giving particular attention to elements such as the band's formal economy, their energetic performance style and the complex personae they developed. A critic known as Larry, writing in the zine *Genetic Disorder*, says quite a bit about the music simply by describing its instrumentation in detail: 'I can't believe how much came from so little. The guitar has little distortion, if any, and is played like a bass half the time; the drums are mostly high hat, snare, and bass. No solos, no leads and no bass' (Larry c.1994: n.pag.). And Johnny Ray Huston, when describing releases by Bratmobile and Bikini Kill, similarly describes depth in the music, despite its minimalism:

The bare-bones, one-take, do-it-yourself approach of groups like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile are deceptively simple; there's an interesting complexity at work in their vocals and words. Both Kathleen Hanna (Bikini Kill) and Allison Wolfe (Bratmobile) are wont to run through a variety of personas in the course of a single minute-long song. Free to make and break their own vocal rules, Hanna and Wolfe adopt fragmented/multiple identities that are worlds away from the rigid, enclosed subjectivity of your average male rock singer.

(Huston 1992: 35)

Huston thus appreciates the complexity the two bands developed even in brief songs. He attends to the nuances of their construction of identity, situating this within the dynamic of oppositional male power. Huston provides insight into the band's music and demonstrates his own awareness of a broader context for its making. He legitimizes the work by characterizing the music as complex, despite its seeming simplicity, and he respects its makers as distinctive, innovative and self-possessed.

And yet, even as Huston and Larry demonstrate genuine appreciation for the bands' music, using the conventions of legitimate music criticism to assimilate the bands into a lineage of great art, I would like to leave room for a reading in which their work still functions to contain the girls' project, in light of the bands' broader ethos. As Emily White wrote of riot grrrl, coeval with the movement's formation, '[m]aybe the girl revolution won't take shape in the public world, the world of men. It won't happen out on the street, where girls aren't safe. Maybe it will begin in a private, enclosed space men

2. Taking on a similar tone, the critic Bob describes Bratmobile, in a brief, cryptic review for the zine *Popwatch*, as 'three ladies looking for sensitivity in all the wrong places' (Bob c.1993: n.pag.). Straying beyond his role as a critic of the recordings or musical performances, he dispenses chiding advice regarding the band's behaviour more generally.

never enter' (White 1992: 8). Maybe critical affirmation was the last thing some riot grrrls wanted, and to offer it was a form of violence.

Perhaps some critics knew intuitively that too much legitimacy would compromise the grrrls' project. Legitimization is not always a favour or something to be desired. Riot grrrls themselves rejected attention from mainstream media, at least as early as 1993, when Diana of the zine *Riot Grrrl NYC* wrote in an editor's note: '[M]any of us never wanted the attention in the first place [...] it's bothersome that these publications [*Seventeen* and *The San Francisco Chronicle*] are presenting strange and distorted perceptions of Riot Grrrl' (Diana 1993: n.pag.). Other girls would battle corporate publications throughout the decade. Barry Shank has called this 'ambivalent authority', a reluctant mode of microcelebrity he identifies among stars of the riot grrrl moment – artists who claimed 'legitimate authority' in a 'world of power' they did not actually want to join (Shank 2014: 7). Selling out, in this musical world, was and remains forever in tension with authenticity, in all its guises, and subcultural capital depends on one's ability to maintain a distance from dominant culture. Experienced critics probably understood the grrrls' dilemma to an extent – enough to try, in some way, to protect it. In this light, Christgau's pithy three-star review ('adolescent petulance, tingling clits, no bass player') can be understood as a type of legitimizing delegitimacy, a way of acknowledging the accomplishments of the riot grrrls without reinforcing the authority of the canon. Assimilation into dominant culture was attenuated, the artists' autonomy arguably maintained.

## POWER AND SOLIDARITY

Music criticism and popular music are deeply entangled, and they have been since at least the nineteenth century. Criticism complements and challenges its objects and subjects of critique, functioning as commercial promotion, artistic commentary and a form of social conversation. In the case of riot grrrl music and criticism of the early 1990s, we can see musical releases and critical reviews, both amateur and professional, forming the shape of a fragmented, uneven dialogue. Anti-feminist critics and feminist critics alike used musical evaluation to serve the ends of punctuation and of containment, legitimizing feminist art even as elements of their evaluations simultaneously undermined the aims of that same music. It would be interesting, in future research, to consider the pacing of this backlash and the rhythms of interaction between musical releases and written responses. In this article, I have tried simply to consider the general mechanisms that formed this backlash. I hope that by exploring some of this punctuation in terms of containment, we can better understand backlash against feminism that persists into the present.

When it comes to deciding whether the men's reviews ultimately aided or undermined the riot grrrl project, the answer is both. As Deborah Tannen and others have argued, what constitutes power as opposed to solidarity varies by context. For Tannen, power and solidarity go hand in hand:

Attempts to understand what goes on between women and men in conversation are muddled by the ambiguity and polysemy of power and solidarity. The same linguistic means can accomplish either, and every utterance combines elements of both.

(1994: 46)

It might be compelling to argue that these critical reviews constitute an essential piece of Bratmobile's art, following Peter Szendy's observation that Romantic art of the nineteenth century often 'awaited' criticism for its completion. We might imagine that backlash criticism, which contained the riot grrrls, nonetheless in some way completed the art or made it whole. Indeed, in a sense, the rhetorical containment was a crucial piece of the movement, insofar as it demonstrated the importance of the problems addressed by the riot grrrls – given the callousness of many of these reviews, who could deny the artists' claims that men really were out of control, power-hungry and inclined towards violence? In any case, the critical responses, whether favourable or dismissive, punctuated the musical releases, lending them importance and weight. To be the source of so much controversy might have been empowering, on some level, or so this argument goes. But we cannot leave the discussion there.

Criticism among the riot grrrl backlash produced harmful material effects for the critics' subjects and communities, however difficult to label or quantify. Mere conviction alone could not qualify the critics to use the grrrls' devices of frankness and honesty. It is perhaps only at this second level – in the shape of the critics' failure to understand, and failure to practise solidarity – that the critics aligned themselves with the riot grrrls' insistent embrace of the flawed and imperfect. This is true even as this body of criticism, and sometimes the very same authors or pieces of writing, also authenticated and propelled the riot grrrls' fight against inequality and misogyny. I wonder how we can hold space for the form of the critics' failure, in all its virtues, while still learning from what one might consider objectionable in their attitudes and approaches. After all, even the most considerate among us might find elements of backlash tendencies in our own critical impulses.

Today, music criticism circulates mostly through social media and internet apps, distributed on diffuse digital forums more quickly than ever before, even as decades-long aesthetic debates continue around values such as originality, virtuosity and perfection. As backlash against feminism recurs in waves, ones that often operate through the violent enclosure of gendered groups, it is urgent that we understand punctuation as a method and that we recognize the power it holds not only to undermine but also to establish bonds of real, lasting solidarity.

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