

# **‘Do We Scare Ya’ Cuz, We’re Not Afraid To Fuck?’<sup>1</sup>: Queer-feminist Punk Countercultures, Theory, Art and Action**

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*The article investigates areas of knowledge production in contemporary queer-feminist punk countercultures in/from the US and draws a connection from countercultural accounts to academic anti-social queer theory. Based on the thesis that queer-feminist punk–countercultures, bands, musicians, writers and organizers—can be understood as a political movement, their productions—lyrics, writing, sound and performances—will be seen as a form of queer-feminist activism and agency. The main argument developed in the article is that queer-feminist punk countercultural agents do not only engage with queer and feminist politics, as well as academic theory, but also produce queer-feminist political theory—a more or less coherent set of ideas to analyze, explain and counter oppressive social structures, as well as explicit and open violence and oppression.*

*Queer-feminist punk musicians combine decolonial and antiracist accounts with their specific punk philosophy of anti-social queerness or queer negativity. Lyrical content, and writing will be analyzed to show examples of queer-feminist anti-social accounts of punk music. Relating such queer-feminist punk negativity to academic concepts and scholarly work, it will be shown how punk rock is capable of negotiating and communicating academic queer-feminist theoretical positions in a non-academic setting. Moreover, it will be proven that queer-feminist punk does not only negotiate, translate and appropriate academic accounts, but also produces similar negative and repoliticized queer-feminist theories without any direct inspiration through academic discourses. Furthermore, it will be proposed that queer-feminist punk communities accomplish what academic queer theory following the anti-social turn often does not: they transform their radically anti-social queer positions into (models for) liveable activism/artivism.*

*Keywords: Anti-social Queer Theory, Punk Rock, Riot Grrrl, Queercore, Queer-feminism, Artivism, Radical Theory, Music, Activism.*

This article seeks to challenge contemporary cultural discourses of the relationship between counter-cultural activism, art and academia. To be more precise, it questions the popular hierarchical view that academia is the place of theory production, whereas art and activism ideally rework or appropriate (academic) theory for their specific purposes. Against this view, I claim that counter-cultural spheres and protagonists have not only inspired academia by providing subjects/objects for academic analysis, but have also contributed to the field of queer studies with their autonomous queer-feminist theories. In other words, I argue that counter-cultural spaces are important places of theory production and that the theories they produce are often transferred to and incorporated by academia only retroactively.

The counter-cultural field or subject my article is going to question for its relationship to (academic) queer theory is contemporary *queer-feminist punk* in/from the US. The theoretical discourse – which arguably can be found in queer-feminist punk rock predating or paralleling their academic hype – is *anti-social* queer theory. The term queer-feminist punk subsumes North-American (including Canadian) countercultures, as well as individual bands, musicians, writers and organizers, their politics and productions that promote queer, trans, inter and/or feminist politics. They emerged between 1985 and

today, and are mostly known as *queercore*, *homocore* or *dykecore*, as well as *riot grrrl*. Although bands and individuals use different labels and self-identifications, strong connections between the individual protagonists, scenes, as well as their artistic and political discourses can easily be found. Accordingly, it can be argued that queer-feminist punk countercultures belong to or form a political movement and that their productions – lyrics, writing, sound and performances – are their form of queer-feminist activism and agency. Following this line of thought, I want to stress my argument again that queer-feminist punk countercultural agents do not only engage with queer and feminist politics, as well as academic theory, but also produce queer-feminist political theory – a more or less coherent set of ideas and practices to analyze, explain and counter oppressive social structures, as well as explicit, open violence and oppression.

The usage of the terminology of *queer-feminist politics* – rather than queer politics – is inspired by the queer and feminist punk musicians, who account for the still prevalent sexism, misogyny and oppression against ‘women’ in mainstream cultures, as well as punk and queer movements, by foregrounding the feminist aspects of their queer politics. Their usage of *queer feminist* or *queer-feminist* falls into line with the practice of many activist collectives all over the world who understand

that feminism is 'not just about women('s issues), [but] it is [also] a gendered power sensitive perspective on all aspects of life as developed in various ideas and practices that need to be addressed again and again' (The Feminist Salon. Flyer. Amsterdam. April 2007, quoted in Baumgartinger 2009, 48). More recently, similar politics have found their way into academic accounts, for example through the work of Mimi Marinucci (2010), José Muñoz (1999; 2009), Judith Jack Halberstam (2005; 2011b), and others. Such activist, queer-feminist punk and academic accounts conceptualize their queer politics as a continuation of feminist movements and theory rather than as a revolutionary break from it. Furthermore, such accounts seek a dialogue between lesbian and gay movements, second wave feminists and the diverse range of queer movements to build alliances and forms of solidarity.

Although I want to emphasize the political aspects of queer-feminist punk rock, as well as academic theory, the artistic aspect of the countercultural movement should not be forgotten. Queer-feminist punk rock is not imaginable without punk music, punk aesthetic and style. It inhabits the transparent and shifting borders between activism, art and theory production. However, queer-feminist punk rock is also a movement that foregrounds d.i.y. politics, distinguishes itself strongly from

'high art' and uses very 'unartsy' methods (besides a very 'unacademic' language). Hence, queer-feminist punk rarely gets labeled as art. I want to challenge the concept of art by stressing the artistic aspects of punk rock. To appropriately account for the art as well as activist aspects of queer-feminist punk rock I will proceed to use the label *artivism*.

The term *artivism* nicely describes the close entanglement between creativity and protest, style and meaning, action and experience. Additionally, it offers a usage or appropriation of the word art that accounts for a form of art that is not as serious and sophisticated but is instead playful, whilst nonetheless important and full of meaning. Moreover, the term is strongly connected to the *Dream Act* movement in the US, as well as to *Occupy* movements all over the world, to issues of migration, citizenship, and international Latina/o and Chicana solidarity in general. Accordingly, it is a reminder of the important issues often ignored in reference to queer-feminist punk rock, and queer art and activism in general, especially under the assumption that queerness as well as punk rock is exclusively a 'white' subcultural thing. Contrary to this ignorance, I want to stress that queer-feminist punk countercultures are strongly involved in all these movements. So far, the term *artivism* again is used to perforate the imagination of countercultural

borders that do not account for lived collaborations.

One theoretical discourse of queer-feminist punk countercultures which seems to be shared among many, if not most musicians, groups and circles centers queerness as something destructive, anti-social and radically political. In the following, I analyze lyrical content, writing, music, sound, performances and countercultural settings to show examples of anti-social queer-feminist punk theory, starting with a brief description of an anti-social punk understanding of queer and queerness. Next, I will show how queer-feminist punks theorize anti-social queerness using and reframing anarchist philosophy. Moreover, I show how queer-feminist punk musicians combine 'decolonial' and antiracist accounts with their specific punk philosophy of anti-social queerness or queer negativity. By relating such queer-feminist punk negativity to academic concepts and scholarly work, I show how punk rock negotiates, creates and communicates queer-feminist theoretical positions in a non-academic setting. Taking queer-feminist punk countercultural discourses seriously, I argue further that queer-feminist punk communities accomplish what academic queer theory following the anti-social turn often does not: they transform their radically anti-social queer positions into models for livable activism/artivism.

**'Raise 'em high / Let it hang / Clinch your fist / And sissy, Dang:'<sup>2</sup> Radically Queer**

Considering contemporary usages of the term *queer* within theory as well as institutionalized queer politics, I claim that queer-feminist punk offers a perspective on queerness as well as models for queer and feminist critique and social activism able to counter the ongoing inclusion of queerness into neoliberal capitalism. Such politics are able to reactivate the radical potential the term and concept queer used to have in earlier times.

The line 'Raise 'em high / Let it hang / Clinch your fist / And sissy, Dang', which I used as subheading, is from the song 'Sissy Dang' by the contemporary queer-feminist punk band Agatha from Seattle, Washington. The song is a very good example of the attempt to re-radicalize and re-politicize queerness within US-based activist and punk discourses and beyond. It is a call to arms against 'Assimilation [which] wears out the soul,' as the song states. Queerness is seen as the weapon itself, the 'armor [which] is so fucking beautiful / It keeps you safe from this fucked up world' (Agatha 2012).

In their song 'Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you' (2009), Agatha emphasize that the term queer from a historical perspective emerged on the landscape of US-based political discourse and activ-

ism in the 1990s as intervention. It was a term of resistance against oppression and a statement for radical social change:

[Q]ueer, unlike the rather polite categories of gay and lesbian, revels in the discourse of the loathsome, the outcast, the idiomatically-proscribed position of same-sex desire. Unlike petitions for civil rights, queer rebels constitute a kind of activism that attacks the dominant notion of the natural. The un-natural sense of the queer was, of course, first constituted as a negative category by dominant social practices, which homosexuals later embrace as a form of activism (Case 1997, 383).

Agatha's song is a reminder in a relatively unencrypted way of some of the negative connotations queerness used to have, and in some US-regions and cultural environments, that it still has. The first line of the song, which is 'Not gay as in happy, but queer as in fuck you,' indicates the negative connotations of *queer* through the particular usage of the words 'fuck you' as insult. This negativity corresponds with the punk aesthetic of the music and performance (shouting, high volume, and speed). Although 'fuck' is clearly used as an insult, Agatha additionally hold on to the meaning of 'fuck' as sexual activity, which is signaled through lines like 'Your legs are wide and

I'm inside.' The first line's relatively undirected or unspecific display of rejection – the 'fuck you' – becomes a very concrete criticism or rejection of mainstream lesbian and gay politics through the next line – 'I'm gonna fuck about queer liberation.' It addresses liberation efforts like the Human Rights Campaign, which is the largest non-profit gay and lesbian organization in the US today. During the last couple of years, the Human Rights Campaign focused almost exclusively on the level of legislation, for example on marriage, healthcare benefits and adoption rights for same-sex couples. Very recently, they concentrated their money and energy in lobbying for the repeal of the *Don't Ask Don't Tell* law, which barred gay and lesbian people from serving openly in the US military until it was abandoned in September 2011. Many queers, gays, lesbians and transgender criticized the Human Rights Campaign for their single-sided approach, arguing that marriage and serving openly in the military were the least of their concerns. They argued that the Human Rights Campaign only represents the aims and needs of a small, privileged, white and male minority and ignores the rest of queers and other sexually and gender deviant people – a view and critique Agatha address with their song.

The lines 'we'll take these scraps of faith, and well make / a feast and stuff our face' which follow 'I'm gon-

na fuck about queer liberation’, establish a connection between such gay rights politics and consumer culture, which Agatha repudiate. Moreover, through their combined meanings the lines question the gay rights model of sexual freedom. It seems as if Agatha is asking if freedom – and accordingly gay liberation activism – can be limited to individual sexual freedom. Additionally, the song seems to criticize gay liberation politics for their single issued politics and exclusive focus on sexuality. Agatha, contrary to gay rights groups like the Human Rights Campaign, are calling for a more radical liberation movement that is not only intersectional in its approaches and analysis, but also more rigorous in its rejection of the socio-political and economic system.

Agatha theorize the term *queer* as negative position, as challenge to hetero- as well as homo-normativity. When theorists imported queer as a theoretical concept into the academy in the 1990s, they aimed for a similar effect – to challenge norms. Teresa de Lauretis was the first documented scholar to use the term queer theory in an academic setting in February of 1990. David Halperin recalls de Lauretis’ intention for her usage of queer in his article ‘The Normalization of Queer Theory’ as ‘deliberately disruptive’ and intentional ‘provocation’ meant ‘to unsettle the complacency of “lesbian and gay studies”’ (Halperin 2003, 340).

He suggests that de Lauretis used queer theory to reject dominant gay and lesbian identity politics, as well as academic approaches that focus on sexuality as a stable identity category. His article indicates furthermore that queer theory was once seen as a promising and radical political intervention into the production of knowledge and meaning, into social structures and into institutions.

Shortly after the annexation of queer in academia however, a de-radicalization of the term *queer* became visible and *queer* became normalized within the academic landscape. The incorporation of queer theory into gender studies programmes and the numerous queer studies, as well as queer theory book series by commercial publishing companies mark such processes of absorption and de-radicalization of queer within the mainstream academic field. Even more unsettling to many activists and artists was the successful incorporation of the term queer into the language of capitalism. The corporate media increasingly included representations of gays and lesbians for the promotion of life-style products and commercial entertainment through the late 1990s and 2000s, and created mainstream perceptions of queerness as non-threatening, successful, beautiful and predominantly white and, most importantly, compliant with capitalist consumer logics.

Resisting that end, songs like the aforementioned 'Queer as in fuck you' by Agatha aim to 'find ways of renewing [queer's] radical potential' (Halperin 2003, 343), to borrow Halperin's words again. I argue that the appropriation and usage of queer within queer-feminist punk rock in general is an approach that has the radical potential to resist the ongoing inclusion of gay and lesbian identities in mainstream discourses and consumer culture, and the transformation of gay and lesbian identification into a lifestyle choice as well as legal category. Moreover, queer-feminist punk rock uses the term *queer* to counter the process of queerness becoming an identity category itself. A validation of counter-cultural queer theory, as in my example of queer-feminist punk rock, within academic discourses could halt the process of academic queer theory becoming normative. It could participate in developing 'a renewed queer theory' (Eng et al. 2005, 1) – a queer theory, which necessarily needs to understand sexuality as 'intersectional, not extraneous to other modes of difference, and calibrated to a firm understanding of queer as a political metaphor without a fixed referent' (Eng and al. 2005, 1).

### **Resist And Exist:<sup>3</sup> Counter-cultural Theory and Practice**

I want to emphasize again that queer-feminist punk countercultures produce queer-feminist theory that is neither less sophisticated nor

less valuable than academic approaches. Such accounts offer a version of queer that still has the political potential to irritate and resist neoliberal incorporation, and reject oppression. Additionally, the queer-feminist punk movement presents countercultural concepts 'for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subjects,' as Halberstam puts it in his recent book *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011, 2). Thus, the theoretical approaches developed within the queer-feminist punk movement have a strong connection to the everyday life of its participants, in contrast to much of academic theory. Within the counter-cultural sphere of queer-feminist punk rock, 'the divisions between life and art, practice and theory, thinking and doing' are not clear-cut, but are fluid or "chaotic",' according to Halberstam (2011b, 2). Accordingly, theory is not just a product of cognitive and emotional processes, but the processes themselves must also be understood as theory. Following anarchists among queer activists and scholars, such as Benjamin Shepard, theory does not only influence practices, but practices and theory are inseparable within queer activism (2010, 515). Theory is a doing, a practice and 'the understanding of human practice,' that becomes 'directly lived,' as Guy Debord emphasizes in *The Society of the Spectacle* (quoted in Eanelli

2011, 428). To account for both, the processes and products of knowledge production and distribution, as well as the term and concept of theory itself need to be reworked.

The band Agatha is one of many examples for the ways in which queer-feminist punk theory, socio-political analysis, music/art and practice/activism are inseparably entangled. Agatha theorize queer approaches within their songs and other forms of writing, and offer models for intersectional analysis that account for oppressive power structures like class, ethnicity, age, color, gender and sexuality. Moreover, they are involved in a range of projects including a free rock camp for queer youth, community bike projects, a radical marching band, a radical farming project and a collectively run anarchist bookstore. Additionally, they are connected to the broader queer-feminist anarchist punk movement in the US and beyond, exchanging ideas with other groups and touring the country. In August 2012, they also participated in the *New Direction Fest: From Anger to Action*, in Olympia, WA. During the three-day 'think tank'-like festival, through music concerts and other art projects, as well as workshops and presentations, power structures inside and outside the punk movement were analyzed and criticized, while models for emancipatory, solidary, anti-racist, queer-feminist and anti-ableist action be-

came negotiated.

Before moving on to a more detailed discussion of anti-social queer theory and punk countercultures, I want to briefly describe another band that participated in the *New Direction Fest*, namely Wretched of the Earth. The band-members of Wretched of the Earth identify as persons of colour or their allies. Furthermore, they aim at:

liberating [their] identities, empowering [their] communities, deconstructing internal oppression and outward privilege and power dynamics. [They] support struggles for autonomy, sovereignty, self determination and independence [and] believe liberation necessitates the destruction of white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. [They] strive to contribute individually and collectively towards these ends.<sup>4</sup>

The songs of Wretched of the Earth are good examples for intersectional queer-feminist punk theorizations. 'For Gender Self-Determination' (Wretched of the Earth 2012), for example, explains the interplay of language, recognition, social structures and knowledge in the process of forming a gender identity. The lines 'right from wrong written by another's hand / spectrums smashed for the power of heirs' name cultural knowledge and the power dynamics at play for



recognition. It explains that gender identification is first of all a performative act, a labeling process that has little to do with biology or the subject itself. The lines 'defining a child / subjected. Assigned' as well as 'in identifying the boy / who never got the chance / to decide' mark the potential of language and categorization to oppress, harm and violate. 'We must understand beyond binary / we must not be the men / we were told,' is a political call for action. It is a call to recognize the flexibility of gender identification, the recognition of transgender, and also a call for a critical analysis of gender roles, especially male roles and behaviour. This aspect is a crucial point within the punk scenes within the US, where male dominance is still an issue. If the lyrics of 'For Gender Self-Determination' are understood as theory, interesting parallels can be drawn to Judith Butler's works *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997) and *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005). In both books – especially the latter – Butler analyses the formation of the subject, as well as the limits of self-knowledge/knowledge of the self. Furthermore, she theorizes the subject in relation to the social and the condition of that subject's formation, particularly focusing on those aspects beyond the control of the subject it forms. In other words, she (like *Wretched of the Earth*) questions the terms and conditions under

which a subject becomes recognizable as human being.

In the following passage, I want to pick up the question again of what is so radically queer about radical queer-feminist punk theory. Radical queer theories – which can be found in both academia and counter-cultures – are theories that refuse and reject complicity in neoliberal consumer, homo- and heteronormative cultures. Moreover, they are irritating, disturbing, and unsettling and understand action as a necessary part of theory and vice versa. Such radical theoretical accounts and actions are dedicated to dismantling oppressive power structures in their full complexity, as already indicated, and can be related to academic queer theory.

Queer-feminist punk rock uses anti-social queer politics that parallel in interesting ways recent developments in queer theory, which have become known as anti-social queer theory. Moreover, the embrace of negativity connected to the word queer within punk rock anticipated queer as anti-social even before academia 'jump[ed] on the negativity bandwagon' (Eanelli 2011, 428), as queer anarchist Tegan Eanelli (2011), and queer theorists, such as Halberstam (2006; 2008; 2011), Nyong'o (2008), or Muñoz (1999) indicate. Although radical queer-feminist activists such as Eanelli disdain academic anti-social queer theory, I see potential for the radical

irritation of hegemonic discourses in the corpus of academic queer theory that Halberstam framed as the 'Anti-Social Turn in Queer Theory' (Eanelli 2011, 140–156).

**'I kill kids / better keep hid:'<sup>5</sup>**  
**Anti-social Punk Theory**

As a theoretical concept, the anti-social turn is informed by psychoanalytical – mostly Lacanian – concepts of sexuality. Following queer psychoanalytical approaches, such as those of Leo Bersani (1995), sex is understood as anti-communicative, destructive, and anti-identitarian. American literary scholar Lee Edelman posits that sexuality in our symbolic order marks the irritation of the self as in-control, whole and autonomous in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004). In other words, sexuality and sexual acts irritate the constant construction of identity and autonomous agency. To integrate sexuality successfully into the illusion of an autonomous self, it must be attached to the purpose of reproduction. Consequently, queerness in this logic can only signify the opposite of creation and reproduction or 'the place of the social order's death drive' (Edelman 2004, 3). Queerness may appear in the form of identity, but this is just an illusion produced by its attachment to a specific object or end. Moreover, queer sexuality, as Edelman suggests, re-makes identity as illusion and impossibility visible. Within the

logic of the social order, queerness must then be understood as the ultimate threat, because it would reject the future (which is symbolized through the Child, with capital 'C') and therefore put an end to society (as we know it). Queer-feminist punk music alludes to the threat of queerness as a danger to society more often than as a threat to the coherence of the self. The 1990s band God Is My Co-Pilot were one of the first displaying a version of queerness opposed to the imaginary Child, the symbol for the future as society knows it. Queerness and queers in God Is My Co-Pilot's songs, album titles and zines are strongly connected to negativity, but with an ironic undertone. Besides connoting fears, for example in the title of their 1993 7" vinyl, *My Sinister Hidden Agenda*, queerness is positioned as precisely opposed to the future and the imaginary Child. In 1995, for example, they released the album *Sex Is for Making Babies* (DSA). The title song consists only of one line: 'Sex is for making babies 1000000 times.' On their EP *How I Got Over* (1992), they feature the song 'I Kill Kids' – a threat they picked up again in 'Queer Disco Anthem':

We're here we're queer we're going to fuck your children  
 Privacy is a punishment / Privacy is not a reward  
 Publicity is a human right  
 Live in the light / don't die by a word  
 Speak up / Don't put

up with it I came out upside down and they had to turn me around [...] We're here we're queer we're going to fuck your children (God Is My Co-Pilot 1992).

God Is My Co-Pilot connect the term *queer* to right-wing hate speech against queers, through the lines 'we're going to fuck your children,' which addresses prejudices, combined with 'don't die by a word,' addressing those with queer desires. They refer to the subordination of queers in the dominant hegemony and embrace the negative symbolic position, through enjoying themselves in articulating it. They mark discourse on the public/private dichotomy as an oppressive system; the references to coming out narratives with phrases like 'Speak up' and 'live in the light' are drawing on the historic lesbian and gay civil rights movement. By putting such references next to the well-known and too often commercialized slogan 'We're here we're queer,' they position themselves in a history of political movements. God Is My Co-Pilot take a critical stance to that self-positioning and additionally criticize the politics of those movements by turning the phrase 'We're here we're queer get used to it' into 'We're here we're queer we're going to fuck your children.' Thus, God Is My Co-Pilot anticipate what Edelman suggests in *No Future*, which was published in 2004. Yet, the queer-feminist punk band does not propose to take

the symbolic place of queerness, its negativity, literally (Edelman 2004, 5). In contrast to Edelman, God Is My Co-Pilot do not reject politics per se.

Academic anti-social queer theory – especially Lee Edelman's account, however potentially radical or dismantling his theory is – forecloses any possibility of political activism. Moreover, Edelman argues that queerness is not only the opposite of society's future, but also the opposite of every form of politics. Many queer scholars criticized this aspect of anti-social queer theory and reworked anti-social psychoanalytical accounts as politics. Halberstam (2008), Elizabeth Povinelli (2002), Nyong'o (2008) and Muñoz (1999), for example, hold on to the political potential in anti-social queerness. They criticize Edelman's account for its 'inability to recognize the alternative sexual practices, intimacies, logics, and politics that exist outside the sightlines of cosmopolitan gay white male urban culture' (Rodríguez 2011, 333), as Juana María Rodríguez points out.

Queer-feminist punk theory, in contrast to Edelman, manages to hold on to the political while theorizing queerness as negativity. It does so by taking not only psychoanalytical concepts of queer sexuality as negativity into account, but by also considering a much broader repertoire of academic and activist works to criticize and resist hegemony. Many queer-feminist punks com-

bine and extend anti-social queerness with black feminists' theorization of anger, especially bell hooks (1995) and Audre Lorde (1984). Such references allow contemporary queer-feminist punks like Osa Atoe (musician, author and creator of Shotgun Seamstress Zine), Mimi Thi Nguyen (creator of Race Riot), Anna Vo (activist, writer, and founder of An Out Records) and Miriam Bastani (writer, musician, activist, and *MaximumRockNRoll* coordinator) to think through the anti-social and queer at the intersection of racialization. Moreover, a focus on anger enables them to extend the analyses of the realm of symbolic meaning to the realms of the corporeal and the affective: action, feelings, experience and the body.

Anger and negativity are almost always part of queer-feminist punk discourses. Additionally, however, queer-feminist punks do not shy away from more positive emotions and relationality as well as their theorization. An example is the song 'The Rain' by the band Agatha that quotes Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987). In the liner notes to the song, author and singer Kaelen explains that she wanted to account for the anti-social aspects of queerness, to mark and reject oppressive power structures and ideologies like religion for their participation in genocide, racism and the policing of sex, gender and sexuality. Additionally, however, she was in-

trigued by feminist spiritualism, like Anzaldúa's, because such accounts enabled a different view on the ontological status of being and belonging (Kaelen in the liner notes to 'The Rain' 2011). On a meta-level, Kaelen's reference to feminist spiritualism is in line with punks' tendency to engage with minoritized positions, theories and discourses.

Queer-feminist punks draw a relation between the very unspecific punk tradition of 'celebrati[ng] the degenerate (as Hitler termed Jewish art), the sick [...], and the alienated [...], not to mention the socially outrageous [...],' as the Jewish punk researcher Steven Beeber has it (2006, 8), with the very specific and directed focus on oppressed feminist, anti-racist and queer knowledge. This focus on the borderlands of theory is one additional reason for queer-feminist punks to engage with and rework anarchist theory and politics. A very exhaustive theorization of a queer-feminist anarchist anti-social punk theory can be found in the zine *Anarcho Homocore Night Club* from about 1992.

**'Hitler was right, – Homosexuals ARE enemies of the state:'<sup>6</sup>  
Queer-feminist Politics of  
Negativity and Anarchism**

In *Anarcho Homocore Night Club*, Toronto-based author Robynski draws attention to the common belief in Western society that anarchists are chaotic, destructive and negative. Using the example of the

public outcry that the Sex Pistols' song 'Anarchy in the UK' (1976) provoked, he argues for a strong 'cultural connection' (Robynski 1992, 11) between punk and anarchism. This connection is the negative stereotype mainstream society offers for both movements. Conservatives, mainstream newspapers, commentators and politicians used anarchism frequently as a derogatory term in 1976 when the Sex Pistols introduced their song, and they continue to use anarchism in that way (Squibb 2011, 175). Journalist and theorist Stephen Squibb argues that until today '[t]he charge of anarchism has always been a filthy smear on the lips of the ruling class' (Squibb 2011, 175).

Queer-feminist punk Robynski points to this 'cultural', or symbolic, negativity and anti-social meaning of anarchism. Moreover, he makes a connection to the symbolic meaning of punk rock, arguing that punk was associated with similar negativity and anti-social meanings. Although he stresses the fact that the negativity of punk and anarchism is a stereotype or structural rather than empirical, he nevertheless refers to them, because he understands that stereotypes are one form of symbolic meanings and influence verbal and social discourses as well as the formation of the inner psyche.

Robynski emphasizes that the symbolic meanings of punk and anarchism both pose a threat to what he calls 'the establishment' (1992,

11). The establishment in this context can be understood as cultural norms, social structures, as well as political institutions. Pointing out the connections between the symbolic meanings of punk and anarchism again, he draws a further connection to the symbolic meaning of queerness:

Army-booted, leather jacketed, black-clad, crude, rude, lewd and tattooed, broken-toothed, pierced, foul-mouthed, poor, unwashed, ragged, matted, stubled and safety-pinned, antisocial, Nihilistic and violent, the Punk has almost every feature of the stereotyped Anarchist – only the proverbial bomb is missing. Add gaudy make-up and androgyny and there you have the stereotyped image of the Queer (as any Punk who has been bashed can painfully testify) (Robynski 1992, 11).

Like Edelman in his book *No Future*, Robynski points to the symbolic meaning of queerness. He refers to the negative place of queerness within the symbolic order that Edelman describes so pointedly, and to the violence this symbolic meaning can lead to. He sees this cultural meaning of negativity and the anti-social displayed in queer-feminist punk lyrics and other forms of writings, for instance in the seminal *MaximumRockNRoll* article 'Don't be gay, or, how I learned to stop worrying and fuck punk up

the ass' by G.B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce (1989). Following Jones, LaBruce and numerous other queer-feminist punks, Robynski embraces the negative or anti-social meaning of queerness as signifying the cultural location of queer-identified people. Like Halberstam (2008), and in contrast to Edelman (2004), he sees the negativity of queerness directly interlinked with the negative meaning of punk. Robynski embraces queerness, as well as punk's structural negativity, as the rejection of futurity. In other words, such queer-feminist punk writings understand queerness and punk as negative forces that have the potential, if embraced, to reject, irritate and finally destroy '[t]he Law, [...] the fundamental principles which underlie all social relations' (Evans 1996, 98) in psychoanalytical terms. Moreover, Robynski understands queer-feminist punk performances, and the production of meaning, as political activism that is able to reject the society's ideologies and aims, and resist what Edelman calls futurity. Edelman rejects punk as 'punk pugilism,' a 'pose of negativity,' or 'abiding negativity that accounts for political antagonism with the simpler act of negating particular political positions' (Edelman 2006, 822). Robynski's article proves, however, that queer-feminist punks draw on punk and queerness as symbolically negative on a much broader level than just political opposition.

Interestingly, Robynski sees

the same potential in the term anarchism (Robynski 1992, 11–12). He analyses the terms queer, anarchism and punk on the level of symbolic meaning, as already explained. Moreover, he addresses the political concept of anarchism and suggests that such strategies are useful for queer-feminist punk activism. Thereby, Robynski shifts his focus for queer-feminist activism from irritating 'the Law' in terms of meanings and social relations to state laws and other political instruments of realpolitik of regulation and normalization. Again, in contrast to Edelman, Robynski does not understand this real-political aspect of punk, anarchism and queerness as 'the seeds of potential renewal' (Edelman 2006, 822) of heteronormative structures or a reaffirmation of the ideology of futurity. Robynski does not outline a definite future he wants to achieve with his anarcho-queer punk: 'The point is not to achieve anarchism as a state or as a final form for the political organization of society,' to use Butler's words (quoted in Heckert 2011, 93). 'It is a disorganizing effect which takes power, exercises power, under conditions where state violence and legal violence are profoundly interconnected. In this sense, it always has an object, and a provisional condition, but it is not a way of life or an "end" in itself' (Butler in Heckert 2011, 93).

Robynski emphasizes the destructive qualities of queerness,

punk and anarchy. The school or version of anarchy he refers to is mostly influenced by the Russian revolutionary and theorist of collectivist anarchism Mikhail Aleksandrovich Bakunin. Bakunin and his alleged lover Sergei Gennadyevich Nechayev understood destruction and violence as often unpleasant, though necessary, aspects of the revolutionary liberation of the oppressed. In *The Catechism of a Revolutionary*<sup>7</sup> they argued that rather than reform, only a radical abolition of the state and the revolutionary overthrow of the class system could free people from their subordinated status. Many theorists understood *The Catechism of a Revolutionary* as 'a horrifying credo of the revolutionary as nihilist, a cold-blooded individual who has severed all the personal ties and human feelings binding him to conventional society the better to destroy it' (Shatz 2002, xxiv).

By re-reading *The Catechism of a Revolutionary*<sup>8</sup> (Robynski 1992, 16–18), Robynski develops his concept of queer-feminist anarchism as equally nihilistic. Moreover, it is exactly within the nihilistic and destructive aspect of Bakunin's and Nechayev's anarchism that Robynski identifies the connection to queer-feminism. 'For Bakunin,' he argues, 'anarchy could only [mean that] the current social order and all of its institutions – physical, cultural, ethical, spiritual – [need to be] completely and utterly destroyed'

(Robynski 1992, 13). Robynski thereby makes the argument that the homophobia within anarchist circles during the 20th century as well as their diversion from anarchism's original nihilism were both fatal concessions to established heteronormative systems. He emphasises that:

[t]he document is less a list of rules for radicals, however, than a testament of rage, hatred and bitter alienation from the entire established social order. Here we have the pure Nihilism of original Anarchy, expressing all the destructive sentiments of Punk (indeed, some band should set it to music), only strategically targeted in a specific direction (Robynski 1992, 12).

Robynski suggests an appropriation of the nihilistic meaning of anarchism as a strategy for queer-feminist punk. Additionally, a reference to Bakunin and Nechayev allows Robynski to understand anarchism as a movement, rather than exclusively as a theory. 'It was left to Nechayev and Bakunin,' he writes, 'to begin the network of conspiratorial cells, working to overthrow the government by violent means, to found Anarchism as a Social-Revolutionary movement based on activism' (Robynski 1992, 13). The emphasis on anarchism as activism, in contrast to theory, is interesting, because it supports Robynski's

argument of the cultural activity of punk rock as anarchist activity. He, like myself, understands queer-feminist punk rock as political activism/artivism. Moreover, he implies that successful queer-feminist politics need to be shaped as revolution. Referring to Nechayev in *The Catechism of the Revolutionary*, Robynski states that a revolution can only be made to happen through revolutionary action, not through words alone. Nechayev argued that '[t]he word is of significance only when the deed is sensed behind it and follows immediately on it' (quoted in Confino 1973, 28). Similarly, Robynski explains that '[p]unks always gave greater weight to action, thus maintaining the [relation between theory and action] that Nechayev and Bakunin indicated, and sharing the two men's Nihilistic obsession with "merciless destruction"' (Robynski 1992, 23).

Robynski emphasizes the process of irritating or deconstructing social power relations and meanings rather than envisioning a concrete future in his theorization of queer-feminist punk anarchism. Nevertheless, like the scholars Halberstam (2008; 2011) and Muñoz (1999), he does not reject futurity per se. Quoting work on Bakunin's anarchism, Robynski points out that '[t]he passion for destruction is a creative passion too!' (Sam Dolgoff quoted in Robynski 1992, 13). He suggests that a politics of negativity might have a sur-

plus value. Such value, I want to argue, with scholars like Halberstam (2011) or Povinelli (2011) could be the formation of different social relations. In other words, the surplus effect of queer-feminist punk rock lies in the new meanings and social bonds created in the liminality between the rejection of futurity and society as it is today, and the realization or creation of a different future through anarcho-queer punk politics. Accordingly, the negativity of queer-feminist punk is understood as politically productive, insofar as it potentially deconstructs heteronormativity and other systems of oppression, while at the same time establishing a queer social sphere, which differs from heteronormativity, racism, classism and ableism in its meanings and power-structures.

The contemporary band Rape Revenge from Calgary, Alberta, elaborates the importance of action in contrast to theorization in a slightly more explicit language than Robynski in their song 'When The Meeting Ends' (2012). 'Surrounded by selfish fucks,' they scream towards their audience, 'I'm done with giving myself to cause / that doesn't exist outside of books. Don't you get it? Your inability to live equally doesn't exist outside of your fight against inequality.'

Queer-feminist punks' emphasis on action within anarchism and punk activism is important to understand the simultaneity of anti-social discourses and the creation



and maintenance of queer social bonds. Robynski emphasizes in his discussion of *The Catechism of the Revolutionary* that anarchism must be leaderless, though it needs facilitators who provide the movement with the necessary infrastructure and organization. He suggests that punk communities reflect this ideal of leaderlessness with their rejection of the star cult, as well as any other form of (social) authority, and their do-it-yourself ethos. Again, Robynski's point is translated into a more drastic punk-language through the queer-feminist antiracist anarchist band Rape Revenge. In their song 'Lawful Of Shit' (2012), they call on their fellow punks for action: 'Waiting in endless lines for permission to resist. Egypt, Greece and Wall Street would fucking laugh at these permit seeking half-ass attempts at social unrest.'

The references to prior punks – like the Sex Pistols – as well as activists, feminists – like Anzaldúa – and thinkers – like Bakunin – within queer-feminist punk counter-cultures, accordingly has to be understood as reference to role models, not leaders, that is nevertheless always critical. It is a validation of prior efforts and, at the same time, a reflection on hegemonies and social power relations. Moreover, Robynski suggests that queer-feminist punks should broaden their view by looking for role models in spheres that are not necessarily related to punk or queerness. He

argues that queer-feminist punks should look for role models among all oppressed racial and sexual minorities, the 'déclassé intellectuals, the insane, prisoners, street people, squatters, sex-trade workers, "out-laws" and antisocial elements, the so-called criminal class' as well as in 'the underclass below the working class who were not "producers", [...] the unemployed and the unemployable, unskilled and poor workers, poor peasant proprietors, landless [...]' (Robynski 1992, 24). Moreover, queer-feminist punks should try to build alliances with those who are oppressed. He emphasizes that such new alliances need to be built under the condition that queer-feminist punks reflect on their own privileges and take responsibility for their entanglement with hegemonic power structures. 'They need to reflect on their own entanglement in oppression themselves,' Robynski emphasizes, 'to successfully deconstruct existing hegemonies' (Robynski 1992, 24).

In their song 'Herbivore' (2012), Rape Revenge equally ask their community members to face their privileges as well as their entanglement in oppression and hegemony. They ask:

Tell me how you find nourishment  
in the horrors you can't face. [...] Your  
palate is built upon a lie you tell  
yourself. There's no reason to base  
your survival on the torture of  
someone else. If it's not in you

to murder, if you can't look them in the eye as you take their life.

The song from the vegan queer-feminist Rape Revenge addresses the issue of veganism. It questions how queer-feminist punks can argue against human exploitation, war and the death penalty on the one hand, and exploit, torture and eat animals on the other. Rape Revenge reject prioritization of their political agendas and subjects for their solidarity. They fight for the communities they belong to – females queers, people of color, Native people etc. – with the same enthusiasm as for other people and species.

Moreover, through their accounts they ask queer-feminist punks to support the broader community according to their needs and wishes, rather than act out of compassion or benevolence. This position, again, draws queer-feminist punks to anarchist theory, where solidary support and action are defined as facilitation. Queer-feminist punk projects often show such facilitating activism. These projects include *Rock 4 Choice* and the *Calgary Zine Library*, and *Food Not Bombs* – all projects Rape Revenge are currently active in – as well as the *Girls Rock Camps* all over the US, which support young girls and women in making music, or the *Home Alive* project in Seattle that teaches women and queers self-defense skills. Additionally, festivals like *Ladyfest*, or *Queerruption* can be seen as fa-

ilitating projects, because they offer musicians and music fans platforms for their activism.

To sustain anarchist projects, however, queer-feminists like zine-writer Robynski, argue that queer-feminist punks have to resist the cooptation of their movement by their oppressors, (1992, 24). Resistance against cooptation can only be established if the violent aspect or destructiveness of anarchism and punk are preserved. 'The downfall of Anarchism,' Robynski writes, 'was that it became intellectually respectable; the downfall of Punk was that it became aesthetically respectable' (Robynski 1992, 27). Rape Revenge similarly argue against cooptation and for confrontation and violence in their song 'The Messiah Effect' (2012). 'Fuck this feel good bullshit,'; they reject the language of consumer culture parroted by punks; and continue offensively with 'Ghandi was a puppet, peace is a cop out. I hope you choke on your reformist fucking bullshit. As I burn your pacifist empire to the ground.'

Violence as the means of self-defense and rejection, 'chaos and disorder' (Robynski 1992, 30) are necessary to escape the constant perpetuation of a system that denies them. As a consequence, the aim of queer-feminist punk activism cannot be social integration or even peace with society as it is today. Once queers were aiming at social integration, queerness became structurally integrated into systems

of law, and (at least partially) socially accepted. 'Gone are the days when perverts were perverts – the most hated of the hated, the lowest of the low. Now Queers are fine, upstanding, moral citizens [...]' (Robynski 1992, 30). Robynski argues that the assimilation of white male queers, and to a lesser extent white lesbians, into hegemonic orders, did not only deradicalize the potential of the term queer, but shifted the line of social unacceptability to different groups. 'The cost of assimilation, has been borne by those who are still perverts, the Queer lumpenproletariat,'<sup>9</sup> to quote him again:

sex-trade workers, drag queens, S/Mists, leather and other fetishists, fist-fuckers, and Boy-lovers. As with Anarchism, a dichotomy has been created, separating the 'good' Queers from the 'bad' Queers, with the 'bad' Queers taking all the heat because they threaten establishment moral values and prevent assimilation. The very fact that Punk, Anarchy and Queers have the capacity to be assimilated is testimony to [the fact that] that Capitalism has an almost limitless ability to adapt itself to the demands of any given situation (Robynski 1992, 30).

Like the band Rape Revenge or Agatha, Robynski points to the complicity of gay culture in capitalism and marks the pitfalls of contemporary gay politics. He argues that

an effective queer-feminist punk anarchism, should be '[i]ntellectually disrespectful, immoral, [...] and anti-bourgeois, Nihilistic and passionate,' 'anti-liberal' and 'lawless' (Robynski 1992, 30). The only way to resist assimilation and the cooptation into capitalism, he concludes, is to appropriate the:

stereotype, because it is a caricature painted by the establishment of what threatens it most [...]. It has been possible to show a cultural continuity between Classical Anarchism and Punk only because I have been deliberately stereotyping. By equating it with Nihilism, [...] I have so severely marginalized Anarchy that it can only fall together with other marginals, [...] with whom it shares identical stereotyped attributes (Robynski 1992, 30).

Again, Robynski emphasizes the anti-social meanings of punk, queer and anarchism as crucial for queer-feminist resistance. Moreover, he points to the intersectionality of classism, gender binaries, racialization, ableism and cultural and economic oppression.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude my article, I want to emphasize again that queer-feminist punks produce radical anti-social queer theory through their activism through lyrics, music, zine-writing, workshops and other gath-

erings. The theory they produce, as I have shown, is neither less sophisticated nor less complex than academic anti-social queer theory, and is often actually in dialogue with academic knowledge. Noticeably different to the latter – in most, but not all cases – is the language in use. Queer-feminist punks use a decidedly offensive and confrontational language from which most theorists restrain themselves. Moreover, punks avoid complicated grammatical constructions and other markers of bourgeois or institutionalized language. Additionally, their rejection of any borders of academic schools or fields, as well as political tribes, is divergent from academic anti-social queer theory. This flexibility allows for an anti-social queer theory that is not only intersectional, but also relational. In other words, queer-feminist punk theory offers queer-feminist punks a tool for analyzing oppressive power structures and concepts for activism against them. Additionally, it also offers the possibility of creating new ways for relating to each other and forming a solidary community.

As my brief examples have shown, countercultural spaces are indeed important places of theory production. The theories they produce are often retroactively transferred to and incorporated by academia. Those transfers are often facilitated by countercultural protagonists or former members of countercultures themselves. In the

case of punks or ex-punks, it is not only since Zack Furness' most recent publication *Punkademics: The Basement Show in the Ivory Tower* that we know that 'colleges and universities function as some of the places where people with "punk" values can [...] potentially put their ethics and ideas into practice' (2012, 19). Numerous queer theorists, like Halberstam, Muñoz and Nguyen have given accounts of their punk history and it can be presumed that the politics and theories of their communities have influenced their work, even if they do not make this explicit. More obvious incorporations of queer-feminist punk knowledge can be seen in the recent opening of the Riot Grrrl Collection of the Fales Library at New York University, which contains tons of original Riot Grrrl and queercore materials, fanzines, records, letters, flyers etc. from the 1990s to today. To name more of such incorporations and analyze them would clearly go beyond the space constraints of this article. At this point, these few examples, as problematic as a detailed analysis might discover them to be, can be read as proof of the relevance queer-feminist punk theory has for the environment of academia.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Agatha. 2012. *Cut The String*. Self-titled. LP. Self-release: Seattle.
- <sup>2</sup> Agatha. 2012. *Sissy Dang*. *Self-titled*. LP. Self-release: Seattle.
- <sup>3</sup> I use the name of the peace punk band from Los Angeles, California, Resist And

Exist, here, because it appropriately summarizes the – mostly unbalanced – relationship between political idealism, political ambition and everyday life. Although I do not write about Resist And Exist, I want to emphasize that they have participated in much activism and organizing around the anti-war movement, animal rights, solidarity work with political prisoners and the Black Panther Party since the 1990s. They are therefore a good example for political punk activism.

- <sup>4</sup> According to their band description on the festival homepage, available at <http://newdirectionfest.net>. [Accessed 17 October 2012].
- <sup>5</sup> God Is My Co-Pilot. 1992. I Kill Kids. *How I Got Over*. EP. Ajax Records.
- <sup>6</sup> Dreher, Mark. 1989. Hitler was right, – Homosexuals ARE enemies of the state! J.D.s 5 42.
- <sup>7</sup> *The Catechism of a Revolutionary* is a guideline for the formation of secret societies published in the Government Herald in July 1871 as the manifesto of the Narodnaya Rasprava. Historians agree that it is co-written by Bakunin and Nechayev, although the degree to which Bakunin contributed is heatedly discussed among the experts. *The Catechism*, besides defining some anarchist values and beliefs, most importantly outlines important general rules of revolutionary organizing.
- <sup>8</sup> Robynski emphasizes that *The Catechism of a Revolutionary* was a foundational text for the anarchist movement. He argues that '[i]ts continuing relevance is attested to by the fact that, a century after it was written, it was republished by The Black Panther Party [...], which used it as their model of revolutionary organization. Panthers Eldridge Cleaver, George L. Jackson, and Huey Newton all sang its praises (which is ironic in Cleaver's case, considering his virulent homophobia; [...]). It was, as well, the basis for the Italian revolutionary Renato Curcio's organization, Brigade Rosse (Red Brigades)

in October, 1970' (Robynski 1992, 12).

- <sup>9</sup> The term lumpenproletariat was first defined by socialist Karl Marx, meaning a vicious underclass or low working class. Marx saw no political or revolutionary potential within this part of the population. Bakunin opposed Marx's view. He defined the lumpenproletariat as the 'educated unemployed youth, assorted marginals from all classes, brigands, robbers, the impoverished masses, and those on the margins of society who have escaped, been excluded from, or not yet subsumed in the discipline of emerging industrial work' (Thoburn 2005). Within this group he saw the most potential for a socialist revolution (see also Thoburn 2002).

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