

Punk Rock Clit Lit: Reading Toward a Punk Poetics in *Bent on Writing: Contemporary Queer Tales*

by T.L. Cowan

In January 2000, I organized a spoken word cabaret called Choice Words for the Rock for Choice Festival in Vancouver. One of the invited guests for the show was Lynn Breedlove, lead singer/front-man for the dyke punk band Tribe 8, and member of the touring punk-infused *Sister Spit's Rambolin' Road Show*. As stage manager/host, it was my responsibility to provide the artists with what they needed for their performances. Backstage, Breedlove, revealing a large fleshy dildo, asked me to find her a “pretty young fag” to perform fellatio during her performance. Soon enough, a “pretty young fag” materialized, and when he went on stage with Breedlove, he got on his knees and played the part.

While this routine would have been expected by those familiar with Breedlove's Tribe 8 performances—wherein she would generally invite a young man on stage to perform fellatio and then “castrate” herself during a song about gang rape, throwing the member into the audience—the majority of the Choice Words audience that night seemed unaware of Breedlove's past performances.¹ It struck me then that the audience—mostly comprised of feminists, a large number of them lesbians—was perhaps more literary than punk because, while Breedlove's performance was met with a some raucous laughter and cheering, it seemed at the time that most of the audience members were startled and uncomfortable, unsure how to respond; more than a few people left, upset and angry. The political climate of the moment made this performance extremely provocative.

Breedlove's performance, not surprisingly, had disturbed the audience because transgender politics, still as yet contentious in 2000, were becoming ever more visible on the periphery of feminist activism. In Vancouver, then like so many other cities in North America, women were taking sides in the divisive issue of whether or not transgendered women should be allowed to participate fully in lesbian- or women-only events and spaces.² Breedlove's stage-act had challenged not only the staid conventions and

expectations of literary and spoken word events, but her sexually-aggressive gender-bending persona was also an uncompromising and belligerent response to the anti-transgender politics of the day.

Breedlove's performance remains for me the quintessence of dyke/queer punk poetics.³ As an instance where radical sex, art, and politics converged, it required an understanding of, and even an affinity for, punk politics and aesthetics in order to engage with it on its own terms. Breedlove's impressive status in the world of punk makes her an ideal hero for this story—and indeed she is an exemplar—but she is by far not alone in the practice of dyke/queer punk poetics and performance. Many contemporary dyke/queer poets use comparably provocative strategies and assume disruptive, double-edged stances similar to Breedlove's. I want to examine these strategies in my readings of poems by Kathryn Payne, Barbara Brown, and Trish Salah, three poets featured in *Bent on Writing: Contemporary Queer Tales*, edited by Elizabeth Ruth. *Bent* is a collection drawn from the "live performances" of Clit Lit, a dyke/queer reading series, which ran at the Red Room in Toronto's gay village from 1998-2003.⁴ Ruth was the curator, organizer and roller-blading poster girl for Clit Lit, which was "Canada's only monthly queer reading series" (Ruth x) of its time. The poetry and prose included in *Bent* is necessarily associated with a particular dyke/queer artistic and political community or scene, some aspects of which might be considered punk, or punk-influenced, but much of it would not be considered punk at all.

I was never punk. However, having spent years in the dyke/queer spoken word scene in Canada and beyond, I have watched many performances inflected with what I came to understand as a punk aesthetic. Seeing Lynn Breedlove's performance in 2000, I was struck how her confrontational style was similar to many other spoken word performances I had seen in the dyke/queer scene, and I realized that the political and aesthetic stances of many of these performances were not as random as they first appeared. Once I began to think about a punk genealogy for much of the poetry I was seeing, it became clear that this work served a different function and had different goals than other poetic forms, and that the value of the work needed to be appraised not solely based on the criterion I applied as a student of poetry but, rather, required a new criterion which inflected poetic principles with standards articulated through the range of punk practices.

Dyke/queer poets who practice punk aesthetics are likely to embrace a DIY (Do It Yourself) ethic, which, like the punk music and zine writings of the past and present, valorizes process over product, revels in the amateur and, through subversions of conventional formalist criteria, seeks to

challenge dominant cultural forms in general, and heteronormative capitalism in particular. While, politically and aesthetically, this work performs that “urban queer/not-easily-described-to-relatives thing” (Whittall 115), and stages an “unstable” and “disruptive” relationship (Fuchs 104-105) to mainstream, mass-culture heteronormativity and capitalism, it simultaneously articulates positions not always in synch with queer culture, dyke culture, trans culture, or all of the above. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, these poets connect politics and desire through experience: the personal and the political converge in a performative praxis which includes the pleasures and politics of sexual desire but also manifests as desire for community, family acceptance, a desire to have a voice, to tell a story, to claim a past and to stake a future.

While my readings will focus on *Bent*, I argue that a punk imprint can be felt, seen, and heard in a great deal of the dyke/queer performance-oriented poetry of the past decade. The influence of punk on dyke/queer writing can, of course, be felt much earlier than this,⁵ but what I am interested in, in particular, is poetry published by a dyke/queer generation that has never known a world without punk, a generation for whom “punk” signifies one of many possible resistant responses to mainstream culture. Because punk music and culture have filtered through popular media, and because punks have been a visible presence in both urban and rural settings in Canada for at least two decades, this generation’s dyke/queer poets, born in the sixties and seventies, must be understood to have been influenced by punk movements even if they do not identify as punk (or never have), and may reference punk politics and aesthetics in their artistic practices, even if they do not participate in any recognizable punk subculture.⁶

As Miriam Rivett explains in her work on punk-influenced novels, classifying texts as punk does not necessarily involve identifying a set of “shared formal or stylistic conventions,” but rather, punk writings can be understood to share “certain underlying ways of thinking expressed in an adherence to a particular set of cultural assumptions and frames of reference” (32). Or, as Guy Lawley suggests, “punk influences” might include an attitude, which he identifies as “a general desire to shock, offend or subvert” as well as punk “thematic concerns” and “subject matter: punk characters, gigs and bands” (100-101). Rivett illustrates that a common characteristic of the punk novels she studies “is the way in which experience is both conceptualized and foregrounded. [...] The concept of experience is one in which punk becomes part of a process through which, by direct participation, identities are formed” (33). The “experience” to which Rivett refers is experience in the punk scene; this experience serves to val-

idate or authenticate the author or text's claim to "punkness." In a more general way, then, we can understand the component of experience in punk writing as stylized experience. The dyke/queer poets/performance discussed below use experience as code to read as resistant, sexy, powerful, and raw. Their work can be read as, to borrow the title phrase from Eileen Myles and Liz Kotz's anthology of lesbian writing, "the new fuck you."

Dyke/queer writers and performers deliver experience in code as a strategy for recognition, as a way to (re)produce the signs which lead to being recognized and accepted as part of a community. Stylized experience, like the "mundane objects—a safety pin, a pointed shoe, a motor cycle" (2) Dick Hebdige points to in his classic *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, negotiates desire and belonging using insider terms, references, objects, and forms that read, like Breedlove's dildo, for example, as "outsider," "as signs of forbidden identity" (3). Dyke/queer punk writing and performance draw the writers and readers into a circle of knowing by using the objects and vernacular(s) of a community raised on punk along with trans/queer, feminist, race, and radical sex politics. While Hebdige bases his analysis on "objects that are made to mean and mean again as 'style' in subculture" (3), my analysis deals primarily with words-as-objects (through the blending of particular dyke/queer vernaculars with dominant language codes) as well as poems-as-objects in order to consider these poets and poems as constructing, and constitutive of, dyke/queer punk style.

While my examination of dyke/queer punk will deal primarily with riot grrrl—the young women's punk movement of the 1990s that brought "together the radical critique of patriarchy and desire for female community of past feminist movements, and the in-your-face, rebellious individualism of punk rock" (Ducombe 66)—it must be noted that the term "punk" has a range of meanings. "Punk" refers to a particular subcultural body, marked by particular style—"that type of person displayed through that hair, clothes, tattoos, piercings, etc." (McKay 63-64)—and simultaneously indicates a type of music and a political and aesthetic movement that, as Stacey Thompson argues, not only has multiple sites of textuality, but also a diverse range of scenes, each functioning differently, sounding and looking differently, making "punk" signify variously (Thompson 3).⁷ Fuchs has noted that "the rejection of dominant cultural forms is a central theme" for contemporary punk movements like queercore and riot grrrl, but that, while punk forms of protest continue to inform these movements, they "are less strictly oppositional, more disruptive" (105) than earlier instantiations of punk.⁸ That is, the emphasis for many queer and feminist punk-influ-

enced artists who came of age in the 1980s and 1990s is not strictly to strike an oppositional stance to dominant forms, but rather to disrupt them in various ways. Dyke/queer disruptive politics/poetics might be best understood as the punk (and that of earlier avant-gardes) practice of *détournement*: these poets approach poetry itself as an “aesthetic artifact,” taking it out of context and diverting it, as Greil Marcus frames it, “into contexts of [their] own devise” (168). The concept of *détournement* insists upon a distinction between oppositional and disruptive practices. While an oppositional tactic may focus on contradicting the status quo with new or counter-information, the disruptive practices of riot grrrl and queercore attempt to rend the status quo by distorting and misappropriating the language (i.e., words-as-objects) and cultural commodities of mainstream, middle-class culture, re-deploying them in unfamiliar contexts so as to expose this language, these commodities, as symptomatic of hetero-capitalism and its manifest injustices.

In the context of a discussion on dyke/queer punk poetics, it should be noted that words-as-objects bore a special place in riot grrrl performances and politics. Thompson notes that “[w]ords such as *bitch*, *dyke*, *feminist*, *whore*, *slut*, and *rape* held special power for riot grrrls” (64), and he reminds us that Kathleen Hanna (lead singer of the bands Bikini Kill and Le Tigre, and oft-cited—though she rejects this label—‘leader’ of the riot grrrl movement) encouraged women to “[w]rite stuff on your hands and arms so that other women will know that you’re into feminist stuff too” (Turner qtd. in Thompson, 64). By hijacking the language of misogyny, feminist punks challenged sexual bigotry (Thompson 65) and, through this tactic of *détournement*, used these words to serve their own needs. These words, now operating like Hebdige’s “mundane objects,” put into this new context, functioned doubly as newly-configured identity markers and as a disruptive political/poetic tactic.⁹

While Clit Lit was not a punk reading/performance series *per se* (and indeed, as the collected work in *Bent* reveals, it was a stage for a whole spectrum of dyke/queer expression), performing a punk-informed reading of Payne, Brown and Salah provides new kinds of access to the politics and aesthetics of work that might otherwise be dismissed by contemporary poetics scholars. For example, Kathryn Payne’s “Champagne Socialism” uses words-as-objects in order to stylize experience that at once marks dyke writing and a political engagement that might be understood as punk:

As if fisting
could cleanse all those

oh-so-classed
 assumptions
 out of us.
 I would not be
 the guilty liberal one
 nor you the angry trash.
 (Bent 7)

The word “fisting,” like the reclaimed and re-contextualized words of the riot grrrl taxonomy, serves to simultaneously include and exclude. While certainly not exclusive to the dyke/queer community, “fisting” connotes a particular non-reproductive kind of sex. The term thus creates a specific audience for the poem: it includes those who know what it is, who have experienced “fisting,” and it excludes those who do not or have not. While not a “mundane” object in Hebdige’s terms, this word-as-object is Payne’s claim to a “forbidden identity”; “fisting” marks her as someone on the inside of dyke/queer sexual experience.

The overtly political nature of “Champagne Socialism” also sets this poem out as a punk-influenced product. The consciousness of class politics and the didactic references to class difference—“the guilty liberal one,” “the angry trash”—draw our attention to the integration of sex and class politics, while the scoring of the poem—the fragmented, mostly single-sentence stanzas—signal that this is supposed to be read as a *poem*. The poem reads as a fantasy, the narrator wishing that her partner could

in your curled up hand
 catch hold
 of my expensive education
 white-collar wardrobe
 & property-owning aspirations.
 Pull them into the air
 to rot with every other product of post-industrial capital.
 (7)

Payne incorporates an aesthetic that engages sex and class politics concurrently: the “curled up hand” is a repeated reference to fisting and “white-collar wardrobe,” “property-owning aspirations,” and “post-industrial capital” mark the language of an aspiring socialist dealing with upper/middle-class guilt. The narrator is hoping for class salvation by having her partner’s “clench[ed]” “work-callused palm,” (7-8) in her “uptight princess cunt” (7). Typical of many postmodern endeavours, Payne’s poetics (as well as Brown and Salah’s, which I will discuss later) resists distinctions

between high and low culture. By blending reclaimed bawdy/body language and polemical rhetoric in a confessional lyric poem, Payne appropriates the form made ubiquitous by Robert Lowell and demands to be read not only as a radical lesbian activist, but also as a poet.

The language of “Champagne Socialism” claims a particular, personal, and coded dyke/queer experience, and yet employing the form of confessional lyric for a performance piece might also be understood as a subversive strategy, bringing the issues of class disparity to a personal level and thus exposing the often concealed class politics within the dyke/queer scene. Payne uses the discourse of experience to take a disruptive stance within the community with whom she shares the “forbidden identity,” which the coded language hides/reveals. Looking beyond the poem to her introductory prose piece, entitled “Barring of the Bathhouse,” we can appreciate Payne’s desire to not only *épater* the bourgeoisie, but the queer bourgeoisie at that:

The next step, I think, is getting over ourselves. Our community is just like any other grouping of folks. We have our own social structures, our stars, our status and our own set of borders. We prefer the familiar, the similar, the already-known. We don’t know how to take the risks of mixing it up. The leather girls play with each other, the artists stand together in their well-put-together-ness, some of us cling to our girlfriends like the floaty-toys in the pool. (6)

Addressing her dissatisfaction with the outcome of a dyke bathhouse, Payne dares her community to integrate sex and politics in its strategies of resistance:

We could be whispering our pride and pleasure to each other while hands move in heat and labia open in wild, willing risk. We could be breaking down the walls of fashion and association, taking strength from the common currents of our desire, flipping a sweet and naked bird at those who would have us forever marinate in shame. (6)¹⁰

It would be fairly easy to claim that “Champagne Socialism” and “Barring of the Bathhouse” lack the kind of nuanced language and metaphor usually associated with serious literature. As Maria Damon has explained, the major critique of “spoken-word-style” poetry—and of populist poetry in general—coming from the “‘language-oriented avant-garde’ dismisses poems like Payne’s because of the tendency toward a utilitarian, semantically overdetermined ‘message,’ in which language is commodified, sub-

ordinated, and consumed as either spectacle or propaganda ('false consciousness'), both of which are considered to be epiphenomenal to 'real poetry'" (328). Payne's straightforward treatment of sex and class politics might be understood as what Robert Garnett has called the "shit-stirring anti-style" (24) of punk aesthetics, which, in the music scene, comes from the DIY ethic that you do not need to be a musician to play punk music, in fact, all the better if you're not. As Lucy O'Brien has noted, "the lack of emphasis on technical expertise meant that many women felt able to enter a world from which they'd previously been excluded" (194). Furthermore, the appeal of punk-style spoken word poetry performed at events like Clit Lit—which itself fosters a punk-like oppositionality to mainstream sexualities and politics—is that it, like punk music, offers an "outlet for that political outrage, that disaffection with the status quo" (O'Brien 196). The "semantically overdetermined message," while not sanctioned in most poetry circles, is *expected* in punk. For example, Bikini Kill (one of the major dyke/queer bands to come out of the riot grrrl scene) performs straightforward, didactic lyrics, which never stray from the political. The opening verse for "Li'l Red," for instance, is a political taunt against sexual harassment:

These are my tits, yeah
And this is my ass
And these are my legs
Watch them walk fuckin' away
These are long nails to scratch out yr eyes.

Similarly, Team Dresch, another riot grrrl outfit, directly confronts homophobia both in the music scene and in society in general:

What do you think cuz I'm not sure whether I didn't get the job (we hired someone else) because my hair's parted on the wrong side or because I'm a flaming s&m rubber dyke (whack!).

Clearly, work that is considered bad poetry might be considered good punk. While not (entirely) making an argument for aesthetic relativism, it strikes me that the challenge of reading work that blends poetic form and punk-style political aesthetics is recognizing that this is a form with its own rules, goals, and genealogy. The reading practice that I propose involves understanding punk-influenced poetics as a hybrid artistic practice, a practice that requires the critical tools to read and teach with flexible and porous alliances to genre and form. Instead of disregarding poems that treat

subject matter didactically, which confront a readership and/or audience in a less-than-subtle way, reading beyond one genre's conventions can provide a useful broadening of criteria. However, instead of simply fishing around until a genre-blend is found that will allow a critic to proclaim a poem "good," this critical practice aims to consider a range of aesthetics in order to avoid neglecting a whole field of contemporary cultural work simply because it does not conform to accepted poetic custom.

Perhaps one of the major criticisms leveled against punk-style poetry (as well as other populist forms) is that it insists upon a direct referentiality between language and its 'real-world' counterpart. Personal experience poems, those which follow a "fairly straightforward narration of a dramatic event" (Damon 331), abound in punk-style poetry. As Rivett has explained, writing from personal experience or *about* personal experience is a central tenet of punk in general, and the main preoccupation of zine-writing—the major literary expression of punk. Initially *zines*, or *fanzines*, were "publications devoted to discussing the intricacies and nuances of a cultural genre" (Ducombe 9). While zines did not originate in punk culture, they were part of the original punk scene in New York in 1976 and, as Stephen Ducombe notes in his study of zine culture, "the punk fanzine was a fixture at every show and in every hip record store" (118). Furthermore, Ducombe explains, zine culture was the main way that the punk DIY ethos spread: "Part of the mission of early punk fanzines, besides spreading news about and interviews with punk bands, was to convince their readers to go out and do it themselves" (118). The DIY philosophy extended from music and band formation to zine production and "[t]his idea that anybody can do it was important to how punks were defining themselves" (118), and resulted in a "celebration of the amateur" (119).

While zines have consistently been important to most, if not all, punk scenes since the 1976 CBGC's scene in New York, the zine culture that developed through the riot grrrl scene is particularly remarkable in relation to the punk literary aesthetics that I am discussing here. While many dyke/queers are not, or never have been, affiliated with the riot grrrl movement, I maintain that the impact of this movement, its politics and aesthetics, is a central influence in much of the dyke/queer literary production of the generation of poets and other writers currently coming to the fore. The provocative performances of someone like Lynn Breedlove, for example, inspire other dykes/queers to take risks on stage and encourage new writers and performers to (as the saying goes) "fuck shit up."

Perhaps the most influential component of the riot grrrl movement on literary culture has been the rants printed in zines, on album covers, and

written on bathroom walls. These rants, which identified what a particular band stood for—their politics and aesthetics rolled into one—abounded in early and mid-90s riot grrrl and continue in spoken word performances today. These rants are most often found in “political zines” or those which blend art and politics and in their own terms, are meant to be “angry, intense, obsessive and anarchistic” (Tiexeira, par. 1). The influence of rant politics is overt in Barbara Brown’s “girls, boys.” Brown exploits the rant form to vent her frustration with gender stereotypes, channeling anger in the flow of her short lines and long pages and in her truncated, infuriated language as she attempts to explain top surgery (breast removal) to her mother:

you say
woman’s knowing is just
too gender typical

but there is something
some space
some, fuck! I don’t know what
that, if it isn’t there
I feel
uneasy
cramped
needing to push myself in
to try to be seen
heard

(216)

These short lines encourage a quick pace, a reading that gains momentum. The language here linguistically enacts the frustration of gender boundaries—“some, fuck! I don’t know what”—breaking the rhythm and speed to express exasperation, typical of this kind of speech act.

As I noted earlier, transgender politics has been perhaps *the* formative issue in young (and old) feminist communities of the past decade. There are few dyke/queer spoken word poets who have been able to resist some form of the “post-reading-*Gender Trouble-or-Gender Outlaw-or-Female Masculinity-or-Boys Like Her*” rant about the problems inherent in a binary gender system.¹¹ Since so many spoken word artists have already proselytized on the liberative potential of genderfuck, the opening phrases of Brown’s poem would signal to a room full of dyke/queers that what was to follow would be a gender-bending rant:¹²

I'm a girl
 I'm a girl
 what does that mean
 in this gender-fucked world
 of girls are pink
 boys are blue
 girls do feelings
 boys do things, stuff
 my soul feels rough and tumble
 longing for gentle touch[.]

(216)

While Clit Lit audiences may not expect that all performances will have had undergone a process of “definitiveness, pre-paration, and pre-selection” (Pratt 117) (as they would expect of a published text, which normally goes through a rigorous editorial review), they do share the expectation that the performances will conform to the standards they have developed throughout their experience at the series. Since Clit Lit is not an open mic series, but rather—as Ruth points out in her introduction—a series that books readers/performers often months in advance while simultaneously encouraging the readings of works-in-progress, a Clit Lit audience would expect a certain degree of raw polish in the performances. That is, they would expect neither someone reading straight from her journal (although that does happen from time to time), nor a poem performed with a full light show. Rather, the expectation is that the performances will be enjoyable *because* they are still a bit rough around the edges (the raw polish). Performances of rants will be evaluated by an audience familiar with the form (i.e., Is this better than the last rant I heard?), especially when this familiarity is prompted by the common introductory apology/warning/promise: “This is a rant.” While it is true that many audience members will simply not be impressed with a rant of any stripe, it is important to note that the rant, like other forms of punk poetry, is a form with its own conventions.

After a show a few years ago, in which there was an abundance of rant-style political poems, an audience member complained to me: “I’m sick of going to shows and getting yelled at for two hours.” Fair enough. However, it must be noted, as Damon has remarked in terms of Slam poetry, that when dealing with popular forms of poetry, and performance poetry in particular, if you are going to engage with these forms, you must “take seriously the criteria of [the poets] [...] themselves” (328). The rant is meant to scratch, not soothe. It is, according to the OED, “a high-flown, extravagant, or bombastic speech or utterance; a piece of turgid declamation; a

tirade” (“rant”). Rants are sometimes (by definition, in fact) tedious and repetitive, especially when (seemingly) an entire generation of performance poets writes and performs a rant for every issue-of-the-month. For this reason the rant is an easy target for critics of political and content-driven spoken word poetry, in much the same way that punk music was criticized in its early days as being not-really music. Rant-influenced poems like Brown’s, however, should challenge critics—as Damon does for critics of Slam poetry—to “listen more closely [...] with more openness, respect for content, and intimacy, [with] [...] ‘soft focus listening,’ in which the overtones and undercurrents of the purported narrative can come to the fore” (330).

Gradually, “girls, boys” transitions from rant to lyric: anger transforms into a desire for understanding, and ultimately, for family acceptance and love. But even as the tone and structure of the poem changes, Brown draws on dyke/queer punk poetics in order to negotiate the fraught emotions and politics of breast removal. Like Payne, she refuses polite language in favour of a more raunchy sensibility, using vulgar terms for sexual anatomy (“cunt,” “dick”), terms which gesture to the symbolic violence of binary gender, and which, in a genderqueer vernacular, insist upon flexible gender categories by bending the strictly definitional sense of these terms:

I stand
awkward

my belly says
go find a woman
a woman
with a cunt or a dick
go find a woman
(218)

The phrase “a woman/ with a cunt or a dick” signals an elastic experience of gender and sexual desire. In particular, “dick” has important semiotic implications: Brown could be referring here to a “bio” woman with a dildo, or a pre-operative transgendered/transsexual woman with a penis. Furthermore, by repeating the word “woman” three times in this short stanza, Brown overtly resists anti-trans feminism and insists that one might have either a “cunt or a dick” and still be a woman.

Brown’s next stanza returns to the main theme of the poem: breasts and gender construction.

My breasts
they're beautiful
the perfect size
according to white western body myth
36B
round, firm
sweet areolae
pink on white

(218)

The emphasis on the “white western body myth” performs a similar political function to Payne’s anti-capitalist rhetoric. Brown’s description of her breasts mimics the idealized language typical of popular (for example, women’s magazines) descriptions of breasts. Rather than alluding to the ideological nature of body image politics through metaphor, Brown confronts the issue directly, using phraseology more typical of a political treatise than a conventional poem. The choice to use this direct language is reminiscent of riot grrrl aesthetics. As Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo note, “Riot Grrrls are loud and, through zines, music, and spoken word, express themselves honestly and straightforwardly. Riot Grrrl does not shy away from difficult issues and often addresses painful topics such as rape and abuse” (810). Brown’s “straightforwardness” makes her accessible, which, as an extension of the DIY ethic, might encourage other women to write about their experiences.

Like Brown’s “girls, boys,” Trish Salah’s “Teenage Trans Vamp” uses punk poetics to vocalize transgender desires. Unlike Payne and Brown, however, Salah’s poem includes linguistic cues to punk living, which alert punk-familiar readers/audiences to a punk style and energy:

In the donut shop
we argue over which of us
should wear the dog collar
go down on the other.
In a room full of cops [.]

(15)

The “dog collar” is a typical punk accessory, indicating, as Lauraine Leblanc notes, the punk convention of using “inversion to create style.” A dog-collar, for example, is worn to indicate the “glorif[ication] of anything that connoted low status” (40). The image of two young punks talking dirty in a donut shop “full of cops” can be read as a classic punk maneuver which mobilizes a kitbag of “mockery, irony, and parody” to protest “against the

constraints imposed by conventional norms” (41). Moreover, Salah describes sartorial choices like signifying gems, or as those “mundane” objects that Hebdige describes, in order to indicate “simultaneously [...] membership in the subculture, solidarity with other punks, identification with the subculture, and disaffiliation with mainstream culture” (40). Salah’s poem goes on to describe the narrator’s appearance that night: “You gunk up my face and put me in your dress, / ripped fishnets. I look awful” (15). The guttural vernacular of “gunk” here highlights the quotidian experience of this “Teenage Trans Vamp.” Furthermore, “gunk,” “ripped fishnets,” and “I look awful,” connote an anti-style that conjures a punk mentality of “contraven[ing] social standards in an effort to challenge the integrity of the culture that produced them” (Leblanc 41).¹³ The “ripped fishnets” are another symbol of a punk dress code: Hebdige observes that fishnet stockings have long been associated with punk attire (108), and anything worn ripped, usually deliberately (notice they are ripped before she puts them on), signifies (at the time of the poem, 1987) a challenge to middle-class codes of appropriate attire, or, as Hebdige notes, “what Vivien Westwood called ‘confrontation dressing’” (107). The lines,

[...] I cut my face
in the bathroom mirror. You suck the glass out,
smoke me up and promise
someday I’ll have tits like yours.

(15)

provide context that is at once an expression of hardcore antipathy and irony and simultaneously tender and sympathetic, suggestive of the emotional pain associated with body/gender dysphoria. Trans and punk politics here coincide. Salah’s combination of punk and transgender codes means that the poem is read as an altogether “outsider” narrative. Politics, love and sex collide in a montage of found images, giving the impression of young punks reeling around the streets of Montreal:

Love, the collusion of teethlike needles
cutting up the backroom of the Café Commune,
velveteen seats, piles of pamphlets from the rally.
The sleaze gets me hot,
too much like work, you say.
I take my pills, the depression rolls
over the futon, I say my mantra:
idon’twannadieidon’twannadieidon’twannadieidon’twannadieidon’twannadie

You kick me out of bed—obviously, the futon—
 it's okay I masturbate in lunar cycles.
 Who's on thee floor tonight?
 The working assumption.
 After I give him head, and you, her
 in some artguy's loft
 I push you downstairs.
 Not jealous just unable to fathom
 why are you so nice to me?
 [...]
 My uncle, the cop, drives us home.

(16)

Love and politics blur in the beginning lines of the passage, setting up a narrative pieced together from bizarre and seemingly tragic details: the teenager on anti-depressants, apparently anonymous oral sex, which may or may not be for money, may or may not refer to “my uncle” a few lines down, heartbreak and self-loathing, blended with casual acceptance (“it’s okay I masturbate in lunar cycles”) are details which present a confusing, chaotic snapshot sequence of what resistance to middle-class notions of decency might look like. The poem itself is a defiant act, refusing coherence in the same way that the young characters flout social norms.

While the details of “Teen Trans Vamp” read as punk, use shock-value as a kind of defamiliarization, Salah also uses figurative language effectively, thus blending the aesthetics of punk with some conventional poetic moves. The refrain, “I masturbate in lunar cycles,” which is the first line of the poem and is repeated later, gestures toward a menstrual cycle and indicates both an affinity for a prototypical “female” experience, and an ironic distance from it; if the poem were to begin “I *menstruate* in lunar cycles” we would be in for a very different poetic experience. Salah’s astute use of the almost-homophone “*masturbate*” encourages an aural double-take, linking the images/experiences through misrecognition and insisting upon a transgendered identity that is both alike and different from normative (reproductive) definitions of female-ness. Like the political, social, and linguistic challenges issued in Payne’s “Champagne Socialism” and Brown’s “girls, boys,” Salah uses punk’s disruptive linguistic tactics to vex middle-class, heteronormative standards of decency and aesthetics.

The “uniformly basic and direct” (Hebdige 109) aesthetics of punk style, as they are embodied in recent dyke/queer poetry, performs an important intervention in Canadian poetry. In the same way that not all

linguistic challenges issued in Payne's "Champagne Socialism" and Brown's "girls, boys," Salah uses punk's disruptive linguistic tactics to vex middle-class, heteronormative standards of decency and aesthetics.

The "uniformly basic and direct" (Hebdige 109) aesthetics of punk style, as they are embodied in recent dyke/queer poetry, performs an will will be. However, the use of punk strategies of resistance has, for instance, provided a context in which dyke/queer poets—like Breedlove, Payne, Brown, Salah and others—can voice the contiguities and instabilities of desire, experience and politics. The ironic distance of punk permits poets to play with the boundaries of identity, sometimes claiming categories, sometimes disavowing them. By enacting a disruptive punk stance, these poets intercept the mundane language of identity politics, heteronormative capitalism, and contemporary life in general, making it "mean and mean again."

Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Inside/OUT Speakers' Series at the University of Alberta. Thanks to organizers Kris Wells and Marjorie Wonham for inviting me to present this work and to the audience that evening for their generous feedback. Thanks also to Amber Dean and Mary Pinkoski who listened and hashed out this paper with me in various stages. Finally, thanks to two anonymous referees and to Andrew Lesk for providing attentive and patient readings.

- 1 Ann Cvetkovich and Cynthia Fuchs have both commented on Breedlove's performances. See Cvetkovich's *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures*. (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2003) 4-88, and Fuchs (105). Cvetkovich has also made the connection between punk and dyke poetry in her note on Sister Spit (309 n. 46).
- 2 The most famous case of a transsexual/transgendered woman being denied full participation in a woman-only space in Vancouver is the ongoing case of Kimberly Nixon v. The Vancouver Rape Relief and Women's Shelter. However, other spaces in Vancouver dealt with the issue in a range of ways. The Vancouver Lesbian Connection, for example, closed after losing a Human Rights suit filed by a transgendered woman who was denied access. The Michigan Womyn's Festival is another famous example of a woman-only space that has had trouble dealing with trans people in its access policies. As Trish Salah, (whose poetry I will discuss later) notes, Clit Lit was "remarkable" and anomalous in the dyke/feminist world, because of its acceptance of trans women. Salah notes:

I've read on a lot of different stages, published in a variety of places, many of them marked as queer/feminist or women's in one way or another, and usually I've had to fight to do so, or at least I've had to bare teeth to write a not-too-polite letter. This is because I am transsexual and because non-transsexuals, particularly queers and feminists, have been, by and large, rather uncomfortable accepting us transsexuals among their ranks. Those of us who've wanted to be counted amongst them, that is. So it is very refreshing to perform in a space that is recognizably, markedly a queer wom-

en's space for making literature, and not have any grief about it. Whatsoever. Quite the reverse. (14)

- 3 A note on identity: I am using the term "dyke/queer," which I hope is adequately inclusive and embraces the groups most affiliated with the poets/poetry at hand. The term "dyke" is too narrow for it can (although does not always) imply an acceptance of the binary gender construct, and "queer" is too broad because, while it has the semiotic capacity to mean folks from all genders and bent sexual orientations, it fails to provide the kind of specificity I am looking for here. The text in question, *Bent on Writing*, is produced within a community principally comprised of people either born as women, those assigned the sex "male" at birth but who have become, or are becoming, women or trans-women, those who were assigned the sex "female" at birth and become men or something in-between, and/or folks who sometimes dress or identify as women/girls/grrrls, and participate in this diverse community. So when I use the term "woman" here, I mean it in the most flexible and porous possible way, and yet I also need to distinguish this community from straight communities and those queer communities mostly populated by gay men (which is also a problematically limited category but not one I can take up here).
- 4 Clit Lit itself might be understood to have engaged in punk resistance to capitalist mercantilism. Ruth explains that "[s]ometimes I pass around a donation jar with the words "Fund for Thought" taped on to help offset the cost of photocopying. Other than this, the event has always been free, and that is important to me" (x). Ruth's choice to not benefit financially from the series is consistent with the practices of many (but certainly not all) punk organizers (like Hilly Kristal of New York's CBGBs, for example) who have presented bands for free or for a minimal door charge. Commenting on Kristal's original practice of charging one dollar to see early punk bands like Television and The Ramones, Stacy Thompson notes "[t]he fact that the bands and Kristal were not making much money, allowed for the possibility that both audiences and bands gathered at CBGBs for predominantly noneconomic reasons. The audience did not solely come to purchase entertainment, and the musicians did not come solely to earn a living" (11). It should be noted, however, that "establishing a realm not wholly conditioned by economics" (Thompson 10) is less remarkable in the literary world than in the world of music.
- 5 Kathy Acker's oeuvre is probably the most well-known example of dyke punk writing.
- 6 As Gary Clarke has noted, many young people (and those not so young) "draw on particular elements of subcultural style and create their own meanings and uses of them" (92) without ever becoming entirely immersed. See: "Defending Ski Jumpers: A Critique of Theories of Youth Subcultures," *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, eds. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London: Routledge, 1990) 81-96.
- 7 See Thompson's first chapter, "Let's Make a Scene," for a detailed description of what he identifies as punk's seven major scenes (9-79).
- 8 While I will not be specifically addressing the politics and aesthetics of queercore, it is important to note this important influence on punk and punk-influenced writing. As Michael du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman note (following Ki Namaste), "[i]n creating a compound of 'queer' or 'homo' and 'hardcore,' queercore and homocore not only signaled their allegiances to post-punk subculture, but also positioned themselves as equally distinct from lesbian and gay culture and the masculinist tendencies of hardcore punk" (para. 13). See: "Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture," *College Literature*. 24:1 (Feb. 1997). *Academic Search Premier*. 10 September 2005. <<http://weblinks1.epnet.com>>. There is a significant overlap in the usage of "queercore" and "riot grrrl." Many bands, zines, etc. that have been slotted into the riot grrrl camp, can also be considered queercore. In fact, there is now (and, to some extent, always has been) some resistance to the riot grrrl label. Most of this resistance has to do with the mass-media coverage of the movement, which diluted the message (Revolution Grrrl-

Style Now!) and ultimately resulted in the patronizing “Girl Power” conglomerate. The current associations of riot grrrl lead many feminists to distance themselves from the movement as a whole without considering the radical and revolutionary tenets of the original movement. Perhaps the movement that most resonates now, although it is not as strictly punk as riot grrrl, is Ladyfest: a network of festivals featuring work by women artists, which might best be explained as riot grrrl all grown up.

- 9 These words-as-objects also function as commodities within the riot grrrl subculture, indicating a specialized kind of ‘hipness,’ which Sarah Thornton calls “subcultural capital”. Functioning as subcultural capital, then, these words-as-objects, in Thornton’s terms “confer...status on [their owners]...in the eyes of the relevant beholder” (11). See Thornton’s *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital*, (Hanover and London: UP of New England, 1996).
- 10 The Pussy Palace, a dyke bathhouse in Toronto, was raided by police in 2001. Charges, which were ultimately dismissed, were laid against the organizers, but as Payne notes in her introduction, “the court case, still going at the time of the next bathhouse night, seemed to make the atmosphere, well, restrained” (2).
- 11 This impulse is perhaps inevitable given the revolutionary power of these texts and the galvanizing effect that transgender issues have had on queer and feminist art and politics. See: Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Kate Bornstein, *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us* (New York: Vintage, 1995); Judith Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*. (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1998); Taste This, *Boys Like Her: Transfictions* (Vancouver: Press Gang, 1998). In particular, *Boys Like Her* has been perhaps the most formative dyke/queer text to come from Canada in the past decade. Taste This members and *Boys Like Her* co-authors, Anna Camilleri, Ivan E. Coyote, Zoë Eakle and Lyndell Montgomery, exemplify a punk-influenced narrative style for this generation of Canadian dyke/queer writers.
- 12 While the term “genderfuck” is common parlance in most North American (and perhaps beyond) queer communities, it has not yet been institutionalized in the OED. However, *Wikipedia*, the open-source on-line encyclopedia provides a passable definition:

Genderfuck is a [gender performance](#) which “fucks with” or plays with traditional [gender identities](#), [gender roles](#), and [gender presentation](#), and often also with [sexism](#) and anti-gay bias. It is also defined as a relationship with [gender](#), making love to gender and its [performance](#) (Smith). Examples include [androgyny](#), [drag kings](#), [cross-dressing](#), [effeminacy](#) in [men](#), [masculinity](#) in [women](#), etc. (“Genderfuck.” Feb. 9, 2006. Wikipedia: The Free Encyclopedia. 2 March 2006.<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Genderfuck>>)
- 13 It is important to note the ambiguity of Salah’s phrase, “I look awful.” For example, one might read the line as an instance of hindsight, the older Salah mocking the punk aesthetic of the 1980s, or as a self-deprecation, whereby the young Salah is critical of her inability to transform into a woman/girl. Alternately, the phrase could simply be fetishizing the punk look, reveling in this moment when she deliberately choose to “look awful” as a subversive tactic.

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