

“FREE PUSSY RIOT!” & RIOT GRRRLSM: INTERNATIONAL SOLIDARITY, OR THE INCORPORATION OF THE ‘EASTERN OTHER’ INTO NORTH/WESTERN DISCOURSES? ¹

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses some of the recent solidarity projects in support of the Russian feminist activist group Pussy Riot within the global North/West. It will be shown that the described solidarity projects follow and reproduce ideas of tolerance that produce ‘Westernness’ as progressive and ‘Easternness’ as backward. At the heart of such processes of the reproduction of this power imbalanced East/West dichotomy lies the ascription of a feminist punk identity to the Russian art and activist collective. This political countercultural—however ‘North/Western’—identity and reference to the international queer-feminist punk and/or riot grrrl movement, which emerged within the US and North/Western Europe during the 1990s, will be further examined. It will be argued that such discourses subsume Pussy Riot within North/Western meanings and ignores important aspects of the Russian feminist collective’s activism and art. Furthermore, the well meant support by queer-feminist activists risks becoming a strategy of prolonging North/Western hegemony.

When the three Pussy Riot activists—Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich—were arrested and charged with “hooliganism” in March 2012, North/Western² European and US media quickly started reporting about the “feminist punk band.”³ The reports, state officials and people of popular culture agreed that the legal means against the group were a severe case of human rights violation. What fueled the media ruckus were firstly spectacular gestures by stars like pop-singer Madonna or Lady Gaga, but later also demonstrations of solidarity by activists in North/Western Europe and North America, who had started rioting the streets and producing art and music, creating a new movement under the slogan “Free Pussy Riot.”

Between March 2012 and December 2013⁴ North/Western discourses were signified by intense affects and affective politics of solidarity, despite the lack of any prior personal relations to Pussy Riot, or any other Russian based activists for that matter, by its protagonists. Considering the more d.i.y. and activist-oriented solidarity projects, it seemed that the most

¹ The content of this article was developed in discussions with Masha Neufeld. I want to thank her for her critical comments and inputs as well as her help with translations of Russian language.

² The terms and concepts of the “North/West” and the “East” are highly problematic, always relational and perpetuating unequal power relations. With reference to Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizelińska (2011, 2012) we emphasize that a clear and unambiguous definition of the terms seems impossible; nevertheless, “it seems inescapable to use them, while they persist in their abundance of historical, cultural, political, geographical, ideological, and other meanings” (Kulpa/ Mizelińska/Stasinska 2012: 137).

³ For example in the US Guardian (August 17, 2012), the UK Spectator (Sewell 2012), or the Austrian Standard (Höller 2012).

⁴ The month Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina were granted amnesty by the Russian authorities.

intense and loudest acts of solidarity came from the international (pop-)punk and riot grrrl networks.⁵ A review of mainstream and independent media coverage gives the impression that migrant groups with Russian origins were either more hesitant or silenced in the process of creating and representing the movement. In interviews with mainstream media, as well as independent media and new media, activists—like popular and public figures—addressed Pussy Riot with the labels “feminist punk band,” “musicians” and “riot grrrls.” Such labeling localizes and understands Pussy Riot within a North/Western framework of meanings that ignores their specific socio-political circumstances and oversees their specific art forms and political messages. Moreover, such labeling includes Pussy Riot into North/Western discourses of tolerance, human rights and modernity.

North/Western media, officials and public figures based their solidarity on this problematic ascription of Pussy Riot to North/Western values and ideologies, and ironically verify thereby binary assumptions of North/Western tolerance and Eastern intolerance. Subcultural protagonists, especially queer-feminist (pop-)punk protagonists and riot grrrls additionally confirm this incorporation of Pussy Riot into North/Western value politics, by basing their solidarity on an (assumed) common political-identity and similarity, namely a punk and/or riot grrrl-identity.

My article examines the nature and characteristics of the reference from Pussy Riot international queer-feminist punk and/or riot grrrl movement, which emerged within the US and North/Western Europe during the 1990s. I am wondering how and why Pussy Riot—out of all activists and artists active in and around of the December 2011 protests⁶— became a symbol for the formation of new and very intense emotional support for Russian feminists, as well as lesbians, gays and transgender. Moreover, I ask which role the music and artistic form of (queer) feminist punk play in all of the solidarity actions. I examine the knowledge and political discourses North/Western queer-feminist activists produce and mobilize by incorporating Pussy Riot into riot grrrl and other progressive punk circles. I am interested in the question of how (queer-)feminist concepts like riot grrrl enable global solidarity, and at which price. I show that North/Western Europe and US analysis examined Pussy Riot from a North/Western set of understandings which rendered invisible the Russian signifiers, politics and approaches inherent in Pussy Riot. Furthermore, such discourses subsumed Pussy Riot within North/Western understandings. This new interest in and support for Russian feminists, lgbtqs and other oppressed, risks becoming a strategy of prolonging North/Western hegemony, by reproducing concepts of Eastern otherness/similarity, and North/Western progress.

⁵ The riot grrrl movement emerged as a feminist intervention into the hardcore punk scenes in Olympia and Washington D.C. around the year 1990. Since the 1990s the movement has been taken up in many places within the US, Canada, Western and Central Europe. Although the movement varies from location to location, it is strongly connected to feminist empowerment, punk rock music and a do-it-yourself ideology.

⁶ In December 2011 protests started criticizing the Russian legislative election process, which many political activists, journalists and Russian citizens considered to be flawed. People demonstrated for fair elections, and additionally criticized the then ruling party, United Russia, led by Vladimir Putin, who announced his running for President at the same time.

My preliminary hypothesis is that the solidarity activism, including queer-feminist pop-punk and riot grrrl activism in the US, Great Britain, Germany, and Austria, is based and probably dependent on a misinterpretation of Pussy Riot as Russian riot grrrls. Furthermore, identifying a US or North/Western political identity—a riot grrrl or punk feminist—in “the Eastern Other” creates a feeling of solidarity and incorporates Pussy Riot into North/Western discourses, that reestablish North/Westernness as progressive and Russianness as backward. While appreciating the intention to support Pussy Riot, most existing solidarity actions are based on an assumed shared gender, sex and political- or other identity. Besides the obvious limits to such politics, such activism projects North/Western concepts on the “Eastern other” rather than supporting their causes. Before analyzing some articles and lyrics that I find significant for trends within the broader solidarity movement,⁷ I will briefly refresh everyone’s memory of Pussy Riot.

PUSSY RIOT’S HISTORY WRITING

Pussy Riot is a “Russian feminist performance art group formed in October 2011,”⁸ that organized illegal punk performances on a prison roof, the red square—in front of the Kremlin—and recently on an oil drill. The topics of their performances are political persecution, gender inequality, homophobia, class-inequality as well as racism, capitalism, exploitation and pollution within and by contemporary Russian society and especially through and by the state. They always perform wearing balaclavas and brightly colored feminine clothes.

The North/Western world had no idea about Pussy Riot’s existence until May 2012, when Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Yekaterina Samutsevich, were arrested and incarcerated for their performance of the “punk prayer” in the Russian Orthodox Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow, on February 21st. Within North/Western media coverage Tolokonnikova, Alyokhina, and Samutsevich became synonymous with the large anonymous collective Pussy Riot, as their spectacular trial was featured in every detail. When they became convicted of “hooliganism” and Tolokonnikova, and Alyokhina were sentenced to two years in a prison camp, North/Western Europe and the US were outraged, regarding this as a human rights violation. “Global press coverage was quick to describe the conflict in classic terms: believers against atheists, nationalists against internationalists, or the liberal intelligentsia against the conservative narod (people),” as Anya Bernstein (2013: 221) has rightly pointed out in her recent article on public discourses around the Pussy Riot trial. Bernstein emphasizes that the local debates inside of Russia ran along different, less dichotomous lines, than the global, and especially North/Western European and US press would suggest (Bernstein 2013: 221). Arguably, North/Western media did not only not consider inner-Russian discourses carefully or appropriately, but also use North/Western language and labels to describe and analyze Pussy Riot as well as the reactions they provoked. Mainstream media from the Guardian (Aug 17,

⁷ The method applied is a discourse analysis.

⁸ <http://freepussyriot.org/about> (November 5, 2013)

2012) to the New York Times (Aug 17, 2013), the Spectator (Sewell 2012) to the Austrian Der Standard (Höller 2012) interpreted Pussy Riot as feminist punk band, preferably quoting analysts sure of having a Russian version of rebellious punk grrrls in front of them. The International New York Times for example, cited Spencer Ackerman who congratulated Pussy Riot for attracting “international attention to the paranoid repression of Vladimir Putin’s Russia” and “foresaw a future for punk as a global force for justice and freedom, after the genre’s largely unsuccessful record in disrupting corrupt and authoritarian governments, corporations, and other structures of international power” (Morris 2012).

This quote suggests, that many analysts were more eager to find a live sign of North/Western punk in Pussy Riot rather than looking closely at their politics. It seems only logical then that North/Western media additionally started reporting about solidarity actions by queer-feminist punk and pop-punk musicians and activists in North/Western Europe and the US. To enrich their reports—avoiding to consult a Russian translator—many writers included some details about the queer-feminist punk and riot grrrl movement as well, often starting and ending with Kathleen Hanna and her Olympia based band Bikini Kill from the 1990s (e.g. Rucker 2012). Journalists approached queer-feminist musicians and riot grrrls frequently for interviews about their solidarity actions. In many interviews, activists addressed Pussy Riot as feminist punk musicians and riot grrrls, and argued that their solidarity is partly based on this (assumed) group affiliation and shared politics (e.g. Samson qtd. in Gensler 2012). Riot grrrls like JD Samson (MEN, Le Tigre), Tobi Vail (Bikini Kill), Johanna Fateman (Le Tigre), Kim Gordon (Sonic Youth), or Marissa Paternoster (Screaming Females) published press releases and produced a large amount of poetry, music and art pieces, in most of them referring to Pussy Riot as feminists, musicians, riot grrrls or punks.

It is impossible to tell, and probably unimportant, who started addressing Pussy Riot as riot grrrls. The fact is that riot grrrl-identified people as well as the mainstream media started making this connection. It seems that the reference between North/Western riot grrrlism and Pussy Riot is significant to understand the ongoing reproduction of North/Western hegemonies and Eastern otherness through solidarity discourses. Hence, the identity label riot grrrl as a political identity under which activists undertake their solidarity activism, as well as the reference from Pussy Riot to the broader thriving international queer-feminist punk and/or riot grrrl movement which sprung up within the US and Western Europe during the 1990s will be reexamined in the following.

Many solidarity actions and protests by queer-feminist activists in the global North/West left the impression that the identification of Pussy Riot as riot grrrls motivated solidarity actions as much as the state orchestrated injustice, and were crucial in causing the very emotional forms of protests. The quick identification of Pussy Riot as punk band, without considering their reference to Russian Art and Actionism, for example Kazimir Malevich, connects the group to North/Western values. This interpretation, however, speaks more to the North/Western bias of most analysis than to Pussy Riots performances and interests. Thus, labeling Pussy Riot as

feminist punk band or riot grrrls is a way of westernizing them, to detach the group and their political values from the rest of Russia. This 'Westernizing' must be understood as a tendency of stabilizing North/West hegemony. The rhetoric at play shows some familiarity with cold war rhetoric, which stabilizes notions of a progressive free North/West and a regressive, backward and authoritarian East. Interestingly, this familiar stabilization of the free North/West against authoritarian/unfree East is newly combined with the question of religion.⁹ Many examples of feminist and queer-feminist solidarity projects are very bluntly anti-religious and interpret Pussy Riot as anti-religious as well.¹⁰ This seems especially interesting from a queer-feminist perspective, as the question of religion is a hot topic in the radical underground due to anti-muslim discourses within the US and Europe, a sentiment shared by many mainstream lgbt groups and individuals. Many queer-feminist punks and riot grrrls as well as academics like Jasbir Puar, or Chandan Reddy criticize such discourses as forms of homonationalism (Puar 2007, Reddy 2011). These scholars argue that North/Western ideologies include white (male) homosexuals into concepts of the nation and grant them citizenship privileges, like the right to marry etc. to promote North/Western nations as tolerant and progressive in contrast to racialized others. Connected to this North/Western tolerance and liberalism is an enlightened democratic secularism, against the authoritarian religious (especially muslim, but also Russian Orthodox) conservatism (Puar 2007).

The interesting question is why groups and movements that are usually very careful to avoid making a connection between a religion they did not grow up with, like Islam, and homophobia, simplistically assign homophobia to Russian Orthodoxy. The simplistic focus on Russian Orthodoxy as source and reason for homophobia and sexism in the Russian context, and master mind behind the violence against Pussy Riot overlook local gender hegemonies, discourses on protest culture, freedom of speech, the prison complex, reproduction and family etc. that should be equally considered within the Pussy Riot case. Moreover, such focus speaks to Nikita Dhawan's (2013), Linda Alcoff's and John Caputo's (2011) thesis "that the Cold War's 'communism versus capitalism' opposition has been displaced by the secularism-religion divide," that this replacement is first an ideological one and not necessarily based on historical events and politics, and "sexuality is being mobilized on both sides" (Dhawan 2013: 192) that are played against each other.

'Free Pussy Riot' and activism opposing 'anti-gay propaganda law,'¹¹¹² are participating in such biased ideological discourses. Many of these biases originate in the attempt to literally

⁹ The construction of a binarism connecting authoritarianism and religiousness against democracy, secularism and punk ideology can be seen in Sophia Kishkovsky's article in The New York Times from 20 March 2012 titled "Punk Riffs Take on God and Putin" for example.

¹⁰ A widely known example of the interpretation of Pussy Riot as anti-religious was executed by the FEMEN activist Inna Shevchenko on 17 August 2012 in Kiev. The topless FEMEN activist brought down a big wooden cross in front of a Orthodoxy Christian church, — which by the way was Greek and not even Russian— the words "Free Riot" written on her chest (see the video at theguardian.com, 17 August 2012).

¹¹ Since July 2013 a federal law bans the 'promotion' or 'propaganda' of homosexuality to minors (people under the age of 18), the law that is said to protect children from pornography and other information 'harmful' to them. An exact definition of what is to be understood as 'propaganda' is however not included

translate non-North/Western activism into English language as Russian kvir theorists and activists like Vera Akulova (2013) and Masha Neufeld, as well as scholars working in the context of Central- and Eastern Europe like Robert Kulpa (2011), Joana Miezelska (2011 and 2012), or Tea Hvala (2012) have pointed out. In the search for the next best word to describe Pussy Riot's activism and art, North/Western analysts identified their reference to the riot grrrl movement and punk rock and used these familiar concepts to designate the group as such and forever. They did not have any second thoughts, so it seems, about the fact that methods, forms, concepts and labels change according to the context they become used in and to the specific individuals working with those methods, forms, concepts and labels.

THE INCORPORATION OF PUSSY RIOT INTO THE NORTH / WESTERN PUNK POLITICS AND RIOT GRRRLISM

Russian scholar and feminist activist Vera Akulova, argues the labels 'punk,' 'feminist punk,' or 'activists' group, as well as 'performance art group' which the media reports attached to Pussy Riot all misrepresent the form and format 'Pussy Riot' and labels them "media artists" (Akulova 2013: 279). Especially the labels 'punk band' and 'activists' bother critical commentators like Akulova. While I in contrast to Akulova still hold on to the label 'performance art and activist group' and understand the performances of Pussy Riot as feminist activism, I share her view that the identification of Pussy Riot as punk band is a misidentification of the group as the feminist punk or riot grrrl movement. An example and arguably one of the first of such misrepresentations, which should cement the label 'punk,' was by Amy Scholder, editor of the book "Pussy Riot! A Punk Prayer for Freedom" that provided a (controversial) translation of lyrics, the court statements of the three incarcerated Pussy Riot members, as well as comments by US based queer-feminist artists, academics, musicians and activists. The book, which was translated into German, and other languages introduces Pussy Riot as "Russian feminist punk collective" (Penny, in Scholder 2013:1). Even before, in April 2012, the group Riot Grrrl United suggested this identity by declaring August 17, 2012, the day the court announced the verdict, to be the international day of solidarity for Pussy Riot through new media platforms like facebook, twitter and so on. The group announced that "Riot Grrrls and allies around the world [should] demand the release of Maria Alyokhina, Yekaterina Santsevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova"¹³ on that day. Approximately at the same time, JD Samson, queer-feminist punk and riot grrrl icon additionally suggested the connection to riot grrrl politics, by organizing a reading involving other riot grrrl musicians like Johanna Fateman as well as queer-feminist celebrities like Justin Vivian Bond or Eileen Myles, "who read from Pussy Riot court statements,

in the law, which leaves it up to the execution and judges if and to what degree such act has been encountered.

¹² I am mentioning these the two political discourses together, because most media reports as well as activist actions combine the political agendas, opposing the incarceration and prosecution of Pussy Riot as well as the anti-gay propaganda laws.

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/events/314311478624378/> (April 21, 2012), (emphasis in the original)

letters from prison, songs, and, of course, the Punk Prayer” (Scholder quoted in Fitzpatrick 2012) in New York City, for August 16, 2012.¹⁴

Supported by mainstream media reports as well as the riot grrrl and punk counterculture, especially (queer-)feminist punks and pop-punks, like Alice Bag, Bruce LaBruce, the band Rape Revenge (all in Neu 2013), Peaches¹⁵ and many more, started analyzing Pussy Riot’s artistic and activist forms and produced essays, art pieces, music and videos in solidarity with them. It should be emphasized again that to criticize the simple identification of Pussy Riot as feminist punk band is not to say, that Pussy Riot did not make a reference to riot grrrl and punk performances in their protest projects. Akulova notes that Pussy Riot indeed “used formal techniques inherited from riot grrrl, which was obviously one of the reasons behind their popularity and mass support in the North/West” (2013: 280). However, their oeuvre is much better described as “media art—rather than music,” she continues. “In each of their works, the final product was not simply the performance itself (some of them were filmed in fragments and in different locations), but in blog posts published by the group. These posts included text, photos, and specially edited videos. [T]hese materials [...] have not been properly considered outside of Russia” (Akulova 2013: 280).

North/Western feminists, riot grrrls and punk activists identified the artistic adaptation or conceptual reference from Pussy Riot to their artistic formats like punk music, offensive and feminist lyrics etc. However, they concluded that this reference was identity politics and a political statement with feminist riot grrrl content (without specifying what that meant). In other words, they reasoned that Pussy Riot were riot grrrls, feminists and punks, just like themselves. Being a riot grrrl within the US and North/Western European context means rebellion against (North/Western) gender roles within youth and the music cultures, where females are rather ‘decoration’ than actors and is a broadly understood form of feminist emancipatory politics (see Marcus 2010; Nehring 1997; Wiedlack 2011). Arguably, musicians like Peaches, JD Samson and the band MEN, read Pussy Riot’s art and activism within this set of meanings, as feminist punk rebellion against gender roles and norms, without knowing what Russian gender roles were, if the performance was a rebellion against local gender norms and in what way, or why. Anyhow, they produced punk and pop-punk music and music videos to express their solidarity with the (what they believed to be a) Russian feminists punk band.

Pussy Riot members on the other hand have pointed out many times that, although they choose punk style and punk-styled performances as their preferred art form at the moment, they are not a band. In an interview on <http://pussy-riot.livejournal.com/>, they explain that they have decided to use punk rock and illegal performances, because they were looking for a spectacular, ironic and provocative form, a form, which was not smoothly to be integrated into the conservative sphere of mainstream media. They wanted to be as visible as possible and

¹⁴ Gensler, A, ‘JD Samson On NYC’s Free Pussy Riot Event, The Riot Grrrl Movement, Band’s ‘Courage and Strength.’ *Huffington Post*. www.huffingtonpost.com (August 14, 2012).

¹⁵ Peaches. (2013). “Free Pussy Riot.” Hugs And Kisses--Tender To All Gender. Digital Album. Trikont.

punk seemed to be the perfect format and brightly colored balaclavas the perfect attire. However, it was important to explain that they did not understand themselves as punk band.

Ignoring these self-representations music critic Everette True in *Overland* Nr. 209 localized Pussy Riot and their art/activism within North/Western punk knowledge and history in the five page article about Pussy Riot called “Me and Pussy Riot.” Although she observed that Pussy Riot’s performances are as much “rock’n’roll” and punk rock, as they are “street theatre, performance art, protest and flash mobs” and that “none of those terms really hit the mark.” (2012: 7), she nevertheless localized Pussy Riot within a Western canon of feminist punk bands inbetween “Crass, [...] Bikini Kill, [...] Dutch insurrectionists, [as well as] The Ex ...”, (ibid.), all landmarks of punk history from the end of the 1970s to the mid 1990s.

Notwithstanding the importance and urgency of these well-meant interpretations and solidary actions, a critical engagement with the omissions of such incomplete or miss-interpretations of Pussy Riot as ‘Eastern Riot Grrrls’ is indispensable. A critical enquiry is needed, because the focus on riot grrrl overlooks the reference to the earlier artistic forms of Russian Actionism in Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer.” Furthermore, the label riot grrrl subscribes Pussy Riot to a set of political values and beliefs that they do not communicate in their songs. For one, the design or concept of Pussy Riot’s political performances is much more an intervention into public space, than an actual punk concert. It is meant to disrupt everyday life, offend and provoke. Although most punk concerts, especially queer-feminist punk concerts are partly also about all of that, the latter are also much about sound, music, queer-feminist punk community, and enjoyment. Through the references to riot grrrls and punk, Pussy Riot get incorporated into a North/Western canon of rebellious musicians. Many analysts, like Everette True, use North/Western knowledge to explain Pussy Riot. True compares Pussy Riot with “Crass and The Ex [..., two] politicised bands with a leaning towards anarchist beliefs,” and

[T]he power of the collective. [...] Bikini Kill is the obvious one. The connection between the two bands is obvious, both musically and politically. Female. Empowered. Confrontational. Determined. Even now, especially now, it seems there's still a perceived right and wrong way to play a guitar, record a song, how to make your instruments sound: an idea rooted in fifty years of male expression. Pussy Riot's music is so charged with emotion and intelligence and humour and—yes, catchy as shit choruses—that it's an insult to label it as anything other than music. (True 2012: 7)

Pussy Riot’s choice of protest form and art made it understandable for North/Western—especially North/Western queer-feminist—eyes as protest. However, Pussy Riot are not concerned with questions of sound and musical ability. Thus, the incorporation of Pussy Riot into the North/Western canon of queer-feminist punk values and issues makes their actual issues invisible. Their attribution to North/Western riot grrrlism is a dangerous negation of difference between Pussy Riot and US riot grrrls and oblivion of their different local experiences, histories and socio-political structures. At the same time, it is a production of extreme difference between the US and the Russian Federacy. Furthermore, when making references between the

US and British history of punk rock, by invoking Bikini Kill, Ex, and Crass, who are bands of the past—a past were the UDSSR still existed—True implies that the struggle feminists in Russian have to face today, are of the North/Western past. This stabilizes North/Western hegemony. Moreover, “[i]n this construction,” so Kulpa, Mizielińska and Stasinska, “whatever CEE became/is/will be, North/West had become/has already/will have been” (Kulpa and Mizielińska 2011: 18). These scholars argue for more cautiousness for post-socialist localities, suggesting we need “to look for possibilities of conceptualizing and doing sexual politics in CEE without falling into the false logic of origin/al and copy; to go beyond the diagnosis of the North/Western/American hegemony and CEE legitimization through referencing this hegemony” (Kulpa/ Mizielińska /Stasinska 2012: 119).

Staying in the inner-Russian context, the label punk suggests an alliance with a counterculture to which they do not belong. Ivan Gololobov and Yngvar Bordewich Steinholt (2012) who do research in and on Russian punk countercultures, have pointed out that Pussy Riot have no relations to the local punk communities. Their cultural location is definitively within the political performance and visual art scenes, as well as some kvir and feminist circles. Two of the three incarcerated Pussy Riot members used to belong to the performance artist group Voina, prior to Pussy Riot. They were most likely connected to the broader conceptual art scene, as well as to other feminists and kvir feminists like Grey Violet or art-activists like Victoria Lomasko. A more precise analysis of Pussy Riot’s art and writing, as well as cultural location would have complicated the North/Western focus on Pussy Riot. It would have also complicated the simple picture North/Western media paints of the Russian authorities and Vladimir Putin as all encompassing dictator. Moreover, such focus might have made more alliances with Russian activists possible.

RIOT GRRRL AFFECTS, DESIRES AND PUSSY RIOT

It can be argued that the Free Pussy Riot movement is a form of “emotional protest,” which means affect plays a very important role to its agitators. At the heart of this affect and compassion, however rests identitarian identification with Pussy Riot, which makes the North/Western individual feel as if the injustice has been done to them or at least one of them. An account of the affective politics of Pussy Riot solidarity projects was given by Journalist A. Gensler in her article in Huffington post, where she asked queer feminist punk musician JD Samson what it meant to her that “Pussy Riot [...] cited the 1990s punk rock feminism of the Riot Grrrl movement [...] as a source of inspiration (Gensler, A. 2012). Samson answered that she “was both unsurprised and proud.” She continued saying that “Riot Grrrl was incredibly inspirational to most feminist activist punks so it doesn’t surprise me, [and] I think that’s why I feel so close to them, and think that in solidarity I must fight for their freedom, just as I know they would do for me” (ibid.). This statement by Samson can be seen as a model for the incorporation of Pussy Riot into the riot grrrl movement history and testimony and source of the affective attachment of North/Western riot grrrls to Pussy Riot. JD Samson is not any riot grrrl,

but an important figure within the scene as well as the Free Pussy Riot movement. She produced a Free Pussy Riot song and video with her fairly famous queer-feminist punk band MEN, organized a reading of Alyokhina's, Samutsevich's and Tolokonnikova's court room statements and letters on August 17, 2012, the day the verdict was announced and participated in many protests in NYC, latest in a riot in front of the Russian embassy in NYC on August 17, 2013, one year after the verdict. Although the importance of continuing efforts by riot grrrls and queer-feminist punks like JD Samson has to be emphasized, a critical discussion of the underlying assumption of solidarity needs to be done. Reducing Pussy Riot's action to or interpreting them solely along the reference to riot grrrl and queer-feminist punk values and forms is problematic, because thereby North/Western riot grrrls and queer-feminist punks project their own political issues into Pussy Riot, and ignore the benefits that solidarity actions have for themselves.

Further examples of the projection of local desires into Pussy Riot by North/Western riot grrrls and queer-feminist punks, artists and writers can be found in the recent publication "Let's Start a Pussy Riot" (Neu 2013) released by an international group of activists. The foreword of the book is an interview between its editor, Jade French and one of the initiators of the project, Emely Neu. Asked why she felt the need to create a solidary project for Pussy Riot, Neu answers that she felt like "growing up in the 90s, [her generation] never had one of these moments that hit you like a thunderbolt. Those provocative, musically-tinted click moments that every generation seems to have, except [hers]" (2013: 5). Neu reaffirms the interpretation of Pussy Riot's performance as riot grrrl act, praising its "raw DIY punk power [...] paired with bravery and courage" (ibid.). Furthermore, she highlights her emotional attachment to the group by saying that what she identified as "bravery and courage [...] just surpass every logical emotion running through your brain cells" (ibid.). Pussy Riot satisfied her desire for a political spectacle, danger, courage and extreme oppositionality. The reason why the political immediacy of Pussy Riots actions translated into Neu's political consciousness—why they "hit [her] like a thunderbolt"—was through the identification of the Russian activists group as (North/Western) riot grrrls. This precarious moment of concern for the Russian other needed to arrive in a familiar medium or format to create a strong attachment and initiate a reaction. This format, obviously, was Pussy Riots reference to punk rock. It can be argued that Pussy Riot filled a personal or collective void or lack for politically interested riot grrrls, queer-feminist punks and other feminists. Their effect seems more important than Pussy Riot's actual politics and fate within North/Western countercultures, as the just quoted interviewee Neu seems to suggest.

Although this point should not be over emphasized, it is important to note that Neu's book "Let's Start a Pussy Riot" additionally confirms the reading of Pussy Riot as anti-religious through artwork by artist Carol Coon, who produced several prints in solidarity with Pussy Riot, among others the piece subtitled "It is a Women's Duty and Right To Hate Religion" (Neu 2013: 94/95). While the liner notes to the pieces in "Let's Start a Pussy Riot" connects Pussy Riot to anti-religiousness, another one of her texts designated to the group connect them to the

North/Western ideals of free speech, as well as the particular appropriation of derogatory language of punk culture. Coon writes in her text “Defend My Right To Insult And Offend!”

We honor and support those women and men who use words, however insulting and offensive, to bring about inclusive, pluralistic societies. In our interconnected world when people deploy words they reduce the need for violent revolution and civil war. Risking one’s life and freedom by protesting against the horror of totalitarianism – with civil disobedience, words and music - is the ultimate price we pay for an enlightened, democratic posterity. All freedoms from tyranny enjoyed today are due to the bravery of those who insult and offend tyrants.” (Caroline Coon <http://www.carolinecoon.com/cunstart.htm>, retr. August 26, 2013)

Coon, like many other queer-feminists, uses the group signification “We” under which she subsumes Pussy Riot as well as every other person (or rather ‘woman’) in solidarity with the collective. She identifies the strategy of insulting within Pussy Riot’s videos, and attaches this strategy to a claim for rights. Human rights claims, however, are not very present in Pussy Riot’s song lyrics and the three members’ court statements. Moreover, she interprets Pussy Riot as striving for an “inclusive, pluralistic society” implicitly arguing that the Russian society is not, and furthermore understands them as fighting against “the horror of totalitarianism” of the contemporary Russian regime.

THE CREATION OF A QUEER-FEMINIST “WE”

Many articles, songs, and riot slogans start or end with the line “We’re All Pussy Riot” (eg. Morris 2012). This creation of a feminist ‘We’ can be interpreted as a strategy to overcome feelings of marginalization as individuals, or empowerment strategy on the side of the Free Pussy Riot. It can be interpreted as desire for belonging of the solidary protesters, considering that people in solidarity with Pussy Riot often maneuver themselves into legally, materially and physically precarious situations, for example when protesting on the streets of New York wearing balaclavas, where it is illegal to cover your face publicly in a group of people and police is known for its brutality against political riots (Pinto 2012). However, it seems that the creating of a ‘We’ is often based on a feeling of equality that neglects differences and supports white hegemony, especially within artistic productions.

This binary thinking in a universal queer-feminist ‘We’ against ‘them’ emerges frequently in the book “Let’s Start A Pussy Riot,” although in not so obviously racialized and gendered pictures. More frequently, the book suggests a collective queer-feminist and punk identity. Other examples of Pussy Riot solidarity projects that base their activism on the problematic identification with ‘the Russian other’ through the label queer-feminist punk musician or riot grrrl can be found in lyrics by the New York based band MEN as well as riot grrrl icon Tobi Vail.¹⁶

¹⁶ Tobi Vail and her friend Kathleen Hanna were two of the first women who created and used the label riot grrrl for their punk feminism during the late 1980s and early 1990s in Olympia, Washington.

In the lyrics of the song “Let them out or let me In”¹⁷ the band MEN also uses an undefined ‘We’ that only lets assume that Pussy Riot are like the members of the band MEN lesbian identified, and/or gender-queer as well as riot grrrl identified people. They sing:

They said let me out / I said let me in

We scream let them out / I scream let me in

This is a revolution and together we will win

We scream let them out / we scream let us in

Let them out or let me in, yeah let them out or let me in

Exchanging the ‘me,’ ‘we’ and ‘us’ with ‘them’ from one sentence to the other and thereby making it hard to follow if they sing about themselves or Pussy Riot. Through this rhetorical move they emphasize their feelings of sisterhood and similarity with Pussy Riot, as well as the seriousness of their intentions to ‘free Pussy Riot.’

30 seconds of protest just got you two whole years in jail

I’m standing with you on the front lines / we’d sell our souls to make your bail

We are all sisters and today you are me ...

This assumes that the ideas, ideals, political values and identifications of these North/Western individuals and groups are similar to those of Pussy Riot. A similar creation of a universal queer-feminist punk ‘We’ that incorporates Pussy Riot into North/Western concepts is the song “Free Pussy Riot” by Tobi Vail and Pussy Riot Olympia agitator Henri Riot (Re-purposing a song written by Vail and New York based artist Amy Yao in their group The Up All Nighter’s in the late 90’s) released on October 7th 2012.¹⁸ The lyrics consist the four times repeated names “Nadezdah, Yekaterina, Maria,” followed by the lines “We Are All / We Are All! / We Are All / We Are All! / We Are All You / You Are All Us / We Are All You / You Are All Us!” The last strophe repeats the words “Death to Prison, Freedom to Protest” four times in a row and ends with the sentence “Pussy Riot is organizing in Moscow but the struggle for the self-determination of women, LGBTQ rights, gender justice and political transparency is an international one.”

Again, Vail and Riot closely identify with Pussy Riot, ignoring any differences in terms of identification. Additionally, they also assume that Pussy Riot’s political aims and agendas are exactly the same as their own.

At the heart of the tendencies within queer-feminist punk countercultures and activist circles seems to be the impossibility to imagine any other reason to relate to an individual, group or cause other than communality and similarity, at least to some extent. When Everette True titled

¹⁷ <http://www.menmakemusic.com>, 17 August 2012.

¹⁸ Vail and Riot re-purposed a song written by Vail and Amy Yao in their group The Up All Nighter’s in the late 90’s. for the lyrics see: <http://spiderandthewebs.bandcamp.com/track/free-pussy-riot>, November 10, 2013.

her article “Me and Pussy Riot,” she unknowingly suggested a similar judgment about her own writing in solidarity. It seems that injustice is not enough to be solidary with somebody. People have to ‘find’ themselves in the other, to take up their cause. I argue that many groups and individuals within the North/West project their own political issues into Pussy Riot. And many are very ignorant to the benefits their solidarity actions have for themselves.

CONCLUSION AND ALTERNATIVE READINGS

Pop-culture figures like Björk, Madonna, and Patti Smith, as well as the more radical political opposition of riot grrrls and queer-feminist punks, artists and activists are crucial promoters and producers of discourses and knowledge about the Russian performance art collective Pussy Riot within the North/Western world. Their solidarity discourses, frequently present Pussy Riot within the framework of political music, concretely punk rock and riot grrrl feminism. This reading of Pussy Riot privileges radical queer-feminist punk movements within the North/West, their forms and methods of solidarity. Pussy Riot gets incorporated into the North/Western riot grrrl movements and the genre of political music, and assigned the values of these North/Western movements. Moreover, they are seen as representing North/Western values and their environment, i.e. the Russian Federation becomes seen as opposition to the universalized (North/Western) values of equality, freedom, and secularism, overemphasizing Putin’s power and neglecting any diversity within the Russian state.

Everything in Pussy Riot’s performances and politics that does not fall into the North/Western framework of riot grrrl feminism or queer-feminist punk politics, becomes sidelined or completely ignored. The Russian art traditions, like Russian Actionism get ignored or brought to oblivion within the public eyes and Pussy Riot become reduced to a mere copy of the riot grrrl movement. Hence, this identification of Pussy Riot as riot grrrls, without paying attention to their transformation or usage of riot grrrl forms, reaffirms what Robert Kulpa and Joanna Mizielińska have called a “North/Western present” as a Russian “future to be achieved” (2011: 16). Consequently, the Russian present is coerced as North/Western past. Within this narrative, Russia can never become equally tolerant, progressive, free etc. as the allegedly ‘advanced’ North/West. Thereby, every solidarity action runs the risk of becoming a paternalistic gesture of charity that helps Russians to catch up with North/Western conditions, which by definition they never can. This not only ignores the multifaceted forms of kvir and feminist art and activism within the Russian Federacy that do not use North/Western forms and methods like riot grrrl punk, but also neglects the possibilities of building discursive references and solidarities from non-North/Western activists to other feminisms and kvir-feminist activities outside the global North/West. If Pussy Riot’s performances are not reduced to punk politics, their usage of the balaclavas could be read as reference to other minoritized feminisms, like the Chiapas movement in Mexico, a Zapatista group famous for covering their faces through knitted wool balaclavas (Huber 2013: 78) and not only as necessary precaution, rejection of individualization and “the worship of celebrity” (Bruce LaBruce in Neu 2013: 67). Also their style

of colorful wide cloths and balaclavas could be considered within the context of Russian art and Actionism as a direct reference to the colorful paintings of Kazimir Malevich for example. Masha Neufeld and Philosopher Mikhail Iampolski argue that not only Pussy Riot's attire but also their choice of location in the Christ the Savior Cathedral can be read as complying with Malevich's intention of "filling a church with art when religion degrades."¹⁹ Other references, so Neufeld, could be drawn to Vladimir Mayakovsky, who uses colorful clothes and make-up in order to provoke the Russian bourgeois public and Russian futurism in general. Looking beyond the punk reference also means to re-read Pussy Riot's presentation of female bodies within those colorful cloths. Artist Alexandra Neufeld analyses Pussy Riot's choice of attire as a discussion of female gender roles, social norms and femininity within contemporary Russia. She argues that the brightly colored thighs signal playfulness and childishness, while the usage of the balaclava makes age and hair style unidentifiable. The outfits Pussy Riot wear for some of their performances are the traditional домашний холат, clothes women, especially older women, wear at home for reproductive work. These house skirts are loose and comfortable, and connected to the home and working class in contrast to middle-class business outfits, which are supposed to be tight and sexy. This addresses the strict public and private distinction for women's choice of appearance as well as the question of age appropriation. Within North/Western discourses Pussy Riot's clothes become identified within the framework of Glitter as well as a 1980s and early 1990s revival. The feminist critique around femininity, class issues, and age are completely lost. Alternative readings necessarily need to consider North/Western biases and question the universality of North/Western values. Insofar, similarities and familiarities have to be re-evaluated and questioned again, not to confirm Eastern Otherness but to ask for hegemonies and power structures. Such solidarity, could avoid the recreation of a familiar global "We" that is always already defined through whiteness, class and economic privilege as well as sex/gender binary, and could in contrast open up alliances with other movements.

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¹⁹Mikhail Iampolski <http://newtimes.ru/articles/detail/55977/>, 27 September 2013

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