

The Savage Twisting of Vowels

Megan Sormus

'Here are mutes, liquids, aspirates - vowels, semivowels and consonants. Now we see that words have not only a definition and possibly a connotation, but also the felt quality of their own kind of sound'
Oliver (1994: 22).

'The savage twisting of vowels which resonate with the disarticulation of the body'
(Whiteley, 2000: 110)

This piece examines the combination of words and music and the visceral effect and tangible quality of language itself. In order to bring the felt attributes of words that Mary Oliver describes to the forefront, it is based on my own research on riot grrrl. It focuses on the way in which the somewhat textual traditions of riot grrrl - their music and lyrics, body writing and zine making, brought the feelings of young women to life. It was the marginal language of their experiences that, in part, activated an alternative and distinctive sound. This echoed the anger and alienation felt by riot grrrls, goaded by a consumer culture they felt existed to silence them and indeed, 'write them out'. A principal objective of the riot grrrl community was to create an autonomous female identity that stood outside the inscribed confines of domestic, patriarchal and consumer institutions. This piece is therefore centred on two contrasting scenes, one denoting the private space of a girl's bedroom, and the other revealing a contrastingly public but similarly girl-orientated space of a riot grrrl gig. With this, it brings to light the two contrasting narratives of riot grrrl - the fight against the domestic confinement of young women, and the creation of subversive spaces that housed alternative forms of female self-expression, constructed by the motivating effects of words and sound. To build on female expression within these new spaces, riot grrrls borrowed from the do-it-yourself (DIY) tradition of punk. At the forefront of this piece is an interpretation of 'D. I. Y' and the way that its construction substantiates the growth of an independent grrrl identity and the connotation it carries is one of autonomy. Riot grrrl also encouraged young women to use this DIY objective to regain control of their bodies. This is duly noted in the twisting of the word 'grrrl', as it is distorted from its original meaning and brings an aggressive quality that worked to separate the young women from the idealised narratives of girlhood. Body writing is another example of way that riot grrrl encouraged a crude corporeal reaction to language, transforming the body into a textual space for creation and expression. The piece plays on this bodily response to sound, its permissions and its limitations, interpreting Oliver's quote through a first person narrative. This is in order to reveal how the words and sound of riot grrrl, housed in a do-it-yourself attitude, create songs of the self.

d.I.y

At the piercing intonation of a drill, I jolt upright in my bed. The rhythmic reverberations unfurl my curled up body from its question mark curve into a reluctant exclamation mark, as my legs remain stretched out before me, unwilling to depart from their prostrate position. The sound of the drill stutters on - a shameless solo artist and me its reluctant listener.

My aching feet appear to feel the mechanised music and bob back in a sluggish harmony. This spontaneous kinaesthesia sparks memories of the way my feet had stomped, kicked and jumped in response to the sound of the Bikini Kill gig the night before. The caterwauling, the soft-spoken seductive tones and the guttural aggression of Kathleen Hanna's eclectic vocals summoned my body. This was to be my first experience of the way riot grrrl bands put music to the words of my own feelings. Hanna's concoction of ugly verse and harsh music flooded out into a sonic sea that seemed to solidify underneath my feet. It became as tangible as the Dr. Martens in which I stood and carried me in a hard-hitting wave of grrrls that surged me forward to the front of the stage.

I think back to the way Hanna switched from jumping up and down to striking vogue like poses, twisting seductively to the contrastingly savage twang of the opening lines of 'Rebel Girl'. Her white t-shirt depicted *The Jam*, the combination of words echoed what I felt as I was also jammed in an odorous pick 'n' mix of grrrls in the small pit, who were all mimicking Hanna's punk pogoing. Jumping straight up in the air in unison and crashing back down to the floor with a dot and a dash, the grrrl audience aggressively punctuated each of the verses Hanna sang out with their movement: a violent exclamation mark, an assertive full stop or a pause-for-breath comma, all of which both encouraged and halted the flow of linear verse. The whiteness of Hanna's ripped t-shirt mixed with crimson lips and raven hair transformed her into a subversive Snow White. Rewriting the romanticised fairy tales fed to young girls, this punk princess dripped her own poisonous words and built her own forest of prickly obscenities and bountiful truths to protect us all and keep out the so-called Knights who carried patriarchal ideologies like their shining armour.

The savage sound and aggressive syllables arranged themselves into narratives around me to tell the story of my life as a young woman that I could embody and believe in. The amalgamation of grrrls created a stormy ocean of contorting faces as they spat, and sang and silently mimed along to Bikini Kill, their words animating Hanna's thrashing limbs and hypnotically swinging hair. With the streaks of red hair on black emblazing under the hot lights she became ever more the phoenix rising from phonetic flames created by the all-girl mosh audience. I remember the way a grrrl had shouted to me in one ear, elevating her syllables in order to reach me over the noise. The spray of her enlivened words created a vehement mist, condensing until it dropped to the ground into the ever-growing puddle of things never to be heard at a loud concert that was forming around us. In the other ear, I heard Hanna bawl from the stage **'WE'RE BIKINI KILL AND WE WANT REVOLUTION GRRRL STYLE NOW'**. At this prompt my mouth opens automatically and a ceremonious roar escapes. As if it was waiting for this opportunity all night, the roar builds in intensity as confidence grows. Grrrls slot between each other both awkwardly and amorously, a weird waltz that ricochets young women in-between two worlds, a carnivalesque scene where grrrls

lead in heavy boots and ripped floral dresses as opposed to being led in gowns and glass slippers. Words have carved out this subversive space. It is a textual terrain that spells out pure female expression through the transformation of words into song. It carries the limbs of grrrls to an alternative beat. It is the definition of resistance.

Putting the music of my memories of the night on repeat in the recesses of my mind, my eyes begin to shoot darts across my bedroom. The reverberations of my father's dodgy Sunday D.I.Y still bumbled around me, the sound conjuring apparitions of wonky shelves, bent nails and family photographs hanging skew-whiff, all out-of sync with the chorus of the tools that had brought them to life. I watch and the vibrations of the sound enliven my messy bedroom, the punk inspired collages I have stuck all around notebooks, my scrapbooks, and my guitar leaning against the wall all beat at the bloodied scream of the drill. The music of D.I.Y animates them with a sense of themselves as tools of resistance. For a grrrl, these tools work against the preened and proper girly images of consumer culture. These narratives speak *for* young women in reams of idealisation and leave them mute. This provokes an angry and aggressive response to the oppression felt by the crushing language of girl culture. Each object around me is a tool to twist the language of this culture out of shape, to inject resistance and disrupt it, to disarticulate my body before it becomes erased by the regulatory fictions of idealised girlhood.

Suddenly, the language of the drill provokes an irritation that swells inside me as the noise continues to tug at the tendrils of my inertia, like a child tugging at the skirts of its mother with sticky hands demanding her attention.

Shhh.

I clamp my hands over my ears and close my eyes and force the air between my lips. Its shrill quality brushes the enamel on the back my teeth as it falls in sharp drops out of my mouth. A fully formed swarm of sound buzzes in the air carrying with it the connotation of silence. The realisation of the imposing and imprisoning quality of the call for silence pricks my eyes and ears back open. I begin to feel that it is no coincidence that the call for silence also constructs the sound of 'she'.

Shhhe

The definition of the word becomes fully realised. There is a sudden feeling of imprisonment as the social construction of my gender sounds out around me, carrying with it the rules that formulate a girl prison: *Shhe* can't play guitar, *shhe* can't write songs, *shhe* can't be anything other than what she is told to be. My *shhh* mingles with the drill that still refuses to give up its subversive sound. With this, I sound out D. I. Y. Strange. A dissonant blend of letters that bookend a rebellious sounding vowel, which spurts strong in the centre despite having no business wedged between two consonants. I think about how the sound of this blatant contradiction blends better than the make-up I am instructed to wear by consumer culture that whisper step-by-step instructions of how to become the perfect girl. It is clear. d.I.y brings power through juxtaposition.

I glance at a zine I've marked open and remember how it felt as if the words it housed had crawled onto my skin, glowing like the felt tip I had used to illuminate a particular quote.

At its command I became a tool of contradiction, a collage of resistance:

'We're tired of being written out – out of history, out of the 'scene', out of our bodies... for this is the reason we have created our zine and our scene... be proud of being a grrrl'
(Harris, 2008:6).

I look down at my arms still harbouring the smudges of riot grrrl resistance embedded in the body writing I had done the night before. Body writing is proud armour for a riot grrrl. I remember the way I blew onto my arm to dry the liquid letters, breathing life into the sound of the words that I had sketched on there - ugly words that are so lightly thrown at young women yet stick to them like a heavy slime - 'Slut'. 'Bitch'. 'Whore'. However, when they glow on the skin like a shield made of Sharpie silver they sound out another meaning. The body becomes a textual site of self-expression, of identity, of creation and enjoyment. It becomes the centralised 'I' in D.I.Y.

I stand up at the final rallying cry of the drill. I desire to carry the same aggression, the same perseverance of the D.I.Y tool to wake up the whole street and embody the repetitive aggression at the heart of the word *grrrl*. I scratch out the letters 'd. I. y' onto a blank page, a skeletal frame to begin with but nevertheless emphasising the 'I' I wish to find by changing these words into song. Singular letters stand waiting for the spin of sound to give them a faint pulse that will inevitably strengthen into a fully formed composition.

I pluck at the strings lying inert on the fret board of the guitar, creating a resuscitative jolt that animates them. E A D G B E: I feel through the secret language of this private alphabet and make it public with cacophonous tones. The metal fuses with the new beginnings of a language that is still waiting for a perceptible definition. The lettered strings reverberate and talk back to each other, my fingers travel from the low hum of E to the lofty heights of B. Backwards and forwards they whisper their secrets to me and make my hand twitch as I scratch fresh words onto the white paper at their command. Their sound spills out to form letters that form words that then form lyrics and verse. At the beating heart of resonant sound I blow hot air from my pursed lips onto my sore fingers, I sense the language of the sharp strings as it indents itself into my skin like brail. I scratch and scribble, feeling the vibrations of the life chords of my guitar filling out the undernourished frame of the song of the self. With this, I grasp a glimpse of my self among the feeling of sound, within the contradictory construction of d. I. y.

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