

A JOURNEY IN THE WORLD OF QUEER AND FEMINIST PUNK FESTIVALS

A LOOK AT THE PROCESS OF
IDENTITY-BASED COMMUNITY
MAKING

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Nothing is Static

by Agatha

For a little more than five years now, I have spent considerable time traveling across France and Germany to attend to various queer and feminist punk-related festivals. At first, they were only communal spaces I visited as both a queer young woman and a strong fan of hardcore punk music, but two years ago, I also started studying them as fieldwork for my PhD dissertation. Since 2014 I have attended events such as the Bitcherland Bitches Festival in Lemberg (France), the Et Biiim Festival in Lille (France), the Queer Fest in Nancy (France), the Lady*Fest Mannheim (Germany), the Lady*Fest Saarbrücken (Germany), the Noc Walpurgii in Berlin (Germany), the LadyFest Strasbourg (France), the Lady*Fest

Karlsruhe (Germany), and the Böse & Gemein Festival in Dresden (Germany). I was also involved in the organization of a feminist punk festival in my hometown in 2017. Drawing on these various experiences, this piece for Riffs aims to offer a personal insight into how LGBTQ and feminist community spaces within music scenes, such as queer_feminist punk festivals, might impact on identity construction and affirmation.

Yet, it is firstly important to consider my positionality. I am a middle-class white queer woman with a college education. Engaging in a PhD on the topic of queer_feminist punk festivals has made me realize some flaws of the scene I hadn't noticed before, because of that specific background. For example, nowadays I am quite critical regarding the appropriation of the concept of "intersectionality" by the queer_feminist punk scenes, as they remain mostly white and middle-class (as I myself am). This is something I had never considered before I had to do a cross-analysis of archives, fieldwork and academic research. Working on queer_feminist punk festivals as a research topic has made me realize that the scene was way less unified as I thought, and helped me identify the breaking points of the scene.

In a certain sense, my academic experience made me see queer_feminist festivals less as the safe spaces for all the minorities or marginalised people they sometimes claim to be^[1], and more as critical platforms for feminism and LGBTQ politics where controversial topics are embedded and are to be argued upon. For once though, I wanted to approach the topic of queer_feminist punk festival from a personal and maybe even emotional point of view and, therefore, recall experiences I have had when I wasn't even a graduate

[1] The organising collective of Lady*Fest Heidelberg 2018 for example wrote "Through awareness we strive to provide all people with a safe space." (Lady*Fest Heidelberg website, 2018)

student. In order to make my own path within the punk scenes more understandable, I will first recall how I discovered punk music through recordings and my hometown local scene. Then, I will explain how queer_feminist punk festivals are places that participate in community building. And finally, I will analyse how they also provide tools that helped me navigate the masculine spaces of punk music.

Recalling that journey of my own wouldn't be complete without music itself; therefore, as you might already have noticed, each section begins with an album. I highly recommend listening to them all.

Soft Cage

by Body Betrayal

As a teen, I grew up in a really small town of north-eastern France. The landscape was full of fields and old factories. The neighbourhoods I paced every day had nothing in common with the dynamism and the effervescence of the urban life. It felt like no music scene could ever grow there. I'd spent my days skateboarding, and I slowly started to discover punk music when I was 10 or 11, with the help of a few friends and their older brothers. When it arrived to my parents' home a few years later, the Internet was already full with music gems I could explore for hours and hours. At that point, music (punk especially) felt as an escape from a daily life where even skipping class sounded boring, as it would merely involve wandering in deserted streets. My first experience of listening to punk rock is therefore no exception to all the studies that highlighted the relationship between this kind of music and boredom (see for example Sikarskie, 2014 amongst others).

Nor did my first steps in a local punk scene differ from Sara Cohen's (1997) analysis of music scenes as masculine network. I discovered her chapter "Men Making a Scene" (in *Sexing the Groove*) at the very beginning of my PhD.

And when I read “The scene thus comprises predominantly male groups, cliques or networks engaged in activities shaped by social norms and conventions, through which they establish and maintain relationships with other men” (page 20), it instantly transported me back to my early days in my local punk scene.

At 18, I moved to the nearest city. It didn’t take me long to find the first shows I would attend there, nor did it to realize that the scene was mostly composed of straight white men. I still spent nice moments discovering the joys of live heavy music and slam dancing all night long and meeting new people, but each night had its own darker side. Sometimes someone would ask me the long-lasting casual interrogatory about my musical knowledge: “Oh you’re a hardcore fan, so you must know these bands and these bands.” Sometimes a random guy would think I came to see his band live hoping to hook up with one of the members. Sometimes someone would call me a groupie. Sometimes a guy would try to prevent me from going into the pit because I would get hurt. Sometimes I would just feel completely invisible. I eventually met some other girls, but sooner or later I would nonetheless have that strange feeling of otherness, being queer in a predominantly straight scene. I felt “out of step with the world” but also out of step with “my” scene. So far, the whole environment I had gotten to know was far away from the feminist punk and queercore bands that I loved.

At that point, it felt urgent to me to find queer representation everywhere I could. It was around 2012 and France was experiencing huge weekly anti-gay protests, as the state was about to authorize same sex marriage. Times weren’t easy but music helped get through them. Queer hardcore punk provided me with a good soundtrack to fight back.

Choose Your Weapon

by Closet Burner

I started traveling to visit queer_feminist scenes and festivals) across France and Germany. Sometimes I was alone, sometimes I had the company of friends I had met in my local scene or online. The first times were determining experiences. September 2014. I'm sitting on the stairs that lead to the entrance of a small bar, located in a tiny village in North-Eastern France. Inside, an electro-punk band named Fumer Tue is playing and a bunch of girls from the nearest city are organising their very first feminist DIY music festival. It is the very first time that I attend an event of this kind. October 2014. Only one month has passed and, wanting to live this experience again, a friend and I have been driving several hours to Lille (France) in order to attend another punk-feminist festival. In the cellar of an anarchist social centre, an all-women punk band from Belgium named Vagina Dentata are playing some loud crust-punk soundtracks. Between the songs, the singer makes long statements about patriarchy, queerness, psychiatry and a few other topics, which truly speak to my heart and mind. These two consecutive experiences blew my mind. The frequency of my trips obviously increased when I started my PhD in 2017 and started playing in an all-girl post-punk(ish) band. The more I attended festivals, the more eager I was to feel that I was part of this queer punk community again.



Images: Walls of the JUZ Mannheim, taken during Lady*Fest Mannheim 2017.



Festivals and Community Resistance

The classic reference for all scholars working on or with festivals is without any doubt Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "carnavalesque". In his work, Bakhtin introduces the carnival as "opposed to that one-sided and gloomy official seriousness which is dogmatic and hostile to evolution and change, which seeks to absolutise a given condition of existence or a given social order" (1984: 160). Festival scholars such as Bennett, Taylor and Woodward (2014) also draw on this quote to consider festivals as sites of resistance, building on the medieval carnivalesque analysed by Bakhtin. They, therefore, dedicate the first part of their book, *The Festivalization of Culture*, to chapters dealing with "Lifestyle, Identity and Cultural politics".

Indeed, notions of community and politics are also central to the offerings of queer_feminist festivals and music festivities. Queer movements link culture, political engagement and partying. A queer party often has a political dimension, and a queer protest often has a festive dimension. For instance, pride parades and their festivalisation clearly bridge community politics and community festivities (Taylor, 2014). Sharon Fernandez (2006) analyses the impact of the Toronto-based Desh Pardesh arts festival on the South-Asian LGBT community. She explains that the festival helped the participants "[negotiate] a sense of being simultaneously a part of two (or more) cultures" (31) by bringing them "a home away from home"(31). Feminist movements have also played out their activities

through music festivals since the 1970s. The National Women Music Festival, and the way its lesbian-feminist community deals with diversity, has been studied by Donna Eder, Suzanne Stagenborg and Lori Sudderth (1995).

As primarily political music festivals, the queer_feminist punk festivals I have witnessed, both in France and Germany, largely draw on two DIY music movements of the 1990s: Riot Grrrl and Queercore. Both movements held at their heart bands and zines before they developed into local collectives or were expressed through social and musical events. Riot Grrrl was born in Olympia, Washington around the early 1990s. Led by punk bands such as Bikini Kill or Bratmobile, they used fanzines as DIY medias through which they could share their ideas. The dissemination of fanzines helped to rally geographically dispersed young women attracted to this new punk-feminist movement, and local Riot Grrrl chapters developed all over the USA. In 1992, the first Riot Grrrl Convention was held in Washington, DC. The movement started attracting the attention of professional North-American media and Riot Grrrl bands quickly felt that their messages were being distorted and misquoted by the mainstream press. The original movement vanished around the mid 1990s, but its values didn't disappear from the scene. Rather, they re-emerged in the form of the first Ladyfest that took place in Olympia in August 2000. The festival positioned itself as "a non-profit, community-based event designed by and for women to showcase, celebrate and encourage the artistic, organizational and political work and talents of women" (Ladyfest Olympia Website, 2000). As examined by Elke Zobl (2005), Ladyfest Olympia inspired local collectives all over the world to organise their own festival, creating an international network that now has local representations in four continents.

Queercore appeared a few years before Riot Grrrl, at the end of the 1980s. Its goal was to rally queer punk fans that felt marginalised both in the punk scene for their sexual orientation, and within gay movements for their engagement with punk culture. Like Riot Grrrl, Queercore had its iconic bands such as Pansy Division or Fifth Column and fanzines such

as *HomoCore* and *OutPunk* through which local chapters were inspired. In the United States, events such as the SPEW convention, DirtyBird Queercore Festival (held in San Francisco in 1996), Homo-A-Gogo Festival (that took place in Olympia and later in San Francisco between 2002 and 2009), or more recently Chicago's Fed Up Fest or Philadelphia's Get Better Fest, also galvanized the movement.

Emerging out of this very particular history, events that I have attended offer their attendees workshops on LGBTQ and feminist issues, as well as shows by queer- or feminist-identified bands such as Anti-Corpos, a lesbian-feminist hardcore punk band from Brazil (but now Berlin-based) or Finisterre, a crust-punk band based in Cologne (Germany). These festivals aim to provide community spaces for anyone who isn't a cisgendered man, as is sometimes indicated in the festivals' documentation.

Festivals have been considered by participants, scholars and the media alike to provide a space that cuts their attendees from their daily lives, hence their potential to subvert the social order, as suggested by studies drawing on Bakhtin's "carnavalesque". Based upon my own experience and my doctoral research that followed, it is clear that the rules that regulate the social space of the queer_feminist festival are therefore different from the rules that govern the social space of each attendee's daily life. One of the things that initially surprised me the most was how everyone is encouraged to ask for each other's pronouns or even wear a pin or a label displaying their own. Some people even make up new pronouns in order to sound more neutral. Through this, everybody has the opportunity to experiment with their own gender. Respecting each other's chosen pronouns translates as a respect for one another's gender. And most of the time, awareness teams are in attendance to support interpersonal mediations in case one of the attendees feels offended by the attitude of another. Organisers aim to guarantee that the festival is a safe(r) space for minorities and marginalised people, especially women and queers.



As a consequence, an outsider of the scene would probably find the milieu of queer_feminist punk “cliquey”. And it is true that queer_feminist punk festivals are deeply underground events and it sometimes feels like they don’t try to attract new people, and are organised instead for people who are already well aware of how to navigate in queer_feminist spaces. In that sense, my experience within queer_feminist punk festivals relate to Susan O’Shea (2014) study on homophily in the world of Ladyfests in the UK. She relies on McPherson description of “homophily” as “the principle that a contact between similar people occurs at a higher rate than among dissimilar people” (2001: 416) and on actor-network theory to evaluate if “similar types of people” regarding data such as gender or sexuality “tend to be attracted to Ladyfest festivals and associated feminist music worlds” (134). She concludes her investigation by proposing that “involvement with Ladyfest increases the opportunity of forming meaningful relationships with others from different ethnic groups and places” but that “age, education, class and a non-heterosexual identity have a slight tendency to encourage more homophilous ties” (141).

In the cases of the festivals I attended, only one of these events (Ladyfest Strasbourg 2018) provided workshops for women, queer and non-binary people of colour only while most of the others provided workshops and spaces for women, lesbians, trans, intersex and queer people only. During the concerts, the organising crew also prioritises bands that are at least showcasing one woman or queer person. The restrictive gender balance they allow during workshops, as much as the female and queer representations they display on stage, contributes to community building by allowing the women and queer people in the audience to self-identify to empowering musician figures.

In June 2018, I attended Böse & Gemein Festival in Dresden, Germany. I took part in some workshops that were pretty interesting and insightful, but my favourite moments definitely were the concerts. There, I got the chance to see (or see again) some of my favourite punk and hardcore punk bands, such as Gattaca and Kenny Kenny Oh Oh and to discover new ones like Weak Ties and Choral Hearse. Over two nights, I saw many women and queer people on stage and at the front of the audience (where I was also standing). This was an extremely empowering moment for me.



Kenny Kenny Oh Oh preparing themselves for their show during Böse & Gemein Festival 2018.



Gym Tonic's show during Böse & Gemein Festival 2018.

During Lady*Fest Karlsruhe, Germany in December 2018, I attended a workshop about DJing with vinyl records. I had wanted to learn the technique for quite a long time but never got the chance to meet anyone who could have taught me. The workshop was accessible to women, lesbian, trans, intersex and queer people only, in order to counter the usual male-dominated gender balance of music scenes and industries. We numbered only three attendees. A girl from a female-only DJ collective based in Freiburg, Germany showed us the required equipment and taught us a few easy mixing techniques. She, then, let us play with her records. Trying to implement what she had taught us for ourselves was not mandatory. I therefore felt absolutely no pressure, which was definitely relieving, and in stark contrast to the music courses I took when I was a kid.

Thus, the gender dynamics in queer_feminist punk festivals community building might recall women's music festivals of the 1970s. Donna Eder, Suzanne Stagenborg and Lori Sudderth (1995) drew for instance on Verta Taylor and Nancy Whittier's (1992, 1995) works on the construction of a collective identity within lesbian feminist movements to analyse the National Women's Music Festival. Taylor and Whittier as well as Eder et al. stated that the formation of a collective lesbian feminist identity draws on boundaries established between themselves and what they considered as "dominant groups". To do so, lesbian feminists engaged in "creating alternative institutions and a women's culture that promotes a distinct set of values" (Eder et al., 1995: 489), such as a music festival.

This also applies to my experience of queer_feminist punk festivals more generally. The main difference, though, is that contrary to women's music festivals, queer_feminist punk festivals expand their target audience in order to develop a better balance of LGBT, queer and non-binary people. The gap between my daily life and the life at queer-feminist punk festivals therefore seemed –and still seems – huge. Coming to the end of a festival and (temporarily) leaving "my" community always kind of breaks my heart. But significantly, attending more and more queer_feminist punk festivals also helped me navigate the punk scene of my hometown.

Queer_feminist punk festivals function as toolkits of practical, theoretical or interpersonal resources. The attendees can apply these when the festival is over and, importantly, when they engage in non-queer/non-feminist scene spaces. During the whole time of my journey within the queer_feminist punk festivals scene, I have learnt about various typical DIY music activities: booking and organising shows, making fanzines, making music, managing a record label, and so forth. Thanks to these festivals, I have acquired a subcultural capital (Thornton, 1996) that can also be translated into my participation within my local scene. I have gained confidence and built a network of contacts all over Europe. Moreover, I have been able to share part of this knowledge with other women back home who continue to participate primarily within a male-dominated and (sometimes) misogynistic scene. Therefore, queer_feminist punk festivals not only provided me new competences that were useful in the punk scene or the support of an international network of DIY bands, artists and promoters, but it also helped me reclaim a space within my local scene by bringing to other women the kind of expertise that used to circulate in mostly masculine networks. In a certain way, this experience directed us towards what Pauwke Berkers writes about punk-feminist women in the Netherlands in the 1970s, that is: “punk feminists tried to change the world just by being where they were traditionally not supposed to be, that is, within male-dominated punk scenes.” (2012: 167). In this way, it is vital that individuals such as myself, who traverse different subcultural spaces, continue to engage, when possible, with their local and cismale-dominated spaces, both adding a level of gender or sexuality diversity and instigating conversations and actions with other women/queer participants which ultimately challenge and change the definitions and behaviour that have come to dominate particular music scenes.

Conclusion: From My Personal Experiences to PhD Research

Being with a group of like-minded people definitely has something powerful. It helped connect with other people who had a similar path within the punk scene and helped realize my experiences with men from the punk scene weren't isolated experiences. While I had read that in zines, for example, being able to talk about it with other women and queer people was another step in my consciousness-raising process. In that sense, queer_feminist punk networks served as a community where I felt I belong. Yet, looking at different identity criteria, such as race, age or class, would probably reveal that the whole queer_feminist punk community does not necessarily experience navigating music scenes the same. Teaming up with collectives stemming from other marginalised communities, in order to build a more diverse and inclusive space and festival programs might be a first step queer_feminist festivals can make to solve that problem.

Engaging in queer_feminist festivals has offered me a means to more successfully engage within my local scene. It has been truly empowering and has probably led to give a different representation of the scene's gender balance. But it hasn't washed gender boundaries away. Men still get more collaboration opportunities, venue owners seem to take them more seriously, and they, thus, keep gaining more and more visibility. Hopefully, keeping in traveling to festivals, bonding with women and queer people, locally and translocally, will help us tip the scale.

Writing this piece offered me an opportunity to recall my discoveries of that sense of belonging through the queer_feminist cultural effervescence of a binational festival scene. It also encouraged me to connect years of personal experiences with an academic expertise, that is articles, books, and dissertations I read during my PhD. In a certain sense, my (emerging) academic career did not only help me to better understand gender and popular music-related social phenomena that I aimed to study, but it also made me step back in order to better understand my own experiences



with both my local hardcore punk scene and queer_feminist spaces, and to use these to add a missing piece of the puzzle in our scholarly understanding of how marginalised groups engage within subcultural music scenes.

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Besides her academic work, she plays guitar in an all girl post-punk band, enjoys experimenting with cassette tapes, organizes outdoor guerrilla music shows and has been involved in several feminist and queer collectives.

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Weblinks

Lady*fest Heildeberg website, <https://ladyfest-heidelberg.com/>

Ladyfest Olympia website, <http://ladyfest.org/index3.html>

