

“Delicate, petite & other things I’ll never be”: trans-punk anthems and love songs

Gareth Schott

Abstract: Punk’s dogged durability continues to be driven by a communal ethos that once embodied inclusivity, resistance, challenge and transformation. The precipitous absorption and integration of punk into the mainstream ran the risk of undermining the authenticity of its rebellion, DIY principles and sub-cultural inimitability. Yet, in emerging from the underground punk has continued to provide a counter-normative framework and aesthetic. The ethos that underpinned first-wave punk is evident today in punk’s ongoing engagement with queer politics and persistent illustrations of gender fluidity. This article examines an articulation of ‘transgender as punk’ focusing on the example of Laura Jane Grace, lead singer of US anarcho-punk band Against Me!, who came out as transgender five albums into her public life as an established punk musician. Punk has time and again served as a site for making visible and verbalizing discordant experiences, which Grace has accessed to document her complex and troubled personal intercessions, transgender realities and their uncertain future.

Keywords: anarcho-punk, *Transgender Dysphoria Blues*, D.I.Y culture, trans punk, subcultural politics

Introduction

Being transgender describes both individual experience of incongruence between sense of self and assigned gender at birth and non-normative expressions of gender (Brooks 2000; Lev 2004; Mallon 1999; Stryker 2008; Whittle 1998). The emergent field of Transgender Studies has sought to reinforce trans realities whilst exposing society’s attempts to “subjugate non-normative ways of doing gender” (Westbrook 2010, 45). This has subsequently led to greater attention being given to the “productive power” of transgender as a viable social identity and “knowable category of personhood” (46). As a mode of actuating a transgender identity, ‘transcending’ “privileges the sub-process of ‘re-defining’, as part of a radical critique of gender polarities,” (Ekins and King 2010, 25). This article offers a case example of transgender singer-songwriter Laura Jane Grace, front-person of Gainesville Florida anarcho-punks, Against Me! for her

expression of transgender as a subcultural ideal. I will argue that Grace calls attention to the relationship between punk, on the one hand, as a social movement that has sought to deconstruct sites of authority, including gender, and reconstruct them on “autonomous non-hierarchical terms” (Nicholas 2007, 1) and transgender identity, on the other, that seeks to provide expanded opportunities for identity to be organised around the modality of non-normative gender practices in order to maximise the “possibility for a livable life” (Butler 2004, 7).

The political invective of DIY anarcho-punk, in particular, has cultivated a code of self-creation and supported individual freedom to construct identity (Glass 2012) since the 1970s. Subcultural and political identification with anarcho-punk has often instilled ‘anarchist autonomy’ towards achieving “independence even from anarcho-punk ‘orthodoxy’ itself; re-appropriating the movement’s ‘ways of being’ in other [...] settings” (Cross 2010, 11). As the singer of Against Me!, Laura Jane Grace represents an individual with an open trans identity that has embraced punk’s sub-cultural values as an empowering site within which to redefine and transcend the restrictions of gender. This, I argue, stands in contrast to many other documented trans experiences of “building identities in a social environment that invalidates [trans] reality and may even punish them for violating traditional gender roles” (Burdge 2007, 244).

Transgender scholarship together with trans activism serves to draw attention to “where and how bodies escape or act clandestinely outside [existing gender] categories – and at moments in which the categories of immigrant, transgender person, man, and woman become incoherent and inconsistent” (Aizura 2012, 135). Laura Jane Grace, is an “identity innovator” (Ekins and King 2010), who presents direct, unguarded, and complex accounts of transitioning and gender-intercession through her punk practices extending trans representation. As a practicing anarcho-punk from the age of seventeen, Grace’s personification of punk includes her decision to transition at the age of thirty-two. Furthermore, what constituted a life-transforming moment for Grace also served a crucial role in ensuring the progression of punk culture itself. Despite offering a means for resisting instruments of oppression, punk also has to guard against the risk of “evolving (unintentionally) into a control mechanism that nullifies the creative efforts of others that Punk provides” (Cross 2010, 12). It is essential that, as a mode of cultural production, punk DIY participation continues to operate within a framework of activism (Moore 2004) that empowers individuals to bring into being “hoped-for futures” (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010).

In discussing anarcho-punk, Griffin (2015) argues that the concept of activism unifies a “plethora of actions, attitudes and behaviours that occur through DIY, as it can describe the productive, the creative, the alternative, the political and the cultural as well as the resistant” (18). In this way, elements of both punk and transgender identity draw on feminist and queer theories that locate social identities in the conflict between social- and self-determinants (Nagoshi and Brzuzy 2010) that also seek to discard essentialist approaches that view social identities as fixed within the person. The anarcho-punk movement has instead sought to maximise the “rights of the individual, free from societal interference” (Cross 2010, 20) that includes the need to contest the reification of gender and identity through the “variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal” (Butler 1990, 5).

First phase of punk empowerment

In this article, Against Me!’s contemporary cultural contribution to the “critique of normative aesthetics” (Muñoz 1999, 95) is presented as a return to expressions of identity politics that were once foundational to key movements and practice of punk. As swiftly as punk surfaced it also dispersed, diversified and transmuted so that it never really promulgated a single coherent and consistent politics. However, as Gunckel (2018) notes, “debates surrounding key categories and issues, including race, gender, and sexuality were fundamental to conceptions of punk operating at the time” (156). Politics of rejection and dispute were found in first-wave punk releases such as the Au Pairs’ *Playing with a Different Sex*, on which Lesley Woods sang about violence against women, challenged sexism, patriarchy and gender roles, and presented female sexuality with candor. The Slits too poked holes in masculinity and societal expectations. Within the broader movement, “sartorial agitprop artist” (Assange 2014) and fashion designer Vivienne Westwood’s rebel fashion aesthetics challenged both what women and men should look like (Jones 2018). When Linder Sterling placed an iron for a porn star’s head in her collage cover art for The Buzzcocks’ single “Orgasm Addict” she employed it in a “raw, violent attack on media images” (Haenfler 2014) that fuel and confine understandings of gender.

Examining punk tactics and their cultural impact, reflections of those who were first to resist hegemonic, mainstream cultural values (Haenfler 2014) under punk, articulated a community of practice invested in an ideology of DIY culture, social transformation and egalitarianism. Founding member of The Raincoats, Gina Birch, recalls how punk

“was a great time for women [...] There was a kind of genderlessness. It was the most genderless time that one could imagine” (Birch 2010). Recollections of the inception of punk suggest it was an “egalitarian, non-hierarchical social structure” (Phillipov 2006, 384). As Penelope Houston of San Francisco band, The Avengers, recalls: “The early scene embraced all comers, be they female, gay, non-white or even older. There was no dress code. Women were pioneers along with everyone else involved. I noticed no separation. I knew women who were musicians, bookers, managers, photographers, visual artists, film makers, journalists, label owners... etc.,” (Houston 2016).

‘Cause baby I’m an anarchist

As Stinson (2012) has argued, the punk mainstream today is represented by white males focusing on “stale, homogenized social politics and a rote ‘punk’ stance and style” (276). To counteract its commodification, and preserve its founding principles it was necessary for the movement to dissipate “across a diversity of genres and sub-genres” (Osgerby 1999, 156). Counter to the visibility achieved by mainstream punk, sub-genres such as anarcho-punk split off to pursue a belief in the “politics and practice of punk ‘as it was always supposed to have been’ – autonomous, subversive and free from commercial corruption” (Cross 2004, 26). Anarcho-punk became a broader platform for promoting political change, headed by bands such as Crass and Poison Girls. Musically challenging and confrontational, Downes identifies how anarcho-punk “reproduced a masculinist music culture as feminist content” characterised by “nihilistic and bleak sonic assaults” (Downes 2012, 206-207).

Contemporary anarcho-punk bands offer an entry point to punk sensibilities beyond the confines of the annals of history. Its cultural legacy is instead embodied within an active cultural force of a new generation releasing music and live performances. Far from the cultural epicenters of punk in Gainesville Florida, anarcho-punks Against Me! entered the story of punk long after youth culture had prompted the reinvention of capitalism and turned subversive practices into business plans (Mason 2009). Against Me! evolved from Laura Jane Grace’s adolescent DIY solo project (1996’s self-produced and released Demo Tape), through which she cultivated her craft over a series of lo-fi and limited releases on local labels (Misanthrope Records, Crasshole Records, Plan-It-X Records and Sabot) resulting in the eventual release of the bands’ first long-player

album, *Reinventing Axl Rose* in 2002 on No Idea Records. From 2002 to 2009 an established line-up released five albums that took them from DIY self-reliance to industry sell outs, resulting in intense criticism by the anarcho-punk community. Their persistence and calling saw the band progress from playing basements, to larger venues and eventually stadiums. In 2012, an interview with mainstream music magazine *Rolling Stone*, reaffirmed Laura Jane Grace's commitment to education, criticism and socio-political defiance and changed the trajectory of her punk agenda. Grace who spoke openly for the first time of her struggles with gender dysphoria and growing up closeted, used the interview to announce her decision to live as a transgender woman. In revealing her authentic self, Laura Jane Grace signalled a political realignment with the ideologies of punk that first gave her the impetus to express resistance and reject oppressive assumptions in relation to gender (O'Hara 1998). As Grace (2017) commented in an interview:

you know, one of the very appealing things to me about the punk rock world when I was, like, 15, 16, especially stumbling onto, like, anarchist punk rock and activist punk rock. And, you know, a scene that was really strongly feminist and anti-racist and anti-homophobia, anti-transphobia, all about body liberation, all about, like, you know, just being yourself. And that's – you know, those are values I still strongly hold onto.

Against Me!'s journey through punk's subcultures revealed a restrictive and often disingenuous scene. In her 2016 memoir, *Tranny: Confessions of Punk Rock's Most Infamous Anarchist Sellout*, Grace often portrays punks as rigid in their thinking. A view she reinforces in interviews: "I turned to the punk scene because I thought it would be a more open-minded place, but I found that it was more closed-minded than the church" (in Farber 2016). Having uncovered and experienced the "restrictive conditions set by both in-scene attitudes [...] and capitalist imperatives about marketability" (Cogan 2012, 122) Grace's capacity to defy the rules of punk was to a large degree impeded by the power of the codes of masculine identity – a system within which she was required to operate (Mullaney 2007). As she now reflects, the more profound transition for Grace had to do with: "smashing the male ego. If you've been raised and socialized, as a male, and you're transitioning to living your life openly as female, then you have to destroy the male ego you've been raised with" (in Farber 2016). Indeed, in

their 2004 tour film *We're Never Going Home*, we see male band and crew members bonding by hanging-out topless, engaging in arm wrestling and general laddish high jinks (stealing beer, exploiting industry hospitality and being ejected from another Warped Tour band's bus-party for gate-crashing). At the same time, Against Me!'s songs critically reflect on the punk scene expressing disappointment in the behaviours that undermine punk's progressive politics and alternate community.

A healthy mix of frustration and fervour pervades Against Me!'s back-catalogue, from 2002's *Reinventing Axl Rose* song, "Those Anarcho-Punks are Mysterious" in which Grace's apparent war cry, contains an interpretation of political punk through the lens of identity formation and personal evolution:

And we rock
Because it's us against them
We found our own reasons to sing
And it's so much less confusing
When lines are drawn like that,
When people are either consumers or revolutionaries,
Enemies or friends hanging on the fringes
Of the cogs in the system.
It's just about knowing where everyone stands.

When reviewed by punk site *Dying Scene*, Winter perceptively identified how the song encouraged a "new initiative to look inward for the battlefront and conquer yourself before taking to the streets. In a world where lines are constantly blurred and maps constantly redrawn, knowing yourself can be just as bloody a battle" (Winter 2002). Likewise, *Quietus* reviewer Smith (2014) recognised Grace's tendency to conflate political battles with personal experiences. As Grace (2016b) confirmed: "I was so desperate to express myself outwardly, feeling like I couldn't dress how I really wanted. Punk rock offered a certain extravagance of fashion. It was putting on a costume, and it gave you this armor to face the world. It was also reassuring to set myself apart and let people know, 'I am not like you. I am fucking different'."

Drawn to the purity and conviction of punk as a counterpoise to the turmoil of growing up experiencing gender dysphoria, punk initially offered Grace a platform to address real issues, beginning with politics (e.g. “The Politics of Starving”), violence (e.g. “White People For Peace”) and the music industry (e.g. “Unprotected Sex With Multiple Partners”). The urgent playing style of early releases often served to mask the personal commentary, in which expeditiously delivered lines whizzed by unnoticed, having been given so little emphasis, time and space. In this way, Grace was able to pepper her songs with dysphoric sentiments of imposter syndrome often using the deceptiveness and guile of punk, as a metaphor for her own self-deception. Indeed, released in 2003, Against Me!’s album title *Eternal Cowboy*, is explained by Grace as either “symbolic of the power structure,” or “someone forever wandering, lost and alone.” In the song “Turn Those Clapping Hands into Angry Balled Fists” Grace appears to be finding fault with the bromide of meaningless anthems, but may equally be appraising her own voice, as she sings:

I hate these songs
I hate the words
That the singer is singing to me
I hate this melody
I hate this stupid fucking drum beat

But I’m not gonna tell anyone
What I’m really thinking about

Grace’s centrifugally dispensed criticisms are often turned inward within the spatial confines of a song (e.g. “Don’t Lose Touch”). As *Spin*’s Aaron (2005) noted when reviewing *Searching for a Former Clarity*: “Repeatedly, [Grace] assays the self-importance (and obsolescence) that trails any band presuming to redeem people’s lives. Still, [s]he bullhorns on, even when [s]he can’t remember why, turning up the guitars to cut through the bullshit – especially [her] own.” On the album’s closing title track, a fictitious account of an individual deteriorating from a disease, Grace dared to drop bigger clues of her own desire to drop the façade of her masculine punk dialogic.

And in the Journal you kept,

by the side of your bed.
You wrote nightly in aspiration,
of developing as an author.
Confessing childhood secrets,
of dressing up in women's clothes,
Compulsions you never knew the reasons to,
Well everyone, you ever meet or love,
be just relationship based on a false presumption

This intimation was followed by the “The Ocean,” on their major label debut *New Wave* (2007) on which Grace sang: “If I could have chosen/I would have been born a woman/My mother once told me/She would have named me Laura/I’d grow up to be strong and beautiful like her.” On their second and final major label release, *White Crosses* (2010), Grace irrevocably called out the scene for its ‘opportunistic’ and ‘self-serving’ politics – terms Grace employed when responding to criticism from the band Rise Against over their song “I Was A Teenage Anarchist” on which she denounced: “I was a teenage anarchist/but then the scene got too rigid/It was a mob mentality, they set their rifle sights on me/narrow visions of autonomy, you want me to surrender my identity/I was a teenage anarchist, the revolution was a lie.” Some album reviews appreciated the message and acknowledged the “slippage between ideology and fashion” (Cole 2010), largely overlooked in their previous intelligent polemic songs. When unmistakably trained on the “close-minded futility of scenester punks” (Lawrence 2010) – the scene finally got the message. In growing out of simplistic punk politics and an “oxymoronic expectation to conform to a non-conformist norm” (Griffin 2012, 70), Grace was simultaneously beginning the process of redressing the unbalanced gendered spatiality of punk sphere (O’Hara 1999). On her last album, under her birth name, Grace parted company with an inchoate punk persona with the words: “What God doesn’t give to you/you got to go and get it for yourself.”

“Does god bless your transsexual heart?”

When Grace publicly announced her gender dysphoria and transition in *Rolling Stone* (Eells 2012), she tested the genre’s egalitarian resolve in earnest through her neoteric embodiment of punk and its message. In addressing her gender dysphoria Grace also

simultaneously gave voice to the experience of transitioning and the “daily threat of rejection, humiliation and violence” (Davis 2014) through her music. Grace’s subsequent song writing on albums such as *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* (2014) and *Shape Shift with Me* (2016) became undeniably trans in its worldview holding punk to account over its commitment to inclusivity and questioning its dedication to masculine performativity. Grace’s “unconditioning” (Raha 2015) interjected a queer rebelliousness into punk, bringing a trans visibility that refocused punk on challenging gender norms. *Transgender Dysphoria Blues* (TGDB), represented a seminal and potent mix of anthemic self-bolstering (“True Trans Soul Rebel”), continued call to dismantle misogynistic bro culture (“Drinking With the Jocks”) and expressions of the sadness and brutality attached to an enduring dysphoria (“FuckMyLife666”).

Smith’s (2014) review of TGDB in *The Quietus* described the album as a “toast to the worth of one person,” drawing comparison to the triumph of Against Me!’s debut album (*Reinventing Axl Rose*) for the manner in which they both conflate “political battles with the personal experiences that catalyze them.” As Grace has commented in interviews, punk “was about wanting something to be real” (in Faber 2016). Indeed, the outward character of anarcho-punk, “built upon the roots of mainstream punk,” has been a dedication to artistic “integrity, social and political commentary and actions, and personal responsibility” (Gosling 2004, 168). As Grace (2015a) has stated: “14 years of me building up defenses to really protect everyone from who I really was and what I was really going through.” In beginning the process of “making yourself up as you go along” (“True Trans Soul Rebel”), Grace drew on the confluence of gender and sexuality in punk, in order to combat her own “internalized transphobia” – “the inevitable result of living in the world I live in” (in Faber 2016).

TGDB brought a new voice, a new perspective and new anthems for punk audiences to sing along with in support. Fans’ initial response to Grace’s transition were compassionate, but not without concern at how it would change the band. Yet, with the release of TGDB, Against Me! did not simply replace the composition of their earlier fanbase with a new more diverse fanbase (as is the case for many bands who successfully cross-over to the mainstream), but continued to communicate to cis fans. As Chance notes, TGDB “takes an idiosyncratic experience, puts it under the magnifying glass, and universalizes it, so that anyone can relate to lyrics that are in

reality very disparate from their own experience.” Similarly, ‘young states’, posting on a Reddit discussion thread, contributed the following observation:

I’m a cisgender woman [...] I want people to see me like they see every other girl, too. I’m not a delicate, petite little woman [reference to the song “Delicate, Petite & Other Things I’ll Never Be”] that men find cute/sexy and I never have been. Never will be. I’m nearly 6’, I’ve always been on the thicker side, and I’m the clumsiest person in the world. I also don’t believe that I’ll ever carry a child, or ever be a mother, or a wife. I often feel like I’m just not good enough and AM’s music is the first music that actually spoke to those feelings in me.

Grace’s open representation of trans experiences and realities on TGDB also empowered a section of her fan base to make themselves known. Revealing a dimension of her audience that even Grace (2014) was unaware of, and uninformed about:

we were playing in Texas and I looked out at the audience and thought, “OK, who is coming to see us now in Dallas, Texas?” At one point this guy jumped up on stage – this very bro-looking, kinda jock guy – and then he lifted up his shirt to reveal his scars from a top surgery – the surgery in which a trans man has his breasts removed. I was totally blown away. I had to really check myself and stop making snap judgments based on appearances. I realized that maybe I didn’t really know our audience that well and maybe I had underestimated our fans.

Additionally, TGDB allowed Against Me! to attract a broader and more diverse audience which offered Grace support for her own transitioning process: “The most amazing part for me is the amount of trans men and women who have been coming out to the shows and meeting them after and talking with them. I’ll have a lot of them come up to me and be like, “It’s amazing what you’re doing and I look up to you so much.” And it blows me away because I look at them and they’re so much further along in their transition.”

As part of Grace’s open exploration and documentation of her experiences transitioning, she presented an AOL web-series, *True Trans*, in which she talks with a

range of people prepared to share experiences of growing up with gender dysphoria, who openly concede to self-loathing and suicidal thoughts, disclose its impact on relationships and family and divulge their process for working towards self-acceptance. While affirming the series also importantly acknowledges the high suicide rates amongst trans individuals. Clements-Nolle and Marx (2006) report on the unique stressors that lead to depression and substance abuse such as history of forced sex and gender-based discrimination. Grace's sudden elevation to a positive public role model is offset by her admittance that "41 percent of trans people attempt suicide in their life, and I'm part of that statistic." In an interview for Marc Maron's *WTF Podcast*, Grace spoke of her "suicidal nervous breakdown about a year after coming out" in which she describes "being just so sick of thinking of gender roles and what it means to inhabit, like, being a man or being a woman. I was just tired of thinking about it. And with all this focus over like, you know, just, like, using a restroom is just so ridiculous and so dehumanizing." A process she describes as losing the foundation of why she was transitioning in which she "just dissolved as a person." In doing so, she acknowledged, that while there is an experience of fluidity and continuity with some phases of transitioning, that for Grace resulted from public knowledge and awareness of her transition, this subsequently gave way to anxiety around "who are you passing for?"

Punk aesthetics and appearance

One of Grace's first acts was to cover up a wrist tattoo that read "Ramblin' Boys of Pleasure" (a drunken matching tattoo she had gotten with her friend Brendan Kelly) indicative of punk masculinity. In her memoir Grace (2016c) wrote: "this was my first step; the start of my acceptance that I was going to transition into a woman." On TGDB's "Black Me Out" Grace sings:

I don't ever want to talk that way again
I don't want to know people like that anymore
...
I don't want to see the world that way anymore
I don't want to feel that weak and insecure
...
Full body high

I'm never coming down

The song is an obvious pledge to honesty and an undertaking to no longer “be” in way that others expect, drawing on the experience of having to “fake the person that you are and be inauthentic and compromise yourself to people you work with” and the capacity of gender norms to “make you the kind of person that you aren’t, really” (Grace 2014). Langman (2008) has highlighted the sense of personal agency that can be obtained from tattooing, that signals punk’s resistance to domination and its inversion of disciplinary codes. Grace has gone on to completely black out her arms, overlaying and erasing former indelible marks of a past lifestyle. As Grace (2016a) has exclaimed: “To be able to wipe the slate clean is oddly refreshing.” And: “Changing the way my arms look in the past year has completely changed my self-image. It also prepares you for knowing what it’s like to undergo bigger surgeries.” In a discussion of transgender politics Katrina Roen (2002) highlights how, for some, passing for the other sex is considered “complicit with normative gendering” (501).

Aesthetically, Grace has remained punk. As she has stated:

there is no such thing as ‘male’ clothes or ‘female’ clothes – there’s only cloth. I’ve had people be surprised when I show up and dress how I dress – a lot of the time I just throw on a pair of dirty black jeans with holes in them and put on my punk-rock T-shirts and go about my day. Because the dysphoria isn’t about that – the clothes are an outward expression, but it’s my body, it’s my mind, and that’s what it’s more about (Grace 2016b)

Grace’s position echoes Karina Eileraas (1997) example of female bands such as Hole who also reject traditional notions of femininity as ‘nice’, ‘gentle’ and ‘pretty’ drawing on punk practices of “uglification,” resulting in punk imagery employing the “body’s uncontrollability” (Eileraas 1997, 123). Papoulias (2006) states that “a new generation of trans activists and academics are distancing themselves from the queer theoretical emphasis on the mobility and deconstruction of gender, claiming that such perspectives elide the materiality of trans bodies” (232). When Grace discarded her outward punk apparel to reveal her changing body for a feature story in *Rolling Stone*, her ex-wife Heather Gabel found the exposure of Grace’s body contradictory to the conventional

representation and accessibility given to the female body. Commenting on the image of a topless Grace submerged in water, revealing her forming breasts, Gable posted on Facebook:

Rolling Stone has never published a photograph of a non trans women's nipples uncensored before, which, to me, reads as them making arbitrary distinctions between trans and non trans women, which is fucked up [...] Everyone's tits should be legal. In my opinion, this is not a subversive decision aimed at giving censorship the middle finger, it's a blatant example of misgendering, of gender inequality, and a general slap in the face to anyone who expects to have their gender identity respected.

On the one hand, the image demonstrates the mainstream's willingness to present Grace as a deficient female, not requiring censorship as it is perceived to lack a sexual character. While, on the other hand, the presentation of the image as 'unintelligible' as a gendered subject challenge the either/or of pre-op or 'convincing' post-op transsexual. To this effect, Siebler (2012) has stated that "there are few representations in mainstream media of a transgender person who defies these categories" (75). Grace's daily representation of punk gender fluidity is multi-modal employing her singing voice, lyrics, clothing and onstage performances. In the *Rolling Stone* image, she reaffirmed a 'both/neither' conceptualization of gender identity through counterpoise of her outward punk aesthetic with her transitioning body – rarely accentuated by her clothing. As Keegan (2013) argues, "transitional and non-conforming bodies [...] deconstruct the fiction of static gendered categories." The image of Grace served to contest trans-normativity and the notion "that one can 'come home to' or 'arrive at' one's true gender in the end" and that transgender people cross neatly from one gender to the other. Grace's otherwise unchanged appearance and alignment with other examples of punk 'female masculinities' (Halberstram 2005) such as Joan Jett, whilst authentic and consistent with her sub-cultural alignment, was effectively destabilised by revealing her body to reinforce a different category of gender.

Filmic treatments of transgender individuals have shown a tendency to represent transgender characters 'in dilemma' attempting to "create an alternate future while rewriting history" (77). Yet, Grace has remained consistent in her presentation not

seeking to present herself in hyper-feminine ways inconsistent with her sub-cultural allegiance. Nor has Grace attempted to modify her distinctive scream and rasp either through post-production methods or surgically via tracheal shave. Indeed, she has commented that: “coming from the punk scene. The politics that attracted me to the punk scene was the idea of smashing gender roles. And in transitioning, I definitely didn’t want to go from box A to box B. I was never gonna come out looking like Betty Boop.” While Grace took authority over her gender experience (Bettcher 2010), the length of her musical career in Against Me! also means that her evolving trans identity and its visibility would exist alongside her pre gender affirmation. As Grace (2014) has acknowledged: “because of what I do there will be pictures and videos of me that will exist forever on the internet or in print” (Davis 2014).

“Please, please, please, say that you love me”

If writing a complete album from a trans perspective was a first for the punk genre, Grace’s writing on Against Me!’s 2016 follow-up album *Shape Shift With Me* (SSWM) moved beyond excitement at a budding new public identity, body transitioning and concerns over external validation and acceptance to address how: “Trans people should be able to fall in love and sing love songs too, and have that be just as valid” (in Feeny 2016). In her second collection of songs Grace examined different aspects of post-transition negotiation of sex, love and heartbreak. Having successfully presented her battle cry for the freedom to live her truth Grace has continued to chronicle her personal realization as transgender (McInroy and Craig 2017). As a cultural artefact SSWM tackles the social dysphoria caused by ubiquitous heteronormative mainstream media content and the lack of life experiences represented and explored from trans perspectives. SSWM has thus served to generate a new awareness of the social challenges inherent in constructing or consolidating identity.

As Grace (2016b) has explained in interviews promoting the album: “the biggest fears a lot of trans people have if they decide to come out, that they’re making themselves unlovable and that they’ll never have a relationship again.” Additionally, taking on the themes of relationships and love takes punk away from the natural territory of anti-war and violence agitation in a way that breaks-down gender-based power dynamics (Waksman 2009). Grace (2016d) assesses the focus of her current output as:

questioning how much of who we are in relationships or dating or sex is just purely driven by testosterone or estrogen. What emotions are exclusive to one or the other? Or are they not exclusive to either? Are certain emotions just there and equally valid for both genders, or genderless? Are some emotions strictly male or strictly female?

Prior to SSWM, Against Me! were more likely to chronicle a relationship break-up over a (“spineless liberal”) partner’s refusal to throw a brick through a Starbucks window (“Baby I’m an Anarchist”). Changing tactics somewhat, SSWM serves to address male normative privilege, the weight of objectification on a woman, whilst emphasising that all humans should be unidealised and realistic.

Conclusion

As a punk musician, Grace has conveyed her devotion to the feasibility of purity and conviction that the punk scene aspires to. As a transgender woman fronting an anarcho-punk band, Grace has opened up the political terrain of punk defiance to scrutinise and expose harassment, stigma, rejection and systemic inequality from a transwoman’s perspective, to add to the band’s treatment of religious hegemony, corporate greed, US foreign policy and left-wing hypocrisy. In doing so, Grace fulfils the punk ethos of demonstrating that music is for everybody by providing anthems which everyone can sing along to. She refuses to be a spokesperson for her own uncertain path, but willingly shares her journey and viewpoints. Grace’s art and life intersect to present a reality that embodies and progresses the subcultural politics of punk. Against Me!’s lineage, as identified by Grace (2015b) herself, is traceable to:

British anarcho-peace-punk bands of the 1970s and early 1980s, which had a very strong female presence. That extended over to a lot of things that happened in the Pacific Northwest in the 1990s and the riot grrrl movement. Those were the examples of what I wanted to see in punk. I thought that was a space for me to exist in, because I didn’t feel accepted in other places

This article has sought to highlight the potent and emancipatory nature of the themes of Grace’s song writing, and outline how she promulgates her raw, honest, transient,

multifarious reflections on her shifting and open trans reality. Against Me! have successfully transitioned from proficient practitioners of a genre of music, shaped by hierarchies of masculinity occupying spaces that were inaccessible for many queer people, to carve out a space in punk for trans perceptibility and queer presence. Reporting on an Against Me! album release show for SSWM, Wes Enzinna opted to share how Grace communicates with the crowd, suggesting that there are now ‘safe spaces’ being created in punk: “Whatever your gender identity, your sexual orientation, whatever, I just want everyone to feel at home here” (in Enzinna 2017).

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