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**Collage Grrrls:
Reclaiming Contradictory Femininities in
Anti-Chick Lit**

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A commentary submitted in partial fulfilment
of the requirements of the
University of Northumbria at Newcastle
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy.

PhD

October 2017

Declaration

I declare that no outputs submitted for this degree have been submitted for a research degree of any other institution. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this commentary has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee on October 2015.

I declare that the Word Count of this Commentary is 75,561 words

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Date: 06th October 2017

Abstract

Collage Grrrls represents the first sustained attempt to define, historicise and analyse the contentious genre of ‘anti-chick lit’. In this thesis, I argue that anti-chick lit – while critically neglected – represents a key development in women’s writing from the 1990s onwards; alighting on the girl and the grrrl as figures of contradiction and transitional possibility, anti-chick fictions generate spaces in which the darker aspects of female experience – from mental illness, self-harming and unwanted pregnancies, to sexual excess and consumerism – can be creatively (re)imagined.

In this way, *Collage Grrrls* makes a timely intervention into debates about feminine identity and feminism in popular culture. At the heart of these debates, however, exists a fraught paradox that *Collage Grrrls* will interrogate: at the same time as celebrating a female subject that is ‘untamed, ungroomed and unglossed’, does anti-chick lit’s alignment with the mass-market appeal of chick lit mean that the subject is simultaneously *re-tamed, re-groomed and re-glossed* in order to preserve her appeal – paradoxically – to a mass audience? I identify Emma Forrest, an Anglo-American author and journalist, as a representative for the genre. Along with Forrest’s novels *Namedropper* (1998), *Thin Skin* (2002) and *Cherries in the Snow* (2005), I will also include detailed reference to Stephanie Kuehnert’s *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* (2008) and Kristin Hersh’s *Rat Girl* (2010). *Collage Grrrl’s* scope of literary genres includes Young Adult fiction and memoir, with each key work presenting an unapologetic portrait of female pathology.

The discussion will address the impact of third wave and postfeminism, and the cultural shifts in mainstream representations of gender, specifically in light of the fluxional identity politics of the 90s and their effect on young women. The politics and practices of this era paved the way for movements such as riot grrrl, with the grrrl becoming a notable figure for challenging normative meanings of femininity. By examining authors and works on which there is little critical material, *Collage Grrrls* aims to do the same, seeking out authors and texts that have yet to be recuperated to academic discourse.

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Introduction

‘This is Not Chick Lit’: The Emergence of Anti-Chick Lit

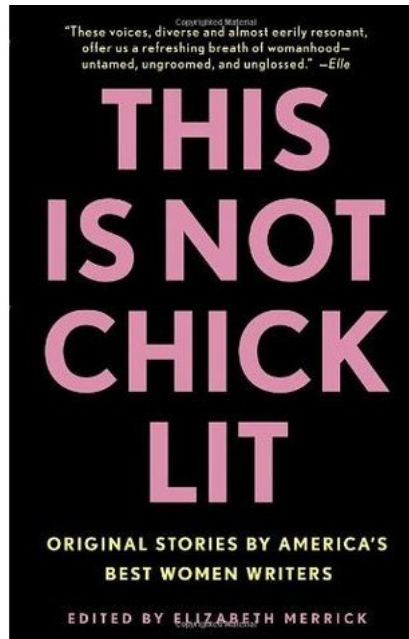


Figure 1: Front cover of *This is Not Chick Lit*, Ed by. Elizabeth Merrick, 2006.

THIS IS NOT CHICK LIT. The title of Elizabeth Merrick’s 2006 anthology aimed to challenge the ‘cotton candy cliché’ of contemporary chick lit. Such critiques of chick lit are ubiquitous, and have contributed to the controversy around whether the genre is harmless or harmful.¹ The front cover of Merrick’s collection is black and bold, yet the statement of what chick lit is *not* is spelled out in shocking pink, parodying the assumed status of chick lit as a ‘pink menace’.² (See Figure 1) The anthology’s dissociation from chick lit is, paradoxically, redeployed in a mass-market context – a tension that is central to

¹ Elizabeth Merrick, *This is Not Chick Lit* (New York: Random House, 2006), (viii).

² Merrick, p.6

the concerns of this thesis. (Re)appropriating the way chick lit is marketed, as well as modifying its content (no ‘money, makeovers [or] Mr. Right’s’ allowed), Merrick claims that her anthology includes the ‘best’ work by ‘the most gifted contemporary female authors’; the importance of these women had been, according to Merrick, ‘obscured by the chick lit deluge’.³ As much as Merrick seems assured in her claim that her anthology is ‘not’ chick lit, it nonetheless presents the question: what exactly makes a chick lit text? And, by that same token, what are the objectives of a ‘non’ chick lit text? In order to begin investigating these questions, I have drawn up a table that highlights the conventions of chick lit and the ostensible (un)conventions of what I am terming ‘anti-chick lit’:

Chick lit conventions	Anti-chick (un)conventions
<p>Humorous account of a neurotic, single female protagonist.</p> <p>Mid 20s to early 30s.</p> <p>White, straight and middle-class female characters.</p> <p>Free and empowered sexual agent.</p> <p>Jovial relationship with body image: favours the ‘she might not be perfect but we love her anyway’ rhetoric that is in line with a positive postfeminist emphasis on the empowered and independent female.</p> <p>Consumerist emphasis, mass-market appeal.</p>	<p>Darkly humorous account of a pathologized female protagonist.</p> <p>No older than 25, always and already ‘girded’.</p> <p>White, straight and middle-class, female characters. No acknowledgement of lesbian/queer identities apart from where they offer a kind of cool/edgy quality.</p> <p>Celebrates sexual excess and through this, reveals woman’s deliberate attempt to cause ‘shock’ or establish a desire to ‘ruin’ herself.</p> <p>Exposes darker aspects of female experience with the body. Deliberately imperfect, and in some senses, unlikeable protagonists. Is a subject of self-harming, eating disorders, and suicide attempts, therefore revealing the more damaging effects of postfeminism.</p> <p>Counter-cultural emphasis that is haunted by echoes of the mass-market appeal of chick lit.</p>

³ Ibid., ix

<p>Emphasis on empowering, tight-knit relationships between women.</p> <p>The ‘ups and downs’ of the female lead are drawn out throughout the plot, yet they always end in success: whether this is in friendships, a career, or finding a suitable male partner.</p>	<p>Deliberately destructive relationships with other women: narrative accounts are generally self-indulgent and undermine a sense of collective feminine ‘resistance’.</p> <p>The female protagonist remains in-between categorisation, yet she attempts to celebrate this ‘failure’ to achieve a fixed feminine identity <i>as</i> a type of success.</p>
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Ever since chick lit’s explosion into the mainstream with Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in 1996, critical scholarship has had a divided reaction toward the ‘chick’ category. In *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (published in the same year as Merrick’s collection), Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young demarcate how chick lit usefully brings into focus ‘many issues facing contemporary women – issues of identity, race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image’.⁴ Chick lit has also been accused of being a ‘frothy sort of thing’ by contemporary female authors, while many others have expressed their politically damning view that the chick oeuvre is ‘unserious and anti-feminist’ (Beryl Bainbridge; Doris Lessing; Jeanette Winterson; Jennifer Belle).⁵ Like Ferriss and Young, Stephanie Harzewski emphasises chick lit’s continued popularity, while simultaneously offering trenchant critiques of its ‘frothiness’, its “‘connect-the-dot plots” enclosed within “identikit covers” and its ‘titles in loopy discursive script’.⁶ Still, Merrick’s claim about showcasing the most gifted female authors is overzealous, and lessens the merit of many assumed chick lit authors, as well as the value that contemporary readers do find in chick lit. As Ferriss identifies, there are women who seek out chick texts

⁴ Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, ‘Introduction’ in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2006), Ed by. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, pp. 1-17, (p.3).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7

⁶ Stephanie Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2011), (p.2).

as they *want* ‘to see their own lives in all the messy detail reflected in fiction today’, and so chick lit has productively carved out a space in which female protagonists are ‘not perfect but flawed, eliciting reader’s compassion and identification simultaneously’.⁷ Equally, Harzewski observes that chick lit’s formula ‘cannot be pegged into a simple generic classification’ and is more than the sum of its pink/fluffy/frothy parts: ‘chick lit presents a genuinely innovative mixture of forms. Chick lit novels are ultimately romances of the self [...] an attempt not only to find a way to articulate a new-millennial novel of female development but also to synthesize romantic comedy with consumerism’.⁸ However, as Harzewski continues, ‘what compromises chick lit’s realism [...] is its engagement with the “success story”’ that, as I have outlined in the chart above, is the inevitable and conventional conclusion to any chick lit text.⁹ While it is useful to map out, it is not the intention of this thesis to condemn chick lit, or to recapitulate the type of harmful/harmless debate that surrounds chick lit any further. Rather, this selective overview of chick lit detractors serves to map out a cohort of female writers who, much like Merrick in *This is Not Chick Lit*, have aimed to separate their work from ‘chick lit’s cloying sameness’.¹⁰ By separating their work from chick lit’s ‘cloying sameness’, these contemporary women writers seek to celebrate feminine identities that, in part, work to contradict the very femininity that has been normalised and established in chick lit portrayals. The exposure of these contradictory femininities attempts to unsettle the established philosophies of ‘successful’ femininity that are, as set out in the table above, a prominent tradition of the genre of chick lit.

At first glance, *This is Not Chick Lit* contributes to what Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, refers to as narratives that purposefully ‘[fall] short of expectations’ (a provocative pink heading that states what it is not); however, it is exactly this that ‘yields a

⁷ Ferriss, p. 4

⁸ Harzewski, p. 57

⁹ Ibid., 57

¹⁰ Ibid., 7

whole terrain of new questions'.¹¹ The dark cover and obscure content of Merrick's collection (short stories of ruined celebrities, drugs, depression and 'failed' female characters) makes plain that this fiction is not sutured around chick lit's conventional submission to happily-ever-after successes. Instead, it reveals contemporary fiction that is 'making its peace with the possibilities and alternatives that dwell in the murky waters of the counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal'.¹² Like the bold aesthetic juxtapositions of its cover, the content of *This is Not Chick Lit* exemplifies contradiction, working both with and against the conventions of chick lit to expose simultaneously 'what else is *beautiful*, what else is *scary* [emphasis added]'.¹³ I suggest that this oxymoronic synthesis of beautiful/scary exposes the complexities and contradictions of contemporary femininity. This construct has in itself been demarcated by social, cultural and theoretical practices that have invited, shaped and still influence ideas of 'correct' feminine behaviour. More importantly, it does so in ways that generate opportunities for feminine creativity and potential resistance/rebellion.

Merrick contends that chick lit 'presents one very narrow view of women's lives' and *This is Not Chick Lit* widens the parameters of this debate through its dual identity: it proposes that it will reveal the *best* by first making its shortcomings (read: *this is not*) explicit, while at the same time, its cover page mimics the mass-market appeal of chick lit. This tension is supported by a striking review of the anthology by *Elle* magazine that hovers provocatively above the title: 'these voices, diverse and almost eerily resonant, offer us a refreshing breath of womanhood – untamed, ungroomed, unglossed'.¹⁴ Merrick's

¹¹ Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), (p.7).

¹² Halberstam, p. 2

¹³ Merrick, p.xii

¹⁴A review by *Elle*— a mainstream lifestyle magazine and one that is published worldwide, no less— is especially suggestive. Here, the popular magazine appears to be sponsoring and aligning itself with a countercultural aesthetic of the imperfect. Herein lies a consumer contradiction central to this study: does the sponsorship of such a prolific magazine account for a 'rebranding' of conventional femininities to the contradictory, perpetuating the eerily resonant and diverse into reductive stereotypes? Or less cynically, does it stand as a progressive feminist gesture? Back in October 2013, The Creative Review wrote the

introduction is sympathetic with *Elle's* review: 'it is the job of the artist', she writes, 'to expose what is hidden, what is "imperfect", and what popular culture might not be ready to hear'.¹⁵ Here, Merrick designates femininity that is untamed/ungroomed/unglossed as 'imperfect', proposing that a key objective of the female artist should be to play up to and expose exactly what popular culture is not equipped to handle. The ambition of *Collage Grrrls*, then, is to identify and answer the kind of 'new' questions that emerge from representations of feminine identity that deliberately fall short of expectations, that dismantle mainstream notions of success, and which find productive potentials in the 'untamed, ungroomed [and] unglossed'. The female authors whose work I interrogate in this thesis range from those who are making the best out of what could be considered as the 'bad' aspects of feminine identity, to those who acknowledge and celebrate the idea that femininity is not a fixed identity. With this, they work to expose the possibilities that lurk 'in-between' this perceived lack of classification. For example, Merrick's anthology begins a strand of contemporary fiction that is not chick lit but, I would argue, it is not *not* chick lit either. It is here that I will draw on Sarah Gamble, who provides the more succinct model of 'anti-chick lit'.¹⁶ Gamble's account of anti-chick lit, while innovative in its terminology, is not extensive, and her literary analysis includes only two texts – Carol Clewlow's *Not Married, Not Bothered* (2005) and Michele Roberts' *Reader, I Married Him* (2006), two novels that are both very literary parodies of chick lit. Gamble's initial essay does, however, hint at some of the intricacies of anti-chick lit, not dissimilar to the ones I identified at the beginning of this introduction – namely, anti-chick lit's counter-cultural objectives that are always and already shadowed by the simultaneous mass-market

following article about *Elle's* 'rebranding' of feminism (<https://www.creativereview.co.uk/rebranding-feminism/>). Clearly, this is not the first time *Elle* has attempted to bring a mass-market appeal to resistant political agendas. In this respect, is the untamed/ungroomed/unglossed attributable to a refreshing breath of womanhood, or indeed, a refreshing *brand*?

¹⁵ Merrick, (p.ix).

¹⁶ Sarah Gamble, 'The Rise of the Anti-Chick Lit Novel', in *Working papers on the Web*, Ed by. Sarah Gormley and Sarah mills, 13 (2009), <http://extra.shu.ac.uk/wpw/chicklit/gamble.html> [Accessed 20 March 2014], (para. 3).

appeal of chick lit. By extension, Gamble traces this distinct *inter*-relationship between ‘chick’ and ‘anti-chick’ that is central to my examination. She writes:

Anti-chick lit constitutes a straddling of contradictory positions with regard to chick lit- an acknowledgement of the playful, even seductive nature of chick lit, set alongside a deliberate attempt to subvert the romantic resolution to which the chick lit protagonist ultimately submits.¹⁷

As Gamble identifies the genre as overlapping two opposing points, there is an explicit dual identity at work within anti-chick lit – a duality that can be immediately identified from the cover of *This is Not Chick lit* spelling out its threat of resistance against conventions yet playing on the established chick image. Gamble further observes that this generates a space for a ‘feminist subversion’ to take place from ‘within the boundaries of popular women’s writing [...] an undermining of the conventions of chick lit that takes place beneath the covers of the fiction’.¹⁸ The formulation of ‘anti-chick lit’ is noteworthy. However, given that Gamble does not thoroughly interrogate the complexity of its embodiment of two opposing positions, and as I have evidenced by drawing up the simultaneous contrasts *and* the comparisons between the two genres at the beginning of this introduction, the bold claim that anti-chick lit inspires a total feminist subversion is overstated and optimistic. The texts Gamble gathers underneath this heading could be described simply as fiction which attempts to undermine contemporary constructions of femininity and does so through altering only one identified convention of the chick lit genre: the romantic resolution. The texts I am analysing are very different novels to that of Clewlow and Roberts, and *Collage Grrrls* presents the first sustained attempt to define, historicise and analyse the contentious genre of anti-chick lit. To regard the genre as a mode of feminist subversion would be to ignore the complexities of its own counter-cultural practices – practices that are at odds with the mass-market appeal of the chick lit genre with which it is affiliated. As contemporary women’s writing that challenges

¹⁷ Gamble, 4.

¹⁸ Ibid., 4

conventional constructions of femininity existed long before the production of this thesis, my objective is not to claim anti-chick lit is creating something new. Rather, it works to *reclaim* – by identifying and consequently celebrating – the contradictions that are inherent in ‘normative’ femininity. This stems from the genre’s ‘straddling’, as Gamble puts it, of two opposing positions, with the outcome that the anti-chick lit novel tends to be characterised both by its ‘deliberate’ subversion of, and playful subservience to, specific conventions and tropes. I argue that anti-chick lit does more than undermine the romantic resolution of chick lit. While critically neglected, the genre represents a key development in women’s writing from the 1990s onwards; anti-chick fictions generate spaces in which the darker aspects of female experience (or failures, in accordance with Halberstam) – from mental illness, self-harming and unwanted pregnancies, to sexual excess and consumerism – can be creatively (re)imagined, even if popular culture is not ready to ‘hear’ them. At the heart of these debates, however, exists a fraught paradox that I will interrogate: at the same time as celebrating a female subject that is untamed, ungroomed and unglossed, does anti-chick lit’s alignment with the mass market mean that the subject is simultaneously *re-tamed*, *re-groomed* and *re-glossed* in order to preserve her appeal – paradoxically – to a mass audience?

In this context, the affinities and tensions that are highlighted through the ‘anti’ prefix merits much deeper discussion, definition and analysis, especially in terms of the wider cohort of authors and works that I am examining. *Collage Grrrls* will include detailed reference to work published by Anglo-American female authors between the early 90s and 2000s: Emma Forrest’s *Namedropper* (1998), *Thin Skin* (2002), *Cherries in the Snow* (2005), *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* (2008) by Stephanie Kuehnert, and *Rat Girl* (2010) by Kristin Hersh. Some of the imperatives of anti-chick lit can be found in Elizabeth Wurtzel’s *Prozac Nation* (1994). Her memoir – a harrowing account of her repeatedly unsuccessful diagnosis for atypical depression, breakdown, suicide attempts, and Prozac use – was immensely popular. As such, it is useful in terms of locating a style

of women's writing that is ostensibly subversive but which has been co-opted by popular culture. Wurtzel is, however, not discussed at length in this study as she, unlike the majority of the texts I am analyzing, is already reasonably established as a subject of academic studies. This thesis instead identifies the work of Emma Forrest, an Anglo-American author and journalist, whose first film *Untogether* is due for release in 2018, as representative of anti-chick lit. Forrest's oeuvre draws on range of literary traditions, from YA fiction to memoir, and each of her novels presents an unapologetic portrait of female pathology. I have selected my primary material as it makes a significant contribution to the way female writers are revealing the 'failures' of the contemporary woman through intellectual, insightful accounts that utilize the conventions of chick lit while adding 'subversive' thrills.

To return to Gamble, her analysis of anti-chick lit also illuminates a generational conflict between the female protagonists of 'chick' and 'anti-chick' lit. '[F]ollowing in the example of *Bridget Jones*', she observes, 'the main protagonist of a typical chick lit novel tends to be somewhere in their late twenties to early thirties'.¹⁹ The female characters of anti-chick lit, however, are much older: 'Aurora [the protagonist of *Reader, I Married Him*] is 50 and Riley [*Not Married, Not Bothered*] is 53, which makes them nearly old enough to be those characters' mothers'.²⁰ My definition of anti-chick lit is completely different: the female protagonists with whom I am concerned represent a 'confusion of girlhood and womanhood', reflecting the contemporary fascination with the 'girling' of women – a postfeminist phenomenon that I interrogate more fully in chapter 2.²¹ Anti-chick lit therefore alights on the girl and the grrrl as figures of contradiction and transitional possibility. Each key character is either no older than twenty-five, *is* a girl (YA fiction) or looks back to her own adolescence in retrospect (memoir). My analysis will address not just the impact of postfeminism, but will also consider third wave identities that were

¹⁹ Gamble, 9.

²⁰ Ibid., 9

²¹ Harzewski, p.9

ultimately 'defined by contradiction'.²² I will examine alongside this the mainstream representations of gender, specifically in light of the fluxional identity politics of the 90s and their effect on young women. The politics and practices of this era paved the way for movements such as riot grrrl, with the 'grrrl' gathering status as a figure that challenged normative meanings of femininity. By examining authors and works on which there is little critical material, this thesis aims to do the same, seeking out contradictory representations of the contemporary woman in fictions that have yet to be recuperated to academic discourse.

Using the F-word: 'normative' femininity, 'postfemininities' and 'anti' femininities

In *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*, Stephanie Genz outlines the various "F-words" that have entered the cultural arena: 'femininity', 'feminism' and 'femaleness' are markers which continually circumscribe the life of the contemporary woman, as she, in turn, 'measure[s] her respective strengths and failings in these categories'.²³ These f-words, Genz continues, are 'variable and therefore have to be recognised as areas for change'.²⁴ Here, I am drawing on the variability and changeability of the f-word 'femininity' in order, firstly, to elucidate my use of 'normative' femininity throughout this thesis. Secondly, I am using Genz to map out the distinction between 'normative' and what I am terming 'contradictory', or indeed, 'anti', femininities, and to explain how these differ from what Genz has identified as contemporary 'postfemininities'.

As Genz asserts, femininity is variable and changeable, exposing the extent to which it is a 'social and cultural construct' and *not* a fixed identity.²⁵ Femininity may act as the 'norm' for woman's 'self-definition', but it is only made normative as it fits with the

²² Melissa Klein, 'Duality and Redefinition: Young Feminism and the Alternative Music Community' in *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, Doing feminism*, Ed by. Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 207- 226, (p.208).

²³ Stephanie Genz, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), (p.3).

²⁴ Genz, p.3

²⁵ Ibid.,4

changes in the social, cultural and personal contexts of the time in which it is interpreted and (re)interpreted. Thus, the question of what makes a woman is constantly called into question. Women of the new millennium have, as Genz describes, ‘been subjects/objects of countless enquiries which have come to a number of conclusions: the “new woman” of the bi-millenary are hapless “singletons” looking for Mr. Right; confident “chicks” who wear lipstick with pride; “power feminists”; third-wave feminists who relish difference and diversity; postfeminist traitors/saviours’.²⁶ Given that femininity is a ‘mutable cultural construction’ and is therefore subject to many changes that Genz outlines in the broad and diverging list above, it seems fair to conclude, as Genz does, that ‘we seem to be trapped in a labyrinth of (re)significations and we can no longer say with confidence and certainty what it means to be female, feminine and feminist in the twenty-first century’.²⁷ Given this, when I draw on the term ‘normative’ femininity throughout this thesis, I refer specifically to the types of ‘norms’ and ‘conventions’ that have been established in the genre of chick lit (that I have, in turn, outlined at the beginning of this introduction), along with the types of femininity that have been specifically influenced by the period of the 1990s from which the genre emerged. Genz acknowledges the transformation of femininity and feminism in the 90s as it re-entered popular culture as ‘girl power’, which ‘heralded femininity and sexual forwardness as signs of female freedom and progress. “Pink packaged femininity” made a substantial and lucrative comeback into fashion style and the publishing industry (evidenced by countless, pastel covered chick lit paperbacks)’.²⁸ In these terms, my demarcation of ‘normative’ femininity with regard to chick lit is sutured around these ideas of sexual agency, female empowerment and autonomy. Moreover, these aspects of female agency gained traction in the 90s mainstream through the emergence of the fashionable and lucrative niche of ‘pink packaged femininity’, which I am also associating with the conventional aspects of chick lit texts.

²⁶ Ibid.,4

²⁷ Ibid., 4

²⁸ Ibid.,1

However, the markers that accounted for the ‘successes’ of femininity in terms of achieving autonomy, agency and empowerment, also worked to measure the ‘failures’ of the contemporary woman. As women gained an increasing freedom to be multiple things, their previously established roles became increasingly blurred. Past meanings of femininity never fell out of focus entirely, and, as Genz explains, the characteristics associated with the ‘new’ categories of femininity that were afforded to women – specifically under the rhetoric of ‘girl power’ – were viewed as ‘somewhat incompatible and even contradictory’ to former definitions.²⁹ For example, the contemporary woman now had the freedom to become a ‘successful business woman’, yet the successful business woman is simultaneously ‘perceived as having shortcomings as a mother/wife and vice versa’.³⁰ By establishing such contradictions and incompatibilities, we are faced with labyrinthine (re)significations of femininity that work to unsettle the idea of femininity as fixed; instead, we must acknowledge and face up to its inherent contradictions. As Genz reflects, ‘what if a woman decided to abandon femininity and relinquish its markers (fashion, hairstyle, or even through breast reduction) would she still be considered as a woman? Feminism, femininity and femaleness are thus linked to a cultural framework that is in the process of constant realignment’.³¹ To trace these contradictions in terms of the idea of empowered femininity that entered the shifting terrain of the 90s as ‘girl power’, this ‘power’ was concurrently indicative of a ‘postfeminist moment of female disorientation and anxiety’.³² ‘The 1990s woman’, Genz continues ‘was seen to be in danger of serious mental and physical damage’.³³ By acknowledging inherent inconsistencies, Genz concludes that the ‘contradictions surrounding modern-day femininity are such that it can no longer be defined in singular terms and instead is characterised by hybrid qualities’.³⁴ Here is where anti-chick lit comes in. My utilisation of the term ‘contradictory femininities’ that, as I

²⁹ Ibid., 3

³⁰ Ibid., 3

³¹ Ibid., 3

³² Ibid., 2

³³ Ibid., 1

³⁴ Ibid., 27

have posited, anti-chick lit is attempting to reclaim, is formulated around the darker aspects of femininity experienced by 90s women who were immersed in a postfeminist moment of empowerment and agency but also of disorientation and anxiety. Anti-chick lit celebrates the contradictory and hybrid qualities of contemporary femininity in a way that specifically brings to the forefront the mental and physical damage that the contemporary woman has been subject. However, it does so in a way, I argue, that works to generate opportunities for feminine creativity and potential resistance.

Genz uses the term ‘postfemininity’ to describe the manifold layering, contradictions and communicative juxtapositions of contemporary femininity. She reasons that her terminology ‘references both the traditional narratives of feminine passivity and more progressive scripts of feminine agency’.³⁵ Postfemininity, she proclaims, ‘carries echoes of past, present and future femininities’.³⁶ While Genz’s study does successfully draw out the contradictions of contemporary femininity and asks us to consider feminine identity not as fixed but mutable, I use the term ‘anti’ femininities as opposed to ‘post’ femininities to extend Genz’s examination in the following ways. Firstly, I am not wholly convinced that the ‘post’ prefix thoroughly embodies elements of past, present *and* future femininities. As they are premised on unavoidable connotations of pastness, ‘postfemininities’ appear as afterthoughts, undermining the role of women’s creative agency in the forging of progressive feminine identities. In these terms, the prefix ‘anti’ presents a more proximate embodiment of the contemporary woman’s ‘deliberate’ attempt to resist or rebel against normative accounts of femininity. Secondly, ‘anti-femininities’ encapsulates a straddling of two conflicting positions – its hyphenated nomenclature foregrounding the hybrid and contradictory qualities of contemporary femininity. Finally, ‘anti-femininities’ more effectively captures the idea of purposefully falling short of expectations, which, as Genz points out, is part and parcel of the inconsistencies that

³⁵ Ibid., 17

³⁶ Ibid., 17

contemporary women face when trying to position themselves in language. At the same time, by locating identities that are already grounded in a refusal and a failure to live up to convention, my use of anti-femininities expresses the paradox on which this thesis turns: that the ‘anti-chick’ is always and already set up to fail. While ‘postfemininities’ is marked by the past and implies some of the rebellious tinkering with normative structures that I associate with anti-femininity, to mark something as ‘anti’ or as ‘other’ is to make it expressly open to co-option and reinterpretation by the very thing – in this instance, normative femininity – that it works to define itself against.

Messy texts: the palimpsest, low theory and anti-chick lit

Collage Grrrls is informed by two key theoretical frameworks: Sarah Dillon’s evocative concept of the ‘palimpsestuous’, taken from her study *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (2007) and Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure* (2011). Both Halberstam and Dillon, in very different ways, examine the productivity of in-between spaces, acknowledging their complex duality and exploring narratives that break away from established binaries and instead celebrate alternative, and somewhat messy, identities. In the overview of my hypothesis, I fleetingly indicated that anti-chick lit patterns the logic of failure that Halberstam identifies. Anti-chick lit fictions favour the possibilities and alternatives that dwell in a refusal to adhere to convention. While *The Queer Art of Failure* has been subject to critiques about romanticising failure, I read it as a text that usefully dismantles romanticised notions of success in order to expose the ways in which an individual can be successful in their failure to adhere to customary behaviours. This thesis establishes how deviations from the fixed scripts of the ‘normative’ femininity that is set out in chick lit can enable/precipitate creative (re)imaginings of what contemporary femininity is or could be. However, what I also examine is the extent to which these failures or deviations are politically, socially or culturally progressive: Do they really

change anything, or suggest a pathway to change? Or are they evidence not of resistance or rebellion but of an inevitable structural tinkering to interpretations of femininity that have gained traction in contemporary consumer culture.

Halberstam's own framework is informed by a (re)appropriation of Stuart Hall's 'low theory', a concept that significantly 'tries to locate all the in-between spaces'.³⁷ Halberstam affiliates low theory with 'popular knowledge' to 'explore alternatives' that demarcate a 'way out of the usual traps and impasses of binary formulations'.³⁸ Exploring, looking, and locating, the complexities of low theory combined with quotidian life map out, in short, the 'basic desire to live otherwise'.³⁹ However, immersed in this desire 'to live otherwise' is the rather optimistic observation that living otherwise can '[save] us from being snared from the hooks of hegemony and speared by the seductions of the gift shop'.⁴⁰ I would argue that anti-chick lit locates an in-between space through its deliberate subversion and acknowledgment of chick lit's playful seductions. Nevertheless, this in-between formulation means that anti-chick preserves at least some of the seductions of the 'gift shop' through its concurrent straddling of chick lit's coquettish, mass-market appeal.⁴¹ Why, then, is anti-chick lit's exposure of contradiction significant? To return to Genz, 'there is no doubt we have to account for femininity's cultural embeddedness and its sedimented meanings as a patriarchal heritage. At the same time, there is also a need to "unsettle" femininity and re-negotiate its place in a changed social and cultural context'.⁴² In these terms, anti-chick lit is significant in its recognition of diverse accounts of femininity. Yet, that the genre is a deliberate 'attempt' to subvert and unsettle 'conventional' aspects of femininity seems an inevitable reaction to not only the unwanted pressures of patriarchy but also to the evolving status of femininity in a context of social, cultural and theoretical change. Thus, reconciling anti-chick lit's politics of

³⁷ Halberstam, p. 2

³⁸ Ibid.,2

³⁹ Ibid.,2

⁴⁰ Ibid., 2

⁴¹ Ibid.,2

⁴² Genz, p.26

rejection/subversion/failure with its mass-market success/appeal is primarily just about enjoying this contradiction, of watching female authors tinker with structures in an – invariably unsuccessful – ‘attempt’ to achieve creative autonomy.

In terms of my chosen primary texts, Halberstam’s focus on failure as specifically emblematic of queer identity may seem inappropriate, as each protagonist is distinctly heteronormative: straight, white, and predominantly middle class (although there are non-heteronormative characters that feature peripherally in two of Forrest’s novels). What I am exploring in relation to Halberstam’s queer framework are femininities that are *queered* in terms of their disavowal of convention. The conflicts associated with this queering are embodied by the figure of the anti-chick protagonist, who is invariably situated in between the states of girlhood and womanhood. Such a confusion plays with the idea that each female character might not be ‘succeeding at womanhood’.⁴³ Halberstam notes that the ostensible failure to become a woman in this way offers ‘unexpected pleasures’; ‘where feminine success has been measured by male standards [...] gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals’.⁴⁴ Despite the failure of each female character to grow-up, male characters are still very much part of the narrative drama. In this respect, feminine flaws do not, as Halberstam posits, completely fall outside of patriarchal norms. Equally, the ‘successful’ failure of female characters is measured quite stringently with reference to other women’s bodies, as opposed to a precedent that has been set completely by male standards.

Sarah Dillon’s sustained interrogation of the palimpsest also informs this thesis. In *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory*, Dillon explores a *palimpsest* as a historical artefact to substantiate her theorisation of *the palimpsest* as a metaphorical construct. Subsequently, Dillon utilises the palimpsest/a palimpsest to illuminate her concern, much like Halberstam, with the space of the ‘in-between’. Dillon illustrates that ‘the vellum of

⁴³ Ibid., 4

⁴⁴ Ibid., 4

the palimpsest represents the “inter” – the between of the texts – a between that is no longer that of difference, but of identity, an identity redefined as, and traversed by, difference’.⁴⁵ Each text of the palimpsest is, when read in relation to Halberstam’s analysis, a queered text; its linear trajectory is made uneasy through the interruption of other narratives. By default, a palimpsest – and consequently *the* palimpsest – is a body of alternatives; with layers of new texts scrawled over old, they are redefined by the very difference between both past and present inscriptions. Dillon uses a charmingly suggestive model for her account of the interrelationship between the texts of a palimpsest that she terms ‘the palimpsestuous’, which usefully demonstrates the simultaneous intimacy and independence of each text. This, to return to Genz, is a specifically apt metaphor in relation to the construction of contemporary femininity, especially in terms of substantiating the contradictions of feminine identity that are celebrated in anti-chick lit. Femininity, like the palimpsest ‘appears as a complex, multi-layered puzzle that is dynamic in its capacity to change and absorb cultural messages, without being amnesiac and forgetful about previous versions of femininity’.⁴⁶ Both Dillon and Halberstam gesture toward reclaiming contradiction, whether in the form of Halberstam’s desire to ‘live otherwise’, or in Dillon’s conceptualisation of narrative as defined both by its difference and *as* its difference. Equally, they are both organised by an ‘inter’ – that is, the in-between of two opposing narratives – and it is this ‘inter’ space that demonstrates their unease: such narratives are at once productive and distinct in their own right. However, as they struggle to break tradition – the underlying and already established narrative – they maintain the seductions of convention. In this sense, they seem always to be saved from achieving a full sense of agency from their own ‘undoing’, and are haunted by the ‘subordinating, oppressive elements’ of previously established definitions.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Sarah Dillon, *The Palimpsest: Literature, Criticism, Theory* (London: Continuum, 2007), (p.97).

⁴⁶ Genz, p.8

⁴⁷ Ibid., 8

Beneath the covers: a palimpsestuous reading of anti-chick lit

To Gamble, anti-chick lit provokes a subversion (of sorts) from *within* the boundaries and *beneath* the covers of popular women's fiction. Much like the threshold state of being 'betwixt and between' two opposing positions, Gamble's 'within and beneath' illuminates exactly the kind of figurative, illicit interrelationship to which Dillon alludes in her theorisation of the palimpsestuous, existing here between anti-chick and its sister genre, chick lit.⁴⁸ I read the relationship between chick and anti-chick as palimpsestuous, a relationship which Dillon succinctly defines as a 'simultaneous relation of intimacy and separation [...] preserving as it does the distinctness of texts, while at the same time, allowing for their essential contamination and interdependence'.⁴⁹ In this context, the model of the palimpsestuous – 'interdependent' and 'contaminated' – at once testifies to and also queries the rhetoric of openness that surrounds the contradictory feminine subjects of anti-chick lit. The *essential contamination* that Dillon attributes to the palimpsestuous is curious in its reiteration that revelation and concealment are simultaneous: at the same instant that the anti-chick female subject is exposed as 'untamed, ungroomed and unglossed', she is tainted by the closeness of tradition and concealed through a *re-taming*, *re-grooming* and *re-glossing*, and, ultimately, through a re-fashioning of her agenda of refusing what is 'normal'.

It is useful to examine the construction of a palimpsest as a historical artefact to better understand how it works as a metaphorical construct in relation to anti-chick lit. In *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith

⁴⁸ Victoria L. Pitts, 'Reclaiming the Female Body: Embodied Identity Work, Resistance, and the Grotesque', *Body and Society*, 4 (1998), 67-84, (p.82).

⁴⁹ Dillon, p.3

provide a comprehensive description of the interactive layers of a palimpsest, illuminating its complexities and exploring how the thin strata of its body is essentially contaminated. The traversable vellum formulates the ‘inter’ – that is, the complex relationship between each of its texts – and represents both closeness (through their co-existence) and detachment (through their difference). As Watson and Smith illustrate:

In a palimpsest, one image lies submerged, apparently erased or overwritten by a second image; but traces of what has been erased or overwritten leak through the overlaid surface. The layers underneath [...] house alternative narratives or images that compete with and contest the visible and apparent meaning.⁵⁰

In this context, anti-chick lit can be read as a palimpsestic ‘second’ image. This is in the way that what Merrick identifies as the original ‘well-crafted’ aesthetic of writing that is ‘not chick lit’ gives way to the deluge of ‘truncated legs, shoes, [and] handbags’ that we find in contemporary chick lit.⁵¹ This shift in narrative accounts for the way in which the second image ‘concealed or obscured deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning.’⁵² Like a palimpsest, anti-chick lit’s untamed/ungroomed/unglossed account embodies the ‘deeper’ underlying narrative: while initially submerged, its imperfect traces leak through to contaminate the external image, which – at the same time – aims to conceal it. In turn, this intimacy/separation frames the very contradictions that exist within and beneath the covers of popular women’s fiction. The consistent erasure and overwriting which causes the texts of a palimpsest to compete with and contest each other testifies to the difficulties of remaining distinct within a mess of narratives. What is left is a discursive, imperfect body that is theoretically ‘*in progress*, not quite one thing or another’, an illustration of the ‘in-between’ that is the touchstone of this thesis.⁵³ The

⁵⁰ Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith, ‘Introduction: Mapping Women’s Self-Representation at Visual/Textual Interfaces’, in *Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance*, Ed by. Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith (USA: University of Michigan, 2002), pp. 1-49, (p.28).

⁵¹ Merrick, viii.

⁵² Kristy Tenbus, ‘Palimpsestuous Voices: Institutionalized Religion and the Subjugation of Women in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*’, *Margaret Atwood Studies*, 4:1 (2011), 3- 14, (p.4).

⁵³ Catherine Grant and Lori Waxman, ‘Introduction: The Girl in Contemporary Art’ in *Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art*, Ed by. Catherine Grant and Lori Waxman (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), pp. 1-17, (p.2).

construction of ‘not-quite one thing or another’ is the foundation of anti-chick lit: the genre is not quite subversive, but it is not wholly conventional either. Amongst other things, anti-chick lit makes the intermediate and indeterminate spaces of identity discernible to readers. This justifies anti-chick lit’s constant traversal and embodiment of alternatives and as a result, it is redefined not just by its difference but also *as* difference. The feminine subject of anti-chick lit becomes (or *unbecomes*, in conjunction with Halberstam) written off in contradiction, not quite one thing or another.

Dillon, much like Watson and Smith, depicts the inconsistencies and tensions that formulate the palimpsest. Dillon champions the competitive, almost visceral interaction of texts as they vie for visibility: ‘the layers of scraped-off writings were often imperfectly erased, so that texts mysteriously and stubbornly resurfaced centuries later, providing ghostly images of an eradicated past’.⁵⁴ Here the scraped and flayed skin of what has gone before illuminates both the flawed aesthetic and fluxional status of palimpsests. The imperfect erasure of previous writings reveals the latent traces of the past upon the body of the text: the “‘present” of the palimpsest’, Dillon continues, ‘is only constituted in and by the “presence” of texts from the “past”, as well as remaining open to further inscription by the texts of the “future”’.⁵⁵ Former narratives are removed, but only imperfectly, and they are therefore stubborn and indelible, constantly resurfacing to once more locate the in-between and with it, the possibilities of creating new narratives of interference. As Dillon states, ‘the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down – perhaps even violently, via the jolts in fashion – in the interests of a new object and a new language’.⁵⁶ Yet, the new object is not always productive and distinct. Instead, it holds on to past contamination. With this, the palimpsest collapses the binaries of old and new, original and derivative, creative and destructive, its present survival seemingly hinging on the revival of past narratives, which are fragmented and imperfect. This idea is interrogated in more detail in chapter 5, with

⁵⁴ Dillon, p 4

⁵⁵ Ibid., 37

⁵⁶ Ibid., 2

reference to Hersh's *Rat Girl* and the anti-chick memoir. For now, I will use the cyclical and palimpsestuous interaction between past and present to map out the genealogy of anti-chick lit. Moreover, as a title such as *Collage Grrrls* would suggest, aesthetics are integral to the *inter/* 'not-quite' femininities that tend to prevail in the anti-chick oeuvre. Through tracing the confusing history of chick lit, I will demonstrate how women's fiction that championed an ostensibly disruptive agenda emerged, was subsequently concealed and eventually displaced. By drawing attention to what is also taking place *on top* of the covers of these fictions, I will demonstrate how their 'in-between' narratives make these palimpsestic interruptions visible. At the same time, they work both against, yet become a part of, the traditional ways in which contemporary chick lit is marketed.

Over ten years ago, the contemporary women's writing scene was flooded by a torrent of texts that fell under the 'chick' category – texts by Helen Fielding, Sophie Kinsella, Plum Sykes, and Candace Bushnell to name a few. One would not perhaps find nestled amongst them Cris Mazza and Jeffery DeShell's allegedly 'transgressive' anthology of 'new women's fiction', *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (1995).⁵⁷ The curiously titled collection was (equally curiously) published one year before the emergence of chick lit as the pink/frothy/cloying/unserious/unfeminist genre that it has come to be defined as by some of its harshest critics. Delving into the *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* collection, it seems that the title is the only similarity it bears to the chick lit we now know. Mazza and DeShell's anthology carried the intriguing subtitle of 'On the Edge: A New Women's Fiction Anthology', with the *edge* perhaps the first indication of literature that, like anti-chick lit, was attempting to identify/harness the productive possibilities of personal and/or political marginality. The collection was an effort to generate a space in which female experience could perhaps be creatively (re)imagined through fictions in which women were 'no longer afraid to honestly assess and define themselves without having to live up to standards imposed by either a persistent patriarchal world or the

⁵⁷ Cris Mazza and Jeffery DeShell (eds.) *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* (Illinois: FC2, 1995), (p. 9).

insistence that [women] achieve self-empowerment'.⁵⁸ Mazza's use of the term chick-lit was intentionally provocative and, initially, strikingly unsympathetic to the profuse, pinky sameness of the contemporary characterisation of chick lit. As such, its original objectives – to assess honestly, to live outside of definition, to not always achieve self-empowerment – can be read in conjunction with Halberstam as illustrating its celebration of falling short of expectations.

In terms of the fiction's alliance with feminism, Mazza's chick-lit – dubbed 'postfeminist fiction' – indicated that it was not intended to be as unserious/unfeminist as what we now know as contemporary chick lit. Yet, Mazza's alignment with postfeminism was more of a 'wry joke' than a serious political treatise, as her explanation demonstrates: 'I just thought postfeminist was a funky word – possibly a controversial one if read as "anti-feminist" so I didn't try and define it'.⁵⁹ Whether it is 'anti-feminist', or just a 'funky word', the term postfeminism has been used and abused, celebrated, rejected, and invited back into feminist critical discourse. Given this, it is easy to understand Mazza's reluctance to attempt a definition, but her (lack of) rationale for classing the anthology as postfeminist is still far too tentative for introducing such a bold and complex feminist politics into her 'transgressive' anthology. What *is* useful, however, is that the ambiguities that frame postfeminist politics are a fitting provision for feminine fiction that is positioned – equally ambiguously – as 'edgy'. Mazza continues to describe how she wanted to celebrate fiction that is 'on the edge' by way of mobilising the 'actions women [characters] could incite *on their own* [...] whether bad or good, hopeful or dead-end, progressive or destructive. We [the editors] hope that women are not only what society has made them but there is some individual identity to work with'.⁶⁰ The type of 'chick-lit' that is set up by Mazza champions the unconventional aspects of female experience that are located in between bad/good, hopeful/dead-end, progressive/destructive. Such juxtapositions imply that

⁵⁸ Mazza and DeShell, p.9

⁵⁹ Ibid.,9

⁶⁰ Ibid.,1

women have the power and freedom to transgress binaries. Seemingly, Mazza's 'chick-lit' was very different to that of Fielding, but what became of Mazza's definition? Harzewski offers the following explanation:

Mazza and DeShell's term, for the most part unknown to the literary mainstream, was subsequently appropriated as an idiom by journalist James Wolcott [...] Wolcott stripped Chick-lit of its hyphen, the term entering the New York publishing conversation as a stylish sneer [...] [the genre] lost its muscle, devolving into cutesy assonance. The term chick lit itself became wobbly, as it had vacillated in print between chick lit, chick-lit and chicklit⁶¹

Here, Harzewski indicates the origins of 'chick-lit' – partly unknown to the mainstream and therefore subject to a host of palimpsestic permutations – have made its definition unstable, moving between 'chick-lit, chick lit and chicklit'. Such interruptions to the original term account for the appearance of 'anti-chick' lit. When read in conjunction with the above quotation, the genre's emergence is a result of the imperfectly erased past of Mazza's 'chick-lit', combined with the now 'cutesy' conventions of contemporary chick lit. Like the palimpsest, the history of chick lit is a complex layering of opposing definitions: the idiosyncratic and putative honesty of Mazza's 'chick-lit' was *overwritten* by a new, stylised permutation of the term that was made to fit more mainstream appetites.

A chapter by Mazza that appeared in Ferriss and Young's 2006 study, entitled 'Who's laughing now? A Short History of Chick-Lit and the Perversion of the Genre', traces the disappearance of Mazza's 'chick-lit'. It is curious that apart from Harzewski, the genealogy of 'chick-lit's' devolution has not been traced in critical scholarship; Mazza's chapter is overlooked, perhaps as a consequence of its inclusion in an altogether celebratory study of the genre. As a title that gestures towards the 'perversion' of chick lit would suggest, Mazza writes in elegant lament about ever having invoked the term 'chick-lit' in the first instance. She avers: 'something happened that could have set the course of chick lit to carry on as fiction that transgressed the mainstream or challenged the status-quo,

⁶¹ Harzewski, p. 46

instead of becoming what it is now: career girls looking for love'.⁶² The 'joke', as Mazza states, was intended to rouse a generation of women who were writing about their darker experiences and, from this, their more marginal position in contemporary culture. Instead of inviting a new, transgressive mode of contemporary women's writing, Mazza's use of the term 'chick-lit' actually backfired. In the first instance, Mazza's confidence in just how pivotal and ground-breaking her 'new' women's fiction anthology was supposed to be is overzealous when, in reality, *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* was actually subject to some terrible reviews. One reviewer called it an 'offense to the senses' (although, I would argue that provoking such visceral disdain was actually the point of the fiction).⁶³ Yet, the intended 'offense' (that is, the exposure of a darker, more marginal and imperfect side of feminine experience) lost the contentious force of 'here's who we are, plus what you (still) think of us thrown back in your face'.⁶⁴ As this strand of contemporary women's fiction was, and most importantly remains, partially obscured by a new 'cutesy assonance', Mazza concludes 'how is anyone to make a distinction?'⁶⁵

From this, I see anti-chick lit as having emerged from the inability to make the 'distinction' Mazza sets up. Anti-chick is a deliberate attempt to subvert the conventions of chick lit, yet as it is unable to break away from these same seductive traditions, it plays up to its own lack of distinction. In so doing, anti-chick lit's attempts to reclaim narratives of feminine failure evoke the problems that exist between the conflicting texts of the palimpsest. This conflict and lack of definition has become the focal point of the front covers of anti-chick novels. (See figure 3 and 4).

On the front cover of Mazza and DeShell's anthology, a truncated female torso is explicitly bared, made up of half-woman, half-shark, and half-mask, with a peculiar

⁶²Cris Mazza, 'Who's Laughing Now? A Short History of Chick Lit and the Perversion of the Genre', in *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, Ed. by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (London: Routledge, 2006) pp. 17-29, (p.21).

⁶³Mazza, p. 21

⁶⁴Ibid.,21

⁶⁵Ibid.,21

plumage of black feathers sprouting from a heavily made-up face. This rather hideous collaging of hyperbolic femininity, along with symbols for violence, destruction and masquerade, is a visual rendering of Mazza's original intention: 'here's what you think of us thrown back in your face'. Much like *This is Not Chick Lit*, Mazza's cover is cluttered with ideas of re-fashioning a disruptive feminine aesthetic as an alternative brand that may well celebrate a lack of distinction, but as it appears here in black and shocking pink, is co-opted as a trademark nonetheless. Figure 4 is the 2007 edition of Emma Forrest's *Thin Skin*, and is equally curious: the truncated legs and heeled shoes, dangling awkwardly from a cloud that is outlined in black, walk in the symbolic footsteps of chick lit cover imagery. The cover at once acknowledges the different representations of femininity that have been 'wrongly' appropriated, while the dark cloud appears to represent the murky aspects of female experience that *Thin Skin* draws into focus. However, the pink background still presents a problematic alignment with the mass market that detracts from the transgressive aspirations of anti-chick lit: the fragmented feminine representations on the covers of *Thin Skin* and *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction* fail to live up to the models of 'conventional' femininity that chick lit upholds, yet they also fail to break away from these same models.

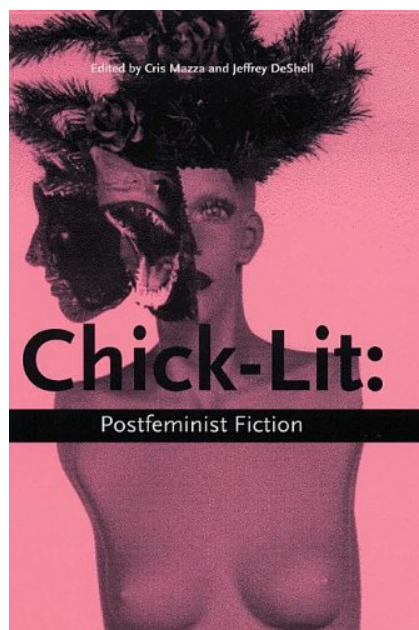


Figure 3: Front cover, *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist fiction*, Ed by. Cris Mazza and Jeffery DeShell, 1995.



Figure 4: Front Cover, Emma Forrest's *Thin Skin*, 2007 edition.

Female (un)becoming: 'cutting' and reclaiming discourse

Characterised by this aesthetic of contradiction, anti-chick lit seeks to distinguish itself through a calamity of collaged images on top of 'cutesy' surfaces. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam understands this 'failed' aesthetic in terms of losing one's way: 'losing [...] is an art and one that is "not too hard to master though it may look like a disaster"'.⁶⁶ To break away from tradition, to 'lose' your way and therefore 'look' like a disaster is, as examined above, exactly how anti-chick lit is marketed. Losing, however, opens up a potentially useful route towards what Halberstam terms '(un)becoming'.⁶⁷ To return to figures 3 and 4, it is the collaged aesthetic of the feminine images that are present on the covers of the fiction that illuminates this sense of (un)becoming and exemplifies

⁶⁶ Halberstam, p. 6

⁶⁷ Ibid.,6

what Halberstam describes as a ‘disaster’ aesthetic. In order to make both the aesthetic of disaster and the (un)becoming conduct of the subject explicit, Halberstam explores the act of ‘cutting’ as a ‘feminist aesthetic proper to the project of female (un)becoming’.⁶⁸ While cutting ‘represents an attempt for [the female] to remake herself’, its negative associations reveal that the act also ‘crafts a version of woman that is messy, bloody, porous, violent, and self-loathing’.⁶⁹ In order not to glamourize cutting and self-harm as a triumphant remodelling of the female body, Halberstam highlights its futility by suggesting that it is framed by a ‘masochistic will to eradicate the body, literally transcribing felt inadequacies so that the female body is a site of negative projection’.⁷⁰

I am choosing to focus on cutting in part because self-harm is one of the darker aspects of female experience that anti-chick lit highlights – not as an attempt to idealise the act, but to draw attention to ‘unconventional’ behaviours. I want here to utilise the way in which Halberstam links cutting with the artistic practice of collage in order to explore the extent to which collage is emblematic of the disaster aesthetic, of the failure to adhere to norms, and the ‘unbecoming conduct’ of refusing defined boundaries that lies in its aesthetic construction. In order to draw attention away from the problematic focus of the cutting involved in self-harming as a stylised act to ‘remake’ the body, I want to focus on ‘cutting’ as a metaphor for reclaiming contradiction: a break from tradition that acts as a form of *reclaimative* discourse, much like the kind examined by Victoria Pitts in ‘Reclaiming the Female Body: Embodied Identity Work, Resistance, and the Grotesque’ (1998) and in her later monograph *In the Flesh* (2003) to which I will return. Halberstam offers a fitting examination of ‘collage’, suggesting that its political potential lies in the ‘communicative’ juxtaposition of ‘cutting’ and ‘pasting’. The images generated through this practice create what Marion Leonard also calls a ‘project of communication’; the

⁶⁸ Ibid., 137

⁶⁹ Ibid., 137

⁷⁰ Ibid., 137

collage widens prescribed boundaries through its consistent allusion to the space existing in-between its diverse images.⁷¹ Halberstam states:

I want to use the example of collage, a cut-and-paste genre, to find another realm of aesthetic production dominated by a model of radical passivity and unbeing. Collage precisely references space in-between and refuses to respect boundaries [...] used by many female artists [...] to the promise of transformation, not through a positive production of the image but through a negative destruction.⁷²

By invoking collage as a metaphor for the cutting that is involved in self-harming, Halberstam suggests that collaging is responsible for the repositioning of boundaries that, like the body that is mutilated through self-harm, makes the ‘frisson of potential failure, collapse and crisis’ explicit.⁷³ Moreover, Halberstam indicates that it is the prominence placed on the space in-between that exposes the capacity for transformation. In conjunction with the contradictory aesthetic of what Halberstam terms a ‘cut-and-paste’ genre, collage ‘produces’ through its apparent destruction of the image; the end result exposes an incompatible texture that repositions the ‘positive’ image as a somewhat ugly, hybridised aesthetic that, paradoxically, Halberstam classifies as a *transformative* state of ‘unbeing’. The ‘cut-up words and images’ of the collage aesthetic, as similarly observed by Leonard, constitute a ‘project of communication [...] inviting debate and gaining power from juxtaposition’.⁷⁴ In this respect, anti-chick lit is an example of a cut-and-paste genre as its main objective of reclaiming contradictory femininities generates, like the communicative juxtapositions of collage, alternative spaces. In terms of what popular culture ‘might not be ready to hear’, the practice of collage exposes an imperfect feminine experience and aesthetic in which the protagonist of anti-chick lit, as she is celebrated as untamed, ungroomed, and unglossed, carries her ‘emotional discomfort, vulnerability and passivity’

⁷¹ Marion Leonard, ‘Rebel Girl, You Are The Queen of My World: Feminism, Subculture and Grrrl Power’ in *Sexing the Groove: Popular, Music, and Gender* Ed by. Sheila Whiteley (USA: Routledge, 1997), pp. 230-257, (p.236).

⁷² Halberstam, p. 136

⁷³ Ibid., 143

⁷⁴ Leonard, p. 236

on ‘full display’.⁷⁵ At the same time, however, the model of ‘radical passivity’ that Halberstam sets up is rather problematic and undermines the power of juxtaposition. It suggests that any ‘radical’ action is actually an incidental (and passive) response to the pressure to perform a certain mode of femininity. The ‘radical’ then becomes a performance that, while it drives the subject to a state of unbeing, is still a performative act. As Halberstam continues, ‘in a performance of radical passivity, we witness the willingness of the subject to actually come undone, to dramatize unbecoming’.⁷⁶ This dramatization of unbecoming relates to my account of anti-chick lit as it suggests that the (un)becoming conduct of the untamed/ungroomed/unglossed protagonist is a performance of contemporary femininity that has the capacity to gain currency within consumer markets.

Pitts’ examination reveals the drama of unbecoming through the figure of the female body-modifier – termed so for her demonstrable engagement with self-mutilation. This ranges, in accordance with Pitts, from the performative acts of ‘tattooing, body piercing [and] scarification’ to the more pathological aspects such as ‘anorexia [and] bulimia’.⁷⁷ In both cases, each act is representative of a ‘non-normative adornment’ which generates a space of ‘liminality’ (originally coined by Arnold van Gennep) and resembles ‘a point of transition in ritual – the middle stage between young and old, unsocialised and socialised, pristine and marked’.⁷⁸ Symbolic of the in-between spaces of the cut-and-paste genre of collage, Pitts’ study identifies ‘liminality’ as ‘the temporal and physical space of ambiguity, and the place where a “cultural drama” of rites is enacted with initiative and audience [...] transgression – marking, cutting, bleeding – trespasses former claims on the body [...] creating a rite of passage’.⁷⁹ In these terms, the liminal persona matches anti-chick lit’s production of a collaged femininity by refusing to respect boundaries through the (un)becoming and transgressive conduct of marking/cutting/bleeding. By the same

⁷⁵ Halberstam, p.138

⁷⁶ Ibid., 142

⁷⁷ Victoria Pitts, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), (p.24).

⁷⁸ Ibid.,73

⁷⁹ Ibid.,73

token, it also dramatizes its underlying ambiguities: what should be a peripheral engagement is, according to Pitts, at once acted out with agency and creativity, but is simultaneously aligned with an ‘audience’. By trespassing former claims on the body, the liminal persona invites consideration in relation to an ideology of ‘reclaiming and resistance’ that, as Pitts continues, ‘implies that the social inscriptions on the body can be rewritten and the body [...] can be reclaimed’.⁸⁰ Some women who engage in acts of body modification, she notes, ‘describe an attempt to reverse a sense of ugliness imposed by social imperatives for women’s beauty’.⁸¹ Here, Pitts sets up the contradictions inherent in contemporary femininity and champions an anti-chick aesthetic through the communicative juxtaposition of being both beautiful and ugly. As opposed to the rites of passage, the liminal persona, or indeed the collaged feminine figure of anti-chick, initiates a kind of *wrongs* of passage in which established ideas of beauty and ugliness are undone, the non-normative is celebrated, and women do not succeed in conventional narratives of becoming, being poised instead on the threshold of ‘(un)becoming’.

Living contradictions: girls, grrrls and collage grrrls

What I am terming as the ‘collage grrrl’ is evocative of the liminal persona mapped out above, and this section will demonstrate how the girl, grrrl and the practice of collage usefully correlate with the contradictory femininities that are central to anti-chick lit. Anti-chick lit depicts (and problematizes) the postfeminist trend of ‘girling’ women in the twenty-first century. This deliberate confusion of girlhood and womanhood demonstrates that postfeminism, as Harzewski identifies, is ‘fundamentally uncomfortable with female adulthood itself, casting all women as girls to some extent’.⁸² Such discomfort, and the muddled distinction between a girlish and grown-up identity, is tied to the way in which

⁸⁰ Ibid., 73

⁸¹ Ibid., 71

⁸² Harzewski, p. 9

anti-chick lit capitalises on a ‘more provisional, 90s sense of identity’ that Genz associates – through the rhetoric of ‘girl power’ – with both freedom and disorientation, empowerment and anxiety.⁸³ As the primary material covered in this thesis spans the 90s to the later 2000s, the ‘provisionality’ of the 90s is paired with the nostalgic consciousness of millennial texts. In *Retromania*, Simon Reynolds identifies the 2000s’ as a time when ‘the pop present became ever more crowded out by the past [...] nibbling away at the present’s own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel’.⁸⁴ The ‘leeching’ and ‘nibbling’ of *retrospection* upon 00s identity is reflected in what Reynolds refers to as ‘a self-conscious fetish for period stylisation (in music, clothes and design) expressed creatively through pastiche and citation’.⁸⁵ This referencing of past styles comes to constitute present identity. Moreover, the provisional, and subsequently ‘in-process’ atmosphere of the 90s, inspired, according to Reynolds and Joy Press, many female artists of the time to embody ‘double-edged [strategies] fraught with potential misunderstandings’.⁸⁶ Press and Reynolds cite Madonna and Courtney Love as exemplifying the fraught and ambiguous territory of 90s femininity, linking back to the complex, multi-layered puzzle of contemporary femininity as described by Genz. I return to both Madonna and Love throughout this study as a means of reflecting on the in-process identities of anti-chick femininities in a wider historical context of contemporary female artists. It is exactly Press and Reynolds’ sense of the potential that is inherent in ‘misunderstandings’ that binds anti-chick lit not only to postfeminist disorientation and anxieties, but also to third wave celebrations of fragmentation and contradiction, specifically with reference to the figure of the girl and the grrrl.

⁸³ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), (p.318).

⁸⁴ Simon Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), (p.xi).

⁸⁵ Reynolds, p. xiii

⁸⁶ Reynolds and Press, p. 318

The first question that emerges from the unashamed and commemorative girling of the contemporary woman, is why: why are female authors, artists and the wider cohort of popular culture so fascinated with the reclaiming of their former girliness?

In *Girls* (2002) Catherine Driscoll develops a similar line of questioning:

What to make of the fact that grown women often refer to themselves as a ‘girl’? It seems self-evident that girls are female children, or young women. But this self-evident understanding raises a number of questions [...] how are they defined? When we call an older woman a ‘girl’ are we evoking characteristics of childhood or youth?⁸⁷

Before answering Driscoll’s question, I want here to draw on the ambivalences and tensions at the heart of the girl identity to establish the sense of girliness – i.e. woman-defined-as-girl – inherent in anti-chick lit. Later in her study, Driscoll usefully observes that ‘the renovation of the girl and her connotations is what Foucault calls a *discursive formation*’.⁸⁸ Given the emphasis on the figure of the girl as a discursive construct, Driscoll presents the following consideration: ‘if “girl” indicates uncertain narratives about identity, development and social position, if girls are marginal to narratives about culture and yet central to them, does girl culture have to reflect those uncertainties and displacements?’⁸⁹ My response is yes, and part of the girl’s appeal is the very unruliness that avails in her transitional identity. She is a harbinger of ‘in process’, ‘not quite one thing or another’ uniqueness, and the uncertainties and displacements of her identity present her as ‘a *collage* of identification’ [emphasis added].⁹⁰ The idea of the collage of identification is provocative, especially with regard to Halberstam’s account of the artistic practice of collage: the girl, like collage, refuses to respect boundaries, her body is transitional and an explicit embodiment of the in-between. The uncertain amalgamation of the cut-and-paste pieces of collage generate a discursiveness that, much like the girl, is poised on a threshold of failure, collapse and crisis.

⁸⁷ Catherine Driscoll, *Girls: Feminine Adolescence in Popular Culture and Cultural Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), (p.2).

⁸⁸ Driscoll, p.35

⁸⁹ Ibid.,235

⁹⁰ Ibid.,97

The girl, therefore, has always been a useful emblem for locating the ‘inter’: caught in the transition from childhood to adulthood, she is the ‘in-process’, the ‘not quite’ one thing or another identity *par excellence*. Therefore, in answer to Driscoll, the reason why women might identify as girls, and why there is, furthermore, a growing contemporary trend to portray the grown woman as girlled, is partly because of just how productive the girl’s ‘in-between’ position is. To extend Driscoll’s hypothesis, then, ‘girling’ is not so much about evoking the characteristics of childhood or youth; instead, returning to the figure of the girl (and the grrrl) promotes the freedom to remain in, and to celebrate, the state of being unclassified and ‘not-quite’. Questions around the contemporary woman’s creative agency come to the fore here, stemming from whether the woman is choosing to return to this former position, or whether, in light of contemporary political, social or cultural infrastructures, she is left with little choice and made to do so. The girl/grrrl is instrumentalised to tinker with established structures of feminine identity; this is the licence that the courting of girlish identities grants to grown women. In terms of anti-chick lit, authors play on the discomfort of the girlled woman to justify the corporeal and emotional volatility of their female protagonists, their failure to succeed at becoming women and their alternative embodiment of ‘unbecoming’ (usually through the portrayal of the darker aspects of female experience). Secondly, the focus on the figure of the girl reveals anti-chick lit authors working to (re)claim girlhood in order to (re)tell a certain, and contemporary, coming-of-age narrative. In this, the grown-up woman remains girlled, reflecting the contemporary woman’s liminality in both the period and the field of literature.

Young women’s creative experimentation with positions of ambiguity and marginality reached its apex with the figure of the grrrl, who emerged with the 90s subcultural community of riot grrrl. The community, influenced by punk pedagogy and aesthetics, began in Olympia, Washington State. It was ‘spread via band tours, fanzines, high school and college networks, and word of mouth’ and as a result, grrrl ‘chapters

sprang up around the country'.⁹¹ The most recognisable facet of the movement was the 'all girls to the front' ethos and the transferal from 'girl' to 'grrrl', which worked to reflect 'a full spectrum of personas among which young women felt pulled'.⁹² The 'grrrl', therefore, encapsulated what Sara Marcus recognises as a 'way for girls to resist the outside world's attempt to define them', utilising the sense of provisionality and multiplicity that the 90s afforded to them.⁹³ As the grrrl was centred on 'embracing contradictions and fluidity', she represents, in this thesis, the ultimate celebration of contradiction.⁹⁴ Moreover, the grrrl is a pure embodiment of failure; in falling short of expectations – as 'an aesthetic and political response to dominant representations of patriarchal girlhood' – the grrrl, and riot grrrl chapters, '[forged] spaces in which girls and young women [were] empowered to resist and moreover, to *produce* their own self-representation(s)'.⁹⁵ My use of the neologism grrrl is intended to reflect a transitional position that communicates displacement, marginality, and a desire to live 'otherwise' through uncertain images brought to life by contradiction. The grrrl is also useful when read in conjunction with the palimpsestuous: the term grrrl was invoked to re-write conventional girlhood, to offset the anxieties that these young women felt about being 'written out' (or 'written off') by those same conventions. Narratives of girl/grrrlhood thus collided in a kind of 'punk palimpsest' that emerged out of the type of girlhood that was celebrated in popular culture.⁹⁶ The cultural manuals of consumerism (advertisements, teen magazines) have been responsible for producing and perpetuating this prototype of a desirable and 'conventional' femininity, establishing a narrative of girlhood in mainstream society that Lynn Brown labels as the

⁹¹ Klein, p.214

⁹² Ibid., 216

⁹³ Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front* (New York: HaperCollins, 2010), (p.221)

⁹⁴ Klein, p.214

⁹⁵ Rebecca Munford, 'Wake up and Smell the Lipgloss': Gender, Generation and the (A)politics of Girl Power', in *Third wave feminism: A Critical Exploration*, Ed by. Stacy Gills, Gillian Howie and Rebecca Munford (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pp. 142-154 (p.145).

⁹⁶ Megan Sormus, 'I Could Scream My Truth Right Through Your Lies If I Wanted': Bikini Kill's Sound-Collage and the Subversive Rhetoric of Grrrlhood', *Punk & Post-Punk*, 4:2-3 (2015), 159-174, (p.6).

‘perfect girl’.⁹⁷ Brown explores the ubiquitous and pervasive aesthetic of this figure, contending that she is instantly ‘recognizable to anyone who opens the pages of a teen fashion magazine: beautiful, tall, long hair, perfect skin, pretty eyes, nice figure’.⁹⁸ The ‘grrrl’ makes a strategic intervention into these ‘normative’ accounts of girlhood, creating a ‘peculiar collage of contrasting narratives in the way that the identity of the grrrl is found on the attempt to erase and rewrite the established narratives of girlhood’.⁹⁹

In *Raising their Voices: The Politics of Girls’ Anger*, Brown interprets ‘grrrls’ as a particular demographic of ‘angry’ young women, who, in keeping with the fierce articulations of the grrrl, aim to rewrite conventional meanings (the ‘perfect’ girl) and instead animate alternative femininities. She writes that:

These young women [...] use the subversive power of the body, sexuality, and language to challenge the conventional meanings and expectations of femininity. As *living contradictions*, they represent stones in the road toward idealised femininity, causing those of us who listen to them to ponder the usual or “normal” paths toward womanhood, to reconsider our assumptions about the way are and the way things go.¹⁰⁰ [Emphasis added].

Brown’s quotation highlights three particular structures available to young women: the body; sexuality; and language. These, as she suggests, can be utilised and manipulated in order to push destabilising narratives and images of contradictory femininity to the forefront and to divert ostensibly normative paths. Brown illustrates how young women embodied paradoxes– they are *living contradictions*. In a similar way, Driscoll sees girlhood as ‘produced through a range of consumption upon the collage surface of girls as a group identity’.¹⁰¹ Girls, she continues, ‘are recorded as producing and desiring themselves at the *edge* of such identities’ [emphasis added].¹⁰² Again, Driscoll’s reference to the girl’s edginess consolidates her association with peripheral or ‘in-between’ spaces,

⁹⁷Lyn M. Brown, *Raising their Voices: The Politics of Girls’ Anger* (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), (p.138).

⁹⁸ Ibid., 138

⁹⁹ Sormus, p. 13

¹⁰⁰ Brown, p.9.

¹⁰¹ Driscoll, p. 287

¹⁰² Ibid., 287

and – in the context of anti-chick lit – the ‘collage surface’ of girlhood represents the inherent volatility of the ‘girded’ woman: she too is a living contradiction. It is exactly the contradictory subjectivity of the girl that emerges from her position on the *edge* of identities and it is here ‘where the potentially creative moves, born of the interface of two disparate and sometimes contradictory realities’.¹⁰³ Here, Brown theorises that the intersection of two disparate realities produces creative agency, which can move freely between these two conflicting points, rather than being circumscribed by one singular narrative or representation. With Brown and Driscoll in mind, I argue that it is by embodying the position of a ‘living contradiction’ and occupying a state of being ‘in-process’ that the girl is able, potentially, to expand the parameters of femininity; this is, in turn, the objective of anti-chick lit.

At the same time, I am paying specific attention to the *grrrl* because her creative agency and her attempts at resistance are fraught with tensions; the aesthetics of the *grrrl*, and the objectives of riot *grrrl* on the whole, were eventually co-opted by the mainstream. The *grrrl* therefore encapsulates the paradox that lies at the heart of my thesis, whereby ‘untamed, ungroomed [and] unglossed’ modes of femininity are, through their affiliations with mainstream culture, re-glossed, re-packaged and re-sold to feminine consumers as ‘new’ identity brands. As Marcus states, it was exactly that which *grrrls* were attempting to define themselves against that ended up defining them; their reactions against popular culture’s attempts to define them ‘paradoxically, [wound] up *intensifying* those external definitions’.¹⁰⁴ Driscoll further highlights this inconsistency:

Girls are also involved in anti-fashion fashion – styles that do not appear fashionable, but that, in order to be recognisable as not fashionable, nevertheless require a degree of standardisation [...] punk or riot *grrrl* fashion, for example, is recognizable as not mainstream by producing a particular identifiable style. Articulating a position beyond or opposed to fashion is thus also a way of marketing that fashion [...] to girls.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ Brown, p. 130

¹⁰⁴ Marcus, p. 221

¹⁰⁵ Driscoll, p.246

Here, Driscoll's demarcation of anti-fashion fashion is evocative of Gamble's depiction of anti-chick lit. Both are grounded in a creative refusal but at the same time conform. To articulate a position that is 'beyond' or 'opposed' to convention is to explore the possibilities that lurk in-between classifications. By the same token, in order to be unfashionable, and in this respect, to fall short of expectations and remain at odds with 'conventions', such fictions/fashions must be consistent with convention in order to illuminate their own sense of (un)convention.

Collage Grrrl chapters

Beginning with Emma Forrest's *Thin Skin* (2002), my first chapter considers the emergence of the anti-chick aesthetic. The anti-chick aesthetic encapsulates the darker, more violent narratives of female experience such as self-harming, bulimia, anorexia, and depression. This is explored through Forrest's twenty-something, failing actress protagonist, Ruby, as she desires to reach a state of 'ruined beauty'.¹⁰⁶ Through the novel's title 'thin skin', Forrest also implies that a fine line exists between the attempt to subvert, and to inevitably comply with, 'normative' feminine representations. Throughout my examination, I draw on both Lauren Berlant's theorisation of 'attachment' in *Cruel Optimism* (2011), as well as Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith's *Interfaces* (2002). This is in order to further interrogate the production of 'fine' boundary lines, where two opposing points of beautiful and 'normative' femininity, as well as the 'ugly' femininity that is created through a deliberate attempt to resist feminine conventions, are attached but are also kept separate.

My chapter uses *Thin Skin* as a case study for a politics of resistance against conventional constructions of what has historically come to be understood as 'normative' femininity. Indeed, as I have outlined in relation to Genz, contemporary femininity is host

¹⁰⁶ Emma Forrest, *Thin Skin* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), (p.53).

to multiple permutations and therefore is not a fixed identity. Yet, I use this chapter to draw on the idea that femininity is a ‘social and cultural construct that acts as the *norm* for women’s (self)definition’ and the ways in which ‘anti-femininity’, or the anti-chick aesthetic, is an acknowledgment of these various permutations. In this respect, it works to deliberately unsettle the ‘norms’ of femininity through which women perform their self-definition.¹⁰⁷ This is at the same time as preserving the pre-existing and more acceptable interpretations of feminine identity that Forrest explores through the character of Rachel. I introduce Susan Bordo at the start of the chapter, who observes feminine resistance as the advent of ‘pathological’ femininity, in which women act out the dramas of their social oppression (for example, the strain of keeping up with the tiniest details of feminine fashion and contemporary feminine representations) through their bodies. I then return to Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure* in order to question whether a creative productivity can emerge from a deliberate sense of *undoing*. The latter part of this chapter interrogates the ‘flaws’ of the anti-chick aesthetic: the vacillation between ‘normative’ accounts of femininity, combined with the attempt to expose seemingly alternative models, carries a sense of ambiguity that undermines the resistant actions and creative agency of this aesthetic. The suggestion is that if ‘ugly’ is the face of counter-cultural feminine practice, it is at the same time in danger of becoming just as normalised as the drive to be ‘beautiful’.

The focus of chapter 2 is on Emma Forrest’s *Cherries in the Snow* (2005). I identify the novel as drawing on the neoliberal ideals that are inherent in postfeminist ideologies – primarily, self-obsession and self-improvement – with third wave ideas of a collective ‘grrrl’ feminism, with its emphasis on (re)appropriation and subversion. From this, I examine the possibilities of make-up as an agentive tool for women, through which they can form a collective agenda of resistance to convention by remaining ‘girled’, or indeed, ‘grrrled’ (the novel focuses on the creation of ‘ugly’ makeup through fictional company ‘Grrrl Cosmetics’) in contemporary culture. As such, this chapter will interrogate the

¹⁰⁷ Genz, p.6

following issue: as young women are perpetually entwined with the beauty industry, as Brown identifies through the formulation of the ‘perfect girl’, can the same industry be manipulated, and its products reclaimed, in order to create a permanent and resistant narrative of femininity? My examination further interrogates Brown and Driscoll’s theorisations to explore how the bodies of young women are shaped by cultural texts just as much as the discursive nature of their bodies are utilised to interrupt formal meanings/conventional discourses. In *Cherries in the Snow*, this comes to the fore through the (mis)use and appropriation of lipstick as an instrument of rebellion and I ask the question: can the ‘deliberate attempt’ to create a gesture of resistance through the two inherently changeable mediums of cosmetics and the grrrl be considered in serious terms? I conclude to reveal how Forrest’s text fails to refuse the very postfeminist discourses that underscore her narrative; discourses of individualism, consumerism and a competitive market-focused ideology circulate throughout the novel. As a result, any resistance toward normative femininity gleaned in the text is not emblematic of a collective resistance but is in fact self-indulgent, directed both to and about the self.

The material that I consider in chapter 3 and 4 represents a shift in literary form. Both texts, Emma Forrest’s *Namedropper* (1998) and Stephanie Kuehnert’s *I wanna be Your Joey Ramone* (2008) are written in a style that I term Young Adult Anti-Chick Lit. Given their coming-of-age narrative, both texts sit more comfortably with the emphasis that anti-chick lit fictions place on the girl, and indeed, the grrrl. These chapters also affiliate the emergence of the ‘collage grrrl’ of anti-chick lit with the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s. I introduce and draw on seminal scholarship in girlhood studies by Catherine Driscoll, Mary Celeste Kearney, Angela McRobbie, Lynn M. Brown, Mary Jane Kehily and Anita Harris in order to establish the specific parameters of the genre of YA anti-chick. I explore how the ‘grrrl’ makes a bold intervention to coming-of-age narratives by celebrating contradiction and practicing gestures of resistance. I argue that this is achieved

through various outlets: make up (in chapter 2); ‘making up’ fantasies (in chapter 3); and making music (in chapter 4).

Specifically, chapter 3 introduces Emma Forrest’s *Namedropper* (1998) as a YA anti-chick lit which works to deconstruct the formula of what Joanna Webb terms as ‘Chick Lit Jr.’ and ‘the successful girl image’ at its centre.¹⁰⁸ Examples of Webb’s demarcation include the more consumable brands of YA fiction that border the publication of Forrest’s *Namedropper* such as Louise Rennison’s *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging* (1999), Meg Cabot’s *Princess Diaries* (2000), Meg McCafferty’s *Sloppy Firsts* (2001), and Cathy Hopkins’ *Mates, Dates* series (2001). In *Namedropper*, Forrest introduces the ‘fucked-up girl’ through her teenage protagonist Viva Cohen. In contrast to the typical YA protagonist, Viva’s character rejects the rites of passage that mark the entrance into womanhood and instead comes to symbolise the ‘wrongs’ of passage. Rather than success, Viva fails in realising her identity and relies on make believe (fantasy) to counteract her failure. At the same time, failure becomes an instrument for effecting change and resisting the conventional scripts of girlhood. I return to Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure* to explore the prospect of failure as prosperous to Viva’s narrative. In this novel, ‘failure’ works as an artful form of resistance that is deliberately employed by the ‘fucked-up’ girl to challenge and dismantle notions of success. Concurrent to this, I introduce Halberstam’s study *In a Queer Time and Place*, in which Halberstam explores ‘queer temporalities’ as a creative life schedule that dismantles paradigmatic life experiences, and affords the contemporary subject the opportunity to live a life that is unscripted. Therefore, this chapter uses *Namedropper* to question the extent to which getting it wrong works as an art form that ends in a *successful* opening up of the potentials for young women’s distinctive minority ‘subversion’.

¹⁰⁸ Joanna Webb Johnson, ‘Chick Lit jr.: More than Glitz and Glamour for Teens and Tweens’ in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, Ed by. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young (London: Routledge, 2006), (pp.141-159), (p.142).

Chapter 4 moves on to *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* (2010), written by American author Stephanie Kuehnert, which explores the young woman's coming of age in a small-scale suburbia within the U.S. Kuehnert started writing YA fiction as she wanted to find literature that related to her own adolescent experience with 'depression, addiction, and self-injury'.¹⁰⁹ Much like *Namedropper*, Kuehnert's novel attempts to make room for a specific mode of girlhood that emphasises failure. What is particularly noteworthy about Kuehnert's work is the way in which she uses her own 'love of music', much like riot grrrl, as an expression of the grrrl's creative agency.¹¹⁰ *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* reveals how the grrrl sought to carve out 'public' spaces (i.e beyond the bedroom) for the articulation/exhibition of young women's creativity. Alongside Kuehnert's championing of riot grrrl, I also use this to map the problems inherent in riot grrrl movement, and the shift from the personal and political agendas of resistance as they became accepted and co-opted by a wider, and more mainstream, domain. My examination is centred on how the young woman negotiates her own coming-of-age geography, trapped in an inevitable conflict between creative, and resistant expression and mass-market commodity.

The focus of my final chapter is on the anti-chick memoir. Here, I argue that the survival of the collage grrrl depends on the nostalgic appropriation of the past through autobiographical accounts. I use Kristin Hersh's *Rat Girl* (2012) to explore how the female author of the anti-chick memoir recollects the experiences of her younger self and subsequently speaks from her former position as a 'girl'. This chapter draws upon the recent boom in female life writing in order to historicise *Rat Girl*. Lena Dunham's HBO series *Girls* (2012-2017) and her literary memoir *Not That Kind of Girl* (2015) is a pertinent example. There has also been a sudden spurt in autobiographical work both by and about female musicians like Hersh, such as *The Punk Singer*, the 2013 music biopic of

¹⁰⁹ Stephanie Kuehnert, 'Stephanie Kuehnert Interview', Simon&Schuster <<http://www.simonandschuster.ca/authors/Stephanie-Kuehnert.html>> [accessed 7 July 2016] (para. 1 of 11), para.5).

¹¹⁰ Eva Langston, 'Interview with Zine Queen Stephanie Kuehnert', <<http://www.evalangston.com/014/08/21/interview-with-zine-queen-stephanie-kuehnerthtml>> [accessed 7 July 2016] (para 1 of 10), (para. 4).

Kathleen Hanna, Kim Gordon's *Girl in a Band* (2015), Carrie Brownstein's *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl* (2015) and Viv Albertine's *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys* (2016). There are also works in which the female author reflects on her disruptive pathologies that coincide with the darker aspects of femininity represented in anti-chick lit. These include Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994), Rae Earl's *My Mad Fat Diary* (2007), Forrest's *Your Voice in my Head* (2012), Melissa Broader's *So Sad Today* (2016), and Bryony Gordon's *Mad Girl* (2016).

In these terms, I use popular culture's infatuation with the past to account for the problematic collapse of past into present, drawing on studies such as Simon Reynolds *Retromania* (2011), and Elizabeth Guffey's *Retro: A Culture of Revival* as guidance. The fact that *Rat Girl*, and the contradictory female subject at its forefront, is very much part of the past, prompts the following question: while my former chapters have discussed making room for a more contradictory female subject, my final chapter queries what happens when you *run out* of room? Relying so heavily on the past means that its constant revival weakens the possibilities of a multiple and resistant identity to stand distinctively, as opposed to derivatively, in the present. Using Guffey, this chapter addresses whether *Rat Girl*, and by the same token, the anti-chick memoir, constitutes a progressive form of resistance by looking back to the past position of the 'girl'. Is this revival, merely a stylistic gesture bound up in the feminine desire to publically self-mythologize, to indulge in the past and ultimately rehearse ways of being seen in contemporary culture? Given the integral focus on what Reynolds defines as the 're-' decade in this final section, *Rat Girl* is employed as a spring-board to conclude with a recapitulation of the problematic nature of anti-chick lit. The 'untamed, ungroomed, and unglossed' female subject of anti-chick lit is being simultaneously, and unavoidably, concealed, 're-tamed, re-groomed and re-glossed' as another brand.

As Genz suggests, 'contemporary women no longer perform femininity only as a subterfuge but also as a method for contesting and subverting problematic and cultural

feminine norms'.¹¹¹ However, when 'such complexity around interpretation is missing, femininity can only be read as offering "more of the same", rather than a new script characterised by hybrid qualities'.¹¹² This thesis examines such complexities through the lens of anti-chick lit, arguing that the genre works to reclaim and celebrate the contradictions embedded in contemporary femininity. Yet, even by acknowledging such complexities, the centre focus is not about, as Genz suggests, each text offering a 'new' script of femininity. Rather, I contend that such inconsistencies inherent within contemporary femininities are shadowed by, and are an inevitable product of, the shifts that take place within the social, cultural and theoretical contexts in which they are situated.

Chapter 1

Untamed, Ungroomed, Unglossed?

The flaws of the Anti-Chick Aesthetic in Emma Forrest's *Thin Skin*

Ruined Beauty: the anti-chick aesthetic

This chapter is concerned with contemporary femininity as a 'mutable construction' which affords women the opportunity to confront their contradictions. This confrontation underlies the 'anti-chick aesthetic' that shapes Emma Forrest's novel *Thin Skin* (2002). In 'The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity', Susan Bordo writes of the different modes of contemporary femininity that are produced in lieu of labour-intensive constructions of 'conventional' feminine identity:

¹¹¹ Genz, p.27

¹¹² Ibid., 27

In hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia [...] the woman's body may be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme [...] form. They are written, of course, in languages horrible and suffering. It is as though these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks around the corner, waiting at the horizon of "normal" femininity.¹¹³

Indebted in many ways to De Beauvoir's seminal conceptualisation of the female body as defined by lack, Bordo considers how contemporary women constantly seek out methods of self-improvement, devoting time to labour-intensive beauty practices in order to make up for their felt insufficiencies. In Bordo's telling, contemporary femininity emerges as a pressured practice in which girls and women are conditioned into pursuing standards of beauty that are forever changing, and forever elusive. The psychological effects of these pressures are, according to Bordo, likely to reveal themselves through the deliberate and extreme attrition of the body (Bordo draws heavily, for example, on the emaciated frame of the anorexic in respect of this). Here, Bordo illuminates the pathological threats that lie in wait to tarnish the glossy exterior of what she lightly terms 'normal' femininity in a language that is, conflictingly, 'horrible' and 'suffering'.

Bordo's viewpoint sets up the following challenging position: what is the more insidious? Is it the pathologized woman that lurks at the apex of 'normality' and threatens to disrupt its surface? Or is it the insistence on using loose terminology like 'normal' (hence the selective in-quote) to favour a feminine ideal that is, in reality, unattainable? 'Normative' femininity is formed, according to both Bordo and Genz, by 'popular representations [that] forcefully employ the rhetoric and symbolism of empowerment, personal freedom, of "having it all". Yet female bodies, pursuing these ideals, may find themselves distracted depressed, and physically ill'.¹¹⁴ In service to 'normal' femininity—to attain empowerment, freedom and ultimately agency—the contemporary woman

¹¹³ Susan Bordo, 'The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity', in *Writing on The Body*, Ed by. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 90-110, (p.97).

¹¹⁴ Bordo, p. 105

constantly attends ‘to minute and often whimsical changes in fashion [...] through the exacting and normalising disciplines of diet, make-up, and dress’.¹¹⁵ Such ‘disciplines’ at once conceal and make manifest ‘certain pathologies’ that speak of the darker, more violent narratives of female experience such as self-harming, bulimia, anorexia, and depression. Destructive and suffocating performances of femininity are therefore translated through the emergence of a disordered feminine body that ‘act[s] out and gives voice to dramas of social oppression’.¹¹⁶ The tension between ‘normal’ femininity and the exposure of more unruly, and presumably ‘sick’, femininities involves a ‘transformation (or, if you wish, a duality) of meaning’: conditions that are ‘constraining, enslaving, and even murderous’ are packaged, paradoxically, as ‘liberating, transforming, and life-giving’.¹¹⁷

Anti-chick lit does not focus on concealing such disorders; rather, anti-chick fictions attempt to dismantle the dangerous insistence on the normative by playing up to certain pathologies (self-harm, bulimia, even suicide) to accentuate the serious role they play in the construction of contemporary femininity. It does not seek to position these acts, as Bordo explores, as categorically liberating, transforming, and more troublesomely, *life-giving*. What I am terming the ‘anti-chick aesthetic’ makes this duality of meaning explicit. The anti-chick novel foregrounds the complicated, ambivalent status of contemporary female identities and investigates the possibilities that are created when the normative presentation of these identities is subverted or disrupted. Forrest’s *Thin Skin* is an example of one such work, with the title acting as an extended metaphor for the contradictory models of ideal/ill femininity that endlessly traverse each other. Ruby, the twenty-something protagonist of *Thin Skin* illustrates this interplay in the opening passages of the novel: it is closing time at the bar, and Ruby is left alone as thoughts of ending her life drift

¹¹⁵ Ibid.,91

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 91

¹¹⁷ Ibid.,91

up toward a 'bruised and damaged sky'.¹¹⁸ Gloomy and foreboding, the setting foreshadows Ruby's dark romanticising: 'I am going to die. Tonight's the night, baby'.¹¹⁹ Immersed in her own abnormal fairy tale, Ruby searches for her dispassionate love interest, Aslan, and confesses along the way 'I didn't bother to check my reflection [...] If I had, I would have seen a mad woman, although I might have dismissed that as bad lighting'.¹²⁰ A mad woman brought out by bad lighting, Ruby's reflection articulates the threat of disorder surfacing and making itself visible in ways that are at odds with the feminine 'normality' that Ruby represents when she has 'her good face on'.¹²¹

Both attractive and self-destructive, Ruby's character is beset by these relentless contradictions. Set in Hollywood, the narrative drama of *Thin Skin* charts the 'wild dreams' and ugly facets of Ruby's experience, not just as a failing actress but also a failed woman – a 'fucked-up girl' in the luminous scene that surrounds her.¹²² As a fucked-up girl, Forrest paints Ruby as disruptive pathology personified. *Thin Skin* opens in immediate psychological ambivalence as well as temporal ambiguity with a beginning chapter headed 'how it ended'. Forrest ironizes the volatile association between Ruby and the thought of ending her own life by using it as the starting point of her story. After sitting drunk and despairingly in the bar, 'the thought of suicide' does more than lurk but plays a narrative part in 'walk[ing]' Ruby home.¹²³ If, as Gamble states, chick lit conventionally concludes with a romantic resolution and the submission of the protagonist therein, the opening of *Thin Skin* feeds on anti-chick lit's tendency to acknowledge, and at the same time subvert, this thematic. Ruby is rejected by Aslan even before she 'had time to break down for him';

¹¹⁸ Forrest, p.4.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 4

¹²⁰ Ibid., 4

¹²¹ Ibid., 13

¹²² Ibid., 4 and 60

¹²³ Ibid., 6

it is, then, the anomalous ‘thought of suicide’ that walks with her ‘arm in arm [...] laughing in the wind’ in an ironic mimicry of ‘young lovers’.¹²⁴

Stopping outside her home ‘normality’ kicks in, as Ruby states “‘I’m not supposed to bring things like you home with me” [...] “‘Things like me?’” huffed the thought of suicide’.¹²⁵ Here, the personification of suicide is a ploy that articulates Ruby’s troubling pathologization and the chapter ends in a submissive, but still an ‘anti’, resolution: ‘let’s just get on with it’.¹²⁶ Revealed from the onset is the locus of being in-between, the sense of ambiguity and transition that frames *Thin Skin* as a whole: Is this the end? Or, does a beginning that stresses Ruby’s ostensible failures offer the possibility of an alternative narrative? In this chapter I use *Thin Skin* as a case study for exploring the anti-chick aesthetic and the strategies of potential resistance against the conventional constructions of ‘normal’ femininity that it explores: the latter, as Bordo observes, working to act out dramas of social oppression through the body. I question whether from Ruby’s self-destruction there can emerge a creative productivity that, in line with Halberstam’s brilliant study *The Queer Art of Failure*, is formulated ‘not from a doing but from an *undoing*’.¹²⁷

In correspondence with the formal contradictions that frame the anti-chick aesthetic, Ruby’s character occupies the in-between position of ‘being in the shape of a beautiful girl’ but playing up to her unsettling pathologies as she behaves like ‘an ugly one’.¹²⁸ Through Ruby’s oxymoronic synthesis of beautiful/ugly, her femininity locates the in-between of being both a beautiful and an ugly *girl*. Forrest presents her preoccupation with exploring female agency through a lead narrator who teeters on the threshold of contradiction: a self-proclaimed ‘fucked-up girl’, Ruby is stripped of her status as a woman. As I have discussed elsewhere, the girl (and the *grrrl*) is an established agent of unruliness. With Ruby wearing her pathologies on her sleeve and confusing the boundary between girlhood

¹²⁴ Ibid., 4

¹²⁵ Ibid.,4

¹²⁶ Ibid.,4.

¹²⁷ Halberstam, p. 124.

¹²⁸ Forrest, p.53

and womanhood, she makes manifest the accepted status of the girl as a harbinger of disorder and exemplifies the capacity of the girl to upset conventional categorisations.

Yet, the creative and resistant objectives that are central to what Halberstam describes as an ‘undoing’ are complicated: the interrelationship between ‘anti’ and ‘chick’, much like the threat of violence, pathology and refusal that unsettles accounts of ‘normal’ feminine identity, is complex and highlights the contradictions of contemporary femininity. Such a convolution exposes that the ‘line between subversion and compliance’, as Elizabeth Grosz points out, ‘is always a fine one’.¹²⁹ This ‘fine line’ between subversion and compliance represents the tense contradiction that lies at the heart of the anti-chick aesthetic. In light of this tension, this chapter works to query the extent to which anti-chick lit’s intention to present an ‘anti’ female body – through the emphasis on contradiction and the in-between – might actually weaken its potential for subversion. While the anti-chick aesthetic may not be wholly subordinate to the scripted roles of conventional femininity, it is still attached to such scripts in order to undermine them. This vacillation between the attachment to ‘normative’ accounts of femininity, combined with the attempt to expose seemingly alternative models, carries a sense of ambiguity that undermines its potential for resistance and creative agency. As a result, the contemporary woman is forced to confront her intrinsic contradictions and accept her femininity as unfixed, and dependent on the inconsistent mores of popular and consumer culture. The suggestion is that if ‘ugly’ is the face of counter-cultural practice, it is at the same time in danger of becoming just as normalised as the enforced drive to be beautiful.

I will examine how Forrest’s *Thin Skin* problematizes the anti-chick aesthetic as a suggestive model of destabilisation: although Forrest places a messy female subject at the novel’s heart, this subject retains a vexed attachment to the conventional (dressy) feminine image. In conjunction with Lauren Berlant’s examination of attachment in *Cruel Optimism*

¹²⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (USA: Indiana University Press, 1994), (p. 144).

(2011), the anti-chick aesthetic suggests a ‘cruelly optimistic’ relation as the attachment of its oppositional facets. The anti-chick protagonist, existing in the space of in-between, therefore ‘ignites a sense of possibility’.¹³⁰ However, it is the very object of one’s attachment that ‘makes it impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or people risks striving’.¹³¹ As with Gamble’s focus on anti-chick lit’s straddling of contradictory positions with regard to chick lit – combining the playful, ‘seductive’ nature of chick lit with a deliberate attempt to subvert these conventions – Forrest’s protagonist oscillates between the two contrasting states of subversion/submission. These are, in turn, aligned in *Thin Skin* with the contradictory aesthetics of being both ugly and beautiful. The latter part of this chapter will draw out the complexities of *Thin Skin*’s conclusion in which Forrest seems to undermine the trials and tribulations of her protagonist to achieve and communicate an ‘ugly’ aesthetic. After Ruby’s suicide attempt, the implication is that the reappearance of her ‘beautiful’ shape is inevitable, which weakens the potential of ‘undoing’ to bring about an individual form of resistance/rebellion. In a contemporary terrain obsessed with fictive femininity, it appears there may be little room, and ‘no choice’, in Forrest’s Tinseltown fiction, to strive for anything but becoming attractive again, signifying that one cannot exist in the transient state of in-between forever after.¹³²

Interfaces: Women/Autobiography/Image/Performance edited by Julia Watson and Sidonie Smith is an examination that is, in parts, reminiscent of Mulvey’s pivotal study *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989). Their focus is on contemporary female artists working in a range of media to invert the assaulting and possessive male gaze. The collection includes examinations of Frida Kahlo’s painfully drawn self-portraits, Cindy Sherman’s monstrous female masquerades and Tracey Emin’s ‘unedited and unpolished’, ‘anti-art’ assemblages.¹³³ In *Thin Skin*, we see Ruby battle with her own artistry as an actress; she

¹³⁰ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (London: Duke University Press, 2011), (p.128), (p.2).

¹³¹ Berlant, p.2

¹³² Forrest, p.210

¹³³ Watson and Smith, p.1

‘throws tantrums’, convinced her ‘work was childish, unformed and crude’.¹³⁴ Indeed, Forrest’s chosen lexicon of childish paroxysms does make the reader question whether this is the raw genius of a female artist who desires to defy expectation or merely a puerile display. To return to Watson and Smith, *Interfaces* reveals contemporary female artists as involved in a mature and reflective process of self-making that, as Halberstam theorises, paradoxically emerges from a sense of *undoing* conventional positions. In this respect, the unusual dynamics of the unformed, crude and even childish can be interpreted as the beginnings of Ruby’s creative rebellion against normative accounts of femininity.

Rather than ‘disciplined to a constraining script of femininity’, the (un)conventional artistic works that are analysed by Watson and Smith advocate the unravelling of female identity to a ‘fragmented, unstable, alternative, hybrid and/or collective’ state.¹³⁵ Collage-like in their self-representation (fragmented, hybrid, unstable), the female artists of *Interfaces* emphasise female subjectivity as a narrative of alternatives, accessed and shaped through the interface that creates the two opposing points of ‘and/or’ which locates and allows space for enquiry. Given that, historically, women have ‘encountered themselves as the objects of art and not as its makers’, the embodiment of and/or dismantles the objectifying male eye, but also the established, subjective ‘I’ as a stable and unified pillar of autobiographic work.¹³⁶ Such transformation affords the freedom to be multiple things rather than being bound to one overarching script of female identity; poised at the interface ‘/’, female self-representation is no longer assured by the cohesive ‘I’. This reclaims narrative detail as contradictory and, in relation to Pitts, could be regarded as a subtext for the liminal persona. The embodiment of liminality is empowering in the respect that, like and/or, it resembles a *point* of transition, and so, from this liminal state, ‘boundaries are erased and redrawn; heterogeneity and contradiction are

¹³⁴ Forrest, p. 8

¹³⁵ Watson and Smith, p.20.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15

embraced'.¹³⁷ Liminality generates the middle ground between young/old, unsocialised/socialised, pristine/marked and, in the context of anti-chick lit, girl/woman, unbecoming/becoming, untamed/re-tamed. Pitts' reflections of these and/or, in-between states is initially positive, and she suggests that to invoke this type of liminality is to carve out a space for resistance, which in turn '[gives] sense to reclamation as a subversive project'.¹³⁸

In *Thin Skin*, Ruby's liminal embodiment is acted out, quite literally, through her failing acting career. Her misconduct is continually telegraphed by her exasperated agent, Sean: 'if you had done what I said, if you had just behaved on set and left your body alone, you would be a major star by now, instead...'¹³⁹ As her agent's scolding trails off into a vague ellipsis, much in the same way as Ruby's chances at a successful career are dwindling, Ruby acts up to the ambiguity of 'instead...'.¹⁴⁰ It is Ruby's endeavour to be 'ugly' that penetrates the surface here, and with it, her character represents the female body as a site of experimentation where the untamed, ungroomed, and unglossed anti-chick aesthetic can be tried and tested. She subsequently embodies a female narrative that resists and attempts to (re)appropriate the influence of the featureless collective of 'they'. Here, the 'they' Ruby establishes refers to the men who try to 'fuck her'. It also gestures more abstractly towards the postfeminist forces that Harzewski identifies as promoting a standard of femininity that is synonymous with 'wrinkle-, cellulite-, hair- free sleekness', and which thus inspires Ruby's 'fucked-up' actions.¹⁴¹ The 'free' and 'sleek' postfeminist subjectivity that Harzewski depicts is not so much premised on an emancipated femininity

¹³⁷ Pitts, p.72.

¹³⁸ Ibid.,80

¹³⁹ Forrest, p.29

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 53

¹⁴¹ Harzewski, p.155

as it is oddly austere. Such traditions are atypical ‘anathema’ to Ruby’s ‘contours and curves’, which, in a gross illustration of feminine unruliness, ‘oozed above and beneath the cups [of Ruby’s gossamer bra] like Play-Doh’.¹⁴² Much like Halberstam’s insistence on dismantling binary formulations as a productive endeavour, embodying the chaotic realm of and/or through ugly/beautiful is to invoke liminality as a technique of resistance. The liminal subject, oozing above and beneath the gossamer structure of convention, is, to Pitts, ‘a moving subject, invoking symbolic inversion, paradox, parody [and] fluidity’.¹⁴³ It is exactly this transience that, as Pitts argues, ‘might reflect, at least temporarily, a liberation from regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life’.¹⁴⁴

Certainly, there is an unsettling ambiguity to Pitts’ observation. She articulates that the liberation from everyday life that the liminal persona desires, which is provided by embodying a position of liminality, is not only uncertain but is *temporary* besides. The productive aims of Ruby’s dual embodiment of ugly/beauty become problematically two-faced: indeed, it is tempting to understand the desire to be ugly as a spiteful gesture toward the oppressive nature of particular beauty practices. However, Pitts’ theorisation of liminality as a subversive *project* makes for a rather awkward interpretation. The revelation is that anti-beauty practices are equally in danger of becoming patterned; increasingly absorbed by the mainstream, the threat of anything ‘anti’ may, in contemporary culture, just as rapidly end up being co-opted and diminished. In *Thin Skin*, the act of resisting is tied to an awkward dependency on ‘normal’ representations of femininity; Ruby needs to be attractive initially in order to then be ruined and spoiled. The anti-chick aesthetic can be just as labour-intensive as conventional beauty practices, perhaps even maximising some of these same practices to a hyperbolic extreme. Midway through *Thin Skin*, Ruby draws a razor across her throat – ‘not deep enough to die’, but ‘graphically effective’ enough to satiate her desire to ‘create new ground’ and to certify

¹⁴² Forrest, p.50

¹⁴³ Pitts, p.81

¹⁴⁴ Ibid.,73

that ‘everyone [could] see it and admire [her] handiwork’.¹⁴⁵ Here, the innovative ‘new ground’ of Ruby’s desires does not stack up as a strategy of resistance. Instead it reveals a ‘bloodline *necklace*’ that has been stylistically recuperated as Ruby’s ‘newest accessory’, confirming the way in which ‘anti’ acts can just as easily become socialised and acceptable practices.¹⁴⁶ [emphasis added].

In *Aesthetic Labour: Beauty Politics in Neoliberal Times*, Christina Scharff, Rosalind Gill and Ana Sofia Elias explore the way in which radical actions are magnified to such an extreme that they lose all their intended threat, a paradox that is articulated in *Thin Skin* through Ruby’s stylistic self-harming. The introduction to their study distinguishes that an ‘inflationary process’ is underway in which the ‘most minor acts of resistance to expectations of female appearance are heralded as “radical” and “revolutionary”’.¹⁴⁷ Even the most quotidian of gestures, such as being in public ‘without mascara’ on or ‘having a visible panty line when wearing leggings’ are treated as if they are ‘revolutionary’ and ‘threaten to bring down patriarchal capitalism as we know it’.¹⁴⁸ The problem, as Gill, Scharff and Elias identify it, is that these inflationary reactions can all too easily belittle resistant actions. Undeniably, the resistant practices described by the scholars are not as invasive as the tattooed, scarred and pierced bodies of Pitts’ analysis, the anorexic, the bulimic bodies that Bordo sets out, or even Ruby’s trendy throat-slitting in *Thin Skin*. However, the problem of the reduction of the subversive gesture remains the same. Purposefully outlining body modifying processes that are tenuously resistant (VPLs and no mascara), one can see just how easily acts of bodily subversion are depoliticised, and turned instead into stories of bodily submission. In this respect, the implications of the unruliness inherent in the ‘anti’ prefix become ambivalent, outlining a key flaw central to the anti-chick aesthetic as a whole: Ruby’s ruined beauty is forged on the ‘thin skin’ that

¹⁴⁵ Forrest, p.170

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 170

¹⁴⁷ Rosalind Gill, Christina Scharff and Ana Sofia Elias, ‘Introduction’, in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* Ed by. Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (London:Palgrave, 2017), (p.28).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 28

exists between compliance and subversion, at once trivialising conventional practices while at the same time exemplifying her subservience to them.

Faces and Interfaces: the role of skin in *Thin Skin* and Forrest's contemporaries

In order to explore the boundaries of subversion and submission in the anti-chick aesthetic, this section analyses skin as a persistent metaphor within Forrest's text and critical theory. Skin has played a crucial part in academic scholarship: to Butler, it is a 'site for play with categories'.¹⁴⁹ Bordo views it as a 'malleable medium of culture'.¹⁵⁰ It is the affective site central to French feminist philosophies of writing the self, as well as a site for the articulation of abjection, as bodily fluids are contained within and ooze from its surface (Cixous; Irigaray; Kristeva). Pitts, along with Samantha Holland, analyses the role of skin in body modification, viewing it as a harbinger of marginal expressions that work to reclaim alternative femininities. Fragile and unforgiving, much can be revealed through and concealed by this surface, gesturing toward the ability of skin to alter and control. Naomi Wolf's pivotal study *The Beauty Myth* (1991), followed by more recent work by Gill, Scharff and Michelle Lazar, explores skin as a malleable site of cultural attraction and anxiety. Their specific attention is on beauty practices that are acted out on the skin. Such contemporary regimens are as much a form of vain, solipsistic expression and indicators of a subservient aesthetic labour as they are modes of female agency.

As drawn out above, the narrative of *Thin Skin* is a symbolic canvas upon which a feminine desire for ugly self-definition is articulated: its 'thin' nature also situates it as a veil that separates contradictory elements, as well as a threshold that exposes how easily clashing practices of femininity can be traversed. Claudia Benthien offers up an examination of skin that echoes Halberstam's focus on undoing. Benthien suggests that the 'shedding of skin' (either physically or symbolically), which can, in turn, be

¹⁴⁹ Conboy, Medina and Stanbury, p.6

¹⁵⁰ Bordo, p.90

contemporised through the lens of postfeminist beauty practices as a ‘kind of exfoliation’ of the skin, presents a rebuttal of self-improvement regimens. Such ‘shedding’, after all, implies the rejection of circumscribed ‘normality’ and instead, according to Benthien, accounts for a ‘process of maturation and transformation’.¹⁵¹

Previously, I proposed that Watson and Smith’s *Interfaces* charts the female artist as (re)constructing and taking charge of her own self-display. The interface by definition signifies a membrane between two opposing phenomena as well as a surface where they can interact. It therefore resembles the thin membrane of self-representation and it is the boundary where practices of female subjectivity are formed and interrelate. Watson and Smith proceed to delineate how female artists, by uncovering a more fragmented, unstable, and hybrid self, become ‘makers of their own display’.¹⁵² This feeds into the already well-explored theories of the male gaze and female objectification that deviate away from the ‘history of woman as an object of speculation and specularisation’ and instead expose ‘the kinds of intervention [female artists] have deployed to disrupt that specularity’.¹⁵³ The view of women as utilising skin to disrupt regulation reveals the varying processes of Benthien’s ‘shedding’, or indeed, ‘exfoliation’, through which female artists reclaim their felt contradictions and become ‘makers’ of their own image. As Benthien proceeds to explain that beneath the skin ‘there are ever new layers to discover’, the process of ‘shedding’ skin is representative of the multi-layered body of the palimpsest. To return to Dillon, the constant traversal of texts and the subsequent reappearances of underlying narratives within the palimpsest defines it as ‘different’.¹⁵⁴ Therefore, much like the vellum of a palimpsest, as it is scraped and prepared for the inscription of a new narrative, skin-shedding initiates a ‘process of cyclical regeneration and transformation’.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵¹ Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and The World*, trans by. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), (p. 94).

¹⁵² Watson and Smith, p.5

¹⁵³ Ibid., 5

¹⁵⁴ Benthien, p.84

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 83

Published in the same year as *Thin Skin*, Watson and Smith's *Interfaces* is perfectly apt in terms of historicising Forrest's novel, as both reify the idea of the interface as a thin skin upon which artistic (re)creation and creative agency can be played out. Both texts expose the female artist's attempt to cast off the layered histories of patriarchal objectification and further attempt to dismantle the passive eroticisation of the female body by the male gaze. In an early interview, Forrest, who has self-admittedly always found 'more in common with damaged artists', reveals Ruby's flaws and fragility in *Thin Skin* as reflections of her own anxieties and her desire to revise what she calls the 'fucked-up girl' genre:

[*Thin Skin*] is a revised addition to the fucked-up girl genre [...] When I was younger I loved *Betty Blue*, and at the moment I'm completely besotted with Angelina Jolie. But sometimes I'm unnerved by the idea of men liking her. Because I think that there is a side to every man that really wants to watch a woman fall apart.¹⁵⁶

From the young and volatile protagonist of *Betty Blue* to the dysfunctional early life of Angelina Jolie, Forrest highlights the lineage of her protagonist; inheriting the instability and impulsivity of her celebrity forebears, Ruby is the fucked-up girl *par excellence*. Following on in this untraditional tradition, Forrest reveals that the rendering of a deteriorating female subject is unnerving, but also endearing – as if representative of a kind of contemporary craze for the 'crazy' feminine subject that persists in popular culture, reflected in autobiographical works such as Wurtzel's *Prozac Nation* (1994), Rae Earle's *My Mad, Fat Diary* (2007) and, more recently, Melissa Broader's *So Sad Today* (2016) and Bryony Gordon's *Mad Girl* (2016). There are, as Forrest keenly acknowledges, issues that accompany her revision of the trope of the fucked-up girl: one of these issues is that it inspires the male desire to watch the female fall apart. At the same time, she undermines her own felt discomfort with this, acknowledging that she too is 'besotted' with

¹⁵⁶ B. Schoenhoff, 'Deep Dish with Emma Forrest', *PaperMag*, 30 July 2000, para. 5

representations of damaged femininity. Such inconsistency indicates that revising the genre, while preserving and in a way ‘saving’ the idea of the fucked-up girl, might actually add to its inherent problems rather than amend them.

Forrest’s dialogue is curious as it drives the following unnerving paradox home – one which centres on the morbid cultural intrigue with the fucked-up girl and the subsequent emergence of the ‘anti’ chick aesthetic: what role does the contemporary viewer/reader play? As we turn the pages of *Thin Skin*, we intensify our investment in the subject because we want to see what happens when someone is falling apart. In this respect, Forrest toys with reversing the felt scrutiny of women’s suffering and visible disintegration, as if to say ‘why shouldn’t these assumed failures be celebrated?’ Benthien’s illustration of shedding/flaying accounts for the violence inherent in the anti-aesthetic of falling apart, which in itself is centred on ‘provocation and identity crisis’.¹⁵⁷ By making a spectacle of such crisis, *Thin Skin* illuminates a ‘radical self-alienation’ that is problematically ‘stylised into a moment of self-becoming’.¹⁵⁸ A more positive account of this stylisation can be read in terms of Halberstam’s consideration of other modes of aesthetic production – like collage – that reference the spaces in-between. For *Thin Skin*, the central protagonist, by falling apart, embodies the in-between; the reader, in viewing it, partakes in disrupting the spectacle of the contemporary regime of women as objects, therefore revising the outcome of being fucked-up. In these terms, Forrest and her contemporaries expose the alienation of the millennial woman by pushing a destabilising narrative of ‘anti’ femininity to the fore, amplifying its unnerving capacity by revising acts of self-destruction as spectacular promises of transformation. At the same time, however, to witness these female leads ‘falling apart is to *buy* into skin as a metaphorical construct. In this context, the ‘shedding’ to which Benthien alludes is a kind of unique selling point that detracts from the fact that these women are in crisis.

¹⁵⁷ Benthien, p.83

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 83

Jennifer Egan's short story 'Selling the General', included in Merrick's *This is Not Chick Lit* (2006), is a further example of the same phenomenon. Compatible with the narrative of *Thin Skin*, Egan's story focuses on the 'new ruined state' of PR woman Dolly, a formerly famous publicist who was known by her then-reputable nickname 'La Doll'. Dolly/La Doll attempts to rebuild her own image by saving the reputation of her new client, a tyrannical dictator named 'The General'. She accomplishes this by linking him to a dwindling movie star – the young, fallen celebrity Pia Arten.¹⁵⁹ Like Ruby, both Dolly's failings and Pia's own 'spectacular acts of self-destruction' force the reader to confront, and celebrate, an alternative femininity that is 'oddly painful to look at'.¹⁶⁰ 'Selling the General', like *Thin Skin*, explores what happens when one sheds one's glamorous skin. In so doing, these works expose not only the 'ugly' side of glamour but also the personal failings of its core characters. However, the proximity of anti-beauty and business in Egan's text does once again illuminate the problem of *generalising* counter-cultural practices; 'selling' subversive images might, paradoxically, re-establish them as successful.

Such conflicts are an important facet of Ruby's persona. Through her on-and-off screen artistry, Ruby deigns to 'carve [herself] an unforeseen niche as the fucked-up girl'.¹⁶¹ In the first instance, her objective is certainly bestowed with the right adjectives of resistance: she forcefully 'carve[s]' out this space herself, heading towards her 'unforeseen' future in the threateningly unpredictable ways that we might associate with the 'fucked-up girl'. As Ruby sheds expectations by exhibiting her radical self-alienation, she invites her own productive undoing, squeezed into the 'anti' niche of the fucked-up girl. 'The people who like that really like it', Ruby states.¹⁶² 'I have the added advantage of scrubbing up nicely when I feel like it, so I look like I have a range, when really I just have good

¹⁵⁹ Jennifer Egan, 'Selling the General' in *This is Not Chick Lit* Ed. by Elizabeth Merrick (New York: Random House, 2006), pp.101-128, (p.107)

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 107

¹⁶¹ Forrest, p.60

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 60

skin'.¹⁶³ It is here that Ruby's former, seemingly 'anti', narrative is undermined. The 'unforeseen' elements of her transformation are unimaginative rather than creative; the resistant gesture of being 'fucked-up' is weakened by Ruby's 'scrubbing up well'. The basis of everything is that she just has 'good skin'; scouring off skin does not appear to be a productive process of self-destruction, but rather presents a build-up of feminine tropes that merely 'look like' they have substance. The sylphlike connotations of Ruby's character – the 'thin skin' that is the prominent symbol of her undoing – is also a marker of her capacity to become a 'sellable' niche. The awareness of Ruby's flaws foreshadows her failure at being wholly resistant to convention. Yet, they still reveal that her preoccupations are with processes of undoing (the carving out, the scrubbing away) as opposed to *doing*. The scrubbed skin is a metaphor, then, for the tenuous relationship between self-destruction and self-transformation, and how easily traversable 'good' and fucked-up representations of femininity become, or indeed, *unbecome*, through the interface of anti-chick.

Breakdown Girl: concealing and revealing pathological 'make up' in popular culture

As explored by Bordo, 'normative' femininity is tacitly pathologized in terms of the implicit oppression that is caused by the pressures to 'scrub up well' and meet the kind of elusive feminine ideal that I have formerly identified. In contrast, the anti-chick aesthetic is always and already regarded as pathological – it is, as the previous section evidences, *carved out* as fucked-up. Given that attending to the minute and fanciful details that come with the fluxional fashions of femininity brings about the fragmentation of feminine identity, this felt disorder inspires an anti-aesthetic that is illustrative of 'subjects who

¹⁶³ Ibid., 60

unravel, who refuse to cohere, subjects who refuse being where being has already been defined in terms of a self-activating, self-knowing, liberal subject'.¹⁶⁴

In *the Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam locates new ways of being outside of conventional models – that is, the state of ‘unbeing’ and the action of ‘undoing’ that contribute to a larger narrative of failure. For example, such failure resounds in the ‘refusal to be and become a woman as she has been defined and imagined within western philosophy’.¹⁶⁵ *The Queer Art of Failure* therefore works to celebrate a feminist politics of undoing, locating the productivity of a female subject who refuses, and unravels, prescribed roles. To Angela McRobbie, the unravelling of the female subject is indicative of a postfeminist disorder. In *The Aftermath of Feminism* (2009), McRobbie analyses, in short, the abeyance of feminism in popular culture. While she argues that feminism is not missing per se, she suggests that the established gains of feminism are becoming increasingly undone by popular culture. The transformation of feminism by postfeminism, with its insistence upon feminism’s ‘pastness’, implies that feminism has achieved all it had set out to. McRobbie describes how, with the ‘undoing’ of feminism, the contemporary woman is beset by anxieties that have become part of her make up. McRobbie recognises that, certainly, ‘these girls [...] may be cutting themselves, endlessly on diets, fearful of their weight, prone to low self-esteem, frequently anorexic’, but she disturbingly contends that ‘these are all now healthy signs of unhealthy femininity’.¹⁶⁶

Although Halberstam’s exploration is grounded in an analysis of queer identities and McRobbie’s is feminist, both scholars trace the aftermath of failure, the implications of undoing conventional models, and how to interpret the rhetoric of rejection – the ‘anti’ or ‘post’ prefixes – that is left in the wake of failure and undoing. Under the umbrella of ‘undoing’, McRobbie sees pathologies as becoming normalised, while Halberstam argues

¹⁶⁴ Halberstam, p.126

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 124

¹⁶⁶ Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture, and Social Change* (London: Sage publications, 2009), (p.95).

that these same pathologies, and persistent pathological failure, should be celebrated for their normality and the ‘rewards’ that failure offers. The rewards of ‘failure’, Halberstam states, are that it ‘allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development’.¹⁶⁷ Halberstam does not discount the fact that failure comes with a host of negative associations such as ‘disappointment, disillusionments and despair’.¹⁶⁸ An alliterative array of ‘negative affects’ this may be, but Halberstam proposes that they be productively utilised ‘to poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life’.¹⁶⁹

In relation to Halberstam’s construction-through-active-destruction account, McRobbie contends that ‘she who suffers is *no longer passive*, indeed she is expected to be *highly active* in her struggle to overcome her afflictions’ [emphasis added].¹⁷⁰ McRobbie recognises the failures of the female subject, but asserts that their embodiment means that women cannot become passive, but must be ‘highly active’ in her struggles to overcome her flaws. I do not see this as completely negative: when read in conjunction with Halberstam, the revelation of inherent failures allows the female subject to manage her own self-development; as she tries to overcome her flaws, she embraces them at the same time. Both scholars pinpoint the effective acknowledgment of shortcomings, such as a refusal to be/become a woman in a conventional or idealistic sense, as a kind of agentive tool with which the subject, in this case the feminine subject, works to expose her imperfections as positive and productive. The suggestion, then, is as follows: if pathologies are indeed part of the ‘failed’ or failing woman’s make up, then why not use them to the same advantage that make-up might be used to ‘self-improve’ and project a ‘normal’ femininity? The anti-chick aesthetic therefore conceals and reveals simultaneously, embodying this contemporary makeshift state between pathologically ‘normal’ femininity and the normalised pathology of the supposedly ‘failed’ woman.

¹⁶⁷ Halberstam, p. 3

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.,3

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.,3

¹⁷⁰ McRobbie, p.95

The pathological construction of the girl – a figure invoked to represent the anti-chick objective of refusing to become a woman – is writ large throughout *Thin Skin*. In line with McRobbie and Halberstam, Ruby’s antagonistic traits can be read as ‘healthy’ signs of an unhealthy femininity, and the pressure that she feels to remain beautiful and behave accordingly is articulated through her strategies of ironic subversion: to be ugly, ruined and spoiled. Damaging and purging her body through various modes of self-harm marks the beginnings of her failure to become the woman she has been defined, and ‘imagined’, to be.¹⁷¹ Rather than ‘famously beautiful skin and hazel eyes’, Ruby ‘went in and out in all the wrong places’.¹⁷² With ‘chewed lips and nails’ she disrupts the beautiful reputation that proceeds her, and is, quite plainly, ‘all wrong’.¹⁷³ Yet, she acknowledges her flaws with a celebratory and unapologetic assertion: “‘I know!’” Ruby squealed with delight’.¹⁷⁴ In this sense, Ruby brilliantly encapsulates the components of the anti-chick aesthetic; her female body is chaotic (ostensibly untamed, ungroomed, unglossed) and so leaks through the veneer of normality. Such facets are, to McRobbie, an undeniable part of the girl’s make up and are therefore increasingly normalised. In a similar way, Halberstam argues that the unconventional should be actively celebrated and utilised as a productive gesture of resistance. Nevertheless, the inconsistencies central to my examination of the anti-chick aesthetic remain. With McRobbie and Halberstam in mind, how much are these failures an active, resistant and/or creative choice, if they are, indeed, an undeniable and inescapable part of contemporary femininity?

The following scene is populated by crude invasions of the female body that take place through the rough sexual excess of ‘being fucked’ and the excessive dimensions of being fucked-up.¹⁷⁵ Ruby does not want the sex with her casual partner Sebastian to be sensual. Instead, she attempts to get him to ‘smash her’, transforming the erotic act into a

¹⁷¹ Forrest, p.110

¹⁷² Ibid., 117

¹⁷³ Ibid., 117

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 117

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.,69

violent exorcism to ensure that ‘the spaces inside [her] that were coveted by demons would be smashed too’.¹⁷⁶ As Ruby increasingly plays up to her ‘fucked-up’ emotions, ‘smashing’ her internal demons through visible self-destruction (rather than seeking to preserve the preciousness implied by her name), Sebastian, who ‘does not help or understand’, eventually reprimands her:

I would try not to be sad, but I couldn’t help it. And it wasn’t long before [Sebastian’s] concern turned to frustration and then disdain. “For Christ’s sake, Ruby, cheer the fuck up.” I heard it as “Cheer the fuck-up!” I pictured myself being encouraged from the side-lines of the football field by a squadron of tan blonde girls: ‘two-four-six-eight, who do we appreciate? Breakdown girl! Breakdown girl! Go! Go! Go!’ and so I behaved like even more of a fuck-up.¹⁷⁷

Ruby is driven by her inherent struggles here. Although she attempts to hide them, stating ‘I tried not to be’, her cheerlessness seeps to the surface and as it is at odds with conventional behavioural practices, it is met with ‘disdain’ and ‘frustration’. Through the line ‘I heard it as “cheer the fuck-up!”’ Forrest captures a kind of schizophrenic echoing that demonstrates to Ruby the ‘correct’ way to act. The synchronised team of ‘tan blonde girls’ cheering for Ruby as a ‘Breakdown Girl’ reveals the extent to which her anxieties are in clear conflict with the pattern of glossed femininity that the cheerleaders represent. The scene, then, invites consideration in relation to McRobbie’s claim that the pathological ‘make up’ of the girl has been normalised; Halberstam’s insistence that it *should* be normalised and celebrated, moreover, is literalised in the well-timed cue ‘who do we appreciate? Breakdown Girl! Breakdown Girl!’ By addressing both the healthy and unhealthy signs of femininity – that is, both chick and anti-chick simultaneously – Forrest crafts a bricolage of the disordered tendencies of her female protagonist that conflict with mainstream, more accepted constructions of femininity. This displaces the idea of what can be considered as ‘normal’ in and for young women. It is clear then, that the staged

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 69

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 69

intimacy of the bedroom antics that open this scene – the loving sex made to ‘please’ Ruby versus her crude request to be ‘fucked’ – paves the way for the intimate proximity of the two contradictory femininities that exist, quite literally, on the same playing field. The embodiment of the ‘Breakdown Girl’ may well indicate Ruby’s failure to become a woman, but the reward is that she is granted agency. She does not deny her ‘demons’ and is not completely demoralised by the glossy women that surround her. Instead, Ruby is relegated to the side-lines, but she is also the focus of the narrative: she is both liminal and visible, while being celebrated as such. In the aftermath of failure, the distance between what is ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’ is reduced to a fine line – the interface, and the ‘thin skin’, between opposition and convergence.

Atypical Girls: attachment/detachment in *Thin Skin*

‘The formal point of attachment’, writes Lauren Berlant, ‘is an opening of something beyond individuality, surfacing from the rhythms of encounter and relation’.¹⁷⁸ Here, I understand Berlant’s formal ‘point’ of attachment as the boundary where two things meet and interrelate. As the above section suggests, ‘encounter’ and ‘relation’ are brought to the fore by the intimate proximity between the tan blonde girls and Ruby as ‘Breakdown Girl’. In *Cruel Optimism*, Berlant examines Mary Gaitskill’s novel *Two Girls: Fat and Thin* (1991) and the relationship between the two contrasting female leads. Berlant reveals that there is a formal attachment between both girls despite their apparent divergences (this difference is ironized by Gaitskill through the simple demarcation that one is ‘fat’ and the other is ‘thin’). Yet, the girls are complexly drawn together; through their strangely matching experiences of past trauma and alienation, they become parallel misfits amidst the confusion of contemporary life.

As Berlant continues, it is exactly the formation of this boundary which stands for both attachment and detachment and ‘organises the women’s mutual attraction/aversion

¹⁷⁸Berlant, p.128.

throughout the novel. They feel taken over by it as well as taken in by it'.¹⁷⁹ *Thin Skin*, even down to its title, alludes to the simultaneous and often volatile encounters and relations of contradictory positions. This is primarily played out through Ruby's reclamation of ugliness in lieu of her beauty and her 'failure' to live up to specific scripts. However, Forrest also develops a formal point of attachment between Ruby and another female lead, Rachel. Rachel, described by Ruby as clearly 'caught between trophy wife and career woman' is the glamorous wife of Scott, a business mogul with whom Ruby has an affair.¹⁸⁰ Ruby describes how she had 'seen pictures [of Rachel]' and that Rachel was 'pretty, with honey highlights in her hair, although I could tell she was *really* a brunette'.¹⁸¹ [emphasis added] At the same time as Ruby is confronted with Rachel's image, she 'hack[s] off' her own hair with a razor.¹⁸² The interaction of these conflicting characters 'opens up something beyond individuality' which, much like the position of and/or, locates and opens up an in-between space for examination. The 'honey highlights' concealing Rachel's natural brown hair are on some level akin to the 'hacked' hair of Ruby, in that they each reveal the ways in which contemporary women confront their own contradictions through the body.¹⁸³ In conjunction with *Interfaces*, the relationship between the two characters and their strangely parallel aesthetic unsettles the unified 'I' of normal self-representation for the '/', accentuating the differing femininities that Ruby and Rachel represent as well as (and perhaps most significantly) exposing their similarities.

We follow Ruby into the downward spiral of her self-destruction and undoing – bulimia, body mutilation, illicit affairs, love, and loss – until she comes face-to-face with Rachel, a paragon of what Bordo might recognise as tenuously 'normal' femininity. This femininity is, in turn, circumscribed by the postfeminist discourses of rigorous self-improvement described by Gill et al, as well as Harzewski. When Ruby and Rachel first

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 128

¹⁸⁰ Forrest, p. 14

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 14

¹⁸² Ibid., 14

¹⁸³ Ibid., 128

meet, Ruby admits that even one of Rachel's toenails was in better condition than her 'entire life'.¹⁸⁴ The pristine toenail, shimmying in its 'pearlescent pedicure' is a heavily caustic representation of, in the words of Gill et al, the 'contemporary injunction' that pointedly emphasises that 'look[ing] good' is all-encompassing and is both physically and psychically labouring.¹⁸⁵ The toenail, in this respect, might be the last box on what they call the 'checklist gaze', which involves 'a quick but sweeping scrutiny of the entire body'.¹⁸⁶ This indicates a stringent and submissive body-story, a formidable tick-box exercise where even the most inconsequential part of an individual can be perceived as more prosperous than another's *entire* life. Playfully dark in its humour, *Thin Skin* heralds the contemporary cuticle as a synecdoche for an excessive femininity that could be, oddly, equally as ugly as the oozing and ruined contours of Ruby's anti-beauty image.

While their friendship is based on uneven ground, given Ruby's affair with Rachel's husband Scott, the combination of messy and dressy female characters Forrest clashes together in *Thin Skin* presents a colourful portrait of contradictory femininities. Through the collaging of these two opposing positions, Forrest's novel anticipates Halberstam's calls for a cut-and-paste genre – a genre that reveals how, like the disparate pieces of a collage, two contradictory images can be attached. As the narrative drama of *Thin Skin* begins with opening credits, Ruby is formally cast as '(a fuck-up)' from the offset and placed in opposition with her feminine foil Rachel, who plays '(a grown-up)'.¹⁸⁷ By setting the role of the mature 'grown-up' woman alongside that of the 'fuck-up' girl, Forrest implies that the characters are at odds, but as they are as much attracted as they are averse to each other. Forrest is also suggesting that they are both equally dysfunctional 'types' of contemporary feminine identity. When they first meet, Rachel has all the intentions of 'shooing [Ruby] away like the bedraggled sex kitten she was [...] but [she]

¹⁸⁴ Forrest, p.188

¹⁸⁵ Gill, Scharff and Elias, p. 5

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p.27

¹⁸⁷ Forrest, p.1

didn't'.¹⁸⁸ Later, it is the dishevelled apparition of Ruby that becomes the 'focus' of Rachel's life as she admits 'Ruby was all I had to live for'.¹⁸⁹ At the same time, Ruby 'could see that Rachel was every bit as lonely as [she] was'.¹⁹⁰ When they are together, each character attempts to nourish the other, as if providing what Berlant calls, in her examination of attachment, the 'sustenance of both'.¹⁹¹ Yet reaching this implied sustenance and attaining the possibility of transformation is impossible as both characters share a common dynamic: they 'do not eat'.¹⁹² As Ruby 'sets down coffee that was too weak and toast that was burnt' in front of Rachel, she 'pushes it away and instead draws on her cigarette'.¹⁹³ In another scene, Rachel makes salmon pasta for Ruby, and then listens outside the bathroom as Ruby makes herself sick 'panting as the last piece of salmon fell crushed into the toilet'.¹⁹⁴ Based around attraction and aversion – the two principles of attachment – the complex bond between Ruby and Rachel is both central to and outside of the predictable comfort zones of conventional relationships: they are 'being nice' just as much as 'they weren't being nice'.¹⁹⁵

While Ruby is riddled with disruptive pathologies, insistent on practising a particular way of *unbeing*, Rachel adopts a policy of stringent self-surveillance and disciplined self-improvement. Even so, the outwardly disconnected stories of Ruby and Rachel strangely correspond: both are successful in failing and fail to be successful in their own unique and comparable ways. Two girls, one fuck-up and one grown-up, Ruby and Rachel succumb to the pressures and contradictions of the contemporary female body. Their polarised positions, as I will now demonstrate, reveal their feminine practices to be every bit as 'ugly' as the other, mobilising once again the idea that the anti-chick aesthetic is flawed in its simultaneous straddling of subversion and submission.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 112

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 109

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 142

¹⁹¹ Berlant, p. 15

¹⁹² Forrest, p. 129

¹⁹³ Ibid., 128

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., 125

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 133

Ways of seeing, ways of unbeing: the panoptic and pathologized body-stories of *Thin Skin*

A symbolic line establishes all divisions, distinctions and dichotomies. This suggestive model, the figurative in-between of two opposing points is, to repeat Grosz, a fine one. It is the fragility of such boundary lines that constantly invites them to be revised and so, what has been established as normal and what can be considered as resistant is increasingly blurred. Pathologies are normalised to a damaging extent, while gestures of resistance are progressively exaggerated and depoliticised. Though Halberstam's claim that failure should be celebrated, exploited and flaunted – and, in this sense, tentatively 'normalised' – is a key imperative of the anti-chick aesthetic, it is perhaps the same sense of exploiting the darker aspects of female experience that destabilises the division between normative and flawed femininities. This occurs, for example, when eating disorders and self-harm become standard reactions to social oppression, while everyday incidental gestures (wearing no mascara, visible panty lines) are read in the same context as deliberate, radical actions of resistance.

I have mapped out Berlant's theorisation of attachment as a suggestive model for analysing the fragility of boundaries in anti-chick lit as it accounts for the breakdown of these distinctions, while at the same time maintaining their ambiguities. Berlant's attachments are always cruelly optimistic, made so as the objective for which the person strives is always and already out of reach. This section will return to the dynamic between Ruby and Rachel in *Thin Skin*, and the spectrum of neuroses that shape their two body-stories. Both characters are riddled with complexities and contradictions, and their attachment is symbolic of a wider process of collaboration, production and eventual self-transformation. Yet, their stories articulate feminine projects that are simultaneously beset with the anxiety of becoming (ways of seeing) and purposeful unbecoming (ways of

unbeing) that end up overwhelmed by a lack of clarity regarding what is resistant and what is submissive.

The formal point of attachment is representative of the interface, which, in accordance with Watson and Smith, hinges on the connection between and/or. The traversal of alternative narratives, to return to Dillon's palimpsest, confounds notions of a straightforward, singular reading and therefore highlights the contradictory overlap of the two femininities central to *Thin Skin*. Attachment, as Berlant observes, is a necessary component of contemporary life as it provides a specific 'sustenance' and sense of possibility (both the subject who attaches and the object/subject they attach to).¹⁹⁶ This 'makes life bearable' when life, in turn, presents itself 'ambivalently, unevenly, and incoherently'.¹⁹⁷ At the same time, attachment makes the possibility of 'expansive self-transformation' impossible to attain.¹⁹⁸ Berlant offers the following definition of attachment as an affective state in which the attached are at once attracted to notions of self-transformation via a particular object, but in attaching themselves to it, they also succumb to the inevitable attrition of the self. Berlant asserts:

Attachments are made not by will, but by an intelligence after which we are always running [...] this lagging and sagging relation to attachment threatens to make us feel vertiginous and formless, except that normative conventions and our own creative repetitions are there along the way to help quell the panic we might feel at the prospect of becoming exhausted or dead before we can make sense of ourselves'.¹⁹⁹

Here Berlant articulates how attachment is not made by personal will. Rather, it is the drive of an exterior fantasy that 'we' desire and, in following its lead, we encounter the exertions of attachment. This 'lagging and sagging relation to attachment', as Berlant puts it, wears

¹⁹⁶ Berlant, p.15

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.,15

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 2

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.,125

down individual identity and threatens to make this identity 'formless' in a contemporary culture that is itself characterised by ambivalence, instability and incoherence.

To Berlant, attachments are potentially transformative, but only in the conservative sense that through them we realise our (usually traditional) desires. The interface in Berlant's quotation is structured between the polarities of personal and/or creative repetitions on the one hand, and normative conventions on the other; both must be recognised in order to counteract the formlessness felt during attachment. In relation to anti-chick lit, it seems that, as attachment centres on the threat of being overwhelmed, what is needed is a 'straddling' of both creative/normative femininities. In *Thin Skin*, Forrest uses Ruby and Rachel's attachment to each other as a means the ways in which contemporary women negotiate their contradictions: Ruby needs Rachel's 'normative' image in order to encourage her own creative agency, their relationship is a proximate embodiment of women's 'deliberate' attempt to resist or rebel against normative accounts of femininity.

Pitts explores the idea of 'creative repetitions' through acts of body modification, such as 'tattooing, genital piercing, scarification' that are undertaken by women in order to represent a 'culturally marginal female body'.²⁰⁰ With normative conventions as the foundation – for example, the pristine, unmarked female body – body modifications are acted out on the skin as a way to radically self-define, and with a view to developing 'reclamative mode[s] of representing' alternative femininities.²⁰¹ Pitts contends that by marking their bodies, female body modifiers 'shift private self-identification and their public identities' and use the attachment of private/public to nourish an alternative femininity in order to '[tell] new stories to themselves and others about meanings of their embodiment'.²⁰² It is exactly the interface of the unmarked and marked body, where creative-meets-normative that, to Pitts, provides the correct amount of proximity and

²⁰⁰ Pitts, p.67

²⁰¹ Ibid., 67

²⁰² Ibid.,73

distance in order to create a progressive feminine identity that stands out against convention and therefore does not ‘depict hopelessness’ (the vertiginous, formless self of Berlant’s study).²⁰³ Instead, the ‘body-stories’ of the women central to Pitts’ work embody contradiction – they are both private/public, socialised/unsocialised, pristine/marked – and, as such, are ‘in flux, opened to the possibilities of inscription and renaming’.²⁰⁴ To some extent, through identifying these body-stories as being ‘in flux’, Pitts presents an account of feminine identity that stresses its potential agency, and which underscores her own resistance to singular modes of classification; the political potential of the ‘alternative’ female body of the body modifier lies in the fact it can be constantly inscribed and renamed anew. However, this positive account of inscription/renaming must be read in conjunction with Grosz, as well as Gill, Scharff and Elias. As acts of bodily resistance – ranging from the self-modification of tattooing, piercing and scarification to the self-damaging practices of cutting, bulimia, or anorexia – become increasingly popularised, overstated, intensive, or, more damningly, accepted as ‘normal’, they highlight the complex fragility, to return to Grosz, of the distinction between subversion and compliance. This idea is strengthened by the fact that body modifiers successfully expose a self-marginalised female body, but these individuals cannot remain ‘in flux’; they still require the conventional dimensions of their bodies *before* they were marked in order to make their contradictions explicit. As a result, the ability to create ‘alternative’ stories through confronting contradictions and remaining in-between ‘creative’ and ‘normative’ is habitually undermined.

In relation to *Thin Skin*, the awkward proximity of creative/normative, through which the clear definitions and objectives of each state are muddled, exists between Ruby and Rachel’s body-stories: what should make them distinct actually makes them similar, and what should count as subversive, reclaimative gestures instead tend to signify

²⁰³ Ibid., 73

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 73

compliance. This is particularly evident in two scenes in which both Ruby and Rachel are talking about their ‘transformed’ bodies. In the first passage, Ruby is confronted by her manager about her bulimia:

‘I’m pretty sure you’re bulimic, aren’t you?’
“I am”, I answered firmly, with inappropriate good cheer.
[...]
I raised my arms up above my head and [...] I answered his question: “I’ve started so I’ll finish”.²⁰⁵

Later in the novel, Ruby discusses with Rachel the reappearance of Rachel’s curves, the marker of a voluptuous figure that Rachel once had before she, like Ruby, stopped eating:

“You look curvy to me” [...]
“You know what honey?” laughed Rachel, stretching her hands above her head as if to emphasise the point. “I feel curvy”.²⁰⁶

In both cases, Ruby and Rachel acknowledge their differences but do so, curiously, with the same reaction. Rachel laughs cheerily as she welcomes the return of her curvaceous figure, while Ruby admits to her bulimia, which places her at odds with Rachel’s ‘curvy’ feminine identity, with an ‘inappropriate good cheer’. Moreover, their resistant gestures – the bulimia that works to starve out the curve, and the curve that appears in conflict with Rachel’s previously strict dieting regime – are undermined by the way both women stretch their arms above their head. This action is symbolic of stretching ‘above’ their heads into an alternative space, as if they are reaching upwards to reclaim their intrinsic contradictions. To Watson and Smith, the struggles that women face in order to artfully reconstruct their bodies in unconventional ways is attributable to the fact that, as I have cited elsewhere, they have been historically formed as objects of art as opposed to producers. Watson and Smith’s insistence has ties to both Mulvey’s theory of visual pleasure and male spectatorship, as well as to John Berger’s pivotal study *Ways of Seeing*

²⁰⁵ Forrest, p. 33.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.,130

(1972). In *Interfaces* they argue that the female artist has performed ‘[her] own cultural status as [object] of the male gaze’.²⁰⁷ This position is maintained through her constant self-surveillance. In line with Bordo, the exhaustive attention the woman pays to the most inconsequential of details of her appearance in pursuit of a femininity that is, most poignantly in reference to both Ruby and Rachel ‘reaching their arms’ above ‘their heads’, unreachable.

Rachel’s body-story reflects the anxieties about surveillance and appearance that Bordo, Berger and Mulvey outline. In the context of Forrest’s novel, beauty takes on a Foucauldian, panoptical dimension, in that it ‘defines precisely the dimensions of [the woman’s] physical freedom’.²⁰⁸ Grosz echoes this logic as she states ‘just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon’, the contemporary woman has become a ‘self-policing subject’, bound and incarcerated by her own strictly surveyed femininity.²⁰⁹ Breanne Fahs notes that this type of panoptic body is created by the intersection between postfeminist beauty labours and neoliberal ideologies, as these practices – apparently inspiring choice and free will – have become stultifying and ‘increasingly directed at the self’.²¹⁰ Fahs argues that, as both ‘postfeminist and neoliberal subjects, women are haunted by notions of consumerism and the body-as-product’.²¹¹ The messy reality of this model, in which women and girls are held to a standard of beauty that is, for most, unattainable, prompts feelings of ‘anger’ and ‘disgust’ – feelings that are also ‘directed at the self, particularly as women imagined their bodies as always/already failing’.²¹² In these terms, women’s body-stories, whether detailing self-destruction or self-surveillance, are propelled by the emotions of anger and disgust, and beset by the fact that the women in question are, similarly, always and already in line to fail.

²⁰⁷ Ibid.,15

²⁰⁸ Pitts, p.52

²⁰⁹ Grosz, p. 144

²¹⁰ Breanne Fahs, ‘Mapping ‘Gross’ Bodies: The Regulatory Politics of Disgust’ in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* Ed. by Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (London:Palgrave, 2017), pp 83-101, (p.91).

²¹¹ Fahs, p. 85

²¹² Ibid.,92

The second part of *Thin Skin* focuses more closely on ‘Rachel’s Story’, bringing her ‘normative’ feminine narrative and Ruby’s ‘anti-narrative’ into contact. Rachel embodies an excess of ‘appropriate’ feminine appearances and behaviours but, in so doing, exposes her own repulsion toward the stagnant reality of her world:

“Look, I’m in great shape. I’m really a rather ordinary looking woman. But I’m well turned out. I worked hard at it [...] I did five hundred sit-ups a day [...] then one day I realised, staring at nobody’s floor, with my everywife life, that the deep, deep curve was a straight line [...] so I glanced at the dresser table photos. Us at a premiere, him in Armani, me in a Dolce gown, my waist nipped in [...] Tentatively, knowing already what I would find, I dragged my palms from my ribs to my hips. The curve was gone”.²¹³

Rachel’s body is barely perceptible here, yet beginning her story with the curt use of ‘look’, she immediately uncovers a self that is committed to endless surveillance, which is followed by a sequence of references to the ocular actions of looking, glancing, and staring. As if to emphasise just how relentless self-surveillance is, adjectives pertaining to ‘looking’ are what structure this section and therefore the figurative ‘look’ of Rachel’s story. The punishing insistence on improving the body is revealed through the ‘five hundred sit-ups a day’ that Rachel does. Moreover, the polished gilt surfaces of her environs, represented through her mirrored dresser and the glitzy photographs that surround her, become the inmates that force her self-reflection. She is, therefore, encircled into an ‘everywife’ regime from which she cannot deviate. This is nothing short of panoptic; the poles of Rachel’s body-story are constructed around the interface between the self and surveillance and the symbolic I/eye, reflecting an unnatural symmetry that subdues her feminine frame to a mess of measurements and outlines. The obsessive need to control the perceived threat of feminine unruliness is implied through the emphasis on her great (and her natural) curve: Rachel traces the felt disgust toward the appearance of her attenuated frame, yet ‘dragging’ her hands down her body to find it gone, she is both visually and tangibly ‘straightened’ out and subordinated.

²¹³ Forrest, p.129

It is exactly this type of self-directed violence that continues into Ruby's pathologized body-story, which reveals that her character is indebted to a specific narrative of unbeing, inviting with it the untamed, ungroomed, unglossed aesthetic of anti-chick. The following scene depicts Ruby lying on the bed of her hotel room. To reach her state of unbeing, she ironically does nothing, mapping out her challenge to normative conventions through the bizarrely passive resistance technique of waiting for her body to deteriorate:

I could not leave my bed [...] my body shook. My chest and stomach broke out in tiny hives. My forehead was dotted with spots. My hair sat in useless half-curls about my ears. I lay in bed, unmoving.²¹⁴

The messy pattern of the anti-chick aesthetic is, braille-like, inscribed in the 'hives' and 'spots' erupting on Ruby's skin, and may be read as fully embracing a 'failed/failing' body. These corporeal signifiers of imperfection reveal Ruby's body as pathologized, a disfigured mess of holes and pores that resist normative femininity. However, the discrepancy at the heart of this scene comes in the form of the oxymoronic model of radical passivity that, as I outlined in the introduction of this thesis in reference to Halberstam, acts as a counterpart to unbeing, marking 'an unbecoming [...] a radical passivity that allows for the inhabiting of femininity with a difference'.²¹⁵ How can Ruby's body-story combine the states of being 'radical' and being 'passive' so that her position of unbeing can be read as a productive and creative gesture? Ruby may be actively unbecoming here, but she is also 'unmoving'. The 'bed' thus becomes the bedrock of her feminine neuroses; her attempt to look 'as bad as she could' is played out through the dotted and spotted creative repetitions that, as she lies in wait for them to appear, passively articulates that the 'inhabiting of femininity with a difference' actually turns into 'useless' subservience to that same image.²¹⁶

²¹⁴ Forrest, p. 73

²¹⁵ Halberstam, p. 144

²¹⁶ Forrest, p.73

As Fahs discusses, the contemporary woman is stuck between articulating her ‘gross body’ and recognising the inevitability that this body will be re-tamed, ‘regulated’ and ‘contained’, as ‘women fear emotional reactions such as disgust’ toward their unruly bodies.²¹⁷ To return to Ruby’s body-story, ‘shook’, ‘broke’ and ‘dotted’ are indicative of active and unruly corporeal signifiers of resistance to a unified feminine image. Yet, Ruby’s crazed compulsion is, like Rachel’s story, narrated with a kind of experimental precision, despite the fact that her intentions are based around self-destruction and undoing. The description jolts from the disruptive activity of radical movements (shook, broke) to marginalised passivity (unmoving, sat, useless) that collapses the distinction between subversive and compliant. Ruby’s body-story becomes entangled in the contradiction of radical passivity, which, as Halberstam states, *dramatizes* an unbecoming. In contrast to Pitts’ positive account of body modification as a suggestive model for resistance, Fahs concludes by observing, more speculatively, that ‘perhaps we can [...] one day imagine a radical potential in embracing “grossness” as a form of bodily revolt’.²¹⁸ The fictionalised format of ‘one day’ is just as controversial as the dramatization of unbecoming, and, like a fairy tale, seems far, far away. This draws us back to the cyclical interactions of cruelly optimistic attachment: the ‘new habit that promises to induce an improved way of being’ instead becomes the ‘obstacle to your flourishing’.²¹⁹

In the context of Rachel’s body-story, the persistence of ocular surveillance is grossly exaggerated and reveals the bony, angular lines of Rachel’s body that are just as grotesquely outlined. This exposes what Fahs argues as the contemporary woman’s ‘need to discipline their own, always-failing, always-in-need-of-maintenance, always-problematic bodies’.²²⁰ Fahs continues to state that such discipline occurs in both ‘overt

²¹⁷ Ibid.,95

²¹⁸ Fahs, p. 95

²¹⁹ Berlant, p. 2

²²⁰ Fahs, p.93

and subtextual ways throughout women's narratives about their bodies'.²²¹ Rachel's body is nipped and tucked, scarcely identifiable under the pretext of looking good, while Ruby's fucked-up image speaks to her unrefined insistence to 'look as bad as she could'. At the same time, the mess of pores and holes on Ruby's skin unnervingly match Rachel's abstract breakdown into measurements and lines.²²² Both body-stories are attached and separated by the way both women are working hard to look as good/bad as they could. Their successful transformation is kept just out of reach by the fact that both Rachel's and Ruby's conflicting narratives are always (and already) failing. As such, both collapse into a kind of lifeless attrition: Rachel's 'curve was gone', while Ruby lies 'unmoving'. Their body-stories therefore make exhaustive work of the 'thin skin' between compliance and subversion. As Ruby lies 'unmoving', unable to 'leave', her body-story is overwhelmingly attached to the 'resistant' gesture; the lifelessness that foregrounds her whole anti-display leaves Ruby with little room to do anything at all. Ironically, modes of undoing in this instance seem to slacken the distinctive trajectory of resistance. Ruby's ways of unbeing are, like the lives of the Panopticon's inmates, marked by confinement: where can she go from here?

'Nothing left to do but become beautiful again': Failed endings and queering the fairy-tale

All stories must end and, at the start of this chapter, I outlined that the ending of *Thin Skin* is underwhelming and awkward. After a failed suicide attempt, Ruby has 'nothing left' to do but to become beautiful again, banishing her from existing in the happily ever *alternative* state of ruined beauty.²²³ In the context of the female body modifier, Pitts draws on similar troublesome conclusions in her study. She states that 'reclaiming discourse articulates a project that has a start, middle, and a finish: the need to

²²¹ Ibid., 93

²²² Forrest, p. 73

²²³ Ibid., 210

reclaim the body is felt, the ritual is enacted, and the reclamation is achieved'.²²⁴ Seemingly this is a successful result; however, after this tenuous sense of 'achievement' comes the irksome conclusion that in 'identity subverting practices' there is 'always a limit to the movement, beyond which the mover cannot go' that is, the end.²²⁵ The symbolic '/' that locates the productive in-between space of and/or thus becomes the barrier that, instead, locks down the possibilities presented by 'and' 'or'.

Certainly, *Thin Skin*'s conclusion is rather perplexing in its initial preservation of the 'beginning, middle, end' structure. As Ruby leaves the hospital, she poeticizes her supposed self-transformation:

In the dark, I'm not really me. This is how it will be. I made myself melt and now I get to reconfigure myself as I choose: girl born, not from mother of father, or a lover who treated her well. Girl born of the girl herself. Once you have made yourself ugly, succeeded in your wildest hare-brained mission beyond your wildest dreams, there is nothing left to do but become beautiful again.²²⁶

As Ruby reaches her limit here in terms of the transformative capacity of unbeing (in that it appears only to lead her back to *being* beautiful), it seems Forrest reaches her limit in terms of her technical ability: beginning with a juvenile and unconvincing rhyme of 'not really me, this is how it will be', combined with the careless repetition of 'wildest', drains the closing statement of its transformative potential. Forrest's inconsequential rhyme scheme brings with it a superfluous romantic emphasis to Ruby's supposed self-transformation. The fairy tale echoes of the ending, stressed through the use of 'Once' (as in 'once upon a time'), depoliticises the attempt at a subversive self-narration of the 'ugly' aesthetic that Ruby had set out to achieve.

However, one timely contradiction remains. In homage to the psychological and temporal ambivalence with which it started, *Thin Skin* ends with a chapter titled 'the

²²⁴ Pitts, p.79

²²⁵ Ibid., 73

²²⁶ Forrest, p.210

start'.²²⁷ While this is further evidence of one of the many glitches that exist within *Thin Skin's* narrative, it is also the novel's saving grace: ending with the start disturbs the rigidity of the 'beginning, middle, end' format that brings with it, in accordance with Pitts, an obstructive limit to identity-subverting practices. I want here to return to Halberstam, who identifies these very same temporal ambivalences as existing in 'queer fairy tales'.²²⁸ In the queer fairy tale, protagonists 'do not fear failure'.²²⁹ In this respect, such queered stories are not about 'adults figuring the future', but about investigating those who 'partake in strange and inconsistent temporal logics'.²³⁰ Beginning at 'the end' and ending at 'the start', *Thin Skin's* inconsistent temporality is also strengthened by the emphasis on the 'girl', who plays a focal part in this closing section. Any notion of the linear maturation of the feminine subject is reimagined here: in the end, Ruby chooses the girl, reconfiguring her identity as the harbinger of 'wild' dreams and narrative disorder, reinstating her irregular choice to remain 'girled' against growing-up and, with this, resisting the chronological flow of beginning, middle, and end.

Halberstam continues to define the queer fairy tale, articulating that:

Queer fairy tales are often organised around heroes who are in some way "different" and whose difference is an offense to some large community. While these narratives of difference could easily serve to deliver a tidy moral lesson about learning to accept yourself, each links the struggle of the rejected individual to larger struggles of the dispossessed.²³¹

The entirety of *Thin Skin* is based around an anti-heroine who is deliberately different, who causes offense, and who, seemingly, does *not* encounter any 'tidy' lesson of morality, or even achieve self-acceptance. Rather, her story is about embracing the messy reality of failure, which, in a wider context, reveals how Forrest is playing with structures in an (invariably unsuccessful) 'attempt' to achieve creative autonomy. While the finale of the

²²⁷ Ibid., 210

²²⁸ Halberstam, p. 120

²²⁹ Ibid., 120

²³⁰ Ibid., 120

²³¹ Ibid., 120

novel, and, in turn, Ruby's movie script, is underwhelming, Forrest successfully fails at her own fairy tale ending – an ending that was, at the same time, always and already destined to fail. At the beginning of 'the start' (which is, ironically, the end), Ruby's release from hospital is captured by Forrest in a kind of narrative anxiety attack that is struck through with references to Victor Fleming's Hollywood fantasy fiction *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Rather than capturing the recognisable conventions of the fictional story, Forrest presents an Anti-Oz – a yellow brick road that leads to a failed (read: queer) fairy tale ending: Ruby's 'magic slippers were half a size too small'; the lollipops tasted 'like sex with a pervert'; and the only 'wicked witch' Ruby got to throw water on was 'herself [...] and [she] melted in a waxy green puddle on the floor'.²³² Despite the overabundance of mixed metaphors, it seems at least that *Thin Skin* stays true to its web of contradictions. While it is clear that Forrest cannot break from traditions and the limits that the narrative structure of 'beginning, middle and end' brings, she does queer it through Ruby's entry into 'anti-Oz' as she leaves hospital. The manic wildness of her depiction keeps the narrative on the edge, much like Ruby's consistent desire to be an outcast. The initial articulation of Ruby's subversive body-story is circumscribed to last as long as a Hollywood movie script plays out, concluding with the image of the female body as it moves away from 'unbeing', returning to a spectacle of beauty once more. But, the movie script itself is flawed, queered by contradictory notions. While I am keen not to overpraise Forrest for this ending, to say *Thin Skin* ends in a way that lacks imagination would be unfair. It sets up the productive failure of the anti-chick aesthetic by languishing in its own sense of failure and maintaining its embedded contradictions. Rather than emulating the 'no place like home' idealism of the typical fairy tale Oz, there is only 'no place' at all for Ruby. From this, we can re-read the 'nothing left' of Ruby's finale as her at once upholding the flaws of the anti-chick aesthetic, yet also re-establishing the freedom of her in-between position as a ruined beauty.

²³² Forrest, p. 209

In terms of the broader relevance of Forrest's utilisation of the anti-chick aesthetic in *Thin Skin*, Forrest carves out a pathway, or, indeed, 'yellow brick road', which suggests a road to change in terms of 'normative' versus 'creative' constructions of femininity. Through the anti-chick aesthetic, Forrest takes advantage of the notion that femininity is a mutable cultural construction. This is in order to reveal instead what it could be when women confront, and celebrate, the very contradictions that they face as they attempt to define themselves within the increasingly changeable mores of popular culture. However, the fact remains that any instance of rebellion against 'normative' femininity is afforded only on the grounds that Ruby, like most of the protagonists of anti-chick lit, and like most of the authors who write these fictions, is a white, *straight*, middle-class woman. While anti-chick lit does in part capture the female artist playing up to and exposing that which popular culture is not equipped to handle – to reach the kind of 'no place' that defies convention – is to do so from their position of relative privilege, as I will maintain throughout the rest of this thesis. *Thin Skin* does effectively herald the importance of the 'girl' within its closing lines. The girl, as I have argued, has gathered status as a figure that challenges 'normative' aspects of femininity. However, the very demarcation of 'girl born of girl *herself*' in Forrest's finale to *Thin Skin* infers that the political potential of this position is not collective, but individual, a self-indulgent form of resistance that I will now explore in the chapters that follow [emphasis added].

Chapter 2

Grrrl Revlonution:

Reclaiming grrrl resistance through cosmetics in Forrest's *Cherries in the Snow*

‘Can a tube of lipstick be used as an instrument of revolution?’ Linda M. Scott’s bold question is the central focus of *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* (2005).²³³ *Fresh Lipstick* traces the history of the cosmetic through the centuries, interrogating the conflicting relationship between beauty practices and the fluctuating ideologies of feminism. Scott speculates about the ‘meaning’ of lipstick and its evolution from a mode of ‘imitation and avenue for play’, to a stimulus of ‘self-expression’ with the potential to ‘[mark] the differences among women’.²³⁴ Additionally, she draws on the connection between cosmetics and the young woman, situating the girl’s use of lipstick as a rite of passage that signals her transition into adulthood. In this chapter, I extend the logic of Scott’s vexed critique of lipstick in order to analyse Forrest’s representation of another symbol of contradiction and transitional potential: the grrrl. Yet, rather than using lipstick to symbolise the young woman’s entrance into adulthood, this chapter analyses how Forrest, in *Cherries in the Snow*, explores the contemporary girlification (or grrrlification) of already grown-up women through Grrrl Cosmetics, the New York-based make-up company with which the novel is concerned.

²³³ Linda M. Scott, *Fresh Lipstick: Redressing Fashion and Feminism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), (p. 328).

²³⁴ Scott, p. 209

Make-up has had a turbulent history in feminist critical scholarship. Sarah Banet-Weiser evidences this as she highlights that ‘applying make-up is an “aesthetic activity”, a routine everyday ritual of disciplined femininity’.²³⁵ Here Banet-Weiser is in good company, as it was Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* (1991) that kick-started critical investigations into the ‘dark under-life’ of ‘beauty work’ and its curtailment of female freedoms.²³⁶ To Wolf, cosmetics were not so much instruments of revolution as they were a ‘political weapon against female advancement’.²³⁷ Certainly, Scott’s ambitious questioning disrupts Wolf’s argument of anti-advancement and Banet-Weiser’s rhetoric of discipline, routine and regulation, suggesting instead that makeup can be used as an agentive tool to generate a space of possibility for women. This contention is central to both this chapter and its case study: Emma Forrest’s *Cherries in the Snow* (2005). ‘The natural look’, as Forrest’s (typically young) female protagonist Sadie Steinberg asserts, has ‘no place in the Grrrl universe’, with its décor of contradiction writ large in the ‘hot-pink [and] nuclear skyline blue’ walls and ‘The Clash blasting from the surround-sound stereo’²³⁸. The emphasis on the grrrl is established through Forrest’s specific ‘grrrling’ of her twenty-something female characters: they are not just ‘girls’, they are ‘Grrrl girls’.²³⁹ The Grrrl universe, then, is a garish cosmetic Neverland where the all-female workforce (founders and lovers Holly and Ivy, along with Vicky and Sadie) are, through cosmetics, granted the possibility to remain within the ambivalence that surrounds the ‘grrrl’.²⁴⁰

Indeed, the etymology of ‘grrrl’ is traceable to, the early 90s subcultural collective riot grrrl. Riot grrrl centred itself on political gestures and punk feminist agendas that challenged normative representations of femininity. Young women who were part of the grrrl community shared experiences within safe, all-girl spaces, made zines, and started

²³⁵ Sarah Banet-Weiser, ‘I’m Beautiful the Way I am:’ Empowerment, Beauty and Aesthetic Labour’, in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty politics in Neoliberalism* Ed by. Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (London: Palgrave, 2017), pp.265-283, (p.273).

²³⁶ Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth* (London: Chatto&Windus, 1990), (p.10).

²³⁷ Wolf, p.16

²³⁸ Emma Forrest, *Cherries in the Snow* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), (p.4).

²³⁹ *Ibid.*,239

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*,4

bands. Their instruments of revolution, then, were exactly that, and their all-girl musical endeavour was just one example of the ways in which riot grrrl flouted notions of gender decorum. Given the 2005 publication date of *Cherries in the Snow*, Forrest's utilisation of the figure is curious: why the grrrl? And, moreover, why the *grrrling* of ostensibly grown women? Drawing comparisons between the grrrl and cosmetics in order to examine Forrest's utilisation of the term in her novel, it is worth noting that *Cherries in the Snow* can be historicised in relation to the emergence of critical explorations of young female identity and creative agency. The publication of *Cherries in the Snow* is roughly contemporaneous with the rise of girlhood studies in the early 2000s, with the publication of Driscoll's *Girls* (2002), Greenfield's *Girl Culture* (2002), Hopkins' *Girl Heroes* (2002), Harris's *Future Girl* (2004) and *All About the Girl* (2004), as well as Aopola et al's *Young Femininity* (2005). The novel is also bookended by studies that relate to a particular type of revolution of the girl into the grrrl: preceding *Cherries* is Elke Zobl's article "Revolution Grrrl and Lady Style, Now!" (2004), while Kearney's *Girls Make Media* (2006) post-dates Forrest's novel by only a year. Both works signpost how young women have taken the tools of cultural production into their own hands in order to make an alternative form of identity, expressing creativity through media outlets such as films and DIY zines. With reference to cosmetics and discourses of grrrlhood, many scholars have, in the past decade, returned to explore the particular, and perhaps previously overlooked, nuances of girls, grrrls, and riot grrrl, retrospectively.

If, as Lisa Darms states, part of riot grrrl's central objective was to liberate young women and 'subvert dominant representations of femininity' by '[drawing] upon products of popular culture as resources', then Forrest uses the grrrl in *Cherries in the Snow* to mimic this ethos of subversion.²⁴¹ As the novel is named after the commercially successful lipstick by Revlon, *Cherries in the Snow* also highlights the problematic co-option and commodification of that same 'subversive' intent. Grrrl Cosmetics draws on products of

²⁴¹ Lisa Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013), (p.280).

popular culture, with the aim of inverting their original value through a celebration of ‘ugly makeup’ with correspondingly ugly names: ‘Junkie, Jet Lag, Jaundice’ are, for example, some of the garishly apt, alliterative titles that Sadie invents ‘for the purple, green, and yellow eye shadow trio’.²⁴² The ‘shimmering pinks on the market’ are thus placed in competition with the sallow and hollow triple threat of Grrrl Cosmetics’ particular brand of ‘ugly’, highlighting the ambivalences and contradictions afforded to women through cosmetics.²⁴³

At the same time, however, ‘telling women to highlight what’s wrong with them’ is how the company ‘makes its cash’.²⁴⁴ Once more, the troubling interplay between counter-cultural politics and the mass market is brought to the forefront; this conflict, as I proceed to outline, was to the detriment of riot grrrl.²⁴⁵ It also, of course, raises questions about the permanence of resistant gestures: how can lipstick be an instrument of revolution if, as Sadie articulates, it ‘lasts two hours if you’re lucky’?²⁴⁶ My chapter will thus demonstrate how *Cherries in the Snow* explores a tension in which Forrest, on the one hand, aims to celebrate contradiction by reclaiming the figure of the grrrl; in this way, Forrest’s novel resists specific feminine identities through its ‘grrrling’ of women. By contrast, however, Forrest’s decision to emphasise the temporariness of cosmetics (which ‘lasts two hours if you’re lucky’) implies that the revolutionary possibilities generated by make-up are, much like the figure of the grrrl, destined to exist only for a time-limited period.

Adding to the shortfalls of the novel is the subject of class. As is typical of anti-chick lit, the female protagonists in *Cherries in the Snow* are all white, middle-class women. Moreover, as Michelle Lazar comments, ‘girliness [...] is a distinctly middle-

²⁴² Forrest, p.47

²⁴³ Ibid., 4

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 49

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 64

class identity. Only women of means can partake in prolonged girlhood'.²⁴⁷ In these terms, the novel's cosmetic focus does not work to revolutionise or interrogate class boundaries: Grrrl Cosmetics has its own 'stand at Sephora', where the edgy (and entitled) girls gather.²⁴⁸ The company was founded by Ivy who is 'British and well-bred' and her education alongside Sadie and Holly at boarding school only serves to emphasise their collective entitlement.²⁴⁹ This was also true of the riot grrrl community in which both the 'white privilege and middle-class privilege' of the grrrls was undeniable.²⁵⁰ While I am arguing that *Cherries in the Snow* uses make-up as an agentive and effective tool to reclaim contradictory narratives of femininity – namely through the resistant trope of the 'grrrl' – it is necessary to note that in so doing, the novel maintains a specific narrative of social class in which the grrrling of women is only a possibility for those who are of means.

Riot grrrl's use of cosmetics to perpetuate a discourse of 'ugliness' prefigures Forrest's reclaiming of the girl as grrrl. Cosmetics played a large part in riot grrrl's distinct gestures of resistance; it was with magic marker and lipstick that grrrls created their brash body-writing. As they scrawled terms such as 'slut', 'incest' and 'rape' onto their bodies, they *embodied* 'ugly' (through their cosmetic defacement) in order to reclaim the derogatory narratives they encountered day to day. Riot grrrl's attempts to reclaim cosmetics, particularly through their (mis)use, highlights their inherent contradictions: grrrls developed make-up into an agentive tool through which to revolutionise normative representations. Indeed, these were the very same representations that cosmetics were simultaneously responsible for producing. In this way, riot grrrl revealed to young girls that it was 'possible and acceptable to be angry, smart, sexy, loud, and ugly in uneven and

²⁴⁷ Michelle M. Lazar, "'Seriously Girly Fun!': Recontextualising Aesthetic Labour as Fun and Play in Cosmetics Advertising', in *Aesthetic Labour: Rethinking Beauty Politics in Neoliberalism* Ed by. Ana Sofia Elias, Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff (London: Palgrave, 2017) pp.51-65, (p.65).

²⁴⁸ Forrest, p. 3

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 4

²⁵⁰ Leah Perry, 'I Can Sell My Body If I Wanna: Riot Grrrl Body Writing and Performing Shameless Feminist Resistance', *Performance: Circulations and Relations*, 4:1 (2015), p.5.

contradictory ways'.²⁵¹ The binary oppositions articulated through the grrrl-body, such as angry/smart and sexy/ugly – which in turn gives weight to the transitional, in-between appeal of young women – was 'a way to rewrite its meaning'.²⁵² The grrrl posed a distinctive challenge to normative meanings of girlhood, replacing and (re)appropriating, in the words of Driscoll, the 'the regulatory fictions of idealized femininity' and fostering instead an unruly and creative subjectivity.²⁵³ True to this form, in the world of Grrrl Cosmetics, 'nail polishes [are] named after tough bitches: Ivana, Imelda, etc.' and the meaning of the cosmetics is rewritten through their intentional (mis)use: rather than using nail polish for painting nails, Sadie intends to 'commission a young female artist to paint using our polishes'.²⁵⁴ As riot grrrl exploited the ambiguities of cosmetics by dismantling the normative practices that make-up was also responsible for upholding, so the grrrl is a suitable conduit for Forrest's attempts to celebrate contradictory, dysfunctional representations of femininity in a contemporary terrain that is otherwise saturated with manufactured types of 'normative' identities.

Just as the term 'girl' was (re)appropriated to 'grrrl' by rewriting its meaning (which is encapsulated by Forrest through Grrrl Cosmetics), Michelle Lazar contends that 'beautification' was likewise 'recontextualis[ed]'; no longer a 'labour', it became 'girlish fun', governed by 'notions of experimenting, "creativity" and "dress up."' ²⁵⁵ Lazar's theorisation is wonderfully reminiscent of Driscoll's conceptualisation of the girl-body as a discursive construct. Lazar notes that 'the postfeminist girlishness' that was inspired by this transformation heralded the 'girling of women [...] a discursive theme that invites grown women to return to the time of their girlhood'.²⁵⁶ The scare quotes flirt with the possibilities present in girlhood; through creative experiments with cosmetics, the grown-

²⁵¹ Perry, para. 2

²⁵² Driscoll, p. 173

²⁵³ Ibid., 154

²⁵⁴ Forrest, p. 49

²⁵⁵ Lazar, p. 55.

²⁵⁶ Michelle Lazar, 'Entitled to Consume: Postfeminist Femininity and a Culture of Post-Critique', *Discourse and Communication*, 3:4 (2009), 371-400, (p.390).

up woman can seemingly regress to her previous girl status and embody the girl's possibilities. The transition of beautification from labour to play and from woman back to girl serves to 'uphold the ideology of perpetual youthfulness achieved through make-up',²⁵⁷

In *Cherries in the Snow*, Sadie is a subject of this 'perpetual youthfulness' as her job as a 'Grrrl girl' simultaneously seeps into her personal life. Marley, the main love interest of the novel, who perversely lapses at times into a kind of father figure to Sadie, can never quite seem to grasp whether she is 'very experienced' or 'very naïve'.²⁵⁸ Sadie's relationship with Marley's eight-year-old daughter, Montana, exemplifies the collision of girlhood and womanhood. Sadie's uncanny resemblance to Montana is first telegraphed by the unsettling language Marley uses when they first meet: 'baby girl, you want to meet my other baby girl?'²⁵⁹ Another example is the improbable yet humorous scene in which Sadie trims off all of her pubic hair before meeting Montana. She reasons: 'I want to be like Montana. It's better if she doesn't know I'm an adult', before making a crucial addendum: 'not that I'm planning on showing her what I've done. It just gives me some weird feeling of equality'.²⁶⁰ This oscillation renders her a difficult protagonist, but, in this way, her distinct grrrling affords her the kind of *unbecoming* that is so often the focus of anti-chick lit: for Forrest to make her main protagonist a likeable character would be to miss the mark, and instead Sadie is an impressive complement to the ugly make-up that she is promoting. Her character is compelling, however, primarily as a means of examining a mode of femininity that exists, as Sadie herself asserts, 'somewhere in-between'.²⁶¹ Notably, she reveals a character poised on the threshold, a 'weird' confusion of grrrl and woman composed of naivety and experience.²⁶² Sadie's persona embodies the sense of ambiguity

²⁵⁷ Lazar, p. 55

²⁵⁸ Forrest, p. 87

²⁵⁹ Ibid., 117

²⁶⁰ Ibid., 119

²⁶¹ Ibid., 87

that is overwhelmingly associated, as Lazar highlights, with the discursive attributes of the ‘girdled’ woman. Yet, as a ‘Grrrl girl’, Sadie also embodies what Perry identifies as the uneven and contradictory possibilities that were promoted by the grrrl.

Left in the wake of Lazar’s exploration, however, are questions: in particular, why would the contemporary woman desire to return to her former girlish state? Grant’s following assertion offers an answer. She states that in popular culture, many contemporary female artists ‘deploy female adolescence to bring into focus the potential inherent in such a state of transition’.²⁶³ Celebrated as a potent symbol of cultural desirability and female sexuality, it is the girl’s ‘placement on the boundaries between childhood and womanhood’ that, crucially, ‘allows for the reworking of feminine stereotypes’.²⁶⁴ By reconsidering the girl as grrrl, we are offered the possibility of reworking stereotypes and allowed to return to Scott’s bold claim that lipstick might be used as an ‘instrument’ with which to revolutionise feminine identities. The grrrl’s fraught relationship with cosmetics, along with the symbolic in-between that she signifies, is then applied to the grown-up woman. From this, the grrrl can be considered, along with lipstick, as an instrument that is capable of revolutionising feminine representations, and Forrest captures this destabilising potential in the suitably contradictory collective enterprise of Grrrl Cosmetics.

It was the Riot Grrrl band Bikini Kill and their lead singer Kathleen Hanna who made a slogan of the following lines: *when she talks, I hear the revolution*. Their song, entitled ‘Rebel Girl’, ascribed to girlhood the insurgency necessary to create the alternative narrative of *grrrl*hood central to the riot grrrl community. Bikini Kill’s rhetoric promoted an unruly grrrl subjectivity in a contemporary culture that was otherwise fixated on the compliance and ineffectuality of young women. The term ‘riot grrrl’ itself was based on a

²⁶³ Grant, p.4

²⁶⁴ Ibid.,4

‘deliberate manipulation of signs’, a semantic foregrounding of riot grrrl’s personal and political agenda of resistance. As Alison Jacques illustrates:

“Riot” implies protest and aggression; the word “girl” describes female childhood and is condescending when used to refer to grown women; the transformed word “grrrl” literally includes a growl to turn the sugar-and-spice connotations of girl upside down.²⁶⁵

Jacques’ interpretation is strengthened by the pro-feminist tenor of young female activism that is intrinsic to riot grrrl music – as evidenced in the lyrics of ‘Rebel Girl’, in which the girl hears the revolution when *she* talks. The objectives of riot grrrl were rooted in third-wave celebrations of multiplicity and contradiction. Interestingly, however, there is a similar activist tenor and creative agency at work in Lazar’s examination of postfeminist girliness, through which the adult woman’s identity is placed in flux and ‘girled’ through a synthesis of ‘purposeful, linguistic/semiotic creativity and innovativeness’ that is like that of riot grrrl.²⁶⁶ Lazar terms this creativity ‘symbolic entrepreneurship’: while her terminology sounds more advanced than the riot grrrl approach of protest and aggression, the objective of turning connotations ‘upside down’ and defiantly breaking conventions remains the same. Symbolic entrepreneurship includes ‘word play, flouting linguistic conventions and the use of irony to index and popular light-hearted postfeminist identity’.²⁶⁷ While the term ‘girl’ is condescending when applied *to* women, under the lens of symbolic entrepreneurship, the term ‘girl’ is no longer condescending when applied *by* women; rather, the deliberate manipulation and (re)appropriation offered by symbolic entrepreneurship signifies creative irony and celebrates contradiction. Forrest takes this further in *Cherries in the Snow*, as the main characters refer to themselves as *Grrrl* girls, signalling their commitment to the shared creative enterprise that shapes their distinctive Grrrl universe. Through wordplay, much like cosmetic play, linguistic and semiotic

²⁶⁵ Alison Jacques, ‘You Can Run but you Can’t Hide: The Incorporation of Riot Grrrl into Mainstream Culture’, *Canadian Woman Studies* (2001), 46-50, (p.48).

²⁶⁶ Lazar, p.61

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 61

conventions are flouted: the grrrling of women has roots planted firmly in riot grrrl's deliberate revolution of conventional signs. At the same time, it is suggestive of the innovation and agency that Lazar associates with symbolic entrepreneurship, in which the 'serious time, skill, effort invested in beautification get re-framed'.²⁶⁸ This, moreover, accounts for what I refer to playfully, in light of *Cherries in the Snow*, as *Revlonution*. In Forrest's novel, this 'Revlonution' is one in which cosmetics are the means by which conventional modes of femininity are queried, as well as tools that serve to highlight the 'unbecoming' conduct of the anti-chick lit protagonist.

In terms of the creative agency made accessible through symbolic entrepreneurship, or, indeed, wordplay, Sadie's fantasy is to become a successful writer. In her real job, however, all she can muster are the literary obscenities ('Ass-Slapping Pink', 'Heroin', 'Suck my Left One') that signpost Grrrl Cosmetics' trademark ugly make-up.²⁶⁹ Often, even Sadie finds herself too prudish for the overtly sexual way that the brand is marketed: 'the lip-gloss with the wand either end called double-penetration [...] I didn't feel too good about that one'.²⁷⁰ Desperate to create her own 'Cherries in the Snow', a name and image she feels is 'worthy of a true writer [...] Truman Capote could have written that', Sadie is charged with the ultimate task: to 'name the lipstick that will change the company'.²⁷¹ In her newly appointed line of duty, Sadie believes she 'wields great power' and, further, that she could make a '*real* mark' in a world of cosmetic traces [emphasis added].²⁷²

Sadie's desire to make a *real* mark by naming the lipstick that will 'change' Grrrl Cosmetics in terms of establishing the brand's objective of collective resistance, echoes Jacques' foregrounding of the grrrl's potential to turn things 'upside down'. It also mimics Lazar's illustration of the purposeful semiotic/linguistic creativity of the symbolic entrepreneur: Sadie is *supposed* to be writing her great novel, but as there is 'no great

²⁶⁸ Lazar, p.61

²⁶⁹ Forrest.,6

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 6

²⁷¹ Ibid., 64

²⁷² Ibid.,64

novel [...] just one deleted chapter after another’, she reverts to naming lipsticks in spite of herself²⁷³ This is, ironically, a productive action away from an established mode of representation – the great novel – that is often bound up with the flourishing, and hence ‘grown-up’, trajectory of the young woman’s coming into maturity. The creative irony here is that, at twenty-five, this should have happened to Sadie already. The disheartening familiarity of ‘one deleted chapter after another’ not only implies Sadie’s lack of development but also sparks the beginnings of her ‘lipstick project’.²⁷⁴ Replacing the repetitive strain of her writer’s block with the creative stains of her lipstick project represents Sadie’s achievement of semiotic/linguistic creative agency. Sadie’s procrastination seems, then, to be the ultimate resistant gesture. Her character is poised between production (her novel) and prevention (the procrastination of naming make-up), and the forestalling of her literary writing is a mindful rejection of conventions. Sadie is, like her novel, destined to remain unfinished. It is exactly this formula of unfinished self-production that keeps her in-between, purposefully and artistically abiding by her status as a ‘grrrl girl’.

To return to riot grrrl, and the legacy left by the movement, Leah Perry highlights that the very innovation and semiotic creativity that grrrls stood for fell victim to a mediatised form of hyperbole, as ‘the political practice of body writing/word reclamation was presented as a fashion statement [...] their message domesticated and commodified’.²⁷⁵ As the 90s drew to a close, riot grrrl began to lose its aggressive bite; the term ‘grrrl’ and its promotion of resistance was decontextualized and reduced to a mere ‘sound bite’ that ‘effectively trivialised its origins [...] and minimised its otherness’.²⁷⁶ When read in conjunction with Lazar, creative manipulation can be trivialised through the carefree connotations of *wordplay* that accompanies symbolic entrepreneurship,

²⁷³ Ibid., 2

²⁷⁴ Ibid., 63

²⁷⁵ Perry, para.48

²⁷⁶ Jaques, p. 14

accounting for a simultaneous indexing of a popular and, most problematically, a ‘light-hearted’ postfeminist identity.

In the milieu of Grrrl Cosmetics, this playful indexing besmirches the ‘real’ mark Sadie wishes to make, and, more than once, Sadie positions her make-up naming as ‘procrastination’, a tantalising trap that has overwritten her desire to become a serious writer.²⁷⁷ When taking into account not only the cosmetic emphasis, but also the word ‘play’, her lipstick project appears more of a happy accident, an idle coincidence and, what is more, a flippant gesture.²⁷⁸ With a ‘head full of stories’, her character is encumbered by the girlish fancy that would make the ‘great novel’ she is ‘*supposed* to be writing’ a metaphor for a grown-up agency that has not yet been accomplished.²⁷⁹ Despite wielding power, Sadie is perhaps more of a symbolic procrastinator than an entrepreneur. As the ‘real’ mark can also be interpreted as mere cosmetic play, it is exactly the characteristic of playfulness, instilled by the distinctive reclaiming of the woman as grrrl, which aggrandises its creativity yet centralizes the problem that *play* is exactly that. In this respect, how can Sadie’s deliberate attempt to create a gesture of resistance through the two inherently changeable mediums of cosmetics and the grrrl be considered in serious terms?

Oh, make me over? Plasticity, possibilities and the problems with reclaiming the grrrl

As the above section evidences, the girl, or indeed, the grrrl, is historically slippery in terms of neat categorisation, troubling distinctions through the (potentially) transitional and transformative position she holds in popular culture. Likewise, the objectives of contemporary beauty practices are, according to Gill, Scharff and Elias, traditionally

²⁷⁷ Forrest, p. 2

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 63

²⁷⁹ Ibid., 2

complex and transitional. As cosmetics are ‘stuck in an impasse of polarised positions’, one can never definitively ascertain whether they articulate ‘pleasure, playfulness and female agency’ or exacerbate the ‘oppressive tones of cultural domination’.²⁸⁰ In these terms, both make-up and young women carry connotations of plasticity. In *Cyborgs and Barbie Dolls* (2007), Kim Toffoletti describes how a similar troubling of distinctions can be found in the flexible formula of plastic, asserting that ‘the many forms plastic takes are ambiguous and contradictory’.²⁸¹ Toffoletti continues to highlight that ‘the generative potential of plastic resides in its ability to become any shape. It is transformative, contaminating the distinctions between natural and artificial, subject and object’.²⁸² While the plasticity of identity has previously been considered as a postmodern paradigm (Bordo), Toffoletti studies plastic through the lens of posthumanism to reify its placement as an in-between of representation and reality.²⁸³ Despite the fact that cosmetics epitomise the dichotomy of representation and reality, my aim is not to extend Toffoletti’s posthuman reading. I offer this critique of plasticity because it recognises the transitional nuances of both cosmetics and the grrrl, as they each represent an ‘on-going boundary play where meaning is up for grabs’.²⁸⁴ These images, Toffoletti argues, ‘open up possibilities for new articulations’.²⁸⁵ Toffoletti’s interpretation of plasticity in terms of unending ‘boundary play’ and ‘new articulations’ highlights its generative political potential in the same manner as the cosmetic and wordplay that Lazar situates. In this context, Forrest’s grrrling of women, and her investigation of make-up as both a regimental practice and revolutionary instrument, starts to make sense. While plasticity captures the potential of the in-between, it is, at the same time, through boundary *play* that the perception of

²⁸⁰ Gill, Scharff and Elias, p. 5

²⁸¹ Kim Toffoletti, *Cyborgs and Barbie dolls: Feminism, Popular culture and the Posthuman Body* (London: IB Tauris, 2007), (p. 68).

²⁸² Toffoletti, p.68

²⁸³ Susan Bordo ‘Material Girl’: The Effacements of Postmodern culture’, in *The Female Body: Figures, Styles, Speculations* (USA: University of Michigan Press, 1991), pp. 106-131, (p.107).

²⁸⁴ Toffoletti,p.6

²⁸⁵ Ibid.,6

permanence is once again troubled. This takes us back to an earlier question: how serious are these gestures, and how long can they last?²⁸⁶

In the *Aftermath of Feminism*, McRobbie identifies the contemporary makeover – one of the key tropes of postfeminist politics and popular culture – as a mode of boundary play. In light of the specific kind of plasticity the makeover affords, McRobbie underscores the simultaneous possibilities and problems of the made-over body. She contends that the ‘makeover format is a new space of attention, a form of gender power which has the effect of offering to women a specific form of freedom and particular idea of independence’.²⁸⁷ There is a visible tension at work in McRobbie’s account that, on the one hand, suggests that women are, through the makeover, opened up to a new reality of freedom and independence. On the other hand, the makeover is purely representational, carving out a space of ‘attention’ that promotes an all-eyes-are-on-me type of immaturity and which, in turn, shines a spotlight on the problems of cosmetic play. McRobbie may signpost liberation and freedom as offered by the makeover, yet she makes clear that this freedom takes a specific form. Moreover, the idea of independence that she illuminates is ‘particular’, a straight and narrow, and already predefined, trajectory that is out of the woman’s control. Freedom, liberation and independence are, then, artless ‘effects’, offered to the contemporary woman through the illusory and seductive face of the makeover.

Like McRobbie’s exploration, the introductory pages of *Aesthetic Labour* suggest that the makeover transforms the body into a space of ‘fixing and fussing’.²⁸⁸ It is this ‘constant attention’ that ‘keeps it going’, perpetuating a sense of ‘needing to be done to and then doing’.²⁸⁹ The made-over female body thrives on constant attention, on both fixing and fussing: note again, the embedded language of ‘girlish’ femininity as once more the woman is ‘caught in-between the state of childhood and adulthood’ through the use of

²⁸⁶ Ibid.,6

²⁸⁷ McRobbie, p.125

²⁸⁸ Gill, Scharff and Elias, p. IX

²⁸⁹ Ibid., IX

cosmetics.²⁹⁰ The desire to be done to and then doing simulates a boundary play, not just between femininity and distinct immaturity – as play would have it – but between the agency and vulnerability that characterises the made-over body.

The close proximity of the possibilities and problems of plasticity, underscored by the boundary play it affords, is captured by Forrest in a scene in which Sadie is coerced into persuading Holly of the transformative potential of her beloved ‘Cherries in the Snow’ lipstick:

“Give it to me”, [Holly] says, hand outstretched.

“Give you what?”

She rolls her eyes. “Your cherries.”

[...]

I fish inside my bag [...] She takes it from me, presses me up against the wall, and applies it to my mouth, not at all the way I do it. Then she applies it on herself. The same join-the-dots pattern but I see it this time in slow motion, gasping as the colour appears before me.²⁹¹

With rolling eyes and outstretched hand, Holly demands Sadie’s ‘cherries’. In this moment of troubling sexual tension Forrest illuminates the contradictory dynamic between the two women: of female agency and domination that is ‘offered’ by the makeover, and of woman and girl. The ‘cherries’ symbolise both the beginnings of Holly’s cosmetic play and a risqué pun on Sadie’s virginity. Whoever possesses the ‘cherries’, it seems, demarcates who is being woman and who is playing girl. Certainly, playing dumb is no resistant measure (‘give you what?’ Sadie retorts). Holly’s forceful application of lipstick stains Sadie’s mouth with a ‘*great red*’, marking out the made-over female body as one caught in-between an excessive ‘grown-up’ femininity and the immaturity of the girl before she symbolically loses her ‘cherries’ [emphasis added].²⁹² Sadie’s bloodied mouth contrives a not-so-subtle engendering of the female body as being ‘done to’ through the medium of the makeover, paired with a simultaneous sense of ‘doing’, as Holly applies the ‘same pattern’

²⁹⁰ Grant, p.4

²⁹¹ Forrest, p. 51

²⁹² Ibid., 52

to herself. The great red lipstick is the site of their communion, yet it accentuates boundary play, as the sudden role reversal combines normative representations (the uniform ‘join-the-dots’ pattern) with a contradictory narrative – ‘not at all the way I do it’. The forced application of the lipstick is ominous, but the seductive pull of playing with the cherries is more captivating: played out in ‘slow motion’, it leaves Sadie ‘gasping’.

Later in the scene, the creative agency inspired by the ‘great’ hue of the cosmetic is translated through Sadie’s vivid imagination. Observing Holly’s application of the lipstick, Sadie simultaneously envisions ‘the first woman on the block to get divorced, the first to find herself’, before adding ‘each time I apply Cherries in the Snow, I have hope...’²⁹³ Here, the boundary play is located between imagination and physical application, and both inspire the various dramas of feminine agency – the first woman to get ‘divorced’, the first one to ‘find herself’ – that unfurl before Sadie’s eyes. The contradictory function of Sadie’s ‘cherries’, at once unfamiliar and uncomfortable – *not* the way she is used to doing ‘it’ – forcefully divorces representations of femininity from convention. The use of the lipstick offers confidence, the ‘hope’ that Sadie might ‘find herself’ in the bloom of her cherries.

Toffoletti imagines the oppositional pull of plasticity as both a potential and a problem. This is especially true in terms of the tricky context of the scene above, in which Sadie’s use of cosmetics places her in-between agency and domination, doing and being done to:

The place of the subject at the centre of the world is destabilised, creating the potential to rethink subjectivity as always in process. Reconfiguring the idea of plastic in the cultural psyche is an attempt to disturb the unity of the subject in favour of a more fluid conception of the self – we mould plastic and plastic moulds us.²⁹⁴

What is notably central to Toffoletti’s summary of plastic here is its distinct possibilities: it encourages rethinking, invites renaming and its fluidity preserves the subject as always in-

²⁹³ Ibid., 51

²⁹⁴ Toffoletti, p. 75

process. Building on Toffoletti's observation, I would suggest that plasticity offers a lens through which to envision the revolutionising of contemporary representations of femininity through cosmetics. However, the ending of Toffoletti's quotation reconfigures the generative potential of plastic as problematic and leaves a vexing trace: we may mould plastic, but our desire for agency, to remain always in-process, does, in turn, mould us. This kind of harrowing allegory can be found in examinations of the makeover; it both lends itself to a productive 'doing' but also enforces a perverse longing to be 'done to'. Perhaps, then, as well as the hope for change Sadie embodies each time she applies her lipstick – signifying with it the pleasure and creativity of feminine agency – she is always and already the unwitting object of her own cosmetic play.

'Holly wanted to Shock. Period': girlish play as grrlish (mis)use

The girlish cosmetic 'play' envisioned by Lazar in her work on aesthetic labour draws from the hive of popular 'playful' buzzwords, from 'experiment' and 'dress up' to 'DIY fun'.²⁹⁵ This semantic play, decontextualizes make-up as an instrument through which to revolutionise conventional feminine representations in popular culture. Lazar asserts that contemporary 'beautification' has been 'overtly re-classified as play'; make-up, in turn, is 'integrally tied to the "play" with identity'.²⁹⁶ Lazar's examination of play certainly seems to take the sting out of McRobbie's dismissal of the makeover as offering only an *idea* of independence, conjuring up visions of female liberation that are, at best, illusory. Yet, Lazar's theorisation is both idealistic and momentary: the light-hearted transience of 'play' is inescapable and, while it may offer the creative presentation of an agentive female self, it calls the integrity of this alternative identity into question. This unsettling conclusion is bound by the influential hold of consumer culture, especially in terms of its role in promoting the development of 'different' and 'unique' counter-cultural practice. Lazar continues:

²⁹⁵Lazar, p.396

²⁹⁶ Ibid.,396

Consumer culture has been vital in offering plentiful opportunities to ‘play’ with identity through the use of commodities, so that women’s sense of who she is increasingly comes from what and how she consumes’.²⁹⁷

An interesting parallel can be drawn between Lazar and Toffoletti’s examination of plasticity: who we are depends on how we consume, in the same way that as we mould plastic, plastic moulds us. As cosmetic play reconsiders the self as ‘new, unique and different’, its creative flouting of conventions is apt. However, its accompanying semantics – dress-up, girlishness, and light-hearted fun – are in conflict with its serious intentions.²⁹⁸ In *Cherries in the Snow*, Sadie notes the condescending implications of the term ‘play’, acknowledging how Montana ‘bristles at the world *play*’ and how she, equally, ‘remembers feeling the same exact thing when [she] was [Montana’s] age’.²⁹⁹ Bristling at conventional terminology makes room for a more suitable (or not so suitable) language to articulate the creative agency inherent in cosmetic play. In this respect, girlish play might better be reconsidered as, in line with previous examinations of riot grrrl, a form of grrrlish (mis)use. This returns us to Grrrl Cosmetics, and how their (mis)use of make-up successfully aggrandises the space of resistance they provide to young women to ‘go away and be ugly instead’.³⁰⁰ The saccharine implications of play – girlishness, fun, dress-up – are replaced with an ‘ass-slapping’ creative agency.³⁰¹ Cosmetic (mis)use incorporates the creative contradictions that come with resisting beauty regimes at the same time as playing up their cultural significance. It entails an unconstrained, creative presentation of the self. Yet, in contrast to Lazar, this is not entirely of ‘one’s choosing’. Rather, given that there is a clear dependency on convention, it becomes *partly* of one’s choosing. This is suggestive, in that to be chosen partly, as opposed to entirely, plays up to the discursive, unfinished

²⁹⁷ Lazar, p.56

²⁹⁸ Lazar, p. 396

²⁹⁹ Forrest, p.158

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 203

³⁰¹ Ibid., 43

and in-between status of the grrrl, and the contradictory femininities at the heart of anti-chick lit.

Within the framework of cosmetic (mis)use, Forrest's articulation of Holly's perverse desire to shock in *Cherries in the Snow* comes as no real surprise. In one passage, Holly admits to an illicit application of her mother's blusher brush, which becomes a perverse *part* of her choice to flout traditions:

“When I was a little girl”, says Holly, “I would take my mother's blusher brush” – and right there you might think she's about to reminisce in *Anne of the Green Gables* tones about her golden childhood – “I would take my mother's blusher brush and shove it up my ass”. She pauses. “No, she says delicately, “not shove. I would insert it in my ass”.

[...]

The collection [of lipstick] is spread out in front of me. But now all I see is Holly spread-eagled.³⁰²

Holly's indecent instrumentalisation of the blusher brush is certainly illustrative of the shift from girlish cosmetic play to uncomfortable (and unforgettable) (mis)use. It testifies to the (quite literal) intrusion of cosmetic objects upon the body of a resistant subject, with the 'golden' tones of the girlish cosmetic play being sullied by one hard-faced gesture: that consumer culture can shove its conventions 'up [its] ass'. Forrest's quotation gestures toward Lazar's theorisation that *who* the female is depends on *how* she consumes, and so Sadie's vantage point – of seeing the cosmetic collection spread out in a similar manner to the ghost of Holly, as young girl, spread-eagled – is not unexpected. Representing Grrrl Cosmetics' collection and Holly as simultaneously 'spread' out serves to accentuate the intricate entwining of cosmetic consumption and the body of the young woman. Yet, Holly's reminiscing is not rose-tinted, but retells a contradictory coming-of-age story that is imbued with the resistant power of the grrrl. Here, the (mis)use of cosmetics (in which the blusher brush becomes part of her body) reflects the fact that the individual's decision

³⁰² Ibid.,2

to be different is only partially autonomous, being determined in relation to conventional objects.

Even Holly's chosen lexicon in this passage is (mis)used and misplaced to labour her point. She begins with the brash word 'shove', pauses, and instead applies a subtler verb. With the application of conflicting actions of shove/insert, Holly toys with contradictory language and continues, awkwardly, to 'insert' ideas of cosmetic (mis)use into the everyday. Later, Sadie articulates that Holly's main objective was that she 'wanted to shock us. She wants to shock. Period'.³⁰³ The switch in tense here is significant: Holly remembers and recalls her resistant gestures in order to shock, yet she simultaneously desires to prolong this shock factor into the present, full stop. The abrupt period lends her resistance a sense of permanence, and the assertiveness of the present tense matches the forcible *insertiveness* of the past (mis)use of the blusher brush. The boundary of past and present resistance is formulated by a full stop; the punctuation is absolute and reveals that, perhaps, the revolution of feminine representations through cosmetics lasts longer than the 'two-hour' period introduced at the beginning of this chapter. However, the full stop does not serve as a definitive answer. Instead, it raises further questions about the seriousness and sustainability of resistant gestures that, as they are ironized by Forrest through an unfortunate encounter with Holly's 'ass', are simultaneously rendered problematic.

'It's about time': memorable make-up and remembering resistance

The energy of *Cherries in the Snow's* plot derives, in part, from the desire Sadie has to make a real mark; as the concurrent narrative tension is, however, centred on the troubling reality that lipstick does not last, the permanence of the name that will 'change the company' is called into question. This challenge is not just reflected by the fact that

³⁰³Ibid.,4

lipstick wears off, but also by the reality that the grrrl will eventually grow-up. The dynamic between fading youth and fading lipstick highlights the novel's overarching paradox: how can one make a 'real' mark using transitory media?

The contemporary (and inevitably ageing) woman experiences a knot of unease about her waning youthfulness. Diane Negra identifies this unease as the driving force behind postfeminism, which 'thrives on anxiety about ageing and redistributes this anxiety among a variety of generational clusters, while also extending the promise/possibility of age-evasion'.³⁰⁴ The 'Grrrl girls' of *Cherries in the Snow* capture this sense of possibility and contribute to the novel's timely reflection on ageing. Yet, the novel offers a kind of reversal of felt anxieties: rather than the dread of *looking* older, Forrest's 'needy and attention seeking' narrative foregrounds an unease about *being* grown-up.³⁰⁵ This fear is, moreover, focussed on the stability and memorability of Sadie's resistant mark and how long the 'revolutionary' impact of Grrrl Cosmetics can last. Returning to Holly's objective to 'shock. Period.', Forrest positions, this particular gesture of resistance (and her related desire to transgress conventional boundaries through object (mis)use) in terms of anxiety about what comes after the period: a full stop must be placed eventually, and, when the 'shock' wears off, anxieties about growing up and eventually being forgotten will kick in.

Laurie Penny's *Meat Market: Female Flesh Under Capitalism* is a trenchant critique of consumerist attempts to counteract the signs of growing older. Penny argues that 'however much we shop, starve, sweat and apply make-up to conceal the marks of weariness and unhappiness' is inconsequential.³⁰⁶ If 'we want to live' Penny continues, 'we need to remember the language of resistance'.³⁰⁷ Penny rips any celebratory potential of these consumerist endeavours to shreds by reducing them down to shopping, starving and sweating. Yet, her assertion of needing to 'remember resistance' gestures toward a

³⁰⁴ Diane Negra, *What a Girl Wants? Fantasising the Reclamation of the Self in Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2009), (p.12).

³⁰⁵ Forrest, p. 272

³⁰⁶ Laurie Penny, *Meat Market: Female Flesh under Capitalism* (London: Zero Books, 2010), (p. 66).

³⁰⁷ Penny, p.6

kind of perverse longing that generates a space, to return to Jacques and Lazar, for creative wordplay – a flouting of linguistic conventions that Penny interprets as a ‘language of resistance’. To return to the scene above, Holly’s defiant cosmetic (mis)use is recalled as she reminisces about the inappropriate act. Rather than highlighting ‘little girls, playfully experimenting with make-up’ who in turn ‘naturalis[e] the experience of make-up as an intrinsically girl thing’, Forrest reclaims it as an intrinsically *grrrl* thing.³⁰⁸ Holly’s nostalgic indulgence is darkly perverse, yet the memory of it solidifies her act as more than a ‘playful’ experiment: her (mis)use is so disturbing (she wanted to shock ‘us’) and definitive (she wanted to shock ‘period’) that it becomes memorable despite the fact that it is short-lived. This suggests that her language of resistance can, quite literally, be embodied, remembered and sustained.

In a later scene in *Cherries in the Snow*, Holly converses with Sadie about her desire for the legacy of Grrrl Cosmetics to ‘live past’ her, and she seems to take the embodiment of her defiant brand too far:

“Look, the ugly, edgy make-up is cute and all, but we need something that will last, live past us. Honey, I plan to die young. I want to know that there’re dream-filled sluts out there using my products long after these skinny bones are gone...”

I never would have described her as skinny. Compact is better. The pun is not intended. Rather destiny has entwined her body type and her career.

“These girls are going to grow up eventually [...] One product, one name. That’s what will do it ...”

“That’s my job, huh?”

She nods. Kisses me on the forehead. And walks out. I look in the mirror. She has a nasty habit of stamping me with her scarlet seal of approval.³⁰⁹

In a crass expression of her anxiety that the influence of Grrrl Cosmetics might fade, Holly’s desire for a memorable gesture of resistance is what shades this scene. If, as Negra suggests, postfeminism upholds certain fears about getting, and therefore looking, older, Holly’s method of age evasion is darkly humorous: she will simply ‘die young’ in a quasi-self-sacrifice to the cause of remaining ‘grrrled’. The burden of making a real mark,

³⁰⁸ Lazar, p. 56

³⁰⁹ Forrest, p. 52

however, falls on fictional constructions of femininity and the idea of resistance is fraught as a consequence of this tension: In terms of ‘fictional’ constructions, Holly’s wish is that Grrrl Cosmetics be remembered by ‘*dream filled sluts*’, and her intimate identification of *my* products holds more weight than the reality of her own skinny body [emphasis added]. In contrast to her definitive body-language in terms of cosmetic (mis)use, her body is diminishing as a consequence of her commitment to the cosmetics that are designed to enhance it.

In the context of *Cherries in the Snow*, the space of ‘attention’ that McRobbie identifies with the postfeminist makeover is evident in Holly’s laborious dedication to Grrrl Cosmetics’ candid rhetoric. As Sadie remarks, ‘Holly is set. Harder, deeper, nastier’.³¹⁰ Yet, as Holly is ‘set’ in pushing a harder/deeper/nastier product to the forefront, Holly’s embodiment seems almost *too* far: what is left is an emaciated gesture of resistance as she ‘becomes the object of her project’.³¹¹ While Holly’s ‘project’ in this scene is to make sure her brand will outlive her own emaciated frame, the view of her body as ‘skinny’ proposes that she has already been made the central project. The exploited bones of her body have, in the same way as her products, been consumed by gaggles of cosmetic-hungry ‘grrrls’. This is representative of the negative effects of the makeover, of doing and then being done to; moulding and being moulded; consuming and being consumed. Holly’s body has literally been made compact, punning, as Sadie states, on Holly’s makeover into the very products that she creates and claims as hers.

Yet, could this intimate relationship between young women and cosmetics, demonstrated by the ‘compact’ body of Holly, transform cosmetics and wordplay into more serious endeavours? In these terms, I will read ‘play’ in conjunction with what Gill, Scharff and Elias term as ‘glamour labour’, an ambivalent mode in which a woman’s work is never done:

³¹⁰ Forrest, p.6

Glamour Labour ‘fuses’ different aspects of body work, showing how they have ‘bled together’ and become inseparable [...] the notion is important because of its emphasis upon dynamism - glamour work is never done. It is always unfinished and in a state of becoming.³¹²

The scholars’ signposting of bleeding (another appropriate terminology in light of the semantics of girl/woman and her coming of age through make-up) reveals that glamour labour is constructed through ‘different’ and contradictory aspects of ‘body work’ that seep into each other. With this, Holly literal body work – the entwining of her body type and career – embodies a crucial ‘dynamism’: traces of Driscoll’s theory about the girl’s ‘unfinished’ self-production is manifest here as Gill et al observe that glamour labour is ‘never done’. At the same time as it is perhaps potentially labour-extensive and detrimental, glamour labour is also destined to remain ‘unfinished’; women and girls engaged in this kind of labour are always in a state of ‘becoming’. What this quotation brilliantly encapsulates is the extent to which the grrrl’s discursive ‘make up’ is entwined with the processes and aesthetics of make-up. Yet, rather than this labour being exploitative, the contradictions the vex glamour labour, or body work, are set up as agentive as they remain fluidly ‘in-process’. In conjunction with Forrest’s novel, Holly’s body may be compact, but her work remains, like the transitional possibility of the grrrl, in a productively unfinished state; it can be constantly added to and built upon.

It is in the former quotation that the idea of linear temporality is unsettled, as it pivots between young women who will ‘eventually’ grow-up at the same time as Holly’s resistant body language begins to lose its weight. In terms of *remembering* the language of resistance, the temporal ambiguity of body work and glamour labour– that they are unfinished and in-process– is what aids in the formation of making a memorable mark and of dismantling the rigid temporal inevitability of fading out and getting older. In *Cherries in the Snow*, this can be read as the ‘trace’ that Holly leaves behind as she ‘stamps’ Sadie’s forehead. This nasty habit, at once reminiscent of the violent intrusion of the made-over

³¹² Gill, Scharff and Elias, p.38

body—of being ‘done to’— is also evocative of the cyclical temporality of the sentiment that glamour work is never ‘done’. This is both in terms of the fact that a ‘habit’ is a recurring gesture, but also because of the lingering, imperfect trace that Holly leaves behind on Sadie. The ‘language’ of Holly’s stamp is, true to the form of her delectable charm, ‘nasty’, and its lasting impact is thus one that is contentious and conflicting. The ‘nasty habit’ leaves a trace that unsettles the idea that the transformative potential of cosmetics is insubstantial. The stamp is at once a subtle hint, yet it brings with it a severe temporal dislocation that is needed to make ‘nasty’ gestures memorable: the lingering, ‘nasty’ blemish is resistant in that it will not fade but rather is ‘set’ and ‘will not budge’. Although lipstick wears off, its trace leaves a *remarkable* implication that that it can ‘live’ and ‘last’. As Taru Elfvig observes, such ‘disruptive stains’, like Holly’s ‘nasty’ stamp, are emblematic of the transitional possibility of young women: as the ‘grrrl’ and cosmetics ‘bleed’ together, the creative agency of the ‘great red’ is evoked once more, leading – potentially – to ‘somewhere unpredictable’.³¹³

Unpredictable endings: the memorable becomes the (dis)memorable

The ending of *Cherries in the Snow* is marked by unpredictability as Forrest dismantles the idea of collective resistance by having Grrrl Cosmetics ‘fall apart’: Sadie loses her job, Holly and Ivy break up and, as a result, ‘so came the end of Grrrl’.³¹⁴ In this respect, it is curious that Forrest based her narrative around riot grrrl, given that the subcultural community is historically famed for having lost its aggression, with the grrrls’ political agendas becoming trivialised and depoliticised by the media. The resistant collective of riot grrrl, in the hands of the mass market and in the eyes of the public, also fell apart. Forrest’s ending, then, serves to uphold the very tensions imbued in the figure of the grrrl

³¹³ Taru Elfvig, ‘Haunted: Writing with the Girl’ in *Girls! Girls! Girls! In Contemporary Art*, Ed by. Catherine Grant and Lori Waxman (Bristol: Intellect, 2011), pp. 1-17, (p.120).

³¹⁴ Forrest, p. 271

as opposed to serving as an answer to the integral question, why the grrrl, especially in terms of the novel's 2005 publication date?

While the 'girl' is at once celebrated as a site of possibility by female artists, she has just as much been unjustly maligned: the girl has at once been deemed by popular culture as a site worthy of narrative attention, but as Brown asserts, it is within that very same culture that 'young girls are not taken seriously'.³¹⁵ Firstly, this is to the girl's advantage. In terms of possibilities, the embodiment of the girl figure locates the productive in-between of her position in the middle of childhood and womanhood and with this, the possibilities of slipping under the radar. The girl can be utilised in order to excuse the foibles of women who are visibly 'falling apart' that is so typical of anti-chick lit and especially Forrest's fiction. Young women are, as Brown continues 'more or less free to break the rules; they can blur the boundaries, be creative, boldly express possibilities'.³¹⁶ In this respect, Forrest's *Cherries in the Snow*, through utilising the 'grrrl', a figure who, as I have mapped out throughout this chapter in accordance with riot grrrl history, was always and already falling apart does nevertheless establish that the specific tactics of grrrl resistance are still with us. While, as Sadie observes, 'it was a sad an all-girl company had to fall apart', it is the very unpredictability of 'falling' apart that accounts for a crucial disruption to temporal logic. This promotes resistant gestures that will be remembered and what is more, upon nostalgic reflection, they can be taken seriously. Sadie describes how the products of Grrrl Cosmetics were promptly removed from the 'shelves of Sephora' but it was exactly this that allowed the company to be remembered and elevate them to 'to the next level: they will miss us. They will from time to time have memory flashes of cleavage tipped lipstick that they felt excited about putting on their mouth when they were twenty years old'.³¹⁷ In these terms, I find Forrest's ending successful. It suggests that if public consumption is what minimizes the threat of a politics of resistance, then resistance must

³¹⁵ Brown p.6

³¹⁶ Ibid., 6

³¹⁷ Forrest, p. 271

be made, and preserved, as a bothersome mark that may disappear or be removed, but will not be forgotten. Memorable marks then, remain as ‘other’ as they are not co-opted by consumer culture. Instead, they live on through the memory of those who once consumed them and in this respect, such marks have the capacity to ‘introduce new words, as yet unpopulated with the intentions and meanings of dominant culture’.³¹⁸ As Brown continues, it was exactly this that allowed young women to boldly express their creative possibilities, and to ‘carve out room for those pieces of her experience that are unfit for the public world’.³¹⁹

Initially, this space for creative agency is forged by the disparate ideas of Sadie’s lipstick project that are central to the closing scenes of *Cherries in the Snow*:

I looked at my lipstick short list pinned to the corkboard, unused; never to be seen by Holly, let alone the cosmetic hungry public:

Pig Butt Called
Red Mist
Harvard Stripper
Surrender Dorothy
The Ripped Tutu
Love is the Drug

And I kind of had an idea for a novel. I wiped off my lipstick and turned on the computer.³²⁰

Here, the transferal of Sadie’s lipstick ‘blotting’s’– that she usually leaves on ‘notebooks’ and ‘post-it notes’ having used them to ‘blot’ her mouth–to actual pieces of narrative that have been inspired by her experiences throughout the novel.³²¹ As each name is ‘never to be seen’, the closing statement encapsulates the ‘unofficial’ and ‘as of yet unpopulated’ expression of the grrrl. Sadie carves out ‘pieces’ that do ‘not fit’ a consumer culture upon which, ironically, these narrative pieces are based upon and are central to. The fact that each name remains ‘unused’ reveals that the grrrl’s language of resistance is not

³¹⁸ Brown, p.113

³¹⁹ Ibid.,113

³²⁰ Forrest, p. 273

³²¹ Ibid., 11

susceptible to fade or be wasted by a ‘cosmetic hungry public’. Sadie’s lipstick shortlist, in all its fragmentary and imperfect glory, outweighs the emaciated gesture of resistance (specifically that of Holly) that is central to previous scenes. As I have argued, it is exactly this position of contradiction that invokes the possibilities that are attributable to status of the grrrl. Thus, a ‘Revlonution’ of contemporary feminine identities is solidified through the methodical layout of Sadie’s lipstick shortlist that is ‘pinned’ around her. It seems clear that, to extend Scott’s initial questioning of lipstick’s ability to ‘revolutionise’ contemporary femininity that ‘lipstick is where we have to start from. [It] is just a beginning as [the girl] sets out to radically reorder her space and literally rework the functions and places of its various elements.’³²²

However, while beginning with lipstick in order to generate a space for feminine agency seems appropriate given Forrest’s closing lines, it is also important to remember that the grrrl, and her potential for rebellion, was meant as a *collective* form of agency and resistance. My problem with Forrest’s conclusion is that ‘Grrrl Cosmetics’, along with the grrrl’s commitment to their ‘all-girl’, shared creative enterprise that, in turn, shapes their distinctive Grrrl universe, falls apart. However, the individual grrrl – Sadie – does not. This brings the paradoxes that are inherent in the riot grrrl collective to the forefront, as Perry states ‘riot grrrl was not about a particular kind of girl, *not about the individual*’.³²³ Yet, at the same time as championing a collective of resistant young women, grrrl’s simultaneously utilized the “self-centered language of adolescence” and the personal story in lieu of a narrative group[...] which was antithetical to the movement’s goal to empower women and combat [...]other forms of structural oppression’.³²⁴ In these terms, what we are left with at the end of *Cherries in the Snow*, much like the ending of *Thin Skin*, is an incomplete sense of resistance. This ‘incomplete’ and ‘imperfect’ outcome is true to the form of anti-chick lit’s simultaneous straddling of potential ‘subversion’ and convention,

³²² Elfving, p.116

³²³ Perry, para. 49

³²⁴ Ibid., 62

and in terms of carving a clear path to rebellion/resistance, is never quite able to successfully go all of the way.

In these terms, Sadie's departing gestures are curious and bring to the forefront two alternative positions. As Elvfiing states, everything 'begins' with lipstick, which then allows for a creative reworking of space therein. As Sadie's narrative concludes with her 'wiping off' her lipstick and 'turning on' the computer, she maintains the integral position of her grrrl identity as in an unfinished (underscored through 'wiping-off') process of self-production (made apparent through 'turning on'). As Sadie wipes off her lipstick, she articulates the artistic possibilities of the grrrl: a contradictory figure whose unfinished aesthetic is brought to life when reading between the lines and re-writing the limits that lipstick formulates. However, questions remain. The selfish objective of Sadie's narrative, to return to Brown, can be read through the pieces of 'her' (singular) experience as she sets up to 'radically reorder' a (self-centered) space. If Grrrl Cosmetics is supposed to be committed to a collective resistance against normative feminine representations, but Sadie's 'marks' are 'unfit' for and 'unseen' by the 'hungry' public, then what about the rest of womankind? Do they remain sidelined from a sense of empowering, communal resistance while Sadie plays adult for the day? Here, Forrest fails to refuse the very postfeminist discourses that underscore her narrative: discourses of individualism, consumerism, and replete with a competitive market-focused ideology that are, in turn, directed both to and about the self. Forrest invites the grrrl to be reconsidered in a contemporary discourse and with this, attempts to extend the creative reworking of the identity of young women that riot grrrl had started. At the same time, the novel solidifies that the 'grrrl' is unfit for the unrelenting commitment to the self that is embedded in postfeminist praxis, and further, that any sense of collective feminine resistance is precarious and insecure. The subtle subtext of Sadie's narrative fragments tells us more: she 'surrenders' herself, and 'rips' off the objectives of Grrrl Cosmetics as a collective in order to make room for her own indulgent creativity. Having Sadie wipe off her lipstick,

Forrest encapsulates a sense of retreatism that is dressed up only as a *partial* gesture of resistance, strengthened by the ambivalent, adolescent language of Sadie's last words: 'kind of'.

Chapter 3

Celebrity Skin:

Fantasy, failure and the fucked-up girl in Emma Forrest's *Namedropper*

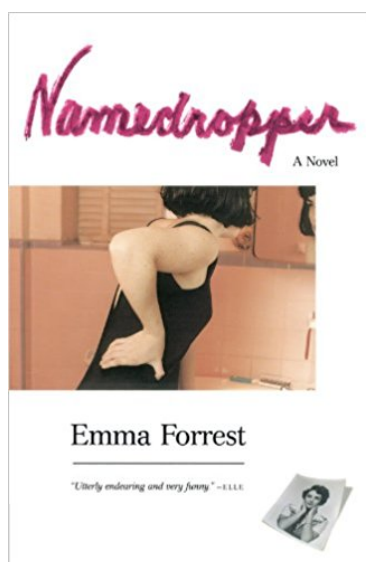
The scripted and the screwy: chick lit jr. and young adult anti-chick lit

'He was a super-shiny boy and I kind of liked the shape of him'.³²⁵ Emma Forrest's *Namedropper* (1998) begins in a dream sequence; the opening lines are immediate with the self-centred language and ambivalence of the adolescent young woman (the reappearance of 'kind of') that, as drawn out in the chapter above, is so typical of Forrest's work.³²⁶ *Namedropper* is Forrest's first novel and is therefore thoroughly immersed in the drama of coming of age. This is not just in terms of its subject matter but also because it indicates Forrest's progression into the literary world. As I have examined, the protagonists of both *Thin Skin* and *Cherries in the Snow* are pointedly *not* adolescents. This is in order to make the contemporary 'girling/grrrling' of grown women that is integral to anti-chick lit explicit. In contrast, *Namedropper* follows in the tradition of YA (young adult) fiction. Throughout *Namedropper*, the anxieties of Forrest's teenage protagonist, Viva Cohen, mingle with her preliminary narrative fantasy and become nightmarish: Viva's anonymous 'boy' leaves

³²⁵Emma Forrest, *Namedropper* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), (p.11)

Hansel and Gretel-style ‘clues of a man, a trail of breadcrumbs to a ginger bread cottage’.³²⁷ Yet, when Viva finally reaches the cottage, she is confronted with the reality of rejection: ‘peeling pictures of Elizabeth Taylor and Marilyn Monroe [...] slide to the floor’, and while she finds the boy she loved inside, Viva states that ‘he didn’t want to hug me because I was blistered and spotted with bread crumbs’.³²⁸ Firstly, *Namedropper*’s dream sequence plays into the ‘small stretch of the imagination’ that Joanna Webb Johnson observes as a key characteristic of the Young Adult tradition. The pictures of Monroe and Taylor set in a gingerbread cottage hyperbolise the young woman’s consumption of popular (namely celebrity) discourses. It is these discourses, and the extent to which they instil in the young woman a make-believe confidence that she can ‘be that girl on that cover and in that story’, with which I am primarily concerned in this chapter.³²⁹ As Johnson continues:

The cover art [for YA] often offers real life photos of teens without revealing the person. The photo always chops off below the eyes and sometimes only features a body from the neck down [...] this allows the reader to impose herself into the story. The novels are not necessarily about visualising a particular character. The writers, or at the very least the publishers, hope the reader will internalize the story. (See Figure 1 and 2).³³⁰



³²⁷ Forrest, p.11

³²⁸ Ibid., 11

³²⁹ Webb-Johnson, p. 153.

³³⁰ Ibid., 153

Figure 1: *Namedropper* front cover, 1998 edition.

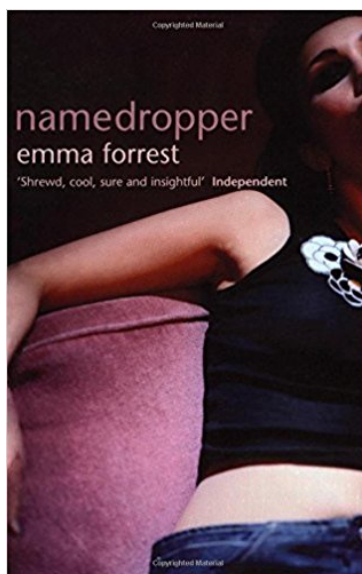


Figure 2: *Namedropper* front cover, 2003 edition.

At the same time as a ‘stretch’ of the ‘imagination’, Forrest reveals the reality of a disillusioned young woman through her simultaneous ironizing: the portraits in Viva’s fantasies are not appealing but are ‘peeling’, the celebrities are dead, and *that girl in that story* is in fact blistered, spotted and undesirable. In light of this, why would you want to be this girl? At its most incoherent and fragmented, *Namedropper* is also at its most lucid. This is reflected in both its content and the marketing of the novel. The half-revealed and half-concealed girl figure on the two different editions of *Namedropper* shown above exposes not only the flaws but also, to return once again to Driscoll, foregrounds the ‘girl’ as an unfinished and discursive construction. This places *Namedropper* in tension with the narratives of ‘success’ that prevail in more conventional modes of YA fiction. At the same

time, there are aspects of *Namedropper* that carry a ‘my first novel’ quality that it is hard not to misconstrue as a blatant showcase for Forrest’s own hang-ups about celebrity discourse, art and popular culture. This is an irritating aspect of the novel that Forrest attempts to excuse through her bombastic protagonist, utilising her ‘girl’ character to ‘get away with anything’ and defend her own foibles. Forrest admits as much in an online interview: ‘Viva is a superhero me [...] she’s a little more stable than me. In the past few months anyway (laughs)’.³³¹

Although Viva is a teenage character, she lacks the capacity to ‘act like a teenager’, oddly carving out specific times in which she can behave as such: ‘five weeks a year I should be allowed to behave like a teenage girl and not like Norman Mailer’.³³² Such unfitting, old-before-her-time references are a strange tendency that Forrest instils in Viva’s character. These tendencies are revealed again in a later scene, as Viva comments, ‘I suddenly became very embarrassed about how young I looked. Which is stupid, because I’m a teenage girl. What were they expecting? Joan Rivers?’³³³ The allusions to ‘Norman Mailer’ and ‘Joan Rivers’ are peculiar co-ordinates of self-description for a teenage girl. Yet, there are instances when Forrest’s narrative collapses in an apprehensive enumeration of ‘what if’, as Forrest tries to achieve a timelier trajectory for her adolescent protagonist: ‘I don’t want to have sex for the same reason I don’t want to apply for university. What if I don’t make it? What if I’m not good enough?’³³⁴ This may be purposeful; however, I would argue that the kind of clumsy underpinning of the conventions of YA fiction are coincidental, a result of Forrest’s exhaustive sounding out of her own intellect that is immersed in her own obsession with literary and pop culture. Still, Forrest does foster a productive narrative tension I wish to explore in relation to the ‘fucked-up girl’ genre that I am here considering as YA anti-chick lit, and which I introduced previously in chapter one.

Namedropper sees Forrest once more utilising the figure of the girl. Yet, in contrast to *Thin*

³³¹ Schoenhoff, para.1

³³² Forrest, p.133

³³³ Ibid., 130

³³⁴ Ibid., 51

Skin and *Cherries in the Snow*, Forrest attempts to follow in the tradition of the YA novel and successfully embody adolescent fantasy, but by failing to do so fully, a sense of ‘failure’ once again becomes the heart of Forrest’s fiction.

In *Namedropper*, the fairy tale introduction immediately gives way to blisters of breadcrumbs in a way that foreshadows its narrative (mis)direction and foregrounds a contradictory coming-of-age experience for the young woman. The plot charts one teenage girl ‘tipping over the dress-up box’ and attempting to create meaning from the chaos of coming of age.³³⁵ A narrative laden with literary and pop culture references reveals that Viva is close to achieving the official title of ‘the worst namedropper in the world’, while simultaneously ‘failing school miserably’.³³⁶ Instead of a stable family unit, Viva grows up in the image of Elizabeth Taylor, whose portrait hangs on every wall of the home that she shares with her gay uncle, Manny. Viva’s wry accounts reveal that she spends most of her time trying to match up to the ‘looks’ of her best girlfriend Treena, who ‘doesn’t want to know about boys or pain or pictures of dead actresses. The irony being that she has the looks of a silver-screen goddess’.³³⁷ At the same time as this, Viva tries to soothe the ego of her ageing and self-aggrandising musician friend, Ray. She wastes her days rebelling rather than revising, eloping to LA and Vegas with rock stars and living her life in word-perfect homage to the lyrics of her favourite song *Boys of Summer* by Don Henley. These lines teach her more than an exam script ever could, until we learn that Viva, as the tenor of failure begins to inflect her story, has ‘heard the words wrong’ all along.³³⁸

The plot weaves back and forth between episodes that Viva terms as ‘little failures on a daily basis’ in a way that exposes a vulnerable, ‘screwy’ side of the coming-of-age girl.³³⁹ Such flaws and inconsistencies— truanting from school with rock stars when she should be revising, hearing the words of her apparently favourite song wrong— are,

³³⁵ Ibid.222

³³⁶ Ibid., (p.140 and 30).

³³⁷ Ibid., 11

³³⁸ Ibid., 238

³³⁹ Ibid., 128

moreover, only minor concerns of conventional teenage chick lit, or what Johnson terms ‘Chick Lit Jr.’.³⁴⁰ My examination of *Thin Skin* in chapter one revealed Forrest’s work as a revision of the ‘fucked-up girl’ genre, and this chapter will subsequently explore *Namedropper* as the precursor for this fucked-up, ‘anti-chick’ character, as exemplified by Viva’s telling confession: ‘I am self-destructive. Everyone says so. I’m always mispronouncing words so that everyone will think I’m dumb and laugh at me and hate me forever’.³⁴¹

The theoretical paradox of successful failure is grounded in the work of Halberstam, and this section will introduce a reading of *In a Queer Time and Place*. At the same time, it will return to the idea of failure as a potentially recuperative art form that Halberstam sets out in *The Queer Art of Failure* and which I explored initially in chapter one. In *In a Queer Time*, Halberstam celebrates the concept of ‘queer temporality’, arguing that the sense of queerness that it evokes should be viewed as a ‘compelling form of self-description’.³⁴² This is precisely because of the way in which queer temporalities offer the ‘potential to open up new life narratives and alternative relations to time and space’.³⁴³ The traditional bildungsroman has temporal direction; the reader assumes that the adolescent will successfully mature into an adult. This is not so true of *Namedropper*, as not only does Viva find it hard to act like a teenage girl, she does not successfully mature into adulthood either. Halberstam’s theorisation introduces a new horizon of possibilities when reconsidering the idea of fucking up/getting it wrong in relation to the narrative of *Namedropper*. Halberstam describes ‘queer temporalities’ as ‘proper subcultural activities’ that ‘propose how we rethink the adult/youth binary in relation to an “epistemology of youth” that disrupts the conventional accounts of youth culture, adulthood and maturity’.³⁴⁴ Queer temporalities, moreover, ‘produce alternative temporalities by allowing their

³⁴⁰ Webb-Johnson, p.142.

³⁴¹ Forrest, p. 165

³⁴² Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (London: New York, 2005), (p.2).

³⁴³ Halberstam. P.2

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 2

participants to believe their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic life experiences— namely birth, marriage, reproduction, and death’.³⁴⁵ Queering temporalities, then, collapses the ‘logics’ of the (predictable) paradigms of life experience (birth, marriage, reproduction, death) and instead, ‘exploits the potential of the transient, the fleeting, the contingent’.³⁴⁶ I read Halberstam’s ‘queer temporalities’ as introduced by Forrest in *Namedropper* through the figure of the fucked-up girl. If we associate ‘fucking-up’ with losing a firm grasp of stabilising narratives and logics, then to invite ‘queer temporalities’ – that is, to ‘fuck up’ strict life schedules—is in the case of anti-chick lit, the disruption of conventional accounts of youth, adulthood and maturity. The disruption caused by the fucked/fucking-up girl introduces a more compelling, and creative, form of self-description to contemporary constructions of femininity.

When paralleled with Halberstam’s *Queer Art of Failure*, this prompts the ‘unmaking, undoing, unbecoming’ of the subject from their obligations to behave correctly – for example, being *on* time or hemmed *in* to a specific place, especially in terms of conventionally ‘coming of age’.³⁴⁷ This furthers the creative possibilities of queering narratives to which Halberstam alludes, producing an enticing trail of flaws and fuck-ups that eventually lead to the ‘potentiality of a life unscripted’.³⁴⁸ YA anti-chick works to expose the potentials afforded to the young woman who does not stick to the script of conventional girlhood. By exposing each experimental step of the young woman’s development, as she symbolically tips over the dress-up box in order to make sense of her transitional identity, the protagonist of YA anti-chick lit aims to make sense of her inherent contradictions by visibly getting things wrong. As Viva makes room for a ‘flawed’ self-description, she reveals a ‘temporally schizzed embrace of a wilder, less thoroughly

³⁴⁵ Ibid., 2

³⁴⁶ Ibid., p.2

³⁴⁷ Ibid., 2

³⁴⁸ Ibid., 2

socialized, less straightjacketed brand of femininity'.³⁴⁹ Through cutting ties with the straightjacketed script of mature femininity, is it possible for young women, as their bedroom dreams turn into real-world failures, to defy 'the walls that say you can't'?³⁵⁰ In light of Viva's very deliberate self-destruction, I use *Namedropper* to examine the following: can knowingly forming a plot that is 'wrong' or 'fucked-up' and using this inaccuracy as a form of self-description (as Viva does by mishearing and mispronouncing words which 'she knows perfectly well how to say' so that *everyone* recognises her as self-destructive) actually introduce *successful* ways of being a young woman?³⁵¹ And, moreover, to what ends can this sense of successful failure be preserved? Much like Forrest's exploitation of the figure of the grrrl in *Cherries*, how long can Viva's stand of resistance against growing up, in a 'conventional' sense, actually last?

There is a conventional script of girlhood that tends to structure the more consumable brands of YA fiction that border Forrest's *Namedropper*, as exemplified by Louise Rennison's *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging* (1999), Meg Cabot's *Princess Diaries* (2000), Meg McCafferty's *Sloppy Firsts* (2001) and Cathy Hopkins' *Mates, Dates* series (2001). As Johnson identifies, the protagonists of chick-lit jr. achieve success in relationships and graduate from school, gleaning a sexual and emotional maturity that allows for their transition into adulthood. 'High school graduation marks the official end of childhood', Johnson observes, 'whether prepared or not, the young adult is now an adult (and, thus, the story must end)'.³⁵² The young women of chick lit jr. are established through a conventional, rather than a contingent, temporality, as their story *must* reach an official end and the timely arrival of their 'grand moment of self-realisation' lies therein.³⁵³ Certainly, chick lit jr. does productively document the difficult and often

³⁴⁹ Hilary Malatino, 'The Becoming-Woman of the Young-Girls: Revisiting Riot Grrrl, Rethinking Girlhood', *Rhizomes* 22 (2011): <http://www.rhizomews.net/issue22/malatino.net> [Accessed 1 January 2015] para 1 to 27, (para. 12).

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 23

³⁵¹ Forrest, p.165

³⁵² Webb-Johnson, p. 149

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, 142

less-than-graceful shifting patterns of the young girl on the threshold of adulthood. However, the non-negotiable arrival of the ‘grand moment’ of maturation and the ‘end’ of the girl-protagonist’s adolescence shows that her experience is structured by a firm adherence to time and place. The conventional script of girlhood is thus one of strict, as opposed to a strange, temporality. The girl subject of chick lit jr. ultimately grows-up, but through her maturation she is excluded from imaginative life schedules and the potentiality of unscripted narratives that stand outside of success.

The stable and scripted girl central to chick lit jr. is the antithesis of the fucked-up girl, who does not pass securely into adulthood, but who – when read in conjunction with the un- prefix that Halberstam sets up – is both the creative subject of her artful failure, as well as the object of her own *unmaking/undoing/unbecoming*. Viva’s character dismantles the logics of success and failure throughout *Namedropper* with consistent aplomb: ‘the exam went great. In terms of failing heroically’, ‘I opted to do very badly instead’, and then ‘I did the best that I could, just not in the way that they would expect me to’.³⁵⁴ This deliberate inadequacy positions both strange temporalities and creative life-schedules as the foundations of the fucked-up girl, who is purposefully ‘fucking up’ everything around her. This is an intermediate state, as I outlined in the introduction, and is summarised by Grant in the following way: ‘the figure of the girl, then, stands for an identity that is defined as being in progress, not quite one thing or another’.³⁵⁵ It is exactly this – the peripheral existence of the girl, as she is poised between her immediate girlhood and the inevitability of adulthood, of becoming and the threat of unbecoming – that locates the potentials that exist in the spaces ‘in-between’ such trajectories.

Namedropper ends with Viva’s accomplishment of failure and, more than this, with her concerted determination to fail – a far cry from Johnson’s identification:

I failed the exams. Those I turned up for. Considering the amount of effort that I made to fail, this did not surprise me [...] according to the rules, I should have done

³⁵⁴ Ibid., 172

³⁵⁵ Grant and Waxman, p.1

fabulously well because that's what would happen at the end of a film. The rebel comes right.³⁵⁶

Viva's coming-of-age experience defies the rules of the 'rebel' eventually coming 'right' and, instead, shows how she remains unfinished via a deliberate and undeviating effort to fail. Johnson resolves that chick lit jr. 'affirms and guides its young readers', but I argue that the stabilising temporal event of the end of girlhood, of doing 'fabulously well' in accordance to the rules, negates the creative potentials and possibilities presented by being expressly 'wrong' as opposed to 'coming right'.³⁵⁷ The narrative of failing is, in fact, a positive outlet for the unscripted and the screwy version of adolescence integral to YA anti-chick lit. In *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth*, Roberta Seelinger Trites reads the sense of affirmation in YA fiction as short-lived. Rather, the initial empowerment provided by adolescent literature to its young readership 'proves to be something of an illusion in many novels because frequently, teenaged characters demonstrate to teen readers that the only true form of empowerment comes from growing up and leaving adolescence behind.'³⁵⁸ In terms of the close proximity of success and failure within adolescent experience, Trites states that 'maturations become a matter of winning *and* losing [...] although the adolescent can win only conditionally as long as he or she remains an adolescent'.³⁵⁹ The interweaving of winning/losing echoes the paradox of successful failure at the heart of YA anti-chick lit. This said, exposing the palpable failures of coming of age is not exclusive to YA anti-chick lit as Trites reveals that in fact 'many YA novels in the later part of the twentieth century showed a harsh, graceless, and often unsuccessful struggle to make the transition from childhood to adulthood' and that this was a typically 'singularly male experience'.³⁶⁰ By extension of Trites' critique, I suggest that while *Namedropper* borrows from the YA tradition, the novel's narrative drama – instances of

³⁵⁶ Forrest, p. 230

³⁵⁷ Webb-Johnson, p. 142

³⁵⁸ Roberta Trites, *Literary Conceptualizations of Growth: Metaphors and Cognition in Adolescent Literature* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2014), (p.14).

³⁵⁹ Trites, p.14

³⁶⁰ Ibid.,145

failing ‘heroically’, opting to do badly, and making a huge effort to fail – works to revise winning *and* losing to winning *as* losing. In conjunction with Halberstam, this queers distinctions between success and failure and offers empowering forms of self-description by instead making room for the unmaking/undoing/unbecoming of the adolescent. Not only this, but *Namedropper* disrupts Trites’ designation of failure in contemporary adolescent literature as a specifically masculine characteristic, as Forrest translates it from a singularly male experience into an integral component of the fucked-up girl.

‘A bed of film trivia and song lyrics’: making room for the fucked-up girl and the new girl (dis)order of YA anti-chick lit

The narrative dynamism of *Namedropper* comes from Viva’s explicit inconsistencies. In these terms, the novel can be historicised alongside what Heywood and Drake in *Third-Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism* (1997) observe as the crucial ‘lived messiness’ of third wave feminine identity.³⁶¹ Both scholars distinguish this as a specific characteristic of the third wave and the narratives of girlhood (specifically in light of the formation of riot grrrl in the early 90s) that exist therein. Given its 1998 publication date, *Namedropper*’s exploration of disordered girlhood is timely in terms of its emergence amongst feminist scholars unearthing a similar sense of the chaotic ‘multiple identity positionality’ of young women in the late 90s/early 00s (Heywood and Drake; Klein; Driscoll; Harris; Munford, Gillis and Howie; Nayak and Kehily).³⁶² Nayak and Kehily observe that the lived messiness and the multiple identities surrounding young women were made sense of through ‘personalised girl-zones’.³⁶³ In *Namedropper*, these zones are represented through Viva’s messy girl-bedroom and embodied through her transitional

³⁶¹ Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake (eds.), *Third Wave Agenda: Being feminist, Doing Feminism* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1997), (p.8)

³⁶² *ibid.*, 14

³⁶³ *Gender, Youth and Culture: Global Masculinities and Femininities* Ed by. Anoop Nayak and Mary Jane Kehily, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), (p.72).

girl-body – terms which I have hyphenated here to capture how both the bedroom and the body act as the ‘extension of girlhood’ necessary for the ‘cultivation of [their] femininity’.³⁶⁴ Girls work to make sense of the haptic geography of coming of age through the dynamics of body/bedroom. While the bedroom and the body are at risk of collapsing into the inevitable clichés of specifically gendered spaces, they are at the same time fluid and useful emblems for personalised girl-zones, beneficial for the refinement of the girl’s (multiple and contradictory) femininity.

The ‘culture of the bedroom’ was initially termed by Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber in ‘Girls and Subcultures’ (1976). Both scholars designated the bedroom as an intimate space in which girls were ‘experimenting with make-up [and] listening to records’ by way of an artful appropriation of the lived messiness of becoming a woman.³⁶⁵ Since McRobbie and Garber’s influential study, ‘bedroom culture’ has become a term that is much utilised and explored in scholarship pertaining to girls and girlhood. Sian Lincoln is one such example, and her study reveals how the tailored spaces of the girl’s bedroom/body are interwoven. Lincoln suggests that girls’ bedrooms are not only personal ‘containers of meaning’, but that the subsequent meaning that is generated within them – for example, the girl’s distinctive femininity – can then spill out into public areas. She notes that bedrooms are ‘gendered leisure sites regulated by “situational body image” that is, by the extent to which young women feel comfortable in situating themselves in different spaces and contexts’.³⁶⁶ There is a fluidity that accompanies this customised space that allows meanings to pass on through the girl’s body as it is situated outside of the bedroom: ‘not restricted to the four bedroom walls or the closing bedroom door’, Lincoln continues, ‘the porous edges [of these containers] enable a flow of the public and private

³⁶⁴ Ibid., 72

³⁶⁵ Mary Celeste Kearney, ‘Productive Spaces: Girls’ Bedrooms as Sites of Cultural Production’, *Journal of Children and Media*, 1:2 (2007), 126-141, (p.126), (Quoting Angela McRobbie and Jennifer Garber).

³⁶⁶ Sian Lincoln, ‘I’ve Stamped my Personality All Over It’: The Meaning of Objects in Teenage Bedroom Space, *Space and Culture*, 17:3 (2013), 266-279, (p.267).

realm of larger functions and structures'.³⁶⁷ The personalised and porous 'walls' then tailor the body, which can, in turn, shift into public domains.

In terms of heavily tailored girl-zones, it seems unsurprising, to return to *Namedropper*, that the walls of Viva's bedroom 'are barely visible for posters and magazine cuttings. They are assigned by decades [...] prints of Gloria Swanson, Louise Brooks, and Clara Bow [...] Marilyn, Marlon, Monty, and Mitchum'.³⁶⁸ Viva recreates the scrapbook of identities plastered all over her walls onto her body and can often be found in her 'boudoir' dressed as Elizabeth Taylor in a 'pencil skirt, cream angora sweater and flesh coloured stockings with black seams'.³⁶⁹ Not restricted to these four walls, however, the multiplicity and meaning afforded to Viva through her personalised body is re-established through public reactions, such as 'the girls at school on non-uniform days' who 'scathingly eyed up [Viva's] pencil skirt, kitten heels, and white mohair Elizabeth Taylor sweater'.³⁷⁰ Cushioned in a collision of styles, lived messiness, multiplicity, and inconsistencies, *Namedropper* as YA anti-chick lit exposes a contradictory story of girlhood, a revised bildungsroman that is punctuated with fantasies. These fantasies are then dismantled by anxieties and failures to conventionally come-of-age and pin down a stable identity. Viva is, instead, at odds with the 'real world' that she sees as 'no good'.³⁷¹

According to Lincoln, 'mess and memorabilia' are often utilised by young girls, and they tend to 'surround themselves with their things as signifiers of ownership and control'.³⁷² The cultivation of femininities and the meanings generated from this inherent mess are usefully 'unstable and elusive', built on a shifting ambiguity which, ironically, strengthens the inconsistencies inherent in the girl.³⁷³ Viva's physical and emotional immersion in mess and ephemera re-establishes identity as a Jamesonian postmodern

³⁶⁷ Lincoln, p. 269

³⁶⁸ Forrest, p. 39

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 166

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 140

³⁷¹ Ibid., 140

³⁷² Lincoln, p. 267

³⁷³ Ibid., 269

playground in which the ‘condition of possibility [...] consists primarily of the sheer enumeration of changes and modifications’.³⁷⁴ Forrest’s text toys with ideas about the transformative potential of consumption and the artful way that Viva attempts to manage her inconsistencies through a decorative enumeration of lyrics, trivia, lived mess, and ultimately, namedropping as she states: ‘Lauren Bacall, Rosalind Russell, and Cary Grant [...] Albert Finney, Julie Christie, and Terrance Stamp. Mod is the most modern I get’.³⁷⁵ In this postmodern playground – one that is, moreover, embodied through personalised girl-zones – Viva’s character is metaphorically stripped down and left rooting around in remnants of the peeling pictures of the outdated or dead silver screen stars that, like a ‘trail of gingerbread crumbs’, guide her narrative fantasy to a consumable ‘shiny, iconic beauty’.³⁷⁶ At the same time, her trajectory is haunted by anxieties about the real world, in which daily failures interrupt, or in Halberstam’s terms ‘queer’, her narrative, spoiling the fantasy of adolescence like ‘pores, grey hairs [and] chapped lips’ so that Viva is misdirected and can no longer ‘see a damn thing’.³⁷⁷

Returning to Heywood and Drake, the influence of these highly consumable (‘iconic’) and evidently consumed (left ‘porous’ and ‘chapped’) images can be read alongside what they distinguish as ‘third wave identities formed within a relentlessly consumer-orientated culture’.³⁷⁸ As noted, the unravelling story of the young woman in *Namedropper* and the amalgamation of narrative fantasy and actual failure is symptomatic of a third wave (dis)order– a lived messiness – wherein there lies a ‘contradictory feminine condition that engages young women in ever-more artful ways of managing the inconsistencies inherent in identifying as young and female’.³⁷⁹ It is this implication of creatively utilising the changeable, fragmented landscape that lies between being young

³⁷⁴ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), (p.7).

³⁷⁵ Forest, p.39

³⁷⁶ Ibid.,11.

³⁷⁷ Ibid.,11

³⁷⁸ Heywood and Drake, p.8

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 8

and being female that brings to life their inconsistencies and (mis)directs their awkward experiences. A crucial ambiguity resides here, vital for the cultivation of a ‘seemingly different new girl order’, which presents ‘a reshaping of normative femininities’.³⁸⁰ Throughout *Namedropper*, Viva attempts to pin down an identity through her obsessive consumption of the images of celebrities that she has pinned up to the walls of her bedroom. Her facades work as what Maria Buszek terms as ‘porous covering[s]’ through which Viva utilises her transitional potential as a teenage girl by slipping in and out of various celebrity skins, true to the form of the postmodern condition of possibility.³⁸¹ The dress-up allows Viva to act out her conscious alienation and narcissism (true of both Forrest and Viva alike) as in the end, despite her obsessions with other people, ‘all roads lead to Viva’.³⁸² Viva’s ‘little failures’, moreover, work to undermine the restrictive ‘walls’ of the conventional trajectory of adolescence. Instead, they make room for, as an extension of Nayak and Kehily’s critique, a new girl (dis)order within YA anti-chick fictions.

Bettina Fritzsche furthers the notion of the girl-body as an intimate space that is apt for the cultivation of femininity, remarking that it is ‘important to understand the very common, playful, and body-centred ways that girls cope with society’s scripts of identity’.³⁸³ Fritzsche advocates the customisation of the parameters of the young woman’s body as a ‘necessary precondition to encourage them to pursue aspects of their own identity that do not conform’.³⁸⁴ The conventional scripts of girl identity in *Namedropper* abound in Viva’s depiction of the ‘girls at school who are considered pretty’.³⁸⁵ These girls are, in reality, grossly angular and amorphous, ‘like colts in cults. All gangly limbs and blank expressions’.³⁸⁶ Viva’s body is contradictorily curvy and vivaciously adorned in

³⁸⁰ Nayak and Kehily, p. 69

³⁸¹ Maria Elena Buszek, *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture* (London: Duke University Press, 2006), (p.20).

³⁸² Forrest, p. 98

³⁸³ Bettina Fritzsche, ‘Spicy Strategies: Pop Feminist and other Empowerments in Girl culture’, *All About the Girl: Culture, Power, and Identity*, Ed by. Anita Harris (London: Routledge, 2004) pp. 155-163, (p.161).

³⁸⁴ Fritzsche, p. 161

³⁸⁵ Forrest, p.29

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29

vintage clothing in order to mimic the ‘dead actresses or B-Movie stars who haven’t worked in thirty-seven years’ that litter Viva’s story.³⁸⁷ Adding to Viva’s nonconformist ‘look’ – which very much conflicts with the blank and gangly average school girl – Viva states that she has ‘grown up’ in Elizabeth Taylor’s image; however, she is ‘not nearly as beautiful. But like a bad Internet printout of her’.³⁸⁸ With ‘almost black hair and blue eyes [she] tries to wish purple’, Viva is made-up as Taylor’s double. At the same time, she is incompatible with Taylor’s iconic beauty. Viva’s shortcomings relegate her to the periphery of not-quite (with *almost* black hair, and eyes that she *wishes* were violet), like a ‘bad internet print out’.³⁸⁹ This embodiment of ‘not-quite’ works to tailor – or, in line with *Namedropper*, ‘Taylor’ – the strict contours of the definitive script that marks the girl as successfully reaching the essential ‘end’ of girlhood. The success rooted in consumable brands of YA fiction promotes, as explored, a confined, straightjacketed brand of femininity, symbolised by Forrest’s imagery of colts in cults. In accordance with Johnson, this is the timely marker of chick lit jr., but the girl of YA anti-chick lit wreaks temporal havoc by opening up new life narratives. With this, Viva embodies the notion of the ‘unscripted’ – a *bad* print-out that allows her to make room for her own flaws. In so doing, Viva is an inconsistent archive that houses narratives of two worlds – one of the fantasy of successes and one of unabashed failure. Together, they formulate the crucial ambiguity of ‘successful failure’ that frames both *Namedropper* and the figure of the fucked-up/fucking-up girl.

Post-Madonna-ty: material girls and the double narrative

In Forrest’s text, the act of namedropping guides Viva and works as her creative reaction to her confusing, coming-of-age identity. The condition of possibility that is toyed with at the

³⁸⁷ Ibid.,140

³⁸⁸ Ibid.,26

³⁸⁹ Ibid.,26

beginning of *Namedropper* in order to account for the reshaping of ‘normative’ femininities echoes what Fritzche posits as an essential body-centred form of resistance. Fritzche’s sense of bodily defiance is achieved through girls’ work on areas of their identity that do not conform to the adolescent conventions of success. In these terms, Viva’s aesthetic inconsistencies are based on a distinctive ‘Tayloring’ of her identity. Yet, as well as Elizabeth Taylor’s physical influence, Viva also proclaims that her teenage ‘moods are the equivalent to Madonna’s dancing: inappropriate but all-out’.³⁹⁰ As *Namedropper* is a text formulated around a definitive ‘90s girl’, both in terms of her fluxional identity and multiplicity as well as the novel’s 1998 publication date, it seems apt that Madonna, as a key influence on young women in the 90s, is invoked by Forrest to describe Viva’s ‘mood[s]’.

Certainly, it would not be possible to examine the 90s girl’s daring negotiation of contradictory styles and femininities under the empowering rhetoric of ‘girl power’ without reference to Madonna’s ubiquitous influence. My focus here, however, is on the way in which Madonna’s duality of self-definition and her resistance to neat categorisation has created an effect of ‘post-Madonna-ty’ that has left, in Viva’s words, residual ‘all-out’ traces on the mood of contemporary girlhood. The dance of post-Madonna-ty then, to return once more to Jameson, qualifies ideas of the postmodern as a ‘quantum leap in [...] the "aestheticization" of reality [...] a prodigious exhilaration with the new order of things, a commodity rush, our "representations" of things tending to arouse an enthusiasm and a mood swing not necessarily inspired by the things themselves’.³⁹¹ Such a prodigious exhilaration of a new order of things, along with the heady mix of representation and reality, accounts for the ‘double narratives’ that have structured Madonna’s career. Through ‘forms of fashionable metamorphoses and playful references to all kinds of existing images’, the matriarch of pop has survived as an inconsistent archive of images,

³⁹⁰ Forrest p. 98

³⁹¹ Jameson, p. 10

and she is therefore a productive anachronism. The pop archive has, in turn, aestheticized and memorialized Madonna as the ultimate ‘material girl’.³⁹²

The preservation of Madonna as a ‘material girl’ is useful to my own examination of *Namedropper* in two ways: firstly, it reveals a female artist who, like Viva, has developed an identity through reference to iconic images, reshaping normative modes of contemporary femininity with her allusions to the past. In this sense, Viva growing up in the image of Taylor becomes an apt homage to the blossoming of Madonna’s early career as she materialised in mimesis of the curvy silhouette of Marilyn Monroe. This has allowed Madonna to embody contradictory categories, layering myriad images and old-fashioned references upon one surface. Overall, it was her artful and unapologetic management of these inconsistencies that permitted her to make room for an engagement with difference, forming ‘new patterns’ of being a girl from old, out-of-joint templates ‘again and again’.³⁹³ This is in terms of both Madonna’s reality now as a middle-aged female artist and mother and the fantasy girl lens through which she still viewed.

If postmodernism is, in another of its many interpretations, ‘an exhaustion of totalising metanarratives’, it does, in short, corrode the idea of linear and cohesive identity into fragmented and porous pieces.³⁹⁴ Like the effect of postmodernism on contemporary identity, Madonna has become a conduit for the dominant means of understanding contemporary girlhood and of managing in-process identities and their chaotic ensemble and repetitive (re)assembling that takes place ‘again and again’. There are hints of these postmodern effects in Viva’s identity crisis in *Namedropper*: the ‘exhaustion’ of ‘totalising metanarratives’ is portrayed as she fears that the coherent, iconic beauty that guides her teenage fantasies will become porous and chapped; the sensation of postmodern

³⁹² Patricia Pisters, ‘Madonna’s Girls in the Mix’: Performance of Femininity Beyond the Beautiful’ in *Madonna’s Drowned Worlds: New Approaches to her Cultural Transformations 1983-2003* Ed by. Santiago Fouz-Hernandez and Freya Jarman-Ivens (London: Ashgate, 2004), (pp. 22- 35), (p.28).

³⁹³ David Gauntlett, ‘Madonna’s Daughters: Girl Power and the Empowered Girl-Pop Breakthrough’, *Madonna’s Drowned Worlds: New Approaches to her Cultural Transformations 1983-2003* Ed by. Santiago Fouz-Hernandez and Freya Jarman-Ivens (London: Ashgate, 2004), pp.162-174 , (p. 173).

³⁹⁴ Ryan Moore, ‘Postmodernism and Punk Subculture: Cultures of Authenticity and Deconstruction’, *The Communication Review*, 7 (2004): 305-327, pp.305-7, (p.307).

displacement is illustrated as these recognisable portraits of ‘established’ famous figures instead ‘peel’ and ‘slide’ into chaos.

Like the postmodern identity effect, in which the whole picture is made porous and left peeling, failing therefore to reach a coherent ‘totality’, David Gauntlett posits that Madonna was ‘credited with popularising the view that identity is not fixed but can continuously be rearranged and revamped’.³⁹⁵ As such, Forrest’s portrayal of the fucked-up girl, in all her lived messiness, is influenced by this state of post-Madonna-ty. Carrying on in the wake of Madonna’s rearrangement and revamping of identity, the girl attempts to make room for herself in a contemporary terrain that is saturated with consumable images. In post-Madonna-ty, the ultimate material girl has paved the way for young women to collapse clear distinctions. Instead, they can seek out desirable ambiguities and daring double narratives, creating collaged moods that artfully construct a new paradigm of contradictory girlhood out of anachronistic images. Madonna has become, in line with Patricia Pister’s succinct illustration of the legacy of Madonna’s constellation of identities, a ‘multitude of textual personae [...] a tantalising puzzle’.³⁹⁶ Madonna’s failure, as it were, lingers in her inability to be pinned down and neatly categorised. Through her consistent slippage from one persona to the next, she is not quite this and not quite that. It is exactly these inconsistencies that reveal to young women that in ‘a post-Madonna world, there is an open realm of liberating possibilities’.³⁹⁷

‘Like a virgin?’: hymenic fusion and the fucked-up girl

³⁹⁵ Gauntlett, p. 173

³⁹⁶ Pisters, p. 35

³⁹⁷ Gauntlett, p. 174

As Pisters observes, Madonna has been mythologised as a puzzling assembly of alluring, ambiguous personas that invite with them a wealth of ‘liberating possibilities’. Therefore, the dovetailing of the contradictory girl-tropes that Madonna represents make her construction of girlhood ‘powerfully productive’.³⁹⁸ Santiago Fouz-Hernandez and Freya Jarman-Ivens analyse Madonna’s attempts to reshape the boundaries of normative feminine narratives. They see these narratives as ‘subcultural worlds’ that Madonna has embodied and which have sequentially been ‘drowned out with new worlds’, but these narratives are always, nonetheless, ‘threatening to resurface’.³⁹⁹ As a result, ‘new complexities in the meanings she generates are constantly emerging’.⁴⁰⁰ The indication that the past can leak into the surface and generate new complexities in the present gives a fluid and rippling quality to Madonna’s girl status. Consequently, Madonna emerges as a myriad figure, whose patterns of being are created, concealed and repetitively resurface, invoking the best of both past and present in order to produce an archival and consistently ‘girled’ body. As Fouz-Hernandez and Jarman-Ivens illustrate, Madonna is a figure who is constantly altering, yet she still bears traces of her earlier forms. Thus creating new patterns from old templates, Madonna is an apposite metaphor for another archaic body constructed of a complex doubling of texts: the palimpsest.

In line with Madonna’s somewhat palimpsestic image, I will return to Dillon’s useful model of the palimpsestuous, which she invokes to signpost the relationship between the seemingly incompatible texts of the palimpsest. Dillon describes the way in which various texts of the palimpsest are held together and kept separate by a thin skin, their contradictory nature merging in what she calls a ‘hymenic fusion’.⁴⁰¹ She states:

The concept of the hymen represents both marriage and division, a doubleness which renders the hymen an appropriate figure for the relationship between the texts of the palimpsest [...] As a result, they exist in hymenic fusion or marriage

³⁹⁸ Pisters, p. 23

³⁹⁹ Fouz-Hernandez and Jarman-Ivens, p.xxi.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., xxi

⁴⁰¹ Dillon, p. 97

which at the same time preserves their separate identities and inscribes difference within the heart of the identity of the palimpsest.⁴⁰²

Dillon's reading of the conceptual hymen is formulated around a symbolic double meaning which fleshes it out as a model of 'doubleness': the hymen is an alternative terming for a veil of skin and therefore works as a particularly apt metaphor for the parchment that separates parts of the 'body' of the palimpsest. Equally, it is also the vestal material that covers parts of the girl's body. In terms of the girl engaging with her integral difference, the hymen, much like the thin skin of the palimpsest, works as an 'appropriate figure' for the relationship between the 'texts' of coming of age. Hymenic fusion accounts for the girl's duality as it becomes the structure wherein conflicting narratives collate and separate. One of these narratives denotes the success of *becoming* woman. The other preserves a detached narrative of *unbecoming* – that can be read in relation to this chapter as the 'failure' of *not quite* being one thing or another. The hymen acts as a porous covering with which two conflicting identities can be detached and traversed.

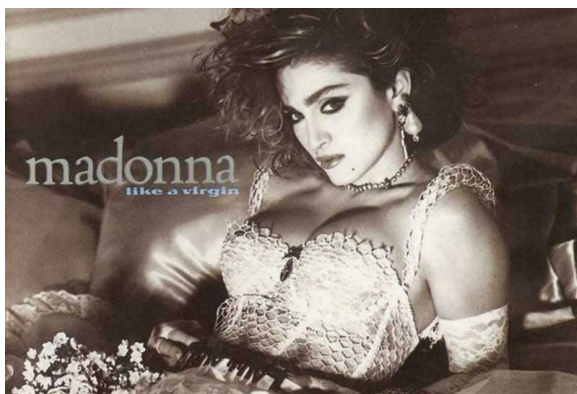
The hymen is symbolic of the girl's virginity and therefore encapsulates the crucial ambivalence of the virgin. As Driscoll observes, 'the focal point of modern appropriations of the virgin as a metaphor for art, text and meaning is her status as an ambivalent boundary'.⁴⁰³ In relation to Madonna, one of her many patterns of being a girl, and her all-out influence on the coming-of-age narratives of young women, was her personification of the virginal girl in Madonna's 1984 hit single 'Like a Virgin'. Driscoll establishes that the virgin is her own paradox, marking the 'impossibility of fixing or determining meaning' – as is stressed in modern appropriations of the virgin, which tend to trade on her symbolic ambiguity.⁴⁰⁴ Indeed, Madonna embodies this inconsistency, deviating away from the mawkish nature of the virgin in a highly sexualised way. The image that both the single and the album 'Like a Virgin' publicized was Madonna's celebration of a contradictory

⁴⁰² Ibid., 97

⁴⁰³ Driscoll, p.142

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 142

mode of feminine identity as a form of self-description. It was this very sentiment that made the image both famed and fabled. A first glance reveals Madonna languishing in a wedding dress, an ironic nuptial to the girl's inexperience (See Figure 3). What is suggestive about Madonna's embodiment of the virginal girl-trope, however, is the way that it is riddled with ambiguities. In line with Driscoll, the image marks the inability of the virgin to carry a fixed meaning. Tucked in at the waist with her (now infamous) 'Boy Toy' belt, Madonna sets the standards for the young woman's engagement with difference. The 'boy toy' belt has been identified in much feminist scholarship as problematic, in that it capitalises on patriarchal ideologies that would see the female body objectified, manipulated and restrained. In light of my own examination, however, the image provokes ideas of hymenic fusion and subsequent doubleness: the 'boy toy' belt and the purity of the white dress is an unlikely juxtaposition that 'marries' together the contradictory identities that are available through the figure of the girl. This combination fabricates, albeit rather problematically, a new layer of narrative of possibility.



(Figure 3: Cover for Madonna's 'Like a Virgin' Album, 1984)

True to its adolescent form, there are many episodes in *Namedropper* that reveal the idea of the girl, and moreover, the virginal girl, as what Driscoll defines as a 'figure for textual slippage'.⁴⁰⁵ Throughout the narrative, Viva centralizes her own status as a 'virgin' and

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 143

wonders if her interest in celebrity has influenced her curiosity about sex: ‘if I had photos of Madonna on the wall, maybe I would be keener to try sex. But I have Liz. And Liz is a frigid sex-bomb’.⁴⁰⁶ In conjunction with the above, it is hymenic fusion that renders the relationship between the conflicting narratives of frigidity and overt sexuality fluid, so they are both kept distinct yet ‘slip’ into one another. One of the most striking episodes of this slippage occurs when Viva describes the awkward trajectory of her coming-of-age body, as she makes the journey from her school back to her home on a congested London tube:

When I did get a figure, [Manny] just went crazy for it, like if I never did another thing in my life, I’ve made him as proud as he could possibly be. He buys me fancy fifties gear – vintage pointy stuff – and takes a lot of care handwashing them. Not even Treena is wearing a suspender belt under her regulation A-line skirt. I’m trying to read over my History notes. The garter belt is making me nervous. I clamp my legs together [...] the unnatural fibres of the skirt lap at the tops of my exposed thighs, like a one-night stand that you don’t want to touch you in the morning. The train clunks gingerly up the line, a supermodel descending the runway in six-inch platform shoes.⁴⁰⁷

As Viva’s body causes quite a stir, this scene galvanises the awkward experience of adolescence and marks an attempt to manage the very inconsistencies inherent in being young and being female. Forrest’s rich imagery fashions a nexus of two opposing patterns of being a girl that assures a coming-of-age fluidity, discomfort and ambiguity. One depicts the austere fabrication of an ‘A-line regulation skirt’ and the other a submerged narrative of provocation that comes in the form of a ‘suspenders belt’, which threatens to become exposed and unharness Viva from her rank as a schoolgirl: ‘*not even* Treena’ is wearing a suspender belt underneath her uniform. The more conservative connotations of Viva’s ‘regulation’ skirt, much like the untainted pallor of Madonna’s dress, relate to girlish inexperience. In the same way, the appearance of Viva’s ‘garter belt’ clinches a stimulating narrative that threatens to slip into regulation, an unnatural matrimony between the two that Viva allegorises, with a distinct wariness, as ‘a one-night stand’ that you ‘don’t want to touch you in the morning’.

⁴⁰⁶ Forrest, p. 52

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 32

Half concealed, the garter belt flirts with Viva's anxieties and the tense air is aggravated with the cutting tangibility of the 'unnatural fibres' that lap at Viva's exposed legs. Her coming-of-age angst is signified through images of transition – a clunking train or a self-conscious supermodel – with Viva endeavouring to contain/maintain the peripheral threats to her girlhood. Forrest uses obstinate verbs that stifle the notion of fluidity or the transience of the young woman as Viva 'clamp[s]' her legs together and her transport 'clunk[s] gingerly'. The clumsy trajectory of the train allegorises the cautious and awkward line of girl-becoming-woman that, in this scene, is fused between the script of 'regulation' and the 'vintage pointy stuff' that taunts and threatens to transfigure the script. Viva's corporeal and conscious movements are bound in a restless aesthetic that holds up (articulated through the suspender belt) the inconsistencies of the young woman that here lie between being composed and becoming uncomfortably unravelled.

The irony of this quotation comes from the way that Forrest imbues 'figure(s)' with a double meaning: Viva may not have success in the statistical figures central to her narrative as a schoolgirl – in a later scene she makes reference to the fact that 'everyone else is good at Maths and I'm not'.⁴⁰⁸ Yet, she capitalises on the 'proudness' with which her developing body is addressed, stating that when she did get *a* figure 'Manny went crazy for it'. Here, Viva finds success in her failings as she plays numerical figures against her physical figure, and reveals a body adorned with 'fancy fifties gear'. This seems, at last, a victory in numbers that is achieved through, to return to Fritzsche's theorisation, a body-centred form of resistance. The 'fifties pointy stuff' exaggerates aspects of Viva's identity that do not conform to the aforementioned straightjacket of femininity. Not quite one thing or another, Viva gestures toward the material instabilities and contradictory layering that is equally inherent in Madonna's image. Each represents the palimpsestic pallor of a girl-body that is uneasily imagined through Viva's embodiment of juxtapositions that are stifled but fluid, that are drowned out, yet capable of spontaneously resurfacing.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 34

Taylor-ing the girl: mimetic makeover and making sense of the self through ‘celebrity skins’

Viva’s coming-of-age experience is not only ‘tipped’ into the messy process of the girl’s *bildung* experience but is also ‘tucked’ into the aesthetics of (dead) celebrities that fully account for the ‘Taylor-ing’ of her self-representation. Viva’s own affiliation with Taylor is used to justify her adolescent foibles, as she states: ‘I love Elizabeth Taylor because she is a short girl with a weight problem’.⁴⁰⁹ She also uses Taylor to strengthen her dual, transitional and ambiguous status as a girl who is ‘not quite’, as Taylor is ‘*torn between being highly sexual and wanting to settle down*’ [emphasis added].⁴¹⁰ Sarah Projansky’s *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* draws parallels between ‘celebrity discourses and girlhood discourses’ and interrogates how this celebrity/girlhood amalgam ‘depend on and affect each other’⁴¹¹. Equally, Lisa Penalosa identifies that celebrity images are ‘like products [...] part of the contemporary landscape and consumers view and employ them in their daily lives [...] into stories to make sense of human existence’.⁴¹² Both studies are curious in that they understand young women’s artistic consumption of celebrity discourse as a part of an attempt to make sense of, when read in conjunction with Heywood and Drake, the lived messiness of their adolescence. This validates Viva’s tendency to use the symbolic dress-up box as a way to make sense of her differences through a ‘mimetic self-transformation’ that is influenced by the embodiment of what I am terming as celebrity ‘skins’.⁴¹³

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 220

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 220

⁴¹¹ Sarah Projansky, *Spectacular Girls: Media Fascination and Celebrity Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), (p.6)

⁴¹² Lisa Penalosa ‘Consuming Madonna Then and Now: An Examination of the Dynamics and Structuring of Celebrity Consumption’, in *Madonna’s Drowned Worlds: New Approaches to her Cultural Transformations 1983-2003* Ed by. Santiago Fouz-Hernandez and Freya Jarman-Ivens (London: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 176-192, (p.176).

⁴¹³ Fritzsche, p. 160

Locating the girl's self-representation within celebrity discourse reveals her contradictory and in-between position as she either 'stands out' as herself and/or 'blends in' as someone else. The standing out/blending in dichotomy accounts for the young woman's simultaneous anxiety about revealing, and desire to expose, her in-process identity as she 'wants to be discovered in the process of self-making'.⁴¹⁴ Yet, Forrest takes this idea of successful self-transformation to further levels of irony as the celebrities Viva mimics are either dead, B-movie stars, or have been out of work for years. The girl of YA anti-chick lit makes her inaccuracies the focus, along with her 'failure' to fully emerge as a successful subject of the 'real' world. This allows young women, through different fantasy discourses, to engage artfully with – and, importantly, to excuse – their failings. *Namedropper* marks Forrest's coming of age as an author, and so reveals how she affiliates her own faults with established celebrity names and explains her curious mimetic affiliation with Viva. This leap from fictional into the autobiographical telegraphs the fact/fiction crossovers that I will be considering in the next two chapters. When asked if she has a huge obsession with movies and celebrities like Viva does, Forrest answers:

The thing I want to get straight about the book – and about me – is that I'm not obsessed with celebrities [...] [Bruce] Springsteen makes me want to be a better me [...] I'm very selective in my obsessions. The Liz thing for me is the battle between being miserably Marilyn and being torn between [the two women's personalities]. The last year's been really tumultuous and quite awkward. I could feel myself being emotionally unanchored, and I felt myself drifting over to the Marilyn side. It's been a big fight to get myself back to my natural state, which is the Liz side.⁴¹⁵

Forrest's account here is irritatingly evocative as much as it is just plain irritating. She firstly refutes that she is obsessed with celebrities, yet proceeds to namedrop at least three (Springsteen, Monroe and Taylor) as part of her vehement denial. While she charges Springsteen with making her want to be a better 'me', she further attempts to pin her

⁴¹⁴Rachel Moseley, 'Dress, Class and Audrey Hepburn: The Significance of the Cinderella Story', in *Fashioning Film Stars: Dress, Culture, Identity* Ed by. Rachel Moseley (London: BFI, 2005), pp. 110-120, (p.118).

⁴¹⁵ Schoenhoff, para. 10

identity as a battle between the two quite unlikely states of being ‘miserably’ Marilyn and ‘naturally’ Liz. Yet, there is no ‘natural side’ and here Forrest is indulging in fantasy as a possible reality away from fiction, while at the same time, being another form of fiction in itself. In actuality, what we are left with is the feeling that *Namedropper* is an overly emotional showcase of Forrest’s insufferable (but NOT obsessive) knowledge of celebrities.

A positive reading of Forrest’s answer is that the almost palpable (yet very much repudiated) obsession with celebrity discourses does productively give shape to Projanksy and Penaloza’s assertion of the collapse of celebrity into daily lives. As highlighted, both scholars interpret this collapse as a means to cultivate stories that make sense of human existence. Animated by references to (dead) celebrities, the very contradictions that exist at the heart of young female identity are exposed: Forrest pours her own ‘tumultuous’ and ‘awkward’ experiences into *Namedropper* in order to flesh out the coming-of-age form of the novel. The fictional space that she carves out is an emotional amphitheatre in which contradictory celebrity sides ‘battle’ each other. In this arena, it appears that any sense of stable identity is unpinned as Forrest describes herself as emotionally ‘unanchored’; Forrest is fictionalised in a drift, disembodied between being ‘miserably Marilyn’ and the ‘natural Liz side’ and she encapsulates the duality of self-representation as ‘torn’ between these two states. However, Forrest centralizes her own hang-ups about her identity. As a result, she mimics Viva’s consumption of feminine identities and in this sense, especially in accordance with Guilbert’s examination of Madonna, appears as if she had been ‘fed on old Hollywood images decades after the event’.⁴¹⁶

The image of consumption that Guilbert evokes foregrounds the way in which celebrity discourses nourish the story and experience of adolescence. Most importantly, however, this occurs ‘decades *after*’ such celebrities were at the height of their popularity.

⁴¹⁶ Georges-Claude Guilbert, *Madonna as Postmodern Myth: How One’s Self-Construction Rewrites Sex, Gender, Hollywood and the American Dream* (London: Macfarland, 2002), p. 137.

This allows for the temporal havoc that is, as I have argued in relation to Halberstam, crucial for upholding the ambiguity of the YA anti-chick protagonist. In terms of bodily resistance, mimetic self-production is more than an unimaginative reproduction of images. As Fritzsche asserts, it is exactly this ‘act of consuming[...] that is always more than a simple, passive reproduction of existing role models; it has its own creative potential’.⁴¹⁷ Fritzsche’s assertion is important as it reveals that by copying these images, young women are not merely treading old ground; rather, the consumption of timeworn templates allows for the creation of new narratives. In relation to Halberstam, there are unscripted possibilities of being torn between two sides, and a thorough engagement with difference that once more evokes the girl’s artful management of inconsistencies. This is writ large in the proceeding section of *Namedropper*. Viva curtails her anxieties about her own overweight body by overplaying her consumption of icons, ‘Taylor-ing’ her weight to fit desirable celebrity discourses. Once again, Forrest brings a perceptible unease about failure to the forefront through an embodiment of juxtapositions:

You’d think Manny was feeding me feathers if I wasn’t so fat. Manny says I am not fat. He says I am voluptuous. I don’t feel voluptuous. I feel like a cow and have reoccurring dreams about running to do a big leap and then not being able to lift myself off the ground [...] On a good day, I know I’m not *fat* fat. I’m somewhere between Madonna in the “Lucky Star” video and Drew Barrymore pre-comeback. Or Elizabeth Taylor in *Butterfield 8*. I have these boobs and this butt that are just separate from me, like they’re having a conversation with each other and I’m not allowed to join in. My own body makes me feel like I am alone.⁴¹⁸

Viva’s body is a surface of conflicting styles: the whimsical nature of ‘feathers’ and their fluttering trajectory compared with the bulk of the ‘cow’ illustrates her status as an unsettled young woman in a transitional, coming-of-age period. In comparison to being fed ‘feathers’, it is Viva’s consumption of celebrity discourses that give her weight. The depiction of her body as ‘so fat’ hyperbolizes the influence of the fantasy discourses that she consumes, such as Madonna, Drew Barrymore and Elizabeth Taylor, and as such,

⁴¹⁷ Fritzsche, p.160

⁴¹⁸ Forrest, p. 26

provides a recipe for her self-transformation. Viva's apprehension about being 'fat' is reshaped, in the parlance of celebrity, as pride in her 'voluptuous' curves. In light of consuming celebrity discourses yet combined with the coming-of-age young woman's anxieties about her body, Viva's own body is self-consciously dissected into the various parts of 'boobs' and 'butt' that she feels are 'separate' from her. As her body makes her feel 'alone', Viva 'stands out' in her coming of age transitions and here, her bedroom dreams are changed into a personal politics of an inaccurate self-description: a corporeal conversation that 'she is not allowed to join in' with. Viva's self-production here is created by the imagery of a body out-of-joint, one that has been fed fantastical images of old Hollywood. As Viva is 'somewhere in between', she productively preserves the failed and 'not-quite' polarities of her girlish identity through a closing statement that is ironically definitive given the image of her divided body, as she asserts: '*I am alone*'.

A method in the messiness: the artful management of failure

It is the idea of daily failings that saturate *Namedropper*; they intermingle with Viva's narrative fantasies that in turn, signify the 'stretch of imagination' typical of the YA tradition. In this imagined space, the girl can be who she wants to be and, as if by magic, the chaotic geography of coming of age will productively lead her to where she needs to be. The 'stretch' of fantasy, in light of Gauntlett's assertion, offers liberating possibilities. These possibilities are made explicit through, as explored above, the tailored/ 'Taylored' girl-body. Unlike conventional YA traditions, *Namedropper* reveals how these fantastical spaces do not necessarily lead to the perfect imagined life but are also vulnerable to be infiltrated by failures. In Viva's story, her failings and failures may be 'little' but their impact is great and, occurring daily, they are set out in undeviating lists: 'shoes pulled off without tying laces', 'expensive sunglasses with one lens crushed', 'congealed yogurt bowls', and 'the time I decided to cut my hair based on a picture of Louise Brooks and

ended up looking like Prince Valiant'.⁴¹⁹ Crushing, congealing, and cutting suggest that each of Viva's botched episodes leaves distracting traces to what should be successful conclusions. More than this, they are not just one-offs. In fact, they are creatively scheduled into Viva's day as acts of deliberate destruction and they offer (especially in terms of Viva's DIY haircut) a breakthrough in terms of unscripted schedules and imaginative potentials.⁴²⁰

It is here that Halberstam's own question – 'what kind of rewards can failure offer?' – comes back into focus.⁴²¹ It is the idea that failure can be 'rewarding' that 'dismantles the logics of success' and allows for 'more creative [and] more surprising ways of being in the world'.⁴²² To Halberstam, failure has its own rationale; as failure is both creative and surprising, it carries 'its own complexity, its own aesthetic, but ultimately, its own *beauty*' [emphasis added].⁴²³ It is, moreover, a peculiar art form in itself. Alongside Halberstam's hypothesis about failure opening up creative and surprising ways of being, Klein's theory of the girl's artful engagement with her contradictory surroundings is equally suitable for comparison: one must remember the artful effort that Viva is making in order to fail. A later scene in *Namedropper* exposes a (dis)organised space that reveals Viva's creative agency and her surprising ways of living within the girl-bedroom. Viva describes her unruly bedroom as a treasure trove that holds the paradox of rewarding failure at its core. She confesses:

There have been little failures on a daily basis [...] most often, there are aesthetic differences in opinion, an adult's perception of a room looking like a pigsty versus a child's belief that a mess is the best place to hide happiness you want to come back to later. Use the pile of dirty knickers and odd socks to conceal the ring that Treena swapped with you, the necklace Manny gave you [...] you thought these things were gone for good? Think how delighted you'll be when you see them again [...] You need the controlled chaos of your bedroom to keep you going.⁴²⁴

⁴¹⁹ Forrest, p. 128

⁴²⁰ Ibid., 128

⁴²¹ Halberstam, p. 3

⁴²² Ibid., 3

⁴²³ Ibid., 93

⁴²⁴ Forrest, p. 128

Here, we see the young woman making sense of her lived messiness, and failure is made the foundation of Viva's fantasy retreat. Beneath the piles of dirty knickers, and the odd sock here and there, Viva's bedroom is a mere *guise* of disorder. Each flaw is explicitly crafted and deliberately placed and Viva engages with, and constructs, 'difference' within this 'arty' bedlam. Halberstam's delineation of failure as craftily carrying its own logic is revealed through the creative agency and communitive juxtapositions of this space – for example, the mess/happiness, and the child/adult conflict– that offers 'new versions of maturation, *bildung*, and growth that do not depend upon the logic of succession and success'.⁴²⁵ It is 'mess' that inspires a girlish inventiveness, and the rewards of Viva's 'failures' is the creation of a new girl (dis)order formed from the flaws of this space. The sullied and strewn underwear hides a grander narrative as Viva ironically comes clean about the fact that they are preserving a 'ring' and a 'necklace' underneath them.

To expand on the evocative depiction of failure as an art form and as a site of productive continuation rather than destruction, Halberstam states that 'failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers'.⁴²⁶ The 'odd' and 'dirty' items do not impede the 'delight' brought about by the necklace and the ring. The lived messiness disturbs, quite literally, 'clean' boundaries through the juxtaposing of the dirty and the delightful. As Halberstam states, failure accounts for the conservation of 'wondrous anarchy', and the flaws and faults that interrupt daily narratives also conceal and preserve that which you can 'come back to later'. Viva's personalised girl-zone becomes a paradoxical surface, artfully constructed in order to make 'room' for the girl's empowering inconsistencies. Discarded clothes are not useless – they are in fact 'used' – and there is a method in Viva's messiness: her chaos is controlled and her (dis)order 'keeps' her creative and imaginative trajectory 'going'.

⁴²⁵ Halberstam, p.119.

⁴²⁶ Ibid., 119

‘All roads lead to Viva’: YA anti-chick and a new girl history in the making?

At the beginning of this chapter, I outlined the ways in which *Namedropper* accomplishes a sense of successful failure. At the same time, I queried whether or not the creative possibilities gathered from such a paradoxical state could be preserved. I use the idea of preservation here specifically in terms of the problems that are inherent in attempting to extend the transitional position of the girl as she will, inevitably, grow up. As I have drawn out throughout this thesis, one of the main problems in Forrest’s fiction is that its resistance to convention is always in some way restrained by the very characters that she creates to promote this resistance. This is namely due to Forrest’s persistent ‘girling’ of her female protagonists who, as representatives of anti-chick lit’s straddling of subversion/subservience to the conventions of chick lit, are themselves not fully one thing or another.

Yet, what is evident in the final scenes of *Namedropper*, more than in *Thin Skin* and *Cherries in the Snow*, is that in using the coming-of-age format, Forrest attempts to articulate new ways in which the potentials that are gathered from unlikely juxtapositions and the in-between spaces of the ‘girl’ might be preserved. Viva’s character embodies the tension between longevity and transience that stems from her wish to prolong the legacy of the dead actresses that she idolises through consistent referencing and mimesis. In these terms, her character’s consistent experimentation with different identities ‘provides a recipe for longevity’, and Viva’s transitional position as a girl becomes grounded by this ‘regular self-reinvention’.⁴²⁷ Given the consistent self-reinvention and the alternative avenues of experimentation with identity, Viva, like most of Forrest’s protagonists, carves out a space in which a collective sense of resistance to gender scripts instead collapses in a

⁴²⁷ Gauntlett, p. 162

very self-centred narrative. As noted earlier, it is ‘in the end’ that all roads lead ‘back to Viva’. Viva’s narcissism is reminiscent of my examination of *Cherries in the Snow* in chapter two, as the conclusion of the novel introduced that the young woman’s language of adolescent resistance is in fact ‘self-centred’. With this in mind, I want to focus on the etymology of ‘viva’: it is at once an exclamation of longevity through its meaning of ‘long live!’. It is also an abbreviation of ‘Viva Voce’ and therefore indicative of the oral exams that, as Forrest makes the reader all too aware, Viva has worked very hard to fail. In these terms, Viva, as a character who is always and already failing, is with reference to the etymology of ‘viva’, grounded in celebrating and preserving these failures. To return to *A Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam holds the ‘archive’ as an ultimate symbol of preservation but also of progression. In the following quotation, Halberstam captures the ‘archive’ in all of its ‘fucked-up’ potential. Much like the fucked-up girl, the archive presents the ultimate symbol of temporal havoc as its very foundations are representative allusions to the past:

The notion of an archive has to extend beyond the image of a place to collect material and hold documents, it has to become a floating signifier for the kinds of lives implied by its paper remnants[...] In order for an archive to function it requires users, interpreters [...] to wade through and piece together a jigsaw puzzle of queer history in the making.⁴²⁸

To Halberstam, the archive is not a mere dumping ground for the lost and defunct; as a creative outlet that can ‘extend beyond’ itself, the archive is formed of transitional miscellanea that house contradictory patterns in which ‘new’ ideas can be formed from ‘old’ templates. As the chief objective of the archive is to preserve ephemera, it is at once a workshop of make-believe, at the same time as evoking a sense of failure as it collates the fragments of past lives that are no longer one thing or another thing. As an extension of Halberstam’s definition of the archive and its transitory potentials, I would argue that YA anti-chick lit disavows ideas of coming of age and instead takes the position as a ‘signifier’

⁴²⁸ Halberstam, p. 170

for the in-between. The fucked-up girl, who is deliberately fucking things up, represents – to extrapolate Halberstam’s ‘queered’ history – a new ‘girl’ history in the making. The YA anti-chick protagonist defies the maturation and successes of conventional YA fiction and, importantly, like the archive, is ‘temporally schizzed’, continually unfinished, in-process, and visibly in the ‘making’.

In the end of *Namedropper*, Viva fails her exams; she also finds out she has misheard the lyrics to *Boys of Summer*. By her own admission, she has ‘lived her life a certain way’ because of these lyrics and she asserts that if the lyrics are ‘I *can* tell you [my love for you will still be strong] and not I *can’t* tell you, then I don’t want to live in this world’.⁴²⁹ Left stranded and unscripted, Viva remains in a ‘world’ that she has built up from the foundations of a narrative that is ‘*not-quite*’, as is evident in her mishearing of ‘can’t’ in the place of ‘can’ [emphasis added]. Rather than joining the ‘real’ world, the implication is that she will continue to live by and preserve her failings by simply ‘find[ing] a new record to mishear’.⁴³⁰ As Viva is no longer living her life in ‘certain’ harmony to set lyrics, she is unanchored. Yet, Viva articulates that the ‘mess’ she has made by mishearing her favourite record can actually be preserved: through finding a ‘new record’ to mishear, a new pattern of being can be formulated from old behaviour.⁴³¹ The mistaken lyrics become part of the miscellanea that has informed her story, which, like the remnants that compose an archive, holds a transitional potential: a ‘new’ girl history.

Through missteps, Viva ends up precisely where she needs to be. Yet, this does not mean, in relation to ‘conventional’ YA chick lit, that she successfully reaches the ‘end’ of girlhood. While the narrative is, in light of Forrest’s other fiction, typically self-centred, for once the self-centred assault made by Forrest’s protagonist upon ‘collective’ resistance grants access to a sense of preservation that is made explicit by Viva’s character. In these terms, Forrest’s YA anti-chick dismantles Trites’ designation that the empowerment of

⁴²⁹ Forrest, p. 238

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 238

⁴³¹ Ibid., 238

coming-of-age fiction is short-lived, and she does so ironically by championing girl (dis)orders, uneasy juxtapositions and ‘queered’ temporalities. Rather than a ‘grand moment’ of self-realisation, the closing passage reveals Viva’s ‘failure’ to mature into a well-rounded, and recognisably successful, woman. Instead, like Elizabeth Taylor in her later career, Viva’s ‘not-quite’ identity is preserved amongst a hubbub of the unscripted and imaginative. The following scene depicts this, as Viva, nearing the end of the school summer holidays and after failing her A-levels, attempts to find a job in London:

A crowd of extras is a great place for a troubled star to hide. Elizabeth Taylor did it. In 1969 she appeared, unbilled [...] just a violet-eyed, double-lashed face in the crowd. It was the happiest she ever was.
And then I remembered one extra.
I didn’t have time to dress as anyone [...] In Uptown records, Marcus was shutting up shop for the day [...] when he saw me he smiled. The gold of his teeth caught the last rays of the day’s sun.⁴³²

Aside from the fact that, realistically, any sunny possibilities available to Viva in ‘Uptown Records’ would not exist in a post-recessionary world, the passage is completely immersed in unscripted potentials and archival preservation. As an ‘extra’ is ‘not-quite’ an actress in a fully ‘successful’ sense, the many ‘extras’ depicted here, along with the capacity to hide amongst them, builds on the scene as an archive of preserves and backups. This passage is also ‘crowded’ with echoes of my earlier examination of the formation of rewarding failure and the ‘happiness’ that can be construed from ‘mess’: Viva describes the ‘new’ anonymity of Taylor found later in her career, a mere a ‘double-lashed’ and ‘violet-eyed’ face in a disordered throng. Yet, Viva makes the contradictory assertion that it was the ‘happiest’ that Taylor ever was. Viva follows in the wake of this anonymity: she has ‘no time’ to dress as anyone, and this emphasises the creative potentials of unscripted life schedules. It also captures the transitional and unruly capacity of the coming-of-age girl to both ‘stand out’ and ‘blend in’.

⁴³² Ibid., p.239

In this respect, Viva carves out a space that is unfit for conventional narratives and, with this, she makes room for a minority resistance against ‘normative’ conventions of girlhood that are present in more consumable YA fictions. Her allusions to ‘remembering’ one ‘extra’ give her deficient dress code an element of not just creating, but also preserving, a ‘new’ identity amongst her surrounding lived messiness. The ‘trail of gingerbread crumbs’—the postmodern hubbub that has guided Viva’s narrative fantasies— provide a recipe for preservation; accordingly, *Namedropper* is a coming-of-age novel that is framed by *unbecoming*, managing inconsistencies, (re)collections of ‘extras’, and (mis)hearing lyrics. Each component ultimately plays out notions of the fucked-up girl’s success at getting it wrong. Perhaps, in a broader context, *Namedropper* even partially excuses Forrest’s ‘self-centred’ language as a namedropper herself: while there is nowhere for Forrest to hide in terms of her submission to another ambivalent ending within her fiction, the concluding scene casts light on the kinds of complex multiplicity inherent in the construction of contemporary femininities that *Namedropper* both unsettles and preserves.

Chapter 4

‘I don’t wanna walk around with you’:

Routes, Roots, and the Grrrl's Geography of Rebellion in Stephanie Kuehnert's *I wanna be your Joey Ramone*

Bedrooms and Drumsticks: composing grrrlhood

'Displaced in this place, the only home I know is next to you, blasting the stereo'.⁴³³

These lyrics are composed by Emily Black, the young female protagonist of Stephanie Kuehnert's *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* (2008). Kuehnert's coming-of-age text joins Forrest's work as an examination of the girl/grrrl's gathering status as a figure who challenges 'normative' accounts of femininity. However, as the title is based on riot grrrl band Sleater-Kinney's song 'I wanna be Your Joey Ramone', I use this chapter to examine Kuehnert's representation of young women as agents of unruliness through the 'unconventional' influence of punk music. The musical lines that Kuehnert incorporates reveal how Emily's (mostly) all-girl punk band, She Laughs – true to the riot grrrl ethos discussed in chapter two – transform the passive girl consumer into an active girl producer and eventually become famous. Set in the cornfield scattered American countryside of Carlisle, Pennsylvania, *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* depicts a young woman who, to return to Halberstam, embodies and 'tells disorderly narratives' of her displacement.⁴³⁴ Much like Forrest's focus on the young woman using 'make-up' (ch.2), as well as 'making up' fantasies (ch.3), in order to celebrate their contradictions and practice gestures of resistance, this chapter will explore how the young woman composes a space for the haptic geography of becoming-woman through 'making' music. Moreover, rather than homing in on typically British punk scenes, Kuehnert's focus is geographically specific and charts punk music's effect on a young woman in a small-scale suburb within the U. S.

⁴³³ Stephanie Kuehnert, *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* (New York: Pocket Books, 2008), (p.233).

⁴³⁴ Halberstam, p. 187.

I wanna be your Joey Ramone joins a host of critical scholarship stretching from the early 90s to the late 2000s that explores girlhood and the influence of riot grrrl, while also querying the extent to which ‘music’ might be instrumentalised as a means of composing young female subjectivities. Key examples of this scholarship include Gayle Wald and Joanna Gottlieb’s ‘Smells like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrls, Revolution, and Women in Independent Rock’ (1994), Sheila Whiteley’s *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (1997), Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine’s *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* (1998), Marion Leonard’s *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse, and Girl Power* (2007) and Sara Marcus’ *Girls to the Front* (2010). Kuehnert’s text captures the disorderliness that is typically embodied by the teenage girl of YA anti-chick lit, a genre that tends to explore the artistic production of the young woman as in-progress by portraying her lines of failure as deliberate and artful. Certainly, Kuehnert’s novel is explicitly invested in ‘the *art* of bad endings’, as distinct from the clear-cut trajectories of success that prevail in more conventional stories of the girl-becoming-woman.⁴³⁵

I wanna be your Joey Ramone explores what Gayle Wald in ‘Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth’ identifies as the way in which ‘youth music cultures continue to offer girls important sources of emotional sanctuary and vital outlets for the expression of frustration and hope’.⁴³⁶ To return to the opening quotation of this chapter, it is the ‘blast’ of the ‘stereo’ that, to Emily, offers a version of sanctuary that she relates to as ‘home’. Her frustration at being ‘displaced in *this place*’ plays out in musical form, and plays up to the sense of lack and longing that she feels as a young woman. Without the outlet of music, the girl would remain as anonymous as the ‘place’ (early 90s American suburbia) in which Emily lives, and with which she feels at odds. Indeed, one of the objectives of the riot grrrl collective was to support young women as they attempted to make sense of their feelings of isolation and alienation. Riot

⁴³⁵ Kuehnert, p. 268

⁴³⁶ Gayle Wald, ‘Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth’, *Feminisms and Youth Cultures* 23:3 (1998), 585-610, (p.608).

grrrl has now come to be defined in a number of ways: as a scene; a network; a chapter; a movement. Yet, whatever the chosen terminology, Marisa Meltzer maps out the prodigious impact of the détourned punk collective. Drawing on her own experiences, Meltzer recounts how the ‘underground movement trickled up from punk-rock utopias to teen girls’ bedrooms around the world’.⁴³⁷ Riot grrrl’s philosophies of self-production and self-making (zines, music, clothes) trickled into their girl audience’s fantasies of ‘becoming-otherwise’ [emphasis added].⁴³⁸ Riot grrrl’s valorisation of this ‘becoming-otherwise’ developed in tension with the ideologies and images of a culture that had failed to meet the needs of young women, and which did not represent their diverse experiences and distinctive aesthetic. While riot grrrl aimed to turn girl fantasies into creative philosophies, it was the movement’s emphasis on creating music that provided a space for the young woman to navigate her felt confusion.

Julia Downes explores how riot grrrl drew on punk culture in order to widen the parameters of contemporary femininity. This was a particularly bold and unconventional move as punk subculture was a space that was unremittingly intended for white, heteronormative masculinity, which meant the exclusion of women. Riot grrrl’s utilisation of punk is, of course, not to ignore the prominent female punk musicians who were pushing against gender boundaries in punk music before riot grrrl, particularly in the late-70s British punk scene to which Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and The Banshees (1976), Poly Styrene of X Ray Spex (1976), The Slits (1976), and The Raincoats (1977) contributed. Despite the marginalisation of women, the influence of punk did, nevertheless, introduce a ‘DIY ethic to a generation of young people, who seized the impetus to create subversive art, music, and culture. In particular, women used this moment to open up a subcultural space for the transgression of gender and sexual hegemony’.⁴³⁹ In the same

⁴³⁷ Marisa Meltzer, *Girl Power: The Nineties Revolution in Music* (New York: Faber and Faber Inc., 2010). (p.x).

⁴³⁸ Malatino, para. 5

⁴³⁹ Julia Downes, ‘The Expansion of Punk Rock: Riot Grrrl Challenges to Gender Power Relations in British Indie Music Subcultures’, *Women’s Studies* 41:2 (2012), 204-237, (p.204).

way, riot grrrl sought to carve out 'public' spaces (for example, beyond the bedroom) for the articulation/exhibition of the grrrl's creativity. Riot grrrl achieved this, in part, by stressing the community's debt to both punk *and* feminism through their music-making and live performances.

In *Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock and Roll*, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press quote Sonic Youth's Kim Gordon, whose memoir *Girl in a Band* (2015) marked her own contribution to the recent stage-invasion of female music memoirs in popular culture. Gordon's *Girl in a Band* joins Kristin Hersh's *Rat Girl* (2012), Carrie Brownstein's (Sleater-Kinney) *Hunger Makes me a Modern Girl* (2015) and Viv Albertine's (The Slits) *Clothes, Clothes, Clothes. Music, Music, Music. Boys, Boys, Boys* (2015), as texts that aimed to push the grrrl effect into the present. These memoirs have also afforded women musicians the opportunity to define themselves in language and return to exorcize their longstanding frustrations at their marginalisation. Press and Reynolds' quotation reveals some of Gordon's wistful reflections on her life prior to becoming a super-cool female role model for misguided (sonic) youth. '[B]efore I picked up the bass', Gordon claims, 'I was just another girl with a fantasy'.⁴⁴⁰ Here, Gordon makes her girlish fantasies a reality as she picks up an instrument and begins to make music. The switch from the girl's fantasy to reality is central to my examination of *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* and I question: as the transitional state of girlhood is usually characterised by the performance/staging of different identities, can young women transform their bedroom fantasies of becoming-*otherwise* into a reality?

As Susan Smith states, music is 'a performance of power (enacted by music makers and by listeners) that is creative; that brings spaces, peoples, places into form'.⁴⁴¹ Smith joins Wald in charting how music provided young women with a suitable outlet to express their sense of displacement. Halberstam, meanwhile, takes the argument about the

⁴⁴⁰ Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock 'n' Roll* (London: Serpent's tail, 1995), (p.247).

⁴⁴¹ Susan J. Smith, 'Performing the (Sound) World', *Environment and Planning: Society and Space*, 18 (2000), 615-637. (p.634).

‘performance’ of power and creativity further, arguing that producing disorderly and alternative narratives demands that we expose the ‘silences, gaps, and the ruptures in the spaces of performance’.⁴⁴² If adolescence is a *stage* in the woman’s life cycle, I wish here to reflect on the additional meaning of the ‘stage’ in the context of Smith and Halberstam’s references to the ‘performance’ of identities and power. The ‘stage’ of the girl’s maturation is difficult, transitional and confusing but it is also a space for creativity. In this way, the ‘stage’ of adolescence echoes Halberstam’s illustration of uncovering the ruptures, gaps and silences within life narratives. Music-making, then, enables young women, central to the ‘stage’ of adolescence, to make full use of their transitional agency, or what Marion Leonard terms as their ‘bodies’ spatial potentialities’ (for example, Kim Gordon’s fantasies becoming a physical reality as she ‘picked up’ the bass).⁴⁴³

Leonard expands on the definitions of performing, stating that ‘performances [...] are not simply an outlet for creativity but an attempt to communicate to and engage with [...] not only to *show off* but also to try to *reach* the audience’ [emphasis added].⁴⁴⁴ With the work of Smith, Halberstam and Leonard in mind, I will argue that the ‘potentialities’ available within the ‘stage’ of girlhood consist of both the fantasy of ‘showing off’ (posing) as well as the physicality of ‘reaching out’ (composing) themselves. Much like riot grrrl’s (mis)use of cosmetics, as explored by Forrest, Kuehnert focusses on how the young women of riot grrrl embodied the art of punk music– with its ‘imperfect’ aesthetics and the audible roughness of its production process– in order to recognise, celebrate and spread their resistant agendas. In this respect, *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* explores how Emily makes the most out of the silences, gaps and ruptures that characterise her displaced coming-of-age experience. With this, she moves from her humble beginnings to an artfully ‘bad’ ending and into a productive grrrlish rebellion against ‘normative’ aspects of femininity.

⁴⁴² Halberstam, p.187

⁴⁴³ Valentine, Gill, *Social Geographies: Space and Society* (London: Taylor&Francis, 2001), (p.41).

⁴⁴⁴ Marion Leonard, ‘Paper planes: travelling the new grrrl geographies’ in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* Ed by. Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1998) pp. 102-122, (p.119).

At the same time, problems arise from the way in which the expression of power/resistance through music can be interpreted. This comes to the fore through the idea that ‘art’ can be made from ‘bad endings’ and the ‘failures’ of young women can become translated through a performance, portrayed through Emily’s band, She Laughs. What is problematic is that a large proportion of the novel charts She Laughs’ fame and success, suggesting that the alienation and ‘rebellion’ of young women can be exploited, re-packaged and re-sold to feminine consumers as a ‘new’ identity brand. This clash of subversive/sell-out is central to the politics of the ‘countercultural rebel’, as argued by Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter in *The Rebel Sell* (2005).⁴⁴⁵ As they pumped out a ‘subversive’ ethos, remaining ‘unpopular in order to be authentic’, countercultural rebels—who were originally punk and then grunge musicians (for example, The Sex Pistols’ Johnny Rotten and Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain) – were, at the same time, co-opted by popular media. Heath and Potter describe how the counterculture addressed this tricky paradox by adopting a ‘Trojan Horse’ strategy, going undercover in order to discharge their destructive impulses from within the mainstream. In this scenario, the subcultural ‘other’ and the ‘threats’ he or she presented were not contained or minimised (as Dick Hebdige popularly cites in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, 1979); rather, the ‘undercover’ rebel was ideally poised, in the words of Cobain, to ‘rot the mechanics from the inside’.⁴⁴⁶ Charlotte Greig draws on this idea further as she examines how ‘alternative’ music gets caught in the crossfire between small-town/mainstream and subversive/sell-out. In so doing, Greig maps out ‘the popular song’s transformation’ from a ‘collective form of expression within a given community’ to its then problematic ‘existence as a commodity’.⁴⁴⁷

As I have identified from my analyses of a number of Forrest’s texts, the co-option of collective resistance is as much invited as it muted by the self-centred language of

⁴⁴⁵ Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter, *The Rebel Sell: Why the Culture can’t be Jammed* (Sussex: Capstone, 2005), (p.17).

⁴⁴⁶ Heath and Potter, p. 16

⁴⁴⁷ Charlotte Grieg, ‘Female Identity and the Female Songwriter’, in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender in Sexing the Groove: Popular, Music, and Gender* Ed by. Sheila Whiteley (USA: Routledge, 1997), pp.168-178, (p.172).

adolescence that is promoted by both the girl and ‘girlled’ women characters in her work. This, moreover, echoes the broader context of anti-chick lit, as its own counter-cultural practices are restrained by the influence of the mass-market genre of chick lit to which it is affiliated. Given the problems that occur as a result of resistant narratives that end up being co-opted by popular culture, I would like to draw on the discrepancy inherent in ‘composing’ girlhood. Does the young woman, in a sense, pull her own strings in terms of transforming her haptic geography of coming of age into an alternative narrative that displaces ‘normative’ accounts of femininity? Or are her ‘spatial potentialities’ caught in the conflict between creative, ‘rebellious’ expression and commodity?

Growing up Punk: the coming-of-age outsider and punks’ language of the rejected

In conjunction with Leonard’s focus on the ‘spatial potentialities’ of young women that are, I argue, made available for exploration through music-making, Kuehnert describes how Emily ‘takes her first steps to The Beatles and learn[s] to dance to The Clash’.⁴⁴⁸ By depicting this ‘stage’ of Emily’s experience, Kuehnert explores specific avenues that, tying into Wald’s focus on music culture as an important source of expression, reveal how music inflects Emily’s movements within the small-town geography that surrounds her. As the narrative of *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* moves from the ‘unending cornfields’ of the countryside to the ‘towering skyscrapers’ of the city, Emily rebels against her roots and begins the transformation from country girl into punk rock star.⁴⁴⁹ While *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* is a YA anti-chick novel in which Kuehnert explores geographical and generational conflicts through the trope of the mother-daughter relationship, it is also a novel that investigates the role of music in bringing the girl into being: in the wake of her

⁴⁴⁸ Kuehnert, p. 47

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 166

mother's abandonment and the residual boredom of her insular upbringing, Emily rises from the dust of the inspiration of her absent mother's old record collections. Her story marks her growth from a girlish groupie into a grrrl 'goddess' as her band She Laughs, formed with best friends Regan and Tom, 'silently plot how to make the city beneath [them] clamour at [their] feet'.⁴⁵⁰

At the same time, She Laughs' evolution from a small-town trio to a huge success story plays on the struggle between 'selling out' and preserving the band's 'subversive' intent (to make the city 'clamour', as Emily puts it) that I explored earlier. In order to emphasise the fragmented geography of Emily's coming-of-age story, *I Wanna be your Joey Ramone* incorporates both first and third-person narratives, through which Emily's 'present' reflections and the nostalgic resonances of her mother Louisa's past experiences are interwoven. This is as well as illuminating the 'ruptures, gaps and silences' that are inherent in the disorderly narrative of YA anti-chick lit. Drip-fed clues as to her mother's whereabouts, Emily's story is shaped by her mother's absence, yet it also embodies a specific sense of generational separatism that is characteristic of the displaced young women who were part of the riot grrrl community. With her mother's picture as a 'compass', Emily attempts to carve out a rebellious route for herself, yet the narrative is simultaneously led by Emily's desire to reconnect with her familial roots and bring her mother back to her.⁴⁵¹

Doreen Massey, while not explicitly referencing riot grrrl, presents an argument that helps to shed light on these aspects of Kuehnert's text. Massey studies the 'spatial construction' of youth cultures and describes how youths gain their power and control through a 'reworking of the geographical imagination of culture'.⁴⁵² In doing so, she stresses the transitional relationship between "'roots" and "routes"'.⁴⁵³ In contrast to the

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid., 140

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 220

⁴⁵² Doreen Massey, 'The Spatial Construction of Youth Cultures' in *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Cultures* Ed by. Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.121-130, (p.123).

⁴⁵³ Massey, p.123.

idea that young women have the power to rework their ‘roots’ and form new ‘routes’, Kristen Schilt paints a bleak picture (one laden with mixed metaphors) of adolescent girls as ‘saplings in a hurricane’, who, having ‘lost belief in themselves as talented and creative beings’, are ‘in danger of drowning in the Bermuda Triangle of adolescence’.⁴⁵⁴ In a similar vein, Roberta Trites charts the abundance of ‘growth’ metaphors in YA literature, stating that ‘adolescent growth involves gaining or losing something; girls themselves are metaphors for powerlessness’.⁴⁵⁵ The active transferal from old ‘roots’ to new ‘routes’ that Massey proposes is a symbolic marker of the girl’s ‘growth’, as she turns the ‘hurricane’ of her adolescent ‘powerlessness’ to her own advantage. As an alternative to powerlessness, young women might choose to be instrumental in developing their creative agency; they might, moreover, explore their displaced, in-between status in order to become-*otherwise*. *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* considers the potential of young women to rework the ‘private spaces and domestic cultures [which] seem to structure girls’ lives’, querying the extent to which they can develop the dreams of resistance that are formulated, and remain within, the fantasies they play out in their bedrooms.⁴⁵⁶ Rather than the young woman submitting to a loss of faith in herself, Kuehnert analyses how she might use her ‘roots’ as a springboard into the wilderness of a more disorderly narrative,

The geography of the grrrl’s rebellion leads the young woman, according to Kearney, down a defining route of ‘separatism’.⁴⁵⁷ To Kearney, ‘separatism’ was a liberating position from which riot grrrl’s rallied against all that stood in the way of their community (primarily misogynist institutions, along with ageist attacks) and which threatened to hinder their resistance. Kearney continues to highlight that this position of ‘separatism’ was not about self-centred, individual resistance, but instead meant

⁴⁵⁴ Kristen Schilt, ‘I’LL RESIST WITH EVERY INCH AND EVERY BREATH’ Girls and Zine Making as a Form of Resistance’, *Youth and Society*, 35: 1 (2003), 71-97, (p.71).

⁴⁵⁵ Trites, p.26

⁴⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 26

⁴⁵⁷ Mary Celeste Kearney, ‘Don’t Need You’’: Rethinking Identity Politics and Separatism from a Grrrl Perspective’, in *Youth Culture: Identity in a Postmodern World* ed by. Jonathon S. Epstein (Massachusetts: Blackwell, 1998), pp.148-189, (p.149).

‘reinterpreting the “do it yourself” directive commonly associated with the punk scene as “don’t need you” – a self-affirmation as well as refusal of assistance from outside the grrrl collective’.⁴⁵⁸ [emphasis added]. Lisa Darms has more recently drawn upon this idea of separatism, defining it as a ‘kinship of outsiderism’ that aligned with grrrls’ antagonist activities.⁴⁵⁹ While I find Kearney’s demarcation of the rebellious rhetoric of ‘don’t need you’ valuable, I prefer Darms’ distinction of grrrl outcasts as united by a specific ‘kinship’, as it incorporates both the possibilities and problems of this position. Firstly, the idea that grrrls’ lingered on the peripheries, but at the same time managed to preserve a tight-knit ‘kinship’ of rebellion, enhances the political impact of their collective resistance. Yet, remaining on the peripheries recapitulates the girl’s marginal position in contemporary culture more generally. This is slightly more problematic, and implies that grrrl ‘separatism’ is also a form of retreatism that weakens the force of their resistant gestures.

Kearney and Darms’ examination of ‘separatism’ and ‘outsiderism’ can be read alongside Massey’s observation of the girl’s reworking of her established ‘roots’ to unconventional ‘routes’: it was riot grrrls’ reinterpretation of the original punk ‘roots’ of do-it-yourself that inspired their widespread rhetoric of rebellious separatism (don’t need you). Through Kearney, Darms and Massey’s analyses, I have found three vital bases that make the grrrl a figure who is capable of challenging ‘normative’ accounts of femininity: roots, routes, and rebellion. These bases not only form the foundation of my thematic examination of *I wanna be your Joey Ramone*, but also offer a different interpretation of the etymological roots of the term *grrrl* (as in the shift from the ‘ir’ of girl to the three r’s). To Halberstam, a ‘ritualised and stylised language of the rejected’ frames punk.⁴⁶⁰ This ‘stylised’ language of rejection is reflected in what Kathleen Hanna terms a ‘jigsaw feeling’

⁴⁵⁸ Kearney, p.149.

⁴⁵⁹ Lisa Darms, ‘Preserving Contradiction: The Riot Grrrl Collection at the Fales Library’, *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, 22, (2012), 335–341, (p.337).

⁴⁶⁰ Halberstam, p.153.

(borrowing from the title of the 1978 single by Siouxsie and The Banshees).⁴⁶¹ The jigsaw puzzle became a metaphor used by riot grrrl's to describe the 'confusion of girls who were trying to see where they fitted into a male-dominated world'.⁴⁶² The aesthetic of the jigsaw—as it is constructed by finding the different pieces that, eventually, all fit together—also mirrors the way in which riot grrrl's 'pieced' themselves together to form their 'kinship' of outsiderism. This, moreover, reveals the extent to which the grrrl's 'roots' are embedded in the language of rejection and not quite 'fitting' together that Halberstam identifies with the punk movement.

At the same time, it seems fitting that Kuehnert has incorporated this punk language of the 'rejected' into her YA anti-chick novel. The narrative, after all, combines an account of Emily's mother's experiences as an outsider with Emily's own story and therefore 'unites avenues of the outcast, the rejected, and the rebellious'.⁴⁶³ In her examination of YA fiction, Trites describes how the plot is typically based on 'the frequent assumptions readers bring to the genre'.⁴⁶⁴ These assumptions are based on the reader's 'belief that the protagonists will arrive successfully at their metaphorical destination and grow'.⁴⁶⁵ Instead of the success and eventual growth of her central protagonist, Kuehnert describes her 'desperation' to develop different accounts of young women's experiences through her fiction.⁴⁶⁶ To do this, she addresses the awkward space of adolescence that exists outside of reader's basic assumptions of growth by acknowledging, rather than ignoring, the 'elephant in the room'. In an online interview, Kuehnert highlights:

I wrote [...] simply to give kids like my characters a voice. There is a perception of suburbia as perfect and safe, but there are broken homes and broken hearts everywhere. I think there is a tendency in our culture—maybe in suburbia especially—to ignore the elephant in the middle of the room.⁴⁶⁷

⁴⁶¹ Kristen Schilt, 'A Little Too Ironic': The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians', *Popular Music and Society*, 26:1, (2003), 5-16, (p. 7).

⁴⁶² *ibid.*, 7

⁴⁶³ Halberstam, p.153

⁴⁶⁴ Trites, p. 80

⁴⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 26

⁴⁶⁶ Kuehnert, para.6

⁴⁶⁷ Langston, para.4

By revealing the ‘elephant’ in the room, *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* challenges misconceptions about coming-of-age which, as Kuehnert herself describes, undermine the reality that both ‘broken’ pieces *and* narratives of ‘growth’, frame adolescence. By addressing what Kuehnert believes is usually effaced in conventional YA fiction, the rebellious geography of her coming-of-age novel aims to rework the domestic and private spaces that structure girls’ lives. Emily is transported from the structured domesticity of her bedroom as Kuehnert brings the theme of ‘broken’ homes to light. The fragmented home life is representative of the dysfunctional relationship between mother and daughter that runs throughout the novel, and which is responsible for the equally dysfunctional tendencies of the young woman. This accounts for the ‘separatism’ that is integral to the *grrrl*’s path toward rebellion. It also reveals a specific separation trauma (the ‘broken’ hearts to which Kuehnert alludes) that exposes the difficulties that construct Emily’s fragmented story. In so doing, Kuehnert forms a kinship of unruly youth that she otherwise felt was missing from YA fiction, as she explores the darker recesses of adolescent female experience, such as self-harm, drug addiction, and mental illness. These darker aspects are, in turn, influenced by punk’s language of the rejected and are a reflection of riot *grrrl*’s anxious, alienated and ‘jigsaw’ feelings about their place within popular culture.

Kuehnert describes how she began writing YA fiction for ‘selfish’ reasons, and highlights the ‘hard time’ that she had as an adolescent seeking out books which were representative of her own story of wayward adolescence.⁴⁶⁸ Kuehnert designates specific moods and rituals such as ‘depression, addiction, and self-injury’ as themes that she was ‘DESPERATE to read about when [she] was a teenager, so that’s why [she] wrote [her] novels’.⁴⁶⁹ Here, Kuehnert invites consideration alongside Forrest, as both authors ‘attempt’ to write fucked-up, or indeed, ‘fucking-up’, characters into their work. As such, Kuehnert follows the anti-chick lit route to expose what popular culture ‘might not be

⁴⁶⁸Langston, para.4

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., 4

ready to hear' and uncover that which has been rejected and marginalised from contemporary discourse. At the same time, however, Kuehnert's 'selfish' objective echoes the kind of self-centred language of resistance that swirls around the figure of the girl in Forrest's fiction. This is not to mention the co-option of riot grrrl's 'marginal' possibilities by the mass market, which is foregrounded in Kuehnert's case by the fact that *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* is published by MTV books. It is exactly the egocentric positioning of the female artist (for example, Kuehnert's 'selfish' reasons) that links to the idea of the problematic staging of feminine identities at the heart of my examination. In this respect, *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* can be viewed as a novel that not only (selfishly) speaks *for* girls who are struggling with very personal experiences of marginalisation, but as a text that also sells these darker experiences *back* to girls – albeit re-glossed and re-packaged in the language of YA anti-chick fiction– through Kuehnert's co-option by popular culture.

'All roads lead to rock 'n' roll': 'imagining' a new grrrl geography

As Kuehnert works to expose the dysfunctional aspects of adolescent experience within her fiction, *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* 'thread[s] between the ill-defined edges of more ambivalent territories of belonging and not belonging'.⁴⁷⁰ The coming-of-age girl, poised in-between 'fitting' in and being cast out, is bordered by ambivalence. It is exactly this ambiguity, however, that locates her spatial 'potentialities': the combination of 'belonging' and 'not belonging' passes into what Leonard claims as a 'new girl geography', which has the central objective of 'constructing new road maps of territory [...] which are unbounded by walls and unmarked by flags'.⁴⁷¹ Indeed, Leonard's illustration of a space that is completely 'unbounded' and 'unmarked' seems far too fantastical; it is unlikely that

⁴⁷⁰ Helen Scalway, 'The Contemporary Flaneuse' in *The Invisible Flaneuse? Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture* Ed by. Aruna D'Souza and Tom McDonough (Manchester: MUP, 2006), pp. 168-172, (p.170).

⁴⁷¹ Leonard, p.119.

such a liberal and untouched terrain can actually exist. It is here I wish to return to Massey's designation of the geographical 'imagination'. While the 'reworking' of the geographical imagination implies a creative reconstruction of surroundings, it also indicates that this creative geography does not carry weight outside of fantasy. My question here is how far the creative agency of 'reworking' (gendered) spaces is just part of the girl's geographical *imagination*? As Massey states, it paves the way to 'gain[ing] some control [...] even if only in our heads'.⁴⁷² With this, however, she suggests that the young woman's spatial 'potentialities' (which Leonard highlights as the creation of a new girl geography) can only prosper in the confined space of the girl's fantasies. The suggestion here is that the young woman's attempts to become-*otherwise* outside of her bedroom can flourish only in the confining, fantastical space of her *headroom*.

The following scene plays heavily on the 'headroom' of the young woman, and Emily creates an imagined landscape in which she is in control as she 'fantasises about her first gig with her own band'.⁴⁷³ Her fantasies reflect the transitional state of girlhood as characterised by the performance/staging of different identities, whereby the conflicted process of 'composing' a resistant 'grrrl' identity is realised:

As un-punk as it was to do so, I'd even planned out what I was going to wear: a short, sea-green velvet dress that I'd found at a thrift store and I thought it complimented my father's Lake Placid-Blue '69 Mustang and that it just looked hot. I wanted to be a million times sexier than the false deities whose arrogance I'd fallen for at River's Edge.⁴⁷⁴

Emily's designation of 'un-punk' shows her immediate dissociation from the roots of the punk collective and presents her curious alienation from that particular brand of rebellion. Indulging, seemingly, in commodity worship, Emily strays into the territory of a sell-out. The typically crude aesthetic and reckless attitude of punk is tidied through a specific ordering that takes place within Emily's imagination: she had 'planned' out what to wear,

⁴⁷² Massey, p.126

⁴⁷³ Kuehnert, p. 81

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.,81

with the blueish hue of her dress ‘complimenting’ the colour of her father’s guitar. Emily’s co-ordination conceals her separatism, smoothing over the ‘ruptures’ that are typically explored by the grrrl. A preliminary reading of Emily’s fantasising suggests that the grrrl is not pulling her own strings. Instead, she is instrumental in the passivity of posing (Emily desires to ‘look hot’) and is further confined by patriarchal expectations as she seeks to match her father’s guitar. The thrift store dress is, itself, something of a cliché; the vintage dress is a recognisable sartorial indicator of an ‘alternative’ (and supposedly anti-corporate/ ‘individual’) identity. With it, Emily is lost in the depths of commodification, indistinguishable in ‘sea-green’ against ‘Lake Placid Blue’. She leaves only a trace of passivity, illustrated through her desire to ‘look hot’, as opposed to rebellious.

However, the reader must ransack Emily’s fantasising to understand how an agentic ‘reworking’ of space might in fact be taking place. Emily’s preoccupation with ‘posing’ is bookended by spaces of displacement that direct the grrrl to the beginnings of a ‘new’ geography: it is Emily’s withdrawal from punk culture that frames the opening of this quotation, alongside the closing of the scene at ‘River’s *Edge*’. The marginality that is articulated by both the prefix ‘un’, as well as the designation of an ‘edge’, shows that Emily is embodying a specific kind of separatism and is on the brink of an agentic resistance. The fantastical space of Emily’s imagination and the physical spaces of marginality can be read in conjunction with Kim Gordon’s creative agency as she stopped being ‘just a girl with a fantasy’ and (physically) picked up a bass guitar.

As the colour of Emily’s ‘dress’ matches her guitar, it seems that she is not just picking up the instrument fleetingly but ‘belongs’ to it; in this way, she negotiates the alienating ‘jigsaw’ of female youth, at the same time as she highlights the places of ‘not belonging’ (un-punk, river’s edge). This imagery illustrates that Emily is not just previewing an ‘edgy’ pose but is strategically showcasing her body’s spatial potentialities. These potentialities, I have argued, afford young women the opportunity to ‘show off’ as well as ‘reach out’ to their audience. While it might appear that Emily has ‘fallen’ for the

more mainstream route of posing, the sea-green dress – matching the blue commodity that she holds– displays her subtle sabotage. As explored, this is typical of the Trojan Horse ‘countercultural rebels’, going ‘undercover’ in order to detonate their destructive impulses from within the spaces of popular culture. Emily’s sea-green thrift dress represents a sea change in the geography of girlhood. This geography exceeds (Emily desires to be a *million* times sexier) the conformist characteristics of the mainstream (the false deities) and is a mark of the grrrl’s ‘stubbornly individualistic female imagination’.⁴⁷⁵

A later scene depicts another one of Emily’s imagined gigs with She Laughs. Emily delves further into the rebellious and ‘stubborn’ space of her imagination in which, once again, she gains control. At the same time, the space is unsettled by the young woman’s struggles to maintain her position as an agent of unruliness within a traditionally male-dominated arena:

After losing my virginity to a pathetic excuse of an aspiring rock god [...] my fantasies became increasingly elaborate. I daydreamed that even at our very first concert, we headlined [...] I imagined most people upfront would be girls like me and Regan, who slammed in the pit just as hard as the boys. Mixed in with those girls – hopefully being brutally shoved around by them– would be the pseudo rock-god boys I’d slept with. They would gaze up at me [...] begging acknowledgement between songs but I would stare right through them like I had no idea who they were.⁴⁷⁶

As with the preceding scene, this quotation proceeds from Emily’s sense of separation, as she describes ‘losing’ her virginity. The sexual excess and references to wayward promiscuity (while problematic in the respect of compromising the safety of young women) is another example of a bodily performance of power that brings Emily into form. As Press and Reynolds state, ‘controlling those who enter her ‘house’ i.e body is one of the teenager’s few avenues of power’.⁴⁷⁷ Fitting with Press and Reynolds, Downes highlights that ‘punk girls had to negotiate their sexual activity in relation to being labelled a “slag” or a “drag” whereas, the sexual exploits of punk men did not interfere with their punk

⁴⁷⁵ Caroline O’Meara, ‘The Raincoats: Breaking Down Punk Rock’s Masculinities’, *Popular Music* 22:3 (2003), 299- 313, (p.301).

⁴⁷⁶ Kuehnert, p.81

⁴⁷⁷ Reynolds and Press, p. 349

status'.⁴⁷⁸ The girl's negotiation of her sexual activity and the rejection of conventional labels is indicated in this scene as the extravagant position of the 'aspiring rock god' is derisively dismissed as 'pathetic' in Emily's headroom (read: imagination). With this, Emily controls her unruly bodily geography through her sexual excess – an action that is otherwise so out of character for the young woman– and she is elevated from the disparaging labels of 'slag' or 'groupie' to a more 'elaborate' position. The young woman's negotiation of her body, especially in terms of the ill-defined, ambivalent territories of 'belonging' and 'not belonging', is made apparent through the allusions to the unsolicited entering of territories: a thread of wayward violence runs through the scene, which highlights the young woman's struggles for ownership over the established, and seemingly non-negotiable, masculine control of this space. This was, as Ednie Kaeh Garrison illustrates, typical of punk scenes 'where girls were made to feel the place belonged to the guys'.⁴⁷⁹ This returns us to the notion that riot grrrls' retreat to their always and already marginal positions (what should be their kinship of outsiderism/separatism) is problematic, and, potentially, limits the impact of their political resistance. Kuehnert, moreover, animates how these specifically gendered spaces—for example, that men have a physical presence in the 'mosh pit', while girls take recourse to their bedrooms and imagination –are so persistent that even Emily's fantasy gig is overrun with the violent penetration of 'pseudo rock-gods' who slam 'hard' into the pit.

However, Garrison argues that 'instead of retreating, [young women] decided to recreate [the punk scene] as their own [...] infusing it with new, girl-positive, feminist significance to combat the scene's apparently masculinist roots'.⁴⁸⁰ As the rock-gods of the preceding passage become 'pathetic excuses', Emily's control of her geographical imagination renders the 'masculinist roots' of the scene irrelevant. The terrain thrives with the forceful formation of a 'new' grrrl territory, with young women 'upfront', 'slamming'

⁴⁷⁸ Downes, p.207 (quoting Lauraine LeBlanc)

⁴⁷⁹ Garrison, p. 156

⁴⁸⁰ Ibid., 156

and ‘brutally shoving’ in the mosh pit. Once more, the young woman appears instrumental in composing herself; she distorts masculine territory as the movements of her body pattern the virile actions of ‘shoving’ and ‘slamming’. The reworking of the conventional ‘labels’ to which Downes alludes supports the young woman’s reworking of gendered space: these ‘labels’ are replaced, or rather, displaced, by anonymity. Instead of the ‘promiscuous’ woman gaining status as a ‘slag’ or a ‘drag’, she becomes an empowered figure who challenges ‘normative’ aspects of femininity both through her music-making and her sexual encounters. It is the boys who Emily has slept with that ‘beg for her acknowledgment’, while Emily deflects their gaze and penetratingly stares ‘through’ them. The idea that young women do not retreat into their imagined space, but instead, have the capacity to recreate it, comes to the fore as boys ‘beg’ while young women ‘slam’ and ‘brutally shove’ their way into a new, ‘girl-positive’ geography of rebellion.

Reality bites: getting a ‘real’ taste for the new grrrl geography

Throughout this chapter, I have questioned whether the reworking of the geographical imagination can be transformed into a tangible creative agency, or if it is merely a refuge to which young women with aspirational fantasies take recourse. Garrison offers a ‘real-life’ example of Leonard’s new ‘grrrl’ geography. Garrison quotes “Rebecca B”, a contributor to the zine *Girl Germs* (1991). Rebecca describes her experience attending the infamous ‘Girl Night’, which was part of the International Pop Underground festival that took place in Olympia, Washington in 1991:

Girls/women can and do use musical instruments, microphones, stages, their bodies and voices, and performance as a "forum" for "female expression." By appropriating the objects, spaces, and aesthetics of a culture generally dominated and determined by men and male issues [...] a new "reality" is being formed, a "reality" in which "stands the new girl, writing her dreams, speaking her will, making her music, restructuring the very punk rock world you reside in." Rebecca describes girl bodies filling up the stage and the consciousness of embodied girls

filling up a room (the barroom, concert hall, sound room, bedroom) with sound and words and movement.⁴⁸¹

The 'reality' of this space, as expressed by Rebecca, is in conflict with Massey's allusion to the geographical 'imagination' and the claim that control can exist only in our heads. Instead, it echoes Smith's focus on music as a performance of power that invokes 'form', as it is within this very real space that young women use various techniques (music/instruments/bodies/voices) to design a 'forum' that was constructed entirely by 'female expression'. The experience of 'Girl Night' worked to amplify the young woman's spatial potentialities: women's bodies fully dominated this space and, in this respect, became the 'stage', with various rooms overwhelmed by the penetrating personifications of their dreaming, speaking and making. The real-life events that Rebecca describes complement the fictional scene explored above, in which, through Emily's imagination, young women establish their 'headlining' presence in a typically masculinist domain. 'Girl Night' (re)appropriated and unsettled the 'objects, spaces and aesthetics' of a music scene that was conventionally determined by men. This gave rise to the 'new grrrl' who 'stood' as a firm marker for a 'new' space that was made up of female expression. The specific occasion of 'Girl Night' revealed how young women were taking the opportunity to occupy established spaces, and on this night, the embedded 'reality' that the 'punk world' was dominated by men was purged. In light of this, the formation of the new grrrl territory spills out from the young woman's headroom and gives shape to a 'reality' that is depicted here as 'Girl Night'. Through this, young women successfully negotiated their feelings of alienation and confusion in a scene that was devoted to masculine 'issues', and paved the way for the 'restructuring' of the punk rock world with 'new' grrrl characteristics.

However, what I find problematic about Rebecca's recollection is just how transient Girl 'night' is. The idea of a 'new reality' that is formed through a single night is,

⁴⁸¹ Ednie Kaeh Garrison, 'U.S feminism- Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)cultures and the Technologies of the Third wave, *Feminist Studies*, 26:1 (2000), 141-170, (p.158).

perhaps, not wholly convincing. The question then becomes centred on the way in which young women can play with temporal limits. Such parameters define not just *when* they can act, but *where* and *how*. The following quotation by Kathleen Hanna introduces the idea of a temporal slip that can be created by young women as they use their bodies (utilising gestures, rhythms and spatial potentialities) to intrude and fill up the spaces that have formally excluded them. This very physical act is opposed to girls merely filling up their heads with fancies of freedom and transformation. To Hanna, one of the very strengths of punk music and performance is the way in which it does not just produce a temporary soundbite of rebellion; rather, its political gestures of resistance can quickly extend into and play a bit ‘part’ in a real, day-to-day narrative. She comments:

I like that music engages people’s bodies and can be simultaneously intellectually and physically stimulating. I also like that concerts create an immediate sense of community. I have found that the only way change occurs is if we taste it for moments and then seek to make it part of our everyday [...] to be able to create a community that goes from horrible to glorious and back again depending on the performance’.⁴⁸²

Here, Hanna introduces the way in which sound can influence both the mind and the body, meaning that any sense of transformation that arises from music-making and performance is experienced both fantastically *and* physically. At the same time, the unpredictability of performance—for example, the leap from ‘horrible to glorious and back again’—expand the parameters of acceptable behaviour for women. Hanna highlights a temporal slip that exists between the fleeting ‘taste’ of an extraordinary moment of ‘change’ and the desire to savour this moment of change by incorporating it into the everyday. It is the physical ability of music, instruments and performance to engage ‘bodies’ that strengthens the young woman’s capacity to infiltrate spaces and create alternative communities outside of these parameters. Comparably, Smith draws out the creative potency of performance that, in a similar way to Hanna’s depiction, brings people into form. This reveals the young woman’s appetite to transform transitory potential (illuminated through ‘Girl Night’) into

⁴⁸²Downes, p.210 (quoting Kathleen Hanna).

an agenda of rebellion and an established route to change. By carving out a space in which both the transience of the ‘imagination’ and the immediate ‘reality’ of everyday are united, an in-between space is generated in which, as Sharon Becker states, ‘marginalised material becomes wholly important’.⁴⁸³

As Hanna suggests, the only way ‘change occurs’ is by making the ‘moment’ of change part of the ‘everyday’. Initially, this kind of everyday co-option of rebellious acts appears disturbing in that, as Heath and Potter argue, it proposes that any ‘change’ is absorbed by the very mainstream audience that the counter-culture is designed to oppose. This reflects the commodification of marginalised material and implies that the young woman’s staging and performance of various identities is based on posturing, as opposed to a genuinely politicised exploration of her potential and capacity for change. However, Emily Spiers considers the interference of the mainstream in the young woman’s rebellion in a positive light. She quotes Johanna Fateman of Le Tigre (an American band that was formed in 1998 by both Fateman and Kathleen Hanna after Bikini Kill split up in 1996) who explains what she felt could be achieved when introducing marginal material to popular culture. Fateman states that at the time of Le Tigre’s formation (the late 90s) ‘there were no feminist voices at all in the mainstream and we felt like it would be really great if we could have some kind of a presence to a larger audience’.⁴⁸⁴ If the ‘kind’ of presence that the grrrl has to a larger audience is based on a don’t-need-you separatism and a girl-positive, feminist ethos, Fateman proposes that, if anything, making their feminist voices part of the everyday actually strengthens their political impact and autonomy. As Fateman describes, at the time of Le Tigre’s ‘popularity’ there was no real trace of feminist agency in popular culture. Given this, the incorporation of young women’s marginalised voices into the mainstream incites change by making their displaced relationship with popular consciousness explicit. In this way, Hanna’s embodiment of change through the

⁴⁸³ Sharon Becker, ‘The World’s a Mess It’s in My Kiss’: Punk Women and Why They Matter’, *Women’s Studies* 41:2 (2012), 117-120, p.119.

⁴⁸⁴ Emily Spiers, ‘Killing Ourselves is Not Subversive’: Riot Grrrl from Zine to Screen and the Commodification of Female Transgression, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 26:1-2, (2015) 1-21, (p.176).

unpredictability of her performance expand the parameters of acceptable behaviour for women outside of her bedroom, as well as her head. Moreover, as young women make this ‘new reality’ a part of everyday existence, their route toward rebellion extends the temporary and delimiting capacity of *girl night*.

In *I wanna be your Joey Ramone*, Kuehnert draws out the creative potency of the musical young woman, as Emily describes a real performance with She Laughs:

When I got on stage, the passion for music that my father had instilled in me since birth rose from my gut like a tornado [...] By the end, I was nothing but [...] a wave of sound. And then I wanted to be in the audience. The jostling, bruising, hot sweat of colliding bodies was all part of the experience for me.⁴⁸⁵

This passage jumps from Emily’s imagination (which has been the focus of the previous scenes) to the sense of real agency that, as Hanna articulates, can be gathered from the transitions of physical performance. Emily stresses that she is ‘getting on’ the stage, rather than just fantasising about it. Here, the ‘taste’, as Hanna puts it, of feminine expression and transgression is intensified by the very visceral reality of Emily’s performance. By ‘filling up’ her stage, Emily embodies the ‘stage’ of her experience as a young woman in which she is no longer retreating into a refuge of fantasy. Transitioning from the young woman spectator into the young woman composer, Emily becomes ‘otherwise’ with an instrumental immediacy, rather than an imaginative one. Emily’s musical ‘passion’ is forceful, and pushes a girls-to-the-front rhetoric to the forefront, like ‘tornado’. As Emily becomes a ‘wave of sound’, the creation of her cacophonous sonic landscape matches the wild torrents of her movement ‘on’ stage. At this moment she develops into an unruly figure, animated by energies that are seemingly at odds with her former objective to look ‘hot’. Moreover, her sonic seizure illustrates her *seizing* her moment, releasing a ‘tornado’ of creativity that emanates from the ‘passion’ for music-making that Emily feels ‘in her gut’, and which shows little sign of calming. In turn, Emily’s empowered movements

⁴⁸⁵ Kuehnert, p. 97

unsettle Schilt's 'bleak picture' of young women as untalented and unproductive 'saplings' who are lost in the 'hurricane' of adolescence.

Mimicking the volatile gestures and rhythms of a 'tornado' exposes Emily's spatial potentialities, illustrating the contagiousness of her transgressive influence within the 'larger' crowd of spectators. So potent is this influence, in fact, that Emily herself 'wants to be in the audience'. The upshot of this is that Emily's performance becomes all-consuming *to* the audience, rather than being consumed *by* the audience. Moreover, the wave of sound is the vehicle through which Emily becomes instrumental in her own transgression and resistance: fantasies become tangible and reverberate from her creative whirlwind routine of music-making and performing that leaves in its wake a space for the 'continual creative escape from location, containment and definition'.⁴⁸⁶

Promiscuous grrrl: 'passing on' rebellious resonances

Kuehnert's description of Emily's forceful performance is full of intimate adjectives: the 'jostling', 'bruising', 'hot sweat' and 'colliding' of bodies depict the unruliness of the young woman's bodily geography, and the 'new' power she has to penetrate and control specific, and conventionally gendered, spaces. Throughout *I wanna be Your Joey Ramone*, Kuehnert affiliates Emily's passion for power and performance with her promiscuity. Emily attempts to draw out the rebellious potential that she associates with sexual excess, transforming herself – in her headspace – from 'Emily Black, toy of the rock gods' into 'Emily Black, future rock goddess'.⁴⁸⁷ Emily outlines what she wishes to achieve by sleeping with as many boys as possible: 'boys could have their playthings, why couldn't I have mine? I was demanding equal rights'.⁴⁸⁸ Through her promiscuity, she seeks to

⁴⁸⁶ Cathy Schwichtenberg, 'Connections and Intersections' in *The Madonna Connection: Representational Politics, Subcultural Identities, and Cultural Theory* Ed. By Cathy Schwichtenberg (USA: Westview Press, 1993), (p.281).

⁴⁸⁷ Kuehnert, p. 38

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 38

transform men into her playthings and, in this respect, is instrumental in expanding the parameters of Downes' earlier demarcation of male domination with her own sense of control. Emily 'toying' with her 'playthings' through her consistent one-night stands becomes a metaphor for music-making. Once again, it is by heralding performance as an engagement of bodies that provides, to return to Hanna, a physically creative capacity for change.

By incorporating Emily's one-night stands into the narrative, Kuehnert presents an alternative take on the processes of the young woman's coming-of-age experience— that is, of losing her virginity and 'becoming' a woman. Just as riot grrrl denounced the sexual degradation of young women as they 'spat critiques of patriarchy [and] [spoke] of the contradictions young women face', Kuehnert weaves these very active political gestures into Emily's relationships with 'boys'.⁴⁸⁹ By making her protagonist extremely promiscuous, Kuehnert heralds the importance of failed conquests and sexual excess, as opposed to successfully finding a mate, which I have outlined previously as a conventional trait of chick lit and 'chick lit jr.'. At the same time, Emily's 'one-night stands' segue into the transitory reality of the 'one night only' time frame of 'Girl Night'. This suggests that any sense of 'change' made within this space has a very specific time limit. Yet, Kuehnert reveals how Emily exceeds these temporal limits through her sexual activity, which leaves a lingering signature as she scratches the backs of the men that she sleeps with. Rather than being marked by the derogatory categorisations that are emblematic of women's experience within a male-dominated punk scene, Emily leaves her own mark on her 'playthings'— a specific 'signature' by which, she conditions, '*they will never forget me*'.⁴⁹⁰ The allusion Emily makes to 'never' forgetting, and the lasting 'mark' of her very physical signature, symbolises a 'continual' creative escape from the situated containment of 'one

⁴⁸⁹ Anna Feigenbaum, 'Remapping the Resonances of Riot Grrrl: Feminisms, Postfeminisms, and the "processes" of Punk', in *Interrogating Postfeminism*, Ed by. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra (London: Duke University Press, 2007), pp.132-153, (p.132).

⁴⁹⁰ Kuehnert, p. 39

night' as her resistance to conventional romance through her sexual excess will *never* be forgotten.

In the scene below, Emily affiliates her sexual exploits with her passion for music-making. She highlights how both music-making and 'love-making' play a big part in her transformation from a 'toy' of the rock-gods to rock 'goddess'. This also marks a shift from posing to composing a resistant identity. She describes one of her first sexual conquests:

My disappointment was unforeseen [...] I thought Sam would touch me with the raw power he used to play guitar [...] I thought he would be able to satisfy the burn between my legs that surged every time I heard a distorted guitar. I slept with him because [...] he oozed frenzied, furied rock energy, because I knew I could absorb it, make it mine [...] I had no interest in watching him backstage or vibing in the records he made, gleaming with gratitude that I was his muse [...] I dug my finger nails into his back and raked them down, feeling the skin splinter like weak wood. The scratch would become my trademark, the signature I left on every guy I hooked up with.⁴⁹¹

Initially, Emily appears to rely on a forceful male presence, playing up to established ideas of the male's domination over specific scenes: it is 'Sam' whom she desires to 'touch' and 'satisfy' her, assuming a controlling intimacy over her in the same manner that he would play an instrument. Here, it is the male who appears to personify an engaging 'energy'; he 'oozes' an attractive power that overwhelms Emily's creative agency. However, this masculine control is 'distorted' by Emily's own confidence that she too has the power to 'absorb' and take ownership over Sam's virile energy and 'make it [hers]'. This is strengthened as she rejects her role as a 'groupie' who would 'watch him' backstage'. Rather than being painted as his 'muse', Emily wants to amuse herself with a new 'plaything' into which she 'digs' and 'rakes' her fingernails. The topographical metaphors of digging and raking, then, become the memorable mark of Emily's intimate activities. This, in turn, changes how young women are perceived in terms of the control and prowess

⁴⁹¹ Ibid., 23

of their bodily geography as Emily, quite literally, starts her alternative route from ‘scratch’.

Anne Feigenbaum asserts that the creation of ‘marks’ and, in particular, their ability to be absorbed and pass on specific meanings, can be used to assess the residual impact of riot grrrl. She compares riot grrrl to a ‘form of energy’ and recognises that ‘we all know energy is neither created or destroyed but rather passed on’.⁴⁹² In the above excerpt, Emily picks up boys in the same manner that she picks up her guitar. Transforming them into ‘playthings’, Emily becomes instrumental in inciting change as she ‘passes’ on her *memorable* trademark by marking their bodies. Instead of being labelled, to return to Downes, as a ‘slag’, it is Emily’s ‘boys’ who carry the legacy of the grrrl’s signature of resistance. Emily’s unruly gesture of ‘running’ her hands down Sam’s back as if it were a fretboard transforms him into an instrument of her own resistance. Rather than oozing masculine ‘power’, each ‘boy’ becomes ‘weak wood’ that ‘splinters’ with her creative ‘trademark’. The primitive ‘raking’ of her hands symbolises an active political gesture away from posing to ‘making’ which, like the ‘passing on’ of riot grrrl energy, is remembered and offers a ‘continual’ creative escape from containment. Though these marks are not permanent they are memorable—much like the impact of the grrrl. As is the case with Sadie in *Cherries in the Snow*, Kuehnert’s protagonist is interested in creating the space for a language of resistance to be *remembered*. In this respect, it is the continual memory of Emily’s trademark scratch that makes her resistant gestures tangible: they may fade, but their imprint will ‘never’ be forgotten.

Mimicking myths and creating riffs: the longevity of the grrrl’s geography of rebellion

⁴⁹² Feigenbaum, p.150

While Emily is making her own ‘marks’, her story is also inflected by the mythic marks of her mother’s narrative. Kuehnert fleshes out Emily’s coming-of-age experience by combining it with a ‘ghostly tour’ of Louisa’s own messy and musically infused journey.⁴⁹³ What is interesting about this is that there is a sense of ‘separatism’ that stems from the geographical divide between mother and daughter. Yet, at the same time, the rebellious bodily geography of the two women is mirrored: Louisa’s narrative is based on her account of being a stripper and this, in turn, connects with Emily’s negotiation of sex in her present narrative. As explored, Emily transforms herself from a ‘muse’ to a memorable, powerful presence that ‘splinters’ masculine control and unsettles the objectification of the young woman within specifically male domains (for example, the mosh pit). In the same way, Louisa attempts to assume control over male-dominated spaces. In Louisa’s narrative, however, this occurs in the strip club where she works, as opposed to a mosh pit. Louisa states that despite her intimate performances, her male audience will ‘*never penetrate [her] thoughts. They’ll never know [her] name.*’⁴⁹⁴ As she maintains a position of anonymity, Louisa ‘strips’ away the assumption that she will be objectified, in much the same way as Emily moves from being a boy ‘toy’ to having boys as her ‘playthings’. Louisa, like her daughter subsequently, exchanges the ‘humiliation of being an exhibit’ for ‘an empowering exhibitionism’. This, moreover, captures the moment of change that can be achieved through physical performances and incorporated into the day-to-day lives of the individual.⁴⁹⁵

Taking the idea of the ‘striptease’ further, Louisa unveils little clues of her identity in unexpected places. These little shreds of her identity are representative of an empowering ‘exhibitionism’ and come in the form of the red nail polish engravings that Louisa leaves in the various rooms that she has inhabited. This amplifies her resistance and exposes her capacity to leave her trace in specific spaces that she has entered with a

⁴⁹³ Kuehnert, p.118

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid., 29

⁴⁹⁵ Reynolds and Press, p. 262

memorable signature, similar to those that her daughter leaves on the men that she sleeps with. From this, Louisa ‘passes’ on an artistic energy, rather than maintaining the conventional penetrable persona of a ‘stripper’ who remains as a ‘humiliated’ exhibit of male-dominated spaces. As Emily attempts to track her mother down in the latter chapters of *I wanna be your Joey Ramone*, she finds the nail polish traces that her mother has left behind: ‘Louisa’s initials, 1981[...] I hope she’d left her mark in every place she went [...] I wrote “E.D.B. 7/96” next to “L.C.B. 4/81”’.⁴⁹⁶ As Emily discovers what Louisa has left behind – the memorable ‘marks’ that indicate Louisa has been ‘filling up’ the many rooms she has visited – give her otherwise mythic movements a tangible reality. Moreover, Louisa’s initials, ‘L.C.B’, are chord-shaped, and significantly, are in tune with Emily’s own musical lettering of ‘E.C.B’. With this, the geographical and generational locations of mother and daughter are brought into (temporary) alignment through their respective marks of resistance.

To Garrison, in order to ‘see and recognize such forms of resistance, we often need to look “into the fabric of experiences” outside, beyond, and maybe underneath the places that we are told have mattered’.⁴⁹⁷ Garrison’s quotation extends Halberstam’s idea about exposing the ruptures, gaps and silences of disorderly narratives by looking in places that extend ‘beyond’, ‘outside’, and ‘underneath’ the very ‘conventional’ places that we believe ‘matter’ most. As Emily discovers her mother’s inscriptions in the wooden drawer of her hotel room dresser, she discovers an unconventional space of resistant female expression. As the draws are ‘pulled’ out, the presence of these resistant expressions fill specific rooms, allowing for a continuous creative escape as the energy of past resistance (Louisa’s initials) makes its way into the physical present (Emily’s initials and scratches).

Massey describes the movement from the haptic ‘roots’ of adolescence to the grrrl’s negotiated ‘routes’ to agency in *I wanna be your Joey Ramone*. Massey proceeds to

⁴⁹⁶ Kuehnert, p. 225

⁴⁹⁷ Garrison, p. 158

assert that ‘many lines of cultural connection around the world are expressions in one way or another of solidarity or of a desire to belong to something *believed in*’.⁴⁹⁸ The ‘lines’ of cultural connection come to the fore through Emily’s inscription of her name alongside her mother’s initials. It represents both an expression of solidarity and ‘separatism’, as the inscription, ‘E.C.B.7/96’, comes fifteen years after Louisa had left her mark in 1981. Still, the placement of both mother and daughter’s initials together represents what Massey would view as the desire to ‘belong’ to something ‘believed in’. Furthermore, ‘belong[ing]’ to is representative of the young woman’s desire to compose a tangible identity. This identity lies outside of the staged/performed identities that are formed within the young woman’s imagination and emerges instead from her capacity for transition. How, then, does Emily harness the energy of the ‘myth’ of her mother? To what extent does Louisa’s inscription give life to Emily’s own geographical ‘imagination’? Does Emily’s modification of her mother’s mark enable her to make a resistant feminine identity that exists outside of a (maternal) myth that she has only ever imagined/believed in? Emily explains that her wish is to place herself within the ‘believed in’, and with this, mimic the ‘myth’ of her mother:

My mother was a woman of myth [...] she consumed the rumble of drums, ferocious guitar riffs, throbbing bass lines, throaty voices [...] claw-your-eyes-out yowls. She hunted music. I didn’t just like that legend, I needed it. I drew my strength from it.⁴⁹⁹

Emily’s mother is not confined to the very private spaces and domestic cultures that shape women’s lives, but instead embarks on an undomesticated ‘hunt’ for music. Here, Kuehnert unsettles the more ‘conventional’ myths surrounding the role of a mother as providing sustenance for her daughter. Emily is drip-fed pieces of her mother’s ‘myth’ and it is from this fantasy that she ‘draws her strength’. The very primitive action of ‘consuming’ the ‘rumble’ of drums, ‘ferocious guitar riffs’, the ‘throbbing bass lines’, and

⁴⁹⁸ Massey, p. 125

⁴⁹⁹ Kuehnert, p.153/153

‘throaty voices’ all mirror Emily’s empowering transformation into a ‘tornado’. In this respect, the primal energy of her mother’s movements give Emily strength to carve out her own route of resistance. The throb, ferocity and ‘claw-your-eyes out’ yowls that accompany Louisa’s narrative exposes, in accordance with Kathleen Rowe Karlyn, the suppressed voices of “‘unrepentant’” mothers, a ‘term that suggests unruliness over time, the stubborn refusal of women in later life to apologise for who they are or have become’.⁵⁰⁰ Emily ‘needs’ the rumble of the ‘myth’ that precedes Louisa to maintain her identity as an agent of unruliness. The energy of the myth, which persists ‘over time’, liberates Emily from the kind of ‘different’ yet transitional identities that the girl may stage/perform in her bedroom and her imagination. Emily’s hunt to find her mother mimics her mother’s desire for the ‘taste’ of change, as she sets out to ‘consume’ the cacophonous rumbles, yowls and throbs of a narrative that resists conventions (in Karlyn’s words, of an ‘unrepentant’, unruly and refusing mother) and make it part of her everyday existence.

I want here to focus on the ways in which the kind of ‘stubborn refusal’ to which Karlyn alludes – one which endures ‘over time’ – might help to shed light on the concluding sections of *I wanna be your Joey Ramone*. A myth is, by definition, a trace of a story, something that we return to and re-tell ‘over time’. Myths are ‘passed on’, to return to Feigenbaum, like a source of energy. In this respect, they are not destroyed but shape (and re-shape) structures of thinking and identifying in popular culture. A ‘woman of myth’, as Emily puts it, carries the specific gender values and scripts that persist in contemporary consciousness. These types of ‘myths’ relate to the specific narratives built up around ‘normative’ femininity in terms of girlhood or motherhood– and by what means they are lived up to or unsettled. For example, the unsettling of such myths is evident in the agency that the contemporary young woman has to move beyond and become successful outside of the home. At the same time, her empowerment and successes are undermined by assumptions that she is a ‘bad’ woman/mother/wife.

⁵⁰⁰ Karlyn, p. 11

The ‘stubborn refusal’ of Louisa’s myth of ‘unruliness’– in terms of the fact that it unsettles established gendered spaces and scripts, and that it will not disappear, as Emily ‘needs’ it– is granted a physical reality as the refusal stretches ‘over time’. The re-made ‘woman of myth’ in *I wanna be Your Joey Ramone* explores the shift from the domesticated woman to the unruly and ‘unrepentant mother’. In this way, Kuehnert considers the extent to which one’s resistance to established myths about femininity can be preserved within a present, everyday consciousness. At the same time, the ‘mark’ of unruliness, as it is incorporated into the everyday, is interesting in terms of revealing the impact of riot grrrl. This incorporation of rebellion is one of the key means by which riot grrrl worked to unsettle ‘myths’ about normative girlhood. In light of the historical impact of riot grrrl on contemporary consciousness, Garrison makes the following claim: ‘riot grrrl continues, resounding in echoes [...] reverberating against walls[...] riot grrrl is a cartography of punk feminisms’ successes and failures, exclusions and inclusions as they *continue* to resonate in print, and over the airwaves’ [emphasis added].⁵⁰¹

In order to understand riot grrrl as a cartography of ‘success’ *and* ‘failure’, as well as in terms of the ‘exclusions’ *and* ‘inclusions’ that continue to resonate in contemporary culture despite the fact that the young women of the riot grrrl community have now all grown up, I need to return to Halberstam. Halberstam argues that in ‘western cultures, we chart the emergence of the adult from the dangerous and unruly period of adolescence as a desired process of maturation; we create longevity as the most desirable future’.⁵⁰² In these terms, Halberstam’s observation that western culture ‘charts’ the dangers and unruliness of adolescence, and in doing so exposes the gaps, ruptures and silences that are inherent in the processes of maturation, is illustrated by Kuehnert’s depictions of rebellion in her coming-of-age novel. More than this, Halberstam cites that ‘longevity’ is the most ‘desirable’ future in terms of maturation. Once more, the staged/performed identities of the

⁵⁰¹ Garrison, p.150

⁵⁰² Halberstam, p. 152

maturing young woman are grounded in this sense of ‘longevity’, and it is this that strengthens their unruliness as it becomes a real, as opposed to an imagined, presence.

The very essence of longevity gives a tangible resonance to the composition of the grrrl’s rebellious geography that elevates it from merely reflecting a ‘moment’ or an ‘unruly period’ in the life of the young woman. Instead, the resonant ‘reality’ of this moment is due to the way that it exposes the successes and the failures, the darker, and ‘broken’ pieces of adolescent narrative, combined with metaphors and assumptions about ‘growth’. These are, as I have argued, the imperative of YA anti-chick lit. Kuehnert explores this longevity in terms of riot grrrl’s continuing resonances. *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* captures the relevance of the grrrl’s tactics of resistance and geography of rebellion both ‘in’ contemporary print (through record making, which in turn, becomes a metaphor for Kuehnert’s written account of the coming-of-age, unruly young woman) and ‘over’ the airwaves (through music-making). Kuehnert does successfully elongate the impact of riot grrrl’s ‘marginal’ possibilities by entering them into a contemporary context. However, it is exactly the means of distributing material within this context—one must remember that *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* is ‘in print’ and published due to MTV Books— that leaves the figure of the grrrl open to co-option by the mass market once again.

Kuehnert ends her novel with Emily’s estrangement from her music as she ditches her fame for an off-the-rails quest to find her mother and her mother’s ‘records’.⁵⁰³ The closing passages see generations collide as Emily and Louisa meet at the Greyhound Bus station, which becomes a clever allegorical device for the alternative routes created by the young woman. At the same, it highlights a return to ‘roots’ as Emily is confronted with a faded apparition of her mother, with her once-black hair now ‘so bleached it looked white washed’.⁵⁰⁴ The white-washed aesthetic of her mother, and the rejection of her natural ‘roots’, matches Emily’s own attempt to ‘bleach out her identity by changing the colour of

⁵⁰³ Kuehnert, p.10

⁵⁰⁴ Ibid., 327

her naturally black hair'.⁵⁰⁵ Despite 'bleaching out' her identity, Emily's naturally 'black' roots begin to show as she is confronted with the 'black notebooks' that her mother has kept as resounding 'records' of her experiences. These records, moreover, make up the missing pieces of Emily's 'broken' narrative.⁵⁰⁶

These notebooks exhibit another variation on the 'record' theme, and their title of 'The Black notebooks' puns on the black, waxy surface of the musical records that have infused Emily's performance of identities through the novel. At the same time, the aesthetically 'black' notebooks pun on Emily's surname 'Black', and they reveal, quite literally, the roots of an identity that she has endeavoured to 'bleach out'. The notebooks become an embodiment of Halberstam's theorisation of a desired longevity to match the unruly period of adolescence. The essence of preservation, as explored through *Namedropper*, is an integral facet of YA anti-chick lit and is necessary in order for the coming-of-age girl to manage the inconsistencies and 'order' her lived messiness. Simultaneously, the notebooks literally house the 'unruliness' of Louisa's own narrative that has endured 'over time'. In line with Garrison's focus on the continuation of riot grrrl's political agenda of resistance, the marks of grrrl rebellion resound in print (Louisa's written 'records') and over the airwaves (the records that Emily has embodied throughout the novel), passing on, like the resonances of riot grrrl, a map of the successes *and* failures of contemporary feminine narratives.

Interestingly, Emily comments that the incidental meeting with her mother 'hadn't happened how she daydreamed'.⁵⁰⁷ As an alternative to remaining in her 'daydreams', the encounter with her mother causes the past to cascade into the present as Louisa drops the notebooks in shock, with 'two land[ing] in the suitcase, one on the floor, and the other teeter[ing] in-between, pages ruffled and bent'.⁵⁰⁸ The fact that the latter notebook 'teeters in-between' represents the threshold of past/present that makes the 'myth' of her mother a

⁵⁰⁵ Ibid., 327

⁵⁰⁶ Ibid., 340

⁵⁰⁷ Ibid., 328

⁵⁰⁸ Ibid., 332

physical reality. Yet, the ‘ruffled’ and ‘bent’ appearance of the notebook symbolises the disorderly route Emily has chosen to take. ‘[T]eeter[ing] in-between’, the notebook strengthens Emily’s coming-of-age conundrum: does she keep to the ‘ruffled’ route of rebellion, or return to her ‘black’ roots that are transcribed and preserved in each of her mother’s ‘black’ notebooks? Emily chooses to leave her mother. With this, she rejects owning Louisa’s records, and remains instrumental in composing her own identity away from the constraints of these roots, and continues her rebellious route. As Emily travels back to her hometown of Carlisle, she observes the fragmented landscape of her ‘home’, barely perceptible through the window of the aeroplane:

Emily studied the patched-together land [...] “I think that’s it, it sort of feels like down there’s home” [...] “I don’t want to be like her” [...] She replied with a sense of release, the same feeling she got after belting out her favourite song .⁵⁰⁹

Emily’s survey of the ‘patched-together’ land reflects her vague relationship with her ‘roots’, as she states, ‘I think that’s it’ and that it ‘sort of felt’ like ‘down there is home’. The implication of ‘down there’ is noteworthy as it presents the grrrl in an elevated position over her ‘home’, which implies that she is not retreating into her roots. Emily maintains her rebellious route and maps out a space for female transgression. When Emily states, with reference to her mother, ‘I don’t want to be like her’, she draws on the elements of rejection and separatism that are defining characteristics of the grrrl. Emily embodies the ambivalence of ‘belonging’ that is reflected through her demarcation of ‘home’, as well as ‘not belonging’ through her ambiguous statement that she only ‘sort-of’ belongs there. The sense of longevity of the young woman’s unruliness is reflected in Emily’s composed reply to her father– ‘I don’t want to’– which she articulates with a sense of ‘release’. Moreover, the young woman’s fantasies of composing different identities are made tangible through her ‘favourite song’. The construction of this music-making is

⁵⁰⁹ Kuehnert, p. 340

framed by the free-flowing feeling of ‘release’ and the same unruly resonance of ‘belting’ out a song, which offers a creative escape from containment, location and definition.

From conventional ‘roots’ to ‘routes’ of rebellion, Kuehnert’s reconstruction of a coming-of-age narrative comes into view as a contingent fiction that emerges by exposing specific tensions: from the separatist ethos of the riot grrrl community, to the crude, ‘patched-together’ geography of rebellious and resistant girlhood that Kuehnert considers. The affective histories and resonances of riot grrrl, which are shaped by the fraught dynamics of the grrrl’s hindered mobility and sexual degradation within a male-dominated world, might well have been re-packaged and re-sold to a mainstream contemporary audience through the publication of Kuehnert’s text with MTV books. However, they are also remobilized, and the unsettling of narratives of girlhood is preserved: in *I wanna be your Joey Ramone*, Kuehnert works against established formations, much like Emily’s heightened position in the closing scenes, from an elevated (and contemporary) vantage point. True to the form of anti-chick lit, *I wanna be your Joey Ramone* maintains a critical distance from full mainstream co-option, as well as playing up to this as an inevitability.

Chapter 5

Facing the music:

Survival through revival in Kristin Hersh’s *Rat Girl*

‘Me and the rats hang together for a reason’: Nar-rat-ing the collagist memoir

As a ‘dislocated artist’ of the late 80s/early 90s ‘indie scene’, Throwing Muses’ front woman, Kristin Hersh, may be tricky to pin down; however, her memoir *Rat Girl* (2012) is certainly a start.⁵¹⁰ Comprising pages of the diary Hersh kept from the spring of 1985 to the spring of 1986, *Rat Girl* traces the chaotic period in which the female artist is also a young woman. *Rat Girl* is, in this respect, a real-life account of the displaced, rebellious geography that frames the coming-of-age young woman central to my examinations of YA anti-chick lit. As it is a memoir, the real-life resonances of *Rat Girl* are curious and part of the reason I have chosen this text for my final analysis. In what follows, I examine the emergence of the anti-chick memoir and the survival of the ‘collage grrrl’ within the present, as she confronts and reclaims her contradictions in the act of piecing together her past life.

There is no doubt that Spring is a worn cliché for the season of youth and rebirth; for Hersh, it was a time that saw her diagnosed with dissociative disorder, squatting with drug addicts, surviving a suicide attempt, and giving birth to her first child at the age of eighteen – all in a year’s work. It seems, then, a fair hypothesis to make, as Mark Beaumont does in his 2016 article for *The Guardian*, that Hersh has ‘always’ led a tumultuous and transitional ‘life in motion’.⁵¹¹ Despite being difficult to place, Hersh is known for creating Throwing Muses’ disordered sound – the ‘strange words, guttural noises, squashed bug squealing. And then the screams...’.⁵¹² In past interviews, Hersh has offered only a blithe explanation for the disarray of Throwing Muses’ indie-rock oeuvre: “I guess you just have to think of it as a collage”.⁵¹³ This combination of music and art is set out in the foreword of *Rat Girl*, in which Hersh reveals that she ‘finds it *astonishing* that even as a teenager she was trying to bring art and music together; a hell of a mission to

⁵¹⁰ M. Beaumont, ‘Cult Heroes: Kristin Hersh –The Dislocated Star of the 80s US Indie Scene’, *The Guardian*, 24 May 2016, p.1

⁵¹¹ Beaumont, p.1

⁵¹² Kristin Hersh, *Rat Girl* (London: Penguin Books, 2010), (p.178)

⁵¹³ Reynolds and Press, p.368

take on' [emphasis added].⁵¹⁴ Her statement is particularly curious as Hersh seems to set herself up as a kind of pioneer for an avant-gardist amalgamation of 'art' and 'music' (no mean feat as a teenager, never mind a teenager who achieves this single-handedly). However, the blend of art and music is hardly original or ground breaking; it is a signature feature of the punk aesthetics to which I have referred throughout this thesis, and which had a discernible influence on *Throwing Muses*. It is exactly these kinds of inconsistencies that appear throughout *Rat Girl* and undermine Hersh's whole resistant, 'up-yours-to-the-mainstream' rhetoric. Such narrative inconsistencies continue as Hersh argues that she 'isn't creative', that she 'isn't interested in self-expression', nor does she want 'people to listen to her songs so that they care about her, because that would be obnoxious'.⁵¹⁵ In spite of this resistant posturing, she seems happy to place this book about her life with the hugely popular publishing house, Penguin Books.

It is true that Hersh is (very) self-consciously literary in her prose. This is not a result of her unorthodox hippy upbringing, as Hersh would lead the reader to believe. It is, more likely, down to her relative privilege as a white, middle-class American woman, the fact that her father was a university professor, and that she was subsequently schooled at a prestigious American university. Given this, Hersh's writing often seems to lack self-awareness. It is apt, then, that Hersh describes *Rat Girl* as 'riddled with enormous holes and true', yet I would argue that one of the main 'truths' is just how full of narrative inconsistencies (or 'enormous holes') the memoir is. All of its inconsistencies – not least the memoir's affiliation with the mass market, at the same time as Hersh insists, to return to my analysis of *The Rebel Sell* in chapter four, that she is some sort of counter-cultural rebel– mean that *Rat Girl* exemplifies many of the characteristics that I here associate with

⁵¹⁴ Hersh, p.2

⁵¹⁵ Ibid., 2

the ‘anti-chick memoir’.⁵¹⁶ In what follows, I will acknowledge the problems and the potential, that reside in the gaping ‘holes’ of contradiction that comprise *Rat Girl*.

Fragmented, awkward, and displaced, Hersh’s attitude has always been somewhat self-deprecating when referencing her riotous musical journey (the life of a ‘rat girl’), with Hersh preferring the crudity of collage to precision, and the detachment of being ‘nothing’ as opposed to something: ‘you wouldn’t want to go near that girl’, she writes, ‘me and the rats hang together for a reason’.⁵¹⁷ Nonetheless, it appears odd that Hersh has opted for the publication of her ‘humble’, ‘rat-like’ life in print as it conversely reveals her girl persona—about whom she supposedly wants ‘no one’ to care – to the whole world. It is here that the ‘dislocated’ artist’s tinkering with the literary tradition of the memoir becomes curious and deserves enquiry, evoking the following question: ‘Why memoir? Why now?’⁵¹⁸ My attempt to answer is based on an analysis of the following narrative tension: the memoir is a time capsule enabling the female artist to travel back to a vulnerable and transitional age; at the same time, it feeds into the public self-mythologization of the ageing female artist as she returns to her position as a ‘girl’. The latter exposes a ‘grown-up’ identity that is closely tied to consumerism and branding’ and can be found in the growing numbers of nostalgia texts that are similar to Hersh’s own.⁵¹⁹ With the recent rise in memoirs written by women from the indie-rock, punk, grunge, and grrrl scenes – such as Kim Gordon and Carrie Brownstein – Hersh is part of a growing ‘cultural trend’ of the ‘90s nostalgia’ text.⁵²⁰ *Rat Girl*, then, could just as easily be a money-making machine to get in on ‘some of that nostalgia-circuit moolah’.⁵²¹

⁵¹⁶ Ibid.,2

⁵¹⁷ Ibid., 178

⁵¹⁸ Leigh Gilmore, ‘Limit Cases: Trauma, Self-representation and the Jurisdictions of Identity’, *Biography* 24:1 (2001), 128-139, (p.128).

⁵¹⁹ Catherine Strong, ‘I’d Stage Dive, but I’m Far Too Elderly: Courtney Love and Expectations of Femininity and Ageing’ in Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner, *Rock on: Women, Ageing and Popular Music* (London: Ashgate 2012), pp. 124-137, p.134.

⁵²⁰ Strong, p.134

⁵²¹ Ibid.,134.

In terms of the literary genre of the memoir, women's life writing has long provided scholars with a rich site of examination (Leigh Gilmore; Annette Kuhn; Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson). In *Limit Cases*, Gilmore situates the memoir as a 'monument to the idea of personhood, to the notion that one could leave behind a memorial to oneself that would perform the work of permanence that the person never could'.⁵²² Certainly, the permanent 'monument' that is granted by the memoir is at odds with the initial perception of Hersh as a 'dislocated' artist. Following in the tradition of the memoir, Hersh transcribes the strange words, guttural squealing and altogether spasmodic rhythms of her life and her music-making into a self-consciously literary narrative. This includes (but is by no means limited to) the various unrealistic depictions of her music making: the way her chords 'blend in gentle swathes of sound-light' and how her guitar has 'untapped potential, like an ancient farming implement or a magic wand'.⁵²³ However unreliable Hersh's prose is at points, I argue that its embedded inconsistencies may well be the point; *Rat Girl* is not about documenting a grown-up identity *per se*, but more about what it is like to experience, survive and expose the discomfort, alienation, and liminality of a young female artist.

To Marissa Meltzer, Hersh's text 'stops just as everything seems to be starting': the memoir ends as Throwing Muses are signed by 4AD, are about to finish their album, and Hersh gives birth to her son.⁵²⁴ While the memoir may stop, it is clear that Hersh's story remains unfinished. The conclusion to *Rat Girl*, or lack thereof, presents the possibility that Hersh, as the autobiographical subject, might continue to exist somewhere between the 'precipitate creativity of early adulthood and the sculpted creativity of mature adulthood' and Hersh pursues these two alternate narratives simultaneously.⁵²⁵ Against the grain of a 'grown-up' identity, to be in-between early and mature adulthood is to occupy a volatile, provisional position, implying the status of *Rat Girl* as a monument of *impermanence*. This

⁵²² Gilmore, p.136.

⁵²³ Hersh, p. 70 & p.81

⁵²⁴ Marisa Meltzer, 'The Secret Life of the American Teenage Rock Star: A Review of Kristin Hersh's Memoir, *Rat Girl*', *Slate* 2 September 2010, (para 1-10), (para.10.)

⁵²⁵ Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner, *Rock on: Women, Ageing and Popular Music* (London: Ashgate 2012),

dismantles the performance of ‘permanence’ that the memoir conventionally represents. In this respect, ‘rat girl’ is a clever allegorical device, allowing Hersh to do her nar-*rat*-ing by way of scurrying back into the past and collecting, as rodents do, disparate bits and pieces that might be used to fuel new acts of creation. The ‘rat girl’ is a symbol of Hersh’s creative agency, through which she transforms past narratives into a relevant, rather than redundant, presence within the present text. *Rat Girl*, then, indicates a path toward autobiographical possibilities; the inconsistencies of its textual space evoke what Annette Kuhn describes as a ‘collagist, fragmentary, timeless, even musical quality to memory text’.⁵²⁶(See Figure 1)

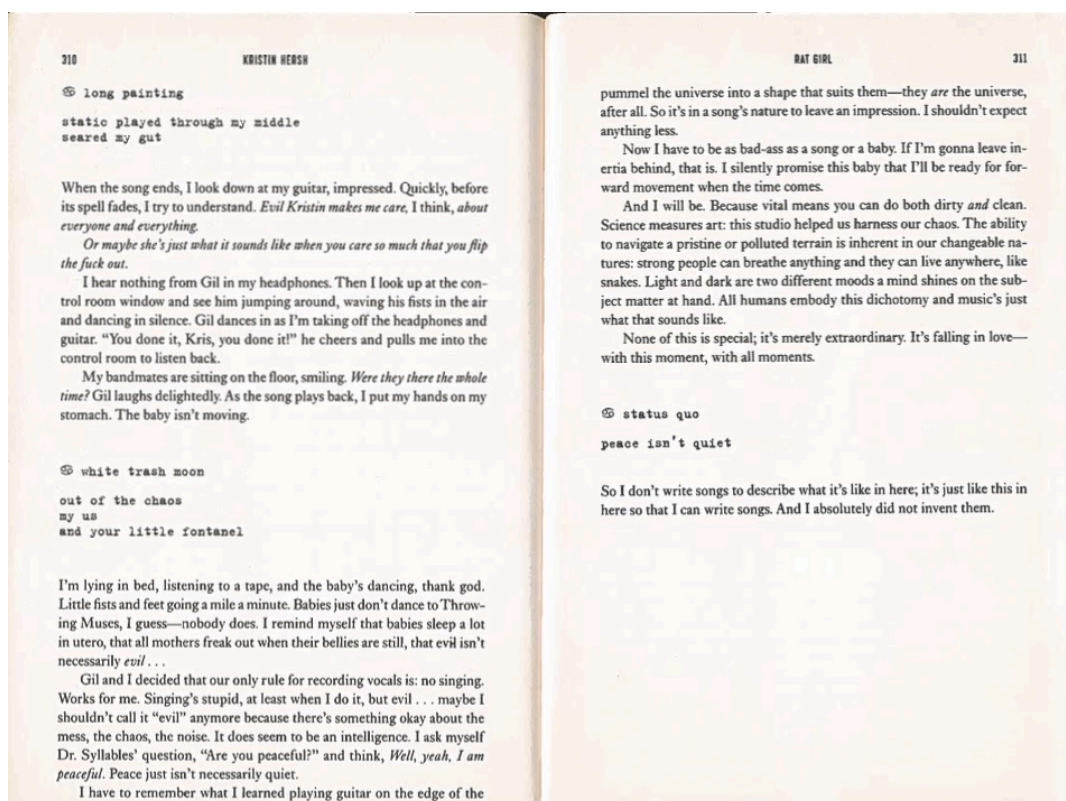


Figure 1: The fragmentary typeface of a ‘collagist’ memoir. Hersh includes her lyrics in a playful font that interpose the page, while the pieces of her ‘present’ narrative appear in the more formal, restrained lettering of Times New Roman.

⁵²⁶ Annette Kuhn, *Family Secrets: Acts of Memory and Imagination* (London: Verso, 1995), (p.163).

Kuhn argues that because the memory text is ‘typically a montage of vignettes, anecdotes, fragments, “snapshots” and “flashes”’, it is ‘collagist’ in its formation.⁵²⁷ The ‘collagist memoir’, as Kuhn defines it, brings with it a ‘tendency for rapid shifts of setting or point of view’, and moreover, its story is ‘narrated [...] in terms of marginality, the not-belonging, the struggle for identity, and an “uprooted” narrator’.⁵²⁸ Such references to an ‘uprooted’ narrator echo the growth of the rebellious coming-of-age young woman of YA anti-chick, as she sets out to become-*otherwise* through her transitional status as an adolescent. The constant recollection and recycling of past narratives in *Rat Girl* is a rejection of the more linear trajectory of, in Meltzer’s words, the female memoirist as she ‘finally grow[s] up’.⁵²⁹ *Rat Girl* may be steeped in the past; however, it is not stuck there. Instead, it is alive with the incoherencies and contradictions of its collagist narrative, strengthening the creative possibilities that come from returning to the past in order to progress. Returning to former narratives in Hersh’s text is a path toward agency, a chance for the female artist to celebrate herself, not as a grown-up brand or indeed just a ‘moolah’-making machine (though this is not to ignore the profit that Hersh would have made from her book’s sales), but as an imperfect work-in-progress.

Rat Girl is a reflective account of a young woman living in the late 80s, waiting to usher in the 90s. Hersh, as a dislocated artist, is right at home on the cusp of this transitional era, characterised by the shifting identity politics that are writ large in third wave feminism. Sheila Whiteley describes how the 90s milieu was characterised by ‘the cult of the disconnected fragment, the fashion of free-floating identity politics, in which we are all at liberty, *apparently*, to be who we want to be’⁵³⁰[emphasis added]. As the front-woman of Throwing Muses, Hersh – in her various attempts to query the gender roles that prevailed in music-making and performance in the 1990s – exemplifies the ‘fashion of

⁵²⁷ Kuhn, p. 163

⁵²⁸ Ibid., 166

⁵²⁹ Meltzer, para. 10

⁵³⁰ Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2000), (p.196).

free-floating identity politics’ to which Whiteley alludes. If these identity politics promise ‘liberty’, however, then they do so only ‘apparently’, on a selective and provisional basis. The female artist must thus be considered in terms of intersectional politics. In this respect, Hersh’s performance of her ‘ratty’ alter-ego is disingenuous: ‘I’m not homeless *per-se*’ she confesses, ‘I just can’t stop for very long, I’m too...wired’ [emphasis added]. The fact that she is at liberty to behave how she wants – as is shown through her implied marginality and quasi-homelessness – is predicated upon Hersh’s own advantages. Notwithstanding her position as a young and white female living in America, it is especially true in terms of her education; her ‘philosophy-professor father’ lectures at the university she attends and allowed her to enrol even ‘before she was old enough’.⁵³¹ In this respect, the freedom inherent in Whiteley’s claim– to *apparently* be who you want– depends heavily on relative privilege.⁵³²

As well as looking back to the disconnected 90s, the memoir’s 2010 publication date places it simultaneously within the derivative noughties. Simon Reynolds proposes that ‘instead of being on the threshold of the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the “Re” Decade. The 2000s were dominated by the ‘re-’ prefix: *revivals, reissues, remakes, re-enactments. Endless retrospection*’.⁵³³ The temporal confusion that resides within the unfinished format of *Rat Girl* is representative of Reynolds’ assertion that, in the derivative 00s, there *is* no end, only *endless* retrospection; the constant replacement of the present with the past results in a contemporary landscape that is littered with the prefix ‘re-’. In *Retro: A Culture of Revival*, Elizabeth Guffey also examines the congestion of ‘re-’ in popular culture. She remarks that ‘as survival and revival began to blur [...] the revived past began to collapse into the present’.⁵³⁴ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters interpret the breakdown of past and present as perplexing. If linear models of progress are missing and undetectable from the debris of the collapse of

⁵³¹ Hersh, p.13

⁵³² Ibid., 13

⁵³³ Reynolds, p.xi.

⁵³⁴ Elizabeth, E. Guffey, *Retro: The Culture of Revival* (London: Reaktion Books, 2006), (p.105).

the past into the present, then ‘how can we know where we are *now*?’ Certainly ‘it is difficult to detect “progress” in a culture that organises itself around the principles of recycling and recombining’.⁵³⁵ The hold that revival has on contemporary culture is disorientating and uncompromising. As the past seeps into the present, it creates little room for new possibilities and stultifies progress through its inability to know what or where *now* is. Retro entities then become products of their time; stuck further and further in their representative past, they are ‘dismissed as a fashionable novelty and fodder for popular culture’s relentless appetite’.⁵³⁶

Susan Hopkins asserts that ‘cultural industries absorb every oppositional meaning; everyone wants a piece of it. One day, safety pins signal rough and ready punk rebellion; the next they are designer fashion statements in Versace’s Punk Revival’.⁵³⁷ Hopkins registers just how quickly consumer culture can subsume rebellion. The once rough and ready, the politically and aesthetically resistant, are transformed into designer fashion statements that the consumer is unable to resist. The breakdown of past into present leaves no room to negotiate. The recapitulation of previous fashions, then, become fixed as products of their time, rather than progressive models of (work in) progress. Nevertheless, not all is lost: Andreas Huyssen’s *Twilight Memories* offers a compelling counterargument to the negative aspects of revival. Huyssen notes that there is a ‘fissure’, albeit a ‘tenuous’ one, that ‘opens up between experiencing an event and remembering it’.⁵³⁸ The discovery of the split between how things were and how things are should not be ‘lamented or ignored’ but instead should be celebrated and ‘understood as a powerful stimulant for cultural and artistic creativity’.⁵³⁹ It is exactly this fissure between past and present that ‘constitutes memory, making it *powerfully alive* and distinct from the archive or any other

⁵³⁵ Munford and Waters, p.36

⁵³⁶ Guffey, p.11

⁵³⁷ Susan Hopkins, *Girl Heroes: The New Face of popular Culture* (Australia: Pluto Press, 2002), (p.8).

⁵³⁸ Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995), (p.3)

⁵³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.3

mere system of storage and retrieval'.⁵⁴⁰ Here, Huyssen presents a means by which past and present can be reconciled through remembering in a way that is not just representative of a kind of archival hoarding; rather, this remembering generates the possibilities for the creation of new futures.

I understand the 'fissure' that Huyssen describes as a means through which to reconcile 'present' survival with past revival in order to create an immediate future out of the imperfect pieces of the female artist's experiences. With this in mind, I am interested in extending Gilmore's initial questioning of 'why memoir, why now' by examining *Rat Girl* as a project that formulates 'a type of subversion' in which the (female) 'artistic and cultural vanguard began looking backwards in order to go forwards'.⁵⁴¹ While *Rat Girl* is very much part of a revived past, do the 'untamed, ungroomed and unglossed' characteristics of Hersh's 'rat girl' persona reveal how the female artist embodies her imperfect accounts of the past in order to remain powerfully alive in the present day? On the other hand, do the collagist, and therefore structural, aspects of *Rat Girl* – the accounts of an 'uprooted' and 'marginal' narrator that are paradoxically published by a reputable brand – merely replicate the idea of 'retro' as a stylistic gesture wherein the female artist can play with past identities and experiences? Is the revival of these collagist fragments, then, simply bound up in a desire to publically self-mythologize, to indulge in the past, and ultimately rehearse new ways of being seen in contemporary culture?

'A song has the ability to tell a nice loud story': remembering, resurrecting and being caught in the act

The structural issues of the collagist memoir – the marginality, the not-belonging, the young narrator's struggle for a coherent identity – all feed into Hersh's use of her diary in

⁵⁴⁰ Ibid., p.3

⁵⁴¹ Guffey, p.9

Rat Girl. The diary format performs a dual role: as a form of life writing, the diary is associated with permanence and seriousness. At the same time, its playful and unfinished textual space symbolises the creativity of early adulthood, and makes it, much like the collage, a ‘rich resource for exploring discursive constructions of identity’.⁵⁴² In a strand of examination reminiscent of Driscoll’s hypothesis in *Girls* (2002), Kearney reveals that young women utilise the ‘discursive construction of “girl” to express and represent themselves authoritatively’, while exploring the multiple identities available to them through diaristic writing.⁵⁴³ As Hersh recalls a younger, more untamed self (hence rat girl) and speaks from her former, more ‘precipitate’ position as a young woman on the verge of adulthood, the revival of adolescence through her memoir exposes a transitional identity. This identity, as both Driscoll and Kearney’s studies suggest, strengthens the perception of a female subject as unfinished and discursive. Irene Gammel analyses the narrative ‘openness’ of the diary, which echoes the openness of the young female identities explored in its pages. The diary, as it deals with the ‘immediacy’ of women’s lived experience ‘records this experience as *in process*, rather than a finished product’ [original emphasis].⁵⁴⁴ It is exactly the perception of being unfinished and ‘*in process*’ that ‘encourages the inscription of new experimental roles and subjectivities, as the diarist produces a collage of plural selves’.⁵⁴⁵ Gammel’s account of the diary distances it from a medium that has a conclusive end; rather, it is never a finished artefact in the sense that the inscription and (re)inscription of new narratives means it is under constant revision. The rejection of formal closure that is encouraged within the diary’s textual space allows the female autobiographical subject to cast off a conclusive portrayal of her own identity in favour of multiple identities. These narratives are framed by the revival of the past. As this, in turn, prompts the survival of these narratives within the present, what we are left with is a collage of ‘multiple’, and contradictory, femininities.

⁵⁴² Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006), (p.152).

⁵⁴³ Kearney, p.152

⁵⁴⁴ Gammel, p. 292

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 292.

The diary generates a certain amount of temporal confusion within Hersh's portrait of artistic maturation, as she reflects 'I don't even know what a diary is, really – a book about now? That means you can't write the ending first and work backwards, right?'⁵⁴⁶ Hersh presents layers of past and present narratives, working 'backwards' to channel bits and pieces of the past that bleed into 'now' until past and present, once mutually exclusive, instead 'dwell side by side'.⁵⁴⁷ Hersh snakes between the boundaries of past/present, old/new, and her hallucinations and references to rodents and snakes that are made throughout *Rat Girl* are, like the diary, a staunch allegory for both her detachment and her renewal – an 'in-between' that allows her a 'tiny bit of control'.⁵⁴⁸ As snakes periodically shed and renew their skin, and rats scavenge for scraps, her constant visions of these creatures throughout her memoir represent her multiple identities and experiences. If, as Hersh posits, the diary structure means that the end cannot be written first, the narrative is left open to interpretation and exposes female self-representation as discursive and fragmentary. In terms of celebrating contradictory femininities, Hersh's suggestion that it is best to consider her work as a 'collage', seems to be right on the money.

In order to shed light on the central hypothesis of 'why memoir, why now', Gilmore, in an earlier monograph entitled *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation*, examines the problematic *history* of female autobiographical writing:

[The] male autobiographer leaves a trace, a monument in his absence, an epitaph in the form of autobiography that memorialises his passing. This disappearance is patterned metonymically through discourses of identity laden with nostalgia and mourning[...] the woman autobiographer, however, caught in the act of self-representation, disappears without a trace, for her passing has not yet been patterned into these discourses'.⁵⁴⁹

⁵⁴⁶ Hersh, p. 7

⁵⁴⁷ Rebecca Munford and Melanie Waters, *Feminism and Popular Culture: Investigating the Postfeminist Mystique* (London: I.B Tauris, 2014), (p.36).

⁵⁴⁸ Hersh, p. 153

⁵⁴⁹ Leigh Gilmore, *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* (London: Cornell University Press, 1994), (p. 91).

The implication that women are not remembered *at all* makes for a disturbing interpretation. Gilmore reads the imprint of male life writing as resonant with nostalgia, leaving an autobiographical identity that is not only worthy of being mourned but also worth remembering. The parameters of debate about the role of revival in the collapse of the past and present are widened by Gilmore's suggestion that the male autobiographical subject is not lost in this breakdown. Rather, his survival is marked in contemporary culture as a phallic enterprise – a 'monument' or 'epitaph' – that memorialises his identity and makes it concrete. The woman autobiographer, on the other hand, leaves no discernible trace; her imprint merely fades away, overshadowed by the phallogentric memorialising of the male autobiographical subject. Self-representation for the woman can only exist as an act, and the woman is 'caught' in it, like a naughty child playing dress up, with no existing model in the discourse of autobiographical writing on which to pattern her reflections. This is where the 'collagist' memoir comes into play. By centralising the felt marginality of the woman life-writer through the gaps and ruptures of her experience that are, in turn, made visible by including the snapshots and flashes of her past life, her absence(s) in autobiographical discourse is transformed into a visible presence.

Deviating slightly from Gilmore, yet drawing a similarly vexing conclusion, Watson and Smith discuss how women's autobiographies *do* leave a trace. They argue that it comes in the form of self-indulgence and they state: 'women artists' self-portraiture and their repeated acts of self-representation is alleged to be "narcissistic", evidence of a merely personal desire to keep looking in the mirror'.⁵⁵⁰ Watson and Smith observe how male autobiographical writers are 'attributed with the ability to take intellectual and aesthetic command to make their lives richly self-reflexive', whereas the female autobiographical writer cannot 'transcend, but only record, the concerns of the private self'.⁵⁵¹ Like Gilmore, both scholars posit the male autobiographer as dominating the field

⁵⁵⁰ Watson and Smith, p.12

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 12

through their ‘intellectual and aesthetic command’ and their rich self-reflexivity. Like the epitaphs central to Gilmore’s thesis, they leave a monumental presence (as well as a notable absence).

Although all three scholars appear to be drawing on the mythology that surrounds life-writing, as opposed to the reality, I will deliberate whether the survival of the female autobiographical subject through narcissistic self-representation is better than disappearing without a trace. Here, I wish to extend such a critique to *Rat Girl*. My suggestion is that more women (however conversely) want to be ‘caught in the act’ of rediscovering their stories, regardless of how imperfectly they might be pieced together; they are not afraid of simply disappearing from discourses that do not accommodate them. Collectively, women life writers are transforming their absence into a distinctive presence. This is particularly evident in the structural concern of being caught in-between early and mature adulthood, evidenced by the high visibility of ‘girl’ titles within the female memoirist scene – *Rat Girl* (Hersh, 2012), *Not That Kind of Girl* (Lena Dunham, 2015), *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl* (Carrie Brownstein, 2015), *Girl in a Band* (Kim Gordon, 2015), and *Mad Girl* (Bryony Gordon, 2016). The transitory position of the girl is aligned with the narrative impermanence of feminine writing. Thus, women’s life writing is not about narcissistic mirroring, or merely disappearing, but, in fact, it evokes artistic reflection: the present acknowledgment of the woman’s absence from autobiographical discourse is celebrated through the embodiment of the ‘girl’ and her potential for agency. This allows the female autobiographical subject to make room for a distinctive pattern of feminine self-representation in life writing. She looks back to the past as a form of resistance against her profound absence from conventional autobiographic discourse. With this, she becomes *present* as a discursive artist and can be held accountable for the things she is making. *Rat Girl*, along with the cohort of girl memoirs that I have outlined, undermines the certainties and complacencies of masculine autobiographical writing by reconciling the woman’s past

status as a girl and her present experience as a woman, but more than this, history with *herstory*.

In the context of being ‘caught in the act’, Hersh’s lived experience with bipolar, along with the haunting and possessive control music had on her, feels immediate throughout *Rat Girl*. Half-formed frames of songs-in-progress interrupt her pages, their unfinished lyrics appear to gnaw holes through her life narrative, a persistent and hunger-fuelled trail that continues right up to the end of the text. (See Figure 2).

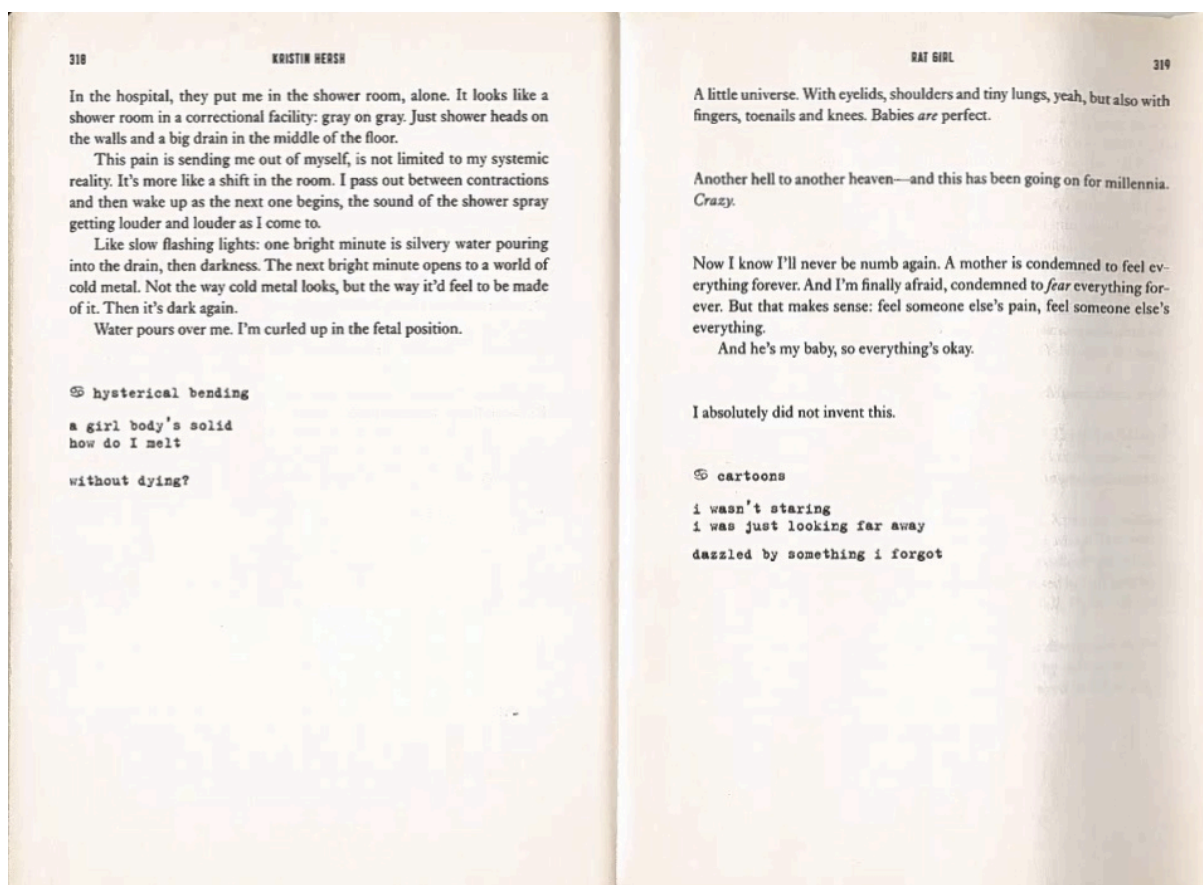


Figure 2: The concluding pages of *Rat Girl*. The past (revealed through Hersh’s lyrics), the present narrative, and the future (shown through Hersh’s baby and her own ‘RE-’birth) collide here. This gives Hersh an immediate presence through the imperfect nature of being ‘caught in the act’ that, in turn, forms the fragmentary aesthetic of her collagist text.

Here, Hersh’s musical past not only adds to her lived experience, but also gives the autobiographic ‘I’ that stands at the forefront of life writing a visual imprint. Watson and Smith propose that in order to make a palpable mark, contemporary female artists ‘mined

the visual/textual interface in many media for its autobiographical possibilities'.⁵⁵² Hersh recreates this visual/textual interface through digital platforms, as the reader can research her fragmentary lyrics on the internet to find audio and video recordings of Throwing Muses' past performances. This is a deft marketing of both the book and the mythologies that surround her. Hersh further encourages this by leaving only subtle hints and suggestions of her presence, rather than presenting the 'full story'. Bringing the 'musical quality' – as Kuhn observes – of the memory text to life in this way formulates a distinctive record of the female artist. The alignment of 'music' and 'memory' confounds the act of disappearing: Hersh's songs not only 'make memories' but have the 'ability to tell a nice loud story' of her life.⁵⁵³ 'Catch me in the act of self-making', they appear to be saying, as recording music, much like writing, becomes a tangible projection of Hersh's dislocated life narrative. From this, there is an unapologetic socialisation of the female autobiographical subject within 'masculine' autobiographical discourse. This strengthens my argument that it is far more productive and progressive for the contemporary woman to be caught in the middle of an act rather than to be shunned and excluded from it.

Regarding the overlap of music and memory throughout *Rat Girl's* narrative, I propose that the textual document (the memoir) be considered alongside Reynolds' depiction of the musical record. Both are tangible artefacts haunted by the distinctive imprints of the memories of their creators. Reynolds argues that the ghostly timbre of the record is ever-present in record 'sampling', which 'involves using recordings to make new recordings; it is the musical art of ghost co-ordination and ghost arrangement. It is often compared with collage.'⁵⁵⁴ This can be read in conjunction with the formation of the 'collagist memoir' from fragments, and Hersh's earlier statement that her 'disordered' art be better thought of as a collage. The 'sampling' of the past within the present, along with the receptive reaction of the contemporary audience, aids in the revival of what would

⁵⁵² Watson and Smith, p.7

⁵⁵³ Hersh, p.12

⁵⁵⁴ Reynolds, p. 313-314

otherwise remain as retiring bricolage. Through ghostly co-ordination and reviving samples of what has passed into ‘now’, Reynolds notes how ‘the individual becomes the curator of their own life-in-style’ and in order to achieve this, ‘nothing’, he states, ‘should be thrown out’.⁵⁵⁵ Reynolds’ stipulation reveals that to preserve important elements of the past within a personal exhibition is to become the curator of your own life. In the same way, to make this type of ‘record’ is to leave a tangible, and lasting, imprint of the self. A waxy body marked with inscribed grooves, or written pages that can be both turned and returned to, are a culmination of the distinctive traces of the musician’s, or memoirist’s, physical labour. This is evident in *Rat Girl* as Hersh explains ‘I was branded, tattooed all over [...] each [song] a musical picture etched onto my skin’. She later reveals ‘another ugly tattoo on this pathetic, little body, *I’m running out of room*’.⁵⁵⁶ Scars of Hersh’s past are etched onto a body that is attenuated by too many revived samples, suggesting that she has been overwhelmed by what has gone before. This leaves the following question: what happens when you *run out* of room? Relying so heavily on the past in order to survive means that its constant revival weakens the possibilities of a multiple and resistant identity that stands distinctively in the present as opposed to becoming a derivative product of its past. While narrative samples of Hersh’s past – her corporeal ‘tattoos’ – gesture toward a sense of permanence, their appearance on a diminishing surface – a ‘pathetic, little body’ – unsettle distinctions. Hersh’s personal exhibition is caught in-between distractive and attractive, destruction and creation.

The account of Hersh’s skin as branded, overwritten and congested with narrative samples makes her body a strong intertext for the palimpsest. Like Reynolds’ focus on new recordings made up from samples of old recordings, the palimpsest is another record, marked with traces of what has been, overwritten by new texts, yet still bearing traces of a past life. The saturation of past/present within the palimpsest creates an ongoing story.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 194

⁵⁵⁶ Hersh, p. 12& 90

Dillon describes the ability of the ‘palimpsest’ to revive dead narratives, stating that the ‘resurrective quality of palimpsest editors always uncannily brings the dead back to life: the footprints of the hunted wolf or stag are traced *backwards* [...] each former Phoenix is restored, alive again, in the ashes from which the present one emerged’.⁵⁵⁷ Dillon’s description of the collation of texts that, as they are traced *backwards*, then form the body of the palimpsest, is evocative of Kuhn’s description of the processes of constructing the collagist memory text, which ‘involves working backwards [...] patching together reconstructions from fragments of evidence’.⁵⁵⁸ It is useful to think of the female autobiographical subject of the anti-chick memoir as a palimpsest editor; sifting through and patching together fragments of evidence, they curate their own life that is, in turn, immortalised within the layered body of the record that tells her unfinished story. Invoking the ‘dead’ narrative musings of the female autobiographical self, then, is not a dead-end endeavour. Rather, her resuscitative impulses invite a renewed and progressive self that, to extend Dillon’s Phoenix metaphor, rises from the phonetic flames of the samples of past narratives. They seep through into the narratives of the present and carry with them the restorative and progressive effect, to return to Huyssen, of being powerfully alive.

In a later scene, Hersh riffs on this resurrective quality: ‘song tattoos glow all over me [...] every few minutes *I am* again’.⁵⁵⁹ As the samples of her past narratives radiate through the visually noisy artistry of her song tattoos, it is clear that the record animates the ‘fissure’ that Huyssen describes that exists between two worlds. In it, the past bleeds into the present and the skin between them glows, as observed by Huyssen, like a powerful and creative stimulus. Equally, the record is a distinct storage system and Hersh’s depiction embodies the vivacity that Reynolds instils in the life curator, who makes productive use of the bricolage of a bygone time through their creative theft of the past. This is not intended to overwhelm the present subject. Rather, the transience of Hersh’s

⁵⁵⁷ Dillon, p.26

⁵⁵⁸ Kuhn, p.4

⁵⁵⁹ Hersh, p. 47

statement ‘every few minutes’ serves to extend the work-in-progress aspects of the self that is produced within the imminent breakdown of past/present with a vivid clarity, as after this she states ‘*I am again*’. As Hersh is exposing her flaws, implied through the appearance of her ‘ugly’ tattoos, she is caught in the act of imperfect self-representation. Hersh’s body-as-record reconciles the ability to survive in the present through the revival of the past. Hersh is patched together through the resurrected fragments of her past story, and from this, carves out a path toward agency in which she has confronted the contradictions of *herstory* and has, quite literally, faced the music.

Below, Kuhn considers the act of remembering as providing raw material, and her observation strengthens the notion that Hersh’s memoir is unfinished and unprocessed. Kuhn’s implication is that memory’s raw material may be constantly returned to in order to make multiple imprints of our self. Bearing the marks and scars of personalisation, the resurrected accounts then survive as a record that is made up of superimposed layers of narratives that are both absent and present:

Telling stories about the past, our past, is a key moment in the making of our selves. To the extent that memory provides their raw material, such narratives of identity are shaped as much by what is left out of the account—whether forgotten or repressed— as by what is actually told. Secrets haunt our memory stories, giving them pattern and shape [...] happenings that do not slot neatly into the flow of narrative are ruthlessly edited out.⁵⁶⁰

Each revived fragment is in communication with the other in order to relay the intimate story of *our* past to prompt its survival within the present. Kuhn holds the act of remembering the past as the intimate ‘key moment’ with which to cast-off assumptions and unlock the raw material— the crude and unfinished creativity of a self— that is set against sculpted, and ‘edited’, creativity. Much like Dillon, Kuhn depicts dead narratives as imposing themselves onto the current story, conveying that our past is animated just as much by the immaterial and the absent as by what is actually told and granted physicality. The ruthlessness of editing in order to create a neat flow of narratives complements

⁵⁶⁰ Kuhn, p. 2

Reynolds' observation of instilling new meaning by arranging the retired bricolage of one's past. While there is no doubt that *Rat Girl* would have been subject to a stringent editorial process, that which does not 'neatly' flow has not been fully concealed. Rather, the narrative is made to reflect the fragmented, painful, and harsh process of revival in order to survive as a model of work-in-progress and replicate the jarring effect of the collagist memoir. This is what makes Hersh's story prescient. Painfully drawn and pregnant with the uncomfortable experiences that have shaped her self-representation, the exposure of her story amalgamates bits and pieces that explicitly toy with unedited transitions, from the overwhelm of 're-' – *I'm running out of room*– to the uncovering of autobiographical possibilities–*I am* again.

The following scene is a depiction of 'Throwing Muses' in performance and highlights the 'resurrection' of Hersh's former experiences through her music. The effect is both uncomfortable, exposing raw material, and restorative, demonstrating the allure of autobiographical possibilities through the release of past memories:

Tonight, everybody yelling together is so *smart*—ugly beauty— that it becomes vividly clear that the song is the point and must be disappeared into [...] Doghouse tattoos glow, crawl down into wretchedness, past memories and muscles and guts then down to the bones 'til I'm nothing. And *that* you don't have to apologise for. No shame down there in nothingland.⁵⁶¹

Fragmented and 'unedited', the scene is bursting with juxtapositions– *smart* yelling, *clearly* disappearing, and *ugly* beauty– all cultivating the in-between self-representation of the collagist memoir and the embedded inconsistencies of *Rat Girl* as a whole. The affective nature of music evokes a jarring aesthetic that destabilises conventional self-representation – the '*I am*' formation– and announces with it the possibility for the ultimate paradox: the tangible presence of absence, that is, to 'become *nothing*'. Certainly, Kuhn's assertion of memory as providing raw material is apt and fleshed out within the viscera of this section– the muscles, the guts and the bones all strengthen the idea of unprocessed and

⁵⁶¹ Hersh, p.113

repressed narratives, that are, like bones, muscles and guts, unseen and untold. If, according to Kuhn, raw material and telling stories is the key moment to the making of our self, then the vocal and written memory samples of *Rat Girl* are the point through which Hersh can be *unmade*, stripped down and (re)categorised as nothing. The self that is exposed therein is not merely a product of that moment in time, made up of revived fragments, but in fact is surviving at its very base level, an untogether and unfinished example of the contradictory reality of contemporary femininities. Hersh is simultaneously absent yet present to be interpreted: her displaced self-representation resonates and leaves an unapologetic pattern of nothingness in its wake. This arid ‘nothingland’ is ironic, however, as it actually brings suppressed narratives to life, formulating a progressive self that is not overwhelmed by the landscape of ‘re-’. The in-between and imperfect self-representation of the female autobiographic subject resonates with ‘ugly beauty’ and inhabits the discomfort of this aesthetic. Exposing flaws through juxtapositions evokes a communicative interface that hinges on a before (past) and after (present) state upon one surface.

‘I have very mixed feelings about my memories’: the problems of performative remembering

There is, as evidenced above, a collective transience that is generated by music and memory as Hersh heralds that the ‘song’, when played to an audience, is the empowering ‘point’ and must be ‘disappeared’ into. However, one must equally remember, as Kuhn does, the ‘*performative* aspect of remembering’.⁵⁶² This performance, Kuhn continues, comes from the way in which:

We choose what to keep in our memory boxes— which particular traces of our pasts we lovingly or not so lovingly preserve— and what we do with them [...]

⁵⁶² Kuhn, p.158

memory through words, spoken and written, in images of many kinds, and also in sounds.⁵⁶³

Given this, what role is the past performing in the above scene, specifically in terms of Hersh's own self-representation as the front woman of *Throwing Muses*? My issue in these terms comes from considering once more Hopkins and Guffey's claim of the 'performative' nature of revival, as well as retro as 'fodder' for consumer appetite. In this respect, the raw material provided by memory adds attractive flourishes (evidenced by the audience yelling 'smartly' in the preceding scene) to what should be female self-representation as unfinished, and markedly, unattractive: their unapologetic 'ugly beauty'. Hersh does little to ease the creeping concerns that she is not carving out space for survival in an otherwise derivative market, but rather, her self-representation as 'nothing' resembles a type of marketable nihilism.

The 'performative aspect of remembering', moreover, invites a sense of temporal confusion. The act of remembering evokes the breakdown of conventional constructions as past and present dwell side by side in a kind of palimpsestic playground (or battleground) that dismantles the possibility of survival through revival. Here I will return to Dillon, who extends the volatile limits between remembering and performing in relation to the 'act of palimpsesting', that she places within the playground/battleground debate by describing it as 'simultaneously destructive, as well as creative'.⁵⁶⁴ With a specific focus on the female modernist poet H.D, Dillon observes the collapse of the fictive and the autobiographical, highlighting the palimpsestuous relation of destruction and creation that is evoked through their superimposition. Dillon's observation of creation/destruction dismantles the 'stable, authorial identity' typical of the memoir as a monument of 'permanence', making room for

⁵⁶³ Ibid., 158

⁵⁶⁴ Dillon, p.111

a collagist type of memoir in which the bits and pieces of a past 'life' are collated through present 'writing' and made intimately proximate.⁵⁶⁵

Life and writing exist in a palimpsestuous intimacy that queers the very notions of the 'fictive' and the 'autobiographical': the 'straight' autobiographical narrative to which H.D. aspires is always queered by the fictionalizing frills of memory and narrative; any fictive narrative is always already inhabited and queered by the life of the writing subject who is formed by it.⁵⁶⁶

Here, Dillon highlights that 'fictionalising frills' are an inevitable and intimate component of the autobiographic subject; composed respectively of their actual life and the creative writing of that life, the female artist is afforded the opportunity to (mis)remember events. To return to Huyssen, perhaps this is the reason that the in-between of 'how things were' and 'how things are' remains such a stimulant for creativity as it allows for the addition of fictitious flourishes to 'real' life. As such, a body of conflict between two worlds – the fictive and the autobiographical – is formed, as the distinction between each is 'queered' by the person who is both writing it and living it, simultaneously author and audience, creator and destroyer. Rather than a clear route to agency, the performance of remembering suggests that the female artist who is 'caught in the act' of self-representation, who is powerfully alive with shameless contradictions, is actually temporary and derivative. The fissure that opens up between experiencing/remembering can be occupied by a new listener, reader, and writer. Its intended content, in a palimpsestic sense, can become overwritten by a new narrative. The audience align their own memories at the time of their encounter with the initial memory text and so, add their own fictionalising frills to those created by the subject who has originally informed the autobiographical narrative. When read in conjunction with Hersh's oppositional state of being 'nothing', it seems that to become nothing is a sought after state, and ironically ends up meaning nothing in itself. The key moment of Hersh's revived narratives and the very raw material that is provided by her

⁵⁶⁵ Ibid., 110

⁵⁶⁶ Ibid., 115

remembering, teeters on the brink of performativity. The revival of the past through performance illuminates that it is a stylistic gesture as opposed to a progressive opportunity to inhabit creative possibilities.

In a later scene, Hersh envisions the fraught disconnect between the fictive and the autobiographical by describing the expanding chasm between her lived experiences and her music-making:

Unintelligible at first, the syllables eventually arranged themselves into words that told stories from my life [...] a mythology of reality. The lyrics were at once impassioned and removed, as if someone else [...] was telling me what happened in black and white and then colouring it in with dream crayons.⁵⁶⁷

Here, what should be a clear split between the fictive and autobiographical which in turn, would evoke a powerful stimulant for artistic agency, instead fuses in colourful display of self-mythology. Hersh's life is consequently (dis)articulated— a host of 'unintelligible syllables' that lay strewn around her. The residue left in the wake of such jumbled stories is a 'mythology of reality', a revival of her life that is, ironically, out of her control and told by 'someone else'. Reading this passage in conjunction with Reynolds' 're-decade' suggests that Hersh's past is open to re-making, re-enactment and what is more, endless retrospection. This, in turn, leaves little room for Hersh to negotiate outside a mythology of a 're-'ality. What should be an inspiring phonetic energy emerging from the creative syllables of her music-making (especially when considering Dillon's idea of palimpsestic revival through her Phoenix metaphor) is instead a derivative capturing of *herstory*— as monosyllabic as the landscape of 're-' — evidenced as it is 'someone else' that tells Hersh what happened in 'black and white'. The lurid cursive of self-mythology — the 'dream crayons' — that sweep over this scene differentiate from the raw and intimate act of remembering depicted in the former quotation. Instead, the fictionalising frills of memory narratives abound in this passage, with the blanks filled in by someone else's interpretation.

⁵⁶⁷ Hersh, p. 78

With the musings of a larger audience defacing the intimate narratives of Hersh's past, what is at stake in this scene is the notion of an artistic vanguard looking backwards in order to go forwards. Rather, a mythologised idea of the self can only exist, propped up by the interpretations of another, a superimposition of monochrome reality and colourful performance that in turn, queers the important division of fiction and autobiography.

Untogether now: the present *presence* of the work-in-progress female artist

The self-representation of the modern female artist in memoir is a palpable amalgamation of past/present. She is, however, also host to the impenetrable interweaving of the 'fictive' with the 'autobiographical'. Susan Hopkins' examines the performativity of female artists with reference to Madonna and Courtney Love, observing that they 'wear many different skins'.⁵⁶⁸ As such, Madonna and Love are examples of female artists who embody old and new, fictional and factual. While inhabiting a multiplicity of 'skins' reveals a particular artistic innovation, it also prompts the rehearsal and performance of those different identities, making it difficult to discern where the autobiographical self ends and where the fictive takes over. This evokes the more problematic implication that such manifold appearances actually mark the collapse of an idiosyncratic agency 'into a plethora of public interpretations'.⁵⁶⁹ The idea of 'multiple skins' also establishes the deluge of 're-' that is observed by Reynolds, and pinpoint a 'decade of rampant recycling: bygone eras are revived and renovated, vintage material is reprocessed and recombined'.⁵⁷⁰ Reynolds continues to set up the palimpsestuous nature of the 00s, in which past and present *skins* are made intimately proximate: the 'taut skin and rosy cheeks' of new ideas and aesthetics are already based on former, more matured narratives as behind the supple parchment of

⁵⁶⁸ Hopkins, p.199

⁵⁶⁹ Ibid.,199

⁵⁷⁰ Reynolds, p.xi

the present ‘you could detect the sagging grey flesh of old ideas’.⁵⁷¹ The sag of the past is testament to the long-term effects of recycling and the reprocessing of old ideas that seep through into the present. Yet, this is a key trope of a cultural vanguard of female artists who are looking backwards and facing their past in order to progress. Their utilisation of many different skins – a communicative juxtaposition between rosy/grey and sagging–collate and animate multiple narratives on one surface, affording the restorative effect of ‘herstory’ as an ongoing and liberating process.

To return to Hopkins, it is easy to consider Madonna, Love and Hersh as very different figures. Madonna, with her pastiche of pop styles, is an emblem of the ‘re-’ decade. Love, on the other hand, is famed as much for her fashion faux pas, cosmetic surgery and her drug addictions as her music. She nonetheless remains a complex ‘symbol of conventional female “prettiness” combined with violent and destructive images’; a hopeless conundrum of the ‘un-’prefix – at once untamed, untogether, unattractive, unabashed.⁵⁷² It is, however, equally necessary to dwell on what these figures do have in common: their insatiable desire to be ‘caught in the act’ of their own self-representation, and become accountable for what they are making. As each artist ‘diversified, reinvented herself and invited us to watch’, they are not merely products of their time but are progressive models of work-in-progress. As such, this is how they are remembered.⁵⁷³ All three artists then, despite their differences, are key examples of women who are opening up possibilities through their art, ‘constantly remind[ing] us that all identity is a kind of work of art in progress’.⁵⁷⁴ They are real-life collage grrrls, who mark their self-representation with communicative juxtapositions: they are traditional and transient, creative and destructive, successful and failing, and so, they visibly work to reclaim the contradictions that are inherent in the contemporary construction of femininity.

⁵⁷¹ Ibid., xi

⁵⁷² Strong, p. 127

⁵⁷³ Hopkins, p. 210

⁵⁷⁴ Ibid., 215

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, it is the very essence of embedded inconsistencies within *Rat Girl*– the traditional and the transient, the creative and the destructive, the attractive and the distractive– that creates a progressive narrative through these communicative juxtapositions. If, as Hopkins states, consumer culture is in ‘perpetual pursuit of the new and the fresh’, the kind of consumption at the heart of *Rat Girl* is deliberately inconsistent with this desire.⁵⁷⁵ It is not for the recent but for the ‘retro’, which replaces the ‘charming’ and ‘romantic’ with the ‘weird’ and the ‘ugly’.⁵⁷⁶ Aesthetic thresholds are constantly crossed: the new and fresh cannot exist without incorporating the timeworn and unfinished. Even Hersh, who as a young woman was dressed often in ‘dirty clothes’ and wayward, thrifty hand-me-downs bears an elemental connection to ideas of travelling back into the past. The ability to twist aesthetic margins in this way is a sign of a potential agency which lies in the reclaiming of dead styles and fashions. Amalgamating the charming/romantic/weird/ugly, *Rat Girl* is decisively open and unfinished in its multiplicity. A ravishing and ravished aesthetic emerges from this, that, albeit ‘staged’ and ‘performed’, it matches the desire for ‘dead’ styles to be resurrected within the present. Furthermore, such revived images are marked with the progressive ability to survive in the long-term, and each female artist reminds the audience/reader of their productive position as a work-in-progress. (See figure 3, 4 and 5).

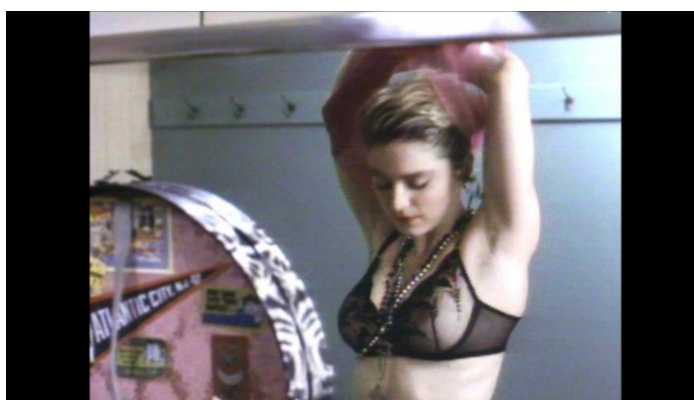


Figure 3: ‘ravishing/ravished’ Madonna, female artist as work-in-progress.

⁵⁷⁵ Ibid., p.8

⁵⁷⁶ Guffey, p.161



Figure 4: 'ravishing/ravished', Courtney Love, work-in-progress aesthetic.



Figure 5: 'ravishing/ravished', Kristin Hersh, work-in-progress aesthetic.

The images of each female figure, representative of the present *presence* of the female artist as untogether, strengthens Hersh's sultry snaking between past and present muses. Here self-representation, therefore, becomes a constellation of feminine conjunctions and timely inconsistencies that Gammel indicates as a collage of plural selves. As Watson and Smith argue the 'past is not a static repository of experience but always engaged from a present moment, itself ever-changing'.⁵⁷⁷ As such, the autobiographic feminine subject, bound on the course of reviving her past, is herself ever-changing, the skins she at once embodies, sheds and renews, reveal her body as a surface for creative agency. Rather than producing a 'grown-up' self, feminine self-representation in the collagist memoir remains unfinished, a marginal subject made up of 'snapshots' and 'flashes'. The insistence on the unfinished in the anti-chick memoir is important as it marks the survival of these images through a seductive split between past and present, girl and grown-up, fostering a 'self that it claims has given rise to an 'I'. And that "I" is neither unified nor stable – it is fragmented, provisional, multiple, in process'.⁵⁷⁸ This suggests that Hersh's memoir – with its revivification of her own girlhood – ends up playing up to/exploiting the visibility of the girl in contemporary western culture. Thus, the excess of nineties-nostalgia memoirs by women are an acknowledgement of the fact that their cultural visibility is contingent on their (lost) youthfulness. Their in-process and imperfect nature is upheld in order to reveal that they *need* to be girls again in order to remain relevant: if they are 'unfinished' in the same manner as the transitional position of the girl, they can constantly be returned to. While this is not necessarily possible to maintain successfully in the long term, the 'girlled' woman, to return to Halberstam, *is* successful in terms of celebrating a 'failure' to become a woman as she has been imagined and defined in western culture.

The following passage is a striking example of the multiplicity and provisional narrative of a self in progress. In it, Hersh depicts the periodic shedding and renewal of

⁵⁷⁷ Watson and Smith, p.9

⁵⁷⁸ Ibid., 9

collagist identities. Throughout this scene, the embodiment of aesthetic thresholds in order to expose different artistic possibilities come to the fore through a ‘flashing’ and disorientating fragmentation of identity:

I guess you could create your own static impression of someone, but it’d be inaccurate, limiting [...] People are movement, structure built on fluidity [...] I stare at their faces, trying to commit them to memory, but their features are always overwhelmed by more fascinating flashbacks.⁵⁷⁹

Here, Hersh illuminates the porosity of self-representation. Her musings revel in the possibility that maintaining a fixed image is actually impossible. The recollection of former narratives are physically blinding, evoking an aesthetic inaccuracy within which both the role of the ‘I’ and the eye is dismantled. From this, ‘more fascinating’ artistic possibilities can be unleashed. The in-process nature of the subject is evoked as the ‘I’ that Hersh depicts is not a static pillar, but rather, the eye of the viewer that beholds it is distracted by the fluttering of past images, revealing a collage of multiplicity that cannot be ignored. Fluid and transitive, the autobiographic subject that Hersh depicts is at once put together by the ‘staring’ viewer yet simultaneously, is taken apart by recollections of images that have been, leaving the memorable trace of the female artist as untogether and unmade. Such an embodiment will survive as long as the revived pieces of her story survive, and it is here we return to the importance that the record is ‘permanent’ but at the same time, needs to remain unfinished: bits and pieces of memory scuttle around this passage with the energy of inconsistent, and immediate, self-representation. Diversified and ‘re-’invented, this scene invites us to watch, aiding in the emergence of the present *presence* and the ‘unfinished’ and ongoing story of the female artist as a work-in-progress.

Conclusion: *Rat Girl* re-born?

⁵⁷⁹ Hersh, p. 56

Under the framework of ‘why memoir, why now’, I have examined the implications of the female artist as she looks backwards in order to go forwards. In an attempt to answer Gilmore’s enquiry, I have revealed that a tense crossroad exists between the creative agency of reclaiming and celebrating a contradictory and ‘untogether’ femininity, alongside the view that the revival of the past— most notably, that of the girl position— is an indulgent state of self-mythology. This is both a weakness, yet also a necessity on the part of the female artist: she needs to remain as a ‘girl’ in order to stay relevant within the established political, social and cultural structures of western society. Such structures are established by patriarchy, the aesthetic labours inherent in postfeminism and neoliberalism that are directed toward the self, as well as contemporary culture’s fascination in becoming a pastiche of the past (the appeal with ‘girling’ women). Such frameworks uphold the more troublesome implication that the contemporary woman is always and already condemned to remain ‘girded’.

What then, in these terms, are the concluding effects of the remnants of ‘re-’ that fashion *Rat Girl’s* narrative drama? In *Next Now: Trends for the Future*, Marian Salzman and Ira Matathia, make the following provocative claim:

We live in a world of constant change. Borders are broken, and cultures are crossed; the world is a pastiche of this and that. We talk in terms of makeovers and renovations and being born again and reinvented.⁵⁸⁰

Both scholars’ propose that the creative theft of the past is agentive in that it prompts a successful ‘reinvention’ of the self within the present. What I find most suggestive here is the implication that, despite the familiarity of pastiche, the nature of revival remains utterly dynamic: it is through ‘this’ and ‘that’ (a description that is charmingly evocative of the collage aesthetic) that thresholds are broken and crossed, so that the ‘made-over’ or ‘renovated’ subject may be *reborn* in an ultimate encapsulation of ‘re-’.

⁵⁸⁰ Marian Salzman and Ira Matathia, *Next Now: Trends for the future* (London: Palgrave MACMILLAN, 2006), (p.127).

Sheila Whiteley looks back to the punk tradition of the (re)appropriation of current culture that in turn, imbued punks' cut-and-paste designs and ethos of 'ripping' up and starting again. Throughout this thesis, I have drawn upon the way in which riot grrrl was influenced by the punk philosophy of (re)appropriation. Alongside this, I have revealed the ways in which anti-chick fictions play on the notion of the 'grrrl' as an agent of contradiction and transitional possibility that works to unsettle 'normative' constructions of femininity. Whiteley's examination matches Salzman and Matathia's observation that the revival of 'this' and 'that' generates an immediate, and creative, future. Whiteley depicts how punk's "cut up", "plundered" and juxtaposed apparently unrelated items and signifiers to create a kinetic, transitive culture which concentrated attention on the act of transformation performed upon the object'.⁵⁸¹ The energy of juxtaposition— the 'cut-up' and the 'plundered' objects— are representative of the collagist memoir which in itself is fragmented, a patching together of various recollections that affords the lively (and imperfect) communication between past and present. This, in turn, inspires the 'kinetic' and 'transitive' energy to push forward from what has gone before into the re-creation of something new. It is then, through the 'this' and 'that' of transformative revival, that survival is sealed.

In the closing pages of *Rat Girl*, Hersh's declining mental health results in a suicide attempt: 'I take the razor blade out [...] sit down on the floor, and cut the songs out of me'.⁵⁸² The outcome of this dark episode is bright, however, and Hersh begins to receive treatment for her otherwise undiagnosed bipolar. In her period of recuperation, Hersh recalls being encouraged to imagine that she is being 'reborn' and that 'birth is a painful process, but a positive one'.⁵⁸³ Hersh's rebirth is predictable, to say the least, but at least it is consistent with not only the restoration of her mental equilibrium, but the creation of *Throwing Muses'* album, and the physical birth of her son. In *Rat Girl*, Hersh, as an

⁵⁸¹ Whiteley, p.105

⁵⁸² Hersh, p.143

⁵⁸³ Ibid.,145

autobiographical subject, is interwoven with the *autopathographical* aspects of her life, which contribute to the felt immediacy and the vitality of re-invention. This is especially true given that ‘haunting and painful memories constitute a well-spring through which identity is recreated and reproduced anew’ and this is, moreover, ‘creative in its process of renewal, revival and recuperation’.⁵⁸⁴ Much like my examination of the problems of romanticising self-harm in Forrest’s *Thin Skin*, I am not attempting to conclude in a glamorisation of the act or suggest that cutting allows for the formation of a ‘new’ identity. My specific focus on cutting is, to return to Halberstam’s examination in *The Queer Art of Failure*, due to its links with the fragmentary nature of the collagist memoir, and the revival of the past, especially its painful elements. ‘Cutting’, in the respect of *Rat Girl*, offers a kind of rebirth through a therapeutic, and recuperative, interweaving of an autopathographical and autobiographical self. This mimics the recuperation of the darker aspects of female experience to popular culture through anti-chick texts. Importantly, the pieces of Hersh’s *herstory*, tinged with her painful recollections, work to unsettle the performative aspects of remembering.

Physical and psychological marks of the past lead to Hersh’s transitive re-birth, as she comments ‘if you’re gonna leave inertia behind, you gotta be ready for forward movement’.⁵⁸⁵ This mantra punctuates *Rat Girl*, and solidifies the concept of the artistic vanguard looking ‘backwards’ in order to go ‘forwards’. This ‘forward movement’ increases in intensity toward the final stages of Throwing Muses’ recording process and the final trimesters of Hersh’s pregnancy. *Rat Girl* ends in transition, and its narrative inconsistencies are, of course, both problematic and productive. Much like a ‘well-spring’ that offers the reproduction of the self as anew, *Rat Girl* ends with the image of recuperative water. It does, however, present a kind of retreat

⁵⁸⁴ *Girlhood: Redefining the Limits*, Ed by. Yasmin Jiwani, Candis Steenbergen, Claudia Mitchell (Canada: Black Rose books, 2006), (p.xiv).

⁵⁸⁵ Hersh, p.266

ism into the woman/birth/creativity clichés which dismantle the ‘openness’ of the narrative through a recapitulation of tired feminine tropes. In the concluding lines of *Rat Girl*, physical birth and ‘re-birth’ are fluid and creative, yet are combined with the tried and tested tropes of ‘this’ and ‘that’. This is particularly evident in the aesthetically ‘patched-together’ typography of the text:

The water pours over me, I’m curled up in a fetal position
[...]
Babies *are* perfect.
[...]
Crazy

I absolutely did not invent this.⁵⁸⁶

In this final diary entry, both birth and a metaphorical re-birth are interwoven to produce the narrative energy of moving forward, of, as Hersh puts it, leaving ‘inertia behind’. Delivering the product of her physical labour to the world, Hersh, as a female artist, can be recognised and accountable for what she is making. Yet, true to the narrative inconsistencies of *Rat Girl* and its problematic, gaping holes, Hersh dismisses her creativity as she states ‘I absolutely did not invent this’. This is, perhaps, to shed all responsibility for an otherwise cliché littered ending. It seems a wasted opportunity on Hersh’s part that *Rat Girl* ends with Hersh’s giving birth and her somewhat banal re-birth. Indeed, this solidifies her position as a woman, a position that, I have argued, she should be unashamed about inhabiting and flaunting. At the same time, feminine creativity does not just begin and end with being a mother. Hersh’s attainment of creative agency would have been better brought out by ending on a lasting impression of her role as an agentive and *young* front-woman in what was otherwise a typically male-dominated music scene. Nevertheless, the ending does in part exhibit and remind the reader of Hersh’s imperfect, work-in-progress aspects in retrospect. It breaks through into an immediate and creative future through her full

⁵⁸⁶ Hersh, p. 318 (Also see Fig.2)

exploration of the various avenues available in the landscape of ‘re-’ that forms contemporary culture.

Hersh’s flip reference to her own pathology through ‘crazy’ is nestled between her own rebirth, as she lies in a ‘foetal position’, as well as the birth of her son. This interweaving of autopathographical and autobiographical dismantles the problems of performative remembering, even if it is just for a ‘moment’. A tongue-in-cheek gesture, it reveals that she has managed to relive her past, learning to accept her otherness on her own terms, and is, furthermore, ready to create a new identity by confronting the ‘*crazy*’ aspects that reside within herself. The narrative tension of perfect/crazy ultimately tells of the liberating process of revealing the multiple, and contradictory, narratives of *herstory*. The distance created in Hersh’s final line– ‘I absolutely did not invent this’– is the vital embedded inconsistency. Here, there is a derisive desire to be ‘caught in the act’ that animates the text’s overall aura of early, precipitate creativity, that is shown through ‘*crazy*’, and a sculpted, mature creativity, revealed through ‘*perfect*’. The distance Hersh maintains reminds the reader that the female artist is a work-in-progress. As Hersh faces the music, *Rat Girl* strikes a chord with the simultaneously regressive and progressive survival of contradictory femininities through ‘RE-’vival.

Conclusion

Collage Grrrl to Cover girl:

Anti-Chick lit as Re-tamed, Re-groomed, Re-glossed

In conclusion, I will firstly draw on the following implication made by Hersh in the closing lines of her foreword to *Rat Girl*: ‘that girl isn’t me anymore’, she writes, ‘now it’s just a story’.⁵⁸⁷ This statement struck me for two reasons. One was due to the way that it substantiates the importance of the ‘girl’ to the portrayal of contradictory femininities within anti-chick lit. Hersh recapitulates how the girl/grrrl has gathered status as a figure that challenges ‘normative’ aspects of femininity within contemporary women’s writing. Secondly, it marks the girl’s transferal from a ‘subject’ to a ‘story’, but what is most curious is that it does not appear in the conclusion to *Rat Girl*; rather, it is set out in Hersh’s foreword. This suggests that Hersh has already come to the conclusion that her position as a ‘girl,’ and the attainment of all of her marginal possibilities, is bound to be recuperated to popular culture and re-sold as ‘just a story’.

My research has incited many questions in terms of what it means for the contemporary woman when she deliberately ‘attempts’ to ‘fall short’ of expectations, whether she can dismantle mainstream notions of the ‘successful’ woman, and if she can find productive potentials by taking recourse to the ‘untamed, ungroomed [and] unglossed’

⁵⁸⁷ Hersh, p. 2

anti-chick aesthetic. Throughout this evaluation, I have located that female artists are working to confront the inherent contradictions that lie within contemporary femininity. As argued by Genz, this confrontation is caused by the understanding that feminine identity is not a 'singular' construction. Instead, femininity is open to multiple interpretations; it is characterised by its hybrid qualities that I, in turn, have identified as an unapologetic showcasing of the contemporary woman as a 'work-in-progress'. My specific focus on the types of dysfunctional characters that anti-chick authors are attempting to write into their work is based around the darker aspects of femininity experienced by 90s women in lieu of the rhetoric of 'girl power'. As transformations of femininity and feminism re-entered 90s culture, women were immersed in a postfeminist moment of empowerment and agency, but also of disorientation and anxiety. Equally, they still carried the traces of third wave identities that were ultimately characterised by contradiction, and were, moreover, central to the ethos of the riot grrrl movement of the early 90s.

From this, I discovered the emergence of 'anti-femininities' from within the bounds of mainstream fiction, and that this was a way for contemporary women to generate opportunities for feminine creativity and potential resistance. My examination subsequently located the following paradox that swirls around the celebration of these contradictory femininities in anti-chick lit: to mark something as 'anti' or as 'other' is to make it expressly open to co-option and reinterpretation by the very thing – in this instance, 'normative' femininity – that it works to define itself against. As a result, such anti-femininities have ended up re-packaged and re-sold to feminine consumers as 'new' identity brands. As the celebration of 'anti', or indeed, contradictory femininities, is an ongoing and cyclical process of revelation (the untamed, ungroomed, unglossed) and concealment (the re-tamed, re-groomed, re-glossed) my findings remain twofold: anti-chick lit attempts to resist the fixed scripts of the more conventional femininity that is laid out in chick lit, and in so doing, can precipitate creative (re)imaginings of what contemporary feminine identity is or could be. However, this 'failure' to live up to

‘normative’ feminine narratives and the rebuttal of convention is not so much ‘deliberate’ or progressive as it is an inevitable reaction to, and a product of, the increasingly changeable mores of popular culture. At the beginning of this thesis, I questioned whether the reclaiming of contradictory femininities within contemporary fiction actually suggested a pathway to change? Rather than inciting ‘change’, my answer is that the dysfunctional feminine identities explored through anti-chick lit are not evidence of complete resistance or rebellion. Rather, reclaiming contradictory femininities within the bounds of popular fiction reflects an (inevitable) structural, rebellious tinkering to interpretations of femininity that have, in turn, gained traction in contemporary consumer culture.

In order to substantiate this answer and broaden the relevance of my examination, I will close with a few further reflections in relation to *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Cover Girl, The Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (2017). *We Were Feminists Once*, written by the co-founder of *Bitch* magazine, Andi Zeisler, is a timely exploration of feminism’s shift ‘from a collective goal to a consumer brand’.⁵⁸⁸ Zeisler maps out the celebration (and co-option) of feminism as it re-entered the 90s mainstream after the huge 1980s backlash that had ‘saddled the word with a wealth of ugly baggage’.⁵⁸⁹ It is here that Zeisler locates feminism’s re-entry into the mainstream as responsible for the commodification of the ‘riot grrrl’ into the ‘cover girl’.⁵⁹⁰ With this, Zeisler traces the productive potentials as well as the problematic outcomes of popular culture’s co-option of counter-cultural practices and politics. In the same way, I have found that as anti-chick lit authors celebrate contradictory femininities through what I have termed as the ‘collage grrrl’, that the ‘collage grrrl’ has also been subject to this transformation into a ‘cover girl’ through the mass-market fiction with which she is affiliated. In the wider context of anti-chick lit, this is representative of the shift from the untamed, ungroomed, unglossed to the re-tamed, re-groomed, and re-glossed.

⁵⁸⁸ Andi Zeisler, *We Were Feminists Once* (USA: PublicAffairs, 2017), (p.IX)

⁵⁸⁹ Zeisler p. IX

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, IX

The ‘collage grrrrl’ of anti-chick lit emerged from the multiplicity and fluxional ‘freedom’ offered to women through 90s identity politics. The objectives of *Bitch* magazine came into form in much of the same way, with *Bitch* materialising in 1995 as a ‘black-and-white, stapled together zine’ and at ‘a time when feminism had only recently re-entered the pop-cultural imagination’.⁵⁹¹ As the tagline for *Bitch* positions the magazine as ‘a feminist *response* to popular culture’, even Zeisler cannot deny that this, just as equally, indicates the mainstream transformation of feminism into a ‘marketplace feminism [...] its decontextualized. Its depoliticized. And it’s probably feminism’s most popular iteration ever’ [emphasis added].⁵⁹² Correspondingly, the ‘anti-femininities’ of anti-chick lit – as they are a ‘response’ to the mainstream conventions of femininity – leads to their transformation into a ‘cool, fun, accessible identity’ for feminine consumers.⁵⁹³ This recapitulates a central concern of this thesis: if anti-chick lit heralds a simultaneous straddling of subverting conventions yet ends in a submission to those same conventions, it remains the case, as Zeisler also concludes, that ‘there is a very fine line between celebrating feminism and co-opting it’.⁵⁹⁴

Where, then, can we go from this ‘fine’ yet (very) prominent boundary line? What is the future of the types of dysfunctional, ‘anti’ femininities that are at the heart of anti-chick lit that, in itself, is a genre that is central to the mass market? Zeisler concludes by stating that, yes, feminism’s alignment with the mainstream has propelled contemporary culture into an era of marketplace feminism. Yet, she contends, ‘why can’t we just enjoy what [marketplace feminism] still has to offer?’ And with this, ‘we can retain the excitement and joy that’s come from seeing a more feminist culture take shape, and bulk up the resolve that’s required to continue shaping it’.⁵⁹⁵ The question of how anti-chick lit’s politics of rejection/subversion/failure with its mass-market success/appeal can be

⁵⁹¹ Zeisler, x

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, xiii

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, X

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 255

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 258

reconciled, shifts into the fact that, actually, it is just about enjoying this contradiction. It is about celebrating the female authors who are tinkering with structures in an – invariably unsuccessful – ‘attempt’ to shape and achieve creative autonomy.

It is here that Emma Forrest, who I have set up as a representative for the anti-chick genre, comes back into focus as a lens with which to consider the future of anti-chick lit. As I have examined in chapter one, Forrest sets herself up as a practitioner for the reclaiming of contradictory feminine identities through her work, and her fiction is a revivification of the ‘fucked-up girl’ genre within popular culture. To relay this figure to a mainstream audience intensifies the morbid cultural intrigue (and specifically male desire) to watch a woman ‘fall apart’. Yet, to recuperate the presence of the fucked-up girl to the mainstream is not wholly negative: as she re-enters the consumer terrain, her relevance gains traction and her contradictions are preserved. The forthcoming release of Forrest’s first film, *Untogether* (2018), substantiates the contemporary significance and growing popularity of the contradictory, and ‘anti’ femininities, of anti-chick lit. Forrest’s indie film focusses on a teen prodigy turned heroin addict who wants to be a writer. The lead role is played by Jemima Kirke, who is famed for her portrayal of ‘Jessa Johansson’ in Lena Dunham’s award-winning HBO series, *Girls* (2012-2017). *Untogether* centralizes the co-option of the darker aspects of femininity by popular culture, but this is also about laying bare, and enjoying, the inherent contradictions of the contemporary woman.

Nothing encapsulates this more than the type of press that has formally announced the upcoming film, most specifically, the *Daily Mail*’s leading headline: ‘Bra-vo! A Pink Haired Jemima Kirke goes without support as she films *Untogether* with co-star Jamie Dornan’.⁵⁹⁶ It is exactly this faming of the woman for being ‘bra-less’, and indeed, ‘unsupported’, that solidifies the cultural fascination with someone who is visibly falling apart. It also returns us to the impact of everyday gestures as they are hyperbolised as

⁵⁹⁶ S. Sotoodeh, ‘Bra-vo! A Pink Haired Jemima Kirke goes without support as she films *Untogether* with co-star Jamie Dornan’, *Daily Mail*, 8 November 2016, p. 2.

resistant actions (going bra-less, and what is more, being applauded for it) that was incited by Gill, Scharff and Elias. However, what Forrest's foray into the indie-film scene evidences is that these playful gestures of 'resistance' will, while co-opted by the mainstream, continue to celebrate the work-in-progress aspects of contemporary women that are, through Kirke's 'untamed' imagery and the film's anticipated release, set to be on full display.

It may be, to return to Cris Mazza, difficult to make a distinction between transgressive actions and those that are perceived as 'normal' or indeed, mimicking the 'status-quo'. This represents what Grosz terms as the 'fine line' between subversion and submission, as much as it reflects the 'fine line' that Zeisler sets up between 'celebrating' counter-cultural practices and 'co-opting' them. This 'fine line' leaves us with, as Genz has articulated, 'more of the same'. However, by confronting and enjoying the contradictions of anti-chick lit, and anti-femininities, productive steps are made toward (playfully) undermining the conceptual foundations of femininity. In this way, anti-chick lit fictions administer a deliberate attempt to realise an 'alternative' to contemporary and cultural feminine conventions, and to do so (un)together.

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