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Riot grrrls and shredder bros: Punk ethics, social justice and (un)popular popular music at School of Rock

ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study of riot grrrl music in a School of Rock franchise in the Midwestern United States. It presents the school as a place in which gender is bound up in specific notions of what it is to play rock music, notions that directly inform what constitutes popular popular music within this context. The article examines the Riot Grrrl project using frame analysis, presenting and discussing three frames through which riot grrrl was taught: as music, punk ethics and social justice. It examines a case of frame conflict as played out in a disagreement between the programme's two male instructors. It suggests that multi-frame approaches to popular music teaching, including clashes that may arise from conflicting frames, are effective in disrupting the musical-cultural status quo and in creating spaces in which students may productively and empathetically encounter the unpopular popular music of marginalized musical 'Others'.

KEYWORDS

School of Rock
riot grrrl
punk ethics
social justice
feminism
frame analysis

1. The codification of riot grrrl as a 'movement' is, as Radway points out, a selective recounting, one that elides the diversity of the 'messy, distinctly wild, range of social practices' that constituted feminist punk participation and engagement in the 1990s (2016: 4). While it is useful to bundle this collection of activities together, in reusing and retelling this historiography it must be noted that it is exactly that – a historiography, one that has been selected and crafted for narrative coherence, and one that has tended to elide or exclude the vital contributions of women of colour and LGBTQ+ individuals (see especially Nguyen 2012).
2. Zines are short, serialized, independent DIY publications. They formed an important part of riot grrrl culture (Radway 2016), and zine-making is a typical activity for girls rock camps today (Ali 2012; Giffort 2011). The School of Rock Riot Grrrl project also included a zine-making component, which is unfortunately outside the scope of this article.
3. School of Rock is a multinational, for-profit music education corporation. The organization has a presence on six continents, with the bulk of its locations in the United States and Brazil.

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In recent years, girls-only rock music spaces have grown in both visibility and popularity. Proponents suggest that set-apart learning spaces for girls, women and non-binary individuals can assist in breaking down barriers to access and involvement in the traditionally masculine sphere of rock performance (Björck 2013; Gregory 2017; Schwartz 2016). At the same time, music education researchers have increasingly pointed to the possibilities of punk and DIY approaches for disrupting the popular music status quo and providing space for underrepresented individuals and groups to make their voices heard (McArton and Niknafs 2019; Parkinson and Smith 2015; Przybylski and Niknafs 2015; Santos and Guerra 2018).

At the intersection of these two themes in rock education sits riot grrrl: the feminist punk movement of the early 1990s (Gottlieb and Wald 1994; Leonard 1997, 2007).¹ Riot grrrl music and associated cultural objects such as zines gave voice to women's experiences, concerns and frustrations within the male-dominated, often sexist culture of punk.² Riot grrrl performance practices disrupted punk performance norms and called into question depictions of women and girls in music and popular culture (Leonard 2007). With its focus on individuality and identity, the riot grrrl musical moment is closely associated with, and even taken by some to be impetus for, the dawn of third-wave feminism (Ali 2012). It makes sense, then, that riot grrrl should have a place in popular music education (PME), both as an important historical moment and as a possible inspiration for contemporary empowerment of those traditionally excluded from learning and playing rock.

The case study I discuss in this article presented riot grrrl to a new generation of learners within the context of rock music education. What makes it particularly interesting, though, is that it does not align with any of the more radical interventions discussed above. The teaching occurred neither in a girls- and women-only space nor in one devoted to using punk ethics for social change; rather, this iteration of riot grrrl teaching took place in a mainstream, neo-liberal educational institution, taught by two male instructors to a mixed-gender group of teenagers. Such a case study has value for interrogating how feminist and social justice themes are taught in more mainstream PME settings and for understanding how social justice-based approaches operate and interact with competing understandings of rock music and rock education.

I begin by outlining the frame analysis approach through which I examine this case study. Applied to educational contexts, this approach poses the question, 'What is it that's being taught here?'. Following that, I introduce the case study location, a School of Rock in the Midwestern United States, positioning it within the literature on PME.³ I describe the specifics of the Riot Grrrl project, along with the musical and gender culture of the school, casting riot grrrl as a form of 'unpopular popular music' within this particular educational setting. (In this article, I will use capitalization to differentiate between 'Riot Grrrl' the educational project and 'riot grrrl' the historical musical moment.)

I present and examine three different framings of riot grrrl that were evident in this project: riot grrrl as music, as punk ethics and as social justice. I discuss what happens when these frames collide, as evidenced by a conflict that arose between the two instructors on the day of the final performance. In closing, I suggest that this case study provides new insight into the ways in which teaching and learning unpopular popular music through a multi-frame perspective might productively subvert the musical and cultural status quo in mainstream PME institutions.

FRAMING RIOT GRRRL IN ROCK EDUCATION: ‘WHAT IS IT THAT’S BEING TAUGHT HERE?’

PME presentations of sociopolitically involved musical moments consist of overlapping frames. In writing of frames, I take my cue from Goffman’s (1974) *Frame Analysis*, which poses the question, ‘What is it that’s going on here?’. Frames are, according to Goffman, the boundaries of time, space and meaning that we place around events in order to set out for ourselves the ‘definitions of a situation’ (1974: 10–11; see also Persson 2019; Rush forthcoming). As with the frame around an artwork, a social frame focuses attention, prioritizing one thing over another. I use the notion of frames and framing to indicate which aspects of riot grrrl were emphasized at various times during both teaching and performance: to put it in Goffman’s terminology, ‘What is it that’s being taught here?’.

While frames may clash at times, educational framing is not necessarily conflictive. In fact, a multiplicity of frames can be useful for teaching social justice within the music classroom: for example, Hess’ recommendations for anti-racist pedagogy highlight the value of ‘multicentricity’ in the curriculum, or ‘allowing students to recognize the multiplicity of ways it is possible to know music’ (2015: 81–82). I suggest that frames in music education spend most of their time co-existing, coming into conflict only in brief, flashbulb moments. Whether they ever conflict or not, recognizing and giving name to the various frames in PME can provide insight into both how and what music educators teach.

Each of the three frames that I identify in this case study productively disrupted the existing music culture and pedagogical methods at this School of Rock, causing both teachers and students to approach music teaching and learning in new ways. A framing perspective on this case study can, moreover, disrupt hegemonic understandings of how riot grrrl might be taught. While the music and movement are most often presented in PME through the lenses of social justice and punk/DIY ethics (see e.g. Przybylski and Niknafs 2015), in School of Rock the music frame took priority, suggesting the usefulness of teaching riot grrrl *as music*, alongside its more political frames. This further suggests the importance of incorporating ostensibly apolitical educational programmes and private, extracurricular institutions into the corpus of PME knowledge.

METHODOLOGY

As an anthropologist and ethnomusicologist, I approached this study using a combination of ethnographic methods. For the four months of the Riot Grrrl project, once per week I drove to the city in which the school is located. I attended the three-hour ensemble rehearsal, stayed overnight in the city and returned home the next morning. I took the position of a participant-observer,

4. I invited all of the Riot Grrrl students to participate in focus group interviews (with parental approval, as all of the students were minors). However, the date picked for the focus groups (the weekend after the showcase performance, which was suggested by the instructors) was a US holiday weekend during which many families travel. Having lived abroad for five years prior to this research, I had forgotten about the holiday, and I did not realize in advance that it would affect student participation.

with the spectrum between ‘participation’ and ‘observation’ tending strongly towards the latter. Musical participation would have been inappropriate, given that the students were all teenagers (and paying customers of the school, which I was not), as would participation as an instructor, as I am neither a trained music educator nor a proficient rock musician. Following the showcase performance at the project’s end, I interviewed three participants, whom for the sake of anonymity I will call by the pseudonyms, or ‘stage names’, they chose for themselves: the two instructors, ‘Odin’s Beard’ (a drummer) and ‘Princess Raptor’ (a guitarist), and one teenage male student, ‘Terrifyer’ (primarily a guitarist, though he also played bass for several songs in the Riot Grrrl season).⁴

My own identity and self-presentation naturally affected how the students and instructors interacted with me. As the only adult woman in attendance, the instructors at times looked to me to legitimate their presentations of riot grrrl feminism and affirm the movement’s ongoing importance in the present day. While I am not a rock musician and did not behave as one, I am a classically trained French horn player, and I mentioned this occasionally to demonstrate my own musical background and framings to the students. Because of my existing musical knowledge, the instructors at times would ask me to step in and cover parts (typically vocals or simple bass guitar lines) when multiple students were absent. In my late twenties at the time, I was around the same age as most of the school’s instructors. However, as an observer I occupied a different space, as Princess Raptor pointed out to me one day, noting that I was the only adult at the school who did not attempt to discipline the students’ behaviour (e.g. by telling them to put away their phones or asking them to be quieter). As such, according to him, I was something of a welcome oddity. I knew Odin’s Beard already, as we had played together in several ensembles as teenagers, having both been involved in public school marching and wind band programmes in the Midwest. It was through him that I initially heard about the Riot Grrrl programme, and it was he who helped arrange my access to this School of Rock as a fieldsite.

RIOT GRRRL AT SCHOOL OF ROCK

School of Rock is a multinational, for-profit music education corporation with more than 288 individual schools in ten countries (School of Rock n.d.). Despite its massive international reach and exponential growth since its incorporation in 2009, in my extensive searching I found no academic studies to date on School of Rock, and so it remains largely outside the current knowledge base in PME, as have for-profit institutions more generally. In a survey of PME in the United States conducted by Powell et al. (2015: 11), School of Rock receives only a brief mention. (The same survey also contains the only academic treatment of a for-profit rock school that I have found to date [Powell et al. 2015: 16–17].)

A key selling point for School of Rock is its focus on performance, and to this end individual schools largely prioritize performance experience over pedagogical training in hiring instructors. Thus, in my experience, relatively few School of Rock instructors are trained music educators, with most drawing instead on a combination of their own experiences in informal learning techniques, School of Rock pedagogical materials and trial and error. (This lack of connection to music educator training programmes may partially explain the organization’s absence from the music education literature.) However, as Green notes in her discussion of popular musicians who also teach, the instructors’ general approach to teaching bears similarity to that of their peers working in schools,

Instrument	No. girls	No. boys
Electric guitar	1	3
Bass guitar	1	2
Drums	2	2
Vocals	4	0
Keyboard	1	0
Total	8	6

One girl both played the bass and sang, while one boy ('Terrifyer') played both the electric and bass guitars.

Table 1: Gender breakdown of performance group by instrument

in so far as they included an understanding of technique as the necessary basis for musical interpretation and expression; an assumption that the student will practise regularly if progression is to occur; some emphasis on theory, notation, scales and/or other technical exercises; and a teacher-student relationship which is mainly teacher-directed.

(Green 2001: 179)

For School of Rock students, a hefty monthly fee (around \$300–350) covers weekly one-to-one lessons on the student's instrument (selected from electric guitar, bass guitar, drums, voice and keyboard) and enrolment in a weekly performance ensemble. These ensembles run in 'seasons', each about four months long at the location where I researched. The season theme – also called a 'show' – can be a band, an album, a genre, a period of music history or some other formation (e.g. '70s Rock' or 'Ladies of the Eighties'). Unlike the student-directed practices of some approaches to PME, which have the students select the material they wish to learn, the season themes are selected and the music programmed by the instructors. Students are thus being deliberately introduced to songs and artists whom the teaching staff believe are important to know or which they believe will serve their teaching aims. However, these choices tend to align with the students' musical tastes, reflecting the school's dependence on private tuition fees and continued student interest; as such, this study has implications for both approaches to repertoire selection in PME.

The riot grrrl-themed season occurred in 2019, at a School of Rock in a mid-sized city in the US Midwest. The students in the Riot Grrrl performance group were aged 12–16, mostly (though not exclusively) White and almost evenly split between girls and boys (eight girls and six boys; see Table 1). None of the students openly identified as non-binary; as such I will use the binary language of 'girls' and 'boys' for descriptions throughout this article. Each ensemble at this School of Rock is led by two instructors, and both of the instructors for the Riot Grrrl season were White men. At the time, all of the instructors were White, and the school only employed one woman, who was travelling internationally during that season and thus did not work on any of the shows.

The Riot Grrrl programme was conceived and planned in its entirety by Odin's Beard. Though he chose the songs himself, the general idea for a riot grrrl show was first encountered through a Facebook group for School of Rock employees; in fact, a number of Schools of Rock in the Midwest initiated and

Song title	Band
'Cannonball'	The Breeders
'Complicated'	Heavens to Betsy
'Die'	Bratmobile
'The Drop Dead Look'	Excuse 17
'Elegie'	Patti Smith
'Fairytale in the Supermarket'	The Raincoats
'Good Things'	Sleater-Kinney
'Ha Ha Ha Armageddon'	The Julie Ruin
'Hello'	Babes in Toyland
'He's My Thing'	Babes in Toyland
'I Wanna Be Your Joey Ramone'	Sleater-Kinney
'In Accordance to Natural Law'/ 'Rebel Girl' (performed together)	Bikini Kill
'Modern Girl'	Sleater-Kinney
'Pretend We're Dead'	L7
'Typical Girls'	The Slits
'Watchmaker'	Excuse 17
'What Kind of Monster Are You?'	Slant 6
'Yeah, Huh?'	Bratmobile

Courtesy of Odin's Beard.

Table 2: Riot Grrrl season set list

programmed riot grrrl shows around this time. Odin's Beard's set list (Table 2) takes a fairly expansive understanding of riot grrrl, incorporating the music of pioneering women in punk – Patti Smith, The Slits and The Raincoats – as riot grrrl herstory.

RIOT GRRRLS AND SHREDDER BROS: GENDER AND POPULAR POPULAR MUSIC AT SCHOOL OF ROCK

Very few of the students had heard of riot grrrl prior to the season, and those who had tended only to be familiar with one or two bands (most commonly Bikini Kill). While the school often programmes shows focusing on various moments in popular music history, prior familiarity with the subject matter varies greatly based on students' own experiences, tastes and listening practices. To put it another way, not all popular music taught at School of Rock is equally popular, and riot grrrl was decidedly *un*-popular.

Prior to a new season, each student completes a form ranking their top choices for the upcoming season's shows. From three or four options (depending on enrolment), they rank those that appeal most to them, as well as those that suit their schedules best, as many of the students are also involved in sports, theatre, church groups and other extracurricular activities. When I asked, the instructors told me that *no* students had selected Riot Grrrl as their first choice, and only a handful had selected it as their second.

One reason for this is that Riot Grrrl was competing with a far more popular season: 'Classic Metal', which included music by bands such as Metallica, Black Sabbath, Iron Maiden, Pantera and Judas Priest. Musical tastes at the school tend quite strongly towards metal, especially among men and boys. Metal bands, songs and albums were frequently mentioned in the icebreaker questions that opened each rehearsal, to which attendees were asked to respond as a way of getting to know each other. During these, metal fore-runner Led Zeppelin was by far the most commonly mentioned 'favourite' or 'essential' band, with Black Sabbath, Metallica and Iron Maiden all featuring prominently as well. So entrenched is the dominance of metal that instructors reported struggling to get students (and at times fellow staff members) excited about the music of non-metal rock staples like Jimi Hendrix and David Bowie.

This broadly reflects popular music tastes in the Midwest, where metal is very popular, particularly fast-paced and 'heavy'-sounding sub-genres such as thrash, grindcore, brutal death and metalcore. These popular genres and sounds intersect in interesting and important ways with gender, given that metal is largely perceived and presented as a male-dominated genre (Hill 2011, 2016; Overell 2014) – though, as Hill (2016) points out, this is in part due to how we conceive of and discuss music 'scenes', which tend to downplay the ways in which women participate in fan communities.

The popularity of metal at the school is not limited to listening preferences; it is also closely intertwined with experiences and feelings that are perceived as desirable ways of playing music. In performance, the virtuosic guitar solo is perceived and presented as the height of skilful playing and the most desirable role in which to be cast. This type of playing – loud, fast-paced, soloistic and virtuosic – is referred to colloquially as 'shredding'. Students who can shred well are perceived as the most skilful, and these also tend to be the most popular students (what Princess Raptor and Odin's Beard both referred to as 'the popular kids'). Princess Raptor described the school's shredder culture well; speaking of the Riot Grrrl season, he said:

Especially a lot of the male guitarists were just like, 'Dude I just wanna play some metal'. Which, that's an unfortunate result of the privilege that they have here, is they get, I don't know, they get an instructor that allows them, allows to cut out a few corners for them? So they can, they *can* start playing their metal right away. They can start playing what is perceived as – and this is getting into something else entirely, but the politics of being a musician *do not stop* when you enter School of Rock. People are gonna want to be the shredder. People are gonna think that's the coolest guy in the school, cause he can play the best guitar, you know what I mean?

(original emphasis)

For many (especially male) students, the most desirable and skilful position, the 'coolest guy in the school', is the shredder (cf. Ferm Almqvist 2016). To shred is to play metal, and to shred is to be masculine – notice how Princess Raptor unconsciously genders the hypothetical shredder as male. Within rock music more broadly, the electric guitar is gendered as masculine, which presents an ongoing barrier to aspiring female and non-binary guitar learners (Bayton 1997; Powell 2019). Aggressive and virtuosic playing also tends to be gendered as masculine within rock music (Björck 2013; Gregory 2017; Hill 2011; Walser 1993). We can see these gender dynamics echoed in the

demographic makeup of the Riot Grrrl group, where the majority of guitarists were boys (Table 1). So entrenched was this intersection of metal, shredding and masculinity that one person at the school described these sorts of players to me as ‘shredder bros’.

The popularity or coolness of shredder masculinity is further reinforced by instructor demographics, students’ responses to icebreaker questions and embodied responses to performance. The last of these was clear in the showcase performance at the season’s end, where differing bodily responses to the Riot Grrrl and Classic Metal shows highlighted what counts as *popular* popular music at this School of Rock. The open area in front of the venue stage, which had been set apart for dancing and moshing, was almost empty for most of the Riot Grrrl performance. For Classic Metal, on the other hand, it was packed with students, who danced to and sang along with the songs. The dancing students also cheered loudly for their peers during and after their extended guitar solos – of which there were many during Classic Metal and none during Riot Grrrl. The sharp variation in audience responses was something both instructors discussed; both of their answers demonstrate these themes of metal, social popularity and embodied student responses:

Odin’s Beard: I was fucking pissed. At the audience. [...] I mean *all* the crowd just went *whoosh*. But we have trouble keeping, even students, like, engaged. In the crowd. It’s a fairly normal thing unless it’s their best friends. It’s really if the popular kids are playing. That’s the long and short of it, if the popular kids are playing, there’ll be a crowd. If it’s not the popular kids, they’ll be out in the [separate seating area at the venue without a view of the stage]. [...] It made me angry. It made me angry, like, I went home and cried after. I worked so goddam hard on that, and those kids worked so goddam hard. Like, I was fucking proud of them, but it was just, it was sad to watch. Like your heart breaks for them. And it’s like, cause they really connected with the – especially a handful of them. And they’re up there fucking playing their hearts out on it, and nobody gives a shit.

(original emphasis)

Princess Raptor: That was a tough show. ‘Cause of how few people were here. Because of the way, just as I said there’s so much politics in music. It was a small crowd for them, man. Because it wasn’t a bunch of people and it wasn’t all the popular kids. All the popular kids wanna shred. They wanted to be in classic metal.

The Riot Grrrl show, then, comprised unpopular popular music within this particular context, and it was in competition (for student involvement, for audience engagement and for general popularity) with the epitome of *popular* popular music. The gender dimension here cannot be ignored: each factor in the bundle of feminine/punk/un-virtuosic/not-shredding that comprises riot grrrl removes the music yet another step from the music at the centre of the school’s music culture.

This case study points to the deep limitations of PME approaches that rely solely on music that the students themselves select as exciting or relevant. The tide of PME has shifted in this direction, suggesting a more student-centred repertoire as a means of engaging music learners in a discipline that has failed to hold their interest or respond to their own modes of cultural participation in

everyday life (see e.g. Green 2008). And there is much value in this approach, especially for engaging 'at-risk', disaffected or 'hard-to-reach' students, as work by Dale (2017) and Millar et al. (2020) demonstrates. However, if we stop at the point of self-selection, we miss out substantially on the potential benefits of engaging students with unpopular popular music. As other researchers have pointed out, focusing entirely on student self-selection limits opportunities for learners to engage with diverse musical skills and perspectives (Cabedo Mas and Narita 2011). It also runs the risk of leaving some students' experiences and preferences behind (Georgii-Hemming and Westvall 2010).

Ferm Almqvist (2016) argues that if gender equality in PME settings is to be achieved, then teachers must take a more intentional, thoughtful role in choosing repertoire, assigning parts in ensembles and presenting students with diverse role models. In the remainder of this article, I demonstrate how one such intentional approach allowed both instructors and students to challenge musical and performance norms at this School of Rock through a multi-frame approach to teaching riot grrrl. However, this case study also shows that working through a multiplicity of frames can lead to value conflicts as both teachers and learners confront the question, 'What is it that's being taught here?'.

RIOT GRRRL AS MUSIC

The first and most straightforward framing is that of teaching riot grrrl as music, in which the feminist songs of riot grrrl bands were employed for the purpose of imparting musical knowledge and skills to young people learning to play rock music. This is the most obvious and most emphasized frame for all musics at School of Rock, though the riot-grrrl-as-music frame is far less common in other PME settings. The musical frame was one of the very first mentioned by all three interviewees, all of whom emphasized the relative accessibility of punk music for early learners. Terrifyer told me this was the first thought that crossed his mind when he was cast in the Riot Grrrl show, saying, 'I was thinking, hey, this might be a really fun show because those songs are really easy. Because it's punk rock'.

The two instructors both commented on the usefulness of pared-down, simpler shows for upskilling beginners and early-stage learners. Odin's Beard explained it as follows:

We try to use the shows as kind of like a scaffolding mechanism, skill-wise. Where say, okay, we wanna offer things that generally would be a good starting point [...]. So we can say, you start with like the Stones, really blues-based but really straightforward. Then you can move on to, like, some AC/DC, which takes that to a different level, and then move on to like Van Halen, which is similar, in the same language. [...] And it's not necessarily that all the same kids are going to be in that show, but you can kinda help track their progression and offer things that would make sense to people who are progressing. Skill-wise.

Princess Raptor made comments that closely resemble those of Odin's Beard, down to the shared comparison to AC/DC:

It's like, it basically is the girl parallel of AC/DC. Like a very very good, very straightforward, lot of power chords, very easy song structure.

Good to get people playing together. But it has more of a history, has more of a message than AC/DC, you know. But purely in the sense of the performance and education musically? I think it was great, great for that. Great for setting up people getting to know each other. Great for, just getting people jamming, getting people used to playing with other people.

So in the first instance, riot grrrl music proved useful in a musical sense, as a pedagogical tool for early-stage learners. This worked very well in practice, as the students who made the largest musical strides during this season tended to be younger or closer to the start of their musical careers. Princess Raptor demonstrated this using the example of a guitarist named Nekeisha, whom he also teaches on a one-to-one basis (all student names used in this article are pseudonyms). He said:

Nekeisha was great this season because it was exactly what she needed. It got her confidence, man, it got her confidence. These are songs that before this, I mentioned I would be writing my own parts [where tabs were not readily available or where students needed simpler versions]. I would write very stripped down versions of songs. And that's what she would play. But *this*, she could play the song the real way. Cause it was power chords. And it was about the energy. I was very impressed with her, I think it was great for her. [...] She really took charge. She knew the songs *for real*. For real for real.

(original emphasis)

So riot grrrl and punk more generally are useful not only for scaffolding musical skills but also for empowering students and building confidence in their playing abilities. As Princess Raptor pointed out, Nekeisha's ability to finally play the show's songs 'for real for real' led to a boost in confidence, and she emerged as a leader in the group during this season, displaying both increased confidence and increased skill. Riot grrrl's punk ethics thus disrupted the dominance of shredder masculinity by running counter to the musical elements of *popular* popular music at the school and opening up a space in which a relative beginner girl guitarist could shine – could, in a sense, supplant the shredder.

RIOT GRRRL AS PUNK ETHICS

The subversive nature of riot grrrl's 'unpopular' punk aesthetics within this space becomes even clearer when comparing the Riot Grrrl show to the Classic Metal one. Where Classic Metal showcased and celebrated longer songs, many featuring extended, virtuosic guitar solos, the Riot Grrrl songs were shorter, musically simpler and did not feature metal-style soloing. Students and instructors rarely referred to song portions as 'solos' at all, even where they may have technically fit the bill.

Terrifyer mentioned the relative lack of virtuosity in the songs in a positive light, noting that it opened up space for experimentation. Here we were speaking about Terrifyer's musical influences, and he was describing a grind-core band he enjoys (Pig Destroyer), though, as demonstrated in this quotation, he quickly pivoted back to the punk ethics of riot grrrl:

It also inspires me to, like, if I have a band. If I don't have a bassist I could still do a band. They have like three members, there was only – there was no bassist, there was just a singer, drummer and a guitarist. It was like, 'Oh wow, this really works'. I thought like having no bass is a bad idea, but I mean, hey, Sleater-Kinney doesn't have a bassist and they still do well.

He also told me that during the Riot Grrrl season he had gotten the opportunity to experiment with other instruments with which he is less experienced than the guitar, specifically bass and vocals. This was an important aspect of his Riot Grrrl experience, as it was something that he desired to learn and to do more often. It appears that these opportunities arose for Terrifyer due to the punk aesthetics of riot grrrl, as these parts required less musical experience on bass and vocals than more complicated songs would have. His experience with vocals during the season is especially interesting. He sang backing vocals on only one song (L7's 'Pretend We're Dead'), and this was not a part he was assigned; rather, as best I can tell, he appears to have initiated this role, asking the instructors if he could fill in some of the echoed spoken-sung parts that appear in the recording but which had not been cast for the show. (These consisted of the recurring 'Come on, come on, come on, come on' throughout the song, as well as various echoes of the repeated line 'Pretend that we're dead' in the chorus).

His self-initiated, DIY vocal performance in Riot Grrrl provided him with an opportunity to sing more often and in a more formal, codified way in future shows. I asked him about the upcoming season, which was due to start the next week and in which he was playing a show dedicated to the band Heart. He was very excited to play Heart's music, and he specifically mentioned excitement about being officially cast to sing on several songs. He also noted that, musically speaking, the Heart show would be more challenging than Riot Grrrl, replicating the instructors' discussions of scaffolding and musical progression.

Riot grrrl's punk ethics also subverted typical teaching strategies at the school. While the two instructors communicated with the students' individual teachers about parts that had been assigned, it fell to each teacher to pass onto the student the part to be played. For better-known songs, their teaching methods often consisted of downloading tab sheets and/or teaching by ear parts they already knew. However, many of the riot grrrl songs were not available in these forms, and the instructors were driven to more informal methods, as Princess Raptor described:

My challenges were, finding, these songs. And pretty much just having to learn them myself. Because of how underground it was. It's not like you can just look up a thousand tabs like the 'Stairway to Heaven' solo, it's like, all these songs – and because it was very low-budget, a lot of the recording on these tracks was not ideal.

A key method was, of course, listening and working out parts by ear (Green 2001). On the day of the show, one of the school's bass instructors revealed some of his additional methods. He told me that when learning by ear he will sometimes turn to YouTube videos of live performances, using these to observe the bassists' fingers in order to work out the notes. Several authors note that this is a common, though under-discussed, strategy among popular musicians

(Johansson 2004; van den Dool 2016, 2018). However, the instructor said, riot grrrl's punk ethics complicated this learning method: in some performances, the band called the entire audience onstage to perform and sing along with them, and the mass of fans on the stage blocked the camera's view of the bassist's hands (Downes 2012; Strong and Rogers 2016). Thus, riot grrrl's punk ethics, in both dismantling the physical divide between performers and audience and in its rough-and-ready, DIY recording practices, actively challenged and subverted business-as-usual strategies of teaching and learning at School of Rock, forcing instructors to DIY their own strategies for learning and passing on musical parts.

RIOT GRRRL AS SOCIAL JUSTICE

Recent discussions within PME provide a number of possible definitions of and approaches to teaching social justice (e.g. Bowman 2007; Hess 2019; Jorgensen 2015; Vaugeois 2009). While they were neither aware of nor active in these academic debates, the instructors' riot-grrrl-as-social-justice framing demonstrates continuity and crossover with approaches and best practices as outlined in this literature. Their approach to teaching the feminist claims of riot grrrl is most closely related to Narita and Green's definition of social justice as 'parity of participation', making space for all musicians and aspiring musicians, regardless of social position or background, to be involved in music-making – 'not necessarily in the same way, but in ways that are equally fulfilling and equally recognized' (2015: 306).

For the instructors, it was vitally important to communicate to the students riot grrrl's history and sociopolitical aims. Time was carved out during the first few weeks of rehearsals to watch key documentaries, including both archival footage of riot grrrl musicians playing and talking about their music and politics and contemporary interviews reflecting on the music and its historical moment.

Woodford suggests that studying history is useful for teaching values of social justice in and through music education, particularly for younger learners who may not yet have experienced or learned to name injustice and oppression in the world. Historical study, he argues, can illuminate and clarify experiences of inequality and injustice and demonstrate their echoes in the present day (Woodford 2015). Hess similarly suggests that studying unfamiliar musics within their historical and political contexts provides opportunities for students to meaningfully encounter the experiences of marginalized 'Others'. She writes:

Contextualization helps youth understand the social, political, and material contexts of musics they encounter, perhaps exposing them to perspectives beyond their own experiences and enabling them to recognize common humanity across musical practices.

(Hess 2019: 68)

While this was not an explicitly social justice-based project, interweaving the historical narrative with the music brought to light the experiences and feminist perspectives that prompted riot grrrl musicians' calls for social justice.

It should be noted that some of these themes were intentionally diluted or left out. The Rock for Choice concerts went unmentioned despite their centrality to the riot grrrl narrative, and themes relating to women's sexuality

(including LGBTQ+ sexuality) and sexual assault were not explicitly discussed, though they did appear in some of the songs in the set list. Within the social justice frame, the instructors focused primarily on riot grrrl's space-claiming motivations, emphasizing the injustice of girls and women being excluded from the dancing/moshing area in front of the stage and not being given the same opportunities to play in bands as their male counterparts.

Odin's Beard, as the instructor who programmed the music and chose most of the documentary footage for student viewing, was very aware of his role in crafting and perpetuating what Kallio (2015) calls the 'school censorship frame', and he indicated to me several times that his role as the de facto male censor of this feminist music troubled him. Odin's Beard made his censorship decisions based on what Kallio calls 'parent stories' – that is, '[t]he imagined values of parents' and the acute awareness of the possibility for negative parental response (Kallio 2015: 204–05). As the school is located in a city and region known for social and political conservatism, he felt that calling attention to politicized topics like abortion would result in negative parental feedback against both him and the school. Giffort (2011) reports very similar negotiations of feminist symbols and themes at a girls' rock camp in another Midwestern city. Parent stories take on greater importance in private, extracurricular rock schools, where parents' choice to continue their children's enrolment is directly responsible for the instructors' salaries.

We might also consider Odin's Beard's choice to programme the Riot Grrrl show as responsive to his own 'teacher story' – his perception of himself and his values as a teacher (Kallio 2015: 205). In our interview, he presented himself to me as a musician and music educator who wishes to support and give voice to marginalized musicians, played out in ongoing (sometimes frustrated) efforts to programme work by women musicians and musicians of colour at School of Rock. Notably, he presented this as an either-or choice: in a given season, he could either programme a show devoted to women musicians, or he could programme work by Black musicians. He felt that given the school's musical and political culture – its collection of 'small stories' (Kallio 2015: 203–06) – he could not do both at the same time.

Even in its limited, 'censored' form, the social justice framing of riot grrrl proved vital to helping students – and even the instructors – navigate and appreciate this unfamiliar and relatively 'unpopular' set of songs. The students used this frame to shape their own opinions of the music, even where the musical properties alone would not have otherwise immediately attracted them. This was evident in Terrifyer's interview. While he demonstrated an eclectic palate and a very diverse set of listening practices, his key musical inspirations as he related them to me hail from extreme metal and grindcore. However, he wanted to emphasize to me that he takes both the aims and the music of riot grrrl seriously, and that he understands what the movement was about and why it was important. In our interview, I asked him, 'So if you don't mind me asking, how do you feel playing it as a guy?', to which he replied:

I'm supporting it. And, I'm not one of those guys like, 'Hey look at me, I'm a guy, and I'm in Riot Grrrl, isn't that funny?' I'm not. I'm supporting it. And just, like, spreading the message. [...] It's like more, we want more equality, in our genders. Anyone can be punk. There's no boundaries.

Of course, it is quite possible that he wanted to put on a good face when being questioned about riot grrrl by an adult woman researcher. But his earnestness, and in particular his intentional contrasting of his own attitude with another possible male response, points to an awareness of and appreciation for the social justice aims of riot grrrl. Throughout our interview, on several different occasions he described riot grrrl unprompted as a ‘powerful movement’ with ‘powerful music’ and an important message.

The power of the social justice frame to alter perceptions of unpopular popular music became even clearer in my interview with Princess Raptor, who admitted having little knowledge of riot grrrl prior to working on this season. When I asked him about his initial reaction to the show, he said:

My initial thoughts were, ‘That sounds super lame. This is the most boring music I’ve ever heard’. Those were my initial thoughts. Not excited whatsoever. I thought it was, like, pandering, just because it would be directed towards women. Like that it wouldn’t be valuable music.

He went on to say:

After seeing the *history* of what riot grrrl was, the meaning that it stood for, I definitely see in the value in it, and [...] how it shaped the people here. [...] So at the end of it, it’s not like it was, I’m never probably gonna go back and listen to these tracks, or a full album in my own time, you know, but I definitely got an appreciation for what it was.

(original emphasis)

COMPETING FRAMES: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THEY COLLIDE?

So far I have demonstrated ways in which these three framings of riot grrrl coexist. But what happens when they come into conflict? I will illustrate the collision of frames by examining a disagreement that developed between Princess Raptor and Odin’s Beard on the day of the showcase performance. Each of the instructors brought up this disagreement independently, without knowledge that the other had also addressed it, underscoring how important this conflict is to understanding the Riot Grrrl season. Discomfort and strong affects can call attention to divergences in perspective – that is, to conflicting frames – and that is precisely what happened here. I examine it, first, in the instructors’ own descriptions of the conflict and, second, in ethnographic data from my own experience, from a moment in which I personally experienced these colliding frames as deeply uncomfortable.

In the weeks leading up to the performance, a guitar student, Ben, suddenly became absent from rehearsals. The reasons for this were unclear, and the instructors were uncertain whether he would be in attendance to play at the final performance. As he had not definitely withdrawn, they kept his parts open rather than reassigning them, and in rehearsals Princess Raptor would fill in for his parts. When the day of the performance came, Ben was absent, and the instructors needed to decide how to replace him at the last moment.

Princess Raptor described the dilemma:

I went in there not knowing if Ben was going to show up. Found out basically when we went in there that he wasn’t. So me and Odin’s Beard had talked about me playing the parts, and I talked to Phil [the school’s

owner-director]. He was *very* opposed to me playing the parts. He was like, 'Maybe you could just stay off-stage?' And I was like, okay so if he's so opposed to it, I just gotta find some other students. [...]

Odin's Beard was very, uh, he's very, *not* into the students coming up and performing. Because he was, he was all about the, uh. [pauses] It was less about the songs sounding good live, than the connection that we had to them. That we all knew what they stood for. The fact that we all went through learning about riot grrrl and all that. To him, it was like I just picked the two best shredders, because I knew they could play well. But they didn't know what these songs stood for, they didn't understand it. So, um, so that's interesting that we had totally different perceptions. For me I was like, 'We've gotta make this show sound good'. To him, he could've cared less. Maybe he preferred no guitarist on the song. But he wanted that group to have kinda the attitude of riot grrrl. He wanted that to be strong, instead of just, 'Hey here's two shredders. Let's have them play these songs'. Cause I, and that *is* the opposite of riot grrrl, riot grrrl was not about that, all these men who have been, had all the attention all these years, 'Forget them, we're gonna do our own thing', you know? So that was just an interesting, that was just an interesting takeaway, and I'm not saying that he's wrong for thinking that, I was just, I thought that was pretty interesting, you know? He and I viewed that so differently.

(original emphasis)

Odin's Beard was much more succinct in his summary of the situation:

I was very not happy that we threw a couple subs in last-minute. I think that was a poor decision. That was Phil's call. Long and short. Um, like, Princess Raptor chose the guys and taught them it well. And we did the best we could, but I, I was not a fan of that. [...] They weren't practising it. They weren't part of the group.

This conflict ultimately arose from a clash between two frames – between different answers to the question, 'What is it that's being taught here?'. In that moment, Princess Raptor (and even more so school owner Phil) emphasized the music frame: teaching music was the priority, and presenting a solid musical performance from the students the primary goal. Odin's Beard, meanwhile, emphasized the social justice frame. His priority was the careful thematic learning that had been accomplished in rehearsals: an understanding of and commitment to the feminist claims of the riot grrrl movement. As Princess Raptor notes, neither of these approaches is wrong per se, as both frames had regularly been part of both instructors' teaching. The sudden clash of frames becomes all the more jarring when they have previously peacefully coexisted, and it was this rupture that led to the instructors' disagreement. Interestingly, while the DIY approach of making music with what is available could have presented a potential alternative for framing this dilemma, and while both instructors had consistently emphasized riot grrrl's punk ethics in their teaching, the riot-grrrl-as-punk-ethics frame was entirely absent from these discussions.

The instructors were not, however, the only ones who experienced this clash of frames. This conflict was also evident in the students' performance, particularly in one of the songs that required a substitute guitarist.

In addition to teaching musical and band-playing skills in the performance groups, the School of Rock instructors put effort into teaching stage presence techniques, encouraging and guiding the students to move their bodies in rock-like ways. When teaching singers, this education in performance skills extends to coordinating how each song or set of songs is introduced to the audience.

Two of the singers, Izzy and Taylor, spent significant time developing and practising their introductions, focusing on interpreting riot grrrl and its aims for an audience likely to be unfamiliar with the music. Most notably, Taylor prepared an extended introduction situating riot grrrl in its historical and political context, emphasizing its extra-musical importance. She read this from her phone on the stage – the only instance in the showcase performances in which a singer read a song introduction rather than improvising from memory. While the instructors designated which singer would speak where, spreading out the tasks equally, to my knowledge neither asked Taylor to prepare this historical introduction to the Riot Grrrl show. The text read from her phone appears to have been initiated and prepared entirely by Taylor, possibly with Izzy’s assistance, as the two are close friends and both took a serious approach to the songs’ feminist aims.

Taylor and Izzy’s social justice framing of riot grrrl came into conflict with the musical frame during the performance of Slant 6’s ‘What Kind of Monster Are You?’, which describes the experience of being stalked. Both the discordant feedback that opens the track and the initial lyrics emphasize the monstrous, frightening nature of the stalker:

Why are you creeping up behind me?
Where did you get those claws?
Don’t look at me that way
I’m really scared because

What kind of monster are you?
What kind of monster are you?

For this song, Izzy had prepared an impassioned introduction emphasizing the threat that women and girls face from ‘creeps’ and ‘creepy guys’, expressing solidarity with those in such situations, saying, ‘This song is for any girl who’s been stalked, stared at’. This is especially relevant given the high percentage of girls who experience stalking, intimate partner violence and sexual assault as teenagers (Smith et al. 2018); in light of these statistics, it is very likely that some of the students in the Riot Grrrl show know of friends or peers who have been stalked or have otherwise been the victims of gender-based violence, or have even experienced this themselves. Izzy’s introduction, then, was not an abstract, theoretical statement but rather a serious discussion of something that affects her and other girls every day.

Her introduction was, however, undercut by the bodily performance of Derrick, the substitute guitarist on the song. Derrick fits the stereotype of a ‘shredder bro’: he is highly skilful (hence his last-minute substitution, as Princess Raptor knew he could learn the song quickly and perform it well, which he did), and he appears primarily to enjoy playing metal. He performed in the Classic Metal show that season. He is obviously one of the school’s ‘popular kids’, as any time he played, especially when soloing, the other students were more attentive, more likely to dance or stand close to the stage

and more likely to cheer loudly. While walking onto the stage as Izzy was beginning to speak, Derrick accidentally tripped over a lead cable, causing him to stumble. He grinned and played up his inadvertent clumsiness, drawing loud laughter from the watching students. The laughter interrupted and drowned out Izzy's anti-stalking statement, forcing her to start again.

While certainly uncomfortable to watch as an onlooker familiar with the song and its meaning, this was not a malicious or intentionally misogynist act; rather, it demonstrates a misalignment of frames. For Izzy, the feminist message of the song was vitally important, and communicating that to the audience took priority. For Derrick, meanwhile, who had not received the same education in the history of riot grrrl, the riot-grrrl-as-music frame took priority and was in fact the *only* frame. If 'What Kind of Monster Are You?' is presented or interpreted solely as music, without other frames, it makes sense that he would perform physically onstage and that he would want the audience's engagement.

The conflict I have described here highlights a seismic rift that runs through the school's social world: the ostensible dichotomies of masculine/feminine, metal/punk, soloing/band-playing and popular/unpopular. Each of the three frames served to destabilize these dichotomies in one way or another, providing alternative options for engaging with the rock music canon and its accompanying performance practices. The performance-day conflict also, in its own way, destabilizes the status quo by forcing those involved to confront the business-as-usual understanding of what constitutes (un)popular popular music at School of Rock and how this core of 'popularity' is entangled with gender.

CONCLUSION: THE ROLE OF UNPOPULAR POPULAR MUSIC IN PME PEDAGOGY

In the School of Rock case study described here, programming an unpopular popular music, together with a relatively unpopular social justice frame, disrupted the school's music culture in significant, productive ways that led to new and different forms of learning. It also drew attention to the highly gendered and very narrow nature of *popular* popular music at the school. This encounter with an unpopular popular music engaged students with work by artists whose lives and struggles were in some ways very much like their own (e.g. in the ongoing relevance of speaking out about girls' and women's experiences of sexual violence) and in other ways very different. Students and instructors were confronted with new ways of being musical, as well as new ways of being political. The explicit addition of the punk ethics and social justice frames to the music frame allowed space for students to understand and appreciate riot grrrl music even where its musical qualities on their own might not have attracted them. A multi-frame approach that includes both popular and unpopular iterations and pedagogies of popular music has the potential to challenge and disrupt the musical and social status quo in ways that can bring students into productive, empathetic encounters with marginalized musical 'Others' and thus into a more inclusive and just understanding of who can learn, play and enjoy rock music.

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