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(Digital) Revolution Girl Style Now!:
Subculture, Social Media, Subjectivity & the Videos of Sadie Benning and Thirza Cuthand

BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other.

– “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” in *Bikini Kill #2*, 1992

In the distant past (fifteen years ago), before the advent of web 2.0, one subculture, riot grrrl, made effective use of social media to communicate a message and build a sense of community. Riot grrrl's successful dissemination of zines, mixtapes and angst ought to serve as an example of the possibilities offered by social media, and subcultures today would be wise to learn from their model. Given the primacy of subjectivity in forming any community and the efficiency with which moving images can serve in such processes, today I will use the experimental autobiographic videos of Sadie Benning and Thirza Cuthand as case studies in an effort to better understand how social media function in the articulation of unique subjectivities, and how their evolution creates space for alternative means of dissemination.

Sadie Benning and Riot Grrrl

Writing in the forward to *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!*, Beth Ditto, lead singer of dance-punk queercore band The Gossip, notes, “Built on the floors of strangers' living rooms, tops of Xerox machines, snail mail, word of mouth and mixtapes, riot grrrl reinvented punk... Riot grrrl was by far one of the most undeniably effective feminist movements, turning academia into an accessible down-to-earth language, making feminism a trend for the first time in history” (8). What Ditto succinctly characterizes, if hyperbolically, is a movement that wanted “revolution girl style,” definitely, but more importantly one that sought connections between and

the establishment of community among frustrated young feminists. Further, her acknowledgement of the communication tools and methods mobilized by the riot grrrl population points to the primacy of ephemeral objects and oral histories in any account of the subculture.

In 1993, when the riot grrrl movement was in full swing, Sadie Benning became the youngest person to ever participate in a Whitney Biennial with the inclusion of her video *It Wasn't Love* (1992). She was just 19 years old, and took the art world by storm with the “cryptic, romantic tale of a flirtation between two women.” Told through the lens of Benning’s Pixelvision camera, *It Wasn't Love* is a story of dangerous lesbian desire, detailing a young woman’s (Benning) meeting and subsequent adventure with a “bad girl.” The video teems with excitement and self-discovery, a mood which Benning conveys through the reappropriation of a number of cinematic narrative devices. Her very deliberate play with tropes of Hollywood cinema manifests largely through pastiche: In one instance, Benning mashes up clips from old Hollywood (specifically, *The Bad Girl* (1956)) with her own voiceover and strains of Prince’s “I Wanna Be Your Lover.” Throughout, she also casts herself in a number archetypal cinematic roles (both males and females among them). Ultimately, Benning is able to queer many classical Hollywood devices, by which I mean both to undermine their cultural hegemony and to inject them with a current of lesbian desire.

Benning’s work received much critical attention throughout the 1990s, frequently for its cunning illustration of the young videomaker’s unique subject position. Chris Holmlund, for example, characterizes Benning’s work as transcending generic classification, noting the way in which it “variously [positions] lesbian and other subcultures in relation to a dominant heterosexual culture...thereby [‘blurring boundaries’] between subjectivity and objectivity, autobiography and ethnography, and thus [extends] how documentary is defined and ‘queers’ are

seen” (130). Holmlund’s observations are particularly resonant vis-à-vis *It Wasn’t Love*, in which Benning presents herself in a number of roles, varying greatly in terms of proximity to her actual position as an adolescent lesbian exploring subjectivity from the privacy of her own bedroom.

That Sadie Benning and her video work are rarely mentioned in writings on riot grrrl is somewhat of an enigma to me; her aesthetic is decidedly DIY, her politics appropriately progressive and her relationship to the outside world rife with the angsty proclamations of youth. Benning’s videos present her as a girl who would greatly benefit from the type communication advocated in the riot grrrl manifesto quoted at the beginning of this talk. Indeed, her work serves as her contribution to the discussion. Holmlund sees this connection, stating, “Benning... proclaims her ‘self’ as representative of a larger group, fluidly composed of other young lesbians, alienated teens, riot grrrls. Her expressive, highly personal videos acquire polemical, quasi-ethnographic resonance in consequence” (131). Benning even seeks community in much the same way as the riot grrrls. This is most clearly seen in *Girl Power* (1992), which Benning ends with a song by Bikini Kill—arguably the most famous band to emerge from the riot grrrl movement. This, as Holmlund argues, connects individual girls to girl groups in order to “testify to the existence of different community and kinship networks” (133).

Thus Benning positions herself as a riot grrrl: she uses riot grrrl music in her videos, her work is discussed as part of what Jen Smith terms the “Lo-Fi Underground” in her zine, *Red Rover*, she and is briefly cited in Suzy Corrigan’s account of the movement in *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now*. Indeed, Benning even goes on to become a founding member of post-riot grrrl band Le Tigre with the movement’s most visible figure, Kathleen Hanna. Why, then, is she excluded as a major figure in more scholarly historical accounts of riot grrrl? While a conclusive answer to this question is, of course, impossible, I contend that Benning’s absence in

the annals of riot grrrl can be traced back to the fact that video could not be effectively disseminated through the social media available to riot grrrls, and was therefore pushed to the subculture's margins. Of course, social media have long since overcome this technical limitation.

Thirza Cuthand and Web 2.0

While the riot grrrls were beholden to the social media technologies of their time, young feminists today are liberated by a seemingly endless and constantly expanding selection of websites through which to communicate in the world of web 2.0. Today, social media are ubiquitous and increasingly intrinsic to our day-to-day lives.

Construction of identity and subjectivity frequently figure prominently in discussions of social media; users are free to endlessly craft and refashion the ways in which others see them—each is writing a continuous digital autobiography. One such user is Thirza Cuthand, a Cree Canadian video artist living in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan whose substantive web 2.0 presence includes publicly searchable accounts on Facebook, Blogspot, and Flickr. Cuthand first received attention for her work as a BFA student in film and video at Emily Carr College, and has since made a number of works dealing with issues of queerness, nationhood and subjectivity. Like Benning, much of Cuthand's work can be described as experimental autobiography, which is perhaps unsurprising from a self-proclaimed "Cree Scots Irish bipolar butch lesbian two spirited boy/girl thingamabob." (Nanibush).

One of Cuthand's most-screened works is *Helpless Maiden Makes an "I" Statement* (1999), in which she presents herself as the frustrated sex slave of an archetypal evil queen. In the video, Cuthand manages to both validate her sadomasochistic relationship with the evil queen and undercut heterosexual patriarchy's degradation of women in the fairy tale genre – and all in only six minutes! Cuthand achieves these feats through many of the same methods present in

Benning's work, most notably pop cultural pastiche and biting, first person narration. The video is essentially a monologue delivered by Cuthand, intercut with footage of evil queens from Hollywood cinema. Cuthand subverts both the fairy tale genre and the nature of sadomasochism by queering the role of the evil queen and subjecting S/M relationships based on a fundamentally unequal power dynamic (at least sexually) to the "I" statement-based conversations advocated by couples therapy. She says, "I feel like we've gotten to a place where you don't particularly care for me any more. I mean, you're so used to having me around. And you think I'm always gonna be here. I feel very taken for granted. And I know I'm supposed to wait for someone to come and save me, but I honestly don't feel that it's happening" (*Helpless Maiden*). Here, like Benning, Cuthand makes clear the artifice of her autobiography, problematizing the spectator's desire to categorize her based on the information presented in the video. Where Cuthand diverges from Benning's practice, however, is the supplement to her subject position she publicly provides via her use of contemporary social media.

Cuthand's biography mirrors Benning's in many ways: she comes from a family of media-makers (Benning's father is experimental filmmaker James Benning), she started creating videos and achieved some success at a young age, and she readily reappropriates established narrative techniques through pop-cultural pastiche. Cuthand, however, makes more effective use of the social media at her disposal, and hence embarks on a different path towards both building community and the specific articulation of her subject position. Cuthand has a relatively substantive web presence, which she uses to actively promote herself and her work online. In the "Personal Information" field of her Facebook fan page, for example, she writes:

I'm a filmmaker/video artist who has been creating work for the festival circuit [sic], galleries, and television since 1995. My work has explored themes of queer youth culture, sexuality (esp. lesbians!), madness, and race. Currently I am creating a video

exploring my mixed race heritage. I am available for screenings, curating gigs, artist talks, and workshops. Send me a message if you would like me to come to your college/gallery/festival. I also have written a feature screenplay and am looking for a producer.

Compared to the biographical elements one can extract from her videos, this blurb might be described as a more direct method of locating Cuthand's subject position; it does not, however, replace the work done by her videos. Rather, Cuthand's online persona provides a supplement, and a context to the self she presents in her videos. Though Cuthand cannot readily be identified in relation a subcultural group such as riot grrrl, she could nonetheless use these social media to connect with members of the LGBTQ and First Nations communities as they exist online. In the best of all possible worlds, Cuthand could also use these platforms to disseminate her work, which is currently relatively inaccessible.

Conclusion

The works of Sadie Benning and Thirza Cuthand share many narrative techniques and seek seemingly similar ends; namely, the legitimization of each of their queer adolescent subjectivities and desires. Bound to the technology of their respective times, each young videomaker interacts with the community of which she is a part using the social media available in her moment. Benning's affiliations with the riot grrrl movement proved less fruitful than they might have been in a more digitally connected era despite that subculture's otherwise well executed use of social media to build community. Thirza Cuthand makes extensive use of social media, but does not have a clear-cut subculture or movement to join.

Benning said in 2007, "Maybe there is something intrinsic to being queer in the world where there's a kind of loneliness to some degree, in that you don't always have things to identify with. You're looking for those things in signs and in more transitory glances." Perhaps if riot grrrl had been able to widely disseminate Benning's work with the rest of their message,

young queer grrrls would not have had to look quite so hard for those “transitory glances.” Now that the enabling technologies are available, it is up to Thirza Cuthand and other video artists to take a flyer from the riot grrrl archives, and use today’s social media to make social change.

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