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RIOT GRRRL AND RAISIN GIRL: FEMININITY WITHIN THE FEMALE GANG THE POWER OF THE POPULAR

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This paper will draw upon American research on female gangs but the emphasis will be on the rising British phenomenon of female gangs. As I have not undertaken any empirical research on the topic, and as there are very few academic research studies on British female gangs, the sources drawn upon will be articles and interviews with gang members taken from the British press over the last eighteen months and telephone interviews with Metropolitan police officers from Scotland Yard and from local intelligence offices in police stations mainly in South London.

The discussion will focus on the emergence of a new type of femininity which is being displayed by young females who join gangs. In defining a distinctly female subculture, I shall draw upon the backgrounds, lifestyles, attitudes, norms and behaviour of young women in gangs. It will be argued that the particular subcultural style of these young women finds its voice in certain musical forms. Most notably, the idiomatic style of hip hop symbolizes the dislocated lives of young, urban blacks who often represent a distinct street culture. White female solidarity finds its voice in the Riot Grrrl subculture, with its emphasis on fanzine networks and songs which challenge injustices to women such as rape and incest. Although these are primarily American movements, their cultural messages have crossed the Atlantic and can be applied to some of the female gangs appearing on the streets in London, as well as to American gangs.

This discussion concentrates exclusively on gangs in London, and its approach is further limited by its reliance on press and police information, but hopefully the analysis can be applied to gangs elsewhere in Britain and America.

It is difficult to establish how many female gangs there are in Britain today. In London, the Metropolitan Police do not keep a central statistical record of gangs. The problem with contacting police officers in police stations is that we rely on their recognition, appraisal and apprehension of female gang members. As a senior police inspector at Scotland Yard told me, female gangs probably are far more widespread than their limited information and records show. The fact that the police have not recorded instances of female gangs does not mean that they do not exist. The problem is one of recognition by the police. The same problem also exists in America. Miller (1975) argues that police broaden or narrow their definition of gangs to suit their own purposes and Hagedorn (1988) similarly finds that the police definition of gangs is formulated to help them with their own operational practices.

Firstly, I will look at the definition of gangs in relation to males, to see whether these definitions can be applied usefully to females. This will lead to the next question: what is so special about female gangs and how are they different from male gangs? After examining the

characteristics of female gangs, I will then try to build up a definition of femininity in relation to female offending and the subculture of the female gang.

How do we define a gang and can the definition be applied to females?

The definition of gang characteristics used here is that which Walter Miller (1975) arrived at after consulting 160 criminal justice and youth service agencies. These include:

- Being organised
- Having identifiable leadership
- Identifying with a territory
- Associating continually
- Having a specific purpose
- Engaging in violent or illegal activities

Considering each characteristic in turn, there is some dispute between researchers about some of these categories. There are mixed findings concerning whether or not gangs are organised. Some researchers (Sanders 1994, Taylor 1993) have found that gangs are more diffuse and have more informal structures, or as Thrasher (1927) termed it, they have an 'unreflective internal structure'. Others, including female auxiliary gangs, are organised according to the age and sex of their members (Sanders 1994, Hagedorn 1988).

Research on female gangs suggests that they tend to be fairly informal and they do not often have a visible leader. For example, Anne Campbell, writing in Huff's book on *Gangs in America* (1990) observes that in Los Angeles some gangs have 'veterinas' or 'godmothers' but she goes on to say:

'Typically the members insist there is no leader and that decisions are made democratically. Observation suggests that some girls clearly have more clout than others, but that this usually is not formalized as a leadership role.' (Campbell 1990: 178)

Sometimes there is not just one leader, but several. In London, the *Peckham Girls*, which have eight or nine members, have three clearly identified 'ring leaders' who are arrested frequently. They are called: 'Little Miss', 'Lady Teaser' and 'Stab'. 'Stab's' nickname refers to her propensity to use a knife in fights with rival female gangs (*Sunday Mirror*, 4 December 1994). The status of these gang members stems from their tough reputation, which involves not being afraid of using violence, which in turn earns them 'clout' and a type of informal leadership.

The third characteristic in Miller's (1975) list is identification with a territory. This is an important aspect of both male and female gangs. Taylor (1993) in his study, *Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs*, observes: 'Women's independence means taking power and territory and that means fighting over what is deemed important ... There were battles over boys, and yet the focus was not primarily boyfriends but the issue of respect'. Females in gangs in the 1990s are no longer concerned solely with the impression they make on boys. Like males, they are interested in laying claim to an area and in exerting power and control over this domain in order to achieve status, which is a necessary component of belonging to a gang. Territory, to Campbell (1990), represents 'a symbolic matter of gang integrity'. In her article in the book edited by Huff on *Gangs in America* she cites a study by Harris (1988) on Cholas, which found that Latino girls and gangs had been known to enter rival territory to paint their gang symbols on walls. Like male gangs, females too are concerned with empire-building and in publicising their identity. In an article in *The Sunday Times* in 1994 on the *Busch Corner Girls* from Brentford in West London, we learn that the girls' 'tag' names were sprayed on the walls of their council estate, serving as a notice and a warning to rival gangs that they were marking out their territory, which they would protect at all costs. Similarly, police information

revealed that the *Peckham Girls* mark out their 'tag' names on the estate where they live in Peckham, South London.

The fourth characteristic in Miller's list is that of associating continually with other gang members. This cannot be disputed, and applies to both male and female gangs. A favourite occupation of most gang members is hanging around on the street or on the estate where they live and the gang provides entertainment, friendship and 'something to do', to stave off boredom.

Miller's fifth characteristic, that gangs have a specific purpose, does not apply to all gangs in research studies. Generally this definition is applicable to gangs involved in drugs and this applies to both sexes, as Taylor (1993) has shown in his research on female gang members involved in drugs in Detroit. Taylor has produced a typology of gangs which includes territorial, commercial, corporate and scavenger gangs. Females as well as males are involved in the selling and production of drugs in order to make a living in commercial and corporate gangs. The limited information received from Metropolitan police intelligence sources on British female gangs in London reveals that as the female gang members tend to be young, they are less likely than gangs with an older membership to be involved in gangs for drugs and business gain.

The last characteristic of gangs involves their involvement in violent and/or illegal activities. This is supported by recent findings which suggest that gangs in Britain and America are becoming increasingly violent. Sanders (1994) argues in his study *Gangbangers and Drive-bys* that a gang which is not involved in violence is not really a gang. The involvement of females in violence will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

Having considered the similarities between male and female gangs it is necessary to probe further to find out whether female gangs have any unique features, visual signs or norms which are absent from Miller's list of characteristics defining gangs.

What is so special about female gangs and how are they different from male gangs?

Female gang members have been identified as falling into one of three main types: independently functioning units; members of mixed-sex gangs; or female auxiliaries to male gangs (Miller 1975, Campbell 1990).

Most of the American research on female gangs has concentrated upon those that are auxiliaries to male gangs. Often this research has focused on Mexican-American Chicano gangs, where women, by virtue of their sex and their cultural role within this society, are allocated a secondary role in relation to men. Hispanic girls are brought up to believe that their main purpose in life is to get married and to have a family. Horowitz (1983), in her book, *Honor and the American Dream: Culture and Identity in a Chicano Community*, argues that the cultural life of the Chicano community is centred upon the notion of honor, especially in its application to the family. The 32nd Street Community that Horowitz studied was organised around cohesive family networks. The strong intergenerational bonds between mothers, grandmothers, and daughters, meant that the traditional sex roles of the women were maintained and it was upon these that the code of 'honor' was based. Within this cultural framework, motherhood was regarded as the most acceptable identity for a woman and women within gangs, were usually auxiliaries and conformed to these cultural stereotypes.

Female auxiliaries to male gangs were also relegated to minor roles, such as carrying weapons for the men, and auxiliary gangs usually have feminized versions of male gang names, especially amongst Latin American gangs (Campbell 1984, 1990; Harris 1988). Within these gangs, females would try to exert their independence from men. Campbell (1990) noted, from her research on Puerto Rican female gangs in New York City, that the female auxiliary gangs disliked male interference in their affairs and the *Sandman Ladies* acted

independently from the *Sandmen*. Similarly in Taylor's (1993) study of African-American female gang members in Detroit, one of the *Shakerettes*, who were female auxiliaries of the *Shakers*, notes that: 'the hardest thing for some fellas is taking orders from a babe' (Taylor 1993).

Typically, research on auxiliary female gangs, or on females within mixed sex gangs, has characterised these female gang members as being either 'bad' girls, that is sexually promiscuous, or as being 'tomboys', that is frustrated males. In either case, women are not viewed as being on equal terms with men. They are regarded either as sex objects and subservient to men or as male 'clones', which is a denial of their sex.

It is also necessary to consider the social and economic structural circumstances that affect the involvement of young people of both sexes in gangs. Hagedorn (1988), Taylor (1993) and Campbell (1987) argue that female gang members' lives are: 'stigmatized by ethnicity and poverty as well as gender' (Campbell 1987). Hagedorn applies the concept of an underclass to his study of small town gangs in Milwaukee. He defines the underclass as 'men and women permanently excluded from participation in mainstream occupations' (Hagedorn 1988) and believes that Milwaukee gangs are part of this underclass; most of the 'gang founders' he interviewed were on welfare benefit and few had been employed. The presence of adults in these gangs signalled what Moore (1988) in her introduction to his book has termed the 'institutionalization' of the underclass in gangs in poor, ethnic minority communities.

Within this context, it can be seen that the expectations of some of the females in gangs, such as the *Shakerettes*, in Taylor's (1993) study, were lessened by their economic place in society where they lived in the housing projects (estates) and truanted from school. Similarly, research on female gangs in London reveals that the young girls involved in gangs live on housing estates in inner city areas, often in single-parent, female-headed homes, do not attend school, and are often pregnant by their mid-teens. The difference between female gangs in the 1990s is that they are more autonomous and they do not define themselves in relation to men.

Turning to autonomous, independently functioning female gangs, the change in familial structures may help to explain the changing nature of female gangs. Except for the females in Puerto Rican gangs, marriage is no longer the expected goal. Jo, one of the members of *The Gunners*, in an interview in *The Sunday Times*, summed up the situation as follows:

'I don't hate men, I've had boyfriends, but in mixed groups the girls are always side-lined, they are paraded round like trophies by the men. In this gang we support each other, just like a family. We don't need men to protect us or to organise our lives, we do it for ourselves.' (*The Sunday Times*, 26 February 1994)

So what more can we learn about these autonomous, fiercely independent female gangs? How do they look, what are they expressing and how do they behave?

Appearance

A female Detective Sergeant with the Metropolitan Police described the *Peckham Girls*, from South London, in the following terms. They are aged between 13 and 14 years. They are 'flamboyantly dressed', wearing gold sun visors, pink fluorescent leggings, red blouson jackets, baseball caps and lots of jewellery including nose studs, several earrings on each ear and rings on every finger. They also wear vivid blue or green contact lenses which contrasts strikingly with their dark Afro-Caribbean complexions. They would also brush gold or silver colouring through their hair and wear their hair in pony tails on top of their heads. But the hair colouring and style, like the colour of their contact lenses, and the particular outfits they wore, would be swapped with each other to confuse their identity to the police.

The appearance of these girls is not one of a tomboy nor is it unisex; rather, it flaunts their difference and individuality as young women. The appearance of these girls contrasts

markedly with the imagery and descriptions of male gang members, who dress as if they are about to go into battle - the imagery of gang warfare finds its apotheosis in their appearance. For example some of the male gang members in San Diego are described by Sanders (1994) as wearing battle fatigue in the shape of baggy, combat trousers and he describes the Mexican-American 'cholo' style as comprising the following:

'A uniform consisting of a Pendleton shirt, buttoned at the top over a white T-shirt, a hair net over short hair combed straight back, a bandeau tied around the head pulled down just above the eyes, dark sunglasses, a hat and baggy khaki pants.' (Sanders 1994)

In contrast to the warrior, or fighter, machismo, male gang look, female gang members are expressing their femininity in their appearance. The *Busch Corner Girls* are described in the *Sunday Times* as wearing mini-skirts, low-cut tops and platform shoes. Like the mythical gangster 'molls', they aim to be sexually attractive as women, as well as being combative, and capable of fighting to defend their own name, their gang's reputation and territory. This is also expressed in the concept of having 'attitude', 'face', or 'front'.

Having 'attitude' or 'face', and showing 'front'

For female as well as male gang members, the ability to protect oneself and the gang involves the concept of having 'attitude' or 'face' and this is closely related to appearance. 'Attitude' is the visual aspect of self-presentation, which includes the manifestation of hostility through the use of verbal and facial expressions, by using gestures and by displaying a manner of bold defiance and arrogant challenge which is summed up in the phrase 'It's not what you say, it's the way that you say it'.

It is generally accepted that belonging to a gang confers identity on the individual (Cohen 1990) and a gang's identity usually centres on the concept of having 'front', 'face' or 'attitude'. These are positive attributes, which are, as Sanders (1994) points out, 'situated in contacts where others acknowledge those positive aspects claimed by a person'. It involves a recognition of the self and the values of the individual in relation to the gang. As Homi Bhaba reported in a recent BBC radio broadcast on Chicago's gangland violence, to earn respect is based entirely on the ability to ward off negative reactions to the body or person of the gang member. Adverse reactions to one's clothing or way of walking or talking can give offence and be the cause of reprisal, as for gang members there is nothing worse than being disrespected. Having 'attitude' means using language, gesture and facial expression in a style of confrontation. This sense of antagonism is used to enhance self-respect sometimes by violent means. Fights are often started through the use of language in verbal exchanges. Informal conversations with school teachers in North London reveals that many fights and confrontations are taking place in school playgrounds over the use of the expression 'motherfucker', and even just calling out the word 'mother' to another pupil can start a fight.

Name calling, and the use of language that has derogatory sexual connotations, throws out a challenge to the other person to defend his/or her self-worth and reputation. This issue is very important for young people who are growing-up and in the process of forming their own identity. Anne Campbell (1981) carried out a study on British adolescent girls' experiences of fighting. She found that fights between girls were often triggered off by namecalling that challenged their sense of 'personal integrity' and the fight would ensue to enable the accused girl to defend her sexual reputation and to 'keep face'. Another English study by Sue Lees (1986) revealed that accusations about a girl's sexual morality could lead to fights and that these were less about boyfriends and more about defending one's personal reputation.

The message that female gang members with 'attitude' are expressing is one of fierce independence, of taking pride in one's self as well as the group's identity and appearance, and in defending one's honour and reputation. Only those having a character of 'defiant individualism', as Jankowski (1991) termed it, join.

The dilemma for these girls is that they want to have a group identity and a sense of belonging and equality with other like-minded females, and yet, at the same time, they are aware of their 'otherness' and their outsider status in society. For example the *Peckham Girls* are black, poor and live in inner-city housing estates and do not attend school. Instead of integrating with the conventional norms of society, which involves working hard at school, taking part in community activities, or taking part-time jobs, these girls choose the path of standing apart from the rest of the community and their 'attitude' and lifestyle can involve openly confronting lone victims, usually females, on tubes, trains or out in the street. By forcing their presence upon others, the girls are showing that they are free from the norms of conventional society and can adopt aggressively anti-social behaviour which involves staring, swearing, pushing and shoving, harassing and interrogating, openly jeering and laughing. As Charlotte Raven, writing in *The Guardian* on 25 May 1995, terms it, 'Attitude is self-love in a void, denoting the projection of a non-specific anger as effect'. It is an aggressive form of femininity.

Having considered the status of females within male gangs and the autonomous, independent female gangs in terms of their members, background experiences, appearance and attitude, I will now turn to their behaviour and offending.

What do gang members do and are the routine activities of female and male gang members similar?

Studies of gangs in America reveal that the activities of male and female gang members are more or less the same. Most of their time is spent in 'hanging out' with other gang members and for the Latin American gangs, time is spent 'partying', drinking and 'getting high'. Homegirls 'hang out' with Homeboys in Sander's (1994) study of Chicano gangs in San Diego and the female Puertan Rican gang members, in New York in Campbell's (1990) research study, describe gang life as 'fun', involving crazy behaviour and wild parties. Campbell argues that gang life, for these women, provides a brief escape from the drudgery and loneliness of their future lives. The theme of the crazy life, or *Mi Vida Loca*, was chosen as the title of a recent film by Alison Anders. The film purported to tell the lifestories of some of the real-life, Mexican-American female gang members from the Echo Park neighbourhood of Los Angeles.

As well as hanging around on the streets, female gang members intersperse the routine boredom of their lives with brief interludes of offending.

Anecdotal evidence about female offending and gangs

Anecdotal evidence on the offences committed by female gang members in London reveals that shoplifting, mugging and robbery are the most common offences committed by female gang members. For example the *Peckham Girls* were reported as on bail in 1995 for five or six offences involving robbery, personal theft/snatch and shoplifting. Shoplifting sometimes involved 'steaming' which meant that several girls would undertake a mass shoplift. But it was more usual for two or three girls to pick on a vulnerable shopkeeper, for example an elderly or Asian person. Other female gang members will choose their targets differently, as Dana, aged 14 years, who 'hangs out' with two gangs, is quoted as saying in the *Sunday Telegraph*, on 27 November 1994: 'We're not into drugs and we don't beat up old people. But we're ready to defend ourselves and fight. Sometimes we go up to the West End and nick designer gear and stuff and if we don't like the look of someone, ok we might beat them up. But mostly we fight other girl gangs'. Dana seems to personify the concept of having 'attitude'.

What do research studies tell us about offending in female gangs?

Rather than referring to studies using official statistics, which rely on police and criminal justice agencies' interpretations of the activities of gang members, a broader and more accurate picture of offending might be obtained by examining the results of self-report research. Sometimes the findings from self-report studies confirm the official statistics by showing that females commit mainly minor and less serious offences. For example a study by Fagan (1990), on high school drop-outs in Chicago, Los Angeles and San Diego, used self-reported information on gang involvement, and found that more than 40 per cent of female gang members were classified in the petty delinquency category compared with 15.5 per cent of male gang youth. Among female gang members there were found to be nearly as many multiple index offenders as petty offenders. In this study females were also found to be less involved in serious delinquency than were male gang members. These research results are consistent with findings from Chesney-Lind's (1993) recent study of girl gangs in Hawaii, where females identified as gang members were found to have committed fewer and less serious offences than men. This study, like the one previously discussed, also found that gang members of both sexes, were chronic rather than serious offenders.

A recent study by Rhodes and Fischer (1993) used a self-report questionnaire on 64 youths referred to a court diversion programme in a midwestern city in America. The findings revealed that there were gender differences in both the referral source and behavioural patterns of the adolescents. Boys were more likely to be referred for criminal offences than girls who were more likely to be referred for status offences which included truancy and running away, and for personal problems. Boys were also more likely to have been arrested in the previous two years for property offences and disorderly conduct including gang activity. Whereas a univariate analysis revealed that the girls were less likely to commit property offences, aggressive acts or to sell drugs. Although girls who had been sexually abused in their childhood were more likely to commit property offences and to be involved in selling drugs. However the self report findings in this study did not show that girls commit more status offences than boys despite the gender differences in referral patterns. Although the results of this research study are limited due to the specific nature and small size of the sample. This finding is consistent with previous research which has shown that girls are brought before the Courts more frequently for committing status offences (Kratcoski and Kratcoski 1979, Chesney-Lind 1989).

Recent research studies tend to suggest that criminal justice officials still are not sufficiently aware of, or do not recognise the fact, that females are involved in serious offending within gangs. Anecdotal evidence on female gangs in London suggests that young girls are becoming involved in violent offending which is justified in terms of self protection, as one of the female gang members, interviewed in the *Sunday Telegraph*, says:

"It's tough round here" ... indicating the maze of concrete high-rise blocks. "And we're ready to fight people. We're not frightened of anybody. Why should we be?" (*Sunday Telegraph*, 27 November 1994)

Female gang members who are involved in serious offending, such as, selling drugs are also prepared to use violence to protect themselves. One of the African-American female gang members studied by Taylor (1993) in Detroit explains:

'Girls got guns for the same reasons guys got them ... it's wild out here, you need to protect yourself. Street law is the same, tough and it regulates itself. You have to regulate niggahs, especially if you're in business. It don't matter if its selling crack, weed or any kinda dope, business is business. Guns protect you and your business, right?' (Taylor 1993: 102-103)

Females, as well as males, in gangs, use aggression as a means of survival. Campbell, in her recent study on aggression, states that 'the indisputable law on the street is fight or get beaten' (1993: 140). In her analysis of fighting within female gangs Campbell argues that fights can stem from the fear of vulnerability in losing a fight. She explains that fear becomes transformed into 'belligerence' and represents a shift from an expressive, that is female, to an instrumental or masculine form of aggression. This leads Campbell to conclude that men use instrumental violence as a means to a criminal end and as a way of controlling other people to achieve those ends, whereas women rarely use violence to obtain money.

It may be that the reports appearing in the British press, and the information received from Metropolitan police officers in London, are not exaggerations. While further research is

required, it is also necessary to consider whether young females are becoming more visibly involved in violent forms of theft to obtain money and goods. Young, female teenagers may be adopting the instrumental, rather than expressive, tactics formerly assigned by psychologists to males. Although this speculation is not supported by the findings from self-report studies, which suggest that female gang members do not usually engage in serious offending, from their self-reported admissions it would appear that they are more likely to be frequent, less serious offenders. An explanation for this could be that either female gang members are not admitting to committing serious offences, or that they are not being picked up by the police at the same rate as males for serious crimes.

Another explanation for the possible increase in violent or serious offending by female gang members might be that the familiar gender stereotypes are changing as a result of their lifestyles and family backgrounds, which may be free from the cultural, gendered stereotypes that exist in the Latin American Chicano communities, such as the one described by Horowitz (1983) in 32nd Street, Chicago. As discussed previously, the family within these communities acts as a very strong mechanism of control.

Many research studies have found that females in gangs fight over boyfriends (Taylor 1993, Campbell 1984, 1987, 1990; Horowitz 1983, Quicker 1983). Other fights may be less connected with boys and more about achieving status, power and control. Campbell (1993), provides an illustration of this in an example taken from her research on female gangs in New York. Connie, of the *Sandman Ladies*, when invited by a man to come up to his apartment, pulls out a knife and threatens to kill him. Campbell interprets this action as proof that she is in control of the situation and that her anger was fuelled by memories of childhood abuse which she had been helpless to do anything about.

Having looked at the offences of females in gangs it is now appropriate to consider why females join gangs. Perhaps one of the most salient and obvious reasons is because other members of the family are members of the same gang. Sanders (1994) talks about Mexican-American gangs in San Diego which include the members of an entire family. Other reasons provided by researchers include: psychological factors and teenage problems (Bowker et al. 1983); because they are 'socially disabled' (Giordano et al. 1986); or because of social structural factors (Bowker et al. 1983). Horowitz (1990) quotes from Sanchez Jankowski's research where joining a gang is seen to be part of a rational, decision-making process. Belonging to the solidarity and the 'collective good' of a gang or group is seen as being preferable to acting on one's own as an individual.

None of these studies mention another crucial factor which may determine gang membership - that is, because it is fun. However Katz (1988) has written about the seductions of crime which puts the 'fun and thrills' back into delinquency, by recognizing that the act of offending can be seductive. As previously discussed, the dress and appearance of female gang members can also be seen as glamorous and sexy. Female gang members can also use their sexuality and feminine 'wiles' to lure their victims in their pursuit of material gain. A story in *The Times* recently ran as follows:

'An all woman gang of pickpockets operating on the Croisette in Cannes found the ideal way to divert the attention of holidaymakers ... As two of the women stripped off their bathing costumes and showered nude on the beach, a third rifled the pockets of wolf-whistling onlookers.' (*The Times*, 4 August 1994)

Femininity and female subculture within the context of the female gang

Culture can be defined as a way of life or the context in which life is lived. Members of gangs tend to lead their lives on the street, rather than in the home. The subculture of the gang relates to finding a group identity, and the expression of this identity is often antagonistic in relation to the outside world. The rebelliousness of gang members can be the result of culture conflict or of alienation. Hagedorn (1988), in his study of Milwaukee gangs, argues that rebelliousness is often: 'cynical and directed against the gang's own community'. The young gang members in Milwaukee felt estranged from their own communities and they did not feel that they played an active part in them. Identity within the gang is often related to the local and the specific and it is established and sustained through the sharing of group norms, values, and attitudes, which differ from those of the hegemonic or dominant culture.

Rather than using the same tired old subcultural theories often used to explain male behaviour and delinquency, for example A.K. Cohen's (1955) strain theory or Matza's (1964) drift theory, I want to move the discussion forward by concentrating on female delinquents and new forms of subcultural values and expression which can be applied to them. I will try to do this by using the analogy of different musical styles and representations, and in particular the analysis of hip hop provided by Tricia Rose (1994), to explain the subcultural style of females in gangs. This involves drawing out similarities between the main features of hip hop style and the subculture of female gangs, and then considering whether any further musical and subcultural icons inform the emerging, sometimes anti-feminist style of female gangs.

Firstly, hip hop is primarily an Afro-diasporic cultural form that represents the dichotomy between the culture of African-Americans and Caribbeans living in the wake of post-colonialism in the major cities of Britain and America. As such it gives a group identity to marginalized black youths living in inner city areas. Hip hop emerged from American cities, and most significantly from New York in the 1970s. Rose (1994) writes in her analysis of hip hop that during the 1970s American cities were receiving less federal funding for housing projects and social services. In addition to this, jobs were shrinking as the growth in information technology meant that service companies were replacing manufacturing industry. In contrast to this, in cities such as London, as well as in New York, there was a growth of inner urban regeneration projects, resulting in the redevelopment and sale of warehouses and lofts in formerly 'run-down' neighbourhoods, to yuppie professionals. This resulted in the rich and the poor living side by side. A similar social and economic pattern emerged in Britain during the late 1970s and early 1980s. South Bronx, in New York, became the home of hip hop culture. Slum clearance programmes in the 1970s meant that young blacks and Puerto Ricans were relocated to the Bronx. In an effort to forge their own identity on the area, Rose (1994) argues that young blacks formed their own crews and posses and, in her words, the: 'Identity in hip hop is deeply rooted in the specific, the local experience and one's attachment to and status in a local group' (Rose 1994).

Thus hip hop came to be used by gangs, crews and posses to give voice locally to a specifically black culture, which although contained within a ghetto was bounded by the larger social and political forces of the dominant culture. Once formed as a cohesive style, the message of hip hop was articulated via the media and recordings of rap and hip hop music to a larger audience that spread beyond the specific location of the Bronx.

The importance of hip hop for young people is that it gives them a distinctive, voice, style and identity through musical form which is expressed via rapping and repetitive beat; and through song lyrics which can give vent to feelings of anger and frustration. Taylor (1993) argues in *Girls, Gangs, Women and Drugs*, that: 'hip hop is the voice of the street and it is empowering a generation excluded from society before birth'. It is these feelings of aggression which motivated some of the females living in poverty in Taylor's study to become involved in dealing in drugs in gangs. The alienation felt by young blacks females as well as males living in inner urban areas finds its expression in hip hop, which at the level of street culture might also involve taking part in illegal activities in the group context of the street gang.

Hip hop also provides an outlet for physical expression through movement, rhythm and dance which finds its artistic representation in graffiti. Graffiti often signifies the presence of gang members in a locale and it publicises, in strikingly visual terms, the gang's group and within that, the individual members' 'tag' or identity. This is how gangs can stake a claim on their environment, as they are fairly helpless to change it in any other way. As Rose (1994) expresses it:

'Hip hop emerges from complex cultural exchanges and larger social and political conditions of disillusionment and alienation. Graffiti and rap were especially aggressive public displays of counterpresence and voice.' (Rose 1994: 83-4)

As discussed throughout this paper, group and individual identity is also expressed in gangs through styles of clothes and appearance, which is important in hip hop. Rose (1994) defines hip hop style as: 'identity formation which plays on class distinctions and hierarchies by using commodities to claim the cultural terrain' which is similar to Hebdige's (1979) claim that subcultures are linked to culture in a broad sense as: 'systems of communication, forms of expression and representation' (Hebdige 1979). Rose goes on to argue that: 'Clothing and consumption rituals testify to the power of consumption as a means of cultural expression' (Rose 1994).

The emerging young female gang members identified in the British press and by the police in London grew up in the 1980s, in 'Thatcher's Britain', which fostered the cult of the self and the

pursuit of an aggressive individualism. They are part of the 'me' generation, whose prime value is consumption and the ownership of material possessions and where one of the prime activities, for people of most ages, sexes, races and classes, is shopping. These values of consumption and the desire to own both designer and ordinary goods, provide the stimulus for some young people to offend.

Identity within the subculture of the teenage female gangs means making a statement about one's own self-image which involves making decisions about the choice of hairstyle, the shade of lipstick worn, and the colour of leggings. These decisions about appearance reflect evaluations of one's own self as opposed to the presentation of an image which is attractive to members of the opposite sex. McRobbie's (1991) studies of teenage magazines has identified the cultivation of the self as an important feature of current magazines aimed at young women.

From the limited information available, it appears that there is a lack of controls in the lives of female gang members who do not belong to stable nuclear families or to strong, cultural familial networks such as those that exist in the Chicano communities in America. Vigil (1990), writing about Mexican-American *Cholo* gangs, has identified a relationship between street socialization and the evolution of a gang subculture where:

'macrohistorical forces and structural conditions have altered social control institutions in such a way that children are forced to deal with the streets as a social arena.' (Vigil 1990: 126)

This is happening to young females in gangs in London. They are spending their time on the streets, not so much truanting from school and just not attending school at all. Often female gang members will come from broken homes or dysfunctional families (Taylor 1993, Campbell 1984). Some of the young women from single-parent families will not have experienced any significant male role models in their lives and the absence of patriarchal controls may provide a positive enhancement to their feelings of power and independence as young women.

Girls growing up in all-female households in western cultures are therefore experiencing a new type of female autonomy. They have learnt that women can run a home, bring up children, work and manage a household on their own. Moore (1988) in her book *Feminism and Anthropology*, argues that the concepts of 'woman' and 'mother' are cultural constructions in western societies and that other cultures provide more egalitarian role models. For example, in Africa, significant numbers of women are making positive decisions not to marry. Similarly, black women in Britain are showing more autonomy by choosing to remain single and by rejecting living with the fathers of their children. An article in *The Independent* in 1994 investigated the reasons why 64 per cent of black women, aged between 20 and 39, in comparison with 36.3 per cent of white women, were without a partner (these figures were taken from the 1991 census). One of the most salient reasons given was that according to a Labour Force Survey, 6 out of 10 black men between the ages of 16 and 24 were out of work. Women did not want to support a man as well their children and themselves.

These determined, or 'feisty', as the press likes to call them, street females require strong, female role models to base themselves on. Members of a female gang called *The Gunners*, from Gunnersbury in West London, were interviewed for an article in *The Sunday Times*. The author of the report, Julie Cohen, noted that the gang girls modeled themselves on the 'Raisin Girls', who feature in a song entitled *Cornflake Girl*, by Tori Amos, who sings songs about female self-empowerment. The Raisin Girls are independent and open-minded characters in contrast to the 'Cornflake Girls' who are labelled 'rabbit' and are more conforming. Cohen interprets the purpose of the gang as follows: 'They are essentially a self-righteous sisterhood and their main target is men. They are committed to protecting women. Anyone threatening a member of the gang can expect a vicious beating' (*The Sunday Times*, 20 February 1994). These 'raisin' or gang girls are defying the standard norms and conventions in a similar way to those male delinquents who were the subjects of delinquency studies in the 1940s, 50s and 60s (Shaw and McKay 1942, Cohen 1955, Matza 1964).

The self-empowerment of women through subcultural styles might arguably have begun with punk, which was the precursor to hip hop. Punk culture represented the start of female self-empowerment and it marked the inclusion of women taking a central, rather than a supporting role, in a major subcultural movement. Notions of femininity were questioned by female punk rock singers and punk broke through race and gender barriers. Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald (1994) in their chapter in the book *Microphone Friends*, observe that: 'punk's foregrounding of a potent combination of sex and anger opens a fertile space both for women's feminist interventions and for the politicization of sexuality and female identity'

(Gottlieb and Wald 1994). This expression of sex and anger has spawned the birth of the Riot Grrrl subculture, a predominantly white, middle-class movement that has spread from America and includes loud, angry music, played by loud, angry females. Some of their songs concern injustices to women such as rape and incest, and the Riot Grrrl movement has forged female networks and, in the words of Gottlieb and Wald (1994): 'communities of support to reject the forms of middle-class, white youth culture they have inherited, and to break out of the patriarchal limitations on women's behavior, their access (to the street, to their own bodies, to rock music) and their everyday pleasures' (Gottlieb and Wald 1994).

In the same way as Riot Grrrls, gang girls are finding networks of support within the gang and within this context that they are able to redefine the norms and values of femininity, by their open expression of sexuality in their appearance, by asserting their independence in their actions and by finding their own cultural values expressed through the way they live their lives on the street. Riot Grrrl and hip hop mirror the message of punk performers who transformed notions of femininity by means of unconventional clothing, hairstyles and performance. Riot Grrrls embody an angry rage against norms of femininity which they challenge by calling themselves girls and by rewriting the word, to show their rebellion and rage against traditional values.

The subcultural norms of some of the female gang members studied in this paper can be interpreted to mean that they involve a cultivation of a positive self-identity within the context of shared group meanings. This focus on self-identity is expressed through the gang members' appearance, music and through the idea of consumption as a cultural message. The importance of the gang is that it provides an all-female network which, unlike Latin American gangs, can replace the family as a support unit. The Riot Grrrl subculture in America places a strong emphasis on female networks which are developed through fanzines, which have the slogan 'zines foster girls' (Rose 1994). A similar type of movement can be seen in direct action groups such as the *Lesbian Avengers*, which use fanzines and support groups to promote their message and to provide solidarity for women. Although they are not a gang, in the sense of the definitions discussed at the start of this paper, they do not stop at breaking the law in their pursuit of challenging and confronting those who misrepresent, or who are intolerant of, their sexuality.

Some female gangs do embody positive and reinforcing values for women, which involve the notion of networks. Quicker (1983) refers to the *Homegirls* in his study of Chicano gangs as 'working class sororities' whose values include those of trust, loyalty, hopefulness, and friendship, which Quicker says are values which would 'make most Girl Scout Leaders proud' (Quicker 1983).

The search for an identity in gangs also involves establishing a reputation which female as well as male gang members assert through showing 'face' or by having 'attitude' and where violence may be used to encourage feelings of self-worth as Campbell (1981) found in her study of aggression and adolescence.

Identity within the female gang is a way of obtaining respect, marking out territory, and of challenging and fighting other female gangs if necessary. This subcultural style finds its expression in Riot Grrrls and hip hop which influence the values, behaviour and lifestyle of some of the females in gangs who are expressing their autonomy and independence from men.

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"Gender power structures are entrenched in the popular music industry so it is much harder for women to become credible, authentic and legitimate cultural creators," says Julia Downes, editor of *Women Make Noise: Girl bands from Motown to the Modern*.^Â A powerful statement of boredom with the status quo and how female potential is played down, it was met with derision and claims that the song was "a joke". Of course mainstream pop feeds on selling out and co-opting. There's nothing revolutionary in the love songs of Katy Perry and the hedonism of Gaga, despite her good works. But to gauge the revolutionary power of riot grrrl you need only check the labour camps of Mordovia and Perm Oblast where two Pussy Riot members are still held. Dissenters in Day-Glo â€¦