# ‘You can’t walk around with a big hole inside of you’: Courtney Love, feminist anti-nostalgia and the Maligned Nineties Woman


## Abstract

This paper explores what it means to think with Courtney Love as a feminist theorist whose work explores questions of survival, authenticity and feminine rage. I explore how Love embodies the figure of “the ‘Maligned Nineties Woman’, a term coined in contemporary recuperative accounts of pop culture’s past to describe a recuperative and reparative cultural figure who, by constituting new mad temporalities and new relations of intimacy, offers ways of thinking that precisely show how we might ‘live through’ relations of gendered violence. The paper combines personal memoir, media analysis and feminist cultural theory to engage with the wider cultural reverberations of Love’s public persona and artistic legacy, contextualizing her within feminist discourses of trauma, survival, and voice. Through the lens of feminist anti-nostalgia, the paper argues that Love’s life and work disrupt linear narratives of recovery and challenge media representations of the maligned women of the 1990s. Love’s voice—both literal and metaphorical—is examined as a powerful means of resistance to misogyny, especially within music and celebrity cultures. The paper traces Love’s complex relationship with gendered media scrutiny, exploring how her embodiment of survival transcends simplistic readings of victimhood, survival and progress. By revisiting and amplifying Love’s legacy in the post-MeToo era, I aim to think through the cultural and political significance of her ongoing resonance, particularly among younger feminist audiences.



Keywords: celebrity, feminism, anti-nostalgia, trauma, survival, grunge, Courtney Love

## Introduction

*History is a set of facts that gets incredibly distorted, and the right side of history needs proper stewardship. It's really hard to do that. There's shock. There's turmoil. There's lament. There's relinquishing. There's remembrance. There are huge swings of emotion. There's fake smiling. There's ugly crying. I really felt like there were a couple of times where I'd get over it, and then it would come back a few years later. (Courtney Love)*

*"I'm like a cockroach--the ones that survive the nuclear blast" – Courtney Love*

*'There is a hole that pierces right through me…'* Euripides, *Medea:* fake, probably misremembered)

## Introduction

In 2005, Courtney Love was captured arriving at the Comedy Central roast of another much-maligned celebrity of the time, the actress Pamela Anderson. It was a night which would be widely reported as disastrous for Love's already troubled public image; shots of her visibly intoxicated appearance would be subjected to intense scrutiny, folded into the media narrative of her downfall that ended in a conviction on drug offences and eventually to her becoming sober. The early 2000s were a low point for Love, then struggling with a flare-up of her drug addiction in the face of new celebrity gossip industries that only served to intensify the scrutiny and criticism she had already experienced throughout her career and which were to lead to her arrest, court-mandated rehab stay and recovery (although as I will argue, one thing she does as a public figure is disrupt linear narratives of recovery. For all that, on the red carpet, she looked well: poised and queenly in a black dress her vanilla-blonde barrel curls perfectly styled. As she ran the gauntlet of press, fans, and hangers-on, reporter Natasha Leggo asked her, 'what career advice would you give young women in the entertainment industry?' Love hesitated and muttered under her breath, 'I'll get libelled if I say it' but then responded, 'if Harvey Weinstein invites you to a private party at the Four Seasons? Don't go. Don't go' (France).

This moment in time, circulated in the form of a seventeen-second long clip by news channel KCAL in 2018, *after* Weinstein's exposure as a bully and sexual predator, has engendered a new stage in a

career defined by cycles of survival and revival. Arising in the context of a globally mediated feminist movement as well as of a nineties and Y2K revival in fashion and pop culture, Love's current mythic status as lone voice of truth among those either too complicit, too cowed or too traumatised to speak out about abuse, this reframing of her status as an artist and a celebrity figure is interesting: especially in its account of what was already public as 'surfacing' or having 'emerged'. In the KCAL edit, the clip is said to have 'come out', implying that it has somehow bobbed out of some dark, murky pond into the light. And yet it was never lost. Abuse in media industries has been an open secret since 2006, when Tarana Burke pressed send on her now legendary social media post. But Burke, as a Black woman, was ignored. The same fate greeted Love, then widely regarded as the embodiment of a mad, bad, and spoiled feminine identity. It is always frustrating to speculate about what might have happened if various marginal or problematic voices had only been heard. As it was, 2005 was a terrible year for Courtney Love, and a bumper one for Harvey Weinstein. Later that year, the latter founded his own production company, giving him unprecedented power as an independent producer. Besides being widely dismissed as vindictive, incoherent and mad, Love's speaking out was not without personal and professional consequences. A 2016 tweet expanded that 'although I wasn't one of his victims, I was eternally banned by CAA for speaking out against #HarveyWeinstein #rape', referring to the powerful Hollywood agency that was later alleged to have supplied Weinstein with potential victims.

The current, much-vaunted 'reckoning' with misogyny and abuse across the entertainment industries has revitalised key feminist concerns about the politics of speaking out, and on relations of speaking and listening. It is a movement that centres, above all, on the question of voice: of who gets to speak, who listens, and on what terms. Courtney Love is an influential figure in the current nineties revival, not only through the obvious frames of fashion, style or even rock n' roll mythology but also as a figure whose art and celebrity persona involve an excessive and transgressive voicing of feminine trauma. Her characteristic speaking voice, with its instantly recognisable low, contralto rasp and sardonic commentary on the excesses and absurdities of celebrity culture, has been as much a constant over the past four decades as the still thrilling guttural whisper-scream of her songs or the big, brash

power chords of her guitar playing. This multifaceted sonic performance resonates through time, reaching new audiences as her artistic and stylistic legacy is re-examined as part of a wider cultural shift to re-unearth the work of women and minority artists who have been denied their due. In this context, the 'rediscovery' or 'surfacing' of the Weinstein clip has engendered a recuperation of Love's image, especially among younger fans, and has situated her at the heart of a wider movement to re-frame and reconsider media cultures of the nineties and early aughts, especially in relation to the treatment of women and minorities. This recuperation of maligned women of the recent past has been central to the post-MeToo project of understanding how widespread abuse was allowed to emerge and circulate and to reconsidering the complex relationships between celebrity, media images and wider inequalities of labour, representation, and voice that produce and enable abuse. It is in this context that I want to consider Courtney Love and, more widely, the question of what it means to be a survivor, specifically a survivor of the music and celebrity industries of the nineties and early 2000s.

Love's ability to derail the expectations of redemption at stake in the makeover plot is embodied in another 'resurfaced' clip, this time from 1998; in this case, the clip was shared by Love herself, on her now-deleted Instagram page, after first going viral on TikTok. The scene is a press conference at the VMA Awards, and Love is already back in grunge mode: dressed in black, her blond hair back to its signature dishevelled waves, surrounded by her band. The question she is asked, by a female music critic, is inaudible except for the word 'fashion', but from context, the reporter is presumably asking whether her newfound links to designers undermine her rock credibility. Love's response is a startlingly articulate takedown of the anti-femme sentiments at stake in this false binary:

> Well you know the deal about fashion is that proletariat male rock critics have a real Bruce Springsteen problem with like denim boomer issues. We as females have thousands and thousands of years of fashion in our DNA. We want to wear nice fucking clothes, it's part of what we do! If you have an opportunity to go to the Oscars in a fabulous gown and be absolutely fabulous, you're going to fucking take it. I don't have to like listen to a rule. Who made that rule? Some dumb guy (Mu5icology)

Delivered in the same warm, throaty and impassioned voice as her songs, it is a poetic, improvised skewering of the kind of critics who care about the pressures of media body image absolutism only when it gives them a conveniently respectable language with which to attack prominent women. What is striking, though, is not Love's articulacy – which is well-known to her fans – but the distinct lack of response from the assembled press. At the end, she seems to lose confidence a little, half-turning back towards Erlandson and Auf Der Mar on her left with the tag question, 'am I right'? It's a tough crowd; an echo audible as her half-joking, half-angry comments meet with absolute silence, an almost imperceptible waver of uncertainty in her voice reflecting the iciness of the reception – the slight echo on the soundtrack eerily reflecting back the silence of the room.

This paper was originally intended to be about the misogyny that has followed Love all her life, and about what it means to follow an artist through multiple cycles of eagerly anticipated spectacular 'fall' and surprising, un-stereotypical recovery. Through my work on the maligned women of my own youth, I wanted to think about how media survivors like Love pave the way for a new way of thinking about the cultural effects of misogyny, and the intimate, mediated relations of collective speaking and listening that might enable us to speak honestly about how we 'live through' this together, and how art might be a site of resistance. In doing so, I collected an archive of written, screen media and internet sources that I remembered from my own past, immersing myself in an archive of work that ranged from deeply misogynistic to actively libellous. I had forgotten some of these sources, but some of them are burned on my brain, the slurs and dehumanising language often so precise, so cutting, as to be unforgettable. The result was a depression and rage that, far from making me want to respond, all but made it impossible to write at all.

In her groundbreaking work on gender, race and the politics of academic citation, Sara Ahmed raises the question: who appears? What bodies surface, are made comfortable, and feel at home in the spaces we create? We could also add to this, whose voice reverberates in these spaces – who gets to sing out, and who gets to look back on the past with authority? Traditions of citation that define work in relation to white, male authorities are, Ahmed says, 'a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies' (Ahmed n.p.). Until recently, both the music

industry itself and music media have similarly produced the world through racialised, gendered, classed and ableist lenses. As a woman whose struggles with addiction and trauma appeared to 'spoil' her identity as blonde, white rock wife, Love was fair game. I concluded, then, that I did not want to reproduce the misogyny to which Love was subject by citing those writers and filmmakers who belittled her (and none of them are cited in this article). Instead, I became interested in how she is regarded now: how her voice, which has been traduced but never silenced through open and hidden relations of abuse, is able to surface in a new way in digital feminist spaces. At that time, listening to younger fans and media-makers' takes on Love felt like a balm.

In this paper, then, I want to turn from describing how Love has been subject to misogyny to think *with* her as an artist whose work is centrally concerned with exploring possibilities for feminist expression in a way that resonates and reverberates across generations. In examining how she has been taken up as a proto-feminist survivor, then, it feels imperative to have her speak for herself. I argue that far from simply being an effect of not dying and of being publicly visible as a postmenopausal woman, questions of trauma and survival are always present in her work. Since its inception, Hole has been concerned with the voicing of feminine trauma in the context of its symbolic annihilation. This is evident from the outset of her career: indeed, the band name Hole is in itself rooted in ideas that would thread through her career, giving an account of herself that draws intimate connections between fans' pain and her own. In 2010, a clean and sober Courtney was interviewed on the BBC show *Later… with Jools Holland*, where she discussed her 'comeback' album *Nobody's Daughter,* her recovery, and her speech to the Oxford University Students' Union on the subject of 'the tormented artist' (BBC ). It is a short snippet, but dense with references and ideas that humorously play with notions of violence, comeback and survival. Holland asks her about the cover art featuring Marie Antoinette and Anne Boleyn: 'I wouldn't have got my head cut off', she says, 'I would've run away'. There are layers of time and memory here, too: it was on the same show 15 years earlier that she spoke about the origin of the name Hole, making the oft-disputed claim that her mother told her a line from Euripides' *Medea* that ran 'there is a hole that pierces right through me', as

well as ‘the obvious genital reference’. She remembers trying to talk to her mother about the impact of ‘a really fucked childhood’:

> [A]nd she said, ‘well, Courtney, you can’t walk around with a big hole inside yourself about it’ Then I realised that a lot of different kinds of anger and stuff came from my hole, this hole that needs to be fed … We’re not trying to be obscene, we’re not trying to be gross, we’re just a vapour of fucking hell that passes through your hole and out the other side and it leaves a fucking impression and that’s fucking great (BBC)

The hole that needs to be fed, and is fed through sonic connection as well as through the parasocial relation between musician and audience, is a key image that recurs throughout Love’s career. I want to imagine, then, how the notions of sound passing through audiences and leaving impressions might allow us to recognise the power of Love’s specific brand of feminism beyond the limited binary reading of ‘good role model’ versus ‘bad feminist’. Crucially, these are questions of voice. I want to think about how music – and music of such power and such a centring of the feminine voice – might carry affective resonances that reverberate across time and generation. If the MeToo movement is universally depicted through narratives of speech, speaking out and listening, it is striking that the implications of this for thinking about the way music, and voice, embody relations of gender and power have yet to be fully understood. In her book *The Fact of Resonance*, sound theorist Julie Napolin thinks through the way acoustical figures resonate, travelling across space and time and traversing boundaries of language and culture. While Napolin is concerned specifically with modernist fiction, I am inspired by her argument that cultural studies does not sufficiently attend to the complex interplays between sound, narrative, and the unconscious that are always at stake in relations of power. Critical theory, Napolin suggests, is founded on an exclusion of sound: the question ‘who speaks’ draws attention away from the ‘hidden acoustical questions “who hears?” and “who can hear?”’ (6). To this I would add: what sounds, what voices, resonate with us, and what moments, platforms and relations enable voices to break through layers of silencing? It is through these questions, and through the notion of sound tearing a hole through time and place, that I want to think about Courtney Love’s work of feminist survival.

As a fan closer to Love in age than many of her new online fans, these questions resonate for me in intimate, personal, and political ways. I discovered Hole in 1991 through an interview in the US feminist zine *Bust* and immediately bought their Kim Gordon-produced debut album *Pretty on the Inside* on cassette tape. As a young feminist in love with punk and alt-rock, I became obsessed with the album Love called 'unlistenable' and - more importantly - as 'a calling card … announcing my persona as a cunt', a word that, to a working-class teenager in the early nineties, still felt excitingly transgressive (Cooper 2011). I can hear her voice saying this as I write: my attachment to her is not just a narrative phenomenon, but a sonic one that is heightened by listening to the album itself. The track 'Teenage Whore' – which documents the titular character's screaming fights with a controlling mother, swerving between desire and a deliberate, gleeful courting of revulsion – sounded like the *id* of every Gen X teen girl struggling with the pressures of an emerging selfhood bound by expectations of appropriate feminine respectability and parental pressures. The sheer excessiveness of Love as frontwoman, hedged by chaotic noise, her bedraggled wide-eyed knowing child persona and her deep voice almost *vomiting* forth unspeakable truths, resounded with a fundamental sense of un-shameability that felt enthralling. It was a quality she would need in the following years, in a period marked by a widespread backlash against feminism, the emergence of a new 'postfeminist sensibility' marked by toxic masculinity and pervasive irony (Gill 2007, Gill and Scharf 2011) and the intensification of a celebrity culture fuelled by deeply gendered, classist and ableist regimes of bodily surveillance and discipline often profiting from women's suffering. As a woman publicly identified as a feminist and not only openly struggling with, but also sonically *voicing*, addiction, trauma and grief, Love became a lightning rod and focal point for indie and mainstream misogyny. To be a fan was to find oneself, often, beyond the pale of indie acceptability. As a star figure who emerged from the alternative music scene in the 1990s, she became the target of aggression from the music press, from her husband's fans and, sadly, from some feminists. Music writer Lisa Whittington-Hill recounts having 'a red Solo cup full of warm gin and tonic thrown at me by a guy who really, really believed Love killed her husband'; as a fan, 'defending Courtney Love' is, she writes, 'a full-time job' (Hill n/p). A satirical music site headline astutely sums up her unique ability to expose hypocritical attitudes to women: 'Gen X Man 100% Feminist Until Someone Mentions Courtney Love' (Bookbinder).

It is not my intention, in this article, to carry on this work of defending Courtney Love. First and foremost, it is clear that she is an artist who can take care of herself. Instead, I want to consider how we might think *with* Love as a theorist of misogyny, resistance and survival. That is, to think about her not just as some 'ultimate survivor', as the headlines around her recent sixtieth birthday (and her fiftieth, fortieth and even thirtieth) would have it, but as a figure whose work and public persona, and especially voice, constitute a public performance *about* survival that forms intimate connections between past and present that reverberate with the traumas that haunt us. The MeToo movement has brought a new focus to the role that media and celebrity culture both play not only in perpetuating gendered, racialised, classed and ableist violence but also in their potential to enable resistance. For a generation of women artists now reaching middle age, this has meant spelling out what was previously articulated in their work, but ignored and dismissed. It has also meant a new kind of resonance as contemporary fans amplify and expand the performer's voice through digital remediation of statements that previously went dismissed or unheard. The current nineties and Y2K revivals in music, fashion and pop culture have coincided and crossed paths with this collective act of re-membering, with a new generation of fans and overtly feminist artists engaging with 'problematic' figures from the past. It is in this context, I suggest, that we need to think with Courtney Love: not just through the spectacular and stereotypical framing of the 'rock widow', but as a fellow survivor whose struggles resonate with and amplify our own.

## ' I remind you that nobody identified publicly as a feminist: figuring the Maligned Nineties Woman

Recent times have seen a surge of scholarly interest in the complex relationship between celebrity culture and conversations around previously taboo issues of consent and sexual violence (Horeck, Boyle). As Evans and Ringrose (2024) argue, digital media plays a key role in this ambivalent re-membering, engendering new intimate publics that facilitate recognition of the way past traumas haunt and shape the present moment (Berlant). Postdigital media spaces engender 'a sense of belonging …framed by institutions, politics, ethics, law, and where various 'publics' feel like they

express a shared emotion, desire, and collective subjectivity' (Evans and Ringrose 2024: n/p). Celebrity studies pays attention to the ways in which digital and social media collapse social boundaries and contexts, rendering the sharing of what was once regarded as intimate and private at once more acceptable and less obvious (Marwick and boyd). This focus on the increasing collapsing of boundaries around public and private, individual and social, and the (over) sharing of personal experiences and images has expanded the existing body of work on celebrity and parasocial intimate relationships (Abidin 2018). These intersecting strands of cultural enquiry come together in the figure that journalist Sarah Marshall has termed 'the maligned 90's woman' (Dockterman). In her successful podcast series, *You're Wrong About*, Marshall and her writing partner Michael Hobbes engage closely with various pop culture figures including Pamela Anderson, Princess Diana, Britney Spears, Whitney Houston and Monica Lewinsky to show how the emergence of new celebrity cultures and digital media subjected women and minorities to new forms of surveillance, bodily discipline and intrusion, and how the silencing of these women foreshadows rhetorics of popular misogyny today (Dockterman 2022). Through the lens of the current moment, we can see that the postfeminist era harmed women who were idealised within this system as much as those who were abjected and excluded.

Crucially, this work of reframing raises questions about who counts as a celebrity feminist, focussing on the messier and more difficult work of artists who did not necessarily have access to the privileged platforms available to mainstream stars today. Finally, the maligned woman sits within a wider call for feminist figures who trouble and complicate the 'good girl' narrative demanded of women in the public eye (Hamad) and who 'resist reductive sense-making' (McNicholas Smith, Harris and McNicholas Smith). Seen as sexually transgressive, queer, mad, or an addict, the Maligned Woman inherently resists the reduction of celebrity feminism to a call for wholesome (and bankable) role models. By surviving and shaping her own legacy, she continues to untangle comforting, linear and progressive nostalgic narratives that frame the past as over, that claim things were just 'different back then', and that render women harmed by past abuses as passive victims of their time. In this article, though, I am interested in how this mode of anti-nostalgic recuperation risks positioning women artists as simply victims of their time, and how such a reading closes off the more radical and complex

possibilities that a figure like Love opens up. As Anwen Crawford summarises in her heartfelt fan memoir *of Live Through This*, 'intellectually I know that there are better feminist 'role models' than Courtney Love – but then I am not particularly interested in role models. Nor am I interested in a feminist project with a missionary aim to make people better … It's not a lifestyle choice' (Crawford 98). Instead, we can think about feminist identity as bound up with 'living through' the depredations of a patriarchal world, and doing so with elan and defiance.

Alongside the digital re-emergence of resistance to misogyny and sexual violence, there has been a significant re-evaluation of nineties and Y2K pop culture, and in particular of women artists associated with those eras who are now figured as survivors, elder stateswomen or casualties of their time. The role of sound and voice in this political project have been under-explored; all the more surprising since so many of the performers involved are musicians and singers, and the reappraisal of the past has gone hand in hand with renewed interest in their music. As Jonathan Sterne notes, sound studies has always been concerned with the ways in which new technologies of listening shape our experience. WEB Dubois turned to sound as a 'key modality for thinking through African American culture'; Freud and Heidegger both considered how sound recording allowed for a new experience of memory, enabling what was once fleeting to be captured, as well as both escaping and expanding the boundaries of the everyday world (2). Sound is essential to our lived experience of power, memory, and time: the sonic, writes Walter Gershon, 'operates in ever-emergent reverberations of simultaneity that are always already mobile and present in ways that are metaphorically and literally significant (1). As Lisa Blackman discusses, the affective relations at stake in play with sound and listening '[engender] a conversation with traumatic memories, albeit a conversation that does not occur primarily in a verbal register' (63).

Love has been entangled in ideas of survival and victimhood throughout her career, working these tropes into her image. While this idea of survival most often centres around the death of her husband and her struggle with addiction, the trope of surviving her childhood appears as a motif in her earliest work. It is a common observation that landmark anniversaries of cultural events have the effect of making one feel old. The thirtieth anniversary of *Live Through This*, on April 12 2024, is one such

landmark event, made all the more bittersweet since the album was released just a week after Cobain's death from suicide after a long struggle with chronic pain, heroin addiction and depression. *Nevermind* was released the same year; it was the breakthrough moment for an extraordinary creative flowering that in hindsight seems – in the usual way of such things – almost unbelievably brief. In April 1994, 29-year-old Love was left a widow with an 18-month-old child, unresolved trauma from her own childhood, and suffering from addiction. In August of that year, she opened a world tour. With no time off, no rest, and no apparent protection from the prurience of the press; the tour started in the UK, the nation with perhaps the most unhinged and certainly the most lawless tabloid media in the world. Newly bereaved, first by the death of Kirsten Pfaff in June 1994 and then by that of Cobain, Hole were compelled by their record company to go through with their planned world tour (it was capitalism all along, indeed). A grieving Love, given a degree of grace following her shared grieving with fans in the immediate aftermath of Kurt's death, attracted intense press attention. On the band's debut at the UK-based Reading Festival, the first appearance for Melissa Auf Der Mar, influential British music journalist John Peel wrote of Love's 'bedlam'-like appearance, that the band 'teetered on the edge of chaos, generating a tension which I cannot remember having felt before from any stage'. It is a positive review, and one which reproduces Cobain and Love's own use of mental health stereotypes, but arguably ended up lending an authority to the then popular view of Love as out-of-control 'madwoman' (Williams n.p.).

A year later, they were to play the same stage to wide acclaim. Remembering my own experience as a 21-year-old Hole fan who attended this second gig two years after seeing Nirvana at Reading, I remember it as an intense, cathartic and draining collective spectacle which cemented my personal investment in the band, and my sense of Love as an artist speaking in a unique way to questions of feminist agency and trauma familiar to me as a young woman navigating the many depredations of life in nineties Britain. The gig audience, one could argue, constituted a fleeting and transitory 'intimate public' (Berlant) in which fans screamed, moshed, and generally transgressed norms of acceptable feminine respectability. Standing fierce in the face of absolute horror and chaos and loss, screaming back at a world of culturally pervasive misogyny, saneism, ableism and body shaming, she

seemed fundamentally un-shameable. Yet – in common with the feminist fans of Love I have cited – my memories of this experience are not reflected in the media of the time. In returning to analogue media commentary on Hole, it is striking that the voices of fans are often missing from the discussion of Love and Hole, who are often treated as exceptional, marginal and freakish. When the band are accorded praise, it is through a language of acceptability according to masculinist standards of rock excellence. More often, they are presented as objects of voyeuristic disapproval. It is though the reviews are written from the viewpoint of those men who stand silently in the front row of rock gigs with their arms folded (perhaps because they are). To have been alive as a young woman who loved Hole in a time of anti-feminist backlash is always, to some extent, to be a survivor.

And yet, her survivorhood does not originate with Cobain's death and the moment after it. Instead, her work is always already concerned with questions of what might need to be survived, how we might live through painful experiences, and how this living-with might be amplified and shared through music. It is impossible to understand the gendered cultural landscape of the early nineties without understanding the guttural, cathartic response it engendered: the scream. A guttural, cathartic response to lad culture and prettified postfeminism alike, the scream both encapsulates and exorcises the many tensions that exist between feminine subjectivity and the emotions – of rage, desire and trauma – on whose repression femininity depends. She is framed as a provocateur and truth-teller whose lyrics are 'analytical, no matter how viscerally she howls them'; although grounded in collective and personal trauma, their insightfulness transcends the merely confessional.

Certainly, there is much to scream about – now and then. A 1997 article by Karina Eileraas is an important archival source, collecting many contemporary interviews and quotes that have since been lost. Eileraas' work – one of the very few contemporary sources to take her seriously as an artist and a feminist – gives a vivid picture of a culture in which women's pain is taken for granted and where victims are held responsible for gender based violence. Eileraas' article brings the pain of being a woman or minority in the rock scene of the nineties roaring back: the intimacies and connections inspired by screaming along in darkened rooms, but also the gendered misogyny and violence that have been erased from subsequent memory. The scream, she argues, is 'an acquired skill-and given

that the first sound we all make as babies is the cry or scream, the fact that grown women must rediscover and cultivate this scream attests to the mammoth task of unlearning that accompanies any movement from female or feminine to feminist' (125). Tracking this vocal style from earlier female punk artists and avant-garde vocalists like Diamanda Galas, Eileraas argues that it constitutes 'an aggressive, anti-decorum presence [which] is politically significant in a culture that has historically socialized women to doubt the authority of their voices and to soften or silence them altogether' (125). The scream, she argues, represents a re-learning of the pre-socialised, pre-linguistic self: that grown women must re-learn how to scream, she suggests, 'attests to the mammoth task of unlearning that accompanies any movement from female or feminine to feminist' (ibid). This is not to claim that Love's vocal style derives from some primitive, natural outpouring of essential trauma. Instead, it is a dramatization and exorcism that 'proclaims substantial feminist presence' (ibid). At the same time, the scream is met with violent backlash which attempts to put women artists back in their box. She cites Love's account of a stage diving incident in which she was 'fondled, undressed, and (in her words) "figuratively raped" by several of her front-row audience members' during a London gig, a moment she frames as both all too typical, and as formative in developing the band's feminist grunge sound. It was this experience, she argues, that Love would channel into the track 'Asking For It'. The scream is a performance that reproduces an ordinary feminine rage that cannot be articulated within the boundaries of the celebrity interview, as well as a venting of deeper childhood trauma. Love's contemporary and rival Kat Bjelland of Babes in Toyland similarly described her own need to scream as 'a cathartic release from childhood, when she was always told by her parents to shut up and was frequently locked in her room' (ibid).

Love's work, then, plays a complex and contradictory role in 'living through' painful experiences: both puncturing us with memories of past injustices that haunt us, and at the same time creating the necessary conditions for living-through. The notion of 'living through this' – of what might be lived through, on whose terms, and the consequences for women artists as bearers of historical trauma – is pivotal to post-MeToo writing on Love and Hole. An article by Megan Volpert for *Salon* magazine illustrates this. Written on the thirtieth anniversary of *Live Through This* and the release of Love's

series for BBC Sounds, *Courtney Love's Women,* the piece considers how Hole's influence has 'cascaded' through three decades of rock music, representing a 'rallying cry for feminist expression' (2024: n.p.). What is important about this emerging archive is the way it discusses the more 'problematic' aspects of Love's persona, not in opposition to her work, but as an integral part of it. Volpert, in common with other contemporary writers, sees her as 'a catalyst for conversations surrounding mental health, addiction and the complexities of fame' (ibid): a role she is only able to play in the current conjuncture when survivor activism and a mass movement to destigmatise mental distress has made them speakable. The podcast *You're Wrong About* similarly celebrates her willingness to speak openly about her addictions as well as her experience of sex work, which is presented as deeply shameful in the context of nineties media culture but acceptable now: 'I mean', says guest presenter Candace Opper, 'she kind of talks about it the way that she talks about everything else, which is just like, yeah, this is a thing I did for a while'. Importantly, it is her refusal to represent her past through expected neoliberal narratives of recovery that is seen as making her both dangerous and authentic:

> 'I think this is one of the reasons why she's unlikable to a lot of people. She doesn't do the thing that celebrities do when they're past their, like, messed up years where they show some like extreme growth as a person or like as like a growing up. You know, it's like they're like now I'm a mom, like, she's just kind of like, yeah, I was kind of fucked up for a while or like, yeah, I lived in Liverpool on the Street or yeah I, I stripped'

This flat insouciance is summed up by host Marshall as 'the classic affectlessness of the grunger' This sense of emotional flatness, expressed through voice, is a counterpoint to the deeply charged and emotional sound of her songs. This flat voicing makes possible a refusal of the simplified affects demanded by mainstream media narratives of mental health and recovery: a way of looking back on the past *without* shame and regret which refuses the lure of achieving respectability through the rejection of the past self. In contrast, the period before and immediately after Kurt Cobain's death are discussed as one of *excessive* affect. What the titular 'you' are held to be wrong about is the idea that Love's grief was excessive and possibly even dishonest. Marshall and Hobbes describe her response

to this appalling loss as ‘revolutionary’, especially in terms of her intimate engagement with fans. This, they suggest contemporary critics, subverted ‘that image .. people had in their mind of a public widow, which is like the Jackie O, you know, the complete 180 from that’ (Marshall and Hobbes 2020). As Hobbes summarises, ‘I think it's easy to look at those images now 30, almost 30 years later and be like, yeah, that's Courtney Love or yeah, that was the 90s or whatever. But at the time it was it was kind of revolutionary’ (ibid).

In thinking through the political uses of anti-nostalgia, it is important to remember that the past is never past: rather, competing accounts of the past, whether as memory or new discovery, shape our sense of the present as well as of possible futures. Such a view complicates the notion that to engage with the musical and clothing styles of the past represents a simply naïve belief that things were better ‘back then’. The current feminist wave of nineties nostalgia subverts this, providing a counter-narrative to Christopher Lasch’s influential work on nostalgia which argued that it ‘provides continuity, or at least the illusion of continuity, in a society subject to change’, operating as a comforting bulwark against the passivity and disengagement that characterises popular culture of the time (69). The still emotionally charged stories of survivors defy his claim that nostalgia ‘evokes the past only in order to bury it alive’; that the ‘sentimental regret’ in which it surrounds the past ‘has the effect of denying the past’s inescapable influence over the present’ (70). Feminist critics have always framed nostalgia differently, arguing that returning to the past can be vital in processing and understanding the traumas that shape us. Often, nostalgia entails the return to the ‘moment before’ some momentous social change. In 1987, Janice Doane and Devon Hodges wrote that canonical male writers employed nostalgia to imagine a world unsullied by feminism, presenting ‘an indictment of contemporary culture that depends upon opposing the "deteriorating" values of the present to the "truer" values of the past, and each characterizes the "liberated" woman as implicated in this movement toward degeneracy’ (4). Current work on trauma shows that we are never more determined by the past than when we think we have put it behind us: painful memories can only be repressed, never entirely eradicated, and are always threatening to re-erupt.

Musicologist Stephen Davis Turner compellingly expands on the relationship between music and anti-nostalgia in his work on *Twin Peaks.* As he notes, there is no universally agreed definition of anti-nostalgia: instead, the term describes the dissonances that occur when 'the historical realities that surround nostalgic versions of a history may also conjure anti-nostalgia when they are made visible or … audible' (21). An image of an ice-cream kiosk by the African-American photographer Gordon Parks, depicting a scene of seemingly innocent '50s Americana becomes disturbing when we notice the signs signalling separate counters for 'whites' and 'coloreds' (ibid). While popular nostalgia attempts to conceal trauma, he argues, 'the realities reflected in these texts contradict that nostalgia, provoking remembrance accompanied by disillusion or some other kind of unpleasantness rather than fondness' (Turner 21). Anti-nostalgia 'encourages viewers to remember the past, but not fondly, and maybe disturbingly' (ibid). The maligned nineties woman precisely disturbs audiences' pleasure in revisiting earlier times: while audiences engage in pleasurable experimentation with the fashions and styles of an earlier time, they are also invested in uncovering the abuses of that time and understanding how they shape our own cultural moment. What is important about our current moment is the way this anti-nostalgia reconfigures the notions of generation and progress at stake in anti-nostalgia. Given the current and ongoing revelations of abuse in the music industry, it is impossible to frame the past as Other in relation to some improved, enlightened present. Further, the media presence of a figure like Love – a survivor who is very much with us and actively engaged in reflecting on her own legacy – continually fractures and disrupts not just our memories of the past, but the linear framing of the past as past. Instead, she constantly reveals what we are collectively living with and *at the same time* proposes a rich and complex way of inhabiting and voicing not only the pain of the past, but also the ways in which art, fashion and music might enable a collective ongoing act of survival.

## Conclusion: temporalities of survival

The addict with the hole that needs to be fed, the art passing through the holes in others, momentarily filling them (us), the tunnel through time, trauma connecting past, present and future: these powerful, overlapping images embody Love's relationship to feminism in her work and public persona. She

embodies contradiction and paradox: as an artist who said in her address to the Oxford Union, 'I'll always prefer to play with women and hang out with women, and I'll always be a feminist' yet who has been defined in the public eye primarily as 'connected to the Alpha male as some kind of ancillary object' (BBC News). Love has worked with complex and contradictory narratives of survivorhood from the very outset of her career and yet her survival is framed solely in relation to her widowhood, and a truth-teller frequently derided as dishonest and delusional. At the same time, unlike some of the key nineties figures currently subject to recuperation, she has consistently shown an astute awareness of these gendered power dynamics and her place within them. While frequently subject to the abuses of, variously, toxic masculinity in music fandom, tabloid misogyny, Hollywood rape culture and actual violence, she is far from a tragic victim. Instead, her survivor status is defined not by having been subject to public shaming, but by the way she continually models a loud, confrontational refusal to be shamed. In our own post-MeToo moment which is defined by the commodification and incorporation of survivor stories, she continues to resist in creative and confounding ways.

In this paper, I have shown how the 'Maligned Nineties Woman' returns through postdigital media as a recuperative and reparative cultural figure who, by constituting new mad temporalities and new relations of intimacy, offers ways of thinking about violence, survival and trauma that transcend the overt linear temporalities of recovery at stake in narratives of 'reclaiming'. At the same time, this figure is limited in its reproduction of linear-progressive temporalities that depend on a framing of 'back then' as unenlightened and barbaric, and also in its unwitting mobilisation of saneist recovery narratives around mental health. In writing about Courtney Love, then, I do not want to reduce her to the misogyny she has experienced, which is considerable. Instead, I have argued that her work and persona have contemporary resonance precisely because they anticipate and transcend the current moment of recuperation. Love continues to matter not just because she survived to speak out about the relations of violence and inequality that structure indie and mainstream entertainment industries alike, but because she refuses to do so on the terms set by mainstream narratives of recovery, recuperation and respectability. In continuing to defy these terms, she tears a hole that pierces through time,

generation and memory. Her work and celebrity persona embody the kind of resistance to misogyny that Samantha Pinson Wrisley calls for when she writes, ‘by cultivating a sense of collective political resiliency from decades of misogyny-motivated derision, harassment and violence … ‘feminists have exploited misogyny's various triggers as points of weakness within the gender hierarchy's scaffold and have identified those points as places to push harder. Accepting political, social and interpersonal infamy might as well be a central principle of claiming a feminist identity at this point’ (2023: n.). Love has always embodied just this kind of agentic relationship to misogyny: an artist informed by both punk and feminist performance art, she precisely seeks infamy as a means of tearing through the barriers of respectability and normative femininity that operate to secure complicity and silence dissent.

As I have shown, ‘pushing harder’ is a collective as well as an individual task. As a rock musician and as a feminist, Courtney Love has been persistent in claiming her place centre stage (and centre image) as an individual figure at odds with all attempts to reduce her to a movement. Nevertheless, her voice does not speak alone but resonates and reverberates through the memories of fans, through the affective communities of listening, lip-syncing and screaming along that digital media create, and through the new alliances that form when these communities and platforms intersect. She ignites what Sterne calls the ‘sonic imagination’ of her audience, an imagination that is ‘necessarily plural, recursive, reflexive, driven to represent, refigure and redescribe’ (5). Neither accepting patriarchal narratives of the past nor simply repudiating it, continuing to profit from past struggles but refusing to be defined by them, her scream echoes through time and place, creating new spaces for feminist engagement beyond the deadening terms allowed under heteropatriachal capitalism. At a time when new forms of digital misogyny are shaping ‘new techniques of controlling and disciplining women’ (Ging and Sapiera 2018: 516), we need such voices more than ever.

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