

## **Smells Like Teen Spirit : Riot Grrls, Revolution and Women in Independent Rock**

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In the meteoric rise of quintessential Seattle grunge band Nirvana from indie obscurity to corporate rock fame, a rumor emerged among rock circles nationwide: that the cryptic title of their megahit "Smells Like Teen Spirit" was the invention not of Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain, but of his neighbor Kathleen Hanna, who jokingly scrawled it on the wall of Cobain's house prior to his ascension to rock stardom.<sup>1</sup> From this one gesture and its retelling ensue multiple ironies, dizzying in their cumulative effect. First, the anecdote hints at the creative invisibility of a woman behind what was to become a ubiquitous, industry-changing, Top 10 hit for a male rock group. The story additionally implies the male appropriation of Hanna's own ironic reference to a brand name deodorant marketed to teenage girls (Teen Spirit). While the pointedness of Hanna's reference gets lost in Nirvana's translation, she uses a brand name which itself conjures notions of female teenage identity, group activity and group solidarity: in short, in an ambiguous use of "teen" which actually refers specifically to female teens, "Teen Spirit" creates a marketable fantasy of female youth culture. Moreover, in contrast to her previous invisibility, Hanna now suddenly occupies a position of mass visibility as lead member of Bikini Kill, a band which has gained particular prominence, both within the independent music scene and in the corporate rock press, for its role in fostering the Riot Grrrl "movement" of young feminist women in underground rock. Given these origins, Hanna's slogan consolidates several themes that we propose to explore in this essay: namely, girl-specificity within commodity culture and youth subculture; the historical invisibility of women in rock; the newfound prominence of women bands; the relation between performance, gender and sexuality: and the possible links between women's musical production, feminist politics and feminist aesthetics.

We will examine these themes in the context of the recent explosion onto the independent or underground rock scene of all-women bands or individual women artists making loud, confrontational music in the ongoing tradition of punk rock.<sup>2</sup> The appearance of these bands and their widespread recognition in both the mainstream and alternative presses would seem to signal a heady change, one which situates the broadened access of girls and women to the transgressive potentialities of rock, and especially punk, subculture within the larger narrative of gains made by women in the wake of feminism. At best, this change promises to expand the possibilities for women's public self-expression, individual or collective gender identifications, and transgressive behaviors—at least within the bounds of white, middle-class culture in which this scene is primarily staged.<sup>3</sup> The recent visibility of women in rock not only signals greater access for women to male-dominated realm's of expression, but also specifically frames these expressions in terms of femininity and feminism. In part, our inquiry will examine the historical interaction of women in rock, to see both how this cultural mode has framed gender, and how gender has been enunciated within this cultural mode. One of our central concerns involves the reassessment of standard accounts of the subversive powers of subcultures: specifically, if rock and (especially) punk subcultures provide a language of rebellion, a vehicle, as Dick Hebdige writes, for "deformity, transformation, and Refusal,"<sup>4</sup> then women's

appropriations of these already subversive cultural modes are potentially both promising and problematic.

The women rockers in question emerge from the independent music scene, a lasting outgrowth of the punk movement which has spawned numerous small, independent, record companies. As for terminology, "independent" refers to status of the record companies, "underground" to the movement at large; these terms replace outmoded descriptions like "punk" or "hardcore," which now refer more specifically to moments or genres within underground music. Independent record companies such as those that turn out the music by women rockers—labels that include Harriet in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Kill Rock Stars in Olympia, Washington—are "independent" from huge, major-label corporations such as Warner, Sony, or Geffen. Independent labels are often tiny (run from someone's kitchen), have limited funds and minimal distribution (primarily through mail order), and have to choose the least expensive recording technologies and media—most often the 7-inch vinyl single or, more recently, cassette. Majors plunder indies for talent and trends and are therefore viewed with skepticism and, frequently, loathing among the rock underground. Most recently, last year's phenomenal success of Nirvana after the band signed to Geffen has impelled majors to seek out more punk-influenced "belligerent hard rock."<sup>5</sup> Despite (or perhaps because of) the prestige and economic payoff of deals with the majors, the independent rock scene tends to cast aspersions upon bands that are perceived as "selling out" to gain broad popular visibility and commercial viability. Such major-label recognition can be construed as particularly threatening to the musical, stylistic and political integrity of women performers, who are simultaneously pressured to tone down their music (through "softer sounds," less guitar feedback, and more elaborate, even cosmetic production) and to dress up their image (through new hairstyles, makeup and clothing).

Perhaps ironically, then, the women-in-rock phenomenon is also marked by the movement of key, all-women, hardcore bands into "mainstream" mass market venues (such as MTV and Top 40 or "modem rock" commercial radio) through deals with the major labels. In the cases of the bands Hole, Babes in Toyland and L7 (the last of which had a single, "Pretend We're Dead," in rotation on Top 40 radio stations during fall 1992), majorlabel contracts carry with them certain undeniable perks—like an audience of more than a few thousand people and enough money to concentrate exclusively on the production of new music. The boundaries between what constitutes "alternative" culture and what constitutes the "mainstream" are decidedly blurry in this discussion, in part because these terms are constantly being renegotiated. Both underground and mainstream cultures are continually reinventing themselves and even commenting upon one another—the mainstream through its imitations and appropriations of underground or street sounds and styles, the underground through its constant discourse of besiegement. Hebdige describes the mainstream recuperation of subculture as a commodity as a process by which the ideological challenge of subculture is "handled and contained."<sup>6</sup> Yet a hopeful reading might claim that the entrance of women bands, especially the so-called "angry" ones, into the mainstream resonates slightly differently from the standard narrative of evisceration which accompanies the movement of a band like Nirvana onto the Top 10, or the marketing of grunge at the mall. Despite real fears about the erosion of

their integrity, or their reduction to a short-lived, gender-based fad, the signing of the three most recognizable "angry women bands" to major labels may signal mainstream commercial acceptance of a new role for women in rock and, most optimistically, the beginnings of a new role for women.

Our optimism is tempered, however, by two crucial observations: first, despite the advances of particular female performers, the ongoing tradition of rock is still deeply masculinist; and second, because of patriarchal restrictions, the youth cultures of girls historically have been defined by very different parameters from those of boys. As a result of this second circumstance, girls may have different access to the expression of, or different ways of expressing, nascent teenage sexuality and rebellion against parental (that is, patriarchal) control, two themes that predominate not only in rock music, but in the formation of Western teenage identity in general. The conjunction of these two terms intimates that the forms of resistance offered by rock culture are closely linked with the music's frank expressions of sexuality.

This means that rock 'n' roll is a potentially, though by no means an inherently, feminist form: indeed, among male punk and hardcore performers, there is a long tradition of this rebellion being acted out at the expense and over the bodies of women. The latest generation of women performers emerge from punk via American hardcore, the loudest, angriest, most violent (at least in imagery), and most disaffected music to date. Although hardcore is not monolithic, for our narrative, hardcore in its aggressively masculinist, mid-1980s incarnation stymies any easy historical progression from early women punk rockers to contemporary riot grrrls.<sup>7</sup> In her fanzine *Satan Wears a Bra*, Debby Wolfensohn demonstrates how all-male hardcore bands have often resorted to blatant misogyny. Among her examples, she cites the lyrics of a song by the band Fear: "I just wanna fuck so ... piss on your warm embrace/ I just wanna come in your face/ I don't care if you're dead."<sup>8</sup> Hardcore has the potential to be not only antiromantic, but, as in this example, also downright ugly and violent, replacing conventional heterosexual rock 'n' roll romance with rape and murder. Insofar as hardcore reflects the desire of middle-class, white boys to shock their parents or other authority figures, its fascination for the repulsive and violent is sometimes less a kind of advocacy and more a kind of irony. However, this does not negate the significance of the fact that such desire is often, and not incidentally, articulated in terms of a desire to hurt or to degrade women.

Despite the fact that punk and hardcore have provided a forum for such misogyny, rock's, and especially 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. Riot grrrl subculture, in particular, extends beyond the production and consumption of live or recorded music or the pleasures associated with the expression of subcultural styles, reaching into the realms of political strategizing and continually re-rehearsed self-definition through fanzine publication. Though the two are sometimes confused as synonymous, riot grrrls are instead a particular, self-conscious subset of the more generalized "women in rock" phenomenon. In other words, though riot grrrls are among the most recent additions to the ranks of female rockers, not all women in rock identify themselves as riot grrrls. By organizing around a certain musical style,

riot grrrls seek to forge networks and 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. Riot Grrrl—the name refers to the movement-at-large has forged salient connections between musical subculture and explicitly feminist politics; these qualities in turn transform or revise previous paradigms of rock production and consumption.

In the past year rock journalism has had a significant role in molding and disseminating the belief that all-women bands and particular women artists represent a new and noteworthy presence in the rock music scene.<sup>9</sup> Depending on where you look, recent inventories have either confirmed the new emergence of women in rock as a real trend, or described the phenomenon as a journalistic construct—mere media hype, conceivably linked to the marketing interests of the music industry. In one of the first pieces to address the female rocker phenomenon as such, a February 1992 *New York Times* article by Simon Reynolds identified a new movement of women hard rockers, specifying two of the most visible all-women bands, Hole and Babes in Toyland, as well as Inger Lomas, the lead singer of the Nymphs, as notable for their unprecedented (and, to his mind, refreshingly "unfeminine") expressions of rage.<sup>10</sup> Yet this account, like others that followed, partly worked to diminish the new phenomenon by attaching to it such global and inadequate monikers as "angry women."<sup>11</sup> In the same vein, Thurston Moore, guitarist and lead singer in the band Sonic Youth and one of the most influential men in the independent music scene, coined the pejorative term "foxcore" to describe the same phenomenon, implying that this brand of women's hardcore—the roughest, most abrasive end of the underground music spectrum—hinged on some version of female erotic performance. In short, although these journalistic treatments may have reflected, or continue to reflect, an important reality, they serve an ambivalent function in both defining a new trend and limiting it, and in diminishing the diversity of women's performance and musical styles under a single label. While such designations serve a descriptive function, they do so at the risk of essentializing women's punk or hardcore musical production, and hence of reifying and marginalizing it as "women's music." In particular, the epithet "angry girl bands" foregrounds the fact that in the history of rock 'n' roll, as well as in the dominant culture, anger has largely been understood as an all-male terrain. It is not surprising, therefore, to find popular journalistic accounts of the women rocker phenomenon groping for a vocabulary to describe the confrontational and rage-filled musical and performance styles of women without the descriptive modifier angry.

Part of the naming dilemma emerges from the women performers themselves, who resist journalistic attempts to lump them together as an "interesting" new phenomenon. Particular bands—Hole, L7 and Scrawl included—have attempted publicly to distance themselves from the "angry women" label under the pretense (or, as is often the case, by taking the last available line of defense) that gender does not and should not figure in matters of artistic production or appreciation. For these women, such journalistic categorizations carry with them unwelcome baggage of the trivializing model of the Phil Spector type "girl groups," for one and the danger that once identified and labeled, their music will become faddish, or worse, ultimately clichéd or *Passé*.<sup>12</sup> In an interview in the

riot grrrl fanzine *Girl Germs*, produced by Molly and Allison of the band *Bratmobile*, the members of *7-Year Bitch* voice their frustration with gender-labels while also acknowledging their inevitability, and even their necessity. "We're helping open [male audience members'] minds," says lead singer Selene. "Like, 'Oh wow, you're women and you can play!' But it's like, No shit!" Adds drummer Valerie, "Just think about how many all-boy bands we sat through!"<sup>13</sup> In *7-Year Bitch*'s counternarrative to most journalistic descriptions, gender labels are a frustrating, limiting obstacle to respect and acceptance.

Punk spawned a tradition of male bands semi-ironically naming themselves after exaggerated phallic symbols (*Sex Pistols*, *Revolting Cocks*, *Dickies*, *Meat Puppets*, *Prong*, *Fishbone*), as well as bands that identified themselves with distanced and objectified references to women, women's genitals or women's sexuality (*Mudhoney*), from which they derive a certain self-conscious masculinity. Conversely, many of the new women's bands name themselves in response to a ubiquitous and negative vocabulary for the female body, calling themselves *Hole*, *Burning Bush*, *Thrush*, *Queen Meanie Puss*, *Snatch*, *Pop Smear*, *Ovarian Trolley* and *Dickless*. Women bands have also employed names to communicate a succinct critique of masculinity, as in the names *Pork*, *Thrust*, *Spitboy* and *Weenie Roast*. In one particularly interesting example, a band that used to call itself *PMS* later adopted the name *Cockpit*, combining references to both sexes. Self-naming here becomes a tactic not only of reclaiming and recirculating masculinist terms (and thereby depleting their potency), but also of outing or enabling women's uses of vocabularies otherwise forbidden to "good" girls, who are never supposed to swear or speak to loudly in public, let alone refer explicitly to their genitals and what they do with them.

These bands find a precedent for their parodic self-naming in the example of the *Slits*, one of the greatest and earliest all-female punk bands of the late seventies. This brings us to another aspect of the "women in rock" phenomenon: despite its apparent novelty, its roots date back approximately fifteen years, with the emergence of women out of the 1970s punk movements in Britain and America. Women could participate in punk in part because the lack of musical experience or even prejudicial beliefs about female musical incompetence-were relatively unimportant in punk, which rejected technical virtuosity and professionalism in favor of amateurishness, iconoclasm and a do-it-yourself aesthetic. This relatively high degree of active female participation in the early days of punk-not merely in roles that coded women as the pretty fronts for a producer's corporate musical venture has prompted some critics to argue that the seemingly "new" entrance of women into rock culture, not unlike the Year of the Woman, had been seen before, and without lasting impact. According to this reading, the recent phenomenon seems to mirror an extended moment in the punk and postpunk era when brash women artists like *Debbie Harry*, *Poly Styrene* (of *X-Ray Spex*), *Chrissie Hynde*, *Siouxsie Sioux*, *Exene Cervenka*, *Laurie Anderson*, *Grace Jones*, *Lydia Lunch*, *Nina Hagen*, the *Slits*, the *Raincoats*, and the *Go-Go's*, among others, also seemed to herald a fundamental change in the roles available to women as performers.

As opposed to the above reading, which confines the entrance of women into rock culture to distinct and dramatic moments, and hence raises the suspicion that these moments are



journalistic inventions, another narrative posits incremental, progressive change. For example, more and more women musicians-such as Georgia Hubley of Yo La Tengo or Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth-play in integrated (that is, mixed-gender) bands; functioning primarily as instrumentalists rather than lead singers, these women occupy a different role from the one that was previously available for women in rock bands, and thereby alter what Jean Smith of Mecca Normal (a one-man, one-woman band) calls "the standardized four guys in a band" formula of "what punk bands are supposed to be."<sup>14</sup> This standard formula underscores two major contradictions in this musical history. First, though punk was more open to the participation of women, its subsequent incarnations reified both the all-male band structure and the use of punk musical style as a vehicle for the expression of a generalized male anger and rebellion. Second, though women bands were formed throughout the eighties, especially on the West Coast, they nevertheless received little recognition in the music press; as a result, the recent media hype bell: the fact that some of these women bands have been around for more than a decade. Despite these qualifications, however, we seem nonetheless to have arrived at a new moment in this history, in which a number of factors coalesce, including the sheer number of women bands, the introduction of self-conscious feminism into rock discourse and activity (both in the promotion of outspoken girl culture on the part of the riot Grrls, and the political organizing of Rock for Choice and the Bohemian Women's Political Alliance<sup>15</sup>), and the (in part media-driven) increased visibility of women rockers in defiant and often outrageous performance and musical styles, which both defy and recast conventionally "feminine" erotic performance.

Before moving on to a specific consideration of the riot grrrl phenomenon, we want to explore the problematics of women in subculture, and specifically women in rock. To do so, we draw on two figures in British cultural studies: Simon Frith, who has written key texts on youth, music and politics; and Angela McRobbie, who has worked on the culture of girls, and who has attempted a feminist rereading of male-authored theories of subculture. The study of the gendering of subculture helps in part to explain why girls historically have not participated as actively as boys in rock culture-both because of the patriarchal restrictions on girls, and because their pleasure and identity-formation, in response, tend to take a different form from those of boys. Social restrictions on girls, their limited access to the street and their greater domestic role make the public spaces in which subcultures are acted out (clubs, the street, bars) prohibitive and exclusive for them. The street often poses a threat to girls and women, insofar as they are liable to male heckling, harrassment or assault. Though women historically have participated in street culture as prostitutes, such access is nevertheless regulated by patriarchal ideologies that designate women sex-industry workers " unfit" to occupy domestic roles. Therefore, while male youth culture is public, oriented around the street, girls' culture often takes forms that can be experienced within the home, such as dressing up, or engaging in the creative consumption of mainstream pop idols, including fan-oriented visual materials such as magazines, photographs and, most recently, videos.

The conclusions of Frith and McRobbie suggest that rock 'n' roll subculture is not the place to look for female participation, especially in terms of rock's production, and at first glance rock history seems to bear this out. In the past, when women have participated in

rock culture, they have tended to do so as consumers and fans—their public roles limited to groupie, girlfriend or backup singer, their primary function to bolster male performance. When women performed, Frith writes, it was "almost always as singers, fronting a performance or record, their musical abilities confused with their visual images and style." Frith accounts for the exclusion of women from rock production as part of an ideology of rock growing out of bohemian culture. Rock was a place for male friendship in a resistive, unregulated life-style, where women represented unwelcome demands for "routine living," for the provision of money for food and rent.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, rock culture, like other forms of oppositional culture that McRobbie describes, developed signifying systems that privileged masculinity, systems in which "[t]he meanings that have sedimented around other objects, like motorbikes or electronic musical equipment, have made them equally unavailable to women and girls."<sup>17</sup>

One of the most puzzling aspects of this whole history is the extent to which hardcore until recently seemed to have negated gains women made in the punk moment. The difficulties faced by girls wanting to participate in this scene are played out not only in terms of band composition and lyrical content, but also in live performances, where girls are often crowded out of the pit<sup>18</sup>—in other words, literally marginalized—by the aggressive jostling of the boys. Cathartic exercises in semilegitimized violence or visceral abandon in collective movement, slamdancing and stage-diving clearly have different implications for boys and for girls. While they might willingly take part in a crowd of human projectiles, girls operate at a disadvantage because of their generally smaller size and weight; moreover, for girls, the violence in the pit can quickly shade into violation. Or, as one writer put it, "Most of the girls didn't want to dance in the pit—it hurts your boobs."<sup>19</sup> In short, the performance setting is potentially experienced by women as an uncongenial or unsafe place. As one incensed male hardcore fan recently wrote to Rolling Stone magazine,

As a direct result of her femaleness, [Rolling Stone staff writer] Kim Neely cannot possibly comprehend what moshing (skanking, slamming, et cetera) is all about. Moshing is not a feminine activity but a chance for a man to reach into himself, grab all of the anger and hatred that has built up and bash everybody around over the head with it. Women have their own ways of dealing with stress.  
[20](#)

Given the parameters of the mostly antagonistic field in which women bands struggle for recognition and definition, the problem of female participation generates a series of questions: What does it mean for women to participate in rock? What specifically does it mean for this generation of women, at this point in the evolution of underground music (how are they different from their predecessors)? To what extent is music that is loud, hard, and fast ultimately a masculine kind of expression? Conversely, what place do women have in this kind of expression, except as one of the boys? What is the value of this kind of expression for women? How do women change the nature of this kind of expression, and how does this kind of expression change the nature of women? If the symbolic meaning of the lead guitar, signifying male power and virtuosity, the legitimate

expression of phallic sexuality, perversity (Jim! Hendrix) and violence (Pete Townshend), is tirelessly resurrected by generations of male rock performers, then something potentially radical happens when women appropriate this instrument, with all its ingrained connotations. What has changed to give women access to the pleasures of hard, fast, rock music?

The changes in rock, which has always been associated with sexuality, parallel changes in societal attitudes towards sexuality and romance. Frith writes that:

Rock [in the sixties] was experienced as a new sort of sexual articulation by women as well as men.... At a time when girls were still being encouraged from all directions to interpret their sexuality in terms of romance ... rock performers like the Rolling Stones were exhilarating because of their anti-romanticism, their concern for "the dark side of passion, " their interest in sex as power and feeling.<sup>21</sup>

When the traditional association of love and romance with popular music (as well as the association of sex with pleasure) came apart in punk, women's voices began to emerge, "shrill, assertive, impure, individual voices, singer as subject not object."<sup>22</sup> As punk performers, participating in a new way, these women "brought with them new questions about sound and convention and image, about the sexuality of performance and the performance of sexuality. . . . [P]unks opened the possibility that rock could be against sexism."<sup>23</sup> What precisely are women punk rockers saying about the sexuality of performance and the performance of sexuality?

In order to answer this question, we need to look back to the what male rock performers have done—in other words, what male rock performance means. Women punk rockers emerged out of a decade of male rock experiments with gender, such as those of Gary Glitter or David Bowie. That is, the trajectory of (male) rock up through the late seventies was marked by increasing androgyny and gender ambiguity. The male gender bending of seventies glam-rock forms an important node in this history: breaking with the heterosexual romance paradigm of Elvis or the early Beatles, the glam-rocker elevated the erotics of performance to a high narcissism, alternately playing alien, outcast, deviant, prophet, high priest and messiah. This moment celebrated sexual deviance and connected it to the rock I 'n' roll values of teenage rebellion and transcendent experience. Moreover, British punk had its immediate origins in the gender and sexual experimentation of the New York scene, notably in the sexually decadent Velvet Underground (originally invented as a concept band by Andy Warhol), the cross-dressing camp of the New York Dolls, and the deadpan androgyny of Patti Smith. The origins of women in punk at such a crucial moment points at a key set of tensions: as McRobbie argues, these overwhelmingly male experiments with gender and femininity may have opened a space for the greater acceptance of women in the rock scene, yet in general, "sexual ambiguity" in male subcultures does not automatically translate into greater freedom for women with regard to gender and sexuality.<sup>24</sup> One reason for this might be precisely because male experiments with gender, however liberating or transgressive, are still uncomfortably fraught, constantly requiring reference to a stable femininity. In other words, the



transparency of the concept of woman, the persistence of essential womanness, has facilitated male freedom to experiment, even with the terms of gender itself.

Glam-rock produced some freakish results in the form of heavy metal cockrock, which attempted to recoup this performance tradition for masculinity. In this genre, glam's camp and sexual ambiguity became cockrock's baroque staging of a peculiar form of longhaired, becostumed hypermasculinity—a phenomenon easily parodied, for instance, in the documentary spoof film *This is Spinal Tap*. The progression from glam-rock into cockrock (the masculinity of which is actually ambiguous and conflicted) suggests that within rock performance, there is a struggle with femininity that may stem from the feminine gendering of the performance position itself.<sup>25</sup> Two touchstones of white, male, rock performance, Elvis Presley and Mick Jagger, both created excitement in their performances by making sexuality explicit, in hip and lip movements which were uncomfortably unmasculine.<sup>26</sup> If early rock 'n' roll performers acquired their primary mass appeal as the objects of female heterosexual desire (for example, Beatlemania), the translation of rock performance into a predominantly male system relies on the performer's delicate posturings as both erotic and identificatory object. To the extent that the rock audience was male, the male performer generated anxiety around the erotics of the gaze. Rock masculinity is therefore not a transparent reflection of a patriarchal society and macho culture, but is itself fraught: the exaggerated masculinity of rock performance at crucial moments may attempt to recoup the gender discomfort that accompanies the open display of sexuality, and the assumption of the to-be-looked-at position, by men among men. Following this argument, the marginal, subservient and eroticized positions which women in rock long occupied served to deflect an implicitly homoerotic gaze.

This phenomenon has complex consequences for women rockers as performers: for one, women rockers have less freedom to experiment with transgressive performances of gender precisely because the stable femininity of women forms an important part of the dynamic. Conversely, Simon Frith defines the dilemma of women in rock in terms of its restriction on specifically feminine possibilities. With regard to women's attraction to rock via the antiromanticism of groups like the Rolling Stones, he writes:

But the problem [was] not whether rock stars were sexist, but whether women could enter their discourse, appropriate their music, without having to become "one of the boys" (239).

Elsewhere he repeats the point:

Women musicians obviously have made it—there are a number of female rock stars—but most of them have done it by working within a man-made notion of how women should sound, by becoming "one of the boys" (86).

Although exactly whom or what Frith means by female rock stars who have become "one of the boys" is unclear, this formulation poses an essential question—what does/can rock mean for women?—while at the same time foreclosing its answer. It achieves this foreclosure by implying that women rock performers are limited to either of two,

diametrically opposed and equally unattractive options: the to-be-looked-at sex object, or the woman with balls. It reifies the roles available to women, closes off the resistive possibilities of rock for women, and ultimately begs the question of rock's masculine hegemony.

Frith's dilemma, however, alludes to underlying questions about the difficulties women contend with in the rock performance position, and the various resonances of occupying that position as a woman. Women performers go through complicated contortions as they both appropriate and repudiate a traditionally masculine rock performance position which is itself premised on the repression of femininity, while they simultaneously contend with a feminine performance position defined primarily as the erotic object-to-be-looked-at. These complexities are also played out historically. Although male experiments with gender did not translate into an equal flexibility for women, glam and disco helped to erode the necessary association of popular music with romance and heterosexuality, thereby preparing the way for female performance in punk rock. Introducing explicit homoerotics onto the rock stage, male glam-rockers—like their female punk successors—revealed the performativity of gender. Ironically, the same years which saw women emerge as punk artists also witnessed the establishment of a new cultural form—MTV. The advent of music video provided a space for women rockers based on traditional aspects of female musical performance—the visual and emotive connotations of the female vocalist.<sup>27</sup> A generation whose teenybop idols included for the first time women who displayed not only sexuality but also some degree of independence and sexual power, Riot Grrrl emerged from punk via Madonna.<sup>28</sup>

If MTV provided multiple images of women rockers, including Madonna's street smarts and her easy assumption and rejection of various feminine roles, punk's staging of defiance and impropriety allowed female punk performers to negotiate the paradox of femininity on the rock stage by enacting transgressive forms of femininity, for instance, in frighteningly unconventional hair, clothing styles and stage activities.<sup>29</sup> Punk featured an extreme degree of bodily incontinence—beginning with the Sex Pistols' famous episode of spitting and vomiting at Heathrow Airport<sup>30</sup>—although in general, blasphemous punk antics among boys met with greater public tolerance than those among girls. Out of the whole range of possible transgressive behaviors, spitting seems to rate particular attention with regard to gender expectations. McRobbie writes that, "if the Sex Pistols had been an all-female band spitting and swearing their way into the limelight, the response would have been more heated, the condemnation less tempered by indulgence." She adds that though girls are more visible in punk subculture than other subcultures, "I have yet to come across the sight of a girl 'gobbing'."<sup>31</sup> Similarly Gillian Gaar quotes the *Evening Standard* on Patti Smith: "She is the only girl singer I have ever seen spit onstage."<sup>32</sup> Yet transgressive bodily activity does provide a particular opportunity for women. In one of the most outrageous examples of the feminist appropriation and adaptation of male punk stage antics, one member of the band L7, in response to heckling from a male audience member at a concert in Boston in fall 1992, reportedly pulled down her pants, pulled out her tampon, and threw it at him. Aside from raising the question of what happens when women exercise their power in the form of an aggressive and confrontational expression

of their sexuality, this act—a reverse rape?—takes the notion of a woman's being "on the rag" and literally hurls it back at patriarchy.

It's also interesting to place this instance of rock performance in the context of the collaboratively written liner notes from a 7-inch single released by the Los Angeles hardcore band named, appropriately, Spitboy. One of the band's members writes that "rape is inevitable in a society, as in western culture, where people are constantly taught and encouraged to be aggressive and dominant." Here the band's antirape, antiviolence discourse results in a peculiar irony—that of disavowing aggression within a musical form that celebrates it, yet has long denied its possibilities and pleasures to women. Poly Styrene, the lead singer of the punk band X-Ray Spex, puts it another way in the opening lines of the group's most memorable punk anthem: "Some people say little girls should be seen and not heard. But I say ... OH BONDAGE UP YOURS!" Such a speech-act conjoins the rebellious youthful anger of punk with the articulation of an expressly outlaw sexuality.

In one response to the complexities and contradictions of their performance positions, women rockers, from Yoko Ono and Tina Turner and continuing up to Bikini Kill, have resorted to the strategic use of the scream, a radically polysemous nonverbal articulation which can simultaneously and ambiguously evoke rage, terror, pleasure and/or primal selfassertion.<sup>33</sup> Screams work as linguistic signs having no particular referent outside of the context in which they are uttered; the scream can be read as a kind of jouissance, a female body language that evades the necessity to signify within male-defined conventions and meanings. But far from being a fluid signifier, screams are also emotional ejaculations bearing specific associations with highly charged events—like rape, orgasm or childbirth. Often associated with femininity at its most vulnerable, the scream in its punk context can effect a shocking juxtaposition of sex and rage, including the cultural terrors of the open expressions of female sexuality, or feminist rage at the sexual uses and abuses of women. If female screams are often associated with women's sexual violation and rape, then these examples seem to voice a collective outrage at such abuse. An attention-getting device, the scream publicizes private or internal experience. These girl screams, moreover, voice not only rage, but rage as pleasure, the scream as orgasm. Taken together, they seem to be suggesting something new—not just that women are angry, but that there's pleasure in their performances of anger, or even just pleasure in performance; the scream thereby replaces the pleasant, melodious and ultimately tame emotionalism traditionally associated with the female vocalist. Conversely, these screams can communicate a profound ambiguousness about consent and coercion, a fine line between orgasm and rape, as when Kat Bjelland of Babes in Toyland chillingly apposes the chanted phrases "I'd love to/ I had to" and punctuates them by a piercing "Good God!" in the song "Blood." A form of expression both denied to women in public (screaming is unladylike) and devalued in private (women are so emotional), punk screams are a wordless protest against the overdetermined femininity that these female performers—performing as women—must occupy; the scream musters the energy of the whole body to burst these constrictions. Unruly and unexpected, these screams deploy punk values to violate the demand that women remain patient, uncomplaining and quiet.

Girl's night will always be precious to me because, believe it or not, it was the first time I saw women stand on a stage as though they truly belonged there. The first time I had ever heard the voice of a sister proudly singing the rage so shamefully locked in my own heart. Until girl's night, I never knew that punk rock was anything but a phallic extension of the white middle class male's frustrations.

Rebecca Basye, writing in the fanzine *Girl Germs*, on Girls' Night at the International Pop Underground Convention in Olympia, Washington, August 20, 1991.

Even before mainstream journalism "discovered" a recognizable, critical mass of women rock and punk bands, riot grrrls were emerging out of Olympia, Washington and Washington, DC, two cities with thriving underground punk/hardcore scenes and associated independent record labels ("K" in Olympia and Dischord in DC, for example). The history that follows is pieced together from accounts from the alternative presses, including "girlcore" zines. While there are multiple, even competing, accounts of the "origin" of Riot Grrrl, most riot grrrls themselves agree that the concept was spearheaded by women in and around the punk scene in Olympia. Out of this group of women emerged two bands, Bratmobile and Bikini Kill, the second of which published a two-page manifesto in 1990 preaching their own brand of feminist revolution—what they call "Revolution Girl-Style Now."<sup>34</sup> Under the banner of "envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things," the manifesto urged girls to "resist psychic death," "cry in public," join bands, teach each other how to play instruments and produce fanzines, and generally fight back.<sup>35</sup> The Riot Grrrl "revolution" further took root in the summer of 1991 at the week-long International Pop Underground Convention in Olympia, a festival of more than fifty bands put together by K records. A group of all-women bands and women artists—some of whom had never before played in public—made their own Punk Rock Dream Come True (in the words of one band) when they performed together on Girls' Night, organized by Molly Newman and Allison Wolfe of Bratmobile.<sup>36</sup> Now, nearly two years later, a small riot grrrl "network" has sprung up in places like New York, Chicago, Philadelphia and Richmond, Virginia, where high school and college-age girls meet regularly to plan riot grrrl festivals, share ideas, and support each other's efforts to make music. In the words of Sara, a member of Riot Grrrl New York, the girl-style revolution is "one that promotes women's intelligence, creativity and achievement ... what makes Riot Grrrl special is that it is for women in the punk scene." Adds another member of Riot Grrrl NYC, "We support and encourage Grrrls to publish zines, create and show their artwork, start bands in a supportive and non-judgemental atmosphere, and do anything they want to do."<sup>37</sup> Driven by such an aggressive and insistent optimism, riot grrrls attempt to use female community as a way of combatting the forms of discrimination and abuse that limit women's power.

From its inception, Riot Grrrl emerges as a bona fide subculture, one which (to use McRobbie's terms) consolidates "a sense of oppositional sociality, an unambiguous pleasure in style, a disruptive public identity and a set of collective fantasies."<sup>38</sup> Riot grrrls not only have reconfigured punk's energy and rebelliousness in specifically female

and feminist terms, but have also drawn upon punk's D.I.Y. tradition to blur the boundaries between musical production and consumption. If, according to Frith and McRobbie's models, girls have traditionally participated in rock as consumers (either active or passive), then riot Grrls pose a challenge to these models, insofar as they potentially allow all women—even the ones not up on stage playing guitar or drums—to assume the (masculine) role of subcultural producer. Moreover, by granting each other legitimacy as performers, regardless of musical experience, riot grrrls extend punk's early promise for women, which, though it provided precursors, did not eliminate girls' underconfidence in taking up punk performance. Here the idea of the female role model becomes central, not merely symbolic to the fostering of a female rock tradition; indeed, girls often form bands explicitly based upon the examples of other performers, or testify to the ways in which the experience of seeing women occupy otherwise "phallic" positions (such as lead guitarist) can indeed be transformative. Writes one contributor to *Girlymag*, a new zine out of Audubon, New Jersey:

when i was seriously listening to hardcore, back whenever, there were no hc girl bands, at least none that i ever remember hearing on the radio. i remember thinking that girls couldnt do hardcore, because it wouldnt sound good-girls couldnt shout right, or something idiotic like that. i'm so glad that all these girlcore bands are proving me so wrong. Groups like Lunachicks and Bikini Kill really push the bare essential to the limits, and their anger is palpable, it blows away my memories of the most extreme 80's Hardcore boy bands. Listening to these bands and others ... makes me feel like i can stomp every yucky thing i hate right into the tread of my boots like i can shout right after all.<sup>39</sup>

While riot grrrls share a punk aesthetic (minimalism, amateurism and rawness), the bands nevertheless vary widely in musical style; Bikini Kill, for example, makes music that is loud, fast and in-your-face. Heavens to Betsy, another riot grrrl band, put out a self-titled cassette last year with highly personal songs such as "My Red Self" (about menstruation) and "My Secret" (about incest) that are lyrical, sparse and sometimes loud, though without a lot of feedback. Kreviss, a band that performed at Girl's Night in Olympia, has an aggressive, overwhelming sound—the result of eight girls playing guitar. As influences, lead Bikini Kill singer Kathleen Hanna cites feminist writer Kathy Acker and performance artist Karen Finley, as well as the much-maligned (though highly influential) Yoko Ono. The recuperation of Ono is particularly important, since it exemplifies Riot Grrrl's attempts to define the rudiments of a female rock tradition (or to voice the ways in which women have been excluded or written out of rock culture) for their own musical projects. One issue of the Bikini Kill 'zine argues that "part of the revolution (GIRL STYLE NOW) is about rescuing our true heroines from obscurity, or in Yoko's case, from disgrace. . . . What your boyfriend teaches you is that Yoko Ono broke up the Beatles.... But besides being the victim of the girlfriend-is-distracting thing, Yoko was so fucking ahead of her time ... in a lot of ways she is the first punk rock girl singer ever."<sup>40</sup> The writers of *Girlymag* perform a similar archeology of women in rock when they review a 1971 self-titled album by the all-female rock band Fanny: "I stole all my Mom's crackly LPs by these chicks. They are like Aerosmith's sistahs and they really



kick. Maybe they hold a bit of nostalgic significance to me, being that I heard them throughout my twisted childhood."<sup>41</sup>

While music is central to riot Grrrl subculture, it is also not exclusively responsible for defining its contours. In particular, the small "girlcore" fanzine network that has sprung up around Riot Grrrl allows women to participate actively in the ongoing perpetuation and (re)definition of the subculture. Most obviously, the 'zines foster girls' public self-expression, often understood as the ability to tell private stories (secrets) which are otherwise prohibited or repressed by the dominant culture. These include girls' descriptions of their experiences of coming out as lesbian (especially in the "queercore" 'zines, which as early as the mid-eighties took to protesting hardcore's heterosexism and homophobia); the disclosure of their traumas as rape or incest survivors, or as women struggling with eating disorders; and their gushy affirmations of girl-love and devotion to punk music. Thus publicized, such narratives often become the stuff of political commitment and an affirmation of girls' legitimacy within the realm of the political. "Music is a gigantic, humongus [sic] part of my life, playing and listening and seeing and feeling," writes Chainsaw. "I love girls, I love the power and beauty of women who are out to change the world. Being queer is yet another important part of me."<sup>42</sup> Zines additionally serve a journalistic function, offering reviews of record releases and concerts, news about and interviews with favorite bands, addresses of other 'zines, information about riot grrrl organizations, recommendations for the best places to go "thrifting," responses to riot grrrl articles that appear in other print media, opinion about the politics of abortion, and individual laments about the disadvantages of growing up in a small town, where no one (certainly not the prom queen) has a tattoo. This last example demonstrates how zines help to construct both female community and subcultural identity. Named Sister Nobody, Girl Germs, Bitch Nation, and Quit Whining, zines provide a forum, outside (though not detached from) the music, in which the members of riot grrrl subculture can engage in their own self-naming, selfdefinition and self-critique—can comment, in other words, upon the very shape and representation of the subculture itself.

In their efforts to consolidate community, riot grrrls have had additional help from "mainstream," corporate sources, most notably Sassy, which attracts an enormous (three million by one estimate) readership, from teenyboppers to members of the so-called twentysomething generation. If some music critics have insisted that the riot grrrl "movement" does not "really" exist beyond "a hardcore hundred or so teen and college-age women exchanging letters like just-freed POWs,"<sup>43</sup> Sassy has nevertheless attempted to popularize Riot Grrrl, without ridiculing or demeaning its significance. The magazine has featured band/celebrity interviews, record reviews and a monthly feature of zine addresses (which has lead, for example, to a flood of mail at zines such as Bratmobile's Girl Germs). There are other connections, as well: Tobi Vail of Bikini Kill, for example, has dated Ian Svenonius, a member of the Washington DC-based band Nation of Ulysses who was once named Sassy's "Sassiest Boy in America." In a sign of their involvement in riot grrrl culture, a group of Sassy editors recently formed their own all-woman band called Chia Pet, whose quirky, campy cover of Human League's new wave megahit "Don't You Want Me" appears on the Freedom of Choice compilation, which benefits

organizations such as Planned Parenthood. (They also have released a 7-inch on the Kokopop label called "Hey Baby," which assembles and mocks the wide range of verbal harassment experienced by women in everyday life.) Perhaps because of Sassy's respect and even commitment to riot grrrl ideology, many accounts have viewed the magazine as encouraging the dissemination, rather than the dilution, of riot grrrl subculture. Possibly, the riot Grrrl movement would have been significantly diminished had it not been for its careful coverage in the magazine, which gave a mass audience of teenage girls access to a largely inaccessible phenomenon in the rock underground. This suggests a variation on Dick Hebdige's model of ideological incorporation in that—in this case—the media, beyond its function to control and contain this phenomenon, may also have helped to perpetuate it. Sassy's role in publicizing and perpetuating the riot grrrl phenomenon may arise from a gendered division in the experience of youth culture, with girls' participation gravitating towards the forms, often mass-market visual materials, that lend themselves toward consumption in the home. While it appropriates riot grrrl subculture as a marketing strategy, the magazine also enables riot grrrl culture to infiltrate the domestic spaces to which girls—particularly young teenagers—are typically confined.

Instead of tirelessly insisting on the right to be called "women," as mainstream feminism has long been advocating, riot grrrls foreground girl identity, in its simultaneous audacity and awkwardness—and not just girl, but a defiant "Grrrl" identity that roars back at the dominant culture. Indeed, reclaiming the word "girl" and reinvesting it with new meaning within their own feminist punk vernacular has proved one of the most salient aspects of the riot Grrrl revolution. Such a recuperation of patriarchal language in part reflects the subculture's celebration of preteen girlhood—indeed, precisely those years in girls' lives which Frith and McRobbie deem so crucial in understanding their ongoing relation to and participation within subculture, and the same years on which feminist theorists Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown focus in terms of women's relation to society broadly defined.<sup>44</sup> In their song "Girl Germs," for example, Bratmobile revel in the idea of their toxicity to boys/men; in the age of AIDS, they ironically relate germs to girls' self-protection and their ability to repel unwanted sexual advances. "Germs" here also suggests "germinal," the potential girls have to develop into powerful women; alternatively, it refers to girl-specific culture in its embryonic stages. While parody and wordplay are central to the riot Grrrl redefinition of "girl," there is also, admittedly, a crucial element of fantasy in their self-construction—a nostalgia for the apparently close relationships between girls prior to the intrusion of heterosexual romance and its spin-offs, sexual competition and sexual rivalry. (in Bikini Kill, for one, jealousy is a favorite target of critique.) Bikini Kill's song "Rebel Girl" asserts the importance of such girl solidarity as a response to the sexual commodification, categorization and subsequent or resultant (self)-division of women: "They say she's a slut," they sing, "but I know she is my best friend." Most important in light of our earlier discussion of the journalistic labels that have come to define women in rock, the riot grrrls, in rewriting "girl" as "grrrl," also incorporate anger, defiance and rebellion into their own self-definition, construing female rage as essential and intrinsic to their collective punk identity.

Unlike some other women in the punk and postpunk alternative music scenes, riot grrrls draw upon their experiences of girlhood to emphasize female difference in concert with

female equality. In other words, riot grrrls both assume women's equality and understand that it has not necessarily been efficacious in securing them recognition as "legitimate" rock musicians. By underscoring certain traditional paradigms of girl culture such as the intensity of early female friendships, the centrality of menstruation as a sign of "womanhood," the importance of secrets and secret-telling as forms of rebellion against parental control, even the early sexual play between girlfriends-and making them foundational to their political, social and musical interventions, riot grrrls foster an affirmative mode of public, female self-expression that doesn't exclude, repress or delegitimize girls' experiences or their specific cultural formations. While self-consciously and ironically "putting on" the guises of conventional female sexuality and femininity (that is, by acting alternately or even simultaneously "girlish" and "slutty"), riot grrrls also express rage at violence against women (such as rape, incest, battering, as well as the self-inflicted violence of eating disorders), rage which ultimately challenges dominant vocabularies and ideologies.

The band Bikini Kill is in this regard both representative and exemplary. An essential part of their "Revolution Girl Style" is their attempt to encourage young, predominantly white, middle-class girls to contest capitalist-patriarchal racism and sexism, precisely through acts of individual transgression against the implicit or explicit norms of "ladylike" or "girlish" behavior. The band links these individual challenges to private (that is, domestic, local or familial) patriarchal authority to collective feminist resistance and struggle. McRobbie supports this notion in her suggestion that many middle-class girls' first political experiences involve escape "from the family and its pressures to act like a 'nice' girl" (32-33). Bikini Kill makes this connection between personal transgression and progressive feminist politics explicit in a song such as "Double Dare Ya," in which singer Hanna screams:

You're a big girl now  
you've got no reason  
not to fight  
You've got to know  
what they are  
Fore you can stand up  
for your rights  
Rights rights Rights?  
you have them, you know

Performing against a backdrop that reads "ABORTION ON DEMAND AND WITHOUTAPOLOGY, the band similarly encourages girls (and occasionally hostile male audience members) to speak up for women's reproductive rights and against various forms of sexual violation. In "Suck My Left One," a song about father-daughter incest, Hanna grabs her bared breast and taunts her audience. Ventriloquizing a maternal voice which speaks for patriarchy, she sings, "Show a little respect for your father/ Wait until your father gets home" and then ends the song with a line that consolidates rage, disobedience, sarcasm and (even ambiguously pleasurable) submission: "Fine fine Fine fine Fine fine Fine Fine." Fatherdaughter incest recurs as a theme in riot grrrl songs and

zines not only as a reflection of reality, but also because it carries particular symbolic resonance as the quintessential form of patriarchal violation/exploitation of girls within the domestic sphere. On this symbolic level, incest contracts several key issues: it exemplifies patriarchal control within the home as it is embodied in the father; the sexualization and objectification of girls (a theme taken up by female performers from Madonna to Courtney Love); and the subordination of girls and women to male power and authority.

Bikini Kill's adept manipulations of spectacle, exemplified by the audacious and even outrageous performance style of "Suck My Left One," bring us back to performance, as a crucial locus of gender issues in rock. Riot Grrls' engagement with performance may provide us a way to talk about the specific differences in and gains achieved by this generation of women rockers. Citing the examples of Bratmobile's baby doll dresses, sweaty boy dancers and bloody "Grrrl" flag, as well as Love's lace-dress parody of girlish "naughtiness" /innocence, White writes that riot grrrls have "learned from ACT UP and MTV to manipulate imagery."<sup>45</sup> Riot grrrls inherit the lesson of Madonna's constant selfrecreation and combine it with lessons learned from work in the sex industry.<sup>46</sup> "If you can get up on stage and take your clothes off," says Hanna, "performing a punk show is nothing."<sup>47</sup> in concert, Hanna sometimes parodies Madonna, appearing on stage in a black bra and biker shorts, the word "SLUT" penned in across her abdomen. The ways in which riot Grrls perform on and through their bodies reaffirms the very themes articulated in their songs. The abuses of girls' and women's bodies are constantly represented by riot grrrls, both in their music and zines; since such abuses are generally associated with women's alienation from their bodies, the ability to be embodied-the deployment of the body in performance-provides an antidote to its previous violations. Not only do girls wield their bodies in performance, but they do so in such a way as to make their bodies highly visible: this visibility counteracts the (feelings of) erasure and invisibility produced by persistent degradation in a sexist society. Such performance recuperates to-be-looked-at-ness as something that constitutes, rather than erodes or impedes, female subjectivity.

In this respect riot grrrl performances build upon (and surpass?) the challenge to the male gaze that Hebdige describes when he writes that female punks of an earlier generation "turned being looked at into an aggressive act."<sup>48</sup> The current generation of riot Grrls derive their strategies from the first women punks, who put on the conventional iconography of fallen womanhood-the vamp, the prostitute, the slut, the waif, the stray, the sadistic mistress, the victim- in-bondage. Punk girls interrupt[ed] the flow of images, in a spirit of irony invert[ed] consensual definitions of attractiveness and desirability, playing back images of women as icons, women as the furies of classical mythology.<sup>49</sup>

The current generation work changes on the iconoclastic methods of early female punks, replacing punk's angry masochism with a deep sense of abuse and a stronger critique of patriarchy, and relating it ultimately to what happens, not only in the street, but also in the home. Rather than reducing the political to issues of self-esteem, riot grrrls make self esteem political. Using performance as a political forum to interrogate issues of gender, sexuality and patriarchal violence, riot grrrl performance creates a feminist praxis based

on the transformation of the private into the public, consumption into production-or, rather than privileging the traditionally male side of these binaries, they create a new synthesis of both.

We need to conclude with a brief examination of the vexed relation of Riot Grrrl to the media, and our own conflicted place as participants and academic observers. This paper was developed in spring 1993, during a continuing period of media coverage of the Riot Grrrl movement, and equally continuous reaction by the participants. This resistance of Riot Grrrl to its perceived appropriation by various media forces needs to be included in any account of the movement. The resistance has various targets: certainly the mainstream press, but also the alternative and alternative music presses, and, to a great extent, any attempt by "outsiders" (including academics) to describe the movement. In this, Riot Grrrl's resistance to the media has been hard to distinguish from a more general resistance to definition and determination which comes out of its punk ethos. Although we began this study with the observation that media coverage of outrageous women might change the public discourse about gender-or participate in ongoing changes-Riot Grrrl groups have been engaged in contesting what they perceive to be the sexist, dismissive or inaccurate media coverage in many major American as well as British publications. The accelerated media coverage of the Riot Grrrl movement, starting in October 1992 and continuing through the spring, prompted a nationwide riot grrrl media blackout. Rejecting the mass media, in a gesture continuous with the underground rock scene's rejection of major-label recordings, riot grrrls propose instead to spread the revolution by word of mouth through a network of friends, through zines, mailing lists and events.

Yet Riot Grrrl's repudiation of the media has never been complete. In the ongoing coverage of Riot Grrrl in mainstream rock music venues, such as Spin and Rolling Stone, some members of the scene have been willing to talk to the press, while others have stayed away. Perhaps despite itself, Riot Grrrl has been very "media-friendly" in its ability to provoke through visual representations, and even because of the catchiness of its name.<sup>50</sup> Similarly the public reactions of riot grrrls against inaccurate coverage (in Letters to the Editor pages, for example) may be read as ambivalent gestures, seeking the kind of publicity they purport to reject. In March 1993 Courtney Love, by then a jaded observer, told Melody Maker that "Lately, I've been sickened by the media's handling of riot ... and their handling of the 'media.' It's a mutually reciprocal sick relationship-and fascistic."<sup>51</sup> The inherent conflicts over the media risk creates dissension within the ranks of riot grrrl groups themselves, which the press is then quick to document. For example, in May 1993, Seventeen magazine interviewed one Jessica Hopper, a bona fide riot grrrl defector, who complained about the criticism she received from other riot grrrls for talking to Newsweek. More recently Rolling Stone published an article titled "Grrrls at War."

Riot Grrrl is not only wary of recuperation in the mainstream music press, but also in the male-defined spaces of academia and academic discourse. Riot Grrrl NYC, to whom we showed this paper, responded variously; the dominant voices at one meeting articulated suspicion of and anger at our attempts to describe the movement (or even use the name in



our title), and vehemently rejected our rather sanguine conclusions about the effects of riot grrrl coverage in *Sassy*, though to our surprise, the objections articulated turned less on the translation of a street culture into academia (a number of the women attending were college or graduate students themselves) and more on our content, approach and right to speak "for" them. A version of this essay that we delivered at a conference at the Whitney Museum in New York—a presentation which included slides as well as musical examples—provoked a related concern that the audience of intellectuals and museumgoers would be merely titillated by displays of women's rage. Riot grrrl vigilance about their misrepresentation involves questions not only of sexism but also of cultural authority. At the very least, unsanctioned accounts of the movement run the risks of exploitation, trivialization and tourism. Moreover, speaking about the movement, especially from a position of cultural centrality, risks appropriating Riot Grrrl's own ability, as a marginal group, to be heard, to speak for themselves, in a mode continuous with the silencing of girls' voices within patriarchal culture. For these reasons, some members of Riot Grrrl view with suspicion and even hostility any attempt to discuss the movement in an academic setting—even the left or feminist settings provided within intellectual discourses.

Riot Grrrl's vexed relation to mass-media/academic coverage takes us back to the question of the group's ability to broach the gendered separation of public and private. The contradictions of this relation to the media are themselves embedded in punk's own conflicted origins, in that its trademark rawness and crudeness were themselves both the pretext and the product of Malcolm McLaren's adept media manipulations. While Riot Grrrl may have learned from Madonna, McLaren and others how to manipulate imagery, the movement has not so readily adopted their strategy of engagement with the media—a strategy that has proved compatible with a radical agenda from Abbie Hoffman to ACT UP. While Riot Grrrl recognizes the inevitability of gender as a social construct, and attempts to disrupt ideologies of the feminine/femininity through counterrepresentations, the movement has been more reluctant to extend this critique to its interaction with mass culture generally. This is not to say that the movement has not recognized the power of inexpensive and easily reproducible forms to further their revolution; on the contrary, Riot grrrl mobilizes xerox machines, 7-inch vinyl records and cassettes in the service of selfrepresentation, a project inherently threatened by others' representations of them. Yet in pinning its resistance to the undifferentiated "mainstream," Riot Grrrl risks setting itself up in opposition to the culturally "popular," as well as to the political status quo; in this they echo the collegiate erudition and elitism of independent music generally. Moreover, in rejecting the popular, Riot Grrrl may preclude the possibility of having a broad cultural or political impact. In any case, Riot Grrrl's relation to outside forms of representation will no doubt continue to be ambivalent—balancing a demand for cultural power with resistance to distortion or co-optation. At stake are familiar issues of cultural justice which are themselves tied to hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality and class—of who will speak for whom, and when, and under what conditions or circumstances. If Riot Grrrl wants to raise feminist consciousness on a large scale, then it will have to negotiate a relation to the mainstream that does not merely reify the opposition between mainstream and subculture. Like it or not, the Girl-Style Revolution is bound to be televised.

<sup>1</sup> According to indie rock lore, Hanna wrote "Kurt Cobain smells like Teen Spirit." See Gina Arnold, "Bikini Kill: 'Revolution Girl-Style'," *Option*, No. 44 (May-June 1992), p. 46. Arnold adds that "Hanna] wishes ... this fact weren't known."

<sup>2</sup> While we speak as feminist academics interested in both the roles of women and the various articulations of gender within musical culture, we also speak as the disc jockeys on a weekly college radio show that features the music of women artists and all-women bands, not only in rock or punk, but also in rap, soul, blues, jazz, worldbeat and spoken-word performance. Thus while we raise certain issues (such as the definition of "women bands") in their theoretical form, these issues also affect us on a very practical level in our radio work.

<sup>3</sup> In this paper, we have specifically delimited our range of inquiry to include recent interventions of women in rock and punk, but not earlier precursors to rock (such as blues, jazz and R & B) in which women, especially African-American women, have played highly visible, musically and culturally influential roles. Indeed, many transgressive potentialities which we attribute to women's participation in rock and punk musical production may have been anticipated by women blues and jazz performers earlier in the century.

<sup>4</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London and New York: Methuen, 1979), p. 138.

<sup>5</sup> Simon Reynolds, "Fuzzy Daydreams Replace the Grimness of Grunge," *New York Times* (November 22, 1992), Arts and Leisure section, p. 26. Reynolds characterizes grunge as a hybrid of punk and metal.

<sup>6</sup> Hebdige, pp. 94-97.

<sup>7</sup> One account describes American hardcore as emerging, not as a direct offshoot of British punk, but indirectly, as a reaction to punk's new wave successors. Although we focus on the hardcore of the mid-eighties, it still exists today, having gone through various changes and regional variations from its harder incarnations of five to ten years ago; politically it runs the gamut from neo-Nazi gang mentality to the sixties-influenced progressivism of Washington, DC's Fugazi (Taehee Kim, "Capitalism Indie-Style," *Option*, No. 49 [March-April 1993], pp. 53, 57). At the present, both Fugazi and another DC band, Nation of Ulysses, are active friends, cohorts and supporters of riot grrrls.

<sup>8</sup> Debby Wolfensohn, *Satan Wears a Bra* (January 1993), p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> As of February 1993, an article in *The Village Voice* tallied articles on "the Riot Grrrl movement" from *Newsweek*, *USA Today*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Sassy* and *Seventeen*. Charles Aaron, "A Riot of the Mind," *The Village Voice* (February 2, 1993), p. 63.

<sup>10</sup> Simon Reynolds, "Belting Out That Most Unfeminine Emotion," *New York Times* (February 9, 1992), Arts and Leisure p. 27. In contrast, a *Times* piece by Ann Powers, published just over a year later, in February 1993, offers a corrective to Reynolds' article by demonstrating how women in the alternative rock scene "have entered a new phase of [feminist] awareness and determination." Ann Powers, "No Longer Rock's Playthings," *New York Times* (February 14, 1993), Arts and Leisure p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Lorraine Ali provides a detailed account of the issues surrounding the "angry" label: "Foxcore My Ass: Grrrls, Guitars, & the Gender Dialectic," *Option*, No. 44 (May-June 1992), pp. 40-44.

<sup>12</sup> Ali, p. 40-41.

<sup>13</sup> *Girl Germs*: 18.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Jean Smith of Mecca Normal in *Mole No. 5*, p. 31.

<sup>15</sup> Rock for Choice was originally organized by members of L7 and Sue Cummings, associate editor of *LA Weekly*, and subsequently adopted as a project of the Feminist Majority Foundation and Fund. Exene Cervenka of the group X and rock promoter Nicole Panter started the Bohemian Women's Political Alliance, the activities of which include "organizing voter registration, issuing candidate recommendations, and throwing benefits for a variety of causes" (Powers, p. 34).

<sup>16</sup> Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon, 1981), pp. 85, 86-87.

<sup>17</sup> Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (Houndsmills and London: Macmillan, 1981), p. 29.

<sup>18</sup> The area directly in front of the stage.

<sup>19</sup> Emily White, "Revolution Girl-Style Now: Notes From the Teenage Feminist Rock 'n' Roll Underground," *The Reader* (Chicago) (September 25, 1992). p. 9. White's article provides a graceful, complex and persuasive account of the riot Grrrl phenomenon. Our copy comes originally from *Riot Grrrl* Chicago.

<sup>20</sup> Lucas K. Sauer, "Correspondence, Love Letters & Advice," *Rolling Stone* (February 18, 1993). Quoted in *Option*, No. 49, p. 29.

<sup>21</sup> Frith, p. 239.

<sup>22</sup> Frith, pp. 243-44.

<sup>23</sup> Frith, p. 244.

<sup>24</sup> McRobbie, pp. 7, 26-27.

<sup>25</sup> Arguably, this gendering originates in the display of sexuality and the manipulation of bodily artifice that have traditionally been associated with the feminine.

<sup>26</sup> In the case of Elvis, these movements were explicitly borrowed from the body stylizations of black, male, R & B performers. Indeed, some accounts of Elvis's popularity and success suggest that as a white artist, he was able to perform for mainstream (white) audiences sexually suggestive movements that would have been taboo for black male performers. Such an imitation of black male performers suggests a related erotic identification with them. In other words, within this economy of imitation, a crucial homoerotic tension operates between differently-raced men. The homoerotic aspect of white, male, rock performance would further complicate the sexual dynamics of male performance in general.

<sup>27</sup> Lisa Lewis, *Gender Politics and MTV- Voicing the Difference* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), P. 69.

<sup>28</sup> In a similar vein, Frith writes disparagingly that "the only sexual surprise of a self-conscious siren like Debbie Harry, for example, was that she became a teeny-bop idol for a generation of young girls" (Frith, P. 244).

<sup>29</sup> Hebdige refers to this same phenomenon in "the minority of girls publicly affecting the punk style" in punk street subculture generally, in addition to the punk rock stage. Dick Hebdige, "Posing ... Threats, Striking ... Poses: Youth, Surveillance, and Display," *SubStance* 37-38 (1983), pp. 68-88.

<sup>30</sup> Hebdige (1979), p. 92 and n. 4. See also Hebdige (1983), p. 85.

<sup>31</sup> McRobbie, pp. 27, 29.

<sup>32</sup> Gillian G. Gaar, *She's a Rebel* (Seattle, WA: Seal Press, 1992), p. 238.

<sup>33</sup> In the examples of Ono and Turner, we link the female scream with two divergent musical traditions—the performance art tradition in which Ono was a germinal figure, and the R & B tradition embodied in Turner, especially in her role as a crossover artist. Gaar notes that "shouting and screaming" figured highly in the R & B tradition from which Turner's musical style emerged (Gaar, p. 89).

<sup>34</sup> Bikini Kill is actually three women—Kathi Wilcox on bass, Tobi Vail on drums, and Kathleen Hanna on vocals—and one token man, guitarist Billy Boredom, whom the women call the "girliest boy" they know and who, incidentally, sometimes wears a skirt during performances. In 1992, the band came out with its first recording, an eight-song demo cassette jointly released by K and the Simple Machines label, which has been called the "first musical document of the Riot Grrrl Movement" (Kim, p. 53). Most of the songs from the cassette appear on a six-track vinyl release put out by the Olympia-based Kill Rock Stars label. Bikini Kill's second vinyl release, recorded on four-track in 1992, is titled "Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah," and appears as one side of a split LP with the British band Huggybear. The band also has a cut on at least two compilations: the International Pop Underground Convention (K) and Kill Rock Stars (Kill Rock Stars). Both vinyl recordings come with handwritten lyric sheets, in the style of the 'zines.

<sup>35</sup> White, p. 8.

<sup>36</sup> See White, p. 9. K has since released a compilation of live recordings from the convention, which includes many of the performances from Girls' Night.

<sup>37</sup> "Riot Grrrl," *The New York Planet* (December 19, 1992), p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> McRobbie, p. 33.

<sup>39</sup> "Chickpunk," *Girlymag* 1 (1993), p. 7.

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in Arnold, p. 45.

<sup>41</sup> *Girlymag*: 4.

<sup>42</sup> *Chainsaw* 3, p. 1.

<sup>43</sup> Aaron, p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> White, p. 20.

<sup>46</sup> Citing examples from a range of women rock bands, Ashley Salisbury notes that "Courtney Love of Hole and Bjelland of Babes in Toyland formed a band after meeting at the strip bar where they both worked. The members of Frightwig [another all-women band] also used to strip. . . . Hanna left home and began stripping to pay her college tuition." See Salisbury's "Street Access and the Single Girl," *Nassau Weekly* (February 4, 1993), p. 12.

<sup>47</sup> Quoted in Salisbury, p. 12.

<sup>48</sup> Hebdige (1983), p. 85.

<sup>49</sup> Hebdige (1983), p. 83.

<sup>50</sup> We owe this observation to Sandra York.

<sup>51</sup> Quoted in Kim France, "Grrrls at War" Rolling Stone (July 8-22, 1993), p. 24.