grunge feminism: performing gender paradox in queered plays of hypertexuality

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Ann Linnea Zeiner
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The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Ann Linnea Zeiner

grunge feminism: performing gender paradox in queered plays of hypertsexuality

Eve Kornfeld
Department of History, Chair

Paula DeVos
Department of History

Jessica Pressman
Department of English & Comparative Literature

11/29/15
Approval Date
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Ann Linnea Zeiner

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DEDICATION

For my ever supportive and loving parents,

Thank you Mom and Dad for helping me

pursue the life I have always wanted.

For Nana, Papa, Pam, Gramp, and Grandma.

This work is especially dedicated to the beautiful miserable bliss of grunge artist

Scott Weiland

October 27, 1967-December 3, 2015
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

grunge feminism: performing gender paradox in queered plays of hypertextuality

by

Ann Linnea Zeiner
Master of Arts in History
San Diego State University, 2015

The history of grunge and the meaning of its musical expression has suffered as a result of its early categorization as a hyper-masculinized and hetero-sexualized rock genre. This unfortunate classification at the hands of rock journalism and music media outlets misinterpreted the artists’ cultural criticisms as simply anti-authority and generation X angst, when in fact, many artists posed serious challenges to late 20th century conventions of gender, sexuality, and feminism. These male and female artists, rebelled against binary gender conventions by performing queered and Camped identities, that were commercially misinterpreted, packaged as “grunge”, and sold to the masses. Consequently, in spite of commercial praise and success for their music, the many gender provocateurs in grunge have been widely overlooked by scholarship and activism. The female grunge artists have had it the worst; lacking the recognition as both gender-fucking performers and as serious contributors to a unique music movement that saw more female-led bands with mainstream airplay, high album sales, and more concert tickets sold, than ever before in rock history. This thesis, in order to exhume the untold history of grunge, discards the old categories and cultural trappings created for the genre and instead explores the performative value of its abstractions, contradictions, and abjections as feministic expressions. To begin to disinter the marginalized female grunge artists, it is necessary to begin with unequivocally, the most marginalized and chastised female of all, Courtney Love. Love’s legacy has been so distorted that her counter-culture feministic expressions have been subsumed. This thesis aims to illuminate the physical and lyrical hypertext deployed by Love to create her personal evolution of her punk feminism, grunge, into a new queered feministic expression examined through her albums Pretty on the Inside (1991) and Live Through This (1994).
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IMBEDDED MEDIA

Music


VIDEO


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Dr. Paula DeVos aka “The Godfather”.

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Mary Stout aka “Obi-Wan”

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grunge

The history of grunge and the meaning of its musical expression has suffered as a result of its early categorization. Consequently, the many identities associated with grunge have been minimized, even if they have been commercially praised. Nearly twenty-five years after grunge was brought to the airwaves and sold to the masses the collective memory of the genre remains trapped in a narrow masculinist legacy. In its current state of internment grunge’s vibrant vigilance in challenging late 20th century conventions of gender, sexuality, and feminism is imprisoned. The artists of grunge remain unrecognized for their contribution to a broader counter-culture lineage of artists in the U.S. and Europe who performed socio-political divergency through unique and powerful speech.

Like the Dadaists, the Situationists International, and the British punk scene before them, grunge artists impacted a global community with their ideas, but on an even larger scale. The artists established a community that was geographically and socially invested in the performance of visceral rebellion through a hypertextual voice, that droned against the extremely conservative and excessive commercial climate that thrived during the 1980s in the United States. An integral part of their protest, which some artists performed more than others, was a strategic attack on the normative concepts of gender attached to masculinities and femininities constructed out of a

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2 Using N. Katherine Hayles’s theory of multiple layers of text and natural language combining into a symbolic dialect with a unique process which I connect to feministic expressions in analog and digital creations that are performed, from “Print Is Flat, Code Is Deep: The Importance of Media-Specific Analysis.” Poetics Today. Vol. 25. No. 1 (2004): 76, 79.

3 Referring to one of the four interrelated elements of gender outlined by Joan Scott in “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” The American Historical Review Vol. 91 No. 5 (1986): 1067.
consumer-based economy. Like, the artists that preceded them, visual deconstructions, or, acts of deformance, were vitally important to inverting a stagnant society pregnant with binary narratives of dress, behavior, and body restrictions.

Grunge needs to be valued for its abstractions, contractions, and abjections as performative cultural rebellion. The artistic expressions of grunge produced unique rhetoric that took shape in dress codes, speech, lyrics, music, bodies, and materials. As media producers, grunge artists created a counter-culture economy of ideas. Severely inverted to the acceptable binary structure of gender signifiers rooted in the Heterosexual Matrix, gig flyers and zines reflected the raw content of social subversion in both abject speech and hostile visual performance. These hypertexts served as creative mechanisms of expression, where rage and trauma were combined with intellectual precision and wit. The hypertexts operated beyond the material and onto the bodies of the performers and into the voices, lyrics and speech present in the music, invoking an unmistakable dirge of disaffection.

The artistic expression of grunge was a distinctive deviation from popular rock and hair metal. Grunge sought to abort the rehearsed rhymes, elaborate costuming and choreographed performances of “rock stars” of the 1980s. Instead, they basked in

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4 I use the term “Heterosexual Matrix” from Judith Butler’s theory influenced by Monique Wittig in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Routledge Classics & Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition)

5 Inspired by Hayles’ classifications of hypertexts in Print is Flat, Code is Deep, and Johanna Drucker’s theory of “reading as a performance; an active remaking through an instantiation” in Graphesis Visual Forms of Knowledge Production. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. 2014, 154. I am relating grunge as the abstraction that is being realized in varied artistic expressions of grunge artists, but at the same time is being misinterpreted into objectification. Improvisation and play is the very nature of the feminist visual knowledge that is being produced by grunge artists like Courtney Love; through gig flyers, through body graffiti, into persona, and in the stripping of persona. Meaning is imbedded and encoded in this counter-culture feminist practice…appearing as an iteration to some, but to the members of the subculture the code (graffiti) is messaging that is reflective of individual and collective experience in rebellion.
alienated forms of apathetic inverted social-cultural ceremonies and purposely buried their aesthetics in low culture. The stage of their circus spotlighted freakish parallels, producing unpretentious paradox, where gender and its corresponding sexuality were interrogated in a sideshow. Kurt Cobain once described this place as a, “miserable bliss”; a space where everything gets subsumed into disfunction and is celebrated.

A muddled place hovering between a comfort with the grotesque and the stabbing of laughter is a perfect condition for social deconstructions, which grunge bands created in gender-deprecating antidotes and disturbing affected contradictions. They brutally juxtaposed the abject with the acceptable for their band names, albums, songs, and lyrics. The grunge rhetoric of despair, vulgarity, and venom is evident in the names of grunge bands such as 7 Year Bitch, Alice in Chains, Belly, The Breeders, Green River, Hole, Mother Love Bone, Mudhoney, Pork, Slant 6, and Veruca Salt; and with album names such as Bad Motor Finger, Dirt, In Utero, Jar of Flies, Nevermind, and Pretty On The Inside.

By subverting to low culture to invert heteronormative structures, grunge rhetoric performed gender as a questionable object. Suffusing American pop culture and media with queered speech, gender anti-archetypes were created in grunge, demonstrating the inherent social distortion in the construction of gender itself. Grunge created an

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7 Following Elizabeth Weed and Judith Butler’s contention that Joan Scott’s article, Gender A Useful Tool of Analysis, proposed that gender was only useful as a question in Question of Gender: Joan W. Scott’s Critical Feminism. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), pg 1. http://site.ebrary.com.libproxy.sdsu.edu/lib/sdsulib/reader.action?ppg=8&docID=10481708&tm=1437527620285
important vantage point⁸ from which to observe the unstable and unrealistic doctrines that monitor the culturally available symbols, normative concepts, gender relationships, and subjective identities of gender⁹. Grunge made gender and its binary discourse interchangeable and malleable in an aggressive fashion. This is exactly the complexity of gender, offered by Joan Scott and carefully pronounced by Judith Butler¹⁰; allowing the body to take on (or perform) a sex and sexuality continuum that is not culturally induced. This is a model of instability that seeks a fluidity of female and feminine, male and masculine that isn’t trapped in a prescribed category of gender. Many male artists of grunge embraced this instability through their dress codes and lyrics.

Many grunge performers regularly vivisected mainstream heteronormative rituals, but their feministic contributions have all but been ignored. In 1992, Kurt Cobain was very explicit about his questioning of gender, reflecting in RollingStone, “I definitely feel closer to the feminine side of the human being than I do the male—or the American idea of what a male is supposed to be.”¹¹ Only in recent years has some scholarship and rock journalism begun to acknowledge Kurt Cobain’s punk-feminist roots; however, I know of none that have gone far enough to establish his art in Nirvana as a feministic expression.

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For the artists of grunge, reclaiming derogatory terminology was an important connection to third-wave feminism which sought to highlight issues such as domestic abuse, rape, gender abuse, and abortion in mainstream media outlets. Grunge’s reclaiming of words like bitch, whore, and slut through hypertextual expressions was also aligned with Riot Grrrl’s punk feminism. A new counter-culture feminist consciousness was being expressed through music in the Pacific Northwest. This feminism was incongruent with previous mainstream waves of feminism that had excluded sexual difference, race, class, age, and gender identity. Reclaiming derogatory terminology in the performative space, simultaneously subverted the heterosexualized spaces in rock and punk, making a formerly male-gendered genres flooded with a continuum of gendered identities challenging music paradigms.

Grunge is a feminism. It is a performative expression of gender rebellion and gender paradox that produces a gender aporia; a territory of fluctuating binary masculine and feminine identities that are deploying paradox to subvert gender and undermine heterosexuality and heterosexual normativity. The artists who performed its feministic expression deliberately deconstructed the divisive binary concepts of hetero/homosexuality and sexual difference by deconstructing gender in iconoclastic manners.

One of the most important grunge feminists is Courtney Love. Like the musical genre of grunge, Courtney Love has been misunderstood and grossly mislabeled. She has been interpreted as reinscribing heterosexist hierarchies of domination and subordination because of her costuming and her behavior. The criticism of Love’s performance has very publicly fallen victim to the hermeneutic repetition found in modern interpretations of art, resulting from of a culture of excess that has lost its
ability to experience the sensory and appreciate multiple levels of art.\textsuperscript{12} By disparaging her with labels such as, “half arena-rock cliche, half catastrophe”\textsuperscript{13}; “Soap Opera”\textsuperscript{14}; and “Train Wreck”\textsuperscript{15} Courtney Love’s feministic contribution to grunge and grunge feminism is minimized. This is indeed is a violation of art and reflects a lack of understanding and appreciation for abstract visual performances of socio-cultural oppositionality.

The continued criticism of Courtney Love beginning at the height of her success in the 1990s and twenty-five years later reveals the perpetuating “limitations of a cultural matrix through which certain kinds of ‘gender identities’ cannot ‘exist’—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not ‘follow’ from either sex or gender.”\textsuperscript{16} Love’s aggressive [Camped persona] as the “Kinder Whore”\textsuperscript{17} is an “insurgent and confrontational aesthetic practice produced by punks to create shock effects in contemporary society.”\textsuperscript{18} Through the “Kinder Whore” persona, Courtney Love challenged 20th-century the incestuous relationship of ageism and

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{12} Referring to Susan Sontag’s call for Transparency in art criticism in order to avoid interpretation that removes the sensory experience of art. in \textit{Against Interpretation: And Other Essays}. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), 13-14
  \item \textsuperscript{13} Cohn, Jason “Hole is a band.” Rolling Stone Magazine, AUG. 24, 1995. http://archive.rollingstone.com/Desktop/#/19950824/46 !
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Rolling Stone Cover August 24, 1995.
cou
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Mary Celeste, Kearney. \textit{Girl’s Make Media}. (New York: Rutledge, 2006), 157-158.
\end{itemize}
female gender aesthetics, by making herself unattractive. In her interview with *Rolling Stone* in 1994 she said, “I would like to think - in my heart of hearts - that I’m changing some psychosexual aspect of rock music. Not that I’m desirable. I didn’t do the whole kinder-whore thing because I thought I was so hot.” This began a new aesthetic era for women in rock, and specifically in grunge.

Love’s “Kinder Whore” persona effectively weakened the political economy of the female body in rock in the 1990s and splintered its signifiers through her speech and lyrics in grunge. She made being ugly... “cool” and commercially acceptable evidenced by Hole’s album *Live Through This* going platinum in 1995. Further mainstream accolades for Courtney Love were; “Best New Female Singer” (Courtney Love), “Best-Dressed Artist” (Courtney Love), “Best-Album” (Live Through This), “Best Single” (Miss World), “Best Video” (Doll Parts), and “Best Album Cover (Live Through This).” Love effectively subverted the connection between sex, gender, and music that had been established for females in the U.S. in the early 20th-century and popularized it. As third-wave feminists, Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards have reflected,

“*Because of Courtney Love...sixteen-year-old girls in Ohio learn about feminism by coming across the word in a SPIN interview with Courtney, and in general women don’t feel held back by society’s expectation of what it means to be a lady. Girls and women, including us, have been inspired to be more aggressive and to ask for more because of Love’s example.*”

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20 The album never charted higher than no. 52, but went certified platinum in April 1995 found in Jason Cohen, “Hole is a Band”, *Rolling Stone*, August 24, 1995.


The mainstreaming of grunge, while misinterpreting its point of view, helped mainstream a counter-culture feminist movement. The popularity of the Kinder Whore persona and the commercial success of Courtney Love’s band Hole\textsuperscript{23}, not only changed gender aesthetics for women in grunge but opened up the opportunity for a variety of gender identities to be commercially accepted. During the 1990s, there were more female-led bands, more females playing traditionally male instruments (such as the bass and drums), more all-female bands, and more queer identities within the “female” bands that ever experienced commercial success or had so much radio play. This performance of gender rebellion was emulated, adopted, and evolved by other artists in the 1990s, creating a new culture of feminist rock that had a feminist media economy thanks in part to an active Riot Grrrl movement that shared the same feministic values.

The divisive public persona carefully architected by Courtney Love deserves to be valued in a polemical limelight and recognized for its purposeful discontinuous divulgence of gender subversive messaging, intended to offend, shock, entertain, and enrage. Courtney Love is a Derridean, expressing grunge feminism through the performing of gender aporia. She spreads her legs and invites everyone (feminists, misogynists, fans, and critics,) to be shocked and tricked into the contradictory realm of play\textsuperscript{24} and performance. Her true fans, as she says, “are lots of females, homosexual


\textsuperscript{24} I explain my theory of play in the interregnum Invitation to Play, which is based on Jacques Derrida’s theory from Without Alibi; “The possibility of the impossible the “play” of a certain excess in relation to any mechanical movement, oriented process, path traces in advance, or teleological program), would be the very condition of the step [pas], or even the experience of pathbreaking, route, march, decision, event: the coming of the other, in sum, or writing and desire.”
men, a few enlightened heterosexual men, and hardcores.”25. Her persona is purposely a Cunt.26 She is the Hole. She is also the Rabbit. And the mainstream audience (media included), has never caught on that they are Alice.

The dissymmetric inversions of gender performed by Courtney Love and other grunge feminists in the 1990s provide a powerful portal into the constructions of American mainstream feminism and female gender identity. They are part of an important lineage of female spectacle that has utilized the stage since the late 19th century to destroy the limitations of gender, while also expressing new interpretations of gender, sex, and class that impact the formation gender identity in feminisms. Examining grunge feminism demands a deliberate inversion of form in order to experience grunge as intertwined intellectual and sensory functionalities producing unique socio-cultural formations of gender rebellion. The approach I have taken to undercut the hegemonic tendency of explanation masquerading as interpretation is to interrupt the linear narrative through an intertextual and inter-sensory architecture. By discarding traditional chapters and creating interregnums in a transmedia platform, the important abstractions of grunge remain subversive; preserved in their native media formats.

Grunge as a performative feminism requires us to view feminism as art. This thesis values the carnivalesque extravaganza of grunge in its mediated material and improvisations through the voice and body. By not forcing grunge or Courtney Love to become linear, the art itself can be revealed. The hyperlinked themes throughout the


26 Ibid.
thesis, allow multi-directional navigation, connecting the reader to the personalized experience of gender, feminism, and grunge. In this manner, the dynamic feminist visual knowledge of grunge is allowed to demonstrate its ability to affect the very categorization that mainstreamed its abjection.

The brushstrokes of grunge feminism are rich, vibrant, and illicit contributions to Women's History and American feminism. This thesis is an initial intellectual invitation into the dangerous interplay conducted by grunge's queered and Camped identities to emasculate late twentieth-century dysfunctions of heterosexist power. As an invitation into abstraction, this thesis carefully defines the aggressive criminalities of gender paradox in performance, while celebrating the disruptive and disturbing grunge feminism of Courtney Love.

**Through A Vocabulary of Digital Form**

My intention for creating a digital thesis construction is to appreciate grunge and its expressions and not further contribute to its miscategorization by sustaining content in a linear, one-dimensional form. As part of this non-hegemonic architecture, interregnums have been created, instead of traditional chapters which serve as multiple entry points of experiencing gender rebellion in grunge. They are meant to stand alone, and not necessarily to be experienced in a particular order. Expression is about experience, and without the opportunity to engage with expression in its form created by

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28 ..it is the habit of approaching works of art in order to interpret them that sustains the fancy that there really is such a thing as the content of a work of art. When a work of art is primarily its content, the idea exerts extraordinary hegemony by Susan, Sontag in *Against Interpretation: And Other Essays*. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), 5.
the artists, there is no art….there is no expression, only content. Experience in this thesis takes a visual and audial form where songs can be heard and performances can be viewed. This type of architecture is intertextual and intended to reflect, a non-linear platform of communication, which as Marsha Kinder has helped us see that in a much broader and cognitive and ideological sense, narrative becomes the patterning and interpreting of the meaning of all sensory input and ‘objects of knowledge.’”

The following interregnums: What's the F with/in Feminism; Creating a Culture of Feminist Scholarship; Language Offers a Gender Continuum; Play; Speech; Notes on Lyrics and Images; The Body; The Vocals and The Feminist Voice; and Inverted Interpretation are hyperlinked with key terms and phrases. By clicking on the linked words highlighted by a purple box, readers are connected to these themes within the thesis. Readers may also venture outside the thesis through any of the active hyperlinks. These interregnums represent a disjunction between feminism and queer theory and a lack of a historiography for grunge and grunge feminism in Women’s History. The result is that each interregnum is influenced with Gender Theory, Feminist and Queer Musicology, Sociology, History, Media Studies, Comparative Literature, and Informational Technology.

Certain spelling and visualizations of grunge, [feminism], feminism F^Q, play, and Camp are deliberate throughout the thesis. Grunge as a capitalized word represents the commercialized efforts of rock journalists, media outlets, MTV, clothing designers and other capitalistic endeavors and has nothing to do with the artistic expression of the artists of grunge (lower case). [feminism] as I explain more thoroughly in What's the F

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with/in Feminism represents mainstream feminism that is tied to binary gender construction and all the signifiers of the Heterosexual Matrix. Feminism F^Q represents the unification of feminism and queer theory that is evident in grunge feminism. Play, is a theory of performance inspired by Jacques Derrida’s work and intentionally not capitalized to associate it with the low culture of grunge and to indicate its interconnected relationship with the hypertexts that are produced within counterculture. Camp, is capitalized and treated as Susan Sontag envisions “Camp” with exaggerated quotations marks.

What ’s the F with/in Feminism

“I’m kind of a sloppy feminist. Any ideology makes me a little nervous because there’s some point where it doesn’t allow for the complexity of things. I think feminism is really interesting historically. It is a term for me that does belong to the ‘70s.”30-Kim Gordon (1997)

20th-century American feminism has been historically categorized into three waves of activism that encompass access to socio-economic and political “rights” as well as racial and sexual equality, all predicated upon a binary gendered understanding of sexual difference. Gloria Steinem, second-wave feminist writer and activist has defined feminism as, “The belief in the full social, economic, and political equality of women and men… and doing something about it.”31 It’s a definition about acquiring access, with a predisposed understanding of the gender identity of “woman” and “man”. Jennifer Baumgardner, third-wave feminist writer and activist, has gone further, defining

feminism beyond the access to racial and gendered spaces. “Feminism is about access to white male spaces like the army, the boardroom, on the President's cabinet [or running for President], flying airplanes, and playing basketball” which, “puts white women at an advantage over women of color, because they have more access to those white male spaces.” The problem then becomes an issue of equality in those white male spaces and equal opportunity to acquire those spaces. But as Baumgardner writes, “this makes us face the fact that we have to build a new structure for equality. The fact that access is not equality plagues our understanding of modern feminism.”

Even more than the concerns of “access” defined by Steinem and “equality” defined by Baumgardner, is the dangerous assumption of gender and sexual identity that has been embedded in American Feminism for too long. Feminist theorist Judith Butler roots out the trouble by stating

\begin{quote}
  feminism encounters a political problem in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, women, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety. Access and equality without common gender signifiers become sites of inaccessibility and inequality in that their very foundations become “domains of exclusion. These exclusions threaten the universality of feminism’s claim of representation, causing us to look at what has produced these domains and these identities.
\end{quote}

\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibid, 451.
\item Ibid, 6.
\item Ibid, 5.
\end{enumerate}
For Butler, “woman” isn’t and shouldn’t be a universal category. To treat the term as a quotient of access and equality within feminism is to fall into the power structure that created and monitors “gender”.

These binary gender definitions of American feminisms have been rooted into the Historical scholarship of women, and Women’s Studies, riding out the waves of Marxism and Liberalism and surviving into the 21st century as sacred statutes. These esoteric pillars have had a buttressing effect on an extinct perception of gender, that has not only limited scholarship, but has excluded from History, those individuals who would not or could not conform to the Heterosexual Matrix. The result is a feminist dystopia, which barricades itself from the intellectual and physical concepts of sex, sexual difference, and sexuality in a variety of gender identities. Perhaps one of the most shocking results of this historical phenomenon is that there is a lack of equality and access for those who define or associate themselves as females because the binary gender fallacy has assumed a particular identity for women. As Judith Butler notes,

the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject [woman/women], create a political problem for feminism encounters as it assumes that the term denotes a common identity. As a result, it becomes impossible to separate out “gender” from the political and cultural intersections in which it is invariably produced and maintained.\textsuperscript{38}

I see part of what Butler is discussing in the historical fem of feminism. It is a regulated femininity that determines who is a “female”, who gets to participate in the “female sphere”, and who gets to be written about in the history books as a

Feminist. This first syllable carries a lot of weight that predicates participation. That Fem has created and perpetuated its own ism, down to its nomenclature, its taxonomy, and its time frame. The Fem has fortified its binary gender construct so strongly with political fallacy and with perpetual reinforcement of heterosexual constraints that any attempt to participate in feminism, much less redefine it, requires a sexual and intellectual sacrifice.

The divide between queer theory and feminist theory is established over sexuality. Feminism’s sexual and gender conservatism has gone so far as to act as a privileged site of a theory of sexuality which reinscribes a heterosexual hierarchy partitioned against Lesbian and Gay Studies, which have been greatly influenced by feminist theory.39 The emergence of queer theory then becomes in direct opposition to “gendered” studies, prohibiting a fluid interrelationship with its academic predecessor. The consequence of this imbalance for Historical scholarship that has been positively influenced by gender analysis, by such scholars at Natalie Zemon-Davis and Joan Wallach Scott, is a privileged relationship to a binary concept of gender tied to feminism. Gender, then has monopolized scholarship, and narrowed the viewfinder in terms of reconstructing Women’s History since the 1960s.

So, what is Feminism, without the gravitational pull of a polarity of Female /Feminine gender and its Heterosexual Matrix architecture? Judith Butler states that, “There can be no viable feminism that fails to account for its complicity in forms of oppression, whether they be colonial, class-based, racist, or homophobic. And there can

39 Based on Butler’s disagreement with Rubin.
be no viable lesbian and gay studies paradigm that does not examine its own complicitous investments in misogyny and other forms of oppression."\textsuperscript{40} For the sake of this thesis and the work to be continued, I would like to acknowledge the “oxymoron of gender (male or female)”\textsuperscript{41} that Butler has so well illuminated in her work, by branding the 20th-century American feminism that we have understood in waves to be [feminism]. This visualization of feminism (brackets surrounding the word) represents the pillars of binary gender identity analysis that have been bracketed-in within activism and scholarship. Some F’s to associate with this construction are: fallacy, feminine, family, foundationalist fictions, and female, etc…

Moving on from that [feminism], how do we treat feminism in this thesis and how do we define it? Relegating feminism as activism for socio-economic and political equality that is organized and publicly supported by “women” is historically isolating and insulting to individuals and groups that have been discriminated against for their economic, racial, sexual, and gender inability (or refusal) to participate in the Heterosexual Matrix. Moreover, that feminism assumes that all “fems” share the same signifiers\textsuperscript{42} and limits any gender and sexually expansive definitions of feminism that would not only respect equality movements from the LGBTQ community from the past 30 years, but would dismiss those individuals from previous centuries of American

\textsuperscript{40} Judith Butler, “Against Proper Objects” in Feminism Meets Queer Theory. Elizabeth, Weed and Naomi Schor, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 2.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{42} Judith Butler states, “from the foundationalist fictions that support the notion of the subject, however, there is the political problem that feminism encounters in the assumption that the term women denotes a common identity. Rather than a stable signifier that commands the assent of those whom it purports to describe and represent, women, even in the plural, has become a troublesome term, a site of contest, a cause for anxiety.” in Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge Classics Kindle Edition), 4.
history who sought to negotiate around the established socio-cultural signifiers of their presumed gender, but didn’t or couldn’t participate in organized spheres.

Looking particularly at the late 20th-century and the schisms that occurred within [feminism], significantly with the Feminist Sex Wars that evolved surrounding sexual difference and the incorporation of pornography at the Barnard Conference on Sexuality in 1983, we can’t really go on assuming that feminism was happily defined by the second wave’s sorority of white heterosexual sisters brushing each others hair and singing “I am Woman”43. Who would want to? It’s time to recognize that the feminist schism in the 1980s was a reality check for a singular definition of American feminism rooted in gender and organized around socio-political acceptance.

Feminism, doesn’t have to be just an ism (politicized & publicized commercially) , it can be an expression; an expression that historically reflects agency, creativity, and risk for those who would go against the religious and cultural norms. To define feminism as an expression can begin to reconstruct the histories of women and other gender identities as individuals with the capacity to choose how they want to live, without the restrictions of masculine and feminine socio-cultural barriers. Feminism as an expression circumvents the architecture of social control and gives, instead, social flexibility. Going further, exploring feminism as a broader historical object, not limited by its current nomenclature, allows histories to be rethought in different definitions and with wider artistic and political roots than the current definition currently sustains. It’s time to look differently at feminism and feminisms in the 20th century and to recognize the many interpretations of feminism’s idea of “equality”.

For now, it seems fair to treat feminism differently from [feminism], recognizing the limiting essentialisms that possess historical markers of ideas of culture, class, and race. I want to assure the reader that this distinction of feminism and [feminism] is not a demonization of [feminism], but rather a way of attempting to identify the way gender is associated by the feminists of grunge as a capitalist and heterosexist tool of repression, and how they create their own abjection within the binary. By doing this, we are able to recognize what Scott and Davis talked about with regard to gender in scholarship; “to understand the significant of the sexes, of gender groups in the historical past, and discover that range in sex roles and sexual symbolism in different societies and periods, to find out what meaning they had and how they functioned to maintain the social order or to promote its change.”

Grunge artists clearly distinguish their feminism as a paradox to the historical binary gender construction and create a continuum that is representative of both academic and activist feminism as well as queer theory. I visualize this feminism as F^Q, representing the interrelationship of feminism and queer theory. A counter-culture feminism that rejects the mainstream and capitalist concept of gender commodification. Some Fs to associate with this definition are: Freedom, Full access and equality to opportunities, Fluctuation of gender/sex/sexuality, and gender Flexibility, and gender Fucking. As we work towards a definition of grunge feminism, as its own movement, influenced by Punk feminism and Riot Grrrl feminism and tangent to third-wave feminism, we can begin to think about distinguishing American counter-culture feminism

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44 Conversation with Jessica Pressman August 5, 2015.

(as expression) from American feminism (ism). An expression that is NOT just a socio-political movement (even though its politics are created through its media making economy). We need to view counter-culture feminism as an artistic expression that makes its objections to gender, heterosexualities/heteronormativities, and [feminism], while embracing a continuum of female identities as its core founders and family. It expresses its societal fucking through artistic expressions such as the voice, language/speech, music, physical performance incorporated in feminine and masculine bodies and behaviors, and zine culture (media production). In these expressions, gender as a value is but an accent to the messages that are created, performed, torn apart, and recreated. In these expressions, a unique socio-political and sexually-charged identity is formed reflecting its subculture roots and projecting multiple contradictions to established and accepted [feminisms]. Some of those contradictions can be seen in the abrasive, Campy, and queered performances of gender and the violent and satirical vocalizing of F^Q values. Nothing is esoteric, nothing is sacred, the only thing of value is the performativity of subversion, revealing the fallacy of binary gender construction. This is grunge feminism.

Creating a Culture of Feminist Scholarship

“I distrusted most available accounts of women’s lives in history books. Most of the existing scholarship on Women’s History with which I was familiar seemed faulty...too narrowly conceived, merely antiquarian, or too exclusively focused on exceptional women, too dismissive...etc, all in all too wedded to an outlook in which male was the norm, the female another and lesser case.”46
-Historian Nancy F. Cott (1986)

From asking the questions of sex and sexuality and having my own struggles with gender scholarship in Women’s History, I found that there is a distinct *culture* of feminism that was created in the mid-1960s by both feminist activists and feminist historians. I don’t separate the two, in fact I think they are quite interrelated. The culture that was created at this time permeated historical scholarship so deeply that the topics of examination were narrowed to focus on the hetero-normative objectives of the current socio-political climate. It is an architecture of scholarship that operates within, and therefore is subject to what Judith Butler accurately labels *The Heterosexual Matrix*\(^\text{47}\). From this heterosexual divider, is a critical fissure of cultures between, what I distinguish as “mainstream” or commercialized [feminism], and counter-culture feminisms. This is a serious disconnect, which has marginalized feminist expressions in the form of art to the socio-political activism of commercially viable feminism, for the last forty-five years in scholarship. This disconnect demonstrates the difficulty that still exists between feminist theory and queer theory and the rightful site of inquiry for theories of sexuality.

The site of mainstream [feminism] and feminist scholarship donnes an anti-masculine, anti-sexual difference, and anti-individualistic convictions. This is why female rockers from Janis Joplin in the late 1960s, to Patti Smith in the 1970s, to Joan Jett in the 1980s and Kathleen Hanna and Courtney Love in the 1990s have been left out of historical scholarship as being “feminists”. This particular lineage I am planning to examine more closely in future work, but for now I want to point out the elementary observation that these are prominent figures of counter-culture feminism because they

expressed gender rebellion. They performed a mix of gender identities ranging from masculine to androgynous (disassociating them from the feminine), to queer and Camped. Most importantly, these artists participated in a male dominated arena where they had positions of male power and/or played masculine instruments. Their sexuality was readily displayed in paradox, and continuously is (mis)read causing often visceral reactions from their audience. Joan Jett recounts an incident when she was fronting the Blackhearts in 1984; the male crowd turned on her.

We were playing in Italy and Spain. The audience, it was all guys, and they were like worked up into this frothing frenzy. They wanted to kill me. They wanted to fucking kill me—‘You Fucking Cunt!’ Violently trying to get to me, hawking lugies. I was covered in spit, and it was hanging off me, and I would sit there, and I wouldn’t leave the stage….I mean these guys would’ve killed me, and if they didn’t kill me, they would’ve raped the fuck out of me.48

The fact that these artists didn’t comply with feminist sexual behavior norms and challenged the female gender as a feminized and sexualized commodity by performing masculinities was incredibly dangerous. The risks that these performers took and the boundaries they broke deserve to be examined and documented.

These artists who rebelled against gender norms represent forty years of counter-culture feminism, which has a rich lineage of feminist and queer expressions that should be included in the volumes of feminist history. Judith Butler has heavily critiqued gender and feminism in, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990) revealing the chronic problem of the presumption of heterosexuality. Butler states,

“with the internal restrictions and configurations of power that create and subject the Other (someone not conforming to traditional binary gender identities) to heterosexual cultural “normalities” that desperately cling to the stability of gender categories in a epistemic regime of presumptive heterosexuality that continually produces categories of ontology, and a perpetual reliance on a political system deeply imbedded in patriarchal trade-craft.”

In short, Butler sees blatant road-blocks that have historically existed in feminism that subtly, but directly impair the ability for gender, particularly in the American historiography of Women’s History, to be a universally accessible tool of analysis. Instead it remains hijacked into binary territory.

To be fair, the historiography of Women’s History and the History of Feminism didn’t begin until the 1960s. The challenging circumstances of being the first female historians and feminists beginning with Natalie Zemon-Davis in 1959, cannot and should not be belittled. Rather, it should be an interesting intersection of how new cultural expressions of gender, sexuality, class, race, ethnicity, and socio-political stature were being expressed through counter-culture movements in the United States, amidst an emerging and evolving women’s history historiography. As noted by historian Rosalind Rosenberg, “women, along with other previously socio-culturally discouraged groups, were pursuing their education in record numbers thanks to incentives like the The Readjustment Act of 1944 (the GI Bill) that opened the doors of academies that had been tightly closed to nearly 6 million new students.”

Following Natalie Zemon-Davis, other institutions began producing female scholars that greatly impacted the

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historiography of historians in the mid-to late 1960s who utilized gender analysis in their work such as Columbia, and the University of Wisconsin. These institutions graduated exceptional scholars, but did not have Women’s History as curriculum, nor did they have Women’s Studies programs or departments.

Historian Carol Smith-Rosenberg refers to this cohort’s work at this time as This New History of American Women\textsuperscript{51} being forged. Adding on to her description, I believe that this group of scholars during the Second Wave of Feminism, initiated a search and rescue for the female citizen, lost to the history books that only recounted the tales of white men of property and political power dating back to the 17th century. It was a quest to reinstate women as full citizens in the history of the United States, both in the present women’s equality and liberation movements and into the textbooks that they had been left out of.

Smith-Rosenberg explained this New History in 1975 as “the product of a complex interaction between the political perspective of the contemporary women’s movement and the methodology and focus of the New Social History”\textsuperscript{52}, to distinguish it from a more “traditional or politically oriented women’s history”.\textsuperscript{53} This new history had to dig deep into the rigid gendered-spaces and focus primarily on the domestic sphere. Rightfully noted by Rosenberg that “the domestic sphere offered significant insight into the psychodynamics of private spaces: the household, the family, the bed, the nursery,


\textsuperscript{52} Ibid, 186.

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid, 186.
and kinship systems.” These private realms were the primary locale of women, not public life, and understandably this would be an appropriate historical site of reconstruction. From these hidden cultures and identities, the juris of Christian social influences and its far-reaching power that reinforced class structures, racial categorizations, and the commoditization of women into nameless reproducing property was illuminated.

The contemporary women’s movement that Smith-Rosenberg is referring to in this early time for new female historians was very active. Considering the time frame of that reference from when the new female historians were acquiring their Ph.Ds in the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s when Rosenberg was interviewed, there is an intense span of social and feminist activism; The passing of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, The Supreme Court victory of Planned Parenthood in 1965 to legalize the use of The Pill by married couples, the formation of the National Organization of Women in 1966, the 1971 Supreme Court ruling that discrimination on the basis of sex as a violation of the 14th Amendment, and the passage of Roe v. Wade in 1973 (to name a few). This time of feminism during the 1960s and 1970s, established political rights for women that had not previously been articulated. The success of the Women’s Feminist Movement and later, the Women’s Liberation Movement, in securing a visible presence of qualified women in careers that had previously been socially discouraged or outright prohibited echoes in the very presumption of young girls and women today, in the early 21st-

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century graduating from college, that they have an equal consideration; the same as a male candidate (even though they seem to be unaware or not acknowledge the existing pay gap of $.23) for any job they apply for.

The importance of equal economic and political access is not being critiqued; nor is the availability of theory at this time, which was The New Social History invoking Karl Marx, Jacques Lacan, Levi Strauss, and especially the work of E.P. Thompson. The new scholarship of Women, by women, was synchronized with their activism. But as Elizabeth Janeway noted in 1974, “the experience of women has not only been structured by men, it has been given its significance by men.”

Smith-Rosenberg further acknowledged the inter-relationship of politics and scholarship by saying that the instinct to write Women’s History was forged from their feminist ideals.

“Without question, our first inspiration was political. Aroused by feminist charges of economic and political discrimination, angered at the sexualization of women by contemporary society and at the psychological ramifications of that sexualization, we turned to our history to trace the origins of women’s second-class status.”

Three hundred years of Women’s History in the United States (16th-19th centuries) now had a platform with which to critique 20th century sites of patriarchal power and repression. For the first time, because of these historians, we were able to get intimate glances into the lives of women; their diaries, their court cases, their letters and communications, etc. These detailed views of women demonstrated the complexities of

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women’s lives and their agency within the household and outside it. The experience of the historians as feminists had innovated a breadth of work into classrooms and coursework, created new departments, new scholarly journals, and fueled political activism that sought to correct the gendered social and economic wrongs of the past. Joan Wallach Scott reflected on her experience in an interview in 2009,

“It wasn’t until I was teaching at the University of Illinois in Chicago, in 1970, and there were friends who were organizing courses in Women’s history and I was a part of the faculty...it was there, that I began to be interested in Women’s History and the Feminist movement. And when I went to teach at Northwestern and I was the only woman in the History department, that was when I asked to teach a Women’s history course. The students demanded inspiration and stories about women in the past...and so we invented these courses, because we weren’t trained in this.”

While large inroads were accomplished by this work, the main scholarly influences of this New History also constructed the binary gender paradigm that would become rooted in Women’s History produced in the 1960s through the 1990s. We must unfortunately acknowledge that the works of Michel Foucault, and his fellow incorruptibles, Jacques Derrida, and Giles Deleuze, that would also have an impact on female historians (some more than others), weren’t translated until the mid 1970s. I’m acknowledging this to emphasize the strong influence that Social History had in setting the architecture for feminist culture in scholarship, as opposed to post-structuralism.

Gayle Rubin and Judith Butler both, in critiquing different areas of gender and feminism, attributed the phenomenon of the binary construction of gender to the Marxist


59 Borrowing Hélène Cixious’s term of intellectual endearment “The Incorruptibles” to describe the work of her friend Jacques Derrida and his fellow philosophers. For more background see http:// plato.stanford.edu/entries/derrida/#Inc.
legacy within activist and academic feminism. Rubin states, “There is an immense Marxist legacy within feminism, and feminist thought is greatly indebted to Marxism. In a sense, Marxism enabled people to pose a whole set of questions that Marxism could not satisfactorily answer.”60 Judith Butler, not disagreeing with Rubin regarding Marx, cites Lacan in particular for a chronic non-relation between sexes, a social separation of gender. Her view is that “the hetero-pathos that pervades the legacy of Lacanian psychoanalysis and some of its feminist reformulations can be countered only by rendering the symbolic increasingly dynamic, that is, by considering the conditions and limits of representation and representability as open to significant rearticulations and transformations under the pressure of social practices of various kinds.”61 Both scholars acknowledge some serious limitations that were created in feminist thought and feminist academic work during this time, because of the limitations of the theory that was being used.

No wonder by the time Joan Scott’s article is published in 1986 that its translation is skewed further into the binary. Scott identified this serious complication of “gender” utilized by feminists up until that point in the 1980s, by stating that “feminists have in a more literal and serious vein begun to use ‘gender’ as a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes”62. Joan Scott is desperately trying to point out the important connection to grammar with gender as both explicit and full of


unexamined possibilities. She uses “‘Explicit’ to identify the grammatical usage involving formal rules that follow from the masculine or feminine designation; full of unexamined possibilities because in many Indo-European languages there is a third category-unsexed or neuter. Scott illuminates the powerful distinction that language itself can offer, and perhaps offer as a remedy to mainstream feministic associations with what is “feminine” in direct relation to what is “masculine”. Language itself, Scot assures us, can offer a broader and wider spectrum of analysis for gender.

Language Offers a Gender Continuum

Both Joan Scott and Carol Smith-Rosenberg’s theory of language as possibilities of discovery within gender and how it is expressed, display a distinctive dissension from the ranks of Social History and other cohort members. I read their context of language as an alternative to discourse and I liken it to Foucault’s examination of La Phalange in Discipline & Punish; Language as an indiscipline. “An indiscipline of language: incorrect grammar and the tone of the replies ‘indicate a violent split between the accused and society, which, through the judge, addresses him in correct terms’.” The unsuitable and uncivilized language of liberty, that everyone else views as laziness and debauchery. Language as this possibility is a freedom, by way of the abject. This is the way I’d like to think of alternative music with its lyrics and speech of gender

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65 Ibid, 292.
rebellion; and also of alternative feminisms, in their expressions against mainstream feminism.

Historian Carol Smith Rosenberg has allowed gender analysis in Women’s History to find a continuum of identities with regard to sex and sexuality in writing as expression. It was her book *Disorderly Conduct*, published in 1985, one year before Scott’s article, that first created that continuum of gender, and gender identity for me and inspired me to question the relation to sex and sexual identity as signifiers of gender. For Rosenberg, language is a stage for gender to be experimented with and performed;

> To my mind, the complexity of language makes it an ideal building block for the construction of such a model [the distinct separate social settings of men and women]. Language is by nature open-ended, filled with nuance, in constant flux. It uses metaphor and analogy to bridge the seemingly unconnected and thus succinctly gives voice to layers of disparate feelings and perceptions. Actor and reactor, I believe that language subtly mirrors the social location and relative power of its speakers.

She goes on to say that “Language is not limited to words. If by ‘language’ we mean symbolic communications, then a host of nonverbal forms can be adopted. Dress and food codes, and varied forms of sexuality, all function in societies around the world in highly expressive ways.” It is her detailed description of symbolic communications and nonverbal forms that connect with the multi-dimensional expressions of grunge

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67 Ibid., 43.

68 Ibid., 43.
Feminism; such as fashion, body hypertexuality, zines, queered speech, and so on which I will look at more closely in Speech.

Following Rosenberg’s spotlight on the power of language, Johanna Drucker’s definition of visual knowledge and its production as a graphical language is a compelling addition to formulate a definition of grunge feminism and its multi-modal expressions. Drucker too names performance as an activation that is charged with knowledge for the producer and for the reader. She says, “Reading was always a performance of a text or work, always an active remaking through an instantiation.” She marks the work of creating and conveying texts and other works as performance—and those that would engage as the audience as participants in the performance. Adding to that, her description of knowledge production particularly within graphics, resonated with Riot Grrrls production of a new feminist economy and, specifically Courtney Love’s usage of graphics as speech, as lyrics, on the body and acted in the body, as well as in her written diary appeared to open up a few possible outlines for grunge Feminism. Drucker points out,

Graphics make and construct knowledge in a direct and primary way. Most information visualizations are acts of interpretation masquerading as presentation. In other words, they are images that act as if they are just showing us what is, but in actuality, they are arguments made in graphical form.

Love makes her argument against [feminism] and for feminism by performing gender rebellion. Her transvestification of her own gender (and gender identity) and sexuality

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70 Ibid., 6.
(and sexual identity) into Camped personas are creating an argument that is counter-culture and counter-feminist culture. Drucker is essential here for us to not continue to vilify Courtney Love as an outrageous rocker, but recognize her accomplishment to create and perform a feminist argument for a gender continuum.

Last to be mentioned, but certainly not least, is the extensive work already done by Mary Celeste Kearney, which explores girls’ production of media, displays of female masculinity, the Riot Grrrl’s ability to create a new feminist economy, and the importance of zine culture to female agency. Kearney establishes Punk as part of Feminist history by recognizing its powerful influence on counter -culture and its non-existence in the annals of feminism.

Rarely acknowledged by theorists of feminist politics and culture, punk had had a considerable impact on contemporary feminist ideologies, especially for teenage girls and young women raised during the 1980s and 1990s when this youth culture was broadly diffused beyond its original urban locales. Indeed, while many female youth involved in early punk resisted being identified as feminists (despite their pro-female and anti-patriarchal attitudes), many contemporary girls who participate in this culture attempt to merge their punk perspectives with feminism, thus producing what many call “punk feminism”. As a culture known for its anarchic, unruly, offensive tendencies as well as its youthful perspective, punk provides female youth with a different form of rebellion than that associated with older feminists.  

It is Kearney who has really honed in on a valuable section and unacknowledged part of feminism that has been locked out. Punk and grunge have been largely unacknowledged this far, because of their inherent masculinity and because of their propensity for the abject. I’m not discluding Riot Grrrl from this fraternity, but there is such a strong masculine and horrific influence with Punk and grunge, that there is rarely

anything pretty left to appreciate or substantiate a claim for female power. Both female and male gender identities are so raw, so over-the-top, so Camped, and so ugly, that rarely anyone wants to adopt that persona and perform it themselves. It would almost be self-deprecating to do so, and most people want praise, not subjection to open ridicule and even hatred. Courtney Love’s first album title exemplifies this abhorrence for the pursuit of acceptance, instead she projects the abject, “Pretty on the Inside”. The album graphics, lyrics, and performance all lead to the opposite of the accepted; even the virtues of the inside are perverted from both the reader and the performer. The result? There is no “pretty” on the inside…or the outside. The gender identity here, is un commodified.

**Invitation to play**

“If people were waiting for her to crack, Love didn’t deliver the goods. Instead, she was astonishing, moving fluidly through plaintive drawl to throat-peeling scream in a red-hot hour of punk rock. Amid much baby-doll tossing tottering about on stiletto heels, Love indulged her obsession with childhood, the female condition, and the seductive pull of stardom…Later she climbed atop an amp, scanned the crowd and then dove. Transported from fan to fan, she was finally delivered back to the stage, from which she rose, triumphant.”

-Rolling Stone November 3, 1994

I’d like to invite you to be a fellow creator, and cyborg, to engage in the performance of Courtney Love. This is an opportune moment to follow Courtney into

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performance, into play, and ultimately into the crowd, to examine, extract, and experience the multiplicities of aporia, embedded into performance avatars.

Deeply embedded in the lyrical, mechanical, and visual core of grunge, is a floating and fluctuating concept of play. This varying abstraction is constricted; twisted inside socially-constructed barricades of gender identity that stand as conformed pillars, and induced with painful and rhythmic contortions. The multiple movements of play, as a gender rebellion, initiate cavernous contradictions, where pitch is registered at an extremely low depth; lyrics scatter between raw transparency and bitter felicitousness; and chords drone and bang against the structures confining them. The performativity of these movements create an even wider range of opposing gestures that strive to engage a reality of the socio-political and socio-cultural present by professing rage against heterosexual gender norms. Heterosexual behavior and expectations are inverted in different masculine and female extracts of essentialism causing opposing visual expressions and behaviors to simultaneously erupt and improvise. The complexing visual and aural result is an abstruse aporia, where gender contradictions define a genre of music that continually disguises itself in order to subvert the ever-present panoptic gaze.

The interregnums within this thesis are tangent spaces that offer inquiry into how gender and feminism have been traditionally constructed and how grunge feminism rebels against those constructions. Some interregnums incorporate video and audio, where the reader can directly access and experience three-dimensional artifacts as they pertain to the particular interregnum and the thesis overall. These are spaces to explore the inspiring, defining, and generously liberating nature of the multiple identities and
states of play as aporia in grunge. Play is able to be transformed into an instrument of discovery very much like a micro-scope, as well as a physical, both aural and visual, and even ephemeral state. Play continues as a metaphysical state of being, its very multi-modal existence offering experimentation and an element of risk, in the undertaking of the microscope. Play constitutes artistic expressions that are multivalent; transcendent into composition and enacted on a stage.

We will treat play here as it has been liberally and transcendentally given by Jacques Derrida in his work, *Without Alibi*; “The possibility of the impossible the “play” of a certain excess in relation to any mechanical movement, oriented process, path traces in advance, or teleological program), would be the very condition of the step [pas], or even the experience of pathbreaking, route, march, decision, event: the coming of the other, in sum, or writing and desire.”

It is Derrida’s humble and brilliant suggestion that brings forth the possibility of play, as part-of or within, “the path-breaking”. Deeper still, play is also the path-breaker, the divergent to the gender-structure and the very intention of the deviation.

Deviation in grunge, takes on a very intentional, yet improvisational style. Deviation is a multi-sensory externality that alludes *Signs*, but rejects “Husserl’s expression [as simply and simulacrally as] exteriorization.” Instead, *Meaning* is derived from the state-of-play and engages with its audience at “the risk of being caught up in a

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74 Ibid, xvii.

system of constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions. In this manner, the deviation in grunge is dangerous, because it has the potential to buttress the very gender identity pillars that it intends to rebel against. Danger is not strictly instilled in a sense of divergency, but in the traditional nature of aporia as an irresolvable internal contradiction or logical disjunction in a text, argument, or theory. This is play. It is the performative expression, in sight and in sound, of the textual, the emotional, the psychological; as reactives, purveyors, and perpetrators of socio-cultural and socio-political structures in the late 1980s and early 1990s, to be cauterized and later popularized throughout the decade through the music of grunge.

**Speech**

*Notes on play, Lyrics, and Images*

*Because its gender fuck, man, that’s why. It’s mixing it up, it’s the androgyny, you’re straddling the lines. You’re being a girl, but you’re being a boy. A tomboy is a strong girl. Why does society seem to have a problem with strong women, women who know what they want, and don’t have to ask “Can I do this?”*

- Joan Jett on being a tomboy

*play in Speech*

Speech, in music and musical performance, has an important interrelationship with the voice of the artist. As we have examined the physical manipulation of the vocal chords through play to queer sound, so too the voice plays with speech, to induce queered meanings. In that play, artists are directly confronting and fucking with “ the

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cultural configurations of binary (masculine/feminine) genders.” As Judith Butler states, these cultural configurations have an implied unification of gender identity associated with them.

The ‘unity’ of gender is the effect of a regulatory practice that seeks to render gender identity uniform through a compulsory heterosexuality. The force of this practice is, through an exclusionary apparatus of production, to restrict the relative meanings of “heterosexuality,” “homosexuality,” and “bisexuality” as well as the subversive sites of their convergence and resignification.

In the speech of first Punk and then grunge, the restrictive apparatus of conventional gender norms are continuously rejected and rewritten in performance. They are counter-culture stages of intervention and revolution that acknowledge Foucault’s ideas of social discipline as “punishment as power scaffolds of complex social functions and political tactic” and conduct counter-attacks. Monitored and repressed binary gender constructions of society become “ambiguous” and in this arena are performed as ambiguities. The result is an unpressed sexuality and gender display that is amplified, and valued, producing a distinct feministic expression that is infused within lyrics and imagery.

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79 Ibid., 43-44.


With Speech, words, allusionary images, and instruments enter into play and are performed within and through “ex-pression”\textsuperscript{82}. The playing of instruments, the deployment of lyrics through the vocal chords, and the method of musicological performance with drums, bass, and guitars intersect and conjoin to enhance the \textit{Voice} within Speech. This phenomenological theory of ex-pression and exteriorization is inspired by Jacques Derrida’s exploration of Husserl’s ideas and is in experimentation with the ideas expressed in “Meaning as Soliloquy”. “Where we see and encounter ex-pression, it is an intersession, or lapse between a primordial intention and an exteriorization between the sub-conscious, the conscious, and the exterior of the consciousness, as interpreted by whatever audience (presumed) is listening.”\textsuperscript{83} We discover and relish “exteriorization”\textsuperscript{84} as the stage where the aporia of play creates sounds, textures, and vibrations that intertwine and improvise themselves, inducing speech that can be compounded within its own natural origin and creation in the present moment, and carried on to future exteriorizations. Speech becomes both the factory and the display case for gender subversion in that the multiplicity and complexity of the components involved, manufactured (instruments), physical, biological, sexual, and gendered have found a space to converse and to improvise, in an audial and visual exhibition. \textbf{Speech} designates a \textit{social location} (borrowing from Smith-Rosenberg) and vantage point (borrowing from Walker) from which expression can produce culture. For


\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., 3.

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 3.
grunge feminism, speech is aimed at creating a smeared and sloppy depiction of the social distortion of gender. Grunge’s expression is unique, an improvisational abject of binary gender constructions and their associated expectations. Speech in grunge is a power point of deformative aesthetics that is attacking dress codes, gendered behaviors, and sexual identities. Speech penetrates the socio-cultural norms, by its hypertextual ability to improvise between the physical body (including the physical voice) and written language. In this manner it disassociates itself from traditional social locations in rock and in gender, illuminating a vantage point that is a gender continuum.

Queered speech in grunge, as performed in spoken word or as conversation with the audience, has the power to subvert hegemonic structures. Mimi Schippers’ study of the grunge scene in Chicago demonstrated that “alternative rockers, particularly Courtney Love, expressed blurred sexual desires and practices- in some cases even rendered meaningless the lines between heterosexual and homosexual despite an overall norm of heterosexual identities represented.” Schippers in her work, highlighted a particularly moment of Courtney Love interacting with the audience in queered speech; “Courtney asks the crowd: ”Guess Who I’m fucking?” ..answering that she’s fucking Drew Barrymore: “I’m not a lesbian, “I’m only a part-time muff-muncher”.

Through that dialogue and similar speech, Schippers asserts that “female grunge rockers undermine male dominance through reproduction of sexual identities in their talk.” Love queers herself into a homosexual state, as to be a lesbian, but also queers


86 Ibid., 759-760.

87 Ibid., 759-760.
herself into a heterosexual guy who is bragging that he is fucking a heterosexual girl. The identity of the traditional male heterosexual rocker making sexual comments and gendered stances through his performance is devalued with her speech. In this way, grunge emasculates rock as a pillar of masculinity.

The speech of grunge feminism not only queers itself, but also utilizes images to perform gender rebellion; images that are associated with commercial constructions in mainstream culture and that utilize sexual stereotypes attached to masculine and feminine identities. Speech liberally uses culturally available symbols and normative concepts of gender to produce new imagery of deformance. Gender is distorted into cultural extremes by use of misogynistic vocabulary, Camping, and queering creating a rhetoric that has a lot of moving parts. The messaging is heavy and witty, offering up an anti-archetype of feminism, gender, and sexuality.

Gender is a commodity within the capitalist structure, that is reliant on a uniform identity, as Butler mentioned. The capitalist gender commodity relies on hyper-sexualizing the female gender, “paralyzing the female’s activity and behavior” in accordance with the “acceptable”. In direct opposition to this is the disobedient woman; the female that won’t be contained. Natalie Zemon Davis was one of the first scholars to connect carnival culture (in her study of France) to female rebellion to patriarchy, with her work *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975). Mary Celeste Kearney cites Davis’ work to emphasize the importance of counter hegemonic practices that are

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outside acceptable societal norms of behavior and to connect Punk culture to carnival culture.

“The image of the disorderly woman did not always function to keep women in their place. On the contrary, it was a multivalent image that could operate, first, to widen behavioral options for women within and even outside marriage, and second, to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest. Play with the unruly woman is partly a chance for temporal release from the traditional and stable hierarchy; but it is also part of the conflict over efforts to change the basic distribution of power within society.”

For Davis and Kearney, “the unruly woman” becomes a political figure, operating outside the constraints of acceptable female behavior. We should look at this unruly behavior and disheveled appearance of carnival culture as exaggerated to the level of a freakshow. What is a freakshow? It is a confrontation between the acceptable and the aesthetically pleasing; it is a circus that showcases the rebellious and the grotesque. In fact, the essence of grotesque itself is rebellion enough, but the freak show is that much more of an animated gender fuck, queering itself into a destructive limb of the beautiful. What could be more freakish than a woman who isn’t a woman. Think of the cliche sideshow of the bearded lady for example; A woman, performing as a man, doing “masculine” things creating a rhetoric of gender anarchy. It produces a grotesque and fascinating performance. This is the particular aesthetic that Punk embraces.

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Punk feminism that emerged out of the Punk movement in the 1970s in the U.S. was a subversion of the binary gender identities that the U.S. media perpetually created...
for females and feminism. These Punk feminists were outside of the gendered culture of feminism. Kearney relays that in the 1970s,

“the youth cultures of punk resisted heterocentric and consumerist dynamics of patriarchal femininity that limited girls' cultural practices and confined them to the domestic sphere. Indeed, while numerous young women of this era found women’s culture a supportive site in which to express themselves, many nonconformist female youth felt excluded from feminist agendas and discussions because of their age, race, class, and sexuality.”92

Punk feminism was more akin to Punk aesthetics and politics, which was aggressive, masculine, and at times androgynous, but not feminine. In this way, Punk feminism was defining a counter-culture feminism to mainstream feminism of the time. Feminist Cultural Historian Lucy O’Brien, who Kearney cites often, believes that “punk provided the perfect opportunity…it reacted against, yet at the time re-defined 1960s feminism.”93

What was there to be redefined about feminism? Susan J. Douglas, in her book Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female in the Mass Media (1994) indicts “the media representation of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s as reinforcing the division between the acceptable, and the deviant, between the refined and the grotesque, between the deserving ladies and disorderly dogs.”94 She goes further by stating that,

the false dichotomy that was created helped to reaffirm, more than ever, the importance of female attractiveness to female success, and the utter folly of taking to the streets. Even as the media accelerated the spread of the women’s movement throughout the country, it stunted the movement’s


93 Ibid, 40.

most liberatory potential, a handicap that cripples all of us, women, and men alike to this day.

The rampant contradictions that were created by both the media’s coverage of feminist activism and its objectification of its participants, created a “cultural-schizophrenia.”

The media, for Douglas, is guilty of supporting feminism and in the same breath objectifying the women activists. She notes,

“...by mocking and dismissing the way feminist activists looked and behaved, and by marginalizing many of their critiques of society, the media also endorsed the notion that in some cases female subordination and sexual objectification were not only fine but desirable. In one moment, the media exhorted women to be equal and active; in the next, they urged them to be subordinate and passive.”

Gloria Steinem reflected on these rampant contradictions that existed in 1995 expressing, “the popular stereotype of a feminist gradually excluded any woman who enjoyed sex, or even looked sexual.” She also illuminated the pitfall of the patriarchal archetype and the binary gender foundation of feminism by stating that, “a male dominate culture makes dominance so synonymous with sex that those who reject the first are seen as rejecting the second.”

Considering that the positions of power in the media during the 1960s and 1970s remained mostly white and heterosexual and male, the accusations of Steinem and Douglas work together to support the notion that the patriarchal power structure that needed the most adjustment, was the very platform that


96 Ibid., 8.

97 Ibid., 189.

was publicizing the women’s movement through its newscasts and producing entertainment that was an antithetical view of women, in how they should look (pretty and attractive) and how they should behave (be submissive, not aggressive or angry).

As Douglas mentions often in her work, television in the 1970s perpetuated a hyper-sexualized female ideal. The images produced reinforced an anti-feminist agenda with shows like *Charlie’s Angels* (1976-1981)\(^9\) and *The Bionic Woman* (1976-1978)\(^1\), Lynda Carter as *Wonder Woman* (1975-1979)\(^1\) displayed pin-up worthy females, with skills, but not militant feminists. It’s the combination of the hyper-sexualization of the female body that was present due to an amplification of male heterosexual backlash to the women’s movement. *Playboy* had been around since 1953, yet had gained unfavorable notoriety with feminists after Gloria Steinem’s famous expose of the Playboy Club in New York City, “A Bunny’s Tale”(Part I and II)\(^2\), published in *Show Magazine* in May 1963, where she went undercover as “a bunny”. A few years later we see the importation of *Penthouse* in 1969, the successful mainstreaming of pornography in 1972 with *Deep Throat*, and the first issue of *Hustler* in 1974. Coupled with the complication of women, who were pushing against the Women’s Liberation Movement and the Equal Rights Amendment, namely Phyllis Schafly, “mainstream media became


obsessed with the differences between women, emphasizing all the things that kept women divided and apart.”

The media’s creation of differences between women is the reinscription of gendered and sexualized imagery and expectations pitted against those militants in the movement, but ultimately categorizing feministic expressions into acceptable and non-acceptable visual forms. Douglas states,

“With the women’s movement cast as a bizarre carnival, filled with disorderly, parading women-freaks of nature-in forbidding, scary masks, bursting into previously peaceful, harmonious male enclaves, it is not surprising that questions of imposture would arise. By refusing or failing to conform to prevailing notion of prettiness and demureness, these women sought to gain strength from such defiance. But this failure was used against women deemed grotesque; if a woman wasn’t attractive to men, then she could not be a leader of women.”

In this realm, women become prisoners to their gender, and lose their voice.

The carnival of the unruly and the ugly would become a new social location for counter-culture to create a feminism. The unruly woman, as a social outcast wasn’t bound by gender constrictions of appearance and speech, and therine lies the power of punk.

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104 Ibid, 230.

Riot Grrrl

A severe chasm within feminism occurred in the 1980s furthering Punk feminism’s prolific rise. Judith Butler attributes the schism within feminism at the time to “the anti-pornography movement through and the discourse on victimization in feminist politics, where positions of gender (man and woman) were strictly correlated with

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106 PDF of original page from ack-ack grrrl, April 1999. © jaime, nicole, britton, meghan, amity and Professor Mary Kelley of Women’s Studies. Published in San Diego, CA at San Diego State University. Obtained from SDSU Special Collections.
positions of domination or subordination within sexuality.” The 1980s saw a further growth of feminist scholarship in the form of new journals, the creation of the Pembroke Center for Teaching and Research at Brown University, and more Women’s Studies Departments. However, as Kearney notes, “most of the female youth associated with punk during the 1980s became educated in feminist theory, but found it difficult to connect the ideologies, practices, and aesthetics privileged by feminists during that period with their subculture scenes.”

This unique feminist climate produced by the media in the 1980s, which Susan J. Douglas calls a “feminist rhetoric of narcissism and indulgence”, fostered the search for many Punk feminists to find ways of expressing their socio-cultural and political views, away from Reaganomics and a seemingly profuse capitalistic structure. Kearney states “in the face of commercial culture that reinforced female complacency and consumption over assertiveness and production, many of the young women involved in the formation of Riot Grrrl directly and forcefully challenged girls to be culturally and politically active.” Riot Grrrl feminism and its speech was something completely different, lacking the gender behavior and aesthetics controls of mainstream media it offered a true alternative to mainstream feminist speech.

In 1991, Kathleen Hanna was studying photography at Evergreen State University in Olympia, Washington and was continually being banned from displaying

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110 Ibid, 61.
her work because of its graphic content. Kathleen, a self-proclaimed feminist was striving to find a place where her voice could be heard and to create a supportive space for women to come together and talk about personal topics, such as domestic violence, rape, abortion, misogyny, and being queer evolved her photographic work into spoken-word performances. One of her most recognized, and thankfully recorded, performances is titled, “In the Middle of the Night in My House”. In this piece, Kathleen depicts an unwanted encounter with a male in her house, in her bed. The piece evokes self-doubt, blame, and the denial of her male attacker (spoken in the background) which attempts to silence her voice.

Click here to view Kathleen Hanna’s spoken word performance of “Middle of the Night in My House”

That same year, Kathleen Hanna was inspired by feminist-writer, punk-poet and activist Kathy Acker, to transform her spoken word performances into music. “I discovered Kathy Acker …and I went to this workshop that she did and she told me, ‘why do you wanna write’, and I told her because nobody has listened to me in my whole life..and then she said, ‘why are you doing spoken word, you should be in a band, nobody goes to see spoken word’, so I went home and I started a band.” The result of that conversation was the formation of the punk band Bikini Kill in 1991. The only instrument that Kathleen Hanna admitted that she could play at that time, was her voice.


112 Kathleen Hanna, “In The Middle Of Night in My House” Spoken Word Video [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odPLi4SVdkE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=odPLi4SVdkE), Jul. 10, 2008. An abbreviated and edited version of this performance is also found in *The Punk Singer*, IFC and Sundance Selects, 2013.

113 Kathleen Hannah, *The Punk Singer*, IFC and Sundance Selects, 2013
Hanna’s expression of play in speech, is based upon the foundation of reclaiming “girl-hood” and creating new ideas of “femininity” that reinforce female bonds of friendship and avenues of power that aren’t created by heterosexual and male structures of patriarchy and misogyny.\(^\text{114}\) Her Riot Grrrl Manifesto, written in 1991 and published in the zine *Revolution Style Girl Now* emanates that declaration. It is a declaration of freedom from: female essentialisms, capitalism, gender and racial discrimination, and sexual repression. There are sixteen statements in all, that seek to overturn the unrecognized and unappreciated power of girls and women, particularly through artistic expression. The connection made to Punk Rock in the manifesto is clearly stated, and can be viewed as a proclamation of girl-rights of establishment to male Punk values and music.

These two lines in particular embody the soul of a musicians' movement to overthrow two previous feminist movements that were solidly rooted in socio-political and economic agendas.

\[
\text{BECAUSE we are unwilling to falter under claims that we are reactionary 'reverse sexists' AND NOT THE TRUE PUNK ROCK SOUL CRUSADERS THAT WE KNOW we really are.}
\]

\[
\text{BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock "you can do anything" idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.}^{115}
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In the brief clip of *Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna: The Riot Grrrl Manifesto* from Bicephaly Pictures, Hanna proclaims that angry expression through rebellion is the “only way to save the psyche and culture of girls and women.”\(^{116}\) Click here to view.

The speech of Riot Grrrl is heavily influenced by American Punk’s gender-rebellion aesthetics and gender-paradox rhetoric and is reflected in their Zines. Kearney notes that “grrrl zinesters demonstrate the influence of poststructuralist feminism through their recognition of the social construction of sex and gender and rehearsals of nontraditional identities in the pages of their texts.”\(^{117}\) The post-structuralist form that is evident in Riot Grrrl’s work is an influence from the French counter-hegemonic political artists, The Situationist International. The Situationists, formed in the 1950s and inspired by the work of the Dadaists, created political expressions through collages, assemblages, photo-montages, and ready-made artifacts. These works would be publicly displayed, in order to jostle political temperance. “The Situationists developed a political philosophy based on participatory action that encouraged each citizen to launch her or his own critique of dominant political and economic regimes and the material reality of everyday life, an ethos that later became known as “do it yourself” (DIY).”\(^{118}\) As we look at the materiality that Punk and Riot Grrrl Feminism created in the form of the *Zine*, the aesthetics of the Situationalists can’t be ignored as we look at this page from *NOT YOUR BITCH* (1994).

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\(^{118}\) Ibid., 157.
Image 3.

Ransom Print: *Defines a volume to the phrases in the print; almost like the words would be a protest chant, a cat call, or yelling.*

Body Image: *Is at the literal center of the page, and the center of the argument—the unattainable dieted body that has been withered away attempting to fulfill unrealistic (Barbie) expectations. Conveying an alliance with mainstream feminism over constructed body image and women’s health in general.*

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119 PDF of original page from *Not Your Bitch*, Issue 2. October 2, 1994, © Peg Keil. Published in Denver, Colorado. Obtained from Special Collections SDSU.
Media: There are multiple book and magazine covers accusing the media of perpetuating a visual stereotype of femalehood.

Gender: The intentional deconstruction of the word “women” and “woman” into WOMYNHOOD, WIMMIN, WOMYN, This denotes an alliance to queer identities and a rejection of The Heterosexual Matrix signifiers of what a woman is.

Sex and Sexuality: This zine is denouncing the media myth of skinny = sexy. Instead skinny is associated with women trying to BE sex objects. There are body parts such as: Legs (*mentioned several times), flat stomach, and washboard stomach. All the words relate to a woman being “thin”, the binary opposite of “ugly”-instead this zine promotes strength of being a “womyn”-not someone who buys into the myth.

The Zines are constructed with handiwork, such as cutting and pasting, and xeroxing. The typeface that is created (and cut from somewhere else) is typewriter print. They have handwriting that is used to deface clipped media work, but also to write diary-like entries that are soliloquy, but invite participation from the reader. They are deeply personal like a diary: “images are encoded by their technologies of production and embody the qualities of the media in which they exist. These qualities are part of the images’s information.”\(^{120}\) The Situationists are conveying ideas of capitalism…by photocopying, cutting, defacing and committing acts of “deformance” the original image serves to deface its original values and express the abject of those values and ideals.

Zines create a feminist dialogue by inviting conversations and comments to made in the zines themselves. In this process, feminism is continually challenged and recreated organically and in a very intimate setting. The dialogues are personal; personal stories yes, but they also contain personalized speech; speech that is created in the Zine and becomes a dialect of Riot Grrrl feminism. It is a way of exploring

feminisms and finding expression. Gloria Steinem described her own experience coming to feminism;

In my generation, we came to feminism as adults. Our revelations came from listening to one another’s very different lives, discovering shared themes, realizing we were neither crazy nor alone, and evolving theories as peers. The result was a long and organic process that felt like rebirth, as if we were inventing ourselves and feminism.\textsuperscript{121}

The zine itself is a dialectic visual experience of feminist speech; speech that can be recognized in other forms of grunge, such as gig flyers.

The gig flyer below, drawn by Courtney Love in 1992, shares glaring similarities with the zines such as copying and pasting and xeroxing. There is noticeable graffiti placed on the two bodies with political messaging, a goddess symbol, and simple drawing on the hand (like someone who do to themselves in study-hall). It is easy to assume that this is a heterosexual couple, but we don’t have a clear view of the face or dress of one of the individuals so the reader, or concert goer, can assume what they please. Love has also given us inner soliloquy bubbles, “fuck” and “kill” inserting heterosexual gender subversion by giving the violence to the female form. At the top of the flyer, Courtney Love has written a diary entry where she muses about the biblical usage of the “flesh” becoming the “word” of god; “when man finds god his bones are picked clean….”I am a lean and hungry \( [\text{hyena}] \)...I go forth to fatten myself”.

This grunge deformance flyer is clearly more than just a handbill for a concert (even though it does give that information). Courtney Love is expressing her religious views and equating body image as either a predator (hyena) or as a victim (being clean

\textsuperscript{121} Rebecca, Walker in \textit{To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism}. Rebecca Walker, ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), xviii.
and godly). She also inserts doll imagery from a clipping in the corner, again demonstrating a soliloquy of the body in intellectual, the physical and sexual form of the couple, and perhaps in the commercially molded form of the doll or doll-like child in the corner, which has its own doll.

Image 4.

Notes on Lyrics

Kurt *Smells Like Teen Spirit* Man

When Kathleen Hanna drunkenly spray painted “Kurt Smells Like Teen Spirit Man”, on Kurt Cobain’s apartment wall, Kurt had no idea what she was referring too. He didn’t know Teen Spirit was a female deodorant. In the play of Kurt Cobain, those graffitied words became an inspiration to combat the overly rhymed and dramatized lyrics that hair-metal bands had popularized in the 1980s, as well as commercialized gender identities that imprison youth into binary categories.

In the gender aporia of grunge, a random act inspires more random speech, that purposely disconnect meaning from expression. David Fricke of *Rolling Stone* asked Cobain specifically about the line “Here we are now entertain us” in 1994. Cobain said, “That came from something I used to say every time I used to walk into a party to break the ice. A lot of times, when you’re standing around with people in a room, its really boring and uncomfortable. So it was, ‘well here we are, entertain us. You invited us here.”

*Smells Like Teen Spirit* Audio

“Load up on guns and bring your friends
It’s fun to lose and to pretend
She’s over-bored and self-assured
Oh no, I know a dirty word

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Hello, hello, hello, how low.
Hello, hello, hello, how low.
Hello, hello, hello, how low.

With the lights out, it's less dangerous
Here we are now, entertain us
I feel stupid and contagious
Here we are now, entertain us

A mulatto, an albino
A mosquito, my libido
Yeah, hey, yay”125

The speech of the lyrics also suggest sound play in order to combat rhyming and confuse the message. The sound image that is created from “Hello” produces the effect of “Hallow” and “Hollow”, further dislocating the sacred (or hallowed) as merely “Hollow” (or shallow); unworthy of being worshipped.

In examining the play in lyrics in alternative rock, and particularly grunge, it is important to consider that sexuality and gender are separate identities that are expressed as mutually exclusive deployments of gender-rebellion. Sociologist Mimi Schippers126 and queer musicology theorists such as Philip Brett note in their works how important it is to separate sexuality and gender, in order to view the intersectionality that occurs in music. “Brett invokes an antiessentialist approach to studying sexuality

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and homosexuality and cites David Halperin’s interpretation of Foucault’s body of work in sexuality and feminism criticism of gender.”¹²⁷ Halperin expounds that

Foucault detached ‘sexuality’ from the physical and biological sciences (just as feminists had detached ‘gender’ from the facts of anatomical sex, of somatic dimorphism) and treated it, instead, as ‘the set of effects produced in bodies, behaviors, and social relations by a certain deployment’ of ‘a complex political technology.’ He divorced ‘sexuality’ from ‘nature’ and interpreted it, instead, as a cultural production.¹²⁸

Schippers notes in her work that “conceptualizing sexuality at multiple levels of analysis produced a more robust understanding of how hegemony and resistance operated in the subculture of alternative rock to subvert binary power structures and sexism present in mainstream rock.”¹²⁹

By separating gender and sexuality, play is given a more dynamic field of interpretation, especially when analyzing lyrics. If we generously intersect “the voice” into this arena, we can appreciate the Sapphonic influence in lyrics and hear “a sound that is characteristically powerful and problematic, defiant and defective.”¹³⁰ Elizabeth Wood’s taxonomy of the Sapphonic can be induced into the state of play that erupts, vibrates, and reverberates within and between sexuality and gender. “This is a flexible negotiation and integration of an exceptional range of registers that crosses boundaries…challenging polarities of both gender and sexuality as these are socially


¹²⁸ Ibid., 9.


and vocally constructed.”\textsuperscript{131} The path-breaking dynamic of the state of play between gender and sexuality, is a deviating rhythm-structure that can convey a continuum of sexual and gender identities, directly subverting socially-constructed ideas of sexuality connected to gender.

It is important to note as we diverge into lyrical composition and poetic interpretation of lyrics, that Sappho was a poet herself “who from time to time in her legacy disturbed the strong patriarchal tradition and Christian bias by invoking homoeroticism.”\textsuperscript{132} Just as Courtney Love and Kathleen Hanna as well as third-wave feminist writers express themselves in ways that attract lightning rod attention, so too, “the tenth muse has been celebrated, segregated, ultra-feminized, and demonized throughout history.”\textsuperscript{133} As these next transversals explore samplings of grunge feminism through the lyrics of Courtney Love in Asking For It, Rebecca Walker’s written account of her outrage, and Kathleen Hanna’s Suck My Left One, notice how play is fully deployed as a sarcastic and tragic medium in which words occur within the consciousness of expression, and without it. Also observe, how sexuality and gender are deployed mutually exclusively at times by Love and Hanna and how by utilizing this continuum they are subverting the male recipients that Walker encounters.


\textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 416.
“Asking For It” deploys gender-fucking\textsuperscript{136} by using the author of the lyrics, who is the narrator as; an object of male-gendered heterosexual misogyny and abuse; the
heterosexual male-gendered and sexually stimulated perpetrator; and as the internal female gender conducting a heterosexual soliloquy.

“Every time that I sell myself to you”; implies sexual relationship that Love has with a guy. Whether she is having sex for money or not, but “selling” herself she may or may not be receiving something in return for the actions.

“I feel a little bit cheaper than I need to”: relates the shaming that females put on themselves regarding sex, but also the name-calling and slut-shaming that other females and males project onto girls who have sex.

“Was she asking for it? Was she asking nice? Yeah, she was asking for it Did she ask you twice?”; the chorus is a scathing accusation of rape, mimicking a misogynist and heterosexualized perspective of women that “ask for it” by behaving in certain ways, wearing provocative clothing, etc. Love is breaking down the perpetuating male-ego dialogue that sees women bodies and behavior as disposable sexual objects.

Courtney Love is expressing her outrage in these lyrics, much like Rebecca Walker proclaimed her anger over men’s behavior towards women in her article, “Becoming The Third Wave”. In this excerpt, Walker shares her experience of being a female who is sexualized and misogynized on the train to the New York.

Two men get on the train and sit directly behind me. Loudly they begin to talk about women. ‘Man, I fucked that bitch all night and then I never called her again.’
‘Man, there’s lots of girlies over there, you know that ho. Well, I snatched that shit up.’…Another man gets on the train. After exchanging greetings with the other two he sits next to me. He tells them he is going to visit his wife and child. I am suckered into thinking he is different. Then ‘Man, there’s a ton of females in Philly, just waitin’ for you to give ‘em some.’ I turn my head and allow the fire in my eyes to burn into him. He senses something. ‘What’s your name, sweetheart?’ The other men lean forward over the seat. A torrent explodes. “I ain’t your sweetheart, I ain’t your bitch. I ain’t you baby. How dare you have the nerve to sit up here and talk about women that way, and then try to speak to me?’ …The men are momentarily stunned. Then the comeback; ‘Aw, bitch, don’t play that woman shit over here ‘cause that’s bullshit’. I refuse to back down. Words fly.137

Rebecca Walker’s explosive confrontation that she wrote as an experience piece and Courtney Love’s lyrical tirade are attempting to deliver the exact same message to misogynist heterosexual men. The message is identifying these males as enemies to all women, and to vivisect their beliefs in a way that will express their anger, confront them directly and not back down. This is a rebellion, a *Riot Grrrl* revolution. It is not staying silent on the train and letting the discourse continue. This is an abrupt and unexpected interruption that signifies an end to complacency and a willingness to enter a physical fight. There isn’t any backing down, from Walker or from Love. This is the end of putting up with the old script that confronted issues in a second-wave political manner. It is the flip of that script, signifying a new way of acknowledging feminism, and what feminism can look like and act like, and it embracing, to an extent, male-gendered qualities of aggression.

Bikini Kill’s *Suck My Left One*, like *Asking For It*, deploys gender-fucking through a female author/narrator who has deliberately queered herself to subvert male-gendered heterosexual, sexual abuse. Here again, the female author conducts soliloquy in reference to socially-constructed gender behavior norms and inverts the script of intense male-gendered heterosexual behavior into a dichotomy between heterosexual gender norms and queer norms.

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*138 Suck My Left One*.139 Audio

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139 Metrolyrics.com “Suck My Left One Lyrics” http://www.metrolyrics.com/suck-my-left-one-lyrics-bikini-kill.html
Sister Sister, where did we go wrong?
Tell me what the fuck we’re doing here
Why are all the boys acting strange?
We’ve got to show them we’re worse than queer
SUCK MY LEFT ONE SUCK MY LEFT one
Daddy comes into her room at night
He’s got more than talking on his mind
My sister pulls the covers down
She reaches over, flicks on the light
She says to him: SUCK MY LEFT ONE
SUCK MY LEFT One
Mama says:
You have got to be polite girl
You have got to be polite
Show a little respect for you Father
Wait until your Father gets home
Fine fine Fine fine Fine fine Fine Fine

“Sister Sister, where did we go wrong?”; Hanna embraces the audience in a queer way, and also conducts soliloquy into her own experience of shaming.

“Why are all the boys acting strange? We’ve got to show them we’re worse than queer”; The word “strange” here isn’t demonizing homosexuality, but in fact, condemning heterosexual males. Hanna, declares in this stanza that she is going to be “worse than queer”, meaning what would be worse for a heterosexual male to encounter than homosexual behavior, such a sexual advance?!

“SUCK MY LEFT ONE SUCK MY LEFT one”; This line is deployed as a heterosexual male would use this vernacular, implying that the person they are in opposition with, should suck their left testicle. Hanna, a heterosexual female, has just queered herself into a heterosexual male to invert the power structure of the male gender.

“Show a little respect for you Father
Wait until your Father gets home
Fine fine Fine fine Fine fine Fine Fine”; Here Hanna mimics her “mother”, and the ideals of women who are either too naive to realize that they are being subjugated by their culture that they’ve bought into, and are anti-feminists. This line is coming after Hanna has just fought off the incestuous advances of her father. The juxtaposition allows for a dramatic reveal of how blind gender constructions are. Hanna’s response is a child-like “fine” where we can see here stomping off somewhere (not to her room).
The notion of *Soliloquy* is one of singularity, and understood as internal dialogue, in a natural sense. Influencing that notion, is an artistic desire, to express that dialogue, ideas, and feelings whether to enhance community understanding, or to directly assault discourses that fall in opposition in to the *Soliloquy*. A fluctuating state can be discovered in the moment of expression, of shared experience, and that of deliberate confusion and alienation and this interregnum will hold to that idea. *Soliloquy*, as we have observed in third-wave feminism lyrics, is a particularly effective weapon of play, to perform heterosexual gender subversion. By creating lyrics that act as speaking thoughts and reflections aloud, more relational connections can be made that overthrow gender and sexuality constraints. The intersection of gender and sexuality in *soliloquy* is one avenue by which heterosexually identified females can drag themselves into new sexual personas that fluctuate back and forth. This practice will continue to be reproduced as gender-rebellion imagery is added through speech, technique, the body, and performance.

**Images**

“BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodieism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives.”

*The Riot Grrrl Manifesto*

This excerpt from the *Riot Grrrl Manifesto* creates a representation of how visuals and visualizations represent rebellion concepts in Riot Grrrl feminism, and how images, imagery, speech, music, and DIY are all connected. It is not just the socio-cultural and

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140 “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto”, by Kathleen Hanna.
political constructed icons of race, age, class, body, sex, and gender, but also their imagery that must be destroyed. By creating fanzines and interacting with sounds and visuals that represented reclaimed “girlhood” and disseminated ideas of sexuality and gender, Riot Grrrls were able to represent and share their feministic values. In the creating of this fanzine culture, became an intertwined relationship with imagery. Images aren’t limited to a two-dimensional realm of experience, but take on new meaning as interconnections of gender and sexuality in play.

*Queering Dress Codes/Creating an Anti-Archetype*

Like Riot Grrrl, grunge Feminism uses visualizations to challenge gender norms. The aesthetics of that rebellion that come to mind for most is the clothing code for grunge...lots of flannel and lots of plaid. For many artists of the time, this is also how they remember grunge. The post-punk artist Phranc, who collaborated with Patty Schmel from Hole on her album *Goofy Foot*, reflected,

> To me, the grunge movement was all about fashion, and you know where the grunge movement took all their fashion from...the Lesbians. There’s the line. You want to draw the line, you go all the way to the 1970s Lesbians and right to the grunge movement...I mean the chains, the the flannel shirts, that whole ensemble it’s Lesbian feminist fashion is what it is. \(^{141}\)

Phranc brings up a very interesting gender and sexual dynamic to the flannel shirts, which I correlate to a “Butch” identity with Lesbianism. Janine Delombard, in her essay “Femmenism", describes being butch as “someone who exudes confidence, authority, independence, and a certain sexual cockiness.”\(^{142}\) I like to be inclusive with Phranc's

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definition with the observation that everyone from straight guys to queer girls (except Courtney Love) performed in a Butch Lesbian attire. If we remember Kurt Cobain’s interview with *Rolling Stone* on how he couldn’t relate to the “manly men” who were his fans, coupled with the fact that the grunge scene as a whole originated out of Seattle, Olympia, and Aberdeen, Washington where the logging industry was prominent, Cobain’s costume of multiple plaid shirts could be considered subversive to a very particular masculinity originating in the Pacific Northwest (but he was also just trying to look bigger than he was).

The speech that grunge dress codes, like flannel and chains and boots, was subverting was the sexual archetype’s associated with traditional binary gender roles. Heterosexual women dressed up as masculine men or Butch Lesbians was queering the acceptable narrative of what was acceptable in rock, as well as society. In looking at dress codes, Angela King’s work “Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body” examines how disciplinary power is inflicted upon females in modern society to conform to ridiculous beauty standards, in which some fashion and beauty practices manipulate, train, and mark the female body. She suggests that femininity, is a discipline that produces bodies and identities and operates and effective form of social control.\(^{143}\) While I agree with her thesis statement, I argue that dressing and marking the body abjectively is a way of rebelling *against* the female gender. King says, “Female styles over the years have also served to confirm myths about woman: as duplicitous, over-sexualized temptress; delicate and weak or narcissistic, frivolous and obsessed

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with trivialities: .” Conversely, the speech that is created through grunge is that female dress codes are not weak, but strong, rebellious, even when “feminine”. The screen-shot below from the *Smells Like Teen Spirit* video illustrates an abject depiction of a traditional americana scene of female cheerleaders in a high school gymnasium.

Image 5.

The cheerleaders’ bodies or movements are not the focal point of the video, nor are their faces displayed. They are anonymous; as opposed to having close-up shots of them to be admired. They are in black (not in school colors), and most noticeably they have an anarchy sign on their chests. The anarchy is against the popular, sexualized female cheerleader who follows the routine, and keeps with the group. These cheerleaders are moving to the music and they are doing it individualistically. Their hair

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is not “done”. In fact there is no effort to preening here. Some “head-bang” so much that their hair falls down around their face indicating that the music that they hear and how they relate to it, is more important than being a cheerleader or a female. They have tattoos. This is important. Again, this is abject speech, declaring to the audience that they “adorn” or “mark” their bodies as they see fit to be individuals, not “pretty”. The tattoos, the anarchy symbol, their hair, and their black outfits all signify that these are tough girls. They are not weak. They look like they could beat anybody up if they wanted to.

The speech that is created visually in grunge through dress codes, is an anti-archetype of femininity. Courtney Love engages in this anti-archetype performance through her own Kinder Whore persona, which I look at closely in The Body. Other male and female artists of grunge, engage in Lesbian dress codes, but also use writing, whether written on the body, or printed on a t-shirt, to convey gender rebellion speech. The speech isn’t restricted in any sense, as we saw with the cheerleaders’ uniforms-in fact, the messaging of dress is deliberately intended to be a societal subversion.

Grunge’s subversive speech through mediated and live performance is rhetoric that is extremely familiar with American mass media and pop culture. It is also heavily influenced by the Do-it-yourself aesthetics of the French Situationists International from the 1950s that influenced 1970s British Punk aesthetics and the deformance style manifested in Riot Grrrls’ zines of the 1990s. The speech is a gender deformance, a collage of artistic expressions created materially and also transposed into the imagery and lyrics of songs, and dress codes. There is a lot going on at one time, whether you’re
observing an album cover, a music video, or simply a gig poster. The hypertextuality of grunge speech is contained in all.

Courtney Love’s Diary

“I’ve been a shoplifter and an activist and an asshole. What I really want out of this [diary] is for the reader to know how I experienced life and thus how I created songs.”

-Courtney Love

Courtney Love’s edited diary, Dirty Blonde, revealed very powerful imagery for her own exploration and experience with feminism, gender, and music. The diary contains excerpts of hand-written entries, emails, pictures, institutional documentation, bits of airplane tickets and passports, tour posters, and sketches. The diary contains entries dating back to 1968, when Courtney (Coco Rodriguez) was four and continues through 2006, when she is forty-two. Within that timeframe the reader is given a range of experiences from her attempt to audition for the Mickey Mouse Club in 1976 (and subsequently being rejected), to traveling to New Zealand to be with her father after the the divorce of her parents, to institutionalization at Hillcrest Academy in 1978 after her parents abandoned her. We get to follow Courtney’s travels and studies in Europe from Ireland in 1981, taking classes in Liverpool in 1982, going to Paris in 1984 and back in London in 1986 and 1987, before forming her band Hole in L.A. around 1988.

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147 “Courtney Love; VHI Behind the Music.” First broadcast June 22, 2010 (Season 12, Episode 4). copyright@mtvn.com. This video was viewed for the second time for this thesis on Vulture.com. “Courtney Love; VHI Behind the Music.” http://www.vulture.com/2010/06/watch_courtney_loves_behind_th.html Vulture.com. “Courtney Love; VHI Behind the Music.” http://www.vulture.com/2010/06/watch_courtney_loves_behind_th.html (accessed February 5, 2014). This website is no longer operative. Alternatively, this video can be accessed through Youtube in several parts at https://youtu.be/yu-5-r0tk2s. The video has been subtitled, so the original content may be altered. No other copyrighted distribution or production information is available about this film at this time.
courtship and relationship with Kurt Cobain are documented with family photos, love notes, and expressions of fear and grief. It is a roller-coaster deformance narrative which contains scribbles of lyrics, hopes, rants, and cries expressing everything from extreme pain and hopelessness to exuberant hope and determination. In its aspects of communicating feelings, the diary itself may not be completely unique in that diaries are inherently private confessions. What is unique about this private collection is that it demonstrates Courtney Love’s Derridian nature; her awareness of media and celebrity and her embrace of fame and her rejection of gender constraints. The diary itself deserves further scholarly examination as a gender deconstruction expression in material form.

**Hell & Wish**

You can’t pick up Courtney Love’s diary, even for a moment and not be affected. The cover and its pages are created in deformance (zine) style, with a mix of cultural symbols, gender paradox, and feminist expression. Within the speech that is produced are spaces of what I call “hell and wish”. These are juxtaposed actualities living in close quarters together, that at times contract each other, but never cancel each other out. Each exists with its own identity based in a historical reality and is driven from a place of brutal honesty and sincere vulnerability. There are hallucinogenic, psychological, emotional, and intellectual influences at play at any given moment interlaced with a desire to connect, to ridicule, to kill, and to love.

Courtney Love writes her lyrics from the private *hell and wish spaces* of her soul. Hate is intertwined with love, softness is juxtaposed with hardness, and fantasy is often
imprisoned in a dark reality. It is from these contradictory spaces that we find grunge feminism taking shape from Riot Grrrl feminism as an expression of Courtney Love’s life. From these depths of *hell and wish spaces* emerge fascinating feministic expression that are part of Courtney Love’s personal and musical biography.

Symbols and concepts of history, biology, religion, literature, and music form the main imagery components of Love’s personal feministic expression. The diary opens up a profusion of cultural symbols that have particular meaning for this grunge artist. On page 113 of the diary, Courtney has a page titled “Things that interest me”\(^\text{148}\) Some of the unique visual elements that emerge amidst a wide array of intellectual fascinations are: “Victoriana; Christianity/Catholicism; Romantic Intrigues; Punk Rock; Rock; Chick Musicians; Avante Garde Literature; and Biology.”\(^\text{149}\)

Connected to these interest points are individual symbols for Courtney that this project presumes to be intricately related to both biographical history and “interesting things”. One of these important symbols is the ballet dancer. Courtney had an early fascination with ballet and took lessons as a girl, which caused a fight with her mother who insisted on everything being gender neutral.\(^\text{150}\) On page 207 of her diary is a sketch of a ballet dancer that Courtney drew with the scribble “Nothing you do is ever what it


\(^{149}\) Ibid, 207.

seems; no part of you will ever be CLEAN. Ever been...ever be Clean.” The ballet dancer seems to have a direct connection into the identity of “good” females; females that are naive, follow the rules, follow the rules of the church, and possess an innocence of honesty and surrounding love. This symbol also has a connection to Courtney Love’s daughter, Frances Bean Cobain. She drew this figure after her daughter had been born and the image seems to have a protective quality. Juxtaposed to this page, are the words “DON’T EVER FUCK WITH MY DAUGHTER”.

If we consider the timing of the diary entry, the symbol, the interests, and then look into the lyrics and imagery in Hole’s song *Violet*, the ballet dancer can also hold a metaphor for something that is sacred, a female innocence; something that needs protecting. Courtney, who was abandoned and felt unprotected and unloved by her own mother, clearly has an aggressive desire to create a protective space for her daughter to experience life. The image below, from the beginning of the video depicts Courtney in a disheveled ballet gown on a stage with properly attired ballerinas leaping behind her. The carnival side show overtakes the formality and propriety associated with choreographed ballet performances.

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152 Ibid., 206.
Courtney Love also projects aggressiveness towards those who would invade or corrupt that space, and this is violent. Further validation for this claim is a *Rolling Stone* interview published in 1993 when Frances Bean was 15 months old. In that article Love stated, “There’s some kind of mother blood that just makes you want to buy firearms when you have a child....if somebody were to fuck with my child I would not hesitate to kill them.” Her aggressiveness and anger demonstrate a powerful paradox of love and hate from a mother who is physically creating her own revolution, just like a riot.

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grrrl, “...angry grrrl rock revolution which seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere...”\textsuperscript{155}

In 1991, Courtney wrote these lyrics in her diary;

\begin{quote}
“Above the boy  
put me somewhere Above  
the boy with all  
the candy in my hand  
i’ve seen it all before  
Still cry & beg for more

I will be here Watch  
the sky violet’i want it Again  
and violent more violent  
more violent  
and it comes to me  
as no surprise  
and i Looked at it  
Through your Twisted EYES

i wish my hands  
were Turning  
into Skylarks  

flying millions of them’’\textsuperscript{156}
\end{quote}

This entry is an apex moment of \textit{hell and wish spaces} depicting the hope of love within a distorted violent experience that is doomed to repeat itself. The exchange is so twisted, that the only means of escape is to fly away. This entry also introduces us to another of Courtney Love’s interests\textsuperscript{157}, Astronomy, through the use of “sky”, which is a means of hell as well as the hope of escape.

\textsuperscript{155} “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto”, by Kathleen Hanna.  


\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 113.
In the final version of *Violet’s* lyrics, we see imagery of Astronomy again represented by the “sky” and also the “stars”. These elements directly align with “Wish” spaces such as hope, but also offer empty promises. The fact that the sky is the color of “amethyst” in the beginning of the song, which traditionally is associated with love (according to various crystal mythologies) provides a backdrop of fantasy, but the “stars like little fish” seem to indicate that following this fantasy is a blind hope. Schools of fish don’t really have an individualistic direction, and Courtney ridicules the “fish”, or rather little girls for their behavior. She yells at them “to learn” that that path doesn’t provide what they think it does. Rather like going on an easter-egg hunt and instead of *real* eggs, grenades are painted and placed in their stead.

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**Violet**

*And the sky was made of amethyst*  
*And all the stars are just like little fish*  
*You should learn when to go*  
*You should learn how to say no*  
*Might last a day, yeah*  
*Mine is forever*  
*Might last a day, yeah*  
*Mine is forever*  

*They get what they want, they never want it again*  
*They get what they want, they never want it again*  
*Go on, take everything, take everything, I want you to*  
*Go on, take everything, take everything, I want you to*

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“They Get What They Want”: The chorus “they get what they want...they never want it again”, is a female rant against men, implying that their only desire is sex from women. Females are disposable in this realm, with the female body representing the token of monetary exchange. The value of the exchange isn’t correlated in the color of Amethyst (love), rather it is distorted into Violet, which is violent.

    And the sky was all violet
    I want it again but more violent, more violent
    I'm the one with no soul
    One above and one below
    Might last a day yeah
    Mine is forever
    Might last a day, yeah
    Mine is forever

“Violet”: With the strong image of the color of “Violet”, comes the depiction of a “bruise”, a physical wound that is the color of broken blood vessels, that has been deeply imbedded in the tissue of its victim. This is what love really is; not a fantasy or a fairytale, but a rude awakening, more like a nightmare. The chorus becomes a screaming rebellion against misogyny in all its disguises, most particularly “love”. The lyrics are a dare, of the most riskiest kind. It is a dare that puts the female body and emotions in jeopardy of being hurt, of being used, and perhaps not even making it out alive. Because of these attributes, this song can definitely be categorized as being a fight-song for grunge feminism themes, in its lyrical construction.
Hole’s video production of Violet exemplifies Courtney’s respect and fascination with silent film. On page 202 of her diary, she wrote a “Polemic Chic History”\(^{161}\), which includes influential women who held pivotal roles in the early days of filmmaking. She expresses an interest in female empowerment in the movie industry by listing German director Olga Wohlbruck, actor Lois Weber, and actor, writer and director Mary Pickford as part of this “chic” history, who are all icons of the silent film era. The video’s cinematography incorporates silent film elements, such as the overacting of the chorus (or melodramatic quality) by Courtney Love, the unsynchronized lips of Courtney to the


soundtrack, the scratchy black and white film that appears intermittently as if being projected at different speeds to emulate the old 16 fps (frames per second) even the tinting of the video reflects the silent film method of dipping the film in dyestuffs such as blue and amber\textsuperscript{162}. Clearly, the video is an ode to early female accomplishments in the film industry and professes a feministic of support for their efforts.

Imagery of the ballet dancer is strongly represented in several forms in the video; a mechanized toy, young-adult ballerinas, old female ballerinas, and then Courtney in the mosh pit, wearing her ballerina outfit. The ballerina is diverged into pole dancing in the video, demonstrating the capacity for something pure to be manipulated by men (the leering audience of rats). Another unforgettable image in the video is that of a huge jar of eggs in water with groping hands reaching in, and rats crawling toward it. With the eggs representing women’s reproductive capacity, and the raw exposure of their biology to predators, Violet is proclaiming rebellion and using the Riot Grrrl values of “ageism” and “internal sexism”\textsuperscript{163} to promote female independence from a critical male-gendered society.

\textsuperscript{162} Filmforever.org \url{http://www.filmforever.org/filmforever.pdf}

\textsuperscript{163} “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto”, by Kathleen Hanna.\url{http://onewarart.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm}
The speech that is created in the imagery and lyrics in *Violet* are powered by rough, deep, and rasping, vocals. The Feminist Voice is loud and teasing, playing to *ex-press* a male-gendered persona, rather than female. Violet's imagery and lyrics may be vulnerable and even bruised, but the delivery of the expression is violent and powerful, ultimately inverting the gender of the song. By gender-fucking the vocals, Courtney’s is able to, snarl, yell, and harmonize in a guttural scream that is demanding, accusatory, and professing. She is *Sapphonic*. The normative concepts of “prettyiness and

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sexiness” for women is abjected. This is ugly. Grunge is ugly, but so are the leering men in the video.

Grunge feminism can be viewed as interactive sensory acts. Its performance of feminist speech through music, body hypertextuality, and materiality have a decibel, evoking polemic emotional reactions and behavior. The zines reflect this evocation of opinion, values, ideas, and musings and then visually invoke responses. It is an intimate, violent, and sarcastic dialogue of feminism and about feminism within soliloquy. It is divergent. It is the ultimate counter to the culture of [feminism] that produced its own tangent and parallel cultures (Riot Grrrl feminism is a parallel). This unique element of grunge feminism is why Courtney Love is the originator of this feminism. She is the original provocative artist of grunge; a punk fan from childhood, a riot grrrl subscriber and artist with direct links to the Seattle Sound and the Northwest. Her performance of grunge feminism enraged an array of [feminist] sexes and genders, and in the process creating the trend of grunge feminism that would last into the early 21st-century.

Vocals and The Feminist Voice

“That’s the good thing about women, man. Because they sing they [sic] fuckin insides, man. Women to be in the music business give up more than you’d ever know. She’s got kids she gave up, any woman gives up home life, an old man, probably, you give up a home and friends, you give up every constant in the world except music. So for a woman to sing, she really needs to or wants to. A man can do it as a gig, because he knows he can get laid tonight.”

-Janis Joplin

Feminist writing and activism has been granted a “voice”, but rockers who have feminist ideas, and express their opinions on stages in front of thousands of people

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haven’t been historically acknowledged for having a feminist platform. The notion that what these women have written as lyrics, expressed in speech, or screamed at their audiences is not an expression of feminism is antiquated, and needs to be reconstructed. As rocker Joan Jett has stated, “Rock and Roll is political. It’s a meaningful way to express dissent, upset the status quo, stir up revolution and fight for human rights.”

In beginning to consider the voice as a weapon of feminism, I am specifically indebted to the works that opened up my perspective into Musicology, and consequently [feminism] from Elizabeth Wood and Judith Halberstrom in Queering the Pitch, as well as the fine work of feminist musicologists and queer musicologists, Karin Pendle, Renee Cox Loraine, Susan McClary, and Ruth A. Solie. Without all of these scholars, I wouldn’t be thinking about pitch ranges as possessing a feminist volume of their own as they voice their gender rebellion. Their work also made me mindful of my own heterosocial preconceptions, and invited me into a new critical space for writing and re(thinking) history, that would juxtapose any predilections that my ideas were coming from outside my personal experience and not from within them.

What those wonderful feminist and queer musicologists have done is open up feminist and queered expressions to the ear, to be heard. What we are hearing are maneuvers of agency, gender subversions that invert mainstream culture. Music opens us up to these sounds, especially popular music. Philip Brett noted that “in the 20th-

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century particularly, homosexuality became such a tremendous presence in music that its obliteration by silence is one of the most crushing intellectual indictments of the positivistic musical scholarship". Brett’s comment on the silence of scholarship with regard to sexuality and sexual identity in musicology, opens the floor for questions in other disciplines. Where is the sexuality and sexual identity in Women’s History? Who writes about those identifiers and how is it analyzed within the historiography of feminism?

*Discovering the Sapphonic*

Courtney Love’s voice is widely recognizable because of its violent and raw delivery that could be popularized as a “scream”, or better yet, “napalm”. But, Love’s voice has a very low pitch, whether she is singing, yelling, or screaming. Her vocal range and her performance of that range because of its lower register can very well be characterized as Sapphonic. Elizabeth Wood clarifies this terminology with her work, *Sapphonics*. In her essay, describing the rubric she has designed to identify queer localities within the vibrations of female vocal production, she illuminates the voice as a musical instrument, but also of possessing the capacity to articulate erotcies and emotion that are under the straight radar. In Wood’s work, “the voice is a flexible negotiation and integration of an exceptional range of registers that cross boundaries among different voice types and their representations to challenge polarities of both

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Wood implies that gender barriers are deliberately negotiated in this flexible state of “crossing boundaries”. She goes further to assert that “constructions of gender are not only socially created, but also vocally created.”

Therefore, Courtney Love and other female grunge artists who dive into lower registers and resonate entire concerts and albums in that realm, can be identified as vocal transgressors. There is intentionality to deconstruct notions of both female and male gender-sounds by Love’s proficiency to engage both a chest-voice as well as lower octaves that are clearly "unfeminine". This sense of play produces an intersection of genders, what Wood deems “sonic-cross dressing”. Where Wood brings this theory into ambiguous territory, negating the binary between ‘femme’ and ‘butch’ and supposing a transexual state of integration of male and female gender producing a ‘transvestic enigma’, I argue that this is a juncture of intentional vocal divergence-purposely engaging with lower registers and methods of vocal production that are inherently “male” in order to masculinize her vocal persona and “out-man” male punks and rockers, but also to drag it. The result is a play on the vocalizing concept of gender, creating an aporia.

As a vocal transgressor, Courtney Love drags her voice into male-registers, playing upon the audience as an audial confusion, while mimicking male-rockers with downward spiraling pitches and guttural screams. She vocally juxtaposes herself

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171 Ibid, 28.

172 Ibid, 32.

173 Ibid, 32.
against other male grunge vocalists, such as Kurt Cobain of *Nirvana* and Layne Staley of *Alice in Chains*. All three vocalists depict deep gritty vocals in low registers. What is significant about the shared register of these three individuals is that gender becomes muddled, thickened, and heavy here within the driving bass line and the howling screeches above. Lyrics in this environment slur into overcast and laborious cries, melding with vocal chords in a dense web of desperate extremes interwoven with a lethargic vocal-groan signifying a disdain of conformity; revealing the banality of a post-cold war and post-excessive-economic predicament. A hollow space is produced here. A depression of previous vocal values in chords and sounds, amplified and intensified, of course, by sound production techniques in studio, but resound independently away from the sound studio’s artistic mechanics and strongly reverberate in live audience participation.

A strong example of the interconnectivity of the shared vocal divergence between Courtney Love, and other male grunge artists is her acoustic duet with Kurt Cobain recorded on September 8, 1993 at Club Lingerie in Hollywood, CA for the Rock Against Rape Benefit.
Click here to watch Courtney and Kurt perform Where Did you Sleep Last Night.¹⁷⁵

In this rare live clip of Love and Cobain’s performance, both artists mimic each other’s vocal range, timbre, and tone. When they happen to sing the same note at the same time, it is extremely difficult to dissect and discern the “male” vocal chords from the “female” vocal chords since each produces a sustained sonic gender crossing. Both Love and Cobain take turns scratching and screaming lyrics and notes, creating a

¹⁷⁴ Scan Image of Courtney Love’s photograph of her and Kurt Cobain from Rock Against Rape Performance @ Club Lingerie in Hollywood, CA, Sept. 8, 1993 in Dirty Blonde: The Diaries of Courtney Love, Ava Stander, ed. (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc. 2006), 163.

¹⁷⁵ Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love, duo performance @ Club Lingerie in Hollywood, CA, Youtube Video, http://youtu.be/3_5mTTEF0qQ?t=4m43s, Sept. 8, 1993. The use of this public video via Youtube is the only way to access this rare performance of Courtney and Kurt. Courtney laments in her diary that “noone [sic] Recorded this Show!” Meaning there are no recordings that were done by their record company to preserve this show. Dirty Blonde: The Diaries of Courtney Love, edited by Ava Stander. (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc. 2006), 163.
seesaw effect, as one dives into a lower register and the other reaches a corresponding higher or lower harmonic note. This sound clip is a constative of vocal aporia in a close range example. Courtney Love is not simulating Kurt Cobain’s voice, but instead her own reconstructions of masculinity intersect with his voice and diverge from her femininity.

The vocal depths of gender blurring that Courtney Love displays with her band Hole can be easily classified in Elizabeth’s Wood’s taxonomy as a “transvestic enigma”176. We see this aural confusion, as a deliberate paradox, one of the many paradoxes in grunge as a genre. The biologically identified female voice produces an obscuring of the registers and in the process engages in play. For Wood, this is an example “of the sapphonic, or border-crossing voice inspired by Hélène Cixious; belonging to neither male nor female as constructed, but rather as a synthesis… suggesting that gender and sexuality are transferable.”177 If this transvestification of the voice (produced intensionally by the vocal chords), indeed confuses gender and sexuality and blurs the lines of sexual demarkation, then the voice itself can become a weapon of paradox, inducing play from the shadows into the limelight. From this angle, Derrida’s pathbreaking illustration of aporia178 becomes more than just a biologically influenced physical instrument, but also enters into a diaphoristic relationship with music. Music, meaning the very notes and chords affected by the voice, contain, produce, and project a multivalent idea of the present, of reality, and the subversion of

177 Ibid, 32.
that reality. The female or male vocal range then, is subject to projection and can produce variated meanings within sound. *Differance* is easily observed here within the sapphonic registers. Derrida pronounces this phenomena as a, “differing signifying a non-identity…a common, although entirely [differante], root within the sphere that relates the two movements of differing to one another.” “This differing is given a provision of sameness which is not identical.” We can correlate Derrida's philosophy with the constructed binary and biological oppositions of the male and female vocal registers and the willingness of both to bypass their culturally created comfort zones for many different reasons.

The creation of *Differance* within the lens of Derrida, can also be seen as a created gender rebellion posed against constructed identities. In the framework of Foucault, gesturing, behaviors, and identities fall under surveillance created by mechanisms of power. Following that circle of discourse reveals embedded penalties, viewed here as essentialisms, that constrict the female voice to adhere to the principals of biological and sexual constructs. *Differance* is a diffusion of pure essentiality via dissymmetrical methods of inversion. Gender identity doesn’t retain a stable female recognizable or audible construct. As Joke Dame notes, “the voice does possess a gender attached to binary constructions, but it is open to stylistic interpretation and variation. He goes further to say that voice categories, such as soprano, alto, etc., aren’t

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180 Ibid., 129.

181 Ibid, 129.

sexually fixed but prone to choice.” This is a crucial observation for singers like Courtney Love who intellectually and artistically are subverting binary constructions of gender. She wrote this in her diary at twenty years old;

“ I am not a Beautiful youth. Adolescent boy. This Experiment in Boyishness has Failed I am a woman…MAYBE I am a women I depend upon Artifice As I have been Taught”

This excerpt, in which she compares herself to Roddy Frame from Aztec Camera and Richard Butler from The Psychedelic Furs, demonstrates a likening to male singer-songwriters and a desire to emulate their appearance and their talents. She acknowledges a heightened observation and gender experimentation that goes into physicality, appearance, and aurality. Courtney’s young observations translate very well into what Dame cites as “deliberate gender border crossings.” Dame invokes Roland Barthes’ concept of “sexual difference’ as a way of neutralizing binary opposition male-female at the biological level in order to escape fatalistic essentialism of the sexes.” “Barthes’ work, S/Z, analyzes specifically the difference between the active, and the passive, the phallic and the castrated. Within that analysis emerges a spectrum of genders with polar extremes and androgyne in the middle.” As an extreme gender

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186 Ibid, 140.

187 Ibid, 141.
subversionist, Courtney Love in this spectrum can fluctuate between an active and passive quality and even adopt a phallus into her experimentations.

If the voice can select its trajectory, then surely the voice can become an instrument that not only projects sound, but also enunciates the ideas and beliefs that motivate the choice of the sound. By, agreeing to that, it follows that the voice is also able to react to (communicate) the socio-cultural and political discords surrounding it, and sing its own refrain.

**Feminism in the Voice**

“The first time I ever really screamed it was the most liberating feeling...it was very pure and very free.”\(^{188}\) - Courtney Love

Susan McClary would be the first to say that the female voice in music, (screaming or not), historically hasn't been given recognition;

> History does not offer a separate women's culture [particularly in classical music for which she was writing] complete with styles or performing institutions of its own, from which position a female composer can bargain or negotiate. In other words, there is no traditional women's voice. Even withstanding the inroads made in the 1960s.\(^ {189}\)

Adding to that she states, “Worse yet, there is a bogus tradition of how women should sound, a code developed and transmitted by men that has women as either passive and docile or man devouring harpies.”\(^ {190}\) McClary's feminist criticism transcends musical genres and clarifies the female voice, as something historically subjugated, and

\(^ {188}\) “Courtney Love”, VH1 Behind the Music, first broadcast June 22, 2010 (Season 12, Episode 4). copyright@mtvn.com.


\(^ {190}\) Ibid, 48.
dismissed. It is essentialized into a patriarchal phylum of sounds, “othering” its existence into irrelevance.

The sounds of feminism performed in the voice then, remain, uninterpreted especially in grunge. They continue to be casualties of the masculinist categorization in modern interpretation of rock music. Sontag has condemned this practice of categorization as destructive, even when it seeks to excavate as part of its interpretation.\footnote{Susan Sontag. \textit{Against Interpretation: And Other Essays}. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), 6.} Appreciating the female voice as a feminist expression in music, is to recognize the symbolic dialect\footnote{I’m utilizing “symbolic dialect” as Carol Smith-Rosenberg has described women’s words assuming different meanings that often produce misunderstanding when old social systems attempt to read the meanings of the words. Carol, Smith-Rosenberg. \textit{Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America}. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 44.} that is at play. The public arena, traditionally hosting music that is categorized in the patriarchal system, is a stage of semantic disorder\footnote{Building on Rosenberg’s confusion of symbolic dialect is the social disorder that increases semantic disorder. Ibid, 44.} when the feminist voice speaks, sings, or screams. The sounds of the passive voice of the abiding female and the screech of the harpy become effective camouflage for divergent feminist expression in symbolic dialect.

For grunge, symbolic dialect, involves feminist language that is physically and semantically hypertextualized. As a result of its hypertextual nature, the feminist voice in grunge is at the very least trilingual. The audible sounds from the vocal chords, are both a physical language and a musical language, projecting chords (1st language) and lyrics (2nd language). These sounds are interspersed with queered expressions
(speech) that may not be part of the song being performed, but are part of the performance (3rd language).

Gender dissonance is imbedded in all the languages of grunge, and coded in heterosexualized gender signifiers. The ability for this dissonance to be coded and produced into languages gives the feminist voice a hypertextual quality. There are multiple layers at work here, but only some of those components are visible and able to be interpreted by the public eye (or ear). This reflects the 20th century digital dynamic that is present in mediated and live performances of music, but also the graduated digital ability of art as performance to encompass a wide variety of messaging encapsulated in the voice of the a 20th century artist. N. Katherine Hayles states, “Electronic hypertexts, like all electronic texts, consist of multiple layers of text that combine computer code and natural language.”194 The connection of the electronic texts to the physical feminist voice is not bound by a difference of platform. Hayles distinguishes the analogue and the digital as well as print and electronic by the ways that these modes are mobilized by resources.195 The process itself makes the text, the language, the symbolic dialect, the semantic disorder are from this definition, a hypertext.196

A prime example of vocal trilingual language imbedded in digital and analogue abilities is Liz Phair’s “Girlysound”. As Phair describes in her interview for her iTunes


195 Ibid, 76.

196 Based upon Hayles’ “An electronic text is a process rather than an object.”
Ibid, 79.
original album from 2005, the girlie sound is a deliberate political mechanism to express her vengeance\textsuperscript{197}.

“There was a huge amount of vengeance in me, I was like, you know, screw you guys… I had a lot of pent up frustration at the whole gender system [in music]. I had this kinda political theory that the ‘little girl’s’ voice was the least authoritative in all society, so I would say the most outrageous things…like shocking or aggressive things, and I would speed my voice up slightly. Girlysound was about saying really intense things in very non threatening ways.”\textsuperscript{198}

Liz Phair is describing her physical manipulation of her vocal chords, the inducing of her falsetto pitch range in a higher octave, and also manipulating the sound recording of the music to create the “Girlysound”. She has created a feminist voice to express her vengeance at gender that is trilingual. To hear her complete interview, click here. \url{https://itunes.apple.com/us/album/catalyst-for-girlysound-tapes/id715759982?i=715760176}\textsuperscript{199}

Where Liz Phair is expressing feminist aggression through her coded “Girlysound” which is camouflaged in a “sweet” sound, Courtney Love expresses her feminism through a guttural, violent, and masculine sound as I discuss in \textsuperscript{The Voice}. Both artists queer themselves into vocal divergence that is coded with grunge \textit{feminism}. Kathleen Hanna participates in a riot grrrl coding of \textit{feminism} through a “valley girl” accent (sound), with a feminist message that is hostile. Hanna says, “I got a valley girl


\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{199} Ibid.
accent from The Valley Girl handbook...I think it made us [Bikini Kill] sound rich, like posh.”

Kathleen’s use of the valley girl accent is a powerful juxtaposition of the well-behaved female and the carnival side-show. The feminine signifiers of the rich, upper-class, over-privileged, white girl are completely distorted into aporia because of Hanna’s aggressive and masculine performance. She is a punk, performing male-punk in an extremely female, “girlie” form; queering the identity of masculine punk into the insignificant. As she reflected in her documentary, “Every show was a war,”201 where she would have to fight off and/or defend others against the males who would want to dominate the crowd.

“I have a fucking right to be hostile, and I’m not gonna sit around and be peace and love with somebody’s boot on my neck.”-Kathleen Hanna

Judith Halberstam has remarked that Kathleen Hanna’s feminism “articulates the explosive potential for queer femininity that served as an undercurrent to much of the Riot Grrrl feminism which is readable as a radical style in queer punk.”203 Kathleen Hanna’s own disdain and recognition of sexual power structures while blurring and queering the lines of sexuality and gender in the voice of a feminist movement creates a breaking point for male dominated punk and a disjunction in second-wave feminism. Reflecting on her feminism and Bikini Kill, Kathleen Hanna said “In Bikini Kill I was


201 Ibid.

202 Ibid.

singing to an elusive asshole male who was fucking the world over, and allowing other women to watch me to do that.”204

The kinship between Kathleen Hanna and Riot Grrrl feminism to Courtney Love and grunge feminism is an important feminist relationship to acknowledge in creating a history of counter-culture feminism in U.S. history. Their ties primarily lie in the geography of the Pacific Northwest and reflect the interconnected dynamic of the music scene of Seattle in the early 1990s. This geographical and artistic intertwining is unique, much like the Haight Ashbury’s musical kinship in the 1960s. I will cover this dynamic of grunge and Riot Grrrl in future work, but for now I want to state that an interconnected group of both male and female-led bands existed in Seattle with ties to Aberdeen and Olympia. These artists lived together, played gigs together, wrote music together, and had mutual friends, girlfriends/boyfriends and acquaintances.

I’ve previously mentioned the friendship between Kathleen Hanna and Kurt Cobain, which is significant to Courtney Love, because of her connection to Cobain and his own punk feministic expressions, and the later collaborations between the two of them as musicians. Love and Hanna’s feminist kinship does have roots in Olympia, but more significant than the geography is their affinity for gender rebellion hypertext.

204 Kathleen Hannah, *The Punk Singer*, Streaming Video, IFC and Sundance Selects, 2013
Courtney Love’s connection to Riot Grrrl is evident in her multi-lingual feminist language, but very specifically obvious in her body graffiti. Both Hanna and Love create an avant-garde visual epistemology of counter-culture feminism through their use of body graffiti to reclaim and proclaim a feminist voice. Riot Grrrl and grunge feminism is about creating an alternative culture; a culture that embraces the darker, raw, and often unspoken issues that result from an epidemic condemnation to power structures, as we’ve seen in their zine production. This raw, dark, and loud language meant reclaiming derogatory terminology that had been used to subjugate women. Words such as “Bitch”,

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“Slut”, “Cunt”, and “Whore” became coded maneuvers to bring feminist consciousness into private spheres where domestic violence, sexual violence, as well as issues as abortion and birth control could be publicly addressed in an unruly way. The female body had been a site to be silenced, manipulated, and controlled. Hanna and Love, instead made the body a battle-ground to refute that silencing with an inverted code. As Kearney notes,

“that female youth in the early 1990s came to critical consciousness about their doubly subordinated position as female youth. Some teenage youth and young women involved in the U.S. punk scene began to speak out about various imbalances of power that often result in young females being victims of child abuse, sexual abuse, and self-abuse, not to mention classism, racism, and homophobia.”

That consciousness that Kearney writes about, wasn’t just relegated to lyrics and zines, but possessed a hyptertexuality to its communicable capabilities. The language coded into the feminist voice of grunge, unlike other female voices contained in the private sphere, has had both a public and private lineage. It is not solely semantically experienced in one or the other, but rather is a dialogue between the two. This is evident in Punk feminism’s expression in Zines, as well as in sexual hypertext, which I discuss further in The Body. The resulting speech contains soliloquy and public protest played together as a chord; combining spheres of disadvantage into a reclaimed space. Carol Smith-Rosenberg describes the ability of public and private language as a reflective system and not a mutually exclusive one.

“Public language’ exists to convey socially shared experiences in an affective but deliberately distorted manner. Driven to discuss what is too

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painful or too political to be discussed overtly, societies as a whole, or specific groups within them, develop metaphoric or mythic systems that cloak real meanings behind symbolic masks. The most ‘public language’ this can be decoded to reveal the interplay of social experiences and emotional realities.\textsuperscript{209}

The reclaimed space of grunge feminism in body graffiti is a visual feminist voice. It is a public forum and a visual epistemology of feminism. I borrow the term “visual epistemology” from Johanna Drucker’s work as she configures how, “ways of knowing are presented and processed visually.”\textsuperscript{210} Her work \textit{Graphesis}, which is dedicated to studying the visual production of knowledge focuses on graphical formats and their organization and structures.\textsuperscript{211} These body graphics (graffiti) are a conscious feminist protest language in analogue. The writing has a structure and organization just like a graphic and because of the type of words that are used (for example, whore, cunt, and slut) that structure (or meaning) doesn’t reveal itself. It is coded feminist speech written in gender aporia; whose meaning, if taken at face value, can readily be misinterpreted. These are counter-culture feminist expressions of protest of historically offensive and derogatory terminology. By creating that vocabulary on the body (of the accused) the negative connotations and impact is diffused, just like queering performance. The word Bitch, through this method, is reclaimed as something to be used, not as derogatory towards the body wearing the graphic, or to other similar bodies, but more of a challenge to those who would use the term as a gender slur. The power of the slur is subverted. Just as through vocal and lyrical performance, binary gender is mutated into

\begin{footnotes}
\item[211] Ibid., 2.
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paradox. In consideration of the discipline of the body, from Foucault, the vocal body as embellished with visual subversions to patriarchal power structures, cannot be controlled. Instead of “being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended rights,” art reinstates rights of the individual. Any obligations, to be the cunt, the slut, or the whore, are diminished. Shock and shame, as punishments are removed.

The Body

“feminism has always stood for the right to bare, decorate, cover, enjoy, or do whatever we damn well please with our bodies-and to do so in safety”

- Gloria Steinem

Is it better to out-monster the monster or to be quietly devoured?

-Friedrich Nietzsche quote from Courtney Love’s Diary.

Courtney Love is a performative enigma. To ask who she is, is an answer of antonyms that run parallel to the question and in direct opposition to her signifier as the lead singer and guitarist for her band Hole. She is a creator and re-inventor of Camp, and a transvestic instrument of gender subversion. She is constantly performing gender, and in this manner reveals gender’s limitations and insensibilities. Her clothing is costuming, that teases and provokes through the performative act of physically stripping, where she strips society’s concepts of gender. Her demeanor and stance is


that of a frontman, cocky, raucous, loud, and asking for a fight. Her makeup is over exaggerated to illuminate the essentialized pressures that women experience surrounding attractiveness that is attached to ageism, sexism, and fame. This is in an intensional architecture. As much as there is rage and anger in her expression on stage-right, stage-left can carry uncontrollable laughter for the opposite performance. This is a sporadic dichotomy and a constant intensional deconstruction. She has chosen to be the monster.

Courtney Love’s anterior expression of grunge is a disengaged body communicating to its inner circle in the manner and style of Camp. Her physical body becomes the sloppily decorated, made-up version of a queer enticement. The make-up is too much, the hair too blonde and too dirty and knotted, the dress is too see-through and too young, the shoes are too heavy and boyish, the lingerie shows through too much or is simply displayed through the rips and tears of the female-gendered dress, only to come off later in the act of stripping.

The body for Courtney Love is an instrument of performance and a site of raw contradictions for 20th-century women. It is on Love’s body that the worst trappings of the female and male heterosexualized genders are played out, or rather dragged out. We see the “hysterical” or “unruly” woman from the carnival in Courtney’s performance; we witness the “whore from hell” who speaks out against rape by taunting the rapist through lyrics and speech, but she also uses her body to fistfight the crowd. She is a

\[\text{References}\]


stripper on stage, but not one to be lusted after. Instead, she is a car crash\textsuperscript{217} that no one can look away from. All of these gender rebellion personas are discontinuous, in order to represent the contradictions that are flung onto women’s backs. They are subtly discontinuous in order to reveal that this is a “performance”, but that is missed continually.

In her performance, Courtney Love’s body becomes a target for binary gender practice. Along with the hypertextuality through body graffiti, etchings (such as tattoos), and the creation of “illicit” sexual content, the body becomes a moving, improvisational instrument, just like the guitar or the bass, but unlike these instruments, the sexual-gender body of Courtney Love is “female” and interpreted as hyper-heterosexual. Love’s own body, both the inside (her vagina) and outside (her behavior, her dress, and her persona) is depicted in Hole and she uses it to deconstruct gender’s inequalities and abuses in the late 20th-century.

Courtney Love as The Kinder Whore

Image 11.

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Courtney Love’s performativity is that of “rock provocateur”220, but not in the way that the L.A. Times or Vanity Fair meant in 1992. She is a transvestite in drag, a “kinder-whore”221, teasing her audience as she strips down gender’s fallacies to reveal the ugly reality; that gender is not just socially constructed, but it is also intentionally performed. By acting out this unwelcome strip tease of social norms, Love fully embraces Camp. As Susan Sontag describes, “Camp is the love of unnatural; of artifice and exaggeration…as well as being esoteric-something of a private code, a badge of identity…”222. Love drenches herself in this esoteric performance, as she admittedly created her kinder-whore style from Bette Davis’ character in What Ever Happened to Baby Jane223?.

The psychotic fascination of [Baby] Jane Hudson with fame and agelessness was a trigger for Courtney Love’s creation of her costume for Hole. She talked about her appearance and her dress in an interview for RollingStone in 1994, where she described her “tarnished baby-doll appearance as a play of irony on What Ever

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In that interview, Love reflects on her childhood and how her mother raised her gender-neutrally. What was absent in that genderless environment was the possibility of having dolls that were specifically gendered, playing with toys like tea sets, or even being allowed to take ballet lessons. Love cited her stage persona as one of reclaiming elements of exaggerated femininity, and through that hyper-performative costume, fucking with the essentialisms present in the arena of rock.

Love’s revealing conversation unites her costuming of her body for performance with Sontag’s ideas in *Notes on Camp*. For Sontag, “the essence of Camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration.” Following that attribute, “Camp’s way is not in terms of beauty, but in terms of the degrees of artifice of stylization.” Love is not performing as a *kinder-whore* in Hole, to be cute and to be regarded as “pretty”. Her costume, although, feminine, is anything but a pretty sight. The fact that her clothing on stage, in images, and in videos oftentimes appears dirty, torn, too big or too small, accentuates her intention to be ugly, to confuse and perhaps even repulse the male and female audience. The unruly woman. Unlike Betty Davis’ pathetic and selfishly delusional Baby Jane, Courtney Love is sagaciously aware of the audience’s critique of her physical beauty/ugliness. She is donning the psychotically-inspired personae to impersonate a woman’s view of her younger, prettier, and popular self, intending to vivisect gendered ideas of the body attached to age, while playing with her own gendered fascinations.

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226 Ibid, 277.
Sontag reminds us that,

*it is the great stylists of temperament and mannerism (like Davis) that epitomize the exaggeration of femininity and masculinity, and dramatically confuse the two…what is most beautiful in virile men is something feminine; what is most beautiful in feminine women is something masculine.*

Courtney Love as a kinder-whore embraces the gender spectrum of feminine and masculine and continually fucks with them, producing a disconcerting provocateur-one with child-like antics. Her exaggerations of femininity and masculinity are emulated throughout 90s women’s fashion, with the introduction of baby doll dresses, ripped and torn clothing, and dark bloodred lipstick colors.

Love, as the *kinder whore*, creates “the huge Quotation Marks, that Camp sees everything through”. In *Camp, It’s not a woman, but a “woman”. To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.” Courtney Love is very much a fluctuating role that is playing at “being herself”. This is one of the fantastic and terrifying paradoxical attributes of Courtney Love. The path-breaking aporia that is decidedly engaged in performance is also simultaneously engaged in reality. Love continually inspires her own identity, her own play, and her own role spontaneously, as with an improvisational nature, but also with a cool and collected intelligence. This creation is meticulous at every level, from the creation of her name, to her fascination with literature, to her obsessive curiosity surrounding 20th-century celebrity, to her

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228 Ibid, 280.

229 Ibid, 280.
meditative chanting, self-mutilating persona creation, to furious musician. This conglomeration of personality, vulnerability, and creativity is ignited with lighter-fluid intellect, inspiring a deconstructed artifice that is unique and dark. This is the expanse of Courtney Love’s *Hell and Wish*.

**Courtney Love The Stripper of Gender**

Courtney Love performs stripping both in mediated and live platforms, to reveal the layers of gender constructions that are piled upon women. She also embraces and performs Camp as a “stripper”, a profession she worked in for many years, before music paid the bills. Love uses her body to perform a “strip” of her kinder-whore persona, the exaggerated masculine and feminine catastrophe, by stripping off her own gender costume. She also strips the masculine punk identity by diving into the audience. In this positioning, she takes on a heteronormative masculine behavior, by stage diving, while letting the audience ‘strip’ her.

Stripping is an essential component of Courtney Love’s performance as a sexual provocateur in drag. By performing in ripped clothes, that reveal wear and tear, she demonstrates the beauty of imperfection, the reality of a gender identity being nothing more than a carefully crafted and practiced appearance. By NOT appearing in a pristine dress, she challenges the notion of “perfection” and “beauty” as heterosexualized constructions that are as silly as the baby doll dress that a grown woman is wearing. For Betty Davis, in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane*, reliving her moment as a beloved and beautiful child star is to relive her experience as an exaggerated version of her younger self, stuffed and made-up into her aged and alcoholic body. Jane Hudson as an old woman in her layers upon layers of costume demonstrates the effect that ageism
has on the female body and identity. The effect is a horror show tour of her younger identity as a girl performer.

Stripping is not only the taking off of clothes of the physical body, but also the stripping of social ideas and constructions of gender. By stripping clothing off her body, Courtney Love reveals her biological sex and engages in a play of the economy of the female body. By revealing her breasts (still clad in a bra) and underwear, she performs as a female form/body. This female body, has been stripped of its socially-required and constructed coverings (clothing)...and what is left...by stripping off her clothes, she reveals the feminist critique of females in the sex industry, or females that don’t conform to “normal” or “acceptable” forms of dress and behavior. She also uses her body as a lightning rod for criticism from heterosexual men, who may find her body sexually attractive, or unattractive. This also works to subvert heterosexism, allowing the cat calls, wolf whistles, or female body bashing to hit her directly on stage. The stripped body then becomes a weapon of subversion, as well as a casualty of critique. By using her stripped body, Love demonstrates the co-existence of both the frailty and strength of the female form as a sexualized object. The stripped body becomes a masculine push that is heavily charged with sexuality, anger, desire, female biology, and feminisms. This is a performative rebellion; an assault on sexual convention(s) and gender behavior. As the dragged female stripper, Love Camps the style of her gender-play to include her own inner monologue of comedic satisfaction. She has successfully tricked and teased the audience into believing her antics as psychotic, “crazy”, off the reservation...She is mocking the system of gender construction and the systematic
enrollment and coordination of first and second wave feminisms under juridical constraints.

**The Power of Punk Body Politics**

Melissa Auf der Maur, Hole’s bassist from 1994-1999, reiterates Courtney’s stage diving as a punk characteristic; “There’s always a sense of danger in Courtney, the punk part of her that would dive into a crowd...that's what would make it magical because most people are boring and don’t do that.”

The stripping; the stripping of persona and gender has been much more misunderstood and has been closely critiqued by other grunge artists, particularly Veruca Salt’s lead singer, Nina Gordon, as sending a message that wasn’t empowering [for women]. Gordon reflected in 2011,

> “She was fronting her band, she was different looking, she was fucking with people’s aesthetics in terms of what was pretty, what was cool...all that stuff and it was powerful. Even just her stance, the way she would put her foot up on the monitor and play and it felt powerful....like this is a strong person. But then there was that part that was not so empowering, I suppose..., the message didn’t feel great to me...Like, you know, flashing the audience and ranting and raving, the criticizing of other women, the... uh...sleeping with or dating every rock star. The whole being completely outta control...”

Whether its the stripping as a singular action of Camp, or combined with stage diving of punk, Love engages gender in dangerous territory on risqué /“indecent” terms with this performance. By “stripping” she engages the [feminist] discourse with sex and sexuality on sexual terms in sexual language. The danger of this being misinterpreted by heterosexual males and [feminists] is high, but it’s a risk that Love continually takes. Looking back to Sontag, she describes an ingredient of Camp that possess a sexual

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and raw side that fits very well with Courtney’s stripping. She calls it “the vulgar interpretation of Camp as a verb, ‘to camp’…to camp as a mode of seduction-one which employs flamboyant mannerisms susceptible of a double interpretation; gestures full of duplicity, with a witty meaning for cognoscenti and another, more impersonal, for outsiders.”

For outsiders, to those who aren’t aware of the complexity of the Camp performance, Courtney’s stripping and diving will be continue to be misinterpreted and used against her; however, even in its misinterpretation, this gender-fucking is the theorem through to proof; in either the hetero-masculine enjoyment of the stripping or the [feminist] critique, the point that gender is merely performed, is proven.

**The Carnival-The Frenzied Woman**

The chaos, the “outta control” behavior, the crazy, all invoke the turmoil associated with the “frenzied woman” that Mary Celeste Kearney has used to connect Punk aesthetics to Natalie Zemon-Davis’s work. This performing of chaos has been misinterpreted as Courtney Love’s true identity through the media. All of that which can be observed as “crazy” “out of control behavior” is chaos that is specifically created and is “part of the performance”, as noted by Hole’s drummer Patty Schmemel.

Love’s feminist art has been misinterpreted. Susan Sontag warns us, what is expressed should be treated for what it is, and not restricted to the limitations of interpretation. Instead, it is experience that should act as guide to expression. She defines this through transparence. Her definition of “Transparence; as a highest, most liberating value in art and in criticism. Transparence means experiencing the

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luminousness of the thing in itself, of things being what they are. There is a greatness of that \(^{234}\) seems to coincide with both Rosenberg and Scott’s ideas of language. She goes on to say, This *Transparence*, this *honesty*, this engagement with the raw and real is a dramatic embrace of ambiguity.\(^{235}\)

Recognizing the over-interpretation of Courtney Love’s performance illuminates how convoluted the social structures of gender conformity were in the 1990s and presently with regard to feminism and negates the need and respect for binary interpretation. If we are considering public mediums of expression and truly want to look at their meaning in feminism and in the continuum of gender, then it is necessary to engage with the *performance* that is happening, as described by Carol Smith-Rosenberg and Johanna Drucker. But as The *Transparence* is enlivened within the music and performance and is appreciated and digested externally by the audience, it is as Sontag calls for, “an erotics of art and rejection of *interpretation* based in hermeneutics.”\(^{236}\) If the call to erotics of art is answered; if “gender” is released from any and all social constructions, particularly from that in expression, then it seems possible that we might be able to free it from the Heterosexual Matrix, or at least see its language in juxtaposition to it.

**sexual hypertext**

“Eye me up for i am fuckallovalamiable
I am prettyandchunky and young
I am Godless and Demanding nuerotican
Gutsy i am sexual and Dreamy and


\(^{235}\) Ibid, 13.

\(^{236}\) Ibid, 14.
painfully Extraverted. I am full of Fantasy and lies and astonishment and a Greed to have and a Greed to love and a Greed to taste impossibility and a Greed to Fuck.”

-Courtney Love

Courtney Love’s performative sexuality is gaping with lust for attention, for a stage to play upon. Her sexuality is a hypertext of imbedded wounds of physical unattractiveness, inconsistent hetero-sexual attractions and beliefs, romantic fantasies, and uncontrollable desire. Hell and Wish live in this carnival and are perpetually re-incarnated here as well. Courtney’s love note to Kurt Cobain, [“To Kitty Cobain Room #154] exemplifies this perpetual existence, and her participation in the deconstruction of that existence, as she says, “the language of love letters is the same as suicide notes.”

Love’s own materialism and production of materiality can be akin to the hypertextuality of N. Katherine Hayle’s definition,

“Materiality is reconceptualized as the interplay between a text’s physical characteristics and its signifying strategies, a move that entwines instantiation and signification at the outset. This definition opens the possibility of considering texts as embodied entities while still maintaining a central focus on interpretation.”

Love has coded her character, her costume, and her personae. She is an embodied performer and a figment of Hayles’s definition of a physical artifact, with its conceptual content, and its interpretive activities. Love is directing the interpretation of

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238 Ibid, 56-57.


240 Ibid., 72.
the audience of readers (listeners) to the deconstruction of gender. Through her own body as connective tissue she joins the physical and mental, the artifact and the user.

Body hypertextuality has many languages, symbols, and directives to create and convey meaning. Inscriptions that create the hypertextuality can be works of art, such as tattoos, scars, augmentations (permanent-physical, temporary-physical, adornments, or physical alterations such as a missing limb). These inscriptions write specific messages upon the body, to the physical performer of those messages, and to the audience who views and interprets those messages. For example, viewing a tattoo on the arm of a muscular man that has a violent scene depicted with weapons, could be intimidating or perhaps even repulsive to a stranger (male or female) passing by; the meaning of the tattoo becomes an inscribed layer on the physical body and the appearance of that body, combining to form a threatening message. In the intimate reality, the non-performative hypertex, the tattoos symbolizes a death of a loved one, and the weapons being the cancer that killed the person. The tattoo is violent as articulated to the artist to needles the ink into the skin-the process itself inducing physical pain. The ink then permanently imbedded into the dermis carries memory of the death, memory of the experience of the tattoo, and is a collective commemoration that is personal, but gets acted out publicly as something intimidating.

Courtney Love has a hypertextuality of tattoos; physical permanent augmentation in the form of rhinoplasty and piercings; temporary physical augmentation in the form of make-up for Camp. This visible hypertextuality is co-mingled with her self-created persona, to form a multi-layered *Hell and Wish* hypertext that is performative of its own history and beliefs. Physical hypertextuality of the body produces simple meanings and
reactions that are rendered against the body and performance. Some of these phrases associated with Courtney Love throughout her years as a performer are “trainwreck” and “hysterical”. These critiques are an essential component of Courtney Love’s own performance of letting the audience believe they are interpreting her psychology for themselves and carry out their verdicts; meanwhile she gets to sit back and record the criticisms as part of the buzzing discourse against her gender deconstruction. These critiques are noise and feedback; much a part of any amplified performance. It happens when the balance becomes distorted and perhaps amplification is too loud, upsetting the sounds of other instruments. These are unavoidable casualties of war that many performers experience in different ways. For Courtney, the distortion is purposely initiated and part of the destabilizing gender conventions. While Courtney distorts gender and gender identity, inducing an imbalance in the audience, the audience’s own inscriptions cause reverberations back, supposedly interrupting her, but really they are reinforcing what Courtney is successfully demonstrating.

**Critique is a Compliment for Courtney Love.**

The reverberation of critique that Courtney Love has accumulated over the course of her career is astounding from every sector of media, as well as from musicians. The analysis of Courtney Love in these arenas of public opinion has created a criminalized inscription on her and and perpetually incriminated her as an unfit mother (Vanity Fair) and a money-hungry, spotlight whoring wife. These dissonances have attempted to interrupt the performance of Love, but in observing her over the past several years, seemed to have only strengthened her performance.
The very nature of the critiques, their apparatus of their delivery and the content of their form, strongly suggest a “Panoptic surveillance that is meant to somehow supervise the individual, to neutralize his dangerous state of mind, and eventually to alter his criminal tendencies.”\textsuperscript{241} The panoptic gaze of the media and audience members are like parasitic spores of inscription in this scenario that are potentially hazardous to creativity. Another marked “system of punishment”\textsuperscript{242}, according to Foucault,

\begin{quote}
“\textit{surrounds the ‘political economy’ of the body; even if the punishment doesn’t make use of violence or bloodshed, even when they use ‘lenient’ methods involving confinement or correction, it is always the body that is at issue – the body and its forces, their utility and their docility, their distribution and their submission.}”\textsuperscript{243}
\end{quote}

Courtney Love’s inscribed and hypertextualized body is anything but docile in performance. In rebelling against the discourse of female behavior and feminine essentialisms, Love accentuates her aggressive sexuality, which can be interpreted as a masculine maneuver. In stark contrast to a docile, feminine, and traditionally oppressed (female) body as Angela King has discussed, Love’s body expresses its sexuality hetero-normatively while vocalizing queered language expressions. Her undocile body is then performing in drag resulting in a complex deconstruction of gender. The undocile performing body then relegates itself to a rejected status, joining gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities. In this way, Love is generating and participating in what Judith Butler designates as

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid, 40.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid, 25.
\end{footnotesize}
the complexity of Gender that is permanently deferred never fully what it is at any given juncture in time. An open coalition, then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits of multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure.\textsuperscript{244}

Courtney Love in using her hyptertextualized body to perform and create a persona, is not affixed to a single gender identity beneath her costume. She wrote in her diary as a girl expressing, “This experiment in boyishness has failed” indicating that her pre-performing notions of gender reflect an interest in other genders and identities. Another fascinating layer to her experiment is her restrictions of gender that she experienced being raised gender neutrally by her mother, which she reflected on in a RollingStone interview while explaining her kinder-whore costume; “Maybe it had to do with never having patent-leather shoes. Never being allowed to wear a dress. Never having gender-specific dolls…Nothing was gender specific [in our house].” \textsuperscript{245} The origins of Courtney’s controlled gender-neutral upbringing provide a fascinating base of inquiry into her own designs or performing gender. Clearly, she had ideas of what femininity and masculinity were, but as it seems, wasn’t allowed to divulge deeply in either. Her performance of gender becomes an interesting playground of experimentation and freedom to interpret gender from a multi-valent space, as opposed to strictly binary.


Judith Butler states,

gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed. The challenge for rethinking gender categories outside of the metaphysics of substance will have to consider the relevance of Nietzsche’s claim in On the Genealogy of Morals that “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything.” In an application that Nietzsche himself would not have anticipated or condoned, we might state as a corollary: There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results.246

To the carnival spectacle, to the stripped body of the kinder whore, Courtney Love received these words of praise for Hole’s album Pretty On The Inside (1991); “marvels of euphoric guitar feminism and napalm feminism”247 Later when Live Through This was released in 1994, and the band launched a world-wide tour, RollingStone and other media outlets praised Courtney Love and her band as “the best tour group” on the Lollapalooza Tour. The first song to be released off of Live Through This, was Doll Parts.

“DollParts” - Track #6 on “Live Through This” (Released April 12, 1994)248

Two years before this song was released, Courtney Love had developed a crush on Nirvana’s Kurt Cobain. In her diary is a handwritten note that she wrote to him, sometime in 1992.


To Kitty Cobain in Room #154
What would the Rose do?
Would the rose hire a publicist?
Lets be mountain junkies and breed satanic mall rats.I am Doll parts bad skin Doll heart
it stands for knife for the rest of my Life.
peel my little heart off and soak it in your left hand and call me Tonight...”

Her little flirtatious expression is more than just a simple scribble. “Knife for the rest of my life” is a theme found throughout her diary, and is depicted with the letter “K” encircled by a heart. The youthful romantic gesture and her infatuation with Kurt are connected by a Hell and Wish imagery surrounding love. It seems to be no accident that “Knife” and “Kurt” start with the same first letter. The girl with the “bad skin” and the “doll heart” is displaying an extreme vulnerability to love itself and the possibility that it will kill her, as the heart represents her constructed name that she gave herself because she craved love so desperately. More exploration is needed, as the diary doesn’t give an exact date of this note. The diary also excludes that date on the scrawled “DollParts” lyrics that are contained just two pages away from the note. However, my elementary conclusion is that they were written roughly about the same time in 1992. Going on that assumption the finalized lyrics of Doll Parts have a more complex meaning than originally thought.

“I am doll eyes, doll mouth, doll legs
I am doll arms, big veins, dog beg
Yeah they really want you, they really want you, they really do

Yeah they really want you, they really want you, well I do too! I want to be the girl with the most cake

I love him so much it just turns to hate

I fake it so real I am beyond fake! And someday you will ache like I ache

Someday you will ache like I ache
Someday you will ache like I ache
Someday you will ache like I ache
Someday you will ache like I ache
Someday you will ache like I ache!
I am doll parts, bad skin, doll heart

It stands for knife, for the rest of your life

Courtney’s expression of her love for Kurt has an angry component of self-loathing of her own appearance (noted by many entries in the diary about her nose, her height, and her body-shape). She expressed in her rockumentary, Vh1 Behind the Music, that Kurt had one of the best noses that she had ever seen. The juxtaposition of love and self-loathing achieves perhaps an envious component, where “parts” are analyzed and given value. The song becomes a feminist rage at the credibility that is only achieved through beauty of parts, not the whole of a person. Physical beauty is the only thing that matters to the boys, otherwise they don’t even pick up the doll, or if they do, its only a form of torture, not love. Objectification of women is depicted as pain, that is thrown back in the face of the male tormentor.

“He only loves those things because he loves to see them break.”


251 “Courtney Love”, VH1 Behind the Music, first broadcast June 22, 2010 (Season 12, Episode 4). copyright@mtvn.com. This video was viewed for the second time for this thesis on Vulture.com. “Courtney Love; VH1 Behind the Music.”! http://www.vulture.com/2010/06/watch_courtney_loves_behind_th.html Vulture.com. “Courtney Love; VH1 Behind the Music.” http://www.vulture.com/2010/06/watch_courtney_loves_behind_th.html (accessed February 5, 2014). This website is no longer operative. Alternatively, this video can be accessed through Youtube in several parts at https://youtu.be/yu-5-r0Ik2s. The video has been subtitled, so the original content may be altered. No other copyrighted distribution or production information is available about this film at this time.
I fake it so real, I am beyond fake!
And someday you will ache like I ache
Someday you will ache like I ache”

DollParts’ sound is gritty and guttural. Love’s guitar is hypnotic and intoxicating, slowly coaxing and then slapping you into her reality. The lyrics vacillate between solemn vows and psychotic internal dialogue, at times outlasting the rhythm and the melody altogether. It is this fascinating mixture that make this song a sad, whirling, angry mess that you can’t stop feeling. It is a sense of being “out of control” that is both enticing and manipulating.

Doll Parts Video


The music video created for DollParts is intricate and complex in that it contains imagery from Courtney’s diary, but also has a new dimension of reality that make the lyrics and video even more haunting. This was the first performance of this song after the death of Kristin Pfaff, Hole’s bassist, and the death of Kurt Cobain. Therefore there’s an intertwining of the original intention of the lyrics with new components of death and loss.

A replacement bassist was found in order to film the video, (because of the untimely death of Pfaff from a drug overdose), who is dressed up like a “doll” and whose features are never fully displayed in focus by the cinematography. The incorporation of the little boy in the video, is definitely meant to represent Kurt. The diary has several pictures of Kurt as a little boy, and the resemblance to the boy in the DollParts video is as close as one could hope to achieve. The boy in the lyrics, the one that caused the knife to be formed, is more of ghost. He is disconnected to what is being played out amongst the tattered tea party and the empty bed. His final exit, a quick slip out the door, leaves Courtney crumpled on the floor...just as a many images of her were portrayed in the press after Kurt’s death.

The most prominent imagery in the video is death and decay. Everywhere the camera focuses, there are rotting walls, dolls with peeling “skin” and missing eyes that resemble corpses more than toys. Even the area where Hole performs resembles a burial vault, with its open top to blackness and its cement floors and walls. The imagery of tea sets, one of Courtney’s favorite subjects of gender rebellion, is present amongst an empty field of apparently dead trees and dolls. There is no one to participate in this
“tea party”. No one is left, just the corpses of dolls laying in the grass or impaled on branches. The anger at physical objectivity that was infused into “dolls” in the lyrics as an expression of grunge feminism becomes something much sadder in the video. As Courtney seems to writhe in pain on the ground and eventually start smashing the tea party, the observer sees not only the pain caused by the objectivity of women by heterosexual men, but the decay that abandonment brings. All of this plays out amidst camera cinematography that goes in and out of focus just like someone struggling to see through tears.

The female gendered body, as performed by Courtney Love, in her Doll Parts video, is a construction that is fragile and eventually will die. The parts of the doll that are attractive, lips, eyes, hair, dress, and adornments are subject to age and decay. The female sexual body is just that. A doll. A play-thing. Something to be abandoned and left for dead.

**Inverting Interpretation**

“I definitely think feminism is more relevant than ever, and riot grrrl was an offshoot of feminism that was independent, punk rock, DIY. But I don't like the idea of it being fetishized or historicized in a way that leaves out the flaws. I don't like the idea of having the same mistakes repeated. Those kinds of things, it's nice to be acknowledged, but the sincerest form of flattery is being copied in a better way, you know what I mean?”

-Kathleen Hanna

The unfortunate interpretation of grunge, violated the art of the musicians and produced items of content that were subject to mainstreamed identities structured within

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the Heterosexual Matrix.” Grunge was never meant to be a label, a genre, or a fashion statement. To the artists from Seattle in the late 1980s who were creating music that was collaborative, innovative, and incredibly eclectic, grunge was simply where they lived. Grunge clamored in the air, slumbered in garages, and collected in alleys. It formed in basements, grew in spare rooms, and enveloped small apartments. It was scattered abject elements that became descriptors of the decaying structures of society by performing deconstruction in order to reject a 20th-century American culture steeped in commercialism. It had no interest in self-promotion or self preservation; it wasn’t a tagline, wasn’t sold in chain record stores, and couldn’t be found on a Billboard chart.

Rolling Stone first used the word “Grunge” in their April 16 issue published in 1991. Grunge was connected with guitar in an article about Sub Pop Records, which was being highlighted for the success of its bands Soundgarden, Mudhoney, and Green River. The word was also connected with Seattle itself, as a grunge or grungy City. They interviewed Duff McKagan (the bassist for Guns and Roses at the time) who was from Seattle. McKagen connected grunge to where he lived, “you gotta understand Seattle…it’s grungy. People are into rock and roll and into noise, and they are building airplanes all the time, and there’s a lot of noise, and there’s rain and musty garages. Musty garages create a certain noise.” That same article asked Jack Endino (sound production artist) to describe the sound of grunge. He called it “Seventies-influenced,

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255 Based on Susan Sontag’s view of Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories. In Against Interpretation: And Other Essays. (New York: The Noonday Press, 1961), 10.


257 Ibid.
slowed-down punk music.” Kim Thavil (guitarist for Soundgarden) described it as, “sloppy, smeary, staggering, drunken music.” It is clear from just these few descriptions that grunge represented a lot of different associations that encompassed both physical and musical sensations.

On year later in *Rolling Stone*, Kurt Cobain described grunge as a quest “I was looking for something a lot heavier, yet melodic at the same time…something different from the heavy metal, a different attitude.” The reflection of Cobain as well as the other male artists interviewed about grunge, did not become part of the categorization of Grunge that was propagated by the U.S. media in the 1990s. Even more importantly, the female artists of grunge were not asked in these early days of grunge to describe the genre, making them secondary contributors to a rock genre forged and defined by men. The *Rolling Stone* article featuring McKagan, Endino, and Thavil descriptions, failed to ask any females artists what “Grunge” was. Furthermore, that issue featured the female grunge band L7 (who was also from Seattle) a few pages back, but failed to ask them about their expression of grunge despite their touring with male acts such as Nirvana, Soundgarden, and Pearl Jam.

The article describing Grunge in *Rolling Stone* is only one example of how Grunge became a category of rock defined by heterosexual men, not by female artists or other gender identities. In this narrative the masculine identity of grunge was

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259 Ibid.

260 Ibid.
solidified early on, even before Nirvana and Pearl Jam had multiplatinum albums. The music media demonstrated a compulsion to follow the historical heterosexist construction of rock that hyper-sexualized male and female genders in order to maintain the hierarchy of masculine behavior attached to rock music. When Pearl Jam’s album *Ten* hit in August of 1991 and Nirvana’s *Nevermind* came out a month later, grunge immediately supplanted the popularity of hair metal from the radio and MTV. Since hair metal was perceived as hyper-masculine, only an even more masculine genre would be able to usurp its popularity. The concept that a feministic music expression could emasculate rock publicly and financially was unacceptable at the time.

At the same time that grunge and grunge feminism was being mis-categorized, counter-culture feminism was unknowingly being infused into American popular culture. This is illustrated by new music genres carved out in mainstream music awards such as the Grammys® and MTV VMAs. Female and male artists of grunge were being nominated and winning shiny prizes in newly minted categories such as “Alternative” and “Alternative Rock”, while barging in on heavy metal categories as well. Billboard’s Hot 100 charts still had grunge artists breaking into pop territory, and the Billboard’s Alternative Songs charts reflected the prevalence of female artists in alternative music. Additionally, Grunge fashion had gone mainstream with Marc Jacob’s


262 For reference, look at online catalogs such as rockonthenet.com which has documented Grammy nominees and winners on http://www.rockonthenet.com/archive/1995/grammys.htm and MTV VMAs on MTV.com also documented video clips, nominees, and winners http://www.mtv.com/ontv/vma/1995/


iconoclastic runway show for Perry Ellis in 1992 and by 1995 had noticeably saturated Generation X female culture through commercially-accessible and affordable retailers like Abercrombie & Fitch. Through the masculine and Camped dress codes of grunge, these mass-marketed aesthetics signified allegiance to the music movement’s anti-archetype of femininity.

At the same time that grunge aesthetics and values were seeping into late 20th-century constructions of gender and rock, mainstream feminism publicly evolved into a new movement. The newly declared third-wave of feminism that protested the vantage points of former waves of feminism and the protests of Rot Grrrls and grunge rockers against binary gender constraints formed a unique bond between very different approaches to feministic philosophies. All three interrogated traditional identities created by [feminism], and rejected the categories of [feminism], creating ideological parallels that were commercially perceived as interrelated.

The culture of [feminism] was being intellectually challenged in the 1990s by three parallel movements. In 1995, Rebecca Walker observed,

Young women of age today wrestle with the term [feminism] because we have a very different vantage point on the world than that of our foremothers…For many of us it seems that to be a feminist in the way that we have seen or understood feminism is to conform to an identity and way of living that doesn’t allow for individuality, complexity, or less than perfect personal histories. We fear that the identity will dictate and regulate our lives, instantaneously pitting us against someone, forcing us to choose

265 For a 2015 reflection on Marc Jacob’s line, see http://www.vogue.com/13293785/marc-jacobs-perry-ellis-grunge-collection-90s-fashion/

266 Rebecca Walker’s article “Becoming the 3rd Wave” published in the Jan/Feb. issue of Ms. in 1992 is commonly recognized as the official beginning of third-wave feminism.
Correspondingly to the complaints of third-wave feminism, Riot Grrrl challenged the categories of feminism and defined counter-culture vantage points through their feminist economy of zines and music. Their independently produced media texts encouraged girls and young women to practice a DIY ethos and seize tools of media production, reformulating identities of girlhood, feminism and youth culture. Grunge feminism, deploying the same DIY tools supported the Riot Grrrl movement, resulting in a saturated pop-culture denunciation of prescribed categories of gender, race, and age; therefore rejecting the multiple signifiers of behavior and aesthetics as gender techniques.

The rejection of the gender technique of “behavior”, and the embrace of the “unruly woman” through performance was a direct assault on the masculinist institution of rock and society’s constraints on women. Kim Gordon has talked about this phenomenon in rock, citing that women aren’t really allowed to be kick ass and fierce, because they are expected to be “in control”.

When you listen to old R&B records, the women on them sang in a really fierce, kick-ass way. In general, though, women aren’t really allowed to be kick-ass. It’s like the famous distinction between art and craft: Art, and wildness, and pushing against the edges, is a male thing. Craft, and control, and polish, is for women. Culturally we don’t allow women to be as


free as they would like, because that is frightening. We either shun those women or deem them crazy. Female singers who push too much, and too hard, don’t tend to last very long. They’re jags, bolts, comets [like] Janis Joplin…But being that woman who pushes the boundaries means you also bring in less desirable aspects of yourself. At the end of the day, women are expected to hold up the world, not annihilate it.¹

Being “out of control”, is being outside the cage. The activity of performance, for the artists of grunge and Riot Grrrl is an intentional disregard for the restricted domain of female behavior, making the stage a battleground as Joan Jett and Kathleen Hanna have both attested to. The mechanics of power² inflicted upon the female body, and consequently female behavior is interrupted by performance, both live and mediated. These are not docile bodies with practiced behavior.³ Rather these are improvised, yet intentional rejections of the mechanized system of behavior. Control as a gender signifier in the clique is interrupted dissimulating its gendered and sexualized meaning.

By rejecting feminine and feminist signifiers, and becoming delinquents, Riot Grrrl Feminism and grunge feminism publicly discarded the statuses of privilege that had been carefully constructed by white middle class women, and opened themselves up to critique⁴. They created anti-archetypes of femininity performed through the body making them “unruly women”. Exemplified through personas such as the Kinder Whore,


³ Ibid.

⁴ The examination as the fixing, at once ritual and ‘scientific’, of individual differences, as the pinning down of each individual in his own particularity (in contrast with the ceremony in which status, birth, privilege, function are manifested with all the spectacle of their marks) clearly indicates the appearance of a new modality of power in which each individual receives as his status his own individuality, and in which he is linked by his status to the features, the measurements, the gaps, the ‘marks’ that characterize him and make him a ‘case’. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition), 192.
Riot Grrrl and grunge feminism displayed the abject; unattractive and unsexy bodies that couldn’t be controlled. These abject personas celebrated their subculture and were promoted by pop culture, making the 1990s a unique time of acceptance for the abject in rock for women.

The blind acceptance and consumption of the abject because of the misinterpretations of grunge and its feministic expressions contributed to the rise of anti-feminism in the late 1990s. Grunge and Riot Grrrl were continually connected and confused. Sociologist Catherine Strong suggests that the subsumption of female grunge artists into the Riot Grrrl movement, musically and politically minimized the contributions of both grunge musicians and Riot Grrrls.\textsuperscript{275} Associatively, the minimization of these two genres also decreased the acceptance of third-wave feminism, which paralleled their interrogations of feminism.

The abject that grunge created and celebrated as a behavioral and corporal vantage point of feminism ultimately limited its life span as well as the life span of Riot Grrrl and third-wave feminism. Additionally, the polemic oppositionality of Courtney Love, the champion of the abject through the Kinder Whore, contributed to the short mainstream acceptance of a genre of music that wasn’t sexy or pretty. The third-wave of feminism in the U.S. only lasted six years. This is astonishing compared to seventy-one years for the first wave of American feminism (beginning in 1848 with the Seneca Falls Convention through to the ratification of the 19th Amendment in 1919); and about forty-two years for the second wave (beginning of World War II in 1941 through to the

Women’s Liberation Movement’s expiration of the Equal Rights Amendment in 1982 and the Feminist Sex Wars of 1983-84). The knell of all three feminisms were condensed into a three-year period 1996 when the Spice Girls released their album *Spice*, to *Time* Magazine’s Cover Story in 1998, “Is Feminism Dead?” with Calista Flockhart’s character Ally McBeal on the cover, and later released Brittany Spears’ album *Baby One More Time* in 1999. The dark timbre of grunge and a counter-culture feminism was eventually superseded by a reconstruction of the female gender into something commercially acceptable such as “a faux female type architected by men and marketed to females.”

In the brief popularity of grunge from 1991 to 1999 Courtney Love successfully eradicated the power of the music industry to commodify the female body for profit. She confronted the connection of ageism to female gender techniques, transvesticated herself in order to demonstrate the limitations of binary gender constructions, exposed the violations of rape and domestic violence through provocative lyrics, and stripped her own persona into a fluctuating identity. She unequivocally influenced other artists, musicians and fans who appreciated her iconoclastic stature. They emulated a spectrum of the counter-culture abject through their own interpretations of anti-archetype femininity and feminism. Hole has sold over 2 million copies of *Pretty On The Inside* and *Live Through This*. To date, Courtney Love and her band Hole have sold over 3 million records worldwide.

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276 “Is Feminism Dead” Cover Image & Title of *Time Magazine* June 29, 1998. [http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19980629,00.html](http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19980629,00.html) Photoshop editor unknown.


278 Album sales information provided from Neilsen Soundscan through Hole Discography on Wikepedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hole_discography](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hole_discography)
Love’s performance is untamable.  
So it should be let alone to be viewed as 
self-destructive, important, dirty, and rebellious; 
flaws and all and free from categories and interpretation.

Image 12.

Someday you will ache like I ache

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**Images**


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Courtney Love and Kurt Cobain photograph (scanned into JPG) from Rock Against Rape Performance @ Club Lingerie in Hollywood, CA, Sept. 8, 1993 in *Dirty Blonde: The Diaries of Courtney Love*, Ava Stander, ed. (New York: Faber and Faber, Inc. 2006),163.


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