UNIVERSITY OF VAASA

Faculty of Humanities

Department of English

Susanna Mantila

Ugly Girls on Stage

Riot Grrrl Reflected through Misrepresentations

Master's Thesis

Vaasa 2009

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 3

1 INTRODUCTION 5

2 MATERIAL & METHOD 9

2.1 Material 9

2.1.1 Bikini Kill 11

2.1.2 Bratmobile 13

2.1.3 Heavens to Betsy 15

2.1.4 Huggy Bear 16

2.2 Method 18

3 THEORY 19

3.1 Subcultural Theory 19

3.2 Radical Feminist Theory 22

3.3 Waves of Feminist Theory 26

3.4 Theory of Gender Performativity 29

4 "PUNK ROCK DREAM COME TRUE" –
RIOT GRRRL IN THE TRADITION OF PUNK 34

4.1 Riot Grrrl's Punk Ancestors 34

4.2 First Women of Punk – Riot Grrrl's Role Models 39

4.3 Emergence of Grrrls 45

4.4 Punk Rock Feminism 51

5 "DISTINCT COMPLICITY" – RIOT GRRRL FEMINISM 59

5.1 Foundations of Riot Grrrl Feminism 59

5.2 Riot Grrrl Feminism in the Framework of Feminisms 71

5.3 Credibility of Riot Grrrl Feminism 81

6 CONCLUSIONS 90

WORKS CITED 94

UNIVERSITY OF VAASA
Faculty of Humanities

Department:	Department of English
Author:	Susanna Mantila
Master's Thesis:	Ugly Girls on Stage Riot Grrrl Reflected through Misrepresentations
Degree:	Master of Arts
Subject:	Cultural Studies
Date:	2009
Supervisor:	Tiina Mäntymäki

ABSTRACT

1990-luvun alussa Yhdysvalloista kantautui aggressiivisen punkrock-feminismin eli Riot Grrrl -liikkeen riitasointuja. Nuoret naiset valjastivat epätasa-arvoon turhautumisensa äänekkään ja nenäkkäänkin punkrock-kapinan kolmisointuihin. Ehkä juuri tästä syystä ulkopuoliset tahot päätyivät arvioimaan liikkeen toimintaa lähinnä muotoseikkojen eli musiikin, esiintymisen ja ulkonäkötekijöiden lähtökohdista. Kapinallisten tyttöjen feminististä ideologiaa moni vähätteli tai ei huomioinut lainkaan.

Lähtökohtaisesti olen pitänyt merkittävänä väärinedustusta, joka muodostui 1990-luvun alun valtavirtamedioissa sekä aiemman sukupolven feministien kommenteissa tavanomaiseksi suhtautumiseksi Riot Grrrl -liikkeeseen. Tulkitsen tätä tutkielmassani merkkinä Riot Grrrlin uhkaavasta vallankumouksellisuudesta, jota siis pohdin väärinedustusten valossa. Analyysissani korostuu liikkeen jäsenten epäsovinnainen ja epähyväksyttävä naiseus, jota havainnoin valitsemissani yhtyeissä Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy ja Huggy Bear. Teoriaosassa esittelen analyysini keskeisiksi välineiksi alakulttuuriteorian, radikaalifeminismin ja Judith Butlerin performatiivisen sukupuolikäsityksen.

Tutkielmassani korostunut Riot Grrrl -liikkeen tavoittamattomuus näkyy etenkin löydösteni moninaisuudessa. Merkittävintä löydöksissäni on kuitenkin se, että Riot Grrrl mursi ennakkoluulottomalla moniselitteisyydellään niin median kuin feminismin naiseuden käsitettä, sekä se, että käsittämättömäksi leimattu liike koettiin uhkana sovinnaiselle, patriarkaalisuuden määrittämälle naiseudelle, koska sitä vähäteltiin systemaattisesti. Riot Grrrl -liikkeen vaikutusvaltaa pyrittiin rajoittamaan, mistä syystä sen vallankumouksellisuus kuvastuu väärinedustuksissa hyvin konkreettisesti.

KEYWORDS: Riot Grrrl, punk rock, subculture, radical feminism, Judith Butler

1 INTRODUCTION

> A scrawny boy stands by, watching the group and the bouncing sea of mohawked female fans in Pucci-print minis. They sport hairy legs, army boots and tattoos. Finally he yells: “Punk rock is just an excuse for ugly girls to get on stage!” In seconds, he’s surrounded by an angry mob of girls, hopping and slam-dancing in a frenzy. He bolts to safety, chased by their jeers. (Snead 1992: 5D)

Journalist Elizabeth Snead, reporting in an August 1992 issue of *USA Today*, seems horrified. She is horrified with the herd of punk-rocking girls that she experiences as unappealing and unintelligible. Their awful appearances, their less-than-elegant clothes, and their bossy behavior pain her. She appears threatened by their abrasive aggressiveness. Yet, between the lines of Snead’s persuasive writing reads bias. Instead of attempting to interpret the doing of the girls, she emphasizes their unintelligibility. Snead identifies with the young boy in her text and thus presents a personal resistance to the punk-rocking girls. As a result, the text appears a collection of crude generalizations designed to horrify in the same way its writer has supposedly been horrified. It is designed to condemn the girls as a crazed crowd without names and without faces. It is designed to portray them as a herd of wild animals that need to be tamed. It is designed to misrepresent them.

The girls of Elizabeth Snead’s portrayal are riot grrrls – outspoken, loud, and angry young punk rock feminists. At the beginning of the 1990’s, the Riot Grrrl movement, spelled here in the capitalized form only when denoting the name of the movement as a proper noun, seriously disturbed the status quo via its feminist cultural activism within the punk rock scene. The Bikini Kill song “Double Dare Ya” solidified Riot Grrrl’s most fundamental proposals: “Dare you to do what you want / Dare you to be who you will”[1]. In accordance with them, riot grrrls dared to address taboo issues like rape, abortion, lesbianism, and women’s sexual pleasure. The reaction to this was fierce. Throughout 1992, riot grrrls were confronted with intense media scrutiny which culminated in Snead’s biased article, published late that summer. In a matter of months,

---

[1] From the Bikini Kill song, “Double Dare Ya”, off the album, *The C.D. Version of the First Two Records.*

the underground movement was forced into the public eye, causing frustration and irritation to increase within its ranks. The publicity seemed to instigate its consumers to moral panic. Riot grrrl Allison Wolfe witnessed firsthand how journalists “ended up making caricatures out of everyone” (2006), and riot grrrl Corin Tucker was outraged, because “there was never a serious article written about Riot Grrrl” (EMP 1999).

According to riot grrrl historian Julia Downes (2007: 31), the damaging misinformation the mainstream media distributed sought almost solely to discredit the ideas of riot grrrls. Some journalists trivialized Riot Grrrl’s feminist ideas by defining it as “feminism with a loud happy face dotting the i” (Spencer 1993: 116). Others focused on the superficial characteristics of those involved, reporting that riot grrrls were “screaming brats” (Goad 1994: 22) who “marked their bodies with blunt five-inch high letters reading RAPE or SLUT” (Chideya, Rossi & Hannah 1992: 84). Even music journalists misinterpreted Riot Grrrl. In Britain, they manipulatively sensationalized the movement in order to amplify its punk rock antics. By claiming to know what Riot Grrrl was about, the *New Musical Express* attempted to present the movement as a simple manifestation of the punk rock genre. “[Y]ou’ve been baffled by a load of biased ranting on some kind of new punk for women... now prepare yourself for the DEFINITIVE GUIDE TO RIOT GRRRL!” (Wells 1993: 13), it declared. Furthermore, *Melody Maker* tried to illustrate the essence of Riot Grrrl with definitive Top 10 listings (Joy 1992: 30–32).

In the United States, the music press reacted in a way similar to other mainstream media. “They’re called riot grrrls and they’re coming for your daughters” (France 1993: 23), warned the *Rolling Stone*. This resistance echoed the resistance of yet another group; the feminist founders of the 1960’s and 1970’s were not convinced that Riot Grrrl was feminism at all. Germaine Greer and Erica Jong, among other so-called second-wave feminists, claimed that the movement exhorted promiscuity in the disguise of sexual freedom (Siegel 2007: 148). Several 1990’s feminists agreed. According to them, riot grrrls had distorted the feminist slogan about the personal being the political for their inward polemicization (Siegel 2007: 149). One might react seriously to critique emanating from a qualified group of people, in this case, established feminists, but riot

grrrls interpreted it as a panic equivalent to the one that had surfaced in the mainstream media. “Of course, they’re [academic feminists] very upset and rarely give up that fearful howling on our doorsteps” (*Ablaze!* #10: 15), riot grrrl writer Karren scornfully commented on the panic.

In this regard, it seems paradoxical that Riot Grrrl stemmed from the very feminist movement whose supporters later condemned riot grrrl feminism. As a deviation from the politicized protests, such as marches and petitions, of second-wave feminism, Riot Grrrl proposed a way of conceptualizing feminism based on subversions of cultural activism. The most fundamental channel for such activism became punk rock, the rebellious music genre that originated in the late 1970’s, although riot grrrls were initially inspired to voice their frustration *toward* the genre. Many young women, who had become involved in the American underground punk in the late 1980’s, were disturbed by the unquestionable male dominance of the scene. Although punk was anticipated to provide women with the potential to bend gender boundaries, express aggression, and challenge the traditional understanding of femininity, girls found themselves in a scene where no such potential seemed to exist. Instead, the American punk scene had come to parallel patriarchal mainstream society. Thus, by harnessing punk’s tools of underground cultural activism, riot grrrls not only challenged the present state of the scene but also the present state of society.

Riot grrrls themselves described the movement as fundamentally feminist. Riot grrrl Niki Elliott called the movement “punk rock feminism” (1992) reversing its popularized mainstream label, ‘feminist punk rock’. According to riot grrrl Kathleen Hanna, the movement aimed to uncover “how bullshit like racism, able-bodism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, anti-Semitism and heterosexism” (1991) prevented young girls from fulfilling their needs, goals, and desires. Girls were encouraged to become active in fighting misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy. Despite the aim of Riot Grrrl to encourage and empower girls and women, journalists uncritically condemned the movement as exclusively anti-male. Established feminists viewed riot grrrls as naïve, ignorant, and obnoxious. In other words, the dominant story of Riot Grrrl was formulated with words that confined the movement into a group of sexually

promiscuous, ridiculously naïve feminist punkettes. Furthermore, the fact that Riot Grrrl's cultural subversions provocatively incorporated an array of taboo issues, including sexual abuse and homosexuality, only encouraged the utilization of misconceptions in disclaiming the movement.

The misconceptions apparently represent mainstream society's attempts to protect the status quo from too comprehensive a change, proposed by those involved in the Riot Grrrl movement. This claim finds support in the aggressive, norm-defying punk rock activism and the alleged unintelligibility and noncredibility of riot grrrl feminism instigating a moral panic that most prominently materialized in the reactions of the mainstream media and canonized feminists. This recognition will constitute the point of origin for my argumentation. It has led me to ask why Riot Grrrl was so pervasively misrepresented. Did the misrepresentations simply indicate the ignorance of mainstream society? Or, could they be interpreted as intentional trivializations of the central characteristics of Riot Grrrl that unintentionally reflected the very characteristics they most vehemently attempted to belittle? In this thesis, I will attempt to locate the Riot Grrrl movement, and in order to achieve this, the dominant story of misrepresentations must be challenged. More specifically, I will discuss the misreadings of Riot Grrrl for the purpose of constructing my reading of the movement. By simultaneously constructing and contrasting, I wish to establish the motivation to misrepresent Riot Grrrl as a reflection of the movement's revolutionary potential. Hence, the aim of this thesis is to demonstrate that the revolutionary potential of the Riot Grrrl movement, as well as the fundamental characteristics of that potential, can most tangibly be uncovered in the misrepresentations of the movement.

2 MATERIAL & METHOD

2.1 Material

In this present thesis, I will focus on the misrepresentations of the Riot Grrrl movement, emanating from the music press, mainstream media, and canonized feminists, and for that reason, examples of misrepresentations will form a significant part of the material. I will begin this part of the thesis by introducing the tendencies of misrepresentation. This is not to suggest the misrepresentations as more credible material but to indicate that my reading of Riot Grrrl will derive from the inadequacy of the misrepresentations to present the movement in its complexity. Firstly, the newspaper and magazine articles I have selected were published in American or British publications for the reason that riot grrrl activism began in the United States and Great Britain, and for the reason that the reactions in these countries varied, yet were similarly misrepresentative. One group of articles appeared in specialist niche media, such as the music magazines *Rolling Stone* and *Melody Maker*. Another group appeared in the mainstream media, which refers to newspapers, magazines, and tabloids aimed to reach as comprehensive a readership as possible. Publications that will be quoted include *Newsweek* and the *Daily Star*. Thirdly, feminist misrepresentations have been selected from certain academic publications, including books and journals. Also their creators are mainly English-speaking, because Riot Grrrl began as a phenomenon of the English-speaking world.

The interpretation of outsider reactions to Riot Grrrl will be aligned with the interpretation of the self-representations of the movement, i.e. the representations created by riot grrrls themselves. The riot grrrls that this refers to are the members of four quintessential Riot Grrrl bands: Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy, and Huggy Bear. These bands shaped the movement perhaps more than other riot grrrl bands, although one must be careful not to promote them over other bands, especially because that would indicate consenting to the distorted attention the mainstream media gave to certain riot grrrl bands only. Nevertheless, many insiders consider the four bands the pioneering ones, since they explicitly identified as riot grrrl bands, were active in the movement from its very beginning, and cooperated closely with each other.

Ideally, of course, a movement would be completely represented only by all of its participants, but this is an unrealistically ambitious aim within the compass of this thesis, or any written text, for that matter. I have resolved the problem by choosing to focus on the four bands I mentioned by name, both because this will enable discussing each in more detail and because the bands were dissimilar enough to represent the scope of the entire movement.

Furthermore, the self-representations of the riot grrrls, which will form the basis of my reading of the movement, will be treated as one collective entity of cultural activism. It is worth mentioning here that music, comprising both the musical sound and rock lyricism, formed a significant portion of riot grrrl activism, and its role should therefore not be underestimated. As music historian Jerry Rodnitzky notes, most of the central figures in Riot Grrrl had been brought up on American punk of the 1980's and "knew music's great potential influence" (1999: 59). Unfortunately, many journalists and other outsider writers that reflected upon the movement became preoccupied with the music created within the movement, a point also made by Mary Celeste Kearney (1997: 210). The preoccupation was largely due to the choice of the musical genre, which harnessed riot grrrls with loud and aggressive punk sounds and assertive and often offensive lyrics. Music arguably formed the most comprehensible and tangible portion of riot grrrl activism. It is also possible that the role of musical activity became overemphasized because it was the site of origin for the movement, including the four bands that will be discussed here.

The members of Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy, and Huggy Bear engaged in several other forms of cultural activism, which is why the material is not based solely on their musical activity. Riot grrrls created fanzines, or self-produced magazines, which contained information about bands and concerts, presented grrrls' artwork and poetry, and also addressed more serious feminist issues such as abortion and rape (Leonard 1997: 238). It was inexpensive to produce fanzines, or zines, since the process required only elementary writing materials. Zines were then simply photocopied and distributed at a concert or a meeting. Lucy O'Brien (2002: 164) states that zines, heavy with irony, provided an alternative to the politically correct women's magazines, and

Mary Celeste Kearney notes that they revealed "interests in exploring nontraditional forms of young female identity" (2006: 136). Kearney (2006: 136) also points out that Riot Grrrl's encouragement for girls to produce their own media resulted in an upsurge of the number of zines created and girls active in their creation. Especially during the early 1990's, fanzines attracted considerable attention from the mass media, establishing zinemaking as an effective means for self-expression and networking – and riot grrrl activism.

To conclude, my reading of Riot Grrrl will derive from a variety of cultural subversions and activities related to the bands Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy, and Huggy Bear. In regard to this, it is worth mentioning that even when I use the noun 'band', the activity in question is not necessarily a musical one, although the noun itself carries that denotation. The noun will be employed for the reason of simplification when referring to the individual members active *in* each band. The use of the noun by no means suggests that riot grrrls could not participate in activities independent of music. In fact, those involved in the movement did create art, film, and communities as a part of their feminist activism. Many subversive pieces appeared in zines, which thus reflected the state of the movement, but riot grrrl activism manifested itself also in weekly all-girl meetings that became safe places for young women in much the same way as 1970's feminist consciousness-raising groups. Much of the multifaceted activism of riot grrrls connects with the participation of the four bands, and their interlinking, which is why they form the basis for the material that will be contrasted to the material of the misrepresentations.

2.1.1 Bikini Kill

> You don't make all the rules!
> I know what I'm gonna fuckin' do
> Me and my girlfriends gonna push on through!
> Riot grrrls gonna stomp on you, yeah![2]

---

[2] From the Bikini Kill song, "This Is Not a Test", off the album, *The C.D. Version of the First Two Records.*

For the foursome hailing from Olympia, Washington, the movement was certainly no test but a serious venture, which is perhaps why the band is now widely – and often one-sidedly – credited as the dynamo of Riot Grrrl. Bikini Kill was one of the first riot grrrl bands to form, beginning in the fall of 1990. According to Julia Downes, singer Kathleen Hanna had some prior experience in music-making. She had originally decided to dedicate her time into antiracism activism, but her priorities shifted when she started working through personal issues around sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy, as well as volunteering at a women's shelter. (Downes 2007: 23) Hanna became acquainted with drummer Tobi Vail, and guitarist Billy Karren and bassist Kathi Wilcox completed the hardcore punk outfit.

Bikini Kill encouraged a female-centric, feminist environment at their shows and collaborated to write songs, which became known for their radical lyrics. The lyrics assert the power and capability of women, much in the same way 1970's radical feminism did. On the independent demo cassette, *Revolution Girl Style Now!*, and the *Bikini Kill* EP, Hanna screams, moans, and swears, and the accompanying fast-tempo music sounds equally aggressive. The lyrics focus on female empowerment ("Double Dare Ya", "Resist Psychic Death", "This Is Not A Test"), girl love ("Rebel Girl", "For Tammy Rae", "Alien She"), women's sexual liberation ("Sugar", "Jet Ski"), and sexual abuse ("Liar", "Suck My Left One", "Daddy's Lil' Girl). On "Suck My Left One", Hanna, her voice full of anger, sings: "Daddy comes into her room at night / He's got more than talking on his mind"[3]. Most of Bikini Kill's lyrics address taboo subjects that women had not previously sung as honestly and openly about. Nevertheless, later during the band's career, Bikini Kill's music and lyrics evolved toward a more contemporary pop rock sound, which is particularly audible on the band's final album *Reject All American* (1996).

---

[3] From the Bikini Kill song, "Suck My Left One", off the album, *The C.D. Version of the First Two Records*.

For Bikini Kill, making and performing music constituted a significant vehicle for their feminist message, but Kathleen Hanna, Tobi Vail, and Kathi Wilcox were equally active in other forms of feminist activism. One such venture was producing the fanzine known also as *Bikini Kill*. It contained their artwork and poetry, and it encouraged other young women to join the ranks of riot grrrls. Since the disbanding of Bikini Kill in 1998, its members have continued with feminist activism. Vail is now an accomplished feminist activist and theorist, and Hanna has counseled at women's centers and taught at universities, reflecting the seriousness of the two as feminists. Former Bikini Kill members have also continued their careers as musicians and zine writers, which indicates their interest in riot-grrrl-like activism as other than a passing phase or a fad. Even though the group disbanded, the feminist activism of its former members has not ceased to exist. Karren, Vail, and Wilcox have gone on to perform with a number of bands, including The Frumpies, and Kathleen Hanna currently fronts the feminist electro-pop group Le Tigre.

2.1.2 Bratmobile

> She's the Joanest Jett around
> Like to get her in my bed
> She doesn't need a crown
> So I'll lasso her instead[4]

Bratmobile, another American riot grrrl band, emerged from the underground scenes of Oregon, Washington, D.C., and the Northwest. In the fall of 1989, two University of Oregon students, Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman, became friends after discovering that they were next-door neighbors at the university dormitory. According to Downes (2007: 23), both the growing number of discontented grrrl zine writers and the low-fidelity independent rock bands such as Beat Happening encouraged Wolfe and Neuman to begin creating their own feminist fanzine. Many would name *Girl Germs* one of the most influential riot grrrl zines, and in fact, the term 'riot grrrl' was born

---

[4] From the Bratmobile song, "Panik", off the album, *Pottymouth*.

when Molly and Allison were considering catchy names for their zine. The two also began performing in a rather unconventional and unscripted way. Allison Wolfe remembers how she and Molly attended different parties and intruded the stage during the performers' break: "[W]e would jump up to the mic and sing these silly songs" (EMP 1999). "We really created our own scene" (EMP 1999), Wolfe claims.

Wolfe's statement finds support in the amount of attention *Girl Germs* and Bratmobile began attracting. During the summer of 1991, the activism of Wolfe and Neuman was recognized by other riot grrrls, including Bikini Kill's Tobi Vail and Kathleen Hanna. As already stated, Bikini Kill members participated in the organizing of women-only meetings, but members of Bratmobile should perhaps be credited as the originators of the idea for riot grrrls to connect with other riot grrrls, since particularly their zine attracted the involvement of others. Another zine was employed to voice the call for the first-ever riot grrrl meeting that was held in Washington, D.C. The meetings intriguingly connect Bratmobile to Bikini Kill, which in turn suggests the two bands as the American pioneers of the movement. It also indicates a fundamental togetherness between the members of the two bands, because the initial ideas of the movement were discussed in the meetings they attended. An aspiring guitarist by the name of Erin Smith also attended the early meetings, became acquainted with Wolfe and Neuman, and completed the lineup of Bratmobile in the fall of 1991.

While the outrageous *a cappella* intrusions had attracted their share of attention, with the addition of a guitarist, Bratmobile evolved into a legitimate band. The furious, fast-tempo playing of Smith and Neuman now accompanied Wolfe's sourly moaning voice. In words similar to Hanna's, Wolfe sang about women's sexual and psychological harassment ("And I Live in a Town Where the Boys Amputate Their Hearts", "Stab"), men's depreciation of women ("No You Don't", "Throway"), women's sexual freedom ("Juswanna", "Panik"), and grrrl power ("Queenie", "The Real Janelle"). Lesbianism is addressed more openly in several Bratmobile songs, such as "Fuck Yr Fans" and "Panik". On their album, *Pottymouth*, and EP, *The Real Janelle*, certain songs angrily accuse women of betraying the trust of other women. For example, the lyrics to "Die" ask an estranged friend questions about the withering friendship, only to conclude

cynically: "Yeah yeah girlfriend / 'Soul sisters to the end'"[5]. Finally, Bratmobile also asserted that women who appeared traditionally feminine could be feminist. "[L]ipstick and make-up people can be feminist, we can wear skirts and still be feminists" (2007), Allison Wolfe has said. Bratmobile reclaimed many images and ideas that 1970's feminists would have considered antifeminist.

2.1.3 Heavens to Betsy

> I've got a heart that's true
> I got something I must do
> I know that everything is fucked up
> I ain't never gonna shut up[6]

The third American band that will depict the cultural activism of the Riot Grrrl movement is Heavens to Betsy, also based in Olympia, Washington. Although some would claim the band less influential than Bikini Kill or Bratmobile, I have chosen to include it in this thesis because its singer and guitarist, Corin Tucker, has profoundly influenced women's position in rock through her work with Heavens to Betsy and her later band, Sleater-Kinney. In addition, Tucker's wild vibrato is one of the most distinguishable punk rock voices, arguably boosting the band's noticeability. Heavens to Betsy's influence on Riot Grrrl is significant also because the band participated in some of the most pivotal moments in riot grrrl history. In 1991, Heavens to Betsy performed at the International Pop Underground Convention, which opened with a themed 'Girls' Nite' that celebrated women performers and women audience members. Heavens to Betsy took the stage with such other riot grrrl bands as Bikini Kill, Mecca Normal, Bratmobile, and 7 Year Bitch (Downes 2007: 29). Corin Tucker recalls the event as a "spark of this new kind of idealism and talent […] that everyone was really taken by" (EMP 1999). In the zine *Girl Germs*, a riot grrrl who calls herself Rebecca, writes that Girls' Nite was the first time she saw "women stand on a stage as though they truly belonged there" (1991).

---

[5] From the Bratmobile song, "Die", off the EP, *The Real Janelle*.
[6] From the Heavens to Betsy song, "Nothing Can Stop Me", off the album, *Calculated*.

Girls' Nite was a successful landmark event in the inception of the Riot Grrrl movement, and by participating in it, Heavens to Betsy not only assumed its place onstage but also achieved a status as a pioneering riot grrrl band. Besides providing audiences with powerful performances, Tucker and the other half of the duo, drummer and occasional bassist, Tracy Sawyer, released three singles and an album titled *Calculated* during their three-year long career. On the first single, Heavens to Betsy collaborated with Bratmobile, thus linking the band to other riot grrrl pioneers also recording-wise. Additionally, the two bands were interlinked via the topics their song lyrics focused on. Tucker sang about issues ranging from women's empowerment ("Decide", "Nothing Can Stop Me") to more aggressive criticism of the oppression of women ("Terrorist", "Waitress Hell"). The band also wrote songs about taboos such as abortion ("Baby's Gone") and lesbianism ("Me and Her"). Sound-wise, the band somewhat differed from other riot grrrl punk rockers, including Bikini Kill and Bratmobile. Heavens to Betsy's lyrics vary from mellow to aggressive, but the accompanying music is usually slower in tempo and gloomier in tone, incorporating instruments and arrangements untypical for punk. Tucker developed this sound further with her later band, Sleater-Kinney, which was active from 1994 to 2006.

2.1.4 Huggy Bear

> Stay clear fruity
> 'Cause I'm the rooty too-ka-looty
> I'll blow you off the face of this earth
> You'll be as bloody as you were at birth[7]

The initial idea for a grrrl riot originated on the coasts of the United States, but young women around the world craved to create girl-centric communities that would enable and encourage them to apply feminist ideas to each aspect of their lives. In Great Britain, Huggy Bear announced their allegiance to Riot Grrrl. The band, formed in

---

[7] From the Huggy Bear song, "Blow Dry", off the split Bikini Kill/Huggy Bear album, *Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah/Our Troubled Youth*.

1991, consisted of singer Chris Rowley, guitarists Jo Johnson and Jon Slade, bassist Niki Elliott, and drummer Karen Hill. Thanks to its wide-spread underground punk network, Britain could have provided a more fertile ground for the evolvement of Riot Grrrl, had not the ever-growing media tension led to the implosion of the movement. Downes (2007: 33) argues this, as in Britain, women had been actively involved in the punk scene already in the 1970's, forming bands such as The Slits, Siouxsie & the Banshees, and X-Ray Spex.

On the one hand, Huggy Bear benefited from the work of its British female predecessors. On the other hand, however, the band identified more explicitly with contemporary American riot grrrl bands, as the music its members created and the activities they engaged in carried an explicitly feminist message. Huggy Bear, too, wrote songs about sexual freedom ("Erotic Bleeding", "Shaved Pussy Poetry"), unhappy love stories ("Jupiter Re-Entry", "No Sleep"), and uncompromising women ("Blow Dry", "Her Jazz"). Compared to the American riot grrrl bands presented above, Huggy Bear's rather metaphorical lyrics require more decoding. Whereas for example Bratmobile's lyrics tell stories, Huggy Bear's lyrics can often be read in a variety of ways. The lyrics may also appear threatening and thus closer to Riot Grrrl's punk roots. To give an example, on the song "Prayer", Rowley boldly declares: "Don't try and correct me if you think I'm wrong / If it's necessary when it's necessary for me I'll just shoot"[8]. Even behavior-wise, Huggy Bear resembled its British punk predecessors. This could be witnessed in February 1993 when the band performed on *The Word*, a British late night talk show. After their performance, the Barbi twins were interviewed in the studio. The members of Huggy Bear and Riot Grrrl London began protesting by shouting obscenities at the pin-up models. A chaos followed and the protesters were ejected from the studio. The event was widely recognized in the mainstream media, inevitably boosting the band's notoriety.

---

[8] From the Huggy Bear song, "Prayer", off the album, *Taking the Rough with the Smooch.*

Punk rock historian Stewart Home comments on the event in his book, *Cranked Up Really High,* and connects it to Britain's potent punk legacy. He compares the role of Huggy Bear to the revolutionary role played by the Sex Pistols in the first coming of punk (Home 1997). In Home's opinion, Huggy Bear provided "a myth around which other bands could organise themselves" (1997), leading him to question the band's riot grrrl status. His claims are problematic, nevertheless, because the members of Huggy Bear preferred to remain underground and refused to accept the large-scale role Home has attempted to attribute to them. The band directed its efforts to British riot grrrl enthusiasts but also to American ones by collaborating with Bikini Kill. The collaboration culminated in the release of a split album, *Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah/Our Troubled Youth*, in 1993. Thus, contrary to Home's arguments about Huggy Bear's unfulfilled revolutionary potential, the band apparently fulfilled its riot grrrl potential. Alongside Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy, it remains one of the movement's most influential bands.

2.2 Method

Since the Riot Grrrl movement is a cultural and a political phenomenon reflecting human behavior, the analysis that will follow will be qualitative. My reading of the texts about Riot Grrrl and produced by riot grrrls – representations and self-representations, respectively – will constitute the discussion of this thesis. The theoretical framework, upon which the analysis will be based, will be described in depth in the following chapter, but the basic method will be to consider how Riot Grrrl has been interpreted from the perspectives of subcultural theory and the varieties of second-wave and third-wave feminism, and to contrast these interpretations with my reading of the movement, based mainly on Judith Butler's theory of performative gender. My method can be summarized as an unmasking of the various interpretations and misinterpretations of Riot Grrrl in order to achieve my interpretation of the movement. Simultaneously, I will reflect upon the reasons behind the misrepresentations of the Riot Grrrl movement from the perspective of my interpretation.

3 THEORY

Articles and essays about Riot Grrrl commonly introduce the movement either from the perspective of music or from the perspective of feminism. As I will later argue, it is this forceful division of riot grrrl phenomena that has resulted in the misrepresentations of the movement, and therefore it is significant to begin this chapter by presenting the perspectives that lie behind the division. Three major mainstream perspectives, while each partly applies to the movement, prove insufficient for explaining the complexity of the movement. I will attempt to demonstrate in this chapter that because of their overemphasis, each of the perspectives misrepresented Riot Grrrl. While numerous mainstream journalists and canonized feminists labeled the movement a travesty of feminism, the music press treated Riot Grrrl almost solely as a musical movement, focusing on similarities with 1970's punk rock and punk subculture. The latter interpretation appears accurate in the sense that Riot Grrrl can be understood in terms of a subculture, as the movement was marginal to mainstream culture. At the same time, Riot Grrrl's status as a subculture, as defined by subcultural theory, is disputable, as I will illustrate below. At the end of the chapter, I will contrast subcultural theory, as well as the feminist perspectives of potential representation and misrepresentation of Riot Grrrl, with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, with which I will formulate my reading of the movement.

3.1 Subcultural Theory

During the 1970's, British researcher Dick Hebdige (1979: 3) defined subcultures as youth groups that puzzle members of the dominant culture, threaten traditional practices and social order, and exist on the margins of culture. For his landmark piece of work, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, published in 1979, Hebdige studied several groups, noting that they were "treated at different times as threats to public order and as harmless buffoons" (1979: 2). What he also recognized was that subcultures are created through resistance. A subculture is rather paradoxically dependent on the dominant culture as the object of its resistance (Hebdige 1979: 3). Still, resistance does not

emanate only from those involved in subcultures but also from those representing dominant cultures. 1970's punks met with intense disapproval from the latter, indicating them as one of the clearest subcultural groups according to Hebdige's definition. This was likely due to the nonchalant ignorance of those involved in the subculture that represented mainly white working-class youth delinquents. Their focusing on mindless rebellion is effectively summarized in a quotation from Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols, who declared that his band was "against bureaucracy, hypocrisy [...] and anything that ends in 'Y'" (quoted in Spicer 2006: 29).

The music press of the early 1990's immediately recognized characteristics of subcultural rebellion in the Riot Grrrl movement. *USA Today* called it "the new cult of outrageous, fast-living, dirty-talking, hard-drinking, all-girl bands" (Snead 1992: 5D), linking the behavior of those involved to the delinquent punks of the 1970's. This restrictive view defines Riot Grrrl solely as a punk rock subculture and, by exaggerating their supposed misbehavior, casts their status as another mindlessly rebelling group. Similarly, Anne Barrowclough's article in the *Mail on Saturday* depicts riot grrrls as abrasive, disrespectful youth, or "the latest, nastiest phenomenon to enter the British music scene" (1993: 23). Even more established music journalists have quite one-sidedly equated Riot Grrrl with the punk scene of the 1970's. Punk rock historian Stewart Home argues: "Riot Grrrl, when it was transplanted across the Atlantic and brought into the hot house of British youth culture, should have provided PUNK ROCK with another amplic phase" (1997). Home's claim defines Riot Grrrl as both a subculture, or 'youth culture', and a movement with musical aims. Despite acknowledging punk as one of the movement's outlets due to its 'genderless' and 'unartistic' qualities, he neglects to acknowledge Riot Grrrl as feminism.

Home's claim leads one to question the potential of interpreting Riot Grrrl with the help of existing subcultural theory. As Marion Leonard (1997: 241) points out, 1970's theorists, such as Hebdige, Mungham, and Pearson, present youth as inevitably troubled. Leonard writes that "by equating youth subculture with delinquent culture one immediately marginalises its position and undermines its importance as legitimate expression" (1997: 241). The quotations referenced above certainly demonstrate this

kind of undermining, while the background of riot grrrls was actually far from the emphases of the articles. Many of those involved in the movement were academically educated and demonstrated a high level of sophistication and self-awareness, which Leonard (1997: 243, 250) also recognizes. In light of this, the reactions of the mainstream media display ignorance that be explained as a sign of a gendered discourse. Riot grrrls were labeled as problematic and promiscuous, not because of their punk rock rebellion, but because of their refusal of traditional femininity. And as they were so labeled, they were aligned with the archetypal characterization of members of subcultures as delinquents.

This is not to suggest that Riot Grrrl was not a subculture. One must acknowledge the movement as consisting of young supporters who rebelled against contemporary conventions and utilized music for conveying their message, similar to the late 1970's punk movement. Nevertheless, the dissimilarities must be acknowledged, as well. The outcome of this elaboration is that the subcultural theory formulated in the 1970's appears inadequate for the purposes of interpreting the Riot Grrrl movement. Firstly, it overgeneralizes the ignorance of those involved in subcultures without questioning why subcultures could not be intellectual. Certainly, well-educated people could engage in subcultural activity, as well. Riot grrrls demonstrated this with their concrete feminist ideology. Secondly, the theory concentrates almost solely on interpreting the behavior of men. Later theorists like Angela McRobbie (1997: 114) have argued that the term 'subculture' carries such masculine connotation that it automatically eliminates girls from forming subcultures. In this regard, Riot Grrrl signaled a significant progression in the politics of subcultures as it broke new ground by introducing a female-centric but nevertheless rebellious movement. The mainstream media ignored these developments in relation to the Riot-Grrrl-as-a-subculture narrative, and for this reason, they interpreted the movement like 1970's subcultural groups has been interpreted. Contrary to this, my argument is that Riot Grrrl should be discussed in terms of an 'updated' subculture, since it significantly revised the approach to subcultural phenomena.

3.2 Radical Feminist Theory

Because music journalists focused on their field of expertise, i.e. music, it is understandable that the Riot Grrrl movement initially became defined in terms of its musical content and related subcultural activity. As the movement attracted more attention, also the perspectives from which it was approached began to broaden. In an article published in the British tabloid, *Daily Star*, John Poole describes riot grrrls as "the toughest, meanest group of feminists since women began burning their bras", who "list MAN-HATING among their favourite hobbies" (1993: 15). "[A]re they justified in condemning the Y chromosome as the root of all evil?" (1993: 82), asks Nina Malkin in *Seventeen* magazine. The quotations demonstrate how the mainstream media had recognized the feminist characteristics of Riot Grrrl, but Poole and Malkin, among others, exaggerated the recognition, plausibly in a deliberate attempt to belittle the aims of the movement. Riot Grrrl was uncritically labeled as an anti-men movement, which suggests that rather than being acknowledged for its contemporary and particular kind of feminism, it was aligned with radical feminism, a variety of feminism born in the 1960's, emphasizing gender difference and the oppression of women in patriarchy.

Women, who had previously been active in the American feminist movement, including the National Organization for Women (NOW), created radical feminist theory in the late 1960's and early 1970's. According to Josephine Donovan (2000: 155), it was a reaction against the disrespectful and demeaning treatment radical feminists received from contemporary male radicals, active in the New Left. In terms of theory, radical feminists came to believe "that male supremacy and the subjugation of women was indeed the root and model oppression in society" (Donovan 2000: 156). Kate Millett was one of the early and most influential advocates of this perspective. In *Sexual Politics*, she establishes that the utilization of an ideological hegemony helps maintain the rule of a state. Ideology, as defined by Millett (quoted in Donovan 2000: 159), develops in a dominated social group when that group is exposed over a long period of time to a set of ideas advocated by a dominant social group. In other words, the purpose of a particular ideology is to develop society in the direction the dominant group esteems, and this is implemented most effectively by conditioning the dominated groups

to believe that the particular direction is the one they too esteem. Donovan (2000: 159) states that according to Millett, the ideology of all historical civilizations is one of male supremacy, which is why Millett establishes patriarchy as the root of the oppression of women.

Moreover, Millett emphasizes patriarchal ideology as one which is present in all forms of life and cultural activity, signifying that even the most personal experiences cannot be detached from patriarchy (Donovan 2000: 159). In Millett's terms, patriarchal ideology rather self-evidently permeates all levels of human existence. Women refrain from criticizing this system, because they have been conditioned to accept behaviors and roles with the purpose of serving and pleasing men. In addition to this, women are subjugated through the application of force. Rape, the cruelest heterosexual form of sadism, which is frequently depicted in a variety of cultural texts from canonical literature to pornography, is perhaps the most devastating manner of keeping women in their proper place. According to radical feminists such as Millett, women are both discreetly conditioned and blatantly forced to accept male supremacy, i.e. patriarchy, as the set of ideas that apply in society. In this thesis, the term 'patriarchy' will be employed as defined by Millett in *Sexual Politics*. Hence, patriarchal oppression of women will be understood here in terms of the elaborations of radical feminists.

A significant institution of women's oppression is the family, according to Millett and other radical feminists. Josephine Donovan states that radical feminists see "the family as the main source of ideological indoctrination" (2000: 159), meaning that the family forms a necessary part of the creation and maintenance of patriarchy. Millett argues that it is the family that conditions "the young […] into patriarchal ideology's prescribed attitude toward the categories of role, temperament, and status" (1970: 35). Women can be kept occupied in the home by deceiving them to perceive maternity and family life as innate. A New York-based radical feminist group called simply The Feminists also attacked the institutions of love, marriage, and family (Donovan 2000: 156–157). For instance, Shulamith Firestone (1970: 146) has argued that love is a ploy to keep women vulnerable and dependent, and she proposes the development of reliable contraceptives and extra-uterine gestation as a solution to the oppressive conditions of heterosexual

marriage and family life. Perhaps in an overambitious manner, Firestone (1970: 197–198) states that with the help of technological reproductive advances women can be freed from the mandatory burden of motherhood.

In addition to refusing the dominance of men in intimate relationships, some radical feminists encouraged women to seek solely the company of women in all other personal and professional relationships, as well. Roxanne Dunbar, for example, urged women to form an independent women's movement by refusing to work in mixed political groups (Donovan 2000: 156). Dunbar's early article claims that the trivialization of women's suffering constitutes a malicious social disease. Finally, Dunbar asserts that the dissimilarities between the sexes result from women developing "the consciousness of the oppressed" (1970: 53). This consciousness is created through the ploys discussed by Kate Millett, as well as the alignment of women's liberation with sexual liberation. Dana Densmore contributed to the scope of radical feminism with her argument that the two phenomena should not be considered synonymous (Donovan 2000: 156). By accepting the alignment, women actually adopt yet another – sexual – way of pleasing men. Their intellectual and professional lives remain stagnant, although changes in them would more significantly liberate women.

Analogous to the patriarchal ideology being accused of aligning sexual liberation with women's liberation, Riot Grrrl has been accused of overemphasizing sexuality in song lyrics, performance, and appearances. As I will discuss below in more detail, this issue has been particularly prominent in forming a generational cleft between contemporary canonized feminists and riot grrrls. Several feminists have questioned Riot Grrrl's status as a legitimate feminist movement. Well-known feminist writer and scholar Germaine Greer has labeled riot grrrls as rather ignorant young women known mostly for their "ostentatious sluttishness and disorderly behavior" (2000: 325). Radical feminists similarly discarded sexual liberation as another sign of male supremacy, which is where radical feminist theory does not seem adequate to explain Riot Grrrl. While one does well to focus on riot grrrls' display of sexuality, as it was utilized to convey their message, it would be crudely misrepresentative to claim that the display represented succumbing to the will of men. This is because for riot grrrls, sexual liberation

represented female empowerment and celebration of womanhood. This oppositeness in perspective appears one of the most significant differences between riot grrrl feminism and radical feminism.

Furthermore, while radical feminists advocated a refusal to associate with men, riot grrrls adopted a more neutral stance toward the issue. Riot grrrls encouraged forming relationships on the basis of gratification rather than gender. This may appear confusing in light of the negative experiences riot grrrls shared about men. For instance, they recognized that physical and emotional violence frequently occurred in heterosexual relationships. Nevertheless, one should consider that this was not to generalize *all* men as abusive but rather to recognize the *potential* of men to be abusive in patriarchy. In a more specific effort, riot grrrls encouraged women to refuse enduring date rape, sexual harassment, and other forms of sexual abuse coerced by men. For example the lyrics to the Heavens to Betsy song "Monsters" warn girls of this potential: "There are boys could be those monsters / There are boys could fuck her dead"[9]. Despite the specificity, the mainstream media accused riot grrrls of being separatists. One mainstream publication, *The Chicago Reader*, actually acknowledged the tendency to misinform readers of riot grrrls' aim "to form a life away from men and invent 'girl culture'" (White 1992: 9). Riot Grrrl was female-centric but not female-exclusive, as also men could participate in the movement: Billy Karren played guitar for Bikini Kill and Jon Slade for Huggy Bear. In comparison to radical feminism, which explicitly advocated separation from men, Riot Grrrl surfaced as a pro-woman movement.

As stated, radical feminists emphasized – and continue to emphasize – the role of patriarchy as the root of women's oppression. The frustration and anger of riot grrrls appeared also to stem from that oppression. Nevertheless, riot grrrls and radical feminists embraced significantly dissimilar interpretations of women's sexual liberation and acceptance of heterosexuality. Such dissimilarities suggest that riot grrrls advocated a less absolute approach than radical feminists. Zine writer Irene Chien's statement is a

---

[9] From the Heavens to Betsy song, "Monsters", off the album, *These Monsters Are Real*.

good example of this: “I don’t claim to be […] coherent in my feminist theory” (*Fake* #0: 1). Leonard highlights the heterogeneity of Riot Grrrl’s links with radical feminism. According to her, some riot grrrls admired radical feminist writer Valerie Solanas, whilst others altogether distanced themselves from radicalism. (Leonard 1997: 238) “I don’t share a lot of Grrrls’ views of ‘radical feminism’” (*Persephone’s Network*: 12), stated one zine writer. Such notions of riot grrrl heterogeneity are significant when considering with what bluntness mainstream journalists related the movement to radical feminism. Contrary to their misrepresentation, I conceive the heterogeneity to have realized the potential of Riot Grrrl. This is significant also in relation to interpreting the movement, or aspects of it, as radical feminist.

3.3 Waves of Feminist Theory

In one of the less biased articles on Riot Grrrl, *LA Weekly*’s Emily White comments that “Bikini Kill’s show is not just a vague, fuck-society gesture, but a focused critique of the punk scene itself” (1992: 22). White’s realization stresses that riot grrrls addressed a particular cultural aspect of male supremacy, namely the male-dominated punk rock scene. The article suggests that some journalists recognized Riot Grrrl as a manifestation of punk rock feminism but simultaneously highlights the rarity of such recognitions. Theoretically, nevertheless, feminism appears as the most relevant framework for discussing Riot Grrrl, because those involved in the movement proclaimed themselves feminist, and as Julia Downes puts it, created “a re-working of feminism to work through the needs, desires and issues in the situations specific to young girls and women in 1990’s America” (2007: 26). Feminist theory is especially relevant for the present thesis, because I will employ it to establish what riot grrrl feminism advocated. Additionally, feminist theory will enable to uncover what the misrepresentations of riot grrrl feminism advocated.

Feminism is generally treated as having developed as waves, each of which emphasizes the most central issues of the particular time period. In the United States, the second wave of feminism can be traced back to the early 1960’s. Many consider Betty

Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, the quintessential feminist book that gave the second wave its impetus. As Susan Osborne describes, "the book tapped in to the deep well of dissatisfaction that existed amongst those condemned to the boredom of housewifery" (2001: 43). In addition, second-wavers focused on issues such as equality between the sexes, women's educational and professional status, and responsibility of childcare (Osborne 2001: 25). According to Osborne (2001: 29–30), second-wave feminists agreed on two central issues, the right to abortion and equal pay, but she also recognizes the diversity within the movement. The extreme views of radical feminists, as discussed previously, represent the diversity that even spans twentieth-century feminism and the Riot Grrrl movement, in particular. It is worth mentioning that in this thesis, I will treat the movement as an attempt to link feminist ideologies, past and present.

Since the Riot Grrrl movement emerged in the early 1990's, it has usually been placed in the tradition of the third wave of feminism. Riot Grrrl employed the ideas of the academic feminists of the 1970's – the so-called second-wavers – and rewrote them for the young feminist of the twenty-first century. For this reason, Riot Grrrl can even be credited as the movement that marks the starting point of third-wave feminism. Sharon Cheslow, herself a riot grrrl, comments the shift by saying that "our main focus was being writers and musicians and filmmakers and artists, and how that impacted our lives" (2006). From this perspective, riot grrrls updated earlier feminist theory by extracting the issues they found relevant and reapplying them to serve their contemporary goals. In other words, riot grrrl feminism re-expressed the central aim of feminism, i.e. battling sexism, in a language that was more approachable and less academic. Riot grrrls worked to reposition the focus of feminism onto cultural activism. Finally, they abandoned many of the rigidly prescriptive rules of earlier feminists, which is another reason for considering the movement a third-wave pioneer.

Astrid Henry (2004: 87), who has examined the conflict between the generations of feminists, explains the emergence of third-wave feminism as the daughter generation's reclamation of feminism, i.e. their reconstruction of second-wave feminism. Henry names American author Naomi Wolf one of such 'new reclaimers'. Wolf's radical

views on the obsoleteness of feminism at the end of the 1980's compellingly correspond to those of riot grrrls. Her landmark publications, *The Beauty Myth* and *Fire with Fire*, called attention to the beauty industry, which arguably created inaccessible standards for women, and to the second-wave emphasis on the victimization of women, respectively. According to Deborah Siegel (2007: 102), Wolf's polemicization angered many established feminists who no longer recognized the movement as the one they had created. Siegel (2007: 102) further states that the new generation came to admit that what feminism had become by the end of the 1980's was so inaccessible to the everyday woman that it could not accomplish lasting change. In other words, the new reclaimers proposed to take feminism back to its roots, but the old schoolers failed to recognize this as the goal of the new generation of feminists. The former interpreted the activities of the latter as an attack on previous feminisms.

In spite of the infectious generational cleft and the positioning of riot grrrl feminism at the very beginning of third-wave feminism, it would be inaccurate to separate it from the continuing tradition of second-wave feminism, which Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo (1998: 814) point out. The inaccuracy is particularly apparent in relation to Riot Grrrl's similarities with radical feminism, as discussed above. From this viewpoint, riot grrrl feminism appears immediately linked to representations of second-wave feminism. On the contrary, nevertheless, the dissimilarities between riot grrrl feminism and radical feminism interestingly indicate the former as closely connected with third-wave feminism. This dichotomy serves to highlight the division of feminism into separate waves as anything but clear-cut, and that certain varieties of feminism may have been classified in terms of chronology rather than their theoretical contents. Furthermore, the varieties classified according to each wave display such diversity that it is virtually impossible to characterize a wave of feminism comprehensively. On this note, I would like to position Riot Grrrl chronologically within the third wave of feminism, as it too arose as a response to the backlash of the 1980's. Nevertheless, Riot Grrrl's resemblance to the ideology of radical feminism also positions the movement within the continuum of second-wave of feminism. Hence, both waves of feminism will have relevance in the discussion of this thesis.

3.4 Theory of Gender Performativity

As has been said, the mainstream media approached Riot Grrrl in two primary ways: music journalists described it as a musical movement and other mainstream journalists as an irrefutable extension of radical feminism. Only a few journalists were willing to acknowledge the aims of Riot Grrrl as legitimately feminist, whilst the majority of them one-sidedly concentrated on the aims of the movement as separatist and hence radical feminist, as well as criticized the movement for reverse gender discrimination, i.e. discrimination of men. Canonized feminists, for their part, neglected Riot Grrrl's connection with radical feminism, and other varieties of feminism, for that matter, writing the movement off as a nonfeminist or even an antifeminist one, for the reason that they experienced it as an attack on their work. Each of the perspectives I have discussed above depreciated, misrepresented, or exploited the movement. This is not to denounce the perspectives, because each reflects a significant, potentially revolutionary aspect of Riot Grrrl. Nevertheless, the largest flaw of the perspectives was that they each extracted one aspect of Riot Grrrl and by misrepresenting its overall importance, diverted attention away from the radical heterogeneity of the movement. I will now attempt to illustrate this mechanism by proposing a reading of the Riot Grrrl movement based on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.

Sara Salih argues that when Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* was first published in 1990, it "constituted a significant intervention into a number of fields including gender studies, feminist theory, and queer theory" (2004: 90). Considered by many to be her most important work, Butler's book irritated and even infuriated many traditionalist feminists, the reason being that she set out to reformulate the very basis of the feminist discourse. According to Butler, "the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism is effectively undermined by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions" (1999: 6). This means that feminism circularly seeks to liberate the very subject it has constructed. Over the years, the subject of feminism has been constructed as a white, middle-class or upper-class, heterosexual woman. Refusing to accept this presumption, Riot Grrrl challenged the stability of the subject of feminism in a way that was compellingly similar to Butler's proposal. In the treatment of riot grrrls,

the subject of feminism became elusive, as those involved in the movement focused on embracing heterogeneity. Riot Grrrl's performance of gender, visible and audible in every aspect of the movement's cultural activism, displayed an incredibly diversified subject of feminism.

Having adopted a unified subject, the discourse of feminism has authenticated the heterosexual matrix, a construct that is central to Butler's argumentation. According to Butler (1999: 32), heterosexuality has become a naturalized, compulsory institution that both generates and maintains the oppositional gender system of women and men, femininity and masculinity. Butler (1999: 30) claims that this 'compulsory heterosexuality' is based on a forceful symmetry that presupposes, reinforces, and rationalizes gender as a binary relation. From this follows that within the binary gender system, a gendered self is generated by displaying behavior that is enabled by the heterosexual matrix, or "culturally established lines of coherence" (Butler 1999: 33). According to Butler (1999: 30), this stems from artificial essentialism, i.e. constructing the gendered self on the basis of its alleged substance. In other words, those who do not experience to be of one gender consequently become members of the 'opposite' sex (Butler 1999: 30). If "one is one's gender to the extent that one is not the other gender" (Butler 1999: 30), it is necessary to divide gender into 'maleness' and 'femaleness'. The oppositional system reenacts compulsory heterosexuality within the heterosexual matrix, operating only in terms of either or: heterosexual or homosexual, male or female.

Furthermore, the heterosexual matrix produces and regulates heterosexuality as the approved gender identity and homosexuality as the subversive one (Butler 1999: 104). In Butler's words, "for heterosexuality to remain intact as a distinct social form, it *requires* an intelligible conception of homosexuality and also requires the prohibition of that conception in rendering it culturally unintelligible" (1999: 104). This suggests that it is necessary to maintain homosexuality as accessible in order to prohibit it and in order to produce the dominance of heterosexuality. Thus, homosexuality is not excluded from society but marginalized, since it is defined in terms of the unintelligible (Butler 1999: 105). As a result of this marginalization, continues Butler (1999: 105), one

typically loses their cultural sanctions and may even constitute a threat for those involved in the dominant culture. Not to be socially recognized as a heterosexual leads to the replacement of one's social identity with "one that is radically less sanctioned" (Butler 1999: 105). This notion is extremely significant in relation to Riot Grrrl, because those involved in the movement were obviously penalized for their marginality. This penalization materializes particularly illustratively in the misrepresentations discussed in this thesis.

From a Butlerian perspective, riot grrrls were penalized for their subversive gender performance, meaning the unconventional practices one creates their gender with. Butler (1999: 152) defines gender as a product of performatives, i.e. singular constituents of gender-specific performance, that must be reenacted, or reiterated, to create an appearance of gender. Riot grrrls reenacted performatives that effectively collapsed the notions of traditionally feminine behavior. They refused to conform to the conventional performance of femininity and resorted instead to an ambiguity and inexplicability that appeared randomly to combine conflicting gender-specific characteristics. Riot grrrls became labeled unintelligible similar to the way homosexuality is constructed as unintelligible within the dominant culture, because the drastic subversiveness of riot grrrls eluded definition. According to Butler, such subversive performance of gender signifies the most crucial vulnerability of heterosexuality (Salih 2004: 93). As Sara Salih (2004: 93) emphasizes, subversiveness reveals a critical instability within the frame of compulsory heterosexuality for the reason that it is vulnerable to a variety of subversive performances of gender, perhaps most notably drag and parody. As I have emphasized, also riot grrrls reenacted gender in ways that challenged the illusions of the heterosexual matrix and compulsive heterosexuality.

Moreover, Butler (1999: 185) argues that when the illusion of compulsive heterosexuality is disrupted with nonconforming performances of gender, such as those of riot grrrls, it appears to lose its force. Hence, disruptions reveal the heterosexual matrix as a fictitious cultural construct that governs the very field of gender it alleges merely to describe. According to Butler (1999: 185), the potential to such disruptions

lies within the nonessentialism of gender, as it should be acknowledged that gender possesses no ontological status outside the realm of the performances that constitute it. To quote Butler, “[g]ender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (1999: 45). This claim echoes the Beauvoirian notion of gender as something that is done rather than something that simply is. In other words, the substance that certain performatives intend to express is a fabrication that is both produced and maintained by bodily or discursive means (Butler 1999: 185). The internal core of the substance of gender exists only on the surface of the body, and in this sense, gender performance necessarily constitutes all gendered substance. Gender is ‘doing’ rather than ‘being’. It is apparent that riot grrrls recognized gender as an action. Even though they seemed to accept the apparent duality of biological sex, they constructed gender as something one *becomes* yet can never *be*. In Butlerian terms, riot grrrls recognized that their sexed bodies could be culturally interpreted as “the occasion for a number of different genders” (Butler 1999: 152). This claim finds support in the subversiveness of riot grrrls’ performance of gender, as well as the evasion of linguistic definition that attempted forcefully to posit riot grrrl phenomena within the frames of the binary system of gender.

In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler critiques the presumed stability of the feminist subject as based on the very system that is supposed to further its liberation and as serving the interests of constructing a dominantly heterosexual matrix of gender. Similarly, those involved in the Riot Grrrl movement aimed to challenge accepted “truths” about femaleness as the subject of feminism. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler stresses also that gender-specific behavior failing to conform to “the culturally intelligible grids of an idealized and compulsory heterosexuality” (Butler 1999: 184) is rendered culturally marginal and thus condemnable. Riot Grrrl reflected even this Butlerian claim, as the repeated misrepresentations of the movement demonstrated its cultural marginality and condemnation. Hence, both interpreting the misrepresentations of Riot Grrrl and applying Butler’s theory of gender performativity to formulating that interpretation is crucial to unmasking riot grrrl phenomena. Mirroring Butler’s arguments, the dominant culture rendered riot grrrl activism unintelligible, because the style, behavior, lyrics, and

texts of riot grrrls threatened the presumed stabilities of sex and gender, masculine and feminine, heterosexual and homosexual. Riot grrrls bent traditional gender boundaries, including the fact that Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill members explicitly called Riot Grrrl “a queer scene”[10]. On the basis of such radical redefining, I would like to argue that Riot Grrrl constituted a uniquely Butlerian approach to deconstructing femaleness – an approach that redefined the subject of feminism as no longer stemming from the artificially binary system of gender.

---

[10] Sleeve notes to the split Bikini Kill/Huggy Bear album, *Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah/Our Troubled Youth*.

4 "PUNK ROCK DREAM COME TRUE" – RIOT GRRRL IN THE TRADITION OF PUNK

> See your face all over town
> Pick me up and throw me down
> You're my punk rock dream come true
> I would die to stay with you[11]

Bratmobile singer Allison Wolfe monotonously articulates the lyrics to the song, "P.R.D.C.T." But what they state about Riot Grrrl's relationship with punk is operative for my reading of the movement. As the quotation indicates, riot grrrls' contradictory reaction to punk crystallizes in the lyrics to "P.R.D.C.T.". Wolfe sings about the relevance of punk – "dream come true" [12] – but recognizes also its male dominance – "your face all over town" [13] – and misogyny – "throw me down" [14]. While the punk rock roots of Riot Grrrl constitute a necessary part of my reading of the movement, the contradictory relationship with punk will form the central conception of this chapter. I will attempt to place the Riot Grrrl movement in the tradition of punk rock but also divest it from that tradition by reflecting my reading with what I consider misreadings.

4.1 Riot Grrrl's Punk Ancestors

The musical genre of punk rock developed in Great Britain, the United States, and Australia in the mid 1970's. The ideology of punk stemmed from the opposition to its musical ancestor, rock, which had transformed from the once-countercultural phenomenon into a representation of the mainstream. Punk emerged as a protest against pretentious rock stardom and the corporate million-dollar business that promoted it. Mainstream rock's endless guitar solos and other displays of musical virtuosity were regarded with suspicion. Differing from them, punk provided a channel for those who

---

[11] From the Bratmobile song, "P.R.D.C.T.", short for 'punk rock dream come true', off the album, *Pottymouth*.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.

felt a need to express themselves musically, even if their musical skills were mediocre at best. The resultant music sounded rough-edged and fast, typified by bands such as the Sex Pistols and the Ramones who played songs that were usually short and stripped-down. Theirs and the songs of countless other bands emanated from the frustration of white working-class delinquents battling unemployment, class differences, and the mindlessness of modern life. Punk challenged the contemporary middle-class conformity that upheld the status quo and denied the injustices of the world (Spicer 2006: 2). Thus, young people, who were dissatisfied with their stifled, stagnant lives, directed their angry rebellion toward authorities and members of the dominant culture.

Punk grew equally infamous and influential, argues Dick Hebdige (1979: 4), because it so assertively distinguished itself from the dominant mainstream culture. Bands like the Sex Pistols and the Ramones encouraged young people to create their culture with everyday subversions of the dominant culture. According to rock historian Larry Starr, punk became most visibly known for resisting "the standards of traditional commercial fashion" (2005: 208). Thus, the punk subculture that emerged from the antiauthoritarian ideology displayed a very distinct style of contrasting colors, mohawk hairdos, patched or ripped jeans, safety pins, and powerful anarchist or fascist imagery. This influenced girls, in particular. Many of them entered the punk scene attracted by its extravagant fashion statement that intensely challenged the prevalent norms of the softness of femininity. In other words, punk enabled women to embrace a style that was powerfully radical. Jordan, who worked with designer Vivienne Westwood and Sex Pistol manager Malcolm McLaren at their Sex store in London, became one of the first faces of punk. She recalls how she felt completely comfortable even when she left home in her panties and ripped fishnets (quoted in O'Brien 2002: 133).

For Jordan, "[p]unk wasn't about hanging around being the weaker sex" (quoted in O'Brien 2002: 133). Instead, it was an asexual space that allowed even women to feel omnipotent. This indicates that punk was much more than a musical genre. In actuality, it emerged as a wide-reaching underground subculture that addressed a multitude of political and cultural issues. Another aspect that indicates this is the do-it-yourself (DIY) ethic punk embraced. Associated with the equality of possibilities punk

advocated, those involved in the movement employed the DIY ethic in order to express themselves freely. The DIY ethic enabled gaining access to the means of production and creating distance to the mainstream culture that controlled the commercial means of production. The music that was self-produced and self-distributed was in itself more of an anarchist comment on society than mere music. Yet, music historians and mainstream journalists alike have defined punk as "empty, shallow and trivial" (1997), to quote Stewart Home, or viewed it as a display of commercial genius. For Home (1997), punk represents an occurrence of media hype that, in its masterfulness, epitomizes punk's greatness.

Arguably, Home's view appears constrictive. This is not to say that the punk scene of the 1970's would not have been infiltrated by opportunists, but it seems egregious to claim that punk manipulated the media for its own commercial gain. The Ramones, for example, achieved only minor commercial success, even though they were a major influence on the American punk scene. Yet, punk was restricted into the stereotype-like figures of the unpredictable Johnny Rotten and the shrewd Malcolm McLaren. Fifteen years later, the Riot Grrrl movement was treated equally narrowly. *The New York Times* claimed that the movement was "above all a triumph of punk" (Japenga 1992: H30), while *USA Today* referred to it as "an underground group of punkettes" (Snead 1992: 5D). In Britain, *The Independent* detailed those involved in the movement as "girl-punk revolutionaries" (Matthewman 1993), and *The Guardian* described them as "following punk's initial trajectory" (Sullivan 1993: 33). The mainstream media recognized the connection with punk but instead of elaborating on it, they trivialized riot grrrls as the female version of 1970's punk. This is noteworthy especially for the reason that journalists and other writers had struggled to grasp the punk scene of the 1970's.

Others, including writer Roger Sabin, have appeared more willing to interpret early punk beyond its superficial aspects. Sabin (1999: 2–3) has stated that despite the lack of a set agenda, punk was a subculture that emphasized negationism and class politics. According to Dick Hebdige (1979: 4), punk ought to be interpreted as a subculture rather than a musical movement, as it caused moral panic within the dominant culture. He states that subcultures can exist only through the act of refusal, when the members

of the subculture refuse to accept the dominant culture, and vice versa (Hebdige 1979: 3). This rivalry is the mechanism that establishes a subculture as one, and it clearly existed in the case of punk, as members of the dominant culture vehemently disapproved of it. Many were frightened by the revolutionary potential of the delinquent, drug-abusing, vandalizing punks. Punk appeared to be mindless rebellion of the uneducated and frustrated youth, and "punk values were about identification with the disadvantaged, the dispossessed, the subcultural", as Lucy O'Brien (2002: 133) states. Punk can thus be defined as a movement that embraced a subcultural ideology, do-it-yourself ethic, and working-class credibility, and music provided these with a form of expression. From this perspective, punk should not be interpreted solely in terms of punk rock music.

This notion is especially significant when considering the punk roots of Riot Grrrl. This is because interpreting punk beyond its musical surface illuminates sexism as an inbuilt element of the genre and the subculture. A sign of patriarchy in general and a remnant of the previous decades of rock music, male musicians dominated the first wave of punk. The most influential punk bands – the Sex Pistols, The Clash, the Ramones, and the New York Dolls – were all-male. Even the term 'punk' was initially used to describe "a young *male* hustler" (Leblanc 1999: 35, my italicization). These realizations contradict the avidness of mainstream journalists to describe Riot Grrrl as the 1990's female version of 1970's punk. They also contradict rock historian Stewart Home's claim of Riot Grrrl as a 'transformation' of punk which suggests that those involved in the movement would have inevitably accepted the ideology of the first wave of punk as an integral part of their ideology. As mainstream journalists and music critics alike reacted to what they interpreted as similarities between the two movements, they failed to juxtapose the sexism of punk musicianship in the 1970's and Riot Grrrl's pro-woman stance. This arguably indicates a trend of ignorance in the positioning of Riot Grrrl in the tradition of punk.

Forcing Riot Grrrl into the mold of punk that specifically embraced masculinity and male-dominance appears either an uninformed or a deliberate misrepresentation of the movement. The first wave of punk rendered girls passive spectators whose roles were

limited mainly to those of fans and groupies. Hence, it would have been impossible for riot grrrls to become punk musicians in the sense the first wave defined it. This echoes music historian Jerry Rodnitzky's claim about musicianship emphasizing maleness. He states that male dominance characterizes all rock music, illustrated by the fact that female rock musicians have been and continue to be in the minority. Firstly, Rodnitzky recognizes that rock music has consistently oppressed women through degrading rock lyrics and the depreciation of women in the scene. This argument illustrates rock as a man's world – one which can only be male – and in this sense, punk made no exception. It too defined womanhood in black-and-white terms. Women were assigned either the role of old-fashioned mother figures, i.e. homemakers and child bearers, or wild, uninhibited groupies whose necessity was limited into satisfying men sexually. (Rodnitzky 1999: 60) The male dominance raises the ontological question whether it is entirely impossible for women to be 'rock' or 'punk'. Is the rock and punk of women something completely different?

Complicated questions call for complicated answers. To an extent, it is tempting to answer both simply in the affirmative, since the scenes of rock and punk so explicitly embrace ideologies and exhibit behaviors that elude respecting women. Yet, by answering 'yes' one would once again accept the passive role these scenes have assigned girls and women. My argument is that women's punk is just as much punk as men's punk. It may be *different* in its points of origin and messages but it is still punk. I claim this because punk has systematically emphasized a construction of musicianship that is at least theoretically free from gender division. In this sense, punk can be described as an asexual space, even if the participants of that space adhere to varying sets of gender tolerance or discrimination. Punk could be utilized as a vehicle, which is exactly what Riot Grrrl did, despite the exact message of those utilizing it. In fact, it may seem straightforward to characterize punk as anarchist and rebellious, for example, but answering the question what these characteristics signify is a far more complicated task. Despite the contradictions of punk, it began reflecting its status of potential asexuality in the late 1970's, as the first women crossed the threshold from listener to performer.

4.2 First Women of Punk – Riot Grrrl's Role Models

Fifteen years prior to the birth of the Riot Grrrl movement, the first coming of punk enabled women to question the traditional, pastel-colored femininity of the previous decades. In the late 1970's, women could reconsider their roles as spectators, since the low-fidelity, do-it-yourself scene was musically accessible even to them. Rodnitzky (1999: 59) remarks that women have over time realized the power of music in enabling women to infiltrate male-dominated society. Punk was ideologically ideal for such an infiltration. Those, who became involved in the scene, were "ready to tear down the barriers – sexual, musical, cultural" (2006: 4), declares Al Spicer. By employing shock tactics, punk sought to dismantle taboo issues, discriminatory activities, and class boundaries, for example. As punk addressed a multitude of social issues, women too could harness the rebellion for their purposes. "Punk gave women permission to explore gender boundaries, to investigate their own power, anger, aggression – even nastiness" (2002: 133), O'Brien recognizes. For the first time ever, women could create, perform, and produce rock on their own terms, at the expense of the assigned role of a singer.

Furthermore, 1970's punk scene gave women permission to embrace difference. Women could be of all sizes and shapes and still display a defiant confidence about them. Punk too encouraged attracting attention, but the difference from the constrictive definition of rock groupies that attended to men's needs was that punk women *chose* to be looked at. Artist and musician Linder recalls how women "weren't 'ideal' prizes, but they had small skirts on if they wanted" (quoted in O'Brien 2002: 134). In this sense, punk could be experienced as tremendously empowering because symbolically, women were able to destroy the socialized image of femininity. Some, like Jordan who minimized her clothing, tore the image down with overt sexuality, while others, like the band X-Ray Spex, created a crazed and colorful style that appeared mostly asexual. Within the punk subculture, women were attempting to form their own subculture. "We were trying to find a new vocabulary" (quoted in O'Brien 1999: 185), explains Linder. The new vocabulary became vocalized in the music of female performers, such as The Slits, Siouxsie Sioux, The Raincoats, and X-Ray Spex, that soon infiltrated the British punk scene.

Upon its release in 1979, the debut album of The Slits, entitled *Cut*, made a brief visit to the UK Top 30. Unfortunately, the band's raw live sound had been polished for the album, which was released on a major record label. Nevertheless, the cover art of the record, which depicts the band half-naked in domineering, tribe-inspired poses, is provocatively empowering. Even a more empowering role model became Siouxsie Sioux, singer of Siouxsie & the Banshees, who is widely considered one of the most memorable faces of punk (O'Brien 2002: 142). Sioux sang about the deadness of being ("Premature Burial") and loving the dead ("Carcass"), and anything in between. She has left a lasting impact with her dark voice, enigmatic presence, and wild black hair. The Raincoats, on the contrary, relied on a style of 'ordinariness', which the band's name alone suggests. According to Cazz Blaze (2007: 57), The Raincoats challenged traditional femininity by transforming glamorous beauty into ordinariness, instead of adopting the aggressively sexual look of Siouxsie Sioux or Ari Up of The Slits. Also the lyrics to their songs appear more openly feminist than those of any other female punk performer of the late 1970's. For instance on the song "No One's Little Girl", singer Ana da Silva asserts: "I'm no one's little girl, oh no, I'm not / I'm not gonna be, 'cause I don't wanna be"[15].

The rock lyricism of The Raincoats appears closely related to that of Riot Grrrl, but riot grrrrls' rough confidence and nontraditional display of femaleness bears more resemblance to the all-female bands The Slits and X-Ray Spex. The sole album release of X-Ray Spex, entitled *Germ Free Adolescents*, introduced a genuinely innovative and experimental punk band whose sound was completed with Lora Logic's untamed saxophone honks. The public face of X-Ray Spex became singer Poly Styrene, whose looks were conventionally unappealing – she was heavyset, wore thick braces, and exhibited a rather unflattering wardrobe. Nevertheless, she carried herself with bold confidence and let her penetratingly powerful shriek speak for itself, making her one of the most memorable front figures of British punk. Bikini Kill singer Kathleen Hanna's

---

[15] From The Raincoats song, "No One's Little Girl", off the live album, *The Kitchen Tapes*.

voice very much resembles Poly Styrene's, yet the similarities between Riot Grrrl and X-Ray Spex seem to center around the general punk rock sound and the display of uncompromising female confidence. X-Ray Spex focused on parodying the artificialness of life ("The Day The World Turned Dayglo", "Plastic Bag"), rather than singing specifically about women's issues. Still, at least their classic single "Oh Bondage, Up Yours!" can be alternatively interpreted as a premonition to riot grrrl rebellion. The song opens with the spoken line: "Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard / But I think: Oh bondage, up yours!"[16]

X-Ray Spex, The Slits, Siouxsie Sioux, and The Raincoats conquered the stage alongside their male contemporaries. They showed that women had an equal need and ability to express anger, edginess, and self-confidence. The accessibility of the punk scene had given women confidence to write songs that challenged traditional ideas of femininity. Still, Poly Styrene and most other female punks of the 1970's have repeatedly denied being feminist, a topic both Cazz Blaze and Lucy O'Brien (2007: 57–58; 2002: 141) discuss. On the one hand, it seems strange that women, who were in a position to encourage other women, would discard this possibility. As punk sought to destroy mainstream constraints, why could not it have been harnessed to eliminate sexism as one such constraint and thus carry a subversive feminist message? On the other hand, the reaction can be understood in terms of women's newcomer status on the punk scene. As I have argued, punk ideologically promoted gender equality, even though the scene was male-dominated in practice. Lauraine Leblanc (1999: 51–52), who has studied the relationship between punk and gender comprehensively, has firsthand evidence of the scene that according to her, was far from equal or feminist. For this reason, women had to adjust to what punk was in practice, and not in theory, in order to become established on the scene.

This notion is crucial when comparing riot grrrls to their 'foremothers'. While in the 1970's, the women of punk attempted to assimilate with the scene that was

---

[16] From the X-Ray Spex song, "Oh Bondage, Up Yours!", off the single release, "Oh Bondage, Up Yours!" / "I Am a Cliché".

predominantly male, riot grrrls aimed to dissimilate from male dominance. In other words, riot grrrls reacted against the men on the scene, forming their own scene where the approval of men had no importance. This difference indicates early female punk musicians as nonfeminist, in accordance with their refusal to identify as feminists. Although they explored previously unexplored aspects of femaleness on their own terms, they appeared to accept the scene of punk as it was and attempted only to find their position within the male dominance. This is not to suggest early female punk musicians as passive. Instead, my argument is that they attempted to participate on the scene in the masculine way that riot grrrls later rejected. This argument finds support in the recognition that only the toughest female musicians survived on the scene, and even then, they did so only "by adopting the cool veneer of cynicism" (2002: 136), as O'Brien elaborates. The need for pretence indicates that the scene was not one women had designed.

Although Poly Styrene, Siouxsie Sioux, and other 1970's female punks had to struggle to become successful, they chose to abstain from the label of feminism. It is significant to remember this difference from riot grrrls who should not be considered direct descendents of the previous generation of female punks as the two groups of women attested to quite differing ideologies. As discussed, one explanation for the previous generation's dismissal of the feminist label is that they merged an existing scene and refrained therefore from advocating a gender-specific message in order to gain acceptance. Rather contradictorily, women sought acceptance from the very people, i.e. men already involved on the scene, who had discouraged women from entering the scene in the first place. Another possible reason is that contemporary feminism appeared too serious and elaborate to appeal to creative young women. Instead, these women focused their creativity on the punk scene. They *did* something instead of simply *being* something, echoing what I have previously stated about Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Some women, including Tessa Pollitt of The Slits, adopted boyish looks with short hair, ties, vests, and drainpipes, in order to adapt to the boys' scene. Others hid their insecurities underneath extravagance and eccentricity. Poly Styrene, for example, looked unconventional with her wild black curls, dayglo outfits, and army helmets. Such examples intriguingly demonstrate how 1970's punk women

reenacted their gender in exactly such subversive ways Butler would later theorize about.

In addition to punk musicians who signaled their criticism of feminism by refusing the label, feminist theorists have critiqued the women's liberation movement of the 1960's and 1970's as one-dimensional. For instance bell hooks (2000: 3) has argued that the movement, shaped principally by white middle-class women, failed to address a wider specter of women's issues. Negative connotations had become attached to the movement, and its feminist practices were trivialized in the press. The media focused on isolated myths, such as bra-burning, that likely never even took place. The narrow-mindedness of the political movement that pessimistically emphasized women's subordination appeared highly inapplicable to the defiant women of punk. Still, the relationship between punk and feminism in the 1970's is more complex than that. It is difficult to say exactly what the relationship was, which perhaps why several writers, including Leblanc and O'Brien (1999: 51–52; 2002: 141), have extensively elaborated upon the relationship. It is not surprising that the relationship eludes defining, as it is a challenge in itself to describe what punk was, or is, as Cazz Blaze (2007: 52) points out. As I have emphasized, those involved in the punk scene constituted a subculture that rejected all mainstream phenomena. This, in turn, suggests that punk could have rejected also mainstream patriarchy. Yet, at the time, men embodied the visibility of the subculture and formed all the most successful bands. In practice, sexism was thus inherent in the subculture of punk as it was inherent in the mainstream culture, which is why it failed to encourage feminist causes.

1970's punk might not have addressed feminist issues, but the women of punk succeeded in clearing room for women on the scene. In relation to this, it is notable that the influential women discussed here are British. As described, only the toughest, coolest, and most extreme women within the punk scene gained recognition in Britain. In the United States, women emerged on the scene less obtrusively. Patti Smith, who became one of few successful female punk artists, contributed with her version of punk rock that she fused with poetry. More unconventional female performers like the fearsome Wendy O. Williams of the Plasmatics were attracting mainly underground

attention. In the public eye, American punk looked and acted nicer than its British equivalent. It was closely connected with harmonic pop, and the resulting music, a sort of power pop served with a twist of punk, became commercially successful with acts such as Debbie Harry's Blondie and Belinda Carlisle's The Go-Go's. This suggests that in the late 1970's, the women who were willing to compromise their art commercially and adopt a more glamorous pop princess appearance were also the ones who achieved most success and were most readily accepted as credible musicians. Unfortunately, most of the more radical women of punk would be forgotten with the dawn of the new decade.

In the 1980's, the music industry reverted from the political punk atmosphere back to commercialism, which Lucy O'Brien (2002: 160–161) discusses at length. As the economically-centered thinking penetrated the punk scene, it effectively dissolved punk's original DIY ethic. The self-centered, hedonistic yuppie culture provided a sexist framework for dissolving much of 1970's feminism, as well. O'Brien successfully summarizes the decade as "an era where political and feminist debates were condemned as moribund, and women's eccentricity was effectively silenced" (2002: 153). Feminist writer Susan Faludi (1992: 66) refers to the same time period as the 'backlash' on women and feminism, which extended from politics to popular culture. Faludi (1992: 1) argues in her 1991 landmark piece, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women*, that the American mainstream media orchestrated a campaign to deceive women into believing that equality had been achieved. According to her, the women's liberation movement was singled out as the source of the alleged unhappiness of women (Faludi 1992: 101–102). Women became encouraged to retreat to their conventional roles as mothers and wives, which suggests punk rock musicianship as an unacceptable role for a woman.

Faludi's arguments are as convincing as they are compelling. She states that the depicted harmfulness of the women's liberation movement and women's activism, as well as many of the problems allegedly plaguing women were in fact fabricated (Faludi 1992: 21). For instance, a medical journal claimed that 31 to 35-year-old women stood close to a forty per cent chance of infertility, launching a trend of texts about the

'infertility epidemic' in the media (Faludi 1992: 46). Three years later, a study found a more representative figure to be 13.6 per cent (Faludi 1992: 47). A *Newsweek* article, on the other hand, claimed that feminism prevented women from enjoying maternity or romance. Quoting Oscar Wilde out of context, the article assured its readers that gods would defeat feminism as the answer to people's prayers. (Faludi 1992: 102) Faludi's argumentation forms a solid understanding of the backlash as a continuum of media constructs lacking reliable evidence. She introduces antifeminism as a historical trend which the media reutilizes each time women make substantial gains toward equality (Faludi 1992: 103).

At the center of Faludi's argumentation is the recognition that society seemingly celebrated the gains of women's liberation, while simultaneously holding vehemently onto traditional patriarchal values. Except for feminism, the pattern seems to apply virtually to any form of women's activism, including cultural activism. In the 1980's, the mainstream media began questioning the need for women's rock musicianship. For one, the bands like X-Ray Spex and The Slits, whose members were truly innovative and determined women, lost their footing on the scene, as music became a business of glossy posters and MTV music videos. Secondly, the constant scrutiny had exhausted the bands. O'Brien (2002: 161) quotes Viv Albertine, guitarist for The Slits, who has said that women constantly had to struggle with their objectification. It made the struggle even more laborious that only a handful of women had been able to infiltrate the scene. For a while, the backlash prospered, allowing for supporters of patriarchal values to sigh with relief, as women succumbed to traditional gender roles. As a result of the regression, nevertheless, the first seeds of the grassroots movement that would be known as Riot Grrrl began to root.

4.3 Emergence of Grrrls

In 1996, The Slits guitarist Viv Albertine said: "I don't know how many females in the music business have been influenced by The Slits. […] I know there was this 10–15 year gap where it felt like we'd *never existed*." (quoted in Blaze 2007: 59) Since the

early 1980's, when X-Ray Spex, The Raincoats, and The Slits had all disbanded, there had been a void of women on the punk scene, both in Great Britain and in the United States. Female-driven punk resurfaced in the early 1990's with the emergence of the Riot Grrrl movement. It is hardly an overstatement to say that with Riot Grrrl, also the first punk movement that was masterminded mainly by women was born. Nevertheless, one should also recognize that Riot Grrrl was heavily influenced by the first generation of female punk bands. Lucy O'Brien calls the first generation "a metaphorical shrine" (2002: 161) for riot grrrl rebellion. Those involved in the movement built upon the tradition that had provided a fertile ground for cultural activism in the late 1970's. Riot Grrrl's site of activism reflected the one of its female predecessors: the ideological asexuality of punk.

In the late 1970's, women had discovered the potential of the punk scene. With the expectations of basic musicianship, as well as the shared means of production, the scene had been accessible. Fifteen years later, riot grrrls discovered the same. Queer musician Rachel Carns, who is one of the interviewees in the *Riot Grrrl Retrospective*, an online exhibit produced by Experience Music Project, says that Riot Grrrl embraced "a nontraditional way of approaching music" (1999) that did not presuppose knowledge of musicianship prior to starting a band. Another riot grrrl, Tobi Vail, expected women involved in the punk scene to become excited about playing music and forming bands, following the example of those who had already done so (EMP 1999). Since musicianship mainly required only motivation, riot grrrl music initially sounded mixed and modest. To give an example, Carns gradually completed her drum set, starting her career with only one drum and unaware of the need to tune the drum(s) (EMP 1999). Experiences such as hers may seem amusing, but for riot grrrl musicianship, modesty was fundamental. The key idea was to promote the musicianship of young women in a nonjudgmental way.

Even in the more liberal-minded American cities, such as Olympia in the state of Washington, creative young women continued to battle gender discrimination in the late 1980's. Despite the involvement of girls in the evolvement of Olympia's rich underground punk scene, female musicians, such as Sharon Cheslow, were still

considered in terms of being “good for a girl” (EMP 1999). Cheslow recalls that despite various creative activities, “there weren’t enough women doing bands and fanzines and getting into positions of power, even in that scene” (EMP 1999). Such realizations stimulated wonder, frustration, and anger. Women shared the observation that the subcultural community, whose members were supposed to treat each others as equals, showed regressive signs of paralleling mainstream society. As a result, women repositioned themselves toward the male dominance of the punk scene and also rephilosophized their take on the ideologies of punk. Kathleen Hanna’s “Riot Grrrl Manifesto”, successfully summarized the relationship of the movement and the contemporary punk scene. According to the manifesto, “Riot grrrl is […] BECAUSE we don’t want to assimilate to someone else’s (Boy) standards of what is or isn’t ‘good’ music or punk rock” (Hanna 1991).

The “Riot Grrrl Manifesto” clearly links the origins of the movement to the American underground punk scene of the late 1980’s. Those involved in the movement openly positioned themselves in the continuum of punk. From this viewpoint, riot grrrls apparently aimed to become included in the tradition of punk rather than redefining the tradition. Hanna formulated the contents of her manifesto as a reaction against what Tobi Vail describes as her source of her dissatisfaction: “I feel completely out of the realm of everything that is so important to me. And I know this is […] because punk is for and by boys mostly” (1990). In the fanzine *Quit Whining*, one writer declares how prior to Riot Grrrl, she has not considered punk rock “anything but a phallic extension of the white middle class male’s frustrations” (5). In view of these observations, riot grrrls both identified their link with the existing punk scene and separated themselves from its male dominance. By aiming to create their very own punk rock scene, Riot Grrrl emphasized the problematic position of women performers on the existing scene. According to Marion Leonard (1997: 237), women had been considered incidental, not central, figures on it.

The repositioning of Riot Grrrl was not to neglect the achievements of the punk rock women of the 1970’s. Musically, in particular, riot grrrl bands closely resembled their foremothers. Cazz Blaze (2007: 61) names X-Ray Spex and The Slits as the clearest

role models for Bikini Kill and Bratmobile. The relationship between the two generations is a more complicated matter, as I suggested above. Many of those who have researched the Riot Grrrl movement in the twenty-first century quite inevitably assume a strong link between the generations, but early riot grrrls seldom referred to the issue, more eagerly establishing the link to the contemporary American scene. Thus, one might assume that X-Ray Spex, The Slits, or The Raincoats did not consciously prompt the inception of Riot Grrrl. This appears to have been the assumption of several journalists writing for the mainstream media. According to the *Evening Standard*, for instance, riot grrrls displayed adolescent anger, liked to swear, and believed in anarchy (Waugh 1993: 10). Journalists focused excessively on the aggressive lyrics and stage behavior of riot grrrl bands. Mary Celeste Kearney argues that this positioned Riot Grrrl within the realm of male punk, reproducing "the age-old narrative of female musicians as appropriating masculine forms of music-making" (1997: 212). This positioning, in turn, effectively effaced the role of early female punks for Riot Grrrl.

Another complication is that Riot Grrrl's link to its female predecessors is very much under-researched, possibly because riot grrrls emphasized the state of contemporary underground scenes as the sites of their rebellion, albeit they rebelled *against* that state. Therefore, it is unsurprising that those few who have discussed the relationship have formed varied views. Stewart Home assigns Riot Grrrl an active role in the history of punk by calling the movement its "penultimate transformation" (1997). O'Brien considers the role a more diachronic one, referring to Riot Grrrl as "the 1990's daughter of punk rock" (2002: 462). Both descriptions uncritically define Riot Grrrl as yet another type of punk – its 'transformation' or 'daughter' – but they lack the recognition that riot grrrl musicians might have utilized a traditionally masculine genre in order to deconstruct its gender discrimination. Journalists did not consider this possibility, either, producing unavoidably reductive representations of Riot Grrrl, while the aims of riot grrrls contained a much deeper meaning. A sign of this depth was riot grrrls' respect for the efforts of their punk 'grandmothers'. Blaze quotes British riot grrrl guitarist Rachael, who states that "[b]ands like X-Ray Spex, The Au Pairs, Patti Smith, The Slits and The Raincoats filled in […] missing gaps" (1998) in her history as a woman. According to Rachael, this discovery enabled her to understand her role as a woman

punk musician, putting her “as a female into the scene” (quoted in Blaze 1998). In view of this, the link to the traditions of female punks was much more meaningful to riot grrrls than links to other materializations of punk.

Despite the type of link one wishes to establish from Riot Grrrl to punk, it is apparent that some kind of a link to the tradition of punk existed, not least because riot grrrls themselves repeatedly referred to punk as one of their major influences. From the inception of the movement, riot grrrls embraced the do-it-yourself ethic common to twentieth-century subcultures and countercultures. In the underground punk scene, those inspired to create music were provided access to the means of production. Riot grrrls too borrowed musical instruments, equipment such as amplifiers, transportation vehicles, and money in order to fulfill their dreams. The most fundamental component of riot grrrl DIY culture became fanzines, inexpensively self-produced and photocopied magazines that were distributed at events like concerts or sent by mail. Zinemaking is a true grassroots activity, as it typically requires only basic writing tools and elementary writing skills. For antiestablishment communities, zines provide a significant channel of communicating subcultural subversions. Zines often provide satirical reading – comics, short-form texts, cut-and-paste artwork – but riot grrrl zines treated more serious topics such as sexual abuse and abortion, as well.

Such topics became a part of Tobi Vail’s punk feminist zine *Jigsaw*, which she began compiling already in 1988, the same year Donna Dresch first created her queer-girl zine *Chainsaw*. In the second issue of her zine, Dresch wrote that “maybe CHAINSAW is about frustration. Frustration in music. Frustration in living, in being a girl, in being a homo, in being a misfit of any sort” (*Chainsaw* #2), and Vail expressed similarly frustrated feelings in *Jigsaw*. Another influential early grrrl zine was *Girl Germs*, produced by Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman. According to Mary Celeste Kearney, who has researched women’s DIY activism extensively, such zines focused on exploring nontraditional forms of girlhood, indicated above by Dresch’s reference to homosexuality and alienation. Kearney explains the rise in girls’ zinemaking as the tremendous motivation to render the commercially constructed story of girlhood false. For the extensive attention girl-made zines have attracted from the mainstream media

since the early 1990's, Kearney credits Riot Grrrl and suggests that it indicates the communication potential of zines. (2006: 136, 142)

The communication potential has been avidly utilized by underground punk movements, which has led to the common misconception that DIY activism, including zinemaking, would have originated from underground punk subcultures. Contrary to this, Kearney (1997: 215) has retraced the history of zinemaking to the science fiction press of the late 1930's, as well as other twentieth-century subcultures. This raises the question whether riot grrrl zinemaking subculturally represented women's practices or punk practices. Kearney's has argued for the former by stating that "zinemaking is not a male-dominated cultural practice in which female youth have recently become involved" (2006: 142). Instead, girls have a long-standing tradition as writers of inexpensive text forms such as diaries and letters. Kearney's arguments position riot grrrl zinemaking in the tradition of women's underground cultural practices. This positioning is intriguing, as it should be recognized that zines were not private texts like diaries and letters. In this sense, zinemaking updated women's tradition of writing as a public practice, since zines were obviously intended to be read. Furthermore, Kearney's positioning connects Riot Grrrl's DIY practices to 1970's separatist women's communities and in particular, the lesbian womyn's community that evolved from radical feminism.

It is rather strange that Riot Grrrl has only rarely been compared to the lesbian community, especially since also riot grrrls utilized principles of radical feminism in their feminist ideology. One likely explanation is that the mainstream media refrained from identifying riot grrrls as lesbian because that would have distorted the possibility to evaluate them as sexual objects. It is also possible that the press simply failed to recognize the lesbian tendencies because of Riot Grrrl's ambiguity and heterogeneity, because lesbianism, as such, would not suffice to prevent objectification. Nevertheless, the two communities shared several common characteristics. Both advocated a radical pro-woman stance that emphasized activeness against patriarchy and misogyny, as well as homophobia. In the portrayals of journalists, Riot Grrrl was seldom discussed in relation to the womyn's community, even though several riot grrrls, including Donna

Dresch quoted before, were openly gay. Both riot grrrls and womyn also focused on creating safe discussion forums for girls and women and alternative, grassroots forms of cultural activism, which journalist Val Phoenix (1994: 40) emphasizes. Finally, the DIY thinking profoundly inspired both riot grrrls and lesbian separatists, who considered it essential to control the systems and structures of producing music (Kearney 1997: 219). Women musicians and women-run businesses like record labels formed the framework of womyn's activism. To them, the DIY ethic represented the means of avoiding the patriarchal oppression of women. Very similarly, riot grrrls self-produced and self-distributed their recordings prior to cooperating solely with independent record labels.

Riot Grrrl's DIY ethic reveals something significant about the position of the movement within the tradition of women's cultural and subcultural activism. While it is correct to state that much of their rebellion and aggression originated from the traditions of punk – both the first-generation scene and the underground American scene of the 1980's – it would be a crude exaggeration to claim punk as the sole inspiration for the movement. Such an inference might seem self-evident, because riot grrrl bands, on the one hand, sounded and performed in the uncompromisingly rebellious way characteristic of punk bands. On the other hand, riot grrrls employed underground practices of producing music and spreading information about it – another central characteristic of the punk subculture. Nevertheless, the DIY practices of the movement suggest a stronger bond with the traditions of women's activism, especially those of the lesbian separatist community, rather than the punk scene. While Riot Grrrl appears musically rooted in punk rock, its ideological roots lead to feminism.

4.4 Punk Rock Feminism

Bikini Kill drummer Tobi Vail was among the first grrrls to channel their anger into writing. According to Julia Downes (2007: 22), Vail had encountered the ideology of an all-male punk band, The Nation of Ulysses, which centered on "a completely rotten attitude towards the whole adult world" (1991), and become inspired by it. Yet, Vail's rebellion would display a deeper level of awareness, as she, and other young women

who joined the Riot Grrrl movement, would focus on more specific goals than the ambiguous ‘whole adult world’. Riot grrrls networked and bonded out of a more constructive point of origin. Zine writer Angel lists the movement as being “about love and communication and networking and productivity and learning” (*Persephone’s Network*: 12). Recognizing the constructiveness of Riot Grrrl, Marion Leonard (1997: 243, 250) argues that the level of sophistication, self-awareness, and purposefulness of riot grrrls makes it insufficient to position the movement solely in the tradition of punk or the framework of subcultural theory. Punk, including its subcultural practices, was utilized to express the feminist ideology, once Vail and other riot grrrls had recognized the assertiveness of the genre. It is, thus, significant to interpret Riot Grrrl as punk rock feminism rather than feminist punk rock.

As the slogan, ‘Revolution Girl Style Now!’, declares, Riot Grrrl aimed to revolutionize the world. Nevertheless, the revolutionist ideology alone appears insufficient in distinguishing the movement from other countercultural movements. For example the zine *Ulysses Speaks* indicated that The Nation of Ulysses also focused on revolutionary rebellion by encouraging the subversion of existing social structures. This raises the question whether Riot Grrrl can be classified as a more focused subculture compared to contemporary and earlier punk subcultures. My argument is that Riot Grrrl’s sophistication and mindfulness distinguish it from most punk subcultures. This is not to suggest 1970’s punk or the 1980’s underground scene as less successful in their revolutionist rebellion. As a matter of fact, their rebellion may have been more efficient, because they spoke to a more general audience of frustrated youth. Contrary to this, Riot Grrrl focused on empowering feminist-identified young women, while the main aim of male punk bands seemed to be to rebel for rebellion’s sake. Atypical of Riot Grrrl, many early punks had displayed a level of arrogance and ignorance. As mentioned earlier, Johnny Rotten of the Sex Pistols had nonchalantly declared that his band was “against bureaucracy, hypocrisy… and anything that ends in ‘Y’” (quoted in Spicer 2006: 29).

The ignorance of the early male punks suggests that they came from poorly-educated working-class backgrounds. This notion was fundamental in Dick Hebdige’s

theorization of subcultures in the late 1970's, because Hebdige (1979: 65) recognized that those who became involved in subcultures came from poor or broken homes. Dister (1993: 123) has more specifically relegated punks to the status of shoplifters, drug addicts, and vandals. It can therefore be argued that the punk subculture developed through the refusal to accept the very norms of the dominant culture that had created the unhappiness and discontent. Firstly, the origins of riot grrrls, nevertheless, seem to conflict with those of early punks. The reason for this is that most riot grrrls came from moderately wealthy, middle-class families, had grown up comfortably in American suburbia, and had attended universities. Secondly, those involved in the movement did not aim to completely detach themselves from the dominant culture. In these two senses, subcultural theory seems insufficient in defining Riot Grrrl.

It is intriguing to recognize that, while intentionally detaching itself from the traditional ideas of womanhood, Riot Grrrl seemed to operate on two separate levels. On the one hand, it challenged the norms of the dominant culture, which indicates the movement as a subculture. On the other hand, the movement criticized the sexism and misogyny of the already-existing punk subculture, suggesting that the movement also attempted to become distinct from the subcultural status. The latter notion indicates that Riot Grrrl rewrote Hebdige's definition of subcultures. Riot grrrl rebellion was more particularly directed toward the sexism in both the existing punk subculture and the dominant culture. Rather than completely rejecting it, Riot Grrrl attempted to change the dominant culture, thus redefining the relationship between a subculture and the dominant culture. Riot grrrl Sharon Cheslow experienced this attempt firsthand: "there was this feeling that you could do things on a community level to change what was going on in society" (EMP 1999). It therefore seems that Riot Grrrl attempted both to infiltrate the dominant culture and to become subculturally self-sufficient.

This suggestion conflicts with the characteristics subculture theorist Sarah Thornton assigns to subcultures. She claims that those involved in subcultures should not be viewed as victims unwillingly exploited by the media. (Thornton 1994: 180) On the surface, Riot Grrrl did appear to attract attention and expand by employing media networks: firstly, with zines and secondly, with mass media publications. This seems

accurate in the sense that those involved actively spread information about the movement through the distribution of zines. This, in turn, caught the attention of the mainstream media, who further publicized Riot Grrrl's activities. *The Chicago Reader,* for example, attempted to aid future riot grrrl enthusiasts by publishing 'essential' Riot Grrrl information in the form of "A guide to something happening all around you" and "Hard-to-find record information" (White 1992: 21). As Thornton notes, the function of such articles is to "construct as much as they document" (1994: 176). In relation to Riot Grrrl, nevertheless, Thornton's model of the symbiotic relationship between a subculture and the mainstream media appears insufficient. Riot grrrls realized the limitations of such a relationship. In the zine *Hair Pie*, Jenn and Soph propose their solution to the potential exploitation: "we've gotta stay underground and undermine the corporate rock press" (1). As Leonard (1997: 244) states, riot grrrls adopted a strategy of resistance to the mainstream media instead of attempting to benefit from the publicity. The resistance culminated in the media blackout.

The blackout stemmed from the countless reports that effectively dismissed the deeper feminist message of Riot Grrrl by focusing on the movement as yet another group of youth delinquents. The media appeared to align the movement with traditional subcultures. "Music is the glue that makes Riot Grrrls stick" (Malkin 1993: 81), declared *Seventeen* magazine, while *USA Today* more alarmingly labeled the movement "a new cult of outrageous, fast-living, dirty-talking, hard-drinking, all-girl bands" (Snead 1992: 5D). Such definitions completely ignored the sophistication and constructiveness Leonard (1997: 243) has recognized. In fact, she considers the mainstream reaction to Riot Grrrl as a subculture harsher than to traditional, male-centric subcultures. She argues that the reaction was characterized by gender discrimination for the reason that Riot Grrrl was condemned in the press for its unacceptable representation of femaleness, not for its rebelliousness. (Leonard 1997: 241) The argument finds support in *USA Today*'s report, which concentrated on generalizing upon riot grrrls' traditionally unconventional characteristics of femaleness. The magazine *Glamour* highlighted superficial aspects of the movement in a caricature-like way by informing its readers that riot grrrls "mix baby-doll dresses and bright red lipstick with combat boots and tattoos" (1993: 134).

Hebdige too addressed the significance of the surface in his theory of subcultures. When he analyzed youth groups in the 1970's, Hebdige found that the surface of the subcultures reflected "the tensions between dominant and subordinate groups" (1979: 2). Hebdige's observation applies to Riot Grrrl, even if the movement critiqued not only the dominant culture but even its subcultural predecessor. Still, Riot Grrrl aimed to separate its ideology of womanhood from those of the patriarchal mainstream culture. Had the dominant culture not provided the background for the movement, Riot Grrrl would not have been able to possess any revolutionary potential. And with their revolutionary rebellion, riot grrrls established the contrast to the dominant culture that is a basic assumption of a subculture. It is intrinsic that subcultures, including Riot Grrrl, are mirrored against the dominant culture. According to Hebdige, this juxtaposing is most significantly visible in the style of a subculture, referring not only to clothing but also more generally to appearances and behavior. Hebdige defines style as the surface that most obviously reflects the opposing ideologies and should be focused on when defining cultural phenomena as subcultures. (1979: 3)

For riot grrrls, style did represent the kind of opposition to mainstream conventions that Hebdige has elaborated. Those involved in the Riot Grrrl movement utilized certain styles mainly for shock value. Nevertheless, provocation did not appear the sole purpose of riot grrrl style, as it sought to attract attention to the deeper message of the movement. In view of this, style appears as a significant pathway to riot grrrls' central ideology of questioning and even rejecting conventional ideas of femininity. Traditionally, femininity had been understood in terms of such softness and mildness as displayed by the mute beauties of early motion pictures without sound. In addition, women had been expected to fall silent about their sexuality as if to indicate that it did not exist at all. Riot grrrls fiercely resisted the concept of women's quiet permissiveness and passiveness in the face of incompetence to be but beautiful. The resistance was explicitly expressed in the ideas of riot grrrls – "we are angry at a society that tells us Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak" (Hanna 1991) – as well as in their appearances.

Riot grrrls neither wished to appear nor appeared conventionally beautiful. They displayed their sexuality openly and used their bodies as vehicles for conveying their feminist message. Some adopted the so-called ‘kinderwhore’ look which comprised wearing girlish clothes with an otherwise ‘dirty’ look. For instance, minimal babydoll dresses could be accessorized with smeared bright red lipstick and ripped fishnets. Kathleen Hanna often wore short dresses or pleated schoolgirl skirts that exposed her underwear. Allison Wolfe had a 1950’s-inspired style with short red bangs, cat-eye glasses, and colorful dresses. Other riot grrrls like Niki Elliott of Huggy Bear adopted a more androgynous look with short hair, jeans, and a T-shirt. Traditionally masculine looks were often embraced, as riot grrrls wore military-style boots and neglected to shaving their armpits or wear makeup. As the diversity of style suggests, it was by no means necessary to adopt a specific style in order to become identified with Riot Grrrl. Instead of encouraging a certain feminist or punk rock style, Riot Grrrl appeared to value the principles of unrestrictiveness and individuality that led to the physical manifestation of each riot grrrl’s style. Paradoxically enough, the press depicted the uniformity of those involved in the movement as one of the central characteristics of Riot Grrrl. *USA Today*, for instance, bluntly stated that riot grrrls “sport hairy legs, army boots and tattoos” (Snead 1992: 5D). Riot grrrls commented on the inaccuracy of such statements with parody. For example, a British zine writer urged young people to adopt the proper riot grrrl attire. She writes: “hey you can BE a riot grrrl without knowing anything about it – be trendy kids!” (*Girl Pride* #6: 10)

Because riot grrrls were allowed to look the way they wished, it is difficult to define their style in exact terms. Nevertheless, riot grrrl style clearly aimed to empower women, signaling that the power of riot grrrl rebellion lay in its very indefinability. It criticized traditional conventions of beauty and celebrated the open display of volitional aspects of female sexuality. One of the most common ways of realizing this was with the intentional sexual victimization of women. Riot Grrrl attracted major attention for the ironic victimization, which included sexually-toned drawings of women printed in zines, cut-and-paste artwork combining photographs of women’s naked bodies with pictures of trivial home appliances, grrrls marking their bodies with derogatory words such as ‘slut’ and ‘rape’, and bands performing in revealing outfits. *Newsweek* was one

of the many publications that emphasized that such victimization could not possibly liberate young women. The article it published ridiculed riot grrrl style by emphasizing how the revealing clothing made it "all the better to sing songs about rape and exploitation" (Chideya, Rossi & Hannah 1992: 84). Journalists dismissed Riot Grrrl's aim to seize the power of victimization from men through provocation. They failed to recognize the irony; surely, no feminist movement would victimize women for the purpose of demeaning.

To a large extent, the style of Riot Grrrl is a matter of interpretation, because those involved in the movement have been quite uneager to explain their appearances or behavior. They let their style speak for itself, even though this likely increased misrepresentation in the mainstream media. In the first issue of the zine, *Bikini Kill*, a contributor commented that "[t]he boys can see our underwear and we don't really care" (1991). This suggests that the diversified style of riot grrrls stemmed from a basic carelessness, because Riot Grrrl was a revolution for girls and by girls. From this viewpoint, style appeared insignificant. Still, the style of riot grrrls was so provocatively daring that its significance cannot be ignored. O'Brien recognizes this by stating that 1990's "hardcore girl bands made a comment on beauty that in some ways was more disturbing than 1970's punk – paedophiliac, perverse and schizophrenic" (2002: 165). Except for describing the harshness of the movement, the attributes O'Brien assigns Riot Grrrl appear out of proportion, probably deliberately so, which forms a caricature-like representation of the movement. O'Brien's statement is fascinating as it emphasizes the stylistic elements of the movement that those involved exaggerated for the very purpose of provoking.

Riot Grrrl appeared 'more disturbing' than 1970's punk. Another significant stylistic difference stands out, as well. Riot Grrrl advocated stylistic freedom, meaning that one was allowed to look the part they considered most effective for conveying their message. Punks, for their part, had displayed a rather uniform style of colorful mohawks, drainpipe jeans, combat boots, and anarchist symbols. In his discussion of subcultural style, Hebdige (1979: 2) argues that certain stylistic elements are inevitably uniform. This did not materialize with Riot Grrrl, although the press represented riot

grrrl style as uniform, as discussed previously. Journalists linked Riot Grrrl to punk both musically and stylistically. Nevertheless, the advocacy of stylistic freedom disconnected the movement from the very definition of a subculture. Not only did it distinguish Riot Grrrl from the mainstream ideas of acceptable femaleness, it distinguished the movement from the underground punk scene. Yet, riot grrrls identified with both their punk roots and, thus, their status as a subculture. The Riot Grrrl movement utilized the rebellious framework of the punk subculture and developed into a subculture in its own right – one of punk rock feminism.

5 "DISTINCT COMPLICITY" – RIOT GRRRL FEMINISM

> Determined by many separations
> So controlling and understated
> Determined today by those of us
> Who refuse to conquer hesitation
> I don't see anything else in this room
> To prove me wrong[17]

In 1996, Bikini Kill released their final studio album entitled *Reject All American*. One of its songs, "Distinct Complicity", melancholically details the withering away of the Riot Grrrl movement. "I wanna see your band play / But there's no one here I know" [18], Kathleen Hanna observes disappointedly. She determines that it is the guilt of the many misrepresentations, the many forceful separations, that has led to the loss of self-confidence among riot grrrls. She wishes riot grrrls would again begin battling dominant outsider representations, "controlling and understated" [19], which they have abandoned in the face of doubt, depreciation, and ridicule. She wishes they would, once again, become active punk rock feminists. The riot grrrl variety of feminism that Hanna postulates will form the core of the discussion in this chapter. This is because, according to my reading of the movement, Riot Grrrl was obviously feminist. I will elaborate upon questions such as how I have come to such an understanding and whether there is any reason to doubt that members of a movement that declared to advocate feminism would not have *practiced* feminism. I will contrast interpretations of others to self-representations of riot grrrls, in order to arrive at my reading of Riot Grrrl as feminist.

5.1 Foundations of Riot Grrrl Feminism

The Riot Grrrl movement evolved out of a perceived state of inequality. Allison Wolfe has said that she and other girls, who were involved in the underground punk scene, were dissatisfied with the minimal possibilities of participation that relegated even the

---

[17] From the Bikini Kill song, "Distinct Complicity", off the album, *Reject All American*.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

most enthusiastic to a status of passiveness (EMP 1999). In Britain, Huggy Bear members recognized the need to create a new, girl-friendly underground culture: "We want playgrounds for the kids. New places where they can write, new places where they can hang out, nice new music they can listen to…" (Rowley 1992). Bikini Kill, for their part, advocated the kind of self-esteem and self-confidence that Hanna inquired in the lyrics to "Distinct Complicity". The first song on their first album, entitled "Double Dare Ya", urges girls to do what they want and be who they want. After singing about the importance of assertiveness, Hanna shouts: "Rights? Rights? / You, do, have, rights!"[20] Such statements obviously indicate the foundations of Riot Grrrl as feminist.

Riot grrrl ideology developed from a reaction against the male dominance of punk toward a female-centered scene. This development is recorded in several written manifestos, most notably Kathleen Hanna's "Riot Grrrl Manifesto" which states that "the coming angry grrrl rock revolution […] seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms" (1991). Particularly the last phrase suggests that Riot Grrrl had transformed from a movement based on the punk scene, operating on terms defined by men, into a feminist movement advocating the activeness of girls. Niki Elliott of Huggy Bear produced a similar declaration in her interpretation of Riot Grrrl. "It's about AUTONOMY […] Creating the stuff, music, porn, writing, I want to hear and read instead of waiting and consuming" (1992), she writes. Part way through the page, Elliott suggests that "[b]eing a loud mouth" (1992) is a part of being a riot grrrl. This suggestion echoes Hanna's reference to 'angry grrrls', signaling Riot Grrrl as a movement of assertive and independent young women.

Hanna's manifesto calls young women "a revolutionary soul force" (1991), emphasizing an aspect that became central to riot grrrl feminism: the sense of togetherness. Coming together in meetings where women could share problematic or painful experiences bears witness to this. Julia Downes (2007: 25–26) has compared riot grrrl meetings to the consciousness-raising groups of second-wave feminists, because

[20] From the Bikini Kill song, "Double Dare Ya", off the album, *The C.D. Version of the First Two Records.*

both became safe spaces for young women to discuss their personal experiences. Since the discussions could vary from sexual harassment and eating disorders to racial discrimination and homophobia, Riot Grrrl's togetherness embraced the heterogeneity of femaleness. As previously cited, the movement sought to speak to "girls and women everywhere" (Hanna 1991). There is one problem with this definition, however. By excluding men from their meetings, riot grrrls advocated separatism similar to radical feminism. This similarity prominently links the movement with second-wave feminism and its presuppositions of the universal feminist subject. Furthermore, this leads us to Judith Butler (1999: 3) who has disputed the existence of a universal feminist subject.

"Dare ya to be who you will"[21], sings Kathleen Hanna on "Double Dare Ya". In spite of this all-encompassing encouragement, riot grrrls seemed to presuppose an inherent ability of all women to relate to the experiences of other women, since they chose to organize female-exclusive meetings. Firstly, the separatism incited condemning interpretations of Riot Grrrl as man-hate, as detailed in the previous chapter. Secondly, it appears to indicate the movement as yet another variety of feminism that uncritically accepted the presuppositions of feminism that, according to Butler (1999: 3), are constructed and governed by the same discourse. And thirdly, the universal basis of feminism appears paradoxical for Riot Grrrl, because the movement originated almost exclusively from a white middle-class context. To give an example of this, zine writer Mimi Nguyen, whose family relocated to the United States from Vietnam when she was ten months old, comments that Riot Grrrl "parallels 'mainstream' Euro-American feminism" (quoted in Vale 1997: 61) by presuming gender to be a category that is independent of race and class. This view can be challenged, nevertheless, because according to Marion Leonard (2007: 148), numerous riot grrrl writers named battling racism and classism as central to Riot Grrrl's agenda. And in Britain, Huggy Bear embraced their working-class backgrounds, as Julia Downes (2007: 37) recognizes.

---

[21] From the Bikini Kill song, "Double Dare Ya", off the album, *The C.D. Version of the First Two Records.*

The fact that most riot grrrl pioneers represented the white middle-class does not construct the movement as racist or classist by definition. Of course, the issues that Riot Grrrl initially addressed might have applied most distinctly to young, white, middle-class women, but the movement embraced an openness to battle any discriminatory practices, as Hanna's manifesto declared. Also, the meetings they organized did not necessarily define the feminist subject as universal. Perhaps, separatism was practiced only to enable women to feel safe enough to open up – not to condemn the entire gender of men. Perhaps the women who attended the meetings did not relate to the experiences of all the other attendees but felt empowered by the fact that the experiences could, nevertheless, be expressed. Arguably, the central idea of riot grrrl meetings was to provide a safe space for women to *express* themselves without having to fear criticism or ridicule, not necessarily to be *understood*. And perhaps the meetings were sometimes employed only as points of information about riot grrrl activism without profound feminist discussions but still empowering those present with future feminist activities. Molly Neuman's words about coming together as riot grrrls reflect the latter: "Let's reach out, let's encourage, let's share information with girls" (EMP 1999).

The creation of female-produced and female-centered music became an object of particular encouragement. Music was arguably the most significant individual manifestation of the movement, as it encompassed Riot Grrrl's most fundamental advocacies: the assertiveness of expression, visibility of performance, feminist ideology, and DIY activism. Molly Neuman and Allison Wolfe were among the first riot grrrls to start a feminist punk band, and prospective riot grrrls were encouraged to follow their example. Also the lyrics to Bratmobile's songs encouraged the activation of girls. The song "Throway" addresses a deceitful boyfriend who does not seem to value the relationship. He returns home from a trip, only to inform his girlfriend that "some KISS girl was the case"[22]. By stereotyping attractive young women as supporters of the rock band KISS, Bratmobile suggests that women, too, succumb to sexism by allowing men to objectify them sexually. Also, the lyrics bitterly criticize the boyfriend's

---

[22] From the Bratmobile song, "Throway", off the album, *Pottymouth.*

preference of sexual encounters over a more serious, long-term relationship, ending with the notion that it would be healthier to break the relationship up.

To give another example, the song entitled "No You Don't" addresses an ignorant and unappreciative boyfriend. "Why do you say you care for me, but you won't? / No you won't / How can it hurt your heart when you can't even see it?"[23], sings Wolfe. The lyrics to "No You Don't" and "Throway" were typical of Bratmobile, as the band's songs often focused on women being disappointment with sexist relationships. Bikini Kill proclaimed even more assertively that girls refused to accept old-fashioned, restrictive relationships. For example, the lyrics to the song "Blood One" state: "Your terms / I don't fit into those words / Your alphabet is spelled with my blood / Your alphabet is spilled with our blood"[24]. This demonstrates how language reflects the reality of men and also the inevitable abuse of women. On the song "Statement of Vindication" the band takes a step further in exposing the shortcomings of patriarchy. Kathleen Hanna wails with confidence in her voice: "You made the rules / You wrote the script out / Don't blame me when you fuckin' lose"[25]. Instead of blaming women as the source of their own suffering, the lyrics shift the blame on men.

Bikini Kill adopted a profoundly pro-woman stance, which is particularly audible in the song "Rebel Girl". The song became one of the most memorable riot grrrl anthems, not least because of its girl-identifying lyrics. The lyrics to the song continue to assert the unjustness of patriarchy as the norm-governing ideology. "They say she's a dyke"[26], Hanna sings about a self-confident and proud young woman, whom supporters of traditional norms of femaleness have judged in terms of deviance from the norms. Hanna counters their prejudice with the statement, "[b]ut I know she is my best friend" [27], emphasizing the importance of solidarity amongst girls. Heavens to Betsy sang about girl solidarity in a similar way, even though some of their songs more unmistakably

[23] From the Bratmobile song, "No You Don't", off the album, *Pottymouth.*
[24] From the Bikini Kill song, "Blood One", off the album, *Pussy Whipped.*
[25] From the Bikini Kill song, "Statement of Vindication", off the album, *Reject All American.*
[26] From the Bikini Kill song, "Rebel Girl", off the album, *Pussy Whipped.*
[27] Ibid.

interpret as odes to lesbianism rather than platonic friendship. “When we were together, I thought everything was better / Now I just have to pretend I never cared about her”[28], Corin Tucker sings on “Me and Her”. Even if the story of the song is an unhappy one, the lyrics to this and other Heavens to Betsy songs present lesbianism as a fully legitimate sexual orientation, suggesting a connection to the queercore genre and scene which also aimed to break stereotypes of homosexuality. In this light, it seems obvious that riot grrrls should have been recognized for their advocacy of all sexual orientations. Nevertheless, the mainstream media usually represented them as strictly heterosexual – a misconception which will be discussed further in this chapter.

Except for lesbianism, Heaven’s to Betsy’s songs brought up more specific feminist issues. Female sexuality and teenage pregnancy are dealt with in the lyrics to “Baby’s Gone”. Tucker sings about parents who fail to give their daughter advice on sexuality. When she becomes pregnant, she is left on her own devices and self-aborts the baby with a knitting needle. “Baby won’t be back / Baby grew today / I did what you told me to do – now I’m dead”[29], the sorrowful lyrics elaborate. This suggests that as a result of the abortion, the daughter has reached the ending of her childhood and emotionally died from the experience. Several other Heavens to Betsy songs display a similarly sophisticated understanding of the struggles of women. To give another example, “Waitress Hell” tells about the disrespect a woman working as a waitress is met with: “Bring a million different things to my table on a silver platter / You’ve got nothing better to do”[30]. A male customer carelessly tyrannizes the already overworked waitress. The song also suggests that women are typically offered minimum wage work, or that many minimum wage positions, such as customer service, are typically labeled ‘women’s work’.

Huggy Bear displayed a social consciousness similar to Heavens to Betsy’s. Apparently more loyal to their punk and working-class roots, these British riot grrrls sang about poverty, antiauthoritarianism, and the mindlessness of life, but they also addressed

---

[28] From the Heavens to Betsy song, “Me & Her”, off the EP, *These Monsters Are Real.*
[29] From the Heavens to Betsy song, “Baby’s Gone”, off the compilation album, *Throw.*
[30] From the Heavens to Betsy song, “Waitress Hell”, off the album, *Calculated.*

personal issues such as unhappy love relationships and sexual experiences. The latter topic is most successfully covered in the lyrics to "Derwin", effectively reversing the sexual roles of men and women. The lyrics address a boy, who appears to be dreaming that his "knees are bleeding"[31] as a result of a sexual encounter he has dominated. Nevertheless, the other party of the encounter discards such dreams with the notion: "Stupid kid, follow my cake crumb trail" [32]. It is in fact the girl who takes an active role and seduces the trustful boy with her sexuality. Also the song "Red Flipper #2" addresses the topic of sexual power, but in this song the roles are reversed back to the traditional ones, and it is the girl who is forced to say "yes for the first time"[33]. The lyrics to both songs emphasize women's assumed sexual passiveness and men's tendency to abuse their physical strength sexually. "Red Flipper #2" also indicates women as sexual objects to be misogynously used and abused.

In addition to song lyrics, riot grrrl fanzines commented extensively upon the audibility and visibility of misogyny in the punk scene. Debby Wolfinsohn demonstrates the problem of misogyny in her brilliantly titled zine, *Satan Wears a Bra*, by citing the lyrics of the band Fear. "I just wanna fuck so [...] piss on your warm embrace / I just wanna cum in your face / I don't care if you're dead", Wolfinsohn (1993: 2) quotes them sing. Criticism of such hatred and abuse materialized in the lyrics of riot grrrl bands, as well. In Bratmobile song "Stab", Allison Wolfe sings that "[y]ou want to stab me / and fuck the wounds"[34], the conspicuous lyrics commenting on the sexual supremacy and perverted sexual egotism of men. Wolfinsohn's example again is one of the feminist observations in riot grrrl zines, aligning zinemaking with the tradition of feminism rather than punk. The above examples reinforce the impression that the DIY ethic of producing fanzines was merely adopted from the tradition of punk, and once it had been utilized by Riot Grrrl, it became a clear reflection of the movement's feminism.

---

[31] From the Huggy Bear song, "Derwin", off the album, *Taking the Rough with the Smooch*.
[32] Ibid.
[33] From the Huggy Bear song, "Red Flipper #2", off the EP, *Main Squeeze*.
[34] From the Bratmobile song, "Stab", off the album, *Pottymouth*.

Riot grrrl zine contributors emphasized the larger agenda of the movement. Among others, zine writers Kay and Josie reflect upon the aims of the movement: "'Riot Grrrl' is not just about music. It's girl positive energy. Don't feel that you have to be in a band to do something constructive with your time." (*Go-Go Grrl* #1: 5) What makes the statement particularly noteworthy is that it separates the movement from music and establishes it primarily as a feminist one. Other zine writers, such as Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman, remained somewhat more loyal to their punk roots, while also initiating discussions about traditional gender roles, among other feminist issues. In an interview printed in Wolfe's and Neuman's zine, *Girl Germs*, the members of the band 7 Year Bitch voice their frustration with the ostensibly self-evident male-centeredness of the punk scene. Lead singer Selene parodies the introduction of men in the scene to all-female bands: "Like, 'Oh wow, you're women and you can play!' But it's like, No shit!" (*Girl Germs* #1: 18) Drummer Valerie counters at least as ironically: "Just think about how many all-boy bands we sat through!" (*Girl Germs* #1: 18) The interview reveals an understanding of gender labels as limiting the credibility of women on the scene.

My argument is that zines displayed the most explicit acknowledgments of Riot Grrrl's feminist status, as well as expressed the multitude of feminist issues within the movement in the most candid way. What I suggest with this is that zines most unmistakably define Riot Grrrl as feminist, even when the movement is considered from an outsider perspective. In spite of this, the primary function of zinemaking was networking *within* the movement. As Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald (2006: 360) have recognized, zinemaking became extremely valuable for the movement, because it provided the members with a forum to comment on the very embodiment of the movement itself. Zinemaking enabled girls to self-define and self-critique their movement, and it, too, provided shelter from damaging misrepresentation and exploitation emanating from outside the movement. Molly Neuman has emphasized the feeling of comfort zinemaking generates. In an issue of *Riot Grrrl*, Neuman writes that zines enable girls to contemplate any issue that has importance to them, because censorship does not apply to zinemaking (*Riot Grrrl* #4).

As the 7 Year Bitch interview demonstrated, edged humor and irony regularly appeared on the pages of zines. Zines exhibited pictures of model-thin women and diet advertisements, for example, with slogans such as 'riot don't diet' written over them. *Huggy Nation* printed a picture of a lightly clad woman, and on her leg it read: "I escape your rationale" (1992). This slogan successfully summarizes the aim of riot grrrl zine writers to disrupt traditional notions of femininity and beauty. In other words, zines subverted the message mainstream media attempted to saturate opportune young women with. This indicates that zines not only communicated a serious message but additionally aimed to entertain. Much of this entertainment emerged in the form of parody. A half-naked fashion magazine cutout could have a home appliance for a head, or a knife stuck in an orifice. The body of a female guitarist could be attached to the head of Queen Elizabeth II. Words from advertisements of beauty products, makeup, and diet plans were cut out and rearranged into phrases with completely subversive, even absurd, messages.

Humor may appear a strange choice for communicating a serious feminist agenda. Parodying women may seem derogatory, and the use of obnoxiously edged irony may appear to jeopardize the believability of Riot Grrrl's serious agenda. In fact, could it be that the mainstream media and canonized feminists alike misinterpreted the movement partly because they failed to find the humor in Riot Grrrl? Were riot grrrls ridiculed in the media because *they* had resorted to ridicule? As Corin Tucker claims, "we [riot grrrls] were made to look like we were just ridiculous girls parading around in our underwear" (EMP 1999), but was this deliberate, or could riot grrrls not endure being made fun of? My interpretation parallels Tucker's because the mainstream media seemed unwilling to consider the serious aims of the movement, hyping instead its fashionability and ridiculing its naivety. Among other things, the media did not propose the purpose of riot grrrl humor to be to reveal the dystopian reality of girlhood, which is my interpretation of it. Many zine contributors felt that humor was most effective for provocation, on the one hand, and for deconstructing the inaccurate mainstream depiction of girlhood, on the other hand. To give an example of this, an anonymous contributor to *Grrrls World* writes that she has chosen the title of her zine in an attempt

to be ironic, because the world is "so blatantly not a grrrl's world" (1993). The use of irony also enabled girls to express unruliness and nastiness and to bend and cross the boundaries of the socialized image of a girl well-behaved.

A similar deconstruction of traditional girlhood materialized in the style of Riot Grrrl, as previously discussed. Even though the style was not uniform, its many varieties indicated a feminist agenda. Riot grrrls struggled to separate themselves from the traditional and conventional norms of girlhood and womanhood. By dressing in an outrageous way, riot grrrls sought to collapse the image of a soft-spoken, well-behaved girl, as they sought to accomplish with zine texts, as well. A riot grrrl could choose to wear any outfit without jeopardizing her status as a riot grrrl. Alternatively, by dressing in an emphatically ordinary way and refraining from using makeup, for example, riot grrrls aimed to destroy the patriarchal image of feminine beauty. It can thus be stated that in the riot grrrl style, if one may use such a generalizing concept, several alternative ways of deconstructing the conventional girlishness materialized. The behavior of riot grrrls seriously challenged the idea of women as soft and composed, because it was not uncommon that riot grrrls spat and swore. Therefore, the style of those involved in the movement deliberately bent the boundaries of socialized gender roles. Furthermore, Riot Grrrl appeared to reject the binary gender system by combining both traditionally feminine and traditionally masculine items: wearing babydoll dresses with combat boots, or adding bright red lipstick to a look of tattoos and hairy legs.

The images of oppositeness were similarly ironic as the humor riot grrrl zines contained. The blending of traditionally masculine and traditionally feminine items ridiculed the need for gender labeling, communicated the purposelessness of such labeling, and challenged the status quo of the system that supported the practice of labeling. Apparently, the challenge threatened the mainstream, because the irony was deliberately misunderstood. The ostensibly ambiguous gender blending was confusing, and it appeared to threaten the supremacy of heterosexuality. As a result, the mainstream media reassured their readers of riot grrrls' heterosexuality, which appears contradictory to the lesbian-themed lyrics of Heavens to Betsy, for instance. *The Washington Post* claimed that "most riot grrrls still find boys for the usual teenaged

thing" (Spencer 1993: 116). Such reassurance was apparently needed, as those involved in the movement had identified with lesbianism and adopted a conventionally unappealing style and ironic self-victimization to distort heterosexual objectification. These points are significant for distinguishing riot grrrl bands from a majority of 1990's all-female pop bands. The Spice Girls might have advocated 'girl power' but did so only within the frames of heterosexual desire. This is not to suggest riot grrrls as undesirable, as they often performed in sexually uninhibited ways, but as divergently desirable.

By distorting men's ability to desire them, riot grrrls rejected the heterosexual and therefore also political power relations reinforcing the oppression of women. According to Judith Butler (1999: 3), as well as other feminists, the question of power is crucial to feminist politics, because power can be recognized as both producing and maintaining the status quo. Nevertheless, riot grrrls chose to upset the status quo of power relations by rejecting the potential of desire, deviating from the conventions of femininity and female sexuality, and opposing to the objectification of female performers. In comparison, more traditionally-oriented all-female groups, such as the Spice Girls, were evaluated on the basis of their appearance rather than their musical abilities. Their slogan, 'girl power', appears superficial because of their girlishly cute looks, softcore pornographic wardrobe, and frivolous song lyrics about traditionally heterosexual love. While this appeared only to reinforce heterosexual power relations, the overtly sexual behavior of riot grrrls sought to collapse the relations. An important aspect of riot grrrls' behavior was the practice of self-victimization – the ironic display of womanhood as a status of objectification – which distorted men's ability to desire women and thus confused men's misogynist pleasure to demean women. Riot grrrls' untraditional display of sexuality eliminated several possibilities for producing and maintaining heterosexual power relations.

The shows of riot grrrl bands reflected feminism in another female-centric way. They became forums for feminist expression, as bands sporadically welcomed audience members on stage. Bikini Kill, for example, let spoken word performer Juliana Luecking recite a monolog about the demystification of sexuality. According to

Luecking (quoted in Leonard 1997: 234–235), her speech was received in a uniquely appreciative way that was lacking in venues that did not allow for similarly free communication. Other previously silenced voices could also become audible, as bands invited victims of sexual abuse on stage to share their experiences. During the International Pop Festival of 1991, audience members were warned about a man who had raped several women in the area. One woman responded to this by disclosing that she was one of the women the man had raped. As a result, the band Fugazi invited the woman on stage to sing the close of a song about violence on the streets. Marion Leonard (1997: 235) points out that this enabled the rape victim both to voice her pain and to direct it toward her attacker. Riot grrrl bands established a line of communication between them and the audience that enabled eliminating the hierarchy that was typical of traditional, male-dominated rock concerts.

Mavis Bayton has compared the performance of feminist musicians to other radical musicians, including punks. She states that by prioritizing the women in the audience, feminists have transformed the situations of performance (Bayton 1993: 181). Bayton says that as a result of rewriting the rules of performing, "feminist bands have challenged the traditional taken-for-granted dominance of men at gigs" (1993: 181). Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear certainly did by printing a handout that read: "I really wanna look at female faces while I perform. I want HER to know that she is included in this show"[35] (1993). Such requests led to a reevaluation of women's position in rock shows – a major development from the male dominance early riot grrrls had experienced in the American underground punk scene. Thus, Riot Grrrl rewrote the rules of performance to differ significantly from those of punk bands, even though punks had rewritten the rules in their time, too. In opposition to the communicativeness of riot grrrl shows, 1970's punk shows had traditionally emphasized the nonchalance and aggression of the performer. For example, British punk legends, the Sex Pistols, aggressively tantalized their audiences and employed extremely arrogant stage antics, according to Spicer (2006: 280). This display of arrogance separates punk shows from

---

[35] Sleeve notes to the split album, *Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah/Our Troubled Youth*.

the sophisticated female-centeredness of riot grrrl shows – even if they too were less-than-sophisticated in other aspects – indicating the latter as forums for feminism.

This section has established my reading of what constitutes the particular variety of feminism known as the Riot Grrrl movement. Each form of its cultural activism – music, performance, style, and fanzines – reflected the movement's feminist ideology. Lyrics, zine articles, and artwork explicitly commented upon the shortcomings of the socialized conventions of girlhood and womanhood, and equally effectively, the rest of riot grrrl practices implicitly communicated a feminist resistance to sexism and misogyny. Instead of advocating a superficial idea of 'girl power', Riot Grrrl rejected the frivolous cuteness of the Spice Girls in favor of introducing a more intelligent, active, and powerful grrrl. The riot grrrl variety of feminism emerged from the refusal to be defined as women in anyone else's terms. Riot grrrls were creative, confident, loud, angry, obnoxious, nasty, and radical. They eluded not only the conventional norms of girlhood but also the existing categories of feminism. The following section will focus on placing riot grrrl feminism in the tradition of feminisms.

5.2 Riot Grrrl Feminism in the Framework of Feminisms

Those who have acknowledged the Riot Grrrl movement as a feminist one have tended to place it in the tradition of the third wave of feminism. Deborah Siegel (2007: 146, 160) considers Riot Grrrl's juxtaposition of silliness and seriousness a definite sign of irony, which she in turn specifies as one of the central characteristics of third-wave feminism. "Contemporary feminism is about nothing if not irony" (Siegel 2007: 160), she claims. Riot grrrls, with their girlish yet sluttish appearances and assertive yet sophisticated behavior, certainly utilized third-wave irony. Astrid Henry (2004: 30) describes riot grrrls more mildly as 'daughters' – as third-wavers who dissented the monolithic feminism of their 'mothers'. Ednie Garrison (2000: 159) relates Riot Grrrl to third-wave feminism from a historical, subcultural, and technological perspective. According to her, what matters in defining riot grrrl feminism is not who had invented the tools it utilized, but rather who utilized them and how (Garrison 2000: 159). This

recognition is what essentially places Riot Grrrl within third-wave cultural geography, states Garrison (2000: 159).

The observations of many researchers of feminism posit Riot Grrrl within the third wave of feminism, often resultant from chronological reasons. In fact, as I suggested previously, the different waves of feminism appear applicable mainly *as* chronological categorizations. When riot grrrls began coming together in their variety of consciousness-raising meetings, feminism was resurfacing on political scenes, as well. In the 1980's, Ronald Reagan had been elected to the presidency, and the conservatives that had publicly specified women's 'naturally' proper role as mothers and homemakers had grown their influence. On the one hand, many women had rejected feminism in favor of conservativism, but on the other hand, the political and social circumstances had led others to realize the increasing invalidation of the achievements of the second wave of feminism. 1980's feminism, also known rather misleadingly as 'postfeminism', had kept feminist thinking alive but done so in a rather dormant way, with voices less willing to make themselves heard in public, as Astrid Henry (2004: 20) observes. But by the early 1990's, young women were openly identifying themselves as feminists again. Riot grrrls belonged to this new generation that craved to be seen and heard.

In the United States, one incident in particular has been cited as awakening women from the dormancy of the 1980's. In the fall of 1991, Anita Hill charged her former supervisor, Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, with sexual harassment. Hill was met with fierce condemnation and disbelief, while he, a sexual harasser, was freed from all charges and promoted to Supreme Court (Siegel 2007: 112). Hill's testimony became yet another backlash in the string Susan Faludi (1992: 2) argues as a far-reaching defaming of the achievements of feminism. Women were convinced to believe that the liberation movement had already resulted in victory, even though situations such as the Anita Hill case told a very different story. The new generation realized that gender equality was nothing but an illusion. What they also realized, was that in order to bring feminism onto the forefront of politics, once again, it was necessary to reconsider previous feminisms. These feminisms had not vanished, but they had lost their appeal to

women, remarks Astrid Henry (2004: 18), because their agenda had become distorted by the overly academicized and politicized formulations.

Riot Grrrl became one of the movements that most distinctly challenged previous feminisms. Riot grrrl Corin Tucker recognized that "for teenagers there wasn't any real access to feminism" (EMP 1999), which motivated her and others to rewrite feminism in a vernacular that would make sense to contemporary young women. Sharon Cheslow (2006) has said that the impetus of Riot Grrrl originated from the aim to reclaim feminism for the lives of young women. According to her, the focus shifted from the legal and economic concerns of second-wave feminists onto the issues of third-wave feminists as creative, culturally active women (Cheslow 2006). Both Tucker and Cheslow suggest that it was necessary that the outdated, old-fashioned feminisms of the second wave be adapted to the lives of women in the 1990's. Those involved in the movement thus displayed a definite eagerness to demonstrate the potential of feminism as an ideological discourse, but they also explicitly criticized previous feminisms for no longer utilizing that potential. This very distinction arguably defines Riot Grrrl as particularly third-wave.

Many researchers consider Riot Grrrl's status as third-wave unproblematic, and the reflections of riot grrrls themselves support the definition, but the division of feminism into waves itself is problematic, as I have stated. The division is misleading because it suggests that the feminists that actively participated in the forming of each wave thought alike, even though neither second-wavers nor third-wavers could agree upon even the most fundamental issues, such as the role of separatism in feminist practices. Thus, the division into waves suggests a broad, chronologically-based thinking about the development of feminism, and not much more of the waves can be deducted on the basis of this thinking than their temporal occurrence. In this sense, assigning the Riot Grrrl movement the status of third-wave feminism does not seem to signify much. It is illustrative that Riot Grrrl came together as a loosely connected movement, rather than a rigidly directed organization, whose agenda was *distinctly* feminist but not *definitely* third-wave feminist. This is why several researchers have aligned riot grrrl feminism with the tradition of second-wave feminism, as I have suggested previously.

Among such researchers, Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo (1998: 814) have argued that the practices of Riot Grrrl fundamentally emphasize separatism, and for that reason, they appear most closely associated with the second wave of feminism and radical feminism, in particular. In terms of separatism and radicalism, riot grrrl feminism could be posited within radical feminism in a number of ways. Not only did riot grrrls consider male domination the primal form of oppression, they also attested to specific aspects of radical feminism. Kathleen Hanna identified *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone's landmark book, as one of her primary sources of inspiration (Siegel 2007: 146). The book established the oppression of women resultant from their biology and its disadvantages: pregnancy, childbirth, and child-rearing (Firestone 1970: 5). Firestone (1970: 197–198) emphasized the significance of escaping the biological conditions through seizing the means of reproduction by refraining from motherhood through the use of contraception. These principles could be seen in the song lyrics and shows of Hanna and her band. On the song "I Like Fucking", Hanna declares: "I believe in the radical possibilities of pleasure, babe / I do, I do, I do"[36]. Bikini Kill and other riot grrrl bands established female sexuality as a source of egotistical pleasure rather than a prerequisite for motherhood.

Motherhood did not constitute a self-evident part of the riot grrrl idea of womanhood. This is because riot grrrls belonged to the new generation and were mostly in their late teens or early twenties, but also because they advocated the freedom of sexual orientation. Kathleen Hanna and Corin Tucker both came out as bisexuals, and zine texts reflected girl love and supported queerness. From the beginning, Riot Grrrl was fundamentally linked with the queercore genre, as I have stated with Heavens to Betsy. Also Mary Celeste Kearney (1997: 223) has recognized the connections between riot grrrl, queercore, and lesbianism. The lyrics of riot grrrl bands often dealt with the issues of sexual orientation in a way similar to queercore bands. Several bands, such as Excuse 17, Team Dresch, and Tribe 8, were simultaneously involved in both movements. In

[36] From the Bikini Kill song, "I Like Fucking", off the album, *The Singles*.

fact, Tribe 8 asserts in their song, “Neanderthal Dyke”: “I read Kathleen Hanna”. Finally, independent record labels, including K Records and Kill Rock Stars, supported both riot grrrl and queercore bands. As these examples suggest, Riot Grrrl and the queercore scene were interconnected. While Riot Grrrl reacted primarily to the oppression of women and queercore to the oppression of sexual diversity, both movements embraced the rights of an individual in relation to their gender and sexuality. This suggests that the gender politics of Riot Grrrl not only redefined womanhood but inevitably also women’s sexuality.

The inclusion of sexual diversity was a significant although widely underestimated aspect of Riot Grrrl. Firstly, it further associated the movement with the lesbian separatist community. Mavis Bayton argues that in the 1970’s, the lesbian womyn’s community “optimistically promoted alternative values: collectivism and co-operation instead of competitive individualism” (1993: 179), and this kind of sisterhood certainly materialized within Riot Grrrl, as well. Riot grrrls emphasized and encouraged girls to be active with and for girls even if not exclusively in a lesbian sense. Secondly, the fact that Riot Grrrl embraced sexual diversity not only separated the movement from men as proponents of patriarchy but also from heterosexuality as the sanctioned sexual practice of patriarchal society. The diversity demonstrates riot grrrl feminism as a reassessment of the feminist subject. Riot Grrrl recognized the complexity of gender, reflecting Judith Butler’s statement about gender that never becomes complete but “permits of multiple convergences and divergences” (1999: 22). The diversity also demonstrates Riot Grrrl as battling compulsory heterosexuality, which Butler (1999: 7) claims central to producing the fictitious stability of the feminist subject. Finally, Riot Grrrl’s embracing sexual diversity collapses the artificial order of sex, gender, and desire, also identified by Butler (1999: 11).

The realization thus leads one from lesbian feminism to Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler relates several of her arguments to the notion that “[c]ategories of true sex, discrete gender, and specific sexuality have constituted the stable point of reference for a great deal of feminist theory and politics” (1999: 175). It can be argued that the Riot Grrrl movement, with its convention-defying ideas of

girlhood and female sexuality, did not embrace such presuppositions. Riot grrrls resisted uniformity by refusing to promote a certain way of becoming a riot grrrl. In *Girl Germs*, Allison Wolfe summarizes this by stating that "if you are sitting there reading this and you feel like you might be a riot grrrl then you probably are" (1991). In the same text, Wolfe demonstrates how Riot Grrrl eludes definition. "Right now it isn't anything concrete, it's not a fanzine or a group or anything specific, although it is also all of those things" (1991), she deliberates. Such elusiveness allowed Riot Grrrl to challenge the previously accepted point of reference for feminism, as proposed by Butler.

Riot grrrl feminism appears exceptionally revolutionary, because it reclaimed feminism for the young 1990's woman and also rewrote feminism as a discourse. Much in the spirit of Butler's, Riot Grrrl sought to deconstruct feminist theory, per se, in addition to deconstructing the oppressive conventional norms of girlhood with the help of feminism. The riot grrrl way of making feminism was provocative, obnoxious, and unapologetic. It discarded the correctness and tediousness of overly academicized and politicized feminism in favor of focusing on taboos and other issues of young women, thus challenging the effectiveness of contemporary feminist practices. Riot Grrrl's advocacy of the heterogeneity of women and sexuality firmly echoes one of Butler's (1999: 6) central claims: that the constraints of the feminist discourse critically undermine the presumed unity of the subject of feminism. If women are presumed a homogeneous group, feminist discussion will inescapably be constrained by that narrow presumption which will only reify oppressive gender relations. Riot grrrls sought to expose this deep-rooted circularity of feminism by refusing to assign specific characteristics to the subject of feminism. The style of riot grrrls demonstrated that a riot grrrl could – but did not have to – possess any combination of traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics.

Besides style, Riot Grrrl's tendency to elude definition materialized in a number of other ways. Firstly, the riot grrrl manifestos that emerged on both sides of the Atlantic listed some of the issues of the movement, but the manifestos never became complete, as they were continuously revised. Secondly, once the media blackout had been declared, riot grrrls refused to talk to or be photographed with any representatives of the

mainstream media, indicating that they opposed to the confined mainstream description of the movement. Thirdly, those involved in the movement abstained from assigning characteristics to an ideal riot grrrl feminist, because the movement aimed to empower girls "according to their own terms" (Hanna 1991), not the terms of those already involved in the movement. These examples indicate that Riot Grrrl deliberately employed elusiveness in order to establish the advocacy of heterogeneous womanhood as its subject of feminism. Womanhood as expressed through riot grrrl eludes linguistic definition, which reflects Luce Irigaray's arguments. According to Butler (1999: 13), Irigaray claims the very system of language to be inherently masculinist, hence rendering its ability to represent the female sex necessarily inadequate.

From the Irigarayan perspective, the fact that riot grrrl feminism eluded definition by either constantly altering its manifestos or describing riot grrrls in ambiguously broad terms can be interpreted in terms of resisting a masculinist language. In such language, womanhood constitutes the subject which is *not* one, while manhood is always positioned as the primary subject (Butler 1999: 13). Monique Wittig (1981: 17) claims that women constitute the only gender, because men are always the general. Instead of accepting the linguistically secondary status of femaleness, Riot Grrrl avoided definitions formulated within a system that produced and reinforced such an imbalance. Subversively, riot grrrls reserved the right to locate their subject of feminism according to how they experienced it within the movement. This insubordination connects Riot Grrrl with the work of Simone de Beauvoir. According to Beauvoir (1973: xxvi), men cannot possibly settle the issue of women's oppression because that would make them both judge and party to the case. Riot Grrrl reflected yet another argument of Beauvoir's, i.e. the female body as the instrument, or scene, of women's freedom. In other words, Beauvoir (quoted in Butler 1999: 16) proposes a synthesis of the mind and the body, which can be found in riot grrrl's agency as the sole sign of their substance.

The notion of agency brings one back to Judith Butler. She assesses the Beauvoirian suggestion that women are not born into but learn to become women (Beauvoir 1973: 301) and proposes the deconstruction of the substance, or essence, of gender. Reflecting this, riot grrrls' prolific activism defied the attempts to confine the essence of the

movement into moribund definitions. As I have discussed, Butler (1999: 185) describes gender as performative, because its supposed substance can exist only through performance. This appears an operative argument when interpreting the many forms of riot grrrl cultural activism for the reason that they reflect the deconstruction and reconstruction of femaleness through agency. In a Butlerian way, the substance of Riot Grrrl can most accurately be located in its agency. This indicates that the essentialist representations of the movement require critical consideration. According to Germaine Greer, Riot Grrrl *was* "postpostfeminism" (2000: 325), while mainstream journalists stated riot grrrls *were* "a new feminist voice for the video-age generation" (Chideya, Rossi & Hannah 1992: 84) that had found "a way to *be* sexy, angry and powerful at the same time" (France 1993: 23, my italicization). Such exclusive definitions that do not acknowledge a margin of error seem forceful, as the elusiveness, unconventionality, and ambiguity of Riot Grrrl defied essentialism.

Riot grrrl agency and nonessentialism also suggest constant change, which I have already considered in relation to the revision of riot grrrl manifestos. Change was arguably more profound in relation to the invisible boundaries of socialized gender relations, as riot grrrls' crossing gender-related boundaries appeared nonincidental. Riot grrrls indicated the inaccuracy and disputability of the social construct of femaleness and situated characteristics of girlhood in both conventional femaleness and maleness. They also crossed the boundaries of heterosexuality by exploring rather than inhibiting their sexual expression, by aiming to achieve sexual pleasure rather than pleasuring men, and by practicing bisexuality and homosexuality. It would be an overstatement to interpret the latter as a complete abandonment of heterosexuality, because many riot grrrls engaged in heterosexual relationships, but it should be recognized as the abandonment of *compulsory* heterosexuality. Monique Wittig (1981: 53) argues that gender is formulated as a binary construct, of finite maleness and femaleness, in order to serve a system of compulsory heterosexuality and the reproductive aims of that system. Riot Grrrl interpreted compulsory heterosexuality as the construct that maintained inequality and aimed to break it down, which is what also Wittig (1981: 53) has proposed as the solution.

Butler identifies compulsory heterosexuality as a constituent of 'intelligible' genders. They, she writes, "institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire" (Butler 1999: 23). Compulsory heterosexuality is possibly the most prominent indication of intelligible genders, because the sexual desire that is constructed with the alleged factuality of sex as biological and gender as cultural materializes in it. According to Butler (1999: 23), the construct of gender intelligibility inevitably prognosticates the prohibition of unintelligible genders, as the characteristics of incoherence and discontinuity exist only through the negation of coherence and continuity. Furthermore, the juxtaposition leads to a relation of circularity between intelligibility and unintelligibility, because the laws that govern the institution of the former also govern the prohibition of the latter. This leads one to consider the focus of the mainstream media on the unacceptability of Riot Grrrl. The uncritical condemnation of the movement as "a prayer against men" (Barrowclough 1993: 27) or elitist fakers (France 1993: 23) indicates that mainstream journalists felt obliged to formulate a dominant story of Riot Grrrl that emphasized the unacceptability, and hence unintelligibility, of the movement.

It is my claim that the identification of unintelligibility, constructed by the mainstream media and conveyed to the mainstream population, most pointedly reflects the strategies of Riot Grrrl. It reflects the revolutionary potential of the movement, which was threatening enough to instigate a counterattack of trivialization. It reflects the unconventionality of riot grrrls as truly empowering, since the mainstream media resorted to sensationalism in order to compartmentalize it as unappealing and unacceptable for 'proper' women. Finally, it reflects the defiance of riot grrrls as a threat to not only society in general but to established authority figures, including well-known feminists and their theories. Huggy Bear singer Niki Elliott convincingly summarizes the defiance as a challenge to preconceived notions of feminism and feminists. In her manifesto, she writes that to her, the movement represents "[l]ooking for the bullshit in even the most respected works of feminism, etc, duh. No heroes. Fuck the rules. Yeah a stripper can be a feminist" (Elliott 1992). On the basis of Elliott's claims, one can argue that Riot Grrrl sought to dismantle any constructs that impeded one's experience of gender.

Elliott's reference to punk rock anarchism signals the deconstructionism of Riot Grrrl. The phrase about 'fucking the rules' certainly emphasizes the freedom to criticize any issue or practice. The reference also emphasizes the underground status of the movement: a feminist revolution emerging from the margins of society. This marginality can, for its part, be employed to explain why mainstream society experienced the movement as unintelligible. Finally, it is significant to recognize that Elliott's manifesto fuses feminism with anarchism. This fusion may seem paradoxical in light of my previous arguments about the inbuilt misogyny of the anarchist punk scene, but this should not be confused with anarchism as the political philosophy that aims to overthrow involuntary hierarchy. Punk's anarchist ideology has focused solely on the overthrow, while anarchist feminists, or anarcha-feminists, have reformulated the definition to acknowledge patriarchy as a key manifestation of the hierarchy. Susan Brown (1990: 208), for instance, considers anarchism intrinsically feminist, because anarchism opposes all forms of dominance. "[A]narchism transcends and contains feminism in its critique of power" (1990: 209), Brown argues. In this particular sense, the fusion of anarchist punk rock and feminism in Riot Grrrl does not appear at all problematic. On the contrary, the two approaches seem to reinforce each other according to the descriptions of anarcha-feminists.

Anarcha-feminism, in turn, is associated with radical feminism, particularly because many early radical feminists, including Roxanne Dunbar, formulated ideas of anarcha-feminism later in their careers. Both varieties are concerned with the political institution and sustenance of the power relations of gender. Although Riot Grrrl shared many of their assumptions, the movement appeared less political in its practical applications, because it preferred to achieve subversion through *cultural* activism. As Corin Tucker states, "I consider myself a cultural activist rather than a political activist, because I don't organize politics" (2006). Tucker's words demonstrate that Riot Grrrl aimed at political change through indirect means. Additionally, the movement differed from the organizational forms of anarcha-feminism which appear as both individualist and collectivist. Furthermore, the individualist forms have had most adherents in the United States, the home of Riot Grrrl, according to Judy Greenway (2000: 712). Contrary to

this, riot grrrls became active on a collectivist level. "[T]here was this feeling that you could do things on a community level to change what was going on in society" (EMP 1999), says Sharon Cheslow about the feeling and advocacy of togetherness.

Riot grrrls injected their variety of feminism with an anarchist ideology. They also embraced the concepts of radical feminism, including the famous slogan, 'the personal is political', about the importance of grassroots activism. Yet, the movement steered toward liberal feminism, too. Those involved in the movement emphasized that if given the same point of departure, women and men would behave the same, which Marysia Zalewski (2000: 6) recognizes as the main goal of liberal feminism alongside the exposition of moribund ideas about what characterizes women and their agency. With its elusiveness, nevertheless, the Riot Grrrl movement developed into a feminism of agency that defied classification and categorization – a development that has both complicated and inspired my work. Riot Grrrl's unconventional, elusive, and ambiguous performativity of gender establishes the movement as the kind of 'gender trouble' Judith Butler has encouraged. My argument is that the contemporaneous timing of Butler's theorizing and Riot Grrrl is not coincidental but represents a radical attempt to reformulate feminism for the decade. Riot Grrrl transferred feminism from politics to the cultural spheres of life and from academics to the everyday life of any woman – or grrrl.

5.3 Credibility of Riot Grrrl Feminism

Some of the critics of riot grrrls attempted to compartmentalize their feminism into one variety of feminism or another. Harsher critics expressed doubt about the movement's status as feminist. Journalists writing for the mainstream media recognized that riot grrrls eagerly called themselves feminists but refused to acknowledge this eagerness as legitimately feminist. Ann Japenga, for instance, criticizes riot grrrl feminism with her trivializing notions: "To call herself a Riot Grrrl, a woman need only rally to the slogan 'Revolution Girl Style Now' and appreciate bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile" (1992: H30). Except for the mainstream media, the previous generation of feminists

expressed concerns about riot grrrl feminism. In fact, several second-wave feminists were not at all convinced that the variety was feminism. As previously referenced, Germaine Greer labeled all 1990's twenty-something feminists – from riot grrrls to Spice Girls – spokeswomen for postpostfeminism, reducing their efforts to "ostentatious sluttishness and disorderly behavior" (2000: 325). The mother generation also felt that their daughters were detrimentally twisting the foundations of feminism by embracing overt individualism, claims Siegel (2007: 149).

In contrast to Siegel's claim, Riot Grrrl employed collectivism in the form of DIY activism as their primary form of feminist practice. The movement challenged the cultural representation of women by encouraging girls to create their own forms of cultural expression within music, art, and literature without accepting the glamorized depiction of mainstream publications targeted at young women. In other words, riot grrrl feminism came to challenge the mainstream media. The reaction that emerged in the mainstream media indicates that the challenge jeopardized their entire depiction of girlhood and womanhood, questioning their reliability as a source of information. It seems that upon the challenge, the mainstream media resorted to trivializing the credibility of riot grrrl as feminism. Japenga marvels at Riot Grrrl's self-proclaimed connection to the female-antagonistic genre of punk (1992: H30). In the British *Daily Mail*, Anne Barrowclough rages about riot grrrls in a more condemning way: "They call themselves feminists but theirs is a feminism of rage and, even, fear. […] By forming all-girl bands and screaming tunelessly at their audiences, they believe they can change the balance and ensure that women rule OK" (1993: 27).

As the excerpt shows, Barrowclough bluntly attacks the movement by resorting to uncritical generalization. She emphasizes, for example, that *some* riot grrrls proudly advertise their stripper background (Barrowclough 1993: 27), even though only Kathleen Hanna publicly discussed her former profession, and even then, her pride stemmed from surviving the experience, not the profession itself. Barrowclough uses such phrases as 'screaming tunelessly' and 'women rule OK' that ridicule the knowledgeability of riot grrrls. Her observations are very self-contradictory, because they simultaneously reveal her own unknowingness about the deeper-level message of

the movement. Instead, she focuses on the surface level and overemphasizes its significance to riot grrrl feminism. Barrowclough states that riot grrrls' "actions contradict what they are trying to achieve" (1993: 27) but fails to identify in what ways this would be the case. Finally, she interprets Riot Grrrl's pro-woman stance as "a deep loathing of men" (Barrowclough 1993: 27), likely because she refuses to consider Riot Grrrl's 'modus operandi', to use her term, in a critical light.

In a *Daily Star* article, John Poole (1993: 15) revealed his unknowingness by categorizing such all-female bands as Lunachicks, L7, and Hole as riot grrrl bands, even though the bands themselves had rejected the label. As a matter of fact, Courtney Love of Hole rather angrily denied the significance of riot grrrl bands by likening their musical incapability to making music with "a wooden spoon and a saucepan" (quoted in O'Brien 2002: 172). She clearly distances herself from the movement by continuing: "I don't have to go down there with you and beat on that pot" (quoted in O'Brien 2002: 172). Poole obviously failed to consider his topic critically enough before formulating false claims. This can certainly be argued as the trend the mainstream media displayed in relation to Riot Grrrl. The condemning reactions of Barrowclough, Poole, and others indicate also a trend of defensiveness toward riot grrrl feminism, or any feminist movement. This, in turn, corresponds to the arguments of Susan Faludi (1992: 66–68) about the century-long sustenance of antifeminism in the mainstream media. In this light, the doubt journalists expressed about the credibility of riot grrrl feminism actually represented doubting the overall credibility of feminism as a form of political discourse.

This, of course, was not the starting point of the second-wave feminists that critiqued Riot Grrrl. The necessity of feminism constitutes their basic assumption, so their reading of Riot Grrrl cannot be interpreted as criticism of the discourse of feminism. Feminism that is antifeminist appears logically impossible. Still, second-wavers could be anti-Riot Grrrl. The generational cleft crystallized in the long-lived feminist slogan about the personal being political. In her *New York Times* article titled "The Solipsisters", Katha Pollitt criticized the daughter generation by arguing that the slogan "did not mean that personal testimony, impressions, and feelings are all you need to make a political argument" (1999). Riot grrrls and other third-wavers disagreed with the

accusations of taking the slogan too literally. Even those, who did not primarily engage in politics, refuted claims of political apathy. Danzy Senna elaborates that discovering the personal has resulted in "an awareness of the complexity and ambiguity of the world we have inherited – and the very real power relations we must transform" (1995: 20). In spite of such refutations, the disagreement about the foundational phrase of feminism alienated second-wavers from riot grrrls and other third-wavers.

Out of the disapprovals of riot grrrl feminism, the one that most severely and legitimately challenged the credibility of riot grrrl feminism was the one that emanated from the ranks of canonized second-wave feminists. What do the rather harsh words of Greer and Pollitt, among others, suggest about Riot Grrrl? Do they indicate Riot Grrrl as an inferior or, even worse, a nonexistent variety of feminism? Or could it mean that second-wave feminists, like mainstream society, failed to conceptualize Riot Grrrl as intelligible? The latter possibility emerges as the most likely for the reason that certain aspects of the movement arguably antagonized second-wave feminists to focus too narrowly on those aspects. Paradoxically enough, this reaction markedly resembles the prejudiced interpretation of the mainstream media. Albeit the elaboration of second-wave feminists was better-informed than that of the mainstream media, accusing riot grrrls of sluttish appearances, overemphasized sexuality, and a lack of learnedness in feminist theory equates their reaction with the acriticality of the media. They, too, observed superficial surface details of riot grrrls and riot grrrl practices and evaluated them as unintelligible, which resulted in the refusal to acknowledge Riot Grrrl's status as feminism.

It is worth considering in more detail why established feminists might have rendered riot grrrl feminism unintelligible. Firstly, it is reasonable to think that Riot Grrrl's status as a punk subculture confused the interpretation. As Marion Leonard (1997: 240) points out, approaching Riot Grrrl from a subcultural mode of inquiry appears only logical, because riot grrrls themselves constantly identified with the tradition of punk. Zines likewise commonly emphasized the connection of the movement with anarchism. In *Ablaze!*, a contributor declares that "we're growing, we're underground, and we're denying their [mainstream's] power by not talking to them" (*Ablaze!* #10: 15).

Furthermore, feminists might have interpreted the movement as primarily a subcultural one and thus positioned it in opposition to feminism as a representation of the dominant culture. As I have mentioned, Dick Hebdige (1979: 3–4) claims that subcultures typically represent troubled youth, and on the surface of things, riot grrrls appeared both young and troubled. Several zine writers reinforced this impression. In a Los Angeles-based zine, *Grunge Gerl*, a contributor insists that "we're girls, we're angry, we're powerful" (1).

From the perspective of feminism, it may seem that riot grrrls more eagerly identified with the subcultural punk scene than with canonized feminists. This might have been problematic for feminists attempting to make sense of the movement, as punk had traditionally been characterized as sexist and misogynist, as I have previously acknowledged. For feminists, riot grrrls' identification with punk probably represented an ideological detachment from feminism, despite the fact that riot grrrls had infiltrated the punk scene for the very purpose of criticizing its male-dominance. In other words, riot grrrls refused to think in terms of one or the other. As Allison Wolfe says, Riot Grrrl "was a way of making punk rock more feminist", as well as "academic feminism more punk rock" (2007). Women's version of punk clearly aimed to disrupt the sexism of punk produced by men and to refocus the objectives of the scene. According to Lucy O'Brien, this had been the aim of the women involved in the first coming of punk. She claims that during the 1970's, punk both reacted to and redefined second-wave feminism, and that this meaning of punk resurfaced in the 1990's with Riot Grrrl. (O'Brien 1999: 197–198)

O'Brien (1999: 198) recognizes that in the 1990's, feminism developed from its predominantly political roots toward a more encompassing social applicability. Her emphasis on punk's meaning for women echoes the words of Mavis Bayton, who claims that "feminism has been a major force into popular music-making" (1993: 191). Apparently, both Bayton and O'Brien consider women's punk musicianship an act of feminism. On the basis of their arguments, one can concur that young women might not have become nearly as eagerly involved in punk rock had they not been aware of the genre's deliberate exclusion of women and girls. In other words, the whole purpose of

women becoming involved in the punk scene – both in the 1970's and 1990's – was to inject it with feminism. In the case of the 1990's, the argument finds support in zine texts that recommended the work of a variety of established feminists, including Luce Irigaray, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, as Leonard (1997: 237) points out. In addition to reading the theories of radical feminists, Downes (2007: 23) writes that Kathleen Hanna was inspired by feminist artists like performance artist Karen Finlay. Also during the first wave of punk, many women involved in the scene made a connection with the writings of second-wave feminists. According to O'Brien (1999: 191), artist and musician Linder recognized Greer's *The Female Eunuch* as her particular source of inspiration, which is interesting, considering Greer's later condemnation of punk rock women.

In relation to what I have stated about Riot Grrrl's identification with the punk genre and the punk subculture as a sign of alienation for established feminists, the name of the movement is surely worth considering. The word 'riot' undoubtedly refers to the roots of punk rock: anarchy, anger, and rebellion. The neologism 'grrrl' is a derivative of the word 'girl', indicating the movement as by and for young women. By including the onomatopoeic growl, 'grrr', in the word, the connotation is a markedly different from the conventional connotations of the word 'girl'. According to Marion Leonard (1997: 232), 'grrrl' signifies an assertive feminist and courageous cultural activist. Deborah Siegel (2007: 146) has stated that 'grrrl' refers to a revolutionary, stereotype-defying young woman who was simultaneously serious and silly, cutesy and slutty. Overall, the name 'Riot Grrrl' was brave – not least because of the use of capital letters – playfully innovative, and politically incorrect for an academically or politically credible movement. More importantly, 'riot' linked the movement with punk rock rebellion and 'grrrl' signified it as a youth subculture, while no part of the name directly referenced feminism. It is thus more than likely that the atypical name of Riot Grrrl caused politically more correct, serious feminists to question the aims of the movement.

Political incorrectness became another reason for second-wave feminists to criticize the credibility of riot grrrl feminism. What I mean here by 'political incorrectness' are ideas and practices that are unconstrained by conventionality and therefore offensive to

conventional thinkers. Furthermore, my intent with employing the phrase is to indicate Riot Grrrl as politically incorrect in relation to the tradition of feminism, in particular, even though its political incorrectness in relation to mainstream society is evident, as well. Similar to Merri Lisa Johnson's book, the provocative *Jane Sexes It Up*, which wanted to "force feminism's legs apart like a rude lover, liberating her from the beige suit of political correctness" (2002: 2) , riot grrrls attempted to update feminism toward a more daring and colorful direction of political incorrectness. Like Johnson, riot grrrls wanted feminism to be as bad as they were with their revealing stage clothes, orgasm-celebrating songs, and vibrator workshops. While those involved did recognize and study canonized feminists, they deconstructed the texts and reconstructed them into their own, sex-positive feminist ideology. Analogous to the principles of anarchism, they shamelessly reinterpreted, sometimes even distorted, canonized texts of feminism. The politically incorrect deconstructionism yet again links Riot Grrrl with Butler's critique of the uncritical presuppositions of feminist thought, as Riot Grrrl too refused to respect the origins of feminism without questioning them.

What riot grrrls seemed to question the most was the effectiveness of feminism. Theirs became a feminism of politically incorrect provocation when it came to appearances, statements, zine texts, and sex-positivity. According to Siegel, many second-wavers experienced the attempt to break free from the straitjacket of political correctness a serious mistake. From their perspective, third-wavers both ridiculed the discourse of feminism and risked their believability as feminists. (Siegel 2007: 149) In the case of Riot Grrrl, the name of the movement may have sufficed to appall. It connoted a movement of uncontrollable rebellion whose members were girls in their teens or early twenties, i.e. still in the process of growing up. The neologism 'grrrl' indicated the role of riot grrrls in the generational cleft, suggesting that theirs was not a movement of middle-aged academics. According to Siegel (2007: 148), some canonized feminists like Greer perceived riot grrrls and their endeavors as yet another pop culture phenomenon. Others worried Riot Grrrl's representations of unconventional femaleness would falsify their tradition. They were worried that the overt display of sexuality concealed rather than conventionalized women's sexual freedom. Erica Jong, who herself had become known in the 1970's for advocating the liberating potential of

random sexual affairs, now argued that aiming at sexual pleasure without love was not liberation. “Sexual freedom can be a smokescreen for how far we *haven’t* come”, says Jong (quoted in Levy 2005: 195).

Despite Jong’s claim, third-wave feminists, including riot grrrls, *had* realized that women were nearly not as liberated as the mainstream media kept asserting. It seems that many second-wavers failed to recognize that the two generations ultimately shared the goal of battling sexism and focused instead on surface details of third-wave feminism. Greer’s trivialization is the clearest example of this, and also the most troubling. My claim is that third-wave feminists, represented here by Riot Grrrl, in no way attempted to discontinue the sexual revolution that had begun in the 1960’s and 1970’s, largely as a result of feminist endeavors. Instead, their aim was to promote the revolution by adopting a more aggressive sex-positivity. For riot grrrls, a woman’s right to sexuality and sexual pleasure represented an aspect of liberation from the constraints of patriarchy. It is perplexing that Greer and Jong failed to discern the significance of this, particularly because Jong had popularized the potential of sexual freedom, and in *The Female Eunuch,* Greer had argued that women were taught to suspect their sexuality. In 1971, Greer told *The New York Times*, that the very title of her book indicated that women had been denied their sexual desire (Weinraub 1971). On the basis of this, one would have expected Greer and Jong to be *specifically* sympathetic toward Riot Grrrl.

Adopting a different viewpoint, second-wave feminists may not have been partial toward the practices of third-wave feminists for the reason that they appeared incomprehensible, but for the reason that the new generation explicitly criticized the efforts of the previous one. The unintelligibility became a generational disagreement, which is understandable, as third-wave feminists threatened the then-status quo of feminism. Early third-wavers like Naomi Wolf and Katie Roiphe polemicized about the impossible beauty standards as the regulating force of previous feminisms, infuriating second-wavers. Many interpreted the candor of third-wave writers as a denigration of the achievements of the second wave. Nevertheless, the claims Roiphe and Wolf made were profoundly well-argued. According to Siegel (2007: 101), Wolf’s central argument

was that by concentrating on the oppression of women, the second wave had constructed a pessimistic and ultimately patriarchal view of women as passive victims. If second-wave feminists interpreted the ideas of their followers as insulting, the alleged unintelligibility of Riot Grrrl appears consequential of the generational gap. One can argue that second-wave feminists rendered Riot Grrrl unintelligible, not because they doubted that riot grrrls would not be able to contribute to the tradition of feminism with anything substantial, but because riot grrrls threatened their way of making feminism.

In 2007, Allison Wolfe commented upon the disagreements within feminism like this: "Talking about waves of feminism is weird for me. [...] I understand that there are pushes and times where it gets more prominent at least in the mainstream. But to me, it just seems that as long as sexism exists so must feminism." (2007) Wolfe's comment brings one back to Judith Butler's arguments about the inaccuracy of feminism's point of reference for feminism. Wolfe and other riot grrrls, like Butler, wished to redefine feminism in a way that rejected the presumed binary gender system that both instituted and sustained society as heterosexual. Thus, the feminism of Riot Grrrl may well have differed from traditional varieties of feminism as a result of reconsidering the foundation of feminism. The fact that some supporters of traditional varieties criticized the credibility of riot grrrl feminism and condemned it as unintelligible can be interpreted as a sign of Riot Grrrl's success, because it apparently confirmed that the movement was revolutionary feminism-wise. In conclusion, it can thus be stated that established feminists rendered riot grrrl feminism unintelligible, because it rewrote feminism in a way that echoed Butler's radical rethinking of the feminist subject.

6 CONCLUSIONS

In 1995, punk rock researcher and writer Stewart Home claimed: "It seems unlikely that Riot Grrrl will ever attain the critical mass necessary to have much of an impact on mainstream culture. This failure will in its turn slow down the evolutionary unfolding of ideological Punk Rock." (1997) Despite Home's self-assurance, his summarization of the Riot Grrrl movement appears to fail on both accounts. Firstly, it can be argued that Riot Grrrl did not seek the legitimizing force of a 'critical mass' but aimed to empower young women on a more individual basis, truly echoing the feminist slogan about the personal being political. It attempted to remain underground, which numerous zine writers emphasized, indicating that Riot Grrrl resisted rather than sought mass popularity. Secondly, Home focuses on Riot Grrrl as a transformation of punk rock, recognizing the movement as a primarily musical phenomenon. Although riot grrrls eagerly displayed their punk rock roots, it appears more informed to link several of their practices with women's underground cultures, such as the lesbian womyn's community. Hence, as I have suggested in this thesis, one should read the Riot Grrrl movement more 'thickly' as a punk rock transformation of feminism.

In this thesis, I have focused on constructing a reading of Riot Grrrl through what I consider misrepresentations of it. I have regarded the movement as a reclaiming of feminism and as an updated subculture that utilized the tradition of punk rock for its feminist aims. To summarize, the music press, parallel to Home's claims, recognized Riot Grrrl mainly for its musical activities, while other mainstream media restricted the movement into a fashion statement of promiscuous, anti-male radical feminists. Thirdly, canonized feminists disputed Riot Grrrl's status as a legitimate variety of feminism, since those involved in the movement deconstructed feminist thought into a self-confident, sex-positive, and politically incorrect variety of feminism. Reflecting upon such constrictive readings of Riot Grrrl, my attempt has been to construct a Butlerian reading of the movement as a challenge to contemporary feminist thought and conventional femininity, which both materialized in riot grrrls' ambiguity and elusiveness. Furthermore, I have attempted to demonstrate that expressly because of such characteristics, Riot Grrrl defies definitive essentialist reading.

On that note, one might ask whether that is not what I have attempted to establish in this thesis, as well. How does *my* reading of Riot Grrrl differ from what I have claimed to be misreadings of it? Have I also resorted to subjective interpretation, claiming to formulate *the* definitive reading of the movement? Of course, my reading is exactly what it states to be, i.e. *my* reading, which indicates it as not absolutely objective. One needs to realize, however, that no reading of a complex (sub)cultural phenomenon can be completely objective, as the many misconceptions about the Riot Grrrl movement signal. Realizing this, I have aimed to propose alternatives to the absolutist representations of the movement, which is exactly why this thesis has commented upon Riot Grrrl from the perspective of the representations that claimed to present the essence of the movement. I have not aimed to dismiss previous representations of the movement but to develop their claims further toward a reading that would more accurately represent the diversity of the movement. This is not to claim my reading as all-encompassing or flawless but to demonstrate Riot Grrrl as a complex, heterogeneous movement – a fact that the constrictive readings have intentionally or unintentionally neglected.

While I have repeatedly recognized that various ‘outsider’ readings have only partially succeeded in defining and documenting riot grrrl phenomena, it should be noted that neither can I extricate myself from the process of interpreting the movement. Although I have attempted to avoid defining the movement in essentialist terms, opting instead for less absolutist description, it is unavoidable that I, too, have constructed a rather stable depiction of Riot Grrrl, in spite of the elusiveness of the movement. Furthermore, elusiveness is perhaps the very characteristic of Riot Grrrl that renders each attempt at written representation at least partially inaccurate. Since the movement was loosely connected, it is only realistic that there was no rigid code for riot grrrl behavior or activities. Nevertheless, it can be argued that each part of my discussion has reflected the recognition of the movement’s elusiveness, as well as ambiguity, which my repeated notions of agency over substance have concretely conveyed. At no point have I wished to fixate Riot Grrrl in terms of what it *was*, or what I think it was. Instead, I have attempted to credit the movement for what it *did*.

The notions of agency, and hence elusiveness, may bring to mind considerations about the impossibility to account for the Riot Grrrl movement. One might ask why I selected to discuss a cultural phenomenon that resists generalization. Initially, my interest in Riot Grrrl as a research topic stemmed from the realization that outsiders appeared to respond to the movement with constant criticalness or even hostility. The response of the mainstream media and several canonized feminists seemed out of proportion compared to the response to other subcultures, such as the mods or the punks. To quote Marion Leonard, the response "was clearly informed by a gendered discourse" (1997: 241), as I have discussed. The response developed into a moral panic which I have here interpreted as a reflection of Riot Grrrl's revolutionary potential. In this regard, one can should seriously consider whether the different groups of critics would have condemned Riot Grrrl equally vehemently had it really possessed such trivialized characteristics that the media attempted to assign to it. It followed from such considerations that I chose to approach the topic, fully aware of its challenging nature. In my reading of Riot Grrrl, the most fundamental aim has thus been to reveal its revolutionary potential.

When Bikini Kill ceased to exist in 1998, it had already been years since Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy, and Huggy Bear had broken up. The once-enthusiastic movement had seemed to implode as a result of intense outsider scrutiny. Theo Cateforis (1994), among others, has claimed that the media blackout only aggravated the misrepresentation of riot grrrls. In spite of such seeming failure to be revolutionary, the Riot Grrrl movement indisputably influenced young women's take on feminism, punk rock, and DIY cultural activism. The revolutionary potential of the movement – my central claim about Riot Grrrl – can be traced to girls' contemporary activism informed by the riot grrrl discourse. According to Julia Downes, Riot Grrrl was a cultural catalyst "which continues to provide girls and women with vital inspiration and encouragement worldwide" (2007: 12). Riot Grrrl rewrote feminism in the vernacular of the new generation, even to the extent that the movement may be seen as the point of origin for third-wave feminism. Finally, Mary Celeste Kearney (2006: 136) points out that a considerable number of young women have become involved in zinemaking as a result of the encouragement of riot grrrls. In fact, electronic zines and riot grrrl online

communities continue to prosper on the Internet. Finally, the punk rock bravado of riot grrrls has considerably influenced rock musicians. In 1993, zine writer Karren identified 47 riot grrrl bands that had formed that year, and numerous riot grrrl-inspired bands have since formed around the world.

As the previous paragraph demonstrates, the Riot Grrrl movement has had a lasting impact on girl-centric cultural activism in the United States, Great Britain, and the rest of the world. Perhaps it is the elusiveness of the movement that continues to enable Riot Grrrl's influence to grow upon young women everywhere. Perhaps it is the diversity of gendered expression, theorized by Judith Butler, that appeals to girls who refuse to relate to the forceful division of gender into the feminine and the masculine and, hence, to the dominant story of pastel-colored girlhood the mainstream media still impose. Or perhaps it is the ambiguity of Riot Grrrl that continues to enthrall young women like myself. Whatever the reason, the legacy of Riot Grrrl lives on, and this, if anything, is a certain sign of the movement's revolutionary potential that supporters of the status quo wished to suppress. On a final note, I would like to return to the words of journalist Elizabeth Snead with which I introduced the topic of my thesis. Riot grrrls may have been "ugly girls […] on stage" (Snead 1992: 5D), but their appearances boldly canvassed their revolutionary potential as a subversion of the purported stability of gender. In other words, the "ugliness" of riot grrrls communicated an elusive, ambiguous, and diversified subversion of femaleness. And that subversion crystallized the greatness of the 'Revolution Girl Style Now!'

WORKS CITED

Ablaze! Untitled fanzine article by Karren. *Ablaze!*: 10, 15.

Barrowclough, Anne (1993). "Save The World? Not a Hope Grrrls." *Mail on Saturday*: 27 March, 27.

Bayton, Mavis (1993). "Feminist Musical Practice. Problems and Contradictions." In *Rock and Popular Music. Politics, Policies, Institutions*. Eds. Tony Bennet, Simon Frith, Lawrence Grossberg, John Shepherd & Graeme Turner. London: Routledge. 177–192.

Beauvoir, Simone de (1973). *The Second Sex [Le Deuxième Sexe]*. Translated by H.M. Parshley. New York: Penguin.

Bikini Kill (1991). Untitled fanzine article by anonymous writer. *Bikini Kill. A Color and Activity Book*: 1.

Blaze, Cazz (1998) "Beginnings." In *Screaming in Public*. Unpublished book.

Blaze, Cazz (2007). "Poems of the Underground." In *Riot Grrrl. Revolution Grrrl Style Now!* Ed. Nadine Käthe Monem. London: Black Dog Publishing. 50–97.

Brown, Susan L. (1990). "Beyond Feminism. Anarchism and Human Freedom." In *Anarchist Papers 3*. Ed. Dimitrios I. Roussopoulos. Montréal: Black Rose Books.

Butler, Judith (1999). *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Calculated. Composer Heavens to Betsy. Perfs. Heavens to Betsy: Corin Tucker, Tracy Sawyer. [CD] Kill Rock Stars (1994).

Cateforis, Theo (1994) "Riot Grrrls: Punk Rock's New Resistance?" Unpublished conference paper. Presented at the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association annual meeting, Chicago, 7 April.

Cheslow, Sharon. In *Don't Need You. The Herstory of Riot Grrrl*. Dir. Kerri Koch. Perfs. Kathleen Hanna, Allison Wolfe, Corin Tucker, Sharon Cheslow. [DVD] Urban Cowgirl Productions (2006).

Chideya, Farai, Melissa Rossi & Dogen Hannah (1992). "Revolution, Girl Style. Meet the riot grrrls – a sassy new breed of feminists for the MTV age." *Newsweek*: 23 November, 84–86.

Chien, Irene. Untitled fanzine article. *Fake*: 0, 1.

Dister, Alain (1993). *The Story of Rock. Smash Hits and Superstars*. Translated by Toula Ballas. London: Thames and Hudson.

Donovan, Josephine (2000). *Feminist Theory. The Intellectual Traditions*. 3rd ed. London: Continuum International Publishing.

Downes, Julia (2007). "Riot Grrrl: The Legacy and Contemporary Landscape of DIY Feminist Cultural Activism." In *Riot Grrrl. Revolution Grrrl Style Now!* Ed. Nadine Käthe Monem. London: Black Dog Publishing. 10–49.

Dresch, Donna. Untitled fanzine article. *Chainsaw*: 2.

Dunbar, Roxanne (1970). "Female Liberation as a Basis for Social Revolution." *Notes from the Second Year: Women's Liberation. Major Writings of the Radical Feminists*. Eds. Shulamith Firestone & Anne Koedt. New York: Radical Feminism.

Elliott, Niki (1992), under the pseudonym Mal-fille. "Punk rock feminism." *Furball*: 1.

EMP = Experience Music Project (1999). "Riot Grrrl Retrospective." [Cited 23 November 2008] Available at: http://www.empsfm.org/exhibitions/index.asp?categoryID=129&ccID=135

Faludi, Susan (1992). *Backlash. The Undeclared War against Women*. London: Vintage.

Firestone, Shulamith (1970). *The Dialectic of Sex. The Case for Feminist Revolution.* New York: Morrow.

France, Kim (1993). "Grrrls at War." *Rolling Stone*: 8–22 July, 23–24.

Garrison, Ednie Kaeh (2000). "U.S. Feminism – Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave." *Feminist Studies* 26: 1, 141–170.

Girl Germs (1991). Untitled fanzine article by Rebecca B. *Girl Germs*: 4.

Girl Pride. Untitled fanzine article by anonymous writer. *Girl Pride*: 6, 10.

Glamour (1993). "Grrrl Talk." May, 134.

Goad, Debbie (1994). "Riot Grrrls Rrreally Boring." *Your Flesh*: 29, 22.

Go-Go Grrl. Untitled fanzine article by Kay and Josie. *Go-Go Grrl*: 1, 5.

Gottlieb, Joanne & Gayle Wald (2006). "Smells Like Teen Spirit. Riot Grrrls, Revolution and Women in Independent Rock." In *The Popular Music Studies*

Reader. Eds. Andy Bennett, Barry Shank & Jason Toynbee. New York: Routledge. 355–361.

Greenway, Judy (2000). ”Feminism: Anarchist.” In *Routledge International Encyclopedia of Women. Global Women’s Issues and Knowledge.* Eds. Cheris Kramarae & Dale Spender. New York: Routledge.

Greer, Germaine (2000). *The Whole Woman*. New York: Anchor Books.

Grrrls World (1993). Untitled fanzine article by anonymous writer.

Grunge Gerl. Untitled fanzine article by anonymous writer. *Grunge Gerl*: 1, 1.

Hair Pie. Untitled fanzine article by Jenn & Soph. *Hair Pie*: 2, 1.

Hanna, Kathleen (1991). “Riot Grrrl Manifesto.” *Bikini Kill*: 2.

Hebdige, Dick (1979). *Subculture. The Meaning of Style*. London: Routledge.

Henry, Astrid (2004). *Not My Mother's Sister. Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Home, Stewart (1997). “*Cranked Up Really High: Genre Theory & Punk Rock* by Stewart Home.” [Cited 25 January 2009] Available at: http://www.stewarthomesociety.org/cranked/content.htm

hooks, bell (2000). *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center*. 2nd ed. Cambridge, MA: Sound End Press.

Huggy Nation (1992). Untitled fanzine illustration. *Huggy Bear*: 4.

Japenga, Ann (1992). “Punk’s Girl Groups are Putting the Self Back in Self-Esteem.” *The New York Times*: 15 November, H30.

Johnson, Merri Lisa (2002). “Jane Hocus, Jane Focus.” In *Jane Sexes It Up. True Confessions of Feminist Desire.* Ed. Merri Lisa Johnson. New York: Four Walls Eight Windows. 1–11.

Joy, Sally Margaret (1992). “Revolution Grrrl Style Now!” *Melody Maker*: 10 October, 30–32.

Karren (1993). In “Girl Love and Girl Action.” Presented at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA), London, 4 December.

Kearney, Mary Celeste (1997). “The Missing Links. Riot grrrl – feminism – lesbian culture.” In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*. Ed. Sheila Whiteley. London: Routledge. 207–229.

Kearney, Mary Celeste (2006). *Girls Make Media*. New York: Routledge.

Leblanc, Lauraine (1999). *Pretty in Punk. Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.

Leonard, Marion (1997). "'Rebel Girl, you are the queen of my world.' Feminism, 'subculture' and grrrl power." In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*. Ed. Sheila Whiteley. London: Routledge. 230–255.

Leonard, Marion (2007). *Gender in the Music Industry*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.

Levy, Ariel (2005). *Female Chauvinist Pigs. Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture.* New York: Free Press.

Main Squeeze. Composer Huggy Bear. Perfs. Huggy Bear: Chris Rowley, Jo Johnson, Jon Slade, Niki Elliott, Karen Hill. [EP] Fellaheen Records (1994).

Malkin, Nina (1993). "It's a Grrrl Thing." *Seventeen*: May 1993, 80–82.

Matthewman, Hester (1993). "Rock against Men is Music to the Riot Grrrls' Ears." [Cited 23 June 2009] *The Independent*: 14 March. Available at: http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/rock-against-men-is-music-to-the-riot-grrrls-ears-a-new-movement-of-radical-young-feminists-draws-its-inspiration-from-manhating-allwomen-bands-reports-hester-matthewman-1497542.html

Millett, Kate (1970). *Sexual Politics.* New York: Doubleday.

Neuman, Molly. Untitled fanzine article. *Riot Grrrl*: 4.

O'Brien, Lucy (1999). "The Woman Punk Made Me". In *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*. Ed. Roger Sabin. London: Routledge. 188–198.

O'Brien, Lucy (2002). *She Bop II. The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul*. 2nd ed. London: Continuum.

"Oh Bondage, Up Yours!"/ "I Am a Cliché". Composer Poly Styrene. Perfs. X-Ray Spex: Poly Styrene, Lora Logic, Jak Airport, Paul Dean, Rudy Thomson, BP Hurding. [Single] Virgin Records (1977).

Osborne, Susan (2001). *Feminism*. London: Pocket Essentials.

Persephone's Network (1991). Fanzine article by Angel. *Persephone's Network*: 12.

Phoenix, Val C. (1994). "From Womyn to Grrrls. Finding Sisterhood in Girl Style Revolution." *Deneuve*: January/February, 40–43.

Pollitt, Katha (1999). “The Solipsisters.” [Cited 10 January 2009] *The New York Times*: 18 April. Available at: http://www.nytimes.com/books/99/04/18/bookend/bookend.html

Poole, John (1993). “I Brave the Riot Girls.” *Daily Star*: 9 July, 15.

Pottymouth. Composer Allison Wolfe, except “Cherry Bomb” by Joan Jett, Kim Fowley. Perfs. Bratmobile: Allison Wolfe, Erin Smith, Molly Neuman. [CD] Kill Rock Stars (1993).

Pussy Whipped. Composer Kathleen Hanna. Perfs. Bikini Kill: Kathleen Hanna, Bill Karren, Tobi Vail, Kathi Wilcox. [CD] Kill Rock Stars (1993).

Quit Whining. Untitled fanzine article by anonymous writer. *Quit Whining*: 1, 5.

Reject All American. Composer Kathleen Hanna. Perfs. Bikini Kill: Kathleen Hanna, Bill Karren, Tobi Vail, Kathi Wilcox. [CD] Kill Rock Stars (1996).

Rodnitzky, Jerry L. (1999). *Feminist Phoenix. The Rise & Fall of a Feminist Counterculture, 1960-1995.* Westport: Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Rosenberg, Jessica & Gitana Garofalo (1998). “Riot Grrrl. Revolutions from within.” *Signs* 23: 3, 809–841.

Rowley, Chris (1992). Full transcript of *Melody Maker* interview with Everett True and Sally Margaret Joy reproduced as a fanzine.

Sabin, Roger, ed. (1999). *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*. London: Routledge.

Salih, Sara (2004). Introduction to “Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversions (1990).” *The Judith Butler Reader*. Ed. Sara Salih & Judith Butler. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing. 90–94.

Senna, Danzy (1995). “To Be Real.” In *To Be Real. Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. Ed. Rebecca Walker. New York: Anchor Books. 5–20.

Siegel, Deborah (2007). *Sisterhood, Interrupted. From Radical Women To Grrls Gone Wild*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Snead, Elizabeth (1992). “Feminist Riot Grrrls Don’t Just Wanna Have Fun.” *USA Today*: 7 August, 5D.

Spencer, Lauren (1993). “Grrrls Only.” *The Washington Post*: 3 January, 116.

Spicer, Al (2006). *The Rough Guide to Punk*. London: Rough Guides.

Starr, Larry (2005). *American Popular Music. The Rock Years.* Cary: Oxford University Press, Inc.

Sullivan, Caroline (1993). “Angry Young Women.” *The Guardian*: 24 March, 33.

Taking the Rough with the Smooch. Composer Huggy Bear. Perfs. Huggy Bear: Chris Rowley, Jo Johnson, Jon Slade, Niki Elliott, Karen Hill. [CD] Kill Rock Stars (1993).

The C.D. Version of the First Two Records. Composer Kathleen Hanna. Perfs. Bikini Kill: Kathleen Hanna, Bill Karren, Tobi Vail, Kathi Wilcox. [CD] Kill Rock Stars (1994).

The Kitchen Tapes. Composer The Raincoats. Perfs. The Raincoats: Vicki Aspinall, Gina Birch, Ana da Silva; Richard Dudanski, Paddy O’Donnell, Derek Goddard. [CD] Reachout International Records (1983).

The Real Janelle. Composer Allison Wolfe, except “Where Eagles Dare” by Glenn Danzig. Perfs. Bratmobile: Allison Wolfe, Erin Smith, Molly Neuman. [EP] Kill Rock Stars (1993).

The Singles. Composer Kathleen Hanna. Perfs. Bikini Kill: Kathleen Hanna, Bill Karren, Tobi Vail, Kathi Wilcox; Joan Jett. [CD] Kill Rock Stars (1998).

These Monsters Are Real. Composer Heavens to Betsy. Perfs. Corin Tucker, Tracy Sawyer. [EP] Kill Rock Stars (1993).

Thornton, Sarah (1994). “Moral Panic, the Media and British Rave Culture.” In *Microphone Fiends. Youth Music and Youth Culture*. Eds. Tricia Rose & Andrew Rose. London: Routledge. 176–192.

Throw. Various composers. Various perfs. [CD] Yoyo Recordings (1992).

Tucker, Corin. In *Don’t Need You. The Herstory of Riot Grrrl*. Dir. Kerri Koch. Perfs. Kathleen Hanna, Allison Wolfe, Corin Tucker, Sharon Cheslow. [DVD] Urban Cowgirl Productions (2006).

The Nation of Ulysses (1991). Untitled fanzine article. *Ulysses Speaks*: 9.

Vail, Tobi (1990). Untitled fanzine article. *Jigsaw*: 2.

Vale, V., ed. (1997). *Zines*. Vol. 2. San Francisco: V/Search.

Waugh, Daisy (1993). “Don’t Mess with the Girls who Just Wanna Be Grrrls.” *Evening Standard*: 16 August, 10.

Weinraub, Judith (1971). “Germaine Greer – Opinions That May Shock the Faithful.” [Cited 2 May 2009] *The New York Times*: 22 March. Available at: http://select.nytimes.com/gst/abstract.html?res=F10712FB3E54127B93C0AB1788D85F458785F9&scp=4&sq=germaine%20greer&st=cse

Wells, Steven (1993). “Ready, Teddy, Go! Rage Against The Man Machine!” *New Musical Express*: 6 March, 13.

White, Emily (1992). “Revolution Girl-Style Now! Notes from the Teenage Feminist Rock’n’Roll Underground.” *The Chicago Reader*: 25 September, 8–9, 16, 18–21.

Wittig, Monique (1981). “One is Not Born a Woman.” *Feminist Issues* 1: 2, 47–54.

Wolfe, Allison (1991). Untitled fanzine article. *Girl Germs*: 3.

Wolfe, Allison. In *Don’t Need You. The Herstory of Riot Grrrl*. Dir. Kerri Koch. Perfs. Kathleen Hanna, Allison Wolfe, Corin Tucker, Sharon Cheslow. [DVD] Urban Cowgirl Productions (2006).

Wolfe, Allison (2007). Personal oral history.

Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah/Our Troubled Youth. Composers Bikini Kill/Huggy Bear. Perfs. Bikini Kill/Huggy Bear. [CD] Kill Rock Stars/Catcall (1993).

Zalewski, Marysia (2000). *Feminism after Postmodernism. Theorising through Practice.* New York: Routledge.