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## Spaces of Signification, Representation and Opposition- New Feminism(S) and Women in the Indie Rock Scene

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**SPACES OF SIGNIFICATION, REPRESENTATION AND OPPOSITION:  
NEW FEMINISM(S) AND WOMEN IN THE INDIE ROCK SCENE**

A Thesis Presented

by

MARGARET R. WALLACE

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

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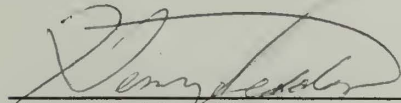
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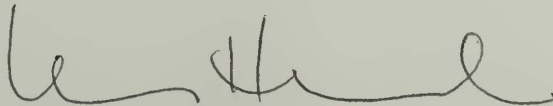
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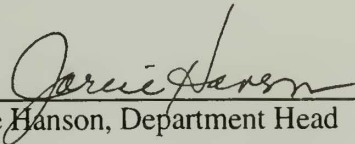
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## PREFACE

My initial inspiration for exploring the discursive community around underground women punk bands burgeoned in the summer of 1992 at a Riot Grrrl Convention in Washington DC. The 'convention' was a celebration of women punks, their bands and of 'girls'<sup>1</sup> subscribing to various degrees of a punk sensibility. A two-day outdoor musical and spoken-word performance in DuPont Circle featured a variety of 'girl bands' from across the US who ranged in age (teens to mid-thirties), playing ability, and degree of exposure to the punk scene. The combination of networking opportunities and DIY (do it yourself) tips aimed to increase the cultural clout and output of female artists, placing the collective experiences and friendships among women and young girls in the foreground.

Alternatives to mainstream methods and media were presented as ways to circumvent the trappings of the overtly male-dominated rock culture and music industry. To this end, ongoing networking activities ranged from exchanging self-made 'zines'<sup>2</sup>, stickers, exchanging addresses, making plans to play music (or 'jam') and embark on tours -- all strategies to promote collaboration among women. Informal workshops were conducted along themes such as how to start a record label, make a zine, safer sex discussions, obtaining safe abortions, and self-defense for women. These efforts to broaden the establishment of self-sustaining cultural enterprises for women and girls in underground rock scenes reflects a range of cultural practices occurring in local music

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'girl' is used throughout this essay. It is commonly used within this interpretive community, having lost much of the pejorative connotations implied when used in other cultural circles.

<sup>2</sup> The importance of the written word in punk culture has always been stressed, a tradition arising from an "indie rock's squatter aesthetic" (Powers, 1994, p. 38). 'Zines, self-made 'magazines' are commonly used as a way to promote bands, a lifestyle, a political agenda. 'Zines are giant editorials, a community forum that gives voice to a group of people adhering to a particular lifestyle. In girl punk circles, these "gleefully polemical fanzines such as Hit It or Quit It mix the methods of grassroots politics -- consciousness-raising sessions, catchy slogans, and guerrilla information blitzes...to produce a milieu that's both political and sexy" (p. 18).

scenes across the US. The occurrence of these activities tacitly supports the observation that "playing music is only one role in a more elaborate set of tasks and relationships that define the musical world" [Frith, 1992, p. 175]. Taken together, this signifies that the robust interaction of music, cultural expression, and meaning, especially with regard to the position of women and young girls in this subcultural landscape, is a terrain in endless ideological contest.

At the Riot Grrrl Convention, the antics of the bands and performance artists on-stage combined with an energized audience, complete with the standard spattering of male hecklers. These performances created an over-signifying environment where hegemonic tensions in underground rock culture were exposed, parodied and defied. For instance, at one point during a band set, one of the guys in the audience shouted: "Is punk rock just an excuse for ugly girls to be on stage?" The women in the audience, having heard this, began to shout back at him, creating an intimidating front against this unwanted intrusion. The scene was instantly transformed into a hotly contested territory and the guy was forced to leave the scene.

Throughout this weekend, these sometimes powerful, sometimes hokey, sometimes explosive activities were waged in opposition to double-standards in rock and the cultural impediments to female participation in subculture -- especially as they pertain to transforming the cultural rules traditionally surrounding the highly ritualized arena of performance space. Witnessing these guerrilla tactics in action in the midst of a busy city park, I wondered how cultural theorists might better establish the link between the subcultural landscape, specifically local music scenes and live performance, as a hegemonic mediator.

This research project is a culmination of my initial ruminations about the practices observed within the context of "feminocentrist" [Alan in Chase, 1993, p. 4] punk bands

in this vital scene. A major purpose of this essay is to contextualize this women-centered discourse and accompanying transformations of engendered cultural codes in indie rock scenes in two significant ways: 1) By situating these various, intersecting discourses within a socio-historical context, drawing on the conditions facilitating this recent visibility of 'girl punk bands'; 2) by grounding this hierarchy of discursive structures in an overall problematization of the cultural landscape as a mediator of hegemony and oppositional practices. This approach may better illuminate the tensions that come into play as discursive forms compete to comprise meaning, spatial relations, and the gendering of subculture.



## CHAPTER 1

### FEMINIST PUNK DISCOURSE IN THE CONTEXT OF THE BOSTON-AREA MUSIC SCENE

**Girl bands in the past, they're all different, but I think traditionally girls modeled themselves more on male performers. Even if it was just male performers acting up on their feminist tendency -- or feminine tendencies, rather.**

• **Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth, 1993**

What follows is an interrogation of the relationship between hegemonic articulation and the cultural landscape within the punk music 'scene' focusing on feminist-oriented<sup>1</sup> all-female underground rock bands and their corresponding sites of signification, most notably the performance space. This critique addresses the proliferation of underground 'girl-bands' as a larger cultural phenomenon, yet it focuses on the local music scene in and around Boston. In this essay, the local rock 'scene' is constructed as "...an overproductive signifying community" [Shank, 1994, p. 122], implying a primary site of ideological articulation. In implementing a context-driven approach to critiquing this vital scene, abstract concepts pertaining to hegemony are anchored to instances of everyday experience. Shank highlights the importance of this critical undertaking since within subculture

scenes remain a necessary condition for the production of...music capable of moving past the mere expression of locally significant cultural values and generic development...toward an interrogation of dominant structures of identification and potential cultural transformation [p. 122].

Similar to urban centers across the US, Boston's punk landscape is comprised of numerous local music clubs, where the performance space takes on signifying prominence, and by local sites of labor and consumption, such as the all-important

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<sup>1</sup> Later in this essay, I elaborate on the ways in which 'feminism' or 'feminist discourse' informs this interpretive community. I use these terms in a twofold manner: 1) to indicate instances where these female rockers identify themselves as feminists, and; 2) to suggest that the interrogations of hegemonies of gender and sexuality which I highlight engage with feminist concerns and goals.

second-hand clothing store. The Boston area music scene has evolved from a number of cultural, regional and economic conditions. Boston is a typical college town, energized by an influx of university and art students. Combined with its proximity to New York City, Boston presents many opportunities for local performers and concert-goers. Given the relatively small area covered by the New England states, the Boston scene spills over to other cities and towns in Massachusetts, and in the neighboring states of Connecticut, Rhode Island, New Hampshire, and Maine. In the eighties, Boston's Rock Against Sexism formed, as did politically-outspoken girl bands such as and High Risk Group. Combined with a relatively active 'queer community', the Boston area is fertile ground for subcultural discontent. Often outrageous "feminocentrist" [Alan in Chase, 1993, p. 4] punk bands began to gain substantial recognition in the underground music scene in Boston in the waning 1980s, paving the way for this latest infusion of female rockers.

Although Boston boasts an active underground music scene, the space afforded to women is commonly viewed as being less open when compared to other more progressive, though not unproblematic, scenes -- such as those occurring in Washington, D.C. or Seattle, Washington. Nonetheless, there is a strong core of women-centered punks in the Boston scene, making it a regular stop on the tour circuit for women-centered punk bands from other cities in the US, Europe, Canada, and Japan. This influx of music from other places informs a sense of cultural affiliation, comprising an international punk network that is often rooted in problematizing cultural limitations based on gender, race, class and sexuality.

In 1990, a year marking widespread recognition of outspoken Riot Grrrls, the most written about segment of this cultural 'movement', the discourse generated by underground feminist-centered bands reverberated in many US scenes, including the Boston scene. Though women have always been involved in the independent music scene in Boston and beyond, their numbers and discursive visibility have grown substantially over the past five years. Punk rock veteran Kim Gordon of the experimental

mixed-gender band Sonic Youth notes this phenomenon, commenting on the now-defunct Jane Pratt television talk show that "girls now have realized that it's power they want and empowerment and it doesn't necessarily have to do with electric guitars...it's just seizing the stage for themselves" [Gordon, 1993]. The incredible proliferation of underground feminist or women-centered rock bands, usually of the 'girl punk' variety, signals that the already converging engendered cultural conventions inhabiting local rock music scenes are in the process of transformation. The transformations heralded by these outspoken bands reflect dissatisfaction with larger institutional structures of the cultural industries and with mainstream feminism -- both viewed as limiting the pleasurable and aesthetic potential of subcultures of refusal:

These days...rock's women are increasingly thinking -- and talking -- about the fact that they're women. Whether or not they embrace the "F" word (feminism), they're shaping a debate that's threatening to change the rules for both rock and feminism [Powers, 1994, p. 37].

These bands and their corresponding signifying communities combine traditional punk convention (such as a do-it-yourself ethic) with scorn for mainstream culture and a problematization of performance and of the uneasy pleasures of female subcultural participation, to promote cultural production and camaraderie among women. The names of these bands include the New York band The Lunachicks, Olympia-based Bikini Kill, Team Dresch and The Third Sex from Portland, Oregon and the 'dyke rock' inspired Tribe 8 from San Francisco, California. Challenging the hegemonically sanctioned marginal position of women in music, these bands openly defy conventional cultural expectations based on gender, race and sexuality, espousing a rhetoric of self-definition and empowerment. Taken together, these expressions mediate the cultural terms of female pleasure in performance by problematizing the ambiguous role of women on stage and making music in the male-dominated world of underground rock. More overtly political and outspoken girl punk bands such as Bikini Kill and Team Dresch represent magnifications of prevalent discourses on gender promoted in girl punk culture,



discourse that directly confronts the gendering of subculture, especially through performance and the accompanying construction of pleasure.

Many critical analyses of youth cultural forms and independent music scenes have documented the uneasy place occupied by women and girls in underground rock scenes, noting the circumstances which historically mitigate against women fully exploiting the liberating potential of subcultures of refusal. The shift in cultural clout and visibility of women musicians and feminist-oriented bands deserves attention, especially considering that

in the past, when women have participated in rock culture, they have [tended to do so as consumers and fans -- their public roles limited to groupie, girlfriend or backup singer, their primary function to bolster male performance [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 256].

For these reasons, "the study of the gendering of subculture" [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 256] is a critical undertaking because it "helps in part to explain why girls historically have not participated as actively as boys in rock culture..." [p. 256]. Significantly, as Angela McRobbie [1990] contends, "the extent that all-girl subcultures, where the commitment to the gang comes first...provide a collective confidence which could transcend the need for 'boys,'" [p. 80] points to critical transformations in "the politics of youth culture" [p. 80].

### **Focus of Study**

This study revolves around three interrelated areas of focus:

- 1] To present a brief socio-historical narrative of the circumstances facilitating the not-so-sudden transformation of the cultural positionality of women and young girls in punk music culture;
- 2] to advocate for an understanding of subcultural style that emphasizes the processes and cultural relations involved in comprising style rather than merely focusing on the patterns and end-products of consumption, and;
- 3] to problematize the ideology of space as absolute, an ideology that "grew up with capitalism" [Smith & Katz, 1993, p. 76], a cultural perception instigating hierarchies of power and meaning.

Woven together with an analysis of subculture and of corresponding counter-hegemonic practices, my emphasis on spatial relations underscores the realization that "the relationality of *social* location is inextricably imbricated with the relationality of geographical location" [Smith & Katz, 1993, p. 77].

The relevant themes of this essay are briefly reviewed below:

### **Punk Beginnings**

In Chapter 2 a narrative on punk beginnings is presented to accompany my discussion of the conditions facilitating the not-so sudden transformation of the cultural positionality of girls and young women in punk. Constructing an historical narrative partially illuminates why the potentially emancipating benefits of subcultural participation have been less-than favorable for girls and young women -- a task made more complex when racial, sexual and economic signifiers are considered in relation to often rigid conventions of underground rock and local music 'scenes'.

Within this framework, Marx's characterization of commodity fetishism is a useful starting point for developing a critique of female participation in subculture, including the role of subcultural style as political refusal. According to Leiss, Kline, and Jhally [1988], "Marx called the fetishism of commodities a disguise whereby the appearance of things in the marketplace masks the story of who fashioned them, and under what conditions" [p. 274]. Given the anonymity of the mass production process referred to above, it is easy to see why this perspective is advantageous to incorporate into cultural critiques.

However, adhering to a classical theory of commodity fetishism is less useful for connecting the centrality of place, labor, and meaningful forms and practices to cultural output for punks as they are described in this essay. A common thread runs throughout the evolution of punk, namely an emphasis on providing opportunities for involvement, thus blurring the lines between production and consumption as well as audience and performer. This do-it-yourself philosophy is evident in subcultural spaces such as local

clubs, second-hand clothing stores, and print/desktop publishing shops -- all locations which contribute to the making of a scene. Given this intimate and constant pattern of engagement, a greater understanding of modes of production is *de facto* achieved -- whether taking the form of self-made style, home-produced zines or independent record releases. This critical theme, one which is deeply rooted in traditional punk ideology, is addressed throughout this essay in my considerations of style, process, and labor in the Boston punk community.

In addition to establishing this closer relationship to modes of production traditionally associated with punk, plotting shifts in punk practices over the years serves to expose potential weaknesses in hegemonic systems of signification, for example, by indicating the niche occupied by girls and young women. With these considerations in mind, I will return to previous critiques of subcultural style to comment on their contemporary applications in understanding counter-hegemonic practices. This chapter provides the framework for moving my critique to one that encompasses a problematization of the spatial as a necessary component for understanding the place of history and memory in relation to larger cultural and economic forms as they are expressed in lived culture.

To achieve this same end, interviews conducted since 1992 are excerpted throughout this essay. The excerpted quotes are not intended to provide a totalizing representation of this community and they are not presented as an ethnography of the Boston-area scene. Instead, they are a reflection of conversations, used to support key inferences made here about the making of meaning in this community. Since the punk scene is primarily created in the local music clubs, I am working from an assumption that conversations with people in the Boston-area scene will certainly yield different information than other scenes in other regions of the United States. In the course of this study, I consciously chose not to limit my interviews to self-described 'fans' of



"feminocentrist"<sup>2</sup> [Alan in Chase, 1993, p. 4] punk bands. The proliferation of women in punk bands fills every corner of the underground music scene; for these reasons, all perspectives inform this cultural phenomena. Hopefully, the quotes introduce others' voices, the voices of people who might well scorn any attempt to expose their lives and passions to academic terminology.

### **Critiquing Subcultural Style: End-Product vs. Process Relations**

In Chapter 3, earlier critiques of subculture, style and identity "in the realm of context-dependent creativity" [Bondi, 1993, p. 96] are revisited for the purposes of promoting a shift in emphasis from an object-based understanding of subcultural style to one which integrates subcultural practices and processes involved in the perpetual transformation of meaning. These critiques are considered in terms of how they specifically relate to contemporary feminist conversations generated by girl punk bands, especially in terms of their relevance to contemporary conditions of this interpretive community. Key concepts in subcultural politics brought forth by Dick Hebdige [1979, in Willis, 1993], Angela McRobbie [1990, 1994], Susan Willis [1993], and Simon Frith [1990, 1992] are considered in relation to subjectivity and pleasure, signification in performance, practices of consumption, and the gendering of cultural location. These issues are critiqued as they pertain to transformations in subcultural modes within feminist-centered underground women rock scenes. In the interrogation of expressed hegemonies of gender, race and class within discursive structures of girl punk bands, the cultural critic must ask how these combined factors interact to facilitate or hinder liberation for women and girls in underground music scenes and in culture as a whole.

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<sup>2</sup>In the course of readings for this essay, I came across this term in a 1993 Boston Rock Against Sexism zine. "Feminocentrist" was used to describe music-makers and artists in the punk scene whose primary activities focus on the experiences of young women and girls within this community.

## **An Emerging Politics of Location**

Along with an expanded emphasis on the cultural practices, for example, style-as-refusal, and on the socio-historical processes involved in the creation and evolution of a 'scene', I also advocate for the incorporation of spatial analysis in order to discover how hegemonic forms are imbued in the subcultural landscape. Chapter 4 outlines the concepts attached to what is meant by what Adrienne Rich refers to as prioritizing a 'politics of location'. Smith and Katz [1993] credit Rich for her awareness of the necessity to engage with a "spatially scaled sense of identity" [p. 76]. This imperative "challenges the presumed homogeneity of identities" [p. 76] of women globally, inevitably bringing the incommensurability of women's experiences to the forefront.

The Boston music scene is used to exemplify how constructs of space permit a broader understanding of subculture. In this essay, space and location are viewed in terms of their relationship to hegemony and oppositional practices within the punk music culture. 'Space' refers to actual and metaphoric sites of signification, but a primary focus will be on the relevance of the performance space occupied by this latest infusion of girl punk bands. My aim is to describe those practices that expose and problematize the gendering of the punk music culture. Other sites of labor and cultural production are also considered with regard to these inquiries.

Implementing a theoretical framework that incorporates a conscious problematization of the spatial as a necessary critical component to understanding hegemony, especially as it pertains to the relationship among cultural forms and practices, illuminates the overt gendering of underground rock scenes. By linking microsocial cultural practices associated with discourse generated by girl punk bands and performance, such as they occur in the Boston scene, intangible themes of consumption, hegemony, the politics of location and cultural affiliation become contextualized and exposed. Connecting these local and regional experiences to larger cultural and historic and economic conditions, especially as women interact in the production and

consumption of these cultural texts, engages with a dialogue that considers the experiences of women across cultures, regions, age-groups, and eras.

Chapter 5 attempts to further ground my observations of the Boston-area punk music scene, and discourse generated by female participation in punk bands, by focusing on two distinct sites of articulation<sup>3</sup> within this community: the performance space and the second-hand clothing store. To illustrate shifts in signification in punk performance, Detels' paradigm [1992] for a postmodern feminist music aesthetics is invoked to show how performance, a central signifying ritual in punk, is linked spatially, historically, culturally, and economically to other sites of signification in the scene. This will take performance out of an sequestered region of signification into the streets and spaces that comprise the punk scene.

### **Mapping the Ideological Terrain of Subculture**

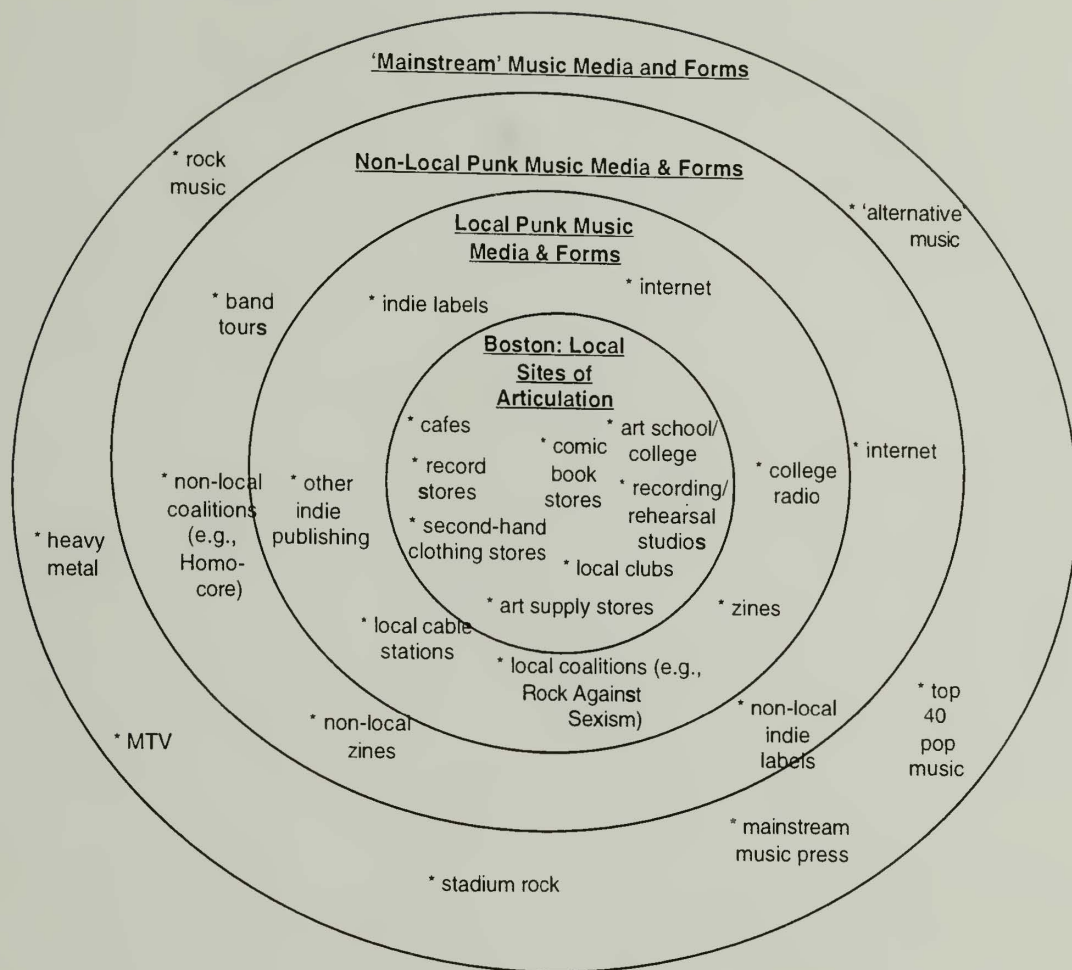
To better illustrate how these goals are conceptually combined, Figure 1 presents an interpretive map, representing the various cultural and economic spheres of influence at work in underground rock scenes, of which the community of feminist-oriented women rockers comprise a large part. A theory of the interpretive map, as it is used here, is based on the writings of Jameson and his contemporary adherents [e.g., Smith & Katz, 1993] who problematize the codes and layers implied in the construction of an interpretive community that can be spatially expressed. Interpretive maps are constantly changing because they are reflections of memory, imagination, experience, and meaning as much as a product of socio-political conditions of a given time. In this sense, interpretive maps are best considered in both material and symbolic terms that relate human consciousness to dominant ideological structures.

The map presented here is intended to profile some of the larger signifying systems that construct this interpretive community on local, even international levels.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'articulation' is used throughout this essay to describe a culmination of practices, processes, cultural, and economic conditions that represent the communication of ideologies.





**Figure 1: Interpretive Map Informing the Boston-Area Punk Scene**



While by no means exhaustive in its detail, the map attempts to visually and conceptually integrate several spheres of cultural and economic influence to expose hegemonically constructed territory, mediated in local contexts, experienced by this interpretive community. A interpretive map pinpoints locations of subjectivity in terms of larger geopolitical and symbolic context.

Due to the limitations imposed by the two-dimensional space of this page, the map is comprised of several concentric circles, with each circle indicating a 'sphere of influence'. The center-most circle represents the local music scene, in this case Boston. Local sites of cultural expression, such as music clubs and places of work are indicated in the geopolitical realm. This illuminates the terrain over which patterns of cultural production and consumption are in motion, exposing where hegemonic forms are most present and tangibly contested. The concentric circles are layered and overlapping, not necessarily indicative of rigid spatial or temporal boundaries. It might prove best to understand that "two-dimensional social maps are inadequate" [Rose, 1993, p. 151] insofar as "spaces structured over many dimensions are necessary" [p. 151] to highlight difference and ambiguity of meaning.

Thus, the Boston punk scene, as it is described here, transgresses geographical boundaries, linking other scenes and mass-mediated signifiers to local cultural and economic circumstances (e.g., the 'kinship' experienced with nearby scenes in New York City or Washington, DC., the influence of MTV or college radio stations). The map also provides a contextualized understanding of the role of mass media role as prominent, though not totalizing. Concentrating on these theoretical dimensions circumvents confounding distinctions between private and public space or local and mass-mediated experience, thereby recognizing the need for a more sophisticated assessment of interpretive cultural domains.

The next outer sphere represents prevalent local music and mass-mediated industries such as local college radio and local indie music labels. The next circle represents non-local music industry and punk forms. The largest sphere represents mainstream cultural industry and musical forms, implying the way in which mainstream cultural industries appropriate and market local cultural forms transnationally. These spheres, considered together and to varying degrees take on symbolic significance in constructing an interpretive community informed by local, mass-mediated, and other imagined or symbolic landscapes.

Describing the cultural conditions according renewed cultural prominence to all-female punk bands and depicting how this relates to local contexts responds to an imperative "to situate cultural forms within the production and reproduction of capitalist spatiality" [Berland, 1992, p. 42], addressing "how does one produce the other?" [p. 42]. An interpretive map conceptually relates abstract hierarchies of cultural signifiers, cultural associations and practices to a space hegemonically inhabited, defined, and reproduced by late capitalist forms such as the stronghold of consumer culture in the 1980s and 1990s. Our discursive positions, while never fully comprehensible, are anchored within the historical and material reality of social relations as they are constructed within the spaces of culture. Visual depictions suggest and expose hierarchies. As a cultural critic, identifying possible in-roads for hegemonic intervention for potentially transforming capitalism rests on linking these places identified on the map. Deconstructing the naturalized forms and practices within the cultural spaces we occupy strikes at the heart of hegemonic cohesion.

## CHAPTER 2

### IDEOLOGY AS 'HISTORY-IN-THE-MAKING':

#### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HALLOWED HALLS OF PUNK

If 1993 is the year of Girl-Powered Rock, what about 1994, 1995 and so forth? Does calling this year OUR year mean we have to relinquish our claim to the future? Absolutely fucking not. Don't believe it if any trend monger tells you anything else.... The key is that girls and women are doing the naming, the working, the playing and the singing, and that is crucial to the future of music, of culture, of life. So there [Joy in Corrigan, 1993, p. 35].

If it is true that all or mostly all-female punk bands and, more specifically, Riot Grrrls constitute "one of those mythical touchstones beloved of cultural historians; a figurative Year Dot for female expression" [Joy in Corrigan, 1993, p. 35], then the process of historicizing cultural movements must be interrogated. The dominant cultural tendency to undermine popular cultural phenomena by relegating them to an in-between state of 'history-in-the-making' betrays an implicit verity that "so-called marginal cultures are at the very heart of the dominant culture" [Patton, 1993, p. 86]. To muddy this issue even more, cultural forms still in their 'infancy', while relegated to the past (through appropriation), are increasingly commodified and "jettisoned...into a cultural (but ahistorical) future in order to have ever-new routes of escape from the cultural stranglehold it exercises" [p. 86]. This tendency toward "denunciation of the recent past" [McRobbie, 1994, p. 113] and disempowerment through absorption "must be challenged if we are to understand the way in which utopian or emancipatory ideals manage to find some latent expression in mass culture" [p. 113].

In the next chapter, I take a closer look at the role of subcultural style as a means for communicating identity and refusal, but it is important to note here that in the classic text on subculture, Subculture: The Meaning of Style [1979], Hebdige posits a theory of punk style as defying historical constraints in the sense that 'style' arises from the



imagination of subcultural inhabitants -- a matter initiated from a cultural position without tangible context. Hebdige's depiction is partly attributable to a noted tendency in punk circles to forge a style that is an amalgamation of seemingly unrelated cultural referents.

These days, most cultural theorists agree that actors participating in any cultural practice are historical, context-bound beings, not immune to, though often opposed to, dominant ideological forms. As a feminist, I work from the frequently documented premise that patriarchal patterns of oppression are repeated throughout all levels of culture. Therefore, out of political necessity, subcultural style is intimately connected to a sense of history and memory. Subcultural style-as-refusal, for example, is better regarded as a reaction to being inscribed within dominant culture which is, in part, defined by perceived historical circumstances. Through the midst of this reactive state, punk forms and practices are continuously redefined.

The punk music culture is not only characterized by outspoken mistrust for authority, loosely organized political inclinations, but it is also noted for an active investment in the construction of cultural space, such as a performance space and the local scene. For these reasons, the combined factors that catalyzed the increased visibility and mobility of female artists in Boston and other underground music scenes across the US are better understood when contextualized within an historical narrative constructed to highlight modes of counter-hegemony and associated genderings of subculture and subcultural space. Viewed in this way, the cultural critic may better show how the overall denial of women's participation in underground music scenes is temporally expressed more through a series of absences: The absence of cultural 'space' to occupy and traverse in order to form social bonds; to carve meaningful surroundings, and; to participate in the pleasures associated with collective transgressions of body, gender, class, race, and consumption. These subcultural perks are largely missing from the dominant historical construction of girls and young women in subculture.



This narrative presented here is comprised of two parts: 1) A commentary on the larger conditions of economy and the state of our cultural and economic institutions and organizations, occurring since the first-wave of subcultural analyses (written in the late seventies), which facilitate the current evolution of 'girl punk scenes' in Boston and beyond [e.g., Hebdige, 1979, Frith & McRobbie, 1990], and; 2) a brief overview of some of the ways that punk has evolved in this overarching context to facilitate the current evolution of girl punk scenes in Boston and beyond.

### **Post-Cold War Culture and Economies: Informing Signification within Women-Centered Punk Discourse**

This section contributes to our understanding of the evolution of subcultures of refusal within the context of the Reagan/Thatcher years and the recent mainstream popularity of punk. By examining the larger historical and economic circumstances that, in part, inform the world view of dominant culture and the subcultural positioning of women in punk, we might better identify those factors which facilitated this increased visibility of girls and young women in music. Thus, this subculture is described in a way that links lived culture to a history selected from traditions that illuminate why this latest infusion of girl punk bands serves to challenge and transform hegemony.

The manipulation of history and so-called popular memory reveals the ideological tensions implicit in sustaining the cultural industries and dominant culture. This is most avidly expressed by considering specific practices associated with the punk music culture, including those occurring in the overproductive signifying region of the performance space. Problematizing these intersecting cultural, economic and historical variables supports a cultural theory that regards all historical narratives as a reconstruction of the past to reflect contemporary thinking, inspiring critical interpretations that are "connective but not linear" [McRobbie, 1994, p. 101].

## Punk for the MTV Generation: The Tensions Between Commodity Punk and Subcultural Expression in the Reagan/Thatcher Years to the Present

Until the appearance of 'grunge' on the mediascape, punk was a dead issue for the mainstream media and the MTV generation. In the US, the lack of media attention in combination with late capitalist economic and cultural forms nullified local culture [Willis, 1993] yet fostered a subcultural climate which facilitated the ongoing evolution of disenfranchised punks. The lack of Reagan-era media hype around punk rock betrays the degree and variation of grassroots cultural activity that marks this loosely organized community and the degree to which feminist dialogue infiltrated indie scenes:

The debate over women's place in alternative music simmered beneath the surface during the 1980s as the loose network of record labels, college radio stations, fanzines and clubs that made up the indie rock scene transformed punk anarchism into low-budget entrepreneurship [Powers, 1993, p. 34].

The mass media-defined year that began the Riot Grrrl 'movement' coincided with grunge band Nirvana's rise to fame and the frequent exposure of 'underground' bands to younger audiences through music videos. The mainstream music industry has developed a marketing niche for toned-down punk, inappropriately tagged as 'alternative' music or 'neo-punk'. This time around, MTV-babies Green Day are stylized mimics of the Sex Pistols, right down to their (fake) English accents. Since this time, feminist-centered girl punk bands have also been receiving considerable mainstream media attention. Coverage tends to either describe these 'angry women in punk' within a narrative comparable to earlier depictions of Equal Rights-era feminists (i.e., as implicitly man-hating, hairy-legged and fanatical) or purely in terms of their in-your-face punk styles.

In "Border Crossing in the USA" [1994], Gaines constructs a cultural narrative to explain current youth and alternative cultural forms. Declaring that "if you were born any time after 1964, here's a laundry list of the things that fucked you up" [p. 229], she focuses on representing historical, economic, social and legal circumstances informing

our world view and everyday strategies to contend with these forces. Historically, Gaines writes, youth and youth culture have lost the clout to influence dominant culture in the way that their baby boomer predecessors did. "The baby boom had the cultural authority to make adults listen" [p. 229]. Economically "inflated expectations and diminished options" [p. 229], combined with diminished social welfare services and a dissolution of a "social contract" [p. 230] between youth and adults, expressed interpersonally, in the community, and in legal and education institutions have combined to give rise to the current brand of punk discontent.

The Reagan/Thatcher years serve as a basis for feelings of discontent brewing in the US and English punk scenes. For many, "the 1980s were the worst years of our lives, the brutality years, a decade of repressions" [p. 228]. This decade is defined by blatant attacks on young people, the socially and economically disenfranchised . In the eighties, "young people were devalued, dismissed and degraded at every turn" [p. 228]. These days, the threat of nuclear war, while still present, has taken a back seat to the overriding cultural anxiety produced by a system too fragile to support a post-baby boomer generation. Shifts in governmental focus toward deregulation of communications media and a diminution of social services favor a system prioritizing multi-national corporate structures, rendering an already-minuscule social relief infrastructure bereft and forlorn:

Deindustrialization, class de-alignment, the changing place of women, and the consolidation of black people [and other racial groups] at the bottom end of the labour hierarchy, have all affected young people during the 1980s [McRobbie, 1994, p. 161].

Amidst these unfavorable circumstances, a "great powerful music emerged," [Gaines, 1993, p. 228] and a space was created in which "kids hid out in the margins, in their scenes, with their friends" [p. 228]. Sometimes mainstream media refer to today's youth as 'Generation X'ers', but this term is generally rejected as disempowering -- expressing negation and dominant cultural appropriation. In the eighties-era of the sound-



bite and commodity fetishism youth "created their own explanations for what was going on" [p. 228] in ways not previously realized.

### **Relocating Punk Narrative in Context**

The roots of contemporary US and English punk are entrenched in a number of traditions and contradictions. In a comparison between the European and US punk communities of the late 1970s, Goldthorpe [1990] critiques the noticeable apolitical tendencies in US punk when likened to their European counterparts. Hebdige himself recounts the American punk "minimalistic aesthetic" [1979, p. 25] of the three-chord thrasher variety as buying into "the cult of the Street and a penchant for self-laceration" [p. 25].

Despite this Neanderthal beginning, punk evolved in garages and local clubs throughout the US to develop political savvy and a great distaste for consumer culture. Several themes which Goldthorpe highlights are of focal concern in all or mostly all-female punk bands and their corresponding scenes. This cultural legacy involves strong tendencies toward what is called positive/anarchist punk, a hefty infusion from queer 1980s activist culture, and the benefits of ongoing discussions generated by feminist discourse(s). These themes are briefly presented below: I regard them as informing contemporary female rockers and female subcultural participation in ways unique to the political sensibilities inspired by of the punk scene.

### **Positive/Anarchist Punk**

Emerging from the apolitical US hardcore scene of the 1970s, Goldthorpe describes how the typical hardcore/punk scene "transmuted into an anarchist scene" [Goldthorpe, 1990, p. 55] in the 1980s. Positive/anarchist punk emerged from the so-called fragmentation in the American hardcore punk scene during the bleak Reagan years. Positive punk embraces anarchist orientations, "anarchist because decentralized politics



and activism have become the norm" [p. 55] and contends with a proactive engagement with cultural production. Within this punk 'scene' -- "'scene' because participants are organized so loosely and politics regarded so expressively, that political tendency would be too sociological a term" [p. 55] -- politically active English punk imports (e.g., Crass and Chumbawamba) and all or mostly-female bands such as The Raincoats, The Slits and X-Ray Specs, implemented a "rhetoric of egalitarianism, self respect, and social change" [p. 45] and combined music, performance and writing into overt forms of political refusal. These punk artists "sought to unify the punk scene by encouraging cooperation among bands and scene business, as well as curbing violence at shows" [p. 45].

Within contemporary feminist/feminine-centered punk scenes, positive punk ideology is one basis for a focus on the erection of self-sustaining entrepreneurial and networking enterprises in the graphic arts, independent zine production, self-created style, the establishment of independent record labels, all supporting the notion that "playing music is only one role in a more elaborate set of tasks and relationships that define the musical world" [Frith, 1992, p. 175]. Not only is it the case that "the simplest school or garage group becomes 'a band'" [p. 175], but the band is often the focal point around which a "support network of promoters and publicists, drivers and carriers, dedicated fans and followers" [p. 175] revolve, all aiming for the ultimate goal of subcultural credibility and the dream of economic self-sustainability. The increased cooperation among bands and scene businesses underscores an important transformation, one which is only beginning to receive adequate attention and is of central concern to this essay. In this sense, the composition of the punk scene, Boston no exception,

resembles that of grass-roots political activism. Self-producing a record or getting in a van and touring the country with no corporate support recalls radicals' direct action approach, which bypasses the bureaucracy to get a message across [Powers, 1993, p. 33].

Despite a tradition of conscientious cultural opposition enhanced by positive punk, one that significantly focused on de-bunking rigid gender roles, the world of punk

was not the free-floating utopia depicted most notably by Dick Hebdige [1979]. Conditions of marginalization and repression of female pleasure in the punk scene, through the gendering of the performance space (acutely expressed by the dearth of women in bands), illustrate that punk remained "dominated by the sensibility of white heterosexual males, who possessed little feeling of solidarity with other movements and lacked a political vocabulary" [Goldthorpe, 1990, p. 42]. Reflecting the status often allocated to women in all levels of culture, "female punks were...placed in an ambiguous position, either accepted as "one of the boys," or marginalized as 'girlfriends' who were not really punks" [p. 41]. A microcosm of larger social conditions, tales of marginalization, trivialization and ignorance have been handed down and continue to reflect the experience of many women in this scene.

Changes in contemporary punk scenes regarding woman rockers did not suddenly happen. However marginalized, women figure significantly in early punk: "Ground-breaking women helped nullify the prejudices against their acceptance into rock -- literally -- one at a time" [Chase, 1993, p. 4]. Whether in behind-the-scenes capacities as sound people or clothing manufacturers, or in all or mostly women bands including Siouxsie and the Banshees, the Au Pairs, the previously mentioned Slits, and X-ray Specs, female artists have always pushed the boundaries of subcultural refusal. Unfortunately, the first-wave of subcultural critiques failed to highlight their presence, focusing instead on "male-defined activities (such as fights), male relationships, and male-defined sites (such as street corners)" [Willis, 1993, p. 371].

In the US, transgressions of gender in subculture were underway as artists such as Patti Smith made "a space for feminine intervention and performance, a space that would be exploited effectively by women in the English punk movement" [Shank, 1994, p. 92]. Following Patti Smith's street-wise aesthetic "and swelled by the burgeoning punk thang [sic], scads of women-powered bands formed" [Chase, 1993, p. 4] to make their own meanings, thereby countering the limitations imposed on women in indie rock

scenes. Importantly, Patti Smith's encounters with androgyny -- typically the purview of male rockers -- opened an arena of pleasure to girls and young women heretofore not realized by female musicians.

This phenomenon spilled into the mainstream as Joan Jett and Cyndi Lauper exposed scores of young girls to strong women in rock. To many, Joan Jett symbolizes the first Riot Grrrl; she began playing music in The Runaways, an all-female 1970s band, before she reached the rest of us in her leather pants singing bad-girl, sexually ambiguous songs with The Blackhearts. Joan Jett has re-entered the girl-punk arena to produce records for Bikini Kill, tour with her new band, and to promote a new album -- with a new song dubiously entitled 'Spinster', full of subtext and celebration of women's independence from male-defined cultural institutions. Similarly, Lauper heralds from the punk scene, her song 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun' is an anthem for an entire generation of young girls:

When Cyndi Lauper came out with her song 'Girls Just Wanna Have Fun,' you could almost hear the sound of thousands of girl-palms slapping thousands of girl-foreheads, V-8 style, as we all realized: Goddamit, that's right! ...somehow, what she sang wasn't as obvious as it should have been" [Hex & Boob, 1993, p.2].

In "Stop Using Fun as a Weapon", 'Hex' and 'Boob' writing for 'Bust' zine explain, "Girls weren't supposed to just wanna have fun. We were supposed to just wanna have kids and touchy-feely relationships" [p. 2]. Cyndi Lauper's new-wave "battle cry" [p. 2] exposed an entire generation of 'square peg' young girls to the possibility of just having fun:

And there we were, doing our new-wave bops on dance floors across the country, drunkenly singing it along with her.... We were gonna have fun like the boys did. We were gonna have one-night stands and hangovers and we were gonna laugh out loud like banshees and fuck the world if they didn't like it [p. 2].

The opportunities offered women in terms of potential for counter-hegemony and subcultural affiliation are incremental, building on the cultural precedents previously offered in punk for transgression; today, as then, these transgressions are spatially



expressed in the signifying arena of the performance space and in local sites where low-level entrepreneurial structures are promoted. Girls and young women in underground rock scenes throughout the 1980s made steady cultural progression within the already problematized counter-cultural modes of punk. The fact that "punk rock idolized the tomboy" [Hex & Boob 1993, p. 2] and, to some extent, provided girls and young women "the freedom to be loud and obnoxious hedonists" [p. 2] indicates one way in which positive punk ideals provided opportunities for more women to broadly transgress sexual and gender boundaries.

Young women punks and the bands in which they play are not uniformly allied according to musical sound or political inclination. Their sounds range from heavy metal to hardcore to bubble-gum pop. Their politics are too loosely organized to be captured under a catch phrase or 'ism', though the punk anarchist tradition remains central to their everyday political postures. Nonetheless, contemporary girl punk culture in places such as Boston, Washington, DC. and Seattle, Washington is strongly aligned to perhaps utopian ideals that radical political agendas are as much a part of everyday life as the clothes one wears or the place one works.

Tracking the early phases of this renewed cultural focus on women musicians in independent rock culture, Gottlieb and Wald [1994] describe one tendency of contemporary indie women's rock bands to parody male rock-world symbolism, for instance, the tendency of feminocentrist bands to choose names that mimic male rock in their use of double entendre. Band and album names that glorify female sexuality are anthems and affirmations of the previously unspoken in rock: Unharnessed female power and, in the words of New York-based 'Vulvapalooza' organizers, of "fierce pussy" [1994]. Some of the all-women bands that emerged from the late 1980s include Boston bands Pop Smear, High Risk Group and from California, The Yeastie Girlz, who perform "no-holds-barred radical female rap...covering such hot topics as masturbation and birth control" that might "make a lot of macho dudes blush" [Nichols, 1989, p. 26].



## 'Bad Girls', Riot Grrrls and Other Sexual Outlaws: Emerging Feminisms

In the 1980s, the "fragile unity of feminism [or feminist theory]" [McRobbie, 1994, p. 158] was confronted in punk and produced some amazing results. Over the years, we have witnessed a situation whereby "a quite dramatic realignment between feminism and the lived experience of femininity (and its textual representations) has taken place" [p. 158]: "'It's not like feminism was just invented,' comments Courtney Love in a Melody Maker interview, 'it's just that it's taken on a new face -- my face, for one'"<sup>4</sup> [Love in Powers, 1994, p. 39]. Feminists speaking out against anti-sex rhetoric espoused by the likes of Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin have found voice and audience in local punk scenes. This is most tangibly articulated in the context of girl punk performance, which has reinvigorated discourse on female sexuality as well as on the individual and collective pleasures of subculture.

The full range of feminist leanings in this community mirrors ideological strains of feminism prevalent throughout culture with similar goals and aspirations. Ideological stances regarding women in culture range from declarations overtly in line with traditional feminist discussions (i.e., Bikini Kill) to girl-bands which most notably parody traditional male punk/'rock star' roles (e.g., The Lunachicks, L7), queer-centered girl-punk (i.e., Team Dresch, Dyke van Dick), and women rockers who denounce gender as a crucial determining factor in punk or their music (e.g., Babes in Toyland) to a younger crowd of girl punks in Olympia, Washington and Washington DC.

The relationship between feminism and the rock scene has never been easy:

women artists themselves continue to squirm when they feel they're being overly identified in terms of gender. Feminism as a word, an idea, and a movement remains divisive in the rock scene [Powers, 1994, p. 37].

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<sup>4</sup> Speaking of faces, it is ironic to note that Courtney Love has reputedly been placed on two years probation for allegedly punching another prominent woman rocker in the face recently -- a culmination of a long-standing vendetta she has had against this woman and the other members in her band. This raises important questions regarding 'the new face of feminism' in this scene, suggesting ideological conflicts inherent in what it means to call oneself a feminist.

Rivaling constructions of pleasure in subculture traditionally mitigate against the transcendent potential of live rock shows for girls and young women in the scene. Furthermore, the mainstream feminist nullification of pleasure as a crucial hegemonic regulator placed most female punks outside the bounds of traditionally articulated feminisms:

I've tried to join forces with feminist groups, only to be pooh-poohed for my particular style, just like I was in high school. Here I was, fighting for the same things as they, and yet they couldn't get past my red lips and short skirts [Powers, 1993, p. 34].

Women rockers who sometimes identify as Riot Grrrls are more obviously, sometimes academically, engaged with themes prevalent in feminist discussions. Riot Grrrls have a reputation for assuming a 'textbook' tone in their discussions, most likely a result of these young middle-class feminist punks growing up with middle-class second-wave feminist mothers, aunts, and teachers. The incorporation of what is perceived by some as textbook feminism into much of the discourse newly inspired by women rockers is most vividly expressed at live shows, especially at Riot Grrrl "rally-type concerts" [Powers, 1994, p. 38], which take-on a 1970s feminist consciousness-raising tone.

Because Riot Grrrls have framed much of this discussion, and it is not possible to discuss girl punk bands without detailing the impact of Riot Grrrls, a brief overview of this network is presented below. This is not intended to be an account of all Riot Grrrls everywhere, but raises the issues pertinent to the goals of this essay.

**Riot Grrrls** The conflicts in ideologies and meaning around women in the underground music scene in Boston and in other US cities (e.g., Washington, DC., Seattle) has been transformed by Riot Grrrl punks. "The '90s noise of female rage comes from underground groups of punkettes, roughly aged 15-25 who call themselves Riot Grrrls" [Snead, 1992, p. 5d]. Riot Grrrls are a loosely organized group of girls and women in the punk scene, who first gained attention in their promotion of a 'revolution, grrrl style.' Through zines, recordings, conferences and, finally, through mass media,

they promote woman-centered alternative cultural activities as a conscious political agenda. "Their movement, without leaders or rules" was initiated around 1989 "when area female punk rock fans," mostly from Olympia Washington and Washington DC "became united by the feminist 'mad as hell and not going to take it anymore' messages shouted by girl bands such as Bratmobile, Mecca Normal, Bikini Kill and L-7" [p. 5d].<sup>5</sup>

"Better watch out, boys. From hundreds of once pink, frilly bedrooms, comes the young feminist revolution. And it's not pretty. But it doesn't wanna be. So there! [5d]. For better or worse, "The famously misunderstood 'revolutionary' forces of Riot Grrrls have been a main focus" [Powers, 1994, p. 38] of dialogue around this renewed prominence of outspoken women in girl punk bands. Their "pesky problem of [using the word] 'grrrl'" [p. 38] is contentious to some outsiders. 'Grrrl' reads and sounds like a growl, a primal utterance intimating power from within and emboldened cultural refusal. The strategic use of 'grrrl' instead of 'women' expresses an ideological distance from their mothers' generation of feminists who fought long and hard against patriarchal constructions of women as child-like and helpless. The distance achieved through the reappropriation (girl) and transformation (grrrl) of this contested signifier reveals a shift in focus from a mainstream and essentialist feminism to renewed notions of pleasure for women in an underground rock context. 'Grrrls' coheres an interpretive community of young girls and women from different backgrounds and ideological perspectives.

Combined with punk power and symbolism, their visibility implies a new force with which to contend. 'Grrrl' indicates an ideological distancing from mainstream feminism, which is seen as literally buying into status quo cultural forms. Together, these constructs represent reactions to the perceived dictates and dogmatism of 1970s feminism, where essentialist dialogue defined the proper boundaries of women's

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<sup>5</sup> The Utne Reader reports that even Chelsea Clinton has adopted her own angst-ridden Riot Grrrl stance, reportedly having created a "DIY masterpiece" (Gogola, 1995, p. 36) entitled 'Are You There God? It's Me, Chelsea'. The cassette reportedly contains songs such as 'Let's Inhale', 'Fuck and Run (for President)' and 'Tip Tipper Over', with lyrics that go something like: "Your stiff old man needs a warning label/ his tree-hugging persona is a goddamn fable/ Tip Tipper over/ Tell Al to go screw/ Tip Tipper over/ The spotted owl will get you" (Gogola, 1995, p. 37).



pleasure. 'Grrrl' punk pleasure is, therefore, derived through a supreme disavowal of subcultural boundaries that essentially inscribed girls and young women in terms of their subordination to male-defined channels for pleasure.

Despite the obvious similarities between this discourse and some of the goals of feminism, feminism as an identifying term is considered too limiting to aptly describe many women in the punk scene. Some feel that calling attention to gender inequalities in music trivializes them as musicians. These girls and women proclaim they want to play and hear 'good' music and judge bands on that basis alone. This stance betrays mistrust for mainstream culture and the essentialist dialogue inspired by mainstream feminism which relegated the realm of women's pleasure to a most unpleasurable terrain. However, this perspective embraces a conventional ideal to be 'just like one of the guys', a traditional role afforded to women in local rock scenes and one that is essentializing in its own right. At best, feminism is considered a good starting point, a basis from which women have evolved. Feminism, as it is conventionally perceived, speaks to the experiences of a previous generation of women, lacking relevance and meaningful context.

Riot Grrrls are a magnification of the resurgence and vitality of the focus in punk on problematizing the cultural positioning of women on the subcultural landscape. These loose-knit female bands make loud and angry music, making many guys anxious and compelling other girls and young women to take up instruments and breathe life into punk rock, a musical form most recently appropriated by mainstream music industry. For better or for worse, they have provided an ideological reference point for noting transformations in the terms and practices occurring in the indie rock scene.

Lately, identifying with Riot Grrrls or Riot Grrrl bands is riddled with negative connotations and ambivalence, since it is considered by some more a media catch-phrase than a term connoting community and political action. Many women punks reject Riot Grrrl as an identifying term, not wanting to be caught up in the backlash and possibly

categorized as a to-be-gawked-at spectacle or as a fleeting fad. Erin Smith of Bratmobile explains:

It [Riot Grrrl] got to a point that it was more of an issue of what fashions they were wearing or who's writing what on themselves and it wasn't a true thing about feminism. What are they [Riot Grrrls] thinking, what do these lyrics mean? It just got to be a group -- a media thing -- a new catch phrase. It really was something very personal and it got changed to something very different than what it was. It pits people against each other [Smith, 1993].

In 1993, most Riot Grrrl chapters began a moratorium on interacting with the mainstream press because the negative backlash obscured their original intentions. An editorial postscript in the September/November 1993 issue of the Riot Grrrl Press 'zine blankly states: "p.s. we [sic] still say if you are a reporter FUCK OFF RIGHT NOW. This is self-representation" [Mary, 1993, p. 2]. Riot Grrrls who broke the media moratorium were scandalized by this violation. The moratorium on interacting with mainstream mass media is still largely in effect throughout most Riot Grrrl communities.

**'Bad Girls' and Other Sexual Outlaws** Girls and young women involved in this women-centered punk scene tend to distinguish themselves "from the previous generation's wimpy female role-models, those hippie-chicks with their lank hair, middle parts and simpy, Sissy Spacek-like facial expressions" [Powers, 1994, p. 2]. So-called pre-feminist 'bad-girl' popular cultural characters have made an impression on many girls and young women within this latest infusion of women as creators of alternative culture. "Women rockers have always embraced the image of the bad girl, associated with pre-feminist women who broke conventions on their own" [Powers, 1994, p. 39]. The extent to which the image of the bad-girl is prized is reflected by the popularity of the Russ Meyer film 'Faster Pussycat Kill Kill', for example, and other b-movies such as 'Attack of the Wasp Woman' or 'She who must be Obeyed'. So-called bad-girl imagery is also evident in songs, zines (e.g., Bust), band names (e.g., Calamity Jane) on album covers and by the degree to which silk-screen shirts and posters from the mall-culture-of-yesteryear are sought in second-hand clothing stores. Popular cultural

icons that have undergone a resurgence in this interpretive community include those which celebrate women's strength, sexual prowess, or 'girl-gang' mentality. These include Lynda Carter as she appeared in the television series 'Wonder Woman', 'Charlie's Angels'<sup>6</sup>, Catwoman from the 1960s series 'Batman', Jane Fonda as 'Barbarella', karate-swinging leather-clad Dianna Rigg as Mrs. Peel in 'The Avengers', Pinky Tuscadero, the Fonz's female counterpart, in 'Happy Days'<sup>7</sup>, any of the 'Bad News Bears'.

Since "the bad girl gloried in her sexual power" [p. 39] she is seen as championing sexual freedom and it is always the case that "the rebel rules the rock scene, where flash and attitude are as important as virtuosity" [38]. In "wearing her lipstick red and her leather pants tight, she wouldn't even go near Birkenstock sandals and unisex sweats" [p. 39], a banal fate. As claimed by the Bohemian Women's Political Alliance, "we are the daughters of Lilith, Lily Munster, Patti Smith and Emma Goldman. We are the women your preachers warn you about" [Powers, 1993, p. 34].

Constructing a selective narrative for girl punk tradition is highly significant since "such hagiographies are both a traditional form of history and a traditional mode of establishing one's lineage and thus one authority to speak" [Patton, 1993, p. 94]. Taken together, these brazen cultural symbols indicate the pleasure gained in sexual transgression, where "the spirit of this improper women's movement challenges feminism to open itself to frank sexuality and personal rebelliousness" [Powers, 1993, p. 34]. While occurring temporally, expressions of pleasure in what is signified by the 'bad girl' occur spatially as both 'real' and symbolic subcultural terrains are traversed and occupied.

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<sup>6</sup>Especially the brainy Kate Jackson.

<sup>7</sup> And, yes, there is a band called Tuscadero.



## The Rise of Queer Punks

In addition to influences from mainstream feminism, 'queer' culture and political punk "have been absorbed into the cultural repertoire of ACT-UP and Queer Nation, combined with a political intelligence that avoids the usual marginalization of countercultural radicalism" [Goldthorpe, 1990, p. 58]. In the 1980s, women in independent rock scenes "became attracted to this new version of the struggle with its cool T-shirts and sexy ways of demonstrating" [Powers, 1994, p. 39]. Off-shoot political organizations such as WAC (Women's Action Coalition) and the frequent occurrence of live benefits (e.g., Rock for Choice, animal rights and AIDS benefits) in the Boston scene reflect this in-your-face political tenor prevalent in these circles.

The New Lavender Panthers astutely expose these similarities. In an article originally appearing in 'Maximum Rock and Roll' and re-printed in the zine produced by Boston's Rock Against Sexism (RAS), G.B. Jones and Bruce LaBruce of the 'fag and dyke division' of the New Lavender Panthers point out that

punk is also an archaic word for dried wood used as tinder, the original meaning of the word 'faggot' as well. Homosexuals, witches, criminals, all denounced as enemies of the state, were once burned at the stake. The word for the materials used to set them on fire became another name for the victims themselves. It's no accident that 'punk' and 'faggot' have a similar root [1993, p. 8].

These days, the influence of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender cultures (i.e., 'queer' culture) is clearly expressed in the girl punk music scene and signals shifts in tolerance toward greater sexual freedom for women invested in this scene. That sexual transgression was traditionally open only to male subcultural practitioners is openly decried and problematized. Again, Jones and LaBruce have a lot to say on this matter:

Let's face it. Going to most punk shows today is a lot like going to the average fag bar...: All you see is big macho 'dudes' in leather jacket and jeans parading around the dance floor/pit, manhandling each other's sweaty bodies in proud display. The only difference is that at the fag bar, females have been almost completely banished, while at the punk club, they've just been relegated to the periphery, but allowed a pretense of

participation [i.e. girlfriend, groupie, go-fer, or post-show pussy] [Jones & LaBruce, 1989, p. 9].

In places such as Boston, San Francisco, Seattle, Philadelphia and Chicago, subcultural queers are vocal, mobilizing to form a substantial cultural and entrepreneurial networks of independent record labels, publishing ventures (e.g., Outpunk, Homocore), bands (The Third Sex, Dyke van Dick), and alternative cultural ventures (e.g., Homocore). Taken together, queer punks are "in the process of exploding the stuffy and crowded punk rock closets" [Tammie Rae, 1994, p. 37]. Queer cultural inhabitants of the punk scene have also forged a tolerant haven from mainstream gay culture, perhaps best exemplified by recent efforts focusing on 'gays in the military'. To many queer punks, the gay, lesbian and bisexual liberation movement focus on such 'straight' concerns signals a disturbing shift toward political centrism. Queer girl punk bands, such as the English band Sister George<sup>8</sup> are outspoken against this alarming mainstreaming trend: "They say Sister George is part of a growing distaste among dykes and queers for a 'straight' gay lifestyle. Hey, they hate you! Fucking A!" [1994, p. 38]. Jones and LaBruce reflect this sentiment that queers are more powerful as sexual outlaws than obedient dominant cultural drones:

The phenomenon of a highly visible and disruptive subculture looking sexually deviant and seeming to behave in that way has proven an effective weapon against institutions that attempt to control sexual freedom. [Jones and LaBruce, 1989, p. 8].

Expressions of sexuality in the punk scene are historically constructed to focus on male transformation of sexuality, leaving little discursive space for young women and girls in underground rock scenes and in popular music. These adverse cultural rules that privilege male sexuality are most richly expressed in the performance space. Experimentation with sexuality and gender ambiguity prevalent in early punk scenes were usually reserved for the guys on stage and directed to their male fans in the pit. Frith

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<sup>8</sup> Don't miss the cultural reference to 'The Killing of Sister George', a cynical film about lesbian life in England during the early 1970s.

points out that "...women are excluded from the subcultural myth not structurally but discursively; what's actually at issue is the denial not of gender as such but of sexuality itself" [1992, p. 181].

The discursive denial of women's sexuality and of the possibility that women can have satisfying sexual and emotional relationships with other women is decried in zines and music. Similarly, Tammie Rae, creator of the zine 'I ♥ Amy Carter', describes these conditions:

Music has been a big part of my life, punk rock literally changed/saved my life in 1981 when I was 16 years old and falling in love with a girl I would never kiss. ..after well over 10 years of going to shows I got sick and tired of listening to lyrics that perpetuate the litany of heterosexual pleasure/gloom and stupid boy angst [Tammie Rae, 1994, p. 37].

Tammie Rae continues: "Let's face it, any industry of entertainment or cultural production/expression is full of a bunch of frail masculine egos" [p. 37]. Homophobia in indie punk circles is a hotly contested topic, as exemplified by the English lesbian publication 'Quim', in this case regarding the semi-mainstream band 4 Non Blondes: "The British music press hates them and I have a feeling its a rampant case of riot grrrl-phobia and homophobia. (Not that they call themselves riot grrrls, but)..."[1994, p. 54]. Also, lesbians, bisexual women (and women perceived as sexually 'loose') still occupy a difficult position, having to alternately negotiate invisibility, denial and condemnation -- even from other women. "Riot Grrrl, like early radical feminism, seems most welcome to white, college-educated women; the place of lesbians in the movement remains unclear" [Powers, 1994, p. 38]. Lesbians are at once mythologized and marginalized.

What may be called 'lesbian' or 'queer' chic plays out in this community, again suggesting that so-called deviant sexuality (and sexual allusions) are powerful agents for social change and mobilization, ultimately defying categorization and co-option by mass media. This occurrence perhaps less obviously signifies a newly-discovered subcultural potency in sexual deviation heretofore obscured to girls and young women in the punk scene. In the early days of Riot Grrrl and this latest infusion of girl punk bands, the



ambiguous, sublimely sexual relationship of women among women was tantalizing and celebrated. The ideal of women sleeping with women is in one sense highly regarded as positive. To add to this irony, female punks often express conflicts in their relationships with men, sometimes keeping their boyfriends carefully on the sidelines at shows. At live shows where girl punk bands play, the guys are often ignored, the women take precedence on stage and in the pit, thus compromising the traditional male discursive position.

Within this radicalized cultural arena, where sexual politics are subject to a ubiquitous double-standard, feminist-centered subcultural punks are pushing the boundaries of sexual freedom. In this pursuit of sexual freedom, sexual confines within this community are confronted. Simultaneously, it becomes more complex for mainstream cultural absorption with these expressions of outlaw sexuality -- especially as when waged by 'angry' women who do not conform to conventional gender expectations.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The increased presence of female participation in underground rock bands and corresponding sites of signification is historically grounded in the precedents already established within punk subculture. Plotting shifts in subcultural practices occurring in punk over the past two decades serves to expose potential weaknesses in dominant cultural representations of this subculture. By emphasizing the practices and patterns traditionally associated with girls and young women in this scene, instances where dominant ideologies interact with this interpretive community are better exposed. With these considerations in mind, I will return to previous critiques of subcultural style to comment on their contemporary applications in understanding counter-hegemonic practices, especially as they pertain to female subcultural participation.

Cultural critics implement socio-historical narratives as tools for comparing past traditions, noting the adoption of certain forms from the "cultural memory reservoir"

[Willis, 1993, p. 366] for the purposes of charting the evolution of cultural codes within these constructed terms. A major goal of this exercise is to promote what Gaines refers to as "border crossing" [1994, p. 229]. Described as "a practical, tactical maneuver... translating and presenting the social self where it usually fears to tread..." [p. 229], border crossing is the necessary fusion of critical theory with political intervention -- an ongoing political agenda of cultural theorists.

In a culture that increasingly transposes an unbelievable number of "elements of natural environments and human qualities into objectified forms, into commodities" [Leiss, Kline & Jhally, 1988, p. 273], it remains crucial to contextualize our experiences within a narrative that focuses on the practices and processes involved in the evolution of subculture. In order to go beyond analyses of subcultural style as end-products of consumption, this chapter provides the framework for critiquing the prioritization of patterns and practices involved in cultural production.

Later in this essay, this narrative is combined with a problematization of ideologies of spatiality. Spatial critiques comprise a necessary component for understanding the place of history and memory in relation to larger cultural and economic forms as they are expressed in lived culture. Subcultural style as political refusal is subsequently situated in the context of the 'real' and metaphoric role that spatialized politics plays in constructing this woman-centered underground music scene. To respond to the call of cultural studies, we must make these connections regarding counter-hegemony, while simultaneously noting the incommensurability of our struggles.

With this in mind, the following chapters more closely examine previous critiques of subcultural style. In these sections, I advocate a shift in the understanding of style from one which is oriented toward the cultural artifact, the end-product of consumption, to one which examines the cultural processes and rituals involved in the production of style and in the implicitly spatialized modes of signification in the Boston music scene.

## CHAPTER 3

### CRISIS IN CRITIQUES OF SUBCULTURAL STYLE: MOVING TOWARD PROCESS AND PLACE IN CONSTRUCTING A POLITICS OF REFUSAL

Today's young, angry girls, taking their cue from the late '70s British punk invasion, are as anti-fashion as ever...Among their tribal tokens: painstakingly pierced lips, cheeks and noses; ears ringed with a dozen hoops; big, bold tattoos decorating ankles, backs and arms [Snead, 1992 , p. 5d].

The word 'crisis' in the title of this section refers to what I have previously identified as the conceptual conundrum that is encountered by focusing predominantly on the end-product of individual or collective style as a primary means for identifying counter-hegemonic practices within subcultures of refusal. This section revisits some initial observations made about subcultural style as one means for signifying oppositional strategies within the punk music culture. A focus of this section is primarily on Dick Hebdige's Subculture: The Meaning of Style [1979], feminist critiques of subcultural strategies presented by Hebdige, and a discussion of the implications of considering the practices and processes involved in the perpetual evolution of subcultural refusal and affiliation. Given the obstacles encountered when critiques of subcultural style focus on individual practices of seemingly 'unlocated' acts of consumption, this chapter presents ways in which history, memory, and spatiality interact to yield enormous opportunities for cultural intervention for the signifying community around feminocentrist punk bands comprised of all or mostly all-women.

#### An Overview of Subculture: The Meaning of Style

In tackling the complexities associated with understanding the make-up of subjectivity and subcultural affiliation, Subculture: The Meaning of Style moves cultural



studies beyond "the old divide between high culture and the pop arts" [McRobbie, 1994, p. 14]. Hebdige's observations of subcultural style as a signifier of affiliation and dominant cultural refusal mobilized cultural critics to look at consumption beyond its original Marxist interpretations. Hebdige himself was drawn to studying subcultures, particularly the punks inhabiting 1970s English rock scenes, because of their ability to imagine new cultural realities, most avidly expressed through the adoption of self-created styles. Described as a "series of spectacular transformations" [p. 116], subcultural style was both a product of imagined realities and a brazen appropriation of artifacts from the most rigid of dominant cultural institutions (e.g., the military or factory-wear). This conversion of symbols threatens the illusory stability of meaning and, to Hebdige, wages veritable semiotic warfare against hegemony. Taken together, these observations note a shift in cultural studies where counter-hegemony is described in terms of cultural empowerment through acts of consumption rather than class struggle. Within various subcultural strata, these oppositional practices take on an almost nomadic form, in self-conscious tension with dominant cultural codes.

Hebdige draws on how the "status and meaning of revolt" [p. 2] are reflected in the ongoing manipulation of cultural symbols, blending his narrative within the context of various socio-economic factors facing England in the sixties and seventies. Painting a portrait of style as a critical indicator of dominant ideological refusal and mobilization against these restrictive codes, Hebdige illustrates the conceptual progressions within subculture that lead to an overt problematization of cultural 'reality' within commodity capitalism. Since "all human societies reproduce themselves...through a process of 'naturalization'", [p. 14] these practices indicate places where hegemony comes loose. In the construction of subcultural style, oppositional "'maps of meaning'" [Hall in Hebdige, 1979, p. 14] are produced and reproduced. To Hebdige, punks were most skilled in expressing this defiance because "no subculture has sought with more grim determination

than the punks to detach itself from the taken-for-granted landscape of normalized forms" [p. 19].

Contesting the supposed unproblematic basis on which everyday culture is structured expresses dominant cultural disdain in a most fundamental, mundane state. In this way, "commodities can be symbolically 'repossessed' in everyday life, and endowed with implicitly oppositional meanings" [Hebdige, p. 16]. To Hebdige, the articulation of refusal through subcultural style is "an imaginary set of relations" [p. 92] where cultural institutions are appropriated, signifying a "breakdown of consensus" [p. 17] in culture. Thus, subcultures are not only "recreating a dialectic between action and reaction" [p. 2], they also usurp dominant cultural mainstays for their own making of meaning, creating "profane articulations" [p. 92] of cultural knowledge and political savvy.

Hebdige positions subcultural style as a practice illustrating "the symbolic fit between the values and lifestyles of a group, its subjective experience and the musical forms it uses, to express or reinforce focal concerns" [p. 113] -- concerns unraveling the local music 'scene' as well in the whole of culture. By examining the "expressive forms and rituals" [p. 2] around subcultural style and linking them to tangible practices and larger socio-economic conditions, Hebdige maps a terrain of social dissidence.

The process of subcultural refusal begins with a "crime against the natural order" [p. 3]. In this sense, punk style is regarded as an amalgamation of apparently unrelated cultural artifacts, including safety pins, combat boots, tattoos. By reworking their use-value in sometimes shocking ways, punk style becomes an instant political slogan, exposing a "whole cluster of contemporary problems" [p. 87]. The unique appropriation and implementation of these objects in innovative and sometimes shocking ways scrutinizes and defies the cultural mainstream. In this way, punk "communicates through commodities" [p. 95].

These 'crimes' against the sacred symbols in dominant culture are momentary articulations of defiance within dominant cultural constraints. Within this overall

conceptualization, subcultural style at best expresses a "cycle leading from opposition to defusion, from resistance to incorporation and encloses each successive subculture" [p. 100] within these terms. Importantly, this leads subcultural refusal down a deterministic path:

The creation and diffusion of new styles is inextricably bound up with the process of production, publicity and packaging which must inevitably lead to the defusion of the subculture's subversive power [p. 95].

Since writing Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Hebdige has revisited his previous conclusions to compare them against the backdrop of 1980s Thatcher/Reaganism. He retracts his earlier stance that subcultural style is at once playful and political -- leading to some sort of hegemonic liberation. Instead, he constructs a postmodern slant around practices of subcultural style, recounted by McRobbie as an "excess of style...a disengagement with the real, and an evasion of social responsibility" [1994, p. 15]. This evasion of social accountability takes place in an era of heightened consumerism, fostering a condition where subcultural style is "translated into commodities made generally available" [Hebdige, 1979, p. 96] on a scale never before realized. To Hebdige, "once removed from their private context" [p. 96], subcultural style loses its potential to disempower hegemony, thus becoming "codified, made comprehensible, rendered at once public property and profitable merchandise" [p. 96].

In Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Hebdige engages with a view of subcultural style as primarily an end-product rather than a cohesive process involving individual and collective imagination, cultural and economic processes and contexts. For feminists, this view is problematic, but makes sense given that "Hebdige invariably qualifies subculture with the term spectacular" [Willis, 1993, p. 365] and that subcultural style is constantly "reabsorbed and reified by the fetishistic quality of spectacle in a commodified society" [p. 365].

Hebdige's focus on subcultural pleasure -- frequently expressed as a desire to disrupt mainstream cultural complacency from the ground up -- is a mainstay of inquiry



that is constantly reassessed by feminist cultural critics. Given the increased prominence and cultural output of women musicians and feminocentrist girl punk bands, this task is especially crucial and must be placed in a broader socio-economic context that links these larger cultural conditions to this specialized instance of cultural production and consumption.

### **Feminist Critiques of Subculture and Subcultural Style: Alternatives to a Purely Object-Based Politics of Consumption**

Feminist critiques of subculture and of Hebdige's original research text center on the overt discursive denial of the place of women within this context. From the outset, "Hebdige's usage of 'style' structurally excludes women" [McRobbie, 1990, p. 73]; his claims have little relation to the lived experiences of girls and young women affiliated with the punk rock music scene. That women are absent within Hebdige's construction of subcultural style as hegemonically liberating (albeit temporarily so) exemplifies the institutional circumvention of problematizing gender in this first-wave of subcultural analysis. McRobbie finds this negation particularly "ironic, for in 'straight' terms, [style] is accepted as primarily a female or feminine interest" [p. 73], thus underscoring the position that

women are so obviously inscribed (marginalized, abused) within subcultures as static objects...that access to its thrills...would hardly be compensation even for the most adventurous teenage girl [p. 73].

This overall critique of gender constructions in subculture inspired feminists interested in the study of subcultural style and affiliation to move beyond traditional boundaries for understanding counter-hegemony, forcing an analysis of subcultural style that incorporates context and process into the composition of cultural refusal. Critiquing the products that constitute punk style is a crucial step toward understanding cultures of refusal, but neglecting to focus on the cultural and economic processes involved in their production and eventual consumption begs the important question of uneven social relations. McRobbie, for instance, points out that early writings on subculture place

so much attention ... on the final signifying products [of subcultural style]...and the permutations of meaning produced by these images, that the cultural work involved in their making did not figure in the analysis [McRobbie, 1994, p. 160].

### **Place, Process and Production of Subcultural Style: Engendered Sites of Labor in the Boston Punk Scene and Beyond**

Viewing subcultural style as an end-product is too much like a spectator sport for cultural theorists, raising theoretical limitations which feminists point out regarding constructions of gender, thus presenting feminists with a closed system of inquiry. In order to better understand the micro- and macro-economies that facilitate the evolution of alternative cultural forms and how girls and young women relate in these spheres, an evaluation of the permanence and break-down of these boundaries and accompanying rules and rituals rests on a sophisticated assessment of lived patterns of cultural production and consumption. This standpoint includes critically focusing on the process that goes into the adoption of subcultural style as a means for expressing refusal, especially in local contexts of production and transmission (e.g., in second-hand clothing stores and at local music clubs).

In Postmodernism and Popular Culture [1994], Angela McRobbie presents a model that creates an "integrative mode of analysis" [p. 39] by linking everyday practices of cultural production and affiliation to overarching hegemonic processes, and spatial networks of relations in a critique that addresses the problematic place of women in subculture. She advocates a shift in understanding subcultural style as a product of intersecting ideologies that are intimately inscribed in patterns of everyday life. In placing less emphasis on individual consumption of artifacts, an emphasis which leads to dead-end critiques of the spectacular in subculture, cultural resistance and negotiation are better understood in terms of subcultural practices within the territorialized context of subcultural experience.

When conducting field observations in the Boston area, I looked at how sites for the production of subcultural style perpetuate pleasure in counter-hegemonic forms. Boston is a prime example of the subcultural networks in place for articulating various degrees of alternative lifestyles. These networks also expose the ways in which subculture is engendered by uncovering the division of labor in the punk scene. Second-hand clothing stores or local music clubs, for example, are sites where entrepreneurial skills are honed and subcultural standards are set, implying various degrees of engagement for girls and young women in the punk scene. The flurry of activity that unfurls in this context suggests the need for a "more detailed engagement with the culture of the workplace" [p. 40] and provides critical commentary on "the sustainability of self-employment, the appeal and the costs of working in the self-expressive fields of mass media" [p. 40] and fashion. Table 1 illustrates some of the most common day jobs occupied by punks in the Boston scene, all having value beyond what mainstream careers have to offer.

Taken together, this is evidence that subcultural style is more a product of a unique investment in cultural location and context-bound subjectivity than a cultural end-product based on frenzied patterns of individual consumption. For example, the sale of self-styled clothing and jewelry in the context of second-hand clothing stores represents both a place where some degree of self-sustainability is achieved and a place where girls and young women in 'the scene' can network. Though this particular site of labor is one traditionally viewed as 'feminine', the cultural critic cannot ignore the significance of a condition whereby "the shop assistant is also...a fashion designer" [p. 162]. More importantly, as McRobbie points out,

the turn toward fashion as a career rather than consumer choices (no matter how shaky these careers might be) represents a strong preference for the cultural sphere [p. 161].



**Table 1: Common Sites of Employment and  
Local Use-Value for Perpetuating the Boston Area Punk Scene**

<b>Common place of employment</b>	<b>Local use-value for cultural production and consumption</b>
Art supply store	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• all art supplies</li> </ul>
Cafes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• networking opportunities</li> <li>• free food</li> </ul>
Local music clubs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to book shows</li> <li>• to promote own/friend's bands</li> <li>• to meet and network with all levels of music industry</li> </ul>
Local food co-op	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• free/discounted food</li> </ul>
Copy shops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• copy fliers for shows for free</li> <li>• to use supplies for 'zines, posters, album sleeves</li> <li>• to learn/use graphics software</li> <li>• to learn/use desktop publishing software</li> </ul>
Museums/galleries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to work in 'creative' setting</li> <li>• to promote own work with curators, others in the art world</li> <li>• to meet other artists</li> <li>• free food at openings</li> </ul>
Record stores	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to stay abreast of the newest releases</li> <li>• to meet other musicians</li> <li>• to network with other like-minded customers</li> <li>• to promote own work</li> <li>• to connect with record labels, distributorships</li> </ul>
Second-hand clothing stores	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to get clothes practically for free</li> <li>• to meet others in this interpretive community</li> <li>• to promote own fashions/jewelry, etc.</li> </ul>
Bicycle courier services	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• to meet other artists and musicians</li> <li>• to work in a relatively flexible setting</li> <li>• well-paying, though dangerous, job</li> </ul>

Second-hand style has offered young people a means for participating in fashion, but also a means for creating networks whereby it becomes possible to survive economically and still produce music and other self-expressive endeavors. By paying particular attention to the "existence of an entrepreneurial infrastructure within these youth cultures" [p. 135], especially in terms of how this relates to feminism, we may better identify "the opportunities which second-hand style has offered young people, at a time of recession, for participating in fashion" [p. 135], simultaneously providing alternatives to the commodity fetishism prevalent in mainstream culture. In this way, girl style is comprised of artifacts that express a "refusal of adult seriousness and an

insistence on hedonism and hyperbole" [McRobbie, 1994, p. 148]. Rather than delineating how the

whole punk phenomenon used the predatory, easily exploited and above all open-ended mass media for publicity, and actually set up, right from the start, a string of shops selling clothes directly to young people, [p. 161]

cultural critics claimed that youth in subculture were duped into commodity fetishism by cultural outsiders anxious to make easy money. To cultural critics justifiably driven by Marxist principles, such a focus on commodities "would have been to undermine the 'purity or authenticity of the subculture'" [p. 136-137]. Looking back to the first-wave of critiques of punk culture, McRobbie notes

it seems strange that so little attention was paid to the selling of punk, and the extent to which shops like the 'Sex' shop<sup>9</sup>...also functioned as meeting places where the customers and those behind the counter got to know each other [p. 136].

In the Boston area, there are several second-hand clothing stores which serve as subcultural centers -- influencing both style and the creation of networks of identification and affiliation. I am thinking of one Cambridge-based store with which I am intimately connected. This particular venue is run and managed by people in local bands who refuse to bow to the nine-to-five lifestyle and are dedicated to making clothes accessible and affordable to other punks in the scene. Not only do the employees of the store often walk away with the best clothes at steep discounts, often for free, but friends who also stop by the store get their clothes practically for free. Out-of-town bands and performers make this particular store a regular stop when in the Boston area for the same preferential treatment. When one has tired of a particular article of clothing, it's either 'traded' for another piece or 'sold' back to the store on consignment. In either case, there is always something to be gained in the trade. I, myself, haven't paid for most of my clothes in over three years.

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<sup>9</sup> A London-based shop owned by Malcolm McLaren of the Sex Pistols.

'Mainstream' consumers also shop at this store for inexpensive clothes for their 'straight' jobs (or during Halloween for outlandish costumes), but these clothes are priced a littler higher for a profit. This differential pricing arises from the practical and ideological consideration that mainstream people have more money to spend and should 'pay' for having such boring, conformist taste<sup>10</sup>.

Recently, the store has expanded its sales to include records produced by indie labels from Boston and other urban centers in the US. Another recently-added section features self-made 'zines, where a wide variety of indie publications from the US and abroad are circulated. Usually, these zines are difficult to find, frequently offered exclusively through the mail or by friends who chance upon these publications.

In these important ways, subcultural style is woven together by practices of everyday oppositional strategies and interventions. Holding a traditional nine-to-five job doesn't allow for the flexibility to go on tour, spend time collaborating on music, and embark on other self-expressive ventures. Conversely,

part-time or self-employed work...offers the possibility of creativity, control, job satisfaction and perhaps even the promise of fame and fortune in the multi-media world of the image or written word [McRobbie, 1994, p. 139]

The celebration of ambiguity and feminine/feminist-centered output in girl punk culture, partially evidenced by the expanded roles of girls and young women beyond traditional sites of labor and consumption, and the increased prominence of girl punk bands in the symbolic transformation of meaning in performance, suggests important changes in counter-hegemony in punk rock music culture for girls and young women. Nonetheless, engendered divisions of labor are reflected in local subcultural economies in that the "spontaneous sexual division of labor seems to spring into being" [McRobbie, 1994, p. 145] and serves as a critical "reflection of those gender inequalities which are

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<sup>10</sup> The actual pricing of clothes 'says' a lot about whether clothes are regarded as mainstream -- with 'boring' apparel having '.99' cents tagged on the end of whatever price is determined for that particular article (e.g. \$5.99, \$3.99, etc.). This parodies the 'sales' often advertised on television and in circulars for mainstream department stores.



prevalent at a more general level in society" [McRobbie, 1994, p. 145]. The centrality of girl punk bands signals shifts in the traditional labor roles allocated to women, including "selling clothes, stage managing at concerts, handing out publicity leaflets, or simply looking the part" [McRobbie, 1994, p. 145].

A process-oriented view of subcultural style gives prominence to the performance space as one means for communicating subjectivity and affiliation. In approaching subcultural style from this perspective, the evolution and increased visibility of girl punk bands is viewed less in terms of the spectacular and more as a condition arising from the increased opportunities experienced by girls and young women within these entrepreneurial networks, including the existence of indie record labels, self-managed tours, and second-hand clothing stores. Thus, subcultural style as political refusal is subsequently situated in the context of the 'real' and metaphoric roles that notions of place play in constructing an underground music scene that is increasingly shaped by women.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Subcultural production and consumption are intertwined both historically and politically, where the spaces inhabited by subculture are fashioned out of the channels and obstacles presented to girls and young women who participate in these interpretive communities. Whether these activities alter dominant modes of production within capitalism, or provide only temporary respite from these forms, they signify critical steps in understanding how opposition operates within hegemony. Clearly, focusing on the cultural processes that are prevalent in the punk scene, especially the status allocated to girls and young women in the scene, provides ample room for comparing the cultural status afforded to girls and young women in the whole of culture.

Dominant culture exponentially renders our cultural artifacts as well as intimate aspects of our humanity into commodities at an unbelievable rate. For this reason, cultural critics must consciously contextualize critiques of our experiences within terms

that focus on the patterns and processes involved in the evolution of subcultural meaning and participation. The practices I describe above illustrate an enormous investment in 'place' and not just the thrill over the pastiche of opportunities offered by more highly commodified forms of subcultural style. Focusing on process moves subcultural style away from the purely object-oriented realm to incorporate what McRobbie and others have noted as an active engagement with local culture over the illusory appeals of consumerism. Combined with a conscious choice to labor for less money in exchange for more opportunities to participate in subculture suggests important oppositions to capitalist forms.

Given the process-oriented focus I am advocating, it is easy to see the importance of delving more deeply into how cultural critics might better discuss geopolitical and social maps of meaning and identity. The next chapter takes a closer look at the mediating role of cultural space in the construction of subjectivity and counter-hegemony.

## CHAPTER 4

### MAPPING THE TERRAIN OF SUBCULTURES

**Power is neither a property nor a privilege that one might possess... Rather, it is a network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity it joins with knowledge to create mechanisms that dominate the body by entwining it in a myriad of dispositions, maneuvers, tactics, techniques and functionings...Such mechanisms need room to maneuver, and power provides it. Power not only deploys tactics, but also creates a theater of operations. Power is, fundamentally, a spatial network of relations [Bracken, 1992, p. 233].**

In uncovering spatial networks of resistance within feminist-centered girl punk culture, places where hegemonic structures are in supreme tension, I am concerned with three primary areas: 1) To position transformations in discourse of feminist-oriented underground rock bands within a context highlighting the importance of place and spatialized politics; 2) to make suspect the seeming non-ambiguity implied by spatial structures, especially as they pertain to uneven social relations and to the gendering of subculture, and; 3) to illustrate why critiques of the cultural landscape present critical opportunities for identifying how counter-hegemonic practices are related to acts of signification, the production/consumption of cultural forms, and the gendering of subcultural spaces in order to access potentially liberating opportunities.

Influenced by Foucault's re-introduction of the spatial as a necessary critical component to understanding ideology, Hebdige [1979] maintains that establishing spatial representations in critical cultural studies presents a point of intersection around which issues of cultural history, identity, power and political struggle occur. Since subcultural experiences are formed in a number of locations, it "imposes its own unique structure...its own hierarchy of values" [p. 84]. Thus, the interrogation of spatial relationships and ideological articulation is considered with particular emphasis on acts of cultural resistance within these local spaces of signification.



Thus, in the same way that "modern institutions of education...carry within themselves implicit ideological assumptions which are literally structured in the architecture itself" [Hebdige, 1979, p. 12], for example, the way in which the arts and sciences are literally 'housed' in separate buildings, subcultural contexts are also housed in local music clubs and sites where cultural output is prioritized. To continue with Hebdige's metaphor, just as the "hierarchical relationship between teacher and taught is inscribed in the very layout of the lecture theatre" [p.12], the 'real' and interpretive layout of the subcultural landscape implies systems of understanding and cultural affiliation. Taken together, these spatialized relations "dictate the flow of information" [p. 12], thus comprising strategies of intervention. Based on a premise that communication research is not "the study of isolated objects but of the process of articulation whereby the cultural complex achieves its figuration" [Angus and Lanaman, 1988, p. 63], studying how articulated systems of meaning are introduced, permuted and transformed within the 'real' and symbolic networks imbued in the underground punk music scene remains central to understanding hegemonic processes.

I have already described the manner in which so-called subcultures fascinate cultural critics in part because of how they are seen as problematizing the ambiguity of meaning within culture. In Subculture: The Meaning of Style, Hebdige examines the "relationship between experience, expression and signification in subculture" [Hebdige, 1979, p. 61] to facilitate a condition whereby punk is best "characterized by unlocatedness -- its blankness" [p. 61]. In the punk rock music scene, he writes that

punk style fit[s] together homologically precisely through its lack of fit -- by its refusal to cohere around already identifiable set of central values. It cohered, instead, elliptically through a chain of conspicuous absences [p. 61].

To Hebdige, the uniqueness of the ways in which signifying systems of dominance are manipulated by punks shatters all notions of conformity and cultural complacency. As I argued in the previous chapters, these critical observations are best substantiated when considered in the context of the spatialized politics of everyday

experience. Contemporary cultural theorists incorporate spatial terms as a metaphoric device because "the production of space is an inherently political process," [Smith, 1992, p. 62] a process that creates conditions whereby "the use of spatial metaphors, far from providing an innocent if evocative imagery, actually taps directly into questions of social power" [p. 62]. Spatialized practices are held in place by power [Bracken, 1993] and, as de Certeau [1984] points out, rejecting the spatialized boundaries implicitly expressed by dominant ideologies of gender, race, and class defies the positionality of the subject as it is inscribed in dominant culture. When confronted, the whole hierarchy of experience is displaced.

To better comprehend the complicated feminocentrist punk network informed by these hegemonic structures, spatial analysis may serve to aid in the dispersal of naturalized mechanisms of dominance that lend credence to one cultural 'reality' over another. In this way, all notions of space as unified and unproblematic are confronted. This perspective is politically expedient in that transgressions of space can thus be described in terms that surpass the confines of geographical boundaries that, on the one hand, forge connections regarding subcultural networks from city to city. Underscoring the political representations implicated in the cultural landscape exposes these hegemonic structures because the naturalized promotion of dominant ideologies is partly rooted in context-specific circumstances.

Thus, the cultural landscape is now regarded as "a 'work' consisting itself as the construction of specific individuals and parties in pursuit of specific technical, political and sometimes artistic goals" [Smith, 1993, p. 88]. In this way, cultural landscapes embody what Warren refers to as "texts of domination and texts of resistance" [1993, p. 183]. In the contemporary punk scene, woman-centered agendas are combined with an overt problematization of these mediating factors, with an implicit -- often articulated -- cognizance that

symbolic meanings are held in place by power...[it is] only through an interpretive struggle with the text of the landscape that we can discover how this power operates [Smith, 1993, p. 89].

When describing the local context around which broad segments of feminism in punk culture revolve, the domain inscribed by this cultural space, most notably in the space of the performance, is saturated with an overproduction of symbolic content. Metaphoric and literal spatial positionings in the performance space create a semiotically rich arena in which hegemonic processes are continuously erected and contested. Throughout this essay, I have argued that the new-found visibility of women rockers in local punk scenes is a profound expression of refusal, a refusal to remain inscribed in "the landscape of hetero-masculine discourse" [Patton, 1992, p. 87].

Using the Boston area as an example, Table 2 depicts the familiar places in which the flow and output of subcultural information are clustered. These are intimate places where affiliation and where collective and individual acts of production, signification and refusal occur. Subcultural spaces such as the local club, the practice space, art studio, comic book and second-hand stores comprise sites of resistance to overarching ideologies of history and power through active investment in place and the creation of living memory.

Table 2 depicts some of the places which take on significance in punk scenes. Locations such as second-hand clothing stores, local music clubs, print/desktop publishing shops and rehearsal studios all provide access to technology, styles, employment, and meeting places for the perpetuation of the punk scene. Also attached to these literal spaces are symbolic associations that are expressed by corresponding cultural practices. Taken together, these factors imbue these sites with particular meaning for this subcultural community, strengthening the punk network.

For example, following the logic of the table, the performance space represents a central meeting place for punks, the primary place where cultural codes and practices are played out. Local clubs are an important site where fashions purchased at local second-



**Table 2:**  
**Prevalent Sites of Articulation in The Local Punk Scene<sup>11</sup>:**  
**In 'Real' and Symbolic Terms and Corresponding Cultural Practices**

'Real' Space	'Real' Meaning	Symbolic Correspondence in Punk Culture	Corresponding Cultural Practices
Performance space	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>live performance</li> <li>center of social interaction and networking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>production of meaning</li> <li>evolution of cultural codes and practices</li> <li>venue where subcultural style is most avidly communicated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>moshing/ stage diving</li> <li>position of audience relative to stage, including the positioning of women</li> </ul>
Second-hand clothing stores	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>flexible employment inexpensive/ free clothes</li> <li>work with friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>self-created style</li> <li>self-expression and cultural transgression</li> <li>against mainstream commodities</li> <li>site where standards of subcultural style are determined</li> <li>imagined community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>buying, selling, stealing and bartering of clothes for other clothes or services that perpetuate cultural production [e.g. trading \$50.00 worth of clothes for the same amount in photocopying]</li> <li>promoting self-made fashions</li> </ul>
Photocopy, print and computer rental shops	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>flexible employment</li> <li>learn graphic arts and desktop publishing</li> <li>access to internet, fax machines, etc.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>access to other punks in other scenes through the internet</li> <li>fast communication</li> <li>acquire skills in the expressive fields</li> <li>virtual community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>production of zines, album covers, posters, fliers</li> <li>use access to equipment to barter for other services</li> </ul>
Rehearsal studio	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>practice for live performance</li> <li>meet others in bands</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>establishing community and affiliation with other musicians</li> <li>'space' to create</li> <li>simulate live performance</li> <li>affirmation of lifestyle</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>collaborate in musical process</li> </ul>

<sup>11</sup> Based on field observations made primarily in the Boston area, but similar to those occurring in many US cities, including Seattle, Olympia, WA, Washington, DC., New York, and in Philadelphia.

hand stores are adorned as well as where transformations in cultural codes are communicated through practices such as audience positioning relative to the stage and moshing or stage diving. Significant changes in these practices may illuminate broader shifts in the composition of subcultures, especially in terms of female participation.

A general system of bartering is also in place at these sites, fostering the progression of the punk scene. For example, services at recording studios are traded for photocopies, or second-hand clothes are exchanged for flyering. Employment at print and desktop publishing shops also gives many punks a means for economic sustainability without having to work at nine-to-five office jobs. Working at these shops supplies access to the means of producing zines, album covers, flyers and posters. In this way, these locations are connected to other primary sites of articulation in the punk scene. This trade system fosters a sense of cooperation in the scene; it also circumvents the need to buy these provisions with money. Bartering services often depend on an ability to borrow or steal supplies from these locations; plundering the workplace sometimes helps employees to rationalize the low wages they often receive for their work.

As noted in the previous chapter, these places represent sites where subcultural networks and sub-economies thrive and where female participation is continuously redefined in light of contemporary conditions. For every subcultural locale, there is a symbolic correspondence that links the site to corresponding cultural practices. Thus, when looking at transformations of female subcultural participation in these intimate contexts, the cultural critic should consider changes in corresponding codes and practices as evidence of the traversal of dominant cultural boundaries.

Spatial interrogations also provide theoretical room for describing the incommensurability of cultural experiences of women globally. "Space is created out of the vast intricacies, incredible complexities, of the interlocking and non-interlocking, and the networks of relations at every scale from the local to the global" [Massey, 1993, p.

155-156]. Viewed in this way, 'space' is conceptualized as an important link in the decoding of abstract signifieds in places where signifying practices unfold. Space encompasses the "presumed effect of location, or where social processes are taking place..." [Agnew, 1993, p. 251], but it goes beyond this descriptor. "Space is more than the outcome of social relations and more than one of the dimensions through which the social is constructed. It is an active, constitutive, irreducible, necessary component of the social's composition" [Keith & Pile, 1993, p. 36]. These constructs infer that cultural space is not fixed. If we agree that "all spatialities are political because they are the (covert) medium and (disguised) expression of asymmetrical relations of power" [p. 36], then distinguishing the layers implied in the construction of meaning around cultural spaces is critical to this undertaking. Viewing space with this understanding enables the cultural critic to move beyond a heavy focus on micro-social elements where individual practices are considered against a neutral cultural 'backdrop'.

### **Feminist Agendas and Spatial Interventions**

Adrienne Rich catalyzed feminist debate around "disrupting the imposed social mapping of identities" [Katz & Smith, 1994, p. 76] by instigating discussion around how patriarchal patterns are produced and reproduced through spatial inequities. The space created by feminist discourse "is multi-dimensional, shifting and contingent. It is also paradoxical" in the sense that "spaces would be mutually exclusive if charted on a two-dimensional map -- centre and margin, inside and outside -- are occupied simultaneously"<sup>12</sup> [Rose, 1993, p. 140]. Problematizing the "positionality of the subject" [Interview with Spivak in McRobbie, 1994, p. 128] confronts the "whole hierarchical taxonomy of experience which has been regarded as completely valid for so long" [p. 129]. The disproportionate development of space, when purposefully mapped, returns

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<sup>12</sup>For this reason alone, it is easy to see why my construction of a cognitive map earlier in this essay is problematic, for it can not adequately represent the simultaneity of female experience within culture.



to a feminism that is invested in the cultural landscape. Certainly, this return enhances chances for the "border crossing" that Gaines [1994] discusses. Gillian Rose comments:

When feminists talk about experiences of space, very often they evoke a sense of difficulty. Simply being in a space is not easy. Indeed, at its worst this feeling results in a desire to make ourselves absent from space" [Rose, 1993, p. 143].

The anxiety over 'being in a space' expressed by certain contingents within mainstream academic feminism has impeded our ability to propagate inter-generational agendas of women's liberation. A return to the spatial implications inscribed in culture as it is experienced in 'everyday' and symbolic terms may create opportunities for feminist networks.

To focus on how "unequal social relations are both expressed and constituted through spatial differentiation" [Rose, 1993, p. 113], feminists discuss hegemonies of space to highlight the relationship between access to cultural power and access to cultural space. 'Forbidden places', where only cultural 'bad girls' dare to tread is a common metaphor invoked by cultural critics to describe the dangers facing women who are hegemonically 'out-of-place', i.e., those occupying traditionally masculinist territory. In their essay on Riot Grrrls, Gottlieb and Wald [1994] also note the circumstance whereby "women historically have participated in street culture as prostitutes, sex-industry workers" [p. 256] and as other cultural outcasts. These conditions reflect the important fact that:

Social restrictions on girls, their limited access to the street and their greater domestic role make the public spaces in which subcultures are acted out (clubs, the street, bars) prohibitive and exclusive for them [p. 256].

A look toward the forms and expressions of cultural compartmentalization will reveal shifts in overall cultural access for women, expressed disproportionately when racial, sexual and socio-economic signifiers are considered. "The sense of being confined by space, into spaces" [Rose, 1993, p. 144] results in the denial of space for girls and

young women in subculture to form strong social bonds and to carve out meaningful surroundings. Rose significantly looks at 'place' as "full of human interpretation and significance" [p. 43]. She is especially concerned about the place of women, questioning if there is a place for women in most aspects of culture. To Rose, places are "laden with meanings" [p. 44].

Punk bands in which women play a pivotal role suggest significant changes in the literal location of women and girls in subcultural scenes and would probably agree with Rose's statement that "we want to be neither the victim nor the perpetrator of the experiences of displacement, exile, imprisonment and erasure" [p. 150]. Viewed in this way, the cultural critic may see that the existence and increased vitality of women rockers in punk bands and those corresponding cultural practices in the local rock scene are uneasy constructions, to some extent, occurring inside a "phallogentric economy of meaning" [p. 110]. Their brazen displays during performance and in the networks that surface around their existence and subcultural promotion are evidence that the practitioners of feminist-oriented punk "refuses to sanction its codes" [p. 110] Women in rock confront these restrictive codes head on through the appropriation and eventual transformation of these codes.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Earlier in this essay, I described how the increased prominence of female participation in the indie rock scene is historically grounded in the precedents established within punk subculture. To better understand the complicated woman-centered punk network, spatial analysis helps deconstruct naturalized mechanisms that lend credence to dominant meanings, including historical reconstructions, of cultural phenomena. In the case of female subcultural participation, a hierarchy of ideological concepts attached to place and locations pertaining, in part, to gender may be revealed. This perspective is politically expedient: Since the naturalized promotion of dominant ideologies is rooted in

context-specific circumstances, the cultural landscape is now regarded as a medium through which meaning is constructed; it is in constant tension with conflicting ideologies.

In this chapter, I attempted to illuminate how the cultural landscape may be conceived of as a 'landscape of intervention'; it is comprised of actors, espousing individual or collective objectives -- often in tension with others. In the feminocentrist punk scene, strategies to empower girls and young women in subculture are combined with an overt problematization of these mediating factors.

When describing the local context around which broad segments of women-centered punks convene, the performance space is most notably saturated with an overproduction of symbolic content. In this highly contested arena, the spatial positioning and network of cultural relations that unfolds symbolizes the maintenance and breakdown of hegemonic forms. Using quotes from punks in the Boston area scene and field observations I've made over the past three years, I will focus on the transformation of cultural codes in the underground scene. This perspective underscores the significance in incorporating a problematization of the spatial in deconstructing cultural codes. With particular emphasis on punk performance as a primary practice of ideological articulation, I will argue that the renewed possibilities offered to girls and young women in this scene is undergoing rapid transformation.



## CHAPTER 5

### THE PERFORMANCE SPACE AS HYPER-SIGNIFYING SYSTEM: IMPLICATIONS FOR NEW FEMINISMS IN SUBCULTURAL STUDIES

**... live performance, for virtually all young rock bands, is still the focal point of their work...Performance is the central ritual of local rock, a special setting for music for which the audience is as important as the performers. It is in performance...that they experience the most intense feelings of achievement [Frith, 1992, p. 175].**

Thus far, I have presented arguments regarding the importance of grounding socio-historical narratives of unique cultural phenomena, such as critiques of subcultural style and refusal, within a context-driven problematization of spatiality. The purpose of this section is to focus on the circumstances of spatial intervention within this interpretive community as they unfold in the overproductive signifying region of the local music club. The ideological intersections occurring within the context of feminocentrist punk performance are explored with particular focus on the interactions of the female body in relation to the subculture as a whole, most notably through the gendering of this subcultural space. To support the main thrust of my arguments that the increased proliferation and visibility of women rockers is rapidly changing the rules and rituals of the underground rock scene, the performance space is here conceived of as a primary 'landscape of intervention'. In the closing sections of this chapter, I will illustrate how these ideologies are articulated by recounting recent shows occurring in and around Boston, adding quotes from interviews to support my observations.

#### **The Importance of Punk Performance in Making and Contesting Meaning**

Typical of the Boston scene and elsewhere, local clubs provide the primary context where cultural codes are played out, contested, and transgressed, supplying a fertile meeting ground for these cultural co-creators to hammer out the terms and respond

to the conditions of the terrain. If it is the case that "the struggle to make claims to political identity cannot be understood apart from the more corporeal sense of place that actors create in their resistance" [Patton, 1993, p. 85], then the significance of recent dialogue generated by all or mostly-women punk bands can best be understood in the smoke-filled clubs and rented auditoriums, where women rockers' performance transforms and reflects focal concerns in an ever-evolving scene.

The construction of punk performance in the local music scene suggests a system of spatialized affiliations and transactions, where actors actively forge a vibrant cultural 'reality'. As a rule, such significance is placed on performance in punk that a markedly spatialized language has evolved to describe the components and boundaries that comprise the space, implicating audience as much as performer. This occurrence is important to note since to "articulate the connections between material and metaphorical conceptions of space" [Smith, 1993, p. 63] underscores the long-documented (e.g., Hebdige, 1979) ability of cynical punks "to understand the sources and potential of metaphorical power" [p. 63]. The elusive boundaries defined by punks include describing a local club (or rehearsal studio) as a 'space' or a 'scene' -- a place where 'scenesters'<sup>13</sup> hang out and network. (In the Boston area, for example, the space where many all or mostly-women bands play is The Middle East in Cambridge.) The area in front of the stage is referred to as the 'pit'; it is constructed as a site of primary bodily deployment, where 'stage diving' and 'moshing' and other so-called forms of ritualized violence occur during a show. The application of these specialized terms illustrates a view that the cultural landscape is an active mediator of hegemony, rather than a 'backdrop' against which individual actors transgress.

The performance space represents a primary site where bands exhibit "the clearest threat to law and order" [Hebdige, 1979, p. 110]; constituting a central role in rituals where symbolic manipulation is both celebrated and sublime. Critiquing ideological

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<sup>13</sup> 'Scenester' is a somewhat pejorative term, usually reserved for those who 'schmooze' important figures in the scene to a nauseating extent.

articulations of identity, gender, race, and sexuality within the many-layered signifying environment of girl punk performance engages with a cultural text that is in "evident display of semiotic disruption" [Shank, 1994, p. 122]; a context where the "overproduction and exchange of musicalized signs of identity and community" [p. 122] unfold. In this expressive context, the relationship between ideology and pleasure is uneasy and problematic -- implicating everyone as culpable in their oppression<sup>14</sup>.

The strong association between performance and the codification and transformation of meaning in underground rock scenes blends well with feminist interventions that view performance as a potentially counter-hegemonic practice. The performance engaged in by these women rockers represents instances where cultural production and reproduction facilitates "collective confidence" [McRobbie, 1990, p. 80] among girls and young women. As noted by Kim Gordon of the band Sonic Youth, these actions place the experiences of women as central to music and meaning rather than merely mimicking their male counterparts:

Girl bands in the past, they're all different, but I think traditionally girls modeled themselves more on male performers. Even if it was just male performers acting up on their feminist tendency -- or feminine tendencies, rather [Gordon, 1993].

Performance reveals and encodes dominance, a place where unequal constructions of pleasure have compromised the experiences of girls and young women. According to Gottlieb and Wald [1994], who conducted the bulk of their research on Riot Grrrls, the recent expressions of underground girl punk performance

seem to be suggesting something new, not just that women are angry but that there's pleasure in their performances of anger, or even just pleasure in performance [1994, p. 262].

These displays of increased cultural clout, pleasure in transgression, and refusal of the patriarchal status quo in music are also vividly expressed in the dynamics of the

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<sup>14</sup> A word of thanks goes to Abby Moser of the New York University Visual Anthropology Department for prolonged discussions regarding this matter.



audience, such as the position of the women in the audience relative to the stage. In punk, the pit is traditionally the purview of men, a place where their gaze could be most directly fixated on the mostly men on stage. Slam dancing in the pit is also a highly ritualized form that allows men ample opportunity to enjoy close contact with other men in a way that is acceptable and non-threatening to their projected hetero-masculinity. The unique presence and proliferation of all or mostly all-women punk bands is changing the terms of these conventions.

The remainder of the chapter grapples with the following questions: How can feminists make better sense of collective acts of affiliation and refusal in the context of girl punk performance? What shifts in the articulations of expressed hegemonies of gender, pleasure, genre, and sexuality are notable in the context of woman-centered punks in performance? Finally, how are shifts in these practices articulated in the Boston area music scene?

### **Feminist Music Aesthetics: Applying Detels' Paradigm of Cultural Relatedness of Musical Experience to Culture and Feminine/Feminist-Centered Punk Performance**

Feminist music aesthetics combines a radical interrogation of aesthetic conventions with a decided turn toward questioning the engendered, often naturalized, hegemony of aesthetic experience. Partly inspired by the "recent flowering of feminist music criticism" [1992, p. 184], Claire Detels proposes a paradigm to inform this critical discussion of girl punk bands. While she applies her paradigm to the context of the classical music concert hall, her ideas complement the cultural activities described throughout this essay<sup>15</sup>. Advocating "soft boundaries and relatedness" [p. 184] in musical aesthetics, "wherein the covert valuation of hard boundaries about music is transformed to consider social context and function" [p. 184], Detels relates her paradigm to all cultural realms, especially performance. Arguing that "music appears to occupy a

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<sup>15</sup> This paradigm is also used here to defy distinctions made between high and low culture.

higher status culturally when it is integrated with other forms of life experience" [p. 195], she underscores the fact that the "academic evasion of music's cultural relatedness is coupled, as is usually the case, with a diminution of women's musical activities" [p. 200].

Detels proposes that cultural critics, conclusively, abolish formalist approaches to music and to musical experience in order to embrace a stance that imposes less rigid boundaries between performer and audience -- a long-standing priority in punk and postmodern aesthetics. Suggesting that any notions of authenticity in music must rest on a thorough assessment of the sublime relationship among the musical text, composer (or, in this case, the band), the body (i.e., clapping, moshing, stage-diving), Detels desires to eliminate rigid patriarchal canons inscribed in the musical experience, thereby illuminating ideologies inherent in this cultural process.

Detels outlines the three areas which her paradigm covers: The relatedness of musical experience to the body; the relatedness of musical experience among the constituencies of music, including performer, audience, critics, and the community-at-large, and; the relatedness of musical style to culture. These interrelated concepts are presented briefly below.

1) The relatedness of musical experience to the body.

In classical concert halls, the cultural critic might consider the relative rigidity with which bodily movements of the audience are regulated and the fact that classical music is listened to complete silence. In punk performance, one might look at the positioning of audience members relative to the stage or by acts of stage diving and moshing.

2) The relatedness of musical experience among the constituencies of music, including performer, audience, critics, and the community-at-large.

In the classical music context, one might choose to reflect on the distant proximity of audience relative to performers on stage and the rigid distinction drawn between 'technically adept' performers and the 'amateur' listening audience. In punk performance, one might look at the blurring of boundaries between audience and performer exemplified by the ideal that everyone can play punk music, no matter what their level of proficiency.

### 3) The relatedness of musical style to culture.

In both the punk and classical music experience, one might contemplate the ways in which these contexts reflect and absorb current social conditions. What cultural modes are communicated in these experiences? How do these musical genres interact with the political dispositions of the listeners/performers?

Table 3 provides examples of shifts in cultural practices associated with female participation in the punk scene. These practices are roughly categorized according to the three areas of relatedness which Detels outlines. While these observations were made in the Boston area, they are generalizable to punk scenes across the U.S., though regional variations abound. Table 3 is an attempt to summarize how various modes of expression, including the cultural rules and rituals surrounding live performance, are transformed by this invigorated discourse, making way for girls and young women to mobilize around a set of meaningful symbols and circumstances. When looking at the discursive practices of girl punk bands, I focus on these relationships, especially in terms of how cultural space operates in mediating subcultural forms and practices, with a full understanding that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Throughout the remainder of this chapter, accounts of recent Boston-area live performances mirror the changes reflected in this chart.

It is important to note that Detels' paradigm revolves around themes introduced by Barthes, who laments that "musical activity is no longer manual, muscular, kneadingly physical, but merely liquid, effusive..." [1977, p. 150]. This condition is widely evident in the classical music setting, where all bodily movements on the part of the audience are restricted to minimal clapping. Detels' support of reasserting the corporeal and social aspects of musical experience segues nicely with the interactions that traditionally take place in the context of punk performance. What follows is an elaboration of these categories, including a description of how her paradigm is adaptable to my observations in the Boston-area punk scene.



Table 3:

**Detels' Proposed Paradigm Compared with Traditional and Contemporary Articulations of Female Subcultural Participation**

Detels Paradigm: Areas of Relatedness of Musical Experience	Traditional Articulations in Local Music Performance Context	Shifts in Articulation: Contemporary Expressions in Girl Punk Performance
<b>To Body</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• women are discursively invisible</li> <li>• female sexuality problematic</li> <li>• women expected to 'act' the part of cultural object</li> <li>• rigid deployment of body on stage and in the pit</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• women gain visibility on stage and in the 'scene'</li> <li>• sexuality, while still problematic, openly discussed and celebrated<sup>16</sup></li> <li>• relationships among women supported</li> <li>• greater range in the deployment of the body/ perceptions of body as strong and self-determining</li> </ul>
<b>Among Cultural Constituents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• women stand to the sidelines of the performance space</li> <li>• male audience members take up most of the space in the 'pit'; the pit is a threatening place</li> <li>• scarcity of women on stage</li> <li>• girls and young women do not play as prominent a role in the scene</li> <li>• the 'gaze' is focused on male performance</li> <li>• zines record the punk experience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• women figure prominently in the pit</li> <li>• greater number of women in principal roles on stage</li> <li>• moshing inviting to women punks</li> <li>• aggressive slam dancers/stage divers reprimanded</li> <li>• a greater number of women are cultural producers and consumers</li> <li>• women as objects of gaze for other women</li> <li>• significant increase in the number of women who put out zines, initiating new discourses about punk scenes</li> </ul>
<b>To Whole of Culture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• concerns in the face of the Reagan/Thatcher years find expression in music</li> <li>• the number of indie music labels increases, providing alternatives to the major labels</li> <li>• MTV becomes a major force in the music industry</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• male-defined punk bands appropriated by MTV and other mainstream cultural industries; no longer underground</li> <li>• all or mostly female punk bands gain new-found 'underground credibility'</li> <li>• indie record labels provide the space to allow more women to record their music</li> </ul>

<sup>16</sup> The traditional lack of opportunity for expressing transgressions of female sexuality in subculture is commonly discussed in self-made 'zines: "I think punk won't ever be whole until women are legitimized as fans in their own right and not considered just dates or groupies or huge enormous bitches" (Hex and Boob, 1993, p. 3 ).

## The Relatedness of Musical Experience to the Body

Detels [1992] observes that music occupies a more prominent cultural position when viewed in terms of its relationship to bodily activity and movement. Focusing on the classical concert hall, Detels explains that taboos against "musico-physical responses of swaying, singing, and beating time" [Detels, 1992, p. 192] during most classical concerts serve to 'disembody' musical form from cultural experience. Similarly, constructed taboos restricting the movements and placement of girls and young women in the punk performance space infringe on their full participation in this subculture.

Many of today's women punks are not satisfied with being pushed to the sidelines and women punk bands provide a focal point for this articulation. If we agree that the "primary, physical site of personal identity" [Smith, 1993, p. 67] is constructed from cultural difference around the body, then "domination of the body derives from its position in, and relation to, specific kinds of spaces," [Bracken, 1992, p. 229]. Control over one's bodily placement and maneuvering in the context of the local club suggests a highly ideological terrain comprised of a hierarchy of experiences.

Since this latest infusion of women punk bands and the increased visibility of their literal and discursive position, the positionality of the female body defies traditional roles afforded to women. The 'new' face of the scene encourages women to celebrate their bodies and their friendships, even if that means recounting previously unspoken histories of abuse, invisibility, and degradation: "The deployment of the body in performance provides an antidote to its previous violations" [Gottlieb and Wald, 1994, p. 268]. For women involved in punk, one avenue for cultural transgression occurs through the strategic employment of the body on stage and in the pit. Whereas female sexuality is generally sensationalized or problematic in the indie rock scene, woman-centered punk performance celebrates the liberating potential of female pleasure and sexuality. In the pit at these performances, women are no longer rigidly relegated to the sidelines, afraid to participate in the pleasures of moshing and slamming.

Bodily transgression on stage and in the pit are more amply considered below by describing Gottlieb and Wald's [1994] observations of New York-based Riot Grrrls. These observations, combined with Detels' original concerns regarding associations of music and the body in culture are further illustrated by recounting recent live performances I have attended in the Boston area.

**Signification on Stage** "Women performers go through complicated contortions" [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 260] of body, gender and pleasure "as they both appropriate and repudiate a traditionally masculine rock performance position," [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 260] long-documented [e.g., Frith & McRobbie, 1990 & McRobbie, 1994] as "premised on the repression of femininity" [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 260]. This matter is further complicated by the fact that women rockers must contend with a "feminine preferred performance position defined primarily as the erotic object-to-be-looked-at" [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 260]. But Gottlieb and Wald argue, and I agree, that girl punk "performance recuperates 'to-be-looked-at-ness' as something that constitutes, rather than erodes or impedes, female subjectivity" [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p.268].

"Girls wield their bodies in performance [and] do so in such a way as to make their bodies highly visible" [p. 268]. Thus, the female body is newly constructed as athletic, sexually self-determining, strong, and even prone to occasional acts of violence. That we possess sexual appetites and desire pleasure, experience P.M.S. or must often face rape, discrimination, harassment or hatred because we may love other women are no longer dirty secrets to be well-concealed if we are to make it in a man's world. Within the revised rules of the pit at shows, the female body occupies a chief cultural location, both emboldened and participatory as these once-hidden themes are brought to the forefront.

At the Riot Grrrl Convention, when the 'movement' still seemed 'young', at least metaphorically, political body art adorned some of the women. Words such as 'girl' or 'slut' or 'dyke' were scrawled in marker across arms and exposed stomachs, overt



expressions of ideological stances, words conventionally invoked to censure female dominant cultural transgression: "The ways in which Riot Grrrls perform on and through their bodies reaffirms the very themes articulated in...songs" [p. 268] that often deal with the pains of childhood, abuse, and violence against women. For women in the indie punk scene, the relatedness of subcultural style to the female body continues to be a constantly contested process of negotiating a difficult cultural terrain:

By wearing a black bra and writing 'slut' on her stomach, a Grrrl makes herself into a neat metaphor for the long-standing argument among women over the uses of sexual display" [Powers. 1993, p. 38].

Not only are themes of regaining visibility stressed, but themes of women having strength, agility, and as possessing the ability to defend oneself physically and discursively are also stressed. In this regard, Erin Smith of the (Riot Grrrl) band Bratmobile comments:

Everyone's realizing that girls have been excluded for a long time [from music] and really didn't feel like they had a voice or even just going to shows, they didn't feel like they could just BE in the audience and BE strong or really be in a band at all. I know I felt like that when I was 11 or 12 years old starting out [Jane Pratt Show, 1993].

Again, the image of the female body as strong and uncompromised is most vividly communicated in the performance arena. At a November 1994 show in a Massachusetts College of Art classroom, Portland, Oregon all-women queer punk band Team Dresch played to a mixed gender crowd of (mostly) young, white art students. Team Dresch begins their show with an exciting and humorous self-defense workshop. Before the workshop begins, however, women and girls are encouraged to come to the front of the stage in order to have a good look at the techniques used. For this tour, Team Dresch (at the time comprised of Jody, Donna, Kaia and Marci) brought a woman named Alice along with them. Sturdy and muscular, she performed a special 'solo' demonstration of her highly refined martial arts techniques. The crowd of mostly women had their gaze fixed upon her -- probably having never seen a martial arts presentation, let alone by a woman, at a punk show. Her swift moves and display of strength inspired a

series of cheers and delighted giggles . During the presentation, women and girls were given tips regarding how to defend themselves against possible predators. The women in Team Dresch who display these techniques are also strong and sure-footed -- symbolizing uncompromising power and agility. This vigor is likewise expressed through their bold lyrics and strong voices. As Tammie Rae writes in the zine 'I ♥ Amy Carter': "It's a great gift they're giving, this knowledge of self-worth and the willingness to stand together for one another as women, as dykes" [1994, p. 34].

In women-centered punk performance, these previous negations become increasingly transformed by an ever-evolving condition whereby this new-found "visibility counteracts the [feelings of] erasure and invisibility produced by persistent degradation in a sexist society" [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p.268]. Overt involvement in feminism notwithstanding, underground women's rock bands [e.g., L7, The Lunachicks, Team Dresch, 7 Year Bitch] illuminate powerful, if not unproblematic, expressions of the possibilities of female sexuality, a subversive purview traditionally defined by masculinist experiences.

The following is an anecdote of two recent performances by Tribe 8, one in Provincetown, Massachusetts and the other in Easthampton, Massachusetts. These accounts illustrate some of the ways in which the female body, far from being distanced from open sexuality, is fully engaged with the domain of pleasure in transgression and so-called deviant sexuality.

**Tribe 8 Show at the Town Hall in Provincetown, Massachusetts**  
**[1995]** In the summer of 1995, the 'dyke rock' band Tribe 8 played to a small audience at, of all places, Provincetown Town Hall. At first, the security guards watching the door of Town Hall drew little attention to themselves. The show was emceed by New York Drag King, Buster Hymen. Tribe 8 plays what may ironically be referred to as 'conventional' punk, with sounds heavy on the bass, sometimes on the

brink of speed metal. This band is particularly known for "ability to entice its female fans to go topless" [Berry, 1995, p. 54].

Before Tribe 8's performance, the New York band 'Miss Guy and The Toilet Boys' opened the show. Miss Guy is comprised of an outlandish Drag Queen on lead vocals who is flanked by four 'masculine' pierced, tattooed, and shirtless guys. Their performance was well-received by the audience.

The women in Tribe 8 often prance around on stage topless. Tribe 8 drummer Slade Bellum explains, "For women in a club, it's very exciting to be able to take your shirt off when you haven't ever had the opportunity" [in Berry, 1995, p. 54]. Lead singer Lynne Breedlove seems to agree: "It's the biggest challenge to toss off 4,000 years of oppression -- the veils, the garments that push up and squish in -- with one motion." [p. 54]. Coming from San Francisco, performing topless tends not to pose a problem. However, in a conservative New England town<sup>17</sup>, even if that town happens to be the East coast vacation mecca for queers, performing topless is too great a transgression for authorities invested in bizarre notions of 'public safety'. About one-third through the set, most of the women in the band are without clothes on top. (If the show took place in San Francisco, it would be likely that more than half the audience would have followed suit). Periodically, Lynne Breedlove would dramatically squeeze a pierced nipple to emphasize a particular part of a song.

At one point during the show, the music stopped: Breedlove announced that she and her band-mates were being forced to put their shirts back on -- it's the law in Massachusetts. Despite the near hundred-degree weather and stifling humidity, Breedlove roared, and despite the fact that Miss Guy and the Toilet Boys had performed mostly shirtless, Tribe 8 was given the ultimatum to either put their shirts back on or get off the stage<sup>18</sup>. The audience joined in her cries against this Puritanical policy, cursing

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<sup>17</sup> At Provincetown beaches, women are fined upwards of \$50.00 for appearing topless on a beach.

<sup>18</sup> This is the second time that I've witnessed this happening to Tribe 8 in Massachusetts, where lawmakers seem to feel that their toplessness threatens public safety.



the suddenly absent security guards who threatened to stop the show. Breedlove, ever quick on her feet, shouted:

I have nothing against the guys in the audience [I counted about five androgynous-looking guys], but if we have to put our shirts back on, so do you!

Vocalist Lynne Breedlove is well-known for other on-stage antics, designed to alternately shock or entice the audience, depending on their exposure to these tough dykes. Writing for the mainstream music rag, 'Option Magazine', Colin Berry devotes a lot of column space to describing "Tribe 8's provocative live show" [1995, p. 54], where Breedlove performs an "on-stage castration ritual during 'Frat Pig' (a song about gang rape that culminates with Breedlove slicing off a rubber penis)" [p. 54].

At the Provincetown show, this Tribe 8 trademark performance ritual was achieved by Breedlove with zeal, who, on this occasion, had 'get over it' written in marker on her arm. Before and after Breedlove castrated her rubber penis, she called on the women in the audience to write the names and telephone numbers of men they know who have raped on bathroom walls everywhere. After a brief moment of silence (Shock? Recognition?) women in the audience cheered, seeming fueled by her provocations.

**Tribe 8 Performs in Easthampton, Massachusetts [1993]** Not all Tribe 8 shows are as easily received as they are in Provincetown or in Boston proper, despite the topless issue. I interviewed Paula shortly after she went to see Tribe 8 in Easthampton, Massachusetts. In this instance, the show took place in a rented auditorium, not in a club. Paula, who identifies as a dyke<sup>19</sup>, told me that "some of the women would not go forward to stand in front of the stage because they were afraid of the singer" [Paula, 1993]. At another point in the show, she continued to explain: "During one song relating to S/M, two big dykes with beards fully got down on their knees and swallowed fire in front of the audience" [Paula, 1993].

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<sup>19</sup> 'Dyke', rather than lesbian, is the preferred term in this discursive community. 'Lesbian' is sometimes used pejoratively to describe a woman who is perceived as being anti-sex and anti-pleasure or to refer to a previous generation of lesbians who are perceived as culturally exclusive and insular. Sometimes 'lesbian' is used to indicate that a particular woman is mainstream or yuppie, hence, the joke: "Q: What's the difference between a dyke and a lesbian? A: About \$50,000 a year."

These pleasurable transgressions occurring on stage and in the pit weren't well received by everyone in the audience. At one point, ugly expressions of homophobia and sexism were painfully evident, illustrating the intersection of dominant ideologies with purportedly progressive audience members. Paula explains that "some jerky dudes singled out the 'big dykes' -- like myself -- and started 'slamming' them harder" [Paula, 1993]. Confrontations such as these happen all the time at shows where conventional boundaries of performance and the gendering of place are confronted. The difference is that women on stage and in the pit frequently band together and fight back. In this instance, Paula continues: "One dude tried to dive onto the singer of Tribe 8 and she [the singer] kicked him and told him to 'get the fuck out of there'" [Paula, 1993].

### **Signification in the Pit: Transformations in the Cultural Rules Surrounding Moshing, Slam Dancing, and Other Acts of Ritualized Aggression**

Punks are known for trying "both physically and in terms of lyrics and life-style to move closer to their audiences" [Hebdige, 1979, p. 110]. 'Slam dancing' and 'stage diving' were described with keen interest by the first-wave of subcultural critics. These practices were viewed as delineating

the boundaries of an inner space where traditional signs and behaviors [i.e., violence, anger, aggression] could take on new meanings or, in fact, be negated [Shank, 1994, p. 124].

Slamming was the norm for the mostly men who stood in the 'pit' of a performance space. Some women participated in those early slamming rituals, willing to put up with bruises, and worse, in order to see the band and to claim a small piece in the loss-of-control pleasures experienced in the pit: "The performance setting is potentially experienced by women as an uncongenial or unsafe place" [Gottlieb and Wald, 1994, p. 257]. Potential bruises aren't the only worry: sometimes wandering hands 'accidentally' land on women toughing it out with guys in front of the stage during performance. Taken together, these circumstances mitigate the potential for partaking in the joys of cultural

transgression. Though the common rule of the pit seemed to be "as long as everyone understood they were supposed to get pushed around, there was no problem" [Goldthorpe, 1990, p. 40], this was not relevant for women:

The difficulties faced by girls wanting to participate in this scene are played out not only in terms of band composition and lyrical content, but also in live performances, where girls are often crowded out of the pit -- in other words, literally marginalized -- by the aggressive jostling of the boys. [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 257].

Characteristic of many live performances where women play central roles, there exists an open acknowledgment that the performance space must be safe for women to participate in the pleasures of the pit, a shift in previously articulated cultural codes where women were discursively and literally relegated to the sidelines of a show. To illustrate how shifts in these articulations take place, below I will describe some examples that occurred during two recent shows: L7 at the Paradise in Boston, Massachusetts and The Lunachicks at the Middle East in Cambridge, Massachusetts. In these instances, transgressions on stage are met with similar articulations in the pit, combining transgressive bodily actions in relation to other cultural constituents in the scene.

**L7 Play The Paradise in Boston, Massachusetts [1992]** The Los Angeles band L7, comprised of "four women metalin" [Nichols, 1989, p. 24], hit the local punk tour circuit around 1989. Their sound is almost heavy metal and their songs are tough and intimately girl-centered, with tough titles such as "Shitlist"<sup>20</sup> and "Shove". Their on-stage antics and furious songs are often compared to male performers, sometimes as parody -- often in earnest. Either way, L7 implicitly exaggerates those conventions implied by "androgynous grunge" [Powers, 1993, p. 34] from a tough-girl perspective "to challenge the usual virgin-vixen-bimbo stereotypes" [p. 34] common in mainstream rock culture.

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<sup>20</sup> This song was recently featured in the soundtrack for Oliver Stone's "Natural Born Killers", another indication of how women in punk are realizing certain mainstream successes.



Their shows support Gottlieb and Wald's observations that in feminocentrist punk performance, "transgressive bodily activity does provide a particular opportunity for women" [1994, p. 261]. Gottlieb and Wald [1994] document this 1992 L7 performance, noting the literal and metaphorical ways in which these women rockers both adopt and reform male rock conventions:

In one of the most outrageous examples of the feminist appropriation and adaptation of male punk stage antics, one member of the band L7, in response to heckling from a male audience member at a concert in Boston in fall 1992, reportedly pulled down her pants, pulled out her tampon, and threw it at him [Gottlieb and Wald, 1994, p. 261].

I was also present at this show, standing to the side of the 'pit'. At this performance, the unacceptability of any slamming and stage diving that seemed to force women to the margins of the space was hotly contested. On this occasion, overly-aggressive guys in the pit were sometimes confused when women in the audience collectively turned to admonishment -- and sometimes violence -- in retaliation for hurting another female occupying the pit. At one point, an intimidating group of punk women surrounded an old-guard male punk, explaining to him why they didn't appreciate his inappropriate actions. For the remainder of the set, they had a rather extensive conversation, informing him that if he continued with slamming violently into women, he would "be sorry". Finally, he relented and ceased his infernal slamming, probably wanting to catch the rest of the show and not deal with this 'girl gang' of sorts.

Sometimes the boundaries between ritualized violence and 'regular' violence become blurred as tempers are fueled when violations of boundaries are too extreme. Later in the show, the same group of women surrounded another old-guard male punk who (after trying to grab L7 bassist Jennifer Finch on-stage) 'stage dived' on top their friend in the pit, knocking her to the floor. At this point, the L7 set was finished and people in the audience were beginning to file out of the club. The group of about five women literally ganged up on the guy as their friend recovered and joined in the fight. Together, they began hitting, kicking and eventually knocking *him* to the ground. Once

he managed to stand up, one of the women seized this six-foot guy by the shoulders, shaking and admonishing him for how he treated her friend. Suddenly, he ran from the club, looking shocked, scared, and embarrassed to have been hurt by 'a bunch of girls'.

As the revved-up audience streamed to exit the packed club, a few shirtless guys were trying to make their way inside the club, only to be met by heckles from the women screaming, "Put your shirt on!" or "if we have to wear shirts, so do you!" The shouts came from a few women initially; eventually the jeers caught on, coming from women everywhere in the long line of people exiting the club.

### **The Lunachicks at The Middle East in Cambridge, Massachusetts**

[1992] A few years back in the summer of 1992, I noted that all-female punk bands which most directly parody the violence of male punk performers, yet combine these conventions with brazen in-your-face attitude, have shows that are ritually violent. When girl punk bands such as "The Lunachicks" play, ritualized aggression is at a maximum.

In the frenzied arena of a Lunachicks show, instances of slamming (in Boston, at least) are on the decline. Lucy describes her perception of changes in live punk performance since all-female punk bands became common again. "Not as many asshole men go to all-girl band shows. If there are, the audience, the band members make sure the women take control and stand at the front of the show" [Lucy, 1993]. Later in the conversation, she illustrates classic oppositional pleasure as she proudly reveals her zeal to put the guys who dominate the pit in their rightful place. She laments: I used to have so much opportunity two years ago to punch a guy in the face for being an asshole in the pit -- now everyone's so damn nice. That sucks" [Lucy, 1993]. The men who break the new rules of the pit have to contend with this renovated 'eye for an eye' philosophy. These practices raise important questions about "what happens when women exercise their power in the form of an aggressive and confrontational expression of their sexuality" [Gottlieb and Wald, 1994, p. 261] and physical power?

"Maybe all-female bands' presence has changed the accepted mode of behavior" in the pit [Matt, 1994]. This causes some in the local punk scene to wonder "if it's changed at those shows, it's possibly just changing in general. I mean it's a change that might not have happened if it wasn't so common to have women on stage" [Matt, 1994].

Matt continues:

It's funny cause I remember like two years ago it would seem like every time "The Lunachicks" would play in town there'd be a fight cause they'd be playing and some fucking shithead would run around like an asshole. It's just like y'know, eventually it would turn into a fight. Now I notice that there are still tons of men in the audience at their shows -- that hasn't changed, but I've been to a whole bunch of their shows now and it hasn't been like that lately [Matt, 1994].

This observation was frequently noted, for example, by Caitlin -- the bass player for the Boston band Cheesecake: "I think in general, at a lot of women's shows, there are more women in the audience. And even if there's men being obnoxious, there's the sense of women being together more than there are when watching boy bands" [Caitlin, 1993]. The transformation of a scene that permits 'slam dancing' to one which prohibits this ritual thought to be such a part of punk reflects the efforts of female punks, who have gained significant cultural status. Caitlin continues: "These days, you see a lot of women up front, there are women together dancing...there's a lot of movement and jumping around but it's not like...violent" [1993]. Lately 'moshing', a less-aggressive form of slamming, is more acceptable.

Naomi, one of the founding members of Boston' Rock Against Sexism (RAS) agrees with Caitlin's observation. In the summer of 1995, Naomi recounted two experiences that occurred during this particular show. Both recollections were about her or girlfriend's experiences in the pit during the height of the Lunachicks' set. In one instance, during a bout of slam dancing, her lover

was knocked to the ground after this big guy slammed into her. In the old days [of the Boston punk scene], that would have been it. But when she fell, the guy stopped slamming, apologized for bumping into her so hard, and helped her to her feet [Naomi, 1995].



At this point, Naomi adds, "I was so surprised. I mean this is a Lunachicks' show -- in Boston" [1995]. To many who live in or visit Boston, the city isn't considered a friendly place. Naomi proceeded to relate another similar instance that occurred to her later in the show when an over-enthused guy crushed her foot under his steel-toed combat boot, then immediately and profusely apologized for his behavior. While these seem like simple acts of common etiquette, both Naomi and I agreed that the scene four or five years ago would have yielded dramatically different results.

Amanda, whom I interviewed in 1993, is critical of this resurgence of women in punk bands, especially of the Lunachicks. She complains:

You know they're [The Lunachicks] just a band that kinda gets on stage and they just mouth off. They're kinda dirty and gross, ya'know. I don't get it. It's just cause they're girls. Guys kinda look at that as being really cool [Amanda, 1993].

Amanda's contempt for these bands remains with me throughout the writing of this essay, as exemplified by her contempt for the Lunachicks. This often-shocking New York City-based girl band often attracts a motley assortment of men to their shows: old-guard male punks, mainstream college-age men and others who are attracted to the punk rhetoric and who seem to find the Lunachicks' visual and musical outrageousness a turn-on. Amanda notes this, objecting to how they exploit their tough-girl attitude on-stage:

Like the guys I know who are in the music industry in Boston are so psyched to go to a girl band show like the Lunachicks. I went to see this show with this guy I was seeing...and he was so into this 'girl band' and they were so bitchy and he was just hanging out back stage or whatever and he was having like the best time...you know, trying to party with them 'cause they were cool...I mean, he doesn't even know them...you know they're just a band that kinda gets on stage and they just mouth off [Amanda, 1993].

Amanda's response to the Lunachicks' antics betrays a classic stance that women should stay in their rightful place -- on the sidelines of cultural production. I interpret her comments to mean that female rockers such as the Lunachicks are frauds, not deserving of the attention they get, especially when that attention comes from men. Amanda seems

to subscribe to the notion that only 'good girls' who know their place have earned respect. 'Bad girls', like the Lunachicks, threaten the status of girls who prioritize the male experience. Amanda's reference to her date hanging out with the band after their set and "having like the best time" [Amanda, 1993] communicates resentment that these women possibly enjoy a more equal status with these male scenesters than she does.

### **Relatedness of 'Girl Punk' Discourse Among Cultural Constituents: Voices of Opposition, Collective Identity and Discontent**

Detels [1992] emphasizes the "value of softer, less hierarchical boundaries among the constituencies of artistic experience" [1992, p. 195]. This emphasis, she argues, may render a "more equitable relationship" [p. 197] out of the confounding "process of hierarchization, disenfranchisement, and disengagement" [p. 197] of music among various members of an interpretive community. In the re-defined terms of the feminocentrist punk performance space, engendered cultural practices are constantly contested. These cultural negotiations are most evident through the conscious problematization of metaphoric and actual 'voice' by the girl bands on stage, through the formation of political networks such as Rock Against Sexism or Rock for Choice, and by the debates inspired by the presence and participation of outspoken female rockers in the scene.

Girl punk bands "have resorted to the strategic use of the scream" [Gottlieb & Wald, 1994, p. 261] in songs and performances, breaking through the tradition of silence surrounding their role in cultural discourse and embracing the pleasure in making noise, being heard and acknowledging the pleasures, vitality, visibility within this cultural arena. Invocation of 'the scream' in girl punk band vocals has been identified as "a radically polysemous nonverbal articulation which can simultaneously and ambiguously evoke rage, terror, pleasure and/or primal self-assertion" [p. 261]. Screams not only represent women's anger, these screams reflect "rage as pleasure" as much as "the scream as orgasm" [Gottlieb & Wald p. 262]. The tactical use of vocalizations to

make noise on the cultural scene enables these gut utterances to "work as linguistic signs having no particular referent outside of the context in which they are uttered" [p. 261]. This is significant because it speaks to the real and metaphorical importance of non-lingual voice in this scene, invoking a whole new range of meanings that are specific to the experiences of girls and young women.

Twenty-two year old Paula says girl punk band "lyrics are more familiar, context and content, than a long-haired dick-bag ranting about his cock" [Paula, 1993], a statement reflecting the flagrant social posturing prevalent in these circles<sup>21</sup>. Paula says she "specifically seeks out all-girl bands because they're not only more aesthetically pleasing, but the sound is raw, furious, driving" [1993]. In our discussion, she rallies against what she considers to be mainstream feminist tendencies to essentialize political action and meaning in culture, allowing little room for women who choose to operate outside the cultural mainstream :

The whole concept of feminism must change. Women are loud and oppressive, rude as well as soft and sensual. Women must air their powerful voices and attitudes. Women are angry and this music expresses this anger [Paula, 1993].

Paula's commentary mirrors many of the women I've encountered in the feminocentrist corners of the Boston-area punk scene. Amanda, however, sees these outrageous performances as constituting a threat to the gains made by feminists over the decades:

It's just stupid. I don't see how that's going to further feminism or whatever, it's not. Women don't have a good rap in societal views. The way they're presented on TV, movies, commercials. For a woman to go on stage and do that, it's just stupid. She's just digging her hole, you know. She's just digging her own grave [Amanda, 1993].

Amanda's elitist interpretation of what makes one a feminist is comprised of a stringent doctrine motivated to keep women in line. Some time has passed since I

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<sup>21</sup>With song titles such as "Dead Men Don't Rape" (7 Year Bitch), "Plugg" -- a song about menstruation (The Lunachicks), "Lesbophobia" (Tribe 8), it is easy to see that these are punk rock songs with an unconventional orientation to women's experiences.



conducted this interview, but I am always struck by her use of the metaphor "digging her own grave" [1993] to describe the detriment to feminism for which she feels these bands are responsible. When she said this during our interview, I literally felt a chill -- so intense was her anger toward these women who dared to raise their voices in active participation in the scene. Her feelings alarmingly buy into the 'blaming the victim' mentality that often diffuses anger toward acts of violence against women in our culture.

**Boston's Rock Against Sexism** The experience of many women in the 1980s Boston local music scene and elsewhere was that their presence would be tolerated as long as they kept to the sidelines of action. When "jocks with liberty spike haircuts beat the crap out of each other at hardcore shows" coalitions like RAS formed, "knowing that 'macho' and 'punk' were a contradiction in terms" [Chase, 1993, p. 4]. The overall goal of the Boston chapter of Rock Against Sexism (RAS) was "to promote rock-n-roll alternatives...for people who don't like or can't get into the clubs because of age, race, sexuality or the price" [Pam in Chase, 1993, p. 4].

Projects that RAS initiated include the creation of a "women's jam space, aimed at 'demystifying' rock equipment and technology" [Chase, p. 4] and International Women's Day radio show. Pam of the now-defunct Boston band Pop Smear and currently in Shiva Speedway is quoted in Chase's article as explaining the reasoning behind this early project: "Boys have this tradition of garage-rock bands. All the kids would get together and play an instrument, but with girls there wasn't that tradition" [Pam in Chase, 1993, p. 4].

This double-standard, while ever-present in the Boston scene, seems to be changing; and the 1993 dissolution of Rock Against Sexism reflects these changes. Boston RAS members "see their particular organization as having outlived its usefulness" [Chase, p. 4]. Following the tradition invigorated by previous practices of the feminocentrist RAS, the cultural right and ability to manipulate constructions of gender and female sexuality is central to contemporary girl punk discourse at live shows, in

publications and throughout cultural forms and practices surrounding spaces of signification. This is also reflected by the in-roads made in creating and maintaining self-sustaining entrepreneurial ventures. Comments Pam, "there's so much going now, with the whole Riot Grrrls [sic] thing....There are tons of bands with women in them in the underground indie circuit" [Pam in Chase, 1993, p. 4]. In Boston, the increased prominence of female rockers is illustrated by bands such as Cheesecake, Quivver, and Come.

**Criticisms of Women Rockers and Dominant Ideological Articulations of Gender in the Boston Scene**

The discursive range implied by girl punk performance underscores the tensions residing between cultural spectacle and cultural necessity. Despite the advancements made by feminist and queer girl punk, Tess and Colleen of the Boston band Cheesecake note that the sexually transgressive, deviant nature in punk was typically male-defined territory:

Tess: That's been the myth of punk rock, like, from the beginning...there's always been a boy thing and especially male.

Colleen: Yeah, a boy-boy thing....

Tess: Punk is not exactly a mecca of free-thinking acceptance for all or anything...There's just as much, like, scary racism and homophobia [1993].

This oppressive mentality is a major reason why female musicians in the indie rock scene are portrayed as cheap-shots, looking for easy recognition. This regressive stance flies directly in the face of what is supposed to be a central premise of punk:

The typical comment is like these women can't play their instruments, even if it's just like innovative or not playing traditional rock music...and you know, that's like the whole punk ethos...that's the whole point [Colleen, 1993].

Colleen's comment once again reminds us that the primary emphasis in punk performance has always been to celebrate the unpolished nature of the music. Performance was always viewed as a community-based process, where audience and

performer alike shared in learning new ways of producing meaning and creating meaningful experience.

In addition to the criticism that female rockers are musically inept, some 'scenesters' are disdainful of women punks who call attention to their bodies in a way that celebrates their gender or problematizes constructions of women in musical cultures. In these instances, their motives for public display and attention come under scrutiny. 'The Angry Women in Punk' look displayed by girl bands such as the Lunachicks is sometimes negatively interpreted as a spectacle, despite the fact that the male-defined punk world enjoys the freedom to exploit genders and stylistic conventions.

In this case, formalist feminist terms are invoked to critique the social positioning of girl punk bands, especially Riot Grrrls. The most contentious dialogue around what it 'means' to be a woman or to play in a band occurs among women. It's not the case that punk guys simply 'stay out of it': "Most guys -- even the most progressive -- see their place in debates over gender and sexism as marginal" [Powers, 1994, p. 37]. Women stand to lose or gain more with the transformation of these cultural rules and the boundaries of their accompanying signifiers: "Women are expected to define and express these concerns" [p. 37] and that is why I interviewed anyone in the Boston scene who would talk to me, not just 'fans' of all or mostly women punk bands. The responsibility of forging the new terms of feminism sometimes proves too much for some female artists, who choose to remain aloof from these ongoing debates.

Amanda generally feels that all the attention given to 'girl bands' is ultimately self-defeating in its patronization of women rockers as a convenient, sensationalist marketing category. At twenty-two years of age, she dismisses angry women in punk as merely representing "a way of saying 'hey, like, I'm a girl and I'm oppressed, so I'm gonna like be rebellious'" commenting that "it's a good excuse to draw stuff on they're stomachs" [1992]. Amanda is especially offended by Riot Grrrls, who "parade through the street to be obnoxious and yell" [Amanda, 1992]. She explains:



Ya know, they have so many better ways to be -- they're just trying to draw attention to the fact that it's cool to be messy, bitchy and a rock and roll girl and get away with it [Amanda, 1993].

Amanda's characterization of female punks parading through the streets invokes images of oppositional tactics performed by political action groups like ACT-UP and Queer Nation -- as well as practices associated with 1970s-style feminism. Amanda's comments constantly contradict each other, leaving me to make the conclusion that her anger operates out of a fear that a disruption of the *status quo* will challenge her own complacency within a male-centered subcultural setting. Amanda continues her opinion that independent women rock bands are "all saying [mimicking] 'I'm a girl and I'm gonna dye my hair and pierce my nose.'" She explains, "the real block builders are the ones that were there in the beginning" [1992]. Once I shared the above critiques with the women in the Boston band Cheesecake and got this response:

Caitlin: [laughs] We are dirty....

Tess: The dirtier the better [laughs].

Caitlin: [mockingly] Do you prefer underarm hair or no underarm hair?  
Her inner child is at war.

Tess: [affirming] She's jealous [1993].

Amanda is not the only woman who expresses scorn over the 'spectacle' created by feminocentrist punk bands. At a recent record release show at the Middle East in Cambridge, Massachusetts (a celebration of a local woman's establishment of a record label) several bands featuring mostly female rockers signed by the label performed. The audience was comprised of women and men in their early twenties or late teens, definitely a younger crowd. One of the attendees, Leah, twenty-two at the time I spoke with her, complains, "I'm sick of seeing shitty girl bands get a lot of attention just because they have pussies and can sing" [1995]. She expressed disgust over the positive reception of the bands by the audience, considering their music unrefined and inferior. So great is her dismay with the 'scene', she can't help but yell out insults about the

audience or the bands when, for example, the audience enthusiastically applauds or cheers for what she believes are sub-standard girl bands. Leah herself plays in a band, but prefers not to play with other women. She explains that "girls are too hard to work with. I like boys -- they're easier to play with and they don't turn into bitches" [1995].

Leah's comments are similar to Amanda's in that she neglects to remember that the ethos of punk performance centers on a sense of community and shared learning rather than on a polished end-product. Her emphasis of end-product over process in punk performance subscribes to the notion that music is the central reason that scenes exist -- rather than the community that comprises the scene. Her position that women always turn into 'bitches' illustrates her compulsion to be like one of the guys at the expense of forging bonds with fellow female artists.

In the course of interviews, there were other instances in which slippage into dominant ideological readings occurred, cases in which dominance was given precedence over opposition. For example, when women take up an instrument, dominant cultural standards are directed toward men and other women downplaying the significance of this endeavor. Male musicians are more likely to characterize themselves as being 'musicians' or artists, women, however, diminish the importance of their playing and say that it's 'just play'. This downplaying the seriousness of their endeavors is reflected by the following quote from a 22-year old Kari:

I have a guitar, but I don't play it, *I just pretend*. But I'm definitely interested and that's the thing -- a lot of people are interested but they're too busy to play. They don't have the time [1993] [*italics mine*].

Kari's comments highlight the pervasiveness of a formalist perspective based on technical playing ability, ever present in the punk scene. In this way, the idea of pretending to play, pretending to be something that one is not, illustrates one type of cultural control exercising itself on female rockers who are struggling to put their art 'out there' in the scene. Suppositions that the punk music genre should only have one sound coupled with ideas about what is professional are entrenched in dominant ideological

constructions of gender, thus linking women rockers to being more primitive, or 'other' in sound. In support of my argument, Matt makes the following comment during my interview with him:

I don't know why it is but it seems that for the most part bands that are all-women tend to be play *less-professional type rock*. If you saw a band that was all-women, you can be pretty certain it would be like a punk rock group or something more challenging and less mainstream oriented. [Matt, 1994] [italics mine]

This perspective taps into formalist notions of authenticity. Real men don't 'play' at being musicians and they don't often describe themselves as such, even if they can only play three chords.

### **Relatedness of 'Girl Punk' Musical Experience to the Whole of Culture: The Tension Between Mass Mediated Forms and Cultures of Refusal**

According to Detels [1992], considering the relatedness of musical experience to the whole of culture poses some advantage for feminists, for they are better situated to implement this model to "deconstruct the traditional basis of masculinist musical privilege and to explore expressions of feminine cultural identity" [Detels, 1992, p. 203]. I would also argue that establishing critical relationships between musical experience and the whole of culture confounds the confusion (expressed by Julie below) that comes about when mass media appropriate local cultural forms:

I was thinking about it and I was thinking well, gee, chick bands have been getting a lot of attention and I was thinking like well, why have they been getting so much attention now cause they've been around for forever, know what I mean? [Julie, 1993].

Typical of most grassroots cultural movements that are absorbed into mass-mediated forms, many of those initially involved in raising awareness and celebrating women rockers feel disenfranchised from the 'movement' with which they once claimed an affinity. Many express cynicism over whether this women-in-rock phenomenon is or has ever been 'authentic' -- or whether it's another mass media scam, something



'thought-up' by greedy music industry executives. These themes are expressed by Anna, at the time twenty-four years old:

It's like, you don't really know what comes first like the influx of women's music and women bands or the actual like someone sitting in an office and saying like well, [invoking the 'voice' of the music industry] 'If we did this and this, we can, like, create more of a profit margin and measure like a whole niche -- a new niche of music we can sort of get profit from' [1993].

This perspective also undermines the importance of female participation in subculture, for it becomes reduced to the level of spectacle.

To Kari, this renewed interest in all-female rock bands is combined with a nineties-style dominant cultural critique of politically correct sentimentality: "It's just like, 'oh, my gosh, it's the 90s and we [the music industry] better start highlighting them or we'll get in trouble'" [1993]. Her expressed negativity belies a mistrust for mainstream culture, resistance to having her experiences relegated to a mass-mediated spectacle, and perhaps a simultaneous inability to imagine a cultural 'reality' even somewhat divorced from commodified forms. Kari continues, "I think it's all industry hype and MTV of course has a big part of it" [1993]. This interpretation of dominant culture is based on experiences with other cultural moments in the history of popular music in which all-girl bands were heavily marketed by major labels (e.g., The Supremes, The Shirelles). Only as an afterthought does she refer to cultural affiliation in local music scenes as having a possible influence on the resurgence of women in rock: "And it's underground things, too" [1993].

Patrick was twenty-two years old when interviewed in 1993. While familiar with punk forms, his exposure to new bands, including women punk rock bands, was limited to those bands that made the crossover into the 'alternative' or 'college music' marketing category. This is an important distinction to make, one that is as important, if not more important, as making comparisons between genders on this topic. He states: I

think they're kind of put on a tread-mill 'here's Belly'<sup>22</sup>, ya'know, 'they're good.' let's see, uhh...all-girl bands...how can we market them?" [1993].

The people I interviewed expressed mistrust over the media attention female rockers are getting in mainstream media. They are fearful that this attention will make a spectacle out of their music and experiences as women and artists. Tess sums up this sentiment during our interview:

Anything that gets over-exposed...by a media that is so uninformed and like out to sell papers...[is] gonna dilute the original meaning behind it...by lumping it together, you diffuse them of like their individual power. There's this whole insinuation that all these women are somehow middle class, upper middle class white women...and they share the same beliefs and that's not true [Tess, 1993].

I would argue that underground cultures gain resistive vitality through their ongoing transformation, transformations that render subcultural forms and practices more elusive, making them more difficult to appropriate by mainstream institutions such as mass media and major record labels. Although Tess' stance toward mainstream media is infused with a healthy dose of skepticism, I want to take this opportunity to point out that it is not useful to focus all opposition on preserving the perceived 'authenticity' of a given subcultural 'movement.'

Put another way, by adhering to confounding dialectics, such as what comprises the difference between cultural authenticity and mass-mediated spectacle, we are ignoring important possibilities for economic and cultural intervention. Mass media absorption, at this point in time, is a reality of our contemporary cultural and economic lives. The questions we should be asking ourselves, however, should not always be concerned with what dominant culture stands to gain from mainstream absorption of subcultural forms, but precisely what subcultures stand to gain *and* lose in the midst of this process. Tricia Rose, for example, notes that when rap music made its "movement from pre-commodity to commodity" [1994, p. 40], there occurred a

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<sup>22</sup> A popular all-woman band marketed as 'alternative' by the music industry.

shift in control over the scope and direction of the profit-making process, out of the hands of local black and Hispanic entrepreneurs and into the hands of larger white-owned, multinational businesses [Rose, 1994, p. 40].

In this important sense, as more girl bands are signed to major labels<sup>23</sup>, the related economic flow of production and consumption moves from small indie labels, presses, and other cultural outlets into the hands of the cultural industries and industries of mass production. On the other hand, we must not ignore the fact that as rap moved into the mainstream, that it had the "contradictory effect of sustaining and spawning new facets of rap music" [Rose, 1994, p. 56]. For these reasons, the position of subcultures resides in constantly transforming and transgressing these forms mediated by the cultural industries in order to forge new meaning, new forms of opposition. Despite these confounding feelings regarding cultural disempowerment through mass media absorption, I would agree with Gottlieb and Wald that "the media, beyond its function to control and contain this phenomenon, may also have helped to perpetuate" [1994, p. 264] the renewed prominence of women in rock.

In this sense, the joint relationship between opposition and dominance is highlighted by the appropriation of women rockers, especially Riot Grrrls, as a marketing category yet through this exploitation, an entire generation of young women and girls are exposed to women artists, who to varying degrees defy the hegemonic constraints in which they operate. The surfacing of Riot Grrrls, while fueling renewed controversy,

served to an extent as Whipping Grrrl. 'I did not know that Riot Grrrl would be so HATED,' says Sally of the backlash which led many readers to believe Riot Grrrl was dead, or just dead uncool [Joy in Corrigan, 1993, p. 35].

The 'uncool' reception of some outspoken girl punk bands is partly attributable to the break-down of conventional gender roles assigned to this interpretive community: "A

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<sup>23</sup> So far, girl punk bands such as Hole, L7, Babes in Toyland and female artists such as P.J. Harvey have all made the crossover into the mainstream by signing on to major labels.



friend told me that punk was hated by everyone when it started. But, really, punk did not threaten the status quo at all. White boy fucks could still hold on to their jobs, and all the power and money stayed in the same old places. Riot Grrrl threatens all of that..." [p. 35].

The increase in cultural clout for female artists in punk scenes is expressed not only in performance but also in the formation of coalitions that serve larger cultural and political endeavors. For example, coalitions such as Rock for Choice (started by the all-female band L7), the Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), and the AIDS Action Committee (AAC) join forces with local bands and clubs to book shows that benefit these organizations. On these occasions, bands usually play for free. Thus, the investment in a local scene extends beyond symbolic manipulation of meaning in performance, adopting subcultural style as refusal, or establishing low-tech entrepreneurial structures to one which fully embraces "border crossing" [Gaines, 1994, p. 229] in the community and culture at-large.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Summarizing the importance of performance for the local punk scene in Austin, Shank [1994] writes that performance allows subcultural practitioners the opportunity to "participate in a nonverbal dialogue about the significance of the music and the construction of their selves" [p. 125]. Taken together, these bold expressions implicate a far-reaching expansion of the terms and limitations of a cultural terrain traversed by this interpretive community. Realizing strength through counter-hegemonic solidarity with others in the scene and in the community-at-large, gaining literal and metaphoric voice, and experimenting with pleasure and sexuality, feminocentrist punk performance broadens the cultural parameters enjoyed by women participating in subculture and in culture as a whole.

Feminist theorists such as Detels [1992] and Gottlieb & Wald [1994] promote an expansion on our understanding of how the engagement of the female body and voice in

the performance context push the limits of female subcultural pleasure and production. For girls and young women in this scene, this often translates into newly established positions as dynamic actors and creators of subculture in symbolic, economic and stylistic terms.

In this essay, I attempted to illustrate this position with examples of live performances by Tribe 8, the Lunachicks and L7 in the Boston area. In scenes such as these, where female rockers play prominent roles, there are corresponding practices of empowerment displayed by girls and young women in the audience. I have described this condition by focusing mostly on the transformation of the cultural codes involved with slam dancing, moshing, and the positioning of bodies relative to the stage.

Along with more utopian readings of the 'girl punk' phenomenon come negative perceptions, confusion, and confounding readings of female subcultural experience and this latest infusion of women rockers. These conflicting readings partially stem from dominant ideologies pertaining to women who dare to traverse their traditional 'location' on the margins of subculture. These tensions also relate to problematics encountered when female pleasure and sexuality are presented, unmitigated, in the performance context (as well as in the adoption of certain styles). Combined with a cynicism regarding the 'authenticity' of local cultural forms and their continuous appropriation by mass media and other industries, the confusion is more easily comprehensible.

Detels' [1992] proposed paradigm to link musical experience to the body, among cultural constituents, and to the whole of culture presents one mode for considering the interplay of disparate ideologies, patterns and practices in the context of musical performance. With this three-pronged emphasis in mind, strategies for achieving semiotic disruption in the hetero-masculine indie rock scene are understood in conjunction with strategies for the liberation of the female body and for intervention throughout culture.

## CONCLUSION

### Process, Gender and Landscapes of Intervention: Implications for Cultural Studies

In Subculture: The Meaning of Style [1979], Hebdige concludes that despite the bold expressions of cultural refusal that he enthusiastically documents, subcultures at best imply "a fundamental tension between those in power and those condemned to subordinate positions and second-class lives" [p. 132]. He assumes an overarching condition within which subcultures "along with social formations of the media, institutions and family serve to perpetuate submission to the ruling ideology" [p. 132]. Throughout this essay, I have advocated that cultural critics revisit analyses of subcultural style and the status of refusal in the 1990s by interpolating

resistance at the more mundane, micrological level of everyday practices and choices about how to live... to see the sustaining, publicizing and extending of the subcultural enterprise to earn a living within what has been described as the aesthetization of culture [against a backdrop of industrial decline] [McRobbie, 1994, p. 162].

In support of Angela McRobbie, I argued that the potential for counter-hegemony is best understood by focusing on the interactions of cultural practitioners, in this case feminocentrist punk communities within local contexts and spaces of lived experience. Prioritizing this position opens channels of inquiry that move beyond conceptions of subcultural refusal as purely object-based to one which incorporates an assessment of the patterns and processes involved in negotiating landscapes of intervention. Given the precarious position of girls and young women as producers of subculture, a location not unproblematically forged in hegemony, exposing these uneasy relationships should comprise the main thrust of our inquiries:

Looking not only at the finished products, the visual and verbal text, but also at the professional ideologies alerts us to wider social changes, to social connections across otherwise conceptually separate sphere, like the media and higher education...as a system with 'openings' [McRobbie, 1994, p. 165].



By confronting the "complex pleasures and the politics of consumption" [p. 160-161] within the reinvigorated discourse expressed by all or mostly female punk bands, critiques based on ideas of class struggle must contend with "a set of practices which seemed far removed from the politics of class and resistance" [p. 160]. To some, this expanded analysis may put into question the perceived 'authenticity' of subcultures, especially if they are viewed as the dialectical opposite to the "contaminated outside world" [p. 161]. Throughout this essay, however, my point has been to confound the limiting aspects of this distinction, such as the portrayal of subcultures as helpless victims of commodity fetishism in order to show how the punk culture, and especially girls and young women operating in this realm, have benefited from exploiting dominant ideological channels for their continued evolution. While, ultimately, these practices do not serve to eliminate capitalist forms, they undermine the hegemonic relationships of overtly 'feminized' patterns of consumption previously assumed by cultural critics.<sup>24</sup>

Rather than strengthening perceptions of the dialectical relationship between dominant and oppositional culture, a large majority of women rockers make important connections between their experiences and the incommensurate, yet comparable, experiences of women operating in different cultural spheres in different times. By placing priority on the self-sustaining enterprises and the symbolic manipulation of meaning during performance, these connections are sometimes difficult, especially when historical conventions of subculture and mass media appropriation figure in the picture, confounding ideologies and perceptions of cultural empowerment. Nonetheless, the practices instigated by women rockers and artists in the Boston punk scene indicate an active investment in place, body, and the revised rules of female pleasure. For these reasons, I have tried to show why it is integral for cultural critics to insert a problematization of cultural space, especially from a feminist perspective. Literal and

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<sup>24</sup> Despite this statement, one could argue that the emphasis on the processes related to the production of goods, combined with a prioritization of the social aspects of labor/production over end-products/commodities undermines capitalist forms.

metaphorical conceptualizations of space, place, and bodily movement in and through the spaces inscribed by culture comprise a driving force in constituting landscapes of intervention, where counter-hegemony is most clearly celebrated and debated. Operating with this understanding also shows how girls and young women have more 'room' to forge social bonds that supersede the confines of the home or other institutions of labor and learning.

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