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Claremont McKenna College

Performing Grrrlhood: A Lyrical Analysis of Riot Grrrl Music

Submitted to
Professor Seth Lobis

By
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For
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Introduction

Riot Grrrl was an underground punk movement in the 1990s made up of three bands – Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy – that envisioned a punk scene dominated by women talking and singing about feminism. The name “Riot Grrrl” comes from the idea for a “girl riot” developed by Jen Smith, briefly a bassist in Bratmobile, and the feminist spellings of women as “womyn” and “womon.”¹ The artists draw inspiration from their personal experiences as young women and knowledge of academic feminism. Their lyrics analyze the sexualization of girls, feminism, rape culture, incest, white male supremacy, politics, violence, and sexuality. Youth has always been a motif in the punk milieu because its attitude naturally rebels against authority. Riot Grrrl reclaimed the traditional values and politics of punk music by wielding girlhood and adolescence as weapons to undermine patriarchal authority.

Riot Grrrl wanted to transform punk’s potent masculinist revolutionary scene into a feminist one. Punk music evolved out of the 1960s garage rock genre, originating in New York City; shortly after, punk scenes appeared in London, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.² Its politics are overwhelmingly anti-establishment and a reaction to contemporary socio-political issues. Punk ethos takes a humanitarian stance by scourging their enemies in defense of the “underdog.” Misogyny pervaded the scene with bands idolized in punk history like the Ramones, Blink-182, and the Sex Pistols singing incredibly misogynistic lyrics. For example, the Ramones sang, “well, you’re a loudmouth, baby / you better shut it up! / I’m gonna beat you up” and Blink-182 wrote “I want a girl that I can train.” This linguistic violence translated into physical violence, especially by the 90s when grunge music emerged. Punk shows were incredibly violent and largely excluded women from taking the stage or feeling safe at shows.

¹ Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (Harper Perennial, 2010), 80.

² Mark Andersen and Mark Jenkins, *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital* (Akashic Books, 2009), 2.

The political climate and the feminist movements in the 1980s and early 1990s produced Riot Grrrl's politics. In December of 1989, *Time Magazine's* cover read: "Women Face the 90s: In the 80s they tried to have it all. Now they've just plain had it. Is there a future for feminism?"³ In-fighting and disagreements in second-wave feminism, particularly among the pro-sex and anti-porn feminists, led to the perception of feminism's demise. The daughters of second-wave feminism were becoming young adults and struggling to balance stereotypes of what a feminist looks like – an angry, man-hating lesbian with hairy legs – and their personal identities. Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill is a prime example of this internal paradox. While Hanna was in college, she attended a speaking event where anti-porn feminist Andrea Dworkin told her that working as a stripper would "affect [her] for the rest of her life" and that she would be "paying for it forever."⁴ In response to this experience, Hanna's work with Riot Grrrl wanted to ensure that girls did not feel excluded from feminism because of their past or personal choices.

Riot Grrrl embodied aspects of second wave feminism but emerged in time with the third wave.⁵ Historically, hegemonic feminism deals with the concerns of white, middle class, heterosexual, educated, and older women. Second wave feminism focused on gaining power through the political and economic system. Riot Grrrl's focus on female separatism and lack of intersectionality and diversity brought the movement closer to second wave feminism. Third wave feminism, coined by Rebecca Walker, saw feminism as an intersectional force engaging with gender in relation to race, sexuality, class, and other forms of difference allowing women to define feminism in their own terms.⁶ Riot Grrrl's grassroots political efforts in the hope it would have a tangible effect on girls' lives aligns with the third wave.

³ "Time Magazine -- U.S. Edition -- December 4, 1989 Vol. 134 No. 23," *Time*, Time Inc, accessed December 1, 2022.

⁴ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 41.

⁵ Jamie Lee Huber, "Singing it out: riot grrrls, Lilith Fair, and feminism," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*: Vol. 9 , Article 5, (2010), 68.

⁶ Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave," *Ms. Magazine (January/February 1992)*, 39.

Riot Grrrl emerged in Olympia, Washington, where there was a thriving DIY punk scene. DIY punk was about “creating something from nothing, fashion from garbage, music and art from whatever was nearest at hand.”⁷ Olympia cultivated Riot Grrrl, but the music scene was too permissive and “cutesy” for their political aims.⁸ Bikini Kill became friends with the members of DC based punk bands Nation of Ulysses and Beat Happening, who suggested they travel to Washington DC where there was already a thriving and politically engaged punk scene. In 1991, the summer of “girl love” kicked off the Riot Grrrl Revolution.

Riot Grrrl intimidated the media, men in the punk scene, and vanguards of hegemonic masculinity. Men in the punk scene wanted to hold onto their power and were resistant to sharing spotlights with women and girls. The media’s sexist illustrations of Riot Grrrl altered its message and declared it dead by the mid-late 90s, while acts like the Spice Girls, a more palatable and marketable version of feminism, topped the music charts. The term “girl power,” which was first written in an angry grrrl zine, started to be sold by other artists and on merchandise, taking what was once a true testament to girl’s liberation and making it a capitalist venture. This captures the paradox in Riot Grrrl between inclusivity/accessibility and exploitation.

Bikini Kill made punk accessible to women and girls in the 1990s. The band name “encapsulates the nexus of sexiness and violence” embodied in their lyrics and performance style.⁹ While at Evergreen State College, Kathleen Hanna’s friend was assaulted in her home which incited her artistic and political endeavors in spoken word, music, and community organizing.¹⁰ The idea for a band came after Hanna met her hero, Kathy Acker, a writer whose work deals heavily with female sexuality. Acker told Hanna to stop doing spoken word and to

⁷ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 37.

⁸ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 37.

⁹ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 47.

¹⁰ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 36.

start a band if she wanted people to listen to her message.¹¹ Music is a major medium for sending messages to the masses because of its ubiquitous power; everyone listens to music, not many people go to spoken word shows. The group's core members – Kathleen Hanna, Tobi Vail, and Kathi Wilcox – met at a feminist art space called Reko Muse, where they hosted shows and bonded over shared love of femme rock bands like Babes in Toyland and The Obituaries.¹² Tobi Vail, another Evergreen student, wrote a zine called *Jigsaw*. She was the only person Hanna knew who was talking about feminism and punk rock in the same sentence.¹³ At the same time, Vail and her friend Kathi Wilcox were starting a band, so they asked Kathleen Hanna to be their lead singer.¹⁴ Billy Karren was their fourth member on guitar.

Bratmobile's original members, Alison Wolfe and Molly Neuman, met in 1989 at the University of Oregon. Wolfe grew up in Olympia, raised by a lesbian activist mother who introduced her to the values of feminism from her generation. Neuman grew up in Washington DC, and inspired Wolfe with a new, cool, and revolutionary mode of feminism. They immediately sparked a friendship, often going to shows at Reko Muse where they met Kathleen Hanna and Tobi Vail of Bikini Kill.¹⁵ Wolfe and Neuman were in awe of Hanna's energy and ability to scream on stage in her band Viva Kneivel. In 1990, Tobi Vail gave the pair a copy of *Jigsaw*, which inspired them to start their own zine, *Girl Germs*, where they published interviews with other bands like Calamity Jane and 7 Year Bitch.¹⁶ Despite neither of them having any experience in music, they wanted to start a band that focused on addressing feminism in their music. After watching Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman*, they came up with the name *Bratmobile* that

¹¹ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 34.

¹² *The Punk Singer* (documentary film), 8:11.

¹³ *The Punk Singer* (documentary film), 10:48.

¹⁴ *The Punk Singer* (documentary film), 11:46.

¹⁵ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 58.

¹⁶ Museum of Pop Culture, and Museum of Pop Culture, "Watch: Riot Grrrl Retrospectives - Triumph of Attitude," uploaded on May 29, 2020.

framed them as a pair of superheroines.¹⁷ Erin Smith, a zinester from Maryland whom they met in Washington DC completed the group on guitar.

Heavens to Betsy formed in 1991 as the third Riot Grrrl band to enter the scene. The phrase “Heavens to Betsy” emerged in the 19th century as an exclamation of surprise or horror, a response the band might expect to hear after people listen to their explosive music. “Betsy” is also slang for a gun or pistol. Corin Tucker, mostly known for her band Sleater-Kinney, was a high school student in 1989 when she met Allison Wolfe at a summer YMCA camp in Eugene, Oregon.¹⁸ She recalled thinking there was something cool and different about Wolfe, making her stand out from the crowd.¹⁹ After Tucker graduated from high school, her and her best friend Tracy Sawyer traveled to Athens, Georgia where they saw one of their musical inspirations: Vanessa Briscoe of the band Pylon. Embodying the power of hearing lyrics agitating people into action, the pair heard Briscoe sing, “Now! Rock and roll now! Now, now, now, now!” and decided to buy a drum kit and start a band.²⁰ Tucker went to Evergreen State where she met Bratmobile and Bikini Kill while working on a school project about the local music scene.²¹ After knowing Allison Wolfe for a few years and seeing her and her band pick up instruments and start writing songs, Tucker decided to do the same.

¹⁷ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 60.

¹⁸ Portia Sabin, host. “Part Three,” *Girl Germs*, Kill Rock Stars, December 2018.

¹⁹ Sabin, “Part One.” *Girl Germs*, episode 1, season 1.

²⁰ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 94.

²¹ Sabin, “Part Two.” *Girl Germs*, episode 2, season 1.

Chapter 1: Bikini Kill

“You don't make all the rules!
 I know what I'm gonna fucking do
 Me and my girlfriends gonna push on through
 Riot Grrrl is gonna stomp on you, yeah”

- *Bikini Kill*

Bikini Kill lyrics and performance style aggressively confronted patriarchal oppression by performing a deranged version of girlhood. On stage Kathleen Hanna juxtaposed a youthful attitude bouncing around on stage with violent lyrics and stripper dance moves. The band combined Hanna's “girlie” voice with blood curdling screams singing lyrics like “you collect your trust fund baby, and I'll be a whore” over the tune of nursery rhymes. Hanna used her body to make political statements like in 1993, at a benefit concert sponsored by Rock for Choice, Hanna took off her skirt and said “I'm gonna show you my cellulite now” then she then bent over, slapped her butt, and declared, “You don't see this on MTV.”²² At some shows she wrote the word “SLUT” on her stomach, an act that combined feminist art and activist visuals to take power from the pejorative terms aimed at women, such as “slut” or “bitch.”²³ These kinds of activist performances revolt against the patriarchal desire for women to be “pretty” and docile. Bikini Kill's intentionally provocative and wild version of girlhood exploits the patriarchy's sexualization of girls to subvert its authority over them.

Bikini Kill's first stint together lasted from 1990 to 1997. In that time, they made one self-released album, *Revolution Girl Style Now!*, and three studio albums, *Pussy Whipped*, *Reject All-American*, *The Singles*, and an EP *Bikini Kill* with the record label Kill Rock Stars. Impressed

²² Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 167.

²³ Jamie Lee Huber. "Singing it out: riot grrrls, Lilith Fair, and feminism," *Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research*: Vol. 9, Article 5. (2010), 69.

by the combination of rock and roll and feminism, Joan Jett produced a few Bikini Kill singles and some Bratmobile songs. *Revolution Girl Style Now!* is not heavily produced, which maintains the raw emotion in their sound.²⁴ *Pussy Whipped* sustains their underproduced sound and is mostly recognized for the feminist anthem “Rebel Girl.” Bikini Kill reached a global audience by going on tour in 1993 with the Riot Grrrl-adjacent band Huggy Bear, performing their collaborative album, *Yeah Yeah Yeah*. After relationships in the band deteriorated, Bikini Kill broke up in 1997.

Bikini Kill lyrics normalize discussions of rape and rape culture. Rape culture is the normalization of sexist behaviors that “operate through social norms, practices, and scripts that effectively and symbolically support logics of aggression, violence, and sexism... and continue to go unquestioned in social and cultural life.”²⁵ The song “I Like Fucking” from *The Singles* begins with Hanna asking the crowd: “Hey! Do you believe there’s anything / Beyond troll-guy reality? I do. I do. I do” Hanna depicts rape culture as a “troll-guy reality.” The intro’s colloquial language makes the song sound like a conversation. In the second verse, Hanna discusses the normalization of rape culture:

Just cause my world, sweet sister
 Is so fucking goddamn full of rape,
 Does that mean my body
 Must always be a source of pain?
 No, no, no, no, no, no, no

²⁴ Eleanor C. Whitney, *Riot Woman: Using Feminist Values to Destroy the Patriarchy*. (Portland: Microcosm Publishing, 2021), 19.

²⁵ Stephanie R. Larson, *What It Feels like: Visceral Rhetoric and the Politics of Rape Culture*. (Penn State University Press, 2022), 5.

She addresses the song to a “sister,” establishing women listeners as allies. The expletives in the second line encapsulate Hanna’s anger and frustration, feelings she thinks everyone should share. Saying “rape” addresses the issue precisely to show Bikini Kill is not afraid of having these conversations. The effect of the rhetorical question “must my body always be a source of pain?” evokes sympathy while bringing into question if rape culture can be eradicated. Her response to her own question “no, no...” asserts that rape culture should not be a daily reality for women. “No” is also the response that women are “supposed” to have when confronted by an unwanted sexual encounter. In addition to starting a conversation about rape culture, “I Like Fucking” offers tangible action to fight it. The final stanza goes “We’re not going to prove nothing, nothing / Sitting around, watching each other starve / What we need is action, strategy.” Throughout the song Hanna’s languid tone captures her fatigue around having these conversations. In an interview, Allison Wolfe of Bratmobile said, “there is a lot of shame that goes with domestic violence and rape, so just having it be an open topic, with music, is important for women to identify and go ‘ok, this didn’t just happen to me’ or ‘this isn’t my fault.’”²⁶ By discussing taboo topics such as rape in a public forum, Bikini Kill holds space for women in the punk community to undermine rape culture.

The song “Liar” imbeds allusions to the Beatles song “Twist and Shout” and John Lennon and Yoko Ono’s song “Give Peace A Chance” as a generational rebuke of rape culture. The song opens with Kathleen grunting “huh, huh,” accompanied by the dissonance from the bass mocking typical boy-band inflection in “Twist and Shout.” When the lyrics begin, Hanna creates an image of a girl after a sexual assault, “Betty’s got the back of her dress all ripped out / Mama’s got her face muffled twist and shout.” The reference to “mama” points to the generation

²⁶ Lyndsey Parker, “Violence Girl Meets Riot Grrrl: A Roundtable Discussion With Alice Bag & Allison Wolfe,” *Yahoo Music*, June 2016.

of parents of the 90s riot grrrls, who were familiar with an ethos wherein rape culture and sexual assault went largely ignored. Bikini Kill emphasizes the violence of sexual assault in their description of Betty, yet the mother responds with silence. Her face is “muffled” suggesting she is actively being silenced and all that comes to mind are the Beatles lyrics “twist and shout.” Hanna criticizes the rape culture undertones in the original Beatles song: “Come on and work it on out (work it on out) / You know you twist, little girl (twist, little girl).” Bikini Kill criticizes their attachment to rape culture and infantilization of girls by singing in the tune of a nursery rhyme: “Liar, liar, you got your pants on fire / Liar, liar, hanging by the telephone wire.” In other words, Bikini Kill says if men chose to see women as little girls, they will embrace that label only to subvert that patriarchal and pedophilic obsession. After the chorus, the guitars cut out leaving only the drums keeping time with Hanna singing “Give peace a chance” in tune of Lennon and Ono’s version. Vail accompanies the singing with a blood curdling scream. Screaming signals an “aggressive, anti-decorum presence” that challenges women’s voicelessness in violent situations like rape or sexual assault.²⁷ Bikini Kill rejects the naive proposal for peace when they proclaim, “you profit from the rape lie, baby.” After about ten seconds, Vail returns to the guitar and the ensemble begins to play together again making it seem like the screaming, or the assault never happened. Hanna sings the opening lines again, “Betty’s got the back of her dress all ripped out,” making the song feel cyclical, suggesting that the abuse will continue due to generational divides and everlasting misogyny.

Bikini Kill frames incest as a metaphor for patriarchal oppression. Incest is a taboo topic, but Bikini Kill targets it and centers the conversation around it. Ignoring incest and rape gives the impression that they are non-issues. The music in “Daddy’s Lil Girl” rings triumphantly like a superhero movie themesong with a buoyant bass line except Hanna sings about rape and incest in

²⁷ Eileraas, “Witches, Bitches & Fluids: Girl Bands Performing Ugliness as Resistance,” 125.

a childish and girly voice. Combining discordant lyrics with an upbeat bass line produces an unnerving feeling. In the song, Hanna describes a youthful naivety and lack of understanding in an incestuous situation: “I have no desire / I can't feel a thing / I just want to make him happy / Daddy's Lil Girl.” Repeating “I” at the beginning of each line furthers her sense of confusion and effort to understand her feelings. The tone is upbeat, aided by the music's fast pace, but Hanna sounds disoriented. By the last line of the intro, Hanna's confusion turns into wild rage: “Daddy's girl don't wanna be / His whore no more.” Using the phrase “daddy's little girl” in a song about incest underscores the pernicious nature of that term.

Patriarchal power dynamics in society trickle down into heterosexual family structures giving fathers absolute power over their children and family.²⁸ Sociologist Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez conducted a study on incest that illuminated how heterosexual romance has “normalized incest by cultivating men's attraction to girls and young women in need of care or rescue, by cultivating women's attraction to men of higher status than themselves.”²⁹ Capitalism confounds the issue by enforcing the commodification of children. Hanna captures this dynamic in the last verse where the father has total control:

Daddy has something to say
 He has something for you to do
 And he wants it done right now
 And he wants you to do it his way

The singer's perspective embodies the voice of “daddy,” referring to himself in the third person. Ending the lines with the rhyme “say / way” and “now / way” emphasizes the imperative nature of the father's demand. The music stops in between each line, showing the dialogue demands the

²⁸ Dominelli, Lena. “Father-Daughter Incest: Patriarchy's Shameful Secret.” *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 6, no. 16, (1986), 8.

²⁹ Jane Ward, *Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, (New York University Press, 2022), 14.

daughter's complete attention. This gap also leaves room for the daughter to dissent. By the third line, Hanna's tone returns to her own derisive voice showing she chooses to rebel and do things her way, not his. "Daddy's Lil Girl" rebukes incest and satirizes nuclear family gender dynamics in which girls and women are treated like children, forced to obey patriarchal demands.

"Feels Blind" calls attention to the practice in which women go to extreme lengths to adhere to patriarchal standards of femininity and physical beauty. The song opens with the bass strumming while Hanna sings,

All the doves that fly past my eyes
 Have a stickiness to their wings
 In the doorway of my demise I stand
 Encased in the whisper you taught me

The doves represent images of supposedly "perfect" women in the eyes of the media who are slender and white. They are "sticky" because women and girls are constantly bombarded with images and advertisements for weight-loss products and programs that teach women they need to control their weight.³⁰ As the only non-monosyllabic word, "sticky" stands out in the line reiterating the need to conform. In the final line, Hanna describes being "encased," giving connotations of suffocation and entrapment. The "whisper" embodies the subliminal and latent messaging sent to women telling them to assert control over their bodies. To reject the media's construction of femininity, Hanna yells, "What you saw wasn't fucking real yeah." Bikini Kill brings attention to myths around femininity to show the media's illustration of womanhood is unattainable.

³⁰ Susan Bordo. *Unbearable Weight Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. (University of California Press, 2013), 99.

Eating disorders are an internalized regulation of women's bodies enforced by the patriarchy. Feminist writer Susan Bordo understands eating disorders as "arising out of and reproducing normative feminine practices of our culture, practices which train the female body in docility and obedience."³¹ In the third verse of "Feels Blind" Hanna sings:

As a woman I was taught to always be: hungry

Yeah women are well acquainted with thirst

Well, I could eat just about anything

We might even eat your hate up like love

Skinniness and restricted eating/dieting gives women a false sense of control over their bodies. The lyrics explain how women have been conditioned or "taught" to consume myths around beauty and femininity. By the end of the song, Hanna repeats the line "I eat your hate like love," as if she has fallen into a delirious state, chanting a mantra that echoes the inundation of messages women receive about eating and body image. Hanna's manic voice defies conventional femininity by performing "ugliness" forbidden for women in popular media representations.³² Women have been convinced that if they do not conform to patriarchal gender and beauty norms through disordered eating, that they will not be loved by men or accepted by society. That acceptance is contingent on conformity and rooted in misogyny.

The song "White Boy" explores male perceptions of female sexuality. The song's discussion of race as alluded to in the title does not engage with whiteness as a racial category, but Bikini Kill uses it to convey whiteness as a social power rather than in comparison to blackness. It begins with a recorded dialogue between Kathleen Hanna and a boy talking about rape: "I don't think it's a problem 'cause most girls ask for it." The music gradually enters while

³¹ Bordo, *Unbearable Weight Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*, 27.

³² Eileras, "Witches, Bitches & Fluids: Girl Bands Performing Ugliness as Resistance," 131.

Hanna inquires how girls ask to be sexually assaulted: “The way they act, the way they dress.... Some of these dumb hoes, those slut rocker bitches walking down the street, They’re asking for it, they may deny it but it’s true.” Bringing this male voice into the song allows Hanna to confront his misogyny. Instead of viewing the girls as autonomous beings who act and dress for themselves, the “white boy” views their behavior and nonconformity as unacceptable. He denies that their choices could be for their own pleasure and only recognizes them in relation to his sexuality. Audre Lorde explains how the patriarchy intentionally denies women power over their own pleasure for sexuality to operate exclusively for men’s benefit.³³ In the first verse Hanna describes speaking up against rape culture: “It’s hard to talk with your dick in my mouth / I will try to scream in pain a little nicer next time.” She screams the lyrics that describe an inability to talk which demonstrates her defiance in realizing her vocal power. Echoing a statement posited in the *Bikini Kill Zine #2*, “It is not our responsibility to explain how boys/men are being sexist any more than it is our responsibility to ‘prevent ourselves’ from getting raped.”³⁴ Hanna refuses to take on that responsibility and shouts, “White boy, don’t laugh, don’t cry, just die!” Critics constantly told Bikini Kill that their lyrics and opinions were sexist against men and “man-hating.” Ignoring these sexist responses, Hanna shouts, “I’m so sorry if I’m alienating some of you / Your whole fucking culture alienates me.” By denouncing “white boy culture,” Hanna makes room for women to take control of their own pleasure and sexuality.

“Alien She” explores the difficulty in upholding feminist ideologies. In 2011 Kathleen Hanna gave a talk at Old Dominion University in Virginia where she said, “Alien She” was “about me before I was a feminist, singing to me after I was a feminist” and balancing parts of herself that were not expressly feminist with her feminist ideology.³⁵ The song begins with a

³³ Ward, *Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, 158

³⁴ Kathleen Hanna et al, “Bikini Kill Zine #2,” *Lame, Lame, so Very Lame*, 1991.

³⁵ Kathleen Hanna. “Old Dominion University.” Herstory Repeats. Herstory Repeats, 30 Mar. 2011, Norfolk, VA.

playful tone that quickly turns into Hanna yelling: “She wants me to go to the mall... She wants me / To put the pretty, pretty lipstick on.” The feminist persona wants to “kill” the version of herself that is not feminist. These two conflicting personalities juxtapose each other: “She is me/I am her.” These identities are inalienable, like the lyrics say, “Siamese twins connected at the cunt.” Referencing being connected at the “cunt” shows that this issue uniquely affects women. In the chorus Hanna sings “Feminist” and “I’m so pretty” in a high pitch, but yells “Dyke whore” and “alien.” Juxtaposing “Dyke Whore” and “I’m so pretty” evokes images of the virgin/whore complex often used to depict female sexuality. Further complicating Hanna’s confusion, she describes pressure to conform: “She wants me to be like her / I want to kill her / But I’m afraid it might kill me.” Feminism is full of paradoxes, an idea captured in the last line when Hanna sings, “All I really wanted to know / Who was me and who is she / I guess I’ll never know.” Roxanne Gay’s collection of essays on feminism, *Bad Feminist*, describes how people have come to understand feminism as requiring women to uphold certain ideas that might conflict with their personal preferences. Instead of following earlier feminist movements that praise conformity, Gay encourages people to be “bad feminists,” because that is better than not being a feminist at all.³⁶ Riot Grrrl accepts girls and women for their contradictions with feminism in order to encourage participation.

“Rebel Girl” is Riot Grrrl’s feminist anthem that encourages women to see each other as allies and friends. Female friendships are vital parts of adolescence and adulthood, but they receive less recognition for their significance compared to heterosexual partnerships.³⁷ As girls get older, their friendships become devalued in exchange for male validation. “Rebel Girl” describes a girl in awe of another girl and the creation of a girl-centered community. Vail plays

³⁶ Roxane Gay, “Roxane Gay: The Bad Feminist Manifesto.” *The Guardian*, Guardian News and Media, August 2nd, 2014.

³⁷ Whitney, *Riot Woman: Using Feminist Values to Destroy the Patriarchy*, 80.

the opening measures, slamming the drums with an echo of dissonance that gradually gets louder until the guitar joins in. Kathleen Hanna joins on vocals that sound like a starstruck teenage girl noticing the coolest girl she has ever seen for the first time:

That girl thinks she's the queen of the neighborhood

She's got the hottest trike in town

That girl, she holds her head up so high

I think I wanna be her best friend, yeah

Labeling the rebel girl, a “queen” reclaims patriarchal hierarchical norms to create a “woman-centered world in which the rebel girl reigns.”³⁸ The opening line has a jealous tone reflecting how girls are trained to see other girls as competition. “Trike” refers to a child’s tricycle or a motorcycle. When the Rebel Girl holds “her head up so high” she sets herself apart from the crowd. Repeating “that girl” emphasizes Hanna’s shock at seeing such an empowered figure. What seemed at first like jealousy transforms into a deep admiration for the rebel girl by the end of the verse. One of Riot Grrrl’s slogans published in a Riot Grrrl zine said, “Don’t let the J Word Jealousy kill Girl Love” that announced how competing for male attention is not empowering and contrary to Riot Grrrl.³⁹

There is an element of sexual desire in “Rebel Girl.” In the chorus, Hanna says, “I think I wanna take you home / I wanna try on your clothes, uh” and in the second verse she sings: “When she talks, I hear the revolution / In her hips, there's revolution.” The eroticism “in her hips” and “her kiss” is juxtaposed to the word “revolution,” making the rebel’s girl’s femininity her source of power. Hanna uses revolution in two senses where it refers to the rebel girl’s hips revolving and a revolution in a socio-political sense. To notice the details in her hips and walk

³⁸ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 73.

³⁹ Suzy Corrigan, *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!* Black Dog Publishing, 2007. 114.

the speaker would have had to pay careful attention to her: “When she walks, the revolution's coming / In her kiss, I taste the revolution.” Hanna screams the last line, showing her newfound liberation. The kiss has an element of desire, but its intention is not to titillate its listeners, but to arouse them to join the revolution and to show that it can happen without men. Riot Grrrl was sometimes criticized for being too straight because the Riot Grrrl groups were predominately heterosexual, but they still extended their allyship to lesbians in this song: “They say she's a dyke, but I know / She is my best friend, yeah.” In an interview, Kathleen Hanna said the rebel girl represented several figures, including a girl she had a crush on in high school and a feminist performance artist named Juliana Luecking who mentored Hanna, giving validity there being a romantic and platonic attraction to the rebel girl.⁴⁰

As girls grow up, compulsory heterosexuality diverts their attention from their female friends and directs it towards male validation. At the end of the song, “Rebel Girl” reimagines a community that only requires female validation and acceptance:

Love you like a sister always
 Soul sister, rebel girl
 Come and be my best friend
 Will you, rebel girl?
 I really like you
 I really wanna be your best friend
 Be my rebel girl.

Hanna flies through these short lines like someone nervously professing their love. In contrast to macho masculine revolutions, the Riot Grrrl revolution is full of love. By the last two lines

⁴⁰ Lyndsey Parker, “Riot Grrrl Pioneer Kathleen Hanna Talks Slut Shaming, Equal Pay and 'Moxie' Message: 'If It's Not Intersectional, It's Not Feminism!'” *Yahoo!*, Yahoo!, (March 2021).

Hanna's pace slows down as she seems more comforted by her association with the rebel girl rather than intimidated. Instead of seeking male approval, Hanna asks "will you rebel girl?" as a plea for her friendship and connection. By declaring the rebel girl, her "best friend," Hanna creates space in the punk world and broader communities for girls to discover and support each other as feminists.⁴¹ Relationships built on feminist ideas resist the kind of individualistic competition that bring girls down for the male attention. However, criticism of Riot Grrl's female separatism and focus on women-centered bonding ignores "the double bias of racism and homophobia" experienced by women of color and lesbians of color.⁴²

Once Riot Grrrl entered the mainstream, the media trivialized its impact by equating it to an amusing trend for teenage girls. Even though media attention about Riot Grrrl made the movement more accessible to girls across the country, it misrepresented the radical, political, and feminist aspects of the movement. An article in *USA Today* patronizingly called Riot Grrrls "self-absorbed punkettes brimming with condescension and overt hostility" obsessed with their looks.⁴³ The media also sexualized the bodies of riot grrrls reporting they wore "only jeans and a bra" and audience members were "taking off their clothes."⁴⁴ Articles about Kathleen Hanna fabricated untrue rumors about her being a victim of rape and abuse.⁴⁵

The song "Thurston Hearts the Who," in which Tobi Vail reads a bad review of Bikini Kill from *USA Today*, denounces the media's sexist illustration of Riot Grrrl. Vail sings, "I was shocked how contradictory their words and actions were. Their supposed message of Bikini Kill's literature is 'girl love' and feminism, but what comes across on stage is man hate! A maniac rebellion against the world and themselves!" At the same time Vail chants and yells the

⁴¹ Whitney, *Riot Woman: Using Feminist Values to Destroy the Patriarchy*, 80.

⁴² Rich, Adrienne Cecile. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 15, no. 3, 2003, (1980), pp. 11–48. 12.

⁴³ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 170.

⁴⁴ Julia Downes, "*Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!*" (Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 30.

⁴⁵ Downes, "*Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!*," 31.

review, Hanna croons, “If Sonic Youth thinks you’re cool, does that mean everything to you, if you think Sonic Youth is cool?” These lyrics are nonsensical background noise creating a chaotic soundscape until the lyrics become indecipherable. Hanna’s lyrics ring like a Dr. Seuss book reflecting their childlike dissent of the review’s derogatory content, “Thurston hearts the Who / Do you heart the Who too?” At the end of the song, Vail and Hanna scream simultaneously until Vail returns to chanting the review with Hanna continuing to scream at the top of her lungs. Performing the review with Hanna’s lyrics and screaming asserts their self-determination in the face of the media’s power.

“Don’t Need You” violently repudiates outsider opinions of Bikini Kill and Riot Grrrl. It begins immediately with both guitar and drums playing in cohesion when Hanna begins chanting:

Don't need you to say we're cute ...

Don't need you to say we're good

Don't need you to tell us we suck

Don't need your dick to fuck.

Hanna rejects the patronizing label “cute” and any other form of criticism or feedback from someone outside of Riot Grrrl. Referring to the collective “we” reinstates Riot Grrrl as a unified counter culture scene and its rejection of mainstream media attention. The sequence of words “cute, good, suck, fuck” embodies outsider perceptions of riot grrrls as sexual objects. After Hanna yells the line “Don’t need your dick to fuck” she screams “wow,” mimicking an orgasmic release suggesting she gains pleasure through rejecting male sexual participation. Throughout the song, the music plays aggressively in the background until one point where the drums play like in a drumline and the bass hums in the background while Hanna taunts her critics in a rhetorical

question: “Does it scare you / That we don’t need you?” Her tone becomes low and sounds forcibly unattractive to create a voice that rejects male validation.

As the first Riot Grrrl band to form, Bikini Kill faced a lot of pressure as the de-facto leaders of the movement. Their politicization of girlhood presented as a manic victim of sexual assault finding power through her voice and music. This inspired other bands to join the Revolution: Girl Style Now! by using girlhood to subvert patriarchal power. At the same time, Bikini Kill transcended Riot Grrrl to find mainstream success. Although they reject being called the movement’s leaders, they inspired the other Riot Grrrl bands to join the revolution and build off their ideas.

Chapter 2: Bratmobile

We're so cool yeah, yeah

Yeah we're so cool, cool

We're so cool yeah, yeah

Fuck you too, cool schmool.

- *Bratmobile*

Bratmobile offered a carefree version of childhood. The group embraces the term “brat,” a label that is usually given to snotty little girls, by singing about the duality where young girls are overly sexualized while their interests and passions are denied legitimacy from adults. Bratmobile lyrics highlight sexism within the punk scene and illustrate tangible visions of sexism that girls experience every day to dismantle them. Like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile contrasts their raunchy and sometimes violent lyrics with girlhood innocence to subvert normative ideas of feminine adolescence to undermine patriarchal authority.⁴⁶ Allison Wolfe’s vocals sound like a cooler older sister girl taunting the school bully in defense of her younger sisters. On a sonic level, Bratmobile had a stripped-down and minimalist sound that made their music liberatory and accessible.⁴⁷ On the guitar, Erin Smith gave Bratmobile their surf-rock sound. Dasha Bikceem, author of the Riot Grrrl zine *Gunk*, wrote in 1991 that the band looked like “they were having a good time” and Molly Neuman played “cool drum beats... ala the Go’s Go’s.”⁴⁸ Bratmobile reconstructs girlhood as a liberated embodiment of indifference towards patriarchal power.

Bratmobile started playing together in 1990, but their performances were like “impromptu ‘guerrilla’ a cappella.”⁴⁹ The group was unorganized until they were asked to

⁴⁶ Ameleah Sutliff, “Taking Back Girlhood: The Power of Bratmobile's Sneering Debut.” *Vinyl Me, Please*, 21 (November 2018).

⁴⁷ Sabin, “Part One,” *Girl Germs*,

⁴⁸ Darms. *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 160.

⁴⁹ Andersen, ed., *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*, 311.

perform in 1991 at a Valentine's Day show with Bikini Kill and Some Velvet Sidewalk in Olympia.⁵⁰ In 1991, Kill Rock Stars released Bratmobile's song "Girl Germs" on the label's first compilation record.⁵¹ Besides "Girl Germs," their first released music was a 7-inch single in 1992 called *Kiss & Ride* with Homestead Records. Later that year they recorded their first studio album, *Pottymouth*. The name *Pottymouth* describes their sound and style, like a group of girls with "potty mouths." The record was not released until 1993 because Kill Rock Stars was still in their early days of recording and producing records.⁵² In 1994, their EP *The Real Janelle* displayed Bratmobile's evolution and skill as a band.⁵³ Ultimately, the band broke up somewhat dramatically on stage in 1994. Towards the end of the band's first run together, Wolfe felt the band was separating her from her community and her bandmates did not seem to care.⁵⁴

Bratmobile's first song, "Girl Germs," echoes their playful version of girlhood. "Girl Germs" sounds like a nursery rhyme recorded in a girl's bedroom that tauntingly opens with "girl germs, no return, can't hide out they're everywhere." A girl persona sings to a boy who decides not to hang out with her based on his "paper doll of superior boyiness." Referring to his superiority as a "paper doll" alludes to its fragility. The song elaborates on gendered oppositionality established in childhood reflected in common idioms such as "girls drool, boys rule" or "boys go to Jupiter to get more stupider; girls go to college to get more knowledge." Multiple studies have shown that children prefer the company of other kids with the same gender identity.⁵⁵ This separation creates a sense of in-crowd and out-crowd as well as the superiority of one gender over another. "Girl Germs" captures the dynamic where children fear being teased at school, so they uphold segregated play:

⁵⁰ Andersen, ed., *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*, 311.

⁵¹ Maria Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*. (Seal Press, 2005), 211.

⁵² Sabin, "Part Three," *Girl Germs*.

⁵³ Andersen, ed., *Dance of Days: Two Decades of Punk in the Nation's Capital*, 389.

⁵⁴ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 309.

⁵⁵ Thorne, Barrie. *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*. (Rutgers University Press, 1993), 46.

‘Cause coed playground means confrontation
 With boyish fears of girl intimidation
 You're too cozy in your all boy clubhouse
 To even consider having Kool Aid at my house

The rhyming couplets embellish the song's nursery rhyme sound. Public spaces leave children vulnerable to teasing, especially around heterosexual coupling between boys and girls. Feminist theorists Nancy Chodorow and Myra Dinnerstein assert that the boyish sense of superiority originates from the devaluation of activities considered "feminine" and masculine dominance in society.⁵⁶ In effect, boys try to distinguish themselves from femininity by socializing with other boys. This results in the "cozy" feeling in the "all boy clubhouse." The clubhouse symbolizes the punk scene where women are excluded from participating. Instead of accepting their exclusion, Riot Grrrl creates their own scene which is reflected in the song's final words: "One day how you missed out you'll realize one day."

The opening song on the *Pottymouth* album, "Love Thing," explores the sexualization and infantilization of teenage girls. The song begins with Smith on guitar while Neuman on drums plays alone for a few measures until Wolfe enters shouting: "Admit it, innocent little girls turn you on, don't they?" The adjectives "little" and "girls" make their address directed at a pedophile, but it also refers to the over sexualization of girls in a general sense. This opening sets the tone for the rest of the album, brandishing Bratmobile's admonishing youthful style. The first verse delves into the dichotomy of infantilizing girls while seeing them as sexual objects:

You like to make them cry
 You like to tell them why
 You like to grow them up

⁵⁶ Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*, 59.

Swallow hard and throw them up

Wolfe's lyrics are confrontational, repetitive, and simple embodying a childlike voice.

Bratmobile establishes the hypocrisy when adults belittle girls' feelings, but simultaneously tell them to grow up. The word "grow" is a double entendre where on one hand it refers to girls being viewed as sexual objects from a young age, and on the other, it refers to oral sex in relation to the verb "swallow." This explicit verbiage refers to the general rank abuse of women and girls. Both Bratmobile and Bikini Kill speak to an older male through a voice of someone younger than the performers to draw attention to the creepiness embedded in that power dynamic.

Violent imagery in Bratmobile songs reclaim lyrical motifs in punk music that promote violence towards women. The most prominent example is their song "Stab," in which the chorus repeats, "You want to stab me / And fuck the wounds / Stab me and fuck the wounds." Sexual violence is confounded in the double sense of the word "wound" as slang for a vagina. Wolfe interweaves sexual violence with physical violence in a hyperbolic manner, however, the last two lines underscore the real misogyny, "you say it's all a joke / But I know you mean it." Similarly, in "P.R.D.C.T" (Punk Rock Dream Come True), Wolfe debunks the offensively absurd, misogynistic idea that women "dream" of the sexual violence committed against them in the punk milieu: "Fuck me silent black and blue / You're my punk rock dream come true." Their song "Die" coopts punk's nihilistic attitude to express their experience with abuse in contrast to the typical white boy feeling of disenfranchisement: "If my blood spilled on your sheets / would you really be there? ... So, I choose death ... So, I'm just gonna die." Blood spilling on "sheets" gives the line connotations of sexual violence. A masculine punk version of this song might substitute "sheets" for "streets." Bratmobile's lyrics subvert the masculinist norms that promote violence and degrade women to demonstrate the real threats of violence against women.

“Brat Girl” inverts the themes in masculine punk bands that view women as sexual objects. Typically, girls were only recognized in the punk scene as someone’s girlfriend. The song’s title “Brat Girl” reverses that dynamic and places girls in the position of power with boys following them like groupies. The song’s title sounds like Batgirl furthering the imagery embedded in their band name. Bratmobile’s musical evolution is clear in *The Real Janelle* where “Brat Girl” was recorded. Their music sounds more produced than in their earlier albums, transforming the band’s sound from underground basement performers to professional musicians. The EP was recorded after weeks of touring the UK with Huggy Bear, Allison’s voice sounds slightly thin, Smith’s guitar is sometimes fuzzy, and Neuman on drums sometimes races ahead of the group.⁵⁷ Instead of a ferocious runaway train on a mission, *The Real Janelle* sounds more restrained.⁵⁸

“Bratgirl’s” lyrics reflect their political evolution where instead of screaming about the toxic gender power dynamics, the lyrics suggest that Riot Grrrl emboldened girls to speak against it:

Ain't gonna be your press darlings
 I'd rather be fucked and throwin things
 So get on your knees and suck my clit
 If you're gonna lie and say that shit

The lyrics subvert the sexist qualities of masculine punk band lyrics. Smith and Neuman play guitar and drums without vocals to build up tension for the verse. The compressed rhymes gives the song a playful feel accompanied by quick pace from the guitar and drums. Wolfe’s lyrics are not asking for permission, but emphatically state that she is no one’s “press darling.” A “press

⁵⁷ Sabin, “Part Three.” *Girl Germs*.

⁵⁸ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 309.

darling” is similar to a groupie. In the second line, Wolfe refuses to be pushed aside and chooses to take up space by “throwing things.” Girls are rarely given this kind of behavioral leeway whereas a boy’s reckless behavior like this might be tolerated because it would be considered “punk.” Wolfe places female sexuality in the forefront when she proclaims, “get on your knees and suck my clit,” as a subversion of phrase “suck my dick.” “Brat Girl” also describes a revenge fantasy about killing the “Spur Posse boys” who were a group of boys from Southern California who kept track of how many women they sexually assaulted for points: “We're gonna kill spur posse boys.”⁵⁹ The violence in this song is intimidating, but Wolfe’s tone remains irreverent while she sings, “I’m Gonna throw this knife right thru yr chest” and “throw that camera right thru yr head.” Throwing a “camera” nods to the media’s unwanted surveillance of Riot Grrrl or to men trying to record their performances. For example, at a Bikini Kill concert Kathleen Hanna yelled at a man who was trying to film her from behind without her permission. On the surface, the song seems like a reclamation of the boy-punk attitude, but on a deeper level it admonishes masculine aggression.

Bratmobile interacts with other bands on the punk scene and denounces their problematic behavior. The band had a “feud” with Ben Weasel of the *Screeching Weasels*, a notorious asshole in the punk scene who wrote sexist lyrics and blurted out loud sexist opinions. During a set Ben Weasel went on a misogynistic rant after which a female fan responded by throwing ice at him. This action evokes the imagery in “Brat Girl” when Wolfe sings, “I’d rather be fucked and throwin things.” In reaction, Weasel punched the woman and another woman who tried to break up the fight.⁶⁰ His smug attitude represents the extremes in the punk scene in the 90s. In 1993,

⁵⁹ David Ferrell, “A Violent Death Marks the Spur Posse's Legacy : Death: Young Man in Group That Gained Notoriety for Sex Escapades Was Killed in Rowdy Holiday Gunfire.” *Los Angeles Times*, Los Angeles Times, (8 July 1995).

⁶⁰ Megan Seling, “All about the Time Ben Weasel Called Me a Moron and I Told Him to Take a Nap.” *The Stranger*, December 13, 2012.

Weasel wrote a song for the band Born Against called “Janelle” that paints the caricature of the punk rock girlfriend: “Janelle / she's so swell / And she doesn't smell / Like most of her pals... I'll tell you that I'm sweet on Janelle.” Weasel’s reductive illustration of Janelle is completely counterproductive to Riot Grrrl’s aims. The word “swell” is a dated term reaching back to the 1950s which illustrates an even more masculinist idea of a young man’s attitude towards a young woman. Saying he is “sweet on” Janelle furthers the retrograde construction of male sexuality. Compressing the rhymes gives the verse a trivializing and casual attitude that asserts masculine superiority. Referring to “most of her pals” references Riot Grrrl’s intention of creating “girl gangs [ruling] all towns.”⁶¹ Riot Grrrl wants girls to be the superhero, not a sidekick, and destroy the punk rock girlfriend paradigm by encouraging girls to start their own bands to change the punk scene.

In response to Weasel, Bratmobile reclaims Janelle by naming their *EP The Real Janelle* and the EP’s opening song after her. In the song, Wolfe sings in an upbeat and cheerful tone:

Janelle! Janelle!
 She's so swell!
 Oh Janelle!
 Bennie Weasel, go to hell!...
 The real, the real, the real, the real Janelle!
 She's the one that I love so so!”

Calling Ben Weasel “Bennie” intentionally infantilizes him to illuminate his backwards perception of gender. In Weasel’s version, he rhymes “swell” with “smell,” but in Bratmobile’s version they rhyme “swell” with “go to hell.” Repeating “the real” four times gives their depiction of Janelle validity. Wolfe proclaims her love and acceptance for Janelle, not as a

⁶¹ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 126.

stereotypically straight feminine romantic partner, but as a person and ally. Four years after Bratmobile released *The Real Janelle*, Ben Weasel went on to release a song called “The Final Janelle,” where he asserted his masculine authority by saying, “you take things way too seriously,” “ugly riot girls saying I don’t know shit,” and “your stupid comments may well be justification for a beating.” His violent and sexist threats almost ironically capture the misogyny within the punk community. Although this kind of back and forth might seem petty to an outsider, Bratmobile strategically asserted themselves into the punk scene’s dialogue to challenge its misogyny.

“Cool Schmool” protests phoniness and exclusion in the punk scene. The emergence of grunge music in the 90s made punk even more male and exclusive. Grunge ignores the politics that define punk music but keeps the attitude. Bratmobile illustrates what this emerging dynamic that took over the punk scene in the late 80s and early 90s looks like for girls. The song begins with Wolfe’s classic schoolyard taunt mocking hierarchies of “coolness” in the punk world: “we’re so cool, yeah, yeah, we’re so cool cool, we’re so cool yeah, yeah, fuck you too, cool schmool.” Singing “fuck you too” fully rejects the boyish definitions of coolness. The rhetorical gesture “cool schmool” suggests Bratmobile does not care about being “cool,” because “being cool ... means being cold, stand-offish, uncaring and self-absorbed.”⁶² In order to be considered cool in the male punk world, girls must assimilate into male culture:

I just wanna be one of the boys
 I just wanna be your little fashion toy
 Let's hang out and be cool, alright
 Let's go watch the girl fight tonight
 Cool schmool

⁶² Kathleen Hanna, *Cool = Dork*, Bikini Kill Zine, (1991).

Wolfe's casual tone reflects the normative options for girls in this world were to either diss their friends to be one of the boys or be a punk rockers girlfriend. Neither of these options result in respect or visibility, only superficial acknowledgement or acceptance. That is why Riot Grrrl wanted to create their own scene for girls. Being a "fashion toy," akin to trophy wife, removes the girl's agency and turns her into something to be checked out and used with a short "shelf life." Wolfe undermines the punk world's vision of coolness when she sarcastically yells, "let's hang out and be cool, alright" because clearly what she is describing would not fall into Riot Grrrl's definition of "coolness." "Let's go watch the girl fight tonight" references girls competing for male attention in order to be considered "cool" which kills Riot Grrrl's aim to make girls allies.

"Cool Schmool" rejects hierarchies of coolness in favor of a girl's only scene. In *Jigsaw #3*, Tobi Vail wrote, "I spent way too much time trying to figure out how to fit into the guy scene instead of realizing that my band and my songs and my whole thing was just as cool."⁶³ Ben Weasel's band *Screeching Weasels* describes the boy punk scene in their song "Cool Kids:" "There's a real cool club on the other side of town / Where the real cool kids go to sit around and talk bad / About the other kids / Yeah, it's a real cool club and you're not part of it." This "cool club" probably excludes women. He calls other kid's "dorks" and says, "you're fat and ugly and an imbecile too." Either completely unaware or indifferent to the toxic exclusivity, Weasel illustrates the exact tropes Riot Grrrl wants to destroy. After attending the Riot Grrrl Convention in 1992 Dasha Bikceem wrote in her zine, *Gunk*, "we met this boy who kept suggesting how uncool we were because we hadn't heard of these dumb DC bands." To counteract Weasel's scene, and the Pacific Northwest punk orthodoxy specifically, Wolfe says, "I don't wanna sit

⁶³ Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (Feminist, 2016), 53.

around and talk about the Wipers / weren't those the good old days."⁶⁴ The Wipers were a punk band in the 1970s and 1980s that influenced bands like Nirvana and the Pacific Northwest punk scene.⁶⁵ Bratmobile mocks this "do-you-like-the-right-bands" attitude because of its unnecessary exclusivity. To the same effect, Wolfe sings, "I don't want you to tell me what's so cool." In the final verse, Wolfe exposes the superficiality of hierarchies of coolness:

See I don't know why you're always telling me
 What's so cool about what I'm wearing
 When you can't even tell me how you feel
 And you can't even be my friend for real

Wolfe speaks these lines to make her message undeniably clear. Rhyming "feel with "real" reiterates the importance of emotional connectivity. The reference to her clothes highlights the high standards women are held to in regard to their appearance. Instead of trying to fit into the impossible mold and clubhouses built by punk boys, the lyrics construct a new community where friendship and loyalty determine your "status." Wolfe also undermines social fakeness in "you can't even be my friend for real." In a flier given out at Bikini Kill shows that summarized the Riot Grrrl Manifesto, a document written in 1991 outlining Riot Grrrl's aims, Kathleen Hanna wrote, "be a dork, tell your friends you love them."⁶⁶ According to Bratmobile and Riot Grrrl, a girls scene defines "coolness" through expressing vulnerability, sincerity, not suppressing feminine qualities, and true friendship.

The song "Fuck Yr Fans" rejects music scene hierarchies and fame similar to Sonic Youth's "Kill Yr. Idols." The shorthand "yr" dates to Ezra Pound's use of it in his personal

⁶⁴ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 69

⁶⁵ Michael Lee Nirenberg, "Discussion with Sub Pop Founder Bruce Pavitt." *HuffPost*, HuffPost, December 7, 2017.

⁶⁶ Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 24.

correspondence.⁶⁷ The Beat and Black Mountain poets like Allen Ginsberg and Robert Creeley subverted poetic norms by using “yr” in their poetry to speed up the sound on the page. Sonic Youth and Bratmobile’s nod to these poets puts them in line with their deeply influential critique of post-war American society. In “Kill Yr. Idols,” Sonic Youth rejects the music industry’s opinions: “I don’t know why / You wanna impress Christgau / Ah let that shit die.” “Christgau” was a music reviewer in the 90s. In Bratmobile’s song, the first verse echoes Sonic Youth’s message:

Get outta my fucking scene
 If you know what I fucking mean
 Get out of our fucking scene
 I hate your fucking scene

Both bands have a low-fi and discordant sound that contrasts mainstream music’s overproduced qualities. Wolfe screams these lines indicating her frustration and rejection of the music industry’s standards. Rhyming “scene” with “mean” highlights the superficiality within music scenes. In a podcast on Bratmobile’s origin story, Evylen McDonnell commented on Bratmobile’s relationship with their fans by saying, “the people who are supposed to support us the most can tear us apart.”⁶⁸ Bratmobile’s final show in 1994 was a dramatic end to an iconic band caused by an inability to balance their fans’ desires. Once Riot Grrrl reached the mainstream it lost control over its message and was no longer able to create an intimate community.

Bratmobile paid homage to their femme punk predecessors by covering The Runaways’ “Cherry Bomb.” The Runaways was an all-girl band formed in Los Angeles in 1975. The band combined a “sexually charged act with tough-girl personas ... their sound was rawer and more

⁶⁷ Professor Warren Liu, in person conversation, December 5, 2022.

⁶⁸ Sabin, “Part Four.” *Girl Germs*.

honest than those of most other female acts of the time.”⁶⁹ The Runaways musicians use their sexuality as young girls or “jailbait” to gain power within the patriarchal systems in rock and roll. In contrast, the Riot Grrrl reimagines girlhood outside of the male gaze. “Cherry Bomb’s” lyrics “expressed young female desire in a decidedly dominant way;” however, criticism of The Runaways notes the role of the band’s producer Kim Fowley.⁷⁰ Critics wondered whether The Runaways’ overt expression of sexuality in their lyrics and on stage was a marketing strategy concocted by Fowley and not a genuine reflection of teenage girls’ sexuality. Riot Grrrl bands self-produced their music with the support of Kill Rock Stars, making their voices the only relevant contribution to their image. Even though The Runaways produced great music, they are remembered for being an influential force ahead of its time. In a quote from Sara Marcus’ book, Joan Jett recalled being in The Runaways in the 1970s: “The Runaways had nobody, I felt like a feminist, but I felt completely dissed by other feminists.”⁷¹ Meeting Hanna and the other Riot Grrrl bands made Joan Jett feel as if people were finally ready for what the Runaways tried to do in the 70s – show people that women can be rock and roll.⁷²

Bratmobile transforms the overly sexualized original into a feminist mantra. In an interview, Allison Wolfe spoke on the “Cherry Bomb” cover saying, “we are going to acknowledge it and change it.”⁷³ Smith on guitar transforms the hard rock sound of the original to their distinct and playful surf-rock sound. In the original version Cherie Curry moans sexually in between the third verse and the chorus, but in Bratmobile’s version Wolfe’s moans turn into a frustrated feminist groan. The chorus alludes to a teenage girls sexual awakening: “Hello, daddy, hello, mom, I’m your ch-ch-cherry bomb / Hello world, I’m your wild girl.” Bratmobile screams

⁶⁹ Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*, 12.

⁷⁰ Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*, 24.

⁷¹ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 266.

⁷² Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 266.

⁷³ Sabin, “Part Five.” *Girl Germs*.

the chorus which erases the double-entendre in the original.⁷⁴ Instead of a grab for male attention, Wolfe describes Riot Grrrl's rebellious attitude against patriarchal authority. Wolfe's version of "get down ladies, you've got nothing to lose" does not reference sex but calls girls to join the Riot Grrrl Revolution. The Runaways wanted to be rockstars; being the first female band was not necessarily their goal. Bratmobile and other Riot Grrrl bands accepted the label "girl band" so future groups would not have to.

Bratmobile's performance of girlhood was playful and reminiscent of schoolyard battles indifferent to authority. Their sound was pure adolescent energy, an unfiltered force expressing themselves and their feelings in a context that did not want to hear from them.⁷⁵ Entering Riot Grrrl as an older sister figure, Bratmobile successfully created a space for women in the punk world and inspired other girl bands to join the scene, including the final band in the Riot Grrrl girl trinity, Heavens to Betsy.

⁷⁴ Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*, 211.

⁷⁵ Sabin, "Part Three." *Girl Germs*.

Chapter 3: Heavens to Betsy

If you think
 That I'm not strong
 You best watch out
 Nothing can stop me

- *Heavens to Betsy*

Heavens to Betsy's girlhood persona screams and throws a temper tantrum. As the final band in the trio to form, they are the most progressive in their discussions of race and sexuality and embody the Riot Grrrl ethos more than the other bands. Their lyrics were inspired by Corin Tucker's own experiences with sexism, relationships, academic feminism, and the punk scene. Thematically, Heavens to Betsy tackle similar subjects as the other Riot Grrrl bands such as body shaming, sexual abuse, and white privilege, but Tucker also discussed queerness and sexuality in a way that the other bands were not able to because they were mostly straight. Heavens to Betsy has a more nuanced discussion of race, sexuality, and sexism than the other bands that challenge the power dynamics that shame, devalue, and belittle.

Heavens to Betsy performed for the first time at the International Pop Underground festival in Olympia in 1991 during "Girl Night" alongside Bikini Kill and Bratmobile.⁷⁶ They were a two-piece group with Tucker on guitar and vocals and Sawyer on drums. The decision to stay a two-piece ensemble was inspired by other small punk rock bands like Kicking Giant and similar groups with smaller numbers.⁷⁷ A two-piece group simplifies their sound, distinguishing them from the typical band construction with a bass, drums, and guitar. Their songs vary in sound, sometimes slow, sometimes very fast and loud, but usually have Tucker at some point

⁷⁶ Museum of Pop Culture, "Watch: Riot Grrrl Retrospectives - Triumph of Attitude."

⁷⁷ Mariana Timony, "A Chat with Corin Tucker and Tracy Sawyer of Heavens to Betsy." *Bandcamp*, (4 May 2018).

sing-wailing in the style of Kathleen Hanna or Sinead O'Connor.⁷⁸ Their first release was a split 7-inch with Bratmobile produced by K Records in 1992.⁷⁹ In 1993 they recorded a 7-inch with Kill Rock Stars called *These Monsters Are Real* that Tucker viewed later as their steppingstone to their album released the following year, *Calculated*. After Heavens to Betsy, Tucker started Sleater-Kinney with Carrie Brownstein of Excuse 17, another Riot Grrrl contemporary band.

Heavens to Betsy has a nuanced discussion of sexuality and heteronormativity. Their first released song, “Me and Her,” describes a queer relationship that is denied validity from an outsider. The song opens with the bass playing alone, then the drums begin a few bars later. Tucker enters on vocals describing her feelings for another girl: “I used to see her almost every day and when I didn't, I didn't feel so great.” Tucker’s tone is contemplative and innocent, evoking a feeling of adolescent naivety experiencing love for the first time. Saying “I didn’t feel so great” as opposed to “I felt awful” furthers this effect. In the chorus, Tucker juxtaposes her complicated feelings when she sings, “I hate her / And I love her.” Tucker raises her voice and elongates the sounds harshly singing, “I hate her,” but then softens her voice during “I love her.” The title “Me and Her” establishes a world where only Tucker and the other girl exist. However, someone disrupts their world and denies her feelings, or does not understand them:

You ask me why I'm getting so upset
 You don't understand a girl who's passionate for another girl
 One day I think I love her then I think I want to kill her
 You tell me to calm down, what is your fucking problem?
 ...You said it once to me that girls are friends and friendships end

⁷⁸ Cam Lindsay, “Sleater-Kinney the Drama You've Been Craving.” *Exclaim!*, January 22, 2015.

⁷⁹ “Heavens to Betsy (2).” *Discogs*.

The “you” sounds like a parent or an adult that tries to mitigate Tucker’s distress by denying her feelings. Tucker talks about sexuality in vague terms reflecting her inexperience. Referring to herself as a “girl” reasserts her age. In contrast to the other Riot Grrrl songs about female friendships, Tucker explicitly states that her relationships with the other girl is not platonic. For young girls questioning their sexuality, “Me and Her” provides recognition for their feelings.

“Decide” critiques compulsory heteronormativity and heterosexual marriage. The song narrates a story in which a woman rejects a marriage proposal to exert her autonomy. Tucker begins the song embodying a male persona proposing marriage, “do you wanna get married baby?” Calling her “baby,” casually presumes her response which trivializes the woman’s agency. Tucker narrates the refusal in the chorus:

“I will decide my life,
I will decide this time,
No man is gonna rule my life,” she said
“I will decide my life”

The music transitions from melancholy to upbeat and positive when the woman says, “I will decide my life.” Using dialogue situates Tucker as an outsider reflecting on the situation. In the second verse, Tucker describes heterosexuality separating women from each other and their communities: “Holding on to nothing else but him, him, him, him, him.” Women have been subjugated for centuries, but only started organized movements for gender equality in the 20th century with the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848.⁸⁰ Unlike other marginalized groups, women lack a sense of shared identity because heterosexual marriage forces them to identify with men.⁸¹

⁸⁰ *The Punk Singer* (documentary film), 29:00.

⁸¹ Ward, *Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, 12.

Riot Grrrl transforms this dynamic by encouraging girls to identify with other girls rather than men.

Tucker deconstructs the notion of marriage as the ultimate aspiration for girls and women. Dreaming of getting married and having a family is not inherently wrong, but women are often told that marriage and family life is their only destiny. As children and adults, institutional and media images associate basic human happiness and fulfillment with heterosexual desire and coupling.⁸² To deconstruct those notions, Tucker sings: “Waiting on forever, waiting on tomorrow, / Waiting on a fairy tale.” Shifting girl’s focus to the future, or “tomorrow,” denies women the ability to live in the present because heteronormative patriarchal discourse ties their identity to a future contract. She repeats “waiting” to suggest women’s expectations of marriage go unrealized. Queer theorist Lauren Berland labels this phenomenon in straight culture as “cruel optimism,” defined as “the condition of maintaining an attachment to a significantly problematic object.”⁸³ In another verse Tucker sings, “is he a real prince charming?” to emphasize the fairy-tale myth surrounding heterosexual marriage. Tucker continues to explore this idea later in the verse:

You get rid of all those traps that they have set around you,
But can you get rid of that seed they planted in your head?

In rejecting the marriage proposal, the woman distances herself from heterosexual marriage, but does not necessarily free herself from that pressure to conform. Tucker’s question addresses the woman in the song and the audience, encouraging them to liberate themselves from the shame around nonconformity. The “trap” represents the path society imposes on women that leads them

⁸² Ward, *Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, 1.

⁸³ Ward, *Tragedy of Heterosexuality*, 29.

into heterosexual marriage and the “seed” refers to society’s implantation of this idea in girl’s minds at a young age that continues to be fertilized.

“White Girl” is Heaven to Besty’s anti-racist critique of hegemonic feminism. Bikini Kill songs “Liar” and “White Boy” and the Bratmobile song “Polaroid Baby” tried to bring race into Riot Grrrl conversations, but they ignored intersectional oppression. For example, “Liar” equates sexism to “eating meat” and “hating blacks.” Intersectional discourses emerged with Kimberly Crenshaws’ articles, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” in 1989 and “Mapping the Margins” published in 1991.⁸⁴ The term “intersectionality” did not enter mainstream consciousness until later in the 1990s after the public treatment of Anita Hill at Clarence Thomas Supreme Court Confirmation hearings. Most of the Riot Grrrl fans were white and middle class and Riot Grrrl’s focus on “girl love” could be seen as an extension of second-wave feminism’s disregard for race, class, sexuality, and other intersectional identities.⁸⁵ Mimi Nyugen, a zinester involved in the Riot Grrrl scene, wrote in the zine *Evolution of a Race Riot* that “Riot Grrrl was – and is – the best thing that ever happened to punk ... Unfortunately, Riot Grrrl often reproduced structures of racism, classism, and (less so) heterosexism in privileging the generalized ‘we.’”⁸⁶ Identifying as “we” in a political movement is welcoming while asserting that everyone is the same. Speaking to white girls in the riot grrrl scene, Tucker opens the song with “We should have talked about this / A long time ago / But I didn't have to think about it.” Speaking in the first person accepts responsibility for her contributions to upholding racist structures. Riot Grrrl began because the punk scene’s exclusion of girls necessitated it. Those same girls, as Tucker points out, did not have to think about racism because they did not think it affected them.

⁸⁴ Arica L. Coleman, “What Is Intersectionality? A Brief History of the Theory.” *Time*, Time, 6 Nov. 2019.

⁸⁵ Anna Feigenbaum, “Remapping the Resonances of Riot Grrrl.” (*Interrogating Postfeminism*, 2007, pp. 132–152), 9.

⁸⁶ Feigenbaum, “Remapping the Resonances of Riot Grrrl,” 9.

Although all forms of oppression are connected, there was not the same sense of imperative action.

In the summer of 1992, the Riot Grrrl bands organized a “Riot Grrrl Convention” that had workshops on sexual assault, sexuality, and race. There was a feeling of optimism and revolution in the air, at least at first. Kathleen Hanna organized for a guest speaker to come and talk to the girls in a session called “Unlearning Racism.”⁸⁷ Throughout the conference, girls discussed how they are oppressed, but when forced to confront their role in oppressing others, they could not comprehend it. After attending the convention, Dasha Bikceem wrote in *Gunk #4*, “I think I was one of the only 3 black kids there ... I see Riot Grrrl growing very closed to a very chosen few, i.e., white middle class punk girls.”⁸⁸ Even though music is a transmissive medium, punk has historically been dominated by white people which Riot Grrrl unfortunately upheld. The chorus in “White Girl” addresses hegemonic feminism’s struggle with intersectionality:

White girl
I want to change the world
But I won't change anything
Unless I change my racist self

The song’s slow pace reflects the seriousness of their subject. Sawyer accompanies Tucker’s vocals on the guitar, there are no drums which accentuate the lyrics without a mess of noise behind it. Tucker sings about Riot Grrrl’s desire to “change the world,” but she points out that their revolution cannot happen without looking inward. “My racist self” places the responsibility on the individual to reflect on her own privilege. Riot Grrrl’s inability to comprehend intersectional oppression is an extension of feminism's same struggle. However, Heavens to

⁸⁷ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 165.

⁸⁸ Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 162.

Betsy's lyrics provide a guide for white girls to understand their privilege in relation to intersectional oppression and racism.

Heavens to Betsy discusses white privilege in American youth culture in the song "Axeman." Instead of preaching about how racism is bad, Tucker dissects her relationship with race and privilege. The song illustrates "high school" as a space for privileged white kids. Tucker attended South Eugene High School in Eugene, Oregon where the mascot was the Axe, or Axemen. The drums and guitar accompany Tucker with a slow and steady beat while she sings:

Here we go axemen, here we go
 At the pep rally, I stole the show
 Wearing our purple and our whites
 Hey, look around there's so much white

Singing from the sidelines appeals to the exclusivity of a pep rally scene. The opening line sardonically chants for her school's team, showing her disinterest in school spirit and uneasiness around the "white privileged scene" she finds herself in. When she says "hey" at the beginning of the line, she wants others to notice her observation as well. Tucker uses high school, the "teenage dream," and "the punk white privilege scene" to highlight white people's oblivion to their privilege. Another verse describes Tucker trying to be a better racial ally:

Cut off the part of me that's privileged
 But that's too easy, this is work I've got to do
 High school, it's me in high school

Tucker wants to remove her privilege by "cutting it off" because self-harm is easier than introspection. She recognizes removing privilege does not solve the problem. Saying "high

school, it's in me" echoes how people internalize racism. Instead of ignoring her white privilege, Tucker recognizes she has to put in work to be anti-racist.

Heavens to Betsy performs girlhood in the song "Playground" to explore the schoolyard as a breeding ground for toxic masculinity and predatory behavior. Starting from a young age, different toys, clothes, and types of games organize girls and boys into distinct categories that often pit them against each other creating a sense of opposition.⁸⁹ "Playground" explores this opposition beginning with Tucker singing the lyrics over the playful strumming of the bass:

I don't wanna play anymore of your games
 You made the rules to tie me up and tie me down
 Spoiling the sport of girl-catching
 Hunting me down in the schoolyard playground park

Their discussion and presentation of girlhood demonstrates how boys are socialized from a young age to see women as enemies. "Tie me up and tie me down" refers to the controversial Pedro Almadovar film of the same title that feminists decried for its depiction of sexual violence toward women. The word "play" and "sport" have positive connotations that erase the serious implications of gendered play. "Hunting" situates girls as passive prey or victims in the boys' game. Tucker names three different locations to show how these gender dynamics are constantly reinforced. "Girl-catching," although to supervising adults might seem harmless, acts as a guise for more serious behaviors about sexuality and aggression.⁹⁰ Tucker introduces a hyperbolic element of violence to show the dangerous consequences of these games: "My body severed on the twist and slide." To remove girls from the passive position, Tucker repeats "I'm watching

⁸⁹ Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*, 2.

⁹⁰ Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School*, 5.

you boy / I'm watching you." The "boys against girls" dichotomy bleeds into adulthood leading to misogyny and sexism.

"Terrorist" reimagines girls and women as agents of chaos against sexual predators. The song describes a murderous revenge fantasy, beginning quickly with the drums and guitar playing together, and then Tucker enters:

You follow me on the fucking street

You make me feel like a piece of meat

You think I don't know what war means

Now I'm the terrorist see how it feels

Rhyming "street" with "meat" suggests the woman's body is worthless. Tucker reverses this dynamic, turning the stalker into a piece of meat in a callous description of his body: "I'm gonna kill you / I'll cut you up gouge out your eyes." Mentioning "war" asserts that women are not immune to war's violence even though it is considered a masculine affair. American politics often frames issues surrounding women using the lexicon of war. For example, the abortion debates are described as a war on women's bodies. The line "Now I'm the terrorist" overturns women's victim status. In the bridge Tucker says in a blood-curdling scream, "I'm gonna kill you" then her voice quickly retreats languidly singing, "I'm not your prey, I'll make you die." These clear declarations leave no room for questioning Tucker's intentions. The guitar chords playing throughout the song align rhythmically with Tucker's inflection when she sings "I'm gonna kill you." "Terrorist" gives women agency in their own "war."

Heavens to Betsy normalizes sharing experiences with sexual assault in "My Secret." A recording of the song is not available on Spotify or any mainstream platforms, only as a demo tape recording on YouTube. It sounds very lo-fi giving the song a covert tone echoing the song's

content and title. It begins with a stop-start guitar part with Tucker sing-shouting quick barrages of rage:⁹¹

My secret is coming out
 And each word, I live it out
 And I won't go through this again
 It happened to my best friend
 I'll tell it again and again

Since so few cases of sexual assault or rape are reported, let alone prosecuted, women and girls protect themselves by warning other girls about predatory men. To that effect, Tucker's primary concern is making sure the predator hurts no one else. Vocalizing the "secret" undermines the culture of silence around sexual assault. She uses her words as a literal weapon: "This song, these words, are a threat to you / A knife in you, I'd stick it in." Using all that she has available to her, Tucker's lyrics set an example for other girls that sharing their experiences is a powerful weapon to prevent sexual assault. Screaming in real life is also a weapon against assault. Addressing a "you" directly confronts predatory men transferring the violence from girls. During the bridge, Tucker strains her voice in a wild determination to force out the repeated line, "I am getting through this." At the end of the song, Tucker reveals her secret in a murderous fervor exploding when she sings, "My truth my truth will get you in the end / And my secret is that I want you dead." "My Secret" reflects the network of girls spreading information about sexual predators to protect themselves since the law does not.

"My Red Self" addresses girls' trauma around menstrual shame. Society and media representations have taught women and girls to internalize that menstruating is not hygienic and

⁹¹ Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, 97.

to feel shame and embarrassment around bleeding through their clothes or being seen with menstrual products. Tucker captures this feeling:

What is the color
 The color of shame
 Is it red
 Is it blood blood red
 Does it creep out
 From my two legs
 Up to my face

The words color, red, and blood repeat in these lines to create a logical flow of words that replicates the motion of blood. The word “creep” echoes its literal meaning facilitating the blood’s movement. Eventually, the stream of thoughts travels from between her legs up to her face, displaying her public shame. Adding the detail “two” in “two legs” gives the song an innocent tone. Girls are forced to police their behavior to avoid further humiliation: “Never wear white / Or your shame will creep right thru.” Tucker repeats the word “creep” coinciding with the bass and drums playing a simple rhythm in slow motion, mimicking blood creeping through her pants. Later in the song Tucker says, “Is this the rag / You use to humiliate me / Cuz I was born / I was born a girl?” “Rag” has a double meaning where on one hand it refers to the colloquial phrase for menstruation: “on the rag.” On the other hand, a “rag” is an insult directed at someone thought of as boring or a nag. Tucker does not mention the word “period” until the end of the song:

Is this the period
 Too long

Too strange
 For you to understand
 So you make me hide

Tucker captures the irony in men's inability to understand menstruation when she sings about periods being "too long / too strange" in very short lines. The long vowel sounds further echo this irony, because in fact, it is not difficult to understand. As the song goes on, the pace increases and Tucker sings louder which transfers the burden of menstrual shame from herself onto the shamer. Screaming rebels against patriarchal structures of language and syntax deemed "proper" for girls.⁹² The song normalizes discussion around menstruation by naming it in a public platform.

Heavens to Betsy was the final of the original Riot Grrrl trinity to form, and they encapsulated Riot Grrrl quintessentially. Riot Grrrl wanted to set an example for girls by showing them that they too could be in a band. In that style, Heavens to Betsy formed after being inspired by Bikini Kill and especially Bratmobile. They brought a queer and relatively racially conscious perspective to Riot Grrrl that if perhaps more people listened to Heavens to Betsy than Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl could have been closer to having productive discussions on race and sexuality. It was not until Riot Grrrl was reborn about 20 years after the summer of Revolution Girl Style: Now! that more queer and racially diverse artists brought Riot Grrrl new life.

⁹² Eileraas, "Witches, Bitches & Fluids: Girl Bands Performing Ugliness as Resistance," 126.

Conclusion

“BECAUSE I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will change the world for real”

- *The Riot Grrrl Manifesto*

Even though the Riot Grrrl movement ended in the late 1990s, its message endures. Riot Grrrl gave women and girls access to cultural agency to create space for themselves in the punk world and in their own lives through music, zines, and community. Decades after Riot Grrrl as a political movement faded, Carrie Brownstein of Sleater-Kinney said, “Riot Grrrl gave people a voice that didn’t have one before.”⁹³ Corin Tucker said Riot Grrrl made it possible for Sleater-Kinney to be recognized as a band, not as *girls* in a band. Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy accepted the label “girl bands” so future generations of female musicians could be recognized for their talent, not as a novelty act.

Riot Grrrl remains relevant because misogyny is still prevalent. Music and art as political resistance are common throughout history and Riot Grrrl is its feminist iteration. Riot Grrrl intended to remain a loose philosophy so that other girls and future generations could continue their legacy of rewriting, recreating, and reworking ideas of feminism.⁹⁴ New music groups have taken Riot Grrrl’s ideas and moved it across different genres. Around the world people have taken Riot Grrrl’s attitude and politics to inspire change and feminist resistance. Bikini Kill’s success transcended Riot Grrrl because the group was reaching for something larger.⁹⁵ Their ongoing reunion tour that began in 2019 shows that their message resonates today. Long after

⁹³ *The Punk Singer* (documentary film), 21:22.

⁹⁴ Nadine Käthe Monem, *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!* Black Dog Publishing, 2007. 27.

⁹⁵ Sabin, “Part Four.” *Girl Germs*.

Riot Grrrl as a movement dissolved, blogs, fan cites, and bands inspired by the bands continue to appear.⁹⁶

In the last decade Riot Grrrl found new life and meaning in relation to the 2016 presidential election, the #MeToo movement, and renewed attacks on abortion rights. This next generation of Riot Grrrl is more racially diverse, queer, and discusses a broader range of issues. Bands such as Destroy Boys, Fea, Margaritas Podritas, and The Linda Lindas sing about feminism in Spanish. The Coathangers sing about gun violence, Tacocat discusses capitalism in “I Hate the Weekend,” and Grlwood sings about patriarchal family dynamics in “I Hate My Mom” and “I’m Yer Dad.” The Regrettes, She Drew the Gun, War on Women, and Le Tigre sing about feminism like the original Riot Grrrl bands. Big Joanie is a Black punk band based out of London that discusses intersectional feminism in their songs “Insecure” and “Confident Man.”⁹⁷ Riot Grrrl’s legacy is visible by the sheer numbers of women and girls in punk bands and in the music scene today.

⁹⁶ Sabin, “Part Five.” *Girl Germs*.

⁹⁷ Ayesha Rascoe, “Punk Rock Band Big Joanie on Their Album 'Back Home'.” *National Public Radio*, 6 Nov. 2022.

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