

Gayle Wald

Signs, Vol. 23, No. 3, Feminisms and Youth Cultures (Spring, 1998), pp. 585-610

Six years before Gwen Stefani and No Doubt burst onto Top 40 radio and MTV, a small group of young women musicians active in and around the punk music scenes in Washington, D.C., and Olympia, Washington, produced a two-page manifesto calling for a feminist revolution within independent rock—what they touted under the slogan “Revolution GirlStyle Now.” At the time, members of the bands Bratmobile and Bikini Kill, the independent women rockers at the forefront of this movement, coined the term *Riot Grrrl* as a means of signposting their snarling defiance of punk’s long-standing (although hardly monolithic) traditions of misogyny and homophobia, as well as racism and sexism within the corporate music industry.

Together with other women active in various punk scenes (such as the related, albeit separate, movement of lesbians in “homocore” music, including the all-female band Tribe 8), Riot Grrrls have not only consistently advocated the creation of all-female or predominantly female bands, but they have also emphasized women’s ownership of record labels and their control over cultural representation. This last goal has been fostered by myriad Riot Grrrl—affiliated or girl-positive fanzines (such as *Girl Germs* and *Riot Grrrl*), inexpensively produced publications that circulate through feminist bookstores, independent music retailers, networks of friends, and word-of-mouth subscriptions and that explicitly envision women’s fan activity as a legitimate and authentic form of cultural production.

For the young, predominantly middle-class white women who have participated in Riot Grrrl subculture, reveling in “girliness” constitutes an aesthetic and political response to dominant representations of female sexuality produced by the corporate music industry as well as a strategy of realizing women’s agency as cultural producers within independent rock. By highlighting girl themes in their music, lyrics, dress, iconography, zines, and the like, performers such as Cub, Tiger Trap, Heavens to Betsy, and Bikini Kill have attempted to produce a representational space for female rock performers that is, in effect, off-limits to patriarchal authority, in a manner akin to the way that girls’ clubs are off-limits to boys.

Such an emphasis on girliness has enabled these women performers to preempt the sexually objectifying gaze of corporate rock culture, which tends to market women’s sexual desirability at the expense of promoting their music or their legitimacy as artists. Riot Grrrls’ emphasis on forms of girl solidarity has important practical implications as well. For example, Riot Grrrl advocacy of all-women or predominantly women bands originates not in a belief in the aesthetic superiority or in the “authentic” oppositionality of such groups but in the practical recognition that rock ideology (e.g., the equation of rock guitar playing with phallic mastery) has dissuaded many young women from learning to play “male” instruments. Similarly, although it was widely derided by male punk rock aficionados as “separatist,” the Riot Grrrl practice of reserving the mosh pit (the area directly in front of the stage) for girls stemmed from a desire to rethink the social organization of space within rock clubs and other music venues.

The relentless cuteness of [Riot Grrrl aesthetics], which might be merely sentimentalizing or idealizing under other circumstances, signifies *ironically* within the context of punk youth music subcultures (where “youth” is more likely to be associated with aggression, violence, and crisis, and where youth and youthiness are frequently conflated with boyhood). Such a recuperative iconography of girlhood contrasts—markedly, in some cases—with the music itself, which regularly explores themes of incest, the violence of heteronormative beauty culture, and the patriarchal infantilization and sexualization of girls: in short,

themes that conjure not a lost innocence, a fall from childhood grace, but an innocence that was not owned or enjoyed, a grace that was denied.

Riot Grrrls' self-conscious performance of nostalgia underscores the culturally constructed nature of women's and girls' access to the public sphere. Such a deliberate performance assumes a subject for whom girliness precludes, or is in conflict with, cultural agency.

But what of women whose modes of access to, and mobility within, the public sphere depend on their supposed embodiment of a girlish ideal?

Osaka-based trio Shonen Knife, [who] have attracted [a] small but significant following among U.S. indie rock audiences, provide telling illustration of the manner in which Asian women, whose visibility within U.S. culture is often predicated on their acquiescence to orientalist stereotypes, have had to negotiate the terrain of U.S. youth and music cultures differently than have their (primarily white) Riot Grrrl counterparts. In the United States, where Japanese rock musicians (whose music has become increasingly visible since the mid-1980s) are often regarded with a mixture of "sincere" musical interest and objectifying, ethnocentric curiosity, the recurring portrayal of Japanese women bands as interesting novelty acts, cartoonish amateurs, and/or embodiments of Western patriarchal fantasies of "cute" Asian femininity presents particular challenges for understanding how evocations of girlhood overlap with discourses of race, gender, and nation in U.S. popular music culture. In contrast to Riot Grrrl bands, whose reappropriations of girlhood are part of a broader effort to harness rock's oppositional energy for feminist critique, Japanese women rockers have had to negotiate a feminist cultural politics from within the context of Western patriarchal discourses that insist on positioning them as the exotic representatives of an idealized girlish femininity.

The immediate, enthusiastic embrace of Shonen Knife in the mid-1980s by indie rock luminaries such as Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore of Sonic Youth is often explained in terms of the band's kitschy punk-pop sound and its trademark parodic "twisting" of icons of American and Japanese commodity culture. Named for a brand of pocket knives (perhaps as a way of encapsulating a succinct critique of patriarchal masculinity?), Shonen Knife readily appealed to U.S. indie rockers, who admired the band's pomo way of blurring the boundaries between advertising jingles and "serious" punk-pop (a practice evident in songs such as "Tortoise Brand Pot Cleaner's Theme").

Despite such affinities, the women in Shonen Knife have repeatedly been portrayed in exoticizing and infantilizing terms, as demonstrated by the liner notes to a late-1980s indie rock tribute album of Shonen Knife covers, titled *Every Band Has a Shonen Knife Who Loves Them*. Here, band members are described in frankly patronizing language: "They are happy people and love what they are doing.... They are humble, kind people who do not realize that they are the most important band of our time".

One music journalist, in a description that conflates infantilizing images of Asian women's sexuality with stereotypes of female musical incompetence, has asserted that the band's fans like Shonen Knife because "they're little, lots of fun and can't really play". Most tellingly, perhaps, in publicity materials for their 1993 album *Rock Animals* explicitly distinguishes Shonen Knife's "simplicity," "charismatic innocence," and musical charm from the restive, confrontational femininity of their U.S. indie rock counterparts. These "Ronettes-meet-the-Ramones," gushes the press release, "are definitely not cut from the same battered cloth as their Riot Grrrl and flannel shirted colleagues."

While Riot Grrrls have been able to reappropriate girlhood as a part of their political and musical practice, Japanese women bands have had to negotiate an unreconstructed, unironic version of the term *girl* that circulates within U.S. discourses of Asian femininity. As the above examples make plain, the media representations of Shonen Knife have tended to reinscribe their lack of cultural agency rather than explore their artistic practices as a potential source of such agency.

For example, Shonen Knife's "Twist Barbie", an upbeat pop-rock song that is probably their best-known work among U.S. audiences, articulates an ambiguous relation to European ideals of femininity through the image of a Barbie doll: "Blue eyes, blond hair / Tight body, long legs / She's very smart / She can dance well.... O, sexy girl!" This initially humorous parody of Barbie as a miniature and synthetic "embodiment" of ideal European womanhood (a parody that imputes stereotypes of girlish femininity to U.S. white women) is punctuated, later in the song, by the phrase "I wanna be Twist Barbie" words that potentially express a more ambiguous relation to Western beauty culture and that cleverly play off of the notion of the "wannabe," a means by which young women articulate their subjectivity through their consumption of popular culture. "Twist Barbie" is noteworthy, too, insofar as it expresses U.S.-Japanese trade relations through the figure of a doll marketed to girls. The trope of a toy is perhaps not incidental, since Shonen Knife themselves are imaginatively "toying" with Barbie as a twisted and impossible ideal of (Western) femininity—the word twist here referring both to a popular dance and to the band's own cultural practice, which twists the signs of Western commodity culture. "Twist Barbie"—perhaps a reference to the Twist N Turn series of Barbie dolls—conjures a specific mode of girls' leisure within U.S. commodity culture (the activity of playing with Barbie dolls) to critique a culturally specific expression of patriarchal femininity. The song suggests that women can toy with ideals of femininity themselves as artificial (i.e., as unnatural or nonessential) as the Barbie doll.

This is not to say that a song such as "Twist Barbie" cannot also abet U.S. stereotypes of "cute" or "innocent" Asian femininity: indeed, the deadpan enthusiasm with which Shonen Knife play and sing "Twist Barbie," on record and in live performance, suggests that they are less critical of a European, Barbie-type ideal than an analysis of their lyrics might imply. The balance of Shonen Knife is taken up with songs that, in English translation at least, seem to toe the line between parody and complicity.

One of the points of my analysis of contemporary rock cultures has been to show that "girlhood," far from signifying a universal, biologically grounded condition of female experience, instead implies a relation to agency, visibility, and history that emerges within a particular context. The different counternarratives of girlhood produced by a Riot Grrrl band such as Bikini Kill and a Japanese band such as Shonen Knife occupy different antagonistic relations to hegemonic girlhood, whose meaning is itself unstable. The fact that these different narratives take root in very different cultural contexts suggests that one cannot assume the portability of contemporary white U.S. women rockers' critical discourse of girlhood and their advocacy of girl culture.

Research into the discourses of girlhood is crucial if we want to understand how contemporary female performers and their audiences have attempted to create avenues of feminist agency within traditionally masculinist popular forms.

It is noteworthy that [No Doubt's] "I'm Just a Girl" peaked in popularity at about the same time that Madonna and Courtney Love, two of the female rock performers most associated with the cultural subversion of girlhood, chose to "grow up," at least in terms of their public performance of gender: Madonna through her very public staging of motherhood and her role as Evita in the film version of the famous Andrew Lloyd Webber musical, Love through a starring role in the movie *The People vs. Larry Flynt* and a highly publicized beauty/fashion makeover. There is something predictably depressing, too, about the global popularity of the Spice Girls, who have appropriated the spunky defiance associated with English Riot Grrrls in a patently opportunistic fashion. Particularly within the context of the global struggle for women's rights, it is clear that girlhood cannot yet be spoken of as a universal right or property of women. If I am sounding a note of particular urgency, it is because I believe that youth music cultures continue to offer girls important sources of emotional sanctuary and vital outlets for the expression of rage and pleasure, frustration and hope.