

(RE)CONSTRUCTING IDENTITY:
STRUCTURES OF FEMALE EMPOWERMENT IN 1980s
AMERICAN PUNK SUBCULTURE

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Advisor/Committee Chair: Dr. Kimberly Rhodes, Professor of Art History

Yvonne C. Garrett
Drew University
Madison, New Jersey
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ABSTRACT

(Re)Constructing Identity: Structures of Female Empowerment in 1980s American Punk Subculture

Ph.D. Dissertation by

Yvonne C. Garrett

The Caspersen School of Graduate Study
Drew University

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This dissertation presents a feminist revisionist history of Punk through a combination of critical engagement with primary texts and performances and a selection of oral histories with women active in the Punk scene in New York City in the 1980s. Central to this history is the proposition that through participation in Punk women were able to create new and more diverse expressions of identity than those demanded by mainstream culture.

Punk did not suddenly “die” in the late 1970s or early 1980s but is a collective community producing material objects as far ranging as literature, spoken word performance, underground print publications, bodily self-expression, and resistance to mainstream culture in the form of clothing, hairstyles, and body-modification. Women active in Punk in the 1970s and 1980s were able to formulate a new image for women focused on a critique of mainstream culture’s expectations of what it means to be female in the world. This work was largely disseminated through media: underground press, music, and film. Women active in Punk confronted and worked against the repression of assertiveness enacted by mainstream culture instead creating identities through physical modes of dress/style, speech, behavior, and material artistic objects that supported a more

open formation of identity thereby influencing later generations of women and providing them with broader opportunities for identity expression.

The written history of Punk has traditionally been male-centric. This dissertation refutes the marginalization of women in Punk history, instead excavating the work of individuals and groups identifying as female who were central and essential to the formation of Punk. This work is essential in giving women the power to narrate our own history while also expanding the historical narrative of Punk. Rather than a decade dominated by male voices and male bodies, the 1980s were a reinvigoration of 1970s liberation, a reshaping of a broader feminism, and a foundation for the Riot Grrrl narrative of the 1990s. This is a history that works against the continued marginalization of women; a history focused on women's bodies taking up space and making noise.

To my family and to all the women who made it through and all those who didn't

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INTRODUCTION

As Judith M. Bennett writes, in the 1970s “one of the battlefronts of feminism was women’s history, where feminists – both in the academy and outside it – were reclaiming a lost past in their research, empowering students in their teaching, and using historical insight to inform feminist strategy.”¹ Bennett cites the fundamental importance of feminism in writing more balanced histories; histories which do not erase entire populations in favor of a central, limited point of view. It is my aim in this dissertation to provide an alternative history of Punk² through a combination of critical engagement with primary texts and performances and a selection of oral histories with women active in the Punk subculture in the 1980s. This work is essential in giving women the power to narrate our own history while also expanding the historical narrative of Punk, a narrative that has traditionally been male-centric.³ This dissertation provides a parallel and at times

¹ Judith M. Bennett, *History Matters: Patriarchy and the Challenge of Feminism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 1.

² Although originally used by Lester Bangs to describe 1960s garage bands, the term Punk shifted in meaning in the mid-1970s to describe a sound coming out of New York and later, London. Punk was and is a global cultural movement originating in New York and London in the 1970s characterized by opposition to social norms of behavior, dress, performance, gender expression. Authenticity is important in Punk subculture with outsiders who attempt to adopt Punk style without being part of the Punk scene referred to as “poseurs.” Breaking down the distance between performer and audience is central to the Punk ethic as is D.I.Y. art, music, and text production. Although Punk has been heavily marketed and commodified since its inception in the late 1970s, those who identify as Punk generally embrace underground and D.I.Y. culture rejecting mass media, mainstream politics, music, and art. Punk also refers to the music that was (and is) central to the movement in all its permutations (Punk, anarcho-Punk, street-Punk, gutter Punk, skate Punk, hard core, AfroPunk, QueerCore, etc.). For the purposes of this dissertation, “post-Punk” and “No Wave” will be included in discussions of Punk.

³ For example, see Gillian McCain and Legs McNeil, *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (New York: Grove Press; 20th Anniversary edition,

antithetical history of the 1980s Punk scene in the United States, primarily focused in New York City. Central to this history is the proposition that through participation in Punk subculture women were able to create new and more diverse expressions of identity than those demanded by mainstream culture. I refute the marginalization of women as presented in histories of the 1970s and 1980s Punk scene, particularly in New York City, and instead excavate the work of individuals and groups identifying as female who were central and essential to the formation of American Punk. Through explorations of individual histories within the Punk subculture, I challenge assumptions made around the centrality of men in Punk using examples of women creating new art forms while also carving a specifically gendered space for themselves that served to break down any assumptions of male centrality by outside observers and/or male participants in late twentieth century American Punk.

One of the many difficulties in writing cultural history is the necessary limitation imposed by perspective. In participant cultural histories such as this one, a claim of authenticity is often put forward, suggesting that as some sort of “insider” the writer has more and better access to accurate information than any outsider.⁴ This then raises the

2014). Roman Kozak, *This Ain't No Disco: The Story of CBGB* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1988), and Everett True, *Hey Ho Let's Go: The Story of The Ramones* (London: Omnibus Press, 2005), Steven Blush, *American Hardcore: A Tribal History* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, Inc., 2001), and Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming: Anarchy, Sex Pistols, Punk Rock, and Beyond* (New York: Faber & Faber, 1991).

⁴ For examples of participant cultural histories claiming “insider” status see Blush *American Hardcore*, McCain and McNeill *Please Kill Me*, George Hurchalla, *Going Underground: American Punk 1979-1989* (Oakland: PM Press, 2016), Vivienne Goldman, *Revenge of the She-Punks: A Feminist Music History from Poly Styrene to Pussy Riot* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), Lauraine Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press), and John Robb, *Punk Rock: an Oral History* (Oakland: PM Press, 2012).

problem of point of view: what one “insider” may see as an accurate presentation of history may be seen by another “insider” as inaccurate or limited by point of view. Such is often the case in cultural histories focused on subcultures and in particular, in the varied histories extant on Punk Rock. Where one writer might present a fairly cohesive history focused on the London Punk scene⁵, another will argue that Punk started when Patti Smith began frequenting CBGB;⁶ another will argue that Punk actually came to fruition in the nearly all-white, nearly all-male American “hardcore” scene of the 1980s; yet another, that Punk “lives on” within self-described “anarcho-Punk” largely-white, largely-male communities in American cities.⁷ None of these histories is inclusive and none is completely accurate but instead, each is part of a vast narrative surrounding the subcultural movement loosely coalesced around the term “Punk” that began in the 1970s

⁵ For example, Savage, *England's Dreaming*.

⁶ For example, Kozak, *This Ain't No Disco* and Clinton Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids: a Pre-Punk History for a Post-Punk World* (New York: Penguin, 1993). Note, CBGB, also called “CBGBs,” and “CBs” (1973-2006) was a music club and dive bar opened by Hilly Kristal in 1973 at 315 Bowery in the East Village (New York City). The club's full name of CBGB & OMFUG stood for “Country, Bluegrass, Blues and Other Music for Uplifting Gormandizers.” Kristal initially planned to showcase rising Country and Bluegrass bands but after the collapse of The Mercer Arts Center building, CBs became a locus for the early Punk scene. Mercer refugees including Alan Vega's Suicide, Wayne (Jayne) County, and others began playing at CBs. Note: in Punk scene vernacular, CBGB was/is often referred to as “CBs” and rarely “CBGB.” For more on CBs, see Hilly Kristal, *CBGB & OMFUG: Thirty Years from the Home of Underground Rock*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2005), and Steven Blush, *New York Rock: From the Rise of the Velvet Underground to the Fall of CBGB*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2016), 130-133.

⁷ For example, Kevin Mattson, “Did Punk Matter?: Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture During the 1980s,” *American Studies* 42, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 69-97, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4064315>.

and, arguably, continues to the present day.⁸ As a long-time participant in the Punk subculture, I lay claim to a level of insider knowledge including connection to and understanding of the women profiled and interviewed for this dissertation.⁹

An essential part of the study of women's history is the study of identity: how women see themselves and how they are perceived by society, particularly in intersections with various media and/or in performance. One of the spaces for experimenting with different forms of identity is within American subcultures: radical political movements, art and music movements, and, in the second half of the twentieth century, the cultural movement loosely termed "Punk."¹⁰ Long before the 1990s rhetoric

⁸ For discussion of global Punk see Goldman, *Revenge of the She-Punks*, Kevin Dunn, *Global Punk: Resistance and Rebellion in Everyday Life* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), Raymond A. Patton, *Punk Crisis: The Global Punk Rock Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), Kelley Tatro, "The Hard Work of Screaming: Physical Exertion and Affective Labor Among Mexico City's Punk Vocalists," *Ethnomusicology* 58, no. 3 (2014): 431-53, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5406/ethnomusicology.58.3.0431>. Jeremy Wallach, "Living the Punk Lifestyle in Jakarta," *Ethnomusicology* 52, no. 1 (2008): 98-116, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20174568>, among others.

⁹ My biography and biographical information on women I interviewed is contained in the Appendix A.

¹⁰ For instance, see Pepper G. Glass, "Doing Scene: Identity, Space, and the Interactional Accomplishment of Youth Culture," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 41, issue: 6 (2012): 695-716, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241612454104>. Michelle Kempson, "'I Sometimes Wonder Whether I'm an Outsider': Negotiating Belonging in Zine Subculture," *Sociology* 49, no. 6 (2015): 1081-095, www.jstor.org/stable/44016773, and Susan Willis, "Hardcore: Subculture American Style," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 2 (1993): 365-83, www.jstor.org/stable/1343880, Michael Du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman, "Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture," *College Literature* 24, no. 1 (1997): 45-58, www.jstor.org/stable/25099625, and Natalia Ruiz-Junco and Scott Hunt, "Identity," in *Protest Cultures: A Companion*, ed. by Kathrin Fahlenbrach, Martin Klimke, and Joachim Scharloth (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016), 153-59, www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvg50b1r.19.

of “grrrl power,” American women were forming new identities and carving new spaces for themselves within American Punk.

In American popular culture in the late twentieth century, women and girls were generally portrayed as weak, or if strong, as somehow aberrant.¹¹ The rise of the various rights movements and women’s responses to the exclusionary misogyny of the Left in the 1960s and 1970s laid foundations for the development within 1970s and 1980s Punk subculture of spaces for women to develop new forms of identity and ways of formulating image in contravention to mainstream society’s expectations of what it means to be female.¹² Women became active participants in the formation, creation, and dissemination of a new image for women and with this, greater possibilities for self-expression. Much of this work was done within American subculture and disseminated through the underground press and Punk scene in the United States. This work of questioning traditional roles and (re)formations of identity and image was integral to the Punk movement of the 1970s and 1980s and laid foundations not only for 1990s Riot

¹¹ For example, see Joy Press and Simon Reynolds, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock’n’Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), Melissa A Milkie, "Contested Images of Femininity: An Analysis of Cultural Gatekeepers' Struggles with the 'Real Girl' Critique," *Gender and Society* 16, no. 6 (2002): 839-59, www.jstor.org/stable/3081937, and Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009; Reprint Edition).

¹² In “Punk Rock and the Crisis of Femininity, 1976-1986,” Shayla Thiel-Stern discusses the false-construct of a crisis of femininity in the 1970s-1980s Punk scene. Teen girls who “dressed like Punks” were represented within various media (Thiel-Stern uses television news, drama, and talk shows as examples) as exhibiting “improper performance of gender” with style being linked to assumed drug abuse and promiscuity. *From the Dance Hall to Facebook: Teen Girls, Mass Media, and Moral Panic in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 123-128, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk728.8>

Grrrl but also more diverse and long-lasting movements including AfroPunk, QueerCore, and more.¹³

Unlike struggles to define identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the sexual revolution and the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s questioned the very definition of "woman" and female sexuality.¹⁴ Later arguments problematizing gender or identity based on biological sex or understanding of the structural position of woman in society are useful but do not necessarily tell us anything about individual women's experiences. Beyond understanding how notions of gender shift over time and how women adapted to these shifts, it is also relevant to ask what role gender played in the construction and presentation of the self and what role various aspects of American Punk subculture played in the (re)construction of female identity.

In the 1980s, there was a backlash against feminism and the hard work done by feminist activists in the 1960s and 1970s. This backlash is detailed in Susan Faludi's foundational text *Backlash* and also explored by Naomi Wolf in *The Beauty Myth*.¹⁵ In

¹³ For more on AfroPunk see Eric Darnell Pritchard, "Grace Jones, Afro Punk, and Other Fierce Provocations: An Introduction to 'Sartorial Politics, Intersectionality, and Queer Worldmaking,'" *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 4, no. 3 (2017): 1–11, www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/qed.4.3.0001 and Bertram D. Ashe et al, "These - Are - The 'Breaks': A Roundtable Discussion on Teaching the Post-Soul Aesthetic," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 787–803, www.jstor.org/stable/25426990. For more on Queer Core see Michael Du Plessis and Kathleen Chapman, "Queercore: The Distinct Identities of Subculture," *College Literature* 24, no. 1 (1997): 45–58, www.jstor.org/stable/25099625.

¹⁴ For more on the Women's Liberation Movement see Choonib Lee, "Women's Liberation and Sixties Armed Resistance," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 11, no. 1 (2017): 25–52, www.jstor.org/stable/10.14321/jstudradi.11.1.0025 and Ellen Willis, "Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution," *Social Text*, no. 6, (1982): 3–21, www.jstor.org/stable/466614.

¹⁵ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2006) and Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*.

both works, American society is shown pushing back against gains made by women in politics, the work place, and the domestic sphere. This backlash was felt in the Punk community by many young women with some refusing to align themselves with the term “feminist” (while at the same time living as active feminists) and others refusing to participate in American mainstream society on any level. As Wolf details in *The Beauty Myth*, “Feminism had become ‘the f-word.’ Women who complained about the beauty myth were assumed to have a personal shortcoming themselves: they must be fat, ugly, incapable of satisfying a man, ‘feminists,’ or – horrors – lesbians.”¹⁶ The 1980s was a time of intense cultural shift with Right Wing Conservative Ronald Reagan coming to power and the Republican Party embracing Jerry Falwell’s ultra-conservative Moral Majority.¹⁷ Opposition to feminist ideals was strong and pressure on women to conform was intense.¹⁸ The feminine ideal of the time, as disseminated by mass media, was “a

¹⁶ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 3.

¹⁷ Haberman, Claude. “Religion and Right-Wing Politics: How Evangelicals Reshaped Election.” *The New York Times*, Oct. 28, 2018, Accessed December 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/10/28/us/religion-politics-evangelicals.html>. Joseph Vogel, “‘To Crush the Serpent’: James Baldwin, the Religious Right, and the Moral Minority,” *James Baldwin Review* 2, 1: 28-48, <https://doi.org/10.7227/JBR.2.3>. Michael Sean Winters, *God’s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* (New York: HarperOne 2012). D.K. Williams, “Reagan’s Religious Right: The Unlikely Alliance between Southern Evangelicals and a California Conservative,” in *Ronald Reagan and the 1980s. Studies of the Americas* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230616196_9

¹⁸ See Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 2, Rebecca Coleman, “The Becoming of Bodies,” *Feminist Media Studies* 8:2 (2008): 163-179, DOI: 10.1080/14680770801980547. See also, Margaret Louise McGladrey, “Becoming Bodies: How Preadolescent Girls Consume and Produce Media in 21st Century America” (Master’s Thesis, University of Kentucky, 2011) https://uknowledge.uky.edu/gradschool_theses/102. In McGladrey’s work on girls and media in 21st century America, she discusses “Objectification Theory” as developed by Barbara

gaunt, yet full-breasted Caucasian, not often found in nature.”¹⁹ To Wolf and other feminist theorists, the “beauty myth” and its attendant ideal served not only a financial purpose (to sell diet aids, breast implants, makeup) but also a political end, “The stronger women were becoming politically, the heavier the ideals of beauty would bear down upon them, mostly in order to distract their energy and undermine their progress.”²⁰ But a growing number of young women in the 1980s rejected this ideal and found a place for our “unfeminine” attitudes and behavior within the Punk scene.

In both personal and more academic histories of Punk, the status of participants as “outsiders” from “normal” society is often stressed. In *Ugly Differences*, Yetta Howard suggests that there is a link between Punk Rock, underground performance movements, and *queerness*.²¹ In this usage, queerness is not simply defined by sexual preference but

L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts in 1997 as a means of explaining the consequences for young women of living in a society that constructs women’s bodies as “objects existing for the pleasure of the male gaze and as subject to constant comparison with other women’s body-objects.” Women in America are subjected to a pervasive presentation of women’s bodies as objects both throughout mass media and in their interactions with others. Treating women’s bodies as objects “conditions girls to view themselves through a critical observer’s gaze” in a phenomenon described as “self-objectification.” Because girls/young women are taught to anticipate nonstop evaluation of their bodies, they develop an “ever-attentive self-consciousness, called body surveillance” that drives intense body/appearance focused feelings of anxiety, shame, and self-loathing which in turn drive the development of depression, eating disorders, etc.

¹⁹ Wolf, *The Beauty Myth*, 3.

²⁰ Wolf, *Ibid.* and Thiel-Stern “Punk Rock and a Crisis of Femininity, 1976-1986.”

²¹ In *Ugly Differences*, Howard also defines “ugliness” as “anti-aesthetic textual practice...locate(d) in/as underground culture” where “underground cultural practices become its necessary archive.” While Howard is primarily interested in queer female sexuality as evidenced in underground culture, her insights work well for investigating non-male participation in the 1980s Punk scene. Howard is interested in “dismantling monolithic beliefs about acceptable identities” work aligned with that done by women in the 1980s Punk scene (1-6).

instead, to be *queer* is to be outside society, as Patti Smith sings in “Rock’n’Roll N*gger,”: “outside of society, that’s where I want to be!” - to be *Punk* is to *desire* to be outside society.²² Smith declaims that she *wants* to be outside society – she wants to embrace a broader definition of identity; one that is defined through resistance to the norm. If the 1980s portrayed in Naomi Wolf’s *The Beauty Myth* is one where women are constrained in action, language, and especially appearance, the 1980s lived by women in the American Punk scene is one defined by a space or place where norms could be rejected, restructured, and rebuilt into a livable world but this would happen only through our own efforts.

For Howard, ugliness is related to “the grotesque” and can be linked with “the abject or with various incarnations of a hideous otherness.”²³ Howard focuses on the female body, “The relationship that female corporeality has with the grotesque has been informed by feminist theories that have sought to reconfigure or, at least, reimagine conceivable damaging characterizations through the lens of opposition.”²⁴ Howard is less interested in the fantastic nature of the grotesque judging it to be aligned with beauty, “it is an unattractiveness that, in being spectacular, functions to draw the viewer in,” but both structures, Howard’s “ugliness” and the “grotesque,” can serve in discussing the restructuring of image and appearance done by many women in Punk; a restructuring that

²² Patti Smith Group, “Rock’n’Roll N*gger,” on *Easter*, Arista Records 4171, 1978, LP.

²³ Howard, *Ugly Differences*, 8.

²⁴ Howard, *Ibid.* See also Mary Russo, *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

was highlighted as “crisis” by American media in the 1980s.²⁵ Howard’s work is also useful to this project in the way she approaches a definition of “underground.” Howard is interested in “harnessing the conceptual boundaries of underground to encompass a variety of texts and contexts that, like the resistance to beauty, have mostly resisted being commodified for mass appeal...a range of anti-aesthetic directions in literary, visual, and auditory cultures.”²⁶ This structuring of the underground as experienced through the production of a broad-based anti-aesthetic is essential to this project and to achieving a broader understanding of women’s contributions to the larger Punk subculture.²⁷

Much critical work has been done on the various forms of subculture performance in the 1970s-1980s. Writings on the avant-garde,²⁸ experimental and Punk literature, the “cut-up” and other late century work generally focus on a male-centered narrative.²⁹

²⁵ Howard, *Ibid.*, 8-9. Also, Thiel-Stern “Punk Rock and a Crisis of Femininity.”

²⁶ Howard, *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁷ In *How Writing is Written* (Los Angeles: Black Sparrow Press, 1974), 154 Gertrude Stein also discusses “ugliness,” linking it with creative resistance to tradition. The artist is always “under the shadow of the thing that is just past...[this] is the reason why the creative person always has the appearance of ugliness.”

²⁸ See for example, “Avant-garde Unites over Burroughs,” *New York Times*, Dec. 1, 1978. Accessed November 14, 2020. <https://archive.nytimes.com/www.nytimes.com/books/00/02/13/specials/burroughs-avant.html>. Rona Cran, “‘Everything is permitted’: William Burroughs’ Cut-up Novels and European Art,” *Comparative American Studies An International Journal*, 11:3, (2013): 300-313, DOI: 10.1179/1477570013Z.000000000048, and Will Norman “Ginsberg, Burroughs and the Ghosts of the Avant-Garde,” in *Navigating the Transnational in Modern American Literature and Culture*, eds. Tara Stubbs and Doug Haynes (New York: Routledge, 2017).

²⁹ Hillary Miller, *Drop Dead: Performance in Crisis, 1970s New York* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016). Julia Earle-Levine, “John Giorno’s Half-Century on the Bowery,” *New York Times*, June 1, 2015. Accessed November 14, 2020.

Similarly, work on Punk culture and music is either British-centered or assumes that women only existed within the subculture as music performers including Debbie Harry (Blondie) and Patti Smith and/or that those performers were in some way aberrant.³⁰ Some of the critical work done on women in Punk attempts to link the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s with the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s, making assumptions about cohesiveness of both subculture and rhetoric.³¹ Perhaps one of the most often cited critics writing on women in Punk, Mary Celeste Kearney, positions Riot Grrrl as "Third Wave" feminism in direct relation and response to what she defines as "Second Wave" feminisms of the 1970s.³² Leaving aside the problematic use of "waves" in relation to American feminism, for Kearney, as for others writing on Punk, either women in Punk did not exist until Riot Grrrl or they existed as subservient to and

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/01/t-magazine/john-giornos-half-century-on-the-bowery.html>.

³⁰ See Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts*, Jon Savage, *England's Dreaming*, among others.

³¹ For example, Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: the True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010), Mary Celeste Kearney, "Riot Grrrl: It's Not Just Music, It's Not Just Punk." *Spectator* 16, Issue 1, (1995): 82-95. Accessed December 20, 2019.

https://www.academia.edu/7684003/Riot_Grrrl_It_s_Not_Just_Music_It_s_Not_Just_Punk. El Hunt "A brief history of Riot Grrrl – the space reclaiming 90s Punk movement," *NME*, Aug. 27th 2019, Accessed December 20, 2019. <https://www.nme.com/blogs/nme-blogs/brief-history-riot-grrrl-space-reclaiming-90s-punk-movement-2542166>. Natalya Lusty, "Riot Grrrl Manifestos and Radical Vernacular Feminism," *Australian Feminist Studies*, 32:93, (2017): 219-239, DOI: 10.1080/08164649.2017.1407638, and Angela McRobbie, *Feminism and Youth Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

³² Kearney, *Ibid.*, also "The Missing Links: Riot Grrrl-Feminism-Lesbian Culture," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 207-29, and "Riot Grrrl," in *American Countercultures: An Encyclopedia of Nonconformists*, ed. Gina Misiroglu (New York: Routledge, 2009), 621-22.

marginalized by the men associated with the subculture.³³ For Joy Press, one of the early critics to write about gender and rock music, women in the Punk scene were either “aping masculinities” in performing Punk or following a long line of “feminine” performance – for Press, women were allowed to sing but not play loud guitars.³⁴ Because Punk is a subculture often observed by outsiders whose history is written largely by rock critics and male self-proclaimed participants, assertions made by writers like Press and Kearney are often repeated by others without any attempt at investigation or critique. Similar to the influence Dick Hebdige’s early work on English Punk had on much academic work on the subculture, so too Kearney’s work has created a questionable narrative of a feminist history linking 1970s feminist activism with 1990s Riot Grrrl, effectively erasing women in Punk in the 1980s. Just as Hebdige has faced critique by both outsider and insider cultural historians, so too must any history of Punk that erases women or neglects the 1980s. While previous academic work on Punk is useful in showing how one might apply the lens of theory to subculture, we need to learn from and then move past Kearney and Hebdige if we are going to find new ways to view Punk history.

A movement that created vast amounts of ephemeral material objects, Punk also evidenced an “end of the century” stance that suggested everything everywhere was up for revision and destruction. Doing research on Punk history is a difficult task, rife with false and distorted narratives, wildly varying collection policies in archives that often

³³ For examples of women in Punk shown as subservient see Leblanc, *Pretty in Punk*, Goldman, *Revenge of the She-Punks*, Sharon M. Hannon, *Punks: a Guide to an American Subculture* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood/ABC-CLIO, 2010), Maria Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score* (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005), and as non-existent see Blush, McNeil, many others.

³⁴ Press, *Ibid.*

serve these false narratives, and a repetition of specific and limited histories that have become a part of the collective memory of Punk. There are several narratives on the history of Punk, all of which are difficult to prove and have been critiqued by both “objective” outsiders and subculture insiders. One of the aspects of social-cultural history is the way much archival information is held by insiders and focused on their specific and personal histories as participants in the subculture. While the importance of oral history and collective memory in any exploration of Punk cannot be understated, it is difficult, if not impossible to perform objective cultural-historical research when the history is constantly being rewritten by the participants. Some of the (a)historical narratives that have evolved around Punk include the claim that it was invented by Malcolm McLaren in London in the late 1970s, focused largely on “his” band the Sex Pistols, and centered in and around the bondage fashion shop “Sex.”³⁵ Another claim is that it was invented in New York City in the late 1970s arising out of the downtown avant-garde poetry/music scene and focused largely on Patti Smith, Tom Verlaine (Television), and early performances by both at Hilly Crystal’s Bowery dive CBGB.³⁶ Another history focuses on the rise of the Ramones and their blisteringly fast 1950s influenced rock.³⁷ There is also the narrative in most histories of Punk – whether based in London or New York –

³⁵ Savage, Ibid., “Vivienne Westwood’s history of Punk” in *Westwood: Punk, Icon, Activist*, directed by Lorna Tucker (Greenwich Entertainment, 2018), Amazon Prime. Also, in Goldman, Ibid., many others.

³⁶ McCain and McNeil, Ibid. Kozak, Ibid.

³⁷ For example, see True, Ibid..

that Punk somehow “died” in 1978 or 1979 and was replaced by either “New Wave”³⁸ or “post-Punk”³⁹ or some combination of other forms.⁴⁰ What is central to nearly all of these histories is the suggestion that Punk ended nearly as soon as it began, that it was largely music-focused, and that it was largely male. Like many histories based on the repetitions and writings of a central few, the history of Punk has become rife with erasures and centered on the perceptions of a few participants and observers with their erasures repeated by later cultural historians until what may have only been the truth for a few participants becomes accepted history of an entire movement or movements.⁴¹ One of the goals of this dissertation is to provide access to the voices of those whose narratives have been erased or simply allowed to languish in silence. I suggest that Punk did not suddenly “die” in the late 1970s or early 1980s and that Punk is not simply the music that came out

³⁸ The term “New Wave” as it was used in the 1980s in the United States generally refers to a distinctly commercially oriented music movement characterized by electronic/dance/pop music, lack of challenge to mainstream musical structures and/or authority, and courting more traditional relationships with societal norms and the entertainment industry. Greg Shaw writes about “the new wave” stressing the “pop” sensibilities of new wave as opposed to Punk, “New Trends of the New Wave,” *Billboard*. January 1978. Debbie Harry also discusses “new wave” versus “Punk” asserting that she is still “Punk” but that Blondie was often classed as “new wave” due to their success with pop-structured songs, *Face It: A Memoir*, (New York: Dey Street Books, 2019), 105, 164, 185, 188, 200, 305, 352.

³⁹ A term used by late 1970s-1980s rock critics to describe those bands that expanded the Punk Rock sound to include elements of jazz, funk, electronic music, dub, and an amalgamation of ideologies derived out of modernism, radical performance, and movement away from the garage-band based sounds of early Punk. Also call art-Punk. See Reynolds, *Ibid.*, Heylin, *Ibid.*, also Mimi Haddon, *What Is Post-Punk? Genre and Identity in Avant-Garde Popular Music, 1977-82* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020).

⁴⁰ For instance, Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978–84*, (London: Faber and Faber, Ltd., 2005).

⁴¹ For example, McCain and MacNeil, *Ibid.*, Blush, *Ibid.*, and many more.

of the movement (or scene) but instead Punk is a collective community producing material objects as far ranging as literature, spoken word performance, underground print publications, bodily self-expression and resistance to mainstream culture in the form of clothing, hairstyles, and body-modification, and also a support structure providing housing, performance spaces, and community for those identified as and self-identifying with the Punk subculture.

METHODOLOGY & THEORY

In this dissertation my aim is to write a feminist revisionist history of Punk. The tools I use for this work include archival research, oral histories, cultural context, and secondary sources. As I explored my sources, I employed theories around performance, performance of gender, and late twentieth century feminism, specifically using lenses of feminist and media theory. Using primary source material in collections held at Smith College, New York University, and private collections along with a combination of historical and theoretical texts as well as oral histories with women active in the Punk scene in the 1980s, I provide an alternate history of American Punk that works against the continued marginalization of women in extant narratives; a history focused on women's bodies taking up space and making noise.

In the past fifty years, American feminist thought has experienced massive shifts in directional focus, upheavals in meaning, and ultimately expanded from a largely hetero-normative, Euro-centric critique to a broad-based, multivalent set of tools to both view and critique society and culture. The feminist lens and feminist critique is essential in any exploration of American cultural history. In this dissertation I rely on past work done in the varied fields of feminist, media, cultural, and literary theory to examine

women's role in Punk and the challenges to traditional identity formation these women enacted.

Focused on the position of women in society, "what is happening around and within" us, and the varied power structures (gender, race, class, sexual identity) that work against women, feminist theory strives to highlight oppression and shift the discourse to both acknowledge bias and attempt to ameliorate it.⁴² While some position theory as a passive tool created by and for the academy, I would argue much of the vital work done by feminist theorists in the past fifty years can be said to "play a worthwhile part in the struggle to end oppression" both within the larger space of media (textual, aural, and visual) and "in the world outside of texts."⁴³ Feminist theory with its attendant application in critical studies of film, television, music, and literature is essential for understanding American culture, women's roles within that culture, and in giving us tools to change structures of oppression. Any history that does not at least in some aspect use the lens of feminism is at best incomplete and in essence enacts erasure and marginalization in favor of a dominant male-centered narrative.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, concurrent with the rise of Punk, ideas around "bodily experience" in culture and society came to the fore. By including work on the body, subjectivity, and identity, feminist thought and activism expanded its efforts to identify and work against dominant power structures in all aspects of American life.

⁴² bell hooks, "Theory as Liberatory Practice," *Yale Journal of Law & Feminism* 4, no. 1, (1991):59. Accessed December 1, 2020. <http://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlf/vol14/iss1/2>.

⁴³ Robyn Warhol-Down and Diane Price Herndel, *Feminisms Redux: an anthology of literary theory and criticism* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2009), xiii.

While many women active in Punk in the 1970s and 1980s did not position themselves as “feminists” and were not reading feminist theory, there is a shared history from Simone de Beauvoir’s existentialist question, “What is a woman?”⁴⁴ and her positioning of freedom as a central value to the work of Luce Irigaray, Hélène Cixous, and Laura Mulvey (among others). Kathy Acker references the work of what she calls the “French feminists” in discussions focused on her writing; Acker sees theory as essential in understanding the forces of patriarchal oppression and in striving against these forces. She illustrates the connection between women’s performance of Punk in material productions, in enacting/recreating their own identities and with foundational ideas found in feminist theory.⁴⁵ Acker viewed her own work in relation to Hélène Cixous’s *l’écriture féminine*, writing that works outside the constraints of patriarchal discourse, empowering women to write their own narratives, and using writing to access their own bodies and identities.⁴⁶ Writing is an essential part of the work of feminist activism; women need to write to redefine themselves and gain their freedom: not only an embodiment of identity but an embodiment of the female body. “Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is

⁴⁴ Judith Okely, “Rereading the Second Sex,” in *Simone de Beauvoir: A Critical Reader*, ed. Elizabeth Fallaize (New York: Routledge, 1998), 19-29.

⁴⁵ For example, in Kathy Acker and Larry McCaffery, “An Interview with Kathy Acker,” *Mississippi Review* 20, no. 1/2 (1991): 83-97 www.jstor.org/stable/20134512 and Kathy Acker, 1990-04-24, Sylvere Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive, MSS 221: Series XI: Audio: Subseries A, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

⁴⁶ Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa,” trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976): 875-93, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3173239> and Verena Andermatt Conley, *Hélène Cixous: writing the feminine*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984).

yours, take it."⁴⁷ This idea is essential in understanding Acker's writing and other texts and performances produced by women in the Punk subculture in the 1980s.

Also writing in the 1970s, Luce Irigaray critiques the idea of the "universal subject," suggesting that this subject is male and neither universal nor neutral but instead achieves domination in discourse only through the suppression of the feminine. The idea that there is an essential history of Punk that does *not* centralize (or even include) women is aligned with Irigaray's illustration of the creation of the "Other" (feminine) by men in order to position the masculine as central and subject; such histories of Punk are neither valid nor neutral.⁴⁸ If women are to become *subjects*, what is required is an ability to imagine equality not through sameness but through *difference*. This idea of difference gestures toward Cixous and work done in feminist media studies beginning in the 1970s. Mulvey's theory of "the male gaze"⁴⁹ wherein women exist in a "traditional exhibitionist role...simultaneously looked at and displayed with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact" signifying "to-be-looked-at-ness"⁵⁰ is useful in looking at the ways women in Punk have been written about or written out of the historical narrative.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Ibid., 876.

⁴⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 171. Also, Luce Irigaray, *The Irigaray Reader*, ed. Margaret Whitford (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

⁴⁹ Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 833-44.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Mulvey's theory of the male gaze is necessarily limited as it focuses on the white cisgender heterosexual male gaze of the white cisgender heterosexual female as she is shown in certain Hollywood films. For critique of Mulvey, see B. Ruby Rich, "In the Name of Feminist Film Criticism," in *Movies and Methods, Volume II*, ed. Bill Nichols

Although not published until the 1990s, Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* is also helpful in exploring gender and identity among women in American Punk. Butler, like Scott, employs Foucauldian theory to challenge assumptions about gender. Central to Butler's argument is the idea that the stability of categories of sex, gender, and sexuality are culturally constructed through performance. Gender is a "stylized repetition of acts...which are internally discontinuous...[with] the appearance of substance precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment."⁵² Gender is "real" only to the extent that it is performed.⁵³ Gender identity, for Butler, is not a choice but instead operates within "regulative discourses" wherein men are "masculine," women are "feminine." For Butler, performance is key in understanding both gender and sexuality. Butler's critique focuses on breaking down the gender binaries within the work of de Beauvoir and Irigaray contesting that there is no such thing as a universal "female" being. In other words, when a rock critic suggests that women performers are merely "aping masculinity" she is relying on assumptions around a universal "femininity" that does not

(Berkeley: U of CA Press, 1985), 341-358, Patricia Erens, introduction to *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, ed. P. Eren, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1990), xxi, and bell hooks on the oppositional gaze in "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators," in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, (New York: Routledge, 2015) 115-132. For the application of Mulvey's theories in conjunction with the discussion of music, see Maria Raha, *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*, (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2005).

⁵² Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, 40, no. 4 (December, 1988): 520, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3207893>.

⁵³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

exist.⁵⁴ Also useful is Howard's exploration of "ugliness" in the underground as it related to women in the 1980s Punk scene as well as Mary Russo's "grotesque," and Kristeva's "abject," particularly in relation to Acker's textual work and the threat "the abject" presents to systems of identity and order.⁵⁵

The central work of feminist theory in media and cultural studies is to "disrupt the narrative" presented by men and for men as a hegemonic narrative where women exist only as objects to be gazed upon.⁵⁶ In this dissertation I provide a history of women in Punk that works to de-center the traditional hegemonic male narrative positioning women as marginal or erases them altogether.

Oral Histories:

Crucial to my work in this dissertation is the presence of the voices of women active in the Punk scene in the 1980s. Over the course of more than three years, I conducted more than thirty oral history interviews with women who self-described as Punk or "formerly" Punk and were active in the Punk scene in New York in the 1980s.⁵⁷ These women were musicians, writers, fanzine editors, photographers, members of the Punk scene, activists, and came from the five boroughs of New York City, Long Island,

⁵⁴ Press, Ibid.

⁵⁵ Julia Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror: an Essay on Abjection* (European Perspectives Series), trans. Leon Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). See also Barbara Creed on Kristeva in *Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: an Imaginary Abjection* (London: Routledge, 1993), 65.

⁵⁶ Margaret Gallagher, "Feminist Media Perspectives," in *A Companion to Media Studies*, ed. Angharad N. Valdivia (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2003), 35.

⁵⁷ As a Punk "insider" myself, my connection with some of these women is personal, others I knew only as members of the New York scene. My biography and biographical sketches of interviews subjects are in Appendix A.

New Jersey, the West Coast, and London. I conducted most interviews online or in person in New York using a standard set of questions.⁵⁸ Select subjects were interviewed more than once to clarify certain issues or at their own request. Due to the request of some interview subjects, some subjects interview responses are not used, and subjects are presented anonymously with care taken to remove identifying language from any who are especially concerned with issues of privacy. In addition to oral histories conducted specifically for use in this dissertation, I also use material from the oral histories on record in the Smith College "Women of Rock" collection.

Oral history research is necessarily a combination of both practice and theory. The process of conducting oral history is generally made up of three parts: the interview, the transcription, and the interpretation. An oral history interview is always a “three-way” conversation involving the interviewer and the subject (or narrator), and the conversation between the subject (or narrator) and culture; the possibility of unmediated or “pure” narratives of the past does not exist. Central to oral history is memory and the process of remembering; it is an active process of performance. The task of the oral historian is to engage with not only the interview subject’s narrative but to acknowledge the relationship between what, how, and why we remember what we do and how memory is then performed and becomes narrative. These interviews were an exercise in remembering, story-telling, and in some cases, nostalgia. One of the difficulties of conducting oral history as an “insider” is the temptation to contribute to the interview with argument over facts, details, and chronology. Throughout I have worked to maintain academic objectivity while also preserving my network of fellow “insiders.”

⁵⁸ See Appendix A.

Although the classic Ramones' lyric might seem like a central ethos of Punk, at some point in the past few decades, "Aging Punks decided that they did care about history."⁵⁹ Instead of an ephemeral culture or "cultural fad that would inevitably be co-opted and dismissed," Punk has persisted, witnessed by a flood of retrospectives and oral histories.⁶⁰ These histories work to create a collective memory of Punk. As James Wertsch argues "collective memory functions to provide a useable past for the creation of coherent individual and group identities...[This] helps to form and sustain imagined communities."⁶¹ Groups use narrative tools from their own "cultural toolkit" to fashion their collective memory.⁶² Punk oral histories are a part of the project of building collective memory within the Punk community on a global level; histories that often repeat a fallacy of authenticity. By using a technique whereby hundreds of interviews are cut and pasted together to form a narrative, various editors suggest that there is no editorial intervention with their subjects and instead lay claim to an objectivity not found in more traditional narrative history.⁶³ These texts are positioned as "definitive" histories and privilege oral history as the authentic form of telling Punk history without analyzing authors' and editors' interventions into the texts nor with any seeming awareness of the

⁵⁹ Joseph M Turrini, "'Well I Don't Care About History': Oral History and the Making of Collective Memory in Punk Rock," *Notes* 70, No. 1 (September, 2013): 59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43672697>.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 59.

⁶¹ Ibid., 60. Also James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 31 and Maurice Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶² Wertsch, Ibid., 31 and in Turrini, "Well I Don't Care About History," 60.

⁶³ Turrini, Ibid., 65.

academic rigor cultural history requires. In order to avoid mistakes made by these Punk Rock texts and to meet the demands of a truly academic study while also respecting requests from some of my subjects for privacy, I rarely identify the narrators of the oral histories used in this dissertation nor is one narrator's history necessarily given priority over another. I do not make a claim of a definitive history of women in Punk in the 1980s, nor do I suggest that there are no other possible authentic narratives, instead this dissertation is an attempt to provide additional, and in many cases, oppositional histories to those presented in most published Punk Rock histories.

A collective memory has developed around such ur-texts as *PUNK Magazine* founder Legs McNeil's *Please Kill Me*, Jon Savage's *England's Dreaming*, Steven Blush's *American Hardcore*, and Dick Hebdige's limited and Anglo-centric critical analysis of Punk, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*.⁶⁴ This is a collective memory that is repeated in Punk narratives outside academic and within academic texts alike, one that privileges a largely male, largely white, and limited history of Punk. Given the nature of the Punk aesthetic – one that insists on authenticity of expression and D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself)⁶⁵ modes of production – it is not surprising that those involved in Punk reject

⁶⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (London: Routledge), 1979.

⁶⁵ DIY, D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) is defined as a central ethos for many members of the Punk community giving rise to everything from self-booked performances, self-published print media, self-recorded and distributed music, self-styling of hair and clothing, and the creation and maintenance of living spaces within abandoned or empty buildings in urban centers (a/k/a "squatting"). For more on DIY/D.I.Y. see Teal Triggs "Scissors and Glue: Punk Fanzines and the Creation of a DIY Aesthetic," *Journal of Design History* 19, no. 1, *Do It Yourself: Democracy and Design* (2006): 69-83, www.jstor.org/stable/3838674, Dawson Barrett, "DIY Democracy: The Direct Action Politics of U.S. Punk Collectives," *American Studies* 52, no. 2 (2013): 23-42, DOI:10.2307/41809730., Stacy Thompson, "Punk Cinema," *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 2 (2004): 47-66. www.jstor.org/stable/1225914, and Ian P. Moran, "Punk: the Do-It-

more mainstream ideas of the production of historical narrative opting instead to create their own histories. However, by doing so not only are we left with gaps in the narrative created by authors' and editors' choices around central themes and a refusal to acknowledge the impossibility of objectivity in their work, but we are also left with the repetition of various fallacies extant in the ongoing production and reproduction of Punk history.⁶⁶ It is my hope that this dissertation will be a part of the larger effort to reclaim this history and work against the false collective memory built by selective histories that focus on male performers as the only essential narrative in the history of Punk.⁶⁷

STRUCTURE

This dissertation is split into three sections. Chapter One is split into two parts. Part one focuses on the 1970s, Patti Smith and the birth of Punk, with a second section on Siouxsie Sioux, and Poly Styrene. This history is essential in understanding the influences by women on women involved in the Punk scene in the 1980s and the broader history of Punk. The second part of Chapter One is focused on the 1980s and Joan Jett. Using oral history interviews, primary, and secondary source materials, in this chapter I

Yourself Subculture,” *Social Sciences Journal*, 10, no. 1, (2010). Accessed September 5, 2020. <https://repository.wcsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1074&context=ssj>

⁶⁶In *Revenge of the She-Punks* (2019), Goldman attempts to rewrite some of this false history but is generally not as useful as one might hope concentrating only on performers in various global scenes across a broad swathe of time. The importance Goldman's work is lost within the broader collective narrative of decades of published oral histories that work to marginalize women's role in Punk.

⁶⁷ Along with Goldman, *Ibid.*, certain recent texts do work to build alternative narratives including Debbie Harry, *Ibid.*, Alice Bag, *Violence Girl*, (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2011), Kathy Valentine, *All I Ever Wanted* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2020).

present a brief history of Punk for both the outsider and insider. Throughout, rigorous attention is paid to creating a more inclusive history while also building on essential work already done by those writing on Punk. Focus in this chapter, as in the broader dissertation, is on the ways women were able to (re)construct their identities and create new ways of being in the world in the space and place of Punk. The attempt here is to create an alternative history to many extant narratives on Punk that position the 1980s as a time of extreme misogyny and the supposed disappearance of women from Punk. Rather than a decade dominated by male voices and male bodies, the 1980s were a reinvigoration of 1970s liberation, a reshaping of a broader feminism, and a foundation for the Riot Grrrl narrative of the 1990s. Most histories of Punk that discuss women focus primarily (or solely) on women musicians – their recordings and live performances. Since these musical performances were (and continue to be) essential to the ongoing construction of “Punk” and are cited by the women interviewed for this dissertation, in this chapter I discuss a number of women musicians active in Punk. Through use of archival materials, my own experiences and those of the women involved in the Punk scene, links are made to the anti-aesthetic and the restructuring of female identity performed by women in Punk. In the history of Punk, highly visible female performers (Joan Jett, Siouxsie Sioux, Patti Smith, Poly Styrene) have challenged societal norms and influenced young girls and women looking for less restrictive ways of being in the world. Continuing the discussion around anti-aesthetic, performing “ugliness,” and the radical challenge that Punk women made on societal definitions of the feminine, this chapter presents both a critique of the traditional approach to histories of “women in rock” and

suggests possibilities for a more accurate and equitable way of viewing the history of Punk.

Chapter Two focuses on Punk as radical⁶⁸ textual performance in Punk fanzines and the work of Kathy Acker. The first part of the chapter focuses on 1980s fanzine culture. After providing an overview of 1970s feminist publishing-activism, I show the connection from the 1970s underground feminist print culture to the 1980s Punk ‘zines which lay the foundation for the Riot Grrrl ‘zines of the 1990s. While many of the fanzines created in the 1980s are gone, some are held in collections at Smith College, Barnard, and New York University. As a former ‘zine editor and contributor, I have my own ‘zine collection as well as access to others’ collections. Through archival and secondary source research and interviews with women who published ‘zines in the 1980s, I show that the 1980s were not merely a decade between voices of the 1970s and 1990s but rather, a proving ground and period of creativity, radical textual performance, and a reshaping of women’s voices. Punk provided an unprecedented avenue of cultural, artistic, and textual expression. An essential aspect of the Punk subculture from inception is the D.I.Y. (Do It Yourself) production of fanzines (or ‘zines).⁶⁹ Unlike the majority of

⁶⁸ Here, as in all instances of the use of the word “radical” in this dissertation, I am using the idea of “radical” as “extreme” or “being an example of great change” especially as regards change from “accepted or traditional forms.”

⁶⁹ Fanzines or ‘zines are underground print publications created by members of the Punk community using the DIY aesthetic, often featuring collage and/or cut-up images and texts and low-grade reproduction values. Fanzines were focused on personal narratives, band interviews, poetry, photographs of scene members, critiques of society, political statements, and other texts deemed important by the author(s). Generally sold for nominal amounts, given away for free, or traded/swapped within the Punk community, fanzines provided both a method of inter-scene communication and a venue for political, personal, and artistic expression essential to the foundational work of scene-building in the 1970s and 1980s Punk scene. See Triggs, *Ibid.*, Alison Piepmeier, “Why Zines Matter: Materiality and the Creation of Embodied Community,” *American*

work done on fanzines that focuses either on the Riot Grrrl ‘zines of the 1990s⁷⁰ or on the larger history of music fanzines, my focus is on the women active in Punk ‘zine production in the 1980s. Fanzines served not only as modes of self-expression but as material representations of community building. Messages were shared, content was varied but always in a language understood by “insiders” and often unintelligible to those not in the scene. The use of collage, the cut-up, DIY production and distribution are all central to ‘zine culture. A rejection of mainstream ideas of print production, aesthetics, and subject matter are all present in ‘zine culture in the 1980s.

The second part of this chapter focuses on self-described Punk Rock writer Kathy Acker. Acker’s work shares a similar textual aesthetic as that found in Punk ‘zines in the 1980s and is a visceral and often brutal confrontation with issues of identity, female sexuality, and the limits and punishments society levels against those not born male. While other work on Acker does exist, few critics engage specifically with Acker’s role in Punk, nor do they link her work on identity in performance with other women active in the Punk scene in the 1980s.⁷¹ Working with Acker’s published writing as well as

Periodicals 18, no. 2 (2008): 213-38, www.jstor.org/stable/41219799, Sheila Liming, "Of Anarchy and Amateurism: Zine Publication and Print Dissent," *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 43, no. 2 (2010): 121-45. www.jstor.org/stable/41960530. Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from the Underground: Zines and the politics of alternative culture* (New York: Verso, 1997), Chip Rowe, *The Book of Zines: Readings from the Fringe*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1997).

⁷⁰ For instance, Rebekah J. Buchanan, *Writing a Riot: Riot Grrrl Zines and Feminist Rhetorics (Mediated Youth) New Edition* (New York: Peter Lang Inc., 2018). Lisa Darms, ed. *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (New York: Feminist Press, 2013). Alison Piepmeier, *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* (New York: NYU Press, 2009). Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls make media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁷¹ Acker critics including, Chris Kraus in *After Kathy Acker: A Literary Biography* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2018) and Carla Harryman, Amy Scholder, and Avital Ronell in *Lust for Life: On the Writing of Kathy Acker* (New York: Verso, 2006).

archival material held at Fales Library (New York University) and elsewhere, I explore the central theme of Punk cultural expression within Acker's formation of identity and her refusal to work within accepted norms as a writer and performer. Acker's experiments with collage, feminist theory, and self-representation connect to the broader Punk scene and its aesthetic of "ugliness." In this chapter, I use Howard's "ugliness," Julia Kristeva's "abject," and additional feminist theorists in my discussion of the anti-aesthetic of Punk and the positioning of the female body in Acker's work. Acker's influence by and on other women in Punk is an essential aspect of understanding the role her work played in the history of American Punk. Because of the importance of Acker's novel *Blood and Guts in High School* to many of the women I interviewed, I focus primarily on this text, its popularity among women in the Punk scene, and Acker's unprecedented crossover from the literary world and New York's avant-garde into Punk culture. Moving the discussion of Acker's work away from a focus on connections with Dada collage and avant-garde experimentation,⁷² instead I show that there is a direct connection between Acker's cut-up technique, meta-textual experimentation, rejection of linear narrative traditions, and many of the central creative motivations of Punk as represented in Punk 'zines of the 1980s.

Punk in the 1980s was, at its core, a performative movement providing both immediate experiences of communal interaction and spaces for self-expression for many

⁷² Acker's work as Dada collage and avant-garde experimentation is discussed in Larry McCaffery and Kathy Acker, "An Interview with Kathy Acker," *Ibid.*, Mark Amerika, *Remixthebook* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), Glenn A. Harper, "The Subversive Power of Sexual Difference in The Work of Kathy Acker," *SubStance* 16, no. 3 (1987): 44-56. doi:10.2307/3685196, and in Georgina Colby, *Kathy Acker: Writing the Impossible* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016).

whose voices were marginalized by mainstream American culture. Punk is also a movement with an aesthetic shared through material objects: fanzines, audio recordings, album covers, and film. The 1980s saw the rise underground films available on video, cable TV, and in New York City – storefront popup screenings.⁷³ Chapter Three is split into two parts. The first part provides a brief overview of key moments of Punk on film in the 1980s that were highly influential and aided in the dissemination of Punk culture. Many of the women interviewed for this project reference viewing Punk on film before or during the early stages of entry into the Punk scene. This viewing is cited by these women as highly influential and includes works by Beth B, Penelope Spheeris's documentary *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981), Susan Seidelman's *Smithereens* (1982), and cult classics *Times Square* (1980) and *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* (1982). While some work has been done on discussing punk on film, this work generally focuses on live performance films or films featuring the Sex Pistols.⁷⁴

⁷³ For more on New York's underground cinema in the 1970s-1980s see *Blank City*, directed by Celine Danhier (Insurgent Releasing, 2011) 1 hr., 34 min. Accessed December 1, 2020. <https://vimeo.com/78429727>. Also, Jack Sargeant, *Deathtripping: The Cinema of Transgression*, (London: Creation Books, 1995, 2000). Jim Hoberman, "No Wavelength: The Para-Punk Underground" in *The Village Voice*, May 1979 Accessed April 4, 2020 [http://www.luxonlin.org.uk/articles/no_wavelength\(1\).html](http://www.luxonlin.org.uk/articles/no_wavelength(1).html).

⁷⁴ Bill Osgerby, "Silver Screen Sedition: Autership and Exploitation in the History of Punk Cinema," in *Fight Back: Punk, Politics and Resistance*, ed. Steve Ignorant, The Subcultures Network (New York: Manchester University Press, 2014), 205-31. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1mf700m.18> and David Laderman, "The Punk Meets the Godfather: The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle," in *Punk Slash! Musicals* (Austin: University of Texas, 2010), 58-68. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7560/721708.7>

The second part of the chapter focuses on one of the more powerful voices to rise out of the 1970s-1980s Punk scene: the highly lauded “No Wave”⁷⁵ Punk performer, spoken word artist, and writer, Lydia Lunch. Lunch is known for her work in music, film, spoken word, and experimental literature. While Lunch self-defines as “No Wave,” differentiating between 1970s Punk and the music she made with Teenage Jesus and the Jerks, her broader role in questioning the limitations patriarchal culture places on anyone born female directly links her with the project of Punk. Her in-depth, challenging, and viscerally experimental confrontations with gender roles, society’s limited definitions of femininity and the female are at the core of the radical changes in women’s self-depictions and constructions of identity in the 1980s. Again, while work has been done on Lydia Lunch, the focus has generally been on her music performances and has rarely used the close reading necessary to understand her cultural importance nor has her work been addressed in relation to oral histories from women active in the Punk scene in the 1980s. Lunch has always been a difficult artist to categorize. When asked to define herself, she claims, “I’m a confrontational performance artist. I consider myself a

⁷⁵ Not to be confused with “New Wave,” also referred to as “avant-rock,” No Wave takes its name from a critique and pun on the more commercially acceptable New Wave movement. An experimental music, art, film, and performance movement that originated in New York City in the late 1970s, those involved in the No Wave scene claimed to be reacting against Punk’s more clichéd aspects, instead experimenting with electronic noise and “anti-song” musical structures, bizarre and confrontational (sometimes violent) performance practices, and a nihilistic world view. Although a relatively small scene in New York, No Wave is considered to be highly influential in the worlds of experimental/underground music, art, and film. For more on No Wave, see Thurston Moore and Byron Coley, *No Wave: Post-Punk. Underground. New York. 1976-1980*. (New York: Abrams Image, 2008), Simon Reynolds, *Rip It Up*, Ibid. also *Blank City*, Ibid, *Kill Your Idols*, directed by Scott Crary (2006; New York: Palm Pictures, 2006), DVD, Museum of Art and Design, “Film Series: No Wave Cinema,” 2012, Accessed December 19, 2020, <https://madmuseum.org/series/no-wave-cinema>.

journalist and a *hysterian* for our times.”⁷⁶ By applying the lens of feminist theory to Lunch’s work in combination with oral history responses, I demonstrate her fundamental importance to the formulation of feminist (and female) identity in the 1980s, 1990s, and beyond. Few critics have engaged with both Acker and Lunch as part of a larger confrontational movement against the limitations of proscribed female identity in American culture in the late twentieth century. Working with Lunch’s published writing, performance materials (recordings and films), and various archival material, links between Lunch’s and Acker’s work focused on radical challenges to society’s constraints on female sexuality and new spaces create by women within Punk will be explored.

Punk, like many subcultures, communicates through a performance of identity that is arguably based on signs, appearance, and materiality. From Punk's nascent years in New York and London, the body was used as a site of resistance through piercing, tattoos, radical hairstyles, and radical forms of dress. Women involved in Punk in the 1970s and 1980s used the tools associated with the subculture to resist oppressive structures of ideas of femininity and were subjected to verbal and physical abuse and broad critiques in the media. But it is also media reproduction that brought Punk style, music, and culture to the attention of many young women in the United States. Punk culture is visual and aural; expressed in music, text, image, and bodily performance. By examining specific moments of Punk expression identified as heavily influential in the 1980s, along with oral histories surrounding those moments, my hope is that this

⁷⁶ Video interview of Lydia Lunch. Women of Rock Oral History Project records, SSC-MS-00756. Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History. https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/160972

dissertation will provide a useful exploration of women's participation in the 1980s Punk scene and the importance of this history to the broader history of Punk.

Punk provided a space for many women to experiment with different formations of identity. Foundational to these efforts at forming new types of identity within the Punk community was the work done by women responding to the exclusionary misogyny of the Left in the 1960s and 1970s. Collective responses that worked to provide diverse spaces for women striving to explore their own identity in opposition to the stringent demands of structures of "femininity" within mainstream culture appeared both within feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s and the Punk subculture of the 1970s and 1980s. Within the Punk subculture, women were able to become active in the formation, creation, and dissemination of a new image for women focused on a critique of mainstream culture's expectations of what it means to be female in the world. This work was largely disseminated through media: underground press, music, film, and in some instances, the more mainstream media. Women active in the Punk subculture confronted and consciously worked against the repression of assertiveness enacted by mainstream culture instead creating identities through physical modes of dress/style, speech, behavior, and material artistic objects that supported a more open formation of identity thereby influencing later generations of women and providing them with broader opportunities for identity expression.

Punk has been depicted as an ephemeral moment that died nearly as soon as it began but several decades later, the importance of women in Punk is just beginning to be excavated. While this dissertation investigates the intersection of Punk and gender in performance in the 1980s, primarily in the New York Punk scene, my hope is that work

done here will aid in building a broader narrative of Punk that allows marginalized voices to speak.

CHAPTER ONE: "I Don't Give a Damn About My Bad Reputation"

Part One: A Primer and Patti Smith

1. The 1970s in New York: Patti Smith and the Birth of Punk

"Within the context of neo rock we must open our eyes and seize and rend the veil of smoke which man calls order."⁷⁷

"Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard, but I think:
'Oh, bondage! Up yours!'"⁷⁸

In the 1970s, various cultural elements combined to provide the impetus for a rebellion against social norms and oppression. For young women coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s, Punk was a space where they could (re)form identity. In a culture that valued appearance and rigid definitions of the "feminine," Punk was a vehicle that inspired a different way of being in the world. The 1970s and 1980s also witnessed a rise in feminist discourse around themes including media, race, and expansion beyond the binary. There was also cultural backlash with young women rejecting "the 'f' word" while also demanding their voices be heard. This demand gave rise to Punk in all its forms including music/performance, fashion and personal style, text, and more. The work done by women in Punk in the 1970s and 1980s laid the foundation for all that came after. In addition in the 1970s, New York City was in economic freefall, crime was astronomical, and neighborhood were on fire. In other words, it was a perfect space to witness the birth of Punk.

⁷⁷ Patti Smith, "The Salvation of Rock," in *Babel*, (New York: Putnam, 1978).

⁷⁸ X-Ray Spex, "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!," by Poly Styrene (Marianne Elliot-Said), September 1977, Virgin Records, 45" single.

New York Punk can be traced to origins in the mid-1970s performance scene at The Mercer Arts Center and subsequently CBGB, along with nightclub culture at the Mudd Club and Max's Kansas City, the publishing of *New York Rocker* (1976-1982) and *PUNK* magazine (1976-1979), and cross-Atlantic cultural influences between London and New York. As Clinton Heylin details, "the history of British Punk continues to intrigue sociologists in music critic's clothing, [but] its elder New York cousin, residing among the Bowery bums at a small rock club called Country Blue Grass and Blues has received scant attention. However, the New York and London scenes shared similar antecedents, reflecting a common disenchantment with the rock & roll status quo."⁷⁹ As Punk has never operated in a social-silo, the Los Angeles Punk scene also shared influences with New York and London, including essential contributions from *Slash Magazine* and Slash Records, The Bags, X, The Germs, and many others. By the 1980s, what started as a small group of subcultural experimenters in New York, London, and Los Angeles became a global scene. Central to this scene were contributions from Patti Smith, Siouxsie Sioux, Poly Styrene, Joan Jett, and many other women both on and off stage.

In the history of most cultural movements, there are apocryphal moments. One such moment, the collapse of the Broadway Central Hotel housing The Mercer Arts Center, appears in several histories of New York Punk and is detailed in an article from *the New York Times* on August 7, 1973.⁸⁰ Although the *Times*' article does not mention

⁷⁹ From Heylin, *Ibid.*, xi. Note: obviously, several histories of New York Punk have been published since Heylin's book was released in 1993, but his larger point is still valid.

⁸⁰ George Gent, "Mercer Arts Center Rises from the Rubble," *New York Times*, Aug. 7, 1973. Accessed November 1, 2020.



Figure 1.1 The Broadway Central Hotel on the day it collapsed in 1973, Michael Pollak, “Broadway Central Hotel’s Heyday Before a Fatal Collapse,” *New York Times*, Nov. 6, 2015. <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/08/nyregion/broadway-central-hotels-heyday-before-a-fatal-collapse.html>

the importance of The Mercer Arts Center to the musicians and fans who congregated there, at the time, it was one of the only spaces to perform or see exciting new work.⁸¹

<https://www.nytimes.com/1973/08/07/archives/mercero-arts-center-rises-from-rubble-plans-to-reopen.html>. See also Associated Press, “Aftermath of a Collapsed Hotel on Broadway In New York.” Aug 8, 1973, Associated Press Archive on YouTube Accessed December 1, 2020. <https://youtu.be/Tu0JhU9wQK0>. Harry Bubbins, “When a Hotel Fell on Broadway,” *Off the Grid* (blog), *Village Preservation*, Aug. 3, 2016, Accessed July 1, 2019, <https://gvshp.org/blog/2016/08/03/when-a-hotel-fell-on-broadway/>.

⁸¹ Blush, *New York Rock*, 89-90, Lisa Robinson, “Rebel Nights,” *Vanity Fair*, February, 2014, Accessed December 14, 2020 <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2002/11/new-york-rock-scene-1970s>, and Kembrew McLeod, *Downtown Pop Underground*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2018), among others.

Opened in December 1971, Mercer Arts became a mecca for downtown performance, including theater, dance, poetry readings, experimental film, and an early home for the nascent Punk scene. The New York Dolls, Suicide, The Modern Lovers, and of course, Patti Smith were a few of the performers who found a home there. Mercer Arts' collapse drove the performance and early Punk scene to other venues, including ultimately, Hilly Kristal's Bowery dive bar, CBGB. One of the women interviewed for this dissertation likens the violence of Mercer Arts' collapse to a sort of "birthing moment" – Punk Rock was born when Mercer Arts came crashing down. "I remember hearing about the collapse of Mercer Arts and have always imagined it as a perfect metaphor for the birth of Punk."⁸² Out of the collapse of the building, a glorious chaos called Punk would be born; on a more practical level, Patti Smith and other rising performers would have to find a new place to play.



Figure 1.2 Judy Linn, *Patti with Bolex*, 1969 from "Judy Linn: 69-76, Photographs of Patti Smith," Feature Inc. JPEG file. http://www.featureinc.info/exhibs-2011/2011-03-04_linn/2011-03-04_linn-exhib.html [Note: original is silver gelatin print]

⁸² Subject 10, Oral History, in conversation with the author, 2018.

Patti Smith (Patricia Lee Smith, born 1946)

“What I really think is happening is that I’ll be a catalyst for rock’n’roll... I’d like to inspire people. I’d like them to see our concerts and listen to our record and then say, ‘Well, fuck her,’ and go off and do something on their own.”⁸³

Patti Smith’s importance to the New York scene and American culture at large cannot be understated. She was (and remains) a central cultural figure with her radical androgynous chic, her riveting live performances, and her never-before-seen confrontational “Babelogue” style of vocal delivery. Smith’s refusal to participate in traditional expressions of female identity served as a significant influence on young women who came into contact with her image and her musical performances (recorded or live). Smith’s refusal to be defined within mainstream gender constructs is central to her importance in the history of Punk. As Smith states, “I don’t limit my ideas of myself to gender. I’ve always fought against that...you don’t say male artist, male painter...I don’t like to confine myself by gender.”⁸⁴ Smith’s work against gender norms is exhibited in her performance (both recorded and on stage), and in her widely circulated photographic images, images that were accessible even to those of us who did not have access to her music in the 1970s.

Smith began as a poet in the downtown scene at Saint Mark’s Poetry Project and Mercer Arts, but also drew from the more visceral realm of Punk. Known for wearing men’s clothing, and with her sometimes partner, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, Smith made a name for herself in New York City’s avant-garde and experimental

⁸³ Patti Smith quoted in Lisa Robinson, *Vanity Fair*, Ibid.

⁸⁴ *Atropina*, “Patti Smith about the Gender Question (Cologne 2002),” *Atropina* 76. YouTube, 24 October 2008. Accessed January 14, 2019. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSW40NnQfJE>.

subculture at Mercer Arts, Max's Kansas City, the Mudd Club, and CBGB.⁸⁵ Smith's repudiation of feminine or gender-appropriate clothing was not unprecedented. However, the stark image of Smith on the cover of the album *Horses* (1975) became an iconic image of the Punk scene, helping to create the space for hundreds (perhaps thousands) of young women to self-identify with Smith's disavowal of stereotypical feminine appearance and a need to identify with gender under traditionally binary terms.



Figure 1.3 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Patti Smith Horses*, 1975 copyright held by Arista Records, Wikipedia. JPEG file.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horses_\(album\)#/media/File:PattiSmithHorses.jp](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Horses_(album)#/media/File:PattiSmithHorses.jp)

Patti Smith: The Image

Images from Patti Smith's photoshoot with Robert Mapplethorpe appeared in music papers, fanzines, and of course, album covers in the U.S., U.K., and Europe. These early images carry significant weight in documenting women's self-positioning in Punk

⁸⁵ Yvonne Sewall-Ruskin, *High on Rebellion: Inside the Underground at Max's Kansas City*, (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1998) and Steven Kasher, *Max's Kansas City: Art, Glamour, Rock and Roll*, (New York: Abrams Image, 2010).

and the influence these images had on the ways young women could imagine their own respective roles and self-presentation. Smith presented herself as a combination of Rock's "outsider rebelliousness and masculinity" with her own interpretation of an "avant-garde, poetic aesthetic."⁸⁶ Smith claimed influences as disparate as Jim Morrison and Arthur Rimbaud for herself and her work, incorporating those influences into her art and her image. In the photograph above, Smith's tight black jeans, men's dress shirt, lack of makeup, and defiant attitude toward the camera gave an impression of challenge - pure Punk attitude - and lay the foundation for later performers to shift the female relationship with the camera from one of subservience to one of challenge and ownership. This attitude became a requisite part of the way Punks reacted to the camera, whether as musicians or simply members of the subculture facing down those who aimed to photograph them and those who would gaze on those photographs. It is not only the musical contributions of women in Punk that are essential but the circulation of their respective images that helped create a larger impact on culture. Performances by and images of women including Patti Smith had an enormous impact on young women working to develop their own expressions of identity. Through Punk, women, as exemplified by Smith, were able "to explore gender boundaries, to investigate their own power, anger, aggression - even nastiness."⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Elizabeth Wolfson, "Matching Bodies, Matching Souls: (re)constructing gender in Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe's Horses photograph," *Queen's Journal of Visual & Material Culture*, Issue 2, (2009). Accessed December 4, 2020. <http://shiftjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/wolfson.pdf>

⁸⁷ Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Punk "style" was depicted in early media coverage as shocking, although many early American Punks simply wore jeans and t-shirts. Punk's positioning as an appropriate subject for media coverage led to the repeated use of photographic images in newspapers, television, and music magazines. Later women musicians and members of the Punk scene reference the importance of seeing these images in the development of their own style through clothing choices, stance, and self-representation in public and on camera. It is not just the confrontational performance of Punk in music and on stage that is central to understanding the liberating possibilities for women in Punk but the image of Punk: Patti Smith showed us that women did not have to remake ourselves in mainstream culture's definition of the "feminine," instead, Smith embraced "ugliness" and androgyny, an embrace that gave us all freedom we did not have before.

Smith cites Jim Morrison as a significant influence on her stage style but also her theatrical work with Sam Shepard; early English Punks reference Patti Smith as an influence and also glam performers, including Suzi Quatro.⁸⁸ In revisiting histories written about women in Punk, Joy Press can be a useful starting place, and many histories of Punk cite her work. For Press, women in rock fall into four categories including, a "straightforward can do approach, as in 'anything a man can do, a woman can do too.'" She positions these women as "impersonators" of "male" attitude, suppressing "'girly' tendencies" but (for Press), the "tomboy approach" is unsuccessful because it merely simulates male rebellion.⁸⁹ Press's critique of these women echoes both gender theory's

⁸⁸ See Lisa Robinson on Patti Smith and Sam Shepard, Debbie Harry in *Face It*, and Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 108-111, among others.

⁸⁹ Joy Press, *Ibid.*

critique of the notion of binary and Diana Crane's discussion of the "hegemonic feminine" in photography;⁹⁰ there is an expectation of how women should *look* and *sound*. This positioning of women in Punk (particularly performers) as male impersonators is central to early critical writing on Punk but also part of why Punk was so influential in breaking down barriers that strove to define what was and was not "female." When Patti Smith appeared in menswear, eschewing traditional structures of "femininity," these images were transmitted globally to an entire generation of young women, many of whom were trying to find their own ways to fit within the constraints of female identity in American culture. With images of Patti Smith finding global distribution, not only could we *hear* an alternative way to be female in her music performances, but many of us found relief in Smith's public visual representation of a denial of mainstream cultural structuring around femininity.

Through reproduction on album covers, in magazines, in fanzines, and as a poster available in many record stores across the U.S., the *Horses* cover image of Patti Smith became a visual touchstone for many young women and in several instances, a pathway to new modes of identity expression. In her memoir *Just Kids*⁹¹, Smith writes about the cover shoot for *Horses*, discussing her choice of clothing and the focus on lighting. She claims there was no discussion about styling or building the final image but instead states, "I had my look in mind. He had his light in mind. That was all."⁹² In this stark

⁹⁰ Diana Crane, "Gender and Hegemony in Fashion Magazines: Women's Interpretations of Fashion Photographs," *The Sociological Quarterly* 40, no. 4 (1999): 541-3, www.jstor.org/stable/4121253.

⁹¹ Patti Smith, *Just Kids*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2010), 251.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 251.

black and white shot (Figure 1.4), Smith stares (squinting) at the camera with one hand up (stretching? or in a defensive move?) and with the other hand on her tie. She appears to be in the process of undressing or at least removing her tie. She is disheveled with messy hair and wearing a wrinkled man's shirt. She wears little to no makeup. These elements signify a refusal to conform to traditional expectations of how a woman should appear in a photograph: Smith has not brushed her hair, put on lipstick, she is not smiling, or even standing fully still to pose. Instead, she is partway through the action of removing her tie; her expression suggests that she might be annoyed at the demand the camera makes on her, or perhaps she is challenging the perceived audience of the photograph. Smith is flouting traditional structures of what a woman should do in front of a camera. It is in this flouting of the traditional feminine, not just in her choice of clothing but in her expression, her refusal to smile for the camera, that we can see the first structuring of one of the foundational aspects of attitude that came to define the Punk woman's relationship to the camera.

Central to work done on the "male gaze" is the idea that the audience for women on screen is essentially male. This oppositional binary structuring of viewer and viewed breaks down when women occupy positions as subject of, creator of, and *viewer* of an image: young Punk women viewing images of Patti Smith and other early Punk women is an essential element in the development and growth of the Punk community and in the work of challenging gender norms: because we saw Smith performing an alternate way of being a woman, we could envision other ways of being female. If the "male gaze"



Figure 1.4 Robert Mapplethorpe, “Patti Smith,” 1975, © Robert Mapplethorpe Foundation, JPEG,
<https://www.phaidon.com/agenda/photography/articles/2018/july/12/what-robert-mapplethorpes-mother-called-patti-smith/>

positions women as existing on screen (or in photographs by extension) for heterosexual male pleasure there is a suggestion then that we can flip the gaze, positioning women as viewers. With Patti Smith as the subject and choosing how she will appear on camera, there is more at work than a shift to a “female gaze” as both ideas structure power dynamics with the viewer (the one gazing) in the dominant position. For Smith, the camera is a part of her toolbox: another way for her to communicate her message of a different way to be female in the world. This message proclaims what Smith calls her “changeling” aspect or her androgyny. But she is not androgynous to the young women who view(ed) her image. Instead, she is providing an early example of what might be called a “queer gaze” that Punk was just starting to explore in the 1970s and 1980s. This is an action or gaze that suggests a move away from rigid heteronormative gender

binaries and instead opens up possibilities for alternative power structures and alternative modes of being.⁹³

Patti Smith: The Performance (Poetry meets Guitars)

While the dissemination and distribution of images through the media was (and is) essential in scene building in Punk, live performances are also a central element of this work. In pre-social media America, communities were formed through shared experience. Punk community building took place at Punk Rock shows and increased through Punk Rock bands' touring, through the dissemination of recordings (official and bootleg), and the consumption of mainstream and underground publications. Though the audiences at early Patti Smith shows were small, the word spread, and her live shows became scene-building moments. A performance at the St. Mark's Poetry Project on February 10, 1971, is recorded as Patti Smith's first.⁹⁴ Smith performed poetry to the accompaniment of Lenny Kaye's electric guitar. When Smith asked him to perform with her, Kaye claims she asked if he could make a guitar sound "like a car crash."⁹⁵

In November 1973 Patti Smith put together a show with Kaye and pianist Bill Elliot as backup. Smith billed the night of poetry and music as "Rock n Rimbaud" with a

⁹³ Molly Moss in "Thoughts on a Queer Gaze" does work on the "queer" gaze in [title] where he suggests that an "Authentic 'queer' gaze doesn't fit with any framework at all, embracing and normalizing [sic] what society perceives as the strange, the unclassifiable, and the difficult." in *3:AM Magazine*, Wednesday, April 3, 2019. Accessed January 4, 2021 <https://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/thoughts-on-a-queer-gaze/>.

⁹⁴ See Caryn Rose, "Patti Smith's Most Notable New York City Gigs," *Village Voice*, November 9, 2015, Accessed November 4, 2020 <https://www.villagevoice.com/2015/11/09/patti-smiths-most-notable-new-york-city-gigs/>.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

nod to her favorite poet. *The Village Voice* reported that Smith performed spoken word, original songs, and a few covers.⁹⁶ While the performance was one-off and bands still struggled in the wake of the collapse of Mercer Arts, Smith and an entire group of young musicians would soon have a new space to play.



Figure 1. 5 Ebet Roberts, CBGB 1977, Morrison Hotel, JPEG
<https://www.morrisonhotelgallery.com/photographers/7hQfOF/Ebet-Roberts>

On February 14, 1975, the Patti Smith Group (PSG) debuted at CBGB⁹⁷ and, for seven weeks in March and April of 1975, did a residency described as “an occupation.” For many, the scene that developed at the PSG shows is what made CBs the club at the center of new music in New York – it became the place to see music, be seen, and perform. PSG played two sets a night, four nights a week, and, sharing the bill with

⁹⁶ “Rimbaud,” of course, is in reference to Smith’s ongoing obsession with the work of Jean Nicolas Arthur Rimbaud, French poet (1854-1891). Smith put together three more events of this nature over the next few years. For more on Smith and Rimbaud, see Carrie Jaurès Noland, “Rimbaud and Patti Smith: Style as Social Deviance,” *Critical Inquiry* 21, no. 3 (1995): 581-610, www.jstor.org/stable/1343938.

⁹⁷ Other early groups performing at CBs included the Stilettos (with Blondie’s Deborah Harry on lead vocals), the Ramones, Talking Heads, the Heartbreakers, and in 1977, The Damned – the first time an English Punk band played in the U.S. The club closed in 2006 due to a rent dispute, with Patti Smith playing a final farewell.

Television, the two bands regularly swapped headlining spots.⁹⁸ By the end of the residency, PSG was signed to major label Arista Records.⁹⁹

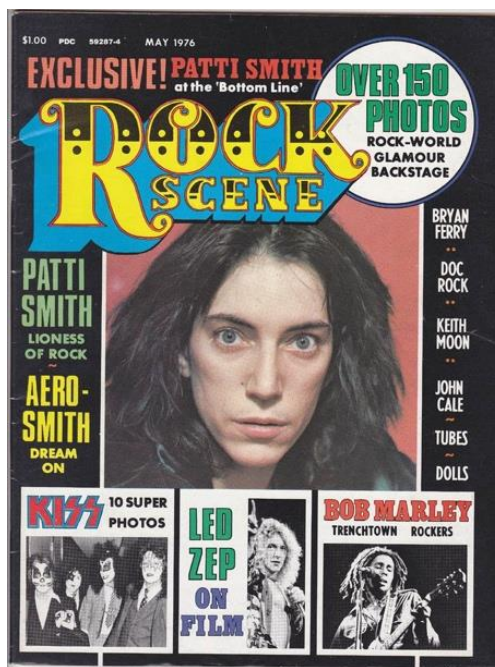


Figure 1.6 Lisa Robinson, Patti Smith, Rock Scene Magazine, May 1976. Private Collection.

Lisa Robinson, one of the best-known rock critics since the 1960s, chronicled the early New York scene in the nationally distributed *Rock Scene* magazine.¹⁰⁰ The images

⁹⁸ Patti Smith with Television, Live at CBGB's April 17, 1975 Accessed January 2, 2020, https://youtu.be/Jt_6OncjvTs.

⁹⁹ Over the years, Smith would return to CBs to perform more than at any other New York venue. She played benefits, one-off surprise shows, and for rehearsals after her accident in 1977. Smith also played the last show on CBs after Hilly Krystal lost his rent fight to keep the place open.

¹⁰⁰ The first issue of *Rock Scene* was published in March 1973 with David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust on the cover. Lenny Kaye (PSG) worked as a writer/editor, along with Lisa's husband, Richard. Columnists included Wayne/Jayne Country and photographers Lee Black Childers and Bob Gruen. Patti Smith sometimes wrote for the magazine. *Rock Scene* was one of the first magazines to cover New York Punk, including publishing some of the first photos of the scene at CBs.

of rock stars and New York scenesters in Robinson's magazine were early influences on women in Punk. As one woman I interviewed states, "I'd never been to New York City, I'd never even seen a live rock show but thanks to Lisa Robinson, I knew what Iggy (Pop) and Patti Smith looked like!"¹⁰¹ Robinson writes about the early days of Patti Smith's career: "[she] had been interested in doing public poetry readings...In the early 1970s, Beat poet Gregory Corso started taking her to readings hosted by the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church."¹⁰² In 1971, Smith opened for Gerard Malanga. Friend/collaborator Sam Shepard suggested she add music to her performance; she did in the form of Lenny Kaye's guitar.¹⁰³ Robinson also mentions an early post-Mercer performance where Smith, "wearing a feather boa, performed a combination of poetry and cabaret songs at Reno Sweeney's on West 13th Street, backed by Lenny Kaye."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Subject 1, Oral History, in conversation with the author, 2018. The same was true for many early Punk fans (including me); Alice Bag, the Go-Gos, and many others refer to reading *Rock Scene*.

¹⁰² Robinson writes about St. Mark's Poetry Project in *Vanity Fair*, Ibid., "[it was a} collective based at the same church where Theatre Genesis was located. It was home to A-listers like Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, and Ted Berrigan." For more on St. Mark's Poetry Project see Miles Champion, "Insane Podium: a Short History, The Poetry Project, 1966-2012," *The Poetry Project*, Accessed December 20, 2019 <https://www.2009-2019.poetryproject.org/about/history/>, Jennifer Krasinski, "The Poetry Project's Half-Century of Dissent," *Village Voice*, December 2016, Accessed April 4, 2020 <https://www.villagevoice.com/2016/12/14/the-poetry-projects-half-century-of-dissent/>.

¹⁰³ Lisa Robinson, *Vanity Fair*, Ibid., also, Caryn Rose, Ibid., and Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 108.

¹⁰⁴ Lisa Robinson, Ibid.



Figure 1.7 Photo: Robert Mapplethorpe, Patti Smith: Cover of Re-issue “Hey Joe (version)/Piss Factory,” 1974. Private collection.

In June 1974, with Tom Verlaine, Lenny Kaye, and Richard Sohl, Patti Smith recorded “Hey Joe,” a radically re-worked cover, backed by “Piss Factory.” Mer Records, a one-off label financed by Robert Mapplethorpe, issued the single. In a continuation of her mix of poetry and music in live performances, the cover of “Hey Joe” was preceded by “Sixty Days,” a poem Smith wrote about Patty Hearst.¹⁰⁵ This performance style, preceding songs with poetic monologue or spoken-word, often revisiting the poem within the song, would become a trademark of Smith’s. “Piss Factory” is an original song written by Smith about time she spent working in a factory that made baby buggies.¹⁰⁶ Smith rages against the monotony of the factory job, the oppressive presence of one of the other workers, and a foreman who tells her, ““You ain't goin' nowhere, you ain't goin' nowhere.” Smith dreams of music and sees the nuns at the convent nearby as “pretty

¹⁰⁵ Heylin, *From the Velvets to the Voidoids*, 103-114

¹⁰⁶ *Rolling Stone*, “Piss Factory,” June 8, 2012, Accessed November 4, 2020, Rollingstone.com/music/music-news/piss-factory-53143/

damn free.” The factory is a hot, airless space and Smith feels trapped, “going nowhere,” and “smellin' Dot Hook's midwife sweat.” Dot Hook is a “midwife” of steel pipes for baby buggies in a horrible parody of (re)production. Smith rants, “we may look the same – Shoulder to shoulder sweatin’” but she resists and “will never faint./ I refuse to lose, I refuse to fall down.” Dot Hook has “nothin’ to hide” but Smith had “something to hide here called desire,” her desire is to “get out of here...get on that train and go to New York City,” and when she tells us “I’m gonna be a big star and I will never return” we hear her resistance and we are convinced.¹⁰⁷ Smith refuses to stay in her assigned role, working in a factory. Her vocal performance is less singing than poetic-hysteric rant and shows elements that will become her trademark performance: exorcising frustration, rage, voicing her desire for escape over the jagged sound of piano and Kaye’s guitar; an aural embodiment of her resistance.

In 1975, PSG recorded their debut album *Horses* with John Cale (Velvet Underground) producing.¹⁰⁸ One of the tracks is Smith’s take on Van Morrison’s “Gloria.” Retitled “Gloria: In Excelsis Deo,” the track starts with the (now) classic Smith line, “Jesus died for somebody’s sins but not mine.” It is a voicing of Punk Rock defiance. Part of Smith’s reworking of the song is a blurring of gender lines. Smith talks about recording the song with Cale producing, “I was concerned 'cause in some of my songs I take on different personas some people might not understand, like 'Gloria' is a guy singing to a girl — but I didn't want to have to think about my sex on the record...John (Cale) was into the chameleon thing, the changeling aspect — and I wasn't

¹⁰⁷ Patti Smith Group, “Hey Joe/Piss Factory,” Mer Records, 1974, vinyl 7”.

¹⁰⁸ Heylin, 103-114.

made to feel guilty or nervous about any of the subject matter.”¹⁰⁹ While Cale may have been supportive of the reversal Smith performs in “Gloria,” the impact of a woman singing about another woman on what would become a highly influential Rock record was immense. As one reviewer put it, “‘Gloria’ is about sex (with Patti defiantly thrusting herself into the male role), pop glory and redemption.”¹¹⁰ For more than one of the women interviewed for this project, the image of Smith being “unfeminine” on the album cover combined with the role reversal of the “woman singing as man” that is part of Smith’s performance of “Gloria” was both frightening and compelling, “I remember the first time I heard that song (Gloria); Patti Smith’s version...I could not believe a woman was singing that. I know now that was something that happened with covers but then, all I could think was here was this woman singing about another woman and it was *predatory*, it was very, very sexy.”¹¹¹ Kimberly Ann Sawchuck uses the lens of feminist theory to claim that Smith’s reworking of “Gloria” not only restructures the point of view of the original but interrupts “its placement of woman as a fetishistic object of male desire, produced by and for a predominantly male listening audience, reinscribing, in fact, what it means to be a sexually active fe/male in our culture.”¹¹² Smith is not just covering

¹⁰⁹ Heylin, 103-114.

¹¹⁰ John Rockwell, “Horses,” *Rolling Stone*, February 12, 1976, Accessed November 4, 2020, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-album-reviews/horses-90476/>.

¹¹¹ Subject 3, Oral History, in conversation with the author, 2018.

¹¹² Kimberly Anne Sawchuck, “Towards a Feminist Analysis of ‘Women in Rock Music’: Patti Smith’s ‘Gloria,’” *Atlantis* 14 no. 2 Spring 1989, Accessed January 4, 2019. <https://journals.msvu.ca/index.php/atlantis/article/view/4289>.

Morrison's song, she "displaces her original subject position, thereby questioning the notion of a static or fixed male or female gender identity."¹¹³ Smith refers to her performance of "Gloria" as her "chameleon thing" but it can also be seen as a deeply powerful performance of rewriting gender power structures. Morrison's original positions Gloria as an object, the object of *his* desire, with no existence outside of that desire. Smith's "Gloria" positions the singer and the female listener outside the traditional binary of male Rock singer: female object of desire into a liminal space where we can be both pursuer *and* object of desire. Smith renames Morrison's "Gloria" as "Gloria: In Excelsis Deo" starting and ending the song with a rebuttal of the Christian myth, where she tells us "Jesus died for somebody's sins, but not mine." It is a moment of liberation for Smith and the female listener: from the traditional binary of Morrison's original, from rigid gender identity, and from the patriarchal Christian myth. It is a performance that is revolutionary, foundational, and very Punk.

In January of 1977, during the American tour in support of PSG's album *Radio Ethiopia*, Smith was in the midst of an extended jam, she spun chanting: "Hand of God I feel the finger! Hand of God and I start to whirl! And I whirl and I whirl! Do not get dizzy! Do not fall now..." and fell off the 12-foot stage. Smith's neck had several broken bones, and she had to be entirely immobile for three months. In 1978, PSG returned to the studio and recorded their best-known album *Easter*. The album was a relative commercial success, including the Top 40 hit "Because the Night," a song written by Bruce Springsteen for Smith.

¹¹³ Ibid.

Another track on *Easter* became a controversial Punk Rock anthem: “Rock N Roll N*gger.” Stephen Duncombe places the song in a tradition of “White outsiders and their identification with racial and cultural Others.”¹¹⁴ The song is also linked to Arthur Rimbaud’s statement “Je suis une bête, un nègre,” with Smith’s lyrics, we must always keep Rimbaud in mind.¹¹⁵ While Duncombe and Tremblay focus on the inherent racism in Smith’s (and white Punk’s) attempt to become “Other” in connection to the Black experience, they ignore the othering inherent in gender constructs. It is not possible for a white person to experience being “Other” in the same way that BIPOC people do, but might one suggest instead that Smith both desires to become and is already “Other,” and “outside society” because of her refusal to conform to American standards of gender norms and the “feminine.” If one is not born but becomes female, for Smith this becoming is also a rejection of society’s expectations. She sings, “Baby was a black sheep. Baby was a whore,” and asks the listener “Are you ready to behave?” She clearly is not ready to behave and is instead, “Outside of society, that’s where I want to be” because she is “a whore” and was “lost in a valley of pleasure,” and the punishment for this, “the cost didn’t matter to me...and the cost Was to be outside society.” In the record’s liner notes, Smith claims to redefine the word n*gger “as being an artist-mutant that was going beyond gender.”¹¹⁶ Smith’s is a problematic claim at best, but for some

¹¹⁴ Stephen Duncombe and Maxwell Tremblay, *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race* (London: Verso 2011), 18.

¹¹⁵ For more on Rimbaud see Michel Courtois, “Le mythe du nègre chez Rimbaud,” *Littérature Année 1973* 11 *Fait partie d'un numéro thématique: Littérature* (Octobre 1973): 85-101, Accessed March 12, 2018, https://www.persee.fr/doc/litt_0047-4800_1973_num_11_3_1981. Kristin Ross. “Rimbaud and the Resistance to Work.” *Representations*, no. 19, 1987, pp. 62–86. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2928531.

¹¹⁶ Patti Smith, Liner Notes, *Easter*, 1978, Arista Records.

young women hearing Smith's lyrics, there is a recognition of shared oppression and a call to rebellion. If we desire pleasure, we are "whores," and if we lose ourselves in pleasure, the cost is to "be outside society."

In 1979, PSG released *Wave*, and in 1980, played their last live show, only playing again in October of 2006 as the last live performance at CBGBs:

(Smith) opened by reading "Piss Factory": "I'm gonna be somebody, I'm gonna get on that train, go to New York City..." and the band covered "My Generation" complete with the original "WE CREATED IT, YOU TAKE IT OVER" exhortation that Patti used to invoke at the end of the song.¹¹⁷

Smith's performance of gender fluidity, her refusal to position herself in vocal performance, on stage, or in front of a camera as traditionally "feminine," was radical in the 1970s and served as a freeing influence for many young women. The iconic photograph of Smith on the cover of "Horses" and the challenge this image made to the traditionally positioning of women in magazines and on album covers was, for many of us, deeply influential.¹¹⁸ For one of the women I interviewed, "seeing someone whose music I loved, a woman I respected, dressed in men's clothing was so incredibly freeing."¹¹⁹ Smith's performance of gender fluidity in "Gloria" was well-known in the Punk scene and even for those concentrating more on the image than the music, Smith's self-presentation and restructuring of "female" was revolutionary but also accessible for many of us, "She seemed cool but more *real* than other women [in Punk media

¹¹⁷ Rose, *Ibid*.

¹¹⁸ Subject 3, 4, 6, 12, 13, in conversation with the author, 2018-19.

¹¹⁹ Subject 3, Oral History, in conversation with the author, 2018.

images]."¹²⁰ By the end of the 1970s, Smith retired from music, but she helped provide a foundation for other women in Punk to challenge society's structuring of gender and of course, Smith was not the only woman in Punk; there were many in New York, London, and Los Angeles both on and off stage.

2. "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!": Siouxsie Sioux and Poly Styrene

"We invented Punk." – (Dame) Vivienne Westwood¹²¹

Punk was (and is) a global community with scenes in different cities influencing each other. The images and sounds of Punk women coming out of London influenced young women growing up in the U.S. in the 1970s and early 1980s as much as Punk coming out of New York; in many cases, women interviewed for this project reference English bands as the "gateway" that drew them in to Punk and, in some cases, drew them to move to New York City (if they weren't already here). As one interview subject says, "I read about Punk before I ever heard it. I lived in a small town, and the radio only played oldies or mainstream Rock. I read every music magazine I could find. I had posters of Queen on my wall, but in my diary, I had collages of the London Punks, Iggy, Debbie Harry, and the Runaways."¹²² Lisa Robinson's *Rock Scene* may have detailed the New York scene, but other music magazines and eventually, major mainstream news outlets, covered Punk.

¹²⁰ Subject 6, Oral History, in conversation with the author, 2018.

¹²¹ Vivienne Westwood discussing Punk in *Westwood: Punk, Icon, Activist*, directed by Lorna Tucker (2018; Greenwich Entertainment, 2018), Amazon Prime.

¹²² Subject 8, interview with author, 2018.

The quote above from Dame Vivienne Westwood, English fashion designer and self-described co-creator of Punk, addresses one of the conflicting histories of Punk: that Malcolm McLaren and his partner Westwood *created* Punk using the Sex Pistols (managed by McLaren) and Westwood's bondage/fashion shop SEX (1974-1976, 430 King's Road, London) as focal points. Westwood's definition of Punk is necessarily limited to a narrative that favors her and McLaren. Certainly, the bondage-inspired fashions she created and marketed and the over-the-top performance of anti-social behavior exhibited by the Sex Pistols were influential and drew massive mainstream media attention to Punk. But London's scene soon developed into one focused on music and politics that quickly grew away from association with McLaren and Westwood.¹²³ For many of us active in the late 1970s-early 1980s Punk scene, the Sex Pistols abortive U.S. tour in 1978 became the stuff of legend: although the band failed to finish the tour and only released one official album, Punks everywhere knew the songs, wore the t-shirts, and some, tried to play the same music.

There were several other bands active in the English Punk scene, and many featured women. As was the case in the U.S., Punk was a scene and a community where the separation between performer and audience often disappeared. Siouxsie Sioux (Susan Janet Ballion) is best known as the lead singer of Siouxsie and the Banshees (1976-1996) but was also part of the "Bromley Contingent," a group of early English Punks who

¹²³ Savage, *Ibid.*, Brian Cogan, "'Do They Owe Us a Living? Of Course They Do!'" Crass, Throbbing Gristle, Anarchy and Radicalism in Early English Punk Rock," *Journal for the Study of Radicalism* 1, no. 2 (2007): 77-90, www.jstor.org/stable/41887578.

frequented Sex Pistols gigs and became the band's de facto entourage.¹²⁴ When the Pistols appeared on ITV's *Today*, TV journalist Bill Grundy flirted with Siouxsie Sioux, and Steve Jones of the Pistols let loose a string of profanity in response – live on British TV. When the story hit the tabloids, EMI Records dropped the Sex Pistols. Sioux made the *Daily Mirror*'s front page with the caption "Siouxsie a Punk shocker," but she was much more than a visual focus for Punk's media notoriety; she was (and remains) one of the most influential Punk performers with her innovative musical performances, her "scream of feminized Punk,"¹²⁵ and her striking style incorporating fetish and bondage clothing and extreme makeup. Riot Grrrl's invectives against masculine domination of the Punk narrative and voicing of the "girls to the front" ethos were first stated by Siouxsie Sioux in 1976 when she decided that, "if the boys could get up on stage, then I could too."¹²⁶

When one of the bands slated to play pulled out of the 100 Club Punk Festival (London, September 1976), Sioux suggested that she and Severin play, even though they had never performed live. Two days later, they appeared at the festival backed up by Marco Pirroni and John Simon Ritchie (Sid Vicious). The new band became known as Siouxsie and the Banshees. Gigging heavily through 1977, they drew significant media attention, including an appearance on Granada television's *So It Goes*, recording their

¹²⁴ Paul Mather and Mark Paytress, *Siouxsie & the Banshees: The Authorised Biography*, (London, UK: Sanctuary, 2003).

¹²⁵ Sheila Whiteley, *Daughters of Chaos: Patti Smith, Siouxsie Sioux and the Feminisation of Rock* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹²⁶ Paul Mathur and Mark Paytress, *Ibid.*

first John Peel session for BBC Radio, and appearing on the cover of the English music weeklies *Sounds* and *NME*. In 1978, the band signed to Polydor (U.K.).



Figure 1.8 Photographer unknown, *Siouxsie a Punk Shocker*, 1976 *Daily Mirror* JPEG, reproduced on “The Banshees and Other Creatures,” thebansheesandothercreatures.co.uk

Siouxsie Sioux is known as an innovative vocalist and stage performer, often referred to as the “Godmother of Goth” for her incorporation of the confrontational stance of Punk with a more “moody,” darker sound that came to characterize 1980s Goth. In the 1970s, Sioux’s onstage performances incorporated decadent cabaret with “shocking” Punk confrontation. One of the most photographed of the early English Punks, even those who had never heard her music, were familiar with her image. Her influence on Punk style through the dissemination of her powerful image cannot be understated, an image she created for herself in defiance of society’s expectations. In Figure 1.8, a newspaper tabloid article exploits her image to create a narrative around the “shock” value of her appearance. Her bleached short hair and menswear were shocking to the mainstream British public at the time, but we can see a style that was widely adopted by women in

later decades. The two black and white performance shots (Figures 1.9, 1.10) show Siouxsie in her early days of performing. Figure 1.10 shows her early menswear/androgynous look, and Figure 1.9 shows a more feminized “cabaret singer” look but still



Figures 1.9, 1.10, Photographer unknown, *Siouxsie Sioux*, 1977, JPEG
mannymiles.tumblr.com

evidences her original and outrageous (for the time) eye makeup. The heavy eyeliner, dark eyeshadow, and strong blush outlines would become de rigueur for many women in Punk after seeing Siouxsie and her powerful stage presence would prove a lasting influence. For Viv Albertine (The Slits), Siouxsie Sioux “just appeared fully made, fully in control,

utterly confident. It totally blew me away. There she was doing something that I dared to dream, but she took it and did it.”¹²⁷

The band’s first single, “Hong Kong Garden,” was released in 1978. Siouxsie’s lyrics reference racist violence at a local Chinese take-away, “we used to go there and...the skinheads would turn up (and) it would turn really ugly. These gits would just go in en masse and just terrorise (sic) these Chinese people who were working there.” Siouxsie wrote the song as a tribute to the Chinese workers and to express her own frustration at not being “like Emma Peel from the Avengers” and able to “kick all the skinheads’ heads in.”¹²⁸ Siouxsie was never as obviously political in her lyrics as other English Punks like the Clash or CRASS, nor was her feminism as apparent as that sung about by The Slits and The Raincoats but instead, Siouxsie played with feminine performance tropes (vocal, musical, physical appearance) for her own purposes. Openly bisexual, Siouxsie reveled in her persona: from kimonos and Kabuki face makeup to sleek black bondage gear, she performed a confrontational “vamp glamor” that played with gender norms as both seductress and threat.¹²⁹ Siouxsie’s was not an embrace of patriarchal constraints around feminine beauty (makeup, “sexy” outfits) but instead was a different structuring of the radical gender “Othering” performed by Patti Smith. Using an image

¹²⁷ *Queens of British Pop, episode 1*, aired June 23, 2018, on BBC One, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00jnjfm> and <https://youtu.be/3jxGcQJl7w>

¹²⁸ Simon Goddard, “Life and Loves of a She-Devil,” *Uncut*, January, 2005, accessed June 4, 2020, <http://www.untiedundone.com/020105b.html>.

¹²⁹ This performance of woman as both seductress and threat also appears in Lydia Lunch’s work as detailed in the final chapter.

that incorporated signs from English Punk (extreme makeup, spiky hair, bondage wear and accessories), vintage Victorian glamour (men's mourning jackets, black Victorian laced boots), and a contrast with the tattered "tomboy" style of other English women in Punk (The Slits, The Raincoats), Siouxs defined early Goth style while at the same time presenting a persona that links with Baudrillard's theory of the seductress and a challenge to masculine power.¹³⁰

Early work by the group is aggressive and confrontational but also contained a deep critique of patriarchal society. "Metal Postcard (Mittageisen)" from *The Scream* (1978) was dedicated to German artist Joseph Heartfield who used photomontage to critique the Nazis.¹³¹ Heartfield's photomontage is aligned with Punk in the use of an "aesthetic of ugliness" and both modes of representation invite audiences to look beyond appearances.¹³² "Metal Postcard" presents a critique of modern society and our addiction to media, "television flickers/For another news bulletin" while the title "Mittageisen" is a play on the German for lunch "Mittagessen," and iron "Eisen" and Hermann Goring's

¹³⁰ For more see Jean Baudrillard, *Seduction* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1991). Victoria Grace, "Baudrillard's Illusions: The Seduction of Feminism," *French Cultural Studies*, 19 Issue 3 (Oct 1, 2008): 347-361, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155808094945>

¹³¹ Siouxsie and the Banshees, *The Scream*, Polydor PD-1-6207, 1978, LP. Siouxs/Susan Ballion, Liner Notes, Siouxsie and the Banshees, *Downside Up* (2004), CD, Universal LC6444.

¹³² Charles Mueller, "Seduction and Subversion: The Feminist Strategies of Siouxsie and the Banshees," *College Music Symposium*, December 13, 2017, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18177/sym.2017.57.sr.11366>

“Iron always made a nation strong, butter and lard only made the people fat.”¹³³ Sioux is paying tribute to Heartfield but also critiquing oppressive patriarchal society, “It’s ruling our lives/There is no hope.”¹³⁴ For Mueller, the band’s use of power cords shifts away from a position of masculine signifiers, instead underlining the message of the song, “combined with the programmatic rhythm, parody rock’s masculine ideology and the logic of production and order.”¹³⁵ Sioux’s vocals shift between defiance and the chorus lyrics of the song’s fictional dictator. But where Mueller claims Sioux’s glissandos “deliberately deface an attractive voice, suggesting Siouxsie’s femininity was lost and consumed by the logic of masculine production,”¹³⁶ I see instead Sioux using her power as Punk performer to move her vocal performance outside any gender constrictions. Mueller and I agree on the conclusion that Sioux identifies “masculine ideologies as the source of the most destructive social ills.”¹³⁷ But where Mueller identifies Sioux as sole proponent of “creating ugliness and cacophony” in Punk to express a critique of the patriarchy, this critique is instead in line with other women performing in Punk in the 1970s and 1980s. Sioux’s performance of Punk was complex and combined confrontational performance with a menacing “Gothic” femininity that presented Sioux

¹³³ Suzi, “Readers recommend: songs about works of art – results,” Music Blog: Culture, *The Guardian*, Friday, February 1, 2013, accessed January 4, 2020. <https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2013/feb/01/readers-recommend-songs-art-results>.

¹³⁴ Siouxsie and the Banshees, “Metal Postcard (Mittageisen),” on *The Scream*, Polydor PD-1-6207, 1978, LP.

¹³⁵ Mueller, *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

as dangerous. Her vocal performance was the hysterical scream of Punk and also the vamp cabaret croon of Baudrillard's seductress: a combination both compelling and challenging to masculine music performance; a performance equally powerful visually and aurally.

Courtney Love talks about the strong impression made on her by early images of Siouxsie Sioux¹³⁸ and many of the women I spoke with for this project cite early images of Sioux as highly influential. Most of these women reference the powerful impression made by the image of a woman making music and the "image" that women presented via photographs in magazines. The music and live performances of Sioux and Smith, and other women musicians may not have been accessible to young American women growing up outside the urban centers of New York, Los Angeles, or London, but photographs of these women were accessible via music magazines, album covers, the occasional mainstream media exposé on television news, and performances on early television music programs. England's early Punk scene featured many women performers, some of whom would significantly influence later generations of Punks – female and male.

¹³⁸ See Carrie Brownstein, *Hunger Makes Me a Modern Girl: A Memoir*, (New York: Riverhead Books, 2015), Kim Gordon, *Girl in a Band: A Memoir*, (New York: Harper Collins, 2015), Courtney Love quoted in *Poppy Brite, Courtney Love: The Real Story* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998) and various Riot Grrrl histories including Sara Marcus, *Ibid*.



Figure 1.11 Photographer unknown, *Poly Styrene X-Ray Spex front cover original UK 7" single "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!," 1977*, author's collection.

Poly Styrene (Marianne Joan Elliott-Said, 1957 – 2011) & **X-RAY Spex** (1976-79, 1991, 1995-6, 2008)

Although certain aberrant elements of Punk on both sides of the Atlantic morphed into an all-white nationalism,¹³⁹ the larger Punk community was inclusive and, if not

¹³⁹ For more on British Punk and Far-Right Nationalism, see M. Worley and N. Copsey, "White youth: the Far-Right, Punk and British youth culture," *JOMEC Journal*, 9 (2016): 2747 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2016.10041> and Timothy S. Brown, "Subcultures, Pop Music and Politics: Skinheads and 'Nazi Rock' in England and Germany," *Journal of Social History* 38, no. 1 (2004):157-78. www.jstor.org/stable/3790031. For more on American Punk and White Nationalism see, Dylan Clark, "Notes: Music and the Education of Anger," *Journal of Thought* 36, no. 2 (2001): 55-60. www.jstor.org/stable/42590265 and Richard C. King, "Listening to Bad Music: White Power and (Un)Popular Culture," in *Unpopular Culture*, Lütke Martin and Pöhlmann Sascha, eds. (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 187-206, DOI:10.2307/j.ctv157bjk.13, also Dead Kennedys, "Nazi Punks Fuck Off," by Jello Biafra, recorded 1981, Alternative Tentacles, vinyl 7" single.

always outwardly supportive, tolerant of Punks from all backgrounds and varied identities. While some have positioned Punk as arising out of the white middle-class,¹⁴⁰ many participants in the London, New York City, San Francisco, and Los Angeles scenes were from working-class and racially diverse backgrounds. Two of the most influential female performers in Punk, Poly Styrene (Marianne Joan Elliot-Said) and Alice Bag (Alicia Armendariz) are representative of the diversity present in the Punk community and the space women were able to make for themselves on both sides of the Atlantic. Styrene is responsible for one of the most famous Punk anthems, "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!" (1977). The song's lyric is essential in understanding the attitude of many women in the Punk scene, "Some people think that little girls should be seen and not heard/But I think 'oh bondage, up yours!'"¹⁴¹ Styrene was half-Somali, and her appearance was far from traditionally feminine from her radical fashion sense to the braces she wore. Her open critique of English society, its oppressive racism and misogyny, were central to her

¹⁴⁰ Daniel S. Traber, "L. A.'s 'White Minority': Punk and the Contradictions of Self-Marginalization," *Cultural Critique*, no. 48 (2001): 30-64, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1354396>, Kevin Matson, "Did Punk Matter?: Analyzing the Practices of a Youth Subculture During the 1980s," *American Studies* 42, no. 1 (2001): 73, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40643156>, Richard Lakes, "Mosh Pit Politics: The Subcultural Style of Punk Rage," *Journal of Thought* 34, no. 3 (1999): 21-31, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/42589584>, and Kenneth J. Bindas, "'The Future Is Unwritten': The Clash, Punk and America, 1977-1982," *American Studies* 34, no. 1 (1993): 69-89, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40642496>, and Ian P. Moran, *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴¹ X-Ray Spex, "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!"/"I Am A Cliché," September 1977, Virgin Records, 7" vinyl single.

message. She had no interest in being seen as a “sex symbol” and “if anybody tried to make me one I’d shave my head.”¹⁴²



Figure 1.12 Photograph: Anorak London, from The Guardian, Fri 28 Apr 2017
<https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2017/apr/28/my-mum-the-Punk-pioneer-poly-styrenes-daughter-remembers-the-x-ray-spex-leader>

Inspired to start a band after seeing a Sex Pistols show, Styrene and her band became one of the more successful on the early Punk club scene, appearing on the influential *Live at the Roxy WC2* compilation. The Punk anthem “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!” was recorded live for the compilation; it was the band’s second-ever live show. In late 1977, Poly Styrene and her band X-Ray Spex re-recorded the song and released it as a single. The song opens with the spoken/screamed line, “Some people think little girls should be seen and not heard but I think, oh bondage, up yours!” Some fifteen years later, Riot Grrrl would claim the song as their own, but in the late 1970s and through the 1980s,

¹⁴² Charles Shaar Murray, “No Pop, No Style: Poly Styrene is Still Strictly Roots,” *NME* (London, England), May 13, 1978, *Web Archive* Accessed December 1, 2020, <http://www.geocities.com/vintageinterviews/xrayspex.html>.

a different generation of women found an anthem in Styrene's song. Later, Styrene stated that the song was meant not only as a feminist critique of patriarchal oppression but also as a broader critique of capitalism. Her stage name was also a critique of capitalist society and celebrity culture, "I chose the name Poly Styrene because it's a lightweight, disposable product. It sounded alright. It was a send-up of being a pop star: plastic, disposable. That's what pop stars are meant to mean, so therefore, I thought I might as well send it up."¹⁴³ Styrene's songs were both critique and tongue in cheek, but "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!" has become a Punk anthem, and for some, feminist scripture. As one interview subject states, "THAT song! I used to blast it and jump around singing along! And that saxophone! Who writes songs like that!"¹⁴⁴

For Styrene, Punk provided a space where she could express herself as a bi-racial feminist; a space where she could enact an identity of difference among like-minded individuals.¹⁴⁵ The front cover image of X-Ray Spex first single (Figure 1.12) shows a black and white graphic of Styrene mid-song with her mouth open, her makeup shocking (for the time), and surrounded by collage graphics that were just coming to the fore in the

¹⁴³ *Arena*. "Who is Poly Styrene." First aired 1979, BBC. Accessed November 1, 2019. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01jn409> and YouTube: X-Ray Spex Official. <https://youtu.be/IYIA7VVK0O0> and *Poly Styrene: I Am a Cliché*, directed by Celeste Bell and Paul Sng (Modern Films, 2021) 1 hr., 29 min., accessed March 1, 2021, <https://vimeo.com/ondemand/polystyreneiamacliche>.

¹⁴⁴ Subject 12, Oral History, interview with author, 2018.

¹⁴⁵ For more on Poly Styrene, see Dave Simpson, "Poly Styrene: the Spex Factor" *The Guardian*, March 23, 2011, accessed December 2, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/mar/23/poly-styrene-interview>

outward expression of Punk.¹⁴⁶ Styrene's performance on stage was equal parts energetic and confrontational: she was a strong performer and embraced her difference: bi-racial, not "traditionally" attractive, and unwilling to compromise in her performance or politics. Styrene's presentation of Punk's aesthetic of ugliness is more complicated than that presented by white women like Smith and Sioux: she is already marginalized by her race and her weight and she risks more in getting up on stage and shouting her feminism. As Caroline Coon comments in writing on the Slits, women in Punk were more of a threat to society than men, "What they represent is a revolutionary and basic shift of female ego from one which is biologically defined to one which is made strong by an assertive, mainstream role in society. Thus they are far more threatening than the male musicians."¹⁴⁷ While male society saw women in Punk as threatening, the image of a bi-racial less-than-perfect Punk female singer shouting, "Oh Bondage, Up Yours!" was a sign of hope and inspiration for many women in the Punk scene. Although Smith, Sioux, and Styrene were only a few of the many women active in 1970's Punk, their work helped lay the foundation for what was to come.

Part Two: The 1980s – Embracing “Bad Reputation”

1. New York in the 1980s

Rather than a decade dominated solely by male voices and male bodies, Punk in the 1980s was also a reshaping of a Punk feminism and a foundation for the Riot Grrrl

¹⁴⁶ For more on Punk graphics, see Jon Savage, *Punk: An Aesthetic* (New York: Rizzoli, 2012) and Toby Mott and Rick Poynor, *Oh So Pretty: Punk in Print 1976-1980* (New York: Phaidon, 2016).

¹⁴⁷ Caroline Coon (the Slits) quoted in Michelle Lee, "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!" *Off Our Backs*, 32, no. 11/12, (2002): 42–44, www.jstor.org/stable/20837705.

narrative of the 1990s. The 1980s was a pivotal decade in American music and popular culture: MTV's growing power made videos essential for music artists looking to break into the mainstream, placing an even heavier emphasis on personal appearance; hip-hop was on the rise, and many of Punk's original bands were now either successful commercial artists or defunct. Starting with the semi-retirement of Patti Smith, the rise of Joan Jett, and a decade filled with political/social turmoil, the 1980s were also a time of intense gentrification in New York City.¹⁴⁸ This gentrification created additional tensions in the Punk community and concentrated the scene in the East Village and Lower East Side of Manhattan and early outposts in Brooklyn. The music industry underwent significant shifts in the 1980s, including a rise of independent record labels eager to sign young artists.¹⁴⁹ Young women not only made space for themselves on stage as performers but at record companies, booking agencies, recording studios, behind cameras, and creating and publishing their own magazines and fanzines.

The economic collapse and social upheaval of the 1970s devastated many neighborhoods in New York City, including the poor communities on the Lower East Side. While then-Mayor Ed Koch was able to negotiate a balanced budget in 1981 and a boom on Wall Street signified a city in financial recovery for some, for many New

¹⁴⁸ For more on New York City in the 1980s, see Herbert London, *The Broken Apple: New York in the 1980s* (New York: Transaction Publishers, 1989) and John H Mollenkopf, *New York City in the 1980s: A Social, Economic, and Political Atlas* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993).

¹⁴⁹ For more on the rise of independent labels, see Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (New York: Little, Brown & Co., 2001) and Kevin Dunn, "How Punk Rock Kickstarted the Do-It-Yourself Record Revolution," *Medium: Cuepoint*, May 2016, accessed November 1, 2019, <https://medium.com/cuepoint/how-punk-rock-kickstarted-the-do-it-yourself-record-revolution-39a41d78e12a>.

Yorkers, the city's efforts at "reclaiming" neighborhoods drove many into less desirable areas and others into homelessness.¹⁵⁰ Throughout much of the 1980s, Manhattan neighborhoods lost affordable housing to intense development, including converting affordable rentals into more upscale co-ops and condominiums. By the middle of the decade, the East Village and Lower East Side had shifted in population away from SROs and large floor-throughs housing immigrant families to a combination of somewhat affordable single apartments and early influxes of luxury development. Despite attempts at renovating the Lower East Side, the high crime rate, relatively poor housing stock, and distance from the subway discouraged more upscale residents from the blocks south of Fourteenth Street, and east of Broadway, leaving room for a mixed population of older rent-stabilized tenants, students, and a vibrant population of young artists, musicians, and creative professionals.

In New York City, geography and access to public transit are essential in understanding the makeup of neighborhoods. The East Village (a real estate term invented in the 1960s) comprises those blocks in Manhattan south of Fourteenth Street, east of Broadway, north of Houston Street, and Alphabet City (those blocks east of First Avenue designated by A, B, C, and D). While there is argument over which blocks constitute the Lower East Side, the area referred to as *Loisaida* (Nuyorican for Lower East Side) includes all of Alphabet City. In a 2007 article on New York City Punk/No Wave band, the Bush Tetras, Caroline Polk O'Meara highlights the history of Manhattan's grid structure as excluding the blocks south and east of First Street and First Avenue. Likely, the nineteenth-century planners of Manhattan's grid did not foresee the

¹⁵⁰ Herbert London, *Ibid.*

grid's ability to "push to the margins of neighborhoods like the Lower East Side, to define liminal spaces somehow both within and outside the grid."¹⁵¹ But it is this very liminality that arguably allowed for the rise of Punk in New York City.

In the 1970s, the Lower East Side's marginalization reached epic proportions. Many landlords abandoned their buildings or burned them down to collect insurance. The resulting disinvestment allowed for squatters to move in and also for intense development and gentrification.¹⁵² When many of the women interviewed for this project began to move to or visit the Lower East Side in the 1980s, apartments were relatively affordable, and landlords often did not demand high security deposits or credit checks. We could find spaces to stay and places to live without finding co-signers or holding down full-time jobs. Lisa Zinna, writing in the *East Village Eye* in 1979, describes the area just prior to the 1980s, "from 14th Street to Houston Street, from Avenue A to Avenue D, one can see, smell, and feel the devastation of the neighborhood."¹⁵³ This devastation is reflected in the art coming out of the neighborhood: Punk music, film, and text. The push to the margins enacted by the City on the neighborhood can be seen as an attempt to erase "the

¹⁵¹ Caroline Polk O'Meara, "The Bush Tetras, 'Too Many Creeps,' and New York City," *American Music* 25, no. 2 (2007): 199, DOI:10.2307/40071655.

¹⁵² For more on the Punk squats of the Lower East Side, see Cait Etherington, "The Neighbors Who Arrived First: C-Squat," cityrealty.com, 2018, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.cityrealty.com/nyc/market-insight/features/get-to-know/the-neighbors-who-arrived-first-c-squat-155-avenue-c/5645> and Amy Starecheski, "The Story of Squats," *Urban Omnibus: a Publication of the Architectural League of New York*, 2017, accessed January 4, 2020, <https://urbanomnibus.net/2017/02/story-of-squats/>, and Stephen Zacks, "Where Can We Be? The Occupation of 123 Delancey Street," *Places Journal*, August 2015, accessed January 4, 2020. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.22269/150810>.

¹⁵³ Lisa Zinna, "Aftermath on the Avenue: The First of a Series," *The East Village Eye*, May 1979, 3.

abject” (Kristeva) in the space and life of the City. The Lower East Side is both on the island of Manhattan and forgotten by the city planners; there are no easily accessible subway lines making it inconvenient for those who want to live there and work elsewhere in the city. Until the massive developments in the 1990s wiped out original housing stock, most buildings were mid-to- late nineteenth century and built to house poor immigrants. In the 1970s and 1980s, these tenements featured barely renovated apartments rented for cheap to a young, transient creative population.

The 1980s also saw the rise of crack cocaine abuse epidemic across the five boroughs and what Republican Rudy Giuliani’s administration would later call “quality of life crimes.”¹⁵⁴ However, Giuliani was a decade away, and Koch would remain Mayor throughout the 1980s, leading a city that often seemed to leave the poorer areas of the outer boroughs and the Lower East Side to fend for themselves. The blocks that comprise Alphabet City were rife with street crime, and abandoned tenements served as headquarters for drug dealers, the sidewalks scattered with the addicted.¹⁵⁵ However, in

¹⁵⁴ For more on Giuliani’s “quality of life crimes” policies, see Katherine Beckett and Angelina Godoy, “A Tale of Two Cities: A Comparative Analysis of Quality of Life Initiatives in New York and Bogotá,” *Urban Studies* 47, no. 2 (2010): 277-301 www.jstor.org/stable/43084683, Bernard E. Harcourt, “Reflecting on the Subject: A Critique of the Social Influence Conception of Deterrence, the Broken Windows Theory, and Order-Maintenance Policing New York Style,” *Michigan Law Review* 97, no. 2 (1998): 291-389, DOI:10.2307/1290289, and Benjamin Chesluk, “‘Visible Signs of a City out of Control’: Community Policing in New York City,” *Cultural Anthropology* 19, no. 2 (2004): 250-75 www.jstor.org/stable/3651556.

¹⁵⁵ For more on gentrification in New York City, see Malcolm Miles, “Creative Classes: Aesthetics and Gentrification,” in *Limits to Culture: Urban Regeneration vs Dissident Art*, (London: Pluto Press, 2015), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183h029.6> and William Sites, “Public Action: Gentrification and the Lower East Side,” in *Remaking New York: Primitive Globalization and the Politics of Urban Community*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctttt7q.7>

the late 1970s, New York also experienced a boom in nightlife, with clubs large and small springing up downtown. By 1980 disco's Studio 54 scene collapsed,¹⁵⁶ the Mudd Club became a new destination for some of Studio 54's celebrities but also hosted a mix of Punks, fashionistas, performance artists, and a new group of New York City club kids.¹⁵⁷ CBs remained a prime destination for seeing live music and "hanging out." Given the draw of cheap rents, local clubs, and like-minded creative neighbors, for many women in the 1980s Punk scene, the East Village and the Lower East Side were where we lived, worked, and played. Originally from the Lower East Side, one of the women interviewed for this project details, "We didn't have cell phones, but we usually knew where people would be. You'd just see each other out on the street or go see the show that night: sometimes just hanging out in front. We were all neighbors, and to us, nothing that mattered was going on outside the LES."¹⁵⁸

Kim Gordon (Sonic Youth, Free Kitten) talks about her early years in New York, arriving in the city during one of the many garbage strikes, working "a horrible graveyard shift at a coffee shop, one of the only places to eat in Chelsea, open 24 hours — super crickets, deserted."¹⁵⁹ Gordon mentions some of the many small clubs that began to

¹⁵⁶ Michael Neill, Benilde Little, and Ken Gross, "Steve Rubell, Studio 54's Puckish Ringmaster, Follows His Club into History," *People* August 14, 1989, accessed November 11, 2020, <https://people.com/archive/steve-rubell-studio-54s-puckish-ringmaster-follows-his-club-into-history-vol-32-no-7/>

¹⁵⁷ For more on The Mudd Club see, Richard Boch, *The Mudd Club*, (Pt. Townsend, WA: Feral House, 2017).

¹⁵⁸ Subject 14, interview with author, 2018.

¹⁵⁹ Kim Gordon in Kate Guadagnino and Thessaly La Force, eds, "24 Hours: What New York Was Like in the Early '80s – Hour by Hour," *New York Times Style Magazine*, April 2018, accessed June 1, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/17/t-magazine/24-hours-new-york-city-1980s-life.html>.

appear below Fourteenth Street in the 1980s, Tier 3 (TriBeCa), Franklin Furnace, A-Space, and many more.¹⁶⁰ For Gordon, as for many of us, the blocks below Fourteenth comprised all we wanted or cared to know about life, art, music, and more. In the early 1980s, the larger nightclubs in the Meatpacking District were still a few years away, and the downtown clubs were prime destinations.

In the larger world, the 1980s were becoming “the Reagan Era,” a time of reactionary politics and draconian policies that exacerbated homelessness, ignored the AIDS crisis, and began “the War on Drugs” so devastating to so many lower-income families and communities. The 1980s also saw the rise of fundamentalist Christianity in the guise of the “Moral Majority.”¹⁶¹ For many young women coming of age in the 1980s, the promise of equality their mothers fought for in the 1970s seemed to be slipping away. With the backlash against feminism, women’s rights, reproductive freedom, and the fight for wage equality, some young women let their frustration shift into activism, others expressed their anger through music and art, while some chose instead to embrace the mainstream of a new feminine ideal focused on big hair, big shoulder pads, and the ultra-thin supermodels. However, some of us found space and hope for equality in the Punk community, often looking to the women who came before us for inspiration. In 1981, a young female Punk Rocker and former member of the all-women band The Runaways launched a solo career that would help change our lives. The release of Joan Jett’s “Bad Reputation” video was a moment that many young women

¹⁶⁰ Kate Guadagnino and Thessaly La Force, *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ Haberman, *Ibid.*, Vogel, *Ibid.*, Winters, *Ibid.*, D.K. Williams, *Ibid.*

cite as the first time they saw a young woman – someone like them – perform on camera expressing both physically and verbally what they were feeling.

2. Joan Jett and "Bad Reputation"

"I don't give a damn about my bad reputation.

You're living in the past it's a new generation."¹⁶²

Where Patti Smith was known for a sort of avant-garde androgyny, Joan Jett (Joan Marie Larkin) embraced a look combining street-tough Ramones-style Punk and a nod to Jett's hero, the heavily influential hard-rock singer/guitarist Suzi Quatro (Figure 1.13).¹⁶³



Figure 1.13 Photographer Unknown, *Suzi Quatro Album Cover*, 1973, SuziQuatro.com.

Jett's Punk aesthetic was in line with a look that many young women in the Punk scene embraced, and one Jett describes as her "uniform": "Really, I just wore jeans and

¹⁶² Joan Jett & the Blackhearts, "Bad Reputation," *Bad Reputation*, Boardwalk Records, 1981.

¹⁶³ Todd Oldham, *Joan Jett* (Los Angeles: Ammo Books, 2010) and Dave Thompson, *Bad Reputation: the Unauthorized Biography of Joan Jett*, (Guilford, CT: Backbeat Books, 2011).

sneakers and a leather jacket and a t-shirt, you know. But that leather jacket, dark hair, heavy makeup, it was kind of armoring because people were kind of afraid of me..."¹⁶⁴

Jett's reference to armor, a need to present an invulnerable stance, is another key element of the way women in the Punk scene positioned themselves. While some women did (and do) try to present a more traditionally "sexy" image with fishnets and short skirts, exposed bras, and red lipstick, there was both a need in 1970s/1980s New York City to present oneself as "street tough" and a signaling of affiliation to the Punk scene through stance, attitude, and clothing. Jett's self-presentation both on and offstage was an example of this and influenced many young women in the scene. As one woman puts it, "There was danger everywhere - on the subway, on the street, walking to or from a show or even work. You had to throw attitude, or bad things would happen. I started dressing like Joan Jett, that helped."¹⁶⁵ Another references specific images of Jett as highly influential in her own experiments with self-expression, "When I first saw photos of Joan Jett, I was confused. She looked like a really hot guy, but then I realized she was just a tough chick. She looked so cool I put her photo on my wall and started dressing like her."¹⁶⁶ In this instance, Jett's image not only provides a positive influence for a young woman in Punk, but her image also works against gender constraints by replacing the more traditional image of a male rock musician on a young woman's bedroom wall. This shifts the focus away from a traditional heteronormative positioning of male rock musician as object of

¹⁶⁴ Oldham, *Ibid.*, Chapter 15.

¹⁶⁵ Subject 14, interview with author, 2018.

¹⁶⁶ Subject 1, interview with author, 2018.

sexual desire (necessarily placing the young woman in a submissive “female” role) to a liminal space where Jett’s image is both object of desire (“She looked like a really hot guy”) and object of inspiration.

Starting the 1970s all-woman proto-Punk band The Runaways when she was only fifteen, Jett is a talented musician and songwriter. With her short shag of black hair, t-shirt, jeans, and leather jacket, her image was harder and more masculine than the other women in The Runaways; she had a reputation as a “tough chick,” and some made assumptions about her sexuality.¹⁶⁷ After The Runaways split, Jett worked hard at becoming a successful solo artist releasing *Joan Jett* (1980) – re-released as *Bad Reputation* (1981), the hugely successful *I Love Rock’n’Roll* (1981), and five more albums through the 1980s. She toured heavily and achieved a significant degree of commercial success. But Jett was still a Punk and her Punk image became iconic and was reproduced in several mainstream music publications, and DIY publications coming out of the fanzine scene. She was a hero in the Punk scene with her iconic sneer and middle fingers aimed at the world. In Figure 1.14 Jett enacts a stance that became central to the self-positioning of women in Punk and in direct confrontation to the more traditional cultural expectations of how women should fashion themselves in public, in performance, and in front of a camera. There is no effort to appear welcoming but instead, Jett enacts a confrontational stance suggesting a refusal to submit to gender-based expectations, a direct double-middle-fingered response to the world. This image (Figure 1.14) and others of Jett appearing confrontational or cool with a direct, unsmiling gaze present an oppositional stance that creates the “punctum” at the heart of many photographs of

¹⁶⁷ Oldham, Ibid.

women in Punk - a visual statement of rebellion that influenced women both on and off stage. It is not merely the musical contributions of women in Punk that are important but the circulation of their respective images that helped create a larger impact on culture. Some cultural critics link the mass circulation of Punk's image to the commodification of the subculture and, through this commodification and mass-production, the absorption of any subversive power within the subculture.¹⁶⁸ However, this argument misses the positive aspect of spreading the news caused by media coverage and the production of material goods (records, t-shirts, and magazines). While this critique presents media coverage as a part of the rapid commodification and subsequent demise of Punk, both the image and the dissemination of that image served to set the groundwork for many of the positive aspects of Punk in the U.S. These images, like those of Patti Smith and Joan Jett, helped to influence the look and often inspire creative aspirations of many urban and suburban young women. Rather than Punk dissipating and losing its power through dissemination and commodification, it created essential spaces for a significant number of American and English youth who embraced the subversive images, music, and often political and DIY ethics that their heroes espoused. By virtually ignoring the role of women in the early days of Punk and the importance of the dissemination of images of these women, critics miss the genuine impact that performances by and images of women like Patti Smith, Poly Styrene, Siouxsie Sioux, and Joan Jett had on young women.

¹⁶⁸ Hebdige, *Ibid.*, 86, 94. Dylan Clark, "The Death and Life of Punk, the Last Subculture," in David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl (eds.), *The Post-Subcultures Reader*, Oxford: Berg, 2003): 223-36, also Stacy Thompson, *Punk Productions: Unfinished Business*, (Albany: SUNY Press, 2012):100.



Figure 1.14 Bob Gruen, *Joan Jett, Max's Kansas City, 1970s*, bobgruen.com

While significant work exists on the negative impact of depictions of women in music videos, few academics have written about the positive influence created by Joan Jett's presence on MTV.¹⁶⁹ In 1980 Jett released a video to accompany her single "Bad Reputation." When Jett attempted to launch a solo career, after the demise of the Runaways, no American record company would sign her. As depicted in the video for "Bad Reputation," Jett dealt with this rejection the way any Punk Rocker would: she decided to start her own record label and release and market her own music.¹⁷⁰ In the video, Jett enacts a recreation of her own story. She is trying to get a record deal. Various

¹⁶⁹ For example, see Susan Alexander, "The Gender Role Paradox in Youth Culture: An Analysis of Women in Music Videos," *Michigan Sociological Review* 13 (1999): 46-64 www.jstor.org/stable/40969035 and Jennifer M. Hurley, "Music Video and the Construction of Gendered Subjectivity (Or How Being a Music Video Junkie Turned Me into a Feminist)," *Popular Music* 13, no. 3 (1994): 327-38 www.jstor.org/stable/852920.

¹⁷⁰ Joan Jett & the Blackhearts, "Bad Reputation" video, YouTube, accessed September 14, 2019. <https://youtu.be/5RAQXg0IdfI>.

male record executives reject her, and in one instance, a man says, "come back when you're dressed like a lady."¹⁷¹ The video shows Jett starting her own label with her band The Blackhearts, and when the record is a hit, the same record executives come swarming, dancing to her music and claiming they supported her all along.

The video and song "Bad Reputation" express the frustration many artists have with record companies. But Jett is doing more here: she is dressed in tight leather, outside an acceptable norm for the time, and is refusing to behave "like a lady" instead strutting confidently through the frames of her video, wielding her guitar like a weapon, and submitting the audience to her direct confrontational gaze. It is this pushing against gender norms, the refusal to "behave like a lady," that is central to an understanding of the intersection between Punk Rock and gender. Playing regularly on MTV, the video for "Bad Reputation" was a touchstone for many young women struggling with the limitations of being female in 1980s America. For one interview subject, this video was as essential as the music itself, "Joan Jett was the coolest. I used to sing that song 'Bad Reputation' out loud, and when I first saw the video, I was so excited. Here was someone - a Punk Rock girl - succeeding despite what the record company guys did."¹⁷²

The lyrics for "Bad Reputation," although somewhat banal, were also a rallying cry for many of the women in the 1980s Punk scene. "I don't give a damn 'bout my bad reputation/ You're living in the past it's a new generation" is as clear a rejection of societal gender norms as most young women had heard at the time. The connection between the message in Jett's "Bad Reputation" and X-Ray Spex "Oh Bondage! Up

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Subject 15, interview with the author, 2018.

Yours!" was made by more than one interview subject, "There were some songs that for me that are what Punk Rock was all about. 'Oh Bondage! Up Yours!' and 'Bad Reputation' are two of them."¹⁷³ Another states that although she was into more underground Punk by the time "Bad Reputation" was released, it still held some power for her, "It wasn't CRASS or anything but still, Joan Jett was cool, and that song was straight to the point."¹⁷⁴ And another says, "I remember seeing that video and thought, wow! She's got attitude! It was the first time I'd seen a woman on TV acting bold; it was really empowering."¹⁷⁵

Jett's success in the Punk scene and radical work against public performance of stereotypical femininity is essential in understanding women in the New York Punk scene. Often called the "Godmother of Punk," Jett is one of Punk's most influential women and has become a major rock star, regularly selling out concert tours. Jett's "uniform" was an important part of her influence - jeans, a t-shirt, a leather jacket - an alternative that we could enact and afford. Jett was also open about female sexuality, many of us related to her boldness and authenticity, "...girls have to be allowed to be sexual, too, because they are...it's wrong to say they can't be and that they can't own it." Jett cites the challenges she has faced as a female performer, "Now, even to this day, all these years later, a girl with a guitar, a girl owning it, is very threatening. They always want you to tone it down."¹⁷⁶ For Jett, Punk was appealing musically and aesthetically

¹⁷³ Subject 13, interview with the author, 2019.

¹⁷⁴ Subject 11, interview with the author, 2018.

¹⁷⁵ Subject 2, interview with the author, 2018.

¹⁷⁶ Oldham, *Ibid.*, Chapter 4.

but also for the freedom it offered. She loved the Sex Pistols and loved Punk's attitude; after suffering in The Runaways at the hands of a hostile press, Punk became a way for Jett to release her anger. "Journalists would look me in the eye and say, 'What the fuck are you doing, don't you know girls can't play guitar?'"¹⁷⁷ Jett also acknowledges the impact she has had on later generations of young women, "I've heard from the women in the band L7 that The Runaways had an effect on them (and) Bikini Kill."¹⁷⁸ For Jett, the energy and DIY culture of Punk gave her the space and place to build her career without allowing the male-dominated music industry to dictate her life. In a recent interview, she states she was rebelling "against society and what they allow. You're given two messages. You're saying girls can be anything, and then you give girls shit when they do something outside the box, different than what you expect a girl to be."¹⁷⁹

When record companies refused to sign her as a solo artist, Jett and her manager/business partner Kenny Laguna set up their own label, pressed their own records, and sold them out of the trunk of a car at live gigs. The record soon sold out, as did every gig she played, and eventually she signed with a label for distribution but retained ownership of her music. By 1982, Jett had a number one record with her cover of "I Love Rock'n'Roll" and has been steadily recording and touring, ever since. Although humble, Jett acknowledges the importance of being a role model for other women, "It is an amazing feeling when someone tells you that you have inspired them...[when] someone says [I] motivated them to pick up a guitar...It's not something you take

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, Chapter 19.

lightly...I've been very lucky to meet a lot of women in bands who have been motivated by myself or The Runaways or both."¹⁸⁰ Jett sees things as still challenging for women but having improved over the years, "Women have found a voice...It used to be that girls were only allowed to be gentle singers and songwriters, but now it's okay to express anger and frustration as well."¹⁸¹

3. American Women in Punk through 1989

While Punk was important for the freedom of expression in personal appearance afforded to young women, the rise of the DIY ethic (Do It Yourself) gave us the space to change our worlds. Many young women were involved in writing for magazines, creating fanzines, working at independent labels (and as more than just receptionists), producing and recording music, taking photographs at shows, booking bands, and managing nightclubs. Prior to the advent of Punk, the music industry mainly relegated women to subservient roles, including answering the phone, fetching coffee, or simply presumed to be groupies. The idea that women could and would perform both on and offstage was novel - to some not in the realm of possibility.¹⁸² Feminism may have inspired women to create their own opportunities, but Punk provided a venue where they could participate without being subservient. Punk was no utopia free of gender-based bias, but the DIY ethos of Punk provided a space where an increasing number of women could explore their own identities and forge careers on and offstage without having to capitulate to male

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, Chapter 13.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Gillian Gaar, *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll* (New York: Seal Press, 1992).

demands to "act like a lady." The growing number of young women active in the Punk scene - not just as band members or girlfriends - would have a sizeable impact by the end of the decade. Women achieved success as performers but also changed the shape of the music industry by running successful magazines, fanzines, independent labels, making documentaries, and in some cases, bringing their expertise to the major labels and MTV.

Although the media generally continued to cover women artists through tired "women in rock" specials, rather than integrating women artists into their general coverage, the continued coverage of women helped to influence a younger generation of female performers, fans, and consumers. Though it was not obvious yet, by the end of the decade, the growing number of women involved at all levels of the music industry would have a massive impact. Not all women embraced the "Punk" title, some instead preferring "alternative" or "post-Punk," but they had all found their way into music listening to early Punk and becoming inspired to find a way to mix their love for music with a "way to pay the rent."¹⁸³ Many of the women interviewed for this project worked as booking agents, band managers, fanzine and magazine writers/editors, college radio deejays, record store or record company employees, and played in their own Punk bands. Punk has always been, at its core, a participatory community. In the 1970s and 1980s, women in Punk participated, they were never "just fans."

When these women were asked about one of the central questions in this project, whether gender was a *negotiable* category, sometimes important and sometimes subordinate to other elements of identity, the responses are widely varied. Most express confusion at the idea of separating different aspects of their identity. Some object to the

¹⁸³ Subjects 2, 11, 13, Interviews conducted by author, 2018-2019.

idea that Punk was about anything other than music. Many women express frustration with portrayals of the 1980s in histories of Punk. One woman states her discomfort with the term *girl/grrl*, "I *hated* when that whole 'riot grrl' and 'girl power' thing started up in the 1990s, the whole idea that we would want to be called *girls* and not women? Seemed so regressive to me. And they acted like we didn't exist, like there'd been no women in the scene until they showed up."¹⁸⁴ For this woman and others, the idea that women were not an integral and foundational part of the Punk scene from the 1970s to the present day shows a lack of understanding.¹⁸⁵ The focus on gender as an essential part of identity is present in women's work off and on stage in the 1980s. When pressed, most women interviewed are more comfortable talking about themselves as members of the scene. "If you're asking was I a woman first, and Punk second, it just didn't work like that."¹⁸⁶ Although another respondent claims, "Of course you're identified through your gender - unless you're Wayne/Jayne County or something. But society? Society rejected *all* of us as Punks, not just the women."¹⁸⁷ While respondents do not agree on whether or not it was more essential to identify with Punk than to identify with gender, they all agree that

¹⁸⁴ Subject 7, interview with author, 2018.

¹⁸⁵ While the 1990s Riot Grrrl movement was a stated reaction to the rising macho-posturing of certain elements of the Punk Rock/hardcore scene and a perceived need to make a safe space for women in the scene to be together and to enjoy and perform the music they loved, there is also a willful element of erasure in a refusal by Riot Grrrl scene members and academics writing on Riot Grrrl to acknowledge the space and place of women in the 1980s Punk scene.

¹⁸⁶ Subject 15, interview with the author, 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Subject 11, interview with the author, 2019. Note: Wayne (now Jayne) County is a transgender performer popular in the late 1970s-1980s in the New York and London scenes.

part of what drew them to the Punk scene in the first place was a need to find a space to belong.

One of the central aspects of Punk is the abrasive in your face behavior of members of the scene and participant musicians. Female Punks embraced the anti-establishment stance of Punk Rock starting in the 1970s. With angst-venting screams and gouged-out guitars, female Punk musicians tore apart the commonly held idea that women's music should be soft and sensitive, preferably played on an acoustic guitar. But it was not just the music that was loud. Evelyn McDonnell adds that Punk "allowed women to be nasty, aggressive, vitriolic, and outraged, to howl and roar and raise a ruckus."¹⁸⁸ In response to the quote, one interview subject states, "First, Punk didn't *allow* us to be anything. We decided how we were going to be in the world. But yeah, Punks - boys and girls - made a big loud mess everywhere and anywhere." She specifies that at the time, "girls were not allowed to swear, to wear ripped jeans and t-shirts, but we did anyway."¹⁸⁹ Another interview subject references the abuse Punk women put up with on the street, at school, in the subway, at home "People called us sluts, weirdos, dykes. Sometimes we got spit on, sometimes we got chased, but usually, we told them where to get off."¹⁹⁰ Young women learned assertive behavior from Punk performers and other people in the scene, and many who felt alienated and suffocated by mainstream society felt more at home at the Punk shows and squats than anywhere else in their lives. Punk's

¹⁸⁸ Evelynnn McDonnell, "Rebel Grrls" *The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock: Trouble Girls*, ed. Barbara O'Dair (New York: Random House, 1997).

¹⁸⁹ Subject 8, interview with author, 2018.

¹⁹⁰ Subject 14, interview with author, 2019.

expressions of rage spoke to the rage young people felt about the state of the world, the lack of options, the failures of their parents' generation, and the constraints mainstream culture attempted to exact on young women. For many of the women interviewed for this dissertation, Punk provided the space and place to develop their own identities apart and generally in contradiction to society's expectations of what it means to be "female." For Nicole Panter (writer and former manager of L.A.'s Germs) a part of being Punk was, "to make yourself look as ugly on the outside as you feel on the inside."¹⁹¹ This performance of "ugliness" is one of the aspects of Punk identity referenced again and again by interview subjects. But the performance of ugliness need not be seen as a *negative* construct or an embrace of the nihilism of Punk often linked with 1970s English Punk as performed by the Sex Pistols. The rejection of "dressing like a lady" enacted by Joan Jett and Patti Smith is part of a broader rejection by women in Punk in the 1970s-1980s to either operate within society's definition of "female" or to embrace the nihilistic "No Future" stance performed by the more sensationalized elements of 1970s English Punk.

Women musicians in the 1980s continued to express their rage and frustration through their music, continuing the confrontational performance stance of 1970s Punk, and the "hysterical scream" performed by women in the 1970s. For Julie Cafritz (Pussy Galore, STP, Free Kitten), a formative moment in college (Brown) inspired her to speak up. A misogynist professor publicly snubbed her, and she found the strength to call him

¹⁹¹ Nicole Panter, "Fuck You Punk Rock 1977," reprinted in Evelynnn McDonnell and Ann Powers, *Rock She Wrote: Women Write About Rock, Pop, and Rap* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1995), 172.

out in class, “if you tell me I can’t do something, that will raise my ire.”¹⁹² When Jon Spencer approached Cafritz about starting a band, she refused to play bass, citing bass as the instrument most likely to be played by other women in their boyfriends’ bands.¹⁹³ Cafritz discusses recording “Hardcore Rebellion,” a track on *Feel Good About Your Body* that garnered fans and critics in the noise and Punk community. For the vocals on “Hardcore Rebellion,” Cafritz “read the vocals from the letters section of *MRR*.”¹⁹⁴ One letter is from a woman complaining about the male-dominated hardcore Punk scene and “I didn’t even know how to use a microphone, so I’m just yelling.”¹⁹⁵ Cafritz describes the use of anger in her performance, “I had to bring my personality to the table...I had a tremendous amount of anger that came out when I was performing...an endless reserve of bile.”¹⁹⁶ The anger was genuine, “In terms of the image I projected, that was fueled by something real; a real desire to somehow assert myself in an arena that I didn’t really feel I belonged in...between the fact that I was screaming rage-filled insults at men from the

¹⁹² Video interview of Julie Cafritz. Women of Rock Oral History Project records, SSC-MS-00756. Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History. https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/160964.

¹⁹³ Some interesting work has been done on women playing bass including Mary Ann Clawon, "When Women Play the Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music," *Gender and Society* 13, no. 2 (1999): 193-210, accessed March 17, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.newschool.edu/stable/190388> and Gina Arnold and Shawn Dahl, “Chicks with Picks,” In *Trouble Girls: the Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock*, ed. Barbara O’Dair (New York: Random House, 1997). Also, Kim Gordon, *Girl in a Band: A Memoir* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015) and Sean Yseult, *I’m In the Band: Backstage Notes from the Chick in White Zombie* (New York: Soft Skull Press, 2010).

¹⁹⁴ Cafritz Interview, Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

stage and I was smoking four packs a day and dressed in black...people had to talk to me.”¹⁹⁷ Here Cafritz positions herself as the antithesis of “approachable female” and yet also, recognizes the appeal of an angry, assertive woman unafraid to express her rage through her art.

Bush Tetras was another band who exemplified women in Punk in the 1980s. For Robert Christgau, one-time music editor of the *Village Voice*, the Bush Tetras’ music “summed up the Lower East Side circa 1980.”¹⁹⁸ The single “Too Many Creeps” positions Bush Tetras forever as feminist icons, albeit in a more low-key critique than found in X-Ray Spex “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!” or “Bad Reputation.” Instead, Sley’s half-spoken vocals are almost a drone shifting between semi-petulant “I don’t wanna” and a more forceful statement against ongoing street harassment, “I just don’t wanna go out in the streets no more because these people give me the creeps.”¹⁹⁹ In 1981, Sley stated she wrote the song about how “it’s just so hard downtown, dealing with these people who constantly harass you.”²⁰⁰ While Bush Tetras sound was more infused with funk than most Punk, the central critique in “Too Many Creeps” was one that young

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Robert Christgau, “Consumer Guide Reviews: Better Late Than Never,” *Village Voice*; reprinted at “Robert Christgau: Dean of American Rock Critics,” accessed November 1, 2019, http://www.robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?name=Bush+Tetras

¹⁹⁹ Bush Tetras, “Too Many Creeps,” 99 Records, 1980, 7” vinyl single.

²⁰⁰ Andy Schwarz, “Bush Tetras,” *New York Rocker*, October, 1980, 39.

women understood, and the song became a favorite, cited by several women interviewed for this project.²⁰¹

While some women in the Punk scene expressed themselves through music, some became rock critics, writing for larger magazines, including Terri Sutton. Sutton writes about the intersection of female sexuality and music that is so often left out of the discussion when male rock critics write about music. For Sutton, the intersection of female sexuality and rock music is not so much present in the quieter sounds of folk music but embodied in the likes of Babes in Toyland: "They're loud, they scream, they shake their hair around, they sweat. They combine wonderful snaky bass, tumbling heartbeat drums, and shards of ragged, roaring guitar...It's a hard and pounding beat; sensual as hell and very much their own."²⁰² Babes in Toyland came out of the Punk scene in Minneapolis, had a national profile and a massive influence in the late 1980s and well into the 1990s. For Sutton, the failure of male musicians and rock critics to acknowledge that women like loud music just as much as they like sex leaves space for bands like Babes in Toyland and L7 to get up on stage and play loud and scream and provide "loud driving chaotic music (that) is part of me, part of my sexuality."²⁰³

²⁰¹ Zoe Camp "The Story of Feminist Punk in 33 songs," *Pitchfork*, August 8, 2016, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://pitchfork.com/features/lists-and-guides/9923-the-story-of-feminist-Punk-in-33-songs/>

²⁰² Terri Sutton, "Women, Sex, & Rock'n'Roll," *Puncture*, summer 1989.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*



Figure 1.15 Pat Blashill, *Babes in Toyland*, 1989, JPEG, private collection.



Figure 1.16 Charles Peterson, *L7*, 1989, JPEG, charlespeterson.net

For one woman active in the 1980s New York scene, bands like Babes in Toyland and L7 were obvious developments from earlier Punk. "Those heavier all-women bands at the end of the 1980s weren't because the guys were playing metal or grunge. They listened to the same stuff we did: lots of women in bands - the Avengers, the Bush Tetras, the Slits - and also just really loud Rock and Punk Rock. I loved Metal. I loved loud guitars."²⁰⁴

²⁰⁴ Subject 14, interview with the author, 2018.

For one critic in the 1980s, "female anger only surfaced in isolated, sporadic bursts, the occasional woman's voice a novelty, not a sign or threat," positioning the refusal of musicians like Kim Gordon, L7, and Babes in Toyland to be interviewed for "women in rock" pieces in magazines as signifying that there was no collective scene.²⁰⁵ Just as Gordon positions herself as "an outsider" and Babes in Toyland would rather be interviewed as "musicians, not women in rock," so too do other women members of the Punk scene refuse limited definitions, "it wasn't about wearing a big sign that said 'I'm a feminist! Look at me!' It was about being a Punk and being an individual, an individual part of the larger scene. We were one big family, but it wasn't just about girls or boys or Black or white or in between. It was about Punk."²⁰⁶ Of course, not all respondents agree; some state that they were always very vocal about being feminists *and* Punks, about being supportive of other women, not just other Punks. When asked about the idea of "women in rock" or "women in Punk," most agree that it is an unhelpful way to write about musicians. "A band should be written about because they're good, not because they're men or women or have a Black singer or whatever," responds one woman.²⁰⁷ Another states, "personally, I always hated the hype around a band just because there was a girl bass player. Was she good? Was the band good? That's what mattered to me." But again, it is not that simple. "Of *course* it mattered seeing other women on stage. That

²⁰⁵ Emily White, "Revolution Girl Style Now," *LA Weekly*, July 10-16, 1992. Reprinted in *Rock She Wrote*, eds. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Delta Publishing, 1995).

²⁰⁶ Subject 15, interview with author, 2018.

²⁰⁷ Subject 18, interview with author, 2018.

meant maybe I could get on stage. And of course, a lot of the time, the people on stage were my friends."²⁰⁸

Although some critics claim that Punk was "dead" by the end of the 1970s, it survived and thrived in the United States in various forms and permutations throughout the 1980s. The decade opened with the semi-retirement of Patti Smith, and the rise of the MTV video-driven music industry. However, the 1980s also brought about a renewed energy in artists like Joan Jett and the Punk scenes in New York and Los Angeles. The East Village and Lower East Side continued to be a proving ground for DIY culture in all its aspects, including music, art, fanzine publishing, and the Punk squats. Where mainstream rock had marginalized women and most non-white men, Punk gave space to any and all. Women found space for themselves onstage as Punk musicians and performers and offstage as publishers, record company staff, booking agents, club managers, and active scene members at every level. While not everyone agrees on the varied histories of Punk in the 1970s -1980s, both regular members of the scene and those with a higher profile worked to challenge gender norms in appearance, behavior, and performative roles in society. This work laid the foundation for later Punk and cultural movements in the 1990s and beyond and largely expanded modes of dress, language, behavior, and options in performance and artistic expression for all women since the 1980s.

For many of us, the Punk scene in the 1980s provided a community that was more than just social but also supportive. For young women moving into traditionally male professions (booking agents, managing bands, radio promotion, deejays, A&R at record

²⁰⁸ Subject 16, interview with author, 2018.

labels, Rock photography), seeing other women in those roles succeeding was essential for many of us. Punk was not just crucial for the freedom of physical expression afforded to young women (what we wore, how we did our hair) but also the core DIY ethic that encouraged many of us to make our own music, create our own magazines and zines, get jobs and succeed at independent labels or start our own labels, produce and record music, manage bands, book shows, and document all of it on camera. Feminism could inspire many of us to push against societal limitations and expectations, but Punk provided examples of other women, a space and place where we could forge careers and explore our own identities. While histories of Punk in the 1980s often focus on male-centric narratives around hardcore, the Punk scene in New York, L.A., London, and beyond was ever-expanding and incredibly diverse. Through the hard work of women like Joan Jett, Julie Cafritz, Bush Tetras, and many more both on and off-stage, the 1980s served as a time when women used the lessons learned in the 1970s and moved forward with the hard work of redefining what it means to be “female.” This work was done (in true Punk fashion) across every medium from music and performance, to body modification and dress, photography, and DIY publication. This DIY production and performance of identity is detailed in the next chapter. Rather than a decade dominated solely by male voices and (violent) male bodies, the 1980s were also a reinvigoration of 1970s liberation, a reshaping of a broader feminism, and a foundation for the 1990s.

CHAPTER TWO: PUNK as RADICAL TEXTUAL PERFORMANCE

"Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it."²⁰⁹

Part One: Fanzines as Punk Aesthetic Performance: 1970s-1990s

1. Feminist Publication: a brief history

Punk is a multimedia expression of identity, a demand to be heard. Punk in print shares an ethos with feminist publication. In the introduction to the iconic feminist anthology *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970), Robin Morgan states, "This book is an action." Morgan's claim is that writing and the publishing of that writing can serve as feminist activism just as do more physically active protests, sit-ins, and marches.²¹⁰ From the mid-nineteenth century through the present, American women have worked to be heard; to find spaces for self-actualization and political activism using a variety of alternative modes of expression. What has united these women is a belief that the written word can be revolutionary, that language can remake the world, and that women's writing matters. The diverse and extensive history of feminist publication in the United States illustrates the link between writing and activism. This history appears within the Punk community in various forms including the self-produced or DIY fanzines published in the 1970s-1990s.²¹¹

Many histories of the underground press in the United States foreground the publications of the New Left in the 1960s with the occasional mention of political tracts

²⁰⁹ Cixous, *Ibid.*, 876.

²¹⁰ Robin Morgan, "Introduction," in *Sisterhood is Powerful: an anthology of writings from the Women's Liberation Movement*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 1.

²¹¹ Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr, eds., *This Book is an Action: Feminist Print Culture and Activist Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 1-2.

in earlier decades but few detail the history of women's publication efforts.²¹² The history of feminist publication in the United States is a long connected line of women's writing and publishing with the work of the earlier decades laying the foundation for the upsurge in the latter part of the twentieth century. The widely visible print output of the Riot Grrrl movement in the 1990s, whose presence is so prevalent in 'zine archives, is part not only of the Punk fanzine genre but also of an ongoing print movement that has existed since American women have worked to use print to communicate with other women.²¹³

In her examination of feminist print production, Allison Piepmeier connects the "girl zines" of 1990s America and predecessors identified in cultural, political productions by women since the 1850s describing these varied publications as "participatory media."²¹⁴ Participatory media is "made by individuals rather than by the consumer culture industries" and provides "a way of engaging with unfriendly mass culture and transforming it."²¹⁵ Piepmeier is particularly interested in self-produced media shared among members of a specific community. As such, she primarily focuses

²¹² For example, Roger Lewis, *Outlaws of America: the Underground Press and its Context*, (New York: Penguin, 1972), Bob Ostertag, *People's Movements, People's Press: The Journalism of Social Justice Movements*, (New York: Beacon Press, 2006), and Robert J. Glessing, *The Underground Press in America*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970).

²¹³ For this version of Riot Grrrl history see Kearney, *Ibid.*, Melanie A. Ferris, "Resisting mainstream media: Girls and the act of making zine," *Canadian Woman Studies*, 21, no. 4 (2001): 51-5, accessed January 4, 2019, <https://cws.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/cws/article/view/6906/6090> and Kristen Schilt, "'I'll Resist with Every Inch and Every Breath' Girls and Zine Making as a Form of Resistance," *Youth & Society*, 35, no. 1 (2003): 71-97, accessed December 2, 2020 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X03254566>.

²¹⁴ Piepmeier, *Ibid.*, 29.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

on connections between nineteenth-century women's personal scrapbooks shared with women's club associates, 1970s mimeographed pamphlets used at consciousness-raising meetings, and Riot Grrrl fanzines in the 1990s.²¹⁶ The idea of connective tissue stretching from the 1800s scrapbook culture forward through 1970s mimeograph publications to the culmination in 1990s zine production is essential in understanding the ways the print medium works to give voice to, build, and disseminate women's voices.

The idea of participatory media is helpful in exploring the history of underground women's publications in America and DIY Punk fanzine culture. Throughout this history are similarities in presentation and construction that emphasize accessibility or DIY culture. This accessibility of constructive style helps create the "embodied community" surrounding underground publications, a community that resides in the production and dissemination of the material objects produced.²¹⁷ It is essential to note the active nature of the term "embodied community" to differentiate it from the more passive idea of the "imagined community."²¹⁸ Through the process of creating and disseminating the feminist print product, women work to form an active or "embodied" community that provides them with voice and agency, neither of which they find within mainstream print publications or the male-dominated counter-culture press.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Piepmeier, Ibid., 1-21.

²¹⁸ Ibid. Note, "imagined communities" is from Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (Revised and extended ed.), (London: Verso, 1991), 6-7.

Histories of the underground press often focus on developments in printing technology as integral to the growth of non-mainstream press publications.²¹⁹ Histories of feminist periodicals include similar overviews.²²⁰ Starting with the expensive and limited printing processes involved in nineteenth and early twentieth-century feminist publications, this history is vastly changed with the arrival of the mimeograph machine in the 1970s and later the advent of relatively inexpensive copy machines, word processors, and desktop publishing in the 1980s and 1990s. Without the shift from expensive modes of production to relatively accessible technologies, it would be difficult to imagine the proliferation of feminist thought and community building enabled by the mimeograph in the 1970s and access to inexpensive copy machines and desktop publishing in the 1980s-1990s. Overall, it was a combination of marginalization, activist drive, and developments in technology and communication that lead to the creation and subsequent proliferation of feminist periodicals from the 1840s through the 1990s.

Histories of twentieth-century feminist publication in America often use a starting point of the late 1960s with a focus on resistance, consciousness-raising, fighting the misogyny of the New Left, and important developments in printing technology.²²¹ Referred to by some as the “mimeograph revolution,” the late 1960s through the 1970s

²¹⁹ For example, Glessing, *Ibid.*, Lewis, *Ibid.*, Ostertag, *Ibid.*, and John McMillian, *Smoking Typewriters: The Sixties Underground Press and the Rise of Alternative Media in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²²⁰ For example Ann Mather, "A History of Feminist Periodicals," *Journalism History*, 1, (Autumn 1974): 82-85.

²²¹ McMillian, *Ibid.* and Agatha Beins, "A Revolution in Ephemera: Feminist Newsletters and Newspapers of the 1970s," in *This Book is an Action*, eds. Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr, (Chicago: U of IL Press, 2016), 46-65.

witnessed a considerable upsurge in self-produced and disseminated feminist periodical publication. The impetus behind many feminist newspapers in the 1960s-1970s was a de facto marginalization of women writers and artists, along with a lack of coverage of women's issues and perceived rampant misogyny on the part of the New Left and its adherent publications. This marginalization and misogyny leading to feminist production finds a parallel in the Punk scene with the DIY ethic and Punk political activism focused on the artistic productions of members of the Punk scene.²²² However, where the New Left allowed little space for women to write, create or publish, late 1970s-1980s Punk witnessed women writing, publishing, and distributing their own print publications; publications which lay foundational groundwork for later 1990s Riot Grrrl 'zines that make up the bulk of 'zine collections in most archives.²²³

The broader history of the underground press in the 1970s is helpful in understanding some aspects of Punk material production. In histories of the underground press and the New Left in the 1960s-1970s, alternative and underground media served as "the central nervous system in the body politic of the adversary culture."²²⁴ Creating an alternative media supported the transmission of the "ideas, values, and visions that make up the shared language that radicals and dissidents seek to communicate with each other and engage the dominant culture."²²⁵ This work of creating underground publications

²²² See Piepmeier, *Ibid.* and Duncombe, *Ibid.*

²²³ For example, Smith College Special Collections "Zines" and Barnard College Library's "Zine" Collection are mainly focused on 1990s Riot Grrrl 'zines which can misrepresent 'zine history.

²²⁴ David Armstrong, *A Trumpet to Arms: Alternative Media in America* (Boston: South End Press, 1999), 16 and McMillian, *Ibid.*

²²⁵ Armstrong, *Ibid.*

continues through the Punk subculture well into the 1990s, witnessing a form of community building and dissemination of key concepts central to Punk including the disruption of central mainstream cultural narratives, the breaking of taboos against graphic sexual representations, and forming new and ongoing narratives around gender identity.

An important aspect of DIY publishing was the work of making the community visible to itself. In Joyce M. Latham's work on feminist periodicals of the 1970s, the materiality of publications is essential as it provides examples to the community of members "shaping their own discourse" outside the status quo.²²⁶ Similarly, the primary functions of Punk fanzines are communication, self-expression, and community building. For one woman interviewed for this project, 'zines served not only as a way for her to create but also as a means to communicate with others "it wasn't just about writing my own stuff but also to have a 'zine to trade with other people who had 'zines.'"²²⁷ Christine Boarts of *Slug & Lettuce* explains that creating the 'zine isn't just an act of creation but also of connection, "just that feeling of being connected with other people."²²⁸ These connections were essential for building and supporting the Punk community in and outside the major metropolitan areas. In their materiality, 'zines served as conversation starters at shows, and for the communication of ideas from band interviews to personal

²²⁶ Joyce M. Latham, "Off/On Our Backs: The Feminist Press in the 'Sex Wars' of the 1980s," in *Protest on the Page: Essays on Print and the Culture of Dissent Since 1865*, eds. James L. Baughman, Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen, James P. Danky (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2015), 222.

²²⁷ Subject 3, interview with the author, 2018.

²²⁸ In Duncombe, *Ibid.*, 44.

essays. The larger ‘zines in the 1970s-1980s (*Flipside, Slash, Punk, MRR*) featured local collectives sharing editorial duties, or far-flung “scene reports” from across the country (and globe). Smaller ‘zines were usually created by one person or a smaller group and often had print runs less than a few hundred. While themes are disparate across ‘zines, production aesthetics are generally similar and easily recognizable to community members as speaking their language.

Agatha Beins references the "radical collage"²²⁹ of 1970s feminist publications, a print aesthetic that juxtaposes "typed and handwritten text, photographs, and hand-drawn graphics, signed and unsigned articles, and layout that appears professionally done alongside typos, [and] misnumbered pages."²³⁰ This aesthetic works to express "an active commitment to anti-professionalism" and an example of the process of the inclusive nature of production.²³¹ The inconsistency in content and production methods suggests an element of spatial and temporal inter-textuality that "produces Women's Liberation in the 1970s as an unfinished, continually unfolding set of ideals and practices," thereby expanding both its reach and its ability to be inclusive.²³² Developing at the end of the 1970s concurrently and at times in conjunction with feminist publications, DIY Punk publications share much in common with the aesthetic of 1970s feminist print publications. Central to the Punk ethos is the idea of possibilities for the non-expert to

²²⁹ Beins, *Ibid.*, 49.

²³⁰ Agatha Beins, "A Revolution in Ephemera: Feminist Newsletters and Newspapers of the 1970s," in *This Book is an Action*, ed. Jaime Harker and Cecilia Konchar Farr (Chicago: U of IL Press, 2016), 46-65.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

²³² *Ibid.*, 49.

create art, text, and communicate with the broader scene. Just as feminist periodicals "opened up a realm of cultural, mechanical, political, and literary practice to women who might never otherwise consider themselves able or skilled,"²³³ so too did Punk fanzines. Just as Punk performance on stage centered on the idea that anyone could be in a band, Punk also moved the passive reader directly into the role of editor, writer, and distributor of material print publications.

Punk 'zines 1970s-1990s

Punk fanzine culture first came to the forefront in response to and as a part of the 1970s and early 1980s DIY aesthetic and served as both an integral part of the broader Punk cultural movement and an essential archival resource for writing histories of Punk. Essential elements of fanzine culture are self-production and the participatory creation of embodied community. Punk fanzines are necessarily a self-produced and individualistic medium, but as a medium, their primary function is communication; they are "as much about the communities that arise out of their circulation" as they are about content or "artifacts of personal expression."²³⁴ Akin to the relationship between the 1970s underground press and the mimeograph machine, fanzine culture was made possible by the convergence of the DIY Punk aesthetic and the broad accessibility of photocopying, word processing, and eventually, desktop publishing.²³⁵

Before the advent of the Riot Grrrl 'zines in the 1990s, Punk Rock 'zines existed in the hundreds (if not thousands) across the globe. The larger 'zines of Los Angeles,

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Duncombe, 44.

²³⁵ Ibid.

New York, San Francisco, and England worked as builders of community and vehicles for DIY self-expression. Although most 'zines from the 1970s and 1980s no longer exist in archives, following are examples of a few 'zines created and published by women in the Punk scene.



Figure 2.1, 2.2 Emily Zane, *019890* Cover, Lisa Fancher, *Biff! Bang! Pow! No. 1* Cover, JPEG, private collection.

Figures 2.1 and 2.2 show the covers of two late 1970s Punk fanzines created by women: *Biff! Bang! Pow!* Lisa Fancher's (Frontier Records) music fanzine and Emily Zane's *019890*. Both 'zines are xeroxed on cheap stock white paper using black and white images and, in some instances, handwritten text. Both use early Punk aesthetics of collage and DIY layout, print, and distribution. While *019890* focuses solely on personal expression and Buffalo music news, Fancher's *Biff! Bang! Pow!* is an early attempt at national music coverage using DIY Punk means of communication. While Fancher would go on to form Frontier Records in 1980, she was also known as a rock critic and writer. Her 'zine was more "professional" than many of the late 1970s 'zines, similar to *Slash* (L.A.) and, to a lesser degree, *Punk* (N.Y.)

Melanie Nissen (photographer) and Steve Samiof started L.A.'s *Slash* magazine in 1977. Premiering with Nissen's photo of The Damned's Dave Vanian on the cover, *Slash* was a large format tabloid-size 'zine selling for fifty cents. Publishing twenty-eight issues from 1977-1980, *Slash* became a central source for information for the L.A. Punk scene. *Slash* covered local and touring Punk bands with Nissen's photos taken at live shows. Despite the Punk aesthetic, *Slash* – though radical at the time – shows a degree of professionalism in layout and printing (newsprint rather than Xerox). Figures 2.3 and 2.4 show interior images from *Slash* – Figure 2.4 is fairly standard format for record reviews in music magazines with aligned columns showing some degree of production value; Figure 2.3 illustrates late 1970s Punk cut and paste collage.



Figure 2.3, 2.4 Interiors *Slash* Magazine, 1970s, JPEG, CirculationZero.

Although *Slash* ceased publication by 1980, scene participants cite its influence both as a community builder for the L.A. (and arguably global) Punk scene. The layout used by *Slash* appears in several later Punk ‘zines, including *Flipside* and *MRR*.

Co-creators John Holmstrom and Legs McNeil claim their New York-based ‘zine *Punk* as the progenitor of the term “Punk Rock” (although Lester Bangs is also credited with coining the term), the ‘zine is an important object in the history of Punk and underground publishing. Started by Holmstrom and McNeil in 1975, several histories of Punk highlight the importance of *Punk* in community building for the early New York scene and in spreading the word to those unable to access the scene directly. Publishing fifteen issues between 1976 and 1979, *Punk* was a music ‘zine and also featured cartoons, humor, and the work of women central in the Punk scene including Mary Harron, Anya Phillips, and Roberta Bayley. Harron was the first writer to join the nascent ‘zine interviewing the Ramones for an early issue. Harron’s feature on the Sex Pistols was their first for a U.S. publication.²³⁶

However, *Punk* was not the only New York Punk ‘zine in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Multimedia artist and performer Barbara Ess produced and edited *Just Another Asshole*, described as “a no wave mixed media publication” project. From 1978 to 1987, Ess organized seven issues across various formats, including ‘zine, LP record, tabloid-sized magazine, exhibition catalog, four-page insert in *Artforum*, and more. Issue 6, published in paperback format, featured writing from several artists in the early 1980s Downtown scene. Contributors include Kathy Acker, Judith Barry, Eric Bogosian, Glenn

²³⁶ Harron is perhaps best known for writing and directing *I Shot Andy Warhol*, *American Psycho*, and *The Notorious Bettie Page*. Her most recent project is *Alias Grace* (Netflix) based on the Margaret Atwood novel.

Branca, Dorothea Franck, Michael Gira (Swans), Jenny Holzer, Cookie Mueller, Lee Ranaldo (Sonic Youth), Lynne Tillman, and many more. Although *Just Another Asshole* became a higher production art project, the first two issues were directly aligned with the DIY Punk aesthetic. Ess created cut-up collages out of appropriated newspaper headlines, news clipping, and hand-written text. While Ess began *Just Another Asshole* as a

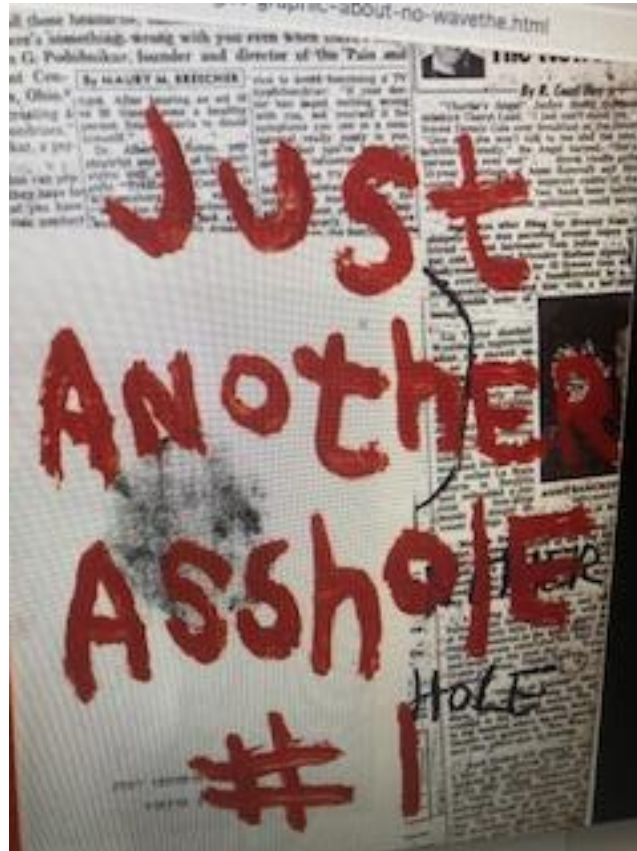


Figure 2.5 Barbara Ess, *Just Another Asshole #1*, 1978, JPEG, private collection.

self-produced critique of news media, it evolved into a cooperative art project across various media that served to build and give voice to a community of artists in the Downtown scene in the late 1970s.

In the 1980s, 'zine publication was a central part of the Punk community. Many 'zine histories focus on the male-dominated publications covering the rising hardcore scene, including *MRR* and *Flipside*. While both publications had women contributors,

another ‘zine coming out of New York in the 1980s was written and edited by a woman.

Wendy Eager started *Guillotine* in 1981 to cover the New York hardcore scene.

Although generally ignored in histories of women’s DIY publishing, Eager’s ‘zine provides an essential resource for both Punk and publishing histories. Eager moved to New York City in 1979 from Long Island. In 1981, Eager saw her first hardcore show at Irving Plaza and began to frequent A7 (a club on Avenue A at the center of the early 1980s Punk scene). For Eager, hardcore provided a community that did not exist for her elsewhere.

Eager told the *Village Voice* in 2014, “Hardcore is more than music. It’s a way of life and a way of thinking. The music is just one part of the whole because it was the entire scene that made it something special and something different.”²³⁷ She set out to capture that scene in *Guillotine*. Although *Guillotine* is now only available online, Eager hopes to bring it back in print. In the meantime, she continues to interview musicians and review books, films, live shows, and recordings related to New York hardcore. As her website says: “*Guillotine*, the online home for one of the longest running institutions of New York Hardcore and Punk – the place where bands like Urban Waste, Murphy’s Law and Agnostic Front got some of their first exposure – and that’s the true facts.”²³⁸ Figure 2.6 is a cover of *Guillotine* Issue #8 with cut and paste and hand-written logo. Guillotine

²³⁷ Tony Rettman, “East Village Nights: an Excerpt from NYHC: New York Hardcore 1980-1990,” *Village Voice*, December 4, 2014, accessed December 1, 2020, <https://www.villagevoice.com/2014/12/04/east-village-nights-an-excerpt-from-nyhc-new-york-hardcore-1980-1990/>.

²³⁸ Wendy Eager, *Guillotine*, accessed December 4, 2020 <https://www.guillotinezine.com/>

was photocopied on white paper stock and sold for one dollar at Punk shows (primarily hardcore) and through mail order and local record stores.



Figure 2.6 Wendy Eager, cover, *Guillotine* #8, 1984, JPEG, guillotinezine.com

One of the best-known Punk fanzines focused on women in the 1980s was Lori Twersky's *Bitch: The Women's Rock Mag with Bite*.²³⁹ While Twersky also focused on women musicians outside the Punk scene, she also regularly featured Punk icons including, Joan Jett, as pictured in Figure 2.7. Figures 2.7 and 2.8 are from *Bitch* #24 (1989) printed on rough newsprint, using a combination of color, black and white photos, handwritten text, and Punk collage. Several of the women interviewed for this

²³⁹ *BITCH: The Woman's Rock Mag with Bite*, 1989, Lori Twersky, Sophia Smith Collection zines collection, SSC-MS-00434, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/749> For more on *Bitch* see Duncombe, *Ibid.* and Garr, *Ibid.*, 255-7.

dissertation reference *Bitch* as an essential source for information on music and other aspects of the Punk scene. While not all coverage was Punk-centered, as one woman puts it, "It was so important to see images of women with guitars, to know that I wasn't the only one who wanted to play music, to be in a band."²⁴⁰



Figure 2.7, 2.8 *BITCH: The Woman's Rock Mag with Bite*, 1989, Lori Twersky, Sophia Smith Collection zines collection, SSC-MS-00434, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/749>

Often a combination of hand-written and printed text interspersed with marginalia, amateur artwork and cartoons, and run off at the local Kinko's (or office job's copy machine), the content of Punk fanzines ranged widely. Some fanzines covered music and politics, some covered local Punk scenes; some were an amalgamation of

²⁴⁰ Subject 6, interview with the author, 2018.

interviews, humor, record reviews, comics, and editorials. While some of the larger Punk fanzines (*MRR*, *Bitch*, *Flipside*) were printed on newsprint and used offset type, most 'zines were black and white on copy paper stock. Generally, fanzines were a combination of typed and handwritten text and nearly all employed the Punk aesthetic of radical collage. The assumption among those of us in the Punk scene was that fanzines were all DIY self-productions created by individual scene members without specific expertise. Central to the Punk aesthetic was the idea that everyone should participate: to speak, to create, and to share. Punk fanzines were often distributed for free at Punk shows or traded through the mail. This accessibility was central to building community as it provided an inclusive, informative, and welcoming space for those participating in the scene to speak out both as individuals and as a part of the larger community. While not all fanzine editors were women, from the 1970s through the 1990s, many were. Like their predecessors active in the 1960s-1970s feminist underground press, both the materiality and accessibility of these publications were essential for community building and disseminating information. Out of the oral histories conducted for this dissertation, many women mentioned the importance of fanzines in their discovery of Punk, in their own artistic experimentation, and in discovering a space to speak their minds. While some of the respondents were rock critics or developed into freelance writers by the mid-1990s, many simply wrote for or published one or two small-run fanzines. There is a consensus among respondents that agrees with a quote from one of the women, "fanzines were so important to me. I always read as many as I could get my hands on. Some were

stupid or just boys talking about other boys, but mostly, I learned about other people, other scenes, music, books...and I felt like I wasn't alone."²⁴¹

Because 'zine archival collections tend to focus on Riot Grrrl 'zines, linking them with a theorized construct of "third wave" feminism, many miss the connection to pervasive DIY Punk 'zine culture and the Punk aesthetic present from the 1970s forward. A brief comparison may prove helpful in illustrating this historical link. Figure 2.9 is an example of a Riot Grrrl fanzine (published in the early 1990s) employing Punk textual collage and covering both music and political issues.



Figure 2.9 *Bikini Kill*, Issue 2, Sophia Smith Collection zines collection, SSC-MS-00434, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass.
<https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/749>

²⁴¹ Subject 7, interview with the author, 2018.

Figure 2.10 is the cover of the "Absolutely Queer Issue" of leading Punk fanzine *MRR* released years before the fanzine above and quite clearly showing a mix of Punk collage aesthetic, political message, and music coverage. While *MRR* was not a women-only publication, it was arguably the most influential and widely distributed Punk fanzine in history.²⁴² Printed on newsprint stock and offset, it was more professional in production values but retained a mix of handwritten and text/image collage layout that signaled its legitimacy to the Punk community.



Figure 2.10 Cover, "Absolutely Queer Issue," *Maximum Rock'n'Roll*, Sophia Smith Collection zines collection, SSC-MS-00434, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, Mass. <https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/resources/749>.

It is difficult to imagine that women active in the late 1980s and early 1990s Punk scene would be unfamiliar with *MRR* or the Punk aesthetic evidenced in most Punk zines published from the 1970s through the 1990s. To suggest that the "girl 'zines" of the

²⁴² For more on *Maximum Rock n Roll*, see Bryant, *Ibid.*, Duncombe, *Ibid.*

1990s do *not* draw heavily from and are a part of the Punk aesthetic and the broader category of Punk publication is to willfully ignore a clear history connecting the 1970s print production through the 1980s and into the 1990s. Rather than separating each group in a binary of 1970s/1980s Punk 'zine: not feminist and Riot Grrrl 'zine: feminist, it is more useful to view them all as Punk 'zines, material representations of an urge to speak, an urge to create outside the constraints of mainstream culture. Significant differences in content often exist in Punk 'zines and Riot Grrrl 'zines, but perhaps more useful for this dissertation are the material and aesthetic connections between the "radical collages" of the 1970s feminist press and the DIY aesthetic of the Punk Rock 'zine of which the Riot Grrrl zine is necessarily a sub-genre. The building of embodied community through participatory media is a central element shared by DIY print publications by women from the 1970s through the 1990s. The Punk aesthetic of radical collage is shared by Punk 'zines and the work of Kathy, discussed in the next section.

Part Two: Kathy Acker's Radical Feminist Collage

"If woman could constitute herself as speaking subject, if the 'feminine' could be present in language, would her voice be that of the hysteric?"²⁴³

1. Kathy Acker as Punk Feminist

Partaking in the Punk aesthetic in her work, art, and physical expression and performance of identity, Acker was a self-described Punk Rock writer. Her work is a visceral and often brutal confrontation with identity, female sexuality, and the limits and

²⁴³ Gabrielle Dane, "Hysteria as feminist protest: Dora, Cixous, Acker," *Women's Studies*, 1994 23:3, 231-255, DOI: 10.1080/00497878.1994.9979025.

punishments society levels against those not born male. Acker's experiments with collage, feminist theory, and self-representation connect to the broader Punk scene and its anti-aesthetic of "ugliness" and Kristeva's idea of the "abject." Acker's influence by and on other women in Punk is a fundamental aspect of understanding the role her work played in the history of American Punk. Acker was an active and often controversial member of the experimental avant-garde literary and Punk scene from the 1970s until her death from breast cancer in 1996. A self-identifying feminist bi-sexual Punk poet and novelist, Acker was closely tied to famed experimental writer William S. Burroughs and the Downtown NYC avant-garde. Acker was arguably responsible for bringing the Punk image to a larger and more literary stage while also continually troubling definitions of feminism, literature, female sexuality, and gender.

Acker's work as an experimental writer, performance artist, and status as a Punk icon all play an essential part in linking American feminism of the 1970s with work done in the 1980s, and that performed in the 1990s by the "Riot Grrrl" movement. The 1980s were crucial in building links between 1970s women's liberation activism and the performance of 1990s Punk-feminism. Coming from a background heavily steeped in critical and feminist theory combined with an ambition to be a counterculture icon, Acker was the first literary figure to recognize the power of appealing to the Punk audience. Her equally lauded and reviled 1984 novel *Blood and Guts in High School* (Picador and Grove) was a necessary instrument in her crossover from experimental avant-garde writer to feminist Punk performer and icon. She was an outspoken feminist who brought the full power of her intellect and her conscious structuring of her own physical image to the international stage. Constantly struggling to balance a desire for literary success and

critical approval with her need to perform her allegiance to "outlaw culture," Acker was beloved and hated by critics, feminist theorists, and members of her own various tribes.

Acker was constantly rewriting her myth and (re)constructing her physical appearance and "image" through body modification, including bodybuilding, piercing, and tattoos. Many of her books' covers feature a photograph of her face or full body, a visual marketing technique often used by Punk bands on record covers. Acker's image is "a unique suturing of the identities and ideologies of the Punk and the feminist."²⁴⁴ Acker built her image through statements in interviews, at live performances, and through her written work, but this idea of a "suturing of identities" can also be connected with Acker's continual work on constructing her physical presence. In Figures 2.11 and 2.12, Acker shows her affiliation with Punk subculture. In Figure 2.11 she confronts the camera with a direct gaze (as seen in other photos of Punk women), her hair is bleached and blunt cut, she is wearing a leather jacket, and has multiple piercings - all signifiers at the time of affiliation with Punk culture. In Figure 2.12, Acker straddles her motorcycle with her back to the camera in order to show her body alterations: large tattoos and muscles sculpted through bodybuilding. Both images are confrontations against women's traditional positioning in American culture, and work to position Acker as both feminist and Punk.

One of the central connections between Acker and Punk is her refusal to align herself with any rules, instead preferring to constantly question actions, roles,

²⁴⁴ Margaret Henderson, "Kathy Is a Punk Writer: When the Underground Goes Overground," *Critique* 55, no. 5 (2014): 536-550. DOI: 10.1080/00111619.2013.793169.



Figure 2.11 Mark Baker, *Kathy Acker in London in the late 1980s*, Reprinted in *The Financial Times*. Aug 11, 2017, JPEG, <https://www.ft.com/content/b4ce8f48-7dc5-11e7-ab01-a13271d1ee9c>.



Figure 2.12 Kathy Brew, *Kathy Acker*, date unknown, JPEG, <https://www.ica.art/films/who-s-afraid-of-kathy-acker>.

instead preferring to constantly question actions, roles, expectations, and how both the status quo and its critics work to limit female desire, sexuality, and artistic expression.

“Why should I behave in a way that *they* want me to behave?” is a phrase that appears in

her work more than once. This stance is also a part of Acker's appeal to young women in the Punk scene who generally saw themselves as outsiders, marginalized by the prescriptive gender politics of 1970s feminism and mainstream American gender-based expectations.

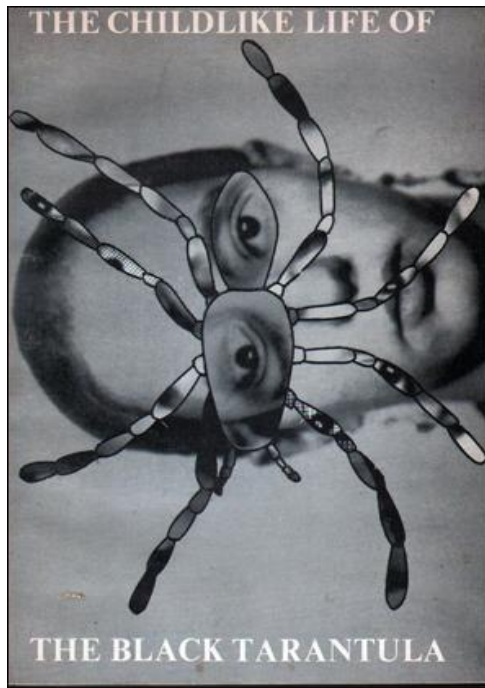


Figure 2.13 Photographer Unknown, *Cover image The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula by Black Tarantula*, (New York: The Vanishing Rotating Triangle Press, 1975), private collection.

From her first forays into print, Acker's work exhibited some aspects of post-modernism; critics have also described her work as avant-garde, experimental, willfully offensive, and of course, Punk and/or post-Punk. Although she was an active participant in and often described herself as linked with the New York or Downtown avant-garde scene in the 1970s and 1980s, Acker saw herself as a Punk writer, poet, instigator, and

“always, always pushing against the rules!”²⁴⁵ She frequently plagiarized other writers' texts,²⁴⁶ was directly influenced by William S. Burroughs' cut-up technique, and "stole heavily" from Jean Genet, Pierre Guyotat, and many others.²⁴⁷ In 1973, Acker self-published her first full-length novel, *The Childlike Life of the Black Tarantula: Some Lives of Murderesses*, using the pseudonym Black Tarantula (cover shown above), followed in 1974 by *I Dreamt I Was a Nymphomaniac: Imagining*. To distribute her work, Acker used a self-curated mailing list of several hundred people she believed would be receptive to her experimental style, those she deemed influential, and various acquaintances and friends.²⁴⁸ This DIY approach to publishing links her to the experimental avant-garde and the nascent Punk scene with its use of self-published print materials and word of mouth publicity. Circulating her art through a mailing list (similar to fanzine editors and Punk musicians), Acker built up a community of readers for herself while also linking herself to the community already created by her mailing lists.

In 1978, Acker published three short texts, "Florida," "Kathy Goes to Haiti," and "Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec." Although still without a formal publishing deal, Acker had by the late 1970s already garnered a certain degree of positive attention from both the critical and underground literary worlds. In 1979, she received a Pushcart Prize for her short piece, "New York City in 1979." The self-publishing and self-promoting work

²⁴⁵ Acker, Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Acker uses the term “plagiarized” to refer to her process.

²⁴⁷ Both Kraus and Acker refer to Acker’s “stealing” from these and other writers.

²⁴⁸ As detailed in Kraus, Ibid.

Acker did in the 1970s helped lay the foundation for the critical and public success she would achieve in the 1980s and directly links her with the DIY project of Punk Rock community building.

In the 1980s and 1990s, Acker did a series of interviews with Larry McCaffery and Sylvère Lotringer. These conversations serve as a vital resource in exploring Acker's work, her attitudes toward feminism, critical theory, Punk, and her own sexuality. In one interview, McCaffery links Acker's textual experiments with the Marquis de Sade, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, the Surrealists, Dadaists, George Bataille, Antonin Artaud, Jean Genet, Burroughs, and Patti Smith. Acker agrees stating that, "there's no doubt that I place myself in that lineage." For Acker, the link rests on a shared perspective that is "deeply sexual, a perspective which insists upon the connections between power and sexuality."²⁴⁹ Additionally, Acker sees their work as "always about seeing" and claims she finds an affinity with work that portrays the idea that "you can't see properly unless you have gone over the limit."²⁵⁰ Literature is closest to what she wants it to say when it pushes boundaries to the extreme; when the mainstream critical world describes it as "offensive," "brutal," even "without meaning."²⁵¹ This idea of pushing boundaries to the extreme is central to Acker's writing, directly linking her to the long list of artists McCaffery presents, and also to the Punk aesthetic. Descriptions of Acker's work as "offensive," "brutal," or "without meaning" recall critical dismissal of Punk in

²⁴⁹ McCaffery, *Ibid.*, 93.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

performance in several instances. In pushing against the boundaries, Acker is enacting a Punk aesthetic.

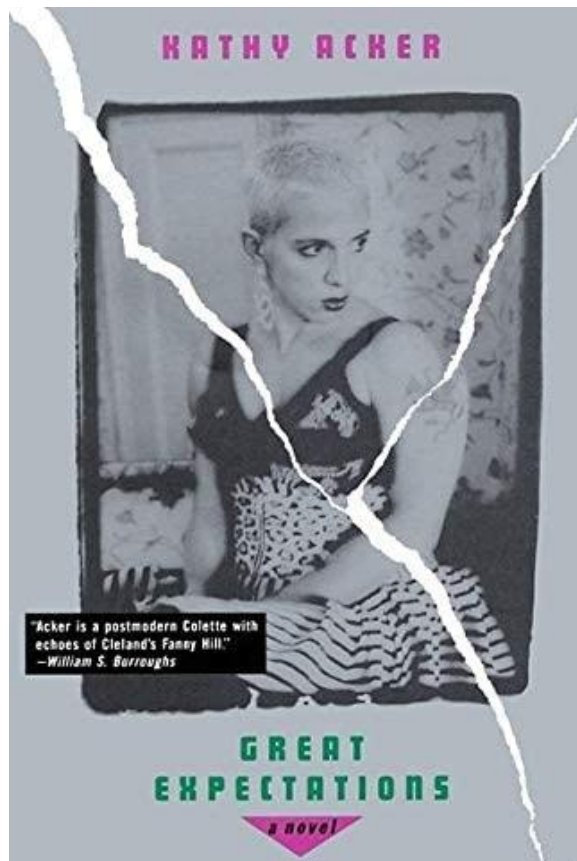


Figure 2.14 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Kathy Acker: Great Expectations*, 1982, Grove Press cover, private collection.

In 1982, Acker published a rewrite of Charles Dickens's classic novel *Great Expectations* (cover images shown in Figures 2.14 and 2.15). While the opening of the novel is a clear lift and rewrite of Dickens, the novel also includes a semi-autobiographical account of her mother's suicide along with sections of Pierre Guyotat's sexually explicit and violent *Eden Eden Eden*. In Figures 2.14 and 2.15, there are links to Punk collage (2.15) and in 2.14, a part of Acker's larger project of building her own image combining literature and Punk represented by the textual content and as represented by her own image on the

cover. Figure 2.14 shows Acker in fashionable Punk attire, looking away from the camera almost as if trying to appear passive or as if she is unaware of the camera. The split image again echoes the violence of Punk collage and also signals a common theme in Acker's writing: splitting of identity and image through violence and trauma. That Acker appears in the photo (2.14) as a gesture towards a sexualized girl-child is no accident: Acker's writing is always about the violence done to girls' bodies.

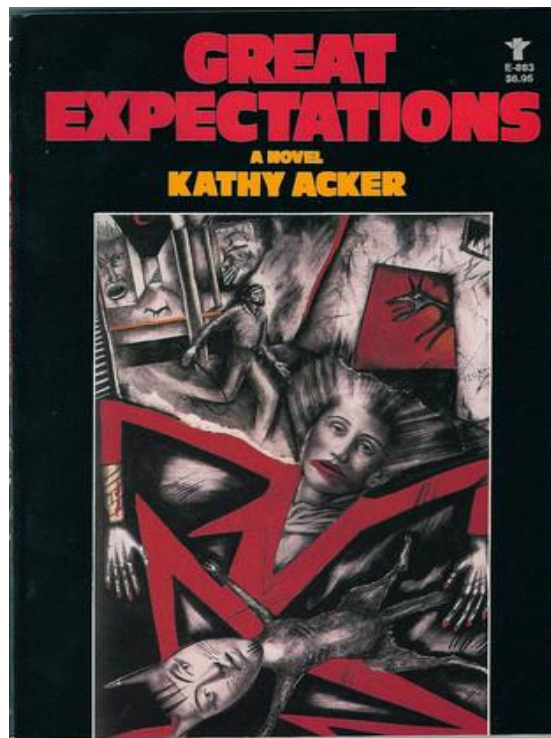


Figure 2.15 *Great Expectations* Picador cover (1983, English publication), JPEG, private collection

For Acker, the “I” of the author was of little interest; instead, in much of her writing, she presented a myriad of first persons: narrators who were both male and female (or in between), narrators whose names, ages, locations shifted and disappeared only to reappear in different forms. She had no interest in traditional novel structure and instead took passages, characters, and plots from classic works (Dickens and Hawthorne, for

example), erotica, random texts, and out of chaos created complex collages that challenged all assumptions about what fiction should (or should not) do. In *Great Expectations*, we might think we know where we are, “1. Plagiarism: I Recall My Childhood...My father’s name being Pirrip, and my Christian name Philip, my infant tongue...” but after this first paragraph, Acker presents, “On Christmas Eve 1978 my mother committed suicide...”²⁵² She has already broken at least two rules of narrative: the “I” in the first paragraph is Dickens’s Pip and clearly not the same “I” in the second paragraph which may or may not be autobiographical (Acker’s mother did commit suicide in 1978). By the time we reach page seven, we have, “...there is no buffer of memory. There is no time; there is.”²⁵³ Acker is not interested in giving the reader a linear narrative or even a novel in the mainstream sense; instead, she is pushing against order, against boundaries, because the “I” is slippery, it moves across categories and will not be subjugated to traditional forms of identity, order, language, and narrative. Acker is, in essence, trying to find a new way to write, perhaps in alignment with Cixous, but in many ways taking the noise of Punk that she found so inspiring and applying that ripping it up and tearing it down, the effort not just create something new but to tear apart the structure of male language and rewrite it into something that can give voice to her rage.

While the violence in her work can be very disturbing and the sex often extreme, Acker positions her work as feminist in its attempt to express deep female rage. In letters and interviews, she states that she was trying to give voice to her "own anger, which was

²⁵² Kathy Acker, *Great Expectations*, (New York: Grove Press, 1982), 7.

²⁵³ Ibid.

very much an anger against the centralization of the Phallus."²⁵⁴ This attempt to express anger, to turn it into some form of artistic expression, is echoed throughout 1970s-1980s Punk subculture, often defined as a new form of protest against Thatcherism and Reaganism's brutally anti-working class, anti-human rights, anti-woman, anti-LGBTQ administrations but also an expression of women's rage. In addition to providing an outlet for outrage and anger, one of the central themes in Punk is a performance of "ugliness" - beyond simple shock tactics, this performance of ugliness takes place within a constant profound critique of and refusal by participants to align with accepted gender-specific appearance norms and accepted traditional art forms.²⁵⁵ This constant resistance to and questioning of traditional definitions and forms is generally cast by critics as a "negative operation" and aligned with nihilistic attitudes (The Sex Pistol's "No Future" as one example). However, many participants in the culture used this process in more generative ways to create, to refigure, and in some instances for productive, overtly liberating, and feminist means.²⁵⁶

Acker *performs* Punk in her appearance and her art, using confrontation and experimental structure to work through her anger and frustration by resisting accepted norms of "feminine" appearance and accepted forms of textual and narrative expression.

²⁵⁴ McCaffrey, "An Interview with Kathy Acker," *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁵⁵ Karina Eileraas, "Witches, Bitches & Fluids: Performing Ugliness as Resistance," *TDR* 41, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997): 122-139, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2307/1146612>. See also Larry McCaffrey on Acker's textual representation of the "Punk aesthetic" in "The Artists of Hell: Kathy Acker and 'Punk' Aesthetics," in *Breaking the Sequence: Women's Experimental Fiction*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989): 218, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt7ztv41.18>

²⁵⁶ O'Meara, *Ibid.*

In various interviews and letters, Acker references Patti Smith's work as influential and sees her very much as a contemporary.²⁵⁷ In "The Salvation of Rock," Smith states, "within the context of neo rock we must open our eyes and seize and rend the veil of smoke which man calls order."²⁵⁸ What both artists are addressing is a need to move beyond the conventions of art (music, narrative structures, and so on) to develop experimental strategies in order to portray the reality of women's lived experience. Acker exists as a kind of "literary criminal" in that she breaks literary "laws" and reinvents her own because the traditional cultural forms cannot express women's lived experience.

Acker's work is deliberately violent, obscene, disjointed, and designed to force reaction, a confrontation between readers and all conventions, to violently critique traditional hierarchies, traditions of narrator, genre, and character and make the reader move beyond passive complacency. All of this work for Acker is essential in finding new ways to access and represent women's lived experience and aligns with the Punk aesthetic that not only questions tradition but works to destroy traditional structures and assumptions, and out of this destruction and attendant chaos create new art. By linking Acker's work with Punk, it becomes clear that she is a part of the project of creating an aesthetic, a style that actively works to express alienation, victimization, rage, and to undermine assumptions about art and the performance of gender created and perpetuated by the dominant culture.

²⁵⁷ See McCaffrey, *Ibid.*, and *The South Bank Show*.

²⁵⁸ Patti Smith, "The Salvation of Rock," *Babel* (New York: Putnam's, 1978).

In her cut-up collage rewrite of Dickens' *Great Expectations*, Acker writes, "Any action no matter how off-the-wall--this explains Punk--breaks through deadness."²⁵⁹ It is this breaking through "deadness" that is central to the Punk aesthetic and essential in understanding the importance of the work being done by Punk feminist artists in the 1980s.²⁶⁰ Rather than an aberrant momentary expression of female authorial anger, Kathy Acker's texts serve as foundational to the broader work of feminist art in the latter half of the twentieth century. Punk's "blasphemous metatexts" combined with the de-centering violence and confrontational stance of participants in the movement work towards a sort of liberation from adherence to traditional modes of cultural expression, accepted performance of music, literature, and gender. More than anything else, Kathy Acker's texts are a continual effort to produce this radical liberation. That her work appealed to the Punk fans of the 1980s should come as no surprise.

2. Blood and Guts in High School

"For 2,000 years you've had the nerve to tell women who we are. We use your words; we eat your food. Every way we get money has to be a crime. We are plagiarists, liars, and criminals." - Janey, *Blood and Guts in High School*²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Acker, *Great Expectations*, 219.

²⁶⁰ See Kearney, *Ibid.*, Marcus, *Ibid.* on 1990s feminism and the Riot Grrrl movement.

²⁶¹ Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School Plus Two* (London: Picador, 1984), 132.



Figure 2.16 Robert Mapplethorpe, *Kathy Acker: Blood and Guts in High School*, (New York: Grove Press, 1984), private collection.

Figure 2.17 Artist Uncredited, *Blood and Guts in High School Plus Two*, (London: Picador, 1984), JPEG, private collection.

Until 1984, Acker's work was only available in the United States and only then in very limited print runs, but in 1984, with the publication of *Blood and Guts in High School* (*BGHS*), that changed, as did Acker's reputation and status in both the Punk and literary communities. The manuscript for *BGHS* was read and tentatively scheduled for publication three times between 1979 and 1981. In 1982, *BGHS* was accepted by Picador and released in England in 1984. Grove Press in New York then picked it for publication in the United States. Picador's first print run of *BGHS* sold out within three weeks of its January 1984 publication.²⁶² *BGHS* is often considered Acker's breakthrough text both

²⁶² Kraus, *Ibid.*

critically and through its work of bringing her to major Punk icon status in England and the United States. The novel provides an experiment in rejecting conventional forms of meaning-making and traditional models of narration, resists character development, and "provides no central meaning."²⁶³ The heroine of *BGHS* is Janey Smith, a young woman whose body is the site for Acker's explorations of the treatment of women in patriarchal society. The novel's plot (if it can be said to have a plot) focuses on Janey's short life; abused then abandoned by her father, Janey moves to New York's East Village where she is kidnapped and forced to become a prostitute, she travels to Tangier where she falls in love with Jean Genet and then dies in the desert utterly abject but also somehow transcendent.

While contemporaries critiqued the sexual violence and tragedy of Janey's life, later readers have recognized the work Acker is doing to portray the impossibility of freedom for women within patriarchal structures of society and language. *BGHS* is a textual experiment in non-linear narrative, image-text collage, and an attempt to meld Acker's influences from the avant-garde and radical aesthetics of Punk. Like other women's work within Punk, Acker uses the Punk aesthetic to explore new forms of writing and making art while also working to "tear down the master's house." As Colby states, *BGHS* "offers new modes of feminist inscription through collage and rewriting as alternatives to Janey's confinement within the parameters of ordinary language."²⁶⁴

When Acker began writing *BGHS* in 1978, she was undergoing her first breast cancer scare. Sharing themes with her earlier work, including explorations of female

²⁶³ Colby, *Ibid.*, 246.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

sexuality, gender constructs, and the materiality of the female body, also deeply ingrained in the fabric of *BGHS* is the fear and dread of disease. In one particularly disturbing passage, Acker writes the following in Janey's voice, "Having cancer is like having a baby. If you're a woman and you can't have a baby 'cause you're starving poor or 'cause no man wants anything to do with you or 'cause you're lonely and miserable and frightened and totally insane, you might as well get cancer. You can feel your lump, and you nurse, knowing it will always get bigger. It eats you, and gradually, you learn as all good mothers learn, to love yourself."²⁶⁵ Disease is an ongoing theme in Acker's work, and in *BGHS*, Janey ultimately dies of Cancer. The novel is full of references to disease, particularly sexually transmitted disease and Janey's ongoing bouts with Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (Acker suffered from PID) that make sex painful if not impossible. PID is a disease attributed to sexually transmitted diseases, abortion, childbirth, and the use of IUDs.²⁶⁶ Like breast cancer, in Acker's work, PID serves as a symbol of the dangers of living in a female body, linking Cancer with the maternal (as Janey does), as both a critique of some feminist theorists focus on woman as mother and also a critique of society's suffering enacted on the female body.

Acker was undoubtedly aware of her potential appeal to the Punk audience, but with the release of *BGHS*, she briefly became a media darling. In the mid-1980s, London's highly influential music press had the power to make or break a performer or

²⁶⁵ Acker, *BGHS*, 116.

²⁶⁶ Mayo Clinic, "Pelvic Inflammatory Disease (PID)," accessed January 4, 2020, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/pelvic-inflammatory-disease/symptoms-causes/syc-20352594>.

band overnight. When the *New Musical Express* (NME) chose to laud Acker, she became wildly popular in England almost overnight. Chris Kraus, in her exhaustive 2017 biography of Acker, quotes Michael Bracewell,

Suddenly, here is this astonishing American woman, incredibly glamorous and Punky, kind of street. But obviously at the same time, talking an intellectual language that in London at that time was like being from another planet... She did an enormous thing, which was that she single-handedly in London connected people who bought records to people who bought books. There had not been a writer, a contemporary writer living in our midst, who united the world of pop culture and music and post-Punk to the world of literature, let alone to the world of critical theory.²⁶⁷

It was this connection Acker was able to make between “people who bought records to people who bought books” that is part of what makes her so influential – she was one of the first writers to understand that Punk was much more than just a music movement. After the NME's efforts to lionize her as a literary rock star, *BGHS* became an essential bedside accessory for any self-respecting member of the subculture both in England and the United States. Members of the Punk scene in both countries who did not read regularly read Acker's work. It is this crossover from the more “high-brow” literary sphere to the “lo-brow” subcultural sphere that makes Acker so essential in understanding the connected histories of Punk cultural expression and feminism from the 1970s through 1990s.

BGHS holds a significant place in the history of Punk. For many young women, it served as an introduction to literature that they could relate to; text that read as being in line with Punk aesthetics. Acker's work came to the attention of young women in the Punk scene through word-of-mouth and media attention Acker received around the

²⁶⁷ Kraus, *Ibid.*, 200-201.

publication of *BGHS* in the mid-1980s. To understand the importance of Acker in the larger history of American experimental, Punk, and feminist art production, it is essential to understand that she was the first to recognize and successfully exploit the potential of connecting experimental literature with the largely untapped audience of Punk *music* fans.

In April of 1984, Acker appeared in an extended segment on England's *South Bank Show* (ITV). Shot in and around her apartment on the Lower East Side in New York City, the segment aired in time to help promote the release of *BGHS* in England. Her appearance on the *South Bank Show* is a first step in making a connection between her work and the Punk audience. Show presenter Melvyn Bragg's voiceover introduction immediately positions Acker as affiliated with a larger cultural phenomenon, "What we want to look at is the hard edge of a tough, fashionable, self-conscious group, now at the top of the New York avant-garde art world. Kathy Acker and the group around her are at present leading the pack."²⁶⁸ Note that Bragg does not use the word "Punk" here but instead the more palatable and elevated term "avant-garde." Acker's work is at times described as "avant-garde," "experimental," "radical," and so on, but Acker herself highlighted the connection with Punk.

²⁶⁸ *The South Bank Show*, season 7, episode 13, "Kathy Acker," directed by Alan Benson, featuring Melvyn Bragg, Kathy Acker, aired April 1, 1984 on LWT, accessed December 1, 2020. YouTube: <https://youtu.be/IFRT6T7YLCs>. The *South Bank Show* is a series of hour-long documentary portraits of prominent people in the Arts (1978-present). Subjects in 1978-1984 included Paul McCartney (1978), Harold Pinter (1978), Woody Allen (1978), Merce Cunningham (1979), Tom Wolfe (1980), Arthur Miller (1980), Gore Vidal (1981), Toni Morrison (1981), Bob Fosse (1981), Germaine Greer (1982), and Werner Herzog (1982), among others.

The program is edited with jump cuts to live performance footage of the Sex Pistols in an attempt to link the New York avant-garde with the early English Punk scene, forcing a narrative on Acker's work that she does not claim and one that suggests a link with a specific male-centered narrative of English/Sex Pistols Punk primacy. Instead, Acker cites the energy of Punk as important for her work; the work of writing used to create new possibilities, "I wanted to take texts - written, exterior, what I hear - and change the frames...setting up something that increases possibilities rather than decreases possibilities. Writing as a set of guerilla tactics where I'm trying to destroy meaning, destroy what I see as a set of very rigid definitions."²⁶⁹ For Acker, this work is both Punk *and* feminist, working against dead traditions of the novel in order to find new ways to express anger, frustration, and what it is to be a female writer. Struggling within the boundaries of acceptable writing as represented by Philip Roth, John Updike, and Norman Mailer, Acker rebels, "It's as if being a female I had to be male; there was no female language given me. I wanted my own language."²⁷⁰ While links to feminist theory around language are present here, it is also this drive, this need to create "my own language" that links Acker with many women in the Punk scene – not only the general Punk aesthetic, but a need to find a way to communicate in a culture that prefers women remain silent.

When the *South Bank Show* aired, Acker was still relatively unknown in the United States outside the New York City Punk and avant-garde scenes. However, she had

²⁶⁹ *The South Bank Show*, Ibid.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

managed to self-publish into a degree of notoriety, and by 1984 Picador was set to publish three of her earlier works: *BGHS*, *Great Expectations*, and *My Death My Life* by *Piero Paolo Pasolini* – in a single volume (*Blood and Guts in High School Plus Two*).

Acker's on-camera performance on the *South Bank Show* is studied and gauged to draw attention not only to her work but also her own *physical* presence; she is selling her “image” along with her art: her hair is a bleached buzz-cut, her eyes outlined with smudged black eyeliner, her ears heavily pierced (radical for the time), and her clothes black on black. On-screen, Acker comes across as both erudite and fully confident of her place and importance in the radical cutting edge of the American cultural scene.

Exhibiting the brash self-confidence of most musicians affiliated with Punk, Acker makes the sweeping claim that, “There are almost no novelists my age who are doing anything besides second and third-generation Philip Roth - they're just imitators.”²⁷¹ Bragg further paraphrases Acker's take on her work: “the disjointed, angry style of her writing is a reflection of the fractured world she lives in. Her experiments arise out of a dissatisfaction with present-day literary forms, which in her opinion, are no longer adequate to describe the modern world.”²⁷² While this description may suggest a link to post-modernism for some,²⁷³ and indeed, there are commonalities between the restructuring of narrative and search for a different mode of expression, Acker's true

²⁷¹ *The South Bank Show*, Ibid.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Katie R. Muth, “Postmodern Fiction as Postructuralist Theory: Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*,” *Narrative* 19, no. 1, (Jan 2011): 86-110. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2011.0000> and Martina Sciolino, “Kathy Acker and the Postmodern Subject of Feminism,” *College English* 52, no. 4, *Women and Writing* (April 1990): 437-445, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/377661>.

affiliation lies with those influences she cites, namely Burroughs's "cut-up" collage texts and the brutal aesthetic of late 1970s/early 1980s Punk. Acker directly connects herself with the Punk aesthetic, "I wanted to have a narrative that was a kind of 'de-narrative' if there is such a word. You see, there was no way I had of talking about it, really, until the Punk movement came along."²⁷⁴ Traditional narrative structures, even centralized meaning in a text was insufficient for what she was trying to do, "I knew I was very angry. I knew I didn't want any centralized meaning...because it was so *male*, and I didn't want that."²⁷⁵ For Acker, instead of relying on the conventions, structures, plots, and language of traditional fiction, women instead need to become literary criminals, break the literary laws and invent their own to express the reality of their lives. In order for Acker to write then, she has first to reject the boundaries of traditional narrative, to find a language that can express her rage: "With all familiar structures destroyed, one must begin reassembling the elements of existence into newer (and hopefully more liberating) patterns."²⁷⁶ In other words, to find a way to write in a language similar to Poly Styrene's shout, "Oh Bondage! Up Yours!"

In addition to the *South Bank Show*, Acker appeared on several smaller U.K. television talk shows and often in the UK press, including the *NME* (*New Musical Express*), *The Face*, *The Guardian*, and *The Observer*. Acker described this period in London as "fabulous for me." In an interview in the *NME* in 1983, Acker discusses her

²⁷⁴ McCaffrey, *Ibid.*, 89.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁷⁶ Larry McCaffrey, "The Artists of Hell," *Ibid.*

link with Punk culture: "I was originally accepted within the art world. Then there was an alliance between the art world and the Punk stuff. At that time I was part of a magazine called *X* and...the bands played for a benefit for us...DNA, Mars, The Erasers...I did really feel alienated before – you know, I just had no one I could really talk to. Suddenly everyone was really talking to each other about our work.”²⁷⁷

For young women active in or just discovering Punk, the publication of *BGHS* was formative and revelatory. As one oral history respondent states, "I'd stopped reading books. There was nothing in them I could relate to. And then someone gave me *BGHS*. It was violent. It was gross, it was amazing. Like Punk Rock in a novel."²⁷⁸ Another respondent cites the location of part of *BGHS*, "It wasn't just New York, it was a New York that I *knew*: scary, dirty, full of crime, and danger but exciting too...plus she mentions CBs and the Contortions!"²⁷⁹ This recognition not only of language but of place and musical references (CBGBs, No Wave/Punk band the Contortions) speaks to the broader appeal of *BGHS* in the Punk community. We loved *BGHS* because we recognized Acker as one of us.

Acker's use of cut-up, collage, and line drawings throughout the disjointed narrative of *BGHS* was a clear connection to the work done in Punk fanzines of the time.

²⁷⁷ Kathy Acker in *New Musical Express*. "Kathy Acker: Punk Porn and Plagiarism." *NME*, January 22, 1983, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://standupandspit.wordpress.com/2016/01/03/kathy-acker>

²⁷⁸ Subject 15, interview with the author, 2019.

²⁷⁹ Subject 19, interview with the author, 2019. "The Contortions" references the No-Wave/Punk band James White and the Contortions; additionally, Acker references Punk Rock club CBGB on pages 120-121 of *BGHS*.

While connected to the avant-garde experiments with literature and Burroughs' use of the cut-up, Acker's work equally aligns with Punk textual expression. In her extensive work on Acker, Georgina Colby discusses Acker's "collage and the anxiety of self-description" present in *BGHS*. Acker's work is "situated within the context of the feminist movement," as exemplified within Janey's imprisonment within language and woman's "ontological negation within the symbolic." Because language is a patriarchal construct and Janey is female, it is impossible for Janey to speak or write herself into being.²⁸⁰ Throughout the novel, Janey struggles to communicate through poems, diary entries, line drawings, and collage. Acker uses collage to both critique normative textual representation and the patriarchal system such texts support and as a way to create new forms of communication; just as Janey struggles to communicate, so too is Acker enacting this struggle in the way she structures *BGHS*.

BGHS exists not only as a material representation of Acker's work to create a space for women in textual expression but also as a material representation of Punk collage. The original manuscript pages of *BGHS* are cut and paste collage work and have more in common with Punk fanzines than more formal textual experimentation. Acker's depictions of Janey's drawings and "dream maps" are interspersed with textual narrative. In the published Picador edition, Acker's intent at collage-based text is clear, and it is partly this Punk-influenced/influencing narrative presentation that resonates with Acker's Punk audience: this is an art form they recognize and relate to.²⁸¹ Figures 2.18 and 2.19

²⁸⁰ Colby, *Ibid.*, 69.

²⁸¹ Colby, *Ibid.*, 73-74 and *BGHS* Picador edition.

show Janey's attempt to write her own life and musings interspersed with her own line drawings (done by Acker). Figure 2.18 is of the hand-drawn color original; Figure 2.19 shows the text as it appeared in the print publication. While the print reproduction loses some of the message, the relation to and resonance for a Punk audience is apparent in either version. The immediacy allowed by Acker's textual collage creates a space wherein young women immersed in the Punk aesthetic can discover an attempt at language meant for them, as one oral history respondent states, "This was a novel I could read."²⁸²

For Acker, as for other women active in the scene in the 1970s-1980s, Punk provided opportunities for artistic expression not available in mainstream culture. Just as the Punk fanzine was an expression of DIY culture and a refusal to create or communicate within the constraints of mainstream culture, so too Acker's collage work in *BGHS* is a disruption of, a reaction against, the limitations of the American novel as it existed in the 1980s. In interviews, Acker repeatedly cites her discomfort, even rage against expectations of male-centered literary culture. Through use of collage and a refusal to present a linear, coherent narrative, Acker challenges readers to move beyond audience and into participation, to access the languages of Punk culture in order to understand the disruption of mainstream narrative she enacts in *BGHS*.

While some work hard to connect Acker's work with Dada and the avant-garde, the connection to the Punk publishing aesthetic is evident. Colby highlights a self-

²⁸² Subject 16, interview with the author, 2019.

produced excerpt Acker created as a gift, “This handmade book is an example of the ‘copy art’ medium of Punk and post-Punk.”²⁸³ Perhaps more important than the material

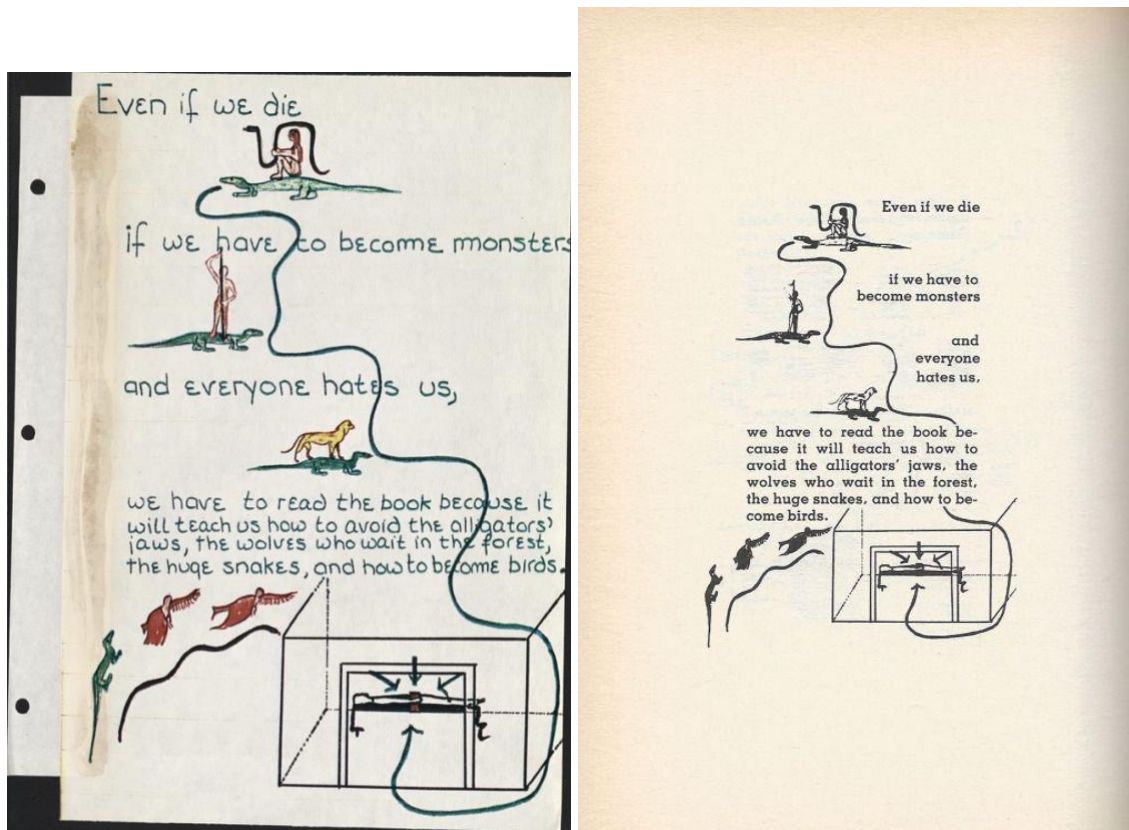


Figure 2.18 Kathy Acker, *Image from manuscript for Blood and Guts in High School by Kathy Acker*. <https://blogs.library.duke.edu/137ubenstein/2015/06/03/profiles-in-research-georgina-colby-and-the-kathy-acker-papers/>

Figure 2.19 Kathy Acker, *Image from published version BGHS* (London: Picador, 1984), 152.

representation of Acker’s text in connection with the Punk aesthetic is the continued influence *BGHS* enacts within the Punk community. When women interviewed for this dissertation were asked to create a list of books or music that they saw as influential in the 1980s, several selected *BGHS*. When asked to clarify the importance of Acker’s

²⁸³ Colby, *Ibid.*, 82.

novel, some cited the book's content; most also cited the use of collage as compelling.²⁸⁴ In Figures 2.20 and 2.21 the text is interrupted with handwritten and typed rants from the protagonist Janey that do the work of disrupting conventional modes of narrative and also speak directly to the portion of Acker's audience aligned with Punk; Acker is not only attempting to speak outside of patriarchal discourse but to speak directly to her fellow Punks.

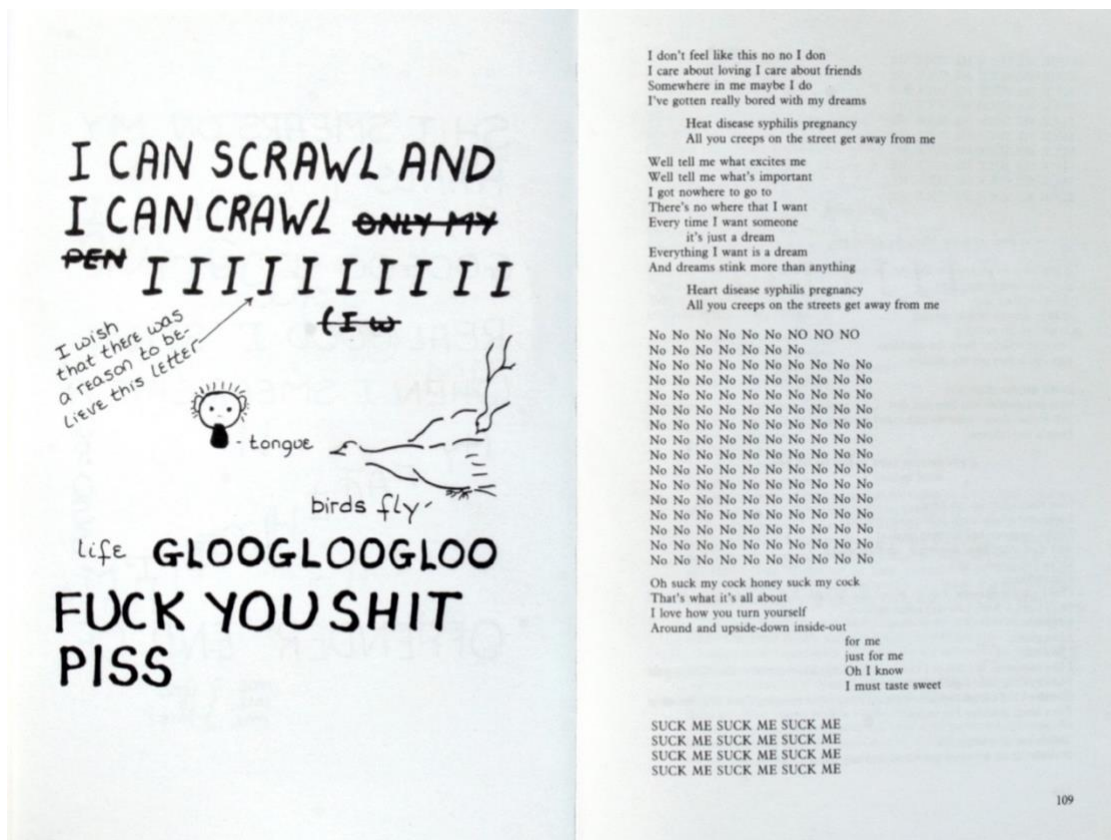
In Figure 2.20 Janey is writing to herself, struggling to communicate. Acker (as Janey) has handwritten the page on the left, "I can scrawl and I can crawl ~~only my pen~~ I I I I I I I I (~~I~~-w". Janey writes a note with an arrow point at "I" stating, "I wish that there was a reason to be-lieve this letter." This is Janey not only trying to communicate but trying to argue against her own erasure; she wants to believe in the concept of "I" despite everything men have done to her in the novel to erase her identity. For Acker, the "I" of the author was something to move away from, as she claimed, she did not have a voice. Janey's attempts to speak devolve into baby-talk and profanity: there is no "I" for Janey, and she has no voice within the structures of male-centric language.

Figure 2.21 shows page 109 of the text, which links to a poem on page 105, a sort of lost-in-the-city adolescent poem but also a poem with a refrain, "Heart disease syphilis pregnancy/All you creeps on the street get away from me."²⁸⁵ Here we not only have the book's theme of disease in "Heart disease syphilis pregnancy," clearly linking pregnancy with disease but also a nod to the Bush Tetras "Too Many Creeps" which Acker was likely familiar with, "I just don't wanna go/Out in the streets no more/Because these

²⁸⁴ Subjects 15, 16, 19, Interviews with author, 2019.

²⁸⁵ Acker, *BGHS*, 109.

people they give me/They give me the creeps.”²⁸⁶ In Figure 2.22, a closeup of page 109, Janey devolves from her poem into repetition of the word “No,” and then a seemingly male voice takes over, urging Janey into a sex act (this is either Janey mimicking voices she has heard before or a real or imagined interruption).



²⁸⁶ Bush Tetras, "Too Many Creeps," *Ibid.*

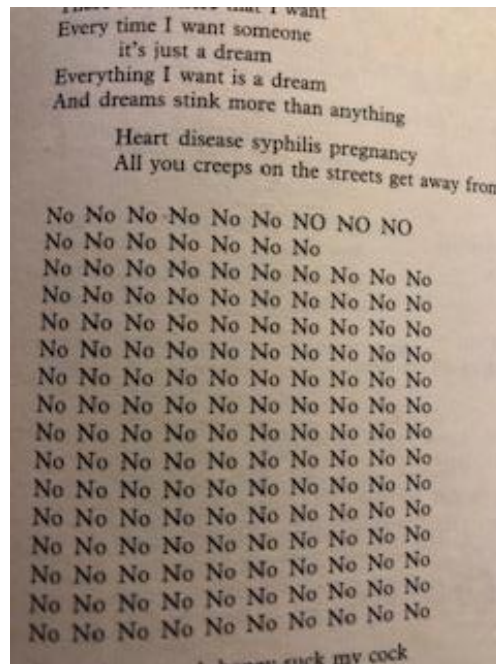


Figure 2.22 “No No No,” Acker, *BGHS*, 137.

While Acker’s text is structured to reflect the collage work of a Punk aesthetic, the breakdown of language in the text can be seen as, “narrative enacting its content, an evocation of the splintered psyche of an abused little girl,”²⁸⁷ and also “enactments of a traumatic mode of discourse.”²⁸⁸ The repetition of “No” in the passage above certainly can be seen as Janey’s attempt at a refusal of the sex act(s), but to suggest the text is an expression of trauma does *not* remove it from its link with the Punk aesthetic. If anything, it makes the link that much stronger: Poly Styrene’s shout of “Oh Bondage! Up Yours!,” Julie Cafritz’s screams of rage in *Pussy Galore* – all of these link to the language of Punk and Janey’s repetitions of “NO.” Carolyn Zaikowski suggests that Acker’s textual

²⁸⁷ Carolyn Zaikowski, “Reading Traumatized Bodies of Text: Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* and Selah Saterstrom’s *The Pink Institution*,” *Nebula*, (June 2010), 242, Questia.com, accessed June 1, 2020, Questia.com.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 204

process, the cut-up, reflects not only the “dissociation and confusion of identity” but also “highlights the disruption of linear time and narrative so prominent in trauma survivors.”²⁸⁹ But is this really what Acker is doing – writing sexual trauma - or is she instead writing against the larger trauma of the limitations of language; language that is always connected to power. When Carmen Wright positions Genet as transgressive and Acker as non-transgressive fiction, she fails to see the very real link between the transgressive power of Punk and the transgressive power of Acker’s text. Because Acker (for Wright) reduces Janey “to her own subjection, the novel offers no resistant position from which to transgress it.” Instead, Wright suggests, “Acker abandons the reader to a frustrating nihilism.”²⁹⁰ With the use of the word “nihilism,” we are brought back to one of the central outsider critiques of Punk – that it was a movement focused on nihilism and without rewarding qualities. For Wright, transgressive fiction should exhibit “political potential.” Because Janey does not transcend her “subjection”/subjecthood, (Wright claims) the text is nihilistic and not transgressive. I would argue against this not only for Wright’s oversimplification of the work Acker is doing in *BGHS* and the uplift of the ending (if read correctly) but also the very politically successful work Acker did within the female Punk community. Reading *BGHS*, young women in the Punk scene recognized that text could speak to them through a new language and in a format they

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 206

²⁹⁰ Carmen Wright, “Transgressing the ‘Subject’: The Reflexive Concept of Transgression and the Interrogation of Subjection in Jean Genet and Kathy Acker,” September 4, 2020, academia.edu, <https://www.academia.edu/15033746/>.

recognized as akin to the texts they were already creating and consuming with fanzine culture.

BGHS ends with Janey's death in the desert, followed by a multi-media narrative, "The World," and a short poem. Janey's death is described with gentle, transcendent poetic language, "So the doves cooed softly to each other...over Janey's grave in the grey Saba Pacha cemetery in Luxor."²⁹¹ We can hear the quiet, the doves cooing, and then the sentence that so many critics seem to have missed and so many young women highlighted and wrote on bathroom walls, "Soon many other Janeys were born and these Janeys covered the earth."²⁹² Here we have Janey not only as transcendent or reincarnated; this is Janey as *covering the earth*. Janey is all of us, everywhere, and through us, she survives. But Acker is not done yet. After the strange interlude of drawings and narrative that is "The World," there is a short poem that reads like a song, a great Punk Rock song:

Blood and guts in high school
 This is all I know
 Parents teachers boyfriends
 All have got to go.
 Some folks like trains,/some folks like ships,
 I like the way you move your hips
 All I want is a taste of your lips,/boy/
 All I want is a taste of your lips.²⁹³

Although the English media's love affair with Acker's work was short-lived (her next publication, *Don Quixote*, was vilified by critics), Punk that she was, Acker refused to submit, instead embracing her status as a renegade Punk icon, throwing herself deep

²⁹¹ Acker, *BGHS*, 140.

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 165.

into the London subculture, and performing with well-known Punk and post-Punk bands on stage. Acker also immersed herself in various subcultures, including body modification (piercing, bodybuilding, and tattoos). She was very much aware of her status as a Punk icon and the contrast of that status with the literary and critical success that surrounded her earlier work, "In England, the media had made this huge image of Kathy Acker. But this media image is so much this kind of sexual image. I'm very well-known there and I get tons of work. But to say they *like* what I do? No, I wouldn't say that. They *fetishise* what I do."²⁹⁴

All of Acker's texts feature intense explorations of the female body and female sexuality. She often stated that she was "obsessed" with the relationship between identity and sex, "this whole issue of identity-and in both the textual and personal aspects of it- sexuality has naturally appeared a lot in all my books."²⁹⁵ Acker writes about the relationship between sex and power, exploring how women (and girls) are oppressed by their own relationship to sex but also the power inherent in the female body, "I've also had a constant concern with sex and power, and how they join and reinforce each other. As a woman but also just as a person looking around at the way things operate, it's hard for me not to be concerned with that; it's almost an obsession."²⁹⁶ Acker saw her own body and her sexuality as integral parts of her constant work of creating herself. She saw

²⁹⁴ Kathy Acker/Sylvere Interview, 1989-10-10, Sylvere Lotringer Papers and Semiotext(e) Archive; MSS 221, E-records: fales_mss221 cuid7160-7162, Format: Broadcast WAV, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

²⁹⁵ *The South Bank Show*, Ibid.

²⁹⁶ Larry McCaffery, "An Interview with Kathy Acker," Ibid.

herself as a composite, and to make herself larger, to meet her own ambitions, she frequently plagiarized other writers' texts.²⁹⁷ As the narrator of Acker's *Don Quixote* says, "I'm forced to find a self when I've been trained to be nothing."²⁹⁸ It is this idea that women are "trained to be nothing" that is often central to Acker's writing; both in her personal and artistic life, Acker fought against society's constraints while also trying to balance her art and need for companionship.²⁹⁹

Although Acker frequently cites "the French theorists" in her interviews and notes, she rarely cites any *specific* theorist as an influence on her work beyond sort of "drive-by" mentions in interviews of Irigaray, Kristeva, de Beauvoir, and Cixous. She is constantly writing and rewriting the body as a source of pleasure, of pain, of pleasure *through* pain, as the site of power, and positions the centrality of the body in any quest for meaning: in a world where "reality and meaning are up for grabs, then the body becomes the only thing you can return to."³⁰⁰ For Acker, the essential truth of the body lies within "the actual *act* of sexuality, or that actual act of disease," which for her represents a "kind of undeniable materiality which isn't up for grabs...The body is the

²⁹⁷ Kraus, *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ Acker, Kathy. *Don Quixote*, (New York: Grove, 1986), 171.

²⁹⁹ Kraus, *Ibid.*, Brit Dawson, "Kathy Acker in her Own Words," Dazed.com, May 9, 2019, accessed December 12, 2019, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/life-culture/article/44371/1/kathy-acker-in-her-own-words>, Kathy Acker, [Diary]: "days and days of anxiety," 1971, "Kathy Acker Notebooks," MSS 434, Box 1, Folder 7, also [The Creation (diaries)]: "Breaking Up," 1972, "Kathy Acker Notebooks," MSS 434, Box 4, Folder 14, and "I was with another woman," 1971-2, "Kathy Acker Notebooks," MSS 434, Box 2, Folder 11, The Fales Library & Special Collections, New York University Libraries.

³⁰⁰ McCaffery, *Ibid.*, 93.

only place where any basis for real values exists anymore."³⁰¹ Her constant search for meaning must begin and end with the physical body, "I write about the body [and] the ability to take your own body and make it something else..."³⁰² Acker is less interested in writing about sex in and of itself, but sex as always a site of power, of taboo, and often, of the power of women's bodies as subjugated to the male, which, of course complicates Acker's relationship with her own feminism and has left her open to critique from some feminist contemporaries.³⁰³

Acker's work does link with the French feminists mentioned above in her repeated use of the trope of the abusive father, father-as-defiler, with male violence as representation of the inherent violence of phallic language. To Irigaray, women are raw material (bearers of meaning) while men are active agents of production (makers of meaning); or to simplify, woman is the blank page, man is the writer with the pen. In order for the female to enter culture, to speak, to write, she must accept "phallic law" or, in the case with Acker's characters, submit to sex with the father. But when Janey says, "NO to you language,"³⁰⁴ of course, we can see the reference to Irigaray and Cixous's call to reject the language of the father and birth a new language. However, Acker is less interested in the maternal act of birthing language as she is in the female body as a

³⁰¹ Ibid.

³⁰² ICA Video. *Writers in Conversation at the ICA*, "Kathy Acker in conversation with Angela McRobbie," 1987, YouTube: accessed December 1, 2020. <https://youtu.be/Pxu85kiqkg0>

³⁰³ Kraus, Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Kathy Acker, *Blood and Guts in High School Plus Two* (London: Picador, 1984): 43

site of sex acts, desire, and suffering. Her characters do suffer, but there is also humor and an exploration of the power of the female body, as she jokes in *BOMB Magazine* in 1983, “Let’s compare a pencil to a vagina.”³⁰⁵ Acker’s work does not align perfectly with Cixous’s “female-sexed language,” although the work Acker does in her texts is directly illustrating the violence that men enact on women’s bodies and the violence enacted by “phallogentric language.”³⁰⁶ But as Janey says in *BGHS*, “[there are] teeth inside my cunt.”³⁰⁷ And indeed, Acker’s positioning of Genet in *BGHS* as an abusive male troubles Cixous’s assertion that Genet’s writing is exemplary of *l’écriture féminine*. Through her use of Genet, Acker is not only questioning his position in Cixous’s narrative but perhaps providing a broader critique of the limited feminism presented by those writing with an assumption of “woman” as heteronormative white European.

Acker references Kristeva in discussing her own work;³⁰⁸ Acker’s interest in Kristeva is not surprising given the focus of much of Acker’s work. In Kristeva, the “abject” exists in contrast to Lacan’s *objet petit* (the object of desire). The abject is always radically excluded and, for Kristeva, “draws me toward the place where meaning

³⁰⁵ Mark Magill, “Kathy Acker,” *BOMB Magazine* #6, Summer 1983, accessed January 4, 2019, <http://bombmagazine.org/article/307/kathy-acker>.

³⁰⁶ Melissa Tanti, “Kathy Acker’s French twist: translating sex in the Blood and guts trilogy,” MA Thesis, Ryerson University, 2010, accessed January 4, 2019, <http://digitalcommons.ryerson.ca/dissertations>. Tanti presents an interesting and extended discussion of Acker’s refusal to participate in binary heteronormative sexuality represented in some theorists work instead suggesting that Acker’s texts “introduce images of non-normative heterosexuality that encourage readings through query political paradigms.”

³⁰⁷ Acker, *BGHS*, 137.

³⁰⁸ McCaffrey, *Ibid*.

collapses.”³⁰⁹ As Acker explores in *BGHS*, the concept of the abject signals that which “existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship, in the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be.”³¹⁰ In other words, Acker is interested not only in disrupting the narrative (the work of Punk) but in exploring this idea of the moment of separation: between subject and (m)other, the locus of what “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.”³¹¹ While Kristeva is writing about the crime of Auschwitz, her concept of the “abject” has been used to discuss that which is taboo, that which disrupts order, the chaos of end of century Punk aesthetic, and, I would argue, the female rage enacted by the performances of women in Punk.

In Kristeva’s work on the abject, she states that “refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live.”³¹² Acker shows Janey participating in scatological behavior in *BGHS* while also living in “the slum where she chooses to live” (the East Village).³¹³ Acker shows both the space and place where she was living in the late 1970s/early 1980s but also positions this space in alignment with the abject; it is a space of marginality. Instead of avoiding the abject, Acker’s characters revel in bodily fluids, their bodies often defined by disease. In *BGHS*, an abortion clinic becomes a communal space and almost a place of comfort, “I got to like that pale green room, the

³⁰⁹ Kristeva, *Ibid.*, 2.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 3.

³¹³ Acker, *BGHS*, 35-57.

women who were more scared than I was so I could comfort them, the feeling someone was taking care of me. I felt more secure there than in the outside world.”³¹⁴ When Janey and her friends in The Scorpions gang go to Connecticut in a stolen van, they trash a hardware store, “We made the store into a death-house and the street look like the New York City east-side slum we had to live in.”³¹⁵ Rather than wanting to escape the site of the abject, Janey feels secure in spaces where the abject resides; although Janey *has* to live there, Acker *chooses* to live there.

For Acker, her work was about liberation just as much as it was an attempt to express rage at the oppressive nature of society. She argues against feminist critiques of her work, suggesting that feminist texts need not include “positive role models” but rather, to show the truth of women’s lives in patriarchal society, “If you're arguing that the society is sexist, why do you want to argue that everything is happy? And why do you want to insist on having these strong, wonderful, terrific women? [Laughs.] That implies there's no reason to have this violent struggle. That's cuckoo.”³¹⁶ Acker positions herself as a feminist but on her own terms. She was, as she references in interviews and her writing, a former sex worker and refers to this work as the beginning of her “political awareness” and the impetus in her lifelong exploration of the relationships between gender, sex, and power. Acker was fascinated by the struggle between her desire for “complete freedom” with sex as a defining act of her identity formation but also linked to

³¹⁴ Ibid., 33.

³¹⁵ Ibid., 35

³¹⁶ McCaffrey, Ibid., 96.

society's brutal appropriation of the female body. Many of Acker's female characters suffer from physical longing, overwhelming and maddening desire, and have violent sexual experiences. These themes of oppression of the female body, desire for dominance, and an impossibility of communication through the vehicle of male-dominated language repeat throughout Acker's texts and are essential in understanding her work and the work many women were doing in the Punk scene in the 1970s-1980s. The refusal to be silenced, the necessity of communicating within male-dominated spheres (text, image, music), and the drive to disrupt male-centered narratives exist across the breadth of women's creative and material production in the Punk scene.

Kathy Acker's work in the 1970s and 1980s, specifically her self-positioning as both writer and performer, both feminist and Punk, helped create an opening for other women to see these categories as non-exclusive while also building foundational links between women active in the 1980s and 1990s. Acker's refusal to be categorized or to follow rules, her insistence on the importance of breaking down boundaries made her not only an essential female voice in the 1980s literary avant-garde but also a Punk icon. Her work directly shows the opening Punk created for the loud and limitless expression of female rage. Much more than a simple feminist literary interpretation of the Punk project, Acker put forth a stubbornly individualistic image of woman as angry, as intellectual, and as capable of shifting both artistic and proscribed societal rules around appearance, language, narrative structure, sexual behavior, and the idea of "the woman's voice" or "(r)ecriture feminine."³¹⁷

³¹⁷ Colby, *Ibid.*, 83.

While the link exists between Acker's radical collage and cut-up textual experiments in her novels to the avant-garde, there is also a clear connection between her work and the Punk aesthetic presented in zines in the 1970s and 1980s. This connection is vital in identifying Acker as a Punk icon and understanding the appeal of her 1984 novel *BGHS* to the Punk audience, particularly to young women in the Punk scene in the 1980s. Because we already "read" through the format of radical collage in our engagement with Punk zines, when *BGHS* was published, we all recognized it as a Punk text and acknowledged Acker as one of us.

Writing and the publishing of that writing by women for women can serve as activism as much as more physical forms of protest. Throughout American history, the mainstream press has excluded women, their voices and issues marginalized by a largely male-dominated publication industry. Using alternative means of production, often amateur writers, editors, and artists, women have created periodicals that speak to other women. These periodicals form an extensive network focused on the work of active community building. Punk provided a space and place for women to write, publish, and distribute their ideas on a local and, in some instances, on a global scale. Fanzines serve as touchstones in the broader history of American Punk but also as connective threads to underground publication from Seneca Falls to the 1990s. The radical collage present in Punk fanzines also exists in the writings of Kathy Acker, signaling that she is not only a writer building on the avant-garde tradition but a writer who embraced the freeing elements of the Punk aesthetic in her work and her self-representation. Acker's public performance of Punk links her the other women discussed in this dissertation: those who

worked outside the boundaries of acceptable public performance on stage, in print, or on screen, weaponizing language in an effort to communicate.

CHAPTER THREE: Punk in Performance

Part One: Punk on Film: 1970s – 1980s

1. Punk on Film: a brief history

Another aspect of Punk participatory media wherein media objects serve to build an embodied community and material media objects help spread the news of Punk, the 1970s and 1980s in New York City saw a rise in underground films, many shot on Super-8 and video, and many that were shown on screens behind bands and on small TVs at Punk clubs. Women interviewed for this project reference viewing Punk on film before or during the early stages of their “becoming” Punk. For many of us, this viewing was formative and includes Lydia Lunch and the Cinema of Transgression and also works by Beth B., Vivienne Dick³¹⁸, and other more “mainstream” films focused on Punk. Arguments surround the topic of “Punk on film” including whether there should be a centrally defined ethic or if all films featuring Punk music, Punk haircuts, or Punks-as-actors should be included. Several academic investigations of Punk on film focus on Malcolm McLaren’s pseudo-Sex Pistols film *The Great Rock’n’Roll Swindle* and others focus on the economics of film production suggesting that Punk films must be fully DIY and not partake in major studio distribution. Perhaps most useful is Bill Osgerby’s suggestion that, like the term “punk,” the “concept of ‘punk cinema’ is slippery and contentious.”³¹⁹ While I agree with Stacy Thompson’s statement that Punk cinema generally resists “narrative linearity and closure” in favor of “techniques that more

³¹⁸ Lydia Lunch, Vivienne Dick, and Beth B. are discussed in Part Two of this chapter.

³¹⁹ Osgerby, *Ibid.*, 206.

actively engage the audience,” these statements could equally apply to much independent or experimental filmmaking that has nothing to do with Punk. The problem with attempting to find a central definition of “Punk on film” or “Punk cinema” is closely linked to issues around the definition of Punk itself and to the Punk aesthetic. For those of us active in the Punk scene in the 1970s and 1980s, we knew Punk when we saw it. For the purposes of this dissertation, the films I will discuss are either made by women active in the Punk scene in the 1970s-1980s or cited as influential moments of discovery of Punk by participants in the oral histories.³²⁰

In the 1980s, Punk was a subject of interest for film and television writers and producers but often portrayals of Punk were done by outsiders only interested in shock value (*Class of 1984*) or simply parody (*Class of Nuke 'Em High*).³²¹ Some members of the Punk scene were entertained by 1979's Ramone's vehicle *Rock'n'Roll High School* (1979) and some preferred edgier fare like the Alex Cox's cult classic *Repo Man* (1984). Punk concert films and documentaries abounded including the inept *D.O.A.: A Rite of Passage* (1981), the heavily male-centric *Another State of Mind* (1984), and the stark band documentary *X: The Unheard Music* (1986). In the deluge of Punk or Punk-inspired films released in the 1980s, a few stand out as both influential and revered as “authentic”

³²⁰ For a largely complete resource guide to Punk on film see Zack Carlson and Bryan Connolly, eds. *Destroy All Movies: The Complete Guide to Punks on Film* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2010).

³²¹ See Osgerby, *Ibid.*, 225 for discussion of Punk on film. For discussion of Punk as trope in TV shows see Shayla Thiel-Stern, “Punk Rock and the Crisis of Femininity, 1976-1986,” in *From the Dance Hall to Facebook: Teen Girls, Mass Media, and Moral Panic in the United States* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2014), 123-28, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vk728.8>.

by those in the Punk scene. One female director whose work attempts to accurately portray the Punk scene is Penelope Spheeris.

Spheeris is an American film director, producer, and screen writer known for documentary and scripted films. Her best-known works include the Mike Myers parody vehicle *Wayne's World* (1992) and the documentary trilogy *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981, 1988, 1998). Spheeris was born in New Orleans and spent her childhood on the carnival circuit in the South until her father was murdered. Her mother moved the family to California where Spheeris studied art and psychology in college and then film, obtaining an M.F.A. from UCLA. She started her film career producing shorts for Albert Brooks (*Saturday Night Live*). Her first full-length film was the documentary *The Decline of Western Civilization* (1981). Spheeris's other films released in the 1980s include the cult favorites *Suburbia* (1983), *Dudes* (1987), and *The Decline of Western Civilization Part II: The Metal Years* (1988).³²²

The Decline of Western Civilization (1981) was filmed between fall 1979 and spring 1980 and focuses on the L.A. Punk scene. While Spheeris was older than most Punks, she was a member of the L.A. scene and spent significant time with her documentary subjects. Her portrayal positions the L.A. Scene in a moment of supposed transition from the "artier" early punk bands (The Bags, X, the Germs), into a broader

³²² For more on Penelope Spheeris, see Spheeris Films, Inc, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://www.declinemovies.com/>, Ann Friedman, "Penelope Spheeris: I sold out and Took the Money," *The Guardian*, August 23, 2015, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/aug/23/Penelope-spheeris-film-maker-the-decline-of-western-civilization>, Laura Snapes, "Spheeris Revisits Her *Decline of Western Civilization* Trilogy," *Pitchfork*, July 15, 2015, accessed December 19, 2020, pitchfork.com/features/interview/9684.

scene encompassing the Orange County hardcore bands (Black Flag, the Circle Jerks). Alice Bag is critical of *Decline*, partly because, “The scene, as I had known it, was starting to fall apart” and to Bag, the film “seemed to focus on the ugliest elements of it and that’s what people who weren’t there will think of it. That’s what soured me on it.”³²³ But Bag is also smart enough to know that *Decline* was important for her career and for Punk history, “I can’t deny that it has also been good for me in many ways because we only had one 45rpm and one cut on a compilation. I don’t think you would be interviewing me today if it was for *Decline* or Penelope.”³²⁴

Since its release in 1981 *Decline* has become both a document for outsiders interested in the early L.A. scene and also a touchstone for those of us in the Punk scene. A recent overview of Spheeris’s work asserts that *Decline* not only recorded a moment in Punk history but “also helped to make it,” suggesting that punk fans who saw the mosh pits filmed for *Decline* began to copy this behavior.

On the other side of the country, punkers in major cities saw Spheeris’s movie and started to imitate the roving, herky-jerky dance seen in the SoCal pits, dubbed the Huntington Beach (colloquially shortened to “H.B.”) Strut. And if hardcore might’ve eventually made inroads in Boston, New York and Washington, D.C., Spheeris’s movie certainly did its part in expediting matters.³²⁵

³²³ Video interview of Alice Bag, Women of Rock Oral History Project records, SSC-MS-00756. Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History. https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/160906.

³²⁴ Alice Bag, Ibid.

³²⁵ Nick Pinkerton, “The Truth About Punk According to Penelope Spheeris,” *On Film*. July 3, 2019, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/6476-the-truth-about-punk-according-to-penelope-spheeris>.

While this is an incorrect portrayal of the scene at the time (by 1981 mosh pits already existed at Punk shows in New York, Boston, and other areas), it is an accurate description of the way Punk on film continued the project of live shows and ‘zines in spreading the word locally and globally. For some Punk fans, *Decline* was the first time they’d seen a Punk show or many of the bands Spheeris filmed. For others, *Decline* was clearly L.A.-centric and not representative of the Punk scene in New York or other locations. At a screening in New York in the early 1980s, two women interviewed for this project describe different reactions. One found the viewing experience “cool...it was [great] to see those bands and hear X talking about their music,” but the other woman had a more visceral reaction, “it was so L.A. I mean, sure I love X but most of it...who cares?! To me there was much more exciting stuff happening in New York.”³²⁶ The Punk scene has always had territorial aspects and by presenting the 1979-1980 L.A. scene as somehow representative of *all* Punk, some insiders in other areas rejected *Decline* as an invalid document although it’s now recognized by many as an important “time capsule” of early Punk.³²⁷ As Brent McKnight writes in a 2015 article on Spheeris, “Growing up a punk

³²⁶ Subjects 1, 3, 9, 12, 16, Interviews with the author, 2018-2019.

³²⁷ In 2016, *The Decline of Western Civilization* was inducted into the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress signifying “cultural, historic or aesthetic importance.” Library of Congress, “With ‘20,000 Leagues,’ the National Film Registry Reaches 700,” December 14, 2016, *Library of Congress*, accessed June 1, 2019, <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-16-209>. See also *BAM.org*, “Punks, Poets & Valley Girls: *The Decline of Western Civilization*,” *Film 2019, August 8, 2019*. *BAM.org*, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://www.bam.org/film/2019/the-decline-of-western-civilization> and Tony Rettman, “Part II: The Complete Oral History of Legendary Rock Doc Series *The Decline of Western Civilization*,” *Vice.com*, June 17, 2015, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/65z9p5/decline-of-western-civilization-ii-57a206c52ab15ddeb5e9ab50> and in Hannon, *Ibid.*, 79 the film is called, “An extremely important film in the history of American punk.”

rock kid in a...smallish town *Decline*..served as a de facto history textbook. You poured over the footage of the Germs, Black Flag, Circle Jerks, and more, noting how they lived, how they dressed, the f**k you attitude they flaunted by their very existence. This was your primer, your roadmap.”³²⁸ There are also performances by Exene Cervenka (X) and Alice Bag – showing women active in Punk on stage and presenting performances as strong as the guys. Despite some negative responses from women interviewed for this dissertation, a few referenced both women as examples of the importance of seeing other women in Punk on film.³²⁹

Running at one hundred minutes, *Decline* was distributed by Nu-Image Film and on video (Media Home Entertainment). The film features live performance footage of The Bags (credited as “Alice Bag Band”), Black Flag, the Circle Jerks, Catholic Discipline, Fear, the Germs, and X. Throughout the film, Spheeris intersperses interviews with scene members, editors at *Slash*, and musicians including X in their home and rehearsal space and Darby Crash (the Germs) incoherently talking while making breakfast. Unlike other early Punk-in-performance films, *Decline* is both professional and gritty with good sound quality and clear footage of interviews and performances. For insiders watching *Decline*, there was both recognition (just like us!) and rejection (not like us), for outsiders seeing these performances, violent crowds, and lifestyles of some scene members (filthy kitchens and marginal housing, drug and alcohol abuse, extreme

³²⁸ Brent McKnight, “The Kids Are Not Alright in *The Decline of Western Civilization Collection*,” *PopMatters*, July 9, 2015, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://www.popmatters.com/penelope-spheeris-decline-western-civilization-2495512172.html> accessed

³²⁹ Subjects 1, 3, 9, 12, 16, Interviews with the author, 2018-2019.

physical appearances) was shocking and threatening. When first screened in L.A., *Decline* “instigated a riot”³³⁰ and then-L.A. Police Chief Daryl Gates banned the film from further screenings in L.A.³³¹

Decline was enough of a success after its initial release to come to the attention of veteran producer Roger Corman who hired Spheeris to direct what was supposed to be a “punksploitation” film. *Suburbia* (1983) instead became a raw, gritty, realistic portrayal of abandoned and abused Punk teens forging lives for themselves.³³² Spheeris cast the film with members of Punk bands (Flea of RHCP and Chris Pedersen of the Vandals) and other local Punks. Filmed in an abandoned housing tract near Downey, California, *Suburbia* has a decidedly West Coast feel that could have been alienating to East Coast Punks but instead, we found it compelling and more realistic than many depictions of Punk on film. The plot focuses on a group of young runaways who live together in a squat, (literally) branding themselves “T.R.” (The Rejected). The empty houses, brutal violence, and general hopelessness of the film help to highlight Spheeris’s themes of child abuse, neglect, and the failure of American mainstream culture to care for its children or even acknowledge their existence. As if to highlight the violence of the life these teens are forced into, Spheeris chooses to include some of the L.A. scene’s more notorious (and misogynistic) bands including Jack Grisham and his band T.S.O.L. But beyond the violence is Spheeris’s sharp observation that one of the ways Punk formed a

³³⁰ Friedman, Ibid.

³³¹ McKnight, Ibid. and Spheeris Films, “Penelope Spheeris Bio,” accessed December 19, 2020, penelopespheeris.com.

³³² *Suburbia*, directed by Penelope Spheeris (1983 Suburbia Productions/New World Pictures) 1hr, 34 mins., Amazon Prime (2018).

community was by providing family and “home” for many young people who had neither. Though many of us on the East Coast who saw *Suburbia* in the 1980s found the music alienating and the car-based culture of L.A. foreign, the patterns of parental and societal abuse and rejection coupled with the alternative family formation of the Punk squat gave the film a degree of authenticity that felt less like “punksploitation” than many of the other “Punk” films release in the 1980s.

2. *Smithereens* and *Times Square*



Figure 3.1 Susan Seidelman, *Smithereens*, 1982, JPEG, IndieWire.com. In this still from the film, Wren is shown talking polaroid photos of herself standing in front of a poster for Eric’s band, illustrating her attempts to position herself as part of Eric’s world, and showing an early example of a “selfie.”

Another female director who got her start in 1980s Punk, Susan Seidelman’s *Smithereens* (1982) is considered emblematic of the New York scene in the late 1970s, early 1980s. A cult classic and indie hit, the film is the earliest American independent feature to be invited to compete for the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival. Perhaps best-known for the early Madonna vehicle *Desperately Seeking Susan* (1984) and her work on *Sex in the City*, Seidelman initially studied filmmaking at Tisch School of the

Arts (NYU). *Smithereens* is Seidelman's feature film debut shot on 16mm for about forty thousand dollars. Like other indie filmmakers at the time, Seidelman shot without permits on New York City's streets and subways.³³³

Set in the early 1980s, *Smithereens*' plot focuses on Wren (Susan Berman), a young runaway from New Jersey who moves to New York City to become a participant in the Punk scene. Wren regularly sneaks in to the Peppermint Lounge and attempts to forge relationships with various members of the Punk scene. Working at a copy shop, Wren makes fliers of herself that she pastes around the city: an early effort at self-promotion that although rare then, seems common in today's social media world (note the early "selfie" in Figure 3.1). For Wren, the people she meets are a means to an end which can be viewed as a parallel or critique of the behavior of many male members in the New York scene. Starring alongside Berman is Punk icon Richard Hell who plays has-been musician Eric, former member of "Smithereens" a vaguely successful Punk band from some years earlier. While Seidelman is playing with the trope of the plucky heroine trying to make it in the big city, Wren's trajectory is realistic but also moralistic. She uses a kind young runaway (Paul – played by Brad Rijn) for companionship and to crash in his van when she's locked out of her apartment. When Wren meets Eric, she attempts to move in with him only to discover that's not an option. Eric spins a tale of moving to L.A. to start a new band and enlists Wren in a robbery but leaves Wren behind,

³³³ Kate Erbland, "Susan Seidelman Looks Back: How *Smithereens* Defined Her Career," *Girl Talk: IndieWire.com*, July 28, 2016, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.indiewire.com/2016/07/susan-seidelman-smithereens-desperately-seeking-susan-1201710555/>. Lisa Thomas, "BAMcinematek presents Punk Rock Girls, an 11-film survey of cinema's toughest she-rockers, May 7-Jun 1," BAM.org, accessed January 4, 2020, www.bam.org/media/3365715/Punk-rock-girls_pr_final.pdf.

taking the money with him. Now destitute, Wren attempts to reunite with Paul but he's sold the van and left New York. The film closes on Wren accepting a proposition and a ride from a stranger in a convertible; her dreams of Punk Rock fame have disappeared and we assume she is left with little choice but prostitution.³³⁴ For many of us who viewed this film in the 1980s it was both realistic showing New York City in all its squalor and energy but also overly moralistic: Wren is forced to become a prostitute because she's selfish and treats a nice guy badly. But Paul is a total sap and Wren clearly an innocent drawn in by Eric's cool, good looks, and ability to spin a convincing story. In 2016 *Smithereens* was shown at New York's art house theater Metrograph and the audience was a mix of young and old, some of the young audience members marveling at how gritty New York looked. The longevity of the film is partly due to its status as Punk indie and partly due to Seidelman's own status as a filmmaker. Her next feature, *Desperately Seeking Susan*, although not "Punk," was decidedly groundbreaking both for Seidelman and the film's star Madonna. It was also resoundingly panned by women in the Punk scene, many seeing it as merely a vehicle for Madonna, some as "silly," and others highlighting the contrasts between Wren and Madonna.³³⁵

Women directors are an essential part of the history of Punk on film; their influence and vision helping to create space for women in the broader Punk narrative. Spheeris and Seidelman are two of many women filmmakers active in the 1980s. Other important women filmmakers in the 1970s-1980s, Beth B. and Vivienne Dick, will be

³³⁴ *Smithereens*, dir. by Susan Seidelman (1982; New York: Criterion, 2018), Blu-ray.

³³⁵ Subjects 2, 5, 7, 8, 11, 13.

discussed later in this chapter in conjunction with their work with Lydia Lunch. In presenting an overview of essential viewing of Punk on film, two films released in the early 1980s must be included. *Times Square* (1980) and *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains* (1981). Both are cited repeatedly by women in the Punk scene in the 1980s (and later) as inspiring or simply “non-offensive” portrayals of young women searching for identity through the performance of Punk. Although both were made by men for major studios, the accessibility of both films gave young women examples of other young women playing music on screen and demanding attention.

Times Square (1980)

One of the films referenced by women interviewed for this project as “essential,” *Times Square* (1980), directed by Allan Moyle, stars Trini Alvarado and Robin Johnson as two young teens who meet while in a mental hospital. Nicky Marotta (Robin Johnson) and Pamela Pearl (Trini Alvarado) are from very different backgrounds but share a refusal to submit to authority (represented by doctors at the mental hospital and Pearl’s wealthy father). Together they form a bond, start a band, and escape into the dangerous streets of New York City.

At the center of the film are themes of youth rebellion, abuse of power, gentrification, female empowerment, and queer sexuality. Pamela’s father is David Pearl (Peter Coffield), a powerful man working to “clean up” Times Square. Nicky is a street kid, wise to the ways of the world; she returns to the hospital to help her naïve friend Pamela escape. Stealing an ambulance, they hide out from Pamela’s father in an abandoned warehouse and try to survive. Pamela’s disappearance is cast by her father as a kidnapping and comes to the attention of WJAD DJ Johnny LaGuardia (Tim Curry)

who resents the campaign to cleanup Times Square. Eventually Nicky and Pamela form a Punk band together The Sleez Sisters, and DJ LaGuardia helps publicize their work including having them play live on air. The warehouse becomes a clubhouse and a home, and Nicky and Pamela fall in love (although overt Lesbian scenes were cut from the final release, the relationship is implicit). The Sleez Sisters develop a fanbase, their rebellion inspiring a city full of disaffected young women.

While the two write music together and inspire others, their paths begin to diverge: Nicky wants to be a Punk Rock star and Pam seems content with what they've accomplished having found a new sense of her own identity. Nicky becomes desperate and after a brief reconciliation they perform one last time as the Sleez Sisters on top of a marquee in Times Square. Their fans show up clad in garbage bags and racoon eye makeup in response to Nicky's call, "If they treat you like garbage, put on a garbage bag. If they treat you like a bandit, black out your eyes!" As the police approach, Nicky jumps from the marquee and her fans help her escape into the night.³³⁶

In the DVD audio commentary, director Allan Moyle states that the film was wrecked by producer Robert Stigwood's involvement. Known for mainstream hits like *Saturday Night Fever* (1977) and *Grease* (1978), Stigwood inserted inappropriate music (The BeeGees) and removed what he deemed to be inappropriate sexual content. Moyle left the production before the film was finished, and the film's stars reference gaps in narrative and a shift in storyline that Stigwood's second unit brought in. The final cut is still a classic but not the film Moyle and his cast hoped for.

³³⁶ *Times Square*, directed by Allan Moyle (1980; Beverly Hills: Anchor Bay Entertainment, 2000), DVD.

While much about *Times Square* is faulty, at its core, this is a movie about young women embracing the Punk ethic: confronting abuse and repression through their words and music and inspiring a community of other young women through their behavior and channeling rage into art. It's this message at the core of the film that has made it such an influence on young women: both in the 1980s and beyond.³³⁷ The opening scene alone is memorable for many of us, a young woman walks through a pre-cleanup Times Square, slides into a gap between buildings and begins to play electric guitar – really, really loudly.³³⁸

Ladies and Gentlemen the Fabulous Stains (1982)

A film that came out in 1982 and might appear to be another “Punksploitation” vehicle at first glance, has over time proven to be much more than that overly simplistic categorization. In Lou Adler’s *Ladies and Gentlemen the Fabulous Stains*, Diane Lane plays Corinne “Third Degree” Burns. A big fan of Punk Rock, Burns is a frustrated young woman stuck in a “nowhere” town and eager to find ways to push back against society’s restrictions. Unlike *Times Square* and despite being directed by music industry heavyweight Adler, *Fabulous Stains* was written by women: Nancy Dowd (*Coming*

³³⁷ *Times Square* has become a cult staple at LGBTQI and “women in Punk,” film festivals and retrospective and Kathleen Hanna (Bikini Kill, Le Tigre) often cites *Times Square* as among her favorite films, for example see: Rachel Michelle Fernandes, “Go See the Punk Rock Girl Film Series at BAM,” *Vice.com*, May 6, 2014, accessed November 1, 2020, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/6837ar/go-see-the-punk-rock-girls-film-series-at-bam-2014).

³³⁸ Devin Faraci, “Schlock Corridor: *Times Square* (1980) Is One of the Great Underseen Teen Films,” *Birth. Movies. Death.*, Nov. 25, 2010, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://birthmoviesdeath.com/2010/11/25/schlock-corridor-times-square-1980-is-one-of-the-great-underseen-teen-films>.

Home) with collaboration from Caroline Coon. In the 1970s, Coon worked as a rock critic for England's *Melody Maker* and briefly managed The Clash. Coon was a Punk insider and a committed feminist and told Dowd that she believed "feminism was the next big thing to come to Punk Rock."³³⁹ Together, they worked to create a female-centered Punk Rock movie that has since become both a cult classic and cited by members of the Riot Grrrl movement as highly influential.³⁴⁰

The film centers around the career of Corrine Burns and her band. Teenage Burns's mother dies of lung cancer and she's working in a fast-food restaurant to support herself and her younger sister. When a TV crew interviews her about the poor economy, she loses her patience and ends up losing her job. But her frustration appeals to teenage viewers and in a follow-up interview, she promotes her band The Fabulous Stains (with her cousin played by Laura Dern and little sister played by Marin Kanter). Although they can't really play yet, Burns talks a promoter into adding the Stains to a show and then a tour with two all-male bands, rising Punk band The Looters and has-been metal band Metal Corpses. The Stains clearly can't play at their first show and the audience heckles them; Corrine responds in kind. The Metal Corpses implode when their singer is found dead and the promoter "Lawnboy" shifts The Looters to the headlining slot with the Stains as openers. Corrine has given herself a Punk Rock makeover and comes out on stage with multi-colored hair and an outfit that features bikini briefs and a see-through

³³⁹ Allyson McCabe, "The Story of *The Fabulous Stains* and Riot Grrrl," *NPR Weekend Edition Saturday*, NPR.org, April 27, 2019, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2019/04/27/717757017/the-story-of-the-fabulous-stains-and-riot-grrrl>

³⁴⁰ Ibid.

top. In her ongoing confrontations with the audience, several stand out but an early one shows the feminist underpinning of the film: “You came here tonight thinking you'd see some cute and wonderful rock star. And you hoped maybe he'd take one look at you from up on that stage and he'd fall in love with you just like that. Then your savior could take you out of this dump of a town you live in. You could be different from all the other girls. Suckers, suckers - be yourselves.”³⁴¹ This clearly shows the influence of Coon as Corrine’s message is a central message voiced by women in Punk: women’s role in music should not be limited to having sex with male musicians. For Diane Lane (who as a fifteen-year-old played Corrine in the film), this is a crucial scene in the film, “women in the audience were saying, wow. Hell yes. I want some more of that. The guys in the audience are grabbing their crotch and making jokes because they don't get it...They don't understand that the train has left the station. A lot of women are going to be on that train.”³⁴²

In Figure 3.2, Corrine Burns (Diane Lane), is shown enacting Punk’s “ugliness.” Though she is traditionally attractive, Corrine Burns is rejecting society’s attempt to position her to be an acceptable pretty girl, instead embracing her rage and embodying it by mirroring famous London Punk Jordan’s pink eye makeup and Punk’s socially unacceptable feminist confrontational rage. The Stains garner media attention both

³⁴¹ Diane Lane as Corrine “Third Degree” Burns in *Ladies and Gentlemen, The Fabulous Stains*, directed by Lou Adler (1982, Burbank, CA: Rhino Entertainment, 2008), DVD.

³⁴² McCabe, Ibid.



Figure 3.2 Diane Lane as “Third Degree” Burns, *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Fabulous Stains: Corinne Burns (Diane Lane)*, directed by Lou Adler (1982, Burbank, CA: Rhino Entertainment, 2008), still from color film in 35 mm, JPEG, artforum.org.

negative from male journalists who focus on Corrine’s bad attitude and the band’s lack of talent, and positive from female journalists who focus on the feminist message. Corrine’s catchphrase, “We’re the Stains, and we don’t put out,” has appeal to young women and across the country they become Stains fans, dying their hair, leaving home, and seeking some kind of tangible freedom. Corrine and Billy (Ray Winstone) from The Looters grow close until Corrine learns Billy asked for the Stains to be replaced on the tour; she takes her revenge by covering one of his songs and it becomes a hit. Billy then publicly calls the Stains “sell-outs” and the fans riot. The tour collapses and Corrine and the band’s career seem over and although Billy asks her to rejoin the tour, Corrine refuses and we see her learn later that the Stains have a hit record.

The film has an awkward tacked on ending showing the Stains at some point in the future, now a successful band and making their MTV debut. This awkwardness is explained by Coon, “[Adler] began just tearing pages out of the end of the script. We

walked off the movie. We were sacked.”³⁴³ The film wrapped without an ending and two years later Adler added the MTV debut “happy” ending. Though the film never saw wide release, starting in 1984 it appeared on late night TV (USA Network’s *Night Flight*) and as a bootleg video.³⁴⁴ Those of us who had cable in the 1980s watched the film on USA, many of us saw it via bootleg video. The film showed in limited art house runs in 1985 in New York, Chicago, Atlanta, L.A., and Philadelphia. Although the film was released by Rhino Home Video on DVD in 2008 and is widely available via streaming services now, it was a long a prized possession in the Punk and indie film community. 1980s women in Punk found the film compelling both for its feminist message and Punk rock cameos³⁴⁵, and younger women who would grow up to participate in Riot Grrrl, often cite the film as heavily influential including Kathleen Hanna (Bikini Kill), Allison Wolfe (Bratmobile), and many more.³⁴⁶ Seeing “ourselves” on screen was an impetus for many young women to start a band, modify our physical appearances, and for some – to move to New York City.

While the category of “Punk on film” is contentious and arguments have been presented to support definitions focused on DIY production and distribution methods or

³⁴³ McCabe, Ibid.

³⁴⁴ Melissa Anderson, “Ladies and Gentlemen the Fabulous Stains: Feral vigor in a cult movie that influenced the riot-grrrl movement,” *4columns.org*, June 12, 2020 accessed December 19, 2020, <http://4columns.org/anderson-melissa/ladies-and-gentlemen-the-fabulous-stains>.

³⁴⁵ The film features several Punk rock musicians in acting roles including Steve Jones and Paul Cook of the Sex Pistols as well as Paul Simonon of The Clash as members of the Looters and Fee Waybill and Vince Welnick of The Tubes as members of Metal Corpses.

³⁴⁶ Melissa Anderson, Ibid., McCabe, Ibid.

conversely, in favor of including *all* films with any Punk elements (music, style, Punks acting) it is more helpful instead to allow for a broad definition based on input from those of us active in the Punk scene ourselves. The above overview is not meant to be all-inclusive but instead to provide information on films and directors central to the conversation around women in Punk in the 1980s. Rather than focusing on Punk as necessarily anti-capitalist and essentializing modes of film production from this limited point of view, the effort here is to show the early and lasting influence of a selection of directors and films from the 1980s including the more traditionally structured films of Susan Seidelman and Penelope Spheeris, and the cult classics *Times Square* and *Ladies and Gentlemen the Fabulous Stains*. These films and directors' work exists because Punk happened; without Punk there would be no films by women as creative and challenging as those by Beth B, Vivienne Dick, Susan Seidelman, or Penelope Spheeris and, without the contribution of their work, Punk would never have been or become as widespread, influential, and vibrant. The work of women filmmakers in the 1980s aided in spreading the word – providing new examples of women on screen for a generation of women growing up in the 1980s and 1990s, from Beth B's dark visions to Susan Seidelman and Penelope Spheeris's Punk narratives, and even "Third Degree" Burns's teen rebellion. Punk has never been about just the music, and it has never been about a brief period of time in London in the late 1970s; instead, Punk is every girl and woman everywhere who said "I can do that," and against the many naysayers, pushed forward and did. In the 1970s and 1980s in New York City, the Super 8 camera became a part of Punk vernacular – central to our experience and wielded by women including Vivienne Dick and Beth B. Although both women were foundational and influential artists in their own

right, their work with Lydia Lunch brought them (and her) to the attention of many “insiders” and also outsiders.



Figure 3.3 Julia Gorton, *Lydia Lunch*, 1978, <http://www.juliagorton.com/seventies>

Part Two: Lydia Lunch “the Mouth that Screams”

1. The Radical Hysteria of Lydia Lunch

“There is a revolutionary potential in hysteria...A movement of revolt and refusal.”³⁴⁷

“I’m a hystertian for our times.” “I am the Mouth that Screams.”³⁴⁸

Lydia Lunch (Lydia Anne Koch) is one of the best-known women to come out of the New York City scene. Like Acker, Lunch focuses on the exorcising of female rage, the restructuring of traditional male-centered narratives to provide space for women's

³⁴⁷ Irigaray quoted in Eluned Summers-Bremner, “Hysterical Visions: Kristeva and Irigaray on the Virgin Mary,” *Women: A Cultural Review*, 9:2, (1998):178-199, DOI: 10.1080/09574049808578347.

³⁴⁸ Video interview of Lydia Lunch. Women of Rock Oral History Project records, SSC-MS-00756. Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History. https://findingaids.smith.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/160972

voices, and in both print and performance on stage and on camera enacts central elements in the Punk aesthetic. When asked to define herself, Lunch says, "I'm a confrontational performance artist. I consider myself a journalist and a *hysterian* for our times."³⁴⁹ Lunch stresses her term "hysterian" to create a link between her work and past male critiques of "hysterical" women as well as the push against the male-centered term "history." Hysteria was linked with women for hundreds of years as a catch-all diagnosis for a wide range of behavior, including anything deemed overdramatic or attention-seeking (epithets often thrown at women in Punk). In the 1970s and 1980s, the idea of the hysteric/hysteria appeared in feminist criticism as a cultural condition (not a medical one), a "specifically feminine protolanguage, communicating through the body messages that cannot be verbalized."³⁵⁰ For Lunch, the term "hysterian" (her own) is central to her message: she sees it as her role to communicate on behalf of women who cannot speak while also telling our collective history.

One of the founders of the "No Wave" movement in New York City, Lunch started the band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks in 1976. The band's performances involved audience confrontation and a sound that featured bottleneck guitar, heavy bass, and screaming vocals, a sound described as "minimalist, yet powerful."³⁵¹ While some claim that No Wave was a music and performance movement separate from Punk, I assert

³⁴⁹ Ibid.

³⁵⁰ Cecily Devereux, "Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender Revisted: The Case of the Second Wave." *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (2014): 19-45, DOI:10.1353/esc.2014.0004.
See also Elaine Showalter, "On Hysterical Narrative," *Narrative*, 1, no. 1 (1993): 24-35, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20106990>.

³⁵¹ V. Vale, *Lydia Lunch* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 2013), 3.

instead that No Wave was connected with and influenced by the central Punk ethos of rejection of expertise as a qualification for artistic expression and, on a basic aural level, a sonic extension of the loud noise of Punk. For Lunch, No Wave served as an early vehicle to express her rage, "I went there (NYC) at sixteen... Certainly, the music had a pull: Patti Smith, Television - it had a pull to me in the sense that I thought it was still too traditional - I had to go there and kick some dirt up!"³⁵² Lunch is dismissive of early Punk, referring to the Sex Pistols as "mannequins for cool t-shirts" and Punk as "boring," but the New York City Punk scene was essential for her development as an artist. Without Punk, there would have been no scene: no musicians, no venues or clubs, no space for her rage. Lunch lived near Max's Kansas City and went to Punk shows at Max's and CBs, where she met other like-minded people, including No Wave instigator James Chance (The Contortions). Together Lunch and Chance formed Teenage Jesus and the Jerks. Later musicians and artists cite Lunch's primal wail as a powerful influence.³⁵³ Lunch herself is hesitant in citing musical influences, instead focusing on literature, providing the same apocryphal narrative in several interviews where, as a twelve-year-old, she discovered the writing of Hubert Selby Jr. and Jean Genet. Lunch does cite David Bowie as an influence, "He was one of the first to disavow his gender, and as someone who always felt ill-defined by my specific gender from a very early age, that was important to me."³⁵⁴ This exploration of gender constraints is part of what makes

³⁵² Ibid., 8-9.

³⁵³ Artists who cite Lunch as a major influence include Kim Gordon (Sonic Youth), Julie Cafritz (Pussy Galore, Free Kitten), and many others.

³⁵⁴ Video interview of Lydia Lunch. Women of Rock Oral History Project, Ibid.

Lunch such an influence on other women, with many in the broader scene referencing her sound, her art, and her image as foundational in their own explorations of identity. Lunch has fronted bands for much of her creative life, but instead of referring to herself as a singer/guitarist, she considers herself "the mouth that screams," aligning herself with the early spoken word movement but also distancing herself from performance art. For Lunch, performance art includes "words and theatrics and props and stage setting. And what I wanted to do was just strip it down to the most basic form, which is *extreme storytelling*: an emotional exchange..."³⁵⁵

For Lunch, New York City in the late 1970s was the place for her to be, and to create, "the NYC state of mind at that period was unlike any other [it] was a bomb zone - Beirut on the Hudson...There were a lot of artistic people living in a condensed situation all attracted to this corrupted and broken place."³⁵⁶ She began to see herself as a voice for not only her own wounded, broken self but as someone whose words could grapple with "the universal wound."³⁵⁷

Lunch's refusal to learn to play "standard" guitar led to a radically confrontational noise: slide guitar played with knives, a bottle, whatever came to hand, "Who wanted chords, all these progressions that had been used to death in Rock?"³⁵⁸ Lunch saw few connections between her work and earlier Punks, "The whole goal was to *kill your idols*,

³⁵⁵ V. Vale, *Ibid.*, 27-29

³⁵⁶ Video interview of Lydia Lunch, Women of Rock Oral History Project, *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ Simon Reynolds, "Contort Yourself: No Wave New York," in *Rip it Up and Start Again*, 141.

as Sonic Youth later put it. Everything that had influenced me up to that point I found too traditional – whether it was Patti Smith, the Stooges...It was fine and good for its moment, but I felt there had to be something more radical. It's got to be *disemboweled*.”³⁵⁹ Ironically, Lunch never sounds more Punk than when she talks about

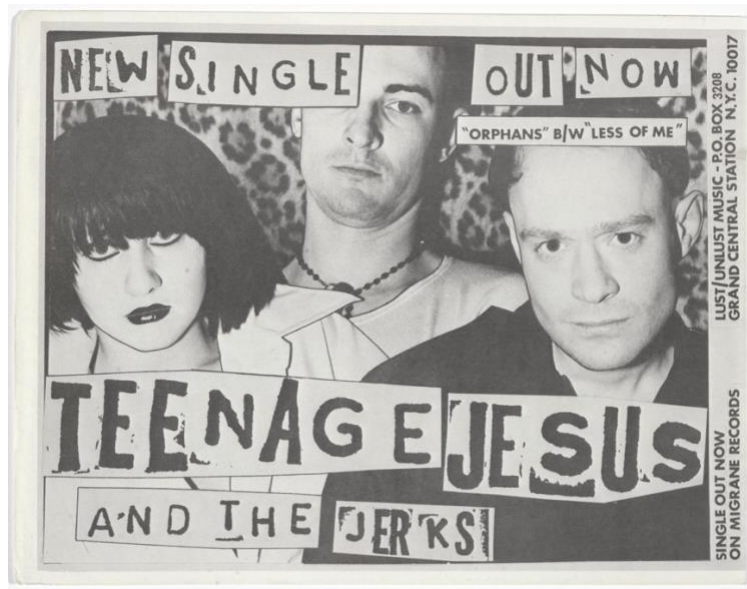


Figure 3.4 Julia Gorton, *Teenage Jesus and the Jerks*, 1978, MOMA, JPEG, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/156160>, Object ID 254.2012

confronting and tearing down tradition – whether that tradition is the patriarchy or Patti Smith. Teenage Jesus and the Jerks’ sound was “coarse, harsh, bitter” and very, very loud. It was, Lunch says, a reflection of her personality.³⁶⁰ The band’s shows were not only confrontational, they were brief: with some songs as short as forty seconds, performances lasted about ten minutes.³⁶¹ In Lunch’s voiceover for the final episode of

³⁵⁹ Ibid., 148.

³⁶⁰ Ibid., also Video interview of Lydia Lunch, Ibid.

³⁶¹ Video interview of Lydia Lunch, Ibid.

Anthony Bourdain's "Parts Unknown," she describes No Wave as the "waste product of *Taxi Driver*, Times Square, the Son of Sam, the blackout of '77" and manifesting a "desperate need to violently rebel against the complacency of a zombie nation dumbed down by sitcoms and disco."³⁶² I argue that rather than position No Wave a separate movement, this "desperate need to violently rebel" directly aligns Lunch with the broader Punk aesthetic as performed by Patti Smith, Joan Jett, Kathy Acker, and many other women.

"Orphans" was the band's best-known song, released as a single in May of 1978 on Migraine Records with a B-side of "Less of Me." "Orphans" was followed in 1979 by the single "Baby Doll," and a self-titled compilation album, also on Migraine. The album runs only 9:22 and features seven tracks. In a 2009 interview, Lunch describes the band as "the most Dada fucking music...it's just brutality. The music is brutal. The lyrics are brutal. It makes me feel very brutal."³⁶³ Discussing a series of thirtieth reunion shows, Lunch claims the shows were partly necessary because there are "still not enough women playing ugly fucking music as a counter to all these pop princesses."³⁶⁴ For Lunch, "it's personally mandatory to play music that's this minimal and so uncompromising and to pick up the fucking guitar which is a grand assaultive weapon and then it's done. Get it

³⁶² Anthony Bourdain: *Parts Unknown*, season 12, episode 7, "Lower East Side," directed by Michael Steed, featuring Lydia Lunch, aired, November 11, 2018, on CNN, accessed December 19, 2020, <https://youtu.be/tzF2OHwEhpY> (full episode).

³⁶³ Carolyn Pennypacker Riggs, "Teenage Jesus and the Jerks: Nothing Could Possibly Disgust Me," *L.A. Record*, October 6, 2009, accessed January 4, 2020, <https://larecord.com/interviews/2009/10/06/teenage-jesus-and-the-jerks-lydia-lunch-interview-nothing-could-possibly-disgust-me>

³⁶⁴ Riggs, *Ibid.*

out of my system – done.”³⁶⁵ The act of playing loud music is an exorcism of her rage, a process akin to Acker’s exorcism through writing and to Punk itself as Lunch describes it, “a noisy chaotic rampaging mass that rebelled against repression, [and] threatened anarchy.”³⁶⁶



Figure 3.5 Bill Arning, *Teenage Jesus and the Jerks – Orphans*, 1978, Discogs, JPEG, Migraine CC-333, discogs.com

In 1978, Lunch took her band to England, “I was one of the first people to decide, with no money at all, that this had to go to Europe. To play there, and to find other people there.”³⁶⁷ Teenage Jesus broke up in 1979 at the end of the European tour, and Lunch stayed in London.³⁶⁸ She moved to Los Angeles in August 1980 and formed 13.13

³⁶⁵ Riggs, Ibid.

³⁶⁶ Lydia Lunch, *So Real It Hurts*, (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2019): 1 09

³⁶⁷ Ibid.

³⁶⁸ Teenage Jesus was not Lunch’s only band in the 1970s. Beirut Slump (June 1978-May 1979) featured Lunch, Vivienne Dick, Bobby and Liz Swope, and Jim Sclavunos (from Teenage Jesus). Beirut Slump released one 7” single, “Staircase” (Migraine Records, March 1979). 8 Eyed Spy (September 1979-October 1980) featured Lunch, George Scott III (The Contortions, The Raybeats), Sclavunos, and other members of the Raybeats. An album was recorded in 1980 and released on Fetish Records in 1981. Queen of Siam was a Lunch solo studio project in 1979 with guest musicians Robert

touring the U.S. through the end of 1981. 13.13 was supposed to open for The Birthday Party and The Cure in Europe, but Lunch went without them, forming The Agony is the Ecstasy (sic) with members of Siouxsie and the Banshees.



Figure 3.6 *Lydia Lunch and 13.13 Mudd Club flyer*, 1981, From the Archives, JPEG from microfilm, *Village Voice*, www.fromthearchives.com

Lunch has collaborated with various performers over the decades in live shows, spoken word, bands, and film; movement and shifting projects is always essential for her, “My addiction is moving,” and she is a great organizer, “I kind of cattle prod people into coming together.”³⁶⁹ Lunch met Thurston Moore through former Sonic Youth drummer

Quine (The Voidoids) and the Raybeats’ George Scott III and Pat Irwin. A full-length album was released in January 1980 on ZE Records-Buddah/Arista, a CD in 1991 on Triple X Records, and in 2009 on Cherry Red (UK).

³⁶⁹ Bil Brown, “The Naked Word: A Conversation Between Lydia Lunch and Thurston Moore at the Jack Kerouac School of Disembodied Poetics,” *Autre*, February 16, 2016, accessed January 4, 2020, <https://autre.love/interviewsmain/2016/2/16/the-naked-word-a-conversation-between-lydian-lunch-and-thurston-moore-at-the-the-jack-kerouac-school-of-disembodies-poetics>.



Figure 3.7 Lydia Lunch on stage with guitarist in bondage mask. Photograph David Corio, *The Agony is the Ecstasy [sic]* live at *The Venue*, Nov. 16, 1981, From the Archives, JPEG, from thearchives.com.

Richard Edson who asked him to collaborate on music for *Vortex*, a film by Beth and Scott B. starring Lunch. Lunch started collaborating musically with Moore in late 1982 on *In Limbo*, and he joined Lunch at her first spoken word show at the Lucky Strike.³⁷⁰ Although “spoken word” was not a term in general use in the early 1980s, Lunch states, “It’s what I’ve always called it. I always called it ‘spoken word’ because I was *not* a performance artist. I was not doing poetry. I don’t know who invented it. I like it because it’s unglamorized.”³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ The *In Limbo* EP recorded November 1982 at Surf Sound Studio, New York, NY. Engineered by Donny Bill and Dan Dreyden, composed by Lydia Lunch and Thurston Moore, except “Still Burning” by Rowland S. Howard and “Some Boys” by Murray Mitchell (13.13). Kristian Hoffman’s piano parts were recorded one day at his (and Bradly Field’s) loft (@ 240 Grand Street, NYC) by Lydia Lunch on a portable cassette recorder.

³⁷¹ V. Vale, *Ibid.*, 27. While Lunch claims first use of “spoken word” (Bil Brown, *Ibid.*), the form of performing works out loud was popularized in the U.S. in the 1960s by the Beats and The Last Poets in the 1960s. Arguably, spoken word as an art form became

Lunch signed a deal with Paul Smith's Doublevision to release the *In Limbo* EP³⁷² and in the summer of 1984, she joined Sonic Youth in the recording studio to "sing" on "Death Valley '69"³⁷³ "Death Valley '69" was released as both a 7" single and 12" EP (with four tracks) and later on the *Bad Moon Rising* full-length LP.³⁷⁴ As Sonic Youth's fame grew, those not already familiar with her work discovered Lunch through the "Death Valley '69" EP. She does not sing on the track but instead presents her trademark sonic verbal assault paired with Moore's vocals. The single was released in December of 1984 and the 12" in June of 1985 on Blast First (England)/Homestead (U.S).

In March-April of 1986 in Topanga Canyon (L.A.), Lunch joined the shoot for the video of "Death Valley '69." Directed by Richard Kern (Cinema of Transgression) and Judith Barry, MTV banned the video due to its "graphic nature" described in the *Los Angeles Times* as follows "[it] grabs you by the neck and thrusts you into a Manson Family-like aura of violent madness...Its jagged images of bombs and riots and a crazed young woman on a rampage (included are bloody shots of her victims) are juxtaposed

more widely known in the U.S. with the release of Gil Scott-Heron's "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," *Small Talk at 125th and Lenox*, 1970. Lunch was likely aware of the Nuyorican Poets Café (founded in 1973) and their spoken word performances. For more on Nuyorican Poets Café, see "History of the Nuyorican Poets Café," accessed January 15, 2020, <https://www.nuyorican.org/history-awards>.

³⁷² Lunch mentioned the deal with Doublevision to Moore, who then sent a Sonic Youth demo to Paul Smith, who signed the band. This deal would lead to Sonic Youth's *Bad Moon Rising* and Smith's formation of Blast First Records.

³⁷³ Sonic Youth "Death Valley '69," Sonic Youth and Lydia Lunch, *Iridescence*, 1984, 7" vinyl single.

³⁷⁴ Sonic Youth "Death Valley '69," *Ibid.* Sonic Youth "Death Valley '69," Sonic Youth and Lydia Lunch, Blast First/Homestead, 1984, 12" vinyl EP. Also available on the *Bad Moon Rising* album, 1985. Note: the Geffen Records 1995 CD release has a different version of "Death Valley '69."

against peace-and-love scenes from the late '60s. We don't see a carefully balanced 'message'--this is dementia unleashed. Why paint pictures of such a mind state? Because it's there, part of the human condition."³⁷⁵ Watching the video again in the twenty-first century, it appears tame, almost campy (as is often the case with Kern's work): the blood is fake, the "crazed" young woman swinging a switchblade around and making faces is one of Kern's actresses (Lung Leg), and the most disturbing images in the video are scenes of police using batons to beat protestors and bombs falling while "flower children" have their faces painted. Sonic Youth's music, assisted by Lunch's screams, serves as counterpoint to the flower children while also highlighting the violence: this song, this video is about 1969, the year of Woodstock but also the year of the Tate-LaBianca murders.³⁷⁶

In addition to her work with Sonic Youth, Lunch was building a reputation as a writer and spoken word performer. Following her performance of "Daddy Dearest" in November of 1982 at Lucky Strike, Lunch traveled to L.A. to do a book signing for the release of *Adulterers Anonymous* (Grove Press) with Exene Cervenka (X). A collection of poems, journal writings, and collaborations, the text became a cult classic. Lunch continued touring to support the book with appearances at The Mudd Club (NYC), the

³⁷⁵ Terry Atkinson, "Death Valley '69 Is Hot," *Los Angeles Times*, February 8, 1987, accessed November 1, 2019, <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1987-02-08-ca-1061-story.html>.

³⁷⁶ On two consecutive evenings in August 1969, members of the Manson Family committed several gruesome murders at the homes of Sharon Tate (and Roman Polanski) and Leno and Rosemary LaBianca. David Felton (*Rolling Stone*) refers to Manson as "The Murderer Who Killed the Summer of Love," *Politico*, December 28, 2017, accessed November 14, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/12/28/charles-manson-obituary-216197>.

Roxy (L.A.), Tupelo's (New Orleans), and bookstores. The mix of music venues and bookstores was indicative of Lunch's ability to perform as a multimedia artist appealing to fans of both transgressive literature and music. In August of 1983, Lunch was in London with Nick Zedd (Cinema of Transgression) filming *Wild World of Lydia Lunch* (1983). By December, she was back in L.A., this time working with Jim G. Thirwell on "What it Is," a track for the *Better an Old Demon* compilation. In December, she performed spoken word at Beyond Baroque bookstore in Venice; Henry Rollins (Black Flag) attended the show, and Lunch contacted him the next day about possibly working together. Together, they did a one-off "assault theater" performance at The Fetish Club (L.A.) By May of 1984, Lunch was back in New York.

In August of 1984, Lunch began a series of spoken word performances at the Pyramid Club (Avenue A) with Henry Rollins called "The Intimate Diaries of the Sexually Insane." These performances became legendary with people in the New York scene referring not so much to the content of the performance(s) but the aggressive verbal assault on the audience. Lunch described her spoken word performances as "intense hysterical harangues;" this was not poetry, but instead, the performance-as-assault central to Punk. Lunch was speaking a language we could all understand and for some, these performances served as an impetus in our own work.³⁷⁷ Eventually, she toured with Rollins drawing large crowds in the United States and Europe, though for Lunch, commercial success has never been the driving force in her art. Instead, she prefers more intimate performances telling her audience, "The marginalized, the abused, the battered; I

³⁷⁷ Subject 9 discussed how these early 'spoken word' performances gave her the courage to start performing on her own.

embrace you...I want to be your mouth!"³⁷⁸ As Beth B. (iconic filmmaker and director of 2019's *Lydia Lunch – The War is Never Over*) states, Lunch has forged a lifelong career of "music and spoken word performance devoted to the utter right of any woman to indulge, seek pleasure, and to say 'fuck you!' as loud as any man."³⁷⁹

Throughout the oral histories I conducted for this dissertation, Lunch's name often comes up. For one woman interviewed, seeing Lunch at an early Pyramid performance was a catalyst for doing her own spoken word and in confronting her own trauma: "I would maybe never have acknowledged the abuse I'd suffered or its effect on me. But I was so shaken up by her words at that show, I went deep and tapped into my own anger."³⁸⁰ Early Pyramid shows included Lunch's "Daddy Dearest," a visceral scream against her father, the symbol of Father, and a scathing dressing down of the patriarchy in general. "Daddy Dearest" details the childhood sexual abuse Lunch experienced at the hands of her father. Partway through the performance, Lunch reveals the abuse in graphic detail and also the core of her conflict: her adult rage and her childhood arousal. The piece implicates the listener: we are drawn into the narrative of confused, damaged sexuality, of victim and victimizer, as Lunch demonstrates her own trauma and the broader cycle of abuse. Her visceral vocal performance enacts a seduction that becomes a betrayal of the listener as Lunch shifts between adult and child voices,

³⁷⁸ Video interview of Lydia Lunch. Women of Rock Oral History Project, Ibid.

³⁷⁹ Sophie Willard, "DOC NYC 2019 Women Directors: Meet Beth B, *Lydia Lunch: The War is Never Over*," Women and Hollywood.com, November 6, 2019, accessed November 4, 2020, <https://womenandhollywood.com/doc-nyc-2019-women-directors-meet-beth-b-lydia-lunch-the-war-is-never-over/>.

³⁸⁰ Subject 9, interview with the author, 2018.

recounting her father's abuse which she links through performance to (taboo) arousal and the abject (using words like "rank," "stink," "anal") while also showing the terrible link of her abuse with her arousal.³⁸¹

In 1984, Lunch recorded "Daddy Dearest," releasing it for distribution in limited edition on her own Widowspeak label in the U.S. and England. Lunch continued to perform "Daddy Dearest," and the recorded versions were dubbed, bootlegged, and traded within the broader community serving as both inspiration and a kind of Punk fetish object.³⁸² While Lunch resists alignment with the Punk movement, her DIY artistic modes of production are characteristic of the Punk ethos and her lo-fi production and performance style in line with the Punk aesthetic. For those of us active in the Punk scene in the 1980s, Lunch was not only an inspiration artistically and stylistically (her ratted black hair, heavy black eyeliner, and all-black clothing were similar to the style many of us had in the 1980s) but also her public performance of rage was both deeply disturbing and deeply inspiring. It was as if Lunch was granting us all the right to be angry in public. Her central message of creating art focused on women's bodily experiences of violence and sexuality, working outside traditional narrative and musical structures also align with Acker's work in the 1980s. Reading *BGHS*, one can see links

³⁸¹ Mary Lee Geitzer, "Queer responses to sexual trauma: the voices of Tori Amos's 'Me and a Gun' and Lydia Lunch's Daddy Dearest," *Women & Music*, January 1, 2013, *The Free Library.com*, accessed November 3, 2020, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Queer+responses+to+sexual+trauma%3a+the+voices+of+Tori+Amos%27s+%22Me+and+a...-a0349721072>.

³⁸² Lydia Lunch, "Daddy Dearest," recorded November 1984, on *The Uncensored Lydia Lunch*, Widowspeak, Cassette Tape. Also released on *The Uncensored/Oral Fixation*, Widowspeak, 1990, CD and *Atavistic* (reissue), 1996; *Crimes Against Nature*, 1993, Triple X, three-CD set and *Atavistic* (reissue), 1999.

between depictions of Janey's abuse and imprisonment in a patriarchal society and much of Lunch's work, particularly "Daddy Dearest."

2. Performing Punk: Lunch on Film

Along with "Death Valley '69," some of the more visible experiments Lunch performed are in her collaborations with underground filmmakers Beth and Scott B.,³⁸³ Vivienne Dick, and Richard Kern as part of his Cinema of Transgression.³⁸⁴ Lunch has always been a multimedia artist and discusses the use of different formats of expression in the New York scene: "there were a lot of filmmakers and photographers and painters and visual artists, and there were a lot of women doing films in New York, which was interesting: Vivienne Dick and Beth and Scott B."³⁸⁵ Filmmakers' preferred format was Super 8mm, with films shot quickly to be shown immediately in order to be current, a part of political or emotional discourse. To Lunch, film was a perfect medium for the times because "there's something very *intimate* about it," with films shown in the same performance spaces used by the musicians in the scene, highlighting film as "another medium to get out the anxiety, the frustration, the horror, the nightmare that you felt at the time...it was a perfect medium."³⁸⁶ In some cases, film is also a longer-lasting

³⁸³ Beth B. is discussed later in this chapter.

³⁸⁴ The "Cinema of Transgression" is a term coined by Nick Zedd in 1985 to describe a New York City-based underground film movement characterized by filmmakers using shock value, dark humor and focused on the work of Zedd, Kembra Pfahler, Tessa Hughes-Freeland, Casandra Stark, Beth B, Richard Kern, and Lydia Lunch. These films were made in the 1970s-1980s using lo-fi production, black and white film on 8mm cameras. For more on "Cinema of Transgression" see Danhier, *Blank City*, Ibid., and Sargeant, *Deathtripping*, Ibid.

³⁸⁵ V. Vale, Ibid., 45-46

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 46.

medium than the bootleg cassettes, the limited edition vinyl, and other ephemera that presented and recorded Lunch and other artists to the world.

Lunch worked with Vivienne Dick and the filmmaking team of Beth and Scott B. before her work with Richard Kern. Early films include *Rome '78* (James Nares, 1978), Vivienne Dick's *Guerrillere Talks* (1978), *She Had Her Gun Already* (1978), *Beauty Becomes the Beast* (1979), *Liberty's Beauty* (1980), Beth and Scott B.'s *Black Box* (1978), *The Offenders* (1980), and *Vortex* (1982). While these films differ in shooting style and content, they all were seen in various venues adding to Lunch's profile and helping to make her a recognizable figure both within the New York and broader scenes and beyond, including *Vortex* which screened at the New York Film Festival.

Vivienne Dick arrived in New York City in 1975, and though she had no experience in filmmaking, she began filming in her neighborhood on the Lower East Side. Dick's first film (1978) *Guerillere Talks*³⁸⁷ was shot hand-held on Kodak sound Super-8 and featured Pat Place (Bush Tetras, *Contortions*), Anya Phillips (the Mudd Club, *Contortions*), Adele Bertei (*Contortions*), Ikue Mori (DNA), and Lydia Lunch. The film is made up of a plotless series of shots of women talking and "hanging out," and is of interest for its participants and also the aesthetic: lo-fi production, challenging camera angles, and no recognizable plot. Unlike similar "plotless" films by Andy Warhol, this

³⁸⁷ I read the film's title as a reference to Monique Wittig's 1969 feminist-separatist novel *Les Guérillères*. Monique Wittig, *Les Guérillères*, trans. David Le Vay (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, [1969] 2007). *Les Guérillères* revolves around the *elles*, women warriors who have created their own sovereign state by overthrowing the patriarchy. Because Wittig is writing in French and is interested in the oppression of binary-language, it is important to note that *elles* in the novel does not translate as "the women" but instead as *they*. In French, a group of individuals is referred to with the masculine *ils* – even if only one male is present.

film has no interest in Warhol's slow-paced, pseudo-realism but instead shows unselfconscious women of the New York scene. Lunch's scene in the film is the most active. The camera pans over an abandoned rubble-strewn lot to focus on Lunch in big sunglasses, heavy lipstick, white sweater, black mini-skirt, black tights, and Punk boots. She leans on a fire escape ladder, swaying and whining, Lunch works the camera, positioning herself as a teenager, "What else is there but violence, destruction, and anger when you have nothing better to do but run around burnt playgrounds. I mean, I wish I had a regular swing set like all the other kids, but no, I gotta hang on a fire escape. It's no fun being a teenager anymore." The camera shifts away from her to an extended shot of a young man squatting in the rubble.³⁸⁸ Lunch's scene is a playful critique of an exposé on juvenile delinquency and urban poverty (she starts her monologue referencing Geraldo Rivera's reporting); it is also Lunch positioning herself as a sexually advanced young girl: a persona she adopts in some of her performances and film work. The other scenes in the film have little dialogue but each woman profiled was doing cutting-edge work at the time; Dick's use of the title of a novel about women who have overthrown the patriarchy is at least aspirational.

Lunch also appears in Dick's second film, *She Had Her Gun Already* (1978), along with Pat Place.³⁸⁹ Shot on Super-8 color on the Lower East Side and Coney Island, the twenty-seven-minute film is an intense interaction between Place and Lunch. Place

³⁸⁸ "*Guerillere Talks*," directed by Vivienne Dick, 1978, Lunch's scene is here: accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvMad1cS4G0>. The full film is here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-RqcTijw2_Q.

³⁸⁹ "*She Had Her Gun Already*," directed by Vivienne Dick, 1978, 27 min., accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F3lB8oqzlkS>.

appears nearly unresponsive or “zombified,” while Lunch is angry and aggressive, repeatedly shouting at Place, “Well, what are you going to do?” The film ends on Coney Island’s terrifying Cyclone roller coaster with Place strangling Lunch just as the ride moves to drop. Despite its relatively linear narrative, the film continues Dick’s Punk aesthetic with spliced in filtered shots of New York: abandoned, burned out buildings on the Lower East Side, a diner, the subway, and Coney Island as it was in the late 1970s. New York City in collapse is a presence in the film, underscoring Place’s character – whether exhausted, drugged, or mentally devastated; perhaps the silent presence of hysteria in contrast to Lunch. Lunch is loud on screen (even when she has no dialogue). In one scene, she sits in a partially abandoned apartment, randomly switching channels on a small black and white TV; her tension and boredom are palpable, echoing her early scene shouting at Pace, “What are you going to do?.” The camera focuses closeup on Lunch’s heavily made-up face while she watches TV footage of car racing and baseball, then the soundtrack quickly shifts to a voiceover of a screaming child. In the next scene, Place is clearly disintegrating mentally. She remains silent; the voiceover is Lunch talking about Ed Gein (convicted killer, grave robber, cannibal) describing his crimes in detail, “he dissected her, hung her legs out to dry...there was skin everywhere...but the strangest thing they found was the skinsuit in his bedroom closet, a woman’s body... Ed would put on and dress up like his mother, to comfort himself.”³⁹⁰ The sound cuts with a harsh screech, and we see Lunch walking through the rubble-strewn city at night. The next shot is New York during the day: Place walks into a diner, a child brings her iced tea, and she pours sugar into the glass. Then Place notices Lunch sitting at the counter.

³⁹⁰ Ibid.

Place breaks her glass, runs out of the diner, and makes a phone call. The only dialogue we hear is “bad timing” with no indication who Place is calling. Place stares at herself in a mirror while “96 Tears” plays, and she sees Lunch in the mirror, then herself, as if they are the same person. Lunch enters a subway station, Place follows her, and they go to Coney Island. Place (all in black) follows Lunch who appears to be having a good time; we see quick shots of colorful images of kiddy rides and carnival music. The camera pans over the Cyclone roller coaster, and we see Place put on black gloves and a bright red scarf. She has a gun in her pocket. Place sits behind Lunch as they ride the Cyclone, Lunch screams, Place strangles Lunch with the red scarf, the screams silenced by the sound of the roller coaster. Place then lights a firecracker snake, and as it becomes ash, the film ends. It is a dizzying visual experience, and the viewer is left wondering if the two characters represent two sides of one personality or a power dynamic, with Place finally rebelling against Lunch’s dominance. The contrast between the two women: Place and Lunch is extreme. Place is tall and emaciated, Lunch short and voluptuous. Place is silent and suffering; Lunch is loud and torments Place. The blood-red scarf used to silence Lunch, the desire for escape and for domination, the silence that culminates in violence: all are part of the Punk aesthetic (the violence, the screams, the images, the soundtrack) and speak to women’s fight for self-determination, with a gesture toward the positioning of women as hysteric and Lunch in the role of victim *and* victimizer.

Not merely serving as a starting place for Lydia Lunch’s film work, these films also serve as documents of a specific Punk aesthetic that influenced later independent film. Vivienne Dick left New York for Ireland, but her early film work helped bring the gritty image of New York Punk and a specific urban ruins aesthetic to a broader

audience. Her focus on the women of the Lower East Side scene shows her ongoing dedication to providing a platform for women's voices and serves to document women in the early New York Punk scene. In both films, Lunch is developing and demonstrating her strong on-camera presence, and a persona that we also see in her spoken word and later film projects: the disturbingly "sexy" teen/girl and the confrontational, rage-filled alter ego to Pat Place's quiet devastation.

Another filmmaker who regularly collaborates with Lunch, is Beth B. In the late 1970s-early 1980s, Beth B., perhaps the best-known of the "No Wave" filmmakers, made a series of Super8 films with her then-partner Scott B. that are considered breakthrough experiments in sexual and political commentary - described as "slapping the audience around," even decades later, these films are not comfortable viewing – which is exactly the point. For Beth B, "[my films] are about speaking certain truths that have been hidden or shamed out of us. By speaking the words, it's a cathartic experience for us individually, and for the people sitting and watching."³⁹¹ Often featuring Lydia Lunch and other members of the downtown scene, the B.s began making films together because the "preciousness" of the art world was "full of shit. I don't want to make something in my little closet and show it to this little art world so that a few people can see it and someone can collect it."³⁹² Instead, they made films for and featuring the Punk scene that they were already a part of, "There was an incredible energy, and incredible response and

³⁹¹ Julia Felsenthal, "In *Call Her Applebroog*, Beth B Takes On Her Mother," *Vogue.com*, June 9, 2016, accessed November 1, 2020, <https://www.vogue.com/article/call-her-applebroog-beth-b-interview>.

³⁹² Scott McDonald, "VORTEX: An Interview with Beth and Scott B." *Framework: The Journal of Cinema and Media*, no. 20 (1983): 26, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44111893>.

reaction, coming from people.”³⁹³ Screening their weekly Super-8 footage at Max’s Kansas City, the Mudd Club, the New Cinema on St. Mark’s, and various Rock clubs, themes were generally political torture, sexual domination, and victimization of the individual by society and those in power. The films were short, loud, and violent, presenting a similar assault on the audience as Lunch’s spoken word and musical performances.

At a recent exhibit focused on Punk style at MoSex, footage of *G-Man* (1978) ran in a loop inside a small black box room titled SEX (after Vivienne Westwood’s London Punk-fetish boutique). Although *not* linked to Westwood’s fashions, the screening presented visitors with a gritty, up-close black and white view of Punk Rock cinema circa 1978. *The G-Man* (1978) focuses on a policeman (Bill Rice) who employs a dominatrix (Lydia Lunch). The footage shows Rice subjected to violence intercut with violent news footage. Lunch presents a terrifying yet compelling female sexuality: dominating Rice and in complete control as she does in B.’s *Black Box* (1978). An Amnesty International report on a torture device manufactured in Texas for use in totalitarian regimes inspired B.’s *Black Box*. The film follows an unnamed man (Bob Mason) kidnapped by a gang of “Punks.” The film gives no reason for his kidnapping or ensuing torture. Lunch torments and flogs the hanging Mason ultimately putting him in the black box, torturing him further. The audience experiences along with him ten minutes of increasing sound and light. While Foster defines *Black Box* as “a terrifying allegory of societal restriction of

³⁹³ McDonald, Ibid.

the individual,”³⁹⁴ the film is also a clear indictment of terror enacted for profit by the U.S. government. It is also another opportunity for Lunch to dominate the camera and a male body with her body and her voice.

In 1979, the Bs created a fourteen-part serial shown over seven weeks at Max’s Kansas City, each episode ending with a cliff-hanger. *The Offenders*, described as a “Punk melodrama,” was funded by contributions from the weekly attendees. The plot focuses on a group called the Young Turks, who kidnap bad girl (Adele Bertei) and her father (Bill Rice). The Bs describe the film as “a savage satire on society’s distortions.”³⁹⁵ The film features a host of members of the downtown scene and provides a portrait of New York as sinister, crime-ridden, and home to Punk femme gangs, Punk bank-robbers, and wayward Punk daughters. Actors include Pat Place, John Lurie, Bradley Field, Lydia Lunch, Diego Cortez, Judy Nylon, Johnny O’Kane, and many more. The film (110 minutes) was only officially shown at the original Max’s screenings and at the Film Forum (NYC) in March of 1980. Not only does *The Offenders* create a format particularly suited to the Punk/club scene with short episodes and cliff hanger endings, but by using members of the scene as actors, the film has a guaranteed funding audience and participates in the type of community building common to Punk creativity. Unfortunately, with its limited release, the film could not move beyond its built-in audience to be seen by anyone not at Max’s or Film Forum (unless on poor quality bootleg).

³⁹⁴ Gwendolyn Audrey Foster, *Women Film Directors: An International Bio-Critical Dictionary*, (London: Greenwood Press, 1995), 29.

³⁹⁵ Hoberman, *Ibid.*

In 1982, the Bs released the ninety-minute *Vortex* shot in 16mm. Made for \$70,000 from an NEA Grant, this was the Bs' first "big" film and the final film they would make together. Written as a skewed take on film noir, Lydia Lunch plays detective Angel Powers investigating a corrupt politician's death. Lunch refers to *Vortex* as one of the only times she "acted" on camera: implying that all her other film roles were an authentic version of herself.³⁹⁶ The film's themes include a critique of government corruption, defense contractors, corporatization of war, and more. *Vortex* screened at the New York Film Festival in 1982 and Maxwell's in Hoboken in 1983. Though these were the only official screenings around the time of release, by the mid-1980s, the film was in full rotation on VCRs at Rock clubs, bars, and other scene gatherings, becoming a part of the scene's vernacular and helping to build Lunch's fame.

Lunch's notoriety also increased through her association with Richard Kern and the Cinema of Transgression. These films screened at clubs, in storefront makeshift movie theaters, and as a backdrop for music performances. Kern's films are shot in grainy black and white and showcase what Lunch calls her need to exorcise her demons while also regaining her body's ability to experience extreme pleasure.³⁹⁷ In watching Kern's films *The Right Side of My Brain*, *Submit to Me*, and *Submit to me Now*, not to mention the deeply disturbing *Fingered*, there appears a common thread with Acker's creation of extreme sexual narratives in her work. Both women share similar aesthetics focused on tearing down the past and a desire to transgress into a new space for women's

³⁹⁶ Video interview of Lydia Lunch. Women of Rock Oral History Project, Ibid.

³⁹⁷ V. Vale, Ibid.

voices. Where Acker's Janey embraces the abject and is "freed" by her own death, for Lunch, by enacting/experiencing sexual violence and abuse on camera, she was exorcising her demons and also illustrating that the victim becomes the victimizer, acknowledging that abuse is a cycle and the only way forward is through. The world must change, and the only way to change it is to tear it down, to scream loud enough to be heard because, "The patriarchy is full of shit: it's homicidal, it's suicidal, it can't last."³⁹⁸

Lunch made several films with filmmaker Richard Kern, and together they created a specific type of "shocking" independent film that became part of the vernacular in the New York scene in the 1980s. Lunch claims she "never felt like an actress, except for maybe in *Vortex*."³⁹⁹ Kern's films served Lunch as a space where she could expand the work she did in her spoken word performances, both transgressive, violent, and focused on "*real* stories from my experiences."⁴⁰⁰ It is this idea of the "real" or "truth" in performance that Lunch repeats in her interviews, part of an effort to show "both sides of victimization" and so that others can "learn from [my] mistakes."⁴⁰¹ Kern may be holding the camera, but Lunch is always in charge. She refutes the critique that her films with Kern are little more than Super 8 low-brow pornography. Instead, she asserts that they are feminist acts; just as her spoken word performances are a call to "raise your fist and scream into the void" in a culture that has historically silenced women, so too are her

³⁹⁸ Video interview of Lydia Lunch. Women of Rock Oral History Project, Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid.

films with Kern a reversal of power, a reversal of her victimization to “finish that cycle of abuse.”⁴⁰²

In *Fingered*, co-written by Lunch and Kern, Lunch plays a phone sex worker who decides to meet up with one of her clients (Marty Nation). When the two meet the scene quickly shifts to violent sex. They hit the road in Nation's vintage car, where they argue, pick up a female hitchhiker (Lung Leg) and proceed to assault her. Through the course of the twenty-five-minute film (shot in Kern's typical lo-fi Super 8mm), the focus is on graphic sex and violence - some enacted on women's bodies - other on men (Nation attacks two men with his switchblade). The point seems to be to shock the viewer through sex and violence, and a refusal to participate in any traditional boundaries of genre - the connection to the Punk aesthetic is apparent and early viewers understood the language: a language evidenced in the music we listened to and in the texts we read. *Fingered* was officially shown in 1986 at a live Wiseblood and Lydia Lunch show in Amsterdam and screened at The Love Club (Lower East Side), the EZTV Gallery (West Hollywood) in 1987, and the Berlin Film Festival (1988). The film could also be seen regularly at small screenings and as a backdrop to live music performances. Eventually released on VHS, copies were dubbed, bootlegged, and traded in the underground music and film communities, *Fingered* became a part of our vernacular and a reference point for a different way of approaching the camera, a different way of being female on film and in performance. For many of us brought up on mainstream Hollywood cinema with women structured for Mulvey's “male gaze,” seeing Lunch on film was as influential in

⁴⁰² *Transmission Super Channel*, “Lydia Lunch Interview,” 1989, accessed November 2, 2020, <https://youtu.be/3r7wzYXhtnA>.

explorations of our own identities as the image of Patti Smith on the cover of *Horses* or Joan Jett in “Bad Reputation.” Lunch was doing much more than refusing to act like a lady, she was showing us that women’s bodies were for more than being pretty and silent. But there is no traditionally uplifting feminist message in Lunch's work with Richard Kern – that is not her point. What Lunch is interested in is exploring extremes, breaking down boundaries around gender, sex, violence, and even between “art” film and exploitation or pornography. Like Acker, Lunch opposed the anti-porn work of some feminists in the 1980s; for her, feminism is a word “without meaning,” particularly if it limits her body-centered artistic expression.⁴⁰³ For those of us who saw the film as part of our regular participation in the New York scene, the images of graphic sex and violence created a mix of discomfort, boredom, or recognition. Of course, some missed Lunch’s point entirely, instead merely making note of her hair, makeup, and clothing and promptly emulating her look.

In the still from *Fingered* (Figure 3.9) Lunch appears in the phone sex segment dressed in her trademark proto-Goth all black with dyed black hair, heavy dark makeup, and (for the time shocking) pierced nose. In this scene, although she is enacting a role traditionally positioned to serve male sexual desire, Lunch controls the narrative on all levels. She hangs up on one client because he is “boring” and verbally abusive, the second client is Nation, and she manages her desire with him to fit her own ends. In Figure 3.8, Lunch leans across the hood of Nation's car, a positioning that is submissive,

⁴⁰³ Video interview of Lydia Lunch. Women of Rock Oral History Project, Ibid.

but this is Lunch, and in both hands, she clutches a gun: an object that is quite obviously linked to the phallus but *also* to Lunch's ability to control the phallus.



Figure 3.8 Lydia Lunch with Gun, Still from *Fingered*, directed by Richard Kern and Lydia Lunch, 1986. <http://houseofselfindulgence.blogspot.com/2013/03/fingered-richard-kern-1986.html>



Figure 3.9 Lydia Lunch on the Phone, Still from *Fingered*, directed by Richard Kern and Lydia Lunch, 1986. <http://houseofselfindulgence.blogspot.com/2013/03/fingered-richard-kern-1986.html>

Although this is a film directed by Kern, Lunch co-wrote the screenplay and is always in control of her on-screen persona. Even as she allows Nation to dominate her physically, she is enacting her own narrative, her own “truth,” and there is no guarantee that she will not turn the gun on him.

Women interviewed for this dissertation cite Lydia Lunch as a significant influence both in physical presentation and in her aggressive and confrontational performances on stage and on film. For one interview subject, Lunch was "a shocking wakeup call...(she) was everything I wanted to be: strong, sexy, and totally fearless."⁴⁰⁴ While there are parallels to be found in other performers active at the time, Lunch has always been an original. Like the work Acker does in her radical textual collage in the 1980s, Lunch uses art as a vehicle to exorcise rage, rage against her father, and the limitations patriarchal society enacts on women's bodies and sexuality. While Acker used text and live performance, Lunch used film, text, music, and spoken word in the work of “enacting truth.”

In the 1980s, the New York scene saw the rise of a group of women performing female rage and desire on stage and screen. Using small hand-held cameras, microphones, guitars, or their own bodies, these women led the way in shaping new forms of protest against the oppression of women by patriarchal society. Punk in the 1970s and 1980s in New York was a space that these women used to scream their rage, to push back against limitations, and to transgress the boundaries of proscribed “feminine” behavior. As director Beth B. states, voicing the unheard and seeing the unseen creates a necessary dialogue, community, and a place for the forging of identity and the building of

⁴⁰⁴ Subject 12, interview with the author, 2018.

community. “There is power in creating and claiming a new vision of woman,” a vision exemplified by the radical feminist Punk in performance of women like Lydia Lunch and all of the many women in the 1980s New York scene. Punk has never been about just the music, and it has never been about a brief period of time in London in the late 1970s; instead, Punk is every girl and woman everywhere who said “I refuse to be silenced,” and “I can do that,” and against the many naysayers, pushed forward and did.

CONCLUSION

The fundamental importance of feminist history centers on the ability to create more balanced narratives by giving women the power to narrate. Over the course of the three chapters of this dissertation, I provide an alternative history of Punk in the 1970s and 1980s, a history that is not male-centric but instead attempts to give women the power to narrate our own history while also expanding the history of Punk. Most studies of Punk and late 1970s-early 1980s radical literature/art/performance focus on male-centered narratives. In my work, I refute the marginalization of women presented in histories of the 1970s and 1980s Punk scene and instead excavate the work of women central and essential to American Punk.

American women were employing the Punk aesthetic to voice their rage against the limitations imposed by patriarchal structures in American society starting in the 1970s. I provide a broader context for the (sub)cultural movement known as Punk by showing the ways women in Punk in the 1970s and 1980s were able to find spaces to express themselves through music, film, performance, spoken word, and experimental texts. My goal is not to provide a definitive history of Punk in the 1980s or even of women in Punk in the 1980s but instead to suggest an alternative view to common and oft-repeated narratives that erase women from the broader history of Punk. Central to this work is oral history, and I present several across the three chapters of this dissertation in context with key figures in the 1970s and 1980s.

For many, Punk provided new ways to develop and express identity. Women in Punk fundamentally challenged traditional “feminine” ways of being in the world, laying foundations for later work with Riot Grrrl in the 1990s and more diverse movements,

including AfroPunk, Queer Core, and experimental text and performance. Punk communicates through a performance of identity based on signs, appearance, and materiality. Women involved in Punk in the 1970s-1980s used the tools associated with the subculture to resist oppressive ideas of the "ideal feminine." I present a new and more open historical narrative of Punk by using specific material and performance moments as touchstones throughout the dissertation and oral histories responding to these moments: Patti Smith's *Horses*, Kathy Acker's *Blood and Guts in High School*, Lydia Lunch's "Daddy Dearest" and *Fingered*, and Joan Jett's "Bad Reputation," among others.

Central to my exploration of Punk is the position that Punk is not merely the production of male musicians but instead a cultural movement represented by a transgressive aesthetic employed by women across various genres including print, film, spoken word, music, and bodily self-expression and modification. Punk is not just three guitar chords and a hairstyle but an active rewriting against mainstream society's structures that work to position women as "Other" and remove us from the historical narrative. Rather than just a brief musical movement in the late 1970s, Punk provided an avenue of cultural, artistic, and textual expression that was unprecedented. From Patti Smith, Siouxsie Sioux, and Poly Styrene's performance of Punk, Kathy Acker's radical Punk texts, and Lydia Lunch's performance of radical hysteria, I show the essential place the Punk aesthetic holds in the history of American society as represented by the work these women have done to transgress boundaries and tear down the master's house.

For Acker and Lunch, women must write in order to redefine themselves and gain freedom from the oppressive gender-based structures in patriarchal society. For Patti Smith, to be Punk is to desire to be outside society. Rather than allowing ourselves to be

forced into silence by patriarchal constraints, positioned as abject and Other, women in the Punk scene embraced an aesthetic that shocked, that transgressed, and through which we found our own voices. My work in this dissertation centers on rediscovering those voices and presenting our history as valid, central, and essential to the creation and ongoing work that is the Punk aesthetic. This work provides a foundational history and specific, close readings of Punk in performance.

The New York scene in the 1980s saw the rise of a group of women performing female rage and desire on stage and screen. Using small handheld cameras, microphones, guitars, or their own bodies, these women led the way in shaping new forms of protest against the oppression of women by patriarchal society. Punk in the 1970s and 1980s in New York was a space that these women used to scream their rage, to push back against limitations, and to transgress the boundaries of proscribed “feminine” behavior.

Contributions to knowledge

In this work, I do not make a claim of a *definitive* history of women in Punk in the 1980s, nor do I suggest that there are no other possible authentic narratives. Instead, I provide additional and oppositional narratives to those presented in most Punk Rock histories. As a (sub)cultural movement, the history of Punk is necessarily based on oral histories and ephemera, forming a collective memory that is often inaccurate and skewed to a limited point of view. Archives are subject to limited collection policies often based on one individual’s definition of “Punk” or “fanzine,” secondary source materials written by self-professed “authentic” members of the scene. I argue that Punk was and is a broad cultural movement made up of many individuals and collectives (scenes); it was not simply a moment in London or New York in the late 1970s focused on specific musical

performances and alternative hairstyles, neither was it exclusively white and male. A collective memory has developed in Punk narratives outside academia and within academic texts alike, one that privileges a largely male, white, and limited history of Punk. In my work, I provide a parallel history: one that features women's voices and alternate interpretations of Punk Rock from the 1970s through 1989. Through the use of oral history interviews with women active in the scene in the 1980s in conjunction with close readings of foundational media (music, film, performance, text), I present a history that is at its core feminist and, in its practice, Punk. It is my hope that this dissertation will be part of the larger effort to reclaim our history.

There is a large body of secondary literature focused on the history of Punk and parallel histories of "women in rock." Many of these histories have been helpful in my research. This dissertation results from my work as a Punk "insider" and a feminist academic to identify the gap in extant histories of Punk. Some of my primary source material in this dissertation derives from Tanya Pearson's work on *The Women of Rock Oral Histories* collection at Smith College. This collection is an essential resource for anyone interested in the history of American Rock. However, Punk is not just music, and musicians do not work in a vacuum. The history of Punk is one of multiple levels of participation including women working as club bookers, running independent record labels, creating and publishing magazines and fanzines, writing experimental fiction, making films, and those who documented the scene on camera. While this dissertation only shows a very small number of the large group of women participating in Punk in the 1970s and 1980s, we can learn much from reading their narratives.

Recommendations and Future Work

In working on cultural history, it is always necessary to deeply investigate bias, both your own and that of other researchers and archivists. The work of feminist history is to identify alternative and more inclusive narratives. Writing a history of Punk in the 1980s is a difficult task and calls for moving beyond accessible archival materials and standard secondary sources. For anyone working in this vibrant field, I would recommend interviewing participants. Many are still alive and can provide alternative histories to those found in popular texts. Writing Punk is never about relying on standard narratives: question everything, always is a central tenet. By following this tenet, I have discovered countless alternative histories and depths of materials. For those interested in this field of study, move beyond the ‘zine collections at Barnard, NYU, and Smith; always question everything you read. Perhaps the most challenging aspect of this research is to move past nostalgia into rigorous critique. This work is essential in understanding the development of American (and English) feminism, discourse focused on the female body, the way we speak, perform, and live in the world. I argue for expanding the Punk archive to include a broader narrative: one that includes women’s contributions in all aspects of Punk.

There are many questions and areas of research that remain unexplored. Among them: the participation and presence of trans women performers in the Punk scene since the 1970s, conflicting narratives of participation by women of color, the influence of 1980s Punk on 1990s “grunge” and performance art, the move from Punk into direct action activism by women, Punk Anarchist collectives and squatting/homesteading

culture in New York City, the profound influence of Punk's women photographers on the representation of women in American photography, and much more.

Just as there cannot be a "universal subject" (Irigaray), so too, there cannot be an essential history of Punk that does not centralize or even include the participation of women. To understand Punk as artistic space and historical subject, one must re-center women as a source of radical innovation in voice, music, text, and bodily presence.

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APPENDIX A: Oral History Interviews and Biographical Sketches

Primary Questionnaire “Women in Punk Survey” [sent as Google Survey to 34 women with 21 responses – one response was deleted at request of the respondent]

1. Are you originally from NYC? Yes/No
2. If not NYC, where are you from?
3. In the 1980s did you consider yourself at all affiliated with Punk Rock?
4. If not affiliated with “Punk Rock” – how did you define yourself in the 1980s?
5. Define Punk Rock (check any/all that apply): a) a music genre b) a cultural movement c) apolitical or cultural point of view d) a false construct created by the media e) Other
6. Was Punk dead by 1980? Why or why not?
7. Was Punk Rock sexist or gender biased in the 1980s? Yes/No/Maybe
8. Did you ever experience sexism or gender bias in the Punk Rock scene? Yes/No/Other
9. Was the Punk scene open to different expression of gender identity? Yes/No/Other
10. Were you ever harassed by people outside the Punk Rock scene for the way you dressed, your hair, makeup, etc.? Yes/No
11. Were you ever harassed by people IN the scene for your appearance? Yes/No/Other
12. In the 1980s, did you care whether or not a band had female members? Yes/No/Maybe
13. In the 1980s, did you consider any women role models? If so, who? And why? Would you describe any of them as “Punk Rock”?
14. It’s been said that Punk was a “male” thing. Do you agree or disagree? Strongly disagree/Disagree/Neutral/Agree/Strongly Agree
15. Most histories of Punk focus on men. Why do you think that is?
16. Did women play an important role in the Punk Rock scene in the 1980s? Yes/No/Maybe
17. Did you consider yourself a feminist in the 1980s? Yes/No/Maybe
18. Do you consider yourself a feminist now? Yes/No/Maybe
19. How much influence do you think women in the 1980s Punk scene had on the Riot Grrrl movement in the 1990s? A) without 1980s women in Punk, there would have been no Riot Grrrl movement B) A moderate amount of influence C) Very little influence D) None at all E) No idea F) other
20. In gender theory gender identity is considered variable & sometimes less important than other types of identity (race, religion, nationality, etc.). Was there ever a point in the 1980s where being “Punk” was more important than being a specific gender? Yes/No/Maybe/Other
21. Do you believe that Punk (and other 1980s subcultures) gave women more space for personal expression (in appearance, behavior, artistic performance)? Or did women have to make that space for themselves? [text box for long answer]
22. Is there anything else you’d like to say?

Biographical Sketches

Subject 1. From New Jersey, Subject 1 was active in the NYC Punk scene from 1984 – 1989. As a music fan, fanzine writer, photographer, and sometimes booking agent.

Subject 2. From Queens, NY, Subject 2 was active in the NYC Punk and hardcore scene from 1981-1990. Her partner was lead singer in a popular hardcore band. Originally from South America, she self-describes as Hispanic-Asian.

Subject 3. From Queens, NY, Subject 3 was active in the NYC Punk and hardcore scene in the 1980s working as a roadie for bands, writing for fanzines, and taking photographs. She self-describes as Korean-American.

Subject 4. From Long Island, Subject 4 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1980s as a fan, photographer, and hosting a radio show focused on local bands. She self-describes as Jewish-American.

Subject 5. From Los Angeles, Subject 5 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1980s as a fan, fanzine contributor, promoter, and “in various other ways.” She self-describes as “mutt” American.

Subject 6. From Seattle, Subject 6 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1980s as a musician, fan, photographer, and tattoo artist. She self describes as “bi-racial.”

Subject 7. From Brooklyn, NY, Subject 7 was active in the NYC Punk and hardcore scenes in the 1980s as assistant at recording studio, band “assistant,” and “writer for magazines.” She self describes as “multi-ethnic.”

Subject 8. From Massachusetts, Subject 8 was active in the NYC Punk and hardcore scenes in the 1980s as a fan, model, photographer, and fanzine writer. She self describes as Jewish-American.

Subject 9. From Bronx, NY, Subject 9 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1970s – 1980s as a photographer and spoken word performer.

Subject 10. From London, Subject 10 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1970s-1980s as a promoter and photographer.

Subject 11. From Long Island, Subject 11 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1970s-1980s as a fan “and lots of other things.”

Subject 12. From New Jersey, Subject 12 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1980s.

Subject 13. From New Jersey, Subject 13 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1970s-1980s.

Subject 14. From the Lower East Side, Subject 14 was active in the NYC Punk scene “forever” as “everything and anything.” She self-defines as “multi-racial.”

Subject 15. From Brooklyn, Subject 15 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1980s as a musician.

Subject 16. From Atlanta, Subject 16 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1980s as an artist, musician, and “lots of other stuff.”

Subject 17. From Brooklyn, Subject 17 was active in the NYC Punk scene as a musician and fan.

Subject 18. From the Bronx, Subject 18 was active in the NYC Punk scene as a photographer and fan.

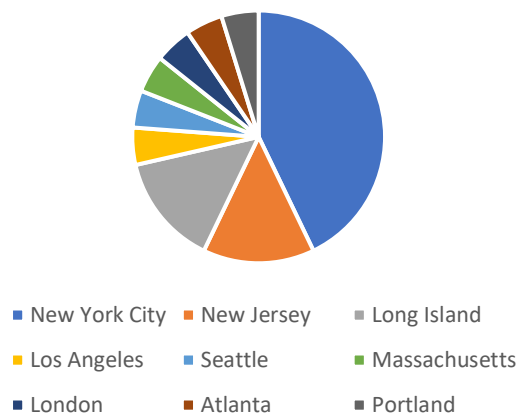
Subject 19. From Queens, Subject 19 was active in the NYC Punk scene “forever!” as a fanzine writer and photographer.

Subject 20. From Portland, Subject 20 was active in the NYC Punk scene in the 1980s working for clubs and record companies.

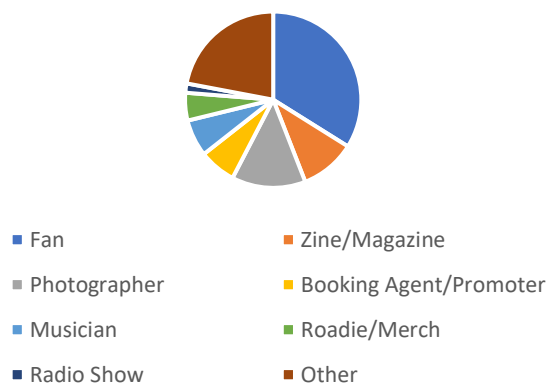
Yvonne C. Garrett was born in Seattle and grew up in Olympia, Washington. She was part of the Pacific Northwest Punk scene from an early age. She moved to Northampton, Massachusetts to study English at Smith College where she worked for the local radio station (WOZQ) playing Punk and dance records and put out her own ‘zine “Release the Bats.” In 1983-1984, she attended the University of London where she was involved in the burgeoning Goth club scene, including working for Dave Vanian’s (The Damned) nightclub. After graduation from Smith in 1985, she moved to New York and began working in the Music Industry for a small record label. Always an active participant in the Punk, Noise, and Goth scene in New York City, she also worked for Caroline Records throughout the 1980s representing a wide range of bands including Live Skull, the Misfits, Swans, Pussy Galore, Suicidal Tendencies, Bad Brains, Naked Raygun, Frightwig, and more. She signed White Zombie to Caroline then left the label to move to Venice, California where she worked with skate punk bands until her return to New York. In the 1990s, she worked at Set to Run (Public Enemy, The Cramps, The Cure, Beastie Boys, EMF, Def Jam), Susan Blond PR (Throwing Muses, Iggy Pop, Debbie Harry, Leonard Cohen, and a host of indie bands), Reprise/Warner Records (Sr Director National Media Relations representing L7, Babes in Toyland, Neil Young, and more). After leaving Reprise, she ran her own PR firm – PRB – representing Punk and Indie bands (Epitaph Records, Mojo Records, Throwing Muses, Dropkick Murphys, and more). In 2001, she quit the Music Industry.

APPENDIX B: Oral History Data Charts

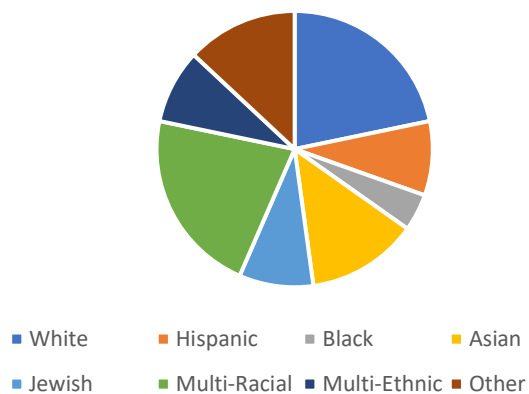
From New York City



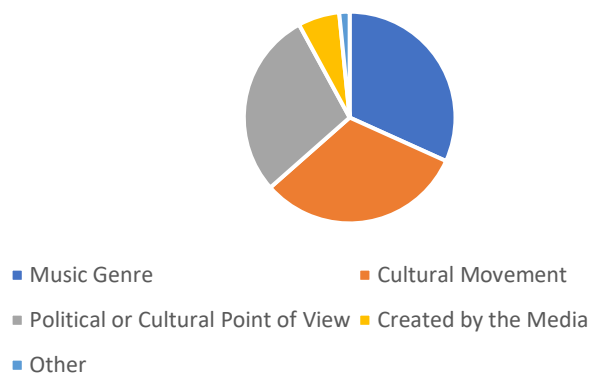
Define Your Participation in Punk in the 1980s



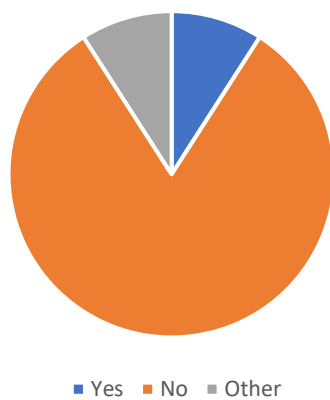
Racial, Ethnic Identity



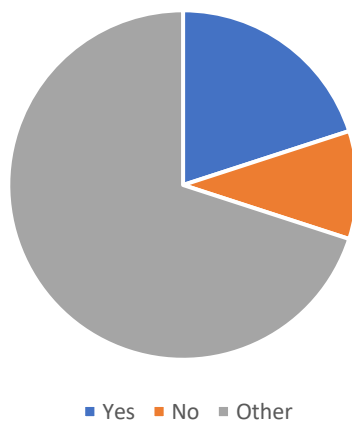
Define Punk Rock



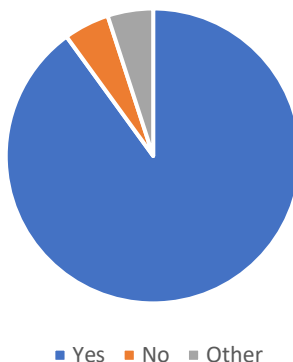
Was Punk Dead by 1980



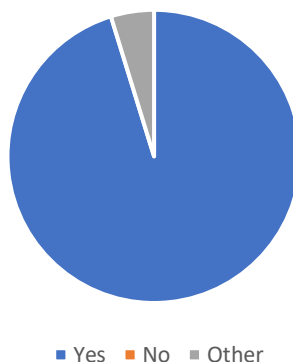
Gender Bias in Punk Rock?



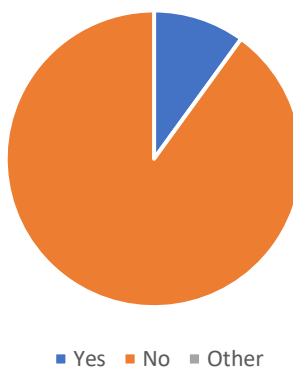
Was Punk Open to Different Expressions of Gender Identity?



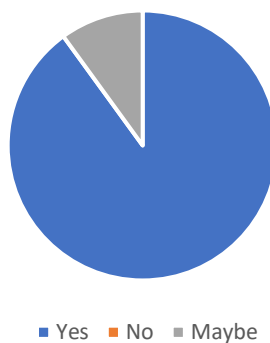
Harassed by people outside the Punk Rock scene for your appearance?



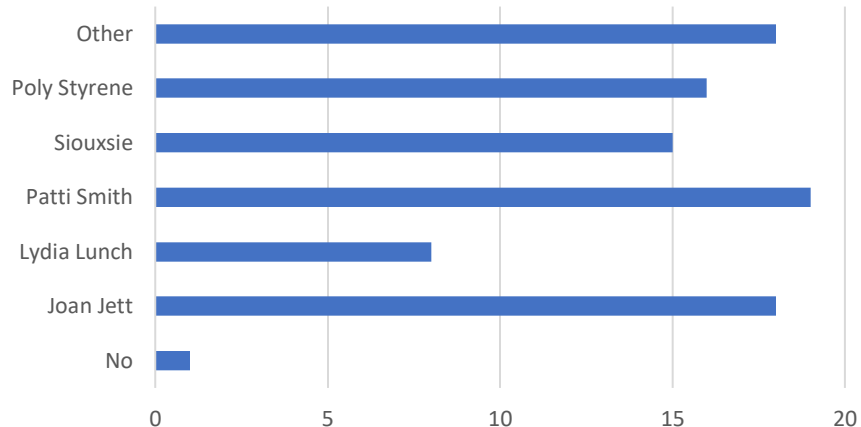
Harassed by people IN the scene for your appearance?



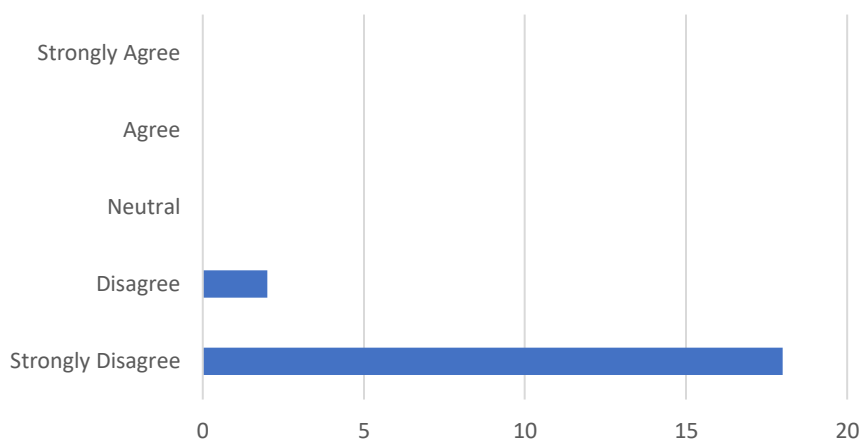
In the 1980s, did you care whether or not a band had female members?

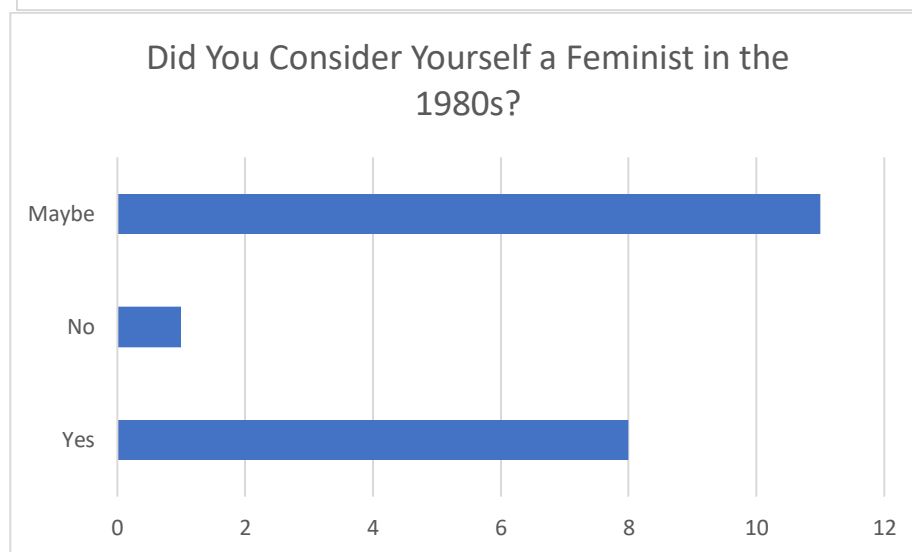
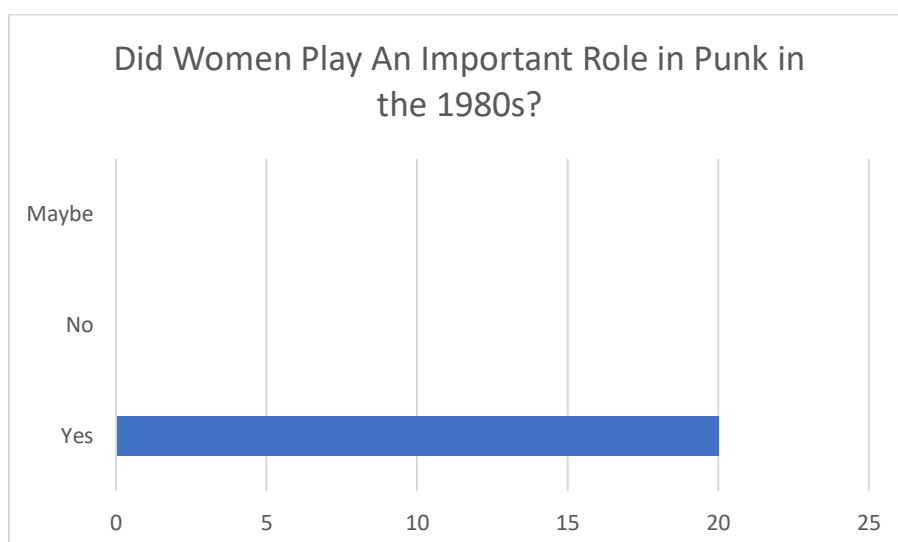
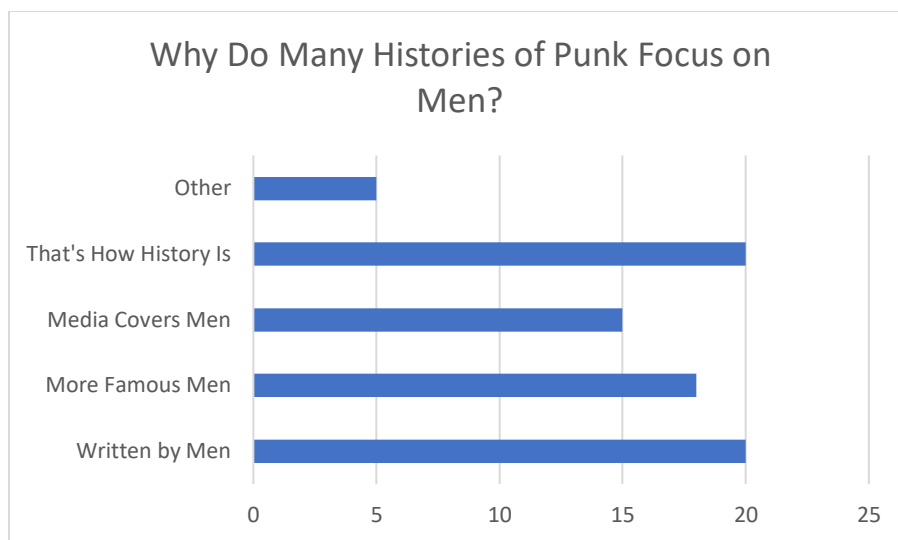


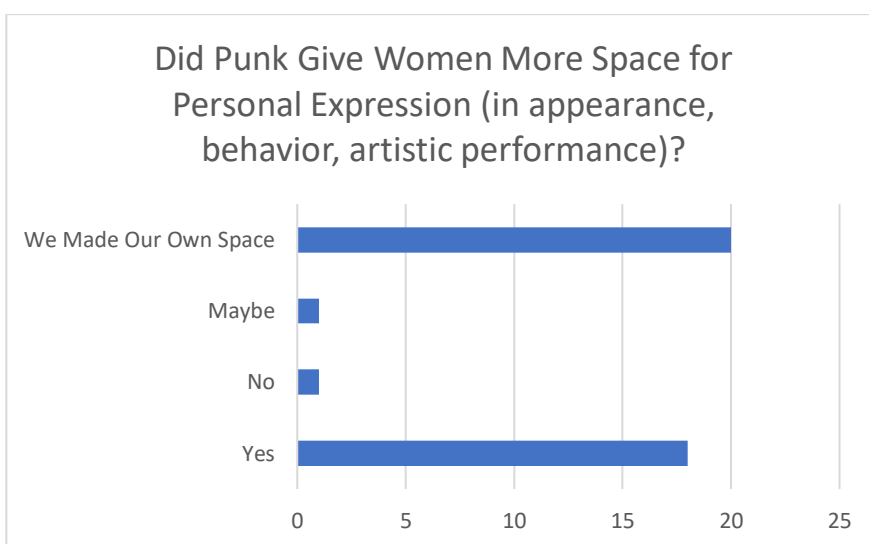
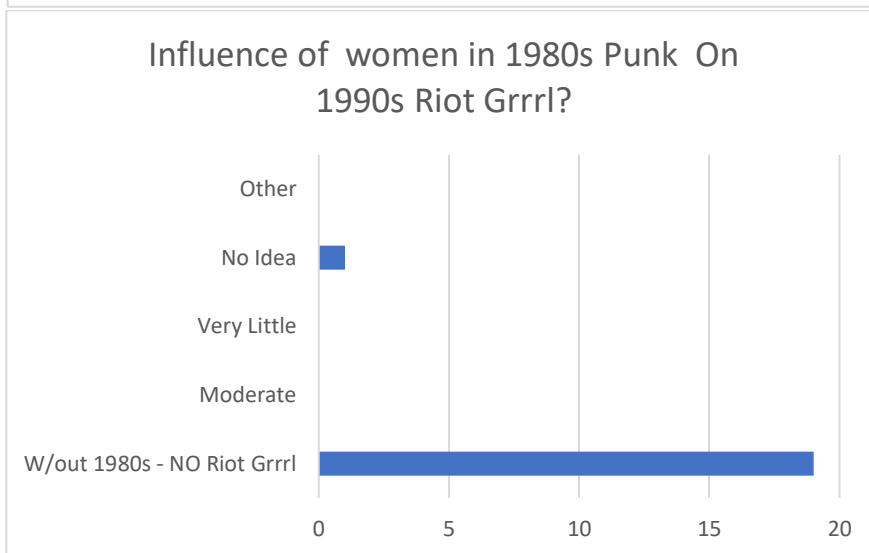
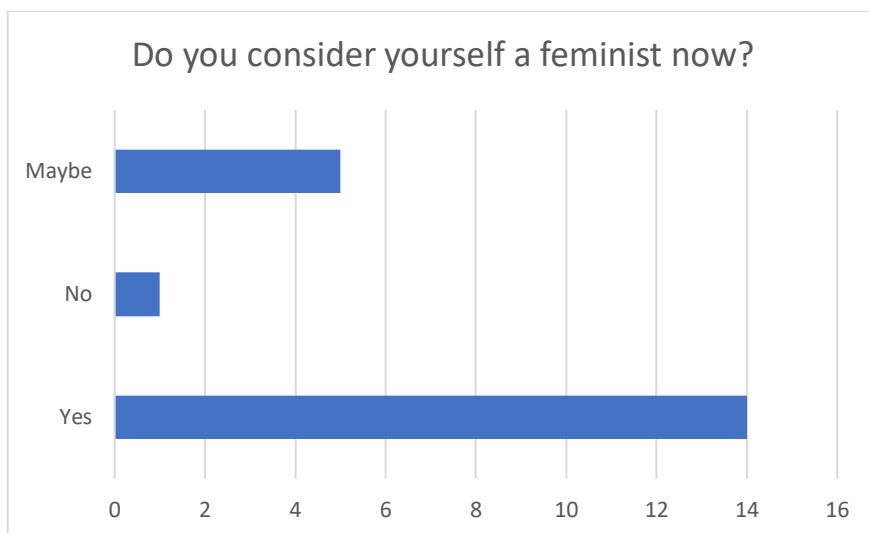
Any Women Role Models in the 1980s?



Was Punk a "Male Thing"?







Appendix C: 1970s & 1980s Selective and Limited Playlist

1975		Horses	Patti Smith Group
1976		Radio Ethiopia	Patti Smith Group
1976		The Runaways	The Runaways
1976	Cherry Bomb		The Runaways
1976		Blondie	Blondie
1977	Queens of Noise	Queens of Noise	The Runaways
1977	Don't Dictate		Penetration *UK)
1977		We Are the One (ep)	The Avengers
1977	One Chord Wonders		The Adverts
1977		Plastic Letters	Blondie
1977	Rock and Roll	Queens of Noise	The Runaways
1977	Oh Bondage! Up Yours!		X-Ray Spex
1977	Gary Gilmore's Eyes		The Advert
1978		Germfree Adolescents	X-Ray Spex
1978		Easter	Patti Smith Group
1978	Lucky Number	Stateless	Lene Lovich
1978		The Electric Chairs	Wayne/Jayne County
1978	Hong Kong Garden		Siouxsie & the Banshees
1978	Survive		The Bags
1978		Wave	Patti Smith Group
1978	Kleenex		Kleenex (a/k/a Liliput)
1978		Parallel Lines	blondie
1979		GI	The Germs
1979		Eat to the Beat	Blondie
1979		Gravest Hits (ep)	The Cramps
1979	Typical Girls/Grapevine	Cut	The Slits
1979	The Wait (B-Side)		The Pretenders
1979	Baby Doll/Orphans	Pre-Teenage Jesus & the Jerks	Teenage Jesus & The Jerks
1979		Joan Jett	Joan Jett
1979		The Raincoats	The Raincoats (UK)
1980	Gluttony	Decline & Fall soundtrack	The Bags
1980	Precious		The Pretenders
1980	Reality Asylum	Feeding of the Five Thousand	Crass with Eve Libertine
1980		Bloody Revolutions	Crass with Eve Libertine

1980	Diddy Wah Diddy		8-Eyed Spy w/Lydia Lunch
1980	Call Me		Blondie
1980		Los Angeles	X
1980		Songs the Lord Taught Us	The Cramps
1980		New Hope for the Wretched	The Plasmatics
1980		The Blue Meaning	Toyah
1980		Wild Planet	B-52s
1980	Baby Its You		Dolly Mixture (UK)
1980	Paint it Black (cover)		The Mo-Dettes (UK)
1980		Chappaquiddick Bridge	Poison Girls (UK)
1980	Too Many Creeps		Bush Tetras
1980	Guilty		Honey Bane (UK)
1980		Queen of Siam	Lydia Lunch
1980		The Nuns	The Nuns (SF)
1980	Bad Reputation	Bad Reputation	Joan Jett
1980	Last Rockers		Vice Squad (UK)
1981	Daddy's Gone Mad	Hell Comes to Your House	Legal Weapon
1981		Psychedelic Jungle	The Cramps
1981	Do You Wanna Touch Me	Bad Reputation	Joan Jett
1981	Crimson & Clover (cover)	I Love Rock'n'Roll	Joan Jett
1981	I Love Rock'n'Roll	I Love Rock'n'Roll	Joan Jett
1981		No Cause for Concern	Vice Squad
1981		Wild Gift	X
1981		13.13	Lydia Lunch
1981		Playing with a different sex	Au Pairs (UK)
1981	Barbed Wire Halo		Annie Anxiety
1981		The Story So Far	The Mo-dettes (UK)
1981		Penis Envy	CRASS
1981	Nagasaki Nightmare		CRASS
1981	Turn me on Turn me off		Honey Bane (UK)
1981	Negative Exposure		Honey Bane (UK)
1981	Been Teen		Dolly Mixture (UK)
1981	Private Armies		Vivien Goldman (UK)
1981		Under the Big Black Sun	X

1981		Stand Strong, Stand Proud	Vice Squad (UK)
1981		NunSexMonkRock	Nina Hagen (Germany)
1982	Never Say Never	Never Say Never	Deborah Iyall/Romeo Void
1982		Beach Party	Marine Girls (UK)
1982	Wish I Could Be Me		Honey Bane (UK)
1982		LiliPUT	LiliPUT (a/k/a Kleenex)
1982		Minna Tanoshiku	Shonen Knife (Japan)
1982		Sense & Sensuality	Au Pairs (UK)
1982	Happy Talk		Dolly Mixture w/Capt Sensibl
1982		Where's the Pleasure	Poison Girls (UK)
1982		Drunk on the Pop's Blood (ep)	Lydia Lunch w/Birthday Party
1982		More Fun in the New World	X
1983		Avengers	Avengers (SF)
1983		Smell of Female	The Cramps
1983		Confusion is Sex	Sonic Youth
1983		Kill Yr Idols	Sonic Youth
1983		Burning Farm	Shonen Knife
1983		Fifth Column	Fifth Column
1983		Yes Sir, I Will	CRASS
1983	Cherry Bomb	Glorious Results...	Joan Jett
1983		Kitchen Tapes (live)	The Raincoats
1984		Faster, Frightwig, Kill, Kill	Frightwig
1984		In Limbo (ep)	Lydia Lunch
1984		It's About Time	The Pandoras
1984		I'm Here, I'm Gone (ep)	The Pandoras
1984		The Uncensored	Lydia Lunch
1984		Ain't Love Grand!	X
1985		To Sir, With Hate	Fifth Column
1985		Songs of Praise	Poison Girls (UK)
1985		Pagan Babies demo	(Kat Bjelland & Courtney Love)
1985		Bad Moon Rising	Sonic Youth
1985		EVOL	Sonic Youth
1985		God's On Voodoo Moon	White Zombie

1985		Feel Good About Your Body (ep)	Pussy Galore
1985	Push It		Salt-n-Pepa
1986		Groovy Hate Fuck	Pussy Galore
1986		Pussy Gold 5000	Pussy Galore
1986		Stop Pretending	The Pandoras
1986		Sister	Sonic Youth
1986		Exile on Main Street (cassette)	Pussy Galore
1986		Honeymoon in Red	Lydia Lunch
1987		Naked in Garden Hills	Harry Crews (Lunch & Gordon)
1987		See How We Are	X
1987	I Wanna Be Your Dog (cover)	Up Your Alley	Joan Jett
1987		Soul Crusher	White Zombie
1988		Sugarshit Sharp	Pussy Galore
1988		Live at the Whisky	X
1988		Oral Fixation	Lydia Lunch
1988		Daydream Nation	Sonic Youth
1988		L7	L7
1988	Yummy Yummy (cover)	The Melting Pot compilation	L7
1988		Osorezan no Stooges Kyo	The Boredoms (Japan)
1989	Suzy is a Headbanger (cover)	Gabba Gabba Hey compilation	L7
1989		Make Them Die Slowly	White Zombie
1989		Dial M for Motherfucker	Pussy Galore
1989		Lunachicks Double 7"	Lunachicks
1989	Shove	Smell the Magic	L7

VITA

Full name: Yvonne Celia Garrett
Place and date of birth: Seattle, Washington – May 3, 1964
Parents Name: Lawrence Tait and Lydia F. Garrett

Educational Institutions:

School	Place	Degree	Date
Timberline High School	Lacey, WA	HS Diploma	1981
Smith College	Northampton, MA	B.A.	1985
The New School	New York, NY	M.F.A. – Fiction	2008
New York University	New York, NY	M.A. – Humanities	2010
New York University	New York, NY	M.A. – Irish Studies	2014
L.I.U.-Palmer School	New York, NY	M.L.I.S. – Archives	2014
Drew University	Madison, NJ	Ph.D.	2021