

8-2005

# Gender Trouble Girl: The Disruptive Work of Kim Gordon

Thomas S. Caw

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.uwm.edu/etd>

---

## Recommended Citation

Caw, Thomas S., "Gender Trouble Girl: The Disruptive Work of Kim Gordon" (2005). *Theses and Dissertations*. 2031.  
<https://dc.uwm.edu/etd/2031>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by UWM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of UWM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [open-access@uwm.edu](mailto:open-access@uwm.edu).

GENDER TROUBLE GIRL: THE DISRUPTIVE WORK OF KIM GORDON

by

Thomas S. Caw

A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Music

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2005

GENDER TROUBLE GIRL: THE DISRUPTIVE WORK OF KIM GORDON

by

Thomas S. Caw

A Thesis Submitted in

Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Music

at

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

August 2005

---

Major Professor

Date

---

Graduate School Approval

Date

## ABSTRACT

## GENDER TROUBLE GIRL: THE DISRUPTIVE WORK OF KIM GORDON

by

Thomas S. Caw

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2005  
Under the Supervision of Dr. Gillian Rodger

Kim Gordon has been referred to as the “Godmother of Grunge,” the “Godmother of alternative rock,” “rock’s reigning experimental diva,” the original “Riot Mom,” and other similar sobriquets when mentioned as an important influence on younger women musicians such as Courtney Love or the bands in the Riot Grrrl movement, but her work has been given only superficial treatment in both the popular and academic literature. Many scholars have addressed more overtly feminist musicians in their work on popular music, but few have focused on the work of Kim Gordon other than to refer to her influence. The mainstream historical record of Gordon’s music-making is not in agreement with the version I know from witnessing her perform and following her career in the underground press for the past two decades. The intent of this thesis is to scrutinize Gordon’s work to reveal how she has successfully established a role for herself as an equal contributing member of a mixed-gender band, how she fits into a genealogy of disruptive musicians, how she has negotiated the gendered expectations for women popular musicians to be either glamorous stars or supportive background figures without enacting either stereotype, how she has continued to transcend gender stereotypes over time, and how she challenges the double standard that posits men as getting better with

age while women are expected to disappear or make more conservative choices. This analysis substantiates her place in both the “Women in Rock” narrative and the broader history of late twentieth-century popular music as someone deemed influential, moving beyond the commonly used “Godmother of Grunge” epithet. I employ an interdisciplinary approach that combines methods from gender studies and musicology in order to locate the gender role disruptiveness and music historical significance of Kim Gordon’s work both chronologically and contextually. This approach is in keeping with the cultural study, analysis, and criticism of music applied to popular music by practitioners of what is called “new musicology,” such as Susan McClary, and Judith Peraino, and Robert Walser.

---

Major Professor

Date

© Copyright by Thomas S. Caw, 2005  
All Rights Reserved

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	vii
Chapter One	
Kim Gordon in Sonic Youth: “I Could Do That”.....	1
Chapter Two	
Gordon’s Role and Influence: “Little Trouble Girl”.....	24
Chapter Three	
Causing Gender Trouble: “Betting on the Bull in the Heather”.....	45
Chapter Four	
A Visual Artist Makes Music: “Fear of a Female Planet?”.....	69
Chapter Five	
Getting Older, Getting Better: “Nobody Knows The Shape I’m In”.....	102
Chapter Six	
Conclusion.....	118
Bibliography.....	123

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Kim Gordon, for inspiring me to translate my thoughts and feelings into words, for granting me an interview, and for remaining open to further communication. I have come to think of you as you think of the women in the Raincoats: an ordinary person playing extraordinary music.

To Thurston Moore, Lee Ranaldo, Steve Shelley, and—since 2000—Jim O'Rourke, for collaborating with Kim Gordon to create the “viscerebral” sounds of Sonic Youth music and enriching my sonic life.

To Dr. Gillian Rodger, for your advisement to not be so clunky and literal, and for constantly reminding me this is “only” a Master’s thesis.

To Dr. Mitchell P. Brauner, for your curmudgeonly counsel and qualified imprimatur.

To Rebecca J. Littman, for being my music librarian, my boss, my mentor, and my friend. Thanks for letting me turn E280A into my “thesis room.”

To Tom W. and Margaret J. Caw, for the lifetime of love and support.

To Melanie J. Caw Woods, for your love and moral support from afar.

To Shelley and Holden, for the love and the patience while waiting for me to be finished disrupting our lives so we can begin the next phase of our lives together.



## CHAPTER ONE

### KIM GORDON IN SONIC YOUTH: “I COULD DO THAT”

Kim Gordon has been widely deemed influential by writers and an inspiration by fellow musicians, but she has received more attention for her image than for her music-making habits and performance strategies. This thesis provides an account of Gordon’s life and work that substantiates her influential status by examining her approach to making and performing music and illuminating the ways in which she disrupts gendered expectations for women popular musicians.

#### KIM GORDON AND SONIC YOUTH

Kim Althea Gordon was born April 28, 1953, the only daughter of Calvin Wayne Gordon—a professor and Dean of Sociology and Education at UCLA—and Althea Gordon—a seamstress who did tailoring and sold homemade fashions out of their home.<sup>1</sup> Gordon’s father, whose publications include *The Social System of the High School: A Study in the Sociology of Adolescence* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1957), undoubtedly fostered a critical attentiveness to sociological matters that would appear in her art and music, and her mother imparted both self-reliance and an eye for fashion. Gordon attended the University Elementary School at UCLA, an experimental laboratory school where the curriculum was based on creativity and grades were not given, until she was

---

<sup>1</sup> Alec Foege, *Confusion Is Next: The Sonic Youth Story* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), 45-6.

11, and this experience fostered her creative thinking and her independence.<sup>2</sup> “I was always a tomboy, I never wore little dresses or anything and I was fairly independent” says Gordon of her middle-class childhood in West Los Angeles, adding: “I was a model child until I was 12 and then I decided to be bad!”<sup>3</sup> She admired her brother Keller, who was three and a half years older and became a paranoid schizophrenic in his twenties, even though she describes him as having been “bad” and “very mean to me.”<sup>4</sup> Keller’s example influenced Gordon’s behavioral transformation, and he had another significant effect on her as she entered adolescence. Keller loved music but did not play an instrument. Gordon credits him with turning her on to Bob Dylan and other sixties pop musicians, as well as to jazz, ranging from bebop to John Coltrane to Ornette Coleman.<sup>5</sup> Gordon’s parents also played jazz records in their home, and Gordon recalls being about twelve years old when she first started really taking notice of the music.<sup>6</sup> Gordon remembers going to the record store to buy new Beatles singles as they were released, and she thinks the first album she bought might have been a Rolling Stones record, which she took with her when her father took the family to Hong Kong for a year when she was twelve.<sup>7</sup>

While she was in Hong Kong, Gordon had her first boyfriend, an English boy named Steve who was also a drummer. She never saw him play in a band, but she does remember going to “clubs in hotel bars and they’d have these Chinese girls playing

---

<sup>2</sup> Amy Raphael, *Grrrls: Viva Rock Divas* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1996), 120.

<sup>3</sup> Gordon, “Own Words,” 170.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 119.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Kim Gordon, interview by Lina Dzuverovic-Russell and Anne Hilde Neset, “Kim Gordon HER NOISE Interview, 26 April 2002, Royal Festival Hall,” Her Noise, [http://www.hernoise.com/interview\\_kim.htm](http://www.hernoise.com/interview_kim.htm) (accessed July 28, 2005).

Beatles songs and wearing weird party dresses.”<sup>8</sup> Gordon remembers being at her boyfriend’s house and how they “would make out in his room for hours, then get up and have a formal lunch served by their Chinese maid,” a scenario she describes as “very colonial.”<sup>9</sup> She claims she was very precocious for her age, and as a result her mother gave her Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* to read when she was twelve, because she feared Gordon was going to turn out like the title character:

I think it was really odd for her to give me that book when I was so young but I think she was trying to stress that you can be one kind of girl or another. She made it so black and white, you know, like if you read and you’re more intellectual then men will like you a lot and not just for your body. She was trying to teach me something like that.<sup>10</sup>

As Gordon continued to emulate her brother’s bad example, she came to realize the motivation for much of her rebellious behavior had to do with the double standards she observed for him as a boy and her as a girl.<sup>11</sup>

Gordon’s upbringing included private art classes and modern dance lessons, and she dreamed of attending art school throughout her high school years. Her father, however, convinced her that a bachelor’s degree from a university would be more beneficial than a bachelor of fine arts degree from an art school, so she initially attended York University in Toronto. While at York, Gordon studied with George Manupelli, the underground filmmaker/artist who founded the Ann Arbor Film Festival in 1963, and she formed her first band with classmates as an art project for one of his courses.<sup>12</sup> Gordon had dated musicians throughout her adolescence, and had flown up to San Francisco to see such groups as Jefferson Airplane, the Grateful Dead, and Moby Grape at the

---

<sup>8</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 120.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Gordon, “Own Words,” 170.

<sup>11</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 119.

<sup>12</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 46.

Fillmore with friends she had met in Hong Kong, but she says it took her a long time to figure out that she wanted to be able to play the music.<sup>13</sup> The unnamed York group was a noise band composed of Gordon, percussionist William Winant, and two Chilean guitarists, and after a few campus gigs they performed at the Ann Arbor Film Festival, where the plug was pulled on them mid-set.<sup>14</sup>

Aside from this project, and a film she made about Patty Hearst, Gordon was disappointed by her experience at York and returned to California to attend Otis College of Art and Design in Los Angeles. Many Otis students were active in both the conceptual-art fringe and the burgeoning L.A. punk scene. Gordon graduated with a degree in what she describes as “post-conceptual” fine art. For example, she collected automobile brochures from showrooms and rendered little paintings in the windows of the cars for a painting class assignment.<sup>15</sup> Gordon’s education produced in her a philosophy that manifested itself in her aesthetics:

To me the idea is more important than how you express it, and I was interested in the kinds of art that made comments about popular culture, and towards the end of my work with art I was thinking about female expression in relation to things like ad copy. You used to get these ads using a first-person sentence, like the swimsuit ads with the big type saying things like “I feel like a million dollars.” I would take the ad and sign my name to it and put it in another magazine.<sup>16</sup>

Her interest in employing appropriation for cultural critique ran headlong into what she describes as a backlash to feminist art when she moved to New York in 1980. This perception, coupled with her repulsion for the attitude of “pure elitism over aesthetics”

---

<sup>13</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 120.

<sup>14</sup> Chris Lawrence, “KIM GORDON - ???/75? - Ann Arbor, MI @ Ann Arbor Film Festival,” Sonic Youth Concert Chronology, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/cc/annarbor70s.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 47.

<sup>16</sup> Gordon, “Own Words,” 171.

she encountered in the New York art world, led her to consider working in music.<sup>17</sup>

Gordon admired the women artists she considered strong, such as Cindy Sherman, Sherrie Levine and Jenny Holzer, but grew weary of the mindset that dismissed work deemed too feminist-oriented and refused to take it seriously on an intellectual level.<sup>18</sup>

She had seen Lydia Lunch's band Teenage Jesus and the Jerks as well as other no wave bands perform when she visited New York after finishing art school, and had found herself more impressed by the visceral force and confrontational performance element produced by these bands than she was by much of the visual arts output of the times.<sup>19</sup>

By her own admission, Gordon was too intellectual in her approach to making art and felt paralyzed by knowing too much to freely express herself, and so she turned to making music because she knew nothing about it and was attracted to the emotional fulfillment in its physicality.<sup>20</sup>

Gordon had met and befriended artist Dan Graham in California, and it was Graham who facilitated her move into music making after she arrived in New York. In addition to writing articles for *Artforum* and other publications, and working for SoHo gallery owner Anina Nosei, Gordon had established a conceptual art operation called Design Office. Design Office was a sort of "fake interior-decorating firm" that involved Gordon altering living spaces based on the inhabitant's personality. For example, she removed the rarely used stove in Dan Graham's apartment, installed commercial-space tiles in his kitchen, and painted Blondie singer Deborah Harry on his wall in watercolor.

---

<sup>17</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 49.

<sup>18</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 171.

<sup>19</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 48.

<sup>20</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 171.

Afterwards, she wrote about what she had done, and had the essay published along with photographs of the installation in a Canadian art magazine.<sup>21</sup>

Graham had delivered a lecture about women performing in mixed gender groups and all-female bands titled “New Wave Rock and the Feminine” in 1980 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, addressing the strategies of such performers as Poly Styrene of X-Ray Spex, Siouxsie Sioux of Siouxsie and the Banshees, Deborah Harry, Lydia Lunch, the Slits, the Raincoats, Ut, and Kleenex.<sup>22</sup> In 1980, Graham also asked Gordon to participate in a performance art piece he was mounting involving an all-girl band, and as a result she made her first attempt at playing guitar and writing songs. Gordon formed a band with her friends Christine Hahn (a member of composer/musician Glenn Branca’s band The Static) on bass and Stanton Miranda (a member of composer/musician Rhys Chatham’s band Arsenal, known simply as Miranda) on drums, and they dubbed themselves CKM.<sup>23</sup> They wrote songs Gordon describes as “making fun of girl talk,” such as “Soft Posh Separates” and “Cosmopolitan Girl,” in which Gordon sang lyrics consisting of ad copy from *Cosmopolitan*.<sup>24</sup> The band’s one performance was part of Eventworks, a festival artist/musician Christian Marclay had organized to explore the relation and influence of rock music on the art world, held at the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston.<sup>25</sup> CKM never played together again, but Gordon continued to play and rehearse with Miranda, and it was Miranda who took her to see the last show by

---

<sup>21</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 49.

<sup>22</sup> Dan Graham, “New Wave Rock and the Feminine,” in *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects, 1965-1990*, ed. Brian Wallis ([Cambridge, Mass.]: MIT Press, 1993), 137.

<sup>23</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Gordon, “Own Words,” 173.

<sup>25</sup> Jason Gross. “Christian Marclay interview,” *Perfect Sound Forever*, March 1998, <http://www.furious.com/perfect/christianmarclay.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

The Coachmen, the band of guitarist Thurston Moore. Moore became Gordon's musical collaborator, her boyfriend, and eventually her husband.

Gordon soon formed a band with Moore called Male Bonding, along with former Coachmen drummer Dave Keay and a keyboardist named Ann DeMarinis. They changed the name of the band to Red Milk before their first show in December 1980.<sup>26</sup> The band was soon rechristened The Arcadians, and played a few shows under that name in the first four months of 1981 before changing once again to Sonic Youth for a May 8 gig at Club 57.<sup>27</sup> On June 18, 1981, Sonic Youth had its official debut during Noise Fest, a nine-day festival of bands and visual arts co-curated by Gordon and Moore at the SoHo gallery White Columns. Gordon and gallery director Josh Baer convinced Moore to bring together many of downtown Manhattan's experimental musicians whom they felt were being overlooked by "the majority of rock/disco club owners and the overground music press" as they said in the Noise Fest press release, and Gordon assembled an exhibit of visual arts made by musicians that hung during the run of the festival.<sup>28</sup> The Sonic Youth lineup for this performance consisted of Gordon on bass/vocals, Moore on guitar/vocals, Ann DeMarinis on keyboards/vocals, and Richard Edson on drums.<sup>29</sup> DeMarinis left the group soon after this. Lee Ranaldo, a fellow downtown experimental musician who had shared bills with The Arcadians in his group Plus Instruments, and had also performed with both Glenn Branca and David Linton at Noise Fest, quickly became the next member of Sonic Youth. One night at White Columns before the conclusion of

---

<sup>26</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Chris Lawrence, "SONIC YOUTH: 05/08/81 - NYC, NY @ Club 57," Sonic Youth Concert Chronology, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/cc/050881.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Chris Lawrence, "NOISEFEST '81 INFORMATION," Sonic Youth Concert Chronology, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/cc/noisefest81.html> (accessed July 28, 2005). This page features a digital scan of the Noise Fest press release, which includes the complete lineup for the festival.

<sup>29</sup> Chris Lawrence, "SONIC YOUTH: 06/18/81 - NYC, NY @ White Columns," Sonic Youth Concert Chronology, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/cc/061881.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

Noise Fest, Gordon suggested to Ranaldo that he should try playing guitar with Moore, and once they did Ranaldo joined the band.<sup>30</sup>

#### PUNK, NO WAVE, AND POST-PUNK

The post-punk milieu in which Gordon began making music and negotiating the gendered expectations for women popular musicians is a space in which gender boundaries are not nearly as fixed as they are in mainstream pop music or popular culture. This subculture, which was known by such names as underground or indie rock in the 1980s before being rechristened “alternative” in the 1990s, has been described as taking feminism as its point of departure in establishing and maintaining a sense of rock as “a place where women were taken seriously as fans and musicians; where men did not exclude, overtly sexually objectify, or otherwise mistreat women; where women did not play traditional parts in rock culture as groupies, teenyboppers, or girlfriends sitting on the side while their boyfriends rocked.”<sup>31</sup> This halcyon portrayal does not apply to all the scenes and niches within the alternative rock subculture, and it fails to acknowledge the degree to which stereotypical gender roles are still entrenched outside the mainstream, but it does capture the spirit that animates many of its participants. Gordon has built on the work of older women in helping to bring about this shift in rock culture, passing through doors held open by various predecessors while also opening new doors, and her negotiation of the gendered expectations for women making rock needs to be located in a continuum of disruptive musicians. This discussion will also show how the “pioneer”

---

<sup>30</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 70.

<sup>31</sup> Mimi Schippers, *Rockin' Out of the Box: Gender Maneuvering in Alternative Hard Rock*, (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 12.



label has been used to continually erase and marginalize the contributions of women making rock music.

Women have been marginalized within the male-dominated popular music recording industry since it began, and have generally been relegated to being attractive singers onstage, doting “groupies” at the service of male musicians backstage, or office underlings offstage in the business realm. That female popular musicians have frequently been singers rather than instrumentalists can be attributed to the connection of the voice to the body, an association that is in keeping with women’s “biologically determined” social roles, and this specious reasoning has led to vocalists not being considered as skilled as “real musicians.”<sup>32</sup> Although the “girl group” phase of the early 1960s produced many chart hits performed by women, there was a sense that the women involved were mouthpieces for professional songwriters and eye candy controlled by male managers. Even the American all-female rock band Goldie and the Gingerbreads was perceived by many as a novelty act, despite their collective instrumental talent. After successfully touring with the Animals, the Kinks, the Yardbirds, and the Rolling Stones in England, they were unable to make a similar breakthrough in America and disbanded in 1965 after a string of bad financial decisions by manager Mike Jeffries.<sup>33</sup> The rise of male rock superstars in the mid-1960s, such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, elevated instrumental virtuosity and the sense of authenticity associated with musicians writing their own songs, fostering a climate in which girls’ place was in the audience.<sup>34</sup> In the decade between 1965 and 1975, the effects of the “sexual revolution,” the rise of

---

<sup>32</sup> Rebecca Daugherty, “The Spirit of ’77: Punk and the Girl Revolution,” *Women & Music* 6 (2002): 27.

<sup>33</sup> Gillian G. Gaar, *She’s a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*, 2d ed., (New York: Seal Press, 2002), 61.

<sup>34</sup> Daugherty, “Spirit of ’77,” 28.

“second wave” feminism, and the hippie counterculture did little to alter the double standards of the rock culture for women musicians, critics, and fans, but many women helped transform the roles for female rockers in bands.<sup>35</sup>

One of the greatest challenges faced by female rock musicians was gaining entry to the unit at the music’s core: the band. The entire band exemplifies rock music’s ideal creative and performing unit, in contrast to the vocalist supported by backing musicians or the solo artist emphasized in pop and folk.<sup>36</sup> The impact of women musicians who played instruments not traditionally associated with female performers, such as Maureen Tucker and Karen Carpenter on drums, Suzi Quatro and Jean Millington on bass, and June Millington on lead guitar, “truly ripped the door off the little boy’s club that had been rock music in a completely new way.”<sup>37</sup> Yoko Ono and Patti Smith expanded the possibilities for how rock vocalists could sound and behave, refusing to harness their expressivity or conform to conventional melodic or timbral expectations in addition to disrupting notions of appropriate feminine conduct. The rebellious streak conveyed by these two women on recordings and in performance eventually surfaced in punk rock, which created many new spaces for women performing popular music.

In contrast to other rock subgenres, punk rock emphasized initiative and spirit over musical technique, and women gravitated towards this culture to join in the rule breaking.<sup>38</sup> Whether considered a revolutionary movement, an attitude, or a subgenre of rock, punk did not entirely do away with the masculine dominance prevalent in

---

<sup>35</sup> Lisa L. Rhodes, *Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 2. Rhodes provides a thorough overview of the cultural shifts that occurred in America between 1965 and 1975 in her chapter “The Tenor of the Times.”

<sup>36</sup> Mary Ann Clawson, “When Women Play The Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music,” *Gender & Society* 13 (1999): 195.

<sup>37</sup> Rhodes, *Electric Ladyland*, 35.

<sup>38</sup> Gaar, *She’s a Rebel*, 190.

mainstream popular music, but it did help reduce the novelty quotient of women forming bands:

Punk gave women the chance to do something new—form a band and play an instrument. Because of the historical importance of women starting bands and playing instruments, the weight of punk was very different for women and men. Men were using punk to protest the politics of boredom and the unappealing popular music in the mainstream. Girls, on the other hand, were making new forays into music and politics—the ethics of punk reordered spaces that were previously unavailable to women.<sup>39</sup>

Punk’s ethics advanced a rejection of the expected, and Gordon’s approach to making music, writing lyrics, and self-presentation has always adhered to this philosophy. Sonic Youth was inspired more by punk rock’s antagonistic spirit than by the genre’s rapidly codified musical or fashion norms.

The other dominant punk philosophy that inspired Gordon and the rest of Sonic Youth is do-it-yourself, or D.I.Y. In response to a question regarding how feminism intersects with women in rock, Gordon contextualized D.I.Y. in her profile included in *Rolling Stone*’s inaugural “Women In Rock” issue in 1997: “The whole do-it-yourself thing took a lot of ideas from feminism.”<sup>40</sup> The D.I.Y. ethic also inspired punks to make their own records, posters, and merchandise, which gave young women another medium of expression. Gordon didn’t take up an instrument to begin making music within a working group until well after the initial swell of punk had spawned numerous bands featuring women, so the work of her female predecessors removed any sense of “rock instrumentalist” being off-limits and freed her to adopt sound as her new artistic medium. At the same time, she was still able to express herself visually through creating and

---

<sup>39</sup> Daugherty, “Spirit of ’77,” 31.

<sup>40</sup> Barbara O’Dair, “Kim Gordon,” *Rolling Stone*, 13 November 1997, 144.

curating images for album art, generating ideas for publicity photos and music videos, and overseeing production of promotional items.

Gordon had already passed through perhaps her most impressionable years by the time punk rock had its revolutionary moment. Gordon had found much of the punk rock music being made in Los Angeles during the late 1970s too derivative of 1960s garage rock to hold her interest. It was not until she went to New York and witnessed Glenn Branca's group The Static, which included Christine Hahn on drums and Barbara Ess on bass, that she finally understood the appeal of punk rock, claiming "in L.A. it didn't make sense to me because I just saw it as more conventional, but this music was much freer and I felt like 'I could do that.'"<sup>41</sup> In her liner notes to the 1993 reissue of the Raincoats' 1981 record *Odyshape*, Gordon describes going to see musical performances in New York during the early 1980s:

Tier 3 was a small cool club I went to religiously to witness the downtown N.Y. whatever (8 Eyed Spy, Theoretical Girls, Y Pants, DNA etc.) and the much anticipated English groups (Pop Group, The Slits, A Certain Ratio, etc.). Those nights were mysterious, lonely, and exhilarating. I loved The Slits because of their boldness and that they actually had commercial songs, but it was The Raincoats I related to most. They seemed like ordinary people playing extraordinary music. Music that was natural, that made room for a cohesion of personalities. They had enough confidence to be vulnerable and to be themselves without having to take on the mantle of male rock/punk rock aggression...or the typical female as sex symbol avec irony or sensationalism.<sup>42</sup>

In addition to the bands Gordon mentions in her liner notes, the list of all-female or mixed-gender groups influential to her in this cultural window also includes Ut, Kleenex (later known as Liliput), the Au Pairs, and the Bush Tetras. Gordon's musical choices were shaped by the live performances and the records made by these post-punk

---

<sup>41</sup> Kim Gordon, "HER NOISE Interview."

<sup>42</sup> Kim Gordon, liner notes for *Odyshape*, by the Raincoats (Rough Trade Rough 13, 1981; DGC DGCD-24623, 1993).

groups during the late 1970s and early 1980s when she decided to pursue making music. Gordon's fashion and performance style choices were also influenced by the presence of women in these groups who, in the wake of punk's spirit of transgression, violated mainstream notions of proper feminine appearance and self-presentation.<sup>43</sup> There were many women involved in New York's post-punk music scene when Sonic Youth began, but it was not long until many of them stopped making disruptive music, or stopped making music entirely, leaving Gordon as one of the most visible women of underground rock.

Sonic Youth formed in the waning days of no wave, a short-lived musical movement centered in lower Manhattan during the late 1970s and early 1980s in which punk rock was combined with minimalism, experimental music, and performance art.<sup>44</sup> No wave musicians thought of punk as pop music that needed to be transcended, and in avant-garde fashion they rejected the formulaic musical elements of punk and moved punk aesthetics towards the art side of the art/pop binary.<sup>45</sup> No wave chronicler Stephen Anderson traces the movement's aesthetic lineage to the music of the Velvet Underground:

The Velvet's music evokes wistfulness, pessimism, despair—anti-rock moods that suit No Wave's world-weariness. Besides the grim outlook and the New York home base, what connects No Wavers to the Velvet is a shared sensibility of noise: noise as evocation of urban life, noise as means to alienation, noise as soundtrack to desire.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Clawson, "When Women Play The Bass," 195.

<sup>44</sup> Christopher Cox and Daniel Warner, eds., *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 413.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 280.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Anderson, "No-Wave Nihilism," *Atlantic*, June 1985, 94.

Sonic Youth were latecomers to no wave, but the group carried forward several of the movement's anti-rock tactics—most notably foregoing hooks, riffs, blues-based structures, and a steady danceable backbeat. In the band's early years, the music was built upon musical fragments, often utilizing minimal variations in pitch or rhythm, with the various timbres and textures produced by the guitars always in the foreground. Moore and Ranaldo sometimes played the guitars with drumsticks and power drills, producing more of a chiming bell effect than anything resembling the strummed chords typical of rock guitar playing, and the overtones they generated further helped define the band's aural identity. Sonic Youth's most disruptive musical practice was its implementation of alternate guitar tunings, a tactic to which Moore and Ranaldo were exposed during their time playing in composer Glenn Branca's guitar ensembles. Branca wrote some pieces for multiple guitars with every string tuned to E, and some called for tunings other than the standard EADGBE. Moore and Ranaldo first tried EADECD, and soon expanded to such tunings as GGDDEbEb, F#F#F#F#EB, and D#D#C#C#GG (played with a screwdriver under the strings at the ninth fret).<sup>47</sup> Gordon played bass in standard EADG tuning and shared vocal duties with Moore and Ranaldo. Their songs projected a bleak lyrical focus suggested by such song titles as "I Dreamed I Dream," "Inhuman," and "She's In A Bad Mood." Richard Edson, the first of their many drummers, contributed a polyrhythmic approach developed from playing for the seven-piece funk band Konk, but left the band after their first record, *Sonic Youth*, was released as the first title on Glenn Branca's Neutral label in 1982.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>47</sup> Chris Lawrence, "Sonic Youth Tuning Tutorial," The Sonic Youth Information Database, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/tab/tunings.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 68.

Sonic Youth employed the basic instrumental elements of rock and roll—guitar, bass, drums, and vocals—and combined them with an improvisatory impulse gleaned from jazz and a willful “primitiveness” borrowed from punk to create a hybrid music that suggested art music as much as it did rock. In an *Artforum* article discussing *Confusion Is Sex* (1983), Greil Marcus noted the record’s songs “are virtually as primitive as they can be without abandoning music altogether.”<sup>49</sup> Sonic Youth built on no wave aesthetics as described by Bernard Gendron in his 2002 book *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde*:

Teetering *institutionally* and *demographically* between the art and pop worlds, no wave music was quite naturally perceived by its media devotees as also teetering *aesthetically* between these two worlds, that is, as incorporating avant-garde components and rock components equally into its musical practices, and thus itself *musically* neither strictly avant-garde nor rock, really a new mutation.<sup>50</sup>

Gendron identifies this institutional teetering as beginning in May 1978 at Artists Space, a not-for-profit alternative SoHo gallery, where many of the bands soon to be labeled no wave performed as part of a five-day festival of relatively unknown new wave bands.<sup>51</sup> This trend, of bands performing in what were called “alternative spaces” instead of nightclubs or bars, was fueled by the high percentage of visual artists and filmmakers involved in the no wave groups. In his 2001 book *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991*, Michael Azerrad describes the early 1980s’ downtown New York City milieu in which Sonic Youth was formed as having rock clubs resembling art spaces and art spaces resembling rock clubs.<sup>52</sup> The literal

---

<sup>49</sup> Greil Marcus, “Gulliver Speaks,” *Artforum International* 22, November 1983, 72.

<sup>50</sup> Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 279 (italics in original).

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>52</sup> Michael Azerrad, *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001), 232.

trafficking back and forth between art spaces and clubs by the no wave groups created a level of sustained crossover activity between avant-garde and pop institutions that Gendron claims was “altogether unprecedented in the history of rock music or any American popular music.”<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps the most salient element in Sonic Youth’s musical practice that situates them in this liminal space between the art and pop worlds is their use of noise. The terms “noise” and “noisy” have always been associated with Sonic Youth, especially with Gordon’s songs within the band’s catalog, although they are seldom clearly defined by music journalists.<sup>54</sup> The “noise” in Sonic Youth’s music stems from the band’s frequent use of feedback, distortion, and sounds of no precise pitch or definite harmonic structure, along with their regular employment of dissonance. Describing certain types of music as “noise” is a longstanding practice of critics seeking to enforce boundaries between such dualities as art/popular, educated/vernacular, and written/oral, and to devalue efforts that resist conforming to the notions of consonance and order in tonal music. Sonic Youth does make music audibly aligned more with noise than order, although they resist engaging in the “game of music” described by Jacques Attali in his 1985 book *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*:

The game of music thus resembles the game of power: monopolize the right to violence; provoke anxiety and then provide a feeling of security; provoke disorder and then propose order; create a problem in order to solve it.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club*, 279.

<sup>54</sup> Robert Palmer, “Noisy Rock Returns,” *New York Times*, 21 April 1985, sec. H, p. 23. Palmer praises Sonic Youth in this article, along with fellow New York bands Swans and Live Skull, for “deliberately putting the racket back in rock and roll.”

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 28.



These strategies are employed in the majority of tonal Western art music, as well as much popular music. Musicians and composers employ tactics designed to eliminate dissonances, resolve harmonic tensions, and control noise. Music that provokes disorder and anxiety without proposing the expected order, that embraces dissonance and tension without always delivering resolution, and that acknowledges problems without offering solutions subverts the “game of music.” This type of music, which I will call disruptive, could also be categorized as “uneasy listening” for its employment of noise.

Disruptive music ruptures or mutates the familiar codes listeners have learned to expect, leading to the construction of a new type of order rather than solely seeking destruction of earlier musical forms. This rupturing process was at the heart of the no wave aesthetic on which Sonic Youth built. The musicians, non-musicians, and artists-cum-musicians located in lower Manhattan in the late 1970s took it upon themselves to disgorge a chaotic “no” in reaction to what they heard as merely a continuation of familiar rock musical tropes in punk rock. Noise was a key element in this disruptive practice, carrying order within itself as well as carrying new information, making possible the creation of a new code in another network.<sup>56</sup> To employ noise in music making is to play with meaning, to suggest that an absence of meaning is a meaning in itself, which leads to art that exists on the boundaries between modernism and absurdism. Attali addresses how this approach might affect a listener, claiming the “absence of meaning in pure noise or in the meaningless repetition of a message, by unchanneling auditory sensations, frees the listener’s imagination.”<sup>57</sup> It is this freeing of the

---

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, 33.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

imagination and the creation of music unfettered by expected codes that I hear in the disruptive work of Kim Gordon within Sonic Youth.

Sonic Youth honed their pop sensibility and tempered their overtone-ridden sound world with more riffs and melodic hooks while maintaining their air of artfulness throughout the 1980s as they released more records, toured relentlessly across the United States and Europe, and went through drummers Jim Sclavunos and Bob Bert before Steve Shelley permanently took over in 1985. Although their music is categorized as rock, there is a strong art music/new music element audible in their affinity for foregrounding textural effects and disrupting the goal-oriented harmonic progressions of functional tonality. These disruptive elements were not acquired from the so-called “classic rock” they grew up listening to or the punk and new wave rock they witnessed in the clubs of New York. Moore and Ranaldo’s time spent performing composer Glenn Branca’s guitar symphonies in the early 1980s exposed them to a larger range of sonic possibilities. Moore credits Branca with enlightening him to the history behind his techniques and procedures, revealing that the Velvet Underground had worked with alternate tunings and that he had adapted compositional ideas from many twentieth-century composers: “Suddenly, I started to understand the very intriguing harmonic world that exists in classical stylings.”<sup>58</sup>

The members of Sonic Youth might have shared rock influences with the post-punk and underground rock groups with which they shared stages in the mid-1980s, but their roots kept growing outward into more esoteric musics as they continued exploring different sound worlds. The group visually documented their status as musical explorers

---

<sup>58</sup> Kyle Swenson, “Overtone Playground: Sonic Youth’s Fearless Quest for Exotic Tone,” *Guitar Player*, August 1998, 55.

by posing for a publicity photo for *Daydream Nation* (1988) outside the New York City apartment building of pioneering minimalist composer La Monte Young during a session with photographer Michael Lavine.<sup>59</sup> The manner in which they stretched out their songs on this double album frequently blurred any sense of linear time and could be heard as a nod to the spaciousness evoked by Young's use of drones in his music since the early 1960s. Sonic Youth has continued vacillating between the poles of concise three-minute pop songs and twenty-minute drone explorations ever since, with the two extremes sometimes fused in the same song—as in Gordon's episodic nine-minute and thirty-three-second "Washing Machine" from the 1995 album of the same name.

The early 1990s saw the underground rock of the 1980s transformed into "alternative music," or what commercial radio and *Billboard* magazine preferred to call "modern rock," with many independent (or "indie") label bands signing contracts with major record labels who had scorned their ilk only a few years earlier. Sonic Youth was among these bands, signing with Geffen Records subsidiary DGC in 1989 in search of better promotion and broader distribution. Although they never managed to become bona fide rock stars with hit songs on the radio and music videos in heavy rotation on MTV, Sonic Youth showed that it was possible to make the leap from indie label to major label without having to compromise their artistic integrity. The group subsequently took on the role of advisor/mentor to many younger bands, giving them music business advice and taking them on tours as opening acts. The most famous recipient of this mentoring was Nirvana, whose members always pointed to Sonic Youth when asked what kind of

---

<sup>59</sup> Azerrad, *Our Band*, 267. The photograph is reproduced on this page.

success they wished for: “a success that fostered creativity and disregarded the pressures of the market.”<sup>60</sup>

Gordon and Moore went to see Nirvana perform their first New York show at the Pyramid Club on July 18, 1989, and eventually had Nirvana open for Sonic Youth. When Nirvana signed with DGC, their decision was heavily influenced by the label’s willingness to allow Sonic Youth creative control. The commercial success of Nirvana’s *Nevermind* made 1991 “The Year Punk Broke.” This phrase was coined by Thurston Moore and was used as the title of filmmaker Dave Markey’s document of Sonic Youth’s 1991 European summer tour. Nirvana joined them on this tour, just prior to the release of *Nevermind*, and they also appear in the film both onstage and offstage. In the boom years that followed for alternative music, it became apparent no matter how much Sonic Youth reined in their experimental tendencies in favor of making accessible rock there was still something too disruptive about their music for it to achieve mass appeal.

Sonic Youth decided to be the headlining act of the Lollapalooza festival tour in 1995, and used the money they earned to build their own studio in lower Manhattan and start their own independent record label, Sonic Youth Recordings (SYR). Geffen allowed them to release their more improvisatory and experimental music on SYR, complementing the more overtly rock records they continued releasing through Geffen’s DGC label, and Sonic Youth has been operating this way since 1997. Gordon admits making more money is nice, but knows there are always strings attached, and she

---

<sup>60</sup> John Rocco, “A Note on Sonic Youth,” in *The Nirvana Companion: Two Decades of Commentary*, ed. John Rocco (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998), 43.

maintains one result of Sonic Youth not being more commercially successful is that it has allowed them to do more interesting things.<sup>61</sup>

In 1999, Sonic Youth commemorated their collective admiration for certain progressive twentieth-century music makers and celebrated the fin de siècle with a record titled *Goodbye 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. Gordon's York University art class project bandmate William Winant had gone on to become a leading avant-garde percussionist as a soloist and as a member of the Abel-Steinberg-Winant trio, in addition to being a Visiting Lecturer in the Music Department at University of California at Santa Cruz.<sup>62</sup> Sonic Youth contacted Winant to help them choose and play the material for the record, which was the fourth release on SYR.<sup>63</sup> The composers and musicians whose works were chosen include Christian Wolff, John Cage, Steve Reich, James Tenney, Nicolas Slonimsky, and Cornelius Cardew, along with Fluxus figures George Maciunas and Takehisa Kosugi. In his *Village Voice* review, Kyle Gann commented that it is hard to imagine conceptualist avant-garde music primarily from the 1960s "as anybody's 'roots,'" but he also noted that Sonic Youth succeeds in their endeavor, delivering "the most imaginatively performed compendium of that repertoire since the Ensemble Musica Negativa's great old *Music Before Revolution* set (EMI) of 1972."<sup>64</sup> Gordon and Rinaldo both graduated from art schools, and came to Sonic Youth bearing the influence of Fluxus, the loosely organized international group of avant-garde artists and composers working in a wide range of media who were opposed to artistic tradition and everything

---

<sup>61</sup> Kim Gordon, interview by Adam Higginbotham, "Up Front: This Much I Know: Kim Gordon: Rock Singer, 51, Massachusetts," *Observer* (London), June 6, 2004, Observer Magazine Pages, p. 8.

<sup>62</sup> See Winant's full biography at [http://arts.ucsc.edu/faculty/Winant/willie\\_home.htm#Biography](http://arts.ucsc.edu/faculty/Winant/willie_home.htm#Biography) (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>63</sup> See Winant's article "The Genesis of SYR4" at [http://arts.ucsc.edu/faculty/Winant/winant\\_interview.htm](http://arts.ucsc.edu/faculty/Winant/winant_interview.htm) (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>64</sup> Kyle Gann, "Roots in Outer Space," *Village Voice*, 28 December 1999, 119.

showing traces of professionalism in the arts.<sup>65</sup> George Maciunas convened the first Fluxus festival in Germany in 1962, at which the assembled artists, anti-artists, and non-artists engaged in a rapid series of performances of brief events of scored actions and music. In addition to such festivals, also known as Fluxconcerts or happenings, Fluxus activities included the publication of collections of object-based works, electronic music, correspondence art, and concrete poetry.<sup>66</sup> The concepts and the practices of Fluxus have surfaced in Gordon's work in the visual arts and within Sonic Youth, and its spirit can be found in nearly everything the group has done. *Goodbye 20<sup>th</sup> Century* is a two-compact disc release, and Sonic Youth included a video clip on the first compact disc of the group performing *Piano Piece #13 (Carpenter's Piece) (for Nam June Paik)* (1962) by Fluxus founder George Maciunas. This is an iconoclastic work in which they all take turns hammering nails into the keys of an upright piano until each key is rendered unplayable, and Gordon seems to relish occasionally missing her nails to strike the surrounding keys.

There were two women composers included in this project, Pauline Oliveros and Yoko Ono, and Oliveros wrote a new piece specifically for the record, *Six for New Time (for Sonic Youth)* (1999). Yoko Ono had been a Fluxus artist long before she met John Lennon, and wrote and performed music as well, making her one of the few role models Gordon had for combining a conceptual art background with music making. Gordon was able to formally acknowledge Ono as a disruptive foremother on this record by including her *Voice Piece for Soprano* (1961).<sup>67</sup> Gordon and Moore's then five-year-old daughter

---

<sup>65</sup> Ian Chilvers, "Fluxus," in *A Dictionary of Twentieth-Century Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 214-215.

<sup>66</sup> Michael Corris, "Fluxus," in *The Dictionary of Art*, Vol. 11, ed. Jane Turner (New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 1996), 232.

<sup>67</sup> Gordon was also able to acknowledge the aesthetics she shares with Yoko Ono when she delivered a lecture on Ono's films and performance art at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Minnesota, on April

Coco Hayley Gordon Moore “performed” its three brief screams—Ono’s score consists of these instructions: Scream. 1. against the wind 2. against the wall 3. against the sky—and this choice of performer suggests that Gordon was extending her own aesthetic genealogy by literally passing the Ono influence on to the next generation. When Sonic Youth went to Europe on the *Goodbye 20<sup>th</sup> Century* tour in summer 2001, Gordon performed the Ono piece alone most nights, although her daughter joined her onstage for its performance on June 8 in Zurich.<sup>68</sup>

Gordon also manifests her interest in promulgating the work of other disruptive women in the video project she is currently making in collaboration with Moore and media artist Andrew Kesin titled *OTHER WOMEN: Women in Avant-Garde Music*.<sup>69</sup> The project is a collection of interviews and live performances, which will eventually become a documentary celebrating women whose contributions to art and culture are often overlooked. Completed sections of the film will be screened in the South London Gallery exhibition beginning in November 2005 as part of HER NOISE, a season of installations, events, performances and screenings by a wide network of artists whose practice involves the use of sound as a medium in a number of venues across the UK and beyond throughout 2005 and 2006.<sup>70</sup>

---

8, 2001, in conjunction with the exhibition *YES YOKO ONO*. See the Walker Art Center’s press release at <http://www.walkerart.org/archive/D/B1A391F6490BB9196130.htm> (accessed July 28, 2005). Gordon also interviewed Ono for the March 2001 issue of *Interview*.

<sup>68</sup> Chris Lawrence, “SONIC YOUTH: 06/08/01 - Zurich, Switzerland @ Rote Fabrik,” Sonic Youth Concert Chronology, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/cc/060801.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>69</sup> HER NOISE, <http://www.hernoise.com/documentary.htm> (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>70</sup> HER NOISE, <http://www.hernoise.com/index.htm> (accessed July 28, 2005).

## CHAPTER TWO

### GORDON'S ROLE AND INFLUENCE: "LITTLE TROUBLE GIRL"

#### GORDON'S PREDECESSORS

Gordon has maintained a residency in the art world, but the majority of her time has been spent working in the realm of pop music, where the roles for women are somewhat more prescribed and limited. Sonic Youth has always operated as a collective, and Gordon has been one of three songwriters/vocalists/instrumentalists from its beginning, sharing the spotlight instead of playing the role of tough rock chick/"one of the boys" à la Chrissie Hynde in The Pretenders or Joan Jett, glamorous sex symbol front person à la Debbie Harry in Blondie, confessional songstress à la Joni Mitchell, or backing musician in the shadows of a star à la Tina Weymouth in Talking Heads. As Gordon sees it, the problem for women performing rock music is that "there are only three or four clichéd personalities you can be as far as the media is concerned."<sup>71</sup>

In contrast to the wide range of roles men are gender-privileged to play, women are restricted to a short list of roles such as those outlined above, and run the risk of being strictly policed if they slip out of these constructed boundaries. If a woman musician happens to convey different personality traits offstage from those of the performer-self she constructs onstage, as is the case with Gordon, the media is unsure of how she should

---

<sup>71</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 176.



be depicted. As an example, the following characterization was offered by the writer of a 1989 *Spin* article after meeting the members of Sonic Youth at their record label's office in SoHo for an interview: "Bassist Kim Gordon comes off sweet, friendly, and mildly shy, a bit odd given her convincing Boho witch get-up and a stage presence that burns with a sexuality once removed from ritual."<sup>72</sup> This portrayal of Gordon's seemingly contradictory attributes can be read as either complementary or critical, and it reveals this particular music journalist's frustration that his perception of her as a performer did not match the reality of her as a person. Another example can be seen in the 1998 year-end issue of *U.S. News & World Report*. In an article that highlighted innovators to watch in the coming year, the media's need for narrow categories can be seen in the crowning of Gordon as "rock's reigning experimental diva" and the identification of her "most important contribution" as her image—"cool and tough, yet smart and sexy"—which has "helped redefine the modern female rocker."<sup>73</sup> In a move typical of the popular media, Gordon's music is ignored in favor of celebrating her image, and the four adjectives used to describe her imply that her intelligence is somehow rare for a woman musician. As Gordon succinctly states, "unless you have a really strong, stereotypical role to put yourself in, you come across as all too human and the media can't deal with it."<sup>74</sup>

Simon Frith maintains that pop songs are more like plays than poems, but he distinguishes pop singers from play actors in two respects. First, they are "involved in a process of *double enactment*; they enact both a star personality (their image) and a song personality, the role that each lyric requires, and the pop star's art is to keep both acts in play at once," and in this manner they are similar to film stars. Secondly, the pop star,

---

<sup>72</sup> Erik Davis, "Bring the White Noise," *Spin*, January 1989, 49.

<sup>73</sup> Dorian Friedman, "Kim Gordon," *U.S. News & World Report*, December 28, 1998, 48.

<sup>74</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 176.

unlike a stage actor, is “also the site of desire—as a body, and as a person (the film star analogy still holds).”<sup>75</sup> Gordon’s creative output reveals that the role she has been most successful at playing is herself, rather than replicating any of the gendered expectations for women making popular music, and as such she has been “too human” for the popular media to neatly interpret in terms of any one clichéd female rock personality.

The tendency to limit the roles or approaches available for women making popular music also exists in the academic literature. In the chapter “Double Allegiances: The Herstory of Rock” from their 1995 book *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock ‘n’ Roll*, Simon Reynolds and Joy Press acknowledge that despite “the recurrent media crazes for ‘women in rock’, the position of female artists has always been as precarious as in male-dominated movements like Surrealism, the beats, and the counterculture.”<sup>76</sup> Reynolds and Press then examine “the scattered history of female rock rebellion” and distinguish four strategies: the “tomboy approach” of mimicking male rebellion, which they trace from Suzi Quatro through Joan Jett to L7; a confessional approach utilized by Janis Joplin, Tracy Chapman, Natalie Merchant, and Sinéad O’Connor; a masquerading approach in which femininity is “a wardrobe of masks and poses to be assumed,” exemplified by Kate Bush, Madonna, Siouxsie Sioux, and Annie Lennox; and the “all fluxed up” approach, which concerns itself with “the trauma of identity formation,” employed by Patti Smith, Rickie Lee Jones, and Throwing Muses.<sup>77</sup> Reynolds and Press admit these strategies often overlap in the careers of specific artists, but their categorization of the rebellion options for women in rock reads like armchair

---

<sup>75</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 212 (italics in original).

<sup>76</sup> Simon Reynolds and Joy Press, *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 230.

<sup>77</sup> Reynolds and Press, *Sex Revolts*, 233-34.

psychoanalysis. They include Gordon in the chapter “One of the Boys: Female Machisma,” and their discussion reduces her to a two-dimensional character:

At times, Gordon’s ‘cool chick’, delinquent image is a bit like Joan Jett with hipper reference points and a degree in modern art; this cartoon-like quality is part and parcel of Sonic Youth’s blankly ironic resurrection of rock rebel clichés.<sup>78</sup>

Although Gordon does possess a certain tomboy sensibility in her performance posture, especially in the way she rests the bodies of her various guitars on her right upper thigh and repeatedly rocks back and forth as she plays, she does not come across the footlights as being “one of the boys.” She might resemble one of the boys while playing guitar, but the femininity she constructs through vocal performance strategies and clothing choices—shaded by her lyrical critique of normative masculinity’s dominance—makes this reading of her image as a cartoon-like cliché problematic. Gordon is definitely a girl, but she is a “Little Trouble Girl,” to quote the title of the song she originally wrote for the soundtrack of Allison Anders’ film *Grace of My Heart* (1996) that appears on Sonic Youth’s *Washing Machine* (1995).

When Reynolds and Press address the music, they describe Gordon’s songs as offering “cloudy, ambivalent images of female desire and identity,” criticizing Gordon for her lyrical ambivalence rather than interpreting her approach to writing and singing open-ended lyrics as the performative gestures of an artist.<sup>79</sup> Reynolds and Press do acknowledge Gordon’s creation of personas in her lyrics, but their description of her characters on *Daydream Nation* as “either passive or out-of-control” reifies binaries gendered male/female such as aggressive/passive, rational/emotional, public/domestic, and competitive/cooperative, in addition to the binary women alone must endure,

---

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, 246.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

virgin/whore.<sup>80</sup> Gordon resists enacting the virgin/whore binary in her work, and only conveys seductiveness in her sexuality under controlled circumstances. Even then, she is employing personas as masks, and there is no sense that she is actually a seductress. Gordon resists settling into extreme states in the personas she constructs, but she does occasionally pass through them. She is more likely to express an extreme state in her music-making via non-harmonic guitar sounds, exploded song structures, or guttural vocalizing, yet even then she tends to vacillate between poles. Gordon's musical practice is dialectical, and it is more of a dialogical both/and than an either/or approach.

I think of Gordon's work as being "viscerebral," appealing to listeners on both the visceral emotional level and the cerebral plane of thinking and reasoning. Gordon's characterization of what she enjoys about making music conveys this "viscerebral" quality I hear in her work: "It's not about thinking—it's like your brain is in your body."<sup>81</sup> This is not to suggest Gordon has somehow managed to achieve a mind/body fusion. Reducing the mind/body split to simplistic terms, Gordon is more of a brainy woman who has a body than a woman who is a body and has a brain. In the Sonic Youth song "Mariah Carey and the Arthur Doyle Hand Cream," Gordon sings a line comparing the way pop star vocalist Carey is "seemingly unconscious" of her body with the way Marilyn Monroe presented herself: "Like Ms. Monroe, your head don't know exactly what your body's doing."<sup>82</sup> Unlike Carey and the image Monroe projected, Gordon's head always seems to know exactly what her body is doing.

---

<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 247.

<sup>81</sup> Gordon, "Up Front," p. 8.

<sup>82</sup> This song appeared as the A-side on a 7" vinyl split single, with Erase Errata's "Glitter" on the B-side, released by Narnack Records in 2003. It was remixed and renamed "Kim Gordon and the Arthur Doyle Hand Cream," and re-released on *Sonic Nurse* (2004).

Gordon's musical influences are not limited to the no wave and post-punk groups she encountered upon moving to New York. Her sense of phrasing, and her emphasis on rhythmic delivery of lyrics instead of a cantabile approach foregrounding melody, can be traced to vocalists Gordon favors such as Billie Holiday, Bessie Smith, and even Frank Sinatra.<sup>83</sup> In addition to the influences of American vocalists, Gordon has proclaimed her admiration for French chanteuses such as Françoise Hardy, France Gall, and Brigitte Fontaine. Gordon admits that many of her favorite rock musicians in her youth were men, but she also admired Joni Mitchell and Janis Joplin. Although Gordon cites the influence of many jazz, blues, and rock vocalists employing blues tropes in their songwriting and performance practice, Gordon has avoided emulating any of them or employing the basic harmonic structure of the blues. In the case of Janis Joplin, Gordon's admiration is focused more on the forcefulness of her voice than the particular musical choices Joplin made, as she expressed on the occasion of Sony Music's 1999 reissuing of Joplin's four studio albums as expanded and enhanced Columbia Legacy versions: "When I was a teenager, listening to her voice, I knew it as a model for not being afraid to do something which may be considered ugly in order to create something entirely original - and beautiful."<sup>84</sup> Joplin definitely disrupted gendered expectations for how a woman vocalist should sound during her brief career, through her range and timbre and expressivity. Joplin can hardly be listed as an instrumentalist role model for Gordon, though, because she was strictly a singer who fronted bands and became a star as a solo artist backed by varying groups of musicians.

---

<sup>83</sup> Kim Gordon, interview by the author, July 30, 2004, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>84</sup> Kim Gordon, "Janis Joplin Appreciations," Legacy Recordings, <http://legacyrecordings.com/janisjoplin/apprec.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

The same could be said of Patti Smith, despite her occasional forays into playing clarinet or guitar in the 1970s during certain songs with her band. Smith's retirement from the music business in 1979 to raise a family in Detroit with her husband, former MC5 guitarist and Sonic's Rendezvous Band leader Fred "Sonic" Smith, meant she was gone from the stage by the time Gordon arrived in New York. Yoko Ono, who was educated as an artist and began making music with her husband later in her life, is perhaps the truest example of an intermedia predecessor for Gordon, although Ono was always "Mrs. Lennon"—an identity she immortalized in her song of the same name on her album *Fly* (1971)—or a solo artist backed by a rotating cast of musicians and never a member of a working band. Tina Weymouth is another woman musician who was educated as a visual artist. Weymouth began making music in the early 1970s while still in college at Rhode Island School of Design with fellow students drummer Chris Frantz, who was also her boyfriend, and guitarist/vocalist David Byrne, as the bass player in their band the Artistics.<sup>85</sup> Byrne was the primary songwriter in the band that became the Talking Heads when the three RISD graduates moved to New York in 1975, which resulted in Weymouth's role being in the background as half of the rhythm section supporting Byrne's songs and his role as an iconic front man. Weymouth's bass playing was in keeping with Talking Heads' blend of melodic pop and funk, a style further explored in the side-project group Tom Tom Club she formed in 1980 with Frantz, whom she had married in 1977. Weymouth's emphasis on funk in her playing also makes her a less important musical influence on Gordon.

---

<sup>85</sup> Gaar, *She's a Rebel*, 212.

## GORDON'S ROLE

Aside from some of the women who played in the post-punk bands she saw upon arriving in New York, Gordon had few role models for being an equal member of a mixed-gender band making disruptive music, and thus had to create a role for herself within Sonic Youth. In her 1987 tour diary, Gordon describes the reality of how before picking up an instrument she was “just another girl with a fantasy,” wondering what it would be like “to be right under the pinnacle of energy, beneath two guys crossing their guitars, two thunderfoxes in the throes of self-love and male bonding,” and contrasts that with the reality of being a woman on the road with a band:

In the middle of the stage, where I stand as the bass player of Sonic Youth, the music comes at me from all directions. The most heightened state of being female is watching people watch you.<sup>86</sup>

Gordon also contrasts the “simple pop structures” that sustain Madonna’s image and allow her “real self” to remain a mystery with the ambiguity that Sonic Youth’s “dissonance and blurred melody” create, and describes this as “a context that allows me to be anonymous.”<sup>87</sup> Gordon realizes that the type of music she makes, which challenges the hegemony of the melodious pop song designed for mass appeal, further marginalizes her in terms of popular culture acceptance and also diminishes her chances of appearing at the top of the insidiously recurring “Women In Rock” lists:

In America, the mainstream doesn’t consider you if you’re a woman making what they see as annoying music. That’s why people like Chrissie Hynde were never a role model for me. She fitted right in.<sup>88</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> Kim Gordon, “Boys are Smelly: Sonic Youth Tour Diary, ’87,” in *Rock She Wrote*, [ed.] Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Dell, Delta, 1995), 66. Gordon’s tour diary was originally published in *The Village Voice Rock & Roll Quarterly*, October 12-18, 1988.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>88</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 124.

In his 2002 book *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Björk*, Bill Martin includes an assessment of Sonic Youth's musical importance in which he devotes a paragraph to what he calls the "feminist element" Gordon brings to the band as an equal member who has written many songs with feminist themes.<sup>89</sup> What Martin finds most intriguing about Gordon's contribution to Sonic Youth is her willingness to resist the pressure on women rock singers to sound "pretty" in favor of singing in an unsettling manner.<sup>90</sup> Sonic Youth biographer Alec Foege's claim that prior to Gordon, women in rock were more likely to develop a vocal style and maintain it than to play with the "different, dark personas implied by shifting deliveries" ignores the work of Yoko Ono and Patti Smith—just two of the most obvious stylistic foremothers for Gordon.<sup>91</sup> Foege is correct, however, in contrasting the freedom male rock singers have always been allowed in exploring various vocal styles and ranges to the restrictions placed on women, but to suggest that Gordon is a pioneer in this regard is to accept the paltry genealogy that passes for history every time *Rolling Stone* decides to foist another "Women In Rock" special issue on the public.

Gordon is careful not to exploit her relationship to guitarist/vocalist Thurston Moore because, as she says, "I like to feel like I'm an individual."<sup>92</sup> Their working relationship has rarely traded on their romantic union for promotional purposes, and on one of the few occasions it ever has—in the music video for "Titanium Exposé" from *Goo* (1990), which includes a scene of them amorously (and at the same time ironically)

---

<sup>89</sup> Bill Martin, *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Björk* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 120. The songs Martin lists as examples are "Tunic (Song for Karen)," "Kool Thing," and "Swimsuit Issue."

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 226.

<sup>92</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 174.



making out on the bed in their apartment—the visuals are oddly jarring. The only Sonic Youth song Gordon sings as a duet with Moore is “Cotton Crown,” from *Sister* (1987). It is one of the few musical moments on record in which their marriage comes to the foreground, and their union is underscored by their unison singing. This song has been described as a love song, but if that label is correct then it is somehow conveyed solely through the musical codes of a simple stepwise vocal melody in major mode with light instrumental accompaniment played at a slow tempo. The opening lines offer this declaration: “Love has come to stay in all the way/It’s gonna stay forever and every day”, but this use of love could just as easily be referring to the abstract concept as to a love between two people. The term is open to interpretation, making this more of a song about love than a love song. There is no chorus, and no outright pledge of love, but when Gordon and Moore repeat the phrase “I got your cotton crown” in unison at the end, it is tempting to hear some type of loving sentiment in this ambiguous refrain, but the lyrics as sung do not communicate any such emotion. “Cotton Crown” is not one of the more frequently performed songs in the Sonic Youth catalog, and when it is Moore sings the vocal alone, further reducing any sense of it as a unified declaration of love.

Gordon always seems like an individual member of the band, whether in photographs, videos, performance, or interviews, and not the wife of the rock star who gets to play with the group via matrimonial nepotism—what might be dubbed the “Linda McCartney Syndrome.” Alec Foege remarked upon this after visiting the band at Sear Studio in Manhattan during recording sessions for *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* (1994), noting Gordon and Moore “rarely exchange the in-public glances and

touches of most married couples.”<sup>93</sup> Michael Azerrad refutes any assumption that the couple might form an alliance upsetting the power balance within Sonic Youth’s group dynamic, claiming “although it would be easy to assume that Gordon and Moore would side together on most issues, it was in fact as likely for the two of them to disagree with each other as with anyone else in the band.”<sup>94</sup> In his 2003 article on Sonic Youth in *Entertainment Weekly*, David Browne acknowledges the “professional, unlovey-dovey decorum” Gordon and Moore maintain, offering as proof early Sonic Youth drummer Bob Bert’s observation from his tenure in the band: “You wouldn’t have ever known they were a couple.”<sup>95</sup>

When *People* profiled Gordon and Moore in a 1996 article, the photographs depicted them playing on the floor with their then 23-month-old daughter Coco and out for lunch with Coco in a restaurant, images of two rock musicians as domesticated parents. There was also a photograph of Gordon alone shopping for diapers in a drugstore, perhaps to help illustrate her adherence to certain feminized duties for readers curious as to why she waited until the age of 41 to become a mother. Gordon claims she did not become a mother sooner because she did not feel like she was ready, despite the fact that she and Moore had been married nearly ten years and had always wanted to have children.<sup>96</sup> By offering what is a stereotypically male reason for postponing parenthood, Gordon manages to disrupt gender norms in America’s most mainstream celebrity magazine despite its attempts to visually manipulate readings of her behavior.

---

<sup>93</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 12.

<sup>94</sup> Azerrad, *Our Band*, 272.

<sup>95</sup> David Browne, “The Greats—Sonic Youth,” *Entertainment Weekly*, March 7, 2003, 47.

<sup>96</sup> Steve Dougherty and Luchina Fisher, “Sonic Youth Won’t Leave Home Without Their Rockabye Baby,” *People*, June 10, 1996, 138.

Describing a band as being like a family is to invoke what Deena Weinstein calls “the mother of all rock clichés,” and it smooths over the reality of organizational dynamics that dictates different group members play different roles.<sup>97</sup> One of the non-musical roles Gordon has played within Sonic Youth is that of the band’s business conscience.<sup>98</sup> The members of Sonic Youth have always described the band as a collective, with everyone having a say in decisions ranging from songwriting to merchandising, and the media has sometimes bolstered this notion.<sup>99</sup> Songwriting is the only act of creativity in the music industry for which some individual band members can make more money than others, and the fact that Sonic Youth has always split publishing royalties for their songs equally is the primary evidence supporting their claim of egalitarianism. Claims of collectivity notwithstanding, writers sometimes declare Thurston Moore Sonic Youth’s *de facto* leader, which conforms to the romantic ideal of the creative individual as charismatic leader. While Moore’s role includes being the band’s most prolific source of musical ideas, he credits Gordon with the responsibility for the band’s business relationship with their record label, Geffen Records.<sup>100</sup>

There are different spheres of creativity beyond songwriting that remain largely unacknowledged in band dynamics, such as sonics, lyrical themes, and visual representation.<sup>101</sup> As a result of Gordon’s background in visual arts and her connections

---

<sup>97</sup> Deena Weinstein, “Creativity and Band Dynamics,” in *This is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project*, ed. Eric Weisbard (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 188.

<sup>98</sup> Azerrad, *Our Band*, 239.

<sup>99</sup> Gina Vivinetto, “The Long Life of Sonic Youth,” *St. Petersburg (Florida) Times*, Floridian section, 3 June 2004, South Pinellas edition, 1E. In this article, Vivinetto claims: “If one band has schooled the indie rock world in feminism and egalitarianism, it’s Sonic Youth.”

<sup>100</sup> David Fricke, “The Rolling Stone Interview with Sonic Youth’s Thurston Moore,” *Rolling Stone*, 22 September 1994, 57. Moore tells Fricke how he handled the record label’s misperception that he was in charge: “It got to the point where I finally had to put out a memo saying, ‘Look, don’t ask me these questions. She’s the one who has it all together.’”

<sup>101</sup> Weinstein, “Creativity,” 193.

with the contemporary art world, she has always made the band's visual representation a key part of her role within Sonic Youth. One of the ways Gordon has done this is by contributing album cover art, both as an artist and as a curator of sorts. For example, one of Gordon's drawings that was initially used for an Arcadians gig flier in 1981 was reused as the cover art for *Confusion Is Sex* (1983).<sup>102</sup> One of the contemporary artists Gordon knows is Gerhard Richter, considered by many art critics to be one of the most significant German artists of the postwar era, and she brought his paintings to the band's attention. Two of Richter's photorealist works, *Kerze* (1982) and *Kerze* (1983), were chosen to grace the front and back covers of *Daydream Nation* (1988), the double album most critics regard as Sonic Youth's masterpiece.

One of Gordon's longest-running associations is with artist Mike Kelley, whom she met in Los Angeles during her student days at Otis in the 1970s. They drove cross-country when she moved to New York, and the two have gone back and forth in supporting each other. In a 1985 *Artforum* article titled "American Prayers," Gordon praised what she described as the "juvenile energy" of Kelley's work as well as his use of "structuralist devices to make fun of the myth of rational thought which led to the myth of progress."<sup>103</sup> Kelley used Sonic Youth as the band providing incidental music for a performance art piece staged like a rock concert titled *Plato's Cave, Rothko's Chapel, Lincoln's Profile*, performed at Artists Space in New York in 1986.<sup>104</sup> Gordon and Sonic Youth later chose Kelley's series of stuffed animal portraits titled *Ahh...Youth!* (1991) for

---

<sup>102</sup> See the *Confusion Is Sex* cover art at <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/lp/lp01f.jpg> (accessed July 18, 2005).

<sup>103</sup> Kim Gordon, "American Prayers," *Artforum International* 23, April 1985, 76.

<sup>104</sup> Timothy Martin, "Janitor in a Drum: Excerpts from a Performance History," in *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, by Elisabeth Sussman; with contributions by Richard Armstrong...[et al.] (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 80-81.

the artwork on their album *Dirty* (1992). Gordon also contributed an essay titled “Is It My Body?” to the book published on the occasion of the Whitney Museum of American Art’s mid-career survey exhibition *Mike Kelley* in 1993, reflecting on the “charismatic, E.T.-like emotional quality that the front cover image came to possess” once *Dirty* was released.<sup>105</sup>

Gordon has brought her relationships with other visual artists—such as Tony Oursler, Raymond Pettibon, and James Welling—to bear on the band’s commercial images, proving she is as adept a cultural producer as her similarly well-connected male bandmates. In addition to the images she has created or helped curate for Sonic Youth’s records and merchandising, Gordon has also contributed significantly to the band’s music videos. Gordon’s bandmates credit her throughout the band’s commentary tracks on *Corporate Ghost* (2004), the DVD compiling Sonic Youth’s music videos from 1990–2002, with contacting directors and filmmakers—such as Tamra Davis and Richard Kern—and providing them specific visual ideas, confirming her prominence in this sphere of creativity.

Gordon’s identity as a cultural producer within Sonic Youth is enhanced by her continued involvement in visual arts outside the group. In referring to the six songs Gordon wrote on *Dirty* (1992), Foege stresses she “reasserted her status as an artist first and woman second (or equally).”<sup>106</sup> Gordon has always maintained this distinction, and her overall creative output supports the claim that she is an artist who at one point

---

<sup>105</sup> Kim Gordon, “Is It My Body?” in *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, by Elisabeth Sussman; with contributions by Richard Armstrong...[et al.] (New York: Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1993), 180.

<sup>106</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 225.

decided to also make music.<sup>107</sup> Although paint was never her primary medium, Gordon began painting again in 1993 while she was pregnant, after years of not picking up a brush.<sup>108</sup> Many of her paintings and mixed media works present slight variations on a human face that is arguably more feminine than masculine in its features and hair style but is ultimately gender ambiguous. These images could be seen as self-portraits, or as portraits of Gordon's multiple selves. Gordon had her first New York City solo art show in spring 2003 at the gallery Participant Inc., a site-specific installation titled *Stairway (Is It My Body?)*, incorporating recent and new works in painting, sculpture, video and sound.<sup>109</sup> In fall 2003, Gordon mounted a collaborative installation with Jutta Koether titled *Club in the Shadow*, described as "a neighborhood art club" and a "clubhouse offering culture and entertainment," that remained up for a little over one month at Kenny Schachter Contemporary in Manhattan's West Village.<sup>110</sup> The installation included a video lounge and performance spaces for poetry, noise, and music events. Gordon had some of her favorite young female musicians perform, including the women in the mixed-gender groups White Magic and Double Leopards. Both of these bands later toured with Sonic Youth as opening acts, and Gordon's inclusion of them in the installation's programming exemplifies how she invests her cultural capital in the future of women making challenging music.

---

<sup>107</sup> Gordon's personal website within Sonic Youth's official site buttresses this notion in its title: "kim gordon artist portfolio." Still images of her artwork and a portfolio film are viewable at <http://www.sonicyouth.com/dotsonics/kim/index.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>108</sup> Holly Day, "Sonic Youth," *Ink 19*, May 2000, [http://www.ink19.com/issues\\_F/00\\_05/ink\\_spots/sonic\\_youth.shtml](http://www.ink19.com/issues_F/00_05/ink_spots/sonic_youth.shtml) (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>109</sup> See the gallery exhibition description at <http://www.participantinc.org/past23.htm> (accessed July 28, 2005); See Stefano Giovannini's photographs of the opening at <http://stefanogiovannini.com/portfolios/sonicyouthpics/kim-art-opening/kimsopening.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>110</sup> Kenny Schachter Contemporary, "The Club in the Shadow," RoveTV, <http://www.rovetv.net/kg&jkpress.html> (accessed July 28, 2005).

## GORDON'S INFLUENCE

Kim Gordon is moderately famous. She is famous enough to sometimes be included in the lists that daily newspapers print of celebrities celebrating their birthdays, or to be approached for an autograph while out to eat. Gordon has never courted fame, so it follows that she is not as recognizable as some publicity-driven popular musicians who crave media attention. The argument could be made that Sonic Youth exists on “the margins of cultural consciousness,” therefore Gordon’s disruption of gender norms fails to enter the widespread popular culture and destabilize gender stereotypes in everyday life.<sup>111</sup> In response to Sonic Youth’s omission from the October 25, 1993, *Time* cover story “Rock’s Anxious Rebels,” which profiled the stars of the newly-profitable “alternative rock” scene, band biographer Foege posed this question: “No hit singles, no gold albums, little MTV airplay, no drug habits—why should that be surprising?”<sup>112</sup> Although Sonic Youth’s lack of platinum records might qualify them as economic fringe-dwellers, Gordon and her bandmates are big enough celebrities to have appeared as themselves on an episode of *The Simpsons*. The episode, titled “Homerpalooza,” features Sonic Youth performing as part of a rock festival called “Hullabalooza” meant to spoof the traveling Lollapalooza alternative music festival.<sup>113</sup>

Lollapalooza began in 1991 as the idealistic dream of Jane’s Addiction singer Perry Farrell, but it had turned into a corporate-sponsored behemoth by the mid-1990s.

---

<sup>111</sup> Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 211.

<sup>112</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 8.

<sup>113</sup> Episode Guide, “Welcome to The Simpsons.com,” [http://www.thesimpsons.com/episode\\_guide/0724.htm](http://www.thesimpsons.com/episode_guide/0724.htm) (accessed July 28, 2005). “Homerpalooza” is Episode 724, 3F21; original airdate: May 19, 1996.

Gordon had played for part of the 1993 Lollapalooza tour on the Second Stage with Free Kitten, a side-project band she formed in 1992 with her best friend and former Pussy Galore guitarist Julie Cafritz, and Sonic Youth had been the headliners of the 1995 Lollapalooza tour, which increased the satirical force of their animated television appearance. All of the band members have lines in the episode, but it is Gordon who delivers the ironic zinger critiquing the crass commercialism of the festival instead of Moore, Ranaldo, or Shelley. Lee Ranaldo expresses disillusionment after Homer backs out of being shot in the stomach by a cannon as part of Hullabalooza's freak show, and Gordon replies: "Hey, Hullabalooza isn't about freaks; it's about music, and advertisement, and youth-oriented product positioning."<sup>114</sup> Gordon is merely delivering a line written by others, but the choice by the show's writers to give this line to Gordon rather than one of her bandmates suggests their awareness of her penchant for expressing social commentary. Sonic Youth also recorded an altered version of the show's theme song that a group of stereotypically "alternative" teenagers danced to while the end credits played.<sup>115</sup> In addition to appearing on television's longest-running animated series, Sonic Youth was featured in 2003 in an *Entertainment Weekly* series devoted to chronicling "popular culture's modern masters," which should be sufficient evidence to locate Gordon's work inside any margins of cultural consciousness.<sup>116</sup>

Gordon is acutely aware of the influence her image might have on young women, and has consciously monitored her behavior with this in mind:

I've always tried to be as ordinary as possible, because for me it's really important for some other girl to see that I don't have to be a freak or a

---

<sup>114</sup> Quote found at <http://www.westegg.com/simpsons/> (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>115</sup> Hear the altered version at [http://www.simpsoncrazy.com/downloads/music/endcredits\\_sonicyouth.mp3](http://www.simpsoncrazy.com/downloads/music/endcredits_sonicyouth.mp3) (accessed July 28, 2005).

<sup>116</sup> Browne, "The Greats," 39.



drug addict or have a Siouxsie Sioux persona and I can still be creative, and I can still express myself in a powerful way—just by being myself.<sup>117</sup>

Gordon is wary of the bad girl/bad boy attitude prevalent in rock ‘n’ roll, and finds performers who strip themselves of it more exciting for the vulnerability they convey.<sup>118</sup> Although her onstage demeanor has been described as cool or tough, Gordon projects an air of openness in her resistance of rock rebellion clichés. Corin Tucker, vocalist and guitarist in all-female trio Sleater-Kinney, admits she is smitten by Gordon’s stage presence, describing her as multidimensional and sexy in a way that defies objectification.<sup>119</sup> When Gordon claims her goal is to be as ordinary as possible, there is no suggestion that she equates ordinary with the notion of authenticity or realness. Gordon’s sense of ordinary allows for multiple perspectives and identities within one personality. Gordon’s use of the term echoes her sentiment from the *Odyshape* liner notes regarding the women in the Raincoats as “ordinary people playing extraordinary music,” and it indicates a self-awareness of her place within the genealogy of disruptive women musicians she has constructed.

Gordon is frequently referred to as the “Godmother of Grunge,” the “Godmother of alternative rock,” the original “Riot Mom,” and other similar sobriquets, and is mentioned as an important influence on Courtney Love or the Riot Grrrl movement, but she does not accept or endorse these media-bestowed titles. The musical and visual aesthetics of Riot Grrrl, an anti-establishment feminist movement of the early 1990s dedicated to empowering young women through forming rock bands and publishing fanzines challenging male dominance of indie rock, bore little resemblance to Gordon’s

---

<sup>117</sup> Gordon, “Own Words,” 176-77.

<sup>118</sup> Robin Eisgrau, “X Girl,” *Paper*, March 1994, 33.

<sup>119</sup> Donna Gaines, “Let’s Talk About Sex,” *Rolling Stone*, 13 November 1997, 91.

work within Sonic Youth, and she downplayed any direct influence whenever asked by the press for a comment. Gordon befriended Riot Grrrl activist Kathleen Hanna and her band Bikini Kill in the early 1990s, and did speak out in support of the loosely organized movement, but she also acknowledged the inherent limitations for women musicians once the term Riot Grrrl came to be “used extensively by the media to label just about any aggressive all-girl band.”<sup>120</sup> In a 1993 *Rolling Stone* article examining the culture of Riot Grrrls, Gordon succinctly distanced herself from any official involvement: “I don’t have anything against it. But I’ve been doing what I do for ten years.”<sup>121</sup> In a 1994 interview, Kathleen Hanna clarified that Gordon didn’t influence her in the past as much as she did at that point with her work in Free Kitten, to which she added this declamatory gush: “Free Kitten proves that girls invented not only punk rock—but also film theory, performance art, fashion and everything else.”<sup>122</sup>

Gordon was included among the “100 Fearless Women” featured in the fifth anniversary issue of *Mirabella* in June 1994, appearing alongside Lily Tomlin, Kitty Carlisle Hart, Elizabeth Taylor, and Bernice Reagon in the “Imperial” category. Also in that issue, music journalist Karen Schoemer described Gordon as a role model in an article reflecting on how many women musicians had played in her favorite indie rock bands during the 1980s. Schoemer calls Gordon the “undisputed queen of her generation,” a title she holds “because she’s tougher, smarter, sexier and more daring

---

<sup>120</sup> Sarah Gamble, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism* (London: Routledge, 2001), 306.

<sup>121</sup> Kim France, “Grrrls at War,” *Rolling Stone*, 8 July 1993 – 22 July 1993, 24.

<sup>122</sup> Eisgrau, “X Girl,” 34.

than any of the others, and because her band is the most groundbreaking and influential of the indies.”<sup>123</sup>

Gordon’s influence extends beyond the musical and visual art worlds, and she has inspired both women and men. For example, Gordon played a part in launching the career of filmmaker Spike Jonze. Gordon was impressed by a skateboarding video Jonze made in the early 1990s titled *Video Days*, and contacted him about contributing similar footage to the music video for “100%” from *Dirty* (1992).<sup>124</sup> Jonze ended up acting and skating in the video as well as providing action shots of fellow skaters Jason Lee and Guy Mariano, which earned him a co-director credit with Tamra Davis.<sup>125</sup> In her commentary track for “100%” on the *Corporate Ghost* DVD, Davis speaks of Jonze not expressing any interest in becoming a cameraperson or a director at the time, an attitude that seems comical in retrospect. At Gordon’s request, Jonze went on to help her direct music videos for “Cannonball” and “Divine Hammer” for the Breeders. After these initial experiences, Jonze created enough memorable and award-winning music videos to merit a DVD titled *The Work of Director Spike Jonze* (2003), and eventually began making critically acclaimed feature films such as *Being John Malkovich* (1999) and *Adaptation* (2002).

Music journalist Maria Raha notes Gordon’s influence in her 2005 book *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*, in which she claims that during the 1980s, “Gordon was one of the only women almost every girl in the indie

---

<sup>123</sup> Karen Schoemer, “Karen Schoemer’s High Notes: Rock and Role Models,” *Mirabella*, June 1994, 160.

<sup>124</sup> Ethan Smith, “Spike Jonze Unmasked,” *New York*, 25 October 1999, 104.

<sup>125</sup> Jonze tells the story of how Gordon invited him to work on “100%,” in addition to sharing many other tales, while narrating some of the photographs he has taken of Sonic Youth over the years in “Spike’s Eye,” a bonus feature included on *Corporate Ghost*.

underground could claim as a role model.”<sup>126</sup> Raha does not acknowledge Gordon’s publishing history of articles about art and music, as well as interviews of artists and musicians, as influencing her to become a writer, but she does attribute the source of her book’s title to one of Gordon’s songs on *Goo* (1990), describing its appropriation as a nod to Gordon for acting as a remote mentor as she discovered herself.<sup>127</sup>

Gordon is flattered by young women who write to her saying she inspired them to start their own bands, and she thought it was sweet when two girls approached her after a show one night and asked: “Will you be our mother?”<sup>128</sup> Gordon’s influence as a mother will be limited to her own daughter, but her influence as a disruptive woman musician who successfully established a role for herself as an equal contributing member of a mixed-gender band will continue to be felt as long as her work is heard and seen.

---

<sup>126</sup> Maria Raha, *Cinderella’s Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground* (Emeryville, Calif.: Seal Press, 2005), 133.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>128</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 118.

## CHAPTER THREE

## CAUSING GENDER TROUBLE: “BETTING ON THE BULL IN THE HEATHER”

In her book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler theorizes gender as “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”<sup>129</sup> In Butler’s view, gender only exists “as a *corporeal style*, an ‘act,’ as it were, which is both intentional and performative, where ‘*performative*’ suggests a dramatic and contingent construction of meaning.”<sup>130</sup> In other words, gender is not inherent in the body, but rather is a construction achieved through repeated performance. Gender is similar to music in its contingency, in that it comes into being through performance. Butler’s approach is useful because it allows us to see beyond gender as “natural,” and to examine the ways it is constructed and negotiated in a cultural context. Kim Gordon causes what Butler calls “gender trouble” in her music-making and performance strategies, subverting “naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony” by presenting multiple gender identities that parody femininity and call into question the dominance of normative masculinity in popular music.<sup>131</sup> Gordon enacts gender in her music-making through various vocal styles,

---

<sup>129</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990; New York: Routledge, 1999), 43-44. Citations are to the 1999 edition.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 177 (italics in original).

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

personas, lyrical perspectives, wardrobe choices and performance postures, demonstrating the constructedness of gender while also disrupting gendered expectations for women making popular music. This chapter provides analysis of Gordon's gender performativity through discussion of the music-making and performance strategies she has utilized throughout her career. I focus first on the strategies of homeovestism in wardrobe choices and gender slippage in selected songs, and then analyze the song "Bull in the Heather" and its accompanying music video.

#### GORDON'S HOMEOVESTISM

A woman rock musician can expose the performativity of gender as much as she likes in music videos and on stage, but she still must contend with the reality of her sex in the materiality of her body on a daily basis. Biological characteristics provide visual cues for identifying differences between females and males, and yet anyone can alter or disguise his or her appearance in negotiating gender and constructing gender identity. The possibilities for alteration range from the extremes of cosmetic surgery and sex reassignment surgery to surface treatments involving makeup, hair, and wardrobe choices. In the years since becoming a performer, Gordon has bypassed makeup application or hairstyle changes in favor of fashion in revealing the constructedness of gender.

Gordon's fashion sense throughout her career has ranged from nerdy bohemian androgyny (oversized eyeglass frames with flip-up sunglasses attached, flak jackets and vests, pants tucked into boots), to boyish comfort (blue jeans, t-shirts), to flamboyant fashionista (form-fitting tops, boas, skintight patterned pants, star-spangled flairs, cut-off

shorts over tights, cowboy boots), and to conventional feminine (dresses, blouses with knee-length skirts, slingback heels). When she is dressed as a “woman,” she tends to favor bold colors and combinations such as pink and black. Since the early 1990s, Gordon has consistently revealed her sex in her clothing choices for stage performance rather than cross-dressing as “one of the boys,” and as her wardrobe has become more stereotypically “feminine” she has drawn more attention to the gendered expectations of appearance for women making rock music. There is a perceivable quality of masquerade to Gordon performing in designer dresses, blouses with knee-length skirts, and high heels, especially when contrasted with her Sonic Youth bandmates’ continued adherence to the indie rock “uniform” of jeans, t-shirts or thrift store dress shirts, and low-cut sneakers. In the chapter “Where the Ladies At? Rebel Girls, Riot Grrrls and the Revenge on the Mother” from his 2004 book *Hip: The History*, John Leland describes Gordon: “As the center of attention, strapped into a phallic guitar, she is a woman playing a man playing a woman, and setting each role aside in quotation marks.”<sup>132</sup>

One way to interpret Gordon’s feminine wardrobe choices is to view her as employing the tactic of homeovestism, which in the case of a female homeovestite entails a woman dressing up as a woman in the theatrical manner of masquerade.<sup>133</sup>

Homeovestism is a term coined by psychoanalyst George Zavitzianos in a 1972 article in which he builds on the ideas of psychoanalyst Joan Riviere from her 1929 paper “Womanliness as a Masquerade.” Riviere provided case studies of intellectual women working in what were traditionally considered “masculine” occupations, and observed that as these women were expected to display such “masculine” traits as ambition in

---

<sup>132</sup> John Leland, *Hip: The History* (New York: Ecco, 2004), 257.

<sup>133</sup> Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen, *Female Fetishism* (Washington Square: New York University Press, 1995), 70.

order to succeed they engaged in exaggerated displays of femininity, in which womanliness was worn like a mask both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if they were found to possess it.<sup>134</sup> Gordon does not utilize feminine clothing as fetish objects to obtain sexual pleasure, nor is she engaging in a fetishism of commodities that confer femininity, and she does not appear to be using feminine clothing to hide masculine traits. Instead, I contend Gordon engages in homeovestism in the sense of the term used by Gillian Rodger. Rodger describes Annie Lennox as employing homeovestism as a performance strategy to expose the performativity of gender. Rodger discusses Lennox's employment of it in terms of Judith Butler's theory of the subversive reiteration of gender roles, which focuses primarily on male-to-female drag, and argues "homeovestism rather than transvestism may provide a more effective means for heterosexual women, and possibly all women, to question and undermine contemporary constructions of femininity."<sup>135</sup> Gordon does not tend to portray specific characters based on feminine stereotypes in her songs in the way Lennox often does, but she does share Lennox's approach to image and style as constructs to be played with. In this sense, Gordon can be seen as working in the space Lennox has helped open up for women making popular music that does not rely primarily on youth or prettiness.

Despite the portrayal of punk rock in the popular and academic literature as a genre that opened up or reordered spaces for female musicians, it did little to change the image expectations for women in the music industry. The significance MTV came to have during the 1980s in promoting musicians led to an increased demand for slick,

---

<sup>134</sup> Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 306.

<sup>135</sup> Gillian Rodger, "Drag, camp and gender subversion in the music and videos of Annie Lennox," *Popular Music* 23 (2004): 26.



sexual presentations, which in turn caused the music industry to resume promoting conventional images of women performers as glamorous front-line singers.<sup>136</sup> As one of three front-line singers in Sonic Youth, Gordon only fronts the band on stage during the songs she sings. Her use of feminine glamour is a tactic she has employed more as she has aged, but she admits her motivation for this type of homeovestism comes primarily from a desire to reject the cliché of the alternative rock “look” that was codified and exploited by the advertising industry in the wake of grunge, rather than from the desire to increase her sex appeal.<sup>137</sup> Alec Foege maintains that for those who know her, Gordon was clearly playing “rock star” in the “Kool Thing” music video, in which she mugs for the camera in a variety of alluring outfits, but the irony in her performance was perhaps lost on many young viewers who saw it on MTV and took her for yet another in a long line of sexually provocative women in rock.<sup>138</sup> Gordon has described her use of clothes as a visual outlet, and she is cognizant of the power costumes can bestow:

To me, I’m a pseudo-sex symbol. Doing the video shows that anyone can do it. You utilize it, put it on for a moment and use it.<sup>139</sup>

Gordon has continued causing the “gender trouble” she used to make in music videos on stage through her wardrobe choices and her performance tactics. During the 2002 tour to support *Murray Street*, Gordon frequently performed wearing a pink oxford blouse with rolled up cuffs and a skinny black necktie, a black miniskirt over fishnet stockings, and slingback heels. In this ensemble, Gordon suggested an executive call girl or possibly a waitress. Prostitution and waiting tables are two occupations gendered as

---

<sup>136</sup> Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2000), 114.

<sup>137</sup> Kim Gordon, interview by the author, July 30, 2004, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>138</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 210. I provide a full analysis of “Kool Thing” in Chapter 4.

<sup>139</sup> Ignacio Julià and Jaime Gonzalo, *Sonic Youth: I Dreamed of Noise* (Barcelona: Ruta 66, 1994), 112.

feminine, and they represent the limitations women seeking work outside of the domestic realm have long encountered. By contrast, rock musician is an occupation strongly gendered as masculine, which heightens the critique encoded in this particular wardrobe choice by Gordon. She wore a variation of this outfit—with a slightly tighter white oxford blouse paired with a dark brown skirt—for the band photo accompanying the 2003 *Entertainment Weekly* article on Sonic Youth, and added a withering gaze that seemed directed towards readers who might be idly browsing through the magazine and pause to decide whether or not she is attractive. Gordon can also be seen wearing this same outfit in performance clips included in the music video for “The Empty Page” on the *Corporate Ghost* DVD. Gordon’s repetition of this particular stylization of her body is an example of a contingent act that produces what Butler calls the “appearance of substance” in gender construction. Gordon’s wardrobe choices are acts framed by the stage, the photograph, and the screen on which music videos are viewed, and within these frames her expressions of gender expose how the illusion of “natural” identities such as prostitute or waitress are constructed. As she has aged, and the visual outlet of music videos has diminished,<sup>140</sup> Gordon has increasingly tended to select a few outfits to wear for the entirety of a tour or in the promotional photos for a particular album.

---

<sup>140</sup> In the first decade of the twenty-first century, record labels have turned away from financing music videos for all of their acts in favor of only promoting those with the greatest chance of stardom, and as MTV has reduced the percentage of airtime devoted to music videos in favor of its own “reality” programming, groups such as Sonic Youth have ceased to be concerned with making videos for the purposes of mass promotion. In the group’s commentary track for “The Empty Page” on the *Corporate Ghost* DVD, Thurston Moore admits that the band has not had the budget to make videos for the last couple of records and explains how this particular video was conceptualized as a documentary of the band rehearsing, performing, and interacting with fans while on tour. Lee Ranaldo relates that this video was shot with a digital camcorder and edited on a Macintosh PowerBook laptop computer by the band’s filmmaker/designer friend and official webmaster Chris Habib, marking a return to Sonic Youth’s D.I.Y. indie rock roots.

Gordon has been able to incorporate more decidedly stylish clothes into her stage wardrobe as a result of befriending certain fashion designers, most notably Marc Jacobs. Marc Jacobs' connection with Sonic Youth was documented in 1992, when his infamous grunge collection was featured in the music video for "Sugar Kane," which starred a young Chloë Sevigny as a vulnerable novice model among the runway professionals. Gordon has joined the likes of Sofia Coppola and Winona Ryder as women Jacobs dresses who have also become his friends, and she frequently performs in his dresses.<sup>141</sup> When I asked Gordon, in a playful "red carpet reporter" tone of voice, "who" she had been wearing onstage following Sonic Youth's performance in Milwaukee on 30 July 2004, she matter-of-factly replied: "Marc Jacobs."<sup>142</sup> She had changed into a t-shirt and jeans by the time anyone came backstage that night, reinforcing the sense that her dresses are costumes meant for performance, tools employed to reveal the constructedness of femininity.

#### GENDER SLIPPAGE IN THE MUSIC

Gordon feels that performing in "the swirl of Sonic Youth music makes me forget about being a girl," which is to say she likes "being in a weak position and making it strong."<sup>143</sup> In her 2002 book *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul*, Lucy O'Brien addresses the idea of freedom that women who are in bands with men can potentially experience, maintaining that when the mixed-gender arrangement is successful, less attention is on the "novelty" tag and women are paradoxically freer to be

---

<sup>141</sup> Cynthia Robins, "Jacobs' celebrity clients quickly become friends," *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 August 2000, D3.

<sup>142</sup> Kim Gordon, interview with the author, July 30, 2004, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>143</sup> Gordon, "Boys are Smelly," 67.

themselves.<sup>144</sup> Although I think O'Brien is correct in saying such women can “negotiate for equal space with the boys,” I disagree that these women—Gordon being among those she lists—are “burying gender difference in a unified sound” that results from their enjoyment of their male bandmates’ respect.<sup>145</sup> Gordon’s work definitely questions or blurs gender difference, but to suggest that burial is an option is to declare that difference no longer exists. Masculinity is as constructed as femininity, and Gordon has frequently negotiated both on record and on stage in her music-making.

Gordon challenges the stability of gender identity by singing songs firmly associated with male performers, a type of transgression Theodore Gracyk calls “gender slippage.”<sup>146</sup> For Gracyk, the content of the song does not need to be particularly confrontational to qualify, because the appropriation of the masculine gender identity is subversive in itself. An example of Gordon employing this strategy is Sonic Youth’s raw live recording of The Stooges’ “I Wanna Be Your Dog” on *Confusion Is Sex* (1983), in which she sings Iggy Pop’s seminal rock declaration of masochism and twists it into a psychotic howl. Iggy Pop’s approach in the original song is a come-on to a woman with a pledge of submissiveness, which blurs the masculine identity of his protagonist. Gordon bypasses seduction and heads directly into unhinged urgency in her vocal delivery. Over the years, Iggy Pop has joined Sonic Youth onstage several times to share the microphone with Gordon for this song.<sup>147</sup> In describing one such occasion in 1987,

---

<sup>144</sup> Lucy O’Brien, *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Continuum, 2002), 178.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me*, 209.

<sup>147</sup> Sonic Youth’s June 4, 1987 performance of “I Wanna Be Your Dog” with Iggy Pop at the Town and Country Club in London was filmed and later released on the VHS videotape *Screaming Fields of Sonic Love* (1995). Sonic Youth also performed this song, sans Iggy Pop, on the short-lived NBC program *Night Music* in 1989, which was their first appearance on American network television. This performance is also included on *Screaming Fields of Sonic Love*.

Gordon observes that Iggy “expressed the freakiness of being a woman and an entertainer,” a comment potentially having more to do with the submissiveness of the song’s protagonist than with Iggy Pop’s hypermasculine performance demeanor, because Gordon confesses she “felt like such a cream puff” next to him, and, not knowing what to do with him freaking out beside her at center stage, she became a spectator and “just sort of watched.”<sup>148</sup> This awareness of being feminized in her own workspace indicates the extent to which the “swirl” of the music normally makes Gordon “forget about being a girl.”

Another example of Gordon employing gender slippage is her lead vocal on the version of Mudhoney’s “Touch Me I’m Sick” recorded by Sonic Youth in 1989. Sonic Youth’s version was released by Seattle’s Sub Pop record label on a 12” vinyl split single with Mudhoney’s version of Sonic Youth’s “Halloween,” one of Gordon’s songs being sung by Mark Arm, on the flip side.<sup>149</sup> Gordon had contributed vocals to the version of Mark Arm’s previous band Green River’s song “Swallow My Pride” that appeared on its record *Rehab Doll* (1988), and Mudhoney had played many shows with Sonic Youth in the late 1980s, making this double-sided offering of gender slippage a friendly affair. “Touch Me I’m Sick” was Mudhoney’s first single and one of the first important records on Sub Pop. Like “I Wanna Be Your Dog,” the lyrics are a come-on to a woman, but the protagonist in this song is sadistic. Gordon snarls her way through this litany of “bad boy” braggadocio, showing how capable she is of affecting a macho posture. It is possibly the most convincing rock performance ever recorded by Sonic Youth, and Gordon’s intensity is integral to the song’s success.

---

<sup>148</sup> Gordon, “Boys are Smelly,” 73.

<sup>149</sup> Sonic Youth’s version of “Touch Me I’m Sick” is also offered as a streaming mp3 via the band’s official website at <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mp3/index.html> (accessed July 30, 2005).

Gordon took an ironic approach to singing the New York Dolls' "Personality Crisis" in the version Sonic Youth recorded to be given away as a promotional 7" vinyl record with an issue of teenage girl magazine *Sassy* in 1991.<sup>150</sup> The song is a complaint about a young woman who acquired a personality crisis "while it was hot," a "prima ballerina on a spring afternoon" who changes into "the wolfman howlin' at the moon." The underlying implication is that young women are prone to such mood swings because they are innately more emotional than men, and therefore weaker, which is a naturalized notion of gender difference supporting masculine hegemony. Gordon employs a bright and almost innocent sounding vocal that transforms this snide glam rock chestnut into what sounds like a campfire folk song, an effect enhanced by the wire brush percussion and acoustic guitar accompaniment. Gordon doubled her vocal, and the two tracks are frequently out of sync, which makes it sound as if two or three friends are singing along. Gordon seems to be offering this performance to the magazine's readership as a model for how to deflect similar petty attacks from both boys and girls during adolescence, and to subvert the notion that their shifting personalities constitute a crisis. Gordon reinforced the message that howling at the moon is sometimes necessary, and not a symptom of gendered feminine emotionalism, during Sonic Youth's acoustic performance of this song at Neil Young's annual Bridge School Benefit concert in 1991. When the technical difficulties the group had been experiencing onstage got to be too much for Gordon to endure, she smashed her guitar halfway through this song. Gordon's frustration in this moment shaded her action as more of an outlet for anger than an attempt to mimic the masculine rock cliché of instrument destruction, and as Lee Ranaldo

---

<sup>150</sup> Sonic Youth's version of "Personality Crisis" is also offered as a streaming mp3 via the band's official website at <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mp3/index.html> (accessed June 12, 2005).

recalls in his liner notes for the 2003 Deluxe Edition reissue of *Dirty*, Gordon “got us booed offstage by the hippies on the lawn and saved the set.”<sup>151</sup>

Gordon employs gender slippage to cause gender trouble in the version of the Alice Cooper song “Is It My Body?” Sonic Youth recorded in 1991, released in 1993 as a b-side to “Sugar Kane,” and included on the Deluxe Edition of *Dirty*.<sup>152</sup> The song was originally an attempt at gender bending in 1971 by the notorious “shock rock” group, in which the man who calls himself Alice (née Vincent Furnier) tried to subvert naturalized gender roles by suggesting his protagonist was hurt by the notion he might only be desired for his body. Gordon plays up the pompous preening in the original version, taking an over-the-top ironic approach to delivering such lyrics as “What have I got that makes you want to love me? Well is it my body?” and “Have you got the time to find out who I really am?” Gordon frequently sneers through clenched teeth instead of emulating the coyness in Alice Cooper’s vocal approach, altering the timbre as well as the gendered perspective of the protagonist. She lets out several moans of feigned ecstasy in the fade after the final chorus, and caps off her performance by calling out the song’s original singer to answer the titular question, pleading: “c’mon baby, Alice, c’mon c’mon c’mon baby!” Gordon successfully uses her voice to subvert Alice Cooper’s attempt at gender role inversion and illuminate what was and remains mostly a garish makeup job.

Gordon’s most tongue-in-cheek performance of gender slippage is her version of Robert Palmer’s 1986 number one hit single “Addicted to Love,” in which the narrator ridicules a woman while simultaneously informing her he will soon possess her. This was included on the album *Sonic Youth* released under the pseudonym *Ciccone Youth*,

---

<sup>151</sup> Lee Ranaldo, liner notes for *Dirty* [Deluxe Edition], by Sonic Youth (Geffen 493410-2, 2003).

<sup>152</sup> Sonic Youth’s version of “Is It My Body” is also offered as a streaming mp3 via the band’s official website at <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mp3/index.html> (accessed July 30, 2005).

*The Whitey Album* (1988). The project began as an outlet for Sonic Youth to collaborate with their friend and fellow Madonna enthusiast Mike Watt in reinterpreting the songs of Madonna (hence the choice of her surname for the moniker), but it eventually became an eclectic collection of deconstructionist whimsy. Gordon recorded her take on Palmer's sexist hit song in a karaoke booth, applying her deadpan lead vocal to a prerecorded instrumental track with canned background singers, and walked away with a cassette. The music video for Palmer's song featured the nattily attired singer fronting a group of women heavily made up and identically dressed "performing" as his band, when in fact they more closely resembled animatronic sex robots than musicians. For her music video, Gordon went to Macy's department store in Manhattan and took advantage of a "make-your-own" video booth where for twenty dollars she got to select various images to perform in front of while her karaoke version of the song played. Gordon chose to perform in front of stock combat footage that was most likely offered as an option for men wanting to make some sort of heroic music video.<sup>153</sup> MTV actually aired the video on its *120 Minutes* program, despite the no-budget homemade aesthetics. Gordon's outfit of a bright green halter-top and tight cutoff shorts brings to mind a pre-*Like a Virgin* Madonna, and the incongruity of seeing Gordon's intentionally awkward dancing in front of armed soldiers leaping out of helicopters is comical without becoming camp. In the 1996 book *Noise from the Underground*, Pat Blashill describes Gordon's version of this song as establishing a benchmark of irony and sarcasm for alternative rock in the late 1980s and the early 1990s.<sup>154</sup> Gordon's artful display of cleverness in this case of gender

---

<sup>153</sup> Foegen, *Confusion*, 183.

<sup>154</sup> Pat Blashill, *Noise from the Underground*. Photographs by Michael Lavine; text by Pat Blashill. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 76.



slippage revealed her ability to incorporate visual ideas into her gender trouble as Sonic Youth entered what would be their most prolific period of music video production.

#### “BULL IN THE HEATHER”

“Bull in the Heather” appears on Sonic Youth’s *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* (1994), and is one of the band’s most commercially successful songs. According to Alec Foege, it is one of three songs on the record Gordon composed alone, which distinguishes it from the typical Sonic Youth group-composed song.<sup>155</sup> The band Pavement had toured with Sonic Youth as an opening act in the early ‘90s, and their auxiliary percussionist/shouter Bob Nastanovich was a horseracing enthusiast and bettor. Nastanovich and his bandmates at one point passed along a bumper sticker bearing the name of the Kentucky-bred racehorse that won the 1993 Florida Derby to Sonic Youth, and Gordon transformed “Bull in the Heather” into a song title. It was the first single released from the record, and Gordon provided one of her paintings of an androgynous woman’s face for the single’s cover art.<sup>156</sup> The young woman depicted is looking downward and away from the viewer, conveying the blasé attitude frequently projected by fashion models. She is of indeterminate age, but appears to be at least pubescent. Her fine facial features and wispy hair are rendered in light umber brushstrokes, whereas her lips are thick strokes of bright red, a hue drawing attention to her mouth. The red lips signify femininity, identifying the figure as a young woman, and their exaggerated rendering also suggests this young woman might be something of a nymphet. The only

---

<sup>155</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 21.

<sup>156</sup> See digital scans of the artwork at <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/lp/ep35.html> (accessed July 30, 2005).

other symbol on the cover, a four-leaf clover silhouette between the band name and the song title, comes directly from the song's lyrics.

The lyrics of the two verses are a list of demands made by the song's protagonist of an unnamed other, and each of the first eight lines rhymes by ending with a long e vowel sound. The ascending numerical count off that begins each verse suggests the protagonist is playing a circle game or delivering a jump rope chant:

Ten, twenty, thirty, forty  
 Tell me that you wanna hold me  
 Tell me that you wanna bore me  
 Tell me that you gotta show me  
 Tell me that you need to slowly  
 Tell me that you're burning for me  
 Tell me that you can't afford me  
 Time to tell your dirty story  
 Time turning over and over  
 Time turning four leaf clover

Betting on the Bull in the Heather

Ten, twenty, thirty, forty  
 Tell me that you wanna scold me  
 Tell me that you adore me  
 Tell me that you're famous for me  
 Tell me that you're gonna score me  
 Tell me that you gotta show me  
 Tell me that you need to sorely  
 Time to tell your love story  
 Time turning over and over  
 Time turning four leaf clover

Betting on the Bull in the Heather

The chorus consists of Gordon sing-speaking the line "Betting on the Bull in the Heather" once in an eight-bar section, and it follows each verse. Gordon employs a rhythmic chanting delivery for the verses, accenting the first and third beats of each phrase, which further evokes a childhood playground game. The song's musical structure is a sort of

modified rondo comprising three distinct sections, intro (A), verse (B), and chorus (C), with the intro material returning throughout in place of such standard pop-song conventions as a bridge or a solo, resulting in the form A-B-C-A-B-C-A. The three sections remain tethered to the tonal center of G, and this harmonic stasis coupled with the repetition of the A section at the end creates a sense of cyclical time in the song. The lyric “time turning over and over” echoes this notion.

In the A section, Moore alternates harmonics with strums behind the guitar’s bridge for the main riff, while Gordon produces loud distorted pick scrapes on the bass and Ranaldo scratches guitar strings against the pickup and processes the sounds with digital delay.<sup>157</sup> These disruptive and unsettling sounds immediately establish a tone suggesting this is not going to be a normative pop song extolling the pleasures of romantic love. Gordon’s bass part for both verses is limited to a repeated G on the E string in what functions like a tonic pedal, while Moore and Ranaldo interweave distinct melodies and make subtle harmonic changes over Steve Shelley’s eighth-note maraca shaking that diminishes any backbeat feeling in the 4/4 meter.<sup>158</sup> Gordon rests for the entire chorus, Moore and Ranaldo trade heavily delayed harmonics, and Shelley repeats a pattern of a two-bar rest followed by two bars of off-beat syncopation. The structural repetition that follows underscores one potential reading of the song’s lyrics.

Although no direct message can be determined from the ambiguous lyrics, as is often the case with Gordon’s songs, one interpretation that emerges is a critique of the entertainment industry’s fixation on youthful beauty and the practice of maximizing the

---

<sup>157</sup> Chris Lawrence, “Bull in the Heather Guitar Tablature,” The Sonic Youth Guitar/Bass Tab Archive, [http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/tab/bull\\_in\\_the\\_heather.txt](http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/tab/bull_in_the_heather.txt) (accessed July 30, 2005).

<sup>158</sup> Chris Lawrence, “Bull in the Heather Bass Tablature,” The Sonic Youth Guitar/Bass Tab Archive, [http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/tab/bull\\_in\\_the\\_heather\\_bass.txt](http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/tab/bull_in_the_heather_bass.txt) (accessed July 30, 2005).

profitability of talent while it is young before discarding it for the next big thing. The reference in the song's title and chorus to a racehorse establishes a correlation between the entertainment industry and the world of horseracing, and the structural repetition of the song that has its end musically where it begins also conjures the cyclical nature of pop culture stardom and horses circling a racetrack. Gordon's chorus lyrics suggest the well-bred and well-trained will stand a better chance of succeeding in the risky enterprises of horseracing and show business, with the reference to the four-leaf clover in the verse allowing for luck's immeasurable influence.

The name "Bull in the Heather" implies a gendered interpretation as to what is being bet on to win. A literal reading suggests a masculine force trampling small evergreen shrubs and devouring their delicate feminine flowers, as well as bringing to mind the optimistic aggression of a bullish stock market investor. Thoroughbred racehorses are most prized when they are young, with the peak age for racing performance being between three and four years of age. If a horse is a champion, it is retired soon after its peak in order to maximize its breeding potential. The entertainment industry is not quite so quick to put its talent out to pasture, but the window of time in which an entertainer can be considered youthful and attractive, and therefore a hot commodity, continues to shrink. This elevation of youthfulness as a desirable and marketable trait affects both men and women, but it disproportionately affects women.

In the first half of the twentieth-century, one of the most frequently marketed feminine archetypes in American popular culture was the adorable young girl who was a combination of innocence and awareness, and whose charms were always irresistible. Over time, this archetype became more eroticized. By mid-century, one of its

manifestations came to be known as the nymphet, a term Vladimir Nabokov used to describe twelve-year-old Dolores Haze in *Lolita* (1955), a character more famously known by the nickname bestowed upon her by the novel's narrator, Humbert Humbert. Although Nabokov was precise in limiting the nymphet's lifespan to between ages nine and fourteen, the gender identity that became associated with Lolita as a result of the novel's reception, and that of its two film adaptations, is unbounded by an age cutoff and therefore open to anyone willing to enact its characteristics. The nymphet is a construction, a fantasy figure of youth and seduction, created and existing in the mental landscape of older male desire. Gordon enacts the nymphet identity in the music video of "Bull in the Heather," as well as the matron, and her gender performativity of both gender identities reveals their constructedness and the critique coded in her lyrics and delivery.

Gordon co-directed the "Bull in the Heather" music video with Tamra Davis, which allowed her to realize her visual ideas while also concentrating on her performance. Gordon lists the visual ideas she wanted to use in the band's commentary track on the *Corporate Ghost* DVD: a reference to a specific scene from Elia Kazan's film *Baby Doll* (1956), sentimental soft focus shots of a young girl and boy in a wooded glen recalling greeting card images, and an attempt to bring to life pictures from the early 1970s of Thurston Moore and a friend posing with electric guitars and pretending to be rock stars in Moore's bedroom. The bulk of the video consists of band performance scenes filmed on a blank white sound stage, alternating between high-angle and eye-level framing, and long and medium shots. Kathleen Hanna, riot grrrl activist and lead singer of Bikini Kill at the time, also appears in these sound stage scenes, dancing around the

room and interacting with the band members like “a little gnat/muse person in the background,” as Davis says in her DVD commentary track. These scenes are intercut with shots from the realizations of Gordon’s three central visual ideas, along with horseracing footage and several scenes depicting Hanna as a stripper. No narrative binds these disparate images, but the gender trouble Gordon causes becomes apparent when the visual codes employed are assessed in relation to the musical codes and the lyrics.

Pink and blue recur in the video’s color scheme, representing their standard feminine and masculine associations. The backlighting in the sound stage is predominantly pink, which upends the standard identification of rock bands as masculine entities. There is an artificiality to the sound stage clips that is heightened by the lack of amplifiers for the guitars and the stripped down drum kit played by Steve Shelley. Gordon enacts the matron identity in the sound stage, achieving it through a combination of costuming and playing a staid mother figure to Bikini Kill vocalist Kathleen Hanna’s exuberant dancing girl character. Gordon’s matron outfit is a white three quarters-length-sleeve jersey shirt with baby blue shoulders, pink miniskirt, and white Adidas tennis shoes without socks. She is wearing a plain silver choker, and has a short shag hairstyle. Her shirt is by X-Girl—the clothing company Gordon co-owned at the time—and it bears the company name logo on the left breast, which stamps Gordon as being an “ex-girl” and therefore a woman. The loose fitting shirt and the position of her bass conceal the fact Gordon was five months pregnant when the video was filmed. Moore and Shelley are dressed all in blue, and Ranaldo is in blue jeans, whereas Gordon’s matron outfit combines pink and blue, suggesting that she possesses both femininity and masculinity. If she were not miming at playing bass in this casual yet sporty outfit, Gordon would not

look out of place picking up children from soccer practice in a minivan. The matron is a gender identity not commonly found in popular music, and Gordon's performance of it exemplifies one way in which she disrupts gendered expectations for popular female musicians while also revealing its contingent construction as a "natural" feminine role.

Gordon's performance of the nymphet occurs in scenes filmed on a set directly inspired by the bedroom of Baby Doll Meighan from the film *Baby Doll*. The screenplay of *Baby Doll* was adapted by Tennessee Williams from two of his one-act plays, "27 Wagons Full of Cotton" and "The Long Stay Cut Short, or, The Unsatisfactory Supper." It is a seriocomic story of dimwitted middle-aged cotton gin owner Archie Lee Meighan (Karl Malden) eagerly waiting for his teenage bride Baby Doll (Carroll Baker) to turn twenty, when he will finally be allowed to consummate their marriage according to the pact established by her father before he died. Baby Doll, who is simply described as a "voluptuous girl" by Williams in his script, sleeps in a crib and sucks her thumb, and her room is strewn with toys, magazines, and records.<sup>159</sup> At nineteen, Baby Doll is five years past Nabokov's nymphet age range, but her behavior and appetites suggest she is more like a fourteen-year-old than a woman about to turn twenty. As a result of the marriage pact, Archie Lee resorts to spying on Baby Doll from another room through a peephole he has cut in the wall with a knife in hopes of catching a glimpse of her changing out of her nightgown. In addition to being an incarnation of the nymphet identity associated with *Lolita*, Baby Doll is essentially chattel to her husband, much like a racehorse is to its owner.

---

<sup>159</sup> Tennessee Williams, *Baby Doll: The Script for the Film* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1957), 7.

Gordon and Davis created a set that captures both the look and the symbolism of Baby Doll's bedroom, cluttering the floor with such juvenile accoutrements as a rocking horse, mounds of clothes, stuffed animals, magazines, records, and a record player. Gordon's nymphet outfit is a white baby doll nightgown, similar to the one worn by actress Carroll Baker in the film. Pink and blue also predominate in these scenes, with the pink bed frame and blanket in the foreground being contrasted by blue backlighting on the shadow-covered walls. As in the sound stage scenes, high-angle medium shots are intermixed with eye-level close-up shots. Gordon lolls about on the unkempt bed lip-synching the lyrics, occasionally doing so in medium close-up shots through the ornate bars of the headboard that suggest she is imprisoned in this child's bed. She is barefoot throughout, except for one shot that shows her wearing white fuzzy mules that she kicks off. Gordon's bare legs metonymically represent the infantilized woman as a sex object, and are emphasized by the lighting in the Baby Doll scenes. This is especially true near the end when Gordon stands on the bed and is in darkness from the waist up. The final shot of Gordon reclining on the bed with her legs propped up and extending over the frame repeats this tactic of highlighting her bare legs while keeping her face and upper body in shadow, and it also functions to show that she literally does not fit into the bed.

The nymphet's allure hinges on the combination of innocence and awareness in her sexual precocity, but in Gordon's enactment of this identity the innocence is obviously lost due to the fact that the baby doll nightgown reveals her pregnancy. The effects of sexuality are seldom acknowledged in pop music lyrics or performance, so the visibility of Gordon's pregnancy in the Baby Doll scenes adds to the sense she is performing the nymphet gender identity incorrectly. Gordon uses the baby doll



nightgown to critique the eroticization of girlhood foisted upon women and taken up by women who willfully enact the nymphet identity. Gordon's critique does not overtly scold women who choose to traffic in this practice, but in revealing the constructedness of the nymphet in her *Baby Doll* homage she questions the "natural" status of this gender identity in the entertainment industry and popular culture.

Both Gordon and Davis wanted Kathleen Hanna to be in the video, although according to Hanna's DVD commentary track neither director gave her any more explicit direction than "dance around" when she arrived on the set. Hanna joins Gordon in causing gender trouble by enacting two distinct gender identities: exuberant prepubescent girl in the sound stage, and stripper in scenes intercut with the sound stage clips. Hanna's exuberant girl outfit consists of a short-sleeved navy jersey shirt with white sleeves, navy panties with a white star pattern over navy tights, and low-cut navy Converse All Star basketball shoes. She wears several necklaces, including one with a star pendant, and a bracelet on her left wrist. Her hair is in pigtails, with a barrette also visible, and she is not visibly wearing makeup. Being clothed head-to-toe in blue accentuates Hanna's boyish presence as she dances and hops spastically around the sound stage engaging in such antics as blowing on Shelley's hair while he drums, wrestling Moore to the floor and taking away his guitar, and strapping on Gordon's bass while mouthing the lyrics as Gordon whispers in her ear. Hanna's performance conveys the free-spirited energy prepubescent girls possess but often sacrifice once they become self-conscious image-obsessed teenagers. One minute into the video, just before the first verse, Hanna sidles up beside Gordon in the sound stage and kisses her on the cheek in the way a daughter

would kiss her mother goodbye as she leaves for school. This gesture solidifies Gordon's matron identity and identifies Hanna as an actual youth in the presence of Sonic Youth.

By contrast, Hanna's stripper ensemble consists of a pink and black bustier, baby blue shawl, and dark tights. Her hair is heavily teased out and sprayed, and she is wearing blue eye shadow, heavy rouge and remarkably red lipstick. She conveys a blasé attitude in the glare of a spotlight, and her dancing is reduced to stiff posing and stereotypically "sexy" sashaying in front of a glittering curtain. These scenes are predominantly framed with low-angle camera shots, which suggest the vantage point of male audience members without conferring any sense of elevated status on the stripper. Hanna's performance of the gender identity parodies this "feminine" line of work, and questions the normative sexuality of the male gaze inherent in its construction.

Gordon's gender trouble is enhanced in the video by the inclusion of coded references to the ways gender roles differ for girls and boys, and how they morph during puberty, resulting in girls losing their early confidence and boys striving to invert the power imbalance they experienced before puberty when they were subservient to earlier-maturing girls. The scenes of a bossy young girl and a compliant smiling boy in a wooded glen show the girl tying the boy's hands with rope and leading him like a horse, tying him to a tree, commanding him to sit with an assertive finger pointing gesture, accepting a kiss on the cheek, and eventually having him paint her toenails pink while she sits on a blanket admiring a four-leaf clover in her hand. The girl is wearing a short-sleeved baby blue jersey shirt with dark blue sleeves and blue jeans, echoing the style and color of Hanna's exuberant dancing girl outfit and establishing a semiotic link. The boy is wearing a plain white t-shirt and blue jeans, suggesting he is a generic boy. The soft

focus employed for these scenes creates a dreamlike halcyon visage by gently blurring the images, making them look like greeting card images as well as suggesting 1970s television advertising. Soft focus is also employed for several shots of Moore leading a barebacked white horse through the same wooded glen, framing these images as idealized constructions and heightening their artificiality.

The scenes depicting teenage boys acting out rock star fantasies with electric guitars on a set made to look like Moore's boyhood bedroom provide a glimpse into the world of adolescent male bonding. These scenes offer one potential outcome for the subservient boy in the glen, showing how he might grasp at the power implicit in the rock star identity at puberty. Like the younger boy in the glen, these boys wear generic blue jeans and nondescript shirts, but their hairstyles and poses signify that they are attempting to emulate their rock star heroes. They are frequently contrasted with the shots of Kathleen Hanna as the stripper, suggesting that this identity, rather than rock star, is the more likely option for girls who want to be on a stage and feel powerful and adored when they grow up.

The only other scenes in the video are four shots of jockeys on horses at a racetrack charging down the homestretch, and these provide the viewer the only concrete clues that the song is referring to horseracing. Horseracing shots are included both times the chorus is sung, making the connection obvious. Lee Ranaldo sports greased-back hair and dark sunglasses in portraying a gambler at the racetrack to further underscore the reference to betting in the chorus. The shot of Ranaldo's character reading a daily racing form hints at what goes into the construction of masculinity among those "in the know" about performance data and handicapping.

Gordon's enactment of two distinct feminine gender identities in the music video for "Bull in the Heather" reveals the contingency of their construction, and also succeeds in subverting the naturalized and reified notions of gender supporting masculine hegemony found in the disproportionate number of men who hold positions of power and/or ownership in the entertainment industry and the sport of horseracing. Her subversion of gendered expectations in a three-minute song that also disrupts conventional pop music harmonic progressions and structures indicates that Gordon is far from the average female popular musician, nor is she anything like a racehorse engaged in the "race" for pop stardom.

## CHAPTER FOUR

## A VISUAL ARTIST MAKES MUSIC: “FEAR OF A FEMALE PLANET?”

In his book *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, Robert Walser analyzes the musical production of meaning in heavy metal music within a “discursive framework that is sensitive to many kinds of social experience even as it focuses on specifically musical practices.”<sup>160</sup> Walser eschews the long-standing tradition in musicology of literate-mode analysis, arguing “musical codes are the primary bearers of meaning; lyrics, like costumes and performers’ physical motions, help direct and inflect the interpretation of the meanings that are most powerfully delivered, those suggested by the music.”<sup>161</sup> The discursive framework Walser constructs for heavy metal music allows him to assess the subject through timbre, volume, mode/harmony, rhythm, melody, and guitar solos. Specific details of rhythm, pitch, and timbre generate musical meanings within Walser’s framework, but these meanings always occur in social contexts constructed through political categories such as gender, class and race.<sup>162</sup> Walser’s approach acknowledges that music is made and interpreted by people, and that to ignore the cultural contexts in which music’s meanings are transmitted and received in favor of a theoretical apparatus that privileges such elements as pitch, meter, and

---

<sup>160</sup> Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 41.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid*, 40-41.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid*, 113.

harmony is to deny its complexity and risk making the subject seem autonomous. What I find most useful in Walser's musicological approach is his willingness to let the performance of this particular music dictate his analytical focus, rather than imposing a preconceived theoretical framework onto it. Gordon's music would frustrate attempts to interrogate its meanings solely utilizing a conventional music theory analytical framework, which is why I chose to follow Walser's musicological model of interpreting the musical codes at play in analyzing her work.

Walser's discussion of masculinity in his chapter on the heavy metal sounds and images of gender corresponds to Judith Butler's notions of gender identity, making his musicology compatible with her theorizing. Walser sees "sex roles as contradictory, mutable social constructions rather than as normative formations somehow grounded in biology or an ahistorical psychology," and believes no element of identity can be called stable or natural.<sup>163</sup> He identifies gender constructions in visual and musical tropes in heavy metal music and videos to reveal how gender and power are interrelated, which provides a useful model for my analysis of Gordon's work.<sup>164</sup> An analysis of the song "Kool Thing" and its music video will delineate the meanings generated by Gordon's negotiation of the gender, class, and race issues factoring into her female protagonist's disillusionment with a male pop star, with close attention paid to the musical, lyrical, and visual tropes employed.

Walser maintains that rock can never be gender-neutral, but he does allow for the existence of a kind of antisexist rock music that disrupts rock's representations of gender

---

<sup>163</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid, 111-112.

and the beliefs and material practices with which those representations engage.<sup>165</sup> Walser does not offer examples of this antisexist rock or discuss the processes through which it is constructed, but an overview of Gordon's approach to making music will identify her work as exemplifying this kind of music and reveal the ways in which it is facilitated through Sonic Youth's compositional process.

#### GORDON MAKES SOUND HER MEDIUM

Gordon's initial interest in being a musician in a band came from her curiosity about male bonding and wanting to cross over from being a voyeur to being a participant observer. Although she was fond of women making rock music, the overall lack of female musicians prior to punk resulted in her seeing a majority of male musicians onstage, and she became fascinated by the way they behaved together:

It was just something that I wanted to be a part of. It wasn't penis envy; it was just like I wanted that too. It was the same as "Oh, my brother has a train set. When am I getting mine?"<sup>166</sup>

Once she had made the transition from the stereotypically feminine role of passive fan to the masculine role of active musician, Gordon shared the insight she had gained from her performing experiences in a 1983 *Artforum* article titled "I'm Really Scared When I Kill in My Dreams":

People pay to see others believe in themselves. Many people don't know whether they can experience the erotic or whether it exists only in commercials; but on stage, in the midst of rock 'n' roll, many things happen and anything can happen, whether people come as voyeurs or come to submit to the moment.<sup>167</sup>

---

<sup>165</sup> Ibid, 135.

<sup>166</sup> Kim Gordon, "HER NOISE Interview."

<sup>167</sup> Kim Gordon, "I'm Really Scared When I Kill in My Dreams," *Artforum International* 21, January 1983, 55.

Gordon came to making music as a voyeur, submitted to the moment, and has been recreating the moment in her work for over two decades.

Gordon's lack of a musical background has helped facilitate her disruption of norms and gendered expectations for women in terms of instrumental technique, songwriting, and vocal approaches, and her choice of collaborators has helped facilitate the realization of her ideas ever since she chose sound as her primary creative medium. When Gordon crossed over to music from the visual arts, she continued to bear the influence of her educational training in her conceptual approach to making music and writing lyrics. As for any overt manifestation of her art education and background in her music making, Gordon acknowledges the importance of her visual sense:

I think spatially in terms of dynamics: light and dark or soft and loud, but if I were doing art I'd think the same way. That's just the way I work. I know Steve, Lee and Thurston probably think about it differently than I do. Our music is really based on all four personalities.<sup>168</sup>

Sonic Youth makes post-punk music that reveals each member's exploratory impulses to generate what Theo Cateforis describes as "distinctive sonorities outside of rock's ordinary perimeters."<sup>169</sup> Textural elements such as timbre and distortion are emphasized over functional harmonic elements such as melodic shapes or contrapuntal relationships in the instrumental and vocal parts, and dissonance is employed without always being resolved. Gordon maintains that she and her bandmates have not consciously worked to create a certain style of music, stressing that the aesthetic results of their efforts reflect each member's wide-ranging influences and their collective desire

---

<sup>168</sup> Carla A. DeSantis, "Kim Gordon: Sonic Warrior," *Rockrgirl*, April 30, 2000, 19.

<sup>169</sup> Theo Cateforis, "'Total Trash': Analysis and Post Punk Music," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 5 (1993): 41.



to challenge themselves and their fans.<sup>170</sup> Gordon and her bandmates were more inspired by the punk attitude that anyone could make music and form a band than the conventional musical models established by such bands as the Ramones or the Sex Pistols. In the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue of *New York* magazine, Gordon shared her thoughts regarding punk and Sonic Youth's relation to the genre:

There are three or four different kinds of punk rock. There's old punk. There's ska punk. There's pop punk. And then there's groups like Bikini Kill, even though they've broken up, that fall into the category of traditional punk, as far as real attitude, what punk rock is supposed to be—going against the status quo, educating your peers, and trying to establish that individual expression is more important than homogenization of culture. Which is where we fell into the punk rock.<sup>171</sup>

The members of Sonic Youth switched instruments regularly in the group's early days, but when Gordon realized she was playing bass-like parts on guitar she began teaching herself the bass and became the band's bassist. The electric bass has come to be gendered as the "women's instrument" in the subgenre of alternative rock as a result of women's overrepresentation in this position, a phenomenon often attributed to the notion that the instrument is easier to learn and less attractive to men than electric guitar.<sup>172</sup> This gendering is in conflict with the way musical instruments typically develop gendered associations grounded in broader notions of gender difference, relating especially to such assumed differences between masculine and feminine bodies as large versus small, low pitched versus high, and strong versus weak:

---

<sup>170</sup> Sarah-Jane, "New Yorker Kim Gordon taught herself the bass for fun. Twenty-one years on with Sonic Youth she is now considered the godmother of alt rock," *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), July 7, 2002, Scotland On Sunday, p. 7.

<sup>171</sup> Kim Gordon, Interview by Ethan Smith, "Kim Gordon: Downtown Doyenne," *New York*, April 6, 1998, 140.

<sup>172</sup> Mary Ann Clawson, "When Women Play The Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music," *Gender & Society* 13 (1999): 193.

As an instrument, the electric bass violates these assumptions. Its tonal range is low. It is substantially heavier than the guitar, and its strings are thicker and less flexible, demanding greater strength but less dexterity.<sup>173</sup>

Gordon has always been quick to tell journalists how much heavier and physically harder to play an electric bass is than a guitar when asked whether or not women play bass because it is the easiest instrument. Mavis Bayton asserts the reasons for the comparative lack of female guitarists in rock bands are entirely social, maintaining there are no physical reasons.<sup>174</sup> Bayton identifies the playing of electric guitar in a rock band as “masculine” work conferring “masculine” identity on its participants, and this masculinity is preserved by the exclusion of women from the role.<sup>175</sup>

Gordon initially became Sonic Youth’s bassist because both Moore and Rinaldo were already guitarists, but she has never been excluded from the role of guitarist. Gordon plays guitar exclusively in her side-project band Free Kitten, and has played guitar more often than bass in Sonic Youth since the making of their eleventh album, *Washing Machine* (1995). Gordon has even contributed new guitar tunings to Sonic Youth’s collection of alternate tunings, such as the one she uses for many Free Kitten songs: BEGDBB.<sup>176</sup> The addition of composer/producer/improviser/multi-instrumentalist Jim O’Rourke to Sonic Youth as a fifth member in 2001 has led the group to resume its initial practice of switching instruments depending on the song, which has further freed Gordon from being solely the bassist in Sonic Youth’s collective compositional process.

---

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, 204.

<sup>174</sup> Mavis Bayton, “Women and the Electric Guitar,” in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (London: Routledge, 1997), 39.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid, 40-41.

<sup>176</sup> Chris Lawrence, “The Sonic Youth Tuning Tutorial,” The Sonic Youth Guitar/Bass Tab Archive, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/tab/tunings.txt> (accessed July 30, 2005).

In his book *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Björk*, Bill Martin characterizes Sonic Youth's approach to making music as a "refusal of technique" in favor of improvisation, "though there is technique to what they do, and they do compose songs and sections of their instrumental music, and they compose the *situations* in which their music is made."<sup>177</sup> Gordon admits she never wanted to play bass or guitar in a conventional way, preferring instead to make music by listening to what Ranaldo and Moore were doing within their alternate tunings and creating parts that fit, aligning herself with a feminine emphasis on the importance of communication and against the masculine tradition of virtuosity.<sup>178</sup> Gordon believes the compositional process employed by Sonic Youth, which emphasizes intuition and an organic approach, is the source of the band's strength.<sup>179</sup> When writing new material, the band members meet every day and record their rehearsals so they can go back and listen for any improvised moments that seem worth keeping and developing, and then they combine those sections into songs. The songs are always worked out instrumentally before anyone begins to lay claim to one for vocal ideas and lyrics, and as part of the band's adherence to democratic ideals, every member has to like every part of every song or it is discarded.<sup>180</sup>

A short video titled "Unwritten," an extra feature on the CD version of *Sonic Nurse* (2004), offers a glimpse into the writing process for "Paper Cup Exit," a song for which Lee Ranaldo eventually wrote lyrics and sang. The video is edited to heighten the overlap between exclamations of structural ideas, guitar parts, and rhythmic parameters.

---

<sup>177</sup> Martin, *Avant Rock*, 5 (italics in original).

<sup>178</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 172-73. Gordon is explicit in her disdain: "There is a certain jock mentality to technique in music. I certainly associate the two, and to me it's just boring. It's like a workout, a display of virtuosity."

<sup>179</sup> Julià and Gonzalo, *Sonic Youth*, 53.

<sup>180</sup> Azerrad, *Our Band*, 244.

It also divulges snippets of Sonic Youth's compositional argot, a hyper-referential code they have developed over the course of two decades. In this code, song sections and sometimes chords are referred to by the names of other songs or musicians they melodically or sonically resemble. "Paper Cup Exit" includes song section examples such as "Kashmir" (a Led Zeppelin song from *Physical Graffiti*), "McCartney" (as in Sir Paul McCartney), and chords named "Longo" (after artist/musician Robert Longo) and "Branca" (after Glenn Branca). Gordon seems to be the only member who refers to note names in the cacophonous exchange, which is ironic given her continued reluctance to identify herself as a musician. "Is that the G sharp, G, C sharp chord?" Gordon asks, after Moore instructs Rinaldo to "come in with your Longo chord." The fact that she is spelling out a chord, and he is referring to a visual artist in this brief exchange, reveals the mutual influence Gordon and Moore have had on each other as music makers.

When asked about the difficulty of practicing such a collaborative compositional process in a 1998 interview by Gordon's friend and fellow visual artist Jutta Koether, Moore replied it involved letting go of the personal attachment to ideas in favor of creating a shared property. Gordon, who also participated in the interview, was quick to counter Moore's idealistic portrayal of egoless collaboration with the realistic assertion that each member finds a way to reclaim the personal parts they initially relinquish and leave their imprint on the finished song.<sup>181</sup> Although Gordon's imprint on Sonic Youth's music consists of her instrumental parts, vocal performances, and lyrical strategies, it is her approach to delivering the lyrics she composes that most distinguishes her contribution.

---

<sup>181</sup> Jutta Koether, "Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore, 1998," *Index*, [http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/kim\\_gordon\\_thurston\\_moore.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/kim_gordon_thurston_moore.shtml) (accessed July 30, 2005).

## VOCAL AND LYRICAL STRATEGIES

Gordon openly acknowledges the artifice in her approach to music, admitting that what she likes about writing songs and singing is that it is almost like acting in the way it allows her to take on different personalities.<sup>182</sup> For Gordon, songs are based on the songwriter's personality, and she identifies herself as having always been rebellious and fond of confrontation.<sup>183</sup> Gordon claims that she does not have "a real singing voice," and so instead of focusing on crafting melodic contours for her vocal parts she approaches constructing and delivering songs in other ways, usually rhythmically.<sup>184</sup> Although she does occasionally sing a melodic line, either with a guitar part or against it, Gordon primarily practices a sort of *Sprechstimme* in which her intonation seldom settles on a specific note for very long. She alters her delivery to fit the song, employing a variety of vocal styles in voicing her song's narrators, including disembodied whisper, tempting whisper, bark, snarl, ironic deadpan, celebratory whoop, and the scream. Gordon rarely screams, but she admits being motivated to write out of anger, and regards screaming as "a kind of vehicle for expressing yourself in ways society doesn't let you."<sup>185</sup> Neil Nehring refers to this quote in his 1997 book *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger is an Energy*, positing this type of screaming as functioning not as catharsis but rather as a call to other screamers to join.<sup>186</sup>

---

<sup>182</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 172.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>184</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 122.

<sup>185</sup> Kim France, "Angry Young Women," *Utne Reader*, September/October 1992, 24.

<sup>186</sup> Neil Nehring, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger is an Energy* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997), 154.

Gordon's employment of a variety of vocal approaches has as much to do with critics describing her as "cold" or "arty"—read "insincere"—as her unwillingness to sing in a consistently melodic and consonant style, or her artful construction of personas in her lyrics that resists the autobiographical or confessional approach equated with authenticity in popular music. In his 1996 book *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*, Simon Frith identifies a relationship between voices and perceived sincerity:

The voice, in short, may or may not be a key to someone's identity, but it is certainly a key to the ways in which we change identities, pretend to be something we're not, deceive people, lie. We use the voice, that is, not just to assess a person, but also, even more systematically, to assess that person's sincerity; the voice and how it is used (as well as words and how they are used) become a measure of someone's truthfulness.<sup>187</sup>

Gordon's sincerity might be questionable for listeners with conventional expectations for how a female pop vocalist should sound, but she is sincere in her effort to question these gendered expectations and disrupt the sense of consonant voices being the only ones considered "authentic."

Gordon describes her Sonic Youth lyrics as sometimes being "weird psychological things, and sometimes more direct and sometimes more like stories."<sup>188</sup>

Alec Foege contrasts Gordon's and Moore's construction of detached and cool personas in their songs with what he describes as Ranaldo's straightforward lyric-writing habits, a portrayal that ignores the number of personas Ranaldo creates and also adheres to the problematic dichotomy of authentic vs. artificial in approaches to popular songwriting.<sup>189</sup>

The adjectives "detached" and "cool" describe only two of the persona types Gordon

---

<sup>187</sup> Frith, *Performing*, 197.

<sup>188</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 177.

<sup>189</sup> Foege, *Confusion*, 178.

constructs, and what these labels fail to convey is how true she is to the narrators and protagonists she creates when delivering her songs.

Specific vocal influences are difficult to locate in Gordon's style, and, as a result, she has a distinctive vocal sound—regardless of which approach she might employ in any given song. Gordon transmits her influences without emulating their techniques. This is not surprising, considering many of the women vocalists of the punk and post-punk era who have inspired Gordon possess voices incapable of being imitated. One such singer is Poly Styrene of the British punk band X-Ray Spex, whose vocal style alternates between screeching and wailing. Simon Frith maintains Poly Styrene's work in X-Ray Spex deliberately challenges both the essentialist biological assumptions of what male and female voices "naturally" sound like and the ideological notions of how female voices should sound.<sup>190</sup> Gordon officially incorporated Poly Styrene into her genealogy of disruptive women musicians in 1993 by recording a version of X-Ray Spex's 1977 anti-oppression song "Oh Bondage Up Yours!" with her band Free Kitten. The song was released as a single by the indie label Sympathy for the Record Industry, which later included it on a two-disc compilation of female-fronted groups titled *Alright, This Time, Just the Girls* (1999). Rather than attempt to mimic Poly Styrene's vocal histrionics, Gordon is true to her indomitable tone in delivering the lyrics.

In addressing the matter of whether words are more powerful than music in transmitting meaning in popular song, Frith remarks that what makes the voice compelling is its ability to simultaneously make meaning as a language transmitter and a musical instrument.<sup>191</sup> The audible quality that emerges in "*the encounter between a*

---

<sup>190</sup> Frith, *Performing*, 196.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid*, 187.

*language and a voice*” in song, when the voice is producing both language and music, is what Roland Barthes names “the *grain*.”<sup>192</sup> Barthes specifies that the grain of the voice is not merely its timbre, and admits to it being a subjective signifier that some singers have “while others, however famous, do not.”<sup>193</sup> Kim Gordon may not have “a real singing voice,” but her voice definitely has a grain.

The artifice in Gordon’s vocal style and lyrics functions to expose the construction of “real” singing voices or “authentic” lyrical content and challenges these beliefs. Gordon’s voice is no less “real” than any other vocalist’s as a result of not matching arbitrary standards of pleasing timbre, just as her construction of personas and use of appropriation in her lyrics is no less “authentic” than the approach taken by confessional singer-songwriters. A close reading of the musical codes and lyrical content of specific Sonic Youth songs will identify ways in which Gordon negotiates gender stereotypes and disrupts expectations for female popular musicians. An analysis of the musical and visual tropes Gordon employs in the song “Kool Thing” and its music video will locate her strategies for critiquing the gender and class issues inherent in the power inequality between fans and celebrities.

#### NEGOTIATING GENDER IN SONG

The song “Protect Me You,” from *Confusion is Sex* (1983), frustrates any attempt at a definitive gendered reading. The music is quietly menacing, with the drums rolling and surging underneath a simple three-note bass ostinato. The guitars sound like cracked bells ringing, which is an effect produced by tremolo picking the strings behind the

---

<sup>192</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice,” in *Image – Music – Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 181 (italics in original).

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid*, 188.



bridge—a sound that has come to be considered part of Sonic Youth’s aural signature. In the midst of this, Gordon gives voice to a child protagonist of indeterminate gender seeking aid from an unknown source, which turns out to be demons. The child ages as the song progresses, and becomes enchanted with the demons’ ability to erase memory:

Protect me from ravagement  
 I am ten years old  
 I don’t know what I do  
 Protect me myself  
 I am fourteen  
 There’s nothing to do  
 Protect me yourself  
 I am sixteen  
 Protect me from starving  
 I am eighteen  
 Protect me you  
 I don’t know what you do  
 Protect me demons  
 That come at night  
 I don’t know what they say  
 Their whispering  
 Sends the night air away  
 And makes me forget  
 I hope they come  
 Again and again

I hope they come  
 Again and again  
 I hope they come again  
 Again  
 Again  
 Again

Gordon’s vocal melody doubles the repeating bass figure up an octave, and she maintains her soft dynamic even as the drums and guitar crescendo, a contrast that heightens the effect of the narrator being in a trance-like state. There are no cadences or tonal goals to the music, and no verse or chorus in the structure. Any notion of linear development or harmonic variation is thwarted in favor of cyclical time created through repetition. All

generic expectations for how a popular song should function are disrupted. Resolution is also avoided in the open-ended narrative portrayed in the lyrics, but by the end when Gordon is tonelessly whispering the child's wish for the demons to return, her persuasive power in delivering the lyric makes it seem as if they might.

In the song "Drunken Butterfly," from *Dirty* (1992), Gordon employs appropriation to construct lyrics critiquing the identity of out-of-control female hedonist. This identity is one of the clichéd personalities available to women in the masculine culture of rock music both onstage and in the audience, and a construction associated with such icons as Janis Joplin or the groupie.<sup>194</sup> Gordon has been employing the tactic of appropriation in her creative output since she was in art school, frequently using it for parodic effect, as she did with the *Cosmopolitan* advertising copy in the songs she wrote for the group CKM. During Sonic Youth's rehearsals for *Dirty* (1992), the group decided the instrumental track for what would become "Drunken Butterfly" sounded like something by the woman-led 1970s/80s band Heart, which inspired Gordon to assemble song titles and fragments of Heart lyrics for the song.<sup>195</sup> Gordon also altered the tuning of her bass, changing the standard EADG to F#F#GA to echo the F#F#GGAA guitar tuning used by both Moore and Rinaldo for the song. Gordon's altered bass tuning made it easier for her to double the simple guitar riffs and thicken the sound, aurally evoking the power associated with many of Heart's hit songs. The band emphasizes rhythm over harmonic content in the music, simulating an album-oriented rock style, while Gordon chants the appropriated lyrics:

Smile like the sun

---

<sup>194</sup> Miss Molly, the subject of Little Richard's 1958 single "Good Golly, Miss Molly," is one of the earliest examples of this identity appearing in rock 'n' roll, and arguably the most famous.

<sup>195</sup> Foegen, *Confusion*, 226.

Back over time  
 Crazy on you  
 Pleasure is mine

I love you, I love you  
 I love you, what's your name?  
 I love you, I love you  
 I love you, what's your name?

You're comin' thru  
 Even it up  
 Going too far  
 Try to understand

I love you, I love you  
 I love you, what's your name?  
 I love you, I love you  
 I love you, what's your name?

Whisper that kisses yr ear  
 Tell you what I fear  
 Whisper that kisses yr ear  
 I'll tell you what I fear

Come on home  
 Just ain't fair  
 In the name of rock and roll  
 Where love dies  
 Couldn't find a soul  
 Tell it like it is  
 Deep down inside  
 Drunken butterfly

I love you, I love you  
 I love you, what's your name?  
 I love you, I love you  
 I love you, what's your name?

Rather than being critical of singer Ann and guitarist Nancy, Heart's Wilson sisters, and their images as big-haired cleavage-bearing wild women of rock, Gordon contests the female hedonist as a "natural" identity with her lyrical collage. Hedonism is assumed to be one of rock music's central tenets, but the chorus of "I love you, I love you, I love

you, what's your name?" delivered in one of Gordon's contemptuous snarls carries plenty of castigation for those who might pledge their love during the night to someone they are unable to identify the following morning. Gordon's tactic of appropriating lyrics from a female-fronted mixed-gender band that was adored by many women reveals that she is open to directing her ironic critical gaze at her own sex in contesting gender stereotypes.

Love songs are rare in Gordon's catalog, and her avoidance of romantic love as song fodder is one of the most noticeable ways in which she subverts expectations for popular music subject matter, especially the normative heterosexual desire for a man that women are expected to voice. Gordon's lack of lyrics celebrating or depicting romantic love can also be traced to the effect punk had on the most time-honored subject of vocal music. Lucy O'Brien describes 1970s punk culture as having its own sexual codes, and in contrast to hippie culture's emphasis on explicitly heterosexual activity she contends the punk culture was accepting of choices to be asexual, gay, androgynous, or celibate.<sup>196</sup> As for romantic love, O'Brien notes that for late 1970s punks it was frowned upon as "something wishy-washy and sentimental," and sex was "just something you got on with."<sup>197</sup>

Gordon does mention love in some of her songs, but in nearly every instance her use of the term is true to punk's avoidance of sentimentality. For example, a quick perusal of the lyrics for "Skink," from *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star* (1994), might suggest it is a love song:

Here, there, here, there  
Down to the bottom around on the bottom we go  
Here, there, here, there

---

<sup>196</sup> Lucy O'Brien, "The Woman Punk Made Me," in *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, ed. Roger Sabin (London: Routledge, 1999), 194.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

Down to the bottom and oh what a bottom it is

Yeah so  
Uh-oh  
Let it go

Uh-oh  
You got soul  
Let me go

Kiss beyond, kiss me on the lips  
Kiss beyond, kiss me on the lips

Ooo I love you

Ooo baby baby, kinda crazy  
Kinda hazy, kinda messy too

Here, there, here, there  
Down to the bottom and oh what a bottom it is  
Here, there, here, there  
Down to the bottom around on the bottom we go

Yeah baby  
Ooo-ooo  
You know  
I love you so

Gordon's disingenuous tone in her vocal delivery, however, undermines any such reading, and the music is more evocative of a soundtrack for film noir than a romantic love story. The soft dynamics in the droning guitar and bass parts are accompanied by a skeletal drum part in which Shelley keeps time on the rim of his snare and barely strikes the cymbals. Both Moore and Rinaldo use a heavy delay effect on their guitars, in addition to substantial reverberation, creating an auditory illusion that makes Gordon sound as if she is singing in an abandoned building. Gordon supposedly took the song's title from one of the bizarre characters populating the novels of satirical author Carl Hiaasen, a former governor of Florida known as "Skink" who lives in the swamp and eats

roadkill, but this connection is not established in her lyrics alone. The eerie music in what functions as the song's verses could be described as "swampy," a designation shading the line "Down to the bottom, around on the bottom we go" with the implication that Gordon's protagonist might share lizard-like qualities with the skink in the title. Gordon delivers the verses in a disembodied singsong style that approaches sultriness without actually achieving it. The line "Down to the bottom, and oh what a bottom it is" brings to mind the value invested in the female posterior by the male gaze as it objectifies and eroticizes. A harmonically new section that breaks out of the swamp mood and briefly sustains a major mode brightness follows an instrumental break in the middle of the song. During this respite from the droning gloom, Gordon also alters her vocal delivery to play up the irony in the lyrics. "Kiss me on the lips" is an explicit instruction, and Gordon employs redundancy to great satiric effect in repeating it. Her impish shouting of "Ooh, I Love You!" suggests she is parodying the proliferation of pop singers who regularly declare their love in such an emotionally heightened manner. The droning guitar and bass parts resume immediately after this exclamation, and Gordon resumes her previous vocal style. The words "crazy" and "hazy" are likely to turn up within the typical pop song about romantic love, so when Gordon's protagonist follows the description of her love that employs the rhyming couplet "kinda crazy, kinda hazy" with "kinda messy too," she disrupts the comfort of the familiar adjectives by including a dose of reality.

The lyrics of the song "Little Trouble Girl," from *Washing Machine* (1995), address the mother-daughter relationship, the transmission of gender expectations that occurs within the nuclear family as the daughter learns to "smile and behave," and the

individuation that occurs during adolescence and leads to children maintaining secret inner lives. The music is atypical for Sonic Youth in that there is a lilting major mode melody in the chorus that is doubled by Moore's guitar part, Shelley plays the drums with brushes, and there is a piano part in the verses. It begins with a stylistic nod to 1960s girl group sing-along choruses, in which Kim Deal of the Breeders (and formerly the Pixies) can be heard prominently singing the melody along with the two other background singers, Lorette Velvette and Melissa Dunn:

If you want me to I will be the one  
That is always good and you'll love me too  
But you'll never know what I feel inside  
That I'm really bad, little trouble girl

The song then proceeds into Gordon's spoken verse, which is her homage to The Shangri-Las. This is one of the few recorded examples of Gordon explicitly imitating a vocal style, but in mimicking the deadpan spoken delivery used by The Shangri-Las in such hits as 1964's melodramatic "The Leader of the Pack," she employs a style that reveals nothing about the singer. There is an overall homogeneity to the girl group vocal style, and although this spoken delivery could be described as distinctive, as a style it is still more of a mask that conceals any sense of individuality than an invitation to identify with the speaker. The "sha la las" of the background singers at the end of each line complete the tribute, and they also signify the contrast between the innocence associated with this era of pop music and the reality of how daughters relate to their mothers during the traumatic years of puberty:

Remember mother? We were close.  
Very, very close.  
You taught me how to feel good  
Flirt and laugh, be understood  
Curl my hair and eyelash

Pinch my cheeks and do my lips  
 Swing my hips just like you  
 Smile and behave  
 A circle of perfection, it's what you gave  
 Then one day I met a guy  
 He stole my heart, no alibi  
 He said "Romance is a ticket to paradise"  
 Mama, I'm not too young to try  
 We kissed, we hugged  
 We were close. Very, very close.  
 We danced in the sand  
 And the water rose, higher and higher  
 Until I found myself floating in the sky  
 I'm sorry mother, I'd rather fight than have to lie

If you want me to, I will be the one  
 That is always good, and you'll love me too  
 But you'll never know what I feel inside  
 That I'm really bad, little trouble girl  
 Little trouble girl [backup vocals repeat x10]  
 Cross my heart and hope to die  
 I can not tell a lie

Gordon delivers the line “Romance is a ticket to paradise” that comes from the mouth of the heart-stealing guy in an exaggerated swoon, and the melodrama of the moment comes across as camp. The song calls into question the notion that good little girls should obey their mothers and resist having a boy burst their “circle of perfection” too soon. This lyric, more than any other in Gordon’s catalog, could be read as autobiography, given Gordon’s admission about being a model child until deciding to be bad at age 12. The song’s musical parody of girl group conventions strengthens the connection to Gordon’s girlhood; she turned 12 in 1965, which means her years of being a model child coincided with the commercial peak of the girl groups. Although such a reading is possible, Gordon’s construction of the lyric leaves plenty of space for the listener to identify with the generic plight of her narrator.



## QUESTIONING “KOOL THING”

“Kool Thing” appears on Sonic Youth’s major label debut *Goo* (1990), and is arguably the band’s most commercially successful song. It was the first single released from the record, and the first music video the group made with the financial support of the David Geffen Company. MTV aired it regularly in the early 1990s on its programs *120 Minutes* and *Alternative Nation*. The cover art for the single features an outtake photo of the group from the sessions photographer Michael Lavine had done for the interior booklet of *Goo*, in which they all took turns swapping absurd clothes such as faux fur jackets of various colors, polka dot shirts, and fringed vests, along with accents such as oversized plastic sunglasses, chains, and strands of stars in what suggests unsupervised children playing dress up in a costume store.<sup>198</sup>

“Kool Thing” is an unconventional Sonic Youth song because of its adherence to conventional pop song structure (intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-solo-verse-chorus), I-V-IV-I harmonic progression, and a simple repeated riff in the bass and guitar parts throughout the verses, which might partially explain its commercial success and its lasting popularity as an audience favorite in the band’s live repertoire. The pop song form underscores the subject matter of Gordon’s lyrics, which include a critique of pop star worship, the gendering of stardom, and the class issues inherent in the power inequality between stars and their fans. Gordon’s lyrics were inspired by her initial attraction to rapper L.L. Cool J as a performer and the subsequent disappointment she felt

---

<sup>198</sup> See digital scans of the artwork at <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/lp/ep18.html> (accessed July 30, 2005).

after interviewing him for a magazine article in the late 1980s when she realized how much of the overtly masculine posturing in his performance persona was also present in his actual personality. Gordon was familiar with being misunderstood by journalists who had difficulty reconciling her onstage persona with her offstage personality, and this song became an outlet for her thoughts on this tension between perception and reality. The titular character addressed by the song's narrator is a stand-in for L.L. Cool J, and Gordon incorporates many references to his hit songs and his image without naming him. The "kool thing" character functions as a symbol for the swaggering masculinity projected by many male pop stars, and Gordon's narrator draws attention to this pomposity while attacking it and putting him in his place.

Gordon constructed the lyrics for "Kool Thing" by appropriating lyrics, song, and album titles from L.L. Cool J, a tactic she would repeat two years later with the band Heart for the song "Drunken Butterfly." L.L. Cool J, which stands for Ladies Love Cool James, was born James Todd Smith in 1968, and by the late 1980s he had become one of the first sex symbols of rap. At that time, L.L. was as well known for his muscular physique and his tendency to perform shirtless as he was for his lyrical skills. His rhymes were full of braggadocio and putdowns, and his image consisted of the hallmarks of a B-boy: athletic sweatsuits, Adidas sneakers, a Kangol hat, and gold jewelry. L.L. expanded his persona with his breakthrough single "I Need Love" from his second album *Bigger and Deffer* (1987), a rap ballad delivered in a soulful whisper that won him many new female fans while alienating much of his male audience who perceived him as becoming soft. L.L. also gained notoriety by participating in several "dis wars" in the 1980s, exchanging taunts and retaliations with rappers Kool Moe Dee and Ice T on

records.<sup>199</sup> One way to interpret “Kool Thing” is to hear it as a dis record from another genre, in which Gordon engages in a practice foreign to alternative rock music in order to comment on a rap artist who was rapidly crossing over to become a pop star.

Sonic Youth hired Tamra Davis as the director of “Kool Thing” based on her prior experience in making rap videos for N.W.A., Young MC, and the clip for Tone Loc’s 1988 number one hit song “Wild Thing.” In her commentary track on the *Corporate Ghost* DVD, Davis recalls how this was Sonic Youth’s first “big budget” music video and yet for her it was a project that presented a challenge of how to make something MTV would air while working with such a low budget. Davis described the feeling of the video as “white alternative music meets black culture” in a 1993 *Rolling Stone* feature article that named “Kool Thing” number 31 on a list of The 100 Top Music Videos.<sup>200</sup> Davis covered the production studio offices with aluminum foil and strung pillow-shaped helium balloons to create a performance space for the band that suggested Andy Warhol’s Factory, the Manhattan studio where he and his “superstars” hung out and made films and various forms of pop art. In this faux Factory, the band members are wearing many of the same clothes they wore in the promotional photos for *Goo* as they mime playing their instruments. This space functions to identify the band as part of a white alternative cultural tradition that blends street smarts with a studied artfulness. By contrast, black culture is represented by the exterior shots of street scenes. Davis cuts back and forth between interior and exterior shots throughout the video, and also makes frequent switches between black and white and color shots.

---

<sup>199</sup> Steven Stancell, *Rap Who? Who: The World of Rap Music* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1996), 176-177.

<sup>200</sup> Jim Farber and Glenn Kenny, “The 100 Top Music Videos,” *Rolling Stone*, 14 October 1993, 80.

In order to play on the visual language of rap videos from the late 1980s and their portrayal of women, Gordon spends the entire video in an array of alluring outfits, walking and dancing in the streets of lower Manhattan with a posse of African-American female background dancers wearing Lycra and spandex outfits, occasionally lying on the floor of the performance space while stroking a black cat, and mugging for the camera as it frames her from extreme high and low angles. Through the combination of her tight and revealing outfits and her non-smiling “tough girl” masquerade, Gordon reveals the construction of a pop star as being a mixture of feminine sex appeal and masculine bravado. Gordon is not making a blatant statement about the appeal of black culture, or of black men to white women, despite the multitude of misinterpretations that have portrayed the song and video as being strictly about race. An African-American male character appears throughout the video in the exterior shots, posing and walking in the streets, and he interacts with Gordon in a few shots, but it is clear he is meant to represent the “kool thing” character. Apparently the spoken interpolation during the song’s middle section in which Gordon asks the “kool thing” character “Are you going to liberate us girls from male white corporate oppression?” was misinterpreted by most listeners and critics who only heard the word “white,” which in America has the power to trump all other issues on the table.<sup>201</sup>

In his 1992 book *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*, Andrew Goodwin addresses the mythic power of “authenticity” bestowed on rock music by the roots it claims in black culture, stressing that music

---

<sup>201</sup> Reynolds and Press, *Sex Revolts*, 247. Reynolds and Press prove that the British have also fixated on race in assessing Gordon’s lyrics and delivery in this song: “In ‘Kool Thing’ (from *Goo*) she delivers rap payback, trivializing such icons of black male rage as Public Enemy by treating them as sexual objects – turning the Black Panther into a sex kitten.”

videos “often use black musicians and audiences to ‘authenticate’ white rock music and/or help it sell in the dance-floor markets whose indices are the charts for black music in the United States.”<sup>202</sup> “Kool Thing” was the first Sonic Youth song or music video to overtly acknowledge black culture, let alone “use” it, but there is no sense of it being used to “authenticate” the musical or lyrical content, or to help Sonic Youth expand its market into dance clubs, even with the guest spoken vocal appearance by Chuck D of rap group Public Enemy. Rather, Gordon is acknowledging that black musicians, particularly male rappers, had become powerful as hip-hop culture began to pervade late twentieth-century popular culture. Rap music, along with heavy metal, was the dominant success story in the American music industry in the 1980s, and L.L. Cool J was one of rap’s stars with the greatest crossover appeal for the pop charts. As part of Gordon’s acknowledgment of this fact, she is also highlighting the discrepancy between the unlimited power fans ascribe to their favorite stars versus the limited power many actually possess as hired talent in the entertainment industry, and critiquing this level of celebrity worship.

Although Gordon addresses star power and the disillusionment that often results when fans meet their favorite celebrities in “Kool Thing,” her performance in the song’s music video had the ironic and unexpected effect of increasing her celebrity status during the commercial heyday of alternative rock in the early 1990s. One of the outfits she wears consists of white go-go boots, white faux-fur jacket, white oversized sunglasses, and a white hat while she walks down the street accompanied by her dancer posse. In some of the faux Factory studio clips when she is miming playing her bass, Gordon has

---

<sup>202</sup> Andrew Goodwin, *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 116.

on a silver bolero jacket, silver hot pants over tights, and the white go-go boots again. The outfit she wears for the majority of her interior lip synching shots consists of a black vinyl halter bra top and leopard print hot pants over tights. She is also wearing large hoop earrings, and has a beauty mark applied above the left corner of her mouth to aid in her enactment of a sex symbol persona. Gordon's performance in this video is most likely the strongest reason for the link between her name and the label "sex symbol," because the lyrics do not suggest such a transformation.

A close reading of the song's lyrical and musical content will identify Gordon's appropriations of L.L. Cool J's lyrics, song, and album titles, and reveal how the conventional pop song form and the repetition of the main guitar riff combine to foreground the message contained in the lyrics.

Kool thing, sittin' with a kitty  
Now you know you're sure lookin' pretty

These lines refer to the title and cover photo of L.L. Cool J's album *Walking With A Panther* (1989), in which he is depicted crouching in an alley behind a black panther. L.L. Cool J is dressed in green leather pants, a black leather jacket with red and white accents, and a white Kangol hat.<sup>203</sup> The panther signifies L.L.'s allegiance to the militant attitude associated with the Black Panther Party founded by Huey P. Newton in 1966, a fierce version of black pride that many rappers emulated in the 1980s.

Like a lover, not a dancer  
Superboy, take a little chance here

---

<sup>203</sup> The red, black, and green colors were in fashion in the hip-hop world of the late 1980s, when Afrocentrism was prominently on display and Black Nationalist pride could be shown by wearing the African colors red, black, and green, as well as leather pendants depicting the outline of Africa or other Afrocentric symbols. L.L. adapts the color scheme to his B-boy style in this album cover photo, forgoing the dashiki and leather pendants in favor of flashy leather pants and jacket and a thick gold rope.

In these lines, Gordon is referring to L.L. Cool J's hit song "I Need Love," in which he was one of the first rappers to also portray himself as a lover. As part of his B-boy persona, L.L. was much more of a tough guy who would never dance as part of his performance, being much more apt to assume a defiant arms-crossed stance. The "Superboy" reference could be related to the boast L.L. makes on the song "Clap Your Hands," from *Walking With A Panther*: "I rhyme like Superman/you rap like Jimmy Olsen." Gordon's narrator seems to be calling out the "kool thing" character on his claim to be a lover, as if she wants him to prove the vulnerability he implies he is capable of showing.

I don't wanna, I don't think so  
I don't wanna, I don't think so

L.L. Cool J had a Top 40 hit in 1988 with the song "Going Back to Cali," which originally appeared on the *Less Than Zero* soundtrack and was then re-released on *Walking With A Panther*. The chorus consists of L.L. repeating the title phrase, followed by the dismissive phrase: "I don't think so." It is unclear what Gordon's narrator is dismissing and refusing in the "Kool Thing" chorus, but the emphatic tone used in delivering the lines indicates she means what she says. She could be mimicking L.L. Cool J's narrator from "Going Back to Cali" in an attempt to puncture his indifferent sheen of cool, an attitude associated with the callousness of masculinity. Gordon's construction of a chorus out of a simple phrase that is ultimately open-ended in terms of its meaning is a tactic she later repeated in songs such as "Drunken Butterfly" and "Bull in the Heather."

Kool thing let me play with yr radio  
Move me, turn me on baby-oh

These lines refer to L.L. Cool J's 1985 song "I Can't Live Without My Radio," which includes multiple variants of him bragging about his radio in which the radio comes to represent his virility and even his manhood. Gordon's lyrics also play on the connection between masculinity and technology.

I'll be your slave  
Give you a shave

These lines simultaneously refer to L.L. Cool J's frequent claims of supremacy and the sensitive subject of slavery. It is a foreshadowing of the power imbalance Gordon refers to in the song's middle section, as well as the line in the verse that follows in which she proclaims she now knows he is the master.

I don't wanna, I don't think so  
I don't wanna, I don't think so

**Chuck D:** Yeh. Tell em bout it. Hit em where it hurts.

**Kim:** Hey kool thing, come here. Sit down beside me. There's something I gotta ask ya. I just wanna know, what are you gonna do for me? I mean, are you gonna liberate us girls from male white corporate oppression?

**CD:** Tell it like it is.

**K:** Hmm?

**CD:** Yeh

**K:** Don't be shy.

**CD:** Word up.

**K:** Fear of a female planet?

**CD:** Fear of a female planet. Fear it baby.

**K:** I just want you to know that we can still be friends.

**CD:** Let everybody know.

**K:** come on come on come on come on

The fact that Chuck D begins this spoken middle section with an introductory remark encouraging Gordon's narrator to "Tell em bout it" and "Hit em where it hurts" makes it clear that he is not the "kool thing" character she is addressing. This is further supported by the editing technique Davis uses in the video, whiting out the screen with "snow" to transition to the shots of Chuck D lip syncing his part, positioning him as an



entity removed from Gordon's contextual location. Davis makes this distinction clear by including a shot of Gordon speaking "come here" directly into the ear of the African-American man portraying "kool thing." When Gordon's narrator asks the "kool thing" character if he is going to "liberate us girls from male white corporate oppression," Chuck D's "Tell it like it is" interjection clearly indicates he is engaging in a responsorial role as a second voice, replicating the call-and-response patterns of West African music that feature prominently in much black American music, from field hollers to blues and from gospel to rap. Gordon's specification of "male white corporate oppression" in her narrator's question introduces the issues of gender, race, and class, three subjects not usually addressed in pop songs. By describing her narrator's oppressor to the star she worships, Gordon rhetorically aligns white women with African-American men and women as partners in disenfranchisement at the hands of a white male ruling class. Gordon's "Fear of a female planet?" question is a play on the title of the Public Enemy record *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990) that Chuck D's group recorded at Greene Street Recording in New York City down the hall from Sonic Youth during the *Goo* sessions. Chuck D follows Gordon's interrogative with a declarative restatement of the phrase, and it is both empowering and comical to hear this bastion of Black Nationalism falling in line with Gordon's feminist narrator.

When it seems the politicized rhetoric has reached its zenith, Gordon reveals her narrator's disillusionment with "kool thing" by delivering the line that tends to deflate the power heterosexual men derive from thinking of themselves as supremely desirable to all women: "I just want you to know that we can still be friends." Chuck D's concluding

proclamation, “Let everybody know,” reiterates his role as a responsorial second voice encouraging Gordon’s narrator to testify.

Kool, kool thing  
Kool, kool thing

When you're a star  
I know that you'll fix everything

Gordon delivers this phrase at the solo’s conclusion with enough sarcasm to reveal her narrator’s awareness that stars only possess the power ascribed to them by their fans.

Kool thing sittin' with a kitty  
Now you know you're sure lookin' pretty  
Rock the beat just a little faster  
Now I know you are the master

With the power shifted at this point in the song away from “kool thing” and towards Gordon’s narrator, she can deliver the line “Now I know you are the master” in this verse following the solo with a level of irony that was missing from the earlier verse in which she was willing to be the slave.

I don't wanna, I don't think so  
I don't wanna, I don't think so

Kool thing walkin' like a panther  
Come on and give me an answer  
Kool thing walkin' like a panther  
What'd he say?

The portrayal of “kool thing” as walking like a panther is conveyed by shots from behind of the African-American man ambling down a New York sidewalk in the video, seemingly walking away in a stupor after realizing his stardom has not made him almighty. Gordon’s narrator is shown walking after him, still waiting for an answer from “kool thing” to the tough questions she posed in the middle section.

I don't wanna, I don't think so  
 I don't wanna, I don't think so

After the chorus is sung once more, the song ends abruptly.

The musical structure of “Kool Thing,” (intro-verse-chorus-verse-chorus-bridge-solo-verse-chorus), is built on a tonic of F#. The tuning both Moore and Ranaldo use for the song is F#F#F#F#EB, and the main riff that is doubled in the bass and repeated throughout the verses consists of the progression F# (I) C# (V) B (IV) F# (I). The repetition of this harmonic progression delivers an arrangement of intervals familiar to any listener accustomed to popular music, bringing the vocal part to the foreground and drawing attention to the lyrics. Gordon sings along with the riff throughout the verses, which further simplifies the listener’s task of grasping what message is being conveyed by reducing the amount of varying information to process. Sonic Youth’s music usually features textures and non-harmonic tones coming from the guitars in the foreground competing for the listener’s attention with the vocal, so the inversion in “Kool Thing” signals that what the vocalist is communicating is significant. In the chorus, Moore plays the “I don’t wanna” riff (C C C A) that Gordon sings along with before she switches to a spoken delivery style for “I don’t think so,” while Ranaldo plays the three ascending half-tones B C C# up high on the neck, tremolo picking each note. In the song’s middle section, Moore and Ranaldo let their open strings ring out F# while Gordon & Chuck D trade lines in addressing “kool thing.” Gordon plays an ascending ostinato of F# A B C C#, while Shelley keeps the 4/4 beat steady during the middle section, essentially vamping to maintain a basic level of harmonic interest while the drama plays out in the questioning of “kool thing.” After she says, “we can still be friends,” Gordon initiates a brief bridge with a figure of F# D F# D that sets up the move to the dominant for the solo.

Moore generates the solo riff from the cluster of notes C# D# D E hovering around the dominant C#, while Ranaldo produces the sort of feedback and noise bursts normally associated with a Sonic Youth song. Gordon's bass part of C# F# F# D during this section supports Moore's solo while also tugging on the song to return to the F# tonic once more, which it does when the verse comes back following the line "When you're a star, I know you'll fix everything."

Gordon's creation of a narrator who uses the words of an admired pop star to expose the fragile construction of his power via a riff-heavy pop song succeeds in introducing the issues of gender, race, and class into an arena usually devoted to shoring up the notion of superstars as supremely powerful. The fact that the song became a hit for Sonic Youth and helped elevate Gordon's status as somewhat of a sex symbol suggests the ease with which ironic imitation can be mistaken for sincere effort. The interpretations of the song that maintain Gordon is attacking Chuck D and black males in general reveal how much power audiences have in determining meanings, and that once a dominant reading enters the realm of reception it tends to become accepted. One message the song conveys is that every listener makes his or her own meaning from each piece of music, and ultimately audiences possess more power than music's creators. In addition to all the meanings being generated from the musical codes in "Kool Thing," the song also delivers pleasure. The pleasure of the song does not diminish the impact of its message, because as Walser notes, "pleasure frequently *is* the politics of music—both the pleasure of affirmation and the pleasure of interference, the pleasure of marginalized people which has evaded channelization."<sup>204</sup> The pleasure derived from "Kool Thing"

---

<sup>204</sup> Walser, *Running With the Devil*, 55-56 (italics in original).

can be labeled that of both affirmation and interference: Gordon's narrator affirms the disappointment often experienced by fans when they meet celebrities to whom they are attracted, and in voicing her point-blank questions during the spoken middle section she gives the audience the vicarious pleasure of interfering with the adoration of celebrity, a pleasure alien to most pop songs. "Kool Thing" is still performed regularly in Sonic Youth's touring repertoire, which means that many nights each year Gordon's narrator gets to ask her questions in front of audiences and tip the scales of power in her favor.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GETTING OLDER, GETTING BETTER: “NOBODY KNOWS THE SHAPE I’M IN”

Gordon has continued to transcend gendered stereotypes over time in her role within Sonic Youth, as she has switched to playing guitar more frequently than bass, begun dancing onstage during selected songs, created more vulnerable narrators in her songs, and begun wearing more revealing clothing when performing in defiance of American cultural attitudes that do not consider middle-aged women attractive. Gordon’s music-making and performance practice within Sonic Youth, her group Free Kitten, and with other collaborators, disrupts the concept of artists naturally declining in their creativity over time and settling into a staid old-age style and provides a model for younger women musicians of how they too can get better with age.

### AGING YOUTH

Aging is an inevitable process that each individual deals with differently, and women face different challenges and cultural attitudes than men. Some women strive to look younger than their years, and some take pride in their accumulation of experience, but all women must contend with the fact that in our image-conscious culture, “a woman is defined primarily by her body, its procreative capacity and as a fetishized object,

representations from which a woman in middle age is predominantly excluded.”<sup>205</sup>

Scholars and journalists have paid more attention to how the issue of aging affects actresses and female characters in literature than popular musicians. Women who are performing artists are subjected to a higher level of scrutiny as a result of being on display, and it follows that their choices have the potential to shape attitudes towards aging in addition to reflecting them. Although there have not been many examples of women popular musicians continuing to make new music and perform past middle age, the demographic forecasts predicting that the aging population in America will continue to increase significantly in the twenty-first century suggest there may soon be more. As the seventy-five million “baby boomers” born between 1946 and 1964 grow older, the number of older persons will increase into what has been described as an “age wave” and a “gerontocracy.”<sup>206</sup> Gordon, who was born in 1953, began making music at the tail end of the no wave movement and now has the potential to become a role model for women popular musicians on the leading edge of the “age wave.”

Gordon and her bandmates have had to endure an increase in sarcastic remarks by critics and journalists about the word “youth” in their group name as they have moved into their third decade as Sonic Youth. Gordon is fond of reminding writers that the band name is not to be taken literally, and that it should be thought of as being preceded by a silent “the” as in the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. She also enjoys pointing out that the members of the Beatles were not insects, and that the Rolling Stones are not actually rocks. Writers reviewing Sonic Youth performances tend to direct their comments about

---

<sup>205</sup> Mary Kelly, *Mary Kelly: Interim* ([Edinburgh]: Fruitmarket Gallery, 1986), 3. Quoted in Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998), 179.

<sup>206</sup> Risha W. Levinson, “Aging and Time-Binding in the Twenty-First Century,” *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Spring 2003, 47.

band members getting on in years at Gordon. For example, in his *New York Press* review of a 2004 benefit concert to raise money for cancer research on the occasion of Joey Ramone's death, J. R. Taylor wrote: "The sell-out of *Goo* may be their best album, but it's embarrassing to see Kim Gordon doing 'Kool Thing' at this stage in her life. Ex-girl, indeed."<sup>207</sup>

Gordon has few role models, and few peers, when it comes to growing older and continuing to make music in a mixed-gender group. Most of her predecessors have retired from performing and recording, or their primary groups have disbanded, as in the case of Tina Weymouth of Talking Heads. Weymouth continues making music sporadically with her husband Chris Frantz in Tom Tom Club, but they rarely perform. Poison Ivy (née Kirsty Wallace) of the Cramps is still playing "psychobilly" guitar and putting on tight-fitting vinyl outfits for performances, but her camp persona has remained unchanged for twenty-five years and the only changes noticeable are in how her costumes fit or how much makeup she wears. Some of the disbanded groups of the past have reunited, such as Blondie or the Slits, but their performances are now tinged with nostalgia. Some musicians from the groups that initially inspired Gordon have carried on with solo careers, such as Ana da Silva of the Raincoats. Comparing Gordon to female popular musicians who have always been solo artists, such as Madonna, or those who have had second careers as solo artists, such as Tina Turner, Cher, and Annie Lennox, fails to account for the particular group dynamic within which she has always operated.

Patti Smith is a curious case in this regard, because she has straddled the line between solo artist and group member since beginning her career in the early 1970s.

---

<sup>207</sup> J. R. Taylor, "Gabba Gabba Hey You Suck!" *New York Press*, 20-26 October 2004, 43.



Smith continues to make new music and tour as she approaches sixty, and although she makes music with the Patti Smith Group she is unquestionably the leader and the front person. Smith famously walked away from the music industry to raise her children during the 1980s, returning in 1996 after her husband Fred “Sonic” Smith died. Since resuming making music and performing, Smith has assumed the role of a wise and compassionate grey-haired elder and hidden her body under baggy pants, loose-fitting tops, and an oversized black blazer.

Many of the young women musicians inspired by Gordon have not been able to maintain their groups into the twenty-first century. These include Courtney Love of Hole, Kathleen Hanna, Tobi Vail, and Kathi Wilcox of Bikini Kill, and the women of L7. These musicians will still grow old, and some may continue making music, but their contexts will shift as they take up solo careers or form new groups.<sup>208</sup> Gordon has never exhibited a tendency toward making music on her own, so it is difficult to imagine she would take this route. In a 2002 interview by her Free Kitten bandmate Julie Cafritz, Gordon confirmed that she has no ambition to be “just a singer.”<sup>209</sup> Only Gordon knows how long she will continue making music with Sonic Youth, Free Kitten, or other collaborators.

Gordon does not regard her age as conflicting with rock music’s role as youth culture; she thinks she has “just as much to offer young people, probably more so, than most people their age.”<sup>210</sup> Gordon feels better about herself the older she gets, but is

---

<sup>208</sup> For example, Kathleen Hanna has continued her feminist activism in Le Tigre, but her current group makes electronic pop music rather than indie rock, and signed a contract with Universal to release the record *This Island* (2004), which included a version of the Pointer Sisters’ 1980s hit song “I’m So Excited.”

<sup>209</sup> Julia Cafritz, “Next of Kim,” *Venus* 13 (The Uncut Version), Summer/Fall 2002. [http://www.venuszine.com/stories/music\\_interviews/130](http://www.venuszine.com/stories/music_interviews/130) (accessed August 2, 2005).

<sup>210</sup> Gordon, “Own Words,” 180.

angry about the double standards that allow men in rock to keep “getting better” with age while women are expected to disappear.<sup>211</sup> Gordon is aware of how the type of music she makes influences attitudes towards her as an aging female musician:

It gets me down when people are malicious about age, and when they have double standards for men. I could name a number of men in their mid-thirties who people rarely discuss in terms of age. Even, for example, with Neil Young, the response is: ‘Oh, he’s just getting better as he gets older.’ With women, it’s more like: ‘As you’re getting older, you’re losing it.’ I think also that if you do a certain kind of music, more dissonant music, people think it’s inappropriate to be beyond a certain age. You get away with more if you make more melodious-type music.<sup>212</sup>

Gordon does not have a cache of radio-certified hit songs in Sonic Youth’s back catalog on which she can rely to perform for the rest of her career, unlike solo artists such as Eric Clapton or classic rock groups such as the Rolling Stones. Sonic Youth fans have their favorite songs, and Gordon’s “Kool Thing” and “Bull in the Heather” are among them, but even these two fail to show up on the conservative playlists of commercial radio stations in the United States. Sonic Youth has never had the support of regular commercial radio airplay, and MTV has only offered token exposure to acknowledge their status as underground tastemakers, and as a result the band has continued generating new music every couple of years and touring as the primary method of transmitting their songs to audiences. Gordon has been conscious of the attitude that she is getting too old to keep making and performing this type of music for over a decade now, as evidenced by comments she made in 1993 at age forty:

I mean, what kind of music am I supposed to play now? Am I just supposed to turn into another type of person? Nobody knows what you do when you get to this age.<sup>213</sup>

---

<sup>211</sup> Ibid, 181.

<sup>212</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 124.

<sup>213</sup> Gordon, “Own Words,” 180.

By continuing to make challenging new music and tour, Gordon has answered her own rhetorical questions while simultaneously disrupting the double standards regarding aging.

#### MAKING NOISE

In recent years, Gordon has begun to play electric guitar more often than bass, and has also added trumpet to her sonic arsenal. This shift is more in keeping with Sonic Youth's return to its initial instrument-swapping ways than the result of a conscious move by Gordon to claim the power associated with more traditionally masculine instruments, but the sight of her at center stage with a guitar hanging on her body while she plays a trumpet sends a message that these devices are now at her disposal and the audience should get accustomed to it. In other words, Gordon is no longer Sonic Youth's female bassist who sometimes also sings.

Gordon joins Moore and Rinaldo in generating feedback, distortion, and a variety of non-harmonic tones with her instruments in performance, both during composed sections of departure from controlled melodic and rhythmic content and the spontaneous improvisatory segments of sound exploration common in Sonic Youth shows. Gordon frequently takes to standing on her bass or her guitar and kicking the strings during these extended feedback episodes, and the sight of her in recent years on top of the body and neck of an electric guitar in heels and a dress is a visual inversion of the usual rock trope of masculine dominance. Although she seems to enjoy making noise with the boys, Gordon does have limits of endurance when these moments stretch on too long, but these have more to do with her personality than her age. For example, Gordon walked offstage

during the feedback improvisation that concluded “Expressway to yr Skull” at the July 30, 2004, Milwaukee show on the *Sonic Nurse* tour, and the rest of the band stayed onstage making noise for another twenty minutes. When I asked her afterwards why she had exited when she did, Gordon said she left once she could sense her bandmates getting into what she described as a “boy brain freeze” that she found boring.<sup>214</sup>

Even though her tomboy status as a youth accustomed her to being around men, and her husband is also her bandmate, Gordon admits to getting bored when the Sonic Youth men “just want to talk about records or whatever.” She admits that her experience in Free Kitten, a side-project band she formed in 1992 with her best friend and former Pussy Galore guitarist Julie Cafritz, is “different” and “generally easier” in terms of communication.<sup>215</sup> The band was originally a guitar/guitar duo named Kitten, a lineup Gordon admits was inspired by the early period of indie rock group Royal Trux, when that band consisted solely of Jennifer Herrema and Neil Hagerty and they proved that a band could just have two people.<sup>216</sup> Gordon believes that in some ways there is nothing scarier than playing guitar without a drummer, and both she and Cafritz wanted to take on the challenge of performing open-ended songs without the structure a rhythm section provides.<sup>217</sup> When a woman approached them after a gig at CBGB’s to say she had been using the name Kitten as a disco performer for quite some time, Gordon and Cafritz changed the name to Free Kitten and carried on making noise. This first incarnation of the band was documented on *Call Now* (1992), a mini-LP released on Thurston Moore’s record label Ecstatic Peace. In a *New York Times* review of a February 1992 Kitten

---

<sup>214</sup> Kim Gordon, interview by the author, July 30, 2004, Milwaukee, WI.

<sup>215</sup> Gordon, “Own Words,” 174.

<sup>216</sup> Kim Gordon, “HER NOISE Interview.”

<sup>217</sup> Jutta Koether, “Kitten,” *Purple Prose*, 1992, <http://adaweb.com/~purple/kitten.html> (accessed August 2, 2005).

performance on a bill with Bikini Kill and Boss Hog at Maxwell's in Hoboken, New Jersey, Karen Schoemer described the duo as being “out of tune, out of tempo,” plunking out “atonal lead lines in loose synchronization,” and making a statement “by being deliberately awful.”<sup>218</sup> Gordon claims they were spoofing New York City's free jazz scene and its earnestness by having fun while making noise and presenting it in a different context, and that very few people seemed to grasp why they seemed to be working hard to make “such horrible sounding music.”<sup>219</sup> Schoemer's review shows that she was one of the few who got it.

In 1993, Yoshimi Yokota of the Japanese bands the Boredoms and OOIOO joined the duo on drums, harmonica, and trumpet, and in 1994 Pavement's bass player Mark Ibold began playing with the women to create a gender-inverted version of Sonic Youth's lineup. As a quartet, they recorded and released a number of singles and EPs on various independent record labels. Gordon and Cafritz branched out from the original freeform conception of Free Kitten to encompass rapping over programmed drum beats on tracks like “Revlon Liberation Orchestra,” and singing an English translation of Serge Gainsbourg's cheerfully twisted French pop song “Teenie Weenie Boppie,” originally recorded by yé-yé star France Gall in 1967.<sup>220</sup> Gordon and Cafritz also involved DJ Spooky on *Sentimental Education* (1997), connecting the sound worlds of indie guitar noise and hip-hop turntablism. What began as a “girl bonding band” making “anti-

---

<sup>218</sup> Karen Schoemer, “Kitten, Bikini Kill and Boss Hog; Maxwell's,” *New York Times*, 6 February 1992, C20.

<sup>219</sup> Kim Gordon, “HER NOISE Interview.”

<sup>220</sup> Free Kitten's version of “Teenie Weenie Boppie” can be heard at <http://www.killrockstars.com/bands/freekitten/audio/TeenieWeenieBoppie.mp3> (accessed August 2, 2005).

commercial music” has proved to be an outlet for Gordon to challenge herself and explore musical ideas that fall outside of the aesthetic boundaries of Sonic Youth.<sup>221</sup>

Gordon has also gone from making fun of earnest improvisers in the free jazz scene to forming an improvising trio with former DNA drummer Ikue Mori and DJ Olive. The group has no name other than the performers’ names, and has so far recorded and released only one record, *SYR 5* (2000).<sup>222</sup> Gordon began improvising with Mori in 1998, and later expanded the group to a trio with the addition of DJ Olive. Gordon plays guitar and trumpet, in addition to singing, Mori plays drum programs she has created on a laptop, and DJ Olive performs on turntables. After finishing the record, Gordon enlarged the trio by inviting Jim O’Rourke to join on various instruments, and the quartet has been performing solo shows and festival gigs ever since. The nature of working as an improviser has kept Gordon attuned to sounds spanning the entire range of frequencies, and definitely helped her combat any complacency that might have crept into her music-making habits after so many years of working within the parameters of Sonic Youth.

#### DANCING AND ACTING

Gordon did not meet the expectation that a female pop musician should play the role of dancing vocalist and exploit her body for audience appeal early in her career. Instead, she waited until reaching her “mature” years to embrace this role that is more associated with youth. During the summer 2000 tour to support *NYC Ghosts & Flowers*, Sonic Youth added Jim O’Rourke as a touring member who alternately played guitar, bass, synthesizer, or manipulated sounds with a laptop. The song “Kool Thing” was

---

<sup>221</sup> Raphael, *Grrrls*, 118.

<sup>222</sup> Chris Lawrence, “SYR 5,” The Sonic Youth Information Database, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/lp/misc12.html> (accessed August 2, 2005).

performed again for the first time in seven years, with O'Rourke playing bass, and this freed Gordon "to dance all over the stage and tease the first few rows with her microphone during the song's midsection."<sup>223</sup> When *Entertainment Weekly* writer David Browne described Gordon's dancing during the summer 2002 tour as "adding a newly erotic, visceral element," the observation suggested Browne had not previously recognized the degree to which Gordon had provided an erotic and visceral element while playing and singing at center stage.<sup>224</sup> Browne also neglected to mention that the song Gordon chose to showcase her dancing during that tour was "Drunken Butterfly." Her dancing style for this song fell far from meeting conventional pop music notions of what is sexy, combining mechanistic moves reminiscent of cheerleading routines with barely controlled lurching and spinning, and it served to underscore the satirical slant of the lyrics.<sup>225</sup> Gordon continues to enact the identity of out-of-control female hedonist by dancing this way every time Sonic Youth performs this song, a performance strategy that enhances her lyrical strategy of exposing the constructed appearance of the female hedonist as "natural." Descriptions that cast Gordon as either a sex symbol or a detached ironist instead of recognizing the play between these two poles fail to understand that her gender performativity blurs the distinction between erotic and parodic. However her performance is perceived, Gordon's decision to start dancing onstage at this point in her career is one more choice on the long list of choices she has made that thwart expectations.

---

<sup>223</sup> Chris Lawrence, "NYC Ghosts & Flowers," The Sonic Youth Information Database, <http://www.sonicyouth.com/mustang/lp/lp16.html> (accessed August 2, 2005).

<sup>224</sup> Browne, "The Greats," 47.

<sup>225</sup> Brief examples of this dancing style can be seen in the music video for "The Empty Page" on the *Corporate Ghost* DVD.

In a similar move, Gordon accepted a part in a major motion picture at an age when most female pop musicians have given up attempting to cross over into acting. Gordon appears in Gus Van Sant's *Last Days* (2005), playing the role of a record label executive who counsels a young male rock star, modeled on Kurt Cobain of Nirvana, who has withdrawn from the world under the pressure of his fame. Gordon was close to Cobain in reality, and so casting her in the film seems like a wise decision on Van Sant's behalf. Gordon and Thurston Moore also served as music consultants for the film, and loaned Van Sant several garments and personal items Cobain had given them for costumes and props. Gordon took this role on her own terms, and it is unlikely she will seek to hyphenate herself as a "singer-actress" the way Madonna and Courtney Love and countless other female pop musicians have, but the fact that she made her screen debut at an age when most Hollywood actresses are struggling to find work is noteworthy.

#### MIDDLE-AGED SEXUALITY

Gordon has always expressed an interest in sexuality and an awareness of what it means to be a woman working in the popular music industry, and this remains true now that she is in her fifties. Not surprisingly, her stance on the topic does not conform to mainstream stereotypes:

I think sexuality is a huge and vital part of rock music. To me, there are more interesting types of sexuality. In the mainstream it always comes down to the most obvious denominator. That's why Carrie from Sleater-Kinney playing guitar is much sexier than Mariah Carey wearing the skimpiest outfit. There's something about breaking taboos that is daring and makes it sexy.<sup>226</sup>

---

<sup>226</sup> DeSantis, "Kim Gordon," 19.



Gordon's notion of "breaking taboos" and "daring" behavior as being sexy has manifested itself in a willingness to construct more vulnerable personas in her songs and alter her vocal delivery style to convey this quality. To undertake such a shift at this point in her career is another way in which Gordon is changing performance strategies and disrupting the expectations audiences might have for the type of personas she has been creating for nearly a quarter of a century in her Sonic Youth songs. An example of this is audible in her performance of "Dude Ranch Nurse," from *Sonic Nurse* (2004). For the *Sonic Nurse* album artwork, Sonic Youth selected several of Richard Prince's paintings from his series of "nurse" paintings, in which he scanned pulp fiction paperback covers featuring nurses, enlarged the images, printed them onto canvases, and added white sanitary masks over their noses and mouths in painting over them. Gordon "inhabits" the nurse from Prince's painting *Dude Ranch Nurse*, and conveys vulnerability in her protagonist in spite of the seamy goings-on hinted at in the lyrics. It is unclear what type of "nurse" this character is, but it seems as if she is engaged in role-playing games with her "patients." Gordon ranges from singing the line "Let nurse give you a shot" in a coquettish manner to one "patient" during the song's bridge, to delivering the repeated final line with a level of pathos new to Gordon's lyrical and vocal strategies: "Nobody knows the shape I'm in." This final declaration functions like an aside, tempering the perception of the "nurse" as a libertine by suggesting that she is troubled in her solitude.

Another recent example of Gordon conveying vulnerability in her vocal delivery can be heard on "I Love You Golden Blue," also from *Sonic Nurse*.<sup>227</sup> Gordon's

---

<sup>227</sup> Dave Markey's video for "I Love You Golden Blue" can be seen at [http://www.wegotpowerfilms.com/music\\_videos/qt\\_sonic2004.html](http://www.wegotpowerfilms.com/music_videos/qt_sonic2004.html) (accessed August 2, 2005).

performance on this recording represents the first time she has sung in the French chanteuse style for which she has long professed admiration. Singers such as Brigitte Fontaine and Françoise Hardy exemplify this style, and Gordon ably transmits their influence.<sup>228</sup> Gordon delivers enigmatic lyrics about a dead boy in a hushed and breathy manner during the verses, in which she sings along with the guitar's melodic line in F# minor. She lightly hits each note and trails off, investing her protagonist with a believable wistfulness. The key shifts to the relative major A for the chorus, a harmonic move that in most instances would signal a happier mood, but the lyrics consist of four phrases expressing resignation: "I can't read your mind, I can't find the time, I can't feel the thrill, I don't have the will." Gordon conveys the melancholy in her lyrics through the melodic vocal gesture she employs. She begins on E3, leaps the octave to E4 on each verb, and remains on that note for the rest of each phrase. In her bass part, she alternates two measures of eighth notes on A with two on its lower neighbor G#, while one of the guitars plays a melodic line that descends E-C#-B-A. By remaining on E4 in her vocal line against this downward harmonic motion, Gordon makes her protagonist sound as if she is too weary to even change notes. Rather than sounding like the result of a staid "old-age style" of singing that relies on sentimentality, Gordon's performance comes across on record and in live performances as the sound of a woman bold enough and comfortable enough with herself to take on the challenge of adding a new vocal style to her repertoire in her third decade of making music.

Gordon's most visible example of "daring" behavior in recent years has been her choice to reveal more of her body in her wardrobe choices for promotional photos and

---

<sup>228</sup> Jonathan Cohen, "Nursed' Back To Health," *Nude As The News*, July 7, 2004, <http://www.nudeasthenews.com/interviews/70> (accessed August 2, 2005). Thurston Moore bluntly assesses Gordon's performance of the chanteuse style in this interview: "She nailed it."

performance. Gordon has always had a slight build and muscular limbs, and her body's appearance has always seemed more like the result of what she does for a living than the result of trying to maintain sex symbol status by hiring a personal trainer and devoting hours to a fitness regimen. Gordon is aware that some women, such as Madonna, seek to control their own bodies by making themselves into sex symbols, but Gordon feels that Madonna "is sort of trapped because she's become such a freak" and has lost whatever sense of normalcy her figure once suggested in the early 1980s as a result of exercising.<sup>229</sup>

When I go back and look at clips of her and her first videos when she was a little bit pudgy, that was the only time I thought she was actually sexy. . . . After that she got more and more hard and refined and hidden. She basically was a mannequin for wearing different outfits and personas.<sup>230</sup>

To Gordon, Madonna serves as an example of how the effort to control one's body—especially when it occurs under the auspices of making oneself more attractive to the opposite sex and adhering to conventional feminine beauty ideals—can have deleterious effects.

Gordon never set out to become a sex symbol, unlike many female pop musicians, and she maintains a reluctant distance from embracing this status. At the same time, as the result of becoming a "pseudo sex symbol," Gordon has found herself fielding offers to wear certain designers' clothes and model for print ads. When asked in 2000 how she decided to pose for a Calvin Klein ad, Gordon undercut the status implied and distanced herself from the realm of professional models with a flippant reply: "Well, when Cal's on the horn, who can say no?"<sup>231</sup> Gordon appeared in a photo taken by Richard Kern accompanying a brief article in the February 2005 issue of *Index* magazine, modeling

---

<sup>229</sup> Gordon, "Own Words," 178.

<sup>230</sup> Mark Guarino, "Sexuality still not a factor for Gordon," *Daily Herald* (Arlington Heights, Ill.), Time Out section, 15 May 1998, 5.

<sup>231</sup> Amy Schroeder, "Kim Gordon," *Soma*, July 2000, 18.

low-rise pants and a zip-front shirt by East Village boutique owner Anne Johnston Albert's designer label Martin.<sup>232</sup> Gordon has the shirt unzipped completely, revealing her own vintage necklace and gold sequined bra, but instead of trying to look fetching and further sexualize the image she is smiling and looks genuinely happy.

Sonic Youth played a series of small club gigs on the east coast of the United States during spring 2005, and Gordon's onstage wardrobe choices suggested she was celebrating her comfort with her body as well as directing irony at standard cultural attitudes towards middle-aged women. Sonic Youth's show at the Hiro Ballroom in the Maritime Hotel in Manhattan's meatpacking district was reviewed in the April 13, 2005, issue of *The New York Times*, and a photo of the band's frontline taken in mid-song accompanied the review.<sup>233</sup> It shows Gordon playing bass and wearing a grey and green tank top covered in jewels and sequins sparkling in the flash, paired with a gold lamé super miniskirt revealing her taut bare legs. To his credit, reviewer Ben Ratliff made no mention of Gordon's attire in assessing the band, which he described as nearly becoming "the Kim Gordon Quintet" in the second half of the show due to the set list selections: "she sang song after song with the same coolly chanted recitations that have become more commanding over time."<sup>234</sup>

Gordon is not becoming an elder trying vainly to still seem vital as much as she is becoming an older performer at ease within her body and unwilling to be excluded from representations of what might be considered attractive. In comparison with older male rock musicians who still foreground their sexuality, Gordon is closer in spirit to Iggy Pop

---

<sup>232</sup> Mike Edison, "The Kim Gordon Revolution," *Index*, February 2005, 34.

<sup>233</sup> Ben Ratliff, "Sailing Sublimely Along, With Flotsam as a Schooner," *New York Times*, 13 April 2005, late edition, sec. E, p. 1. Ratliff deemed it "an astonishingly good performance from a band that won't and shouldn't quit."

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*

in this way than to Mick Jagger or his bandmate Keith Richards. Like Iggy Pop, Gordon continues to enjoy making noise and performing, and her attractiveness stems from this audible and visible enthusiasm as much as it does from her self-presentation. Unlike the women she creates in her paintings that may or may not be self-portraits, Gordon's self-portrait as a performing artist is always in flux, playing an instrument, singing, sweating, and working.

## CHAPTER SIX

## CONCLUSION

Kim Gordon is often referred to as being influential, but the writers who have made this claim have rarely elucidated why. Although her name can be found in the index of nearly every book purporting to tell the story of “Women in Rock,” Gordon is largely relegated to the margins of the popular music narrative in favor of the more dramatic characters at its center.<sup>235</sup> She is not a polemicist in her work or in her personal life, which perhaps makes her less appealing as a subject to writers in search of controversy or scandal. The irony and ambiguity in Gordon’s lyrics and her comments to the press have perhaps earned her a reputation as someone who does not take rock music seriously and thus should not be seriously considered as a musician. Gordon’s approach to making music has always been an exploration of what it means to be a cultural worker critiquing popular culture from the inside, questioning assumptions about what constitutes music while simultaneously writing, recording, and performing songs. I believe it is Gordon’s independent spirit and her commitment to thwarting expectations—

---

<sup>235</sup> Gordon appears in the following: Mina Carson, Tisa Lewis, and Susan M. Shaw, *Girls Rock! Fifty Years of Women Making Music* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004); Gillian G. Gaar, *She’s a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*, 2d ed. (New York: Seal Press, 2002); Gerri Hirshey, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The True, Tough Story of Women in Rock* (New York: Grove Press, 2001); Lucy O’Brien, *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul* (London: Continuum, 2002); Barbara O’Dair, ed., *Trouble Girls: The Rolling Stone Book of Women in Rock* (New York: Random House, 1997). The most substantial assessment Gordon merits from any of these writers comes from Gaar, who devotes four pages to Gordon’s work in her chapter “Enjoy Being a Grrrl.”

musical, lyrical, gendered, and more recently age-based—that underlie her influential status.

This work has filled a gap in popular music scholarship by showing the ways in which Gordon has earned her influential status. Gordon's training as a visual artist continues to inform her approach to making music. Rather than accepting the traditional female role as a glamorous front singer or as a backing musician playing a supporting role, Gordon operates as an equal contributing member of Sonic Youth. I have shown Gordon's ability to forge ahead in D.I.Y. fashion in an area lacking in role models. Although Gordon is an equal within Sonic Youth, she has resisted becoming "one of the boys." I have shown how Gordon draws inspiration from a genealogy of influences, and situated her work within a continuum of disruptive women musicians in order to dispel the ahistorical notion that she is a pioneer. Gordon has a relationship not only to her predecessors but also to future generations of female musicians. Gordon's commitment to this genealogy of disruptive women can be seen in her friendship with and promotion of other women making music and visual art.

Although Gordon describes herself as a "sloppy feminist,"<sup>236</sup> her work is informed by numerous expressions of feminism. In addition to using her influence to open up space for other women in non-traditional roles, she also denaturalizes gender-construction within popular music and the broader culture through her self-presentation in performance and in her lyrics. My analysis shows that despite Gordon being excluded from prior studies of women popular musicians who disrupt gender norms, her work belongs in this scholarly interrogation. Popular music studies scholars have tended to

---

<sup>236</sup> O'Dair, "Kim Gordon," 144.

focus on more spectacular figures whose theatricality is more obvious, and gender studies scholars have perhaps overlooked Gordon's use of homeovestism due to its subtlety. I have shown, however, that her approach is effective in revealing the constructedness of gender and contesting naturalized notions of femininity. I have also demonstrated Gordon's ability to negotiate masculinity, and to contest its normative status in popular music, in my discussion of gender slippage in Gordon's performance of songs associated with male musicians. This subversion of naturalized notions of gender is also shown in my analysis of "Bull in the Heather."

Gordon's lack of musical training initially allowed her the freedom to express herself without feeling limited by formal knowledge when she chose sound as her primary medium, and I believe it is her desire to continue challenging herself that has fostered her ongoing disruption of the gendered expectations for what type of music is deemed appropriate for women to make. In detailing Sonic Youth's collective compositional process, I have shown how the group has subverted the romantic model of the lone creative genius writing music to be performed by others in favor of a democratic approach that has helped them create a type of antisexist rock. Although Gordon is the first to admit she does not have a "real" singing voice, her occupation is listed as "singer" in the 20<sup>th</sup> edition of *Who's Who of American Women*, and I maintain she uses the instrument she has to great effect by altering her approach based on the song. It is the artifice in Gordon's vocal style and lyrics that exposes the construction of "real" singing voices or "authentic" lyrical content and challenges these naturalized notions. This artifice is also at work in Gordon's negotiation of the gender, class, and race issues that factor into her female narrator's disillusionment with a male pop star in "Kool Thing," as



my analysis of the musical, lyrical, and visual tropes Gordon employs in this song and its music video reveals.

By tracing Gordon's changes in her music-making and performance strategies, I have shown how she has continued to transcend gendered stereotypes over time in her role within Sonic Youth and disrupt the concept of artists naturally declining in their creativity as they age. In addition to highlighting and critiquing the double standard in the popular music industry of men being thought of as getting better with age whereas women are supposed to disappear, Gordon's ongoing commitment to making disruptive music is providing a model for younger women musicians of how they too can get better with age. In turn, many younger women musicians have incorporated Gordon into their own genealogies.

Arlene Stein claims that young women today have a "greater variety of different images of gender available to them" than the girls of her own generation had in the 1960s and 1970s, and that they are "no longer forced to choose between a discourse of romance that glorifies surrender and a discourse of rock that idealizes autonomy,"<sup>237</sup> and my analysis has shown that Kim Gordon has been a key figure in bringing about this change. Whereas this thesis focuses primarily on Gordon's disruptive work as it applies to the gendered expectations for women making popular music, her work offers ample material for future scholarly explorations of other ideas. These include Gordon's interrogation of the portrayal of girlhood, a more detailed examination of Gordon's feminism, an assessment of the "whiteness" in her musical aesthetic, and a more extensive analysis of the musical codes at play in her work. This thesis also suggests an analytical approach

---

<sup>237</sup> Arlene Stein, "Rock Against Romance: Gender, Rock 'n' Roll, and Resistance," in *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, ed. Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 223.

that could be productively employed in an examination of the work of other popular music performers. The case of Kim Gordon counters the assumption in popular music that influence comes with fame and a steady presence on the pop charts, and I am confident that she will continue to challenge the expectations of the popular music industry in her future work.

### Bibliography

- Anderson, Stephen. "No-Wave Nihilism." *Atlantic*, June 1985, 94-95.
- Attali, Jacques. *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.
- Azerrad, Michael. *Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2001.
- Barthes, Roland. "The Grain of the Voice." In *Image – Music – Text*, essays selected and translated by Stephen Heath. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.
- Bayton, Mavis. "Women and the Electric Guitar." In *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, edited by Sheila Whiteley. London: Routledge, 1997.
- Blashill, Pat. *Noise from the Underground*. Photographs by Michael Lavine; text by Pat Blashill. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.
- Borzello, Frances. *Seeing Ourselves: Women's Self-Portraits*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1998.
- Browne, David. "The Greats—Sonic Youth." *Entertainment Weekly*, March 7, 2003, 38-47.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990; New York: Routledge, 1999.
- Cafritz, Julia. "Next of Kim." *Venus 13* (The Uncut Version), Summer/Fall 2002. [http://www.venuszine.com/stories/music\\_interviews/130](http://www.venuszine.com/stories/music_interviews/130).
- Carson, Mina, Tisa Lewis, and Susan M. Shaw. *Girls Rock! Fifty Years of Women Making Music*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2004.
- Cateforis, Theo. "'Total Trash:' Analysis and Post Punk Music." *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 5 (1993): 39-57.
- Clawson, Mary Ann. "When Women Play The Bass: Instrument Specialization and Gender Interpretation in Alternative Rock Music." *Gender & Society* 13 (1999): 193-210.
- Cohen, Jonathan. "'Nursed' Back To Health." *Nude As The News*, July 7, 2004. <http://www.nudeasthenews.com/interviews/70>.
- Cox, Christopher, and Daniel Warner, eds. *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*. New York: Continuum, 2004.

- Davis, Erik. "Bring the White Noise." *Spin*, January 1989, 48-50.
- Daugherty, Rebecca. "The Spirit of '77: Punk and the Girl Revolution." *Women & Music* 6 (2002): 27-35.
- Day, Holly. "Sonic Youth." *Ink 19*, May 2000.  
[http://www.ink19.com/issues\\_F/00\\_05/ink\\_spots/sonic\\_youth.shtml](http://www.ink19.com/issues_F/00_05/ink_spots/sonic_youth.shtml).
- DeSantis, Carla A. "Kim Gordon: Sonic Warrior." *Rockrgirl*, April 30, 2000, 19.
- Dougherty, Steve, and Luchina Fisher. "Sonic Youth Won't Leave Home Without Their Rockabye Baby." *People*, June 10, 1996, 137-38.
- Edison, Mike. "The Kim Gordon Revolution." *Index*, February 2005, 34.
- Eisgrau, Robin. "X Girl." *Paper*, March 1994, 32-35.
- Foege, Alec. *Confusion Is Next: The Sonic Youth Story*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994.
- France, Kim. "Angry Young Women." *Utne Reader*, September/October 1992, 24-26.
- . "Grrrls at War." *Rolling Stone*, 8 July 1993 – 22 July 1993, 23-24.
- Fricke, David. "The Rolling Stone Interview with Sonic Youth's Thurston Moore." *Rolling Stone*, 22 September 1994, 52-54+.
- Friedman, Dorian. "Kim Gordon." *U.S. News & World Report*, December 28, 1998, 48.
- Frith, Simon. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996.
- Gaar, Gillian G. *She's a Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*. 2d ed. New York: Seal Press, 2002.
- Gaines, Donna. "Let's Talk About Sex." *Rolling Stone*, 13 November 1997, 91-94.
- Gamble, Sarah, ed. *The Routledge Companion to Feminism and Postfeminism*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Gamman, Lorraine, and Merja Makinen. *Female Fetishism*. Washington Square: New York University Press, 1995.
- Gann, Kyle. "Roots in Outer Space," *Village Voice*, 28 December 1999, 119.

- Gendron, Bernard. *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
- Goodwin, Andrew. *Dancing in the Distraction Factory: Music Television and Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992.
- Gordon, Kim. "I'm Really Scared When I Kill in My Dreams." *Artforum International* 21, January 1983, 54-57.
- . "American Prayers." *Artforum International* 23, April 1985, 73-77.
- . "Is It My Body?" In *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, by Elisabeth Sussman; with contributions by Richard Armstrong...[et al.]. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1993.
- . "In Her Own Words." In *Women, Sex and Rock'n'Roll: In Their Own Words*, edited by Liz Evans. London and San Francisco: Pandora, 1994.
- . "Boys are Smelly: Sonic Youth Tour Diary, '87." In *Rock She Wrote*, [edited by] Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers. New York: Dell, Delta, 1995. Originally published in *Village Voice*, 12-18 October 1988.
- . Interview by Ethan Smith. "Kim Gordon: Downtown Doyenne." *New York*, 6 April 1998, 139-141.
- . "Yoko Ono." *Interview* 31, March 2001, 108-12.
- . Interview by Lina Dzuverovic-Russell and Anne Hilde Neset. "Kim Gordon HER NOISE Interview, 26 April 2002, Royal Festival Hall." Her Noise. [http://www.hernoise.com/interview\\_kim.htm](http://www.hernoise.com/interview_kim.htm).
- . Interview by Adam Higginbotham. "Up Front: This Much I Know: Kim Gordon: Rock Singer, 51, Massachusetts." *Observer* (London), June 6, 2004, Observer Magazine Pages, p. 8.
- Gracyk, Theodore. *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001.
- Graham, Dan. *Rock My Religion: Writings and Art Projects, 1965-1990*. Edited by Brian Wallis. [Cambridge, Mass.]: MIT Press, 1993.
- Guarino, Mark. "Sexuality still not a factor for Gordon." *Daily Herald* (Arlington Heights, Ill.), Time Out section, 15 May 1998, 5.
- Julià, Ignacio, and Jaime Gonzalo. *Sonic Youth: I Dreamed of Noise*. Barcelona: Ruta 66, 1994.

- Koether, Jutta. "Kitten." *Purple Prose*, 1992. <http://adaweb.com/~purple/kitten.html>.
- . "Kim Gordon and Thurston Moore, 1998." *Index*.  
[http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/kim\\_gordon\\_thurston\\_moore.shtml](http://www.indexmagazine.com/interviews/kim_gordon_thurston_moore.shtml).
- Leland, John. *Hip: The History*. New York: Ecco, 2004.
- Levinson, Risha W. "Aging and Time-Binding in the Twenty-First Century." *ETC: A Review of General Semantics*, Spring 2003, 47-52.
- Marcus, Greil. "Gulliver Speaks." *Artforum International* 22, November 1983, 72.
- Martin, Bill. *Avant Rock: Experimental Music from the Beatles to Björk*. Chicago: Open Court, 2002.
- Martin, Timothy. "Janitor in a Drum: Excerpts from a Performance History." In *Mike Kelley: Catholic Tastes*, by Elisabeth Sussman; with contributions by Richard Armstrong...[et al.]. New York: Whitney Museum of American Art: Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1993.
- Nehring, Neil. *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism: Anger is an Energy*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997.
- O'Brien, Lucy. "The Woman Punk Made Me." In *Punk Rock: So What? The Cultural Legacy of Punk*, edited by Roger Sabin. London: Routledge, 1999.
- . *She Bop II: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop and Soul*. London: Continuum, 2002.
- O'Dair, Barbara. "Kim Gordon." *Rolling Stone*, 13 November 1997, 143-144.
- Palmer, Robert. "Noisy Rock Returns." *New York Times*, 21 April 1985, sec. H, p. 23-24.
- Raha, Maria. *Cinderella's Big Score: Women of the Punk and Indie Underground*. Emeryville, Calif.: Seal Press, 2005.
- Raphael, Amy. *Grrrls: Viva Rock Divas*. New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1996.
- Ratliff, Ben. "Sailing Sublimely Along, With Flotsam as a Schooner." *New York Times*, 13 April 2005, late edition, sec. E, p. 1.
- Reynolds, Simon, and Joy Press. *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.

- Rhodes, Lisa L. *Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005.
- Riviere, Joan. "Womanliness as a Masquerade." *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303-313.
- Rocco, John. "A Note on Sonic Youth." In *The Nirvana Companion: Two Decades of Commentary*, edited by John Rocco. New York: Schirmer Books, 1998.
- Rodger, Gillian. "Drag, camp and gender subversion in the music and videos of Annie Lennox." *Popular Music* 23 (2004): 17-29.
- Robins, Cynthia. "Jacobs' celebrity clients quickly become friends." *San Francisco Examiner*, 8 August 2000, D3.
- Sarah-Jane. "New Yorker Kim Gordon taught herself the bass for fun. Twenty-one years on with Sonic Youth she is now considered the godmother of alt rock." *Scotsman* (Edinburgh), July 7, 2002, Scotland On Sunday, p. 7.
- Schippers, Mimi. *Rockin' Out of the Box: Gender Maneuvering in Alternative Hard Rock*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2002.
- Schoemer, Karen. "Kitten, Bikini Kill and Boss Hog; Maxwell's." *New York Times*, 6 February 1992, C20.
- . "Karen Schoemer's High Notes: Rock and Role Models." *Mirabella*, June 1994, 160.
- Schroeder, Amy. "Kim Gordon." *Soma*, July 2000, 18.
- Smith, Ethan. "Spike Jonze Unmasked." *New York*, 25 October 1999, 44-47, 104, 125.
- Stancell, Steven. *Rap Whoz Who: The World of Rap Music*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1996.
- Stein, Arlene. "Rock Against Romance: Gender, Rock 'n' Roll, and Resistance." In *Stars Don't Stand Still in the Sky: Music and Myth*, edited by Karen Kelly and Evelyn McDonnell. New York: New York University Press, 1999.
- Swenson, Kyle. "Overtone Playground: Sonic Youth's Fearless Quest for Exotic Tone." *Guitar Player*, August 1998, 54-55, 57-58, 60, 62.
- Taylor, J. R. "Gabba Gabba Hey You Suck!" *New York Press*, 20-26 October 2004, 43.
- Vivinetto, Gina. "The Long Life of Sonic Youth." *St. Petersburg (Florida) Times*, Floridian section, 3 June 2004, South Pinellas edition, 1E.

Walser, Robert. *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*. Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1993.

Weinstein, Deena. "Creativity and Band Dynamics." In *This is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project*, edited by Eric Weisbard. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Whiteley, Sheila. *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity*. London: Routledge, 2000.

Williams, Tennessee. *Baby Doll: The Script for the Film*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1957.

### Discography

Ciccone Youth. *The Whitey Album*. DGC DGCD-24516, 1988.

Kim Gordon, Ikue Mori, DJ Olive. *SYR 5*. SYR 5, 2000.

Raincoats. *Odyshape*. Rough Trade Rough 13, 1981; DGC DGCD-24623, 1993.

Sonic Youth. *Sonic Youth*. Neutral 001, 1982; SST 097, 1987.

———. *Confusion is Sex*. DGC DGCD-24511, 1983.

———. *Bad Moon Rising*. DGC DGCD-24512, 1985.

———. *EVOL*. DGC DGCD-24513, 1986.

———. *Sister*. DGC DGCD-24514, 1987.

———. *Daydream Nation*. DGC DGCD-24515, 1988.

———. *Goo*. DGC 24297-D2, 1990.

———. *Dirty*. DGC DGCD-24493, 1992.

———. *Experimental Jet Set, Trash and No Star*. DGC DGCD-24632, 1994.

———. *Washing Machine*. DGC DGCD-24825, 1995.

———. *A Thousand Leaves*. DGC DGCD-25203, 1998.



- . *Goodbye 20<sup>th</sup> Century*. SYR 4, 1999.
- . *NYC Ghosts & Flowers*. Geffen 490650-2, 2000.
- . *Murray Street*. DGC 493319-2, 2002.
- . *Dirty* [Deluxe Edition]. Geffen 493410-2, 2003.
- . *Sonic Nurse*. Geffen 000254912, 2004.

#### Videography

- 1991: The Year Punk Broke*. VHS. Directed by David Markey. Geffen Home Video DGCV-39518, 1993.
- Sonic Youth. *Screaming Fields of Sonic Love*. VHS. Geffen Home Video DGCV-39550, 1995.
- . *Corporate Ghost: The Videos: 1990-2002*. DVD. Geffen Records B0000754-09, 2004.