

**Bodies of Irony:  
Irony, the Unruly Body, Feminist Performance**

**Robyn Diner**

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## ABSTRACT

Bodies of Irony: Irony, the Unruly Body, Feminist Performance  
Robyn Diner  
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*Bodies of Irony* begins at the crossroads where theories of irony, configurations of the unruly female body and particular performance pieces meet, greet and get off on one another. As I re-present spectacular scenes featuring Karen Finley, Courtney Love, Princess Superstar, Spiderwoman, Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña among others, I show how irony can give familiar feminist and/or postcolonial sentiments a fresh, funky edge; how it may highlight hypocritical states of affairs and how it enables one to adopt a sensibility that juggles the seemingly irreconcilable. Irony also becomes embodied. I demonstrate how a variety of figures associated with the unruly female grotesque—the madwoman, the slut, the hysteric and the noble savage—are re-done with irony as they rage, smirk and laugh their way across specific stages, spaces and streets. In turn, conversations emerge around: postmodernism feminism, political activity and claims to identity; postcolonial inquiry into concepts like hybridity, authenticity, memory and Otherness as exotic spectacle; critiques of the good girl/bad girl binary and the norms that ground and surround appropriate femininity. As I elaborate on responses to the performances re-staged throughout this project, the risks and dangers linked to irony and the unruly body are fleshed out. Many of the performers that I focus on have been trivialized, dismissed, detested, arrested and/or recuperated. Often their words and deeds seem to perpetuate what they seek to critique. However, although I suggest that ironic and unruly endeavors can backfire, I also stress that such serious play can prove pleasurable, provocatively and politically promising.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Bodies of Irony: An Introduction

#### Setting the Scenes

I light a cigarette, pour more Diet Coke into a sparkly purple glass and stare at the endlessly proliferating array of Post-it notes containing sketchy snatches of semi-awakened ideas about irony and the unruly body loitering all over my living room. They seem to be buzzing with panic, possibility and something that vaguely resembles hope. I will my thoughts to come closer, to cohere and become clear. But they don't or they won't so I put on another videotape.

On screen, it's Saturday night in a San Francisco performance space in the mid 1980s and Scarlot Harlot has squeezed her self-described 250-pound "sexily monstrous" body into a campy, amply cleavage-revealing American flag-inspired ball gown, elbow-length white Southern-belle styled evening gloves, black fishnet stockings and bright red running shoes.<sup>1</sup> I watch and wait for my favorite superslut/anarchist/feminist/writer/activist/videographer/public TV personality/performance artist/sex worker—also known as Carol Leigh—to burst into a song I have come to know by heart:

And I'll suck your yuppie cock for a hundred bucks.  
Sex trade worker.  
A blowjob is better than no job.  
Sex trade worker.  
I never said I'd sell myself to any man.  
I'm only renting an image.  
I talked to you in the lounge before my show.  
I took off my clothes, but i never stripped my integrity.  
Afterwards you remarked, "What's a bad girl like you doing  
wearing glasses and talking so intelligently?"  
And I'll fuck your sexist myths with my whole life.  
I'll fuck your mythology.

I'll fuck your hypocrisy.  
And I'll fuck you too for a hundred bucks.  
After all it's a business doing pleasure with you.

Her witty words and wayward ways crack me up. Soon I see her take to the street—or more specifically to Wall Street at noon—where in full hyperwhore regalia she flirts and flaunts with the anti-solicitation laws that govern her life by interrupting the Brooks Brothers set as they take their liquid lunch breaks. “Let’s engage in a little civil disobedience,” she screams, “I’m selling safe sex for \$200, blow jobs for \$150, half and half for \$200...who’s buying!?”<sup>2</sup> Some stare in awe, apparently astounded by the sight of her. Others somehow pass her by as though she’s not there. Nobody takes her up on her offer—but I hope they are still thinking about it that night.

Or maybe it’s Friday in New York City way off Broadway in a good way and I’m watching Spiderwoman wreak their very own special blend of painfully hilarious havoc. In this space and place, the three Native American sisters who make up the Spiderwoman performance trio—Gloria Miguel, Muriel Miguel and Lisa Mayo—are putting on *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show From Wigwam City* (1988).<sup>3</sup> This seriously playful piece makes a mockery out of the new age trend Spiderwoman call “half-breeditis,” which has led to the pathetic and seemingly mysterious rise of white folks who are suddenly starting to discover great-great-grandmothers who were once one-quarter Cherokee. Don’t even bother looking back to the past, the sisters seem to suggest as they stage a spectacularly fake workshop where they offer to turn white people into Indians faster than a speeding bullet. For a mere \$3,000 Spiderwoman promises that you too can go Native by simply swallowing their “Yataholey Indian Snake Oil.” This concoction, explains Spiderwoman in the spirit and splendor of blasphemous solemnity, is made with real, authentic Indian

ingredients like “porcupine piss...yum yum from a bum...and skunk cum.” They pick out a white audience member to sample the brew. He blushes yet obliges. And *voilà!* He’s become what he’s always wanted to be. To sanction his newfound identity, they give him a true traditional tribal name, such as “twodogsfucking,” and a large photograph of a pre-contact dead Indian chief which he is instructed to hide behind at all times. Sheepishly, he returns to his seat. I’m glad they didn’t pick me.

Or it could be Saturday night and I’m back on my couch with yet another smoke and a Diet Coke and new piles of Post-its to keep me company as I check out *Much Music*’s live coverage of Lollapalooza ’95.<sup>4</sup> I can’t take my eyes off Courtney Love as she bumps and grinds and flashes the g-string that’s hardly hiding under her about-to-be-ripped lace mini-dress. Bright red lipstick traces are smeared across her face. In big-time bad-girl mode, she dry-humps the microphone stand, snarls, sweats and slugs Brandy. As the night wears on she stumbles and screams and smokes and breaks down in tears and sips and scrambles and sings and sips and rambles some more. “Call me a slut,” Courtney commands the kids. And they do.<sup>5</sup> “Call me a bitch,” she yells to them. And they do. “Feel better now?” she asks with a smirk. The camera pans to a group of girls at the front of the stage clapping and laughing and calling for more. Courtney launches into “Mother’s Milk,” a track from *Live Through This* (1994) penned shortly after Seattle Child Services took custody of her baby based on her alleged heroin use during pregnancy. “Yeah! I don’t do the dishes,” wails America’s anti-sweetheart, “I throw them in the crib!”<sup>6</sup>

As these opening pieces seek to signal, my project re-stages and elaborates on ironic and unruly feminist performance practices. As I work with and through irony in

performance, I show what three interconnected forms of irony are doing, undoing and/or redoing. Since irony often comes on to the scene through the work of specific performers whose bodies are always already marked by particular categories, the bodies in my work take central stage. Irony becomes linked to the fleshy, visceral, material and embodied. It also meets, greets and gets off on what I am calling unruly body theory featuring carnivalesque female grotesques in various excessive, explicit, spectacular, blasphemous and hilarious manifestations. Figures such as the madwoman, the noble savage, the slut, the hysteric and the whore are subject to ironic re-presentation in theory and performance. Dialogue flows. Indeed, it is rare that theorists of irony focus on bodies. Similarly, unruly body theorists tend to treat irony as a self-evident and often singular concept. Moreover, as I re-stage specific ironic and unruly pieces of performance, *Bodies of Irony* becomes a breeding ground where rich and fertile feminist themes arise. In particular, conversations concerning postmodern feminism and configures of identity as well as het sexuality, the good girl/bad girl binary and beauty flourish under the spotlight. Postcolonial theories that grapple with the politics of memory, visibility and authenticity also take to the stage. The risks associated with irony and/in the unruly body surface. Questions concerning complicity and site-specificity unfold. Interpretations, counter-interpretations and controversies emerge. Such scenes suggest that irony is indeed a feminist matter.

A promiscuous array of performers who are rarely reviewed together sing and scream and speak out across my pages. Leading ladies include: Karen Finley's raging performance art; Riot Grrrl bands and their lack of teen spirit; Courtney's on-stage and seemingly off-stage over-the-top antics; Princess Superstar's gender, genre and race flip

flops in hip hop; Spiderwoman's not-so-exotic theatrics; and Coco Fusco coupled with Guillermo Gomez-Peña in a hybrid caged museum self-display. I feature this cast based on the premise that in the realm that consists of feminist cultural production, the boundary that supposedly separates art from popular culture is open to trespassing. Clear-cut categories often bleed as many performers refuse to remain in one place.<sup>7</sup> For instance, Karen Finley is generally framed in relationship to performance art—yet she has released music CDs and appears regularly on *Conan O'Brian* and *Politically Incorrect*. Courtney is known as a rock star/actress—yet the personas she puts on and the stunts that she pulls resembles those of many feminist performance artists. The Riot Grrrls make arty 'zines with collages reminiscent of Barbara Kruger's art work—but they also helped create the grrrl grunge/pop/punk sound that Courtney popularized on MTV.<sup>8</sup>

Following Richard Schechner, I am using the term performance to refer to activity that is consciously staged, tightly or loosely scripted and exhibited for an audience. Behavior that is, in Schechner's words, "...heightened...and publicly displayed: twice-behaved behavior" (Schechner 1993, 1). Although one can certainly argue that in the everyday world, everybody is always already performing, I am particularly interested in what I perceive to be overt re-stagings.<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Schneider encapsulates the spirit in which I too am working when she writes:

The performers [in this study] make apparent the ways in which bodies are stages for social theatrics, propping hosts of cultural assumptions, and their works suggests that these social theatrics might be differently scripted, differently dramatized, differently real-ized (Schneider 1997, 7).

Although I situate the work of these performers in their familiar contexts, I hope that the feminist art/pop culture binary becomes even more leaky as I work with the concept of

performance thus drawing connections between seemingly disparate ironic and unruly bodies.

## **Adventures in Irony**

But what is irony? It slips and slides about on the page, colludes and collides with other similar types circulating in the academic marketplace and often quite simply eludes and elides my grasp. Just when I think I have got it finally figured out, “Poof!” there it goes only to return almost instantly to haunt me in its ubiquity. But apparently, I am in good company. Most theorists who work extensively with irony begin their texts with the disclaimer that irony is incredibly difficult to define and describe. “Irony is the mother of confusions,” writes Wayne Booth (Booth 1974, ix). If irony is, in fact, *a* thing, posits John Seery, it is a thing that changes shape (Seery 1990, 169). “Irony is a quasi-mythological, double-natured beast,” suggests D.C. Muecke (Muecke 1970, 13). Furthermore, Kathy Ferguson points out that there is no point in trying to set rules for irony, as its very role is to defy the rules (Ferguson 1993, 31). Yet, in spite of such sentiments, these theorists among others proceed to offer some sort of definition of irony as well as to elaborate on the roles that it can play and the rules that it follows.

However, these definitions, depictions and descriptions cover vast and diverse terrain. In turn, irony is understood as a trope, a technique, a sensibility, a stance and a mode of consciousness.<sup>10</sup> It has been celebrated for its oppositional political potential, and denigrated for its apolitical nature (Hutcheon 1994, 35). Some say it helps build and strengthen communities, whereas others maintain that it functions as an exclusionary elitist weapon (Hutcheon 1994, 55). It has been associated with Socrates, Riot Grrrl



sassitude, Cervantes, pussy power panties, postmodern aesthetics, Shakespeare, the return of the iron-on t-shirt, modernist literature, the hipification and commodification of marginal bodies as advertising eye candy, German Romanticism, Courtney Love, and in Hal Niedzviecki's words, "everything from the demise of morality to the rise of bad TV" (Niedzviecki 2000, 215).<sup>11</sup> Swatch recently named a watch after it.<sup>12</sup> Eminem's dream team defends his lyrics under the guise of it.<sup>13</sup> But again, what is *it*? According to whom? And, most importantly, what can it do for feminism?

In literary studies on irony, D.C. Muecke is like a god. Many defer and refer to his *Irony and the Ironic* over and over again.<sup>14</sup> Unfortunately, his text—like much irony theory—tends to come wrapped and often warped by its very own mini "cottage industry" full of dull and deadly taxonomies (Hutcheon 1994, 3). I will spare you the killer details. Instead, I begin by proposing that the fifteen types of irony that Muecke cites do indeed, as he suggests, fall into two forms: instrumental and observational (Muecke 1970, 9-13, 19). To keep matters swift and simple, instrumental ironies refer to those where one says something opposite to, or other than, what one really means, as in "Oh what a beautiful day!" when it is in fact raining (Muecke 1970, 17). On the other hand, explains Muecke, observational ironies are linked to the recognition and representation of unexpected, contradictory and/or paradoxical states of affairs or turns of events (Muecke 1970, 23). For example, the very steps that Shakespeare's Henry V takes to secure his fortune actually cause his downfall (Muecke 1970, 20). On a more contemporary note, Niedzviecki points to the observational ironic paradox at the core of pop-culture questing:

We turn to that which shouldn't matter [pop culture] and make it matter in order to give our lives a meaning in a world where lives are diminished by

the spectacle of pop culture. We use the very elements that demean and reduce us to try to find dignity in our lives...only to find we are chasing our own tails (Niedzviecki 2000, 25).<sup>15</sup>

From here it's a mere hop, skip and a jump towards the ways in which such observational phenomena come to engender ironic sensibilities—ways of seeing, thinking, doing, and creating that are informed by and re-inform one's attitude toward the contradictory or paradoxical.<sup>16</sup>

In *Horizons of Assent*, Alan Wilde makes a convincing argument that *pace* Muecke, irony should also be understood as a “mode of consciousness” or a sensibility that can be discerned within a history of Western literature (Wilde 1981, 9). For instance, modernist literature, writes Wilde, often resonates with “absolute irony;” a sensibility that informs texts that picture a world in disarray, rife with disjunction and disunity and “unresolvable paradox” (Wilde 1981, 21). The author's struggle tends toward his or her attempts to control or transcend contradictions. As modernist quandary gives way to postmodern assent, continues Wilde, irony becomes a sensibility open to “multiplicity, randomness, contingency and even absurdity” (Wilde 1981, 10). Here, one generally quite simply seeks to embrace life's little pleasures in the face of its greater uncertainties (Wilde 1981, 10). The link between instrumental irony, observational irony and irony as a sensibility resides in their association with movement, fluctuation, contrast, contradiction and paradox.<sup>17</sup>

In this thesis, I propose that irony is best understood, however provisionally, in keeping with an irony-multiplied-by-three schema: instrumental irony, observational irony, and provisional irony as a sensibility.<sup>18</sup> However, I elaborate on irony's doings, undoings and redoings by drawing on texts that move in more overtly oppositional

political directions. Instrumental irony, writes Hutcheon, has an “evaluative edge” (Hutcheon 1998, 2). This edge often targets dominant hegemonic norms and notions via understatement, overstatement and/or critical re-statement. Conventional words and deeds become weapons in the hands of marginal groups who choose to speak the same old central stuff—with a difference (Hutcheon 1994, 32, 34). Irony, as I will show, can thus breathe new life into familiar feminist statements, slogans, and sentiments that are always in danger of becoming stale.

In the realm of instrumental irony, writes Hutcheon, the “said” and the “unsaid” rub up against one another with a critical thrust (Hutcheon 1994, 59). In other words, ironic meaning is not necessarily the opposite of literal meaning; rather irony is about “the making or inferring of meaning in addition to and different from what is stated, together with an attitude toward both the said and unsaid” (Hutcheon 1994, 11). For instance, Scarlot Harlot deploys the word “cheap” with instrumental irony to address and redress the good girl/bad girl binary that divides the ladies from the tramps:

Cheap is when you fuck him just to shut em up  
Cheap is when you fuck him because you love him so much  
Cheap is when you do it to keep them home at night  
Cheap is when you want less than pleasure, a baby or a hundred bucks.

As “Cheap” is twisted loose from its familiar lodgings in conjunction with the figure of the whore, Scarlot silently suggests that the line that separates whores from any so-deemed respectable girl/woman/lady who does it hoping that he’ll stay in love, in lust, in her arms, by her side—or at least until the morning—is indeed quite arbitrary.<sup>19</sup>

John Seery states that observational ironies can often be evoked in order to reveal and ridicule the highly hypocritically undemocratic state of purportedly democratic affairs (Seery 1990, 310). Scarlot puts such work in the service of critically exploiting the

paradoxical role that cops play when it comes to prostitution patrol. In “Laws Against Prostitution=Violence Against Women,” she observes:

Prostitution busts are a form of rape. When an emissary of the government (a cop) coerces me to engage in fondling and petting through fraud (pretending to be a client), then pulls out his gun and arrests me for my sexual behavior, I call that institutionalized rape. That’s why I’m always angry. That’s why I am angry at everyone who isn’t angry.<sup>20</sup>

Here, cops are revealed to be the very rapists that they are supposed to be protecting people from. Call me crazy, but I call that a cheap, low-down, highly problematic criminal irony.

Nancy Walker also points out that in much feminist literature, observational irony occurs when conventional assumptions regarding what one expects to happen are taken for a ride (Walker 1990, 17). Such irony comes alive when even the best-intentioned white audience members go to Spiderwoman’s shows expecting to learn something concrete about Native culture. The mock-workshop that can turn you too into a real live Cherokee, for instance, says more about the colonial, neo-colonial and new-age romance with nostalgia than it does about First Nations life. In other words, and in this case, the picture that one goes to get of the Other is ironically a picture of white dreams and desires—and they are not pretty.

In *The Man Question*, Kathy Ferguson evokes irony as a sensibility that can be productive for feminism. She describes such a sensibility that is attuned to and attends to seemingly irreconcilable contradictions (Ferguson 1993, 14). Irony, writes Ferguson, allows one to step back from a fixed position in order to see the “manyness” of things (Ferguson 1993, 30). Clashing views can thus co-exist, critique and/or inform one another (Ferguson 1993, ix). Donna Haraway elaborates:

Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically about the tensions of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true. Irony is about humor and serious play (Haraway 1990, 190).<sup>21</sup>

As this dissertation unfolds, I show how I sense a promising provisionally ironic sensibility circulating in Finley's take on political activity as well as with regards to gender and identity. Similarly, I suggest that Spiderwoman's sensibility vis-à-vis Native American identity, memory and visibility also resonates brilliantly with provisional irony. As I work with and through instrumental, observational and provisional ironies in specific performance practices, Hutcheon and Ferguson's texts, in particular, have been invaluable. However, both Hutcheon and Ferguson's focus on textuality tends to leave the sight of the female body in performance and/or the body as site of performance from which ironies emerge in the margins of their texts.<sup>22</sup> Thus although Ferguson and Hutcheon's work around the feminist premises and promises associated with irony prove highly productive, they can't help me to flesh out how seeing Scarlot startling stockbrokers with her sexcapades, watching Courtney making a seemingly scandalous spectacle of herself at Lollapalooza, or thinking through Spiderwoman's foul play with some versions of Native spirituality, strike me as coming with so much to offer.

### **Unruly Body Theory**

Keeping theories of irony in mind, I turn to Mary Russo's *The Female Grotesque*, which shows how bodies may transgress, trouble and make a mockery of the disciplinary norms of appropriate femininity. Drawing on Mikhail Bakhtin's celebration of the carnivalesque grotesque body, one that is "open, irregular, secreting, multiple and changing," Russo seeks to revalorize feminism as a "body politic [that is] heterogeneous,

strange, polychromatic, ragged, conflictual, incomplete, in motion and at risk” (Russo 1994, 8). Female grotesques are inevitably associated with excess; with the lower body and with too much sex, sweat, food, drink and cum and so on (Russo 1994, 8). They refuse to stand still, sit down, shut up, smile politely and worry about whether or not their bra strap is showing. They are highly unruly (Russo 1994, 58). They exceed and thus deviate from the norms that give rise to them. Like irony, these unruly bodies break rules, take risks and twist conventional assumptions and expectations out of shape (Russo 1994, 11-12). If there had been a Ms. Grotesque anti-pageant in 1995, Courtney would no doubt have won the crown. “Within the expanded spatial dimensions of late twentieth-century” writes Russo,

...the female spectacle which emerges as a deformation of the normal suggests new political aggregates.... The figure of the female transgressor is still powerfully resonant, and the possibilities of redeploying this representation as a demystifying or utopian model have not been exhausted (Russo 1994, 16, 61).

As Russo elaborates on those who deploy the female grotesque in practice; she suggests that such unruly women often use parody, mimicry and/or strategic re-presentation to embody and reconfigure familiar, historical grotesque figures like the hysteric, the madwoman, the starving woman or the female impersonator in spectacularly transformative ways (Russo 1994, 14). Although Russo states that such spectacles tend to be high on irony, she doesn't elaborate on what she means by irony, nor does she shed light on its doings, undoings and/or redoings (Russo 1994, 13). As I cite many of her insights, I will bring irony into the picture.

For the moment and for instance, if I think of the example of drag as gender parody cited by Russo and made queerly infamous in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*,

both instrumental irony and observational irony are assumed to be at the scene. In Butler's best-case scenario depiction, the classic drag queen dresses and acts like a "woman," thereby signifying, or in Hutcheon's terms, saying, femininity (Butler 1990, 137).<sup>23</sup> However, on another level s/he also maintains and interjects some semblance of masculinity which breaks the illusion of the primary "said" and elicits the "unsaid": if the dude looks like a lady then gender is a performative achievement that can be maintained regardless of one's sex or sexual preferences (Butler 1990, 31, 137). Or, in Hutcheon's words, instrumental "ironic meanings are formed in the additive oscillations between different said and unsaid meanings" (Hutcheon 1994, 66). In turn, the performance suggests that gender is a copy of a copy, or "an imitation without an origin" (Butler 1990, 138). Ideally, one then comes to realize that "gay is to straight not as copy is to original, but as copy is to copy" (Butler 1990, 31). And laughter is generated through the observational ironic recognition "that all along the original was derived" (Butler 1990, 139). As this dissertation unfolds, I continue to stress how irony may be at play in unruly body theory and practice.

Yet as I do so, I also remain highly attuned to Susan Bordo's feminist Foucauldian take on the body. Bodies, writes Bordo, are a site of "material political struggle" (Bordo 1993, 16). Shaped by a range of interconnected, historical and social practices that are often inseparable from our "physiology and morphology," bodies are subject to "practices of containment and control" which become internalized through repetition and routine (Bordo 1993, 21). Throughout her book, Bordo thus suggests that such a discursive approach should not negate the ways in which bodies feel pain, pleasure, exhaustion, debilitation, depression, violation in relationship to social forces

that are intertwined with physical ones. "It makes a difference," she also stresses, "*whose* body you are talking about" (Bordo 1993, 33). Although Bordo shares similar concerns with Russo when it comes to norms that give rise to and circumscribe what are considered acceptable forms of femininity, she is much more critical about the transgressive possibilities associated with exceeding those norms. That which may seem "liberating, transforming and life-giving," she writes, may become "constraining, enslaving and even murderous" (Bordo 1993, 168). As I discuss issues related to grotesque figures like Finley re-doing the hysteric and Courtney Love's engagements with excess involving drugs and booze, I stress that it is crucial that irony enter the show, for, as Bordo suggests, there is a contradiction between "image and practice" when it comes to unruly bodies making a spectacle (Bordo 1993, 124). In other words, there is indeed much to be said for the sight of Courtney Love slugging back Brandy, swearing, spitting and stumbling across the stage as *show*; but if she wakes up every morning craving a Valium to get rid of a hangover; then it is not only the rules that govern what grrrls can do in the grunge/punk/pop scene that are at risk of coming undone; rather, Courtney's body is also in danger.

The bodies in performance in this dissertation also tend toward what Rebecca Schneider calls the "explicit" (Schneider 1997, 2). Etymologically speaking, explains Schneider, explicit bodies "unfold;" they "peel back velvet curtains" and reveal their body as a stage where social and political power relations circulate, script and re-script, mark and re-mark the ways in which bodies are perceived and thus encouraged to proceed in accordance with their "appropriate" identity (Schneider 1997, 2-3, 45). As Schneider notes, feminist performers are increasingly turning to strategies that



“exaggerate, parody, expose” and unveil substantive identity as illusory (Schneider 1997). Yet as they do so, she cautions that ideally, such bodies also need to show how they are simultaneously inseparable from “physical parts and gestural signatures, of gender, race, class, age, sexuality—all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning” (Schneider 1997, 2). Schneider elaborates:

Even in combat boots feminine form is hounded by the historical legacy of sex discrimination in everyday social practice.... The raging 90s impulse to herald identity as performative rather than fixed, natural, essential, or foundational is an impulse that must at all times acknowledge the historical backdrop of its own project—that certain markings of identity bear the historical weight of privilege and others the historical weight of disprivilege (Schneider 1997, 21).

Thus the provisional ironic sensibility that Ferguson evokes regarding identity categories often becomes embodied when, for instance, one is struck by the sight of “a living, breathing woman,” making the “quotation marks around ‘woman’ visible” (Solomon 1997, 15). As gender is revealed to be a copy, it is also ideally shown to be a copy that comes with consequences. In turn, and as you will see particularly in the case of Spiderwoman and Karen Finley, deconstructive activity meets that which is fleshy, visceral, material, at times painful—and provokes multiple, often contradictory, open-ended ways of thinking about and through identity categories.

## **Matters of Method**

### **Ironic Happenings**

How might one go about securely citing and writing about irony if, as Hutcheon suggests, irony operates silently? (Hutcheon 1994, 9). Moreover, how does irony get onto the scene? Following Hutcheon’s take on interpreting instrumental irony, I stress that

irony “happens” (Hutcheon 1884, 5). Such happenings ricochet in the often unstable, unpredictable, dynamic space between a performer’s endeavors and the interpreter’s reading. My decision to “ironize”—to interpret with irony and elaborate on its potential edgy charge—is partially informed by what I believe to be a performer’s invitation to read more and differently into her sayings or doings. Yet the ironic happenings that I re-stage cannot be simply reduced to intentionalist concerns regarding the performer in question. Rather, as Hutcheon suggests, there are various textual, contextual and intertextual factors that encourage one to interpret or create meanings that differ from and add to that which has been stated (Hutcheon 1994, 143). Textual markers are those devices typically deployed in ironic endeavors that signal to the interpreter: “read me ironically!” Such devices include: hyperbole, understatement, contradiction, repetition, juxtaposition and/or radical changes in tone or style (Hutcheon 1994, 144). Furthermore, the site or the context in which irony is deployed inevitably influences one’s reading. In other words, “who is attributing what to whom, when, where, how, why?” (Hutcheon 1994, 143). Finally, the background knowledge that one may or may not bring to the scene is also relevant. “It is as if one takes inferential walks through various intertextual frames to pick up any useful information,” explains Hutcheon (Hutcheon 1994, 145).

Thus when I hear grunge/punk/pop princess Liz Phair sing “I wanna be your blowjob queen / I wanna be your blowjob queen” on an album called *Exile in Guyville* (1994) which I know to be a song-by-song response to the girl-unfriendly tracks on The Rolling Stones’ album *Exile on Mainstreet* (1972), I quickly deduce that Liz would rather be anywhere else than on her knees or under Mick’s thumb.<sup>24</sup> Yet as Hutcheon points out, a whole lot of labor goes into what seems like my instant ironic reconstruction (Hutcheon

1994, 66). Contextually, I situate her in the realm of a variety of grrrl grunge/pop/punk bands that have a crush on irony in a big way. Intertextually, I can make the inference to The Rolling Stones' album. Moreover, I have read interviews with Liz where she stresses that *Exile* is indeed a mock cock-rock anti-salute to the rampant sexism that continues to circulate in Guyville and reflects the ways in which women have been "dicked around for the past 20,000 years."<sup>25</sup> I therefore conclude that Liz's words are jumping with irony.

However, Hutcheon stresses that playing with instrumental irony is particularly risky since the literal meaning is not completely negated. Rather, it remains alive and kicking even—and especially—as one calls it into question. Thus ironic play can simply underline what it seeks to undermine. Indeed, it would also come as no surprise to me if the average 15-year-old boy simply takes the beauty-myth sexy Liz's words to heart—and to bed—at night. Bye-bye, witty sexual politics fused with irony. Hello, I wanna be *your* slut, really. On that note, never mind the average 15-year-old boy: The dudes at *Esquire* Magazine voted Liz the "do-me feminist of 1994" (O'Dair 1997). "Irony's intimacy with the dominant discourses that it contests," writes Hutcheon, is what makes it so good for hegemonic business (Hutcheon 1994, 30). Then again, the homocore band Pansy Division adds a queer twist to irony's potential oscillations as the boys stand on stage gayly singing "I wanna be your blowjob queen" in their word-for-word cover of Liz's song. As Lori Chambers writes, "Between the intended irony that goes unperceived and the unintended irony that becomes perceived, there is room for many kinds and degrees of misunderstanding, misfire and fizzle, as well as of understanding" (Chambers 1994, 14).

Although I am doing the primary ironic interpreting, secondary sources from theoretical and journalistic spheres are cited to remind you and me that the instrumental irony that I sense on the scene does not necessarily emerge in the same way, or at all, in the eyes of others. I often play this up. Similarly, the observational and provisional ironies that I cite and work with are also open to a multiplicity of readings. What I consider to be a problematic paradoxical state of affairs might be business as usual in the eyes of another, whereas what I depict as a provisional sensibility that juggles the manyness of things towards open-ended yet engaged activity may be read as that which suffers from a lack of consistency, continuity and clarity. Moreover, although I often attribute my ironic interpretations back to what I perceive to be a performer's intent, she may or may not agree with my readings of her works.

Since irony also works in conjunction with the unruly body, I highlight how a smirk, a smile, a scream, a look that can kill or one that invites your gaze, along with styles of clothing and fashions of doing and/or undoing pretty femininity, inform whether or not I invite irony in. However, as I do so, I show that I know that others may be less inclined to read unruly body play with irony. For instance, in her discussion about putting femininity on with an ironic, campy vengeance, Russo notes that such strategic display can be easily sexualized and trivialized, dissed and dismissed. She asks:

Are women again so identified with style that they are estranged from its liberatory and transgressive effects as they are from their bodies as signs in culture generally? In what sense can women really produce or make spectacles of themselves? (Russo 1994, 60)

Insights into this question in respect to particular performance sights/sites have been woven into the fabric of this dissertation in keeping with Bordo's warnings that embodied

practices that often seem “liberatory and transgressive” can as easily become constraining and complicit.

### **Documented Deeds**

The performance practices that I pursue and review have taken place live. Some I have seen live—others I have access to via videotape, photographs and/or written text. Moreover, and perhaps more interestingly, most performance practices are in continuous flux. Words, gestures, props may or may not remain the same as the spectacle is performed and re-performed. Thus the sights that I am writing about are always on the go. I inevitably arrest their flow as I date and describe them. As I do so, perhaps I do them a disservice. Peggy Phelan problematizes the role that documentation plays in the representation of any live performance:

Performance honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible traces afterward. Performance occurs over a time which will not be repeated. It can be performed again. But this repetition marks it is as different (Phelan 1993, 146).

However, as Philip Auslander notes, Phelan’s arguments work to privilege live performance by identifying it with an intimacy and a sense of communality that she suggests mediated reproductions can’t possibly deliver (Auslander 1999, 41). Yet, as I think about myself, alone, watching Courtney Love on video over and over again, rewinding/stopping/playing/fast-forwarding/stopping/playing, furiously taking pen to post-its, or surrounded by friends and colleagues in front of my TV, engaged in animated discussion regarding our reactions to Courtney’s bumps and grinds, her wild rants, her ironic tauntings; or live at Lolapalooza ’95 in Toronto getting off on strangers in the

audience getting off on Courtney, all three scenes seem equally yet differently thought-provoking. Amelia Jones' text becomes particularly relevant:

...there is no possibility of an unmediated relationship to any kind of cultural product. Although I am respectful of the specificity of knowledges gained from participating in a live performance situation, I will argue here that this specificity should not be privileged over the specificities of knowledges that develop in relation to the documentary traces of such an event (Jones 1998, 12).<sup>26</sup>

Methodologically speaking, I use endnotes to let you know how I have come to get to know the shows that I am re-presenting in words.

### **Writing as Performance**

A set of related questions also emerge as I write and re-write drafts of this dissertation, as I edit and re-edit my pages, and as I attempt to articulate just what *it* is I think I am staging in words. Della Pollock's words reverberate:

Out of the resulting inky spillage that we have come to call "textuality" rise questions trembling with imperatives: what words remain to the body made at once abject by history and abstract by textuality? How then can we speak? How then can we write?... How can we write in excess of norms of scholarly representation, to write beyond textuality into what might be called social mortalities, to make writing speak to, of, and through pleasure, possibility, disappearance, and even pain? In other words, how to make writing perform? (Pollock 1998, 74, 79)

Pollock raises these questions in light of her dissatisfaction with the radical poststructuralist turn toward disembodied textuality, the cynical celebration of writing as simulation and what she describes as "the debased-Derridian sense of reveling in absence, in the winking spectacle of nakedness to which the emperor is now invited" (Pollock 1998, 96). Yet Pollock shudders when she hears theorists calling for a return to a "politics of clarity," which she describes as a code-word for writing that, however inadvertently, both infers that language has a certain referential transparency which it

actually lacks and also threatens to rob performance practices of their vitality by subjecting them to dry, dehydrating, alienating prose (Pollock 1998, 76, 78). Instead, Pollock proposes that theorists might work towards an elusive something else: “performative writing” (Pollock 1998, 74). Such writing, she explains, announces itself “as writing.” It twirls across the clashing twin peaks of what has come to be known as referentiality and textuality, working with and through language as neither “prison house” nor “fun house” (Pollock 1998, 76, 85).

Taking cues from Pollock, I try to treat *Bodies of Irony* as an evocative text. Announcing itself as interpretation, it nonetheless tries to bring to another life that of which it speaks. “Performative writing evokes worlds of worlds of memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect and in-sight” (Pollock 1998, 81). It reproduces absent presence and invites you to picture the scene. As a hybrid blend of creative and critical writing, it is indebted to metatheories of writing yet tuned into specific sights. “It does not describe, in a narrowly reportorial sense, an objectively verifiable event or process but uses languages like paint to create what is self-evidently a version of what was, what is, and/or what might be” (Pollock 1998, 80). Performative writing is like a dress-rehearsal for the possible (Pollock 1998, 81).

As it stages and re-stages itself, continues Pollock, performative veers toward the subjective and intersubjective. Yet it is suspicious of liberal humanist autobiographical assumptions and conventions. The author is not looking for herself; rather she produces and re-produces selves in conversation with her readers, the theorists and performers whose work she writes about, alongside and through (Pollock 1998, 86). She is not looking for the truth behind the performer and her performance. Situated somewhere

between the Author Knows Best and the Death of the Author, her work is invested and interested in both intent and interpretation. It is highly citational. The cast co-mingles: artists, fans, critics, academics all get their say as alliances are forged and broken in her counter-symphony of cacophony and polyvocality. As the performative writer invites you in, she welcomes you to stay, to play and to help your selves to meaning making. If, like me, she adores her irony, she showers you with words and phrases that “mean at least two things at once” and leaves them open for you to make your own sense (Pollock 1998, 83).<sup>27</sup> You are her “co-constituent of an uncertain, provisional practice” (Pollock 1998, 95). Her style is often nervous, skittish, restless. In a word, unruly:

Performative writing...crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear, linear course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders (Pollock 1998, 90-91).

Ideally, performative writing brings theoretical concepts to textual life. In my case, not only do I want to signal writing’s “delays and displacements,” to acknowledge its status as reproduction while nonetheless writing “toward engaged, embodied, material ends” (Pollock 1998, 96). I also want to specifically theorize about, with and through irony and/in the spectacle of the unruly body in feminist performance practices in a way that puts their premises, promises and limitations into play and on display in writing.

However, the writing that makes up this dissertation does not always perform: words, phrases, even full pages feel flat in spite—or no doubt to spite—my desire that they do otherwise. Yet at times my writing does indeed rise to the occasion and works with and for me. Here I am reminded of a professor who once asked me why bother playing with writing and why not simply and clearly write what I want to say. In response, I accused



him of trying to take away my pleasure. In retrospect, I realize should have evoked Pollock's insights. Trinh's writing and her words also now come to mind:

...where does a committed woman writer go? Finding a voice, searching for words and sentences: say something, one thing, or no thing: tie/untie, read/unread, discard their forms; scrutinize the grammatical habits of your writing and decide for yourself whether they free or repress. Again, order(s). Shake syntax, smash the myths, and if you lose, slide on, unearth some new linguistic paths. Do you surprise. Do you shock. Do you have a choice? (Trinh 1989, 20)

The chapters that follow are designed with Trinh and Pollock's words in mind. In the spirit of evocative writing, they tell stories and re-stage scenes that often read like both theoretically-informed love letters and cautionary tales.

## **Breaking it Down**

In chapter two, I zoom in on and re-produce scenes from Finley's *The Constant State of Desire* (1989) and *A Certain Level of Denial* (1992). As Finley rages with provisional irony as a sensibility, I show how her work stems from a seemingly irreconcilable stance toward oppositional political activity—one that is skeptically hopeful, doubtfully committed, determined yet open to deferral. In keeping with such a sensibility, metaphysical claims to identity crack and crumble—yet continue to matter as they shatter. I posit that observational irony is also put into play in Finley's endeavors in a way that spotlights the dissonance between the American notion of justice for all and the bad deals the country actually tends to offer its women, children and queers. I then go on to show how Finley's wild rage is often interrupted by dark humor laced with instrumental irony that makes a witty mockery out of the assumptions and vocabulary that circulate in the heteronormative kingdom of gender. Upon re-staging Finley's

embodied theatrics in conjunction with an aesthetics of the grotesque, I delve into a discussion of hysteria in theory, practice and performance in order to explore how Finley's unruly hysterical forays rely on instrumental and observational irony to make a variety of points about psychoanalysis, illness-as-protest and the norms of appropriate femininity. Since responses to Finley's bodies of work are often highly hostile, seeped in fear and loathing and surrounded by controversy, I comment on these reactions to flesh out the risks linked to irony and the unruly body. Finally, a brief peak at Finley's recent burlesque-y performance *Shut up and Love Me* (1998) paves the way into my next chapter where irony and unruly body strategies are harnessed by similarly passionately pissed off performers whose serious sexual play tends to imply: "I just might do you, but I'll never be your baby."

I launch chapter three by taking you on a trip down memory lane, where I recall coming to feminism in the early '90s as riot grrrl was all the rage. Although I applaud the grrrls for their bravado and commitment to feminism, I also discuss how and why I believe that the riot grrrl movement, however inadvertently, became normative and exclusionary. In turn, I set my sights on Courtney Love as her various personas embody the good, the bad, the mad, the bawdy, the beautiful and the brainy. Drawing on various unruly body theories I show how throughout 1992 to 1996, Courtney's ironic style, sound and sleazy stagings may have had the potential to disrupt the good girl/bad girl binary, to evoke the power linked to putting ugliness on display, and to gesture toward cultural fascination with and fear of the figure of the madwoman. However, I stress that reactions to Courtney, particularly from the rock press and peers who love to trash her, suggest that her antics have for the most part been read without the irony that I cite as circulating

throughout her scenes. Moreover, a discussion around Courtney's refusal to play by the rules of appropriate motherhood—to look and seem clean—stresses the ways in which North American society subjects mothers to highly problematic forms of surveillance, discipline and punishment. I then re-present Courtney in her glamour queen make-over mode associated with the release of *Celebrity Skin* (1998). As I do so, I engage with feminist debates around the politics and economics of ideal beauty, plastic surgery and high fashion. In contrast, a reiteration of Courtney's 2000 pro-Napster speech shows what happens when she dresses relatively plainly and speaks lucidly about mathematical matters. Before concluding, I take you through different quarters to meet Concetta Kirschner's Princess Superstar—a white hot hip hop artist with a ferocious appetite for both sex and anti-sexist critique. As I re-cite some of her tunes for you, I also show how she uses irony to create her own very special blend of funny feminism. As I sift through some of Princess' press coverage, which is hardly as demeaning as Courtney's, I articulate why I believe Princess has been so warmly greeted. Finally, I suggest that discussions surrounding Princess often work to make whiteness seem remarkable, yet the power and privilege that comes with Princess' white skin, *Penthouse*-perfect body and wealthy family background is rarely acknowledged.

Chapter four revolves around *Spiderwoman's* spectacularly serious play. I re-enact scenes from *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show From Wigwam City* (1988), *Sun, Moon, Feather* (1989) and *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1990), in order to show how family stories, memories and hybrid identity, treated with provisional irony as a sensibility, become strategic—problematic yet promising—paths of entry to launch critiques against neocolonial power relations. The trio also specializes in using instrumental and

observational irony to comment silently on the “post” in postcolonialism and to ask just what exactly it is that is so “new” about the new age.

Throughout their performances, the commodification, romanticization and nostalgia associated with Native identity and spirituality is also subject to ironic mockery. Moreover, I show how their unruly words, bodies, stories and dress rework cosmic elements associated with the carnivalesque grotesque in ways that make their visions hard to recuperate back into the dominant version of the mythic Native figure who exists always elsewhere—somewhere out there. I propose that the trickster humor that Spiderwoman deploy helps to generate critical awareness and elicit positive responses from audiences who attend their shows. On a more controversial note, I turn to Fusco and Gómez-Peña’s *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* (1992) and the video *The Couple in the Cage* (1993) to engage in a discussion of how irony can perpetuate what it seeks to critique. In *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit*, Fusco and Gómez-Peña pretended to be exotic museum curios locked in a cage for the public to view. Although they felt certain that most would get the irony in their satiric display, the subsequent video *The Couple in the Cage* shows that many did not. However, I conclude that this says as much about neocolonial ways of perceiving Otherness as it does about the risks associated with irony.

The final and fifth chapter of *Bodies of Irony* picks up on and elaborates on three particular themes that begged for my attention as I wrote my way through this dissertation. To begin, I suggest that while it is important to remember that irony is risky, there is no guarantee that straight talk with a political edge is risk-free. I draw on Sarah Jones’ hip hop tune “Your Revolution” (1999), which sounds to me like a straightforward

critique of misogyny in hip-hop, but was interpreted as obscene and censored by the U.S. Federal Communications Commission. I also revisit the anti-Miss America Pageant protest of 1968, during which the protestors' unambiguous critiques were easily twisted out of shape in the press. More importantly, one of the least discussed problems associated with irony continues to plague me. In short, if irony tends to be about double visions, fluctuations and reversals, how might my work as well as that of other theorists be trapped in many of the ornery irony binaries that our work seeks to problematize? Lastly, most of the dangers that I, and others, have linked to the spectacle of unruly bodies in performance revolve around the potential for their recuperation, commodification and/or trivialization in the process of their reception within dominant spheres. However, Courtney's recent overdose and the subsequent release of her solo CD *America's Sweetheart* (2004), featuring lyrics that suggest she'd rather not see tomorrow, raise questions surrounding the dangers of self harm that may arise when excess becomes part of one's everyday. In other words, how can one put on spectacles that blur the boundaries between on stage and off, spectacles that involve an excess of drugs, drink and sex, while keeping in mind that when it comes to one's own body, there may actually be such a thing as too much?

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### Notes to Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> Unofficial videotape of this performance and those mentioned in this chapter are courtesy of the author. Countless official Scarlot Harlot tapes and copies of her performance vignettes are also reviewed and available for perusal and purchase on her website at [www.bayswan.org](http://www.bayswan.org). Finally, photographs and scripts featuring Scarlot's vignettes are published under the title "Thanks Ma," in Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings' *Uncontrollable Bodies* (1994). An essay "Inventing Sex Work" also appears in Jill Nagel's *Whores and Other Feminists* (1997). For an interview, see "Scarlot Harlot" in Shannon Bell's *Whore Carnival* (1995).

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<sup>2</sup> In many states in America, although prostitution is not illegal *per se*, “active solicitation” understood as “verbally or through advertisement offering or requesting sexual service for money” is a criminal act (Pheterson 1996, 41).

<sup>3</sup> I saw this performance at Theater for the New City in New York City during the spring of 1988. There will be more on Spiderwoman in chapter 4.

<sup>4</sup> MTV coverage from *Lollapalooza* at Columbia Gorge on July 4, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> I am referring to Courtney Love by her first name only, as in my everyday realm that is how most refer to her. I believe that like Oprah (Winfrey), Britney (Spears) or Kurt (Cobain), Courtney is one of those pop cultural icons whose first name stands in for both names.

<sup>6</sup> I elaborate on Courtney, drugs, motherhood and state intervention in chapter 3.

<sup>7</sup> A perfect example of this leakiness is the feminist magazine *Bitch*, subtitled *Feminist Response to Pop Culture*, which in any one issue might feature rants, reviews and/or raves about television’s Lisa Simpson, Kelly Osbourne and the Gilmore Girls; anti-globalization activists like the Raging Grannies and the Radical Cheerleaders; pop-punk bands like The Donnas or Cub; films like *Monster* as well as the state of black feminist playwriting in America. Moreover, this is not necessarily only a feminist phenomenon. Philip Auslander cites Willem Dafoe’s movement from the experimental stage to film as well as Spalding Gray moving from theatre to film and back again as being noteworthy trespassings (Auslander 1999, 29).

<sup>8</sup>For examples of Kruger’s collages see her “No Progress in Pleasure,” in Carol S. Vance’s *Pleasure and Danger* (1984).

<sup>9</sup> For an early example of everyday life as performance, see Erving Goffman’s *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959).

<sup>10</sup> Hutcheon writes that irony tends to be understood as both a “rhetorical trope or as a way of seeing the world” (Hutcheon 1994, 1). Alan Wilde writes that irony is a mode of consciousness which he sometimes also refers to as a sensibility (Wilde 1981, 2). John Seery posits that irony can be a trope, a technique and/or a sensibility (Seery 1990, 138, 62). Or as Kathy Ferguson writes: “While it is usually thought of as a practice of reading or writing, it can also be conceived more broadly as a temperament, a sensibility, a stance a stance toward the status of meaning in life” (Ferguson 1993, 32).

<sup>11</sup> Muecke associates irony with Socrates, Shakespeare and Cervantes among other canonized authors (Muecke 1970, 3). Wilde elaborates on irony and modernist literature in *Horizons of Assent* (Wilde 1981, 19-49). Hutcheon discusses irony in relationship to postmodernism in *The Politics of Postmodernism*. For irony and pussy power panties see Leah Rhumack’s “Lipstick” (Rumack 2002, 97-98). On Courtney Love and irony, see Karina Eileraas’ “Witches, Bitches, Fluids” (Eileraas 1997, 124). For more on Riot Grrrls and irony, see Neil Nehring’s discussion of Bikini Kill in “The Riot Grrrls and Carnival” from his *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism* (1997). On advertising, irony and hip commodities see Naomi Klein’s *No Logo* (Klein 2000, 83-84).

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<sup>12</sup> In 1999 Swatch introduced this collection whose watchbands are made in a material that resembles iron.

<sup>13</sup> For a critique of Eminem as ironist, see for example Stuever 2003, 155.

<sup>14</sup> For instance, see *Double-Talking* (Hutcheon 1992, 13) and many of the essays included in the anthology, such as Jamie Dopp's "Who says that Canadian culture is ironic" (Dopp 1991, 43) and Manina Jones' "Double exposures: The found poem and ironic reading" (Jones 1991, 74). Nancy Walker's *Feminist alternatives* (1990) is also indebted to Muecke. Lastly, see Seery's *Political returns* (Seery 1990, 162-163, 165-166).

<sup>15</sup> I realize that Niedzwiecki's use of "we" is problematic as it generalizes about that which inevitably only refers to certain specific segments of the North American population. However, it is his example that interests me.

<sup>16</sup> Muecke gestures towards this in his discussion on Romantic Irony but he falls short of actually pushing irony into the realm of sensibility (Muecke 1970, 23-27).

<sup>17</sup> Instrumental irony emerges in the back-and-forth between what is said and what is meant. Observational irony arises during the movement, contrast and contradiction between what one expects to occur, to find and/or to be the case—and what actually happens, is discovered and/or turns out to be the case. A provisional sensibility is characterized by clashing, contrasting and/or contradictory movements towards various theoretical/political/aesthetic and/or ethical stances.

<sup>18</sup> Of course, this is not necessarily the only way to understand irony. Rather, my schema is provisional, contingent on my current thoughts and knowledge of the literature, and it is always open to revision. As Muecke writes, "In the matter of [defining irony] then, I shall not insist (except when I forget) that everyone set his [*sic*] watch by mine. I shall, however, say what the time is according to me, since that is the only time I can be sure of" (Muecke 1970, 9).

<sup>19</sup> Or as Leigh explains in her essay "Inventing Sex Work:"

...it became clear to me that, like many other women, I was raised to trade sexuality for survival, for some social advantage (i.e. a good husband or boyfriend). As a result of the combination of slut stigma, training to trade sex for security or survival and fear of rape (the likelihood of which supposedly increased if one was promiscuous), women were often in a state of paralysis. Women could not acknowledge this "state of prostitution" in which they lived because one cannot admit one is a whore. It seemed impossible to break out of this bind without acknowledging that we were all part of some form of prostitution—the "good women" (the girlfriends and wives) and "bad women" (the whores and dykes)—alike...the stigma and shame accorded prostitutes keeps other women from fully understanding these roles (Leigh 1997, 228, 227).

<sup>20</sup> See Leigh 1994, 249.

<sup>21</sup> As Hutcheon stresses, irony isn't necessarily humorous (Hutcheon 1994, 5). Yet, many of the ironies evoked throughout this dissertation are indeed quite funny. Although I briefly touch on humor as a political strategy in all three of my core chapters (particularly chapter 4), this dissertation could use more insight into humor in relationship to irony and feminism. While time

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constraints have not permitted me to pursue this avenue of inquiry, I look forward to doing so in the future.

<sup>22</sup> Muecke, Wilde and Seery's texts are practically devoid of any mention of bodies in conjunction with irony. Ferguson briefly discusses embodied irony (Ferguson 1993, 32). In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon engages in a short, yet insightful, discussion about irony in the body-centered work of Cindy Sherman and Hannah Wilke (Hutcheon 1989, 156-160).

<sup>23</sup> However, as Butler writes in *Bodies that Matter*, "I want to underscore that there is no necessary relation between drag and subversion, and that drag may well be used in the service of both the denaturalization and reidealization of hyperbolic heterosexual gender norms" (Butler 1993, 125).

<sup>24</sup> The actual title of this song is "Shatter."

<sup>25</sup> Cited in "Mom's the Word," author unknown, *Alternative Press*, August 1998, <http://www.matador.recs.com/bands/liz/ap.html>.

<sup>26</sup> In *Liveness* Auslander elaborates on how the live is always already mediated and inseparable from mass media. Or as he writes: "It is not realistic to propose that live performance can remain ontologically pristine or that it operates in a cultural economy separate from that of the mass media.... From ball games that incorporate instant replay screens, to rock concerts that recreate the images of music video...to dance and performance art's incorporation of video, evidence of the incursion of mediatization into the live event is available across the entire spectrum of performance genres" (Auslander 1999, 40, 7).

<sup>27</sup> Here performative writing can be linked to irony's potential to "disrupt our notion of meaning as something single, decidable, or stable" (Hutcheon 1992, 13).



## CHAPTER TWO

### Shock Treatment: Karen Finley

#### *The Constant State of Desire and A Certain Level of Denial*

Every time I see a rainbow, I also see an angel being raped.

Karen Finley  
*A Certain Level of Denial*

In both *The Constant State of Desire* (1989) and *A Certain Level of Denial* (1992), Finley paints a bleak, brutal, bizarre, spiritually bankrupt picture of a late-capitalist postmodern American landscape.<sup>1</sup> Commodities constitute identities and values—yet consumer desire is insatiable. Abuse is the name of the game. Male violence runs rampant. Fathers fuck their three-year-old daughters up the ass because there's nothing on TV. Dude buggers the 7/11 cashier 'cause she looks so hot standing there by the Slurpee machine. Everyday life is a nightmare that takes Brett Easton Ellis' *American Psycho* to its extreme.<sup>2</sup> Death is everywhere. Jeffrey and Johnny and Joe are gone now that AIDS has oh-so-fucking-slowly taken their lives away. Even Desi and Lucy Arnaz, Liberace, and the Easter Bunny have disappeared from the scene. Art cannot provide an antidote to this dystopic present as its resistant potential is easily sterilized and sanitized via incorporation and commodification into the capitalist devouring machine. Political action is a farce sparked in the name of striking yet another pose for MTV. Yuppie graffiti art fetishists thus reign supreme. "A world in need of mending," writes Wilde regarding such scenarios, "has been superceded by one beyond repair" (Wilde 1981, 31).

However, there are periodic cracks, gaps and fissures in Finley's seemingly radical hopeless and helpless postmodern portrait.<sup>3</sup> In "Enter Entrepreneur," clad in nothing but baggy, dingy beige underwear and caked in a layer of smashed eggs and stuffed animal fur—recently concocted and flung on to her flesh in front of our eyes—Finley morphs from a numb and Novocain-ed desperately seeking body into a lefty Tank Girl with her very own violent agenda. She becomes a raging-artist-on-a-rampage, ready to wreak vengeance on yuppie-land's killer conventions, convictions and constituents.<sup>4</sup> Or maybe not:

So I took too many sleeping pills and nothing happened.  
So I put a gun to my head and nothing happened.  
So I put my head in the oven and nothing happened  
So I fucked you all night long and nothing happened.  
So I went on a diet and nothing happened.  
So I went to all the Big City nightclubs and nothing happened.  
So I tried to get into the art scene, went to Soho, and nothing happened.  
So I went to college, never paid back that student loan  
'cause I knew nothing was gonna happen.  
So I quit booze and drugs but nothing ever happened. So I became kinda political—I worked for ERA, I voted for Jessie Jackson—but nothing ever happened.  
So I decided to become domestic—I cleaned, cooked, and put out roach motels  
—but nothing, nothing ever happened.  
So I petitioned, rioted, terrorized, and organized because  
I'm gonna make something happen.

I'm not gonna let you gang rape me anymore, Mr. Yuppie, Mr. Businessman, Mr. Entrepreneur. I'm not going to let you take my streets that I built with my soul, my creativity, my spirit. You just look at all of my art, Mr. Bucks, as another investment deal. My sweat, my music, my fashion is just another money-making scheme for you.

You are the reason why David's Cookies and McDonald's are the symbols of my culture. You are the reason why fast food is the only growth industry in this nation!

So you come into my neighborhood, after your nine-to-five job, on weekends, looking for the artistic experience. So you can go back to work

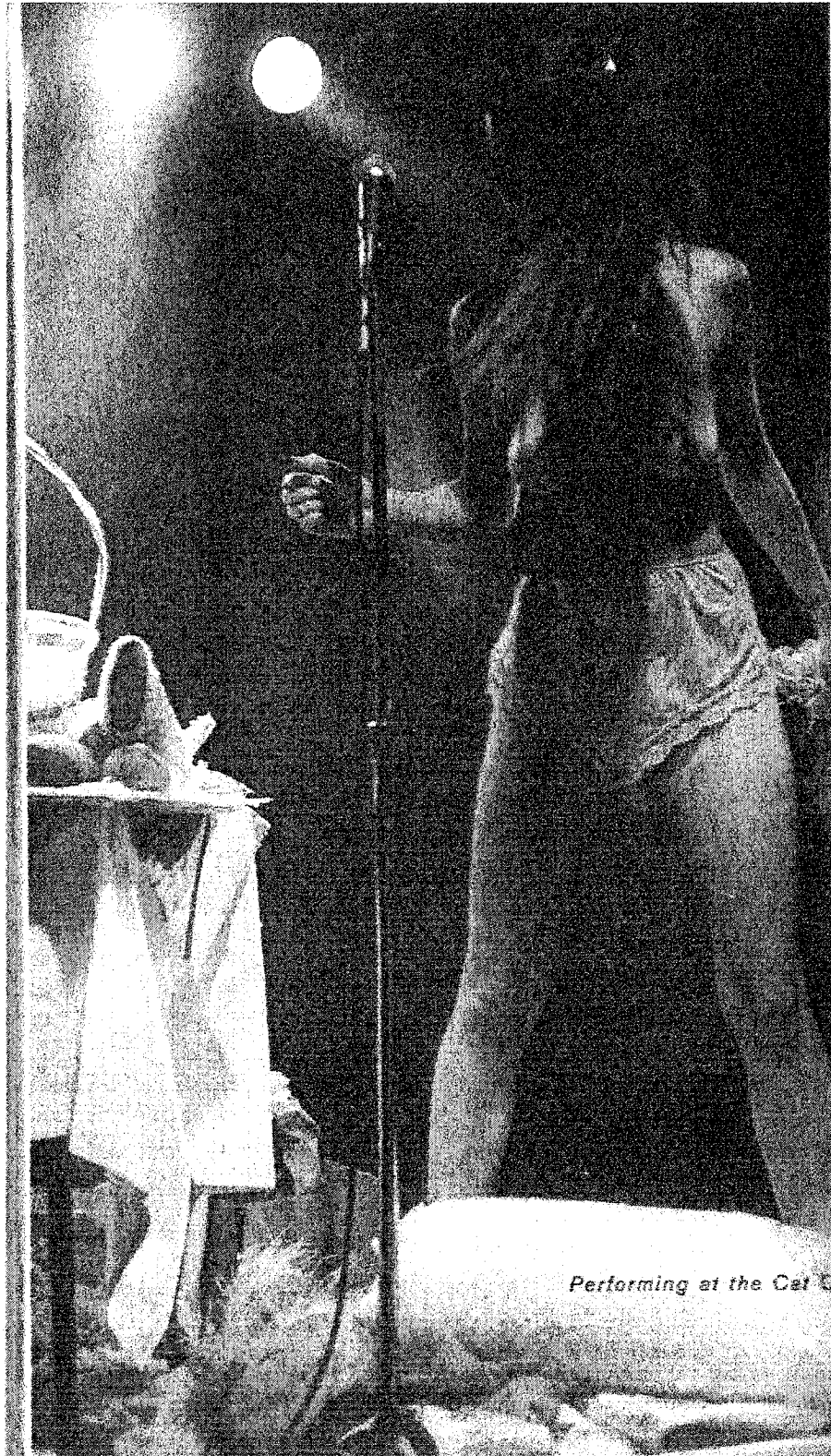
and show off that you've experienced bohemia. I'll be happy to show you the artistic experience. I am the girl for the job.

So I take you, Mr. Entrepreneur, Mr. Yuppie, Mr. Yesman  
And I tie you up in all of your fashion, your Calvin Klein, your Ralph  
Lauren and your Anne Klein too, your Bloomingdales, your Macy's, and  
I tie you up in it  
And I puke all over you  
And you know what?  
You like it  
Mr. Yuppie says, "Is this the artistic experience?"  
And I smile  
And he likes it! He likes it.

So I open up those designer jeans of yours,  
Those Girbauds (i even got a pair)  
I open up your ass and stick up there that sushi, that nouvelle cuisine.  
I stick up your ass that Cuisinart that racquetball  
and everything made by Braun and Decker.  
I keep sticking it up there because there's more room.  
So Mr. Yuppie hands me his walkman and cordless phone  
And I put it up there too  
And he likes it—he likes it!

But then Mr. Yuppie looks up at me worried and asks,  
"But where's the graffiti art?"  
And I just laugh and say, "It's up your ass"  
And he smiles smugly like he got something for nothing  
'Cause he works all day stealing from the poor  
And he wants some of that artistic experience for his résumé

I know you want to experience the inspiration of the artist.  
So I take your Yuppie body and drag it down Avenue B  
I let your tongue roll along the street licking up the shit and piss, the sweat  
and blood  
And you know what?  
You like it.  
Then I leave you on the corner and steal your BMW  
'Cause I know that nothing is ever gonna fuckin' happen  
(Finley 1990, 6-9).



**Figure 1.** Karen Finley, *Enter Entrepreneur* (1989).

## Rude Girls

Writing about Finley in 1986, *Village Voice* critic C. Carr contextualizes her stagings in relationship to what she calls a “rude girl network” featuring performers like Lydia Lunch and Kathy Acker whose mouths ooze with pornographic doublespeak retooled to meet feminist needs. I dare you, they silently suggest, to gaze comfortably at the sight of me. Often deemed outrageous, these rude girls overexpose the conventions of representation that help constitute appropriate femininity. “Think of Lydia Lunch and that baby-faced dominatrix image so startling in the late 1970s,” writes Carr:

or the obscene and sexually demanding narrator in any Kathy Acker performance or the oddball menace of Dancenoise onstage at 8BC swigging “blood” from coffee cans, tearing dolls limb from limb, shouting, “Give me liberty or give me head!” (Carr 1986, 142).

Or, you could think of Annie Sprinkle’s “Public Cervix Announcement” in *Post Porn Modernist* packing stages across America in the late 1980s and early 1990s, in which audience members are invited to take a flashlight and look inside her cervix as she sits with her slit open at the end of the stage “because it’s fun.... And in a way I wanna say, ‘Fuck you guys—you wanna see pussy? I’ll show you pussy” (Vale and Juno 1991, 34).

However, the “rude girl network” evoked by Carr has an extensive lineage that is worth lingering on for a little longer. Schneider explains that since the early 1960s feminist performers have been busy challenging the ways in which they have been relegated to objects of art thus complicating their ability to be taken seriously as producers of art (Schneider 1997, 38, 42). “Under the banner of political purpose,” continues Schneider, “the margins separating artist/woman, high/low, subject/object began to leak and bleed” (Schneider 1997, 31). She discusses the sight of Carolee Schneemann dressed only in body-paint doing *Interior Scroll* (1975), in which

Schneemann pulls a tampon-like scroll out of her vagina and re-cites a critique of feminist aesthetics from a “happy structural film-maker”; an “Art Stud Club” boy who cannot look at “the personal clutter...the painterly mess” that is women’s art. “I don’t take the advice of men who only talk to themselves,” she says as she takes a verbal moment to overtly interrupt her recital of his words (Schneider 1997, 35, 132). Shigeko Kubota’s *Perpetual Fluxfest* (1965) is similarly striking. She squats over a blank piece of paper and uses a brush that appears to come out of her cunt to cover the canvas in red strokes, a gesture that underlines and undermines Yves Klein’s use of women as “human paintbrushes” (Reckitt 2001, 65). Hannah Wilke’s *S.O.S.—Starification Object Series* (1974-79) also comes to mind. Wilke produced a series of sexy self-portraits; often naked, her flesh decorated by tiny “cunt-like bubble-gum sculptures” (Jones 1998, 183). “I chose gum,” explains Wilke, “because it’s the perfect metaphor for the American woman—chew her up, get what you want out of her, throw her out and pop in another piece” (Jones 1998, 184). As I write about Wilke’s take on chicks and chewing gum over 25 years later, I wish I could say, “I don’t get it”—but I do. However, I also re-cite these examples in order to stress that the “rude girl network” that Carr enthuses about didn’t invent the idea of aggressive, sexual serious play. As Phelan writes, “certain art cliches—that all feminist art in the early 1970s celebrated ‘central core’ imagery, that the 1980s were concerned exclusively with strategies of appropriation—do not reflect the diversity of artistic responses at any given time” (Phelan 2001, 11). However, as Amelia Jones and Schneider point out, what does seem relatively consistent is that many of these artists were treated badly by male peers and critics who saw them as somewhat unhinged, messy, narcissistic and/or exhibitionistic (Jones 1998, 177; Schneider 1997, 35). As I

move back into Finley territory, and later over to Courtney; you will see that when it comes to responses to such explicit embodied anti-sexist practices, the song still remains much the same.<sup>5</sup>

### **Finley and Me**

If Finley has a collection of name-tags hidden away in a box somewhere it is no doubt close to overflowing: from art school grad to waitress, Danceteria diva, performance artist, singer, sculptress, author, NEA-controversy Art Star and late night TV personality, this not-so-nice-lady's activity epitomizes the concept of bodies of irony.<sup>6</sup> This chapter takes you on a strategically limited tour featuring Finley's ironic and unruly forays throughout the 1980s and early 1990s. As I re-produce various vignettes from *The Constant State of Desire (CSOD)* and *A Certain Level of Denial (ACLD)*, I suggest that Finley's performance art is alive and kicking with a provisionally ironic sensibility that fuses a postmodern feminist politics of doubt with rage at social injustices. Such work helps one to envision a space for resistant bodies to mobilize in spite of—or perhaps to spite—epistemological and ontological uncertainty. Thus a category like woman is simultaneously taken for granted and called into question. As I journey through Finley's shows, I also re-evoke the observational ironies that she cites in order to unveil the discrepancy between America's PR campaign for itself and its everyday oppressive public policies and abusive private practices. Many of the characters that morph in and out of Finley's menagerie are also armed with instrumental irony. As I re-present their words I show how understatement and overstatement are deployed to humorously question the language that helps create and regulate the norms that govern appropriate femininity. Yet the ironies I associate with Finley's performance practices are not merely

in her words; rather as you will see they circulate all over her unruly, grotesque body. The sight is often hysterical. Thus I invite you to move with me through the realm of female hysteria as illness, protest and/or performance aesthetic in order to enter into a discussion of Finley's engagement with hysteria as ironic display. As I reiterate the enraged responses to Finley, the risks and dangers linked to irony and/in the spectacle of the unruly female body are revealed to be quite costly. Finley, I will show, has been arrested by the cops, de-funded by the NEA as well as trashed and trivialized by so-called left-wing as well as conservative journalists. From feminist quarters, I highlight Lynda Hart's suggestion that the enraged-by-Finley phenomenon can be linked to the queer terror that her work incites. Finally, I zoom in on Elinor Fuch's fear: what happens to certain feminist assumptions about women's objectification and female sexuality when feminist performers disrobe, get dirty and talk trash?

### **Provisionally Speaking**

Being nice hasn't earned women a bloody thing, [Finley] says. Her art says that everything, including male privilege, is impermanent. It also says that there are worse things than shit to eat—like eating your heart out when what you really want to do is draw blood.

Laurie Stone  
*Ms.*

I'm angry.... And that's what a lot my work is about; trying to get people angry so that they'll do something about it. I look at my performances as a pep rally—really, I think of myself as a motivational speaker.

Karen Finley  
*Angry Women*

In "Enter Entrepreneur," cynicism and nihilism are interrupted and disrupted by a potentially politically explosive emotion: rage. It is evoked as an antidote that works—however temporarily—to infect the kind of overwhelming, consuming sense of



personal/political impotence expressed by Finley's character at the beginning of the vignette. Indeed, as Peter Lyman suggests, rage in response to social injustice is the "political emotion" *par excellence*, as it leads to "the will to courage to overcome injury and violation and to defend...the entire realm of things that one cares for" (Lyman 1980, 62). However, in keeping with Seery's suggestion, Finley's raging-artist-on-a-rampage takes a provisionally ironic leap into the realm of the political—a leap that is simultaneously dedicated yet full of doubt (Seery 1990, 177, 191). Seery celebrates such movement as it keeps personal/political paralysis at bay in a way that also refuses to allow one to slide into the territory of ready-made and righteous political certainties (Seery 1990, 55-58). Drawing on Seery, Ferguson posits that the political power underlying such a sensibility is one that gives rise to a postmodern feminist political stance that keeps one from freezing up in one's ultimately open-ended tracks:

[Irony] is a way to keep oneself within a situation that resists resolution in order to act politically without pretending that resolution has come....  
[Irony] produces an ability to sustain the contrary pull of continuing to want what cannot be fully had (Ferguson 1993, 31, 35).

Or as Finley's raging-artist-on-a-rampage suggests: I'm gonna try my bloody best to make something happen, but then again in the end, probably nothing ever fucking will. But I'm gonna try my bloody best to...

Granted, the potentially politically potent promise evoked by the raging-artist-on-a-rampage hardly corresponds to the scenarios of organized, non-violent political praxis envisioned by Ferguson and Seery. However, as Judith Halberstam suggests, vignettes such as "Enter Entrepreneur" produce representations of "imagined violence" that could have quite material effects (Halberstam 1993, 187). Women in particular, writes Halberstam, can benefit from art, poetry, film and other cultural forms that shriek with

rage; that refuse to play by the women-as-victim/male-as-perpetrator conventions thereby producing “different configurations of violence, terror, and fantasy” (Halberstam 1993, 191). Lessons in femininity, continues Halberstam, are designed to suppress female rage at social and political injustice (Halberstam 1993, 191). Or in Lyman’s words:

Women learn to negotiate their anger about subordination by depoliticizing its expression or internalizing it in the form of guilt, and the guilty woman then blames herself for the unfeminine emotion of anger, for having *failed* as a woman (Lyman 1980, 68; emphasis mine).

In turn, Halberstam wonders, what if we strategically “fail” to fully keep our fury to ourselves? What if we threaten to bash the fuck back? And what if we use the realm of representation to do so?:

What if we imagine a new violence with a different object; a postmodern terror represented by another “monster” with quite other “victims” in mind? What if denotes a potentiality, a possible reality that may only ever exist in the realm of representation but one which creates an “imagined violence” with real consequences (Halberstam 1993, 190).<sup>7</sup>

In other words, what if we create more Thelma and Louises? Or as June Jordan’s poetry wonders, “what you think would happen/if every time they kill a black boy/then we kill a cop?” (Halberstam 1993, 188). Might rapists and cops then think twice before they shoot their next load? Ideally, stresses Halberstam, the threat of counter-violence need never be actualized. Ultimately, it is preventative (Halberstam 1993, 193). It is also infectious. “Finley’s hyperbolic transgressions elicit shock and violent emotional and physical responses from audience members and may empower women to resist brutalization, or at least fantasize revenge,” writes Maria Pramaggiore (Pramaggiore 1992, 290). Indeed, when you leave the show, it really does feel as though something’s just gotta happen. Then again, in keeping with the provisional sensibility in vignettes like “Enter Entrepreneur,” the possibility that nothing’s ever gonna happen is hardly effaced or

erased. However, “what if” questions remains hanging hungrily in the air long after Finley has disappeared from the stage.

### **Who me?**

Good. Bad. Man. White. Black. Feminist. Incest Survivor. Victim. If only History (the kind she’s waiting for) could be like this fluid thing she’s thinking of: smooth and gently moving, full of nuance, broad, accessible, instead of mean and categorical. Of course, everyone would have to have the same capacity for existence. For not getting murdered.

Gail Scott  
*Main Brides*

In Finley’s forays, identity is also treated with and to a provisionally ironic sensibility. It is revealed as manufactured, fractured, in motion and at play. However, its marks never go away. Finley, writes Schneider, “stands before her audience and ushers forth an onslaught of identities like a virus run rampant” (Schneider 1997, 100). She becomes the father who hangs himself as he jerks off to pictures of kids in a Sears catalogue because, well, he no longer finds his own daughter attractive, only to morph into a bunch of bulimic chicks engaged in a puke-athon. Seconds later she’s a literal motherfucker—dying to get his shlong right up there in his mama’s snatch. And every once in a while, Finley seemingly halts her productions to chitchat informally with the audience between monologue. In these spaces that seem to be between acts, Finley talks about her everyday in a banal sort of way, only to stop and gesture towards her props and explain that she bought them at “the performance art counter at Macy’s.” She shows off her “Performance Art 101” repertoire of poses right after telling a story about today’s trip on the subway. And she babbles on about runny diarrhea in such a matter of fact way that one senses that there is indeed a show going on here. In short, she calls into question the notion that she may be representing an authentic self. Pramaggiore suggests that there is

something to be said for the ways in which Finley's I'm-just-an-everyday-kinda-performance-artist-on-stage Finley cannot be neatly separated from the rest of the cast (Pramaggiore 1988, 47).<sup>8</sup> Like many feminist performance artists since the late 1960s, writes Vivian Patraka, Finley is testifying about brutality and oppression; yet there is such a "violent dissolution of borders" in *CSOD* and *ACLD* that one cannot easily link her testimonial back to a single subject with an individual autobiographical narrative (Patraka 1992, 171, 176, 177). As Lynda Hart elaborates, Finley "abandon[s] the unity of the humanist 'I' to shift around, between, and among subject and object positions, to confound spectators who desire to locate an identity behind the construction of subjectivity" (Hart 1991, 127). Although as Ferguson points out, there are undeniable legal, social and political benefits associated with the feminist move toward configuring women as subjects, it's simultaneously important to remember Michel Foucault's insight that the subject is "one who is *subjected*, brought to order by the disciplinary strategies of modernity" (Ferguson 1993, 61; Foucault 1990, 85). Or in Schneider's words:

...the door beckoning us to try to achieve subjectivity, selfhood and substantive identity—the door, that is, to full inclusion in mankind—has been recognized as the dream or mirage historically veiling the imperial privilege of propertied white men (Schneider 1997, 44).

Other doors may prove more worthy of opening, suggests Schneider, citing strategies deployed by Finley that seek to exaggerate, overdo and/or parody the notion of identity as unitary (Schneider 1997, 45).

Indeed, in what looks like an obscene precursor to *Gender Trouble*, the stability of coherent gender identity collapses as Finley takes on the male voice, rapes the male body and reveals his fantasies to be the effects of repetitive discursive behavior and scripts that could begin to come undone as they are re-cited by the "wrong" sex.

However, unlike Butler's potentially troubling drag queens, the gender plays and ploys in *CSOD* and *ACLD* fall short of the deliriously deconstructive or the purely parodic.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, as I play/stop/rewind/stop/play my way through these hyperbolically horrific performance pieces, I am struck by how although gender is treated as fluid and free-floating, Finley's female characters inhabit bodies that have been marked and mocked, scared and scorned by patriarchal activity in ways that most quests for infinite choreographies of gender fail to address and thus can hardly hope to redress.<sup>10</sup> "We need not only show that what poses as ontological or natural necessity is a normative injunction," writes Drucilla Cornell; "we also need to remember who and what is at stake in the imposition: ourselves as 'women'" (Cornell 1991, 199). As I take in "Why Can't This Veal Calf Walk," for instance, in conjunction with Finley's more f-to-m drag-like deeds, Cornell's recipe gets fleshy:

Everyone says I deserved it –  
I'm a hussy, I'm a tramp  
I'm a whore  
'Cause I wear lipstick?  
Work at night?  
And drink Bourbon straight?  
When I said NO  
You didn't listen to me.  
When I said NO  
You fucked me anyway  
When I said NO  
I wasn't playing hard to get  
And I never meant yes  
You raped me  
I took a shower, a hot one  
But I couldn't get clean  
His sweat his semen  
His skin smells near  
Another bath another shower  
I just cried. I just cried.  
When I reported it  
Policeman said, "Hey, slut, you led him on."

The doctor cleaned me up, stuffed me with gauze  
I bled for three days with the morning-after pill.

And when they returned my empty wallet  
Mr. Policeman said, "If you don't suck me I'll blow your brains out"  
(Finley 1990, 128-133).

What makes this piece so relevant to me is that it exposes—with a vengeance—what Sharon Marcus calls the language of rape, which in the everyday world, in a heteronormative context, is based on dominant conceptions of gender identity and femininity in conjunction with misogynist assumptions: "women are rapable/women deserve rape/women provoke rape/women want rape..." (Marcus 1992, 389). As Finley overexposes the script, she gestures toward Marcus' point that we need a conception of hegemonic understandings of gender in order to work towards disrupting sexist rapespeak so that it can no longer be used in seemingly self-evident ways against bodies that are perceived as female (Marcus 1992, 391).

Yet, since Finley's attention to who and what is at stake in gendered impositions seems fueled by a provisionally ironic sensibility, it does not trip into the trap of identity politics. Rather, like Haraway, she imagines bodies of resistance that revolve around "affinity, not identity" (Haraway 1990, 197). In "Black Sheep," an oppositional-body-on-the-edge sends a love letter to her people: "the outcasts, the outsiders"—you know there's usually one in every family (Finley 1990, 141). In this piece, Black Sheep have no specific gender, sexuality, ethnicity. Rather, they are "angels, conscience, nightmares, actors in dreams" who do what they can to just say no to the ugly isms and schisms that produce an America that is intolerant and intolerable (Finley 1990, 143). The figures who emerge in this politically aware entourage, writes Hart, evoke the notion of coalition (Hart 1994, 103).<sup>11</sup> Or in Haraway's words, they are "partial, contradictory, unclosed"

bodies who have no firm grounding and thus practice politics in provocative ways (Haraway 1990, 196). Black Sheep are family—brothers, sisters, mommies, daddies—yet they are not biological kin (Finley 1990, 142). Rather, like Haraway’s cyborgs, these monstrous “illegitimate offspring” of patriarchy, capitalism and homophobia are irreverent, unfaithful, liminal and oppositional (Haraway 1990, 192-193). But they treat each other with and to yummy-ness: “We are your holding hand / We are your pillow, your receiver, your cuddly toy” (Finley 1990, 144). Here, a refusal to rely on conventional identity categories is met with what Kwame Appiah describes as “a simple respect for human suffering” (Appiah 1991, 353).

However, just as this piece begins to sound like a Hallmark card addressed to the Left, and in keeping with the ironic sensibility in *CSOD* and *ACLD*, one is forced to recall that such celebrations of solidarity are always tenuous. Black Sheep are disappearing into dangerous drug-induced hazes in response to name-the-issue; others are dying, dying, dying of AIDS-related complications, while some simply can’t get it together to get out of bed to face yet another debilitating day. Indeed, when Black Sheep are alive and kicking, they “take your call at 3 a.m. when you can’t sleep,” but all too often when you ring it’s just: “Silence at the end of the phone. Silence at the end of the phone. Silence at the end of the phone...” (Finley 1990, 144). This bittersweet piece functions as a potent reminder that relationships, like political alliances, are fluid, often fleeting and never finite.

## Observe This!

Finley also evokes a variety of observationally ironic re-citations that work tactically to target particularly diseased sites. In “Father in All of Us” she turns her spotlight on homophobic hypocrisy as it circulates within the medical industry and collapses into the nuclear family. For instance, she becomes the dying-disinherited-son-with-AIDS who says to his med-schooled homophobic dad, “You call yourself a doctor who relieves pain. Man you’ve been giving me nothing but pain since the day I was conceived” (Finley 1990, 22). Here, the ultimate familial—and all too familiar—discrepancy between medical rhetoric and everyday family practice is given center stage. Finley also takes this painful paradox to the heart of the hospital. In “Hello Mother,” the dying-disinherited-son-with-AIDS is brought to the admitting room—but there’s not a soul to let him in. A doctor is summoned—but they seem to have disappeared. A wheelchair is requested—but they are nowhere to be found. Mom is called—she hangs up the phone. “Hello society!” he screams in exasperation. But there’s no answer. He tries again, “Hello America!” Silence. In these pieces, Finley exposes the ironic contradiction at the core of a culture that claims—but does not deliver—democratic rights and freedoms for all. Such ironies may be politically productive as they point to the telling disjunction between the way things are said to be and the way they actually seem in the eyes of Others.

Finally, many of Finley’s disjointed narratives take observational ironic twists and turns. In such cases, Walker suggests that what could be conventional—and painful—climaxes are often humorously interrupted, disrupted and avenged (Walker



1990, 52). For instance, in “I’m An Ass Man,” Finley is a slimy, sleazy married dude—a would-be rapist in search of the chick with the biggest butt:

I wanted to get myself inside of her. But first I wanted to feel some of that butt action. That cheek action. Feel some of that butt pressure. All I want to do is get my mitts against the small of her back. I crack open the seat of her pants, just listening to the sound of polyester. I love the sound of ripping polyester. Then I get my fist, my hand and I push myself into her ass.... It’s turning me on. It’s turning me on (Finley 1990, 51).

When he feels that she’s good and ready, he goes for a fingers-first missionary homerun. However, when he removes his hand from her cunt, he’s shocked and appalled to find that: “THE WOMEN HAS HER PERIOD” (Finley 1990, 51). “How could you do this to me woman?” he roars in dismay. Running away, trying desperately and successfully to keep the blood at bay, he concludes: “Be a long time before I use that hand to shake my dick after I piss” (Finley 1990, 51). It’s impossible not to giggle. In this re-play of a rape narrative ironically gone awry, male desire for dominance and fear of menstruation are highlighted in their ingloriously sick absurdity and thus subject to mockery. Dude is no doubt dangerous—but he becomes the victim of his own bloody misogyny. The ladies get the last laugh. Indeed, Finley’s specialty lies in the ways in which her chaotic choreography of graphic brutality and angry testimony are often undercut with instances of witty irony that keep her work from collapsing in anguish under the weight of its content.

### **Femininity and Instrumental Irony**

Pramaggiore also suggests that Finley’s work draws on what I call instrumentally ironic overstatement and understatement in ways that humorously underline and undermine fictions that govern femininity (Pramaggiore 1998, 49-50). In “Strangling

Baby Birds,” for example, a Freudian patient/client/victim treats herself to classic psychoanalytic theory and thus to a humorously ironic Freudian echo-with-an-edge:

The real problem was in the way she projected her femininity. And if she wasn't passive, well, she just didn't feel desirable. And if she wasn't desirable she just didn't feel female. And if she wasn't female, well the whole world would cave in (Finley 1990, 3).

This hyperbolic re-take on Freudian prescriptions for femininity gestures toward and mocks the key role that the regulatory fiction of normative gender plays in constituting and upholding the binary, hierarchical kingdom of heteronormative relations. As Walker suggests, “humor negates the power of hegemonic ideology quite simply by refusing to take that power seriously” (Walker 1990, 44). Furthermore, this witty ironic re-take also functions as a hopeful double-take. The world will not literally cave in if women stop putting on the feminine, but the “natural” and ontological foundations of gender identity may just begin to crumble.

However, Finley also suggests that such foundations are deeply cemented within the psyche. Indeed, they uphold gendered norms that are, as Pramaggiore points out, subject to self-policing and internalization. For instance, Finley's housewife-who-reads-Steinem character can't quite politicize her personal (Pramaggiore 1998, 50). In turn, this exaggerated take on the twist that is “I'm a feminist, but...” is both funny and frighteningly familiar:

I love my women's studies classes. The books! The women! I love finding out the reasons why I feel the way I do. But if my women's studies class ever got in the way of my being a proper hostess for Richard's business, I'd give it up in a minute. I'd sacrifice anything for my family to the point of becoming a boring and phobic person (Finley 1990, 144).

Here, ironic overstatement reflects Russo's yearning for not-so-normal ways of doing feminism that are not aligned with the correct and conventional; and not concerned with

appealing to the mainstream (Russo 1994, vii). Indeed, Finley's performances seem to anticipate Russo's book, which begins from the premise that feminism loses its edge when it "concedes much to the misogyny which permeates the fear of 'losing one's femininity,' 'making a spectacle of oneself,' 'alienating men'...or otherwise making 'errors'" (Russo 1994, 12).

Finally, Finley plays the chick-in-the-know who sends man-made sexual slang spinning as she reveals its literal and thus ideological underpinnings. As Hutcheon suggests, such irony often involves the repetition of the "Master's" words while suggesting that there is a lot more to be said about his language and attitude (Hutcheon 1994, 32). Such penetrations into the core of linguistic labeling ideally diminish its potency. "Girl Talk," for example, speaks volumes about sexual straight boy social intercourse that seeks to animalize and thereby dehumanize women:

Call her a dog—meaning you'll fuck her if there's nothing else around.  
Call her a cat—if she doesn't speak, just purrs when she's spoken to.  
Call her a fox—when she knows how to wear her make-up.  
Call her a cow—when she has had children and takes care of them well.  
Call her a cold fish—when she doesn't want to get hurt and keeps her feelings to herself  
Call her bird—ladybird—Don't worry she'll never be the President...  
(Finley 2000, 120-121).

The final ladybird line is also a prime example of ironic innuendo. Here, this chick-in-the-know offers mock reassurance to every sexist-pig-next-door while gesturing to the fear of female power that grounds, surrounds and gives rise to their telling guyspeak (Hutcheon 1994, 11). Overall such irony, notes Seery, turns what could be perceived as a didactic rant into a telling, clever political play with words that invites listeners to participate in creating the critique rather than to remain the mere recipients of slogans

that may become monotonously repetitive, thereby losing their bite (Seery 1990, 306, 321).

## Body Language

Finley's performance style uses body with text and body as text to enact the juxtaposition of words and body, and finally, to reveal it as not juxtaposition at all.

Maria Pramaggiore  
"Resisting/Performing/Femininity"

She might be stealing the male voice like that. Might be spitting on the stage. Tearing at her taffetas. Smearing food on herself. She might say or do anything there. Onstage Karen Finley represents a frightening and rare presence—an unsocialized woman.

C. Carr  
"Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts"

From the moment CSOD opens, the spectacle of the grotesque body—along with the so-deemed dirty words used to describe its lower stratum—reigns supreme (Russo 1994, 53, 8). Finley starts the show in her I'm-just-an-everyday-kinda-performance-artist-person-who-happens-to-be-on stage mode and chitchats about her latest pee and shit. Soon she's naked, matter-of-factly discussing the length of her pubic hair and the period stains on her underwear. As she highlights the grotesque-ness of her body, with its secreting, excreting, leaky functions, the normative state of the female body is called into question. She suggests that the figure of the bourgeois classical body—one that is "sleek, self-contained, symmetrical" (Russo 1994, 8)—is an impossible ideal. In past performances, Finley has taken bodily things further by shoving yams across her ass, coating herself in dog food, and dialoguing about the diarrhea that she expels into a bucket on stage (Finley 2000, 5, 24). In the spirit of the carnivalesque grotesque, Finley's body becomes what Bakhtin calls "building material" (Bakhtin 1984, 313).

Uncontainable and unhampered by norms of appropriate stature and speech; it is a body that turns inside out and down, one that shamelessly absorbs and ejects (Bakhtin 1984, 370, 319, 29). It is inseparable from the shit it has to live with and the shit that it expels. As Mary Douglas writes, cultures contain specific bodily prohibitions that “function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience” (Douglas 1969, 4). Such systematic cleansing, continues Douglas, often revolves around establishing and overseeing boundaries between “within and without, above and below, male and female,” in anxious attempts to secure a semblance of social order (Douglas 1969, 4). However, as Pramaggiore notes, “Finley first calls attention to, and then breaks, every rule” (Pramaggiore 1988, 48). Since the sight of Finley’s body inevitably connotes the idea of femaleness (Schneider 1997, 7), her unruly activity speaks to and strikes through the heart of appropriate femininity.

### **Eat Me**

Finley’s unsocialized spectacles should not be easily reducible to titillating bawdy talk; rather, as Pramaggiore writes, her words work with her body—both show and tell. In Finley’s kitchen, food play is hardly simply a gross vision and version of the infamous *9 1/2 Weeks* kitchen scene gone awry—as she transgresses bodily boundaries, she also renders her textual material visceral. Baked beans become menstrual blood and melted ice cream spewed across a chest and dress stand in for a rapist’s sperm (Finley 2000, 23).

Finley explains her most infamous—and one of my favorite—scenes:

I smeared my body with chocolate, because, I said in the piece, I’m a woman, and women are usually treated like shit. Then I covered myself with red candy hearts—because, after a woman is treated like shit, she becomes more loveable. After the hearts, I covered myself with bean sprouts, which smelled like semen and looked like semen,—because, after

a woman is treated like shit, and loved for it, she is jacked off on. Then I spread tinsel all over my body, like a Cher dress—because, no matter how badly a woman has been treated, she'll still get it together to dress up for dinner (Finley 2000, 84).

Ironically, this piece, one of the only few of her early spectacles in which she overtly highlights women's complicity in het dating and mating affairs, is also the one that brought some version of her work to *Washington Post* reporters Evans and Novak's eyes and subsequently to Senator Jesse Helms' ear—and thus into the limelight of the NEA controversy and the culture wars (Finley 2000, 101). Why, asked these boys on the Right, should fine upstanding taxpayers support the indecently obscene displays of this “young, chocolate smeared woman?” (Evans and Novak 1990)<sup>12</sup> Yet, one might imagine that the good journalists and their Senator buddy would choose to applaud rather than critique what Finley depicts as American women's ability to make-up, doll-up and keep on consuming in spite of it all. Go figure.

### **Reconfiguring Hysteria**

One might even say that hysterics are more womanly than other women.

Charles Richet, assistant to Charcot  
“The Demons of Today and Yesterday”<sup>13</sup>

The sight of Finley's body in performance also evokes the figure of the female hysteric. Like the infamous female patients in Charcot's asylum/theatre/photo studio—hypnotized in front of crowds and cameras and made to mime “their” symptoms—Finley (re)turns hysteria into female spectacle (Showalter 1985, 148).<sup>14</sup> As if retracing the hypnotized footsteps of Charcot's infamous “leading ladies” such as Blanche Whitman and Augustine whose bodily theatrics were the *piece de resistance* at Salpêtrière, Finley periodically falls into a trance. Her body rocks back and forth,

alternately screaming, moaning, giggling, with hands often clenched like claws scratching an invisible blackboard.<sup>15</sup>

The spectacle of female hysteria, its link to the early 1900s, and its subsequent appearance in contemporary feminist theory and performance are, I believe, relevant enough to warrant the slight detour that my text will now take.<sup>16</sup> In *The Female Malady* Showalter suggests that as *fin-de-siècle* white, bourgeois North American and European women took to the streets demanding access to sexual autonomy, education, professions and the right to vote, the notion of the hysterical female came into vogue (Showalter 1985, 145; Bordo 1993, 157). Although hysteria was not necessarily believed to be an essentially female disease, it was quickly feminized (Showalter 1985, 146). Interestingly, many medical men seemed to feel compelled to acknowledge that these “sick” women were often more intelligent, imaginative, energetic and spirited than “normal” women, writes Showalter; nonetheless they cautioned that the desire to transgress the role of femininity, clad as it was in docility and domesticity, would inevitably lead to hysteria (Showalter 1985, 145-147; Hunter 1983, 475).

Joseph Breuer and Sigmund Freud soon arrived on and altered the scene by expanding on Charcot’s notion that hysteria has a psychological basis (Copjec 1981, 32). Their *Studies in Hysteria* concludes that such trauma is inevitably rooted in repressed memories (Breuer and Freud 1961, 7). Specifically, the early thesis posited that hysterical women were victims of male sexual violation which they could not recall (Showalter 1997, 38).<sup>17</sup> “The not knowing of the hysterics,” writes Breuer and Freud, “was really...not willing to know” (Breuer and Freud 1961, 202). The good doctors claimed they could provide the cure through a climactic catharsis based on the patients’

“confession” of the traumatic event(s) during hypnosis (Breuer and Freud 1961, 4-5). Importantly, Freud later abandoned this “seduction” (assault?) theory and traced hysteria back to repressed “fantasies based on patients’ unconscious Oedipal desires” (Showalter 1997, 43). For instance, Freud deemed Ida Bauer, or “Dora,” to be suffering not because, as many feminists argue, she was dissatisfied with her limiting and limited role within the domestic sphere, but rather because she was unknowingly attracted to her father, her father’s mistress’s husband, and Freud himself (Showalter 1997, 43).

Throughout hysteria’s late nineteenth-century reign its symptoms varied, but many were said and seen to be suffering from self-starvation, haunted by hallucinations, tormented by fits of temper, agitated and anxious. Such women were also often described as unintelligible. Speaking their own individual blends of gibberish, mumbo jumbo and/or foreign tongues, their occasional utterances were deemed less significant than their mutterings and stutterings (Breuer and Freud 1961, 1-2; Showalter 1985, 146-164; Hunter 1983, 467). Often they became mute. “The great hysterics,” writes Cixous, “have lost speech...their tongues are cut off...it’s the body that talks” (Cixous 1981, 49).

## **Hysterical Detours**

*Nous sommes toutes des hystériques!*



Chant at a feminist meeting in Paris, 1972<sup>18</sup>

Claiming hysteria is not the wisest strategy for professional success.

Elaine Showalter  
*Hystories*

On one side of the debate are those who read hysteria as a woman's defiance of family and physician, a somatic release of repressed anger and frustration. On the other side are those who argue that hysteria is used as a weapon but who maintain that the real object of hostility is the hysteric herself, the figure who, after all, is the one who suffers most. Nothing...of course, prevents us from subscribing to *both* these readings at once.

Diana Fuss  
*Identification Papers*<sup>19</sup>

Paving their way through and across different theoretical trajectories most feminist theorists arrive at similar points: the hysterical female body is a resistant one whose psychological symptoms cannot be separated from the social—yet treatment preferences tend to differ. Hysterical symptomology, many argue, is a bodily protest produced by the silencing and/or subsequent confining of women who either consciously or unconsciously refuse to conform to or confirm their status as subordinate (Showalter 1985, 157; Hunter 1983, 485; Bordo 1993, 50). Freudian feminist Dianne Hunter concludes that Bertha Pappenheim, or “Anna O.,” “*made a spectacle of herself* in order to resolve the tension between her guilt and her desire to escape familial exploitation” (Hunter 1983, 476; emphasis mine). Working through Freud/Lacan with a poststructuralist feminist twist, Cixous suggests that as the hysterical body flails it fascinates—for it fails to play out the proper subdued supporting role in “the general cultural heterosocial establishment” (Cixous 1981, 50). Thus it is hardly surprising to read Avital Ronell suggest that, “What’s important now is to mobilize *hysteria*—it’s an inherently revolutionary power that intervenes, breaks up continuities, produces gaps and

creates horror—refusing conformity with *what is*” (Juno and Vale 1991, 133). However, Showalter concludes both *The Female Malady* and *Hystories* by stressing that hysterics have little to offer feminism. While their body language can be insightful, in the final instance, Showalter finds it lacking:

Hysteria is tolerated because in fact it has no power to effect cultural change; it is much safer for the patriarchal order to encourage or allow discontented women to express their wrongs through psychosomatic illness than to have them agitating for economic and legal rights (Showalter 1985, 161).

In turn, she calls on feminists to engage in “potent alternatives to the self-enclosed strategies of hysteria, toward a genuine form of resistance to the patriarchal order” (Showalter 1985, 165). Yet, Showalter’s concluding remarks evoke an ontological binary opposition between hysterical resistance and “genuinely” feminist resistance that, in keeping with my unruly project, leaves me feeling squeamish and squirmy.

On the other hand, although I am seduced by the concept of “mobilized hysteria,” following Bordo I feel compelled to point towards the ways in which historical and hysterical bodies have indeed suffered from debilitating plights—thus their frenzied flights from the norm cannot be simply celebrated in a Cixouian/Ronnellish dance towards subversion. In spite of their spectacular star status, Showalter writes that Blanche and Augustine were forced to exhibit themselves, and were traded from doctor to doctor through clinic to clinic. They were kept strictly under lock and key—and by extension under the gaze of Charcot and his cronies (Showalter 1985, 154).

On a contemporary note, Showalter writes that many of the symptoms once considered prerequisites for a diagnosis of hysteria have become distinct disorders that continue to circulate and proliferate. She cites anorexia as a prime example.<sup>20</sup> However,

as Bordo stresses, while anorexics like hysterics are no doubt also often trying to speak that which they cannot verbally articulate, they are not necessarily transgressive (Bordo 1993, 177). At the risk of getting personal, while I believe there is a lot to be said for the ways in which contemporary anorexics overexpose dictates of femininity, I have also been there, done that, and can assure you—it was no fucking fun. Nor was it only and always about the political. As Marya Hornbacher writes in *Wasted*, her eating disordered memoir:

Anorexia is a grotesque mockery of cultural standards of beauty that winds up mocking no one more than you. It is a protest against cultural stereotypes of women that in the end make you seem like weakest, neediest, most neurotic of women. It is the thing you think is keeping you safe, alive, contained—and in the end, of course, you find it's doing quite the opposite (Hornbacher 1998, 6).

Indeed, there is a difference between mobilizing “grotesque mockery” and being immobilized by it.<sup>21</sup>

Once again, however, I don't believe that the key to All Things Hysterical lies in giving feminist movement a Showalterian transcendent, disinfectant, “healthy” makeover. Such a cleansing enterprise is hardly possible, nor do I believe it is desirable. Rather, it seems to me that there must be ways to keep irreverent hysterical reverberations alive and kicking—with all of their contemporary and historical promises and limitations—as they are informed by and re-inform feminist theories. Russo suggests that through “re-presentation,” bodies of hysteria might continue to haunt feminist and patriarchal spheres in a productive way (Russo 1994, 68). If the spectacle of hysteria resonates with the female grotesque, writes Russo, then why not engage in strategic re-presentations of hysterical “dis-play” in order to see what it might have to say? (Russo 1994, 68). However, she does not provide any specific contemporary examples featuring

how such endeavors may unfold. Both context and agency are inevitably crucial to the enterprise. Ideally, such a strategy involves bodies, unlike my former and Hornbacher's presently wasted ones, that can travel with and through the hysterical without becoming trapped in it. Irigaray's recipe for mimicry in relationship to femininity comes to mind:

To play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself—inasmuch as she is on the side of the “perceptible,” of “matter”—to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated by/in a masculine logic, but so as to make ‘visible,’ by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible...It also means to “unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply reabsorbed in this function... (Irigaray 1985, 76).

Following Irigaray's logic, if historical and contemporary femininity has been discursively linked to hysteria then it seems that one could subject the hysterical body to ironic re-doings that work to uncover both the logic and conditions that produce the disease *and* its cure. Or, in Schneider words:

A performer's body would like a hysteric's, speak its historical signification and reflexively or *ironically* re-perform its symptomology. The trick is that in so speaking her symptomology within the explicit frame of performance (that is explicitly showing the show), the performer would simultaneously have to escape the very signification her body speaks—the performer would have to comment on the hysteria at the same time as she exhibits it” (Schneider 1997, 116; emphasis mine).<sup>22</sup>

In keeping with Hutcheon's terminology, the performer's “said” (I am hysterical!) would have to rub against the “unsaid” (I am acting hysterical; and by the way, how have we come to have this thing called hysteria?) and be interpreted in critically thought-provoking ways.

## Hysteria, Exposed!

In *CSOD* and *ACLD*, Finley's body displays a variety of hysterical symptoms that her personas comment on via ironic overstatement. Their stories unfold like updated over-the-top fragments from Freud and Breuer's *Studies in Hysteria*—complete with the “non-sequential logic, sudden sharp shifts, disjunctions and displacements...and inchoate rage” that Breuer and Freud observe in Anna O. and company (Breuer and Freud 1961, 2). Indeed, if Anna O. says she has “a storm in her head” it seems fair to suggest that Finley's characters have hurricanes in their brains (Breuer and Freud 1961, 54). However, unlike the restrained references to sexuality that Freud felt compelled to tease out of his patients' mouths, many of Finley's characters rage with vile language as they recount incidences of extreme abuse. She's a lady, a nice lady, raped at gunpoint and forced to perform fellatio in front of her family; she's the five-year old girl who went next door for an ice cream cone and was made to suck the neighbors icky cock instead; the son who couldn't keep dear old dad out of his asshole at night, and so on and on and on. Here, Finley implies that Freud's early work on hysteria was indeed on to something telling—but it seems and sounds nothing like seduction.<sup>23</sup>

Finley also becomes a series of insatiable females: she wants the babysitter, the neighbor, the shrink—she (over) yearns for great, big Daddy dick. In these pieces Finley, like Freud, abandons seduction theory and submits her female characters to ideas about unresolved Oedipal fantasies that apparently lead to hysteria. As their vocabulary bubbles over with ironic overstatement, so-called Freudian truths are thus revealed to be stories that can be overwritten in insightful ways. By overexposing Freud's take on hysterical female sexuality, writes Pramaggiore, Finley calls his assumptions into question

(Pramaggiore 1992, 278). In “Sushi Party,” Finley plays both patient and shrink. The patient begins her analysis by “confessing” (or ironically overstating) her inevitable desire for the doctor, only to throw it—along with his inane questions and cruel cure—back in his face via observational irony, and thus into territory where the socio-personal-political is spotlighted:

Doctor: How long have you been attached to your misery?

Patient: As long as I’ve had these big fat thighs.

Doctor: Why do you spend so much time painting your nails?

Patient: So you know I’ll spend a long time on your tool...

I see you from across the room in that beige man t-shirt. Us girls won’t go out of the house dressed like that. I just have to go up to you and ask you, when did you throw out my phone number, before or after you got home?

Doctor you touched my vertebrae and you are touching my unpaid bills, touching my unmade marriages...

And you look at me and say, “Have you ever had shock treatment?”

And I say, “Doctor, life is shock treatment” (Finley 1990, 46).

In this particular piece, Finley’s character’s play with shock treatment takes on an observational twist as shock treatment, like gendered psychoanalytic assumptions, is revealed to be the problem masquerading as the cure. “Through her politic of literality,” writes Schneider, Finley “‘talks back’ to the social [and psychoanalytic] dreamscapes which rack her frame” (Schneider 1997, 114). Here, her character’s punning commentary speaks volumes about Finley’s hysterical body on display. If the treatment is the condition, then the hysteric has no one thing to confess. Conventional analysis, translation, catharsis and cure become impossible. In short, hysteria is ideally unveiled as the manufactured product of psychoanalytic discourse rooted and rotting in assumptions

about femininity that cannot be disassociated from shock-provoking everyday sexually and socially oppressive practices.

## **Fear of Finley**

Specializing in exposure, both physical and emotional, [Finley] places herself on the firing line and dares her audience to be offended.

Mel Gussow  
*A Different Kind of Intimacy*

For decades partial nudity and strong sexual content have been used by feminist performers. And yet Finley has been perceived as particularly threatening in her transgression of the limits that other feminist performers have crossed without garnering much attention.

Lynda Hart  
"Reconsidering Homophobia"

Response to Finley is worth noting in terms of the outraged, over-the-top agitation that characterizes those who take offence. Indeed, as Hart writes, feminist performers like Schneemann and Wilke among others have been undressing themselves and patriarchy for quite some time—yet Finley's shows provoke excessively hostile reactions that often go beyond dismissing her as exhibitionist or narcissistic (Hart 1994, 96). Even prior to the NEA debates that turned her into an anti-censorship poster kid in 1990, Finley pushed alarm buttons on both the Left and Right throughout the 1980s. During her on-stage Danceteria days in the early eighties, clueless boy hipsters threw lit cigarettes at Finley and shouted at her to shut the fuck up (Carr 1993, 144). In Germany in 1980, the crowd got so riled up that one hundred people ended up chasing her off the stage and into the streets where she found herself desperately seeking safety while costumed in nudity, "sauerkraut and chocolate pudding" (Finley 2000, 6). In England in 1986, Scotland Yard

turned out in droves for her performance, and she was threatened with arrest and deportation under a still circulating law that prohibits “committing indecent acts in proximity to the Queen” (Finley 2000, 40). After the NEA controversy in 1990, Finley elaborates on the effect that a hint of her mere presence had at an event, “I had protests, picketers, threats, assaults, obscene and violent mail and phone calls, city and state inquiries made into my appearances, cancellations.... I never left the house without my attorney’s numbers. And I called them often” (Finley 1990, 150).

Moreover, when Carr first introduced Finley to the *Village Voice* reading crowd in 1986 via a hyped up, descriptive celebratory cover story, ripe with images of yams and replete with Finley’s special blend of four-letter-speak, the NYC paper’s usually left-leaning, liberal readership went wild. As Hart notes, letters to the editor stressing Finley’s “filth and madness” ran rampant across the pages of New York’s self-proclaimed alternative press (Hart 1994, 94). Speaking of hysteria, James Sparks from Manhattan writes that Carr, Finley and the *Village Voice* editorial board “are a pack of crazies” who could no doubt benefit from some in-patient time spent at Bellevue. Yet another outraged reader suggests that Bedlam and Charleton would also make for appropriate residences for Finley’s forays. A final entry maintains that Finley’s work hardly differs from the sight of a “lunatic...junkie” pissing on a billboard.<sup>24</sup> This led a so-called lefty *Village Voice* writer, Peter Hamill, to publish a piece the following week declaring Finley to be “a poor demented creature” (Hamill 1986). Moreover, not only irate letter writers feel inclined to play Doctor when faced with Finley doing her thing. Indeed, during one of her first street performances in Chicago in 1978, Finley attempted to play out and up the cultural connection between “Woman” and hysteria in a solo demo outside of a JC Penny



involving smashed bananas, a motorcycle and a little instrumental irony — only to find herself actually being arrested and depicted by the boys in blue as “insane, and on drugs,” much to the delight of the gawking crowd (Finley 2000, 3). As Russo stresses, “In the everyday indicative world, women and their bodies, in certain public framings, in certain public spheres are always already...dangerous, and in danger” (Russo 1994, 60). In keeping with Hutcheon’s insights into irony, it seems to me that the danger factor also increases when the unsaid never gets heard.

Others are much more disturbed by what they perceive as Finley’s foul play. Here, the *Village Voice* letter writers imply that dirt ranks high as one of their Finley-issues. Those who helped write the piece and/or support Finley, writes one, should “go home, take a shower to clean yourself, wash your mouths out with soap and apologize to all yams.” Many concur. People consider Finley “vile, disgusting, contaminating,” summarizes Hamill with satisfaction (Hamill 1986). Indeed, it seems the yam up the ass portion of Finley’s oeuvre struck a chord with most of the Finley-needs-to-clean-up-her-act-crusaders. Such voices resonate with Douglas’ insights—social custom demands that food should remain in its prescribed place.

These responses, which could themselves be termed “anal” in everydayspeak, also gesture towards Hart’s analysis. Hart argues that Finley makes spectators uneasy not because they fail to get her act, but precisely because they absolutely can not see—and thus repress and “fail” to recollect—the homosexual spectacle that is right before their very own eyes. Hart proposes that Finley’s yammy play with the asshole—a body orifice that is inevitably linked to “unnatural sexuality”—elicits homophobic hysteria (Hart 1994, 96). Citing Eve Sedgwick, she explains that “*there has been no important and*

*sustained Western discourse in which women's anal eroticism means. Means anything*" (Hart 1994, 95). In turn, spectators—however unconsciously—are threatened by her homo "indiscretions" (Hart 1994, 95). Although in accordance with the laws that govern coherent identity, Finley is considered to "be" a heterosexual woman, Hart postulates that in performance, her gender and sexual identity are hardly intelligible:

Finley's indiscretion was thus not only a violation of the "purity" of womanhood, but also a willful crossing over into a domain that has been preserved for gay men in homophobic discourse. Hence in one performative gesture, Finley not only violated the boundaries of gender but also transgressed the hetero/homo binary (Hart 1994, 95).

Hart concludes that spectators project their anxieties onto Finley's body via the hysteria that they themselves feel when forced to think through and about the penetrated anus (Hart 1994, 103). I think Hart's insights are brilliant; however I have shown that Finley manages to offend even when there are no yams or bums in sight. Overall though, I suspect that when the yam act enters the picture; it is the combination of the "queer" as it meets the figure of the "rude girl" raging with hysterics and hurling obscenities at the crowd that may work together to provoke such high levels of anxiety and incite such fear.

Elinor Fuchs' response to Finley evokes a different kind of fear. Fuchs begins her article by stating that although, intellectually and politically, she understands the fire that fuels Finley's spectacles, the sight of naked women performing "dirty, raw" pieces before mixed crowds terrifies her: "I start [this article] less with a theoretical position than with almost physical fear. I find I have a horror so deep of being reduced to my sexual parts by men that I can scarcely give a name to it.... There is (always) that fear...of disappearing" (Fuchs 1989, 35). Fuchs' fear is further heightened by the ways in what she terms "obscene stagings" disrupt what she depicts as the good girl/feminist and bad girl/where

binary rooted in dichotomous scriptures and structures that make easy viewing inconceivable for some. Fuchs explains:

At this intersection I locate the heart of my discomfort. The ambivalence I experience within and about this work, my sense of danger as a “good” female spectator, results from a crack in *this* system: the systematic division of women into opposed sexual pools, and the replication of that division in an elaborated system of values (Fuchs 1989, 51).

But Fuchs finds a more conventional feminist form of comfort in Finley’s work.

Although Finley threatens Fuchs’ sense of appropriate behavior, Finley—unlike Annie Sprinkle—refuses to re-present herself as always already a sexy commodity; rather she “desecrates and defiles” the body, rendering it extremely difficult to recuperate (Hart 1994, 99). Indeed, when the Playboy television channel heard about the young woman who smears herself in chocolate, they sent in their video people to film what they hoped would be the ultimate kinky sight (Carr 1992, 146). However, it’s hardly surprising to learn that the crew quickly ran when they could not digest the show. Finley, in all her raging, naked, potty-mouthed glory, is hardly something they could easily peddle to middle America.

However, by the end of her article, Fuchs convinces herself into championing an array of obscene stagings if they could work in the service of re-writing the terms that dictate the good girl/bad girl dichotomy. This is particularly so since, as she notes, the binary has deep-rooted classist connotations that work antagonistically to keep “working girls” and “professional women” in separate spheres governed by specific seemingly incompatible sexual scripts (Fuchs 1989, 51). Finally, she decides that even sluts like Sprinkle might be worth embracing after all:

In blurring the boundary between “good girl” and “bad girl” the theater of female obscenity I have been discussing is a kind of “repo theatre.” It is

possible to sense, on contemplating its terms, the merged signs of female sexual identity would open for women, a self-repossession that would signify the most profound cultural shift (Fuchs 1989, 55).

Although I think Fuchs' essay elaborating on both her fears and hopes is highly insightful, once again I wish to stress that the "repo theatre" that Fuchs explores dates back to particular feminist performance practices since the 1960s which along with the last three decades of feminist theory, performance and/or activism is often still struggling to unsettle the assumptions that ground the good girl/bad girl binary.

### **Shifting Shows**

I couldn't stand being the Joan of Arc of the art world anymore. Internally, I was burning at the stake from the constant battles of defending the first amendment. The icon of free speech was becoming a pile of ashes.... I had to rethink my career.... I needed an archetype makeover.

Karen Finley  
*A Different Kind of Intimacy*

Finley's latest performance, *Shut Up and Love Me* (1998), suggests that much has been made over in the realm of Finley's theatrics. Sprinklesque burlesque replaces the violated body in pain as Finley shakes and shimmies to disco tunes clad in black lace lingerie, covers herself in honey (because it is so very sweet), and subjects the reduction of the sexualized and trivialized "chocolate smeared young women" caricature created by her detractors to instrumental irony: "You respect me for all my values, you respect me for everything I've done for feminism, everything I've done with the uterus...but I just look at you and all I want you to do is fuck my brains out" (Soloski 2001). For twenty bucks, audience members are invited to lick the honey off Finley. The following year Finley also agreed to pose "nicely" for *Playboy Magazine*—on the condition that they

would allow her to play with the concept of “the chocolate smeared young woman.” With hyper-teased hair, heavily made-up eyes and lipsticked mouth open in an ironically overstated O; Finley can be sighted a few pages before the “Bunny of the Month” appears, pouring Hersheys chocolate syrup across her naked breasts. “My enemies had eroticized me against my will,” she explains, “so this was like taking control and ending things myself. It was a way of saying ‘Case Closed’ —and getting the last word” (Finley 2000, 267). It’s a clever tactical maneuver. However, as this project shows, in the realm of ironic meaning-making, nobody gets the “last word.” Lastly, what Fuchs does not anticipate is the ambivalent responses that such ironic serious play elicits from feminists who, though hardly uncomfortable with female self-objectification *per se*, have been ruminating on the ways in which the oppositional potential linked to bad girl stagings can easily become complicit with the dynamics of capitalist patriarchy in the quest for the latest fuck you/fuck me feminist hot commodity. But that is a subject for the next chapter.

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**Figure 2. Karen Finley in *Playboy* (1999).**

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## Notes to Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> Although I saw Finley live at the Ontario College of Art in 1994, my description of Finley's work along with her costumes, tone of voice and gestures are based on an official video recording of *The Constant State of Desire (CSOD)* performance at The Edge of the Looking Glass Theatre in Chicago and *A Certain Level of Denial (ACL D)* recorded at Lincoln Center—as the recorded versions are often more helpful than my notes. Since Finley has also published vignettes from *CSOD* and *ACL D* in text form in her books *Shock Treatment* and *A Different Kind of Intimacy*, I have cited the words that she has committed to text. The words are almost always the same as the ones in the video recordings as Finley works from a memorized script (Finley 2000, 46). I cite *Shock Treatment* and *A Different Kind of Intimacy* because I have been working with the tapes and texts in conjunction with one another in order to re-produce Finley's scenes.

<sup>2</sup> Finley describes the show as follows: “In *The Constant State of Desire* I wanted to show vignettes of capitalist, consumer society where people go far out, stretch the boundaries—but still they can never be satisfied. So they take things into themselves, and this is what incest and abuse are about” (Schechner 1989, 152). Ellis' *American Psycho* (1991) is about a Wall Street Yuppie Stock Broker who turns into a serial killer when material goods fail to fulfill his cravings.

<sup>3</sup> Elinor Fuchs writes that Finley's work features “a toxic landfill of throwaway bodies and cynical or psychotic voices” that she links to Kroker and Cook's “postmodern scene” (Fuchs 1989, 47). However, this section will go on to suggest that Finley's work is alive with a provisionally ironic sensibility that juggles and struggles with the totalizing and often paralyzing effects of perceiving the world through the eyes of theorists like Cook and Kroker.

<sup>4</sup> Throughout this chapter, I have given names such as “raging-artist-on-a-rampage” to the various characters that emerge throughout *CSOD* and *ACL D*. In my writing I refer to Finley as the one who writes the show, gives interviews, sues the NEA etc and whose body appears on stage. However, I do not believe that there is an “authentic” Finley; a coherent unified subject who exists as a self-evident, transparent entity whom I can come to know. I will elaborate on this through Finley's work in the next section, “Who me?”

<sup>5</sup> For more elaborate studies on feminism and performance since the 1960s, see: Rebecca Schneider's *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997), Peggy Phelan and Helena Reckitt's *Art and Feminism*, Moira Roth's *The Amazing Decade* (1983), Amelia Jones' *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998) and Andrea Juno and V. Vale's *Angry Women* (1991).

<sup>6</sup> Finley is a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute. She began performing in Chicago in 1978. In 1984, she worked as a bartender and performance artist at New York's Danceteria. The following year she released a music CD titled *The Truth is Hard To Swallow*. Finley tours extensively throughout America and Europe. Her most well-known performances include: *The Constant State of Desire*, *The Theory of Total Blame* (1989), *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1990), *The American Chestnut* (1997) and *Shut Up and Love Me* (1999). Her books include: *Shock Treatment* (1990), *Enough is Enough* (1993), *Living it Up* (1996), and *A Different Kind of Intimacy* (2000). In 1998, Ms. named Finley Woman of the Year.

<sup>7</sup> Halberstam's “we” does not necessarily refer to a seemingly unified identity such as women; rather her “we” is a rhetorical umbrella category under which often violated bodies (blacks,

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queers, women etc.) can take cover and create a imaginary spaces of retaliation (Halberstam 1993, 199).

<sup>8</sup> Finley's I'm-just-an-everyday-kinda-performance-artist-who-happens-to-be-on-stage Finley seems to me to more closely resemble the concept of persona that I evoke and elaborate on in relationship to Courtney Love and Princess Superstar in chapter 3.

<sup>9</sup> Briefly, Butler seeks to dismantle the ground of feminist theory-practice, to unsettle the foundations of feminism by deconstructing those identity categories that are rooted in constitutive and constrictive regimes such as compulsory heterosexuality and phallogocentrism. Butler's primary point of contention is with the notion that "women" can and should be represented as the "subjects" of feminism. Butler argues that subjects do not simply exist; rather juridical-legal discourses produce, regulate, and simulate subjectivity (Butler 1991, 2). Similarly, Butler insists that gender is an effect of social, temporal, performative and repetitive acts—as opposed to the origin of one's identity (Butler 1991, 136-139). Inherent in Butler's reformulation of gender is a critique of feminist discourses that rely on binary distinctions and/or metaphysical and ontological presuppositions regarding sex, gender and identity (Butler 1991, 7). Thus, she privileges those practices that repeat and parody identity categories in such a way as to shatter their seemingly "natural" status (Butler 1991, 31).

<sup>10</sup> "Yes, but..." I can't help wondering as I read and re-read *Gender Trouble*, and "my" butts have little to do with Butler's ability to do metatheory. Rather, I wonder about the silences that resonate in this particular book. Although genealogical journeys attempt to uncover shadows, to disrupt origins, to cast doubt upon certainty and to foreground that which remains in the background, are such forays themselves exempt from excluding that which does not fit in? In other words, when does the desire to unmask become yet another mask? In the case of *Gender Trouble*, I am troubled by Butler's unwillingness to acknowledge or at least gesture toward the risks involved in pursuing ongoing subversions when a variety of bodies simply cannot and do not float about like unanchored signifiers. When might rights, privileges and the status given to humanist subjects be of use to oppressed bodies? Might deconstructions of gender also serve to legitimate gender inequality? Could a politics revolving around some notion of identity be a necessary stage in the game? Furthermore, if "we" are all caught up in major metaphysical mismanagement of terms and categories, at what risk do we advocate their (our?) disappearance? Is it, as Butler seems to suggest, possible to do away with such linguistic markers and categories? Without recourse to some stable resting place, some fluctuating line that says "the infinite regress of metatheory" stops here, for now, how can the subaltern speak about the effects of alterity? When can straight-talk, street-talk and casual thought be way more strategically sensible than intellectual choreography? Finally, can parody displace our belief in original-ity? For another critique of the way in which Butler's *Gender Trouble* sidesteps very relevant everyday material dimensions of those who live in bodies marked female, see, for example, Ferguson's "Linguistic Feminism" in *The Man Question*. For Butler's response to such critiques, see "The Body you Want: An Interview with Judith Butler" as well as Butler's "Preface" and "Introduction" in *Bodies That Matter*. Also, for an excellent analysis of the metatheoretical totalizing tendencies in *Gender Trouble*, see Vicky Kirby's "Part 2: Substance Abuse: Judith Butler" in *Telling Flesh* (1997).

<sup>11</sup> Here, I find Butler's description of the ideal doings of coalition politics quite on the mark: "An open coalition then, will affirm identities that are alternately instituted and relinquished according to the purposes at hand; it will be an open assemblage that permits multiple convergences and divergences without obedience to a normative telos of definitional closure" (Butler 1990, 16).



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<sup>12</sup> In short, Finley along with Holly Hughes, John Fleck and Tim Miller had their NEA grants rescinded in 1990 for featuring material deemed obscene. Consequently the “defunded four,” as they came to be known, sued the NEA to have their grants reinstated. Their lawsuit also challenged the constitutionality of the recent NEA clause stating that the organization would not fund work containing “homoerotic, sadomasochistic” or other such “obscene” content (Finley 2000, 104). I don’t want to get into the NEA controversy as it has been well documented and I have little to add. For instance and for more, see: Linda Hart’s “Reconsidering Homophobia” in her *Fatal Women* and Karen Finley’s “Politics” in her *A Different Kind of Intimacy*. However, I will return to the question of responses to Finley’s work later on in this chapter.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in Showalter 1997, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Showalter writes that many suspected that Charcot’s hysterics were acting: “Because the behavior of Charcot’s hysterical stars was so theatrical and because it was rarely observed outside of the Parisian clinical setting, many of his contemporaries, as well as subsequent medical historians, have suspected that the women’s performances were the result of suggestion, imitation, or even fraud.... Charcot’s hospital became an environment in which female hysteria was perpetually presented, represented, and reproduced” (Showalter 1985, 150).

<sup>15</sup> Showalter writes that under hypnosis Charcot’s patients displayed spectacular behavior ranging from screaming, wailing, moaning; to barking like a dog, to the great *grand mal* finale which she describes as follows: “A complete seizure involved three phases: the epileptoid phase, in which the woman lost consciousness...; the phase of clownism, involving eccentric physical contortions; and the phase of *attitudes passionnelles*, a miming of incidents and emotions from a patient’s life” (Showalter 1985, 50). Also, see Joan Copjec’s “*Flavit et Dissipati Sunt*.” (1981). The relationship between Finley’s work and hysteria as re-presentation will become clearer as this section unfolds.

<sup>16</sup> I have pieced together this story from Showalter’s narratives on hysteria in *The Female Malady* as well as in *Hystories*, in conjunction with Freud and Breuer’s *Studies in Hysteria* and Freud’s *Dora: An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*. Copjec (1981), Diane Hunter’s “Hysteria, Psychoanalysis and Feminism” (1983) and Elin Diamond’s “Unmaking Mimesis” in *Unmaking Mimesis* (1997) have also been helpful. However needless to say, it is only one way of telling the tale.

<sup>17</sup> This is stated in the conclusion. Throughout the book, other traumas ranging from the tragic (ie. a loving husband’s death) to the everyday (ie. teasing from siblings) are deemed to be enough to cause hysteria (Breuer and Freud 1961, 62).

<sup>18</sup> Cited in Showalter 1997, 57.

<sup>19</sup> The emphasis on “both” is mine. In keeping with the ironic sensibility that I am advocating, I feel that both perspectives on hysteria as illness or hysteria as protest (particularly as they critique and inform one another) is essential to feminist discussions about hysteria.

<sup>20</sup> In *Hystories*, Showalter writes that although hysteria is no longer considered a medical disease many of its symptoms have been “reclassified as anxiety neuroses, obsessional disorders, manic depression, or borderline personality disorder...anorexia and bulimia are examples of modern

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hysterical epidemics” (Showalter 1997, 17, 20). Bordo elaborates on the link between hysteria and anorexia: “The contemporary woman, who struggles to cope with social contradictions that first emerged in the Victorian era but who confronts those contradictions later in their historical development and as they intersect with specifically contemporary elements, is far more likely to develop an eating disorder than a hysterical paralysis” (Bordo 1993, 51).

<sup>21</sup> Kim Sawchuk makes a similar point with regards to Kathy Sisler’s “aberrant” videography: “Some subjects do not have a choice,” writes Sawchuk. “Some subjects have histories inscribed on and through their body” (Sawchuk 1998, 16). Sawchuk goes on to suggest that it’s important to distinguish between those who play critically with concepts like deviance and those “who are categorized as deviant against their will” (Sawchuk 1988, 18). Sisler’s work features stories of her struggle with drug and alcohol addiction along with tales of a mother who tried to commit her. Although Sisler makes a spectacle of her deviant body, as Sawchuk writes, “Sisler does not argue for an ‘ontology’ of risk, but rather she foregrounds agency—our ability or inability to act—that may put us at risk” (Sawchuk 1988, 15).

<sup>23</sup> In a letter to his colleague Wilhelm Fliess (dated September 21, 1897), Freud explains that he abandoned his seduction theory because: “1) the hypothesis did not help cure patients; 2) *this would mean that a vast majority of men would be assumed to be abusers*; 3) the unconscious is a murky realm where truth and fantasy are often indistinguishable, and 4) these memories of abuse only ever came to the consciousness of patients during hypnosis” (reprinted in Masson 1985, 264; emphasis mine). For more, see Masson’s *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904* (1985).

<sup>24</sup> The quotations from these letters appear in *The Village Voice* under the title “Letters: The Yam Became a Hot Potato.”

## CHAPTER THREE

### Beautiful Garbage: Riot Grrrls, Courtney Love, Princess Superstar

#### Talking About *Whose* Revolution?

We are turning cursive letters into knives.

Bikini Kill  
"Bloody Ice Cream"

This is happening without your permission.

Huggy Bear  
"Her Jazz"

And sometime in the early nineties, the girls all by themselves, with no assistance from any international conglomerates, invented the riot grrrl movement, starting punk rock bands and fanzines in suburban garages and rec. rooms just like the boys used to do, linking up with other girls in disparate cities like Washington, D.C. and Vancouver and Olympia and Toronto through Internet chat rooms and newsletters. And they forged a manifesto, a two-page document that declares, "we seek to create revolution in our daily lives every day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist ways of doing things"..... And they made their own tapes and put together their own tours, started their own labels like K records with bands like Bratmobile and Huggy Bear and Bikini Kill and Heavens to Betsy which were great, even if they couldn't play for shit. And they called what they were doing "revolution grrrl style." And they sang about how just because you want to get laid, doesn't mean you want to be raped.... And eventually, this little movement became part of a huge big deal.

Elizabeth Wurtzel  
*Bitch*

When Riot Grrrl icon Kathleen Hannah of Bikini Kill first leapt onto the cultural landscape a decade ago—in all her glorious, grungy, unruly splendor with "SLUT" marker-ed in blank ink across her non-aerobicized yummy tummy—and ripped off her crop top to scream/sing to both the powers-that-be and/or the pricks-next-door that they could "suck her left one," the first thing to jump to my mind was: I wanna go on tour with

**Bikini Kill!**<sup>1</sup> This edgy, angry yet ironic display and re-play with sluts and stuff spoke to my high school whore side which was still alive and sleazily kicking its way through a Master's degree. It's hardly surprising that I immediately sensed the potential linked to playing with the S-word. You take the weight out of the ugly words that have been used to hurt you as you watch the smirk on the face of every misogynist dude who wields language as a weapon fade to a fucked-up frown as he realizes that you've ripped off—and apart—his vocabulary. As the slut slides into home base grinning like the hardcore sweet tart that she is, the very good girl/bad girl binary that works to keep chicks in their place dissipates. Speaking on behalf of animated self-proclaimed sluts like Tank Girl, Kim Nicolini writes:

Nice girls need the slut to affirm their own purity and righteousness, to secure their place in the good girl community. The problem with sluts, however, is that they talk back. In the process, they force us to question our need to place women in fixed sexual identities (Nicolini 1995).

And there's nothing cheap about that.

Moreover, Hannah had a way of putting on the political that spoke to the feminist theory-head, sex rad warrior and angry activist wannabe parts of me that were emerging at the time. Lyrics like "I believe in the radical possibilities of pleasure, dude" followed a few songs later by the hardcore hammering sound of "Don't need your dick to fuck" made my queer day; whereas the anti-date rape anthem featuring samples of recorded frat boy nonsense like "I don't really think rape's like a problem 'cause most girls ask for it...you know like those dumb ho's who walk down the street in really short skirts," followed by Hannah's response, "White boy, don't laugh, don't cry...just die!!!", made me wanna pick up a gun. It seemed a musical path was being re-paved in the footsteps of the rude girl performance art network featuring aggressive and seemingly obscene

stagings designed to alarm. Unsurprisingly, Juno and Vale followed up *Angry Women* featuring Finley, Acker and Lunch with *Angry Women in Rock* starring Kathleen Hannah, 7 Year Bitch and other Riot Grrrls. The rude girl network seems to have spawned an ever proliferating, political, perverse and potent generation of monstrous offspring that activated theory in song. In Ann Barrowclough's words, "They screech, they spit, they snarl, they swear.... Meet the riot grrrls, the latest, nastiest phenomenon to enter the music scene...they call themselves feminists but theirs is a feminism of rage, and even, fear" (Barrowclough 1993). Indeed, rage and the threat of "imaginary violence" was everywhere in grrrl air: *Baise-moi* and we'll see what the fuck happens. In the words and world of the writer of *Intimate Wipe*:

Not a girl because of the easy cook rice and late bedtimes, not a woman because of the pre-pubescent dresses, the messy bedrooms and the toys.... But a girl—a grrrl—who is a rebel and where the music she identifies with is identified with rebellion, disturbance, riot (Leonard 1997, 232).

The lyrical and verbal links made by these bands to the feminist theory that I was eagerly swallowing at the time made me cum at the thought of backstage passes to a Bikini Kill show. The flamboyant juxtaposition of high femme thrift shop frocks with combat boots, the punk screams and lipstick traces that these chicks created out of the debris of wasted femininity spoke to the semiotically delinquent possibilities evoked by Russo's female grotesques.<sup>2</sup> Huggy Bear gave voice to Cixous' hysterics, Courtney Love made Naomi Wolf's *Beauty Myth* seem tempered and tepid, and Hannah brought Halberstam to music. "Madonna's Boy Toy gone over the edge" is how Emily White describes the grrrls (White 1995, 399). And then there was the sound of it all: ugly, screechy, scratchy, hard on the ears. Guitars, drums and voice were wielded like weapons. Here was the full-scale, unruly, spectacular political movement of my dreams.<sup>3</sup>

I so totally wanted to be a Babe in Toyland. Heavens to Betsy, I was ready to drive L7's tour bus if I could have been there to watch Donita Sparks dislodge her bloody tampon from her menstruating cunt and throw it into the crowd.<sup>4</sup> I never got those passes, nor did I drive a tour bus or join a band. But I've seen a bunch of shows, read reams of zines and my thoughts on All Things Grrrl continue to rise, revise and regenerate as I keep on writing with and through irony and the unruly body.<sup>5</sup>

### **Unruly Order**

Riot Grrrl movement is rife with ironies. What I find most intriguing is the observational irony I perceive when I think of the ways in which this movement that sought to upset what Russo describes as normal feminism—that which is linked to “correct, conventional or moralizing behavior”—actually became normative and regulatory (Russo 1994, vii). Indeed, the very instrumentally ironic and unruly slogans, stickers, posters, and screw you/screw me clothing meant to re-freshen familiar feminists statements, slogans, and sentiments that are always in danger of becoming stale quickly turned into the new grrrl thing to do, say, wear.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, although the grrrls used irony as an instrumental weapon, their sensibility was seeped in the sincerely un-spinny. The grrrls professed their lust for flux, yet their everyday politics were often preachy and super-straightedge: no meat, no booze, no drugs, no superfluous talk about boys and go shopping at your own risk (White 1995, 42; Reynolds and Press 1995, 327). The diet left me hungry for more. “What if I wanted to take a break from heavy theory and political activity and splurge on chi-chi lingerie and slurp on a vodka and Kool-Aid?” wondered the sleazy, messy, excessive hyper het, Jewish Madonna parts of me. “Off the tour bus!” responded my riot grrrl side. Furthermore, once statements like “we aim to free ourselves

of sexism, racism, consumerism and fat-phobia” became a familiar grrrl refrain (Leonard 1997, 232), the poststructuralist in me just had to ask: how exactly does one achieve such transcendence? Finally, when *BUST* magazine raged onto the scene, subtitled “The Voice of The New Grrrl Order,” one, or at least this one, had to wonder: *Whose* voice gets to be *the* voice? And why would a supposedly unruly grrrl-style revolution want to “order” itself?<sup>7</sup> Following Emily White, I don’t want to dismiss the grrrls—their energy, enthusiasm and the networks of activity that they spawned were and still are admirable—rather, I wish to underline White’s point:

The Riot Girls abide by this hardcore ethic: reject the marketplace and, as feminists reject patriarchy, do not try to be part of it. Yet as they keep watch over their integrity, they do not only “purify” themselves of a sick society, they also isolate themselves. Everyone in [the riot girl meeting space] is white, as are most of the girls. Like a religious sect, they huddle together, rejecting the world but also somewhat afraid of it. Glorifying “youth rebellion” they sometimes will themselves into naivete (White 1995, 42).

As Chela Sandoval stresses, without a set of competing, potentially contradictory, context-specific, mobile tactics; riot grrrl-style feminism, risks getting “trapped inside a drive for truth which can only end in producing its own brand of dominations (Sandoval 1991, 15)

Indeed, as Jennifer Breyer points out, the riot grrrl will to purity and integrity often leads to a kind of righteous orthodoxy whereby her days in riot grrrl were differently similar to those at the *Yeshiva* (Breyer 2001, 22).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as White concludes:

While Riot Girls talk in a cursory way about branching out, they haven’t. And until the girls address the socioeconomic basis of their rage—the way they have lived a life that, in many ways, has given them enough economic power to desire other types of power—their force will be limited (White 1995, 42).

To paraphrase Ferguson citing Foucault, power doesn't simply say: no way, it also says: yes, you may (Ferguson 1993, 110).

### **grrrl.com**

Revolutionary rhetoric and manifesto mongering will always be one of the great adolescent highs: its cheaper than amphetamines...and it always draws a crowd.

Simon Reynolds and Joy Press  
*The Sex Revolts*

The revolution is being televised and its reverberations are like a mediated version of the double-edged sword: "While [a riot grrrl-inspired] band's passion and pain will surely give solace to some girl curled up in her room, it will also provide inspiration to demographers planning their next e-commerce start-up.

Michelle Goldberg  
"Grrrl, you'll be a cliché soon"

In 1992, Riot Grrrl declared a media blackout—refusing to speak to or pose for mainstream media—in response to what they perceived as the too pretty packaging of the movement (Jacques 2001, 48). In their wake, writes Alison Jacques, the media turned their attention to related rockers like Liz Phair and Courtney Love who had no qualms about spending time in the limelight (Jacques 2001, 48, 50). Much ink has been spent documenting the rise and demise of Riot Grrrl due to their media blackout and the subsequent absorption and often dilution of Grrrl-concepts into mainstream culture (Rumach 2001, 98-99; Jacques 2001, 50).<sup>9</sup> Products and ideas associated with new grrrl norms now travel across a wide range of territory. For instance, a "dirty sluts are my heroes" poster would presently be unsurprisingly at home in any riot-grrrl influenced punked-out squat in Seattle. It would also no doubt be highly welcome in a mixed gendered queer cool-kid loft in Montreal's Plateau district. However, it may also grace the pink bedroom walls of an L.A. teen from Beverly Hills. The pink might be painted in



mock defiance and delicious defilement of the ideologies that govern femininity, and the poster could serve to anchor her identity as a Courtney Love—as opposed to a Britney Spears—wannabe. However, as Rumach implies, the LalaLand deal might simply be about sass with no substance—or style *as* politics:

From the Spice Girls to the latest in change purses at Le Chateau that proclaim “Girls Rule, Boys Drool,” it’s now cool to be a grrrl. Fashionable. Sassy. Very Millennium.... I mean, if the local fashion kitten thinks she’s a grrrl just because her panties say “pussy power” on them, then forget it. I’d rather be a fucking bitch (Rumach 2001, 98, 99).

In other words, riot grrrl ironic and unruly play with and on sexual slang that seeks to revamp, re-stage and re-circulate signifieds associated with female sexuality have become pop culture staples. And it’s pissing people off.

I have no desire—and way too much po-mo training—to simply demonize cultural artifacts that have been mall-ified because, as the story goes, they have inevitably been mollified by their participation in the capitalist marketplace. Although I am critical of the ways in which buying a “girls kick ass” t-shirt may become a substitute for actual ass-kicking, there is no guarantee that this always already the case. Indeed, even though lowest common dominator feminist content à la Spice Girls lyrics are hardly worth celebrating, they can encourage a girl to take the F-word in further directions. Moreover, theorists such as Javier Santiago-Lucerna have shown that the punk roots that the grrrls have re-sown were never pure to begin with. The Sex Pistols, for instance, knew that by marketing themselves as objects of scandal they would evoke moral panics that would ideally prove financially profitable (Santiago-Lucerna 1997, 246). “There is no such thing as a pure pre-capitalist artistic space,” writes Kylie Murphy (Murphy 2001). And she’s right. Moreover, as many of the boys and girls of hip hop have clearly shown,

“there need not be a separation between pleasure, politics and profits” (Rose 1994, 82).

Public Enemy made millions reminding white Americans just how badly they felt *Fear of a Black Planet*. Then, as Bordo writes, people play with pop culture texts; they contest, resist and negotiate their dominant meanings. However, as she simultaneously cautions, “to focus *only* on multiple interpretations is to miss important effects of the everyday deployment of mass cultural representations of masculinity, femininity, beauty, and success” (Bordo 1993, 24). Keeping Bordo’s warning in mind, I proceed to offer what often tend toward oppositional readings of Courtney and Princess Superstar while continually stopping to pause and point to the ways in which their bodies of irony can and have also been interpreted in keeping with dominant representations of gender, beauty and power that are informed by and reinform everyday business as usual.

### **Lessons in Love**

This chapter thus begins from the premise that although the riot grrrl movement rocked so many grrrls’ worlds, it was also riddled with problematic instrumental and observational ironies that allowed little room for the contradictory, normalized the unruly, and over-demonized the role that the mass media play with regard to oppositional political struggle. In contrast, I re-present and theorize through Courtney Love’s differently promising and problematic ironic and unruly ventures. Framing Courtney as the girl so many love to hate, I suggest that she cannot be so easily categorized and dismissed. Rather, she puts on and plays out a spectacular variety of multiple, contradictory personas that produce thought-provoking insights into irony and/in the unruly body. To begin, I evoke the sight and sound of what I am calling Courtney’s ugly-

angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney which I associate with her CDs, tours, interviews, and press coverage surrounding *Pretty on the Inside* (1991) and *Live Through This* (1994). I show how I see this Courtney using both instrumental and observational irony in conjunction with what Katerina Eileraas depicts as doing ugliness as a resistant unruly strategy that calls appropriate femininity into question. I also suggest how Courtney's looks can be linked to Joanna Frueh's descriptions of "monster/beauty." I then go on to re-picture and elaborate on ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney on stage at Lollapalooza '95. This display works to highlight how instrumental irony circulates in what Nicolini describes as performing the slut. Ideally, such unruly activity works to critique the good girl/bad girl binary via irony. Moreover, Courtney can and does morph into pretty-good-girl Courtney; seemingly squeaky clean and smiling in white as she accepts yet another award from MTV. Here, the metaphysics that grounds the good girl/bad girl binary hopefully comes undone. Yet, I stress that many simply dismiss Courtney as a slut. Also, as I articulate some of what has been termed "crazy-fucking-Courtney's" over-the-top stunts, the grotesque figure of the madwoman evoked by Russo is never far away. Although I reiterate that in interviews Courtney stresses that she's in control of the chaos that she creates—playing with the figure of the madwoman in order to see where it leads—I show how many merely diagnose her as insane. Then I re-trace ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney's ironic take on drugs and motherhood in her lyrics and interviews. In the context of a culture where mothers are, as Nancy Campbell, Susan Bordo and Ann Balsamo argue, under high-priority surveillance, I argue that Courtney has been persecuted not simply for getting wasted; but also for violating the

norms of appropriate motherhood. Interestingly, although bad girls like Courtney are scorned, they have also become hot commodities that call for some critical commentary which I proceed to offer. Then a jaunt through the ironically reflexive *Celebrity Skin* (1998) and Courtney's matching persona, haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney, generates a discussion around the politics and aesthetics of badness, beauty and plastic surgery, and ends with my critique of her self-normalization. Lastly, I reflect on Courtney's infamous intervention into the Napster debates: what happens when Courtney puts on her one-hell-of-a-smart-cookie persona and calmly and clearly refuses to remain mute about her exploitation in the capitalist music biz marketplace? In search of something a little familiar, I pave my way through similarly different territory in order to briefly introduce you to Concetta Kirschner's Princess Superstar. Princess is a new player on the block—a white girl who does flip flops with hip hop. Upon evoking some of her shows, I discuss how although Princess' antics may be considered as sexually provocative as ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney's stagings, they are interpreted in a much more favorable and ironic light. I pause in order to reflect on why this may be the case. I end on a note about whiteness. Even though conversations regarding Superstar, unlike those featuring Courtney's Courtneys, bring the color white into the spotlight, I demonstrate how unfortunately white privilege is relegated to the margins.

## Love to Hate

I recall growing up with Leonard Cohen and going, "I wish that I was the girl he was writing about." I wanted to be Suzanne, I wanted to live down by the river.... Or the girl in Bob Dylan's "Leopard Skin Pill-Box Hat." Or the girl in "Sad Eyed Lady of the Lowlands." All these girls riding the Jersey highway in a Bruce Springsteen song. And then I came around. "No. No. No! I don't want to be the girl. I want to be Leonard Cohen!"

Courtney Love<sup>10</sup>

Why does world love to hate Courtney? Because she is a slut; because she is totally fucked up; because she'll fuck anything; because she is out of control. Or is she?

Kim Nicolini  
"Staging the Slut"

By 1996, Courtney Love had become a household name—the girl everyone loves to hate.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the very critics who love to love Liz Phair turn Courtney-skewering into a fine art. And if Finley thinks she gets bad press, she should take a look at Courtney's coverage. Nirvana fans say she married Kurt for his money, she killed Kurt for his money; or if he didn't kill himself, suggests a former nanny, she no doubt drove him to suicide.<sup>12</sup> She's an out of control junkie whore, says James Moreland, one of her many exes (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 56). Courtney Love, states Kurt's former bandmates, is "irrational, mercurial, self-centered, unmanageable, inconsistent, and unpredictable" (Greenblatt 2002). Actually, "she's a psycho hosebeast," says Seattle producer-guru Steve Albini (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 82). The band Mudhoney penned a not-a-love song to her, titled "Into Yer Shtick" with the refrain "Why don't you blow your brains out, too?"<sup>13</sup> Riot Grrrl used the slogan "Grrrl love, not Courtney Love" to help kick off their 1996 convention (Murphy 2001). And then there's the violence that is far from imaginary: Courtney punched riot grrrl star Kathleen Hannah, beat up Kurt's ex Mary Lou Lord, and threatened to slice up *Vanity Fair's* Lynn Hirschberg's dog after the writer

depicted Courtney as a toxic, pregnant egomaniac (Rossi 1996, xix; Halperin and Wallace 1999, 173; Hirschberg 1992, 98). After granting a feature story to *Playboy*, she told the reporter, "If you mess with me I'm going to hunt you down and kill you." He writes that he believed her (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 181). Or, as Courtney repeats with a twist of instrumental irony, "Yeah, I'm a crazed, obsessive, psychotic bitch and if you fuck with me I'll boil a rabbit" (Raphael 1994, 30). They say Kurt wrote her songs for her; no, Montreal's own Jordan Zadorozny from Blinker the Star wrote her lyrics; no, no...it was Stevie Nicks (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 195). During her reform school years her caseworker called her "the most shrewd, cunning and devious person" to grace the juvie halls of Hillcrest (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 45). She sold out, or so they say, when she bought into Versace and the plastic surgery industry; but no matter how much she Michael Jackson-ifies her face, she'll always be ugly (Murphy 2001). Courtney Love is "without a doubt the most pestilent, tiresome and unfortunate celebrity ever to have sprung from Seattle," writes M. Gnome of the *Seattle Weekly* (Gnome 1999). "Courtney is the celebrity inkblot test," concludes Barbara Ellen: "If you like, you could easily imagine 10 different people looking at her and seeing 10 totally different things. But still: Whore. Junkie. Killer. Witch. Bitch" (Ellen 1998).

Yet, many bless her for raising the bar on what girls can do in Guyville and then leaping way over, and for singing, sexing, slugging and drugging her way into the limelight with wit and insight. Courtney Love, writes Diana Tegenkamp, "has completely knocked the rock world flat on its ass by being every unpleasant and imaginative thing a woman isn't supposed to be" (Tegenkamp 1998). Courtney made it possible for a pop star like Christina Aguilera to rant about the sexual double-standard on a CD called *Dirty*

and still sell a shitload of records, says Candis Steenbergen.<sup>14</sup> “When it comes to testifying to how everything’s totally, unbearably, exhilaratingly fucked-up beyond despair,” writes Charles Aaron, “she has few peers” (Aaron 2004). However, even supporters like Melissa Rossi are quick to point to the contingency of their praise by highlighting Courtney’s status as Queen of the Contradictory:

Almost anything that can be said of Courtney, the opposite is also true. She’s the suicidal cockroach who could survive a world war while battling the war in her own head. She has the will to create locked arm-in-arm with the will to destroy.... She gives and she steals, she’s the epitome of candor, yet she often lies.... Her fifteen minutes have been up for the last ten years” (Rossi 1996, 265).

If, as Rossi posits, Courtney should have kissed her fifteen minutes of fame good-bye a decade ago, why is she still looking, leering and threatening to leap off of the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*, video vignettes on MTV and CD racks at HMV?<sup>15</sup>

### **Courtney’s Courtneys**

I fake it so real...

Courtney Love  
“Doll Parts”

I see [Courtney] as a chameleon.... She’s a great showperson and a great manipulator, and I admire the drive. Even if it’s like I don’t know who the fuck you are lady...

Michael Ryan  
In Phillip Weiss, “The Love Issue”

Most theorists and journalists who write about Courtney tend to associate her with two distinct personas: Di Perna calls them the “messed up rock-slut” who characterizes *Pretty on the Inside* and *Live Through This*, and the “glamour icon” that Courtney begins to embody after starring in *The People vs. Larry Flint* (1996) and posing for a series of Versace prints ads in 1997; a persona that seems to solidify with the 1998 release of

*Celebrity Skin* (Di Perna 1999). Many wonder: which of the two Courtneys is most like the real Courtney? (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 199).<sup>16</sup> I begin from the premise that Courtney's personas are hardly authentic. They are also multiple. They co-exist, clash and contradict one another. Courtney's Courtneys, to paraphrase Schneider, show identity as *show* (Schneider 1997, 163). And in keeping with Madonna as boy toy, virgin, vamp, vixen and dominatrix; what I am calling ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney, pretty-good-girl Courtney, haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney, and one-hell-of-a-smart-cookie Courtney show that when it comes to identity, to borrow E. Anne Kaplan's words, "there is nothing but the constitutive layers of differing constructions" (Kaplan 1993, 151).<sup>17</sup> Or, as Butler would insist, Courtney is an effect of the repetitive, performative discursive practices and scripts that precede her even and particularly as she re-scripts a variety of personas (Butler 1993, 2).

Cindy Sherman's early *Untitled Film Stills* featuring Sherman as both model/photographer performing lost teenager, happy housewife, working girl, femme fatale, tear-streaked, martini-drinking, cigarette-smoking abandoned lover who becomes a semi-dressed dark haired dreamy beauty who metamorphosizes into a housewife working in the garden clad in oversized glasses and a floppy sun hat also come to mind. In turn, as is the case with respect to Finley's forays into gender, femininity is revealed as "an exaggeration in which woman 'plays' at herself, playing a part" (Schwichtenberg 1993, 133). However, unlike most of Finley's characters and Sherman's stills, Courtney's personas are highly aligned with her biography.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, these personas, like Madonna's, are also formed in conjunction with her CD lyrics, her live performances, her videos, her interviews, photographs along with the press coverage of many of her



everyday seemingly off-stage antics which I suggest may be read as performances staged for, and documented by, the press. Thus when it comes to Courtney's Courtneys there is often no clear-cut division between what is considered on-stage or off-stage. Rather, one is always left wondering: To what extent is she self-consciously re-scripting and staging her show?

### **So-Not-Pretty**

I wanted to be a groupie, but I wasn't really pretty enough.

Courtney Love  
'Quotes from the Quotable'

How does one live within yet against a society in which the perfect picture of beauty thrives?

Joanna Frueh  
*Monster/Beauty*

On *Pretty on the Inside*, Courtney introduces us to ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney. During the period surrounding *Pretty on the Inside* as well as *Live Through This* (1991-1996), Katerina Eileraas associates this vision and version of Courtney with "ugliness as resistance." Such resistance is a grotesque practice characterized by the many ways in which girls in bands have used their bodies to deviate from and challenge "nice, gentle, pretty ways of looking, talking, behaving, visualizing" (Eileraas 1997, 122).<sup>19</sup> And Courtney does so in a big way. Lyrically, she likens herself to a babydoll junkie: "jagged and naked," bleeding from abortions gone awry, armed with teeth like knives and hungry to fuck with you.<sup>20</sup> The sound stuns the eardrums: it's "a voice like she drank a bottle of whisky and then ate the bottle," writes Moran (Moran 1994). The CD's artwork could have been taken from Russo's

iconography of the grotesque: madwomen, pregnant hags, anorexic bodies and an exploding Raggedy Ann head litter the CD liner's front and back and in-between. The liner's landscape is also littered with garbage: broken lipsticks, syringes, mirrors, decaying body parts, sparkly eye shadow cases are all on display. Such play with garbage, writes Robert Stam, reveals "a gooey distillation of society's contradictions" (Stam 1999, 69). Although Americans like to envision themselves as pure and civilized, he explains, one look at the country's garbage says otherwise: "[garbage bins are] the place where used condoms, bloody tampons, infected needles, and unwanted babies" can be found, evoking "violent, surprising juxtapositions," or observational irony between ideal visions and everyday practices (Stam 1999, 69). In turn, he shows that art that draws on waste works to uncover that which many which to repress (Stam 1999, 69-70). In the case of Courtney's first CD—and also in the spirit of high instrumental irony—there is nothing pretty about or within *Pretty on the Inside*. Rather, pretty femininity is revealed as inseparable from the disposable beauty products and bodily fluids most girls anxiously attempt to mask.

Ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney's style also relies on ironic juxtaposition in ways that underline and undermine our culture's fascination with sweet teen femininity. It's all about too-tight 9-year-old girl babydoll party dresses, smudged mascara, sparkly tiaras, tangled platinum blonde hair sprouting black roots, smeared dark red lipstick, glittery pink barrettes, combat boots and eyes so glazed you just know you're not getting the best drugs in town. This "kinderwhore" look suggests that something has indeed run amok in the realm of the feminine (Eileraas 1997, 128). "Such surrealist juxtapositions," writes Eileraas, wage "war against the so-called

beauty myth—the capitalist, mass-media production of the ‘desire’ among women to be beautiful—and reworks pretty femininity into the grotesque” (Eileraas 1997, 131).

The “persistent scream/howl/moan/shriek” that is this ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney’s voice works to create a deviant and defiled sound that is impossible to ignore (Eileraas 1997, 125). It’s uneasy listening that grates on the ears: her pussy cat purrs meet wailing guitars and her moans fade into atonal headache-inducing drumming. The amps hiss with static. There’s nothing you can hum to. It’s like the sound of the taste of black licorice, writes David Eggers (Eggers 2004). And it’s relentless. “Come on, try to shut up me!” go the lyrics to “Gutless”—and one doubts that such a feat is possible. Hole’s ugly music, like Courtney’s voice and body, stages “society’s wounding inscriptions” as a site from which resistance can take root (Eileraas 1997, 134). Or as Courtney sings: “There’s no power like my ugly, ugly, ugly.”<sup>21</sup>

Joanna Frueh associates such power with “monster/beauty:” an aesthetics of showy self-creation that is culturally captivating precisely because it deviates from ideal beauty (Frueh 2001, 11). “Hyberbolic, heretical and heroic,” the monstrous beauty “exceeds and therefore cannot be controlled by male desire” (Frueh 2001, 20, 107). She is simultaneously repulsive and alluring as she proudly places on self-display a body that is at home and at work with features that are “bizarre, incongruous, eccentric, strange” (Frueh 2001, 11, 20). Eschewing the desire to look as pretty as a pin-up, the monster/beauty refashions her body in rags and riches, mismatching codes and styles that exude idiosyncratic style, intelligence and sexual plenty (Frueh 90, 31-32, 2001). She is both a mind-fuck and a beauty-fuck (Frueh 2001, 32-33, 165). Her monstrous/beauty

need never fade as it does not depend on perfect beauty's youthful standard (Frueh 2001, 4-5). "Monster/beauty," writes Frueh, is "taking up space, casting a shadow, dirtying the virtues of sexual difference in appearance, [and] of age-appropriate behavior and costume" (Frueh 2001, 33). Here, I feel it can be likened to the kinderwhore look that helps make ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney into an uncomfortably mesmerizing sight.

However, Frueh's monster/beauties are also charged with utopic feminist qualities that seem foreign to Courtney's Courtneys. Frueh's ideal beautiful monster might be mainstream-scary, but she is also kind, empathetic, generous, compassionate and fun (Frueh 2001, 9, 248). She "gives a fuck" about herself as a creation-in-process and she cares deeply about those with whom she shares pleasure (Frueh 2001, 291, 297). The ideal self-sustaining, self-loving, self-affirming monster/beauty is powerful because, overall, she shows that she knows that she can be erotically arresting, while simultaneously resisting "envy, greed and commodity culture's relentless production of lack at a material level" (Frueh 2001, 261-262, 267).

Thus what Frueh would inevitably find unfortunate, and what Eileraas fails to mention, is the ways in which ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney yearns for that which she critiques: "I wanted those pants and I wanted that shirt," she wails in "Teen Age Whore."<sup>22</sup> Taking things further, she purrs: "I wanna be the girl with the most cake."<sup>23</sup> Unlike Kathleen Hannah and the grrrls who produce their music on the indie label Kill Rock Stars (not much irony intended), Courtney wants to be the biggest Star. And in contrast to both Hannah who tells the grrrls to *Reject All American* and Frueh who embraces her own aging, imperfect monstrous/beauty, ugly-

angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney can't get the fucked-up state of American girl desire for ideal beauty out of her system. She sums up the not-so-pretty girl dilemma in an interview with feminist rock critic Amy Raphael by explaining that there is an irreconcilable contradiction in her head: "Although I've done [the beauty myth critique] to death, there is still, a mystique to rock music that I respond to that has to do with people being fucking hot" (Raphael 1993, 3). Perhaps it is her frequent depictions of her late-teen relationship to ex-bandmate Kat Bejland that are most revealing:

Kat was far better with the men.... They'd fall in love with her and she'd break their hearts. She was like a sex symbol who hung out with the coolest musicians, and I was fat and zitty and hanging out with the roadies. *That power was something I wanted* (Rossi 1996, 68; emphasis mine).

Such admissions speak volumes about ideal beauty in contemporary culture in a very un-Riot Grrrlesque way. As Frueh stresses, within feminist spheres it is still taboo to talk about one's own beauty, or perceived lack thereof, in conjunction with power. Rather beauty is supposed to remain a triviality in the grander scheme of one's important political, artistic and/or scholastic pursuits (Frueh 2001, 3-6). Yet Frueh would no doubt problematize ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney's desire for the power she associates with Kat's ideal sex symbol beauty; because as Frueh stresses, unlike monster/beauty, what Kat's got will fade over time (Frueh 2001, 4-5).



**Figure 3. Ugly-Messy-Wreck-of-Punk-Femininity-Rockstar Courtney (1995).**

## Talking Trash

The Slut has recently taken center stage in all forms of media. She comes in a flurry of controversy and hype.... Performance sluts take all the mess of female sex and throw it into the public eye. Ultimately, they help empower women by forcing people to question their own attitudes toward female sexuality. However, this degree of empowerment does not come without complex implications.

Kim Nicolini  
“Staging the Slut”

Kim Nicolini suggests that ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney also engages in what she calls “staging the slut”: an unruly body feminist performance strategy that seek to disrupt the good girl/bad girl binary (Nicolini 1995).<sup>24</sup> Nicolini writes that one can stage the slut by putting on and playing out the trappings of the tramp. Here, the trick behind the trade is in keeping with Irigaray’s recipe for mimicry. One “submits” one’s body to the ideas that have informed and are reformed by discourses that create the figure of the slut—while at the same time adopting the instrumental ironic “armor and detachment” that allow one to silently suggest that the slut is something that one does rather than something that one is (Nicolini 1995). In other words, one cannot *be* a slut; one can only *do* her.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, as I have already suggested, the slut engages in the kind of backtalk that invites a reassessment of the rules that give rise to the divisive dichotomy. “In practice the Slut shamelessly rants, is in your face at every turn, and refuses to slink away after the dirty deeds are done” (Nicolini 1995). Although Nicolini doesn’t acknowledge the role that age plays in such stagings, her text’s focus on Courtney as well as Liz Phair and Tank Girl seems to suggest that, in Frueh’s words, “it is exceptional to see the midlife monster/beauty, the sexually experienced and dangerous older woman, triumph as a symbol of erotic gain (Frueh 2001, 118).<sup>26</sup>

## Do You Want it?

And I'm standing on stage and saying: Do you want it? Do you want it?  
Do you want it? And getting them in a frenzy, in a frenzy, in a frenzy, in a  
fucking ridiculous crowd frenzy—It's like: I'm fucking with you, but you  
are so stupid you don't even know.

Courtney Love  
*Grrrls*

As I rewind/play/stop/pause/play my tape of opening night at Lollapalooza '95 over and over again I am still struck by the sight of the 29-year-old ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney staging the slut. There she goes again: bumping and grinding across the stage like the day stripper she used to be, slurping her brandy, flashing her panties, stumbling, screaming, swearing, singing—"fucking with you." Once more, I watch her smirk and ask "happy now?" as the crowd yells "slut", and "bitch" at her—just as she asked them to do. The smirk speaks volumes. Silently it screams with instrumental irony: *you* need to put me in this category, *you* need to secure "my" identity, *you* need to cling to the good girl/bad girl binary.

There is observational irony here too. Conventionally, the slut is used and discarded, shamed for—and made to feel ashamed about—her deeds (Nicolini 1995). But Courtney's a fucking rock star, with a stage of her own, and she uses it as though she's one of the boys in the locker room. The usual state of affairs featuring the silent slut and the bragging boy is reversed. She boasts about and then disses the rock star dudes she says she's done: "Trent Reznor [of Nine Inch Nails], he's more like 3-inch guy," she tells the crowd; "Billy Corgan [of Smashing Pumpkins], what an asshole! But he's a great fucking lay." As Courtney dismisses the boys, writes Nicolini, she also disempowers them: "Go on take everything/take everything I want you to," she wails, "Go on take everything/I dare you to."<sup>27</sup> Nicolini proposes that "By telling 'him' ...to take everything,



she deprives him of his agency and power. If a woman tells a man to take everything from her, then he has no power to rob her” (Nicolini 1995). Indeed, what can you call a girl who commands you to call her a slut?

### **What a Slut!**

However, Nicolini is quick to point out that such stagings serve different purposes and engender contrasting interpretations. She suggests that as the crowd struggles with their frenzied attraction/repulsion to Courtney’s choreography, ideally they realize how deeply they too are implicated in this sexual spectacle (Nicolini 1995). “This ‘dangerous object,’ this broken/possessed/ugly doll,” continues Nicolini, is only circulating—and is only scandalizing—because the audience continues to aid and abet in the maintenance of the good girl/bad girl binary that grounds and surrounds her scenes:

Both male and female are lured into the seductive diatribe of the performer only to find themselves disgusted and repulsed by their participation in this pornographic and tasteless act, and by their realization that it is their attitude towards female sex that creates the pornographic object in the first place (Nicolini 1995).

Ultimately, such stagings ask audience members to re-think their assumptions and attitudes toward female sexuality and the good girl/bad girl binary in the same way that Fuchs describes her response to Finley and Sprinkle’s choreography (Nicolini 1995).

Yet, all too often, in the case of Courtney, this best case scenario does not necessarily surface. The boys and girls who eat Courtney up, writes Nicolini, often “only see ‘slut’ without the critique of the categories like ‘slut’” (Nicolini 1995). Thus, such endeavors become easy to dismiss:

The majority of the responses I read and heard about Courtney’s performance focused on the fact that she was “all fucked up,” that all she

did was talk about all the guys she fucked...most of them left out the fact that she gave one great fucking musical performance (Nicolini 1995).

I suspect that this is because Courtney's highly public biography featuring anecdotes about her pre-rockstar days working in various strip clubs in America as well as fucking her way through hard-core punk circles in Liverpool meshes with her ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar persona in such a way that the figure of the performance slut and "the slut" slip and slide into one another (Rossi 1996, 34, 55; Halperin and Wallace 1999, 47, 48, 53). "Courtney," writes Nicolini, "cannot erase her own personal history" (Nicolini 1995). Consequently, many read her theatrics in relationship to *being* a slut rather than to *doing* the slut. In Hutcheon's terms, many can't—or won't?—hear Courtney's ironic "unsaid." In turn, as Courtney acknowledges: "they make me wonder, am I like some weird sex freak prize?" (Raphael 1995, 25).

### **As Good As it Gets?**

When ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney isn't busy staging the slut, she often morphs into her lesser-known pretty-good-girl persona in ways that strike me as potentially productively working to reveal the lack of substance that constitutes the good girl/bad girl binary. At the MTV awards in 1992, Courtney got her lipstick on right, combed her hair and donned a simple, elegant white dress; carrying her daughter in her arms, she appeared to be the ultimate yummy mummy.<sup>28</sup> Moreover, according to contract, she cleaned up and stayed drug free for a year during the filming of *The People vs. Larry Fynt*.<sup>29</sup> But perhaps the greatest pretty-good-girl Courtney stunt came at the 1996 Oscars. Coiffed like a lady and clad in white Versace, she smiled in a big way, waved like she was Queen E and failed to stumble even

once. To me she appeared to be the ultimate walking Cindy Sherman *Untitled* still, revealing and reveling in what Sherman describes as “the fakeness of role-playing as well as contempt for the domineering ‘male’ audience who would read the images as sexy” (Suleiman 1991, 120). I can practically hear her uttering her instrumentally ironic unsaid: this is, like, such a fucking put on. Yet, my mom’s response still rings in my ears today: “Did you see Courtney at the Oscars? In Versace! She looked to-die-for! And so well-behaved! So, are you going to stop wearing those awful dresses now?” As Eileraas has points out, mixed responses are hardly new. Indeed, Sherman’s early portraits were often read as capturing and encapsulating, as opposed to questioning, the essence of femininity.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Elayne Rapping writes that Madonna’s early work is easily digested “by a male public very much in the dark” in keeping with the good girl/bad girl binary that I believe it treats to ironic overstatement (Rapping 1994, 272). Once again, as Hutcheon argues, performers who use instrumental irony to silently critique dominant ideals of femininity must repeat those ideals. Such “complicitous critique” is always in danger of being read as espousing that which it mocks (Hutcheon 1989, 152, 159).

### **Out of the Attic**

If people try to put me in the crazy box—“crazy-fucking-Courtney”—go ahead. But if you think you’re gonna stop me from where I’m going, you’re not going to do it. I work my ass off. I deliver the fucking goods. And I will deliver them again.

Courtney Love<sup>31</sup>

Complicating the question of what productive potential, if any, can be said to resonate from Courtney’s good girl/bad girl displays is the highly documented notion that the girl “who fakes it so real” is a genuine ‘90s version of the madwoman let loose from

the attic spreading psychosis for the world to see. "She was insane at times," recalls Kurt in an interview with *The Advocate* (Halperin and Wallace 1991, 81). "Face it, she's a psychopath," says her own father (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 142). "Courtney's delusional" deduces former bandmate Kat Bjelland (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 69). Kurt's ex-bandmates recently issued a plea that Courtney undergo psychiatric testing in order to prove that she is too ill to have anything to do with Nirvana's legacy and fortune (Greenblatt 2002). Moreover, the home she once shared with Kurt in Seattle is often described as gothic, haunted and always on the brink of exploding in violent chaos. Courtney throws fax machines out the window when she's angry. She shrieks and yells and howls at her husband. Reading such depictions, John Connolly's description of the madwoman in *Jane Eyre* comes to mind:

[The house is made] awful by the presence of a deranged creature under the same roof: her voice; her sudden and violent efforts to destroy things or persons; her vehement rushings to the window; her very tread and stamp in her dark and disordered chamber seems to penetrate the whole house; and, assailed by her wild energy, the very walls and roof have appeared unsafe" (Showalter 1985, 68).

In keeping with such madwoman imagery, the Courtney-killed-Kurt rumors are hardly surprising.

However, I think Dave Grohl (formerly of Nirvana, now frontman for The Foo Fighters) is on the mark when he sings: "Can it be that I am the only one to see through your *rehearsed* insanity?" (emphasis mine).<sup>32</sup> Or, as Rossi writes, "Courtney was perceived as an out-of-control maniac because she often *acted* like one" (Rossi 1996, 166; emphasis mine). Once again, when it comes to Courtney, concepts relating to rehearsal and acting are crucial. Courtney claims that if people want to frame her in relationship to madness, she's more than pleased to go with that flow: "People project the

Madwoman image on to me, yeah, but I don't mind *doing it*...it needs to be dealt with" (Raphael 1995, 24; emphasis mine). Indeed she refers to such doings as a "responsibility" (Raphael 1995, 26). "One of the largest duties I have is to *report* on that madness," continues Courtney, "and not become a victim of it in the same way as Anne Sexton or Sylvia Plath or Zelda Fitzgerald" (Raphael 1995, 26). Thus one could suggest that ugly-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney not only stages the slut, she also puts on the grotesque figure of the madwoman and subjects her to strategic representation. And if, as with Finley's serious play with hysteria, one reads Courtney's activity through the lens of irony, the "unsaid" becomes: I am not a madwoman; rather I am doing the madwoman. The question thus becomes: what does this say about ideas of madness and the gendered body? Then again, it's impossible to know to what extent Courtney's outbursts are scripted.

However, if I may play historian/shrink for a moment, it seems to me that if ugly-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney can be said to "suffer" from madness, it is of the "moral insanity" variety often attributed to unruly women in the mid- and late-1800s, prior to the rise of the hysteric. Such "madwomen," explains Showalter, were rounded up and committed based on a highly elastic concept that served to purge communities of those who refused to fit in (Showalter 1985, 29, 56). Showalter cites J.C. Prichard who coined the term moral insanity in 1835, and defined it as:

A morbid perversion of natural feelings, affections, inclinations, temper, habits, moral dispositions, and natural impulses, without any remarkable disorder or defect of the intellect, or knowing and reasoning faculties, and practically without any insane illusions or hallucinations" (Showalter 1985, 29).

Or in Showalter's words, those deemed morally insane had not lost their ability to reason; rather they made spectacle of themselves and their unruly actions deviated from the norms of femininity (Showalter 1985, 29). Needless to say, however, both the concept of "moral insanity" and its "cure" came with highly gendered preconceptions (Showalter 1985, 25).

Women were deemed particularly susceptible to falling prey to moral insanity as it was believed that their reproductive cycles and organs often interrupted their ability to behave reasonably (Showalter 1985, 55). Setting social context aside, doctors diagnosed girls as insane from as early on as puberty, when they were likely to become "irreligious, selfish, slanderous, false, malicious, devoid of affection, self-willed and quarrelsome" (Showalter 1985, 56). Women who showed little affection for their husbands and children were often locked up for their "crimes against nature" (Showalter 1985, 57). Alcoholics, adulteresses and other women who refused to play by the rules were carted away *en masse* (Showalter 1985, 57-58). Doctors, writes Showalter, "were reluctant to listen to their patients, or to find out how they felt and why" (Showalter 1985, 61). In other words, few physicians paid attention to the effects of the conscriptions that confined women to lives of enforced patriarchal servitude and submission—conscriptions that functioned to silence their desires and intellect (Showalter 1985, 59). Rather, doctors sought to cure female moral insanity by turning asylums into large-scale "moral management" units that forced women back on to the good-girl-femininity track (Showalter 1985, 78). Here, women were encouraged to needlepoint, knit, paint and tidy their days away in the asylum until their docility returned and flourished (Showalter 1985, 80-81).

Reflecting on Showalter's historical scenarios in relationship to ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-rockstar Courtney's unruly antics, the oft-cited slogan "you've come a long way, baby" comes to mind. Kurt could not lock Courtney up in the attic like Bronte's Bertha since she owned half the house. Nor can one—particularly one with a legion of lawyers of her own—be so easily incarcerated into the current mental health care system. However, Courtney points out that though the madwoman continues to fascinate, her dismissal as insane, unstable and unbalanced proves annoyingly easy to facilitate: "If there's one thing I am it's lucid. I know that's not a very heavy word like intellectual or whatever, but still, to take away my lucidity, that pisses me off."<sup>33</sup> No doubt. Yet since the lines between on-stage/off-stage and performance/essence are always blurry and open to a myriad of interpretations when it comes to Courtney in all of her guises, it is no major surprise to me that many attempt to rob her of her sanity.

Yet such robbery also reeks of the sexual double-standard that continues to haunt the world of rock stardom. Thinking back to my high school days, I recollect that so many of us kids found it amusing to hear stories of Van Halen trashing hotel rooms because, well, there were red M&M's in their post-show goodie bowl. Sean Penn was once known for turning paparazzi punching into an All-Star sport. On a more recent note, the fits of rage that Miramax's Weinstein brothers are known to fly into at a moment's notice have caused some of their staff members to suffer from anxiety and depression to the point where they have been granted medical disability leave (Beskind 2004, 161). Then there are the lads from Oasis who are famous for pulling down their pants and pissing all over people when the mood hits. And Kurt tried as hard as he could to get his producers at Geffen Records to allow him to name his last CD *In Utero*, "I hate myself

and I want to die” (Halperin and Wallace 1999, 83). To the best of my knowledge, none of these boys have had their sanity called into question.

### **A Portrait of a Mother as a High Artist**

Imagine if you didn't have to worry about money or men. Pretty goddamn nice week. The kind of week you'd want to go: Hey, you know what? I'm so damn happy, I'm gonna stay in bed and do drugs.

Courtney Love  
*Grrrls*

Wouldn't you?

William Burroughs  
*Naked Lunch*

In “The Rhetoric of Drugs” Jacques Derrida asks: “What do we hold against the drug addict?” (Derrida 2003, 25). The response, he suggests, revolves around a rhetoric of productivity seeped in presuppositions regarding the power of the prohibitory. In other words, drugs, particularly the so-called hard kind like junk, get in the way of our ability to function as proper citizens. Thus we come to believe that “*our* society, *our* culture, *our* conventions” needs drug prohibition (Derrida 2003, 21). Consequently, Anna Alexander and Mark Roberts write, the addict becomes a “deviant body” (Alexander and Roberts 2003, 3). The one who fails to just say no, continues Derrida, “is scorned not merely for his [*sic*] unlawful behavior, but rather for the desire to escape;” to veer away from the workday to the realm of fantasy, hallucination, sedation and simulation (Derrida 2003, 25). Yet in the pleasure-seeking, substance-positive sphere that is Rockstarville, why is it that Courtney's drug admissions are treated with such contempt and greeted with such fervor? Why do they evoke such furor? Rossi suggests that the answer may lie in the matter-of-fact “wouldn't you?” way in which she admits to using: “I don't do drugs very



often, but I do,” Courtney tells *Rolling Stone*’s Jason Cohen; “you’re supposed to say that you never do anything, blah, blah, blah.... I don’t think God necessarily put us here to be sober all the time, but I also don’t think he put us here to be junkies” (Cohen 1995, 49).

Indeed, in keeping with Courtney’s chameleon-ings, it would be out of character for her to frame any of her personas as interchangeable with a Burroughsesque version of the self-as-addict focused solely on the need for the man with the next fix. As Rosi Braidotti writes, “Addiction is not an opening-up but a narrowing down of the field of possible becomings” (Braidotti 2001, 194). However, even Nicolini feels compelled to wonder if sightings of a glazed-eyed, dazed-out Courtney stumbling solo through some not-so-pretty streets in San Francisco are about acting “out-of-control”—or about actually being highly harmfully out of it (Nicolini 1995). To what extent is Courtney controlling her very own junkie show, wonders Nicolini? Moreover, to what degree can the body sustain a casual relationship with a hardcore substance like heroin? If Courtney can indeed do junk recreationally as she maintains—without, to borrow Braidotti’s words, “cracking”—more power to her (Braidotti 2001, 184). Yet Burroughs’ among others tales of tangling with the stuff resonate powerfully with me: “I never had enough junk,” he writes, “no one ever does” (Burroughs 1959, x).<sup>34</sup>

However, once again the double-standard reappears and rears its twisted head where Courtney’s concerned; only this time it is in relationship to gender and drugs. Burroughs, Lou Reed, Keith Richards, Jerry Garcia and Kurt himself have become junkie artist-as-genius figures, holy wasted boys. Yet Courtney is apparently just another fucked-up, messed-up, junkie bitch. Or so many say. But how and why did the picture get painted this way? Nancy Campbell’s *Using Women* suggests that it is almost impossible

to imagine one adopting a romantic stance towards high women in this culture. She shows women on drugs are often depicted in relationship to the same old norms of femininity with an extra degree of scorn; they are deemed more needy, more unreliable, more difficult, more self-involved than those who just say no (Campbell 2000, 16, 30, 60, 176). More importantly, their flights often only become of particularly panicky interest when they are perceived as a threat to the lives of others; especially when the others in question are a fetus or a child (Campbell 2000, 39; Balsamo 1996, 103; Bordo 1993, 79). Indeed, it is impossible to discuss the hoopla surrounding Courtney and drugs without reference to her activity during pregnancy, her baby, and her take on motherhood.

### **High Mommy**

The ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-turned-fucking-rockstar Courtney that emerges in *Live Through This* does not romanticize her pregnancy—rather she situates her pregnant body in the realm of the grotesque. In this space, writes Eileraas, the body-with-baby is depicted as internally divided, infested, contaminated—monstrously doubled (Eileraas 1997, 133). Indeed in “Plump,” an anti-ode to pregnancy, Courtney describes her kid-to-be as a parasite sucking her dry, stealing her energy and grossing her out in a big way. Such a depiction, continues Eileraas, “counters the popular myth of pregnancy and motherhood as a uniquely ‘pure’ state of being” (Eileraas 1997, 133). Here I am reminded once again of the lyrics to “Mother’s Milk,” featuring the line, “yeah, I don’t do the dishes / I throw ‘em in the crib.”

Moreover, a few weeks before *Live Through This* was released, *Vanity Fair*’s Lynn Hirschberg published a cover story on Courtney containing a paragraph featuring Courtney gleefully recounting how she and Kurt disguised themselves in order to go out

and score drugs in New York City right after Kurt appeared on *Saturday Night Live* (Hirschberg 1992, 98). Hirschberg did the math and figured out that Courtney was already with child. She also picked up on Courtney's refusal to romanticize her *in utero* state—her “failure” to get with the radiant, healthy, pure, pregnant woman program—only to re-frame it all in the realm of the moral/social and to run with it like an advocate from the Christian right. Courtney, concludes Hirschberg, is nothing more than a gold-digging junkie 'ho whose unborn child is seriously at risk (Hirschberg 1992, 98). Three months later, amidst a flurry of rumor and speculation, authorities from Seattle Child Services made Courtney give custody of baby Frances Bean to Kurt's mother, Wendy O'Connor. Courtney was forced to take weekly urine tests, meet with a social worker and was not allowed to remain alone with Frances Bean until she could prove that she was drug-free. Kurt and Courtney sued Seattle Child Services and six months later, Frances Bean was allowed to return to her parents' home (Rossi 1996, 133; Halperin and Wallace 1999, 73). In an interview with *Melody Maker's* Everett True right after the incident, Courtney stresses, “I didn't do heroin during my pregnancy. And even if I shot coke every night and took acid everyday, it's my own motherfucking business” (Rossi 1996, 155).

Unfortunately, as Bordo shows, what one does or doesn't do during pregnancy is indeed national business. A century ago, the United States Supreme Court stressed that every individual, regardless of gender, has the right to “the possession and control of his [*sic*] own person” and that such a right “may be said to be a right of complete immunity: to be let alone”—but this is far from the case when pregnancy enters the picture (Bordo 1993, 72). Bordo explains that pregnant women are treated by both medical and legal

discourse as “fleshy incubators” whose status as subjects becomes effaced. Pregnant women, she writes, are reduced to “mere life-support system for the fetus” (Bordo 1993, 77). Consequently, involuntary and invasive medical procedures continue to be performed on pregnant women, particularly those who are deemed unfit to parent by virtue of their class, color or marital status (Bordo 1993, 75). Moreover, writes Anne Balsamo, pregnant women are under high-intensity social surveillance: “a pregnant woman becomes a biological spectacle” subject to a variety of public disciplinary practices (Balsamo 1996, 80). For instance, Bordo cites an episode of *Oprah* featuring an interview with a young male bartender who refused to serve a drink to a pregnant woman. The mostly female audience applauded his initiative (Bordo 1993, 82). Bordo also provides a mass of examples of women who have been jailed for endangering the life of a fetus when they were observed—caught?—using drink or drugs (Bordo 1993, 82-83). Bordo suggests that these so-called criminal charges presuppose and perpetuate the notion that pregnant women and mothers are supposed to efface their desires, choices and interests or risk becoming construed as “excessive” and “wicked” (Bordo 1993, 79)—*Mommy Dearest* characteristics that are inseparable from most versions and visions of Courtney. As Campbell stresses, America’s preoccupation with mothers who do drugs stems from the unspoken, yet highly present, assumption that it is women who do and should continue to take responsibility for “social reproduction,” which involves caring for and nurturing babies, the elderly and the sick, as well as appearing “functional, orderly and clean” (Campbell 2000, 4, 5)

### **Courtney Dearest**

When Seattle Child Services came and swooped Frances Bean Cobain away, I suspect that their mandate had little to do with protecting a child surrounded by nurturing nannies and born into a small fortune (Rossi 1996, 34). Nor can the scenario be said to completely confirm and conform to America's "war against drugs," which as many point out tends to translate into the targeting and terrorizing of African American communities and/or the poor (Campbell 2000, 5; Balsamo 1996, 93, 105; Bordo 1993, 93).<sup>35</sup> Rather, as Rossi suggests, the *Vanity Fair* article featuring a chain-smoking, unrepentant, disheveled Courtney in ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar persona mode suggests that mommy may be white—but she is hardly "clean" in many senses of the word (Rossi 1996, 143). Courtney's "crime" thus lies in her violation of the norms of what I would call "appropriate motherhood." Indeed, she refuses to discipline her unruly body both prior to and after it gives birth to another. Thus she is scorned, criticized, condemned and punished for breaching the rules that inform and are re-informed by concepts relating to "good motherliness." In short, Courtney won't publicly play by or display the so-called natural qualities that are central to hegemonic visions of motherhood: self-denial, self-sacrifice, selflessness, all of which inevitably become sanctioned forms of self-stifling in a culture where women with infants are under high-priority surveillance. Once again, Courtney's thoughts on the matter are telling:

What am I supposed to do, turn into fucking Mother Theresa all of a sudden? Am I supposed to write a country record because I've had a baby? I've felt more sexual warfare, political, medical, and media terror in the last couple of months than I've ever felt in my whole life.<sup>36</sup>

Here, Bordo's warnings regarding the dangers of disembodied Butleresque radical feminist metatheoretical activity is worthy of repetition. As feminists strive to dismantle the individual humanist subject via parody, it is wise to remember that many women in

America have not really been granted the necessary subjecthood that gives unruly play its political bite (Bordo 1993, 96, 294-295).<sup>37</sup>

## Hot Commodities

Although Courtney's Courtneys raise a variety of thought-provoking feminist issues regarding the beauty myth, the good girl/bad girl binary, pregnancy and surveillance, as well as madness and gender, they do not pose a challenge to the capitalist marketplace. As Elizabeth Wurtzel points out, bad girls like Courtney and Madonna have become hot commodities (Wurtzel 1998, 10-11). Speaking of Madonna, Kaplan writes that, "no matter how outrageous [her antics] she does not threaten consumer capitalism. On the contrary, she provides ever-new markets and sources of profit for middlemen and women" (Kaplan 1992, 152). The same can be said about Courtney. *Live Through This* made millions for Geffen, and Courtney's kinderwhore gear became the 1994 must-wear for rebel girls with credit cards (Rossi 1996, 216; Raphael 1995, 13). Kaplan explains that from a commodity fetishism perspective, the problem is that an "abstract quality" (bad, mad, hot) is added to a "material thing" or an "object to be consumed," thus Courtney becomes a commodity that "stands in for or covers over oppressive labor relations" that make up the music business. Moreover, she also risks being reduced to an "object of desire"—in Courtney's case, the unruly bad girl as nasty wet dream—which helps constitute men as inherently desiring subjects (Kaplan 1992, 153). Thus it is unsurprising to read the online journal's *ask.men* commentary on Courtney which suggests that she is at her hottest when she "stays quiet."<sup>38</sup> But Courtney's Courtneys make up a cacophony of chaos, verbal commentary and ugly noise that generally

interrupts the silent mechanics of hot commodity fetishism. Her unruly spectacles may not put a dent in the capitalist marketplace, but to her credit, she doesn't pretend otherwise. Or as she sings, "Everything I am can be bought and sold."<sup>39</sup> And since in interviews, she often stresses the role that she plays in her own self-constructions and marketing, the line that separates object from subject and entrepreneur from commodity takes on a Madonnasque fluidity—one that may not directly challenge capitalist thinking, but one that certainly suggests that there is more to the bad girl than meets the eye (Raphael 1994, 13; Rossi 1996, 184).

## Perfect Skin

Celebrity Skin sounds like hard candy.... In the four years between the two albums Love had hired Jodie Foster's publicist, ...swapped her kinderwhore look for Versace and now used a lipbrush. She had enacted a very public refusal to be contained by her infamy as the punk pin-up Grrrl.... Kurt Cobain signed off his suicide note with the reminder that "it's better to burn out than to fade away." To which Love later responded "It's better to rise than to fade away." The question is—how?

Kylie Murphy  
"I'm Sorry—I'm Not Really Sorry"

Somebody wrote, "How can she rock in a Versace gown?" Well, easy—let me show you.

Courtney Love  
"Quotes from the Quotable"

About a year prior to the release of *Celebrity Skin* (1998), Courtney's metamorphosis into her haute-couture-celebrity-skinny persona seems to have crystallized in the eyes of the press. Tuned down, toned up, tanned, aerobicized, plastic surgery-ed and apparently drug-free, Courtney, many write, was now cleaning her way to the top (Murphy 2001; Ellen 1998; Fruchtman, 1998; Di Perna 1999). I used to be the

“freak date,” she reflected, now I’m the “trophy date” (Di Perna 1999). Magazine cover shots featuring this sleeker, slimmer, no longer slumming and somewhat stereotypically stunning ex-grrrl attested to her new status. *Vogue*, *Nylon*, *Jane* and *Playboy* were among the many non-musical rags that paid for a piece of haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney (Murphy 2001). Her body now connoted the ideal of white, Western female beauty. “With her choice of hair, clothing, make-up, physique and plastic surgeon,” wrote Murphy, “Love is no longer unproblematically using her body to make feminist meanings, she [is] no longer grotesque” (Murphy 2001). Rather, in the words of many, Courtney had finally “grown up” (Murphy 2001; Manelis 1998). Yet this cultural imperative to “grow up” is no doubt kin to what Frueh describes as the unfortunate euphemism known as “aging gracefully:” both come with a particular dress-code, an anti-overt sexuality prescription and a new set of stricter non-rowdy rules that are informed by and reinform attitudes around women and age-appropriate behavior (Frueh 2001, 223, 272).

Interestingly, traces of excess and unruliness associated with ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney still remain on the scene. She may be wearing Versace, but she still uses “fucks” like punctuation marks. She continues to wreak havoc on airplanes.<sup>40</sup> She’s also quick to throw her very pricey guitar to the girls crowded around the front of the pit. And she may even show you her new tits—if she’s in the mood. As Amanda Davis writes:

So Courtney keeps some rough edges, wearing and tearing Versace with the same abandon she shredded those kinderwhore dresses, kicking off her spiked heels—albeit expensive ones—and throwing her leg over the monitor in the same stance with the same bravura she did back in the days at CBGB. And the girls, the ones in the audience with their tiaras, well they understand (Davis 1999).



However, the same old questions continue to haunt the territory: what is it that is being understood according to whom?

### **Surgical Courtney**

In “I’m sorry, I’m not really sorry,” Murphy argues that feminists who are quick to critique the heavily made-up woman as a “docile” body—one who is complicit, complacent and overly-disciplined by beauty regimes—are missing some actively playful points. Mainly, suggests Murphy, they forget the fact that Foucault’s notion of power also allows for resistance (Murphy 2001). Or in Foucault’s words, resistance is “mobile and transitory...producing cleavages in a society that shift about, fracturing unities and effecting regroupings, furrowing across individuals themselves, cutting them up and remolding them (Foucault 1990, 96). Along this vein, Murphy argues that Courtney’s construction of haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney is a form of resistance that involves deploying the dominant tools of the patriarchal beauty industry—cosmetic surgery and high fashion—as a weapon in her inevitably gendered battle for celebrity self-advancement and economic enhancement. As such, she epitomizes the promise inherent in what Murphy calls “make-over feminism” (Murphy 2001). Haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney, continues Murphy, is the product of a surprising success story featuring “blonde ambition” coupled with contemporary technologies that enable upwardly mobile flight (Murphy 2001). According to Murphy, those who use observational irony to critique Courtney, such as the Editors at *Bitch* who named her “hypocrite of the year” when she appeared on the cover of *Allure* oh-so-much-prettier in pink, are missing the point (Murphy 2001). In Murphy’s words:

This perspective demeans and dismisses a whole range of female experience. It presents all women who partake in the beauty industry, pleurably or not, as dupes, and it proffers a very narrow definition of correct femininity: one that must exist outside of consumer culture (Murphy 2001).

Here, Murphy's analysis is in line with those who uncritically champion Madonna for her profitable play with femininity as artifice.<sup>41</sup>

It is precisely this emphasis on resistance—disembodied and detached from a variety of cultural and economic matters—that most disturbs Bordo. Resistance to and within hegemony, writes Bordo, is indeed a promising concept. However, it is hardly a simple or self-evident activity (Bordo 1993, 261). Indeed, within what she calls our society's "paradigm of plasticity," much emphasis is placed on one's "power" to take charge and beautify one's body thereby inevitably enabling one to achieve greater personal, social, sexual and/or professional acceptance in the bargain (Bordo 1993, 246). As Frueh's evocation of monster/beauty shows, "regulation—the management of beauty discomforts or the aesthetic/cosmetic maintenance of one's body—is not necessarily evil;" rather it can open up spaces for new reconfigurations of power/beauty relations that seduce even as they trouble the norms of ideal beauty (Frueh 2001, 10). However, I am not that surprised that Courtney chose a different route to achieve what she calls "fucking hot" so-not-a-freak-prize-trophy-date status (Rossi 1996, 68). As Balsamo writes, we live in a culture that rewards women who play by dominant cosmetic rule and condemns those who refuse to buy in (Balsamo 1996, 66).<sup>42</sup> And in Bordo's words, when it comes to refashioning one's flesh "not any body will *do*:

That we are surrounded by homogenizing and normalizing images—images whose content is far from arbitrary, but is instead suffused with the dominance of gendered, racial, class, and other cultural

iconography—seems so obvious as to be almost embarrassing to be arguing here” (Bordo 1993, 250).

Or in other words, people are hardly running to get plastic surgery with the hope of appearing older, heavier or more African-American as a result of the process.

That said, I have no desire to demonize women for being duped by the beauty industry. I often like Robyn much better in lipstick. I also wonder if, like my mom, I’ll want to get my “eyes done” as I continue to age. And I certainly have my very own I-dream-of-Versace days. I don’t chastise myself for such thoughts, yet I’m hard-pressed to see them as a by-product of some new kind of “make-over feminism.” Nor are they necessarily aligned with monster/beauty utopics. Rather, they reflect my own understandably shifty relationship to dominant conceptions of ideal beauty, the cult of youth and high fashion.

In the case of haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney, I can’t see how plastic surgery has, as Murphy suggests, been harnessed in the service of resistance. We are not talking about Orlan here. Although I agree with Balsamo that plastic surgery, like piercing and tattooing, can provide ways for women to be perceived as creatively “using their bodies as a vehicle for staging cultural identities,” haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney seems to support rather than unsettle business as usual (Balsamo 1996, 78). In short, Courtney has, to borrow Bordo’s words, “self-normalized,” thus echoing early-Madonna’s move from fleshy, funky boy toy to tight, lean, celebrity machine (Bordo 1993, 270). Once again, I don’t want to jump on the *Bust* bandwagon and suggests that feminists who rail against the beauty myth cannot simultaneously wear lipliner; rather, in keeping with the spirit of my unruly body project, I simply find it difficult to burst out clapping at the latest sight of Courtney.



**Figure 4. Haute-Couture-Celebrity-Skinny Courtney (March 1997).**

### ***Celebrity Skin: The Album***

However, on *Celebrity Skin*, haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney can and does talk back. Instrumental ironies skim across its slick surface as she delights in her self reflexivity and digs at the music industry. From “Miles and miles of perfect skin, I swear I do I fit right in” to “Oh make me over / I’m all I wanna be / a walking study in demonology” to “I was punk / Now I’m just stupid” and ending with “You wanna part of me / Well I’m not selling cheap,” haute-couture-celebrity-skinny-Courtney is mocking this latest persona, its detractors as well as the whole thing’s profitably titillating-to-tinseltown status.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney has not been entirely effaced. Rather, she gets to come out and have her late nights via lyrics like: “When I wake up / in my make-up / it’s way too early for this dress,” or “Here comes a storm in the form of a girl.”<sup>44</sup> Overall, one could argue that lyrically the album highlights the production values at work in the cult of beauty—its achievement as effect of plastic practices rather than essence. It might also gesture towards the ways in which ideal femininity is about surface, artifice and the make-up that makes up Courtney’s Courtneys. Moreover, if ugly, pretty, crazy, good, bad can all be done, they can also come undone. And maybe that’s what the girls in tiaras understand. I hope so. However, I suspect it might also be something like: it’s better to rock out in Versace than to fade away. Or, if you play by the rules you reap the rewards. Finally and perhaps most importantly, although links between gender identity and performativity are on display whenever Courtney is on scene, she hardly causes the kind of radically parodic trouble that would please Butler. Indeed, Courtney’s obsessive interest in fucking (with) *All Things Boy* helps undermine the possibility. The Britney/Madonna MTV kiss,

followed the next day by media coverage of Christina Aguilera sporting an “I f\*cked Britney Spears” pin are queer in a way that Courtney’s highly het sexcapades do not try to intimate. And that isn’t saying much.<sup>45</sup>

Sonically, I fear that what *Celebrity Skin* has to say is also easily eclipsed by its sound. Pretty, poppy, playful—this is music you can hum to. On the other hand, listening to *Pretty on the Inside* and *Live Through This* makes me wanna kick and scream and riot. But in of itself the sound is not only what is at stake here. As Spearhead’s Michael Franti sings, “Everybody deserves music / sweet music.”<sup>46</sup> However, his harmonious hip hop-py tunes have a critical political edge that remind one of the ways that poor people, blacks, Arabs and/or the homeless in America often experience forms of police brutality that are terrifying. Moreover, Le Tigre’s *Feminist Sweepsteaks* is a dancelicious warning that post-feminism needs to get its ass kicked right back out of town. *Celebrity Skin* makes me wanna buy a pink Cadillac and giggle my way to LA. In other words, if earlier visions and versions of Courtney used to work through the terrain of “body as battleground,” she’s now singing and styling to the tune of the body as pure “postmodern playground” (Bordo 1993; 263). And that can be trippy. But, like reading Baudrillard’s *America*, it leaves me with the feeling that there’s something more to the landscape that’s been left out of sight.

## Calculating Courtney

The last Courtney persona to make an appearance on the cultural landscape—one-hell-of-a-smart-cookie Courtney—revolves around a performance at the Digital Hollywood New York Conference in 2000 in which she implies that although she's happy to stage the celebrity slut, being poorly pimped out is highly uncool. Clad in a simple black dress with a white collar, hair died light burgundy and hanging neatly in loose curls, this Courtney looks neither out-of-control ugly nor over-the-top celebrity stylin'. It may sound strange, but her appearance reminds me of a younger version of Susan Sarandon. Speaking smartly, calmly and with great clarity; this overtly lucid version of Courtney, as well as her matching speech published that month in *Salon.com*, astounded many. Evoking observational irony, one-hell-of-a-smart-cookie Courtney states that piracy is not about kids using Napster or swapping MP3 as the head honchos at Sony and Universal suggest. Rather, she maintains that piracy is exactly what such major label recording companies—the ones who are whining about piracy—do best (Love 2000). In short, they cash in by “stealing an artist’s work without any intention of paying for it (Love 2000). But I’ll let her tell her tale and do the number crunching:

Today I want to talk about piracy and music.... I want to start with a story about rock bands and record companies and do some recording-contract math. This story is about a band that gets a huge deal with a 20-percent royalty rate and a million dollar advance.... What happens to that million dollars? They spend half a million to record their album. That leaves the band with \$500,000. They pay \$100,000 to their manager for 20-percent commission. They pay \$25,000 each to their lawyer and business manager. That leaves \$350,000 for the four band members to split. After \$170,000 in taxes, there's 180,000 left. That comes out to 45,000 per person.... The record is a big hit and sells a million copies. So, this band releases two singles and makes two videos. The video costs a million dollars to make and 50 percent of the video production costs are recouped out of the band's royalties. The band gets \$200,000 in tour support which is 100 percent recoupable. The record company spends \$300,000 on

independent radio promotion. You have to pay to get your song on the radio.... All of those independent costs are charged to the band. Since the original million-dollar advance is also recoupable, the band owes 2 million to the record company. If all of the million records are sold at full price with no discounts or record clubs, the band earns 2 million in royalties. Two million dollars in royalties minus \$2 million in recoupable expenses equals...zero. How much does the record company make? They grossed 11 million" (Love 2000).

She goes on to suggest that the advent of downloading technology is about the same old deal for musicians—with a new, more promising, twist: "Recording artists have essentially been giving their music away for free under the old system, so new technology that exposes our music to a larger audience can only be a good thing." (Love 2000) Indeed, she believes that MP3 files sound like "shit," which actually encourages kids who like what they hear on the internet to go out and buy the CD. She adds that it also exposes the public to music they might not otherwise have access to. "I'm leaving" the major label companies, she finally announces to the suits in the crowd as her speech rolls to an end. "I'm gonna do my own thing:

If you want some little obedient slave content provider, then fine. But I think most musicians don't want to be responsible for your clean-cut, wholesome, all-American, sugar corrosive, cancer-causing, all white people, no-women-allowed soda pop lifestyle...So as a defiant moody artist worth my salt, I've got to think of something else. Tampax, maybe (Love 2000)

What fascinates me about this performance is, although it is sprinkled with ugly-angry-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtneyspeak as the last quotation attests, is that so many people concentrated on and responded favorably to her as one-hell-of-a-smart-cookie; the girl with the big brain, one that is totally sane, in the know and impressive.



Readers wrote back to *Salon.com* expressing a variety of admiring sentiments.<sup>47</sup> Many begin like this one: “Wow, I take back any and all bad things I may have said about Courtney Love.” Or J. Pope writes, “I used to think of Courtney as Nirvana’s version of Yoko.” However, he explains that he has friends who did the “signed by a major label thing,” one of whom he writes is bankrupt and suffering from the loss of his house, his wife and the band’s own name (which the record company still owns). Pope concludes by thanking Courtney for doing the math and having the guts to go public with it. Also on *Salon.com*, Thomas Lipscond, Chairman of the Center for the Digital Future, writes: “As an expert on intellectual property, an author, editor and publisher...I have NEVER seen such a fine wrap-up written by anyone.” Although Courtney is still signed with the majors she condemns, I am fascinated by this glimpse of Courtney that suggests that when the ironic, unruly, seemingly crazy, bad girl, rockstar chick chills out, sheds her newfound celebrity skin and meets the math geek, people seem much more willing to hear and endorse what she has to say. However, I wonder: if one-hell-of-a-smart-cookie was Courtney’s main persona, could she, to re-quote Tegenkamp, have “completely knocked the rock world flat on its ass” by staging the slut, re-doing the madwoman, turning ugliness into a strategic performance and then reworking it all in ways that highlight elegance as artifice? (Tegenkamp 1998). I suspect not. And I think it’s a shame that one needs to dress down, tone down and prove one’s math proficiency in order to be considered intelligent.

## Babygotbackical

I was asked about [Eminem] earlier. And you're not going to like my answer but I said, 'Where's the female one?' That's my fucking answer...

Courtney Love<sup>48</sup>

If, like Courtney, you have ever wondered what Eminem would look like adorned in female drag and accompanied by feminist sex radical politics infused with laughter, I would like to introduce you to Concetta Kirshner's Princess Superstar.<sup>49</sup> Kirshner is the CEO of Corrupt Conglomerate; a record label that she created that features her in the guise of Princess Superstar.<sup>50</sup> Kirshner calls Princess "this persona" which a *New Music Express* reporter describes as "NYC's premier salacious 'n' sassy lo-fi hip hop Aphrodite" (Abrau 2002; Martin 2001). Kirshner defines her music as "flip-flop" because it oscillates between hip hop and electronica with a bit of punk (Farr 2001). Her entire oeuvre also reverses convenient conventions associated with genre, gender and race. Journalists call Princess the female Eminem, or as she raps, "they call me the other white meat."<sup>51</sup> They also love to liken her to a Caucasian L'il Kim—but she's a bit like both Em and Kim and then some (Barton 2000; Watson 2002; Tucker 2002). Campy, trampy and whip-smarty, Princess Superstar is a not-so-nice Jewish girl with a song titled "I Hope I Sell a lot of Records at Christmastime."<sup>52</sup> In Kirshner's own words, Princess is also both a feminist and "a fucking slut" (Barlow 2002). And as Princess boasts, "I'm topical, unstoppable, babygotbackical, one day 'I'm gonna own everything like I was an apostrophe."<sup>53</sup> Watching Princess Superstar play dress-up on stage is like flipping through a combo of *Vogue*, *Vice* and *Vibe* on acid. *The Village Voice*'s Chris Barton sums it up perfectly when he writes that Kirshner is "a grant shy of performance art:

One night, [Princess Superstar] appears in full Chanel regalia, summoning the long-lost spirit of Linda Evans from *Dynasty* more than, say, Mary J. Blige. The next night, she's a new-wave freak show in black latex and rooster hair, popping and locking like a robot and breaking out a mini-Casio keyboard, more Beck than Beck himself. And as soon as *that* image becomes too familiar, she's wrapping her body in Christmas lights under a see-through plastic jumpsuit, mascara smeared, rolling around the stage like some kinda pagan yuletide sacrifice (Barton 2000).

As reviewers enthuse about her, dropping key words like irony, feminism, sex and whiteness, I feel like I can't keep her out of my show.

### **Not-So-Kool-Keith**

In "Kool Keith," Princess launches a hilarious attack on the sexist ways in which women's bodies have been used to market hip hop.<sup>54</sup> As the song opens, Princess approaches Kool Keith with a hidden microphone and begs the hip-hopster to let her photograph his ass for her next album cover. Now this dude is infamous for trying to pick up chicks—including Kirschner—by telling them just how much he would like to see their butt in a thong in the artwork covering his next CD.<sup>55</sup> But when Superstar asks for similar goods for her CDs, he mutters and stutters and looks for a way out. With sassy mock sincerity in keeping with instrumental irony, Princess reassures him: "Keith, I know you are *sensitive* and *vulnerable* man, and you know, I would *never* exploit you." The rapster hems and hums some more and then concludes that he's just gotta say no, because "hey, you tryin' to destroy *my* career?" Dude just dug his own grave. And Princess is about to get supremely "babygotbackical." Just in case anyone missed Keith's self-burial, his words are looped into the song: "you tryin' to destroy *my* career / you tryin' to destroy *my* career / you tryin' to destroy *my* career?" Princess responds by evoking observational irony: "Ha! That's what *he* says to *me*? / How you gonna say that

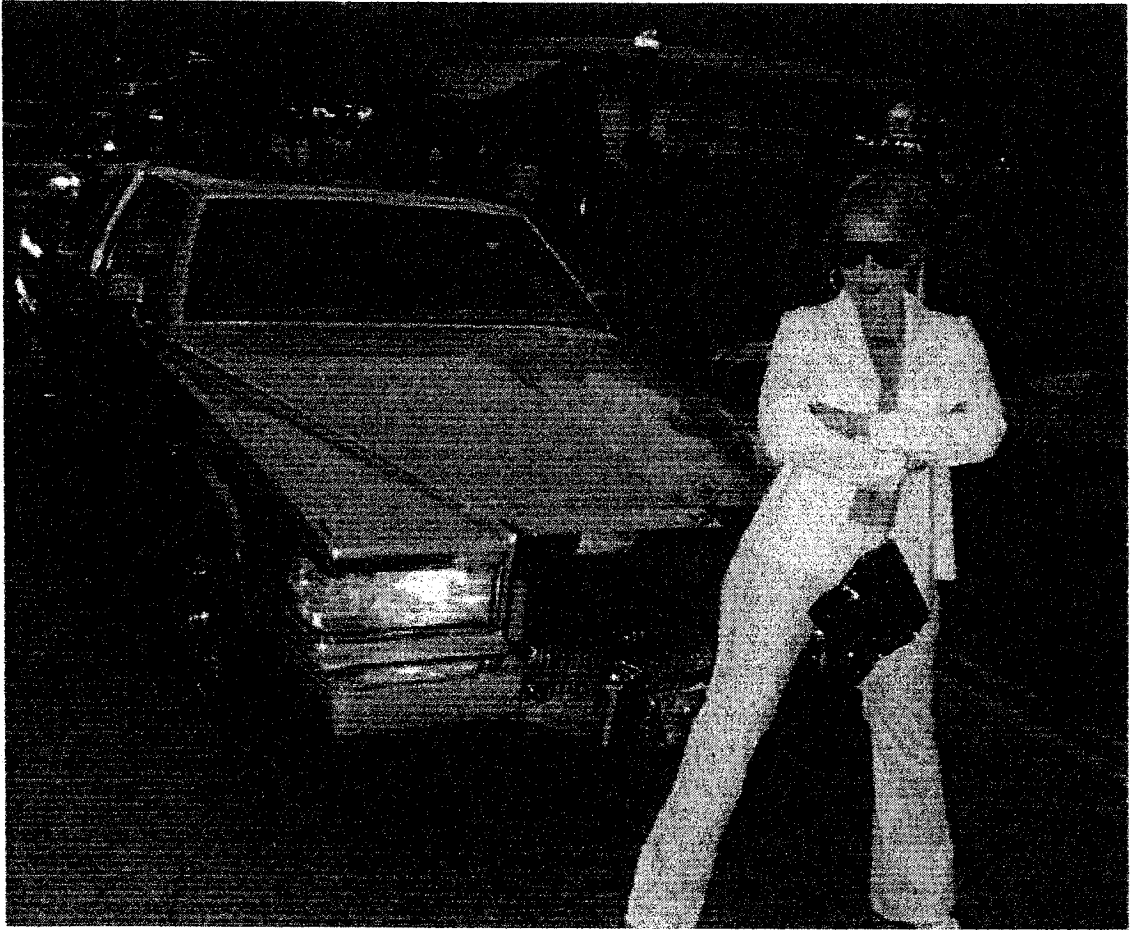
Mr. Doom insane rat sandwich / Dr. Octagynocologist?" Kirschner says that this is one of her favorite tracks as it combines feminist critique with humor. Funny feminism, continues Kirschner, is a strategic way to get folks in the know and into the show. "With politics, I'm not preachy. I'm in your face, but in a tongue and cheek way.... When you start preaching to people, they turn off" (Schatz 2003, 77).

### **NYC Cunt**

In "NYC Cunt", Superstar is the celebrity slut of the day: "righteous, vicious, suspicious" CEO and bitchy, sex crazed white nympho.<sup>56</sup> She grudgingly signs autographs, wails at her hairdresser and steals bottles of champagne from her adoring fans. The song features a chorus of people yelling out "Cunt! New York City! New York City! Cunt!" as Princess delivers a lust letter to Princess: "Hey check me! / fresh candy on the shelf / when I think about me / I touch myself." She then proceeds to investigate the dynamics of bad girl/fan interactions. "I am a cunt, but that's what *you* want," she repeats once, twice, three, four times. In other words, if Princess is the latest nasty 'ho to trick on stage, the kids in the crowd are no better than johns. And "yo check it," she points out, she's also Concetta Kirschner: CEO. In this world of staging the slut via self pimping, Kirschner/Princess comes out on top. She's playing the game and exposing it at the same time.<sup>57</sup> She's Nicolini's dream slut come true. Moreover, as "cunt" flip flops into a term of endearment, the last of the substitute words for unruly women to grace this chapter loses its misogynist connotations.<sup>58</sup>

## **Bad Bad Babysitter**

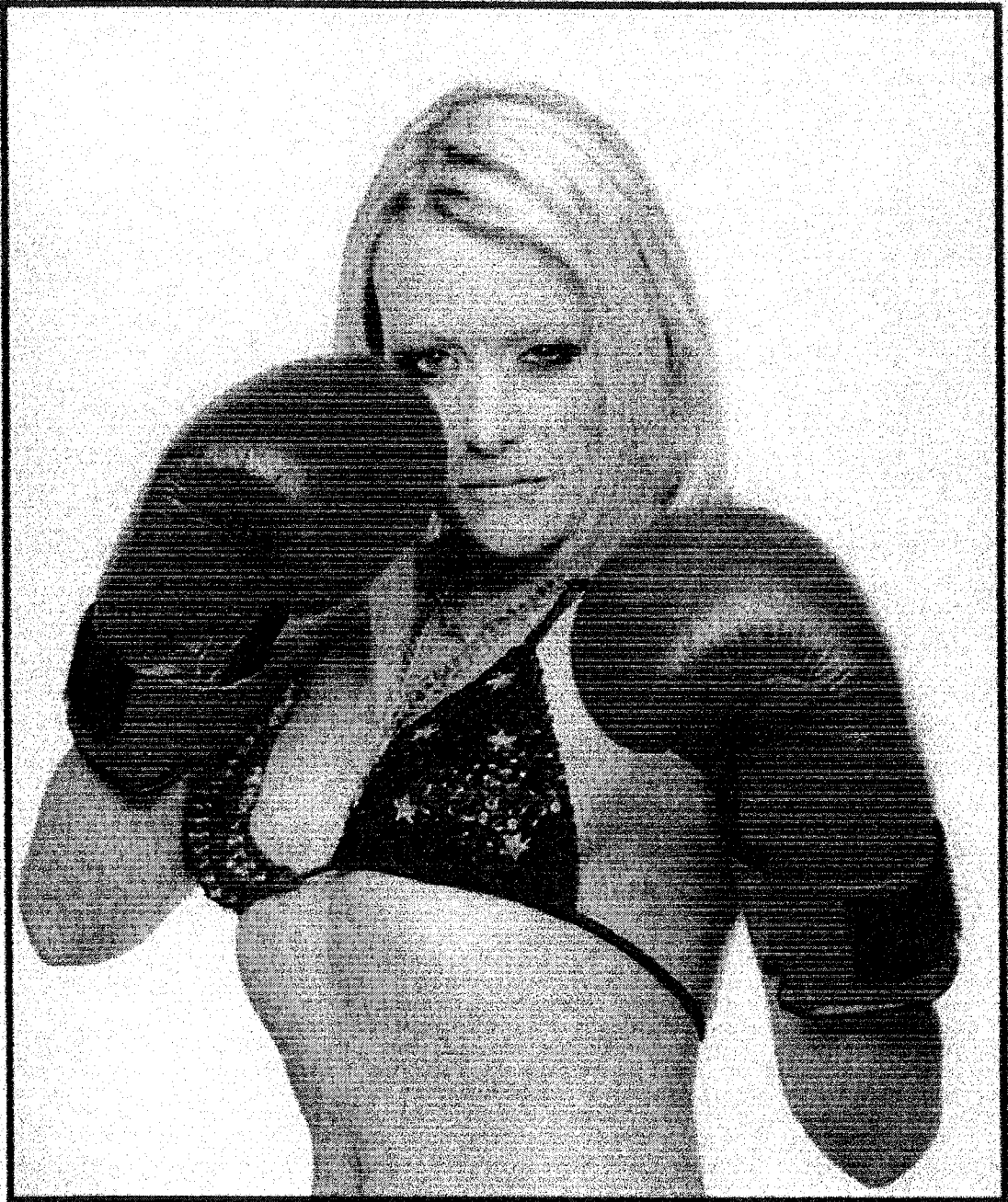
The “Bad Babysitter” song is a hilarious call out to rebel girls to play with the rules—not to mention norms—of nurturing, sweet teen femininity that tend to surround barely-paid child care work.<sup>59</sup> Via ironic overstatement, Princess brags on about how she terrorizes Josh, the tiny tot in her care, while she gets it on with herself and a little help from a friend: “I’m a bad babysitter / got my boyfriend in the shower / Woo! I’m making 6 bucks an hour” goes the chorus to the song that turns into *Home Alone* with a kinky twist. She dresses Josh up in mom’s Chanel outfits, gives him some of dad’s prescription drugs, then makes him go play under the sink while she does herself on the couch with a cucumber. “Don’t worry,” she tells him, “I’ll put it back in the fridgidaire / nice and crisp in the tupperware.” Josh pukes after mixing the drugs with six bags of unmade Jello. Princess’ response? “Stop throwing up / you clean up the rug / I’m not paid enough.” When Josh complains, “I want my mommy!” Princess goes, “I want yo daddy as well / but if you tell you’ll get sickle cell and die and go straight to hell.” After a beat she adds: “Well if you don’t like it I can leave / Believe me that’s what the scary monsters want.” Rather than a bedtime story, Josh gets a warning that “Freddy Kruger might let him see his mom in the morning.” Then he’s tossed into his room early since the boyfriend is finally out of the shower and it’s, like, blowjob time! Little Josh is left with final parting words of wisdom from the Superstar herself: “One day you’ll know how nice it is to get laid while you’re getting paid.” And I think to myself: babysitters of the world unite—sabotage the night!



**Figure 5. Princess Playa (2001).**

## Irony in Action

Interestingly, unlike in the majority of Courtney scenarios I've reviewed, journalists seem quick to catch on to, and play up, the irony and feminism that they associate with Superstar. "For the most part," says Kirschner, "I've been lucky—people do tend to get what I'm doing" (Schatz 2003, 77). Perhaps it's because in contrast to Courtney, Kirschner is quick to proudly evoke the other f-word in interviews. Speaking about songs like "Kool Keith's Ass" she elaborates on the power of using observational irony as a feminist strategy. "I just turned all that [Kool Keith, Dr, Dre, Biggie, Eminem objectify-the-chicks] shit around. Nope, I'm the one doing this! I love that song because it's a real powerful feminist take on hip-hop. And it's funny, too."<sup>60</sup> Yet, she is quick to highlight the double-jeopardy inherent in her blend of serious play; "the press understands the irony and the humor, but sometimes that irony will go over people's heads and that's when I get into trouble, because they think I'm just talking about sex, sex, sex..." (Tucker 2002). Moreover, although Superstar is the Queen of Crazy Costumes with a wickedly unruly, semiotically delinquent style, Kirschner has won the genetic lottery. Tall, blonde, beautiful and blessed with Playboy Centerfold breasts, Kirschner was born with the assets that Courtney Love paid a fortune for. In short, she's not just "fresh candy"—she's eye candy. And that's never a liability. The 28-year-old Superstar is also just the "right" age to signify the ultimate in to-fuck-or-be-fuckedness.<sup>61</sup> As she describes dealing with distributors, "I'd send them the artwork for the CD cover, and I'd get [dumb guy voice], 'Whoa, is that you? You are hot!' And I'd say 'Listen, are you going to take an order or not?'" (Shatz 2003, 78).



**Figure 6. Eye Candy Superstar (2000).**



However, Kirschner is always quick to remind the press and thus her fans that she's no blonde bimbo; rather she's the indie-DIY girl who created Superstar and who runs Corrupt Conglomerate. "Dr. Dre put Eminem on," she stresses, "this one put that one on, but nobody put me on, I put myself on" <sup>62</sup> Although this inevitably helps elicit feminist-friendly responses to her sexual/textual play, I am not quite convinced that this is the crucial factor. Rather, it strikes me that Kirschner's overtly constructed persona, Princess Superstar, and her playground—the stage—encourage fans and journalists to read her antics in keeping with irony and/in pleurably playful politics. Indeed, the campy, comic, topsy-turvy, irreverent carnivalesque aesthetic that is inseparable from all that makes up Princess Superstar invites ironic interpretations. By contrast, it seems that since early Courtney's Courtneys are often perceived as inseparable from the "real Love," and as they tend to teeter on the edge of angry self-destruction in spheres that are difficult to delimit as either on-stage or off, most seem unable (or unwilling?) to interpret her deeds in quotation marks. Similarly, Courtney's haute-couture-celebrity-skinny Courtney mostly gets read as evidence of Courtney "growing up"—rather than as Courtney displaying different versions of femininity and identity with irony.

### **Privileged in White**

Yet what I find most remarkable about Superstar is her status as white novelty and anomaly. There has never been a white "it-girl" in hip hop. In turn, both fans and journalists who rarely describe the Riot Grrrls, Liz and Courtney as white can't quite let Princess' skin go unmarked. Nor can I. To borrow Richard Dyer's words, this could work towards decentering what appears to be white invisibility by "making whiteness strange"

(Dyer 1997, 3). However, when I read reviews suggesting that L'il Kim and Missy Elliot might need to move over and make way for Superstar who they say is way more witty, ferocious, precocious and political, it seems that although whiteness is finally in the spotlight, white privilege remains out of sight.<sup>63</sup>

If, as we have seen, staging the (white) slut involves complex choreography, how would it work for black women who have been historically coded as always already on the bad side of the good girl/bad girl binary? (Tolman and Higgins 1994, 208; Gilman 121). Although Missy and Li'l Kim, for instance, play with the Jezebel stereotype, it is not surprising that they aren't as "in-your-face" explicit as Princess. Nor is it all that puzzling that Missy and L'il Kim don't align themselves with feminism in ways that could help contextualize their work. As Joan Morgan writes, many black female hip hopsters have a tenuous relationship to feminism, dismissing it as a white girl thing. "Not that there aren't black women out there actively seeking agendas of empowerment—be it personal or otherwise—but let's face it, sistas ain't exactly checkin' it for the f-word" (Morgan 1999, 52).

Similarly, as Morgan, Rose and bell hooks all stress, when it comes to critiquing sexism in hip hop, black female critics and rappers often find themselves in compromising positions (Morgan 1999, 74; hooks 1994, 116; Rose 1994, 178). On the one hand, explains hooks, the boys need to be accountable and made to feel responsible for perpetuating sexism. On the other hand, such critiques must contextualize the ways in which black male sexism is often a product of pent-up frustration regarding black male subordination (hooks 1994, 116). Indeed, Rose shows how Queen Latifah and Salt 'n Pepa's tunes from the early '90s engage in a juggling act that involves calling the boys on

their sexist attitudes while simultaneously trying to remind listeners of the ways in which black men have become what Morgan calls an “endangered species” (Rose 1994, 178).

Morgan refers to the latter as the “Black Male Empathy Reflex” (Morgan 1999, 41). She elaborates:

Black folks in the nineties are living and loving in a war zone. My decision to expose myself to the sexism of Dr. Dre, Ice Cube, Snoop Dog, or the Notorious B.I.G is really my plea to my brothers to tell me who they are. I need to know why they are so angry at me. Why is disrespecting me one of the few things that make them feel like men? What’s the haps, what are you going through on the daily that’s got you acting so foul? (Morgan 1999, 72).

Since Superstar doesn’t ask such questions, it’s no small wonder her rhymes seem to strike some as edgier. Or, in Morgan’s words, white girls like Hannah, Courtney and Kirschner can play hardcore sexual politics with less angst because “they don’t call their men ‘brothers’” (Morgan 1999, 36). And that’s something she says she finds sadly enviable (Morgan 1999, 36).

Moreover, such grrrls don’t only have sex radical discourses to jumpstart and anchor their doings—they also have social and economic capital at work. Although Courtney’s punk credibility has always been in question in the press, she got her start on Caroline, a small feminist-fueled indie label that was seeking to give voice to the unruly grrrl rage that permeated the Seattle scene in the early 1990s. Princess Superstar’s more comic carnivalesque choreography is brought to you by a venture grant from Wall Street’s Financial Women’s Association where Kirschner once worked as a webmistress. She also maxed out her three credit cards, and supplanted that with a loan from her parents, both of whom are psychiatrists (Mobioustrip 2002). Female African American rapsters like Li’l Kim and Missy have not had access to Wall Street grants and wealthy

parental loans that enable one to begin DIY enterprises<sup>64</sup> Moreover, although theorists such as Chris Wodskou enthuse about indie/DIY music making spheres; such spaces are not necessarily as anti-capitalist, pro-women or non-racist as he assumes (Wodskou 1995, 30-31).<sup>65</sup> Finally, as Rana Emerson points out, hip hop is still a zone where legitimacy and credibility is equated with masculinity—and men like Dr. Dre and Notorious B.I.G often finance the show (Emerson 2002, 237). Indeed, Notorious BIG put L'il Kim on, while Timbaland gave Missy her start-up cred.<sup>66</sup> Thus the girls are in the difficult place of balancing their critiques against the interests of those for whom they work.

Finally, Princess' words about whiteness hardly shed light on blackness. As Rose points out, the niche that young black rappers have carved out creates a "relatively free play zone" where female rappers can speak to one another, the boys and the fans about "sexual promiscuity, emotional commitment, infidelity, the drug trade, racial politics, and black cultural history" (Rose 1994, 146). To her credit, Kirschner is quick to acknowledge her musical debts to hip hop. Moreover, Princess doesn't try to *be* ghetto—rather, she raps about het sexuality, feminist sexual politics and her uneasy alliances with both dominant and hip hop culture. But is listening and loving Princess a bit like digging Eminem: white people get to get down and funky with hip hop without having to really think about racial inequalities? (White 2003, 180).

Ideally, if Princess' flip flops fly up the charts, her hits will continue to be informed by and could even reinform black girl hip hop in a way that creates new dialogical spheres that cross class, color and religious lines. Generally speaking, writes Rose, in NYC white and black co-exist in tensely demarcated geographical spheres; whereas at a Princess show it is often the case that black and white, boys and girls, punk

and hip hop co-mingle (Martin 2000). It's a promising sight that, in the words of Russo, could lead to "new political aggregates—provisional, uncomfortable, even conflictual coalitions of bodies which respect the concept of situated knowledges and refuse to keep every body in its place" (Russo 1994, 16). Unfortunately, as Kirschner's media coverage suggests, it could also be otherwise.

### **Utopic Yearnings**

Yet I still feel compelled to imagine my own—albeit highly utopic—musical tomorrowland. I somehow get a date with Michael Franti, Scarlot Harlot, Missy, Li'l Kim, the Le Tigre ladies and Superstar. We sit around and get smashed on vodka Kool-Aids while blowing bubbles from the Dollar Store. We envision and set out to create endlessly morphing mixtures of beautifully monstrous political performances; fueled by rage; informed by feminism, queer theory, anti-racist insights and alive with pleasure and play. We disagree, we digress, we doubt ourselves, we laugh. We argue—a lot. I learn more than books can teach me. And since I'm the one doing the dreaming here, somebody actually turns to me and asks: what's Courtney Love got to do with all this? For the first time in a decade, I think I may know what I want to say. But then again, maybe I've got it all wrong.

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### **Notes to Chapter 3**

<sup>1</sup> Riot Grrrl has been given much academic attention over the last decade. Thus this chapter does not seek to explore Riot Grrrl in great detail, but rather to use some of the themes that the grrrls and grrrl scholars have evoked as a backdrop for a larger discussion on Courtney Love and Princess Superstar. For two excellent and widely cited analyses of Riot Grrrl, see Marion Leonard's "Rebel girl, you are the queen of my world" (1997) and Mary Celeste Kearney's "The missing links" (1997). Other relevant works that engage with Riot Grrrl and inform this chapter include: Emily White's "Revolution girl style now" (1995), Michelle Goldberg's "Grrl, you'll be a cliché soon" (2000), Allison Jacques' "You can run but you can't hide" (2001), and Neil

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Nehring's final chapter in *Popular music, gender, and postmodernism* titled "The Riot Grrrls and carnival" (1997).

<sup>2</sup> For photographs, see "Riot Grrrls" and "Kathleen Hannah" in Juno 1986.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term "indie" here in its most literal sense. In other words, I am referring to record labels that refer to themselves as "independent" since they are not commercially affiliated with major record labels. However, I briefly problematize the often righteous, utopic and transcendent assumptions associated with the concept "indie" and/or the DIY ethic in the section on Princess Superstar. Although these sounds and sights seemed musically new to me, Riot Grrrl has precursors in female/feminist punk bands from the late 1970s into the early 1980s such as The Slits, The Runaways, Siouxsie and the Banshees, as well as Lydia Lunch. However, the novelty here, as many point out, is that the women associated with the early punk movement did not—or could not—organize themselves into such a widespread recognizable feminist network à la Riot Grrrl, since the cultural/musical landscape in England and America was still so male-dominated (Murphy 2001; Reynolds and Press 1995, 331).

<sup>4</sup> This took place at the 1992 Reading Festival in England. Donita Sparks recalls: "I swung it [the bloody tampon] around my head, threw it out into the audience, and all these kids are yelling—they think I'm throwing out a lighter or something—and someone caught it, realized what it was and threw it back on stage" (Crist 1993, 33).

<sup>5</sup> To date, I have published two short pieces on irony and the unruly in relationship to grrrl culture. For more, see Diner 2001; and Steenbergen and Diner 2003.

<sup>6</sup> Emily White speaks of "traditional Olympia girl style" which she describes as follows: "short-cropped, dyed hair; wadded-up vintage dresses; bright Woolworth's clothing..." (White 1995, 398).

<sup>7</sup> Also see, for example, Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller's *The Bust guide to the new girl order*.

<sup>8</sup> Yeshivas are schools for those who have grown up or who want to become Orthodox Jews. Bleyer elaborates on her experience at the Machon Alte yeshiva in Tsfat, Israel: "We had classes all day in Talmud, Torah, Kabbalah and various tracts of chabad tradition.... A couple of times a week, we had classes that were essentially Jewish home economics—teaching us how to run a halahically Jewish home by preparing for Shabbat, honoring our husbands, raising our children and attending to the various domestic duties prescribed for women" (Bleyer 2001, 19).

<sup>9</sup> For more on the debates regarding the blackout, see Jacques' "You can run but you can't hide" (2001), Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald's "Smells like teen spirit: Riot grrrls, revolution and women in independent rock" (1994), as well as Cathy Greenblatt's "Unwilling icons: Riot Grrrl meets the press" (1996).

<sup>10</sup> In Cohen 1995.

<sup>11</sup> After spending her adolescence in and out of various juvenile detention centers, Courtney Love spent her late teens touring America and Europe where she often worked as a daytime stripper. In 1986, she appeared in *Sid and Nancy*. She founded the band Hole in 1989. In 1992, she married Kurt Cobain. Almost a year to the date of the birth of their daughter, Frances Bean, Kurt died. In

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1996, Courtney was nominated for a Golden Globe award for her starring role in *The People vs. Larry Flint*. The following year, Courtney appeared in *Man on the Moon*. Hole has released 3 CDs: *Pretty on the Inside* (1991), *Live Through This* (1994) and *Celebrity Skin* (2001). For more, see Rolling Stone's biography archive, <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/bio.asp?oid=4136&cf=4136>; Rossi 1996; and Halperin and Wallace 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Although many of the articles referenced in this section on Courtney cite these accusations, the most damning and damaging coverage appears in Ian Halperin and Max Wallace's book *Who Killed Kurt Cobain: The Mysterious Death of an Icon* (1999) and Nick Broomfield's documentary *Kurt and Courtney* (1998).

<sup>13</sup> On *My Brother the Cow*.

<sup>14</sup> In conversation with Steenbergen, 21 October 2003. Also see Steenbergen and Diner 2003.

<sup>15</sup> I wrote the first draft on Courtney during the summer of 2003, prior to Courtney's first public overdose on the prescription drug OxyCotin on October 2, 2003. At the time, Hole was no longer a band, but Courtney had plans to release a CD of her own: *America's Sweetheart*. As I edit this chapter during February 2004, the CD launch is planned for Feb 12. I will comment on the significance of the overdose, and what *People* magazine is calling "The Unraveling of Courtney Love" among other issues in the conclusion to this dissertation (Smolow 2003, 83-84).

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion on these two personas in relationship to authenticity, see Murphie 2001.

<sup>17</sup> I am using these names for heuristic purposes. Another theorist could easily create their own various versions of Courtney's personas.

<sup>18</sup> The exception here is Finley's I'm-just-an-everyday-kind-of-performance-artist-who-happens-to-be-on-stage-chatting-about-period-stains-and-so-on who more closely resembles the concept of personas that I am evoking in relationship to Courtney's Courtneys. When it comes to the concept of persona, I am playing with and opening up the literary definition of persona as a "person who is understood to be speaking (or thinking or writing) a particular work chosen by the author for artistic purposes" to include one who is singing and performing on stage, which I have borrowed from *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <http://www.britanica.com/eb/article?eu=0&query+persona&ct=>.

<sup>19</sup> Eileraas' article also features other bands that have been associated with Riot Grrrl such as Babes in Toyland, Huggy Bear and Seven Year Bitch.

<sup>20</sup> Lyrics from "Loaded," other imagery from "Garbage Man" and "Good Sis/Bad Sis," all of which are on *Pretty on the Inside*.

<sup>21</sup> From "Pretty on the Inside" on *Pretty on the Inside*.

<sup>22</sup> On *Pretty on the Inside*.

<sup>23</sup> From "Miss World" on *Live Through This*.

<sup>24</sup> In spite of the so-called sexual revolution that purportedly occurred in the 1970s, Leonora Tannenbaum writes that in the sphere that constitutes female sexuality girls continue to be

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divided into two camps: there are good girls and there are bad ones. Good girls, continue Tolman and Higgins, buy into and perpetuate the myth that they are relatively passionless. They know that their role is to regulate male sexuality (Tolman and Higgins 1996, 205–206). If and when they do put out, it's in the sanctified context of a romantic relationship in conjunction with his desire (Tannenbaum 2000, 103). Moreover, since any girl can make a slut of herself if she's not careful, most good girls avoid and re-direct bad girl contagion as though it's a plague gone awry. Speaking of being slut-bashed as a teen, Tannenbaum writes: "If they [the girls at school] called me a 'slut,' it meant that they themselves (girls who had actually done the same thing, or who had considered doing the same thing) were pure and good" (Tannenbaum 2000, 18). In short, playing the good girl game has a host of advantages. You are considered "decent, normal and healthy" (Tannenbaum 1994, 205). Specifically, in the hell that makes up high school hallways, you can live the ultimate "girl-dream: to be liked, loved, respected and popular" (Nicolini 1995).

Bad Girls fall or are forced into contrasting quarters. If girls unapologetically express their sexual agency, choose casual sex over long-term het mating rituals, queer sex over straight and essentially refuse to conform to the norms of conventional female sexuality, they are often bashed and scorned as sluts. Strangely enough, sluts don't even have to sleep around to earn their reputation—working class kids with the "wrong clothes" tend to be territorialized as always already "trampy." She's considered to be the "girl without a future" (Tannenbaum 2000, xvi). Moreover, female black bodies with their ties to the exotic and erotic are almost always already rooted in the realm of animalistic sexuality (Tolman and Higgins 1996, 208). Loud-mouth lipstick-chicks who wear black, read Foucault and just say no to cheerleading are also at risk. As Tannenbaum emphasizes, "Very often the label is a stand-in for something else: the extent to which a girl fails to conform to the idea of 'normal' appearance and behavior. A girl's sexual status is a metaphor for how well she fits into the American ideal of femininity" (Tannenbaum 2000, xv).

<sup>25</sup> I am drawing on and playing with Butler's take on the category "woman" in *Gender Trouble*.

<sup>26</sup> As Lillian Robinson writes, much recent feminist work on sex implicitly suggests that "'real' heterosexual feminists—under fifty, forty, maybe—...are the ones expected to be feminists [joined by] some others still hanging in there (by our silver threads?), albeit potentially frustrated by the joint operation of sexism and ageism that is [assumed to be] our personal problem" (Robinson 1995, 12, 11). Or, as an anonymous feminist artist cited in Frueh's text states, "There is not an erotics for older women. You're out of the game" (Frueh 2001, 71).

<sup>27</sup> From "Violet" on *Live Through This*.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the photograph featuring the trio at the MTV awards in the photo section of Rossi 1996.

<sup>29</sup> In order to secure and literally insure her role as Althea Flynt, Courtney agreed to undergo weekly urine tests for non-prescription drugs like heroin and coke while filming the movie (Rossi 1996, 261; Halperin and Wallace 1999, 193–194).

<sup>30</sup> For instance, Peter Schjeldahl describes his response to Sherman's early *Untitled Film Stills* as follows: "As a male, I also find these pictures sentimentally charming, and sometimes fiercely erotic: I am in love with every look at the insecure blonde in the nighttime city.... I am responding to Sherman's knack shared with many movie actresses, of projecting feminine vulnerability thereby triggering [masculine] urges to ravish and/or protect" (Schjeldahl 1984,



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9). For a discussion of similar interpretations of Sherman as well as Hannah Wilke, Lynda Benglis, Schneeman in relationship to postmodern feminism, see Hutcheon's *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989), especially 156-157, 159.

<sup>31</sup> In Fricke 1994.

<sup>32</sup> From "I'll Stick Around" on *The Foo Fighters*.

<sup>33</sup> From "Quotes from the Quotable."

<sup>34</sup> Other telling high memoirs regarding heroin as a highly addictive substance include Jim Carroll's *Forced Entries* (1987) and *The Basketball Diaries* (1987).

<sup>35</sup> Campbell's *Using Women* stresses the various ways in which America's war against drugs tends to target and terrorize people of color and/or the poor. One of the most devastating consequences of this "war" is how it deters drug using women from seeking pre-natal care: "pregnant addicts have vainly sought treatment, only to be turned away to face criminal charges" (Campbell 2000, 140). I am not suggesting that pregnant women *should* do coke, crack or junk all day. Rather I want to point out the ways in which this discipline/surveillance/punishment paradigm is highly problematic.

<sup>36</sup> "Quotes from the Quotable."

<sup>37</sup> Ferguson theorizes along similar lines when she writes that "some willingness to inhabit the terrain of humanist feminism is necessary to protect oneself against" oppressive everyday power relations (Ferguson 1993, 59).

<sup>38</sup> Available on-line at: <http://www.askmen.com/women/singer/20bcourtneylove.html>.

<sup>39</sup> From "Reasons to be Beautiful" on *Celebrity Skin*

<sup>40</sup> Courtney's been arrested several times for "disruptive behaviour and endangering an aircraft." For more, see Manelis' "The Hole truth;" and "Courtney Love arrested," <http://www.dotmusic.com/artists/Hole/news/February2003/news28176.asp>.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, see Schwichtenberg 1992.

<sup>42</sup> As Balsamo writes: "One of the consequences of the commodification and, correspondingly the normalization of cosmetic surgery is that electing not to have cosmetic surgery is sometimes interpreted as a failure to deploy all available resources to maintain a youthful, and therefore socially acceptable and attractive, body appearance" (Balsamo 1996, 66).

<sup>43</sup> From *Celebrity Skin*, "Awful" and "Reasons to Be Beautiful" on *Celebrity Skin*.

<sup>44</sup> Lyrics from "Celebrity Skin" and "Heaven Tonight" on *Celebrity Skin*.

<sup>45</sup> Indeed, Britney emphatically denies that the kiss was "a lesbian kiss." Moreover, both Britney and Madonna claim that the other is responsible for the length of the kiss. For more, see "I am not a Lesbian, says Britney." Also, for critiques of "queer appropriation" as titillation for pop culture

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consumption that actually works to reinscribe heterosexuality as the norm, see for example Dianne Raymond's. "Popular Culture and Queer Representation" (2003).

<sup>46</sup> Lyrics from "Sweet Music" on *Stay Human*.

<sup>47</sup> Quotations taken from "Letters to the editor: Readers cheer Courtney Love's rant against major labels" (2000).

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Baltin 2000.

<sup>49</sup> Once again, at the risk of oversimplifying a more complex phenomenon, this section refers to Kirschner as the woman who runs Corrupt Conglomerate, gives interviews as Concetta Kirschner and produces the concepts, music and lyrics that give rise to the persona that is Princess Superstar. Following Kirschner, I refer to Princess Superstar as the persona who sings the lyrics and works the stage.

<sup>50</sup> In 1995, Concetta Kirschner dropped out of NYU where she was studying to be an actress. She then went on to work as a webmistress on Wall Street. In 1997, she founded her own record label, A Big Rich Major Label, whose name changed Corrupt Conglomerate in 1999. She generally collaborates with Curtis Curtis who mixes with her in the studio. But Kirschner writes the lyrics, the music and plays guitar, keyboard and drums. Her CDs include *Strictly Platinum* (1995), *Last of the Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Composers* (1999) and *Princess Superstar Is* (2000). "Bad Babysitter" made it to #11 on Britain's top 40 list. Kirschner is also a DJ who is now touring with DJ Alexandre Technique, with a show called *DJs Are Not Rockstars*.

<sup>51</sup> From "Cunt" on *Last of the Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Composers*.

<sup>52</sup> On *Last of the Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Composers*.

<sup>53</sup> Lyrics from "Do it Like a Robot" on *Last of the Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Composers*.

<sup>54</sup> On *Last of the Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Composers*.

<sup>55</sup> Kirschner elaborates: "What happened was, when I was out in LA, I'm friends with [Keith's] manager, and we all went out, and Keith was like "why don't you come with me after the party and pose for my record cover in a thong?" And he totally does this to all these girls just to take pictures of girls in thongs! It's quite a good little racket he's got going on. So I was totally like, I'm gonna flip this shit around, like y'know what? You pose for my record cover in a thong! Fuck that! So when he came through to New York, I was on a mission." For more, see: "Sleazation Feature" 2000.

<sup>56</sup> On *Last of the Great 20<sup>th</sup> Century Composers*.

<sup>57</sup> Once again, Hannah Wilke and Cindy Sherman's early work around themselves as both subject and object of the camera's gaze come to mind.

<sup>58</sup> For more on feminist reasons to reclaim cunt, see: Inga Muscio's anthology *Cunt*.

<sup>59</sup> On *Princess Superstar Is...*

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<sup>60</sup> From “Sleazation Feature” 2001.

<sup>61</sup> Frueh refers to this as “fuckability,” which she claims is linked to young women’s reproductive abilities, their potential to approximate ideal beauty and their status as having a body that “men want and women covet” (Frueh 2001, 137, 61). As Frueh writes, it is problematic that “the postreproductive body is unfuckable—erotically taboo—because it is not a site of male fertility/creativity; it is a tomb for men who seek immortality rather than the pleasures enjoyed by two mortals” (Frueh 2001, 61). Also see note 30 in this chapter.

<sup>62</sup> “Putting on” refers to the idea of “sponsorship” from an already established male hip hop artist who produces, hypes and thus “legitimizes” the music. Being “put on” tends to be the norm for white boys and all women in hip hop. For more, see Rana Emerson’s “Where My Girls At?” (2002).

<sup>63</sup> See for example, Abrau 2002; Barton 2000; and Shatz 2003, 78. For more on L’il Kim, see her discography and biography at <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/default.asp?oid=2956>. Missy Elliot’s discography and biography is at <http://www.rollingstone.com/artists/default.asp?oid=2751>. Both rappers are known for their sexually explicit lyrics.

<sup>64</sup> Both L’il Kim and Missy Elliot come from low income families.

<sup>65</sup> See for example Stephen Lee’s “Re-examining the concept of the independent record company” and Holly Kruse’s “Subcultural identity in alternative music culture.” Moreover, Wodskou maintains that bands like the Sex Pistols and Nirvana are problematic because their music is “contained and controlled by the very relations of production they were supposed to be subverting, and which in turn normalized and codified subversiveness with a consumerist formation (Wodskou 1995, 26-27). Yet, once again, I find this deduction overdeterministic. As Neil Nehring writes, this emphasis on “productivism” takes punk rock or (grunge) and “completely determines, or limits, the possibilities of both the artistic product itself and the way people respond to it” (Nehring 1997, 25)

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Authenticate This!

### Spiderwoman's Spectacles and Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña's *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*

#### Not-So-Exotic-Indians

We started dying before the snow, and like the snow, we continued to fall. It was surprising there were so many of us left to die.... But the earth is limitless and so is luck and so were our people once....

Louise Erdrich  
*Tracks*

I once explained "American Indian" legal rights and the consequent demands of the American Indian Movement to a member of the Institute for Policy Studies. His response was, "But that would break up the United States!" Suppose Germany had begun with the holocaust and its denial. The intellectual or political admission of the situation might cause a breaking up of the state. But the comparison is a little silly. The USA is a continual and movable holocaust.

Jimmie Durham  
"Cowboys and..."

Sometimes our laughter is our only weapon. In spite of efforts to declaw, detooth, detail the Coyote or trickster within us, we continue to find something about our oppression as Aboriginal people funny.

Marie Annharte Baker  
"An Old Indian Trick is to Laugh"

Over the past twenty-five years, while Finley and friends were rude-girling out, the Riot Grrrls were kicking up their storm, Courtney was making headlines and Princess Superstar was getting flip-floppy, Gerald Vizenor suggests that "postindian warriors" were and continue to be busy making their absence strangely present via unruly humor, irony and serious play (Vizenor 1994, 4-5).<sup>1</sup> Call it a renaissance of unmaking, one that

features a diverse array of writers, photographers, theorists and performers who disrupt white dreams of distant pristine authentic Others frozen like ice cubes in time; who refuse to allow America to wallow in amnesia, and who laugh at the egocentric driven New Age quest for a spirituality appropriated in bits and pieces from Aboriginal traditions repackaged as authentic and marketed for western consumption.<sup>2</sup> These wayward warriors also take issue with the decontextualized, often benevolent, journalistic gaze that reproduces and recycles images of reservation bodies reeking of alcohol and deserving of pity, and counter them with imaginative stagings—crossbred narrative recreations in the form of trickster tales that call colonial and “nouveau colonial” scripts into question (Foley 1999, 48).<sup>3</sup>

Louise Erdrich (1988, 1994, 1996), for instance, writes novels in which Indian spirits summon both ancient ancestors and visions of hot dogs at the Dairy Queen; where dreams flicker like channels, changing quickly from past to present until they intermingle like an MTV video with a Native cast. In Erdrich’s world, *The Bingo Palace* is the new Teepee. Identity is hybrid—truly fake. Yet family is everywhere: selves are thus understood as creations amongst familial relations. And humor leaps through the text, shifting from one story and context to the next, suggesting that laughter may be one of the keys to survival.<sup>4</sup>

A postindian trickster is alive and giggling in Lori Blondeau’s photograph starring and titled *Cosmosquaw* (1996), grinning with irony as she twists the dirty squaw /pocahontas princess binary into the present where post-contact Native American women live in a nouveau colonial world that is hardly immune to contemporary sexism, casino dreams and pop culture imagery.<sup>5</sup> The photo is a picture of a copy of a cover of a



Figure 7. Cosmosquaw Lori Blondeau (1996).

*Cosmopolitan* magazine, except the model is chunkier, darker, with hair more feathered than the average Kate Moss-ette. Headlines announcing the themes of the non-existent articles featured in the mock mag include: “10 Easy Makeup Tips for a Killer Bingoface!” and “Learn How to Spoon-feed your Man!” In *Mohawks in Beehives* (1992) Shelly Niro also refuses to vanish, to solidify into a pose from the past or to embody new-age Native goddess figures when she photographs herself in black and white, clad in Marilyn Monroe movie star gear—scarf, sunglasses and cigarette in the proper place—but with a face still looking a little too colored to fit right in. Handwritten captions framing similar shots also show that her hardly stereotypical everyday veers every which way: “she became depressed that soap operas had no ending...that she could never find the missing sock in the dryer...and that Native Issues would not be solved in her lifetime.”<sup>6</sup> In the words of Paula Gunn Allen, these Native American cultural workers shift the terrain as they refuse to play the authenticity sweepstakes and reveal themselves as people who are not so easy to recognize, corner, condense, corral and control:

One of the major issues facing twenty-first-century Native Americans is how we, multicultural by definition—either as Native American or American Indian—will retain our “Indianness” while participating in global culture.... With the growing influence of Gambler on reservations, Old Man Coyote riding freely the waves of popular consciousness, and Old Man Missionary fenced in by his own barbed wire conventions, boundaries have grown permeable, wide open spaces abound. Gee, it’s almost like old times! (Gunn Allen 1998, 6-7).

As I reread this quote I hear Spiderwoman laughing. Once again, I think back to their performance of *Winnetou’s Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City* which I re-set as one of the introductory scenes to open this dissertation. I remember their ironic take on new age instant-Indian-making—the “vomit sauce...porcupine piss...yum yum from a bum...running asshole... and skunk cum” that makes up the Yataholey brew that they

serve at the mock-workshop which turns whites into the romantic figures that many long to be, and I recall the photograph of a long dead Indian whom one can become, nostalgically, for a fee (Mayo, Miguel and Miguel 1991, 95).

Spiderwoman's *Sun, Moon, Feather* (1981) also jumps to mind. Here the trio turn the tables on themselves as they re-enact hilarious childhood memories of re-staging the Cowboys and Indians Hollywood classic *Girl of the Golden West*. As they morph into versions of their kid-like selves, they fight over who gets to be the good guy—which, in their case, is the white girl. Then Gloria recalls a time at a powwow when they heard their uncle trying to get people inside one of the circus tents by ballyhooing, “Cheedebeecho! Chedebeecho! Cheedebeecho!” Hearing such a seemingly ancient chant, she remembers that special feeling of pride that accompanies learning words from the old languages. However, she quickly goes on to remind herself that some years later she learned that what her Uncle was really screaming was, “See the big show! See the big show! See the big show!”

But just when the audience really starts laughing, explains Lisa Mayo, “Then—POW!—we get them with the real stuff...” (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 166). This “stuff” is often made up of stories: tales of their father’s drinking, his violent tendencies and his death are accompanied by talk about their incredibly deep rage at the ways in which Native peoples have been fucked over and over and over again. Such “stuff” thus involves bodies—those of Spiderwoman in particular—that are revealed to be both constituted through the discursive effects of colonial and “post” colonial imagery as well as inseparable from the insights that ensue when one’s everyday is spent in a body demarcated as doubly Other.



This chapter continues to evoke Spiderwoman's spectacles and the critical commentary that they provoke regarding Native identity and its relationship to hybridity, memory, visibility and authenticity as well as the commodification of the exotic Aboriginal body.<sup>7</sup> Starting with *Sun, Moon, Feather*, I propose that Spiderwoman rely on ironic juxtaposition in order to flesh out the concept of hybridity with specificity. Drawing on *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* (1990) along with *Sun, Moon, Feather*, I show how provisional irony as a sensibility circulates in ways that suggest that concepts like Native identity, visibility and memory are always elusive and unstable. Yet they are simultaneously, however paradoxically, impossibly necessary points of reference that can be used to highlight oppressive neocolonial power relations. I then return to *Winnetou* in order to suggest that via instrumental and observational irony, Spiderwoman imply that there is nothing novel about the new-age fascination with All Things Native. Rather, it is seeped in a dangerous combination of nostalgia, commodity capitalism and colonial conquering that functions to erase the present in favor of the past. Spiderwoman's words and bodies, I go on to propose, are highly unruly, carnivalesque and grotesque. The worlds that they evoke, and the bodies that they inhabit, are open to and inseparable from the ancestral, the organic and the spiritual. Yet, I reflect on why their particular cosmic visions cannot be easily commodified. The figure of the trickster and her laughter also reverberate across Spiderwoman's stages. I take a moment to consider what trickster laughter can do and un-do. Although Spiderwoman's work is rife with irony and alive and kicking with unruly bodies, they have not caused the kinds of scandal associated with Finley and Courtney. I offer a variety of speculations as to why this may be the case. But before I close the show, I ask you to wander with me as I re-present Fusco and Gómez-

Peña's highly controversial *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*—a satirical take on the Western practice of exhibiting the Other featuring Fusco and Gómez-Peña as a recently undiscovered-discovered Indigenous couple from a make-believe island, caged and on display, as they travel across a variety of elite American and European museums and exhibition grounds. To Fusco's surprise, many believed the put-on, and the show became a topic of debate amongst museum officials, artists and critics. I draw on Fusco's essay "The Other History of Intercultural Performance" and the video *The Couple in the Cage* to re-articulate various responses from spectators who witnessed *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* and to discuss how and why, according to Fusco, many of the spectators who fell for the show also, quite revealingly, fell into the role of colonial curiosity-seeker. I also re-articulate Fusco's response to those critics who accuse Fusco and Gómez-Peña of misinforming audiences who did not see the irony in their act, and I reiterate her reply to those who posit that the couple's performance thus failed to undermine the spectacle of Otherness that it sought to critique. However, I posit that the circulation of the essay and the video subsequent to the performances suggests that irony is never a one-shot deal. Indeed, its very "failure" to spark in the eyes of many who saw their show is precisely what makes their performances, as well as the essay and video about their performances, so thought-provoking. Lastly, I highlight Diana Taylor's insights, which posit that *The Couple in the Cage* problematically perpetuates the ethnographic codes that it calls into question by reducing mainly white spectators of the show and their commentary into decontextualized material for study. In response, I suggest that although Taylor has a point, Fusco's reverse-ethnography offers interesting glimpses into the politics of turning oneself and others into a spectacle.

## Hybrid Stagings

What to make of such syncretism, such hybrid perspectives in which categories of difference lose their clean edges, their appropriate delineations?

Rebecca Schneider  
*The Explicit Body in Performance*

As not-so-exotic postindian players, Spiderwoman engage with a politics and poetics of hybridity that call dominant assumptions about America's Indigenous bodies as romantic icons lost to the past, as tragic bodies suffering in the present and/or as mysterious contemporary entities located outside America's mythic majority into question. Such hybrid stagings also complicate Native projects, like Kim Anderson's, that work from the assumption that "tribal essence" grounds First Nations female identity in relationship to a singular, self-evident "unadulterated version of our history" (Anderson 2000, 131, 141). In turn, binary-bound borders between premodern and postmodern, traditional and popular, subject and object, sacred and profane bleed:

Notions of ontological identity metamorphose into a conjunctural play of identifications. Purity gives way to "contamination." Rigid paradigms collapse into sliding metonymies. Erect, militant postures give way to an orgy of "positionalities." Once secure boundaries become more porous: an iconography of barbed-wire frontiers mutates into images of fluidity and crossing (Stam 1999, 60).

Here, ironic juxtaposition is often deployed in order to contaminate that which many assume to be pure. Moreover, like slut, whore, cunt and queer, hybrid in its twisted current usage evokes a politics of instrumentally ironic reappropriation. Or as Stam writes:

The valorization of hybridity, it should be noted, is itself a form of *jujitsu*, because within colonial discourse the question of hybridity was linked to the prejudice against race mixing, the "degeneration of blood," and the putative infertility of mulattoes (Stam 1999, 60).

Yet in spite of, or perhaps to spite, its playful and porous potential, hybridity will never be a problem-free concept. Ella Shohat, for instance, warns against the ways in which one can unify and homogenize “diverse modalities of hybridity” under a one-size-fits-all-Others banner that fails to differentiate between “forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political co-option...and creative transcendence” (Shohat 1992, 110). And Julia Emberley posits that hybrid figures can become a sight of theoretical celebration whereby “marginality gains a certain currency” removed from everyday, site-specific pleasures, pains and practices (Emberley 1993, 164). As Stam stresses:

Hybridity has never been a peaceful encounter, a tension-free theme park; it has always been deeply entangled with colonial violence. Although for some hybridity is lived as just another metaphor within a Derridian free play, for others it is lived as pain and visceral memory” (Stam 1992, 60).

As Spiderwoman evoke and embody hybridity it becomes a concept that is open to neither simple celebration nor easy solidification; rather it revolves around roots that stem from and through their personal histories, everyday activities and family stories that are always open-ended, open to revision and fueled by laughter, rage and sadness.

Ironic juxtaposition could be the subtitle to Spiderwoman’s plays and ploys that often revolve around stories; stories that flesh out hybridity, that pronounce presence while diluting essence. *Sun, Moon, Feather* begins by evoking Spiderwoman’s ancestry. Mom is an American Rappahannock Native, dad is of Kuna descent from a small fishing village near Panama. They recite and repeat these names: Kuna, Rappahannock, Kuna, Rappahannock, Kuna, Rappahannock. In turn, the prominence of the “mythical plains ‘Indian’ of the US West” —the ones Americans love to emulate, Hollywood adores featuring and anthropologists tend to study—is decentered by what a former Provost at

UCLA problematically calls the “insignificant tribes” (Gunn Allen 1998, 164).<sup>8</sup> Then we see sepia-toned family photos of mom; an elegant looking lady with a 1920s flapper cut. Muriel describes her as “petite, lively, light-skinned.” She looks to me like an old white movie star whose name I can’t quite place. Spiderwoman themselves are clad in long silk peignoirs. Periodically, they break into happy song, evoking the choruses of old show tunes in a way that sounds like they were once on Broadway. There’s not a drum in sight. Recognition of difference as “Otherness” is frustrated by cognitive dissonance. Where are All Things Indian? But wait, we soon see photos of dad looking like Sitting Bull only to find out that his job in America involved playing Indian for paying white tourists at put-on Snake Oil shows in Brooklyn. Here, Spiderwoman lovingly and laughingly recount the various tricks and over-the-top props he concocted to connote Indianness. How can one authenticate this? Lisa then goes on to tell us about how she married a nice, Orthodox Jewish man and learned to cook kosher. Such stories, writes Julia Emberley, challenge the “‘law of representation,’ in which an authentic Native subjectivity must be claimed in order to maintain uncontaminated cultural differences between Native and white” (Emberley 1993, 160).

In Gunn Allen’s words, Spiderwoman’s tales also show that “American Indian people remain curiously difficult to categorize, “vibrant, dynamic and alive”—part of America and thus ideally difficult to “disown, reject, repress or romanticize” (Gunn Allen 1998, 164). As both Gunn Allen and Emberley stress, Spiderwoman’s stories also imply that a category like Native is hardly homogeneous; rather, a plethora and plurality of differences inevitably exist under its rubric, shaped, in part, by factors like rural living,



**Figure 8. Antonio Miguel, A.K.A. Eagle Eye, playing Indian in Manhattan (n.d.).**

city dwelling, tribal affiliations, family relations and proximity or distance from disparate reservations (Emberley 1993, 96; Gunn Allen 1998, 4-7).

### **Identify Me?**

In keeping with what I characterize as Spiderwoman's provisionally ironic sensibility, the sisters' humorous, hybrid stories in *Sun, Moon, Feather* suggest that American Indian identity is a construct open to metatheoretical inquiry as well as a material site of both painful and pleasurable inscription. For instance, their stories about dad playing Indian for pay suggests that, as Vizenor's Baudrillardian work implies, the category Indian is a copy with no original (Vizenor 1994, 4-5).<sup>9</sup> Moreover, as Spiderwoman shake up their own sense of a familiar and stable identity by highlighting their lack of familiarity with Native tongues, Lisa's ability to speak Yiddish fluently, and their extensive knowledge of Broadway hits, they thus inevitably trouble the foundations upon which an imperialist and colonialist sense of self stands firmly in relationship to, and thus differentiation from, a pure and untouched "Other." In other words, they refuse to play "Other" to a white "Self." Rather, they make a promising mockery out of both positions. Yet, once again, just when the audience really starts laughing, "Pow!"—they gesture towards the visceral everyday dimensions that seem inseparable from the effects that work to produce a category like Native identity. "Look! Look! Look at the Indians eating!" Lisa recalls her shame at hearing the tourists exclaim as the sisters sat down for a lunch break while visiting dad at the Snake Oil show. "Don't wanna marry no Indian—they're all drunkards," all three remember swearing to themselves as teens who aced Internalized Racist Stereotypes 101. "Dad died 'cause he couldn't find a way to live in the white man's world," concludes Muriel as *Sun, Moon, Feather* comes to a close. In

turn, one senses how, paradoxically, any claim to a proper and stable category like Native is inevitably problematic yet crucially critical, as necessary as it is impossible (Gunn Allen 1998, 8). Or, in Rebecca Schneider's words:

Much of Spiderwoman's work is related to the issue of "Indianness," adroitly played in the painful space between the need to claim an "authentic" Native identity and their awareness of the appropriation and the historical commodification of the signs of that authenticity (Schneider 1997, 161).

It is in this place—this "space between need and awareness"—that I believe Spiderwoman's seemingly contradictory ironic sensibility vis-à-vis identity is at its most intense and insightful. Trinh T. Minh-ha describes the logic behind such strategic choreography:

You who understand the dehumanization of forced removal-relocation-reeducation-redefinition, the humiliation of having to falsify your own reality, your voice—you know and often you cannot say it. You try and keep on trying to unsay it, for if you don't they will not fail to fill in the blanks on your behalf, and you will be said (Trinh 1989, 80).

Or, put yet another way, "If she does not ravel and unravel his universe, she will then remain silent, looking at him looking at her (Trinh 1989, 47).

### **Remember Me?**

Spiderwoman also sprinkle a solemnly giggly dose of provisional irony on to the terrain of memory. *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* also revolves around stories: the sisters talk about the time that dad's been drinking, and when mom was in a trance, then they tell the tale about interrupting the white kids putting on a séance. Gloria remembers Lisa, or more specifically, she re-cites how she looked like a tourist in her polyester pants over at the Laos corn dance. Muriel describes the times when their Grandmother came into her head. "She talked," says Muriel, "and my face turned soft...it's grandmother inside my



head...and, she talked, from behind my eyes...and my head split open and..." (Mayo, Miguel and Miguel 1992, 205). As they take turns rooting through the past, they revel in the extraordinary revealed as ordinary and re-told in sketchy, Samuel Beckett style snippets. Often they pause and interrupt one another in mock horror, "Just *what* did you tell those people?" they ask each other again and again (Mayo, Miguel and Miguel 1992, 194, 201, 207). Indeed, sometimes it's hard to know. Moreover, in *Sun, Moon, Feather Spiderwoman* actually wonder aloud: What was mom's favorite song? How does the story about dad's boat end? Memory becomes elusive, dodgy, impossible to grasp yet close at hand. I hear Susan Suleiman's words echo through Spiderwoman's tapestry of memory:

*Remember? Who you are?* the theorist in me bristles...to calm her righteous indignation, I will rephrase the question. When are you old enough to re-member who you "are"? The hyphen makes explicit and emphasizes what is always true about the activity of remembering: it is not a passive reception of memories fixed forever like a series of faded images in a scrapbook, but an active (re) construction, a putting together and shaping of a life or part of a life.... Hence the quotation marks around the verb "to be" which indicate the necessary tentativeness, the necessary self-doubt...the necessary irony, in every discourse about the self (Suleiman 1994, 3).

Indeed, in an amnesiac society, Gunn Allen maintains that reflexive "*desperada*" diaries of "re-creation" featuring stories like the ones that Spiderwoman sow are highly promising even as they —or particularly because they—subject memory to provisionality via irony as sensibility (Gunn Allen 1998, 129).

### **See Me?**

The sisters also engage in a provisionally ironic juggling act vis-à-vis the politics of visibility. In *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, flowers sit in a vase on a table. Lisa announces

that they are dead. Muriel calls them withered. They question each other's sense of sight over and over: "dead," says Lisa, "withered," counters Muriel, "dead" says Lisa, "withered" counters Muriel and so they go back and forth and on and on (Mayo, Miguel and Miguel 1992, 192-193). *Sun, Moon, Feather* features grainy home video footage of dad doing Indian at a Snake Oil show interspersed with uncannily similar brighter powwow-style scenes from Hollywood westerns. At a certain point, the film sequences get grainier and the home video bits become lighter—it's hard to tell which reel features Spiderwoman's real dad. Indeed, as Joan Scott argues, it is problematic to assume that sight can anchor knowledge, that "vision is a direct, unmediated apprehension of a world of objects" (Scott 1992, 23). Or in everyday speak, Scott argues that seeing need not necessarily lead to believing. She goes on to suggest that theoretical/political endeavors that seek to reveal what has been silenced by relying on that which can be seen often do so at the risk of reifying and reproducing binary identity categories that are in need of subversion (Scott 1992, 25).<sup>10</sup> Durham describes the contradictory impulse at the heart of this quandary that faces American Indian representations. Most people, he writes, "know very well who we are, how we look, what we do and what we say—from the narrative of the oppressor" (Durham 2002, 112). Yet, when Native Americans intervene, he continues, the results are differently similar: when whites see art, theater or photographs by Native Americans they often translate this into a problematic sense of knowing "us" as Other (Durham 2002, 112, 114). However, as Gunn Allen points out, Native America is often invisible to the American eye. Some things, she insists, need to get both seen and said:

Some health workers say that over 25 percent of Indian women and 10 percent of Indian men in the United States have been sterilized without their knowledge or

consent. Scratch several hundred thousand future Indians. Many “marry out.” Go to the cities and get lost.... They walk down Telegraph, or Central, or Market or Fifth Avenue. *They see themselves nowhere they look.* Scratch several hundred thousand more. They say, the only good Indian is a dead Indian. There are millions of good Indians somewhere (Gunn Allen 1998, 38; emphasis mine).<sup>11</sup>

I believe that it is the sight of Spiderwoman—alive and kicking up a hybrid storm—that says so much. Moreover, as Spiderwoman weave and leave their tales, engaging in reflexive sightings and counter-sightings, sayings and un-sayings informed by a provisionally ironic sensibility, ideally they make it tough for any body to have the final word about the Other.

### *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City*

There is in the USA a curious phenomenon that is seldom given intellectual *consideration*: whites claiming to be “part-Indian,” and even more, whites who claim to *be* “Indian.” Surely there is not another part of the world where members of the racist oppressor society claim to be members of the oppressed group (The Americans do not, of course, claim any of the concomitant disadvantages).

Jimmie Durham  
“Cowboys and...”

...how are we to understand the social or psychological bases for this postimperial mode of mimicry, this ghost dance of white ethnicity?

Kobena Mercer  
“Black Hair/Style Politics”

As the mock-workshop in *Winnetou* suggests, Spiderwoman also deploy instrumental irony to bite into the heart of new-age, nouveau colonial culture. *Winnetou* targets the wannabes: those whom they claim suffer from “half-breeditis;” who proudly claim to have had a grandmother with some Native blood somewhere along the line (Mayo, Miguel and Miguel 1991, 95). *Winnetou* also takes issue with self-elected “plastic

shamans” who peddle Native spirituality for a fee. In particular, Mayo targets Lynn Andrews, a white woman who says she apprenticed with two Indian medicine women and has learned to channel her shamanistic powers (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 176). Andrews has written many best-selling books, and travels around giving workshops teaching whites to channel their inner shaman. To put it mildly, Mayo finds the phenomena “alarming.”

... these things have been handed down generation after generation. These things have been held in secret for millennia. Now these secrets are being given out to non-Indians who are taking them and selling them to anyone for \$600 a weekend.... The elders feel that it's very detrimental (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 177).<sup>12</sup>

Sun Bear, adds Mayo, is also on to something similar. He's an Ojibway Indian who has created his very own tribe—the Bear Tribe. For a fee, anyone can become part of Sun Bear's tribe, spend time in his sweat lodge and learn Ojibway rites and rituals. Mayo protests:

... we are survivors of a holocaust. Many things have been taken from us. Many have been uprooted. Lots of different ceremonies and rituals were forbidden. Some of them are lost forever. Some tribes are lost forever. Some languages are lost forever, you know. What we have managed to keep through the generations is our spirituality. And so when people come in and try to take that, that's the last straw (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 176).

Finally, Mayo argues that the wannabe, new age quest for “the shaman”—rooted as it is in bygones—also overlooks today's not-so-sweet hereafter. Thus it is not just the past that is at stake—but the present. “What the white search for the shaman misses is the reality of the Native American here and now,” she says, “they're not interested in that. Really for them it would be a lot easier if we would disappear” (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 177). However, that is precisely what Spiderwoman refuse to do.

## **Sacred Parody**

The mock workshop in *Winnetou* strikes me as a supreme example of the hopeful, humorous and seriously playfully political strategies that emerge when the Bakhtinian carnivalesque hits the stage. *Winnetou* can easily be perceived as an updated “sacred parody” of a cultural phenomenon that takes itself oh-so-seriously and solemnly (Bakhtin 1968, 14). As the hyperbolically highly unholy ingredients in their Yataholey stew evoke the lower bodily stratum—the piss and runny asshole-ness of things—the trend is humorously degraded: soiled and “brought down to earth.” (Bakhtin 1968, 20). In this nouveau colonial context, the arrogance and ignorance characterizing the latest in colonial conquest-ing is hopefully degraded in another laughing rejuvenating sense. Or in Bakhtin’s words, “to degrade is to bury, to sow, and to kill simultaneously, in order to bring forth something more and better” (Bakhtin 1968, 21). Here, the humor may also work as a transformative “corrective” (Bakhtin 1968, 22). Or, as Lisa Mayo explains, ideally she wants the workshop to do away with the trend so that Native traditions can flourish unharmed and unhampered by appropriation and commodification (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 178).

## **More Irony**

*Winnetou* is also filled with layers of interconnected instrumental and observational ironies that silently spotlight the assumptions and yearnings that have created the new-age wannabe phenomenon. For instance, the photograph of the dead Indian dating back to 1920, whom one can/cannot become for a fee, silently speaks volumes about the economics of nostalgia that fuel the quest. Non-Native Americans, writes Jean Fischer, have turned the “red noble savage” into the “green Indian” (Fischer

2002, 185). Such a stereotype has been born and bred out of a long lineage of strategic forgetting. Fischer links the green Indian to hippie counterculture movements of the '70s, the new age commodification of the cosmic in the 80s, and eco-movements in the '90s—all of which feed on exclusionary colonial or equally problematic nostalgic images of Indian primitivity associated with the organic and cosmic that echo back to the Romantics (Fischer 2002, 185-6). Or as Peter Kulchyski writes:

Those who once had difficulty being heard now get called, ordered, to live under the injunction of constantly speaking, speaking to the point of exhaustion, speaking as another link in the chain of those who now must be represented: “we love Indians to death” (Kulchyski 1997).<sup>13</sup>

However, as the newly appointed live (white) Indian in the workshop is associated with the picture of the dead Indian, Spiderwoman point to the necrophiliac spirit of such enterprises. In Gunn Allen words:

America has amnesia.... I suppose if I saw myself as murdering, one way or another, several million people and hundreds of cultures, I'd long to forget my past too. The only good Indian is a dead Indian, they said; now that the Indian is presumed dead, he gets better and better all the time (Gunn Allen 1998, 25, 26).

In other words, now that brutal colonial power relations have successfully made sovereign Indigenous sustenance culturally, geographically and environmentally near-impossible; Spiderwoman imply that nouveau colonials seem to feel free to come and take, re-make or romanticize Native spirituality. The only thing “new” about the so-called kinder, gentler, cosmic new age becomes what's bought, stolen or maimed under its guise. Thus, it is sadly ironic, but not surprising, continues Durham, that after the highly televised events of the American Indian Movement (AIM) at Wounded Knee, a market was created for Indian Shamanism<sup>101</sup> in universities, Indian magic crystals appeared in shopping malls and Aboriginal dress become the hottest thing to grace Southwest U.S.

airports—yet living conditions for Native Americans worsened (Durham 2002, 114). In keeping with the logic of commodity fetishism, writes Judith Williamson, products that evoke “images of ‘otherness’ have as their referent an actual Otherness which was and is still being systematically destroyed, first by European then by American capital” (Williamson 1986, 112).

### **Anti-Anthropology**

As the workshop comes to a close, Lisa turns to the crowd, smiles, and utters a single simple sentence: “Thank-you, thank-you, thank-you... for knowing so much more about me than I do” (Mayo, Miguel and Miguel 1991). Here, she engages in classic instrumentally ironic opposite-speak, striking at the heart of anthropological discourse that tends to leak into pop consciousness—the will-to-know the Other. There is nothing “innocent” about this quest, suggests Vizenor. It revels in and merely reveals “an excess of facts, data, narrative, interviews, templates” that for the most part are written in the spirit of “linguistic colonization” (Vizenor 1994, 183). Echoing Vizenor’s words, Trinh writes:

He has introduced law and order into what seemed chaotic and freakish. He has transformed for us the sensational, wild and unaccountable world of “savages” into a number of well-ordered communities governed by law, behaving and thinking according to consistent principles... “discourse,” “law,” “order,” “generalization,” “consistency”—what he values and looks for is, fortunately, what he always finds (Trinh 1989, 56).

And his findings reveal more about the “him” than the “them,” concludes Trinh.<sup>14</sup>

Or, as Mayo spurts out with laughter in an interview, “they think they know all about us from reading books!” (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 178). However, as Spiderwoman show that they know their way around the so-called new age, the objects reveal themselves as

the subjects of a study of their own. Observational irony abounds. Winnetou says little about Native Culture. Rather, it reflects particular white dreams and desires—and they are not pretty. Or in Schneider’s words, Spiderwoman confound what it is a Native troupe is expected to do: “chase after a vanishing point marked as ‘loss,’ the ‘authentic’ rendered by colonialist nostalgia as stuck in time, dislocated, pre-contact” (Schneider 171, 1997).

### **Unruly Indians**

Spiderwoman’s unruly bodies are also in constant violation of the norms that restrict and regulate what “good” Native American female bodies are supposed to be doing. Historically speaking, writes Anderson, the Indian woman—like the land that hardly belonged to Columbus and his buddies—was deemed akin to “virgin frontier, the pure border waiting to be crossed” (Anderson 2000, 101). As an exoticized and eroticized entity à la Pocahontas, the ultimate Native princess willingly worked with and wanted the white man. She was perceived as the pure, primitive Other; the ultimate sexually available object to be discovered and penetrated (Anderson 2000, 102).<sup>15</sup> However, if she stepped out of this role, continues Anderson, she was easily relegated to squaw status: “dirty, lazy and slovenly” (Anderson 2000, 103). Such “squaws” were also framed as savage warriors who deserved the colonial violence inflicted on their bodies and their children (Anderson 2000, 102-3). In contemporary times, the new squaw is the drunken rez welfare mom; whether pitied or hated, she is inevitably perceived as in need of discipline. Off the reservation, the ideal Native woman assimilates: she keeps quiet, keeps sober, keeps clean, keeps punching in 9 to 5 (Gunn Allen 1998, 72). Or, she is the



ultimate new age Native goddess/healer: flowering and flowing with ancient wisdom, healing powers and magic crystals, ready and willing to earth mommy the spiritually bankrupt (Lincoln 1993, 24-25). However, as the title of Gunn Allen's book suggests, *Off the Reservation* can be reframed and reclaimed:

Off the reservation is an expression current in military and political circles. It designates someone who doesn't conform to the limits and boundaries of officialdom, who is unpredictable and thus uncontrollable. Such individuals are seen as threats to the power. They are anomalies: mavericks, renegades, queers (Gunn Allen 1998, 6).

Gunn Allen's book champions those who use their minds and bodies to do it like a renegade—those like Spiderwoman, who speak and move up, out and about in wayward directions.

Evoking Gunn Allen's recipe for the "unpredictable" and "uncontrollable," Spiderwoman are deliciously inappropriate in a myriad of unruly ways. Their hybrid costumes can not be easily confined to any one recognizable, stereotypical look. They may have feathers in their hair, shiny black Mary-Jane shoes on their feet, purple polyester pantsuits adorned with fancy beadwork covering their bodies and faces painted with over-the-top, old school movie star make-up à la Grandma's-gone-to-Florida. Flashy, fleshy, jiggly and juggly, Spiderwoman are also big women who proudly take up sizeable space. "Heavy women" writes Schneider, "aren't supposed to be so clearly free and comfortable with their bodies" (Schneider 1997, 171). Unlike Courtney and Princess Superstar, Spiderwoman don't stage the slut thus running the risk of being reduced to their sexuality. However, they are nobody's good girls. And they are far from ladylike. Indeed, Lisa keeps leaving the stage during *Reverb-ber-ber-rations* because, as she tells the crowd and her sisters, "I've got to pee!" (Mayo, Miguel and Miguel 1990, 187, 209).



**Figure 9. Spiderwoman on stage (n.d.).**

Then when Muriel finally breaks on through to the other side in hopes of hearing a mystic voice, it tells her she's got hemorrhoids. Indeed, throughout Spiderwoman's shows, the sacred secedes into the blasphemous, Native dress meets campy couture, bodies refuse to banish that which has been deemed lower and therefore base, pounds abound—and the sight is spectacular. I think of dead missionaries and the schooling in civilization that they were hell bent on supplying—and I hope they are rolling over in their graves.

### **Spirited Play**

In *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, Spiderwoman's tales also evoke Bakhtinian visions of open grotesque bodies linked to a universe pregnant with cosmic possibility. Everyday conversations between the sisters take place while Grandma climbs into Lisa's head. Mom speaks with ancient spirits that seem as real as the alive/withered/dead flowers on the table. The lower body meets the not-so-nuclear family as Muriel gives birth to an invisible baby that Lisa calls her daughter, sister, mother and aunt. The kid is also the child of familial ghosts that come over for tea. All the sisters sincerely claim to be psychic (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 167). On a similar note, Gloria tells the crowd that "we all possess great powers," while Lisa stresses that she is "the universe" (Mayo, Miguel and Miguel 1990, 211, 212). Such grotesque bodily imagery works to critique modernist notions of the self as a "strictly completed, finished product... isolated, alone, fenced off from other bodies" (Bakhtin 1968, 29). What emerge are visions and versions of bodies without borders—inseparable from the ancestral, the organic and the spirited (Bakhtin 1968, 27).<sup>16</sup> Gunn Allen describes such aesthetics as evoking "a familiarity with what is strange, a willingness to face, to articulate what is beyond belief, to make it seem

natural and frightening at the same time” (Gunn Allen 1981, 376). From a Russo-esque perspective with a postcolonial twist, Jean Rossier Smith suggests that such work also poses a threat to another kind of “normal”: the notion that western linear perceptions of time and space are empirically correct (Rossier Smith 1997, 6).

However, *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, also veers toward evoking a sense of essential Native spirituality that has been used to keep Native peoples tied to an otherworldly *out there* that allows Aboriginal identity to stabilize—rather than to crack and crumble into the *here*. Ferguson writes that although such recent “cosmic feminist” Bakhtinian reconfigurations are a promising response to the “hubris of humanism” which posits the white individual as a self-sustaining entity at the center of a universe to be mastered; such visions are also always in danger of being appropriated and commodified (Ferguson 1993, 104, 111-112).<sup>17</sup> Yet overall, as I picture Spiderwoman’s shows over and over again—the yum yum on a bum and skunk cum that forms part of their Yataholey concoction, the disease they call half-breeditis, the sight of the trio in long silk peignoirs bellowing Broadway tunes, the loving ghost that is grandma entering Muriel’s head in conjunction with the spirit that also tells her she’s got hemorrhoids—I sense something differently cosmic going on. “We are not going to give up our spirituality,” says Mayo (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 178). It is absurd to suggest that Spiderwoman do so. Rather, it is the fusion of the cosmic with the comic as well as the sacred and profane soaked in irony and seeped in family specificity that keeps Spiderwoman’s blend of cosmic feminism from lapsing into a form of totalizing tribal essentialism earnestly tied to a truly recoverable lost tribal past (Schneider 1997, 160). Such a familial spirit world is not one that can be easily bought and sold.

## Trickster Tales

The elusive figure of the trickster also haunts Spiderwoman's stagings in ways that work to keep the sisters' spirituality from becoming neatly repackaged. The trickster, writes Rossier Smith, is quick to evoke the spiritual and pollute it with the blasphemous; to make a mess out of the manners of the many; to play in the intersections of multiple cultures; to traffic in shifted and shifting worlds where the live, dead, human, animal, visible and seemingly invisible share space (Rossier Smith 1997, 3, 5, 7, 8, 14). In short, she treats the seemingly extraordinary as the norm—and she laughs and laughs and laughs her way to survival. Or in Smith Rossier's words:

As liminal beings, tricksters dwell at the crossroads and thresholds and are endlessly multifaceted and ambiguous. Tricksters are uninhibited by social constraints, free to dissolve boundaries and break taboos. Perpetual wanderers, tricksters can escape virtually any situation, and they possess a boundless ability to survive (Smith Rossier 1997, 7).

In *Inj'un Humor*, Kenneth Lincoln suggests that the trickstery mocking, giggling or guffawing threaded through shows like Spiderwoman's tends to be tied to the hopefully survivalist, the helpfully strategic and ultimately to that which is transformative. Reflecting on the roots of Spiderwoman's humor, Mayo confirms that Lincoln's take on laughter and survival is pertinent: "We discovered that the reason we're funny is very unfunny. It's very tragic. Our way of coping with surviving is to cover up a lot of things [with laughter].... You find a way to survive" (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 169). Lincoln writes that such humor works as medicine; a balm "that takes the fatal sting out of history" (Lincoln 1997, 55). However, Mayo also stresses that Spiderwoman deploy their sense of humor in strategic ways. "Pow!" I hear her explaining once again, we hit you with the tough stuff just after you have finished cracking up (cited in Burns

and Hurlbutt 1992, 31). Lincoln elaborates by suggesting that in a mixed audience such humor works as an intercultural invitation to “play” (Lincoln 1997, 25). He adds:

An audience sticks around longer with laughter to ease the listening—indeed, to sharpen the spirit, to loosen the ear, and to wake up our attending...a comic come-on seems the quickest way to attract and hold an audience, then persuade it to come back paying attention (Lincoln 1997, 35).

Moreover, in Spiderwoman’s sphere, it is not only non-natives that become, in Lincoln’s words, a “game to be played with”—rather, the sisters sprinkle themselves with humor (Lincoln 1997, 25). In *Sun, Moon Feather*, for instance, their disenfranchisement from Native culture is often a source of comedy. The Cheedebeecho/See the Big Show story may work to ease the pain or anger Spiderwoman feel, but it also levels out the playing field. As Spiderwoman laugh at themselves, they invite non-Natives to laugh at themselves—thus when things get serious, non-Natives may be more amiable not only to staying tuned, but to thinking self-critically. “So Indian-white tragedies can be alchemized through the alembic of modern red humor; intercultural differences shift toward seriously playful texts, which tell us much about ourselves, American and Native American” (Lincoln 1997, 27).

### **Reviewing the Show**

Mayo says that both Native and non-Native audiences tend to respond favorably to their performances; to laugh as well as listen, and to get the irony in their shows. I suspect that this is because Spiderwoman deliver their messages via both the ironic unstated and the sincerely spoken thus decreasing the multiplicity of interpretations that often occurs when irony takes the stage. Moreover, Spiderwoman perform in small arty venues such as The Theatre for the New City for those “in the know.” However, Finley

caused a ruckus in similarly small spheres. Perhaps Spiderwoman's trickster spirit is simply easier for many to digest than Finley redoing hysteria and evoking homoeroticism or Courtney playing the madwoman whore from hell. Spiderwoman's favorable reception may also have much to do with their main target of critique: new-age-wannabes, who as Mayo confirms, do not often attend their shows (Burns and Hurlbutt 1992, 177). Thus "in the know" whites like me can distance ourselves from Spiderwoman's targets. This allows for an inevitably problematic sense of white-liberal guilt-relief: "we" can laugh with Spiderwoman at "others." Yet, as Lincoln has pointed out, laughter also works as an invitation to think through and about intercultural relations and differences (Lincoln 1997, 27). As Schneider writes, "At moments between the [humorous], they occasionally pause to intimate another experience—an experience of cultural identity that resists the spoof and touches sometimes on a notion of grace, even sanctity, and often pain" (Schneider 1997, 159-160).

However, Spiderwoman aren't completely immune from becoming reduced to that which they critique. As Schneider writes, an issue of *Taxi* contains an article on the sisters that is "hip to their message"—yet it features photographs of Spiderwoman that are altered to look like faded, sepia-toned old pictures thereby re-placing Spiderwoman back into the very version of the romantic pre-contact past that they condemn (Schneider 1997, 163). Dare I evoke the observational I-word? I can't help wondering: what if Spiderwoman's irony was not juxtaposed with more sincere statements? What if they cast their net more widely and publicly? What if their performances moved from small spheres to more institutional sites like museums, exhibition grounds or national festivals? Indeed, as we shall now see in the case of Fusco and Gómez-Peña, serious play that also

involves showing oneself as *show* can go and get read in so many ways—particularly when such ironic dis/play is highly spectacular, unexpected and unaccompanied by overt straight talk.

### **This Show's on You**

In an installation piece in California's Museum of Man, Luiseño Indian artist James Luna put himself in a display case. Viewing "the body," an American white woman said to her husband, "Dear, I think he's alive." The husband replied, "Don't be silly, they don't put live ones in museums."

Jimmie Durham  
"Cowboys and..."

My collaborator, Guillermo Gómez-Peña, and I were intrigued by this legacy of performing the identity of another for a white audience, sensing its implication for us as performance artists dealing with cultural identity in the present. Had things changed, we wondered? How would we know, if not by unleashing those ghosts from a history that could be said to be ours?

Coco Fusco  
"The Other History of Intercultural Performance"

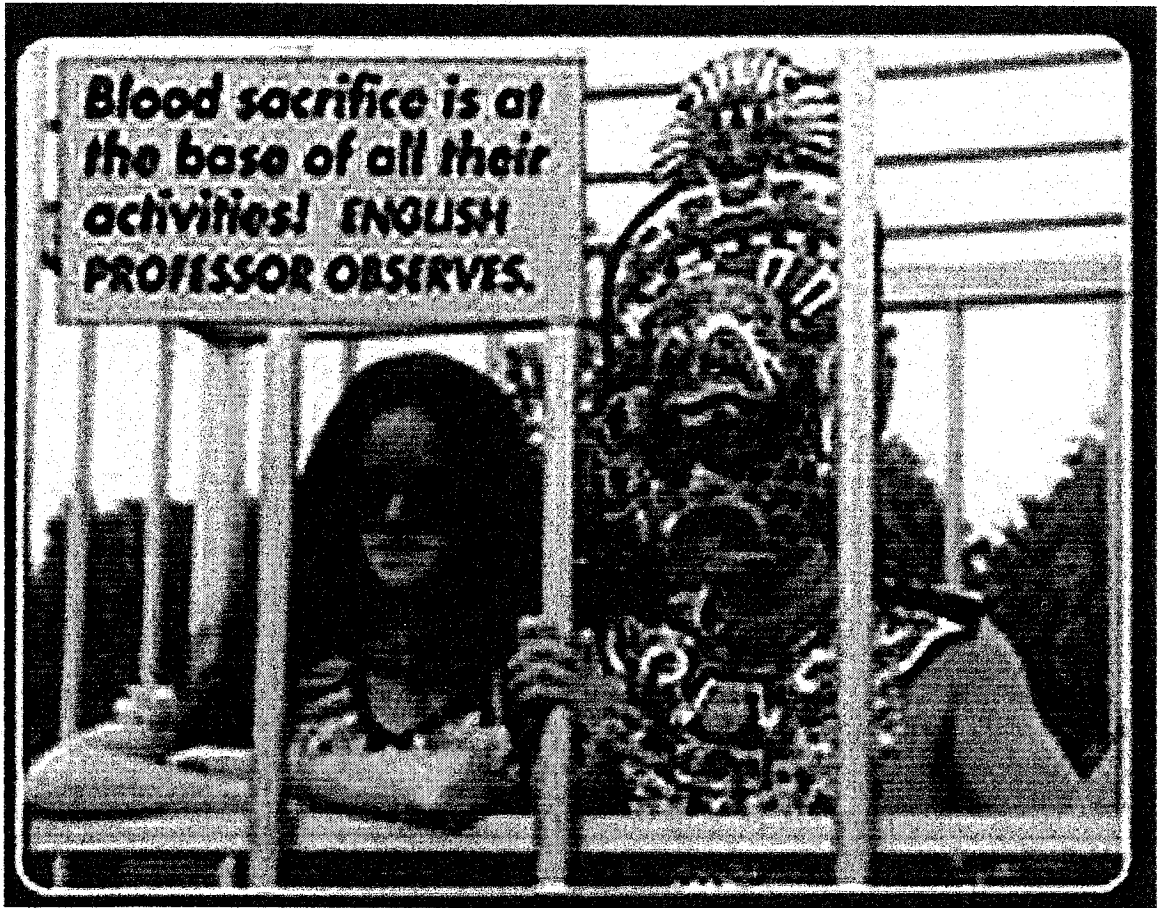
In an interactive performance piece called *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* (1992), Fusco and Gómez-Peña make spectacles of themselves by posing, preening, prancing and dancing while locked in a golden cage in the guise of a recently found tribal couple from the make-believe island of Guatinau. On tour and on display, they roam from Columbus Plaza in Madrid to Washington's Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History to Covent Garden in London and back over to New York's Whitney Museum among other places.<sup>18</sup> Decked out in what Diana Taylor describes as "postcolonial chic," the seemingly imprisoned Fusco sports a grass skirt, black Converse running shoes and a leopard skin bikini top; her hair hangs in long braided extensions made even more hip by a backwards black baseball cap (Taylor 1998, 65). There are green and yellow stripes



painted across her face. Gómez-Peña paces the cage clad in a gold breastplate and the kind of Guatemalan shorts that have become an urban hippie fashion staple, his face covered by what appears to be a latex black and yellow ski mask upon which sits a feathered headdress. His arms and neck are covered in spiked leather jewelry. Both wear fashionably dark sunglasses. Fusco may be seen munching on Saltines, doing an unreal traditional Guatinatean dance to the latest rap tune on her boom box, typing on a laptop or crafting voodoo dolls. Gómez-Peña tells “authentic Amerindian stories,” in a language that makes no sense to anybody, if he is given 50 cents. However, he may also be spotted fondling a TV screen for free. For the adventurous New York set with five bucks to spend, Gómez-Peña will flash a glimpse of real live Guatinatean dick. Folks are also invited to come up to the cage and get a Polaroid picture of themselves with the couple for a mere one dollar. As Taylor writes, the sight is stunningly impressive: “Silent, impassive, enticing, they performed the subaltern in style.... there was something proud, rebellious, humorous, and contemptuous in the way Fusco and Gómez-Peña approached their audiences. Pure critique, and pure *relajo* (Taylor 1998, 165).<sup>19</sup> Indeed, like Spiderwoman, Fusco and Gómez-Peña put their bodies on spectacular display in a way that animates and mocks capitalist colonial and postcolonial desires to both see and buy a bit of the Other.

Ethnography is also on trial here. A plaque simulating a map of the couple’s pretend hometown and a faux Encyclopedia Britannica entry with juicy bits of scientific data leans against the cage:

The male and female specimens here on display are representatives of the dominant tribe from their island, having descended from the Mintomani stock. The male weighs seventy-two kilos, measures 1.77 meters, and is approximately thirty-seven years of age... his frequent pacing in the cage leads experts to believe that he was a political leader on his island.



**Figure 10. Coco Fusco and Guillermo Gómez-Peña,**  
*Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* (1992).

The female weighs sixty-three kilos, measures 1.74 meters, and appears to be in her early thirties.... Her facial and body decorations indicate that she has married into the upper caste of her tribe.

Anthropologists at the Smithsonian observed [with the help of surveillance cameras] that the Guatinauis enjoy gender role playing after dark, transforming many of their functional objects in the cage into makeshift sex toys by night. Visitors who get close to them will note that they often seek to fondle strangers while posing for photographs. They are extremely demonstrative with children (Fusco 1995, 59).

Two guards cum mock-experts in Guatinaui culture are on hand to hype the show. "Step right up, and marvel at these two fine specimen!" yells one guard into a megaphone.

"This display is part of a 500-year tradition of exhibiting Indigenous people started by Columbus!" bellows another. Some visitors seem taken aback by the TV, computer and boom box in the cage. However, the guards are also there to alleviate any confusion.

When summoned by visitors with questions, a guard explains that the television comes as a gift from the mayor upon hearing of the couple's arrival at the museum, whereas some of their pop culture artifacts from North America once washed up on their island on the Gulf of Mexico and have come on tour with them. In a much less playful vein, a second plaque also leans against the cage in jarring contrast to both the first plaque and the seemingly irreverent spirit of the show. Fusco describes it as a "didactic panel" that contains a "chronology with highlights from the history of exhibiting non-western peoples" such as:

1493: An Arawak brought back from the Caribbean by Columbus is left on display in the Spanish court for two years until he dies of sadness.

1810-1815: "The Hottentot Venus" (Sartjee Bartman) is exhibited throughout Europe. After her death, her genitals are dissected by French scientists and remain preserved in Paris's Museum of Man to this day.

- 1905: The sole surviving member of the Yahi tribe of California, Ishi, is captured and displayed for the last five years of his life at the Museum of the University of California. Presented as a symbol of the U.S. defeat of Indian nations, Ishi is labeled the last Stone Age Indian in America.
- 1992: A black woman midget is exhibited at the Minnesota State Fair, billed as Tina Teesha, the Island Princess (Fusco 1995, 39, 41-43).

### Behind the Scenes

We are trying to participate in the Columbus debates in a way that is, hopefully, more complex and irreverent than we see either side embracing: on the one hand, the very fixed ideas of an ultra-conservative position glorifying the Columbian legacy, a position often linked to the New World Order, Free Trade and the entrepreneurial spirit of the Republican administration, things we fundamentally object to; and on the other hand, an ultra-Indigenist, romantic view that believes it is still possible to send Europe back to the old world.

Guillermo Gómez-Peña  
“Unleashing the Demons of History”

Fusco calls *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* a “counter-quincentenary” staging designed to resurrect and reinscribe colonial violations into the celebratory narrative starring Christopher Columbus’ “discovery” that was given its 500th American birthday party over and over again throughout America in 1992 (Fusco 1995, 38). As “a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic primitive Other,” Fusco and Gómez-Peña’s self-exhibition is ghosted by a chronology of similar displays in fairs, freak shows, museums and zoos that, couched in a rhetoric of education, simultaneously managed to evoke a poetics of titillation designed to attract a paying public (Fusco 1995, 41). Historically, Fusco explains, such spectacles were often the brainchild of entrepreneurs backed by anthropologists who sought to bring these “discoveries” to the masses. As objects on display, Ishi, Saartje Benjamin and many nameless Others, were

used to perpetuate pop stereotypes about white superiority and to personify myths about the noble savage and his/her need for just a little more “discipline, civilization and industry” (Fusco 1995, 41). Such sights also served to solidify a white western/dark Other binary thus helping to unify an otherwise heterogeneous European and American population.<sup>20</sup> On a contemporary note, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* is a challenge to the imaginary concept of “happy multiculturalism” which often translates into festivals featuring spectacles of race or ethnicity seeped in the same old colonial language of authenticity, exotica and white dominance:

Unpleasant but important associations have emerged between the displays of old and the multicultural festivals and ethnographic dioramas of the present. The central position of the white spectator, the objective of these events as a confirmation of their position as global consumers of exotic cultures, and the stress on authenticity as an aesthetic value, all remain fundamental to the spectacle of Otherness many continue to enjoy (Fusco 1995, 39, 47).

As Peter Kulchyski notes, although Aboriginal festivals help promote Native performance and artists, when such events are “organized on the principle of the spectacle” they may also serve to “feed the usually already pampered egos of the elite” (Kulchyski 1997).

In an attempt to underline this phenomenon among other issues, Fusco tried to catch people off guard, “to create a surprise or ‘uncanny’ encounter, one in which audiences had to undergo their own process of reflection as to what they were seeing;” videographers circulated amongst the crowds peering at Fusco and Gómez-Peña asking questions and recording audience responses. Fusco and Paula Heredia later created a video, *The Couple in the Cage* (1993), which expresses the intent of the performance, juxtaposes found footage of historical human display with scenes from the couple’s

performances and features many of the audience responses and descriptions of the show that Fusco also describes and comments on in her essay "The Other History of Intercultural Performance." Thus the entire enterprise simultaneously functions as a form of "reverse-ethnography," rife with the observational irony that the exotic Others on display for study and reflection are actually subjects engaged in a study of those who believe they are studying exotic others on display (Fusco 1992, 57). I have drawn heavily on both the video and the essay to re-create and comment on the spectacle through Fusco's eyes.<sup>21</sup>

### **Studying Whiteness**

Much to Fusco's surprise, their mainly white audiences digested the performance at its literal level; seduced by what Hutcheon calls the "said," a variety of museum goers simply did not hear the many "unsaid" that the satiric *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* can convey. "Constantly, from city to city, more than half of our visitors believed our fiction and thought we were 'real,'" writes Fusco (Fusco 1995, 50). The thought that there might be "irony in the Other's self-presentation" did not arise in the minds of many (Fusco 1995, 50). Yet there is plenty of irony circulating at the scene. From a simply instrumentally ironic perspective, Fusco and Gómez-Peña are not "undiscovered Amerindians," Guatinaui is not a country and the zoo guards do not want you to merely "marvel" at the caged display. Yet, in the spirit of satire, Fusco, Gómez-Peña and the guards engage in what Seery calls ironic pretense, or "playing it straight" (Seery 1990, 173). In other words, throughout the entirety of their respective performances, they keep to their role-play, never breaking into another stance that would call their verbal or bodily "said" into question (Seery 1990, 173). Rather, the overall notion that contextually

“something out of whack, off-key, out of tune” is going down is what should cue spectators to read ironically (Seery 1990, 172). Thus one must sense that the observational irony evoked by the sight of caged humans as museum spectacle—on tour throughout so-called “civilized” countries that pride themselves on their humanitarianism—drives home a hard hitting point about “the civilized.” In Emberley’s words, what may become apparent is that “the forces of socio-symbolic regulation imposed on what we receive to be ‘human’ are ironically, terribly, and tragically, ‘inhuman’” (Emberley 1993, 24). Or, one might read the plaque at the front of the cage, featuring a chronology of European practices of exhibiting the Other, and make the following intertextual reference: the couple in the cage are re-presenting a horrific scene featuring the colonial dynamics of exotic human display-to-death. As Taylor writes:

By staging their show in historic sites and museums, they situated the dehumanizing practice [of aboriginal abuse and extermination] in the very heart of these societies’ most revered legitimating structures. The performance (among many other things) repeated the colonialist gesture of producing the “savage” body, and it historicized the practice by highlighting its citational character (Taylor 1998, 163).

Thus, what makes the performance piece so uncomfortably fascinating, powerfully riveting and politically promising is that spectators are asked to re-witness—to see, sense and inevitably participate in the cruel game of colonial show-and-tell as both spectator and object of study. Overall, Columbus’ quincentenary party project is thus revealed to be a celebration of 500 years of colonialist oppression. Ideally, *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* thus silently asks the question: how did the post get into postcolonialism? Such satiric performances, writes Seery, rely on both instrumental and observational irony to produce reciprocal, interactive, thought-provoking, affect-inducing and action-generating bodies of work which counter what he describes as the

didactic impulse toward “moral instruction” where people are flatly told what to think and how to feel (Seery 1990, 190, 193).

### **Reading With the Grain**

However, upon seeing live humans behind bars, Fusco explains that many white Americans and Europeans expressed shock, surprise and discomfort—for about five minutes (Fusco 1995, 50, 52). Those who bought into the act soon fell into the comfortable white western roles of colonial curiosity seekers, consumers, collectors, amateur ethnographers and voyeurs. Scenes from *The Couple in the Cage* show so many well-dressed, seemingly middle-class, smiling men and women happy to have their photo taken with this newest discovery. Many wanted to know more: “where do they sleep, what do they do on their day off?” asks one woman. Another proudly claims that he read all about their island in *National Geographic*. One lady attempts to interpret the symbolism in Gómez-Peña’s storytelling. He seems to be murmuring some kind of prayer at the start of the story, she surmises. Fusco posits that this desire to participate, investigate, speculate and articulate assumptions about the Other works as a shield to deflect the colonial insecurity that stems from one’s sense that it is imperative yet impossible to know him or her (Fusco 1995, 48). The exotic erotic was also never far from the scene. In Irvine, California, Fusco writes, a woman began to pet Gómez-Peña’s legs, moving her hands up as close as she could to his crotch. Guys blew kisses and threw dirty talk Fusco’s way (Fusco 1995, 57). Overall, in the case of the believers, Fusco surmises:

Our experiences in the cage suggested that even though the idea that America is a colonial system is met with resistance—since it contradicts the dominant ideology’s presentation of our system as a democracy—the



audience reactions indicated that colonialist roles have been internalized quite effectively” (Fusco 1995, 48).

Even those who objected to the sight of humans behind bars, adds Fusco, did so in ways that reek of paternalism. “Don’t you realize,” said one English Gentleman to the zoo guards in Covent Garden, “that these poor people have no idea what is happening to them!” (Fusco 1995, 52).

Many visitors who couldn’t quite get into the act expressed anxiety over Fusco and Gómez-Peña’s hybrid play in relationship to notions of authenticity. Fusco recounts that many spent hours staring at the cage trying to explain to themselves how these Guatınai could use computers, smoke cigarettes and sport Converse sneakers with such ease (Fusco 1995, 56). Many also took issue with Fusco’s Island rap dance. “It doesn’t look like something I would see on public TV [filmed by] people who have been to those cultures,” explains one lady. Here, I can’t help but picture Baudrillard smiling to himself.<sup>22</sup> Her husband, on the other hand, expresses both fascination and paternalistic perplexity: “he seems so interested in things he doesn’t understand, like the TV... something about it fascinates him, but I’m not sure why.” The gentleman seems to have forgotten about the myriad of art works, sculptures, icons and so on from developing countries that grace North American living rooms—often put on display by “the fascinated” who know very little about their cultural significance. In Latin America, Fusco recounts that many found her and Gómez-Peña too light skinned to be truly primitive (Fusco 1995, 56). Although a zoo guard tried to reassure them by explaining that the couple live in the rain forest and are thus shielded from the sun, many seemed less than comforted. This obsession with the authentic, the real and the primitive, writes

Fusco, is quite telling. Articulating that which also permeates throughout Spiderwoman's spectacles, Fusco posits that:

The constant concern about our "realness" revealed a need for reassurance that a "true primitive" *did* exist, whether we fit the bill or not, and that she or he be visually identifiable. Anthropologist Roger Bartra sees this desire as being part of a characteristically European dependence on an "uncivilized other" in order to define the Western self (Fusco 1995, 48-49).

Indeed, the myth of the aboriginal body as "over there, outside time, beyond civilization," writes Taylor, lures inevitably destabilized spectators into expressing their desire for "fixed positions, stable identities and recognizable difference" (Taylor 1998, 165).

### **Haunting Identifications**

*Queridos Aborigines,*

Cruelly the truth presents itself. You cannot restore the dignity to the real Aborigines whose pupils were burst after serving as trophies for the smiling "civilized" minotaurs. Most people do not understand. Only a few sense the horror your cage conveys. This piece describes to me the wretched clutch of man and it has cried out the anguish of ancient ancestors.

Your Friend

Letter written to Fusco and Gómez-Peña

Fusco explains that although many non-whites were also taken in by the satire, most tended to respond uncomfortably "*because* of their identification with our situation" (Fusco 1995, 53). Thus, the sight of the couple elicited commentary on slavery and Indigenous genocide, rather than on their ability to understand TV. Empathy was also a common response. Two Mexicans sent Fusco a letter saying that, in their case, living in Europe was akin to being caged. A man from Salvador spent many hours with the couple. He kept pointing to the rubber heart that hung suspended from the top of the cage,

repeating “that heart is my heart” (Fusco 1995, 53). However, Fusco also writes that skin color was not always necessarily a determining factor. An African American man in Washington was angry, stressing that their imprisonment could only be justified “if we had some physical defect that classified us as freaks” (Fusco 1995, 52). Fusco notes that some “cross-racial” identification did occur, and cites the example of a tearful ex-con who insisted that Gómez-Peña have and wear his sweater (Fusco 1995, 53). Upper class Latinos, reports Fusco, often expressed dismay that their culture was being displayed in such an unflattering manner (Fusco 1995, 56). However, many got the message: “it’s a criticism of the colonization of the Americas,” says a man in Madrid, “you have to see the humor in it.” An unnamed Native American begs to differ:

It startled me when I first walked up to the cage. I didn’t know what it was. But then I saw it as a representation of the Natives of this land... how distorted we have become through the economics and some of the philosophies of life. I could see my own grandchildren in that cage. It really brings home to me just how badly our people were treated. And I don’t know that we are any better off today.

These last two responses highlight Kim Sawchuk’s reflection that *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* is strategically “both deadly serious and deadly humorous” (Sawchuk 1992, 28).

### **Elite Speak and Other Commentary**

In spite of the fact that those “in the know” greeted Fusco and Gómez-Peña’s show with empathy, humor and/or pathos, Fusco writes that many academics, artists, journalists and museum functionaries found the spectacle “dangerous.” Fusco explains that “the self-proclaimed” elite from this camp took issue with the “moral implications of our dissimulation” (Fusco 1995, 52, 37). Implicit in this stance, continues Fusco, is the

notion that proper political performance must be tied to literalism—the public must be *clearly* educated (Fusco 1995, 54). Thus the assumption is that racism must be fought through “didactic correctives,” rather than faced through creative strategies that seek to spark thought, feeling and/or action through irony (Fusco 1995, 54). In contrast to Seery’s celebration of satire’s strengths, here irony is reconfigured as a trope deployed by untrustworthy activists—“evil tricksters... who discredit museums and betray public trust” (Fusco 1995, 50). Further underlying these critiques, continues Fusco, is the problematic presupposition that curators can collect artifacts and construct narratives of Indigenous cultures that accurately convey Aboriginal historical or contemporary realities (Fusco 1995, 50). “In other words,” she writes, “we were not the only ones who were lying, our lies simply told a different story” (Fusco 1995, 50). From different quarters, Fusco reports that she was criticized by feminists who found her role too stereotypically gendered and passive—she danced but did not speak (Fusco 1995, 55). On a similar note, Taylor suggests that “Fusco with her beautiful face painted and wearing a grass skirt and skimpy bra” may have elicited the “erotic pleasure” of the ethnographic gaze that Fusco says her attire and activities were meant to ironize (Taylor 1998, 165; Fusco 1998, 10). Indeed, Jan Avgikos, writing for *Artforum*, actually states:

I can’t just stand there and suddenly realize that cultural genocide was a bad thing.... What I did think about was how beautiful [the woman’s] scantily clad body was... which was probably just about what everyone else was thinking too.<sup>23</sup>

Although Avgikos’ projection of his sexualized interpretation of Fusco’s performance onto “everyone” is ludicrous in light of those responses that tend toward empathy and critical political awareness, his comments suggest that Fusco, like Finley, Courtney, Princess and any female performer who toys strategically with nudity, overt sexuality

and/or attempts to comment on the sight of the “scantily clad” exotic primitive via ironic bodily re-citations is, once again, in danger of being re-assimilated back into an economy of the female body as sex.

Overall, and in spite of the myriad responses from both those who did and didn't get caught up in the act, Fusco writes that critics implied that *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* “failed” because so many missed the irony in the act (Fusco 1995, 55). Indeed, one could argue that Fusco and Gómez-Peña should have provided more of what Hutcheon calls “read me ironically” cues (Hutcheon 1994, 144). As Fusco remarks retrospectively, the historical chronology written on the plaque by the cage, which begins with an entry featuring the fact that Columbus brought a member of the Arawak tribe back to the Spanish court who was then displayed for two years until he “died of sadness,” should have worked to invite people to read their performance as an ironic commentary on historical atrocities. However, Fusco remarks that “a lot of people didn't read the chronology and didn't put two and two together” (Woolgar 1998). The sight of the spectacle, recounts Fusco, overrode and often effaced the written chronology (Woolgar 1998). Hence one could suggest that, like Spiderwoman, Fusco and Gómez-Peña should have stepped out of their overt roles (if only for a moment or two) to verbally comment on their act. Yet, such a proposition lessens the promise of irony in satire, which as Seery notes, is that straight talk does not necessarily capture the howl of outrage, the heightened sense of unease and/or the overall discomfort that the unsaid can provoke (Seery 1990, 186).

However, I believe that this notion, that irony quite simply either “passes” or “fails” depending on the interpretations of primary spectators, assumes that irony is a

one-shot deal. Rather, ironic play with dominant conventions can be about recirculation, negotiation and the never-ending struggle for meaning-making in cultural spheres that are themselves always dynamic. Indeed, although many may have missed the irony in *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...*, it gave rise to the award-winning, widely-screened *The Couple in the Cage* documentary video featuring a myriad of responses to the spectacle.<sup>24</sup> Many scenes in the video work to show that although we live in so-called postcolonial times, the satiric sight of caged humans on display can still be greeted with curious fascination and consumed straight through the lens of colonial exoticization. Thus, in this case, irony's "failure" to circulate in the eyes of many is precisely what makes both the performances and the video so successfully thought-provoking to me.

Yet *The Couple in the Cage* and "The Other History of Intercultural Performance" have also been critiqued for perpetuating the codes of ethnography that they critique. "While I personally love the video," writes Taylor, "the hierarchies and epistemologies that the performance attacked are in danger of being reproduced" (Taylor 1998, 168-169). She elaborates by drawing on Fusco's essay:

Like the ethnographer, these performance artists made assumptions about imagined viewers [a "white audience" as Coco Fusco describes it in the opening paragraph of her essay], formulated their goal ["to create a surprise or 'uncanny' encounter, one in which audiences had to undergo their own process of reflection as to what they were seeing"], defined their methodology [interactive performance].... They then decided to measure the size and range of reactions of the audiences that attended the performance. The analysis led to certain conclusions about deeply held Western cultural stereotypes and anxieties that manifest themselves in certain forms of public behavior on the part of spectators... which were then broken down and classified according to age, race, class, gender, and national origin (Taylor 1995, 172).

Moreover, because the start of the video exposes the performance as a satire; it creates an "us" who are both in the know and privy to the sight of specific spectators as little more

than a series of “thems” who are framed as “closet colonists or dupes” (Taylor 1998, 169). In short, “they” become spectacles for “our” entertainment. And the video viewer, like the ethnographer, is able to position herself outside of—and superior to—the field of study:

We can laugh at others’ reactions. We know: they don’t.... Their gullibility reaffirms our superior wisdom; “they” once again serve to stabilize “us”.... It, like the systems of representation it parodies, produces and exposes the other, and unwittingly colludes with the ethnographic pleasures it sets out to deconstruct (Taylor 1995, 169-170).

The spectators’ responses are also cut and spliced. In turn, the spectators become frozen and trapped by the editing process. Effectively, in keeping with Fusco’s intent, they are “caught off guard”—yet since we are only privy to snippets of their commentary, we never know to what extent they come to terms with the show. Moreover, like most objects of ethnography, those who fell for the act do not get to respond to the coverage of themselves “as the show” (Taylor 1995, 172). Framed as a documentary, continues Taylor, *The Couple in the Cage* runs the risk of being perceived as a video that tells the truth about the performances. Once again, this creates an us-vs.-them binary. Similar to the ways in which many whites can watch Spiderwoman’s *Winnetou* and laugh at the wannabes, here whites can underestimate their complicity in ongoing neocolonial power relations by laughing at those who are less in the know or who seem more overtly complicit.

Although I think Taylor’s critiques are theoretically right-on, and I know that my take on Fusco’s coverage can also stand accused of engaging in a theoretically problematic re-presentation of the reverse-ethnographic process, there is still something so telling about those audience responses featuring middle-class white men and women

staring in fascination, spouting armchair-anthropology and/or engaging in banal inquiry in relationship to a sight that, taken straight, should provoke some sense of horror or sadness or critical awareness. Much like overhearing racist and sexist commentary on the bus or being subject to the gaze that often goes with that territory, the colonialist talking and looking featured in some scenes of *The Couple in the Cage* need not have the status of Empirical Truth about the White Audience to serve as a vehicle for discussions about neocolonialism and/or theories of irony in performance. And if there is indeed something unethical about objectifying white spectators, in the final instance I side with Fusco's response to Taylor:

I agree that there are ethical issues involved in putting people on the spot. However, I know that some people are put on the spot all the time, while others hardly ever have to show who they are, or be caught off guard, or have their identities questioned.... I don't feel too guilty about making them stop for a moment and experience the sort of pressure people of color experience all the time..." (Fusco 1995, 11).

In other words, although reverse-ethnography as a methodology may engage in the same practices that it critiques, power relations shift—however momentarily—in ways that may prove productive. If the camera's gaze traps particular white people—people who generally have the privilege of going unmarked—and functions to highlight whiteness, then as Dyer suggests, some work around how one becomes colored may be getting done (Dyer 1997). It can thus produce a certain fleeting awareness about what it is like to live one's everyday in a body marked as Other.

Lastly, critics who condemn Fusco and Gómez-Peña for choosing not to play it straight, not to explicitly state their identities and intentions, seem to be under some illusion that ordinary language or direct speech and action are always inevitably interpreted both correctly and favorably. As Seery points out, although ironic serious play



is always highly risky, it is problematic to assume that “ordinary language and ironic discourse are necessary rivals, are mutually exclusive, or even that much divides them” (Seery 1990, 195). Indeed, as Spiderwoman show, the two can be combined to ground and guide audience interpretations. Moreover, as the beginning of the next chapter will demonstrate, even when artists and activists state exactly what they mean, there is still no guarantee that people will sit still and hear what it is they are saying.

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#### Notes to Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> Following Vizenor, I use the term postindian as a way of framing the bodies that have emerged in this renaissance of un-making—po-mo bodies that play strategically with the notion of “Indian” as simulation. Or in Vizenor’s words: “Simulations are the absence of the tribal real; the postindian conversions are in the new stories of survivance over dominance. The tribes [predate] by thousands of generations the invention of the Indian. The postindian ousts the inventions with humor, new stories, and the simulation of survivance” (Vizenor 1994, 5). Throughout this chapter, however, I invoke more familiar categories like Native American and Aboriginal. As I do so, I am aware that although I call these categories into question, by using them I also run the risk of subsuming highly heterogeneous bodies into a homogenized mass (Nadeau 2001, 21). However, following Julia Emberley, I believe that the categories also work to open up spaces where those who have been marked and marginalized based on a category like Native can respond both in relationship to, and in ways that exceed, the seemingly unified, solid and essential status of the category itself (Emberley 1993, 19, 86).

<sup>2</sup> For a plethora of artistic examples of what I am calling this renaissance of unmaking, see Allan J. Ryan’s *The trickster shift: Humour and irony in contemporary Native art* (1999).

<sup>3</sup> Following Jimmie Durham, I use terms like “nouveau colonialism” (borrowed from Fiona Foley) to stress that “‘Indians’ of the Americas are colonized peoples...colonization is not simply the language of some political rhetoric of past decades. Europe may be passing through a postcolonial time, but we in the Americas still live in a colonial period (Durham 2002, 103). For more, see Fiona Foley’s “A Blast from the Past.” Emberley uses the term “internal colonization” to describe the Canadian situation as follows: “The official cartographic imagination of Canada does not recognize the same inscriptions of the earth which which a Native conceptual epistemology does. Reserves (a state-imposed containment of land mass for Native peoples) are not the same as self-determined band territories. All of which is to say, without the recognition of Native entitlement to the land, including self-government, Native peoples do not have a place or space to return to in the event of cultural, spiritual, and social genocide” (Emberley 1993, 17). Lastly, Durham describes one of the master narratives regarding America’s colonial past and present as follows: “...there were no ‘Indians’ in the country, simply wilderness. Then, that the ‘Indians’ were savages *in need of* the USA. Then, that the Indians all died unfortunately. Then, that ‘Indians’ today are a) basically happy with the situation, and b) not the real ‘Indians.’ Then, most importantly, that that is the complete story” (Durham 2002, 106). For more detailed

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explorations of the European conquest of America and its current consequences from a variety of perspectives, see *American Indian studies: An interdisciplinary approach to contemporary issues*, ed. Dane Morrison (1997).

<sup>4</sup> Some of Edrlich's novels include: *Tracks* (1988), *The bingo palace* (1994) and *Tales of burning love* (1996). For more on Edrlich, see: Allen Chavkin's anthology *The Chippewa landscape of Louise Erdrich* (1998). Throughout this chapter I speak of the fusion of ordinary with extraordinary as a sensibility evoked by Edrlich and others that suggests that seeing ghosts, spirits, visions and so on could be part of one's ordinary everyday if one is taught to think, see and speak that way.

<sup>5</sup> For more on Blondeau's work, see Abasiw Makegon-Iskew's "Native love: Subverting the boundaries of the heart" (1996).

<sup>6</sup> For more on Niro's work, see: Loyd Wong's "Mohawks in beehives" (1992).

<sup>7</sup> Spiderwomen grew up in Brooklyn. Lisa has received classical training as a mezzo-soprano and has studied dance with Uta Hagen. Gloria attended Oberlin College where she majored in drama under the tutelage of Hebert Blau. Muriel has been a dancer in Joseph Chaikan's avant-garde improvisational theatre. The sisters have been performing together since 1975, along with other Native and Non-native women who eventually dropped out of the group. Their first performance as a trio was *Winnetou's Snake Oil Show from Wigwam City*. The trio have toured widely across America and Europe. In February 1997, Miami University awarded them an honorary doctor of Fine Arts. For more, see "Spiderwoman Theater" at <http://staff.lib.muchio.edu/nawpa/origins.html>. I saw *Winnetou* performed at Theater for the New City in New York City during the spring of 1988. In order to flesh out this performance I am drawing on my notes as well as the published script of the show. Quotes from the script are referenced in parenthetical citations. I am working through *Sun, Moon, Feather* via both the official video of the performance and the published script. All quotes are from the video. For *Reverb-ber-ber-rations*, I am drawing on the script. Quotes taken directly from the script are cited in the text.

<sup>8</sup> For a fascinating socio-historical analysis of whites playing particular Indians, see Rayna Greene's "The Tribe Called Wannabee: Playing Indian in America and Europe" (1988).

<sup>9</sup> Vizenor's work is highly indebted to Baudrillard's *Simulations*. For more, see: note #1, and *Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance* (1994).

<sup>10</sup> In "Experience," Scott takes issue with Samuel Delaney's link between seeing "an unadulterated mass of naked male bodies" in a New York City bathhouse in 1950 and the "sense of political power" he derived from the sight of what was then seemingly invisible. In turn, she writes that Delaney's call for more of such sightings, for "making the movement visible...precludes critical examination of the workings of the ideological system itself, its categories of representation (homosexual/heterosexual, man/woman, black/white as fixed immutable identities), its premises about what these categories mean and how they operate, its notions of subjects, origin and cause" (Scott 1992, 25). While I agree with Scott from a metatheoretical perspective, I also believe that bodies can become visible and thus help towards empowerment-style projects without necessarily precluding the possibility that visibility-politics also include some form of simultaneously deconstructive-oriented reflexive edge. Scott gestures

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towards this in her conclusion; however, the gesture reads more like a concession that she is making, rather than a strategy that she is actively advancing.

<sup>11</sup> This quote from Gunn Allen also resonates deeply with me vis-à-vis issues the politics of visibility. As she recalls:

I left the U.C. Berkeley campus walking down Telegraph toward the parking lot.... Nowhere did I see an Indian, an item produced by or even reminiscent of Indians, a food or beverage that was for sale that was identified in my mind, or in the minds of those around me as Indian. Coffee is Indian, but not really. Corn, turkey, tomatoes. Pumpkin, chili, tortillas. So many things. But no Indian visible anywhere, not even me.... I didn't know the disease I was suffering from. I was seeing a shrink. I didn't know that I was only grieving and lost. I thought I was mentally ill (Gunn Allen 1998, 36-37).

<sup>12</sup> David Howes concurs: "There is a widespread consensus among Native spokespeople that such 'cultural appropriation' is as potentially damaging to the survival of native ways of life as the expropriation of Indian lands in the nineteenth century, or the assimilationist strategies pursued by the Indian Schools" (Howes 1996, 138).

<sup>13</sup> The phrase "we love Indians to death" comes from Kate Shanley's "The Indians America loves to love and read" (Kulchyski 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Or as Trinh cites Raymond Firth, anthropology is "the diary of the white man in mission, the white man commissioned by the historical sovereignty of European thinking and its peculiar vision of man." Thus she concludes, "What has been written never addresses the Yellow, the Black, the Red" (Trinh 1989, 57).

<sup>15</sup> For an excellent analysis of the myth of Pocahontas in relationship to the Walt Disney film of that name, see Ziauddin Sardar's "Walt Disney and the double victimization of Pocahontas" (2002).

<sup>16</sup> Or in Bakhtin's words, such a body is not "separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries; it is blended with the world, with animals, with objects. It is cosmic..." (Bakhtin 1968, 27).

<sup>17</sup> In a chapter of *The Man Question* titled "Cosmic Feminism," Ferguson defines cosmic feminism as a feminist stance often grounded in an ontology of origins, being, gender and nature. She elaborates: "Some authors appeal to the [selected] heritage of Native Americans, stressing women's ancient wisdom that men have suppressed but not completely obliterated. Others invoke the traditions of ancient goddess religions and the heritage of witch craft as sources of personal strength and creative power for women, and as a validations of nurturance for women and men. Still others speak of a poetic bonding between women, other animals and the earth..." (Ferguson 1993, 97).

<sup>18</sup> *Two Undiscovered Amerindians Visit...* visited the Edge '92 Biennial in London and Madrid, Covent Gardens in London May 1992, the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History in October 1992, the Australian Museum of Natural History in Sidney in December 1992, the Field Museum of Chicago in January 1993 and the Whitney Museum in New York City in March 1993 (Fusco 1995, 39).

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<sup>19</sup> Taylor defines *relajo* as a “collective prank” that disavows solidarity with dominant norms “in order to create a different, rebellious solidarity—that of the underdog” (Taylor 1998, 173).

<sup>20</sup> Fusco writes:

The exhibits also gave credence to white supremacist worldviews by representing nonwhite peoples and cultures as being in need of discipline, civilization, and industry. Not only did these exhibits reinforce stereotypes of “the primitive” but they served to enforce a sense of racial unity as whites among Europeans and North Americans, who were divided strictly by class and religion until this century. Hence, for example, at the Colombian Exhibition of 1893 in Chicago, ethnographic displays of peoples from Africa and Asia were set up outside “The White City,” an enclosed area celebrating science and industry (Fusco 1995, 41).

<sup>21</sup> I have not seen this performance live. Unless otherwise indicated by parenthetical citations referring back to Fusco’s essay, all descriptions and quotes are from *The Couple in the Cage* video. I will briefly problematize the video and the essay, as well as my reliance on them, toward the end of this chapter.

<sup>22</sup> As this woman contrasts the authenticity of Fusco’s dance to the “real” ones that she has seen on television, it seems that in this instance, as Baudrillard suggests: “The very definition of the real has become: *that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction*....The real is thus not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced...which is, the hyperreal...which is entirely in simulation” (Baudrillard 1983, 146).

<sup>23</sup> Cited on-screen in *The Couple in the Cage*.

<sup>24</sup> *The Couple in the Cage* was screened at the Atlanta Film and Video Festival, where it won the award for Best Performance Documentary in 1993, and at the New York Film Festival and the XIth Black International Cinema Festival in Berlin (Fusco and Heredia 1993).

## CHAPTER FIVE

### In and Out of Irony: Concluding Comments Concerning Poets, Pageants, Pill Poppers, Princesses and Hags

#### Closing the Show

As this dissertation begins to call out for a conclusion, I find myself, once again, lighting a cigarette, pouring more Diet Coke into yet another sparkly purple glass and staring at the Post-its that now seem quite at home in an array of piles lying in various places throughout my living room. Tired and wired, I sit here knowing it's time to sum it all up—but there still seems to be so much to say. As I re-read *Bodies of Irony* for the umpteenth time, it strikes me that my work did indeed, as I had hoped, become a conversation-inciting, evocative piece of writing featuring fertile feminist insights into irony in conjunction with unruly body theory fleshed out through particular performance practices. Yet I worry. What's missing from my show? As I rifle through the Post-its, three concerns among many emerge and beg to be addressed before I reiterate the key themes that fueled this dissertation.

To begin, I wish to stress that although I have focused on the risks associated with irony in relationship to the multiplicity of interpretations that it tends to invite, what remain on the sidelines are the ways in which seemingly straightforward oppositional language and activity can also be decontextualized and reconstructed to support dominant power relations and structures. Thus, I wish to briefly present the case of Sarah Jones, a spoken-word poet/activist who produced the hip-hop single, "Your Revolution," which borrows rapsterspeak in order to directly critique it—only to find her tune censored by

the Federal Communications Commission as obscene, among other things. Next, I move back a few decades in time, to the feminist protest against Miss America 1968, to highlight how, once again, political activity can be reduced, reframed and dismissed in relationship to dominant conventions concerning female sexuality and beauty even when that is what one is explicitly, unironically denouncing. I review these sights not as a way of undermining my analysis of the risks associated with irony and interpretation, but as a reminder that such risks do not enter the scene only when irony is involved. Next, I invoke a concern that I have been grappling with since this project's inception. If instrumental ironic double-visions are generated by textual and embodied contradictions or incongruities involving the said and the unsaid, and if irony as a sensibility is about the ability to sustain contradictory double-visions, to what extent do irony theorists risk perpetuating binary sayings, seeings and doings in order to show what irony can do, undo and/or re-do? Here, a brief review of the literature will help flesh this question out in order to suggest that the risks associated with binary thinking may be among the most inherent yet unacknowledged dangers involved in ironic serious play. Speaking of risks and dangers, I also feel that I cannot conclude this project without addressing the activity associated with Courtney over the last 8 months. In short, she has survived an OD, released a new solo CD, been arrested and charged on a variety of drug and violence-related offences, and cancelled her upcoming tour.

As I elaborate on some of these events, I call on Braidotti's essay "How to endure intensity" in order to suggest that unruly body theory and activity can benefit from insights revolving around self-sustainability. Finally, I leave you with a cursory summary of this dissertation featuring its star performers who in the spirit of irony and the unruly

body embrace contradiction, fluctuation, oscillation while making spectacles that resonate with words and deeds fueled by rage, wit and a wickedly delicious edge.

## **Censoring Sarah Jones**

The revolution will not be televised...  
The revolution will not be brought to you by Xerox  
In 4 parts without commercial interruptions...  
The revolution will not give your mouth sex appeal  
There will be no pictures of you and Willie May  
Pushing that shopping cart down the block on the dead run  
Or trying to slide that color television into a stolen ambulance...  
The revolution will not be right back after a message  
About white tornado, white lightning or white people...  
The revolution will not be televised.

Gil Scott-Heron  
"The Revolution Will Not Be Televised"

Your revolution will not happen between these thighs...  
The real revolution ain't about booty size  
The Versaces you buys  
Or the Lexus you drives ...  
Your notorious revolution  
Will never allow you to lace no lyrical douche in my bush  
Your revolution will not be you smacking it up, flipping it or rubbing it  
down  
Nor will it take you downtown, or humping around...  
Your revolution will not happen between these thighs.

Sarah Jones  
"Your Revolution"

Re-picture this scenario. It's sometime before 10 p.m. on October 20, 1999, and volunteer DJ Deeana Barnwell is spinning at KBOO-FM, a Portland non-profit community radio station. She decides to play Jones' "Your Revolution": a spoken-word performance piece that the poet/playwright turned into a hip hop single as a tribute to Scott-Heron's tune, with a feminist twist that critiques "materialism, misogyny, and the

idea that women should be treated as sex objects” in both dominant culture as well as in certain hip hop spheres—a song that Barnwell finds both innovative and empowering (Lee 2001).<sup>1</sup> An anonymous listener, on the other hand, decides that the song is offensive and calls the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to complain (Lee 2001). Six months later, the FCC fines KBOO \$7000 for playing a track that “contains unmistakable patently offensive sexual references...[which] appear to be designed to pander and shock” and thus cannot be played on the airways between 6 a.m. and 10 p.m. when children may be listening (Lee 2001). “When we got the complaint from the FCC, I thought it had to be a joke,” says Jones (Dunn 2002, 23). And who can blame her? After all, notes Katia Dunn, this is the very same FCC that allows mainstream hip-hop stations to play songs with all sorts of sexual slang and stuff while the kids are slurping down their morning Cheerios. There’s Shaggy’s “It Wasn’t Me” where listeners are invited to imagine him and his bitch “both butt-naked / Banging on the bathroom floor,” or P. Diddy rapping about how he needs a ’ho to “ride, ride, ride” in “Freaky Girl”—and the list could go on and on (Dunn 2002, 95). By contrast, “Your Revolution” is an indirect critique of such hip hopsters as well as a direct indictment of LL Cool J and Notorious B.I.G., whose lyrics Jones quotes in order to criticize (Lee 2001). Indeed, the FCC’s decision to ban Jones’ song in light of what does get aired on the radio throughout the day reeks of hypocritical observational irony.

Yet what I find so striking about this case is that although Jones’ song can also be said to resonate with oppositional observational irony, its message seems to me to be clear, direct, and straightforward. Both Scott-Heron’s track and Jones’ tribute-with-a-feminist-twist can be considered observationally ironic since their tunes overtly rely on,



and thus repeat, the pop culture terminology and imagery that they call into question. Hutcheon refers to this as “the paradox” of political endeavors “that want to (or feel they have to) speak to a culture from inside it” by re-presenting its constricting and confining representations (Hutcheon 1989, 13). Indeed Jones explains that she takes lyrics from notorious rapsters for strategic purposes “to turn them on the ear” —to de-contextualize and re-contextualize them as inseparable from the sexism and the capitalist rhetoric in what she calls “hip pop.”<sup>2</sup> “This is language that’s funny, inventive and deeply resonant with inner-city girls,” writes Marjorie Heins (Heins 2003). Yet Jones explicitly denounces that which she echoes with her stress on the word *not*: “Your revolution will not be you smacking it up, flipping it or rubbing it down.” This is a far cry from Liz Phair singing “I wanna be your blowjob queen.” Jones’ emphasis on the word “not” throughout a song that is anchored by the refrain “Your revolution will not happen between these thighs” means that there’s no instrumental irony circulating on the scene. In other words, the track need not rely on listeners to work through the oscillation between the said and the unsaid to get its message across. Or as Hunter College student Veronica De La Rosa says:

Sometimes we listen but we don’t actually hear.... Bringing out the famous rappers and their lyrics allowed me to see that they are viewing women as sex objects.... Jones tells us women that we don’t have to allow these lyrics to be true, because “Your revolution will not happen between these thighs” (Lee 2001).

Hoping that if the FCC would actually listen to her song they would get what La Rosa and others hear, Jones sued the FCC based on the notion that the ban violates her right to free speech (Dunn 2002, 24).

It took three years spent battling the ban before it was rescinded (Kaur Sedhev 2003, 102). However, as Robindar Kaur Sedhev posits, this hardly “dampens the political significance” of the original FCC ruling (Kaur Sedhev 2003, 107). “Censorship,” she writes, “as it relates to political hip hop, not only threatens artists’ abilities to publicize their work, it also has the potential to repress the anti-racist politics that their work espouses” (Kaur Sedhev 2003, 107). Indeed, after the song was banned, no other station would run the risk of playing it.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, as a poet who often who often visits inner-city schools to spread “Your Revolution” along with spoken-word monologues on similar themes, Jones’ educational activism was threatened (Lee 2001). In retrospect, Jones surmises that it was no accident that the FCC targeted her song: “It was a frustrating thing to feel that my political beliefs were enough to incite this kind of maelstrom.”<sup>4</sup> What is so striking about this scenario is that although, when speaking of Spiderwoman as well as Fusco and Gómez-Peña, I have suggested that oppositional ironic play may become way less risky if it’s accompanied by sincere speech, it seems that, as in this case, even the most straightforward sentiments can go unheard in favor of a conservative, decontextualized, literal focus on lyrics that are deemed obscene.

### **Miss America 1968**

On a more familiar and infamous note, another well known case comes to mind and begs to be briefly re-staged. It’s September 8, 1968, and a group of about 150 feminists descend upon the Atlantic City boardwalk to protest against “The-Degrading-Mindless-Boob-Girlie Symbol” otherwise known as Miss America.<sup>5</sup> At the center of the demo stands a giant “Freedom Trash Can,” which becomes the place to throw

“stenographers’ pads, hair rollers, high heels, copies of Playboy, bras” and whatever “woman-garbage” one may have found lying around the house (Douglas 1995, 139).<sup>6</sup> Tossing her girdle into the bin, one woman shouts, “No more girdles, no more pain! No more trying to hold the fat in vain!” (Curtis 1968). A live sheep, recently crowned Miss America, can also be spotted milling about (Douglas 1995, 139). Periodically, the women holding placards with slogans like “Miss America Sells It” also burst into “three-part harmony” songs with lyrics like “Conformity is the key to the crown” (Curtis 1968). The protest, organized by New York Radical Women, was preceded by a press release/pamphlet inviting all women to come out and rally, stating that: “it should be a groovy day on the Boardwalk in the sun with our sisters.”<sup>7</sup>

The protesters’ critiques, appearing in their press release, on placards and in the pamphlets that they passed out, seem quite straightforward. The ten points under protest include:

2. *Racism with roses.* Since its inception in 1921, the Pageant has not had one Black finalist, and this has not been for a lack of test-case contestants. There has never been a Puerto Rican, Alaskan, Hawaiian, or Mexican-American winner. Nor has there ever been a *true* Miss America—an American Indian.

6. *The Woman as Pop Culture Obsolescent Theme.* Spindle, mutilate, and then discard tomorrow. What is so ignored as last year’s Miss America? This only reflects the gospel of our Society, according to Saint Male: women must be young, juicy, malleable—hence age discrimination and the cult of youth. And we women are brainwashed into believing this ourselves!

8. *The Irrelevant Crown on the Throne of Mediocrity.* Miss America represents what women are supposed to be: inoffensive, bland, apolitical. If you are tall, short, over or under what weight The Man prescribes you should be, forget it. Personality, articulateness, intelligence, and commitment—unwise. Conformity is the key to the crown—and, by extension, to success in our Society.

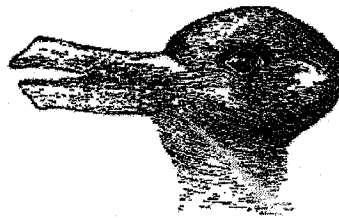
Douglas recalls that although the women seemed “cheerfully delighted” with their actions, the spectacle was, at the time, “a completely outrageous event” and thus invoked dismissive media coverage designed to put the women back in their place (Douglas 1995, 139, 156). Although *New York Times* columnist Charlotte Curtis, for instance, caught the message, she also placed words like *enslavement*, *racism* and *beauty standards* in quotation marks, thus suggesting “these were merely the deluded hallucinations of a few ugly, angry women rather than a fact of life” (Curtis 1968; Douglas 1995, 159). Indeed, Curtis’ article contains way more coverage on those who were hostile to the un-Revloned and non-Maidenformed picketers, citing rebuttals from unnamed men like: “go home and wash your bras!” (Curtis 1968). Another man, writes Curtis, pointed to the sign “Miss America Sells It” in order to suggest that the protesters themselves were “vulgar” (Curtis 1968). Overall, writes Douglas, when the news coverage wasn’t condemning the women for their lack of lipstick, it was paradoxically dismissing the protesters as narcissistic and exhibitionist: “So the women who were protesting the public exhibition of women’s bodies were themselves cast as nothing other than needy exhibitionists (Douglas 1995, 159).

Here what comes to mind is the observational irony I have associated with Karen Finley’s being arrested for hysterical behavior while doing hysteria as performance in front of the JC Penney. But more importantly, Finley did not have a press release and pamphlet explicitly explaining her actions. In keeping with the Sarah Jones case and the Miss America protest, I can’t help wondering just how it is feminists can speak, sing, write, do and/or undo either directly *or* via irony without running the risk that their words or deeds will be reconfigured to suit dominant conventions and clichés. And although one

could argue that the danger in the “No More Miss America” protest is inevitably tied to the threatening sight of “unruly bodies” making a spectacle, Sarah Jones was only heard, not seen, when her lyrics were deemed obscene. Moreover, speaking of sights, the most infamous one to be associated with Miss America 1968, the bra burning, did not even take place. Indeed, although the protesters had wanted to burn the “woman-garbage” that they threw into the can, they did not dare since a fire ordinance forbade the act (Douglas 1995, 159). Yet from then on in, writes Douglas, feminism became linked to bra burning reconfigured as “unleashed sexuality” (Douglas 1995, 160). Or in Douglas’ words, “the media, with a wink, hinted that these women’s motives were not at all political but rather...to be trendy, and to attract men (Douglas 1995, 160). Indeed it seems that the “do-me feminism” associated with Liz Phair, Courtney Love and Princess Superstar’s ironic play with their words and sexuality may not have as much to do with irony’s complicity as I once presumed. Although I still believe that ironic serious play is no doubt riskier than more straightforward doings, in that irony relies on interpreters to work with and through the unspoken in conjunction with contextual and intertextual references that readers may be unaware of, once again I do not want to underestimate the ways that factors like sexism or racism can just as easily enter any scene and skew another’s perception of that which seems to me to have made itself perfectly clear. As I have pointed out with reference to Seery in Chapter Four, ironic happenings and the problems they incite do not necessarily exist in binary opposition to sincere and straightforward doings.

## The Ornerly Irony Binary

Speaking of binaries, although most theorists of irony, including myself, stress its risky character in relationship to interpretation, I would also like to point to yet another potentially problematic aspect of irony that tends to remain under cover: the ornerly irony binary. Simply put, irony generally revolves around oscillation. But what does it oscillate between? Many theorists suggest that it fluctuates between two contradictory visions or meanings in order to call them into conversation and/or question (Ferguson 1993, xi; Haraway 1991, 149; Hutcheon 1995, 60). For instance, Hutcheon writes that one of the most “suggestive and productive” images that one can use to think through ironic



meaning making is the drawing called “Rabbit or Duck?” illustrated below (Hutcheon 1995, 60).

As one glances at this image, writes Hutcheon, one may see what looks like a bird’s bill and conclude that the picture in question is a duck; or one may see what seems like a long pair of ears and deduce that it’s a rabbit. Or one may move back-and-forth between seeing both (Hutcheon 1995, 59-60). The duck and rabbit, or the “two poles,” continues Hutcheon, are not “important;” rather it is the way in which one can use the duck and rabbit to represent the idea of the said and the unsaid that is pertinent for

understanding how ironic meanings are generated by the “perceptual or hermeneutic” movement between the two (Hutcheon 1995, 60). Yet, “Rabbit or Duck?” also reminds me of a similar, albeit less innocuous drawing, where the image looks like either a princess or a hag—or both. Here, the two poles strike me as becoming highly important as they represent a binary hierarchy of two particular sides of femininity which may serve, as Frueh notes, to keep many women striving for a youthful “pretty as a picture” ideal rooted in a sense of terror and dread about aging (Frueh 2001, 1-2). The princess/hag binary can also, as Frueh notes, work to keep younger and older women in divisive spheres contaminated by fear and envy thus creating a host of intergenerational tensions and conflicts (Frueh 2001, 136). Ideally, as in the case of the good girl/bad girl binary discussed in Chapter Three, instrumental irony can be recruited to underline and then undermine such a dichotomy. However, as I have also noted, such strategies must install what they seek to call into question; thus they may perpetuate the polar and polarizing positions they hope to eradicate. Thus my question is: if irony needs “two poles” between which to oscillate, and if these poles often take the form of culturally familiar binary oppositions, to what extent do irony theorists, including myself, run the risk of relying on and even reinforcing those binaries—even and especially as we seek to show how irony can help to undo them?

A quick and cursory review of the literature may help to illuminate this query further. Kathy Ferguson, for example, posits that there are two radical, seemingly irreconcilable “persistent impulses” that tend to anchor contemporary feminist thought: interpretation and genealogy (Ferguson 1993, x). Interpretative feminist theory, explains Ferguson, tends to presume a somewhat stable female subject whose everyday activities

can be conveyed in ways that challenge patriarchal rule (Ferguson 1995, 14). On the other hand, genealogical inquiry is a metatheoretical activity that often works to disrupt the stability and validity of gender identity by stressing the constitutive power of language to produce that which it claims to discover (Ferguson 1995, 15). Feminist theorists, writes Ferguson, cannot afford to fully embrace or absolutely refute either project (Ferguson 1995, 7). Ferguson thus calls on irony as a sensibility in order to encourage feminists to adopt oscillating perspectives that refuse to become fully rooted “in one position or the other” (Ferguson 1995, x) Although Ferguson stresses that feminists such as Haraway, Trinh and Aihwa Ong among others, do indeed work from and through both positions and that “these two projects cannot be neatly separated,” her work nonetheless relies on the genealogy/interpretation binary in order to show how, with irony as a sensibility, one can productively juggle with the tensions evoked between the two (Ferguson 1995, 32, 95, 149). Is she, as she suggests, working toward “unraveling ...two persistent impulses” —spaces and places where the power relations that work to constitute feminist thought have solidified into two major ways of “thinking, writing, and acting” —or is she, as she also worries, reproducing yet another binary which may work to reduce “feminisms’ many faces to two?” (Ferguson 1995, 9). I will return to this question in a moment; for now I wish to stress that she’s not alone.

Seery’s text also relies on a dichotomy that he sets up between the advocate and the skeptic. The advocate, he explains, adopts and defends a particular position at all costs; often s/he relies upon “a preconfirmed ontology, or a certified epistemology, or a prepackaged methodology,” all of which lead to “rigidity; beyond spirited inquiry and towards argumentation” (Seery 1990, 58, 56). On the other side of the spectrum, he



continues, stands the skeptic: ambivalent, detached, negative and non-participatory (Seery 1990, 319-320). Yet, Seery suggests that if both adopt a little irony as a sensibility, the advocate can moderate his “absolutism” and the skeptic can be convinced that it is better to take “a leap of faith” into the realm of the oppositional political because there just *may* be some way to counter what “seems to be the predominant march of history” (Seery 1990, 329). With irony as a sensibility, concludes Seery, one can “live with ambivalence and ambiguity—even while one is acting deliberately and decisively” (Seery 1990, 331).

A variety of binary configurations also circulate throughout this thesis. I show how Finley’s spectacles leap back and forth, moving from what Ferguson calls genealogical inquiry into identity categories while relying on those categories for interpretive purposes to expose everyday oppressive power relations. Moreover, binaries like sacred/profane, native/white, good girl/bad girl and ironic play/straightforward speech among others, appear in my text even when I try to show how they can inform one another in ways that might lead to their unraveling. Once again, is this necessarily inherently problematic? As Ferguson writes:

My own account of the interpretation/genealogy story seems to rest upon yet another version of that age old foe of feminism, the binary opposition. But distinctions are not always dualistic, and dualisms are not always antifeminist.... On the one hand, dualism becomes deadly when it is accompanied by hierarchy, so that one is declared primary and the other subordinate. Oppositions between unlike equals, on the other hand, provide a fruitful field for building feminisms that give up on transcendence and harmony in favor of partiality and irony (Ferguson 1993, 10).

Although following Ferguson, I do not feel that I have set up a series of non-porous binary hierarchies, I do suspect that the ironic double visions incited in this text are both a

necessary as well as a potentially troublesome outcome of working with and through irony. In the future, I hope to make my insights multiply and fly in more wayward directions. Whether or not I can do so with irony is a question that, at this point in time, I can only flag as a worthy avenue for future travel through the premises, promises and problems associated with irony.

### **Sustainable Courtney and the Carnavalesque**

I got pills coz I'm famous  
I got pills coz I'm blonde  
I got pills coz your dead  
I got pills coz I'm the worst and best dressed  
I got pills that make me forget what I said

Courtney Love  
"Sunset Strip"

...we need a sustainability threshold.

Rosi Braidotti  
"How to Endure Intensity"

On October 2, 2003, Courtney overdosed on OxyContin, a prescription painkiller also known as "hillbilly heroin" (Kaufman 2003b). She survived. However this incident, along with the current sights, states and spectacles associated with Courtney and the release of her first solo CD *America's Sweetheart* in February 2004, have me rethinking about excess in relationship to theories of the carnivalesque. "The bitch is back," writes Charles Aaron with glee, or in my words, the ugly-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney that I have associated with *Pretty on the Inside* and *Live Through This* throughout 1991-1996 has come out to play once again evoking the unruly, excessive, highly unladylike styles and stunts that I discussed in Chapter Four with an

added dash of celebrity sauce minus the gloss (Aaron 2004). But the stakes seem different to me. “I keep thinking I’m gonna wake up one morning and find out that she’s really dead,” says my colleague Candis Steenbergen.<sup>8</sup> And I know how she feels. So does *New York Times* journalist Neil Strauss, whose editors asked him to write an obituary for her in October 2003. “If she had a fatal overdose, or sudden heart failure, we needed to be ready,” he explains (Strauss 2004). Indeed, since I finished writing Chapter Three last summer, Courtney has gone from having hardly made headlines in a couple of years to making new ones on what seems like a weekly basis. They just keep coming, writes Strauss: “Overdose! Arrest! Lawsuit! Tantrum! Feud! Public Nudity!” (Strauss 2004).

To make a long story short, Courtney was arrested on Oct. 2, 2003 for “allegedly being under the influence of narcotics” after the cops found her smashing windows and trying to break into ex-boyfriend producer Jim Barber’s house (Kaufman 2003a). After being booked, charged and released on bail, Courtney took what she describes as “10 times the normal dosage” of OxyContin to “calm down” and then called the Beverly Hills Police Department when she realized she was overdosing. Paramedics rushed her to the hospital (Kaufman 2003d; 2003a). Two weeks later, officials from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services placed the now 11-year-old Frances Bean in the custody of Kurt’s mother, Wendy O’Connor (Kaufman 2003c).<sup>9</sup> Courtney was also charged with possessing prescription drugs minus the prescription. And then there is the infamous 48 hours in New York during March 17-18, 2004 where as Lynne Crosbie succinctly summarizes:

...she flashed David Letterman repeatedly; performed at an East Village Club [Plaid] and head injured a fan with a mic stand; performed again at the Bowery Ballroom and stage-dived into a photographer, who left the concert in an ambulance; and posed for a photograph at Wendy’s. In the

Wendy's shot, the smiling, shoeless, and livid-nosed Love is smiling as an unidentified admirer sucks on her breast (Crosbie 2004).

After the show at Plaid, she was taken into custody by the New York City Police Department for six hours and charged with "third degree assault" (Smolowe 2004, 67). *People* and *MTV.com* among other media published photos that feature Courtney in full-on ugly-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar gear on stage at the Plaid show chugging Jack Daniels, hurling herself into the crowd, and then later wandering barefoot in the snow after being released from prison, looking lost and confused. Richard Goldstein refers to the Letterman flashing/mic-stand mayhem/Wendy's spectacle as "performance art," adding that the "climax came when she emerged from jail to the timeless glare of the cameras" (Goldstein 2004). However, he also cautions: "if you step back a bit from this vaudeville" something more than theatre is going down. "Courtney," he concludes, "is a woman in crisis" (Goldstein 2004). Or as Jennifer Vineyard remarks:

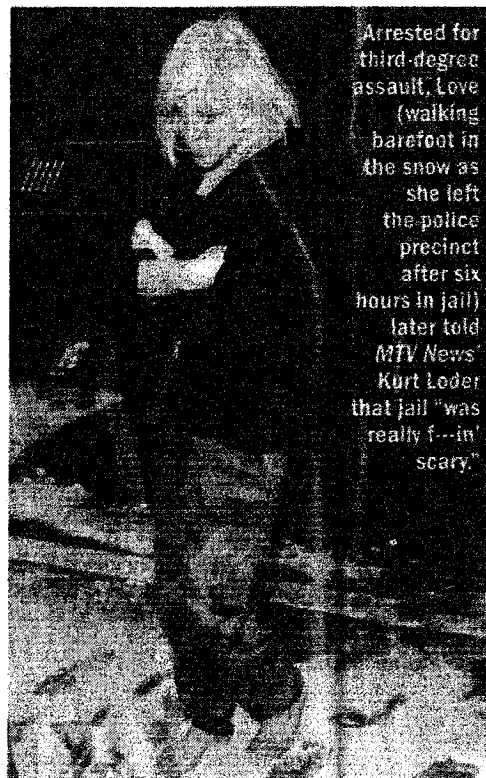
Once upon a time, Courtney Love wasn't considered a total disaster. Sure, she was a mess, but she was a charismatic mess, as daring as she was disruptive, a punk-rock diva party-crasher who made just as many friends as enemies with her antics. But instead of making a comeback, Love is on a losing streak...[with] almost everything she does lately being viewed as proof of her unraveling (Vineyard 2004b).

Predictably, much is also being made of the idea that America's so-not-a-sweetheart is refusing to act her age.<sup>10</sup> At 39, pundits imply, Courtney should be at home with Frances Bean watching Avril Lavigne on MTV (Crosbie 2003; O'Leary 2003, 65; Vineyard 2004a). I don't want to overhype media coverage that is designed to titillate, particularly when it perpetuates the double standards that continue to plague what Courtney describes as the world of "rock 'n ruin" with an added dose of ageism seeped in the norms of appropriate motherhood.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, in keeping with Chapter Three, there



During her  
impromptu  
performance  
at *Plaid*,  
Love hurled  
a milk, an  
electric guitar  
and herself at  
the audience.

**Figure 11. Courtney stage-diving at *Plaid* (2004).**



Arrested for  
third-degree  
assault, Love  
(walking  
barefoot in  
the snow as  
she left  
the police  
precinct  
after six  
hours in jail)  
later told  
*MTV News*'  
Kurt Loder  
that jail "was  
really f---in'  
scary."

**Figure 12. Courtney barefoot in the snow (2004).**

is nothing new about Courtney getting wasted, violent or arrested. However, Courtney has cancelled all of her upcoming tour dates (Errico 2004). On an eerier note, the website, [www.courtneylove.com](http://www.courtneylove.com), designed to showcase and market *America's Sweetheart*, is no longer online.<sup>12</sup> In other words, although she used to stress that she always “delivered the fucking goods,” something has gone awry.<sup>13</sup> More importantly, the OD is a first, and it raises questions: how does one continue to exceed and deviate from the norms of femininity—to make a spectacle of herself—while also looking after herself, particularly and especially as she is being looked at? In other words: when is too much, quite simply, *too much*?

As I listen to *America's Sweetheart* over and over again, the persona that emerges seems to be wrestling with similar questions. Unlike *Celebrity Skin*, this latest CD is neither slick nor sunny, writes Aaron: “Courtney meets you at LAX, tosses you into the back of a limo, blacks out the lights, and before you hit La Cienega and Fairfax, it's on” (Aaron 2004). And at times, it's wonderfully awfully witty. “Bringing the noise (and righteous rage) back to the garage by way of the VIP room at Planet Hollywood,” celebrity ugly-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-fucking-rockstar Courtney takes the piss out of The Strokes' Julian Casablancas and his hipster, holier-than-though, shlock-pop derivative garage-band sound and attitude. With mock sincerity, she sings, “I know that you are so dangerous / what a punk / you would never sell out / just like I did” and then goes in for the big seduction line: “I know I got a screw loose / but please meet me in the bedroom” because “when I touched your limousine / I really felt a vibe / it said I love you baby girl, you know coz I can read your mind.”<sup>14</sup> She follows it all up by screaming: “Shut! Shut Up! Shut Up!” as if by the sheer force of her will she might make him and

his buddies melt into a puddle on the floor of Johnny Depp's Viper room. Then she turns on those boys and those radio stations, you know the ones, they can't stop playing that same old Led Zeppelin song "again and again and again and again."<sup>15</sup> And when she sneers with irony, "Did you miss me?" I realize how much I have.<sup>16</sup> But on other tracks, she seems less sure about what she's doing here and how long she's planning to hang around. In "Sunset Strip" she laments that her love, her money, her fame can't beat the high that she gets from her pills. To which she adds, "yesterday's parties already happened tonight / and I know I won't see tomorrow." Perhaps I am now reading too much into lyrics written in the spirit of the romantic, tortured drug-addicted artist with a gendered twist. Yet to me they also gesture towards something else. How can theories of the unruly body that champion excess and deviation from the norms of appropriate femininity and social reproduction also incorporate non-moralizing reminders that all bodies have thresholds and limits? Although Russo suggests that the spectacle of the unruly female body can incite new ways of thinking about how to do and un-do femininity in everyday spheres; her most striking example revolves around Angela Carter's fictional character Fevvers from *Nights of the Circus*: a woman born with wings who can, in print, sip copious amounts of champagne while still managing to triple-somersault her way across the Big Top trapeze for a living (Russo 1994, 160, 177). What happens when we are talking about someone like Courtney whose performance practices blur into her everyday which seems, as she sings, inseparable from "all the drugs in the world?" However needless to say, the answer cannot simply be: just say no—particularly if it is coming from someone like me who loves her booze and bars and boys.

Braidotti's essay, "How to Endure Intensity," has some insights to offer to those who embody and/or choose to theorize the unruly in relationship to one's ability to sustain affirmative carnivalesque activity on a daily basis. Braidotti begins from the premise that bodies are "an assemblage of forces, or flows, intensities and passions" that are subject to their own internal thresholds (Braidotti 2001, 183). In other words, a subject "can think/understand/do no more than one's embodied, physical spatiotemporal co-ordinates are capable of" (Braidotti 2001, 193). Writing against the backdrop of moralizing and repressive anti-drug sentiments, as well as an "ideology of excess" linked to "sex, drugs and rock n' roll" cultures, Braidotti suggests that the most productively monstrous subjects are those who may indeed use drugs and alcohol as they create, fluctuate and transform, yet they also listen to their bodies—they hear, feel, sense when it is time to say: "enough!" (Braidotti 2001, 194, 195).

Enough designs a catography of sustainability...it is variable in each and every one; it is action-oriented; it is affirmative of potential.... It banks on and actively promotes a future. It is enduring and sustainable: it does go on.... "I can't take any more" is an ethical-energetic statement, not the assertion of a defeat. Learning to recognize thresholds as borders or limits is crucial... (Braidotti 2001, 200,193).

I have already stressed the ways in which unruly female bodies risk becoming trivialized, domesticated and/or dismissed within dominant discourse, as well as subject to arrest and incarceration in the public realm. In the final instance, this is not something that one can easily control. However, I offer Braidotti's insights as a response to Russo, and to my own embrace of female transgressions involving carnivalesque excess—which I described in Chapter One as revolving around the idea of "too much" in relationship to the norms of femininity and what is deemed appropriate when it comes to activities that involve eating, drinking, fucking, cursing and so on. As I have suggested, there is much



to be said for the sight of and the responses to ugly-messy-wreck-of-punk-femininity-rockstar Courtney staging the figure of the slut with ironic reflexivity; stumbling, swearing, swilling down the booze and as she puts it, “getting them in a frenzy, a frenzy, a frenzy, a ridiculous fucking crowd frenzy” (Raphael 1995, 29). And I want her to be able to keep on doing it. So my question becomes: if Courtney’s everyday seems like a carnival starring her unruly female body as it plays with potentially harmful substances in the pursuit of unsettling the order of things; can she ideally also be simultaneously engaged in mapping out and embodying sustainable strategies that allow her to remain alive, kicking and creating? Or am I the one that is now asking for too much?

### **Summing it up**

I would love to stay and continue to play around with these concerns and questions; however, I know that it is time to highlight some of this project’s main features. On that note, *Bodies of Irony* is a feminist theory building project with an open-ended hermeneutic twist composed in the spirit of writing-as-performance. It generated dialogue that rarely occurs between irony scholarship and unruly body theory. I have suggested that in order to understand irony, one need not rely on highly schematic typologies that, however inadvertently, often work to kill irony’s irreverent spark. In turn, I have posited that irony tends to come in three interconnected forms: instrumental irony, observational irony and irony as a sensibility. Irony, I stressed, is also linked to embodied practices.

In keeping with irony as a sensibility, I have shown how Karen Finley becomes characters who exude riotous rage that is simultaneously politically motivated yet highly

attuned to the limits of oppositional movement. I have also suggested that both Finley and Spiderwoman's performances, however paradoxically, rely on the identity categories that they critique as points of entry into the re-presentation of oppressive power relations. Moreover, Spiderwoman also evoke this fluctuating sensibility toward memory which is revealed to be fundamental to weaving family stories which can just as easily be called into question as memory's elusive properties enters the picture. Similarly, in Spiderwoman's shows, the sight of the Native body can be problematized even and particularly as it is valorized. Following Kathy Ferguson, I have stressed that irony as a sensibility is often necessary for it enables one to sustain necessary incompatibilities engendered by clashing insights (Ferguson 1993, 35).

By paying close attention to the ways in which the women/ladies/grrrls who have starred in this dissertation evoke observational ironies in performance, I have exposed a variety of discrepancies between dominant ideals and everyday practices. In Finley's work, for example, America becomes a place where democracy's hypocrisy is revealed when the country that promises "liberty and justice for all" turns its back on the AIDS crisis and ignores violence against women and queers. Moreover, Fusco and Gómez-Peña's work suggests that so-called civilized institutions like museums are founded on barbaric practices. And Spiderwoman show that the new age is actually about the same old business as usual featuring the Noble Savage updated in the guise of the wise Shaman with her spirituality perceived as a commodity for white western consumption. As I reiterate responses to the performances featured in *Bodies of Irony*, I have also evoked observational irony to show how, for instance, in the land Liz Phair calls Guyville, dudes

like Burroughs, Garcia and Kurt are glorified for their drug use, whereas on a good day, Courtney is likened to a junkie bitch.

Working my way through riot grrrl slogans, lyrics courtesy of Princess Superstar and Courtney Love along with witty lines from Finley, I have shown how instrumentally ironic overstatement, understatement and counter-statement allows one to refashion language to express anti-sexist sentiments in unfamiliar, often funny, edgy ways. Moreover, as I have stressed, instrumental irony is often inseparable from the sight of the unruly body in performance. In terms of clothing, it can be evoked via Spiderwoman's hybrid costumes or Courtney Love's kinderwhore look. Ideally, instrumental irony circulates on the scene when Courtney or Princess Superstar stage the slut in ways that work to show that she is a construct, a doing, a product of the problematic good girl/bad girl binary. As Finley exposes, hysteria can be similarly overdone as a strategy toward undoing its foundations. Lastly, Fusco and Gómez-Peña's entire enterprise asks spectators to catch the unspoken in their act thus sensing the horror that the cage, the zoo keepers and themselves as "specimen" can convey.

However, throughout *Bodies of Irony* I have been careful to stress that when one plays with irony and/or the unruly body in performance a variety of risks emerge. Many of the performers in this dissertation have been trivialized, sexualized, demonized and/or dismissed. Much of this has to do with the ways in which irony and/in the unruly female body relies on interpreters "in the know," who can sense what is being conveyed. Yet, once again, this should not imply that those who use straightforward verbal and body language to get their points across are not also in danger of finding that their words and deeds have also been interpreted in a multiplicity of unwelcome ways. As *Bodies of Irony*

trespasses across leaky spheres where art and pop culture are not neatly cordoned off from one another; this dissertation has featured a variety of performers who flesh out different and dynamic ways of doing, undoing and or re-doing identity, hybridity, femininity and het sexuality via irony and the unruly in ways that show that no body need necessarily remain in her appropriate place.

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### Notes to Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> The quotes from Sarah Jones appear in a printed, non-authored version of the BBC's "The World Today" program, titled "Cover Versions: Sarah Jones," 2004, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/music/33376983.stm>.

Jones' song appears in a Ninja Tune compilation album by DJ Vadim called *USSR: Life From the Other Side*.

<sup>2</sup> From "Cover Versions: Sarah Jones" (2004).

<sup>3</sup> From a non-authored report titled "Your revolution will not be televised," <http://www.airbubble.com>.

<sup>4</sup> From "Cover Versions: Sarah Jones" (2004).

<sup>5</sup> From a press release and pamphlet titled "No More Miss America (1968)" passed around prior to and during the protest. A more detailed description of the protest also exists on Jo Freeman's website titled "No More Miss America (1968-1969), <http://www.jofreeman.com/photos/MissAm1969.html>.

<sup>6</sup> The phrase "woman-garbage" is taken from "No More Miss America (1968)."

<sup>7</sup> "No More Miss America (1968)."

<sup>8</sup> In conversation, March 2004.

<sup>9</sup> Neil Zanville, a spokesperson from the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services explains that: "...if someone is hospitalized or arrested under the influence of drugs and we feel that poses an abusive threat to the safety of a child, we will respond and assess the situation. We [can] remove that child and place him or her, usually with a relative" (Kaufman 2003c).

<sup>11</sup> The expression "rock and ruin" comes from the song "Life Despite God" on *America's Sweetheart*.

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