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Sleater-Kinney's Electric Feminism

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Abstract

This article argues that Sleater-Kinney is a transformative band in rock history, fundamentally revitalizing the artform across a three-decade career. Through an analysis of the band's background in the world of independent labels, punk rock, and the Riot Grrrl movement, the article charts the evolution of Sleater-Kinney, paying particular attention to their lyrics, as well as to the ongoing relationship with their fans. Providing both a historical and a theoretical perspective to contextualize the band's music, the article's central thesis is that Sleater-Kinney has cultivated a unique aesthetic capable of conveying its own form of feminism, one that is characterized by a trenchant critique of American neoliberal culture.

Keywords: Riot Grrrl; punk rock; neoliberalism; Sleater-Kinney; feminism; Pacific Northwest; indie rock

I. Introduction: Sleater-Kinney and the Reinvention of Rock

In a column about Kristin Lems and the first National Women's Music Festival back in 1974, the vanguard music critic Ellen Willis highlights a topic that reverberates throughout her writing: the intimate relation between a politics of liberation and the physical abandon of rock and roll. For Willis, rock is a vital vehicle for the articulation of what she calls "the active emotions," which, for her, are "anger, aggression, lust, [and] the joy of physical exertion" (Willis, "Women's Music" 143). Elsewhere, she claims that what distinguishes rock from disco is that the former is "always on some level about rebellion, freedom, and the expression of emotion," whereas the latter "was about cooling out as you moved up"

(Willis, "Beginning to See the Light" 54). Maybe more than most, Willis realized that leftist political projects can only succeed if they are also committed to pleasure and joy. But in the era that saw the emergence of the paradigmatic manifestation of the new art form – the era of "classic" artists such as The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Bob Dylan, The Who, Jimi Hendrix, and Led Zeppelin – women performers were, in the words of Willis, "denied access to this powerful musical language" (Willis, "Women's Music" 143). For the remarkably perceptive and prescient Willis, it was thus "crucially important" for women musicians "to break that barrier and force rock to reflect their experience and aspirations" ("Women's Music" 143).

While there were signs that that barrier was beginning to falter a little – Patti Smith released her colossally influential debut album *Horses* the following year – it was not until the 1990s that Willis's hopeful expectations really started to materialize. Not a decade known for its outsize political appetite, the carefree, irony-infested, and somewhat hedonistic 1990s nonetheless saw the rise both of a new feminist movement indissolubly tied to music and a band that in more ways than one would redefine rock and roll as a means of aesthetic and cultural expression. That band is Sleater-Kinney. Formed by then college students Corin Tucker and Carrie Brownstein in Olympia, Washington, in 1994, the band has released eleven studio albums to date. This article starts from the assumption that Sleater-Kinney, more than any other musicians before or since, encapsulates Willis's faith in a politics rooted in a sense of jouissance no less than in progressive ideals. I also want to claim that the band's reformulation of the language of rock amounts to a release of a dormant potential nestled within the art form, the possibly controversial implication of which is that rock and roll was still a project under construction (of course, in one way, it still is). There were significant precursors, obviously, from UK punk and post-punk band The Slits to the inestimably influential Rhode Island-based Throwing Muses. Yet the claim of this article is that the fusion of rock and feminism, pleasure and politics, had not been as powerfully and distinctively communicated before. Without ever being didactic or proselytizing, Sleater-Kinney manages to create organic music suffused with a vital, wild political pulse

and lyrics that embody a particular ethos continuously expanded and developed over the course of their albums.

Sleater-Kinney's work inaugurated a renewal of an expressive form that by the mid-1990s, post-grunge – one could be forgiven for thinking – had turned somewhat stale. But that is not all. Their dogged insistence on forging their own path – sonically, lyrically, and philosophically – makes the listener more conscious of the gendered history-writing of not only rock and roll as a musical genre but also of its multiple antecedents in the American musical tradition. Sleater-Kinney's work, I shall argue, works like a prism refracting multiple issues that continue to be relevant for the contemporary moment. These include, yet are not limited to subjects such as the historicity of the rock and roll canon; the place of female musicians and performers in it; the gendered character of music criticism; the extended meaning of the notion of feminine writing – and the attendant problem of essentialism; the complex entanglements of differently modulated feminisms; the possibility of an aesthetics of resistance; Sleater-Kinney's position in the larger tradition of protest art; the aspects of American culture and experience filtered through the consciousness of the band; the global influence of feminist punk rock; the aesthetic evolution of the band across three decades; the critique of the many faces of neoliberalism; and, last but not least, the nature of the band's dialectics of pleasure and politics. I will not pretend to be able to cover all these aspects here, but I mention them so as to underscore the richness and relevance of the band's contribution.

It is tempting to consider the band's compelling, obdurate sensibility as an imaginary retort to Theodor Adorno's resigned statement that even though people know that things could have been different, the circumstances of modern living dictate that "the evident possibility of fulfillment" still appears as "radically impossible" (qtd. in Bloch 4). The sound of Sleater-Kinney is the sound of the rejection of such inert despondency, from "#1 Must Have" (off of 2000's *All Hands on the Bad One*) and its affirmative "[c]ulture is what we make it" and "[n]ow is the time to invent" to the collectivist rally of "Surface Envy's" "We win, we lose/Only together do we break the rules" (from 2015's *No Cities to Love*) and to the buoyant suggestion in "Bring Mercy" (from 2021's *Path of*

Wellness) to “[p]ack your bags with things to lift you up.” As this article will attempt to show, Sleater-Kinney is a transformational band in the history of rock and roll, changing the medium in more ways than one. Possibly for the first time, there are writers and performers that redirect the insurgent, world-shattering spirit of this form of music away from its clichéd and often sexist hedonism toward a genuinely emancipatory destination. Not only that, but the band seems to have little time for the myth of the lone, long-suffering genius, who is always male, creating art from misery, excess, and plenty of existential darkness. Sleater-Kinney introduces joy and pleasure into an art form that, outside of gospel, has been extensively beholden to what the literary critic Murray Krieger, in a different context, termed “the tragic vision” (1960). What is more, the band also injects this attitude into its politics. Up against even the most crushing neoliberal forces, the band retains its sense of communal abandon, of that uplift they sing about in a song like “Bring Mercy.” Vanguards also in their relationship with the audience, Sleater-Kinney, more than most bands, has re-stipulated the terms of the contract with the fans. The band moreover epitomizes how to evolve artistically in a graceful and inventive way (it is hard to think of a male-dominated indie rock band that would have the guts to call their album *Path of Wellness*). Above all, the mere existence of Sleater-Kinney suggests that the true animus of rock and roll may not be the caricatured macho poses of a Keith Richards, a Robert Plant, or a Bruce Springsteen, but rather the insurrectionary imagination of a consciousness feminine to the core.

An appreciation of the singularity of that imagination was profusely evident upon Sleater-Kinney’s return after a lengthy hiatus. Nine years after having played their last show, at the Crystal Ballroom in Portland in 2006, the band released *No Cities to Love* in January 2015. The response was rapturous. In *Pitchfork*, the critic Jessica Hopper – reassessing the position of the band from the vantage point of a decade – wrote that Sleater-Kinney “didn’t mean something; they meant *everything*.” (Her appraisal bursts with celebratory description. An ensemble capable of giving a voice to women, queers, and marginalized Others, the band was “pissed dissenters” that actually cared about social injustice (Hopper). They represented “an indomitable, baleful force” that was “ecstatic” on

stage (Hopper). They gained the respect of male music fans. Their every word was “an act of refusal: to be quiet, to be the good girl, to play a game set up for us [women] to lose” (Hopper). Ultimately, this was a band that “legitimized everyone’s lives” (Hopper). If this kind of praise had been conferred upon practically any other band, it would have sounded a lot like hyperbole. But, in this particular case, it scans more as a sober and concise report on the band’s cultural impact. Hopper’s piece materialized at the cusp of Sleater-Kinney’s relaunch; yet, it should be pointed out, her estimation is not contingent on the distance created by a retrospective lens. More than a decade earlier, in one of the rare texts about the band featured in an academic journal, Randal Doane is quick to recognize the band’s impatience with, and defiance of the proclivity for postmodern irony that defined the zeitgeist out of which Sleater-Kinney emerged. What the band was about, instead, was “self-change and revolutionary practice,” transmitted through their “joyful noise and pleasurable decency” (Doane 358). In Sleater-Kinney, Doane sees someone who is not content with simply critiquing the tradition but who also wants, much more ambitiously, to “liberate it” (Doane 361).

II. The Pacific Northwest Chronotope

Sonic identities are sometimes shaped by geographical location. New Orleans birthed jazz. Laurel Canyon spawned a certain kind of singer-songwriters. In the 1970s, New York was home to the proliferation of punk and new wave. Los Angeles in the 1980s had its Paisley Underground. Athens engendered a vital DIY scene that spanned several generations of musicians. Seattle and grunge became inextricably entwined in the early 1990s. Chicago in the same decade saw the rise of post-rock. Montreal became a stronghold of new and recharged indie rock in the noughties. The list could go on. But it is not place as physical site that matters, but rather the fomentation of place into a notable cultural space through artistic or other practices. Olympia represents such an environment. In 1982, Calvin Johnson set up the pioneering indie label K Records there, initially as a way of distributing cassette tapes of the band The Supreme Cool Beings, who performed on Johnson’s radio show at

Evergreen State College's KAOS station. Operated at first from Johnson's kitchen, K Records issued their first vinyl release two years later, the Beat Happening 45 "Our Secret/What's Important." Staunchly anti-corporate, K Records went on to release Beck's third album *One Foot in the Grave* in 1994, and, over the years, a bulk of notable artists have been closely affiliated with the label – Built to Spill, Modest Mouse, The Halo Benders, The Microphones, Miranda July, Thee Headcoats, and Mirah, to name just some of them. While part of the punk underground, K also stood out as an agent of lo-fi, homespun, and sometimes twee rock that appealed to female performers and listeners. The Olympia scene in the 1980s also comprised punk bands with all-female members, such as Neo Boys, and the K label itself was co-owned by a woman, Candice Pedersen, between 1986 and 1999. When, at the dawn of the 1990s, the Riot Grrrl movement would develop in Olympia, it arose out of an already fertile cultural space that valued feminism and progressive ethics. While K released just one Riot Grrrl title, the split Heavens to Betsy/Bratmobile 7-inch "My Secret/Cool Schmool," the label was instrumental in creating a musical and social climate hospitable to female performers and fans.

Cutting-edge Riot Grrrl bands like Bratmobile and Bikini Kill released music on another epochal Olympia label, Kill Rock Stars, which had begun as an outlet for spoken-word performances, one of which featured the seminal Riot Grrrl emissary Kathleen Hanna. Founded by Slim Moon and Tinuviel Sampson, Kill Rock Stars put out an eponymous compilation of local bands in 1991, featuring work by, among others, Nation of Ulysses, Bratmobile, Bikini Kill, Jad Fair, Melvins, and Nirvana. The musicians, bands, and labels comprised a local infrastructure, buoyed by a prevailing feminism, that was amenable to the growth of unorthodox aesthetic practices. It was into this vibrant, venturesome milieu of burgeoning groups, cassette tapes, zines, inexpensive equipment, low-fi sound, idealist producers, and intellectual fervor that Carrie Brownstein and Corin Tucker immersed themselves upon enrolling at Evergreen State College in the early 1990s, the former to study sociolinguistics, the latter film and politics. With Tracy Sawyer, Tucker formed the punk duo Heavens to Betsy in 1991, playing their first show in August of that year as part of K Records' International Pop Underground Convention. Before

the split single with Bratmobile, the band also released a demo cassette on the K label and a full album, *Calculated*, on Kill Rock Stars in 1994 (in addition to two more singles and compilation tracks). Tucker met Brownstein when Heavens to Betsy played a show in Bellingham, where Brownstein was a student at Western Washington University. Arriving in Olympia, she formed the band Excuse 17 with Becca Albee and Curtis James in 1993. Often sharing stages with Tucker's band, Excuse 17 was similarly connected with the Riot Grrrl movement and released two full-length records, an eponymous album on Atlas Records (1994) and *Such Friends Are Dangerous* on Kill Rock Stars (1995). At first, Sleater-Kinney was a side project for Tucker and Brownstein.

III. Riot Grrrl as Protest Music

The initial impulse behind Riot Grrrl was a response to the sidelining of female participants in the hardcore punk scene; later, it widened its scope to address society's alienation of young women. It would not be inaccurate to consider the Riot Grrrl assemblage as American protest music, a term that conventionally has been linked perhaps more readily to class and race than to gender and sexuality.¹ Bands such as Bikini Kill, Heavens to Betsy, Bratmobile, and Excuse 17 were unafraid to bring up, in their songs, fraught subjects such as sexual abuse and rape culture, body shaming, incest, abortion, toxic masculinity, patriarchal dominance, queerness and LGBT rights, racism, and white privilege. Sleater-Kinney's self-titled first album, released on what has been described as the "anarcho-lesbo punk label" Chainsaw on June 25, 1995, contains its fair share of lyrics suggestive of what one may call the sexual politics of Riot Grrrl (Shepherd 2006). In "A Real Man," the third track on the album, the narrator states the following: "Don't you wanna feel it inside?/They say that it feels so nice/All girls should have a real man/Should I buy it? I don't wanna/I don't wanna join your club." Allusions to the female body as a site of psychosexual negotiation and to the objectification of women thread through several of the album's songs, often in ways that prefigure the experiences relayed through the #metoo-movement more than two decades later. "They say a body remembers it," the speaker tells us in the

track “Her Again,” and in “The Last Song,” which also closes the record, the first-person narrator utters the words “This song, your song/Is the only song I’ll ever do/About you for me/So I can stay alive.” Similar themes seem to come up in the somberly entitled “How To Play Dead.” Here, the speaker eloquently and economically gives expression to the anguish of forced intimacy: “You want to show me how to play dead/How to be still/How to please you,” and “What’s good for you/Is not for me/What’s over for you/Is not over for me.”

The voice that speaks these lines is reminiscent of the figure that John Berger terms the “surveyor.” In his seminal *Ways of Seeing* (1972), Berger observes that “the social presence of a woman is different in kind from that of a man” (45). A woman internalizes her own image. Incorporated into her consciousness is this surveyor, who is male, but simultaneously she also possesses an awareness of the presence of the surveyor. This meta-consciousness generates a kind of existential rift between body and mind, the latter drifting away from the taxing enmeshment of that body with the proprietary entitlement of male companions. Many of the songs on Sleater-Kinney’s debut album confront another person, an addressee who is presumably a man that always wants something from the speaker, like in the examples above. The mood through which these testimonials are enunciated is often quite alarming. In another song on the same record, “Be Yr Mama,” the narrator offers the somewhat uneasy declaration “Make you better/I made you better/You’re inside me/I’m yr mommy.” Yet although these lyrics seem tied to the intimate sphere of personal relationships, they are not devoid of the political tenor that would constitute a bigger part of later albums. On “Sold Out,” for instance, there is a stanza that gestures beyond the problem of sexual harassment on an inter-personal level toward the larger cultural horizon of neoliberal commodification: “Wanna be a star/Watch me go nowhere/Sucking on his dick/Fuck it, I want money.” There is a self-reflexive dimension to the writing on this record that would inform the band’s work to come. This is maybe nowhere more pithily condensed than on a song that was to surface more than a quarter of a century after the tales of fellatio on *Sleater-Kinney*. “Well, I like those complex female characters,” the probably male narrator discloses in the song “Complex

Female Characters” (off of *Path of Wellness*, 2021), before he goes on to declare “but I want my women to go down easy.” The rejection of this notion of consumability is a leitmotif throughout the career of not only Sleater-Kinney but most of the Riot Grrrl performers.

The flourishing of feminist activism in the Pacific Northwest was not just literary/textual; it was also by nature spatial and choreographic. It is no coincidence that one of the early accounts of Riot Grrrl was named *Girls to the Front* (S. Marcus 2010). As a measure of protection as well as accessibility, inviting girls to advance close to the stage was a habitual practice for many of the bands. Attending shows thus became a matter of spatio-corporeal repossession. Riot Grrrl shows enacted a form of reciprocity between musicians and fans that went beyond any conventional rapport with audiences. The performances encouraged a form of profound inclusivity, resembling Claire Bishop’s description of participatory art as the mediation of “what is invisible: a group dynamic, a social situation, a change of energy, a raised consciousness” (6). Nor did the feminist recuperation of performative spaces end with the passionate interaction with the audience. Touring behind their third studio record, their breakthrough *Dig Me Out* (1997), the band traveled, due to financial constraints, without a sound engineer. A dependable nuisance on the road was the arrogant chauvinism of club managers and sound technicians, who often mistakenly assumed they knew more about acoustics than the band. Their frustrating experiences induced Tucker to write a tour diary, *Hey Soundguy*, later published as a zine. In it, she wrote about every show and included photos and names of the various engineers, whose actions and attitudes formed recognizable patterns across shows. “The Twiddler” needed always to make modifications to the sound, while “The Muzzler” was the type who would turn down Tucker’s vocal because they found her voice too forceful. “The Bluffer” covered those who had insufficient knowledge of the craft. For the band, the *Dig Me Out* Tour was about “reclaiming their narrative agency from an array of ‘soundguys’,” Jovana Babović writes in her 33 1/3 book about the iconic album (73). On the whole, the tour was seen as more than just a rock show. It was also “a campaign for the physical safety of women, for the social agency of youth, and for LGBT rights” (Babović 86).

What makes Sleater-Kinney as a phenomenon so singular, and what makes their case so compelling and unique, is that they incarnate a form of feminist ethics that is both holistic and wide-ranging. Electrifyingly musical, stridently poetic, vigorously political, emphatically social – this is an ethics that runs the gamut from aesthetic acumen to functional proficiency. Doane pinpoints some of the latter when he writes that Sleater-Kinney “problematizes the gender privilege of height, creates space for girl power in practice, and fosters practical, egalitarian power as possibility in the rock formation” (359). But this is not to say that the band’s cultural ascension was in any way effortless or uncomplicated. As much as their approach, their ethos was revolutionary both in spirit and practice; their relationship with the culture, with the media, and even with feminism and Riot Grrrl was ambivalent at best. First of all, Riot Grrrl’s own relationship with second-wave feminism was notoriously tense. Even as the then young Generation X faced the political backlash of Reagan’s and Thatcher’s 1980s, the women coming of age in the grunge era did not necessarily identify with dominant feminism. Some found its punishingly theoretical language disaffecting, for one thing, while others remained skeptical to their parent generation’s inattention to the variables of race and class in their philosophical tracts.

Feminism 3.0 was a different animal. Its pluralist compass and postmodern individualism were more accommodating to the organizationally loose, internally disunited, and leaderless Riot Grrrl. Yet even the movement’s idealist anarchism would be no bulwark against misrepresentation. In 1993, the media’s consistent diminution of Riot Grrrl to a matter of style and fashion famously prompted a media blackout. Evolving from a subculture with strained relations both to academia and to the mainstream press, Sleater-Kinney would have to negotiate their own path out of a precarious socio-political matrix of divergent forces and interests: the allegiance to their community, the commitment to artistic independence, the ancient punk rock fear of selling out, the cost of letting the media co-author one’s narrative, and the formidable challenge of taking feminism itself in a new direction. Reactions were ambivalent when features on the band started to appear in publications such as *Rolling Stone* and *Spin*. National coverage tended to portray the band as “too

political,” to borrow Babović’s words, while the Riot Grrrl community came to see them as “not . . . political enough” (27). A review of *Dig Me Out* in *Time Magazine*, opening with the condescending line that “[t]he most exciting thing about the rock trio Sleater-Kinney is that it sounds as if its members are still learning how to be a rock band,” came to influence the general perception of the band in the press (Farley 1997).

Babović contends that the media’s presentation of Sleater-Kinney relied upon what she calls languages of authority, of legitimacy, and of sound. The former boiled down to insinuations that an all-female group was a questionable anomaly in the masculine world of rock and roll, while the latter two translated as distrust of the band’s technical expertise (Babović 52-53). A fair amount of attention was given to the fact that the band did not have a bass player, which some would construe as a desecration of the quintessence of the art form. As if the implications that the musicians were untrained was not enough, some of the media reception would also, regrettably yet predictably, sexualize the band. As Babović puts it, Brownstein, Tucker, and Weiss were “framed as lubricants for pleasure, seductresses, and objects of consumption” (62). Despite such disheartening preconceptions, and alongside classifications of their sound as “neurotic and hysterical” (Babović 65), the band maintained relations with the national press (unlike for instance the purists in Washington DC’s Fugazi) because they felt it was an indispensable means of reaching the fans (57).

IV. Non-conformity in an Era of Neoliberal Feminism

There is an argument to be made, especially with the benefit of hindsight, that the many impediments to the vigor of feminist punk projects – such as unenlightened media, skepticism from the RG’s grassroots community, the high theory of second-wave feminism, and overconfident sound guys – were dwarfed by an altogether different adversary: neoliberal co-optation. Writing from the perspective of the 2010s, Andi Zeisler discusses the utter disappointment she calls “marketplace feminism,” a “decontextualized” and “depoliticized” ersatz feminism that has little to do with the concerns of either second-or-third wave feminism. “[M]ost of

the problems that have necessitated feminist movements to begin with,” Zeisler argues, “are still very much in place, but at the same time there’s a mainstream, celebrity, consumer embrace of feminism that positions it as a cool, fun, accessible identity that anyone can adopt” (Zeisler xii-xiii).² This was equally true in 1997, the year of Sleater-Kinney’s pivotal *Dig Me Out*, which also saw the release of *Spiceworld*, the second album by Spice Girls. Not even outspoken and passionate female performers like Fiona Apple, Tori Amos, and Alanis Morissette were able fully to escape the commodifying cultural forces of the mid-to late 1990s. Reduced to an infantilized kind of “girl power” or to the unimaginative trope of the angry young woman, female artists “were not taken seriously as musicians in the late 1990s popular culture,” Babović notes (3). Part of the problem was the pigeonholing of performers in marketable categories; even projects not so directly linked to commercial forces such as the summer festival Lilith Fair (established by Sarah McLachlan in 1997) could be seen as contributing to similar processes of labelling.

Although Babović certainly has a point, her assessment calls for some nuancing. Active in the expansive, ever mutating field of rock and pop music at the time were not just those that Babović mentions – Morissette, Apple, Sheryl Crow, Tracy Chapman, LeAnn Rimes, Jewel, and Spice Girls, to name a few. The founders of Throwing Muses, arguably the most groundbreaking female-led American rock band before Sleater-Kinney, Donnelly and Hersh released celebrated solo albums in the period Babović discusses; Tanya Donnelly’s solo debut *Lovesongs for Underdogs* came out on Sire in 1997, while Kristin Hersh’s second solo record, *Strange Angels*, appeared on 4AD in 1998. That same year, Ani DiFranco unveiled her highest charting record, *Little Plastic Castles* (Righteous Babe, 1998), which was already her eighth in as many years. Cat Power, one of the most central female artists of the noughties, got her start in the mid-1990s; her fourth album *Moon Pix* (Matador, 1998) is considered by Rob Sheffield of *Rolling Stone* to be “one of the Nineties great singer/songwriter triumphs” (2010). Emerging at the time were also major releases by African-American women – Erykah Badu’s *Baduizm* (Kedar, 1997) and Lauryn Hill’s *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* (Ruffhouse, 1998). Three indisputably classic albums of this era were

made wholly or in part by women – Björk’s *Homogenic* (One Little Indian, 1997), Portishead’s *Portishead* (Go!, 1997), and Lucinda Williams’s *Car Wheels on a Gravel Road* (Mercury, 1998). One should also not forget that one of the biggest rock stars on the planet between 1995 and 2000 was PJ Harvey, who offered us the enduring masterpieces *To Bring You My Love* (Island, 1995), *Is this Desire?* (Island, 1998), and *Stories From the City, Stories From the Sea* (Island, 2000). While Harvey has notably resisted identification as a feminist, and being at best unconcerned about Riot Grrrl, from *Dry* (Too Pure, 1992) onward she has consistently made rock music a vehicle for avenues of the feminine experience that previously had little place in the genre.³

Incomparable as the band was when they first appeared, and however deeply entangled with Riot Grrrl, Sleater-Kinney was thus not the only female musicians who refused to conform to what Babović sees as “the gender and cultural norms women were expected to perform in the late 1990s” (2). They were also preceded by postpunk, guitar-heavy indie acts such as Babes in Toyland, L7, The Gits, and The Breeders, which all ascended in the late 1980s or early 1990s on alternative labels. What sets Sleater-Kinney apart is not necessarily just the sharp vibrancy and creative aggression of their 1990s work, the Riot Grrrl-cum-Spice Girl-moment when they first burst upon the scene, but rather the essence of their longevity; throughout the arc of their career the band’s abiding commitment to their own singular form of feminism has continuously evolved and deepened beyond the politics of early 1990s Riot Grrrl. By the time of their first post-#metoo-album, the aspiration to subvert rock and roll’s all too durable gender roles heard in a line such as “I wanna be your Thurston Moore” on *Call the Doctor* (Chainsaw, 1996) had been superseded by other perspectives, like the affecting tribute to Christine Blasey Ford in the mournful “Broken,” off of *The Center Won’t Hold* (Mom + Pop, 2019): “She, she, she stood up for us/When she testified.”

V. Whose Experience? – Redefining Rock and Roll

Sleater-Kinney’s story has been one of not only withstanding the forces of commodification but also of articulating a coherent critique of neoliberal

America. For a group steeped in an artistic environment based on opposition to “the corporate ogre,” as the slogan of K Records has it, things such as acquiring technical prowess, signing to a label like Sub Pop, and achieving popularity and widespread critical recognition were not unequivocally undemanding. The Olympia scene was synonymous with DIY values. After *Dig Me Out*, Sleater-Kinney garnered national attention. On their sold-out tour, they opened for John Spencer Blues Explosion in LA, and, as the tour for that record progressed, also headlined gigs. Moreover, the album’s cover compositionally mimicked the Kinks’ third album *The Kinks Kontroversy* (Pye, 1965), and inside of this figuration was another intertextual reference to the (overwhelmingly male) rock and roll canon, Black Sabbath’s *Vol. 4* (Vertigo, 1972). There was the exposure in *Time Magazine*. The band members started to be venerated as rock stars. Just a couple of years later, in 1999, one of America’s greatest rock authorities, Greil Marcus, affirmed Sleater-Kinney as “The Best Band in the World.” Reviewing *The Hot Rock* (Kill Rock Stars, 1999), the band’s follow-up to *Dig Me Out*, G. Marcus had this to say about the opening track “Start Together:” “You’ve never heard the song before. It’s impossible to imagine it on the radio, because it’s so strong. Like Sex Pistols records, which are almost never played on the radio, it might destroy whatever came before or after” (68). The review is panegyric, yet also quite judicious. It notes that the band has “gotten more extreme” with each record, contrary to most punk bands, “as if the sound they want is a dare against the very idea of limits (G. Marcus 68). Marcus comments on the enormity of Tucker’s voice, on the interlacing of the two singers’ voices, and on the sense of polyphony they evoke. Reading this valuation, one gets the impression that G. Marcus really feels that this is a watershed moment in rock and roll history; the reason, he writes, that one cannot entertain the idea of something like “Start Together” being played on the radio, is that “it would erase every other disc on the playlist” (68).

By the turn of the millennium, Sleater-Kinney had thus already been consecrated as a landmark band, favorably noticed by mainstream media and extolled by the rock cognoscenti (although the former had not translated into much airplay, as Marcus’s review suggests). If – in the face of such recognition – there might have been certain misgivings about the

band's continued allegiance to the activist ideals of Riot Grrrl, their struggle to deconstruct rock and roll hierarchies and claim a place within the art form on their own terms ensured that authenticity was maintained in the transition from DIY punk rockers to critically lauded pacesetters (Babović 2). In an interview with Babović, Janet Weiss offers that around the time of *Dig Me Out*, Sleater-Kinney aspired to be "heroic, scary, edgy, and challenging," qualities that have permeated their work ever since (Babović 48). The question of commitment to the original Riot Grrrl communities also needs to be addressed in the context of Sleater-Kinney's unconventional, democratic approach toward their audiences. On stage, the band in a way incorporated the fans into their world – talking about issues in which the audience recognized themselves, encouraging fans to come up on the stage, and inspiring them to start their own bands. The collapse of the set boundaries between performers and audiences engendered a powerful loyalty on part of the fans, who both felt seen as individuals and included in the band's iconoclastic project. In concert and elsewhere, Sleater-Kinney rebuffed "normative notions of fame," changing rock and roll from within by "embodying an everyday heroism" (Babović 100; 102). For this reason, the band's cultural and political contribution is not just aesthetic or musical; it also represents an ethics of being that perhaps has not been seen in rock previously.

In what follows, I would like to test the hypothesis that Sleater-Kinney's music has acted as a catalyst for the emergence of new epistemic paradigms in the interface between the expressive medium of punk rock and contemporary culture and politics. Their art forces a reassessment of received historical understandings of rock music, which get disrupted and destabilized. Sleater-Kinney's albums and live shows carry new meanings, knowledge that was not part of the rock and roll landscape before. The concept of experience is crucial in this regard. Every art form, and every single work, is the outcome of someone's experience, at the same time as it is also designed to be experienced by someone else, in ways both intended and uncontrollable. The more restricted and homogeneous particular cultural expressions and experiences are, the less inclusive and relevant they become for the plurality of beings that populate the increasingly heterogeneous public sphere. While they are not the only

band to do so, Sleater-Kinney arguably more than many extends the experiential scope of rock and roll, stretches its identity, questions its basic assumptions, and renders it more inclusive and more dialogical. In short, the band transforms the medium from within. This amounts to far more than just an aesthetic rupture, as when U2 released *Achtung Baby* (Island, 1991) or Radiohead *Kid A* (Parlophone, 2000). The music also opens up a space of political experience, and maybe even participation. Even though the band has always shied away from the sloganistic, their texts, I want to argue, have always been unfalteringly political, albeit sometimes in subtle and understated ways.

Taken together, their literary output can be read as a reflection upon and denunciation of neoliberal America from the Clinton era in the mid-1990s and up until the contemporary moment. This critical sensibility harbors mutinous potential, the possibility of releasing something akin to the libidinous social energies Herbert Marcuse considered in his work. Asked around 1970 whether the popular culture of the time could be a springboard for an “aesthetic-erotic way of life,” Marcuse replied that “[t]he groups you have mentioned are characteristic of a state of disintegration within the system, which as mere phenomenon has no revolutionary force whatsoever, but which perhaps at some time will be able to play a role in connection with other, much stronger objective forces” (69). The appearance on the scene of a band like Sleater-Kinney, which regenerates the artform and fuses its élan with sharper politics and with a new way of addressing the audience, in actual fact suggests greater powers of subversion than those of the era that Marcuse considers. It could be argued that the band fruitfully integrates different varieties and segments of feminism across several historical junctures: the countercultural feminism of Marcuse’s time, the poetic punk provocations of 1970s performers such as Patti Smith and The Slits, Riot Grrrl and the third wave, the popular feminism of someone like Rebecca Solnit, and the #metoo movement. These influences become a fiery brew.

Notes:

¹ See, for example, Dorian Lynskey, *33 Revolutions Per Minute: A History of Protest Songs, from Billie Holiday to Green Day*, Ecco, 2011; Kevin Comtois,

Troubadours and Troublemakers: The Evolution of American Protest Music, CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015; and Fernando Orejuela, Stephanie Shonekan and Portia K. Maultsby, editors, *Black Lives Matter and Music: Protest, Intervention, Reflection*, Indiana University Press, 2018.

² See also Victoria Bromley, *Feminisms Matter: Debates, Theory, Activism*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012, 146-147.

³ See for instance Simon Reynolds, "PJ Harvey: 'I'm always looking for extremes' – A Classic Interview," *The Guardian*, 9 July 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2014/jul/09/pj-harvey-classic-interview-rocks-backpages>. Accessed 8 June 2024.

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