

Sluts and riot grrrls: female identity and sexual agency

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Abstract

This article examines some contemporary presentations of female sexuality in sub-cultural and mainstream popular culture. The article begins with a consideration of the ways in which a 'slut' persona has been appropriated in various print and Internet texts and within sub-cultural practices and musical performances. It is argued that this strategy of appropriation is characteristic of third wave and post-feminist interventions in the struggle over female sexuality. A similar process can be discerned in more mainstream representations of female sexuality that depend on the mobilization of a 'goddess' persona that makes it possible to present women's sexual activity as desirable. However, that this is achieved through the repression of the low characteristics associated with the slut, and through the construction of a 'classy' sexuality makes it necessary to examine the ways in which sexual personae are built around signifiers of race and class, as well as those of gender.

Keywords

Slut; goddess; sexuality; representation; mainstream; subculture

An 'anagram for lust'

According to Roget's Thesaurus (3rd ed, 1995), a slut is a 'vulgar promiscuous woman who flouts propriety' and the term is related to a whole category of words denoting women's sexuality, including 'baggage', 'hussy', 'jade', 'slattern', 'tart', 'tramp', 'wanton', 'wench', and 'whore'. Jane Mills (1991) explains that while the origins of the word are unknown, the term 'sluttish' was used in the fourteenth century of both women and men to mean 'dirty and untidy'. In the fifteenth century, it took on the neutral meaning of 'kitchen girl' and the more pejorative gender meaning of a 'bold', 'impudent', 'saucy' or 'brazen' girl. Later, it became associated exclusively with women and acquired 'the negative sexual sense of a promiscuous woman'. By the twentieth century it had become 'a widespread term of abuse' for women who did not 'accept the double standards of society' (Mills, 1991, p.223). Muriel Schulz has argued that this pattern, in which terms associated with women acquire negative connotations and become a 'sexual slur' (1975, p.65), is a common one. This tendency towards the linguistic sexualization and denigration of women also emerges in studies of slang (Munro 1989, Sutton 1995). Schulz argues that the semantic derogation of women is quite possibly based on male fear of women's sexuality and that the continued use of such terms 'both reflects and perpetuates derogatory attitudes to women' (1975, p.73). While the term 'slut' has clearly taken on its meaning in the context of a sexual double standard that conceives of women's sexuality in terms of a Madonna-Whore binary, a diverse range of contemporary uses suggests that it need not be understood

in this way. In this paper, I trace the history of the term and its contemporary transformations in popular media culture. This kind of interrogation is useful as a way of moving beyond the notion of the semantic derogation of women to examine the ways women engage with a culture which frequently reduces them to their sexual value. It can also help to illuminate what is at stake in struggles between women, whether this takes the form of struggles over class, generation, aesthetics or politics.

The Oxford English Dictionary sets out the various meanings of 'slut'; 'a woman of a low or loose character', 'a troublesome or awkward creature', 'a kitchen-maid', 'a woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance'. It is this quality of slovenliness that is remarked upon by Germaine Greer in her discussion of abusive terms for women (1971). She explains that,

'When most lower-class girls were making a living as domestics, struggling to keep clear of the sexual exploitation of the males in the household, the language of reprobation became more and more concerned with lapses in neatness, which were taken to be the equivalent of moral lapses. The concept of sluttishness or slatteriness with its compound implication of dirt and dishonour gave rise to a great family of nasty words, like *drab, slut, slommack, slammerkin, traipse, malkin, trollop, draggletail*' (197, p.264).

This family of words make clear the connections often made in language between sex, women, service, class, dirt and pollution.

The notion of woman as source of pollution is explored in more detail by Bonnie Blackwell in her discussion of seventeenth and eighteenth century uses of the terms 'slut' and 'jilt'. Blackwell suggests that abusive epithets for women which emphasize their polluting qualities have proliferated over time, possibly as a response to an increase in infection by syphilis (2004, p.156). However, other forces motivated the shifting fortunes of the 'slut' and the 'jilt' between 1660 and 1780. Whilst 'jilt' moved from a category of pollution (woman as dirty) to one of diabolism (woman as evil) and then passed out of use completely, 'slut' remained firmly in the pollution category and also outlasted all the other similar terms from its time, remaining in popular usage to the present day.

Blackwell notes that in the 1660s, men used 'slut' as a fond but condescending form of address for female domestics, whilst 'jilt' was a much crueller term used to denote women's sexual availability and their dirtiness (2004, p.142). These usages had changed by 1780, largely as a result of the way middle class women engaged with the terms. 'jilt' was rescued by women fiction writers, coming to denote a heroine who was a 'sexually conniving and higher ranking woman', an 'attractive trickster' who outwits men (2004, p.150). During the same period, 'slut' moved in the opposite direction, acquiring a harsher and more contemptuous edge as it began to be used by respectable women of the female servants who were employed for domestic use - and often unofficially for their sexually services - as Greer notes. The use of the term 'slut' by women of other women, Blackwell argues, marks out a 'performative speech act' that turned a sexually exploited woman into a source of filth and became the prelude for their dismissal. In this way, the 'naming of sluts' became 'the work of women' who allied themselves with sexual aggressors rather than their victims. Women used 'slut' to demonstrate their own virtue in an exorcism of the unclean (2004, p.145) and to

emphasize their own status by making alliances based on class rather than on sex. In this process sexual service was recast as a source of lust and domestic service as a source of dirt. The term grew to be 'an unbeatable signifier for masculine anxieties about female sexuality' and 'one of the few speech acts which gives the illusion of mending men's broken promises by shifting the blame to the other woman' (2004, p.158). Blackwell argues that ultimately 'slut' has endured not only because of this history, or because it is 'an anagram for lust', but because its sound embodies its meaning and its purpose so perfectly. Its looseness lingers 'until the end-stop is delivered like a brutal slap', making it 'ideal as an insult that berates a woman for her laxness: both her looseness and the swearer's rigor are represented at either end of this brief monosyllable' (2004, p.157).

As this discussion demonstrates, to begin to understand the meaning of the term, it is important to consider the contexts of a term's history and usage. The history of 'slut' demonstrates a number of things; that historically women have often been seen in terms of their sexual relations to men, and often as a source of pollution; that the term is not only an indicator of gender, but of class; and that it is used by and between women, as well as by men of women. As a number of contemporary writers have noted, there is some continuity in the use of the term 'slut' to police women; '*Slut is a slur*' (Shamburg, 2001). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the word is most commonly used as a means of branding and exclusion, most notably of younger women and girls by their peers. For teenage girls in particular, the term, 'slut', props up a sexual double standard, marks female sexuality as deviant, and works to control girls' behaviour and social positioning (Lees, 1986 and 1993; Canaan, 1986; Tanenbaum, 2000; White, 2002; Bamberg, 2004). The term is used by women against women, as in the eighteenth century (Tanenbaum, 2000). Although its principal use seems to be for the enforcement of sexual norms, White notes that the category is one of power as well as powerlessness (2002, p. 50), while Canaan notes that girls' discourses about the slut also 'provide space where traditional boundaries of sexual practices can be contradicted and transformed' (1986, p.208).

There is other evidence that the word can take on different meanings and perform different functions. This can be traced in a range of late twentieth century texts, including the polemical *Slut Manifesto* by Lizzard Amazon (n.d), the stories of Pat Califia in *Macho Sluts* (1988), the sex information video, Annie Sprinkle's *The Sluts & Goddesses Video Workshop* (1992), and the sex/lifestyle guide, *The Ethical Slut* (Easton & Liszt, 1998). What these texts share is a positive re-evaluation of sexual promiscuity and/or sex work¹ through a mobilization of the 'slut' persona². For example, the authors of *The Ethical Slut* note the dominant meaning of the term for 'a woman whose sexuality is voracious, indiscriminate and shameful', but reclaim it for 'a person of any gender who has the courage to lead life according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you'. For these writers, to be an ethical slut is to be a force for good: 'A slut shares his sexuality the way a philanthropist shares her money – because they have a lot of it to share, because it makes them happy to share it, because sharing makes the world a better place' (Easton & Liszt, 1998, p.4). In Sprinkle's video the 'slut' is a persona for women to adopt in the pursuit of their own pleasure, while Califia's sluts are tough, powerful women. Robin Shamburg (2001) describes the contemporary slut as 'a woman who takes her pleasure as a man

does...without guilt or remorse', one of the 'sex-warriors, the independent owner-operators who bring great honor to our gender'. In these texts, female authors attempt to revise and rescue the slut, much as they did the jilt in the eighteenth century. In a similar way, the adoption by young women of negative sexual slang such as 'ho' and 'bitch' as terms of joky affection, noted by Laurel Sutton in her study, may be seen as a way of 'trying to construct a new societal identity that does not conform to traditional definitions of femininity' (1995, p.290). Emily White also describes how the embrace of a 'freak' or subcultural identity and the discovery of ways to represent and articulate the 'slut' experience is, for many women, a powerful way of rescuing themselves from their sexual victimization. For them, the slut is a myth that women need to 'retrieve', 'revisit' and 'reckon with' (2002, p.190).

In the contemporary period, the reclamation of words has been closely associated with sexual politics; the term 'queer' being the most notable in this respect as a term of abuse which has been reappropriated to become an emblem of pride and visibility. The process of reappropriating words for women can be traced in the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s, and its 'reclamation of *cunt* and *queer* and *pussy* and *girl*' (Klein in Gillis & Munford, 2004, p.171). This last term, 'girl', has also been a focus of interest for 'the Hello Kitty-accessorised and lipglossed Girlies exemplified by the writers of zines such as *Bitch* and *BUST*, as well as the more anodyne mainstream proponents of "girl power" identified with the Spice Girls' (Gillis & Munford, 2004, p.170). The use of the term 'slut' as a challenging form of self-naming is made explicit in the Riot Grrrl practice of writing the word 'slut' on their bodies at gigs, thus 'publicly confronting the viewer with the very terms designed to prohibit female display and curtail sexual activity' (Leonard, 1997, p.235). According to Kathleen Hanna, the singer with Riot Grrrl band, Bikini Kill, 'When you take off your shirt (onstage) the guys think "Oh, what a slut" and it's really funny because they think that and then they look at you and it says it' (in Reynolds & Press, 1995, p.325). In this moment, 'slut' signifies something new; as one grrrl puts it, 'Yeah, I'm a slut. My body belongs to me. I sleep with who I want...I'm not your property' (in Reynolds & Press, 1995, p.325). Codes of female display are disrupted and the written text becomes a space for dialogue. Here, as in the deployment of the Riot Grrrl zine as 'a writerly text', the body becomes the explicit site of complexity. As Marion Leonard points out, Riot Grrrl is characterized by such uses of 'contradiction as a tool' and 'a playful method of inviting debate' (1997, p.251).

Evidence of activity around the term 'slut' is readily found on contemporary Internet sites. An online Language Log (2004) describes continuity in the term's meaning across the centuries ('bad housekeeping, loose sexuality, general uppitness'), but notes a possible shift to a more neutral emphasis on 'promiscuity' and 'playful usage' in current parlance. The Urban Dictionary, a slang dictionary which allows readers to post their own entries and vote on existing ones, lists sixteen definitions of 'slut', ranging from 'a woman with the morals of a man' (the most popular at no.1) to 'someone or something who gets used and allows themselves to be' (the least popular at no.16). Wikipedia, the collaboratively built online dictionary, lists a range of contemporary usages which mark a further set of changes in the word's history; - 'a slang term used to indicate a person who has frequent sexual relationships with different people'...'usually applied to women...but...often used in the gay male and

bisexual communities about people who are promiscuous', 'often regarded as offensive...but...may be used by the person concerned as an expression of pride in their status'

- 'a Sexually Liberated Urban Teenager' (the usage adopted in Marty Beckerman's novel, *Generation S.L.U.T.*, 2004)

- a term 'used simply to describe any and all women. In "Gangsta Rap" your "slut" could easily be your girlfriend', 'In Internet Porn circles, "slut" denotes basically any woman'.

These definitions suggest that the term 'slut' has broadened in its application to include gay men and bisexual men and women, and teenagers. Other sites adopt both playful and serious approaches. OKCupid! provides Slut and Ethical Slut Tests which offer a diagnosis of the user's sluttiness, rated against a 'worldwide average'³. Teenwire, a sex advice site for teenagers, offers a critique of the way the term 'slut' is used to police girls' behaviour.

Sex chat rooms also demonstrate widespread use of the term. A series of vox pops in one of these revealed an interesting set of explanations of the term. For one person, it was about performing 'filthy perverted acts of sex', for another, it meant 'someone who likes sex a lot'. It meant 'a naughty girl', 'sleeping around', an 'available' or 'undiscriminating' woman, 'a woman who can express herself sexually'. Some users disputed that it had any meaning at all, saying they used it just because 'it has a nice ring' or 'it's a come on'. Conversations with men using the chat room revealed further variations in the tone and meaning given to the term. For some, it appeared to function quite straightforwardly as a term of endearment, for others, it worked as a relatively redundant but handily 'sexy' word to use. Some men meant something quite particular by it – a cheap woman for use and degradation, either within the specific context of a Dominance/submission encounter, or the more general sphere of heterosexual action. Others meant it more neutrally; it simply determined a style of sexual encounter focused on 'dirty', 'earthy' or 'porn' sex. Others still intended it in a positive way to signify a woman's sexual openness, enjoyment and skill. A couple of men also commented on the *power* of the term as a kind of dirty shorthand which helped in 'making a connection to that person, letting them know that you want them and that you know they want you too'⁴. Although the term 'slut' is still primarily linked to women here, some uses relate to sexuality rather than gender, by characterizing the style of a sexual encounter or a particular role within it, or as a way of invoking the force of sexual feelings, the strength and urgency of desire.

Use of the term, 'slut', is particularly prominent in women's, girls and alternative online media. For example, Gothic slut, an alternative erotica site defines 'slut' as 1. a pleasure enthusiast, 2. a wanton individual, and 3. a saucy girl. Uberslut aims 'to diversify the world of erotica' by providing an 'alternative venue for representations of the body that embrace more than one type/size/shape/color' and 'a space where anyone can feel comfortable viewing erotic material'. Discussions of the term are evident elsewhere. A writer in the e-zine, *Disgruntled Housewife*, charts how the significance of 'slut' can change with age and agency, comparing her 'bewildered outrage' at being called a slut as a teenage girl, to her disappointment at *not* being called it as an adult women. At the girlie site, *BUST*, young women discuss 'What IS a slut/whore/skank or whatever it may be that you call it?'

As Jayne Armstrong has noted, since the mid 1990s, girls and women have used online media to forge communities, contest existing meanings of femininity and create 'alternative feminist discourses and practices' (2004, p.92), often through the redeployment of terms such as 'grrrl, wench, bitch and chick' and often through the discursive strategies of mimesis, parody and irony, in both ways making words into 'sites for the struggle over meaning' (2004, p.96). An incisive parodic deconstruction of the term 'slut' can be found at Sarah Bunting's site, *Tomato Nation*. Bunting documents the use of the term to control women, showing how it works to make women feel they are 'gross', 'desperate', 'wrong', 'show-offy', 'miserable and empty inside', 'used', 'dirty', 'pathetic', 'undignified' and 'unfeminine'; how its use has 'a sneer built into it', how it 'tingles, like a slap', 'hides behind the teeth', is 'for when your back is turned'. Bunting's piece shows how 'slut' works its magic; making women fearful of enjoying their bodies and thinking they look too good. How it is used for 'when you don't act like a lady' and for women who like 'sports and belches and messy apartments'; 'for when you forget to hate and fear boys'; for when 'you just love men, for when you want to look at them and talk about them and burrow your nose into their necks and lick them from head to toe and hop right on them when they walk in the door'; for liking sex and wanting it and going after it. The claim that 'slut' may be an important site of reappropriation is made most explicitly in a short essay, 'Whose Slut?' at *the f-word*, an online magazine for young feminists, which argues that the sexualization of women indicated by such terms may be something women can 'accept, reclaim and use' to liberate themselves from 'society's oppressive sex taboo' (Forrest, 2002).

Girls. Feminists. Sluts

Attempts to reclaim the term 'slut', like all such reclamations, involve contradiction and difficulty. This difficulty manifests in a variety of different sites where women try to appropriate and disturb existing meanings of gender. In the TV series, *Sex and the City*, a text that has become emblematic of the mainstream celebration of female sexuality, Carrie Bradshaw uses the term as a way of trying to articulate what is new and possibly uncomfortable about contemporary women's sexual behaviour, 'Are we simply romantically challenged or are we sluts?' (Season 3, Episode 6, 2000). While 'slut' signifies a move away from a traditional – feminine, romantic – sexuality quite clearly, it is less successful in providing a positive model for what this move is towards, unless it is what has previously been understood as a masculine sensibility conceptualized as predatory, episodic, recreational, public and risky. Indeed, the first episode of *Sex and the City* begins with the question, 'Can women have sex like men?' (Season 1, Episode 1, 1998). Given the longstanding association of active female sexuality with pollution, it is not surprising that attempts to envisage women as sexual actors quite self-consciously use male sexuality as a model. Lady J's 'How to Be as Horny as a Guy', a submission to the third-wave Grrrl zine, *Bust*, for example, exhorts women to cultivate an active and pleasurable sexuality by swapping 'expendable girlie activities' for male ones; masturbating, objectifying the opposite sex, talking about sex, using porn and making orgasm central to everyday life (in Karp & Stoller, 1999, pp.102-4). The difficulty of positively equating women with sexuality is not only visible in cultural texts, but in the experiences of girls and women. In their discussion of the way the related term, 'slag', is used amongst adolescents (1981), Cowie and Lees note its complexity and slipperiness, the lack of clear criteria in the way it is applied, its

ambiguous use which slides between 'friendly joking', 'bitchy abuse', 'threat' and 'label' (p.12), the blurriness of distinction that makes it so easy for girls to pass from 'drag' to 'slag' (p.15) and which demonstrates what a 'very narrow tightrope' girls have to walk in order to achieve the impossible state of being sexually attractive 'without the taint of sexuality' (p.14).

As the history of the term shows, 'slut' carries a particular class significance. It is the lowly, dirty, sleazy quality of the slut that marks her out, a quality that suggests that overt sexuality in women is precisely not 'classy'. The class connotations of this low and dirty form of sexuality have, of course, been important in developing the aesthetic of sexually explicit media such as pornography – and indeed, in bolstering its condemnation. Pornography, like other forms of carnivalesque low culture, joyfully enacts the overturning of accepted cultural values, revelling in natural urges, physical pleasure and in the body as 'insistently material, defiantly vulgar, corporeal' (Kipnis, 1996, p.132). Indeed, Constance Penley has argued that pornography, like various other forms of bawdy culture, displays a 'white trash sensibility', expressed through bawdy humour, obscene language, attacks on the middle classes and the valorization of 'trickster women with a hearty appetite for sex' (Penley, 1997, pp.89-112).

Although we should be wary of seeing all pornography as challenging in this way, and of overemphasizing its transgressiveness, the work of writers like Kipnis and Penley is useful in highlighting how representations of sexuality which focus on the 'low' rely on particular categories of gender, class and race. As Matt Wray and Annalee Newitz have argued, the term 'white trash' is both a 'classist slur' and a 'racial epithet' that marks out some whites as 'a dysgenic race' who are 'incestuous and sexually promiscuous, violent, alcoholic, lazy, and stupid' (1997, p.2). Emily White's research also indicates that 'the slut is usually a white girl' (2002, p.166). Future work on the use of the term 'slut' might contribute to the development of our understanding of the way representations of class, gender, race and sexuality are interrelated and what the implications of this are for a feminist theory and practice which is concerned with the way female sexuality is constructed. Kipnis' example is of the film maker and performance artist, Jennifer Reeder, who adopted a 'White Trash Girl' persona, and who argues that attacking race, class and gender norms can function quite radically, 'there's this power in being trashy' (in Kipnis, 1997, p.119). For Reeder there is also a strong link between her White Trash Girl persona, Riot Grrrl and a 'new school of feminism' which swaps what she sees as second-wave victim status and 'whining' for 'female anger and craziness', 'taking responsibility for yourself' and playing with femininity – 'you can be a bombshell and wear black panties and still be really smart' (in Kipnis, 1997, p.130). In this way, sexuality becomes a position of power and a point of resistance, 'Fuck me? No, fuck you' (in Kipnis, 1997, p.115).

As Reeder's comments suggest, this kind of strategy avoids the straightforward opposition of earlier feminist reactions to the way women's sexuality is constructed, replacing it with a more complicated response which puts the ambiguity and difficulty of representing female sexuality at the service of women. Linda Williams' (1993) discussion of Annie Sprinkle's work describes the potential of this kind of strategy. Sprinkle has become an object of feminist fascination because of the playful way she has developed her work in the sex industry as a prostitute and porn star who is also a

sex educator, performance artist and academic. Williams takes up an argument made by Tania Modleski about the way patriarchy defines women, for example, by using the term 'whore' to 'saturate' them with sexuality. She suggests that embracing patriarchal terms, as Sprinkle does, may offer women a position of sexual agency, if it involves what Judith Butler has described as 'subversive repetition'. In the realm of sexual performance, this repetition may produce 'an articulation of something that is not named in "whore": her own desire' (Williams, 1993, p.180), and a re-signification of female sexual identity. Williams argues that Annie Sprinkle employs such a wide variety of sex acts, objects and personae in her work that she disturbs patriarchal definitions of sexual normality, transforming them by going 'beyond' rather than 'against' them. This is, in Judith Butler's term, 'a reversal of effects' (1997, p.14) in which the repetition of injurious speech becomes the 'constitutive possibility of being otherwise' (1997, p.102). Here, 'the word that wounds becomes an instrument of resistance...a repetition in language that forces change' (1997, p.163). Re-appropriations of the term, 'slut', may work in a similar way to Annie Sprinkle's performances, by upsetting categories, boundaries and hierarchies. This is true not only in relation to the display of appropriate sex and gender characteristics, but in the way other markers of status are evaluated. The DIY ethos of Riot Grrrl challenged conventions about the musical skills necessary for public performance and about relations between performers and audiences, while Sprinkle's work, mixing up the personae of whore, porn star, sex educator, artist and academic, disturbs the traditional ordering of such occupations in terms of their value.

The challenge to established order mobilized in many deployments of the term 'slut' is, as I have noted, also apparent in the recent reclamation of 'girl'. The struggle over 'girl' is interesting as a site in which femininities and feminisms are fought over by women and provides the broader context for understanding the changing significance of the term 'slut' and of women's sexual objectification. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the contrast between the approach to signifiers of femininity taken by Riot Grrrl in the 1990s and the women's movement in the 1970s. For example, the practice of writing 'slut' on the body is a gesture that parallels the celebrated myth of bra-burning associated with second-wave feminism, and provides an interesting demonstration of the different strategies used by women to challenge dominant notions of femininity.

Although feminist bra-burning is mythical, a second wave feminist protest against the Miss America Pageant in 1968 did involve throwing 'woman-garbage' such as girdles, false eyelashes and curlers into a 'Freedom Trash Can' (CWLU Herstory Website Archive). While this form of protest enacted the removal of cultural signifiers which conceal and distort the real, body writing manipulates and questions the real through the re-deployment of cultural signifiers. The difference between these two gestures says a great deal about the changes between the cultural moments in which they occur, and about the different political strategies that make sense within those moments. The first depends on the notion of a 'natural' femininity and of 'real' meaning, or at least on a belief that it might be possible to remove all existing definitions and start again. It also reveals a deep suspicion of cultural signifiers in general, and the artifacts of femininity in particular. Clothing is seen as especially suspect in this respect, and feminine clothing and accessories are understood as forms

of artificial imposition and imprisonment. But in the second example there is an attempt to re-fashion femininity from existing items, a form of bricolage that insists there is no essential meaning 'underneath' and that meaning depends precisely on intent, placement, combination and performance. As Mary Celeste Kearney writes, Riot Grrrl performance style shunned the celebration of 'femaleness' and attempted to 'show how genders are socially constructed' (1997, p.221). This style demonstrated a self-awareness which has been part of the increased reflexivity of contemporary cultural movements and the way they express resistance (Leonard, 1997, p.246).

This difference in approach can also be seen in the association of second-wave feminism with distinctly 'unfeminine' clothes such as dungarees, compared to the more playful relationship with clothing adopted by many Riot Grrrls who chose to wear 'bunched hair and hair-slides with patterned dresses' (Leonard, 1997, p.235). As Ted Polhemus has noted, Riot Grrrl style juxtaposes 'little-girl dresses with Fredericks of Hollywood tacky glamour, rugged boots, small-town-American second-hand garments, and, especially in the USA, prominent tattoos or piercings' (1994, p.123). This practice of bricolage which messed up child and adult, girlie girl and man, practicality and glamour, mainstream and alternative style, worked to reinvent and recirculate all kinds of meanings. Courtney Love, the most visible performer to be identified with Riot Grrrl⁵, adopted a rather less playful 'kinder-whore' look, combining very girly, sometimes torn, 'babydoll' dresses with heavy and often smudged make-up⁶; 'a slutty, D.I.Y. subversion of the traditional Prom queen look' ('Kinderwhore', Wikipedia).

Kim Nicolini (1995) argues that the slut persona as performed by Love involved a rejection of both 'Good Girl' and 'Good Feminist' roles in order to 'take all the mess of female sex and throw it into the public eye'. Combining pretty and ugly qualities; the babydoll and the witch, 'the glistening sex doll and the screeching life buried under the pink plastic', Love created an 'attraction/repulsion dynamic' capable of making audiences question their attitudes towards female sexuality. As Reynolds and Press say, 'it's as though one of Charcot's female patients has taken charge of her own theatre of hysteria and transformed the humiliation of being an exhibit into an empowering exhibitionism' (1995, p.262). This kind of performance, embodied by Love, but evident elsewhere in girl subcultures, is a complicated kind of alchemy, on the one hand transforming a position of shame and powerlessness into one of confrontation, yet on the other maintaining a sense of ambivalence and hybridity. The awkwardness of this is particularly evident in performances of the slut persona which often literally signify difficulty by appearing cheap, loud, ugly, noisy, broken, repellent, used and out of control, Other and abject, monstrous and possessed. The 'mess' of female and femininity – essence and artifice - appropriates male space and behaviour in loud, angry public appearances. It disturbs the limits of acceptable feminine behaviour and the boundaries of heterosexual style and performance. Gillis & Munford argue that this can be understood as an attempt to capture 'the contradictions shaping female identity for young women whose world has been informed by the struggles and gains of second wave feminism' (2004, p.169). For example, Love's performance involved a 'dramatic subversion of the polarity between "power" and "victim" feminisms' which characterized key feminist positions in the US during this period. It also combined the characteristics of individualism, combatism, and celebrity with feminist critiques of beauty and male dominance (Gillis & Munford, 2004, p.172).

What is notable here is the shift from an earlier 'second wave focus on the politics of representation to an emphasis on the politics of self-representation' and an interrogation of agency (Gillis & Munford, 2004, p.173). This shift can also be traced in mainstream culture in the growing fascination with Madonna's status as 'postmodern icon and material girl *par excellence*' in the 1980s and early 1990s. In both instances, celebrity, the body, sex, style and language become central in developing and debating contemporary forms of feminist and feminine practice. Although many critics have deplored the sexualized femininity apparent in these manifestations of 'girl power', it is important to recognize that in some cases, an engagement with the pleasures of femininity may function to destabilize existing categories of gender, while providing a space for younger women who 'self-identify as feminist, but do not necessarily relate to existing (second wave) feminist institutions' (Munford, 2004m p,148).

How liberating it may be to engage with sexualization has continued to be a matter of debate in the years since the rise of Riot Grrrl. Certainly, to perform the slut continues to be a risky business. Since the death of her husband, singer, Kurt Cobain, in 1994, Courtney Love has become a regular object of ridicule and abuse in the mainstream press, a position that is attributable to her apparently druggy, bad mother, disrespectful widow and still 'slutty' behaviour⁷ During this same period, the Riot Grrrl practice of writing on the body has been mainstreamed in high street fashion. T shirts emblazoned with all manner of terms for the sexual woman – 'Bitch, Whore, Vixen, Tart...Slut...Saucy, PUNK, Hard Bitch, Nice Girl, Sex Kitten, Hustler, Sexy, Fluffy, Chick, Porn Star'⁸ have become commonplace. As Rosalind Gill argues in her commentary on the best-selling 'fit chick unbelievable knockers' T shirt popular in 2002, this process has worked to hyper-sexualize women's bodies, and is emblematic of the way in which a figure of 'the autonomous, active, desiring subject has become...the dominant figure for representing young women' (Gill, 2003, p.105).

However, the extent to which this hyper-sexualization represents a positive development for female sexual subjectivity remains a source of dispute. Christine Griffin argues that the space and performance of youthful femininity continues to be difficult precisely because of the continuation of a double standard (2005, p.3), and is newly so because of contemporary neo-liberal ideals of individual freedom which *oblige* girls to 'be free' and 'have fun'. Griffin's recent research with girls suggests that they must now struggle to perform as the ideal 'sassy girl' who is 'in a state of perpetual youth, assertiveness and optimism', neither too 'girly', not a 'tomboy' (2005, p.5). This figure offers the potential to experiment with sexualized practices such as the adoption of revealing clothing, but these are still ambiguous in their significance and potentially risky in signifying sluttiness rather than sassiness (2005, p.9).

In a similar vein, Buckley and Fawcett explore the changing relationship between young women, sexuality and identity as it is expressed through fashion and leisure in the 'party city' of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (2002, p.122). They note that in this context young women engage with sexualization, adopting tight, revealing clothing and socializing in 'raucous' girl groups, putting themselves 'on show' in public space (2002, p.135). They argue that women appear confident, assertive, uninhibited and fun-loving in this context, and that the spectacle they present may even be read as 'heterosexual camp, a hyper-femininity that carries a disorientating visual power and positions

women centre-stage in the contemporary urban landscape' (2002, p.138). However, such a reading would downplay 'local anxieties about the status of masculinity in a city in which traditional industry has been decimated' (2002, p.138), and in a region characterized by poverty, low educational expectations and the worst record in Britain for teenage pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases (2002, p.142).

Gleeson & Frith describe a research project with young women which suggests that tight, revealing 'sexy' clothing and high heels function as important markers for young women in moving away from their younger 'immature, asexual femininity' (2004, p.105). Yet they note that girls are evasive about the sexual significance of the clothing they adopt, resisting the researchers' attempts to read them in terms of their production of sexualized identities. They argue that not only does this suggest that sexualized clothing practices are an ambiguous source of anxiety and pleasure, but that ambiguity itself may be 'an important resource for young women in a context where being explicit about sexual intentions is inherently fraught' (2004, p.107). Ambiguity is embraced as a 'crucial means for women to negotiate their way through contradictory identities as women who are attractive without actively seeking admiring glances, who are sexual but not too sexual, and who are clothed without deliberately creating a look'. In this sense, ambiguity becomes a 'powerful resource which allows women to negotiate meaning and position' (2004, p.112).

Similar negotiations are found in girls' relationships with other facets of popular culture. As Bettina Fritzsche's work with Spice Girl fans shows, young women may use even the most mainstream of performances as a 'toolbox' in which the imitation of celebrity, fashion and dance styles becomes an important way of trying out forms of feminine self-presentation and experimenting with the performance of sexiness. Fritzsche argues that it is important that we 'learn to understand the very common, playful and body-centred ways that girls cope with society's scripts of identity', not least in order to help girls 'pursue aspects of their own identity which do not conform' (2004, p.161).

What links these pieces of research is a concern with making sense of what looks like younger women's engagement with elements of a consumerized, sexualized culture which an earlier women's movement saw as a key source of women's oppression. In this sense, struggles over sluttiness have become more politically charged in the twentieth and twenty-first century, and in the last ten years they have also become part of a struggle over feminism itself. Making sense of this struggle is not easy. As Gillis & Munford note, there is considerable confusion about the application of key terms such as post-feminism and third wave feminism which second wave feminist academics have tended to use interchangeably. In addition, there have been two very different usages of the term post-feminism, one associated with the demise of feminism and often linked to 'mainstream media representations of feminism' (Gillis & Munford, 2004, p.166), and another which describes a form of post-structuralist feminism which stresses plurality, difference and deconstruction (Gillis & Munford, 2004, p.168). That difference and deconstruction are also characteristics of third wave feminist practices *and* of some mainstream post-feminist representations, that second wave feminists have until very recently largely ignored the existence of third wave feminism, and that

most third wave feminists have distanced themselves from any form of academic feminism has only served to complicate this situation.

A sense of confusion and struggle marks debates in contemporary feminism, especially where these cross generational boundaries. This is clearly shown in the significance attributed to the term 'girlie' by third wave feminist writers, Jennifer Baumgardner & Amy Richards. They describe it as a joyous 'state of being' signifying a 'fierce, fun independence' (2004, p.61), 'a strong and distinct feminist identity' which illustrates the difference between second and third wave feminism (2004, p.63). For them, this is a moment in which young women appear to rebel against their mothers and against second wave feminism which seems to them to be all about what young women 'can't do' (2004, p.66). As such, the term is an object of anger and pain for older feminists. In this form of generational politics, young feminists - Riot Grrrls and girlies - are positioned as 'rebellious daughters who refuse to conform to the rule book of their second wave mothers'. But it may be argued that, whoever initiates this positioning, all that is reinforced is a conflict which threatens the progress of feminist politics. Gillis and Munford argue that a different understanding of feminist history, not as a 'succession of waves' in which 'generations are set up in competition with one another' (2004, p.176), is necessary if women are not doomed to keep 'reinventing the wheel' (2004, p.177).

As Susanna Paasonen points out, the relation between the adoption of figures of unruly women, young women, third wave feminism and related movements may be overstated. Documenting the prominence of the term 'bitch' in the late 1990s in Riot Grrrl and other girl sites, pop music, feminist art projects, and in self-help and 'popular power feminist writings' (2005, p.210), she nevertheless argues that bitches 'have been articulated as figures for emancipated women in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and 2000s alike – despite the obvious differences in historical context, with notably similar turns of phrases' (2005, p.222). Moreover, 'linguistic appropriation as a means of creating spaces for female networking and self-representation' (2005, p.212) is 'a long-standing feminist practice' (2005, p.223). Thus, while it may be useful to examine the common ground between contemporary modes of women's expression and their emphasis on difference, sexuality, individuality and individualism, there is a danger of overstating the extent to which these 'new' forms of feminism are clearly distinguishable from – and preferable to - 'old' forms (2005, p.223). In the process, the many different positions that have been taken by feminists on sexuality, technology and popular culture since the 1970s are made invisible (2005, p.226).

An understanding of the differing contexts in which women struggle over sex, technology, culture and terminology is clearly important if we are to appreciate what is at stake in that struggle. In the contemporary moment, 'slut' functions for some as an impossible space, the space of contradictions that cannot be resolved in language, theory or practice; the source of conflict between generations and feminisms; a trap and a dead end. And certainly, 'slut' has its limits, threatening to obscure as much as it illuminates and always running the risk of merely reproducing a form of 'hate speak' against women. For others, it is precisely its impossibility that marks it as a potentially productive site, a space of resistance, change and new possibility. Whatever position we take, the reclamation of 'slut' provides an interesting development in this term's

history, and it is important as a starting point for illuminating how women continue to engage with the representation of female sexuality. Whether our focus is the way 'slut' is used to police women's behaviour, the significance of sluttiness in popular culture, or its appropriation in mainstream and subcultural practices, an understanding of the ways it might unite or divide us as women and as feminists is crucial.

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Notes

1. The term is also used in the context of New Age politics and within some writings on D/s (Dominance/submission) subcultures. See Lindentree & Mortale (n.d) and Besson (1997a and 1997b)
2. These kinds of re-appropriations generally accompany sex-positive stances. In the case of Sprinkle, this is expressed in a characteristically utopian, tongue-in-cheek manner, 'In the future, everybody will be so sexually satisfied, there'll be an end to violence, rape and war. We will establish contact with extra-terrestrials and they will be very sexy' (in Morris, n.d).
3. Originally produced for female users, the Slut test was rewritten for women and men in 2005.
4. Email from chatroom user, 'King Bastard' (14.6.04).

5. Courtney Love is often mistakenly identified with Riot Grrrl. However, she does share many stylistic characteristics with Riot Grrrl performers. Reynolds and Press identify her as one of the '90s angry women' of popular music (1995: p.261).

6. It is thought that the kinder-whore look originated with Kat Bjelland of Babes in Toyland.

7. Love's vilification still continues. In 2005, the British men's weekly magazine ran a story on her affair with British comedian, Steve Coogan, under the headline 'You put your cock in that?', reporting that Love had 'nasty, lumpy breasts' and 'had an awful lot of sex' with her 'previous owners' (in Turner, 2005: p.28).

8. Listed at the Fluffy Mules website under 'Fashion Rants'. These are good examples of a 'porn-chic' trend in which previously restricted imagery or terminology is re-circulated in the mainstream, but in a relatively tame way. Fluffy Mules makes fun of this trend by listing 'Bad Ass Hard Gal' T-shirts that 'should exist but won't' for the purposes of comparison: 'I've got crabs, I'm a DVDA sort of gal, I smell of pee, I did the whole team, I shagged your dad, I just masturbated, This is a stuffed wonderbra'. See tinyninjas for an example of 'Slut' shirts and other products at <http://tinyninjas.com/store/cpshop.cgi/4152686719>.