Who Gets to be a Girl?  
Interrogating Gender-Based Oppression at Girls Rock Camp  

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Introduction

A cluster of girls, ranging in age from 9 years old to 17, sits in a circle, each holding a bass guitar. The girls are plucking the bassline to “Ladybug Superfly” by Slant 6, some with trepidation and focus, others with energized glee. All of them are, most importantly, plugged into amplifiers—they are loud. This is the kind of scene established at a Girls Rock Camp (GRC), where girls learn to play rock instruments, form bands, and write and perform an original song, typically in the space of one week. This is a small slice of an international movement, encompassed by the 501(c)(3) nonprofit Girls Rock Camp Alliance (GRCA), that encourages girls—who have historically been excluded from punk and rock music, both as creators and consumers—to learn to write for and play electric guitar, bass, and drums. The music programming occurs alongside activities promoting self-confidence, teamwork, and empowerment. GRCs, which are frequently run predominantly by volunteers, often operate with an explicitly feminist bent, aimed toward social transformation: On their website, Girls Rock Campaign Boston declares itself “a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, feminist organization. By making knowledge accessible and providing a safe space for girls and women, GRCB is a key element in bringing about necessary social change in our community” (“About”).

It is this feminist undergirding that prompts the problem to be addressed in this paper. Girls Rock Camps exist as a solution to a problem. The problem: Rock and punk music are constructed as solely for men and boys, and are breeding ground for toxic ideas about masculinity, femininity, and limiting gender roles. The GRC solution: Teach girls to collaborate with one another. Help them unlearn competing for male attention. Put guitars in their hands and usher them on stage. Listen to the noise they make. All GRCs are slightly different, and variously, they are home to language, ideologies, and some formal policies that lead to the
exclusion of trans, genderqueer, or gender non-conforming youth. When GRCs rely on the

gender binary to structure access to their programming, they unwittingly reproduce the gender

essentialism of the wider society that perpetuates and enforces the sexism that GRCs seek to

destroy. My solution to this problem is to contextualize GRCs in a particular lineage of feminist

thought. Though the history of feminism is fragmented and flawed, I argue that the movements

that led to the creation of GRCs must flow in the direction of inclusivity.

In this paper, I want to place GRCs in the context of the purpose, values, and strategies of

the riot grrrl movement that attempted to explode gender stereotypes and promote unheard

voices in rock and punk music. By placing GRCs in this context, I hope to illuminate why it is

the obligation of these feminist nonprofits to question how they may reproduce gender

essentialism, and to include trans and gender non-conforming kids in their programming. GRCs

must broaden their definition of gender oppression and expand the population being served to all

oppressed genders. In this process, camps will be able to further the aims of social

transformation that GRCs and riot grrrl share.

In order to explain the emergence and purpose of GRCs, I will begin this paper by setting

the conceptual scene of the 1990s and how the development of feminist and queer thinking laid

groundwork for riot grrrl. Then, I will give an analysis of how gender is constructed and

enforced in rock music scenes. Next, I will look at how riot grrrls and other punks contested

hegemonic femininity and worked to loosen the restrictions of the gender binary. This will lead

into a lineage of Girls Rock Camps, explaining how they are linked to riot grrrl in purpose and

strategy. Finally, I will move into an analysis of GRCs as they exist today, and the opportunities

they have to provide youth of all oppressed genders with tools of resistance and self-expression.
The Conceptual Scene of 1990s: Gender, Feminism, and Queer Theory

The purpose of this section of my paper is to illustrate the progression of feminist thought, particularly about the subject of “woman,” as this notion changed shape. It is easy to look at a name like “Girls Rock Camp,” or a term like “feminism,” and presume that the categories in question—girls, females—are stable and clearly defined. However, a closer look at the most important distinctions between second- and third-wave feminism reveals the critical evolutions in thought that lay the groundwork for the inclusion of trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming youth in feminist activist programming. Specifically, the 1990s brought about an undoing of fixed identity categories with the birth of queer theory and identity, new recognition of trans individuals, and the third wave of feminism’s expanded understanding of its subject.

Most often, the labels attached to historical moments are applied retrospectively: Historians looked backwards to decide that the fight for women’s suffrage would be termed the “first wave” of feminism. The second wave is the name for the feminism that flowed alongside the civil rights movement of the 1960s, “focused on gaining full human rights for women” (Dicker and Piepmeier 9). The third wave, rushing forth into the 1990s, named itself: Rebecca Walker declared in 1991, “I am the Third Wave” (Walker 2002). Walker’s essay, “Becoming the Third Wave,” published in Ms. Magazine in 1991, contained this declaration as well as a call to action for women of her generation. Inspired by the intense legal and media scrutiny of Anita Hill at Clarence Thomas’s confirmation hearings, Walker urges women to “Let this dismissal of a woman’s experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power” (Walker 2002). Anger becomes a prominent theme in the riot grrrl movement, one of this wave’s most often remembered movements, to be discussed in further detail later in this paper.
Conceptually, the early 1990s were the site of fundamental shifts in discourse about gender- and sexuality-based oppression. The rise of the third wave of feminism happened alongside the increasing popularity of postmodern and poststructuralist approaches to feminist and lesbian and gay organizing and politics. The year 1990 saw the publication of philosopher Judith Butler’s book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, which would become a foundational text in the nascent queer theory movement. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler establishes her theory of performativity, which explains gender as a series of acts that project an illusion of consistent and “natural” gender. Butler also troubles “woman” as a reliable, homogenous, stable category to serve as the subject of feminism.

The 1990s saw the rise of a generation who had grown up with certain feminist ideals articulated by their mothers, but witnessed division and exclusion within the movement along lines of race, class, and sexuality. Many third-wavers attempt to center women of color and queer people in their analysis and action. R. Claire Snyder suggests that the third wave sought to eliminate the “perceived ideological rigidity” (176) of the second. More specifically, the Butlerian concept of the instability of the category of “woman” influenced third-wave feminists to usher in and validate “multivocality over synthesis and action over theoretical justification” and foster “an inclusive and nonjudgmental approach that refuses to police the boundaries of the feminist political” (Snyder 175).

**Rock Music and the Construction of Gender**

When you ask a group of young girls about gender in the music they listen to, they have plenty of observations to offer. Selena Gomez is always wet in her music videos. As in, floating in a pool, or being rained on, or covered in sweat at the club. The Taylor Swift-branded Barbie does not come with a little plastic guitar, but with plenty of outfit changes and wigs. There is a
focus on looks, and on a very specific brand of sexy girliness. During a workshop on “gender equality” at Girls Rock! Indianapolis in 2012, I asked a group of girls to guess what percentage of *Rolling Stone*’s list of the 100 Best Guitarists of All Time were women. Some offered what they perceived as “optimistic” guesses: 30 percent? The answer is one percent—just Bonnie Raitt, clocking in at number 89. Women fare no better in “alternative” music scenes. How many women appeared on the cover of *Alternative Press* magazine in 2011? The participants in this workshop had guesses, and even names to throw out—Tay Jardine, Hayley Williams, Tegan and Sara? Again, only one woman showed up on the cover that year—Sierra Kay of the band Versa appeared, sandwiched between three guys from other bands, on a special issue promoting the Vans Warped Tour. Because this was a special issue, Kay’s cover was a variant—the other two covers featured all men—so you only had a one-in-three chance of receiving the single issue of *AP* with a woman on the cover.

The girls at rock camp were angry when they heard these facts. They were disappointed. A teenager told the room about how she faithfully attends the Vans Warped Tour every year, and how mad she is each time when she discovers how few women appear on stage. This section of my paper will address how the cultural biases that these girls identified are constructed in the first place. By virtue of their overwhelming control of production, men are constructed as the “natural” owners and actors of rock music, as well as of the constellation of non-musical positions that facilitate rock scenes. Women do not fit into this structure, and are constructed as existing outside of the production of rock, punk and alternative music scenes--they are groupies, sexual objects, and occasional muses. As I will explain further later in this section, even when women are the musicians, their gender is highlighted and addressed as anomalous and incongruous with the “natural order” of rock music.
Cultural biases persist about gender and musicianship, and particularly about the natural primacy of men in rock, punk, and alternative music. As Simon Frith and Angela McRobbie put it, “the brute social fact [is] that in terms of control and production, rock is a male form. The music business is male-run; popular musicians, writers, creators, technicians, engineers, and producers are mostly men” (Frith and McRobbie 373). Though Frith and McRobbie were writing in the 1980s, there is little noticeable change today. Writing for *Wondering Sound*, Megan Seling reports that while 53% of the audience at Warped Tour is girls and women, 94% of the featured musicians are men. Kevin Lyman, the founder of Warped Tour, blames the lack of women on his tour on the lack of women playing music in the genres he books (Seling). Lyman, who holds a position of power when it comes to booking women artists, dodges his responsibility by failing to interrogate the gender imbalance in the scenes in which he works. He assumes that this lack of gender variety in alternative music is natural, rather than considering the factors that contribute. There are numerous probable causes for such a prominent gender imbalance, including persistent social ideas that alternative music is not a genre for girls and women. Girls and women are not encouraged to play “harder” music. Even the girls and women who make it to Lyman’s Warped Tour—again, 53% of that audience—look at the stages and receive visual confirmation that this scene would not welcome their contributions. Girls who do form bands are often discouraged from booking shows by institutional sexism that renders them more likely to be t-shirt vendors than musicians. Further impacting girls’ and women’s creative output is the much harsher criticism that non-men receive. As music journalist Sasha Geffen writes in *The New Inquiry*, “Girls’ limited access to equipment and encouragement is often cited as the reason for the disproportionately low number of women in music, but the male-dominated sphere of music journalism also imposes discrete critical standards upon women.” Not only is the creation of
alternative music naturalized as a space for men alone, but various related fields that revolve around rock music—criticism, distribution and promotion, booking—are largely male.

The construction of music scenes means that men are positioned as the musicians, the producers of culture, the stars, the critics, and the primary consumers. When women are present in the rock arena, they are relegated to the position of sexualized decoration, or the occasional lucky sexual partner to the rock star. Simon Reynolds and Joy Press describe a 1969 issue of *Rolling Stone* that focused on “groupies:” The highest achievement for women in that period was to occupy this peripheral, sexualized position. Even as Reynolds and Press describe the women shunted into this category as photographers, writers, and producers of rock culture, the groupie label means that “these women are somehow deemed ancillary, hangers-on enjoying glory by association” (Reynolds and Press 232), with their sexuality and sexualized bodies forming their primary link to rock and roll.

Music journalism regularly cycles through phases of alternately ignoring or glorifying “women who rock.” *Rolling Stone* infamously published a “Women in Rock” special issue in 2002. The cover featured Shakira, Britney Spears, and Mary J. Blige—an assembly of artists who, while in fact women, do not make rock music. The scroll down the side of the page includes a baffling array of artists, few of whom can be categorized as women who make rock music: Ashanti, Cher, Li’l Kim. As Mary Celeste Kearney explains, “Since rock has been constructed as a naturally masculine sphere in which women, because of their sex and gender can never be fully incorporated, ‘women in rock’ implies the contingency and incompleteness of female performers, as well as their inauthenticity in comparison with male artists” (Kearney 211). The *Rolling Stone* cover underscores that these women’s contributions to music are being noticed not for their content or their actual generic affiliation, but purely for the gender of the
creators. The construct of the woman pop artist carries an entirely different set of connotations than a woman in rock. When it comes to the more comfortable intersection of women and girls with music, the genre connection is clearly pop, “bubblegum” or “teenybopper” music. If there is one position in the world of popular music where girls and women can be easily slotted, it is as the consumer of music that is considered lighter, emptier, and softer. Placing a ubiquitous pop star like Britney Spears under the banner of “women in rock” serves to make the concept of women creating rock music even more difficult to conceive.

The notion of “authenticity” as critics often apply it to music means that contributions by women are summarily dismissed. A notable example is a 2014 review of hardcore band Perfect Pussy, fronted by vocalist Meredith Graves. Reviewing their live performance for the *Dallas Observer*, journalist Jeff Gage writes that there is an “apparent disconnect” between the band’s cacophonous, angry sound and Graves’s appearance. Gage describes Graves as “normal looking. She has short, bleached blonde hair and last night was dressed in a not-at-all-punk-looking shorts and striped shirt that was tied off at the bottom” (Gage). Gage only describes the ensemble and hairstyle of Graves, who at that point was the lone woman in the band. He concludes from her shorts and t-shirt that there is “no outward reason for her to be an angry person.” Here, this critic denies the idea—central to most threads of feminism—that women in the United States have any reason to feel anger. Women’s anger at social subjugation is delegitimized, and thus Graves’s claim to be an “authentic” creator of hardcore is undermined. It is worth noting here that nonbinary and trans kids face similar denial of not only their feelings, but of the legitimacy of their identities. When a group’s existence itself is denied, locating and raising their voices becomes impossible.
The inability of the construction of rock music to interpret women’s contributions as authentic or legitimate extends into roles beyond musicianship. As Frith and McRobbie write, “Female creative roles are limited and mediated through male notions of female ability. Women musicians who make it are almost always singers; the women in the business who make it are usually in publicity; in both roles success goes with a male-made female image. In general, popular music’s images, values, and sentiments are male products” (Frith and McRobbie 374). When women make the creation of music their work, they are often still read as passive parties. Cultural values imposed upon women extend to the work they perform as musicians, as articulated by Geffen: “We listen to women the same way we look at them,” they write in *The New Inquiry*. Geffen describes a woman vocalist, interpreted as “ethereal” and “pretty,” compared to a male instrumentalist, interpreted as the hard worker of the duo. This setup, Geffen explains, is intelligible to consumers of music because it reflects how appearance and labor are gendered in wider culture. “Like beauty,” Geffen writes, “a woman’s voice emanates from her body without visible effort. Listeners don’t hear the voice as an instrument, but as a primal extension of the singer herself, a though-line from her anatomy to yours” (Geffen). Women’s musical labor can only be understood in the context of every other gendered expectation of women that contributes to their oppression. Riot grrrl, Ladyfests, and eventually Girls Rock Camps each developed with vested interest in destroying these ideas about women’s place in rock music, as well as the gender stereotypes and roles that make these gendered limitations feel “natural” to critics and consumers.

**The Gender Rebellion of Women in Punk**

Today, riot grrrl is most often remembered as a genre of music. To listeners, the term riot grrrl brings to mind bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Huggy Bear. Riot grrrl suggests
noisy groups of young women, perhaps not technically skilled with their instruments. Though of
course there are many exceptions to these characteristics, riot grrrl’s musical legacy is that the
movement encouraged young women, underrepresented in punk and often actively silenced by
sexism within the subculture, to make punk rock their own.

Punk historian Lauraine LeBlanc calls riot grrrl “a breakaway faction” of the punk
subculture that developed in the late 1970s (64). Punk emerged from twin bases in New York
City, home of bands like Television and the Ramones, and London, where the Sex Pistols and
the Buzzcocks rose to prominence. Punk championed the destruction of hierarchies, and lyrics
frequently reflected artists’ disillusionment with the rules and conventions of capitalist society.
Some punks explicitly rebelled against systems of oppression like racism, classism, and sexism.
These original punk scenes were home to many women, but this is not to say that larger cultural
ideas about “proper” or “natural” masculinity and femininity did not exist within these scenes.

Some historians tend to gloss over the more hostile behavior and environments enacted
by some punks. Dunn and Farnsworth quote Craig Lee, guitarist of Alice Bag’s band The Bags,
on his interpretation of the inclusion of women in punk: “In Los Angeles circa 1977, female bass
players were almost a requirement, and it seemed that it was often the women who dominated
and controlled the Punk scene. This equality of the sexes was just another breakdown of
traditional rock and roll stereotypes that the early scene was perpetuating” (qtd. in Dunn and
Farnsworth 138). This is a decidedly sunny view of the genre’s general attitude toward non-white,
non-straight, non-men. Some punk bands did indeed include women, and it would be
incorrect to state that women were completely shut out of playing. However, this does not mean
that these punk spaces were actively inclusive, appreciative, or safe for women.
In her book *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, scholar Sara Marcus points out that the punk music of the late ‘70s and early ‘80s included numerous women’s voices—she names artists like Patti Smith, ESG, and X-Ray Spex—and argues that it was the growing popularity of hardcore in the late ‘80s that forced many women and girls out of punk scenes (49). Marcus writes that hardcore punk scenes consisted of both subtle and overt acts of violence. The scene’s mosh pits were “flurries of flying elbows and wandering hands” (49), and she recounts a hardcore show where the singer of a band recited nuggets like “Incest is best, put your sister to the test” (42) as part of their on-stage banter. Punk historian Mark Anderson recalls a Washington, D.C. hardcore show where men in the audience filled the room with the chant, “Girls are poop! Girls are poop!” (*Don’t Need You*).

Women were transgressing gender norms in punk well before the birth of riot grrrl, particularly when it came to creative participation and self-presentation. In her book *Pretty in Punk: Girls’ Gender Resistance in a Boys’ Subculture*, Lauraine LeBlanc devotes many pages to how women in punk confronted gender boundaries, expanding the possible roles for women in the scene; where these women left off, riot grrrls would pick up. LeBlanc, like many other historians devoted to codifying the legends of punk rock, thinks of punk as the first incarnation of rock music that could incorporate women. She refers to punk as a “watershed moment in the involvement of women in rock” (LeBlanc 36). Further underscoring how the construction of rock excludes women, LeBlanc writes, “With the prevailing idea that anyone can play music, women could be, and were, bassists, guitarists, and drummers” (36). LeBlanc spends a few pages commenting on the importance of clothing and other aesthetic choices to punk; though she implies that these women actively stretched the boundaries of acceptable appearance, she writes that women who played in punk bands in New York “embodied the range of options of gender
construction open to women in punk” (36). This leaves open the question of how these constructions were made available to being with, and how they become legible as feminine. In the same paragraph, LeBlanc celebrates the “androgyny” of Patti Smith and the “sex goddess image” cultivated by Debbie Harry: She calls these images opposite ends of the spectrum of gender transgression. While women in punk did crack the door open wider for the participation of non-men in the rock music world, the visible spectrum of transgression remained relatively narrow, and frequently in service of the male perspective. This prompted riot grrrls to push the boundaries further.

**Riot Grrrl and Girls Rock Camp’s Values and Strategies**

In this section, I want to provide brief background on the formation of riot grrrl, followed by laying out the values and strategies of riot grrrl that are most visibly connected to how Girls Rock Camps operate today. These guiding principles are, first, belief in the political power of creative expression; second, a lack of emphasis on formal musical instruction; third, collaboration among oppressed people to contribute to social change; and finally, the creation of a vocabulary for feminist activism that would be accessible to girls and young women outside of educational institutions. I will conclude this section by addressing similar tensions over identity that affect both movements. Specifically, riot grrrls struggles to include grrrls of color echoes GRC’s current struggle over defining who is a girl who gets to rock.

I will begin this section with a short overview of what riot grrrl is. The most apt description of riot grrrl's structure is as a non-hierarchical, loose network. There was no single inventor or founder of the movement. Despite this, many scholars and fans pin the beginning of the riot grrrl movement to musician Kathleen Hanna, most infamously of the band Bikini Kill. Though I do not want to reproduce or reaffirm the narrative of riot grrrl that positions Hanna as
its captain, her story is a useful one when it comes to illustrating riot grrrl’s inspiration and values.

In her retelling of Hanna’s now near-canonized story, Marcus emphasizes how Hanna’s entry into music was the direct result of encouragement from other women artists. The culture of girls and women supporting one another is a key element of what would become the riot grrrl movement, and what defines the mission of GRCs today. When Hanna was an undergraduate student performing spoken word poetry around Olympia, Washington, she finagled a meeting with notorious postmodern author Kathy Acker. According to Hanna, Acker advised her, “If you want people to hear what you’re doing, don’t do spoken word, because nobody likes spoken word, nobody goes to spoken word. There’s more of a community for musicians than for writers. You should be in a band” (Marcus 34). Although neither Hanna nor Marcus explicitly states that poetry and spoken word are gendered female, in opposition to the naturalized masculinity of rock music, this is relevant to Acker’s advice.

Following Acker’s suggestion, Hanna formed the band Amy Carter, then Viva Knievel. Around the same time that Hanna began performing as a musician, she worked at a domestic violence shelter, running a discussion group for teenage girls. Hanna tells Marcus that “hearing those girls talk openly with one another about past traumas, watching how supportive the girls were of one another” (Marcus 38) was a major influence on her music and on the kind of community she wanted to build with her growing platform. Hanna noticed strains in common between her work at the shelter, her own experience with violence and abuse, and the rejection of feminism even by women artists who she knew were feeling alienated by hardcore punk. These observations heavily inspired her lyrics when Hanna eventually formed Bikini Kill with drummer Tobi Vail, bassist Kathi Wilcox, and guitarist Billy Karren.
Bikini Kill was just one of numerous bands that played shows and released records in the prime of riot grrrl, and the themes addressed in her music are common ones in the wider genre. Riot grrrl’s music may be its most lasting media, but the movement manifested in other ways, notably in zines, and in conferences and informal networks of communication built by girls who animated the movement. Jen Smith, Allison Wolfe, and Molly Neuman, who formed one early lineup of the band Bratmobile, created a collaborative zine, “which Smith proposed calling Girl Riot and was ultimately published as riot grrrl— the words inverted, and ‘girl’ rendered as a growl” (Hains 13). In-person meetings became foundational for the movement, as more and more young people, chiefly girls, convened to share their experiences with sexism, abuse, and struggles with gender and sexuality, within and outside of music scenes. A 1993 article in off our backs magazine profiled the first “Convention of Riot Grrrl,” in Portland, Oregon. The article contains what appear to be cut-and-pasted items from the conference’s schedule, displaying a cross-section of the kinds of topics that riot grrrls found worthy of discussion: Workshops with topics like “Sexuality,” “Rape,” “Unlearning Racism,” “Domestic Violence” and “Self-Defense” (Klein 6-7).

The first strategy that riot grrrl and GRCs share, and perhaps the most visible link between the two movements, is the idea that promoting unheard voices in rock music is politically powerful. Riot grrrl’s slogan, “Revolution Girl Style Now,” indicates the production of an alternative to the alternative, created by those who are routinely discouraged from speaking up due to their youth and gender. Riot grrrl was all about moving the means of production—guitars, drums, microphones—into the hands of the people who were silenced even within the supposedly counter-mainstream punk scenes. As Tobi Vail of Bikini Kill describes it, the revolution meant, “Let’s get all these girls to learn how to play instruments and take care of them
and change everything” (“Tobi Vail on Bikini Kill”). In the zines, music, letters, and other media generated by the movement, riot grrrl inspired a wave of cultural production. One critical artifact from the time is the “Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” published in the second issue of the Bikini Kill zine. The authors proclaim that the movement is needed “BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways. … BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings” (Hains 15). This manifesto speaks to the overwhelming pressure on young people to support the status quo, including men’s dominance in every level of culture, including punk music. Riot grrrl’s overarching goal was to encourage girls to think for themselves and produce, without apology, content that countered what made them feel small and silenced. As Hanna sang: “I’m so sorry if I’m alienating some of you / Your whole fucking culture alienates me” (Bikini Kill, “White Boy”).

The second value that directly links riot grrrl and GRCs is the lack of emphasis on formal musical instruction to validate or make authentic girls’ cultural production. One of the most legendary moments in the birth of riot grrrl was “Girl Night,” the first evening of a festival put on by Olympia label K Records. Recalling the night, Allison Wolfe points to an important line of thought among this brand of punks: “You didn’t have to be a real band or anything” (Don’t Need You). Integral to the steam that riot grrrl gathered was this rejection of what it meant to be “real” or “good” musicians. Punk and hardcore, after all, clung to the same three chords, and the men from those scenes who could barely play never seemed to feel shame about it. A fanzine for punk band the Stranglers included a chart showing how to play A, E, and G chords on the guitar, captioned, “This is a chord…This is another…This is a third…Now form a band” (qtd. in Leblanc 38). Elke Zobl observes that riot grrrls “often encouraged audience members to actively
participate and merged the distinctive (and hierarchical) roles between audience and performer” (Zobl 446). By collapsing audience and performer, riot grrrls strove to “[liberate] themselves from intimidating and restrictive (male) notions of control and expertise” (Zobl 446).

The third shared strategy is collaboration and community-building among oppressed people. Corin Tucker of Heavens to Betsy and Sleater-Kinney recalls, “It was really immediate that people gave us access to technology. If we wanted to borrow people’s amps, we could, we could borrow equipment at shows, or if we wanted to record. . .people went out of their way to help us” (“Control the Means of Production”). In the same video, members of Emily’s Sassy Lime recalled that they never owned their own instruments, instead relying—successfully—on community members’ willingness to share in service of the same goals. Riot grrrls supported one another with the continuous lending of equipment, enabling more and more bands to be heard. This sharing also worked to undermine the idea of the proficient rock god: These were young girls who did not even own instruments, let alone have “classical” or formal training.

The fourth strategy that unites riot grrrl and Girls Rock Camps is the interest in developing and sharing an accessible vocabulary for feminist thought and activism that does not exclude anyone based on youth or access to formal education. One of the riot grrrls’ primary goals was to develop a working vocabulary for the gender-based oppression they faced, and to distribute these words to other youth. Formal theory, previously housed in academic, played a major role in the development of riot grrrl’s gender politics. “The whole point of riot grrrl,” as Corin Tucker put it, “is that we were able to rewrite feminism for the 21st century. Feminism was a concept that our mothers and that generation had, but for teenagers, there wasn’t any real access to feminism. It was written in a language that was academic, that was inaccessible to young women, and we took those ideas and rewrote them in our own vernacular” (“New,
Modern and Handy”). Girls Rock Camps continue this practice through supplementary workshops on media literacy, feminism, and gender inequality that are sure to be absent from most youth’s schooling.

I have devoted this section to what positive strategies riot grrrl and GRCs share, and I would be remiss if I did not note the similarity of tensions within both movements. Missing from much writing and collective memory about riot grrrl are tensions within the movement about identity. Zinester Ramdasha Bikceem, pithily described by journalist Gabby Bess as “Riot Grrrl’s Black Friend,” is one woman of color to put words to riot grrrl’s white-centricity. In Kerri Koch’s documentary Don’t Need You, Bikceem recalls, “It was an odd position to be in, to be the only—not always the only, but a lot of times the only person of color there. And feeling like no one gave a shit. Like this was this empowering movement for that that was really only relative to, you know, white, middle class punk girls.” Koch cuts from Bikceem’s frustration directly to footage of a smirking Kathleen Hanna saying, “bell hooks.” Hanna elaborates her take on the politics of race within riot grrrl, asserting that many white women involved appropriated the work of women of color like Barbara Christian and June Jordan. A young Bikceem wrote about that first Riot Grrrl convention in her zine, Gunk, “They had a workshop on racism and I heard it wasn’t too effective, but really how could it have been when it was filled up with mostly all white girls. One girl I spoke to after the meetings said that Asian girls were blaming all the white girls for racism and that she ‘just couldn’t handle that.’ Ever heard of the word Guilt???” (Bess). In this way, riot grrrl replicated some of the racist, exclusionary tendencies of the wider feminist movement—despite its goals of uniting women who faced common struggles.

Struggles over defining identities caused major fractures in riot grrrl. This is relevant to note at this point because I believe that the GRC movement could suffer similar fractures, and
potentially burnout, if the inclusion of trans and nonbinary youth is not addressed soon and on a large scale. There is a parallel between riot grrrl’s shortsightedness regarding race and the choice that lies on the path ahead of GRCs when it comes to defining the population that camp serves. This is not to say that GRCs are a haven of racial and class parity that just have gender “wrong”—on the contrary, I argue that GRCs must truly engage with the intersectionality that many of them believe they already espouse. My particular focus here is that this is true even in regards to gender, the facet of identity that organizers are most likely to believe they are addressing perfectly adequately.

The Lineage of Rock ‘n’ Roll Camp for Girls

In this section, I want to draw further links from riot grrrl, to Ladyfest, to the creation of Girls Rock Camps. I argue that riot grrrl laid the groundwork for Girls Rock Camps, but GRCs would not have been created without the influential Ladyfest movement that followed the burnout of riot grrrl. In 2001, Misty McElroy, a student at Portland State University, created Rock ‘n’ Roll Camp for Girls as a project for the completion of her degree in women’s studies. In an interview with Stacy Singer—then an academic who would later go on to found Girls Rock Camp Atlanta—McElroy explains that her experience volunteering at the 2000 Portland Ladyfest was the first time she observed women and cultural production tied together with punk.

The first Ladyfest took place in Portland, Oregon in 2000, and was organized by “Some ‘grrrls’ who grew out of the Riot Grrrl movement [and] chose to reclaim and call themselves ‘ladies’” (Zobl 448). The four-day festival featured musical performances from genres including punk, folk, and country; workshops on topics like “Gender Socialization in Schools,” “Sex Work,” and “Battling Burnout: Emotional Renewal in Activism and Art;” and numerous film screenings and art exhibits (“Ladyfest Full Schedule”). Several of the more high-profile riot grrrl
zinesters and musicians performed, hosted, or organized segments of the fest, including Allison Wolfe, Nomy Lamm, and Corin Tucker. In some ways, Ladyfest was more legible than the riot grrrl movement as an activist event: Marion Leonard notes that the festival raised over $30,000 “for community-based women’s organizations,” and served as “a showcase for artists, a new call to activism and as an example of what could be achieved with DIY spirit” (163). The original Ladyfest inspired more festivals like it, centering women’s art and political work, spread across the United States and internationally.

The 2000 Olympia Ladyfest also included a series of workshops called the “Rock Block:” “Guitar Basics,” “Bass Basics,” and “Drum Basics,” each stamped on the schedule as “*GIRLS ONLY*” (Ladyfest schedule). McElroy told Singer that she felt that heldover tensions from riot grrrl, particularly regarding race and class, were finally being addressed at Ladyfest: “Ladyfest had workshops that talked about racial identity...with women of color. There were women supporting each other, women playing instruments, women actually being active agents of social change...I had never seen that before” (Singer 90).

If one of the goals of riot grrrl was to involve women and girls in creating music, Ladyfest carried it in another direction by prompting more “ladies” to stage festivals where this cultural production could be celebrated. Ladyfest served to “creat[e] a new receptive space in which to showcase female musicians and artists” (Leonard 163), and further, the organizers deliberately designed a festival that could be replicated in other cities, by new activists. Leonard suggests that the Internet was a major factor in Ladyfest organizers’ ability to share steps to staging a festival—a technology which the riot grrrls operated without. Ladyfest, then, takes riot grrrl a step further in incorporating teaching and knowledge-sharing in the DNA of its activism, a model of community-building that is foundational to GRCs. Ladyfests can be read as an
evolutionary step between the loosely-organized riot grrrls and Girls Rock Camps; many Ladyfests were developed as nonprofit organizations, as are the majority of GRCs (Leonard 166). Pursuing this kind of governmental recognition and opportunity for funding separates Ladyfests and GRCs from riot grrrl, but the ethos of DIY still clearly runs through all three entities.

At this point, I want to make a note about the line of linguistic reclamation that runs through riot grrrl, Ladyfest, and shifts into Girls Rock. Leonard quotes: “As the Ladyfest Berlin 2005 website explains, ‘When the term ‘girl’ was more and more adopted by the fashion and music industries, the grrrls acquired the tougher and more mature ‘lady’ to create a new subversive term” (qtd. in Leonard 166). Riot grrrl and Ladyfest both use feminized words in an ironic, reclaimatory sense—girls rock camps do not. For the majority of GRCs, the word “Girls” in the name describes, simply, the population served. The camps that take the most progressive approaches to breaking down the gender binary tend to adopt names that move away from the “girls” label—the New York camp, for instance, is commonly known as Willie Mae or Willie Mae Rock Camp, named for the queer black woman, Willie Mae Thornton, who originally performed Elvis Presley’s hit song “Hound Dog.” By emphasizing the name Willie Mae rather than calling themselves Girls Rock NYC or a similar name, the camp steps away from leaning on a prescriptive notion of who is served. In addition, the name and the story behind its choosing highlight how women, queer people, and people of color—particularly black people—have been sidelined and erased from the history of popular music. This addresses the GRC goal of amplifying the voices that have traditionally been silenced.

McElroy found the community crystallized by Ladyfest instrumental in developing her personal politics: By the following summer, the first session of Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls
debuted in Portland. Since 2001, over 50 Girls Rock Camps have appeared internationally, including more than 30 in the United States. Most camps are run by volunteers, with some organizers receiving paychecks. Camps generally provide all the instruments for campers, echoing the collaborative sharing environment of the riot grrrls. An average day at a Girls Rock Camp includes a morning assembly followed by instrument instruction, lunch with a live performance by a local band, plugged-in band practice, a social-justice-themed workshop, and unplugged “quiet” band practice. Each band is mentored by adult volunteer coaches, who guide the youth through writing their first song, building consensus, and feeling confident in their on-stage abilities. This repeats Monday through Friday, and typically Saturday is the culminating rock show, where each band debuts their original songs at a rock club in front of a live audience.

The daily volunteer-led workshops are the location in camp where social justice topics are discussed most explicitly. In one workshop I personally observed, “Women in Rock Herstory,” a volunteer presented campers with a slideshow of lesser-known women musicians, beginning purposefully with the story of Willie Mae Thornton. As Stacy Singer explains in her exploration of Girls Rock Camps, giving campers this information demonstrates “how oppression and race and class politics directly relate to the production of rock and roll music” (Singer 110).

While some camps are very forward with their feminism—like the Boston camp, whose organizers declare it a feminist nonprofit on the homepage—other camps with shared values do not necessarily advertise them for fear of alienating families and donors. Misty McElroy of the original Portland summer camp says that even in that city, with all its liberal and hippie connotations, she received feedback to remove the words “feminism” and “oppression” from grant proposals and recruitment materials. “I heard it over and over,” McElroy said: “The word
[feminism] was too strong. It put everybody on the defensive. [It was] too risky, too edgy” (Singer 120). Singer concludes this chapter of her thesis by asserting that it is not necessary to “claim” feminism out loud in order to “act” in a feminist manner. I bring up the idea of potentially “scaring off” families and sources of money because I believe this is relevant to some camps’ reluctance to interrogate their definition of “girl.” While I agree with Singer that it is not necessary to stamp something with the label “feminist” in order for it to further feminist goals—and in fact, the act of arbitrating what “is” or “is not” feminist is often fruitless—what remains problematic is the idea that progressive adults who aim to liberate children fail to question some elemental parts of the systems of oppression—namely, the gender binary.

**The Argument for Including All Oppressed Genders**

In this section, I want to fully explain why the inclusion of trans, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming youth is necessary to achieve the goals that GRCs desire. More specifically, if GRCs seek to contribute to the end of gender-based oppression in music, they cannot rely on outdated notions of the category of “girl” to structure who receives access to programming. Denying access to other youth who are oppressed based on their gender only furthers this inequality in less visible ways.

In their essay on the creation of the Riot Grrrl Archives, Lisa Darms and Elizabeth K. Keenan refer to the “safe space” that riot grrrls sought to create. Darms and Keenan write, “the safe space of Riot Grrrl created an intimate counter-public—that is, a space where girls established a feminist community through shared texts—but one that sometimes worked against its own intentions: boundaries erected for safety sometimes led to exclusion along lines of race, class, or gender identity” (Keenan and Darms 56). Similarly, the Ladyfest movement is often mentioned in the same breath as “safe spaces”—Singer writes that “All Ladyfests are produced
by local volunteers whose aim it is to offer female-produced and female-safe music, art, and activist performances and education” (Singer 92). I argue that GRCs try to recreate this safe space, a counter-public, for girls—but I want to question what exactly is meant by “female-safe” and whose inclusion is thereby deemed “dangerous.”

In order to begin unpacking these questions, I want to turn to an example of a feminist goal stymied by resistance to interrogating conventional, hegemonic understandings of gender and sex. Long before riot grrrl, and even before punk, there was a group of women, chiefly lesbians, organizing a music festival in order to find and build community. 1975 saw the first annual Michigan Womyn’s Music Festival, also known as MWMF or Michfest. Michfest thrived for forty years—during this writing, the festival’s organizers announced that the 2015 festival would be its last. The community it offers over its six days, while woman-based and bearing some crossover in attendees and performers in its later years, is distinct in tone from outfits like the Riot Grrrl Convention or Ladyfest. The primary difference, at least now, seems to be that Michfest tends to attract an older crowd—but this could be a side effect of being a long-running and, for the last ten years, politically embattled site.

Reporting for *The Believer*, Michelle Tea writes, “The festival aims to be a utopia, and in most ways it hits the mark” (Tea). Michfest functions as a miniature feminist society: Women can attend free of charge if they perform jobs like childcare and running shuttles. There are resources available for older women and women with disabilities. Michfest eschews the words “woman” and “women” in favor of “womon” and “womyn,” choosing to symbolically separate themselves from the word “men.” This rhetorical move functions as a sort of reclamation of the terms for woman’s experience, from socialization to oppression—and notably, is similar in intent to the riot grrrl’s reclamation of “girl.” Men are nowhere to be found on the campground
(although there is childcare available for boys). Tea reports that “The only dudes allowed in the space are the ones who rumble in late at night, in giant trucks, to vacuum the sludge from the hundreds of Porta-Potties, called Porta-Janes. They are preceded by a woman who hollers, ‘Man on the land! Man on the land!’—a warning to skittish nymphs to hop into a tent or a bush” (Tea). Though Tea’s description of the attitude towards men is facetious, she observes a real sense of freedom and fearlessness that pervades the campground: “The absence of guys does make for an absence of threat; everyone’s guard is down, finally, and a relaxation level is hit that is probably impossible to access in the real world. Pretty much everyone who attends bursts into tears at some point, saddened at all the psychic garbage that females are forced to lug around” (Tea).

The question that comes up, then, is who has earned membership to this utopia, and who does not deserve to set down their “psychic garbage.” In 1991, a trans woman named Nancy Jean Burkholder was expelled from Michfest, sparking a debate about who belongs. For years, Michfest has included in their “intentions” that the festival is designed for “womyn born womyn,” that is, women who are assigned female at birth and continue to identify as women—cis women only. Because of this “intention,” transgender women and nonbinary people are excluded from the festival. This has raised furor among feminist groups, resulting in the boycotting of the festival, boycotts of artists who play the festival, and the founding of “Camp Trans,” a group of trans people and allies who camp out outside of festival grounds. Burkholder and friends founded Camp Trans after her expulsion from the Michfest; since the mid-1990s, the protest has happened on-and-off. In her account of Camp Trans in 2003, Tea writes that “The former vigil has turned into a sort of alternative to the festival, one that’s free of charge, one that a lot of MWMF attendees mistake as a happy, friendly, separate-but-equal campsite.”
Since Burkholder’s expulsion from the land in 1991, Michfest organizers and politically opposed groups of trans women have fired back and forth about what it means to create a woman-safe space. The admission policy states that only “womyn-born-womyn” may attend the festival, which is to say cis women. Self-identified feminist defenders of the policy maintain that trans women, because they were socialized as boys, have benefited from and retain male privilege. Further, proponents of the policy ask that would-be festival-goers who were assigned male at birth demonstrate their respect for all women by choosing not to attend. Lisa Vogel, one of Michfest’s owners, drew a parallel between trans women and white women, encouraging these groups to allow “room to breathe” for cis women and women of color, respectively.

Opponents of the womyn-born-womyn policy maintain that this logic—the logic that collapses women of color and cis women into the category of oppressed groups—only functions under the belief that trans women are not women. As Koyama writes, the women of color spaces at Michfest extend membership to women of color who can “pass” as white. It follows, then, that spaces for women should not exclude women who currently or previously could pass as men.

The position held by the defenders of the womyn-born-womyn policy is inherently transphobic. The logic used in their argument assumes that anyone assigned male at birth is a man, despite their identity. This is made apparent by the suggestion, made explicitly by Vogel and, according to Koyama, cited often by cis women, that women of color and cis women are groups that are oppressed by white people and trans women. This analogy not only ignores the existence of trans women of color, and the disproportionate violence they face, but also makes extremely clear that these “feminists” consider trans women to belong in the category of men. Further, the argument ignores the reality that there are cis women who may pass as men in public spaces. Certainly Michfest organizers could not get away with excluding butch lesbians from
women-only spaces based on an assumption of any privilege coming along with that presentation.

The opponents of the admission policy fall short in their lack of interrogating the binary, even when considering trans women to fall on the “right” side of it. There is more to be said here about the range of gender presentation how often exclusion and acceptance operate on perception alone. The position of the opponents of the inclusion policy falls short in its failure to address nonbinary, genderqueer, or transfeminine people—including individuals who may be assigned male at birth and do not identify as men or as women.

My position is that trans women are women and that transfeminine people should be welcome in spaces that work to undo misogyny. I have seen feminists performatively express their excitement to welcome trans women whose presentation of their femininity is conventionally attractive and traditional. The work of moving beyond the gender binary cannot end there. Even feminists who consider themselves very progressive about trans rights stymied by the prospect of welcoming, for example, an assigned male at birth person who identifies as transfeminine, but not as a woman, and does not use she/her/hers pronouns. What is frustrating here is that the work should be a complete undoing of the gender binary, not just an acceptance of binary identities. The work does not end at inviting binary trans women to women’s only spaces, where it should be obvious at this point that they belong.

In 2013, ten years after Tea published her account of Camp Trans and the efforts to banish the womyn-born-womyn intention, Michfest had not budged. In October 2013, Sara St. Martin Lynne posted to her blog a letter of resignation from the board of Bay Area Girls Rock Camp (BAGRC). BAGRC states on their website that their summer camp “is open to self-identified girls and trans youth aged 8-18” (“Summer Camp 2015”). According to Lynne, the
president of BAGRC’s board asked her to step down because of her connections with Michfest. In the letter, Lynne confronts the board’s assertion that association between Michfest and BAGRC would reflect negatively on the camp. In contrast, Lynne writes, she and a team of other Michfest supporters raised a great deal of money for BAGRC, and no one had informed her of any potential donors or camper families balk ing at the association.

Much of Lynne’s letter is dedicated to arguing that the rejection of Michfest on the grounds of transphobia has become the most “popular” political stance: Lynne writes, “I had hoped that [BAGRC] would have the integrity, impartiality, and frankly the courage, to resist making assumptions and accusations of transphobia and that the organization would (for the sake of all of the girls and the women that [it] serves) dive deep into the intricacy of this communal struggle without embracing the rhetoric that has created the current atmosphere of political shaming” (Lynne). Lynne further casts BAGRC’s actions as “bullying,” “silencing,” and “sanctimonious assumption deeply rooted in age-old misogynist practices.” Speaking to the New Yorker in 2014, Lynne said that “This moment where we’re losing the ability to say the word ‘woman’ or to acknowledge the fact that being born female has lived consequences and meaning is kind of intense to me” (Goldberg). In this example, a GRC expanded its definition of gender-based oppression, and found itself at odds with a board member about appropriate ways to demonstrate support for the youth the organization wishes to empower.

Debate has raged in recent years about the inclusion of trans, genderqueer, and nonbinary people in women’s communities and women’s activism. In March 2015, Katha Pollitt, writing for The Nation, presented her argument against including language about trans men, genderqueer and nonbinary people in abortion activism. According to Pollitt, the feminist argument for exclusion is that “gender-neutral” language “[renders] invisible half the population” (Pollitt).
Pollitt argues, “Women have such a long history of minimizing themselves in order not to hurt feelings or seem self-promoting or attention-demanding. We are raised to put ourselves second, and too often, we still do” (Pollitt). Pollitt suggests that by incorporating gender-variant voices into the language of what is recognized as women’s activism, women end up silenced. GRC organizers, activists, or women musicians could make a similar argument about including trans or nonbinary youth in rock camp: Haven’t girls been silenced long enough? Could the inclusion of gender-variant kids overshadow girls’ participation? Why introduce “gender-neutral” language and policies to a program that is designed for the feminist recuperation of silenced voices in music? The answer, I argue, is that including gender-variant kids in GRC programming will not lessen its impact on cis girls. Rather, inclusive programming means that more kinds of squelched voices are raised up; “it also provides potential opportunities for all campers to more fully understand their own genders, which is important and useful in the process of identity development” (Gillard 101). The construction of a platform that includes gender-variant and trans kids benefits the entire community involved.

Although it often goes unspoken, I would argue that the majority of resistance among GRC organizers to the inclusion of transgender youth stems from fears about the penis. Regarding Michfest, Koyama quotes one such statement advocating for the exclusion of non-operative trans women from the festival grounds, which notably states that “male genitals can be…emblematic of male power and sexual dominance” (qtd. in Koyama 699). The use of the word “emblematic” reveals a major fault in this line of reasoning—here, the penis is made a symbol not only of manhood, but of oppression itself. To argue that the presence of penises at the festival could trigger memories, both personal and historical, of oppression and violence ignores the fact that many other characteristics of humans carry similar symbolic weight—as
Koyama argues, white skin certainly symbolizes and reminds women of color of centuries of racist oppression, yet there is no movement to eject white women from the Michfest land. In much (faulty) feminist discourse, the penis symbolizes not just manhood or maleness, but oppression, violence, and privilege. How often have we heard feminists flippantly suggest that they would not suffer the consequences of some misogynist reality in terms like, “I’d make as much money for equal work as my co-workers if I had a penis”? Of course, if these women had penises, they would be more likely to be fired, discriminated against by housing professionals, and murdered, not celebrated or compensated for having those genitals.

From analysis of the Michfest debates, we see how the penis in particular comes to represent oppression to groups of women—even womyn, even radical feminist lesbians, and even some trans women—to the extent that activists feel justified in furthering the exclusion and marginalization—i.e., oppression—of trans women. I argue that in terms of Girls Rock Camp, the penis should be entirely off the table. Genitals do not define gender, as many college students learn in Gender Studies 101, and as many preteens today learn on Tumblr. Girls Rock Camp is a political movement dedicated to reversing the effects of a patriarchal society, in individual kids and in small communities, with the hope that GRC participants can carry their empowerment and self-belief outside of camp and create change. A patriarchal society does not necessarily privilege the penised. Patriarchal power and privilege flow through structures, certainly dodging women and girls with penises, and frequently doing them harm. By mistaking the symbol of the penis for the actual physical, emotional, and historical harm done by patriarchy, we enable patriarchy to perpetuate itself.
Conclusion

Feminists, who have devoted lives to dismantling and correcting the consequences of gendered oppression, should be on the very front lines of supporting trans people, including those with binary-adhering and nonbinary identities. Early waves of feminists worked to alter laws that oppressed one gender. Riot grrrl, through the development of independent media and music, worked to bring the theoretical, academic, and queer deconstruction of gender and its attendant stereotypes to youth. Riot grrrl failed and faded because it ultimately upheld a hegemonic white femininity that was repackaged and sold, diluting any political potency it once possessed. Activists simply moved on.

Girls Rock Camps could face a similar fracture and loss of radical political potential if they uphold the hegemonic gender binary by failing to question which youth could benefit the most from their programming. Who gets to decide who is a girl? Would organizers be asking parents to submit medical documentation of assigned gender? Would kids need a note from a gender therapist before learning how to play drums? I cannot imagine a truly feminist movement, created to serve youth, that denies youth the opportunity to self-determine. The movement cannot dismantle gendered oppression, silencing, and exploitation if it validates and is informed by the binary that functions as the foundation of oppression.

The inability to honestly and uncomfortably explore the question of difference is one of the major faultlines in popular feminism, with many feminists claiming “intersectionality” like a righteous sash to wear. When communities like Michfest argue that women without penises, as a group, have a collective experience and history that women with penises simply cannot understand, they ignore the multitude of other differences that are central in women’s lives. The logic that all cis women share the same oppression ignores the massive influence of racism,
classism, ableism, and more oppressions on the lives of many, many women, regardless of their genitals. The argument that only cis women are entitled to anti-misogynist spaces pushes the inherently racist and classist agenda that sexism and sexism alone is the most “important” oppression to combat. This brand of “feminism,” one that assumes a unified experience of disenfranchisement based on sex and genitals alone, fails at basic intersectionality.

The social justice piece of GRCs is integral to their existence: Workshops like “Gender Equality” and “Media Literacy” allow girls to put names on the discrimination and discouragement they have already heard, by age 9, due to their perceived gender. However, upon Googling, it is not difficult to find apolitical programming under the “girls rock” name. These sites are not affiliated with the GRCA, but a child or family looking for a summer activity could easily be fooled. The Fine Arts Center of Wyoming, Ohio, for instance, offers a week-long “Girls Rock! Camp,” the requirements for which include the bold heading “GIRLS ONLY! NO BOYS!” (“Girls Rock Camp (Rock n’ Roll)”). This tiny difference in how the camps present themselves represents the much larger conundrum, and the more just path: The rock camps that hold true potential for breaking down oppression, amplifying silenced voices in music, and empowering youth of oppressed genders cannot function on exclusion.


