READING ROCK AND ROLL

AUTHENTICITY, APPROPRIATION, AESTHETICS

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37. Or, for that matter, the nineties, as evinced by the cover version of “Wishin’ and Hopin’” by present-day lesbian icon Ani DiFranco on the soundtrack of the 1997 film My Best Friend’s Wedding. Accompanied by steel drums, organ, gospel-choir backing vocals, and a shrill whistle, DiFranco’s over-the-top performance makes abundantly clear what Springfield merely intimated: that only the truly clueless would want to achieve the goals the song enumerates, much less take its advice to heart.


39. The Shangri-Las, “The Leader of the Pack,” words and music by George Morton, Jeff Barry, and Ellie Greenwich, reissued on The Best of the Girl Groups, Volume 1. This use of names on the recording has led to some confusion about the actual group personnel. The lead singer was, in fact, Mary Weiss, whose sister Liz (also known as Betty) was a group member as well. The Weiss sisters were joined by another pair of sisters, twins Mary Ann and Marge Ganzer. Frequent squabbles among the members, however, led to constant reconfigurations of the group, with all four rarely performing together at any given time.


41. The Marvelettes, “Too Many Fish in the Sea,” words and music by Edward Holland, Jr., and Norman Whitfield, on The Best of the Marvelettes (Motown LP-11258, 1975).

42. The Supremes, “Back in My Arms Again,” words and music by Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Edward Holland, Jr., reissued on Diana Ross and the Supremes: The Ultimate Collection (Motown 314 530 827 2, 1996).


44. Martha (Reveva) and the Vandellas, “(Love Is Like a) Heat Wave,” words and music by Brian Holland, Lamont Dozier, and Edward Holland, Jr.

45. Grieg, Will You Still Love Me Tomorrow? p. 188.


“DO DOC MARTENS HAVE A SPECIAL SMELL?”
HOMOCORE, SKINHEAD EROTICISM, AND QUEER AGENCY

ASHLEY DAWSON

Punk... a boy whose anus and rectum is a “vagina” for a pederast.

During a performance while on a tour of the United States to promote a recent album, Morrissey, the enigmatic former lead singer of the xux band the Smiths, projected a series of huge images of young skinheads onto screens behind his band. While Morrissey has always been fascinated by British culture during the postwar period, his recent flirtation with right-wing chic places such nostalgic nationalism in a far more problematic context. Morrissey’s paean to the “suedehead” goes to the heart of contemporary debates concerning the destabilizing effects of performance and mimicry. The appropriation of the hypermasculine, racist iconography of skinhead culture by high-profile artists such as Morrissey as well as by sections of the queer underground radically revises the strategies of ironic citation and parody such as camp and drag that have characterized gay and lesbian subcultures.

In Male Impersonators, Mark Simpson, discussing the transgressive role of rock music, writes:

The leading edge of rock ‘n’ roll must always be searching for the fault line of sexuality, the cusp of gender, where the connection between the two are most fraught. In order to channel desire into consumerism, rock ‘n’ roll has first to locate the richest sources of desire. Rock ‘n’ roll has to appropriate images and acts that are unstable and expose the “arbitrary”
nature of gender performance, reveal in the "phantasmatic" nature of identity and thus cause some disturbing feedback.¹

If rock music functions as Simpson suggests, then the current upsurge in the number of bands who actively foreground questions of sexual orientation has much to tell us about popular attitudes toward gender and sexuality. For not only does rock music pick up on shifts in the etiquette through which normality is defined in gendered terms, but it also discloses the fact that this etiquette is itself a social construction. Definitions of gender characteristic of a particular period are consequently revealed as a product of a hegemonic ideology specific to that period. Of course, such hegemony is itself unstable, having constantly to negotiate the vicissitudes of shifting perceptions of identity as well as the very artificiality of gender discussed by Simpson.

Morrissey's opaque suedehead love songs highlight rock music's function as a site for challenges to normative definitions of gender. His interest in the macho drag of the skinhead underlines the performative dynamic of gender identity that I intend to explore in this essay. In addition, the work of homocore groups and performers such as Pansy Division, Tribe 8, the Mukilteo Fairies, God Is My Copilot, and Vaginal Davis—all of whom appropriate and parody hardcore musical style and attitude—links and contrasts the new queer musical production with various queer aesthetic traditions of the past, as well as with contemporary queer politics. Most importantly, these bands use the traditionally ambivalent position of the male rock star as both an identificatory and an erotic object to engage in particularly powerful forms of genderfuck: the erosion of stable, binary gender norms through parodic performance.

Like heavy metal cockrock, hardcore developed alongside and in reaction to many of the transgressive gender practices of the glam rock movement. Despite the relatively traditional, Reagan-era brand of masculinity evident among the majority of hardcore performers, the independent scene has preserved a tradition of genderfuck since the punk explosion in the late seventies. From the glamour boys of the New Romantic movement who kicked off New Wave in the early eighties to the queer roots and sites of house music, forms of transgressive gender performance have been a consistent—if often violently repressed—influence on more commercial genres of popular music.² In this essay, I will examine the characteristics of punk and hardcore that have made these movements particularly important sites for the dismantling of masculinist, heterosexist subject positions by queers. The lyrics, musical style, and performative aesthetics of homocore bands aggressively assert a queer politics that militates against dominant norms of gender identity within both the heterosexual and the gay and lesbian mainstream. In addition, the homocore fanzines that comment on the scene and consolidate lines of alternative communication within the queer community generate a fertile noise that disrupts and reconfigures mainstream musical production.

The counterhegemonic musical form through which homocore circulates is an essential element of its anti-identity stance. Indeed, as Philip Bae argues in Queering the Pitch, music has historically represented a part of Western culture whose emotive power and ambiguity of meaning has been constructed as feminine and therefore dangerous.³ Furthermore, rock music itself was built on the expressive forms of marginalized social groups—African Americans, in particular—in order to satisfy and exploit the voracious popular appetite for acts of symbolic subversion. This tendency of rock to appropriate subversive or marginal social identities has led to the elaboration of various underground forms that resist the logic of the market. While such forms of resistance are laudable in theory, they can lead to a debilitating form of avant-gardist elitism that reinstates music as a so-called high art form. This essay will examine documents of the queer underground, including fanzines and lyrics by homocore bands, that participate in the appropriative strategies of rock music while resisting such avant-gardism. I argue that the proliferation of these parodic forms destabilizes hierarchical, binary forms of social organization such as high/popular culture, straight/gay, and masculine/feminine. In particular, I will pursue the following questions: What are the implications of the homocore appropriation of straight male drag? How are such signs re-circulated within an underground subculture and how does this recirculation reflect their political significance? What relation does the homocore movement have to previous forms of sexual dissidence? What are the pragmatic political ramifications of homocore's resistance against the ethnic identity model of gay identity? I will thus move from an examination of the erotics of skinhead camp to a more general discussion of the role of subculture within queer politics.

The last few years have seen an eruption of the independent music scene into the mainstream, principally through the signing of a number of alternative bands to major record labels in the wake of Nirvana's pathbreaking commercial success. Indie bands have brought with them an antihierarchical aesthetic inherited from the punk movement of the late seventies. This aesthetic
is predicated on an attack on the exclusionary function of musical virtuosity and show biz entrepreneurs. The punk scene drew much of its vibrancy from the assumption that absolutely anyone was qualified to get on stage. The ferment created by this aspect of the scene is perhaps best demonstrated by the now-classic fanzine diagram depicting three chords and captioned, "Here's three chords. Now form a band."

The DIY (do-it-yourself) philosophy of the independent rock scene also extends to the mechanics of production and distribution: bands tend to record on labels that are independent of the major commercial producers, giving them license to experiment artistically by curtailing some of the constraints of the profit motive. In addition, the indie scene also supports various underground forms of communication, such as the fanzine, which employ cheap technology in order to foster circuits of communication as alternatives to the established press. Indie bands are, then, inheritors of the emancipatory political projects of the sixties such as the underground press and, in particular, of the various offshoots of the Situationist International. Decentralization of authority in all its forms, independence from the iron law of the marketplace, and the utopian horizon revealed by the spontaneous gesture are the underpinnings of their pastiche style. The irony involved in the commercial success of certain segments of the indie movement at a time when, as Donna Gaines has argued, the civil rights of youths have been eroded to the point where a fetishized consumerism is the principle simulacrum of freedom available, explains the enduring urgency of attacks on those who are perceived as selling out.

In addition, however, this commercial success has also brought a radical sexual politics to more widespread popular attention. Mainstream definitions of gender have perhaps been most impacted through the work of all-women bands associated with the riot grrrl movement. Groups such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and L7 have brought the ferocious rage felt by women toward forms of patriarchal authority onto the stage with them. The fanzines that circulate in the riot grrrl scene further deconstruct patriarchy by using the ironic humor and techniques of manipulation learned from media activists such as ACT-UP and Queer Nation. Despite their obvious debt to feminism, many of these artists refuse to be boxed in with the label "angry girl bands," briding at the assumption implicit in this kind of labeling that anger is actually the province of male bands. In an interview in a riot grrrl fanzine, for instance, members of 7 Year Bitch feel the need to reject explicitly the patronizing accolades delivered by male audience members and rock critics who are surprised that women can play instruments. Riot grrrl groups cope with this sort of reaction by parodying the arbitrary nature of gender categories. The aggressive inversion of pejorative labels for the female body adopted by bands such as Hole—whose name articulates the ambivalently insulting and fearful synecdoche that often inheres within such misogynist labels—is an apt example of such parody.

Faced with this frontal assault on the gender privilege that once accrued to the rock star, male indie rockers have themselves increasingly moved to acknowledge the lability of gender identity. Britpop groups such as Suede have consequently revived the ambiguous sexual identity of the glam rocker of the early seventies. In addition, even performers within the hardcore subculture have grown more self-conscious about gender. An interviewer's question concerning how he became open-minded enough to invite the homocore band Pansy Division to open for his band on a recent national tour prompted the following exchange between Billie Joe Armstrong, lead singer of the neopunk group Green Day, and Chris Freeman, bassist and singer for Pansy Division: "Well," Billie Joe says, "I mean, I'm not, for the most part, I'm not fully straight—I mean, I'm bi. But, I ask him, aren't you married and isn't your wife going to give birth to your child soon? 'Yeah,' says Billie Joe. 'See,' says Chris, who's standing nearby, 'sometimes the right people do have children.' The gentle humor of this exchange, of course, raises the question of the extent to which nontraditional sexuality is becoming a faddish pose. Severed from any social movement, professions of bisexuality may become nothing more than an attempt to cash in on the latest vogue within rock culture of destroying sexual taboos. Rather than simply seeing Billie Joe's comment as a crass appropriation of a sexual subculture, I would like to think about how it reflects a wider social problematic. If subcultural styles represent, as the cultural studies tradition has argued, "magical" solutions to the problems collectively experienced by youth, then Billie Joe's reaction must be taken as part of a more general social reaction against the masculinization of male identity characteristic of the Reagan-Bush era. As a result of this reaction, the work of artists who are part of the homocore underground is assuming an increasingly visible role within the independent culture and gaining wider acknowledgement from the commercial mainstream.

At a show in a small club in New York City's Lower East Side during the twenty-fifth anniversary celebrations of the Stonewall Riots, a flyer was handed out addressing itself to all "queer punks and other non-mainstream
Individuals.” Clearly intended to skewer the commercial hoopla of the commemoration, the flyer calls for the establishment of a network of nonconformists who find little appeal in the mainstream gay and lesbian communities that dominated the Stonewall festivities. Unlike the mainstream images that circulated during the commemoration, the Morlocks’ flyer rejects the constraints of the “gay lifestyle” as well as the straight world. The group’s name, borrowed from the subterranean cannibals in H. G. Wells’s The Time Machine, heightens the projection of underground identity articulated in the flyer. True to the anarchist roots that the flyer proclaims, the homocore groups that answer to this call for a communication collective cannot be said to have a particular set of doctrines. Nevertheless, the opposition of members of homocore groups to the gay community’s mimicry of heteronorms was a prominent unifying concern for such alternative queer collectives during the Stonewall commemoration. Given that many of the performers associated with homocore appropriate some of the most aggressive musical forms in the extremely heterosexist genre of rock ‘n’ roll, how is this rejection of heteroconformism tenable? How do homocore groups conceive of their identities and the feedback their subculture is generating within dominant gay and straight communities? How, finally, does this relate to broader changes in gender norms during the last decade and a half?

Discussing his fascination with skinheads in J.D.s, the seminal homocore zine he edited along with G. B. Jones, Bruce La Bruce explains the allure of the skinhead subculture on two levels: the ideological and the sexual. On the one hand, La Bruce mentions a former socialist boyfriend who became a white-power skin in disapproving tones; on the other, he describes his recent film dealing with the homofetishization of skinheads. Opposite this explanation is a line drawing of a skinhead in a style copied from gay porn: Complete with Doc Martens, braces, and Union Jack tattoo, the skin fingers the head of his gigantic, erect cock. In a seemingly incongruous juxtaposition, a bar down the center of the illustration announces in script decorated with trippy seventies’ sunflowers that this is a “skin pansy.” Why this anomalous collage of pansy typography and skinhead masculinity? Why this fetishization of the skinhead?

Certain forms of gay style and cultural identity have always been based on a dangerous fascination with the most hegemonic forms of heterosexual masculinity, from the neoclassical, eugenically tipped German wandervogel movement at the turn of the century to gay erotic artist Tom of Finland’s charged images of superbutch farm boys and cops fucking on fences. Commenting on the shifts experienced by masculinity during the last decade, Mark Simpson goes as far as attacking gay pornography for its denial of the variability and fluidity of queer sex roles. According to Simpson, the post-Stonewall masculinization of gay representation runs the risk of denying the subversive interchangeability of gay sexual roles: “What gay porn does is to represent a world in which men have sex with men where there is no such thing as ‘gay.’ Tom of Finland’s drawings depict a guilt-free (and gay free) world of spontaneous public sex between willing, youthful square-jawed cops and grinning, tattooed sailors... In Tom Land, homosexuality is discovered to be the most natural, most masculine thing in the world. This is an unpleasant conjunction of gay and straight porn.” If Simpson’s comments hold true, this tendency also reinforces the coding of sexuality by gender preference through the marginalization of nonconventional sexualities. Dominant versions of gay sexual fantasy thus appear to partake of an ambivalent desire to assume the very rigid, hypermasculine identity that it brings into question.

Simpson’s attack is, however, predicated on an interpretation of Tom’s work that ignores the very performative complexity that is entailed in this fantasy of superpotent masculinity. Queerness is not a quantity that can be represented by a particular physical type or style politics. Instead, queer identity is constituted in and by same-sex desire in all its forms. Moreover, the kick in Tom’s porn consists precisely in the revelation that the most apparently straight forms of heterosexual masculinity carry a powerful homoerotic charge. Tom’s work is thus hardly a denial of homosexuality; rather, it is an affirmation of the homoerotism that is habitually repressed in the homosexual order and of the seductiveness involved in breaking the taboo associated with this repression.

Bruce La Bruce’s interest in the skinhead pansy exemplifies such an erotic collision. The macho category of “skin” and the stigmatized homophobic label of “pansy” are collapsed together in J.D.s in a way that underlines the instability of gender identity as well as the performative element of even the most exaggerated forms of masculinity. In order to understand the attraction of the skinhead for La Bruce and, by extension, that of the hardcore genre for queer activists and artists, it is important to gain a sense of why the skinhead constitutes such a compelling example of rough trade.

The skinhead subculture developed in Britain during the late sixties, a time when the social democratic elements of the consensus society established by the postwar Labour government were increasingly fracturing. Indeed, as Dick Hebdige has argued, the very existence of youth subcultures is an
index of the dissolution of that consensus, though it might also be taken as a sign of the commodification and consequent visibility of "teenage lifestyles." Skinhead style was, according to Hebdige, a simulacrum of working-class identity that was far more unstable than any real version of that identity because of its retrospective, embattled construction in the midst of the ruins of the traditional working-class way of life (57). Skins, however, did not draw only on this mythical image of the dour machismo of the working-class male; they also gained a component of their symbolic repertoire from the "rude boys," the rebellious West Indian youths of the big city:

Ironically, those values conventionally associated with white working-class culture which had been eroded by time, by relative affluence and by the disruption of the physical environment in which they had been rooted, were rediscovered in black West Indian culture. Here was a culture armoured against contaminating influences, protected against the more frontal assaults of the dominant ideology, denied access to the "good life" by the color of its skin. . . . The skinheads, then, resolved or at least reduced the tension between an experienced present (the mixed ghetto) and an imaginary past (the classic white slum) by initiating a dialogue which reconstituted each in terms of the other. (57)

Skinhead style is, then, characterized by an appeal to an iconic and embattled form of masculinity that is itself inspired by the marks of absolute difference conferred by racializing discourse. Indeed, one aspect of skinhead appropriation that Hebdige neglects is the skins' fascination with rude boy sexuality. Certainly, stereotypical fears/fantasies concerning black sexuality must have figured prominently in skins' acts of appropriation. Such tensions can only heighten the instability of the skinhead project of remasculinization, which involved a masquerade of male identity founded on a pastiche of marginalized forms of masculinity.

Skinhead identity is therefore based on a history that, like most forms of nationalism and ethnic absolutism, represses the hybridity of its origins. Indeed, as Hebdige goes on to argue, the polarizing racial discourses of the period ultimately proved too strong for the skins. Retreating from their early stage of sympathy with the rudies of the inner-city ghettos, skins embraced a virulent white-power ideology that nostalgically fastened on the imaginary rituals of national identity and communal class solidarity. It is this uncompromisingly compromised element, however, that makes skinhead style alluring. If the dour macho pose of the skin is constituted, as Hebdige argues, by a repudiation of the regime of the normal that draws on the resistant core of blackness within and yet outside British culture, Bruce La Bruce's eroticization of the skin brings out the latent homoerotic elements that this strongly homosocial subculture represses and projects onto others in the process of consolidating its identity.

La Bruce, and homocore in general, are in other words involved in a form of mimicry of macho drag that has always been a prominent part of gay culture and that is predicated on gay men's affective and sexual ties with other socially marginalized groups such as working-class and black men. This mimicry brings out the dialectical power relations integral to sexuality. Furthermore, J.D's anatomizes the absolute distinction that must be maintained between hetero- and homosexuality in order to prevent the queering of the former. Thus, in the narrative that begins with the question, "Do Doc Martens have a special smell?" the speaker moves quickly from a fetishistic description of the smell of Doc Martens and the sweaty socks they contain to an account of domination by a skinhead. The skinhead whose slave the speaker becomes shores up his straight identity through domination of his slave; ironically, this domination always returns to the sexual, to the skin's need to be serviced by his slave:

"You fucking bastard, you like teenage boys?"
"Yes sir."
"You're a fucking dirty queer—what are you?"
"A fucking dirty queer sir."
"Queers like you are only good for two things—what are they?"
"Licking boots and sucking cock sir." 13

The cartoon that accompanies this narrative foregrounds these issues of sexuality and domination. Not only is the object that has elicited the skin's arousal—the sex slave? the reader?—absent from the frame, but the skin himself is in an ambiguous state, with anger flashing across his face while his cock gyrates in the form of a swastika. Is his cock erecting itself into a swastika or losing that form? Does sexual arousal jibe with or augment white supremacist ideology? Whatever the case, the narrative suggests that skinheads both need the sexual attention lavished on them by their slaves while also seeking to disavow the implications of that relation. The skins in this narrative struggle to retain their identity by adopting an aggressive hetero-fucker stance
while at the same time being placed in a position of passivity as the object of the queer gaze. The more frantically the skinhead asserts this hetero-fucker status, however, the more he is reduced to the level of the purely physical, to an irresistible pot of honey, a fairy who enacts his macho drag at the behest of queer desire. The more absolute the posited distinction between hetero and homo, the more the one flips over into the other.

On a recent single, the homocone band Mukilteo Fairies enact a similar parodic deconstruction of straight culture. The front of the single's cover contains an image typical of the world of heavy metal: a giant, smoking cauldron with Satan's head above the title “Special Rites.” Having invoked this discourse of satanic rites, one through which the heavy metal fan proclaims his outsider status, the Fairies then present us with an image on the back side of the single that locates such rites on the level of the somatic: inside a corona of song titles, a dark hole looms, a set of claws protruding just beyond its edge. This image foregrounds the straight male paranoia that renders the anus the true site of forbidden rituals. As Mark Simpson writes:

The performance of masculinity in all its various rites has more to do with the anxiety a man has about his anus than his phallus. Homosexual representation is not just a desublimation of homoeroticism, making scandalously visible the invisible bond that binds men together, but also a desublimation of anality, a publication of that which must be kept private about the male body, and thus a dissolution of the whole masculine sense of self—predicated as it is upon secrecy and paranoia.¹⁴

Seizing on the fantasy narratives that have been a part of metal culture at least since Led Zeppelin’s embrace of J. R. R. Tolkien’s work, the Mukilteo Fairies make explicit the homoeroticism implicit in the narcissistic feudal reveries of so many teenage boys.

The Mukilteo Fairies engage in a similarly sleazy unsettling of straight culture in their musical style. Their cut “Queer Enough For You?” begins the Outpunk label’s Outpunk Dance Party. After a brief snatch of disco music is ripped with a rending scratch off a turntable, the fury of the Fairies’ wall of grunge guitar erupts, the singer screaming out ironic lines concerning queer identity: “I suck my cheeks in when I dance / Dig Erasure and Man 2 Man.”¹⁵ Yet such clichés concerning dominant queer identity merge with a whirring sense of anger and threat that reverses the corresponding stereotype of passivity that often attaches to them: “Get 49 enemas every day / so you’d bet-

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ter get the fuck out of my way.” In addition, the Mukilteo Fairies tear apart the binary opposition of homo- and heterosexuality by invoking their worn clichés of queer identity amid a welter of furious noise. The lead singer delivers the lyrics in a throaty scream that unsettlingly juxtaposes an ironic invocation of homophobic discourses with the frothing anger of the traditionally male hardcore singer. The Mukilteo Fairies and other bands such as Swine King, which covers a Motorhead song on the same compilation, thus remorselessly out the hardcore rock star by focusing attention on his performance position.

The exaggerated masculinity of a performer such as Henry Rollins, whose pumped-up and tattoo-swathed body dominates the stage, is intended to deflect the homoerotic dynamics implicit in performances in which the male rocker is an object of both identification and erotic desire.¹⁶ The pit of sweaty, moshing, slamming bodies at the average hardcore show engenders a powerful homosocial bonding process whose homoeroticism must be defused by the performer’s expressions of righteous masculine anger. Nevertheless, the discomfort generated by this position as object of a tenuously repressed homoerotic gaze is inevitably exacerbated by the macho strutting of the rocker. Such posturing merely underlines the male subject as spectacle that precipitates this homoerotic dynamic in the first place. Homocore groups are not, then, simply appropriating the male rocker’s performance position. Rather, in adopting the performance mode of the hardcore band, such groups rearticulate the performance position of the male hardcore star.¹⁷ Mimicking the macho drag involved in this subject position, homocore performers lay bare the instabilities associated with the homoerotic dynamic of such a position. In addition, this process of outing transforms the hardcore performer’s physical expressions of anger into an articulation of queer outrage with homophobic discourses.

The Mukilteo Fairies are, however, hardly the first band to denounce homophobia. As early as 1981, the hardcore band MDCK (Millions of Dead Cops) recorded “Dead Cops/What Makes America So Straight?” a track that denounces police harassment of queers, African-Americans, and the poor in general: “Call this the land of the free, say its the home of the brave / You know they call me a queen, just another human being.”¹⁸ Like MDCK, contemporary performance artist and hardcore diva Vaginal Davis remorselessly attacks the racism evident not only within dominant heterosoc but also within the principal style cultures of the queer nation. Vag, a six-foot, six-inch self-described “Amazonian Black Love Goddess,” is a multimedia artist
whose forays into music have consistently transgressed and parodied genres of both dominant straight and gay performance. In appearances in support of her hardcore/speed metal band Pedro, Muriel and Esther’s The White To Be Angry album, Vag struts onstage wearing militiaman chic. Growling down the microphone with prototypical hardcore irie, Vag engages in what José Esteban Muñoz has recently called a parodic disidentification with the modes of macho masculinity that unite militiaman and hardcore performer. As she strips the layers of militiaman garb to reveal the black/Latina queen underneath, Vag peels apart the racial and sexual boundaries that secure dominant identities.

The higher visibility of homocore music today is attributable not only to the inroads made by independent music into the mainstream but also to a crisis in the discourses of masculine identity. During the Reagan era, the political establishment and important sectors of popular culture such as Hollywood engaged in a racially coded project of remasculinization. Faced with the legacy of the bloody, humiliating defeat in Vietnam and the increasing visibility of previously marginalized social groups as a result of the rise of new social movements since the sixties, politicians and sectors of the U.S. cultural apparatus attempted to revive the ideology of American indominability by interpellating the identity of the individual with a national identity based on strength, toughness, and a determination to use force whenever and wherever necessary. The resolution to this crisis in masculine identity took, then, the form of the hysterical male fantasy of Rambo, returning on the silver screen to retake an imaginary Vietnam for us and thereby reclaim our lost honor.

At the same time as this project of remasculinization was being enacted, however, images of the male body were being increasingly commodified. Over the last decade and a half, the male body has been ever more openly depicted as the site of erotic spectacle and stamy desirability. In advertising, for instance, the commodification of men’s cocks has advanced inexorably, most prominently in the form of Calvin Klein’s giant billboards and scandalous soft-porn ads. Indeed, in the retrospect provided by this process of objectification, the homoerotic nature of many of the Vietnam revisionist films, not to mention Beefcake flicks such as Top Gun, is screamingly evident: Rambo’s pumped-up body minces around the screen in battle fatigues, straining to assert a masculine identity through the carefully applied mousse and makeup. The fact that the sexual charge accompanying this display of physical prowess is available for the consumption of an undifferentiated gaze only led to more exaggerated exertions. Within such a context, the irony involved in queer mimicry of straight male drag corrodes the iron façade of hetero masculinity to reveal the erotic charge latent within such postures of hardness.

There is no guarantee that this exposure of homoeroticism will diffuse the mechanism of disavowal and scapegoating that maintains the homosocial continuum. Even so, popular culture has been quick to respond to this increasing awareness of the unsustainable nature of gender binarisms. The members of a group like God Is My Co-Pilot now explicitly conceive of themselves as engaged in undermining such binarisms: “We’re co-opting Rock, the language of Sexism, to address gender identity on its own terms of complexity.” Indeed, their recent album How to Be begins with “Carte Celeste,” a song that charts their sense of the reductiveness of a polarized model of gender and sexual orientation: “We’re off the map—we’re in the dark blue dot screen that stands for in between the stars—everything between the big things.” Employing the map of the heavens as a metaphor for gender, the group reminds us that this map is a social construct that cannot or will not adequately represent the indefinable spaces between the bright points of light on which we hang our sense of gendered order. In taking up the poststructuralist analysis of the categories of social thought, the band attempts to offer up examples of the greater freedom with regard to gender and sexuality precipitated by an awareness of the arbitrary nature of the categories governing these aspects of life.

Concomitant with this shift has been a growing sense of frustration with the assumptions underlying existing models of gay and lesbian identity. Homocore’s ironic appropriation of straight male drag constitutes a challenge not only to heterosexual masculine identity but to the homogenizing tendencies of the ethnic model that underlies existing paradigms of gay identity. This ethnic model of gay and lesbian identity is founded on the assumption that choice of sexual object is the determining aspect of subjectivity. As Stephen Seidman explains, the essentializing tenets of this ethnic model have come under fire not only from academic critics concerned with the social construction of identity but from social groups marginalized by the normative tendencies implicit in the model. The facility with which this discourse of identity lends itself to hegemonization by particular segments of the community is built on the normalizing tendency implicit in the lexicon of family, language, and community on which the ethnic identity model is based. The model tends, in other words, to delegitimize the experience and desires of
individuals who do not conform to the sexual, emotional, and cultural identities authenticated by the hetero-/homosexual binary.

Despite the attempts of individuals such as Andrew Sullivan and the members of the Log Cabin Society to censure queers who do not conform to mainstream identities, lesbians and gays are evidently neither a homogeneous community nor an inherently progressive group.29 Ironically, these neoconservatives have redeployed the modernist discourse of normalization that produced the category of “the homosexual” in the first place, seeking in so doing to cast those who have resisted their version of the homogenizing underpinnings of identity politics as beyond the pale of the so-called normal gay community. Predicated on challenging the ethnic framing of same-sex desire as well as on appropriating the erotics of straight male spectacle, a prominent element of homophobic is its reaction to the growing profile of such neoconservative groups. Homocore’s resistance to this model is a reminder that minoritarian identity, of whatever stripe, is no longer enough to guarantee political progressivism.

Seeking to challenge this assimilationist trajectory, homocore groups reject one of the more prominent aspects of mainstream gay identity: the consumerist lifestyle that, as Michael Warner puts it, gives off the smell of capital in rut.26 This critique was particularly evident during the Stonewall commemoration, when the divisions within the gay community were blatantly apparent in the heated disagreements over the meaning of Stonewall. Indeed, the grand march that culminated the twenty-fifth anniversary celebration was split in two, one group marching along New York Mayor Giuliani’s approved route while another marched up Fifth Avenue in defiance of civic order. This divide further underlines the inability of the ethnicity model underpinning gay and lesbian identity politics to theorize adequately either the forms of hegemony that develop within the community or the role of resistance in relation to issues unrelated to sexual object choice.

Indeed, the Morlocks’ flyer with which I began this analysis loudly proclaims its alienation from the official version of the gay lifestyle just as much as it does its alienation from homophobic segments of the independent music scene. For the Morlocks, this lifestyle involves the unnecessary internalization of stereotypes produced by the gay mainstream’s closeness to straight society. Likewise, the Mukilteo Fairies’ “Queer Enough For You” catalogs clichéd aspects of gay identity not only in order to refute straight assumptions but also as part of a refusal to engage with and participate in the consumption of icons of collective gay identity from a past that no longer seems relevant to many young queers. Homocore refuses the constraints of nominally straight culture as well as those of what it conceives of as a gay subcultural ghetto, whether that ghetto is decorated by photos of Judy Garland or by pink lambs. Performances by other homocore artists such as Vaginal Davis, who radically inverts the traditional performance position of the drag queen, similarly critique the racial and gender codes of mainstream queer identity.

This attack on the heteronormativity of certain segments of the gay and lesbian community is carried out most intensely in S.C.A.B., a fanzine circulated by the so-called Society for the Complete Annihilation of Breeders. As this association’s title makes evident, S.C.A.B. originally assaulted the more and less immediate byproducts of the heterosexual lifestyle. For S.C.A.B., however, heterosexism transcends sexual orientation, including not only the desire to breed but the many forms of exploitation that the group argues are destroying the earth, from capitalism to Christianity. In response, S.C.A.B. has turned the discourse of hatred of straights, formerly used by Queer Nation to clear a public space for nonconformist gays and lesbians, back against the dominant groups within those communities.27 The result is a savage parody of mainstream gay and lesbian culture. All concessions to forms of heteronormativity such as gender segregation and new age mysticism are blasted by this parody. The nugatory intent behind the critique is so powerful, the refusal of the traditional parameters of gay and lesbian identity so total, that S.C.A.B. is led to embrace the most virulent forms of homophobia. The second issue, for example, engages in its own discourse of classification and objectification, ranking the different bars of Toronto using a “bash code” based on the degree of lesbian and gay identification of their patrons.

The dark satire of this “Guide to Gay Bashing” is characteristic of an anti-identity polemic that aims to shatter the assumptions of intelligibility concerning gender, sexual object choice, and national identity that underlie mainstream gay and lesbian culture. Reacting against the deployment of a parodic nationalist discourse by groups such as Queer Nation, S.C.A.B. engages in a counterparody by representing itself as a shadowy terrorist cell intent on undermining queer nationalism. Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman’s discussion of the roles of fanzines in articulating a space for a politics beyond Queer Nation’s satire of the current hegemonic public sphere is particularly illuminating in relation to S.C.A.B.’s parodic methods.28 Berlant and Freeman stress the importance of counterproduction within the ‘zine network. Such counterproduction embodies a form of parody and camp that
rejects the authenticity discourse that grounds the ethnic identity model of queer culture. Adapting the disruptive style of the alternative music culture, homocore similarly adumbrates a postidentity, postnational politics founded on the construction of a public sphere independent of the social institutions and cultural hegemony that currently ground definitions of identity.

Homocore thus represents a significant refusal to adopt the heteronormative identity that is supposedly prerequisite to gaining civil rights within the narrowing horizons of a rightwardly lurching political establishment. The context for such a challenge is perhaps best exemplified by the ultimately unresolved battle for gay and lesbian inclusion within the military that followed Bill Clinton’s election. Homocore’s aggressive assertion of radical difference is an element in a utopian strategy of linking antagonistic minority groups in a politics that refuses to accept the legitimacy of the nation-state as a form of identity. Rejecting the ethnic identity model as well as the lexicon of the nation, homocore reclaims the radical theoretical and political legacy of the Gay Liberation Front. While the GLF’s embrace of the polymorphous perverse ultimately led it toward an ethos of sexual individualism, its awareness of the interwoven nature of forms of oppression remains exemplary. This awareness found pragmatic political context through the forging of bonds of solidarity with marginalized blacks, colonized peoples, and oppressed women that appears increasingly enviable given today’s fragmented political landscape. Homocore’s appropriation of straight male drag and its parody of queer nationalism rearticulate the signifiers of sexual orientation and gender identity, intervening in a cultural formation in which the politics of identity are coming to seem increasingly facile and limiting. The postidentitarian and postnationalist parody carried out by various homocore groups is a particularly important reminder of the political possibilities inherent within a coalitional politics predicated on a refusal of regimes of the normal in all their forms.

This postidentity politics does not, however, constitute a repudiation of identity per se. Rather, the parodic vitriol of various homocore artists generates a radical dissonance that interrupts and refunctions the signifiers of identity in both gay and straight communities. It is this act of bricolage that explains the constant concern with selling out that one finds among these performers: subcultures must constantly attempt to discriminate themselves from the dominant culture in order to reaffirm their difference, their distance from the hegemonic meanings that they appropriate and invert. Homocore is, in the end, a musical subculture and hence is both empowered and circumscribed by the revolution of style typically carried out within such a context. As Dick Hebdige writes in Subculture: “By repositioning and recontextualizing commodities, by subverting their conventional uses and inventing new ones, the subcultural stylist gives the lie to what Althusser has called the ‘false obviousness of everyday practice,’ and opens up the world of objects to new and covertly oppositional readings. The communication of a significant difference, then (and the parallel communication of a group identity), is the ‘point’ behind the style of all spectacular subcultures.”

Where Hebdige writes commodities, homocore writes gender. Homocore’s subcultural stylists denaturalize the hegemonic discourse of gender by appropriating the elements of this discourse and rearticulating them, thereby offering up an alternative reality. Inherent in this process, however, is a tense, interwoven relation between the dominant reading and the subaltern version articulated by the subculture. As a result, homocore must constantly define its boundaries. As Gottlieb and Wald note, this process means that subcultural groups often run the risk of reifying the distinction between the mainstream and their own oppositional culture. I would suggest, however, that this opposition is also the source of much of the energy produced by such subcultures. For it is by occupying the shifting interface between dominant and subaltern knowledges that subcultures are able to engage in their processes of rearticulation. Stripped of this fertile tension, such subcultures are left without the material for their acts of bricolage. As the parody carried out by homocore artists on both the performance position of the straight male hardcore performer and on the dominant gay lifestyle demonstrates, rearticulatory practices offer powerful vehicles for the assertion of difference. Perhaps more importantly, they also offer significant resources for the constitution of vibrant forms of countercommunity.

NOTES
2. For an overview of queer musics during this period, see John Gill’s Queer Noises: Male and Female Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Music (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995).
4. For an inventive history of the connections between the Situationist Interna-


7. This point is made forcefully in the discussion of the relationship between riot grrrl music and the rock press in Gottlieb and Wald, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," p. 254.


10. Andrew Ross introduction to Rose and Ross, Microphone Fiends, p. 6.


15. The Mukilteo Fairies, "Queer Enough For You?" Outpunk Dance Party (Outpunk 12, 1994).


17. The term "rearticulation" derives from Gramsci's theory of hegemony. In defining the term, Cary Nelson describes the way in which rearticulation allows cultural workers "to describe how political discourses either become dominant or organize for resistance by rearticulating existing terms, concepts, arguments, beliefs, and metaphors into new configurations that are persuasive to people in a particular historical context" (Repression and Recovery [Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989], pp. 291–292).

18. MDC, "Dead Cops/What Makes America So Straight?" Millions of Dead Cops (R Radical Records, 1982).


21. For a discussion of this shift in representations of gender during the postwar period, see Andrew Wernick's Promotional Culture (New York: Sage, 1991).

22. From the song "We Signify" on God Is My Co-Pilot's album Straight Not (Outpunk 8, 1995).