

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: HONEYSUCKLE FULL OF POISON:
GENDER POLITICS AND THE 1990s
RECEPTION OF COURTNEY LOVE

Briana M. Nave, Master of Arts, 2019

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Courtney Love, frontwoman of grunge band Hole, is best known for her marriage to Kurt Cobain, the revered frontman of rock band Nirvana. In the 1990s Love was unable to escape persistent sexist stereotyping by the media and Cobain's fans even after two critically acclaimed albums and other significant artistic accomplishments. Cobain's status was valued so highly in patriarchal society and masculinist rock that the possibility of Love's success, who as his wife should have been subordinate, was perceived as a threat to Cobain's dominancy and legacy. The feminist themes of her music and her unabashed ambition provoked gender anxieties in 1990s American society that reflected in her press reception. Through an analysis of her media reception from 1991 to 1999, this thesis reveals that Love's public vilification was a matter of sociocultural policing that sought to enforce gender boundaries delineated by prohibitive patriarchal formations in marriage and rock music.

HONEYSUCKLE FULL OF POISON: GENDER, POLITICS, AND THE 1990s
RECEPTION OF COURTNEY LOVE

by

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Introduction: Blame It On Love

I went up for a play once, it was for “Snow White,” a really big production down in Portland. I studied the part of Snow White forever and had it down, memorised. And they gave me, without even auditioning me, the part of the Evil Witch. And that was when I was eight.

—Courtney Love to Everett True,
Melody Maker, August 1991¹

A year ago, I was a teaching assistant for the course *Popular Music in the United States, 1950–Present*, which dedicated a significant portion of its curriculum to the traditional rock canon of predominantly white men, and in turn attracted an enrollment of predominantly white men. As a lifelong rock fan, most days I did not mind this arrangement, but as a woman, I occasionally longed for a greater representation of female artists. Indeed, I was excited one particular Friday discussion to present to my students an overview of female rock guitarists, correctly guessing that they would be largely unfamiliar with the artists. My enthusiasm began to drain as I watched the blank stares gaze uncomprehendingly at the slides of Rosetta Tharpe, Bonnie Raitt, Melissa Etheridge, and even Joan Jett, until at last the presentation came to the slide for Courtney Love. I used a photograph taken in 1995 during Hole’s Lollapalooza tour, in which she stands atop a stage, guitar in hand and eyes closed in a moment of passion, illuminated from below so that she appears like something

¹ Everett True, “The Prettiest Face in Hell,” *Melody Maker*, August 24, 1991.

mystical emerging out of the darkness in a white dress with a blonde halo.² Out of the dead-eyed silence one of the boys snickered, “Courtney killed Kurt.”

Scholars including Marcia Citron, Marion Leonard, and Brenda Johnson-Grau have noted that it is often the fate of female artists to be forgotten by society, necessitating their constant rediscovery by subsequent generations of women looking for forebears or models.³ In a male-dominated world the contributions of women are seldom incorporated into canons for education, performance, or discourse, leaving their work, and by extension their persons, to be forgotten or tacked on as an afterthought. Courtney Love is an exception. She is one who is remembered, and hated, because her link to one of the most famous men in rock means that she must appear in his biographies, his reception, his obituaries and tributes—therefore she cannot be forgotten, but there are plenty of means left available to render her artistic contributions peripheral, trivial, or otherwise meaningless.

Biography of Courtney Love to 1999

Courtney Love was born Love Michelle Harrison in 1965 in San Francisco, California to two members of the Haight-Ashbury hippie scene. After her parents’ divorce in 1970, her mother legally renamed her Courtney; Love then moved with her

² Bob Gruen, *Courtney Love, NYC, 1995*, 1995, Morrison Hotel Gallery, accessed February 25, 2019, <https://www.morrisonhotelgallery.com/photographs/uooQBN/Courtney-Love-NYC-1995>.

³ Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 67; Marion Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry: Rock, Discourse and Girl Power* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2007), 34; Brenda Johnson-Grau, “Sweet Nothings: Presentation of Women Musicians in Pop Journalism,” in *Pop Music and the Press*, edited by Steve Jones (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 209.

mother and a series of stepfathers up and down the West Coast and even to New Zealand, living just as often in the homes of friends and acquaintances as with her legal guardians.⁴ When she was twelve, she was arrested for shoplifting a Kiss T-shirt and, due to the failure of any guardian to show up and take responsibility for her, she was moved to a series of juvenile detention centers, followed by several foster homes until her legal emancipation at age sixteen, supported by a modest trust fund provided by her maternal grandmother.⁵

Almost immediately, Love discovered that she could augment her income by dancing in strip clubs, an activity that over the next ten years would take her to many places including Los Angeles, Portland, Minneapolis, Alaska, Guam, the UK, Japan, and Taiwan.⁶ While living in Liverpool, England in 1982, Love became a groupie of Julian Cope of the band The Teardrop Explodes, but she was not satisfied with watching someone else live the rock star role.⁷ Love had been learning guitar and singing sporadically, including a brief stint singing with the band Faith No More, for years. She formed her first real band, Sugar Baby Doll, in the summer of 1985 in San Francisco with guitarist Kat Bjelland—who would later front Babes in Toyland in Minneapolis—and Jennifer Finch—destined to become the bassist of Los Angeles grunge-metal band L7.⁸ The group would perform three shows before disbanding.

⁴ See Poppy Z. Brite, *Courtney Love: The Real Story* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 23–33.

⁵ Ibid., 33–34 and 46.

⁶ Ibid., 46–100.

⁷ Ibid., 52–54.

⁸ Ibid., 78.

While living in Los Angeles Love took some small roles in independent movies, including a minor part in Alex Cox's *Sid & Nancy*. In 1989, she met guitarist Eric Erlandson and together they founded Hole, which along with Babes in Toyland and L7, would form the trifecta of non-Riot Grrrl "angry young woman" bands of the 1990s.

Hole released their first album, *Pretty on the Inside*, on the independent Caroline Records in 1991, the same year that Nirvana's *Nevermind* would bring the Seattle grunge scene to national prominence. It was also the same year that Love began dating Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain and subsequently become pregnant. The couple was married in February 1992, and Love gave birth to their only child, daughter Frances Bean Cobain, on August 18. During the first two years of Love's marriage Hole performed sporadically; Love instead spent a great deal of time touring the world with her husband's now supremely famous band, though she continued songwriting.

In April 1994 Hole released their critically acclaimed and platinum-selling album *Live Through This* on Geffen subsidiary DGC, in the same week that Cobain took his own life with a shotgun. In the year and a half after this tragedy, Love maintained her notoriety but achieved even higher levels of success, marked by Hole's performances on the mainstage at the 1995 Lollapalooza and Reading music festivals. In late 1995 and 1996, Love would gain attention for changing her style from the punk rock fashion she had donned in previous years to designer outfits, and especially for undergoing cosmetic surgery, as she made successful forays into Hollywood. Her most lauded role was in the Academy Award-nominated *The People*

vs. *Larry Flynt* in 1996, in which she played the female lead Althea Leasure. In 1998 Hole released *Celebrity Skin*, a platinum-selling album that was nominated for three Grammy Awards the following year.

An artist who can claim as many accomplishments as Courtney Love should be remembered for her artistic contributions, but this has hardly ever been the case. Throughout the course of her career as a songwriter, musician, and actor fans and journalists have concentrated on Love's unconventionally brash, outspoken, and provocative behavior, and the attention was always connected to her gender and her marriage. A Hole fan once astutely summarized the media's approach to Love: "Sometimes it seems that the media has forgotten that she had a life before Kurt, she was still her own person while she was with Kurt, and she continues to have her own life after his death."⁹ Love's characterization in critical, journalistic, and fan media during her greatest period of prominence was so consistently negative and so consistently framed by reference to her more famous husband, that despite major artistic achievements, today she is remembered predominantly as a wife, of the horror-story and laughing-stock variety.

Thesis: Courtney Love as Female Rocker in the 1990s

In order to reclaim Love and her artistic creations from the scrap heap of rock history, this project analyzes her reception over the course of the 1990s, revealing trends and strategies utilized by the press to marginalize Love. Through pathologizing

⁹ This quote comes from an interlocutor of Anwen Crawford, *Live Through This* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 13.

and diabolizing portrayals the media strove to illegitimate Love's feminist performances and to right the upset power structure she unsettled by refusing to take a subordinate position in her highly public marriage. This thesis centers on a discussion of cultural tropes through which Love could be understood by the mainstream press, how her authorial agency and authenticity were challenged, and how the cultural esteem of Kurt Cobain limited Love's own cultural evaluation. To this end, I analyze Love's artistic works, including the three major albums Hole released in the 1990s and Love's most famous movie, *The People vs. Larry Flynt*, to demonstrate their artistic merit, social commentary, and Love's agency. I then compare my observations to the critical reception of the works and Love to reveal the carefully constructed media narratives that attempted to contain Love and render her innocuous.

From these analyses, this thesis argues that the sexist patterns evident in Love's reception are intimately related to deeply ingrained misogyny in rock music, cultural assumptions about the role of a wife and mother, and anxiety over a challenge to male cultural dominance. Her resistance to these cultural forces necessitated a media campaign of suppression and marginalization that served to police cultural gender boundaries. The published reception of Courtney Love and the visceral revulsion it has provoked in the public has proved that if it is not possible to forget the woman, it is at least possible to forget why she mattered. This project exists to jog memories.

The 1990s proved to be a curious time for women in rock as in virtually all other arenas of American life. The era included major gains for women in the

workforce and politics, as a renewed interest in feminism saw women's political activism resurge as a "Third Wave" addressing a broad swath of women's issues. In 1992 the unprecedented induction of four women, plus another reelected, to the United States Senate earned the moniker "The Year of the Woman." In 1993, Ruth Bader Ginsburg became the second female Supreme Court justice in history. All of these developments brought American women increasing degrees of power and visibility. But simultaneous and complementary to these events was a reactionary misogyny rampant in American society and reflected in mass media that tempered these already limited gains.

The so-called "Year of the Woman" was one result of a feminist reaction to the stunning display of misogyny exhibited in 1991 when Professor Anita Hill testified before Congress about her sexual harassment as a former subordinate of Supreme Court candidate Clarence Thomas while working at the Department of Education. Likewise, "Third Wave" feminism took its name and inspiration from an essay penned by Rebecca Walker in *Ms.* magazine reacting to the Hill testimony and encouraging women to rise up in protest.¹⁰ In the mid-'90s, first lady Hillary Clinton was the target of regular, raucous outrage from male politicians and journalists who were flabbergasted that the first lady would dare involve herself in politics; she even made trips to Capitol Hill to speak before the senate on women's issues. 1998 became a year of unprecedented presidential scandal when President Bill Clinton's illicit relationship with twenty-two-year-old intern Monica Lewinsky came to light in the midst of a sexual harassment suit brought by Arkansas state employee Paula Jones.

¹⁰ Rebecca Walker, "Becoming the Third Wave," *Ms.*, January/February, 1992.

What became dubbed the “Lewinsky Scandal” became a primary topic of public interest and political fallout, with young Lewinsky taking a disproportionate amount of blame and subjected to slut-shaming, mockery, and regular invasion of privacy by the media, while the Senate acquitted President Clinton of all charges against Jones and any committed in the act of concealing his relationship with Lewinsky. What these particular cases reveal is that women in the public eye who were in positions to take power away from prominent men, or who were *perceived* as having this power, were duly punished by the mainstream media and its compliant audiences during this period. It further suggests that the women who appeared to this policing institution to be best positioned to siphon power from men were those who appeared to have intimate relations with them. As Anita Hill was to Clarence Thomas, so Hillary Clinton and Monica Lewinsky were to Bill Clinton. So Courtney Love was to Kurt Cobain.

Within rock during the 1990s, female participation was at an all-time high and female rockers achieved unprecedented successes in a genre of music that had been resolutely male-dominated since its inception. Artists such as Liz Phair, Alanis Morissette, Sheryl Crow, Melissa Etheridge, Fiona Apple, Ani DiFranco, Tracy Chapman, Tori Amos, the Indigo Girls, PJ Harvey and many others won Grammys, embarked on lucrative international tours, organized massive festivals, topped charts, and released fantastic rock records. But despite their former popularity, many of these accomplished women are easily forgotten in contemporary times when they are excluded or tokenized in textbooks, omitted from radio playlists, and left out of retrospective “best of” articles. As Catharine Strong notes of both female popular

musicians and the few well-known female art music composers, “the way in which the reputation of some women survives is through their association with men.”¹¹

Love’s proximity to the canonized Kurt Cobain reasserts her presence, leaving her canon-adjacent: an ever-menacing force that threatens to breach the boundary.

Speculation over possible discord in the Cobains’ relationship was a popular media pastime, but whatever tensions may or may not have actually existed within the Love-Cobain marriage are peripheral to a study of reception. American society, in the midst of a generational shift that had huge implications for the political dynamics within marriage, projected so many of its latent anxieties onto the couple that ascertaining actual intermarriage conflict is virtually impossible. However, analyzing those social anxieties is practicable and far more fruitful. Feminist journalist Susan Faludi has revealed that in the 1980s American men had come to resent the ground they had ceded to women in the name of equality since the rise of the women’s movement in the 1970s. Men of the Baby Boomer generation expressed desires for a return to “traditional” marriages and households in which the wife stayed home and minded the children:

A national poll found that men who “strongly agreed” that the family should be “traditional”—with the man as the breadwinner and the woman as the housewife—suddenly jumped four percentage points between 1986 and 1988, the first rise in nearly a decade. (The same year, it fell for women.) The American Male Opinion Index found that the proportion of men who fell into the group opposing changes in sex roles and other feminist objectives had risen from 48 percent in 1988 to 60 percent in 1990—and the group willing to adapt to these changes had shrunk from 52 percent to 40 percent.¹²

¹¹ Strong, *Grunge: Music and Memory*, 119.

¹² Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 61.

In the early 1990s, the Love-Cobain union took place in a country still in the midst of that restructuring, which, as media studies scholar Susan Douglas illuminates, was occurring in a mass media that expressed both discomfort with women's advancements and a desire to profit from them that came along with a recognition of their growing power in the market.¹³

And Love was an antifeminist's worst nightmare. Throughout her marriage and rise to stardom she was loud, crass, ambitious, unrepentant, irreverent, and as time increasingly proved, talented. Her music was full of hard edges with heavy drums and grungy distorted guitars, her voice delivered messages with a low-pitched nasal snarl, and when she bellowed her rough scream could blow out speakers. Furthermore, the messages she delivered with that powerful voice were full of unapologetic female accusation and aggression, privileging feminine perspectives and exhibiting "unfeminine" emotions such as anger and frustration. The very name of her band, "Hole," evokes female anatomy, foregrounding femininity in an unashamed and combative manner.¹⁴

Kembrew McLeod elucidates the degree to which women were excluded from American rock criticism for the purpose of preserving a male perspective.¹⁵ Helen Reddington further explains that male gatekeepers have historically had little desire to

¹³ See Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Times Books, 1994), 245–46 and 276–79.

¹⁴ Love has on several occasions stated that the name of her band was taken from a quote of Euripedes' *Medea* or from something her mother once said. Neither, of course, is what comes to people's minds when they hear the name "Hole." See Liz Evans, "Women: Calling the Tune," *Guardian*, December 11, 1991, Nexis Uni.

¹⁵ Kembrew McLeod, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Gender and Rock Criticism," in *Pop Music and the Press*, ed. Steve Jones (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2002), 94–95.

engage with woman-centered music, because they conceived of rock as a male sound for male consumption, or a female-produced sound for male consumption. Woman-centered rock aimed at a female audience was inconceivable because it did not cultivate male desire or interests.¹⁶ Courtney Love's music, which consistently focused on aspects of feminine experience, was therefore unappealing and critics were motivated to focus on elements of her public persona that circumvented her music. Instead of remembering Love for her accomplishments, media reception focused on sensational aspects of her personal life, often finding easy routes to her marginalization by focusing on her struggle with drug addiction, her appearance, criticism of her behavior as a wife and mother, constant comparison to other artists, and recurring references to her husband.

A Note on Terminology

Marcia Citron reveals that the act of categorization of cultural products is telling of cultural biases: the dominant culture, that of white men, commands the power to determine the defining characteristics of those categories, resulting in an exclusive process even while appearing neutral.¹⁷ The kind of music performed by Hole and other all-woman or woman-dominant bands of the 1990s would struggle to find a stable home in any established rock genre; they were variously labeled “foxcore” (a gendered pejorative), “angry young women,” punk, grunge, alt-rock, or

¹⁶ Helen Reddington, *The Lost Women of Rock Music: Female Musicians of the Punk Era*, 2nd ed. (Bristol, CT: Equinox Publishing, Ltd., 2012), 119.

¹⁷ Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon*, 17–18.

post-punk. Still today critics often describe Hole as a Riot Grrrl band. “Riot Grrrl” refers to an explicitly feminist cohort of all-woman punk rock bands started by students of Evergreen State College that emerged from Olympia, Washington in the early 1990s. I differentiate Hole from the Riot Grrrls: not only has none of its members ever had any affiliation with Olympia or Evergreen State College, but Love has publicly distanced herself from and expressed ambivalence toward the music and politics of the Riot Grrrl movement, believing that adherents’ political agenda made them feel “entitled to suck.”¹⁸ Additionally, the use of the term “Riot Grrrl” to denote a musical genre rather than a political movement is controversial, as the only obvious similarity between many of the groups designated as such seems to be the gender of their bandmembers.¹⁹

The generic homelessness of female rock bands is a result of the male privilege to categorize genre, through which criticism, a male-dominant field, evicts women from acknowledged categories and corrals them into their own. Although the term “grunge” is hardly an uncontroversial appellation, it is the recognized market term for Seattle-associated, Nirvana-inspired punk and will suffice as the name of the genre with which the groups Hole and Nirvana are affiliated. Punk is to be understood as the parent genre of which grunge is a single branch, while recognizing that in reception and interviews with artists the terms are at times used interchangeably.

¹⁸ Love quoted in Pamela des Barres, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Needs Courtney Love,” in *Rock She Wrote*, ed. Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers (New York: Delta, 1995), 205.

¹⁹ Catharine Strong notes this peculiarity in *Grunge: Music and Memory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011), 112.

The term “alternative rock” or “alt-rock” is commonly used as a blanket designator for all rock music that was released in the 1990s and later, indicating only that the music was stylistically and ideologically removed from the classic rock and heavy metal associated with decades prior. It is to be understood as a generality that indicates guitar-centric rock that is grouped according to a certain time period, as opposed to a stylistic genre in its own right.

Finally, it should be recognized that the terms “feminism” and “feminist” are essentially nebulous designations. No effective encompassing definition exists to describe the innumerable sociopolitical movements or varieties of people who identify with these terms, save to say that each is concerned in some way with the betterment of people who identify as women. Throughout her career as a recording artist, Courtney Love’s music has exhibited a deep concern with the subjectivities and sociopolitical statuses of women and girls. Although Love’s relationship with other feminists and even her own identification with the term has at times been fraught, the fact remains that she has on numerous occasions self-identified as a feminist, listeners have heard feminist messages in her music, negative press has often attacked her for her perceived feminism, and a modest pool of scholars who have published on Love analyzed her career and music as such. Therefore, I assert that the concept of feminism is an apt one to apply to Love’s artistic output, and that the prevalence of the term in press and scholarship written about her necessitates that it be addressed.

Literature Review and Methodology

The following analysis of the 1990s journalistic and critical reception of Courtney Love is based on my review of 249 articles published between the years of

1991 and 1999 in newspapers and magazines including *Melody Maker*, *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Village Voice*, *The Washington Post*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, and numerous others. Additionally, I reviewed 40 articles published between 2000 and 2019 to ascertain lasting impressions of Love in popular media, gleaned from sources including *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *New Musical Express*, and *Billboard Magazine*. Where appropriate, I consulted interviews with the artist and other relevant persons, either transcribed in print or recorded on video, to understand the artist's own position on her reception, as well as those of her bandmates, affiliates, and loved ones. I ascertained audience and fan opinions on Love, her artistic works, and press written about her from publicly posted online comments and letters to the editor of magazines and newspapers.

In researching the topic of Courtney Love's reception several areas of interest proved pertinent. I examined the scholarly and semi-scholarly literature on the lives and music of Love, Cobain, and Nirvana, as well as the literature concerning the musical genres of punk and grunge and the youth-based subcultures associated with them. The inherently feminist nature of this thesis and the feminist associations of its subject necessitated a review of the literature on women in rock and popular music, feminism in popular music, and the state of feminism and women in American society during the 1990s. Furthermore, as this project is as much an examination of mediation as it is of music, my review included prominent scholarship on women in popular media.

Biographies of Love and Cobain offer entertaining but ultimately questionable accounts of the artists' lives and careers. While authors did attempt to adhere to

standards of journalistic accuracy with careful citations, reception reviews, and multiple corroborating interviews, at multiple junctures the writers found themselves thwarted by the nature of the work and the kinds of sources that were available. In particular, *Courtney Love: The Real Story* by Poppy Z. Brite and the Nirvana biography *Come As You Are* by Michael Azerrad suffer from an overreliance on the testimony of Love and Cobain themselves—both known to be notoriously unreliable witnesses and serial fact-fudgers—and their friends, family, and affiliates, who proved little better.²⁰ Charles R. Cross's 2001 Cobain biography, *Heavier than Heaven*, benefits from the clarity of perspective gained from temporal distance and increased availability of fact-verifying materials.²¹ Cross's book disputes several of the more sensational claims about the life of Cobain made in Azerrad's authorized (read: commissioned) biography and draws on a wider pool of interviewees to provide a more nuanced picture of the late rock star's life, as well as his relationship with his wife and the media.²²

Mark Yarm's *Everybody Loves Our Town: An Oral History of Grunge* and Clinton Heylin's *Babylon's Burning: From Punk to Grunge* provided insight into the context of the Seattle grunge scene and the history of its stylistic ancestor, punk, which I drew on to understand the accepted standards of musical and behavioral

²⁰ Brite, *Courtney Love: The Real Story*; Michael Azerrad, *Come As You Are: The Nirvana Story* (New York: Doubleday, 1994).

²¹ Charles R. Cross, *Heavier than Heaven: A Biography of Kurt Cobain*, 2014 ed. (New York: Hyperion, 2014).

²² Further insight into the dynamics of Hole was provided by the memoir of drummer Patty Schemel with Erin Hosier, *Hit so Hard: A Memoir* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2017); Further contemporaneous accounts of the Love and Cobain were found in a collection of published criticism by John Rocco, ed., *The Nirvana Companion: Two Decades of Commentary* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1998).

authenticity within punk music. Additionally, Catharine Strong's *Grunge: Music and Memory*, a sociological study of the lasting impressions of grunge music on fans more than a decade after the heyday of the movement, bears testament to the enduring impact of media images on the interpretation of Seattle scene artists, their music, the significance of grunge, and who is remembered as a member of that scene.²³ The memory of grunge, based on the responses of her interviewees, proves to be gendered. The only female grunge artist her interlocutors could readily name was Courtney Love, and their immediate reactions were startlingly negative; one interlocutor called her "just a dirty rock slut."²⁴

Much of the literature written on women in rock has been penned by experienced industry critics, such as *She's a Rebel* by Gillian Gaar and *We Gotta Get Out of This Place* by Gerri Hirshey.²⁵ These accounts benefit from the authors' familiarity with the rock industry and its discriminatory and exploitative treatment of women, and because the authors are critics, serve to demonstrate how the writing of female critics on female rock artists often differs from that of their male colleagues. Often, though certainly not always, female critics portray female artists more positively and in a less sexualized manner than the male critics whose voices dominate rock criticism.

²³ Catharine Strong, *Grunge: Music and Memory*.

²⁴ Strong, *Grunge: Music and Memory*, 115.

²⁵ Gerri Hirshey, *We Gotta Get Out of This Place: The True, Tough Story of Women in Rock* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2001); Gillian Gaar, *She's A Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll* (New York: Seal Press, 1992). Another collected edition of a similar nature is Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers eds., *Rock She Wrote* (New York: Delta, 1995); and Lucy O'Brien, *She Bop: The Definitive History of Women in Rock, Pop, and Soul* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996).

Some of the scholarly literature on women in rock, including Mavis Bayton's *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music*, Helen Reddington's *The Lost Women of Rock Music*, and Marion Leonard's *Gender in the Music Industry*, the latter two focused on female punk musicians, is explicitly motivated by a desire to combat the erasure of women from rock history and to illuminate the difficulty these women face in the pursuit of success and legitimacy in a frequently hostile male-dominated environment.²⁶ Lisa L. Rhodes's *Electric Ladyland* explores the prescribed roles for women in rock, and her considerations are not limited to the role of the performer.²⁷ Although mold-breaking female artists feature prominently, her book also analyzes the role of the female caretaker and groupie who have historically provided unrecognized emotional, sexual, and domestic labor and financial support to rock bands, and whose only reward has been to be remembered primarily as sexual objects and gold-diggers. These acceptable female roles in rock have contributed to sexualized stereotypes of women who become involved with rock stars, exacerbating the difficulty female rock artists face in obtaining legitimacy in the industry, especially for those who are romantically involved with a male rock artist. Kristin J. Lieb further reveals that because the music industry markets female artists in particular as personified "brands" designed to fulfill audience desires, women can be

²⁶ Mavis Bayton, *Frock Rock: Women Performing Popular Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). Simon Reynolds and Joy Press similarly tackle issues of gendered double standards and the over-sexualization of female artists in *The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion, and Rock 'n' Roll* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

²⁷ Lisa L. Rhodes, *Electric Ladyland: Women and Rock Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

trapped in a specific public persona, and extrication may require drastic measures.²⁸

Lieb's concept of artist as brand applies to the third chapter of this thesis, in which I discuss Love's efforts to change her public image.

I explored feminist approaches to the study of popular music in *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity and Subjectivity* by Sheila Whiteley and *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, a collection Whiteley edited.²⁹ I also consulted Robert Walser's analysis of the politics and blurring of gender roles inherent in rock music in *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music*, which allowed for a nuanced look at the gendered constructions of rock music outside the genres of punk and grunge.³⁰ The information in this text is particularly interesting because grunge is so often framed as a backlash and succession to the heavy metal excesses of the 1980s, free of the demonstrably sexist imagery and ideology of the earlier style. In fact, I find that much of the egregious gender discriminations in heavy metal continues in 1990s alternative rock as well. Tony Grajeda's discussion in "The Feminization of Rock" of the renegotiation of masculinity that occurred among Generation X youth in the 1990s through the use of

²⁸ Kristin J. Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2018).

²⁹ Sheila Whiteley, *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2000); Sheila Whiteley, ed., *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

³⁰ Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1993).

lo-fi rock further attests to the persistently masculinist exclusion of women even in the marginally more inclusive 1990s alternative rock genres.³¹

The late 1980s and 1990s was also a period of reevaluation in the field of musicology, prompted by the New Musicology movement that legitimated musical studies in gender and feminism for the first time. Musicological literature from this period that proved important to my study includes Susan McClary's *Feminine Endings*, which encouraged analysis of the presentation of women in music, leading me to question the implications of language that suggested madness and sexual display, and Marcia Citron's *Gender and the Musical Canon*, a work that challenges the erasure of women from the historiography of classical music, raising my suspicions over who is considered "great" in rock and what power structures are in place that determine that women are seldom considered so.³²

Other texts from this body of literature include Susan McClary's study of Bizet's *Carmen*, which facilitates analysis of contemporaneous comparisons made between the iconic punk groupie Nancy Spungen and Love, discussed in Chapter 1.³³ Spungen's story has been heavily mythologized since her death in 1978, and allows many parallels with the Romantic Carmen owing to the sexual deviance and vampiric femininity associated with her legend. Carolyn Abbate's discussion of female opera characters who actively demand to be looked at rather than passively accept the male

³¹ Tony Grajeda, "The 'Feminization' of Rock," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Culture*, ed. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 233–54.

³² Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Marcia Citron, *Gender and the Musical Canon*, 1993.

³³ Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

gaze in “Opera; or, The Envoicing of Women” also suggests possibilities for the agency of female entertainers.³⁴ Additional musicological literature concerning literary tropes of women in dramatic musical productions are important to Chapter 3, which deals with Love’s realization of the character of Althea Leasure. Althea’s character development and death correspond closely to female tropes explored in Linda and Michael Hutcheon’s *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*.³⁵

This period was also fruitful for the publication of scholarship that addresses feminism and gender studies in ethnomusicology, and many excellent analyses and case studies on the conditions of women in popular music across genres, cultures, and global regions exist. This includes collections of essays that broadly address the conditions and challenges of female musicians such as *Music and Gender*, edited by Pirrko Moisala and Beverly Diamond, on such disparate topics as ladies’ orchestras in nineteenth-century Europe, gendered genres in propagandistic Serbian and Croatian popular music in the midst of the Yugoslav Wars, and the career challenges of female mix engineers.³⁶ Similarly, *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Ellen Koskoff, includes essays on the positions of professional female musicians across the globe in places such as Japan, India, and Malaysia, as well as examinations of the conditions of early female jazz musicians in New Orleans and Women-

³⁴ Carolyn Abbate, “Opera; or, The Envoicing of Women,” in *Musicology and Difference*, ed. Ruth A. Solie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), 225–58.

³⁵ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

³⁶ Pirrko Moisala and Beverly Diamond, eds., *Music and Gender* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

Identified music amid the rise of women's music festivals in the 1970s in the United States.³⁷

Scholarship that examines the roles and challenges of women in other popular music genres than rock includes Cheryl Keyes's "Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance," which evaluates the cultural importance of female rappers to African American women.³⁸ Another is Martha Mockus's "Queer Thoughts on Country Music and k.d. lang," which performs a similar study of the importance of lang's transgressive queer performance of country music to lesbian fans.³⁹ These case studies perform an important function in popular music literature as works that give visibility to prominent and talented, but historically marginalized, female artists whose presence in their musical genres may itself be transgressive.

My project fits into this body of historical and ethnomusicological feminist literature, continuing the work of emphasizing the cultural importance and musical craft of female artists, and considering the nature of their oppression. But my project also differs substantially from each of the studies listed above in one important way. These and other studies, such as Susan McClary's essay on Madonna, which emphasize feminine agency in music and unveil sexist practices that contribute to

³⁷ Ellen Koskoff, ed., *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989).

³⁸ Cheryl L. Keyes, "Empowering Self, Making Choices, Creating Spaces: Black Female Identity via Rap Music Performance," *The Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 449 (Summer 2000): 255–69.

³⁹ Martha Mockus, "Queer Thoughts on Country Music and k.d. lang," in *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology*, 2nd ed., ed. Philip Brett, Elizabeth Wood, and Gary C. Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2006), 257–71.

female marginalization, focus on women who were either single or whose spouses' presences were minimized and often invisible in their professional lives.⁴⁰ Courtney Love is an outlier with few precedents because her rise to fame occurred after her involvement with the superstar Cobain: his celebrity overshadowed her entire career, and their marriage served as the basis upon which all of her public evaluation was formed while Cobain lived and after he died. The patriarchal institution of marriage, traditionally conceived, complicates the assessment of Love's treatment by the press and fans in a way that other studies of (seemingly) single women in music and pop culture avoid. For this reason, my thesis relies on many of these studies as important scholarly work on the status of women in music and popular culture, but deals with them sparingly because they lack this key element vital to the examination of Love. I instead look to literature from other fields that engages heavily with the uneven power dynamics of men and women in close competition in music and society.

Susan Faludi's *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*, a preeminent text in feminist literature, describes the conservative resurgence in American society during the 1980s that tacitly encouraged traditional, female-subordinate gender roles as a male anxiety-fueled reaction to the gains of the feminist movement in the twentieth century.⁴¹ Faludi's extensive research into the media's promotion of misogynistic myths establishes the state of the American news industry at the time of Love's rise to fame in late 1991, and therefore contextualizes the nature

⁴⁰ See Susan McClary, "Living to Tell: Madonna's Resurrection of the Fleshly," *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, & Sexuality* (University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 148–68.

⁴¹ Faludi, *Backlash*, 1991.

of the public's backlash to her distinctly untraditional persona. Susan J. Douglas's *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female in Mass Media* contributes to arguments about hegemonic images and representations of women in media and provides a solid background in the history of a field that has struggled to balance serving an increasingly liberated female audience and not alienating a more conservative male audience, resulting in conflicting messages about the proper role of women in society.⁴²

Because Courtney Love is unusual in rock as an artist whose behavior as a mother became an area of intense public interest at the peak of her performance career, several feminist texts on the state of motherhood in 1990s American society proved vital. Indeed, Love herself was occasionally a subject of interest in this literature. Pertinent texts included Norma Coates's "Moms Don't Rock: The Popular Demonization of Courtney Love" found in the edited collection *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth Century America*, as well as Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels's *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women*.⁴³ Each addresses the increased scrutiny faced by pregnant women and mothers in the 1990s—whose movements were restricted by

⁴² Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media*, 1994. See also Cynthia M. Lont ed., *Women and Media: Content, Careers, Criticism* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1995); Brenda Johnson-Grau, "Sweet Nothings," 2000; and Kembrew McLeod, "'★^{1/2}': A Critique of Rock Criticism in North America," *Popular Music* 20, no. 1 (January 2001): 47–60.

⁴³ Norma Coates, "Moms Don't Rock: The Popular Demonization of Courtney Love," in *"Bad" Mothers: The Politics of Blame in Twentieth-Century America*, ed. Molly Ladd-Taylor and Lauri Umansky (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 319–33; Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004).

law and media pressures on account of their motherhood status—as a result of misogynistic backlash to the gains of sexually liberated working women. They further reveal that women who were addicted to drugs faced elevated scrutiny and policing at this time, as heightened misogyny of the late 1980s into the early 1990s intersected with a highly publicized drug crisis.

Additionally, Love's sense of fashion has been a subject of attention from both the popular media and scholars, particularly due to the sexual implications of her "kinderwhore" aesthetic. This look comprised girlish, vintage dresses, garish makeup, and cheap accessories, which conveyed a twisted image of girlhood. Gayle Wald's "Just a Girl?: Rock Music, Feminism and the Cultural Constriction of Female Youth" and Stephanie Brown's "On Kitsch, Nostalgia, and Nineties Femininity," analyze the social and political implications inherent when female performers appropriate, or perhaps reclaim, girlhood.⁴⁴

Scholarly literature on the music of Courtney Love and her band is scant, but Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance's *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity and Popular Music* and Anwen Crawford's book on Hole's *Live Through This* provide a solid foundation upon which to begin analysis of the feminist messages of Love's music.⁴⁵ Both books focus on the woman-centered messages conveyed in Hole's second and

⁴⁴ Gayle Wald, "Just a Girl? Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Constriction of Female Youth," in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, ed. by Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook, and Ben Saunders (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002); Stephanie Brown, "On Kitsch, Nostalgia, and Nineties Femininity," *Studies in Popular Culture* 22, no. 3 (April 2000): 39–54.

⁴⁵ Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity, and Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Anwen Crawford, *Live Through This* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015); another text that was consulted on Love that informs my analysis is Susan Hopkins, "The Monstrous and the Dead?: Courtney Love and Feminism in the 1990s and Beyond," *Feminist Media Studies* 18, no. 2 (March 2017): 318–21.

most critically acclaimed album, *Live Through This*, and to a lesser extent also address the media castigation of Love and her diminished status in the shadow of her more famous husband. Both are integral to the second chapter of this project, which deals specifically with the reception of *Live Through This*, Hole's most influential album in the context of its inevitable association with the death of Kurt Cobain. Other studies include Catharine Strong's "'I'd Stage-Dive, But I'm Far Too Elderly': Courtney Love and Expectations of Femininity and Ageing," which analyses Love's popular reputation in the twenty-first century and facilitates a nuanced consideration of Love's later public standing addressed in the conclusion.⁴⁶

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1 of this thesis, "Two Years in the Hole," focuses on Love's establishment in the mainstream media as the curious new spouse of rock god Kurt Cobain, revealing how her reception developed from bewilderment into sexist vitriol after marriage and pregnancy, culminating in Lynn Hirschberg's infamous 1992 *Vanity Fair* profile that set media standards that would hound Love for the rest of her career.⁴⁷ This chapter analyzes the discrepancies between Love's early music on the album *Pretty on the Inside* and her self-presentation compared with her increasingly negative media representations in terms of roles—those that Love created and filled of her own accord and those into which the media, and through them the public,

⁴⁶ Catharine Strong, "'I'd Stage-Dive, But I'm Far Too Elderly': Courtney Love and Expectations of Femininity and Ageing," in *"Rock On": Women, Ageing and Popular Music*, eds. Ros Jennings and Abigail Gardner (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2012), 123–38.

⁴⁷ Lynn Hirschberg, "Strange Love: The Story of Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love," *Vanity Fair*, September 1, 1992.

doggedly pigeonholed her. Her seeming position of dominance in interactions with her husband stoked fears of a second Yoko Ono, characterized as an overbearing haridan who controlled her husband and alienated his band to the point of its destruction. At the same time, Love's prior indie invisibility and past career in stripping conjured the boogiewoman image of the classic rock groupie—a gold-digging sex fiend, greedy, unstable, manipulative, and contemptable—an idea embodied in the cultural memory of Nancy Spungen, the slaughtered lover of Sex Pistol Sid Vicious, with whom Love is also frequently compared.

Chapter 2, "Death and the Widow," examines the conditions surrounding the release of Hole's most acclaimed album, *Live Through This*, which was fated to be released only days after the suicide of Kurt Cobain. Noting that the authorship of the work was contested soon after its release by fans of the late Cobain, I analyze the album, continuing the work of Mélisse LaFrance and Lori Burns, Anwen Crawford and others, to reveal the feminine agency present in the woman-oriented messages on the album. My analyses challenge the double-edged and facile attacks on Love by a media that was complicit in praising a masterful rock record while distancing its primary creator from her deserved credit. I further examine the role the media had in creating a toxic environment in which accusations of fraud and even violent conspiracy seemed acceptable and plausible.

Chapter 3, "Tales of Redemption," tackles Love's life in the second half of the '90s as an established rock artist, analyzing the unrelenting attacks made on her authenticity in the wake of noticeable changes in both her appearance and musical style, and a steady stream of mainstream commercial musical and cinematic

successes. Love's physical and lifestyle alterations coincide with her legitimization in Hollywood, representative of mainstream celebrity acceptance, after her strong showing in Miloš Forman's *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. This film served as Love's redemption in the public eye as she cast off her previous punk persona. While critics disparaged the "kinderwhore" aesthetic and had mixed views on the rough sounds and disturbing lyrics of her earlier music, many longtime fans felt betrayed when Love "sold out" to the mainstream by turning to designer outfits and a more pop-oriented sound with 1998's *Celebrity Skin*. Despite the fact that Love achieved the greatest successes of her career in the latter half of the 1990s, many fans felt this period was precisely when she was least deserving of accolades. Her misplaced authenticity left her vulnerable to outlandish but persistent charges of conspiracy involvement and further challenges to the authorship of her music as audiences refused to acknowledge someone they recognized as fake.

This thesis is predicated on the idea that Courtney Love's demonization in the media is inseparable from the matters of her gender and her marriage to rock god Kurt Cobain, two facts that virtually every article written about her since the 1990s has emphasized, often at the expense of discussing her art. Love was stranded at the crossroads of a reconfiguration of the social status of women and the politics of marriage in the midst of third-wave feminism, intergenerational cultural tensions between baby boomers and Generation X, and deep-seated misogyny in rock. Placed

at the epicenter of these tensions as a result of her union with Cobain, she became a target of cultural anxiety that resulted in her unfair and disproportionate scapegoating.

Nonetheless, Love's reputation precedes her. During the course of this project, when I told people that I was analyzing the music and reception of Courtney Love to reveal sexist media practices and reclaim her as a legitimate rock artist, I sometimes saw their brows furrow with a question that they were too polite to ask. I could guess what they were thinking: "Well, OK, but *isn't* she a bitch?" It is an inevitable query, because the negative, highly-motivated press that has come to define Love for so many has made the matters of her personality and her behavior primary concerns. But nobody ever suggests that it is necessary or even possible for a male artist to be both a successful rock star and a morally-upstanding, likable person at the same time. Only a female artist finds herself stuck between her own rock ambitions and burdened by pressures to be a good wife, a doting mother, or a *nice girl*. Insofar as any failings of character Love might possess are not represented in her music, they are not for me to criticize. My concerns lie instead with the reasons that the media and audiences were so focused on Love's character and behavior, the tactics they employed to malign her, and the wide-ranging implications that highly negative focus has for other female celebrities.

Love's historical and ongoing bludgeoning in the press is both punishment for trespassing onto the hallowed masculine ground of rock and a warning to would-be female challengers in the future. Nearly two decades after the end of the twentieth century, this story matters because Love's public castigation continues to be used as a tool to enforce traditional gender boundaries in music, setting up barriers designed to

constrict the behavior of women in popular music and society with the clear sign that says: "Know Your Place." What remains so appealing about Love is that she never did

Chapter 1: Two Years in the Hole: Courtney Love, *Vanity Fair*, and Tropes of Deviant Womanhood

Courtney Love's band, Hole, released its debut album *Pretty on the Inside* on Caroline Records in 1991. With the contributions of lead guitarist, band co-founder, and primary arranger Eric Erlandson, as well as bassist Jill Emery and drummer Caroline Rue, *Pretty on the Inside* was an abrasive hardcore punk record, held together by Love's evocative songwriting. Reviews were mixed; many critics thought the album showed promise but suggested that its commercial viability suffered from an experimental sound and thematic focus on female discontent. *Spin* included it on its Top 20 Albums of 1991, in which editor Lauren Spencer declared that it was "destined for a little corner of music history. Snarling and clawing its way, always prettily, into the a(n)nals [sic] of rock history."¹ But despite having just achieved her first big musical accomplishment, Love became a widely known public figure in late 1991 not for her promising career, but for her new boyfriend: Nirvana frontman, teenage heartthrob, and newly-minted rock star Kurt Cobain.

Cobain's success with Nirvana's major label debut, *Nevermind*, released earlier that same year, ensured that Love would garner substantial media attention, a prospect she relished. The early days of their courtship witnessed a Love who was

¹ Lauren Spencer, "Top 20 Albums of 1991: Hole, *Pretty on the Inside* (Caroline)," *Spin*, December 31, 1991, accessed March 20, 2019, https://www.spin.com/1991/12/best-albums-1991/140212_hole-pretty-on-the-inside-web/.

outspoken to the media, naively assuming the attention would help propel her career ambitions. While her reception had never been wholly positive even when she was an indie unknown, the speed and degree with which her reception soured after marrying Cobain and becoming pregnant with their daughter was swift. Love would later claim that she had been warned by friends that her marriage to Cobain would be detrimental to her own career, as her ability would be overshadowed by the public fascination with him.² Where Love sought to compete with her husband as an equal, society at large was convinced that she should adopt the role of demure American housewife, or at least that of a proper rock gold-digger. Instead, she became someone who was perceived by fans, the media, and even Cobain's bandmates to be a threat to him and Nirvana, a group that commanded cultural clout so powerful that their impact was often compared to the Beatlemania of the 1960s.³

This chapter analyzes Love's reception from her earliest appearance in the mainstream presses in 1991 until just before the release of Hole's second album in 1994. During this period the tenor of her reception changed from initial bemusement to subsequent moralistic condemnation after Lynn Hirschberg, a fashion journalist for *Vanity Fair*, published a profile of Love in September 1992 that portrayed Love as an exploiter of her husband and an abusive mother to her unborn child. This pivotal article solidified negative tropes about Love according to which the media would stereotype her for the rest of her career, and which could not be dispersed despite the

² Everett True, "All You Need Is Love: Face to Face with Kurt and Courtney," *Melody Maker*, December 19, 1992.

³ See Azerrad's invocations of "Nirvanamania" in *Come As You Are*; and comparisons to John Lennon in Cross, *Heavier than Heaven*, 215.

family's best efforts to change the narrative. I argue that Love's excoriation in the media is linked both to the condition of the American family woman in the 1990s and to gender conventions in rock music, which scholars such as Lisa Rhodes and Mavis Bayton have explained are founded on ingrained notions of male superiority and female adoration. To this end, I illustrate the aspects of Love's carefully constructed early music and stage presentation that made her a challenging feminist symbol. This prefaces exploration of the significance of Hirschberg's profile, which made surgically effective attacks on Love's character and credibility that focused public attention away from her feminist intrusion into rock. Finally, I analyze why the steps the Love-Cobain family took to assuage the damage caused by the Hirschberg profile were ultimately unsuccessful. The simultaneously misogynistic and moralistic stereotypes used against Love served two purposes. They firstly allowed the media and fans to circumvent engagement with Love's woman-focused performances as her music was subordinated to discussion of her behavior and personality. Secondly, they allowed the media to degrade Love to a position in which she appeared subordinated to her husband, whose unwillingness to dominate his wife proved to be a source of cultural and intergenerational confusion within the mainstream music media.

It's Just Illusions I Recall: Reception Before Vanity Fair

Contrary to popular belief, there was a time when the press did not treat Courtney Love like an all-consuming Medusa. Some of the earliest mentions of her in mainstream press, beginning with the release of *Pretty on the Inside* in 1991, exhibit more curiosity than revulsion: *Spin* declared that "If Hole is an omen of what's to

come, pop is about to get very interesting,” and Deborah Frost of *Village Voice* wrote, with admiration, that “Love is Sleeping Beauty telling the prince to fuck off, Cinderella shattering the one good slipper and sticking the shards in her craw.”⁴ Frost’s review is representative of a faction of female critics who founds Love’s expression of female anger and rebelliousness appealing. But generally, in the roughly yearlong period between Love’s earliest acknowledgement by the mainstream press and the publication of Hirschberg’s article, writers seemed most interested in three things: her strange music, her fashion sense, and her new relationship with Kurt Cobain.

The music of *Pretty on the Inside* is harsh to the ears, consisting of bellowed vocals, supported from the gut and filtered through the natural scratch of Love’s vocal cords, and heavily distorted guitars and bass that ooze into each other sonically so that melodic instrumental lines are frequently difficult to pick out. The *Village Voice* described the sound of the work as “scrungy fungus-nail-on-blackboard screeek,” and meant it positively.⁵ It had punk credibility: the album was produced by Gumball singer Don Fleming and punk queen Kim Gordon, the much-admired bassist of Sonic Youth. The only single off the album, “Teenage Whore,” garnered significant attention seemingly for its graphic title. As would become a recurring woe for Love in the coming years, critics assumed “Teenage Whore” and much of the rest of the album was largely autobiographical. A positive review in *Melody Maker* mused:

⁴ Robert Gordon, “Hole: Pretty on the Inside,” *Spin*, October 1991; Deborah Frost, “Let Love Rule,” *Village Voice*, February 4, 1992.

⁵ Frost, “Let Love Rule,” *Village Voice*.

DON'T get me wrong, but I'm not sure that anyone should really listen to this. That doesn't mean it's not the very best bit of f***ed-up rock 'n' roll I've heard all year, that it doesn't blowtorch the spots off everything else within a hundred- miles, it's just that the hurt expressed on the debut by this LA four-piece is of such a magnitude and is so staggeringly personal, that to simply listen is almost to perve on that pain.⁶

At the time, the matter of Love's previous work as an exotic dancer was a salacious bit of news that wormed into much of her reception and seemed to justify an autobiographical reading of the song. Her past work in the sex industry made for an easy narrative that journalists could latch onto, through which they could approach the song as something enticingly naughty, scandalously deviant, or just excruciatingly personal. This interpretation misses a key element of the work, namely that the song is dialogical. It takes the form of an argument between mother and daughter in which the mother despairingly asks her daughter for an explanation for her behavior, and the daughter responds that she feels alone and expresses a need for attention:

*When I was a teenage whore
My mother asked me, she said,
"Baby, what for?
I give you plenty, why do you want more?
Baby, why are you a teenage whore?"*

*I said, "I feel so alone and I,
I wish I could die
I've seen the things you put me through and I,
I wish I could die"*

*"I've seen your revulsion and it looks real good on you
Denying what, what you put me through"*

*"Of my house, get out of my house!
Get out of my house, get out of my house!"*

⁶ Sharon O'Connell, "Hole: Pretty on the Inside," *Melody Maker*, September 14, 1991.

Interestingly, the nature of this distressing behavior is never actually discussed in the text of the song; the only suggestion of sex work is contained in the word “whore.” Therefore, while the sexual nature of the daughter’s activities is implied, it is not the focus of the song, which instead highlights the tension of a dysfunctional familial relationship.

While Love stated in interviews that several works on *Pretty on the Inside* take inspiration from personal experiences and were composed in a period of anger,⁷ the media’s eagerness to accept these claims uncritically and suggest that the narrative corresponded closely to Love’s real experiences is facile and evades the craft of her songwriting. By 1992, Love was also weary of this interpretation and its implied sexism: “Boys can write things and it’s automatically perceived as being allegorical. Do you think my husband raped Polly? And would it even cross your mind to ask him if he raped Polly? Some of it’s real and some of it’s not.”⁸ Any song can potentially be connected to a songwriter’s personal experience, but as Love’s songs engage with disturbing topics of frustration, anger, and victimization of women, interpreting her lyrics as confessional serves to pathologize her and belittle the legitimacy of her messages. It also gives the false impression that this composition is Love’s alone. All popular music is in some way collaborative, and Love had a songwriting partner: Eric Erlandson. Believing that “Teenage Whore” or

⁷ True, “The Prettiest Face in Hell,” *Melody Maker*.

⁸ Nirvana’s “Polly” is a song about the abuse of a girl given from the point of view of her rapist. Love quoted in Craig Rosen, “Sisters Under the Grunge: L7 and Hole and the Future of Rock ‘n’ Roll,” *Musician*, October 1992.

other abrasive songs on the album are solely reflective of Love's internal anguish ignores Erlandson's role as the primary arranger of the group. He and producers Fleming and Gordon contributed to the disturbing sound of the songs.

The other song on the album that received significant attention was not composed by Love and Erlandson, but by Joni Mitchell. "Clouds," the final track, is a drastic reinterpretation of Mitchell's lauded "Both Sides, Now," from her 1969 album *Clouds*. Mitchell's original soft-spoken, jangly contemplation of changes and obtaining perspective is reimagined with a sludgy, two-chord, alternating riff that complements Love's vacillation between a low-pitched, nasal recitation of Mitchell's lyrics—originally sung in clear bell-tones—and full-throated screaming. In keeping the relaxed tempo of the original, "Clouds" fits in well with other songs on the album which emphasize heavy, low distortion of the guitars to give an aural impression of trudging through muck. For this reason, critics heard "Clouds" as an ironic condemnation of Mitchell's quiet reverie and the hippie softness she represented.⁹ Love may have felt this way, but this kind of superficial analysis again misses the care that Love and Erlandson brought to the work. Love, who grew up consuming Haight-Ashbury fare, has expressed a lifelong admiration for the work of 1970s soft-rock artists, which is further supported by the inclusion of Fleetwood Mac samples on "Starbelly."¹⁰ Rather than a simple rebuke of Mitchell's work, "Clouds" creates a

⁹ See for example O'Connell, "Pretty on the Inside," *Melody Maker*; and Rob Tennenbaum, "An Up-to-the-Minute Dictionary of Rock," *Newsday*, July 5, 1992, accessed February 15, 2019, Nexis Uni.

¹⁰ "Starbelly" samples Fleetwood Mac's "Rhiannon." Dennis Cooper includes Joni Mitchell, Laura Nyro, and Leonard Cohen among Love's childhood favorites in "Love Conquers All," *Spin*, May 1994.

legitimate link to a legacy of masterful female songwriting, while maintaining punk credibility by reformulating a hippie classic to fit the aesthetic of the sludge-metal/hardcore punk hybrid of *Pretty on the Inside*. This also capitalizes on the shock factor sure to result when “adults” heard this mutation of a well-known and beloved song—but they generally exhibited a disturbed response to Love’s aesthetics.¹¹

Love’s choice of dress was off-putting for many; reviewers compared Love’s appearance to that of “a tortured five-year-old.”¹² Love encouraged these readings, declaring she embodied a “rape victim/battered child persona,”¹³ and dubbed this fashion “kinderwhore”: a combination of babydoll vintage dresses and plastic hair accessories with ripped stockings, wild hair, and garish makeup that evoked a twisted image of female youth. In her article, “Just A Girl?: Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Constriction of Female Youth,” Gayle Wald analyzes a trend in ’90s female musical acts of adopting visual markers that evoke girlhood, often accompanied by a rhetoric that places value on the experiences of female childhood.¹⁴ At the beginning of the ’90s, this trend took root in the kinderwhore look iconified by Love and former bandmate and Babes in Toyland frontwoman Kat Bjelland. In their hands, girlishness became something deliberately disturbing, the frayed ends of their clothes suggesting trauma, the viciously growled vocals and heavy distortion of their music forcing an unhappy coupling of masculine and feminine traits that upset notions of coherence

¹¹ “Adults” was Love’s characterization of older people who expressed disdain and confusion toward punk music and its culture.

¹² Richard Cromelin, “Rock for Choice,” *Los Angeles Times*, October 28, 1991.

¹³ Jonathan Gold, “In Love with Courtney,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1992.

¹⁴ Wald, “Just A Girl?,” *Rock Over the Edge*, 192.

between gendered visuals and sounds. Love's style shattered the comfortable image of girlhood as something innocent and innocuous, sweet and vague, but as Wald points out, images of girlhood in popular music are hardly incompatible with "eroticization of the female body."¹⁵ Although many reviewers interpreted Love's performances as promiscuous, one reviewer was highly disturbed that he was unable to detect eroticism in her act, suggesting that failure to make herself sexually enticing onstage was betraying expectations: "Few rock bands, and few female-led bands in particular, have ever painted a less seductive picture of sexuality, with imagery of rape, abortion, and misguided subservience among the lyrics. Feminist? Probably. Revisionist? Definitely."¹⁶

Another delectable avenue for press exploration concerned Love's uncanny ability to get into fights—with Kat Bjelland, or with her husband's rivals Axl Rose and Eddie Vedder.¹⁷ The most significant feud of Love's career began around 1992, pitting Love against the Queen of Pop, Madonna. The pop icon's new label, Maverick, took an interest in Hole soon after the release of *Pretty on the Inside*, and became the first major label to approach them with an offer. Love not only declined Maverick's offer but took the story of what she had done straight to the presses. She told *Vanity Fair* that "Madonna's interest in me was kind of like Dracula's interest in his latest victim," and implied that she and her band rejected the offer specifically

¹⁵ Ibid., 194.

¹⁶ Chris Willman, "Hole: Angry Love Songs," *Los Angeles Times*, February 13, 1992.

¹⁷ Axl Rose is the frontman of metal band Guns n' Roses; Eddie Vedder is the frontman of grunge band Pearl Jam.

because they did not want to be associated with Madonna.¹⁸ Up to this point, Love and Madonna had never met. This incident served as their first indirect interaction and was a shrewd manipulation of the media on Love's part. Love found excuses to bring up her rejection of Maverick so often and so emphatically that the media lapped it up and frequently juxtaposed Love as the rock bad girl to Madonna's by then familiar pop-princess image.

Love did have her admirers; certain female critics latched onto the woman-centered messages and gender transgressing properties of Love's performance, which they interpreted as honest and empowering. Liz Evans of the *Guardian* wrote that "Men, it seems, have trouble with her...But while Love may rattle with conflict, she's just a normal woman, telling it like it is."¹⁹ When consulting Love's fans in a retrospective analysis, Anwen Crawford discovered that this population of mostly women who discovered Love's music as teenagers felt that Love gave them "permission" to be subversive or transgressive.²⁰

But more than anything else, Love quickly became known for being the girlfriend and soon the wife of Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain. Cobain announced their involvement to the world in an infamous incident in November 1991 when Nirvana performed on the television show *The Word* in England. Before beginning their set, Cobain declared into the microphone that "Courtney Love, of the pop group

¹⁸ Hirschberg, "Strange Love," *Vanity Fair*.

¹⁹ Evans, "Women: Calling the Tune," *Guardian*.

²⁰ Crawford, *Live Through This*, 11.

Hole, is the best fuck in the world,” thoroughly scandalizing the British media.²¹ For many Nirvana fans, this was the first time they had ever heard Love’s name.²² The couple’s private February 1992 wedding in Waikiki took place after roughly six months of dating, and the couple was already expecting a baby. Unsurprisingly, this set Love up for attacks based on gold-digging, the perception that she was marrying Cobain for his wealth. There was some early positive press of the new couple, including a sweet cover story for *Sassy*, a teen girls’ magazine,²³ but the tone of Love’s reception quickly changed from one of bewilderment, curiosity, and dismissal to one of open hostility—triggered by a seismic event in rock media when Love was too trusting with an interviewer.

A Strange Love? Pregnancy, Legitimacy, and Vanity Fair

If Love’s reception began to sour after marriage and pregnancy, after Lynn Hirschberg’s article was published in September 1992 it positively rotted. Titling her article, “Strange Love: The Story of Kurt Cobain and Courtney Love,” Hirschberg drew up a profile that went for the throat. She shadowed the rising star for days, having long, recorded conversations and spending time with the Cobain family in their Los Angeles apartment. Love seemed excited to have had a journalist from

²¹ It seems bizarre that Cobain should refer to Hole as a “pop group” considering the uncommercial noise-punk aesthetic of the band during this period. Months after this incident, when the couple was interviewed by *Sassy* magazine, Love told the interviewer that Cobain had yet to listen to her full album. It is possible that at this point Cobain was entirely unfamiliar with Love’s music. See Christina Kelly, “Kurt and Courtney Sitting in a Tree,” *Sassy*, April 1992.

²² Kevin Sessums, “Love Child,” *Vanity Fair*, June 1, 1995.

²³ Kelly, “Kurt and Courtney Sitting in a Tree,” *Sassy*.

Vanity Fair take interest in her. She was open and vulnerable with Hirschberg and she displayed some of the defining characteristics of her personality: a sardonic sense of humor, a boisterous manner, an eclectic fashion sense, and a lack of concern for time. Hirschberg was having none of it.

She began her article by chastising Love for showing up an hour late to their meeting, a habit of Love's that Hirschberg evidently found deeply insulting, and insinuated that the reason Love did it was that she was self-absorbed. From there Hirschberg described Love:

She's tall and big-boned and her shoulder-length hair is cut like a mop and dyed yellow-blond. The dark roots show on purpose—nothing about Courtney is an accident—and today she's attached a plastic hair clip in the shape of a bow to a few strands. She's wearing black stockings with runs in them, a vintage dress that's a size too small, and a pair of black clogs. Her skin, which has been heavily Pan-Caked and powdered to cover an outbreak of acne, is pasty-white, and her lips are painted bright red. She has beautiful round blue-green eyes, which she has carefully made up, but the focus is on her mouth. She's all lipstick. And talk.²⁴

Within the first three paragraphs of an eight-page profile, Hirschberg firmly established Love as someone who is self-important and grotesquely artificial. She goes on to describe Love as motor-mouthed and calculating, referencing Love's feud with Madonna and her purported million-dollar record deal with Geffen as evidence of a manipulative and ambitious character. She quotes barbs from Kat Bjelland and twists tidbits from Love's lawyer Rosemary Carroll and off-the-cuff ramblings from Love herself to imply, but never openly state, that Love is a poseur. Only after amassing this arsenal, strategically interspersed with mentions of Love's history of

²⁴ Hirschberg, "Strange Love," *Vanity Fair*.

stripping, does Hirschberg home in on her most damaging attacks, challenging Love's credibility and talent:

In the alternative world, integrity and credentials are everything—and Courtney is viewed by most as a late convert to the world of punk...Hole played around L.A., but they weren't discovered until they went to England in late 1991. Courtney may have been jumping on the foxcore/alternative-band wagon in America (although she would claim otherwise), but in England she was perceived as an original. With her dirty baby-doll dresses and dark kinky songs, she was the U.K. music-press pinup of choice.²⁵

Hirschberg also juxtaposes Love's vibrant brashness with her husband's evident exhaustion and weakness, suggesting both that her presence is draining his health and that she is neglectful in her duties as wife by having the audacity to be so loud and strong when her husband seems so unhealthy. Hirschberg further suggests that Love hooked him on drugs:

[Kurt Cobain] is small and very thin and has pale-white skin. His hair, which he's dyed red and purple in the past, is now blond, and his eyes are very blue. His face is quite beautiful, almost delicate. Where Courtney projects strength, Kurt seems fragile. He looks as if he might break. "God, it's hot in here," Courtney says, marching into the apartment. Kurt explains that he's turned the heat on—it feels around a hundred degrees in the living room. "I'm still cold," he says, slumping into an over-stuffed armchair. He looks exhausted...Courtney has a long history with drugs. She loves Percodans ("They make me vacuum"), and has dabbled with heroin off and on since she was eighteen, once even snorting it in Room 101 of the Chelsea Hotel, where Nancy Spungen died. Reportedly, Kurt didn't do much more than drink until he met Courtney.²⁶

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

Hirschberg made Love's position in relation to Nirvana one of clear antagonism, insinuating that Love was at odds with Nirvana members Krist Novoselic and Dave Grohl. She quoted Love suggesting that Cobain start a new band with different members. Biographers Azerrad and Cross acknowledge that there was a great deal of tension in Nirvana around the time of Love and Cobain's wedding, from which bassist Krist Novoselic and his wife Shelli were disinvited.²⁷

Finally, Hirschberg digs in to the most vicious part of her article, quoting Love appearing to admit that she had used heroin while pregnant, supported by unnamed sources who express concern over the fate of the unborn child:

"We went on a binge," [Love] says, referring to a period last January when Nirvana was in New York to appear on *Saturday Night Live*. "We did a lot of drugs. We got pills and then we went down to Alphabet City and Kurt wore a hat, I wore a hat, and we copped some dope. Then we got high and went to *S.N.L.* After that, I did heroin for a couple of months"... "It was horrible," recalls a business associate who was traveling with them at the time. "Courtney was pregnant and she was shooting up. Kurt was throwing up on people in the cab. They were both out of it."... Throughout the industry, there is increased worry about little Frances Bean.²⁸

Biographers Azerrad and Brite, as well as lawyers and spokespeople for the Love-Cobains, have repeatedly contested several of the claims made in Hirschberg's article.²⁹ Notably, they are unanimous that Love did not have any part in hooking

²⁷ Azerrad, *Come As You Are*, 251.

²⁸ Hirschberg, "Strange Love," *Vanity Fair*.

²⁹ See Azerrad, *Come As You Are*, 266; and Brite, *Courtney Love: The Real Story*, 139.

Cobain on drugs. Nirvana bassist Novoselic claims that it was an absurd allegation, as “[Cobain] did it before he even met Courtney, Courtney did not get Kurt on drugs.”³⁰ But although Love has maintained throughout the years that she immediately began attempts to quit her drug habits upon discovery of her pregnancy and insists that the quotes that appeared in Hirschberg’s profile were taken out of context,³¹ the basic matter of drug use, which did at least occur during the earliest stages of her pregnancy, cannot be denied. The allegations and implications made by Hirschberg would follow Love for the rest of her career.

Lynn Hirschberg has published similarly scathing profiles throughout her career, several of which have served the purpose of delegitimizing politically outspoken or unabashedly ambitious women, information of which Love was evidently unaware. Another notable profile from the ’90s focused on Jamie Tarses, then president of ABC and the first woman ever to hold a top position at a major American media network. Hirschberg portrayed her as a skittish, incompetent girl, and implied that she had gotten that job in the first place due to a well-timed sexual harassment complaint that allowed her to get out of her previous contract with NBC.³²

But Hirschberg’s attitude toward a ’90s alt-rock marriage dynamic was hardly an anomaly. Her interpretations of the couple fell in line with her apparently conservative view on the institution of marriage, and with those of her readership.

³⁰ Cross, *Heavier than Heaven*, 211.

³¹ For an example see Love’s quotes in Jonathan Gold, “In Love with Courtney,” *Los Angeles Times*, August 16, 1992. (Although this article was released in August, the text makes clear that all parties are already aware of the Hirschberg profile.)

³² Lynn Hirschberg, “Jamie Tarses’ Fall, As Scheduled,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 13, 1997.

Galvanized by the profile, the moralistic furor against Love was swift and vicious. The very next issue of *Vanity Fair* published some scandalized letters to the editor: “Why did *Vanity Fair* profile such an untalented, lowbrow human being as Courtney Love?”³³ Love partly blamed an intergenerational divide for Hirschberg’s clear dislike of her. A reaction she posted on America Online several years later stated:

I had NO fucking idea how a ‘Boomer mentality’ like *Vanity Fair*/Hirschberg would receive me and my family...Feminism, punk rock, and subcultural living did not enable me to have a value system that understood mainstream thought or that understood how us ‘dirty punks’ had no rights to the American dream; that, plus I thought it would be neat to get famous; I had NO IDEA about the archetype I would get slammed into.³⁴

In the early ’90s, the United States was recovering from decades of substantial social changes and their unforeseen aftermaths. In regard to the construction of an American marriage, the women’s movement of the 1970s had thoroughly derailed traditional notions of division of labor and balance of power between men and women. With the rise of Ronald Reagan and the New Right in the 1980s the country swung back toward conservatism. As Susan Faludi details, this instigated a significant backlash against the gains achieved by the women’s movement as a certain portion of the population exhibited a clear preference for older ideas about marriage. The American man began to perceive his loss of privilege as a devaluation that disrupted his very identity as a man.³⁵ Media scholars Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels further reveal that the mass media played a significant role in selling this antifeminist

³³ Vanessa Harrington, “Labor of Love,” letter to the editor, *Vanity Fair*, October 1992.

³⁴ Courtney Love on America Online in 1998, quoted in Cross, *Heavier than Heaven*, 249.

³⁵ Faludi, *Backlash*, 62 and 65.

backlash to American women, which in the '90s took the particular form of what they call "New Momism."³⁶ This ideology of mothers who were supposed to be hyper-involved in their children's lives to the point of sacrificing their own career ambitions and recreational activities, they argue, served to confine women to the home as much as possible, preventing them from gaining further traction in the workforce.³⁷ In addition, the country was in a frenzy over several sequential drug crises, a furor instigated by Reagan's flame-fanning and promoted by the subsequent Bush and Clinton administrations. The combined social forces of antidrug campaigns with the television and magazine promotion of New Momism made the cardboard Courtney Love that Hirschberg had constructed an easy and desirable target.

Apparently the Love-Cobains' first instinct was to sue *Vanity Fair* for libel, but their label and lawyers advised against that tactic in hopes that the impact from one article would be limited and would fade over time; they also were not keen to take on the media powerhouse that was *Vanity Fair*.³⁸ Their hopes were in vain—the Hirschberg profile lingered like a stench over Love's reception and the family's peace long after. A healthy Frances Bean Cobain was born in Cedars-Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles on August 18, 1992 only to be removed from her parents' care two weeks later by Los Angeles Child Services. Family lawyer Rosemary Carroll has maintained that Child Services used the Hirschberg profile as justification for the child's

³⁶ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 4.

³⁷ Douglas and Michaels, *The Mommy Myth*, 11 and 269.

³⁸ Brite, *Courtney Love: The Real Story*, 139.

removal.³⁹ Her parents entered rehabilitation programs and submitted to humiliating drug tests to get Frances back, reobtaining conditional custody in November 1992 and finally regaining unconditional custody with charges dropped in March 1993.⁴⁰

Even after the courts put the matter to rest, the mainstream media was not done with Love. The Hirschberg profile set a precedent that other writers would follow consistently. As Hirschberg wrote in her article, “Courtney is now regarded as a train-wreck personality: she may be awful, but you can’t take your eyes off her,” and everyone wanted to watch the show that they themselves were in the process of creating.⁴¹ Hirschberg put to words rumors that were tittered around the music industry but few writers had ventured to print. After the profile the floodgates were opened. The media had provided its own license to indulge in self-perpetuating and self-legitimizing re-inscription of a handful of roles through which Love could be comfortably filtered.

“Everyone Just Fucking Hates My Guts”: Damage Control and Misogynist Tropes

The months that followed the Hirschberg article witnessed a war between a mainstream media intent on propagating the most sensational of Hirschberg’s claims and Cobain, Love, and their affiliates, who embarked on a campaign of damage control. The clout that Nirvana commanded did afford the family some options for

³⁹ Azerrad, *Come As You Are*, 270; Brite, *Courtney Love: The Real Story*, 141; Cross, *Heavier than Heaven*, 249.

⁴⁰ Cross, *Heavier than Heaven*, 270 and 282.

⁴¹ Hirschberg, “Strange Love,” *Vanity Fair*.

how they would subsequently present themselves to the press. In a clear attempt to counteract the sanctimonious uproar the Hirschberg profile had caused, the couple and their newborn daughter posed for the cover of *Spin* in December 1992, in an article called “Family Values.” The article emphasized Frances’s health and her parents’ obvious love for her, and stressed that the couple envisioned a “traditional” and “nuclear family” upbringing for Frances.⁴² Love said that she did not want her daughter to have an “alternative” upbringing such as the one she experienced:

Yeah, I grew up in alternative families. I grew up living in extended families. I grew up living with my therapist and my stepbrother and my mother’s ex-lover and on and on and I just think it sucks. This is just a personal preference. I think when you get married, it should be forever...For myself, I just want to have kids by the same person and stay with the same person.⁴³

To this, the interviewer responded, “You sound like Phyllis Schlafly.”⁴⁴

Love and Cobain had several friends in rock media who were willing to come to their defense. The family sought out Michael Azerrad of *Rolling Stone* to write a biography of Nirvana that portrayed the family in a positive light and deflate rumors about Cobain and Love’s drug addictions. They also did interviews with Everett True of *Melody Maker* and Robert Hilburn of the *Los Angeles Times*, who wrote sympathetic portrayals of the family and asserted that the couple had recovered from

⁴² Jonathan Poneman, “Family Values,” *Spin*, December 1, 1992.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid. Phyllis Schlafly was a vocal antifeminist who frequently appeared on televised news segments in the 1970s campaigning against the Equal Rights Amendment, which she believed would destroy the institution of the American family.

their addictions.⁴⁵ One of the strongest defenses of Love came from Cobain himself, who wrote an essay in the liner notes of the 1992 Nirvana compilation album

Incesticide:

While all these things were very special [referring to accomplishments of the past year], none were half as rewarding as having a baby with a person who is the supreme example of dignity, ethics and honesty. My wife challenges injustice and the reason her character has been so severely attacked is because she chooses not to function the way the white corporate man insists. His rules for women involve her being submissive, quiet, and non-challenging. When she doesn't follow his rules, the threatened man (who, incidentally, owns an army of devoted traitor women) gets scared. A big “fuck you” to those of you who have the audacity to claim that I'm so naive and stupid that I would allow myself to be taken advantage of and manipulated.⁴⁶

The purpose of this oft-quoted passage was not only to defend his wife's character, but also to act in self-defense. Hirschberg's article had made a pitiful victim out of Cobain, and following reception about Love similarly made him out to be a dupe—hardly a flattering position for a bona fide rock star to find himself in. Tony Grajeda notes that the gender presentations in 1990s alt-rock were significantly altered from the previous rock generations that idealized a sexually and physically dominant man.⁴⁷ Gayle Wald writes that the '90s were full of images of comparatively rough-looking rocker chicks positioned against the new Generation X masculinity, which was contained in the image of an inwardly-focused, sensitive *loser* boy: a presentation of masculinity that expressed frustration with

⁴⁵ Everett True, “All You Need is Love: Face to Face with Kurt and Courtney,” *Melody Maker*, December 19, 1992; Robert Hilburn, “Cobain to Fans: Just Say No,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 1992.

⁴⁶ Kurt Cobain, liner notes to *Incesticide*, Geffen, CD, 1992.

⁴⁷ Grajeda, “The Feminization of Rock,” 243–44.

disempowerment rather than flaunting masculine prowess.⁴⁸ Love and Cobain were the prototypes. To the older baby boomer generation, who comprised the majority of powerful positions within the media reporting on developments in grunge and concurrent music styles, the new Generation X woman seemed stunningly aggressive, opinionated, and unattractive, and the new man in rock distinctly feminized. Articles written about Love and Cobain at this time reflected this generational bewilderment alongside fascination with the rock couple's drug use and family dynamics, the language suggesting disapproval of Love's perceived manipulation and expressing patronizing pity for Cobain's supposed suffering at her hands. In the face of this assault on his masculine identity, Cobain felt compelled to assert his own agency in his marriage and career.

While the most vicious of Love's reception faithfully repeated Hirschberg's claims about drug use during her pregnancy, the silent killer of that article was the insinuation that Love was nurturing a rift between Cobain and the other Nirvana bandmembers. This made her an intolerable threat to a favorite band and drew consistent comparisons with history's other infamous rock wife/accused bandwrecker: Yoko Ono. Cobain aggravated this fear when he gave an interview to *Sassy* in which he claimed to be so happy with his new wife and daughter that he felt he could leave the band and fame instantly.⁴⁹ Love's purported involvement during the production of Nirvana's final album, *In Utero*, also stoked Ono comparisons.

⁴⁸ Wald, "I'm Just a Girl," 195.

⁴⁹ Christina Kelly, "Kurt and Courtney Sitting in a Tree," *Sassy*, April 1, 1994.

With these events, Love's reputation as a manipulator was thoroughly established, and that made her a threat to the music.

Love's own musical career had been put largely on hold while she married and had a baby, then dealt with the legal consequences of having that baby. Her small oeuvre, irregular performances, and history of stripping made it easy for fans and the media to develop the idea that Love's primary purpose in rock was to provide sex to a star. As Lisa L. Rhodes explains in her book *Electric Ladyland*, this role of comfort woman, known as the rock groupie, is a well-established trope for women in rock. Through her association with compulsory sexual behavior, a groupie was appropriate to admire as a sexual object and fit to deride as an expendable, common resource of low value, and a comfortable and familiar pigeon-hole in which to drop an aberrant woman.⁵⁰ When journalists wished to discredit Love's opinions on music or politics, they found the groupie to be a convenient archetype to apply to her.

Love was so despised in the media and fan circles that a second famous comparison emerged to one of the most infamous groupies who ever lived: Nancy Spungen. The narrative of Spungen spins a tale of sordid greed and untimely demise, and supplies the ur-example of the rock femme fatale story. Spungen was a young, blonde, loud and foul-mouthed American who inserted herself into the London punk scene of the 1970s, quickly becoming the notorious girlfriend of Sex Pistols bassist Sid Vicious. In the press, she was construed as a vulgar, promiscuous, drug-addled nuisance whose only purpose was to leech off of Vicious's newfound fame. After the

⁵⁰ Rhodes, *Electric Ladyland*, 159.

breakup of the Sex Pistols in early 1978 the couple moved into the Chelsea Hotel in New York, where twenty-year-old Spungen was found dead of a stab wound in October 1978. Vicious was charged for her murder, but the case never went to trial because he died of a heroin overdose four months later.

Fans of punk rock treat this story with a sort of mysticism, and even though Spungen was hated by the public in life, the satisfying finality of her death mixed with the enticing mystery of her murder has afforded her a certain cult status—even to Courtney Love, who in the '80s auditioned for her part in Alex Cox's biopic *Sid & Nancy*. The illicit allure of Spungen lies in the fact that her femme fatale story progresses like one ought to in literary tales: she gets close to the hero through sex appeal and lures him into moral depravity, but then he breaks free of her spell (or goes completely mad), and, righteously, kills her. Spungen thus becomes the punk Carmen. Susan McClary explains that the disposition and ultimate fate of Bizet's character are closely linked to a patriarchal fear of a sexually aggressive and insubordinate womanhood.⁵¹ The character stokes male desire, but requires vanquishing in order to preserve the dominant patriarchal order—quite akin to the sexualized, reviled, and mythologized Spungen. And the fact that the most satisfying part of Spungen's story is its end connotes the extent of the vitriol directed at Love: maybe Cobain's fans didn't want him to end up like Vicious, but some would be morally appeased to see Love dead. As we will see in the next chapter, death threats would become an increasingly common part of Love's reality in the coming years.

⁵¹ See McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen*, 36–41.

Living in a Shadow

American society was not really interested in a rock power couple—none had ever existed before, and the notion of it was damaging to the concept of the lone, unattached, virile rock god. To preserve this ideal, the media acquired the tools it needed to delegitimize Love as an artist, subordinating her to her husband and restoring a normative gender dynamic. At the same time, these efforts were a double-edged sword, as the castigation of Love required both Cobain's victimization and the constant mention of their infant daughter, putting Cobain in a position where a rock star is never supposed to be—filling the domestic roles of henpecked husband and father with responsibilities to his children, forever damaging his claims to autonomous rock masculinity as traditionally defined. As Norma Coates explains,

Rock sexuality is synonymous with unbridled, unfettered sexuality: sexuality without consequences, and particularly, sexuality without children. The recent influx of "women in rock," particularly younger women, like Courtney Love, who play guitar, scream, and sing from the point of view of female experience and sexuality, trouble not only the meaning of sexuality in rock but the meaning of rock itself.⁵²

This reaction speaks to the state of marriage relations in American society in the early '90s. Marriage was not meant to be a union of equals, one way or another someone had to be the dominant force. And for the sake of patriarchal society, the media and fans were motivated to make sure that if that dominant force would not be the man of the couple, they could at least make sure that the woman's dominant position was unenviable and her power and influence limited.

⁵² Norma Coates, "Moms Don't Rock," in *Sexing the Groove*, 322.

If Cobain would not or could not possess the autonomous, unfettered virility of rock stars past, he was at least still a brilliant songwriter, and this was a ground upon which the media was insistent Love not encroach, even when Love contributed to his music. Cobain wrote “Pennyroyal Tea” with editing input from Love in 1992, and it eventually appeared on Nirvana’s 1993 album *In Utero*. Love also included the song in Hole’s setlists throughout 1993, and in her reception Cobain’s influence was recognized and emphasized to the effect of minimizing her performance. It was perhaps a mistake on Love’s part to include one of Cobain’s songs in her performances, as it encouraged the tendency of certain reviewers to assume that her best material came from him—what would soon become a perennial complaint. At the end of a mixed review of one of Hole’s shows one critic wrote, “Her audience may tire of watching her play neuro-tennis with herself and opt for a woman with something musical to offer. But Courtney’s ready for that one and has some brilliant new material. In the evening’s final irony, the most impressive new song is Penny Royal Tea [sic], which she wrote with her husband.”⁵³ Even Hole’s rumored million-dollar record deal with Geffen subsidiary DGC in 1992 was an accomplishment overshadowed by Cobain, as many people assumed that Hole was only being courted by labels in the first place due to Love’s marriage to Cobain. *Newsweek* reported an A&R man saying, “Sleeping with Cobain is worth half a million dollars.”⁵⁴ But one way or another, it was clear that the industry was expecting great things from Love in the future. If those expectations only looked to further newsworthy scandal, they were

⁵³ Jim Arundel, “Whole Lotta Love,” *Guardian*, July 19, 1993.

⁵⁴ John Leland and Marc Peyser, “Searching for Nirvana II,” *Newsweek*, March 30, 1992.

about to be pleasantly surprised. Or at least they would have been, had tragedy not struck.

Chapter 2: Death and the Widow: Gender, Agency, and the Haunting of Hole's *Live Through This*

Written by Love and Erlandson over the course of three years, the second studio album and major label debut of punk/grunge band Hole was carefully crafted to be a sharply political, feminist punk rock manifesto. But *Live Through This* would be doomed never to receive the attention it deserved, because four days before its release on April 12, 1994 Love's husband Kurt Cobain was discovered in their Seattle home, dead of a self-inflicted shotgun wound. While Love was grieving, the album's release tour was postponed until late in the year, during which time tragedy struck again. In June Hole bassist Kristin Pfaff succumbed to a heroin overdose, forever solidifying the ironically named album's reputation as a harbinger of death.

Soon after the release of the album, rumors began to circulate that the songs had in fact been ghostwritten by the late Cobain, and the vampiric Love, already ridiculed in the media and despised by a substantial portion of her husband's fans, was appropriating his talent. This challenge to her authorship coalesced with wild conspiracy theories that she had orchestrated a plot to have her husband killed. The zeal with which devotees of the fallen rock god pursued these outrageous charges can be only partly explained by the stage of grief in which an object of blame is desired. Both before and after the demise of Cobain, Love unsettled them.

Whether it was her outspoken rhetoric onstage or in interviews, her ambition to be a rock star that did not fade away with marriage and motherhood, or simply her

coveted position next to Kurt Cobain, Courtney Love was always a threat to the boys' club of rock music. Despite whatever lip service was paid toward equality in the '90s punk scene, grunge remained as masculinized as it had ever been. But Courtney Love faced unique scrutiny and vitriol because, where her previous experimental noise-punk indie rock could be easily dismissed, this album proved that her talents, particularly her songwriting, rivaled those of her husband—a trespass on his masculine dominance that Cobain's homosocial fan base of disaffected teenagers and their grown-up rock critic counterparts could scarcely tolerate. Scholars such as Susan McClary, Robert Walser, and Norma Coates have illuminated the connections between containing threatening feminine forces and preserving the stability of masculine social structures within music cultures.¹ In an effort to discredit her alpha-female voice that tested those structures, media publications attempted to contain Love by portraying her as conniving, manic, and fiscally and creatively dependent on her husband. Pathological and dependent characterizations of Love have served to defang her biting political feminist message by separating her from authorship, and the sanity that would merit audience attention.

As Hole's most influential album, and the one which, due to the circumstances surrounding its release, has been most mythologized, *Live Through This* has received a respectable amount of scholarly scrutiny. Authors such as Lori Burns, Mélisse

¹ See Susan McClary, "Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen," *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 80–111; Robert Walser, "Forging Masculinity: Heavy Metal Sounds and Images of Gender," *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Hanover: Wesleyan University Press, 1993), 108–136; and Norma Coates, "(R)evolution now?: Rock and the Political Potential of Gender," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, ed. Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 50–64.

Lafrance, and Anwen Crawford as well as a number of female critics have noted the feminist message of *Live Through This* and the wave of misogynistic reception that followed.² While these writers have done an admirable job of reclaiming the intended political message of the album, they often pay limited attention to the tactics that were employed by mainstream media and fans to discredit and distort the political agenda of the work and smear its primary creator. This chapter aims to continue the important project begun by these women of examining the album and its reception critically, engaging with contemporaneous media publications as well as feminist musicological studies on gender and agency. The first section of this chapter analyzes two of the album's representative themes to evidence the agency, feminine subjectivity, and feminist messages present in Love's lyrics, followed by discussion of the methods and motivations for Love's public defamation in a press that struggled to smear her while praising her music. These analyses will prove that the media became instrumental in the containment of a female menace to rock's masculine hegemony through sexist characterizations of Love as a madwoman, fraud, and succubus.

Yeah, They Really Want You(?): Hearing a Woman's Authorial Voice

Live Through This is sonically and thematically sophisticated compared to the raw, screaming punk rage of Hole's *Pretty on the Inside*. The sound of *Live Through*

² See Lori Burns and Mélisse Lafrance, "Cultures of Injury: Courtney Love on Violence Against Women and the Patriarchal Aesthetic," *Disruptive Divas: Feminism, Identity & Popular Music* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 97–122; Anwen Crawford, *Live Through This*; Lorraine Ali, "Courtney Love and the Flipside of Criticism," *Los Angeles Times*, May 27, 1995; Sasha Geffen, "Live Through This," *Pitchfork*, June 3, 2018, accessed November 20, 2018, <https://pitchfork.com/reviews/albums/hole-live-through-this/>.

This is cleaner, the tempos faster, and the songs more rhythmic and tonal. Love's words are not so distorted by screaming. The high-quality production afforded to the band by their new major label, DGC, a Geffen subsidiary that also held Nirvana's contract, only partially explains the difference in sound. Although some of the only praise given to *Pretty on the Inside* by mainstream media had been directed at Love's lyrics, critics agreed that on the band's second album Love's writing had reached new heights. These powerful words would be mostly unintelligible had the band opted to stick with their previous punk-sludge metal aesthetic. Although indicative of the stylistic impact that Nirvana's grunge had exerted over alternative rock, the new sound was also likely a result of the band's decision to make the lyrics understandable to listeners. In the words of the *New York Times*' Jon Pareles, "the difference between Hole's two albums is the difference between punk rock, which was certain that outsiders wouldn't hear it or understand if they did, and alternative rock—which in the wake of Nirvana—has the chance to reach millions of listeners."³ Unfortunately, though critics almost universally praised the poetry of Hole's latest album, contemporary reviews from the '90s routinely offer only superficial analysis or outright misinterpretations of the supposedly praise-worthy lyrics.

Although certain lyrics can easily be related to Love's life experiences with assault, marriage, and motherhood, she has stated that the work was never meant to be purely autobiographical. When asked about the content of her album Love said, "This record is not as personal. You know, when women say, 'Well, I play music, and

³ Jon Pareles, "Recordings View: Courtney Love Bows to Convention," *New York Times*, April 24, 1994.

it's cathartic,' that applies to me to a degree, but I just wanted to write a good rock record. I would love to write a couple of great rock songs in my life, like Chrissie Hynde did.”⁴ The non-autobiographical elements of *Live Through This* are evident in the presence of various characters who speak from multitudinous perspectives in Love’s songs, as well as open ended phrases that invite multiple possible meanings and the occasional lyrical allusion to literary works and world events. The result is an album full of powerful commentary on traumatic or otherwise impactful events in women’s lives, focusing on themes such as sexual and domestic assault, sexual objectification, celebrity commodification, girlhood, and motherhood. As examples, I will illuminate the complex approaches the album takes to the themes of sexual assault and motherhood to represent the outspoken, distinctly feminine agency present throughout the work.

The first track on the album is “Violet,” and it is a powerful choice to introduce the work. Crawford points out that the first word of this song, and therefore the first word of the entire album, is “and.”⁵ “And” is not a way to begin a thought, but a way to continue one: introducing it at the beginning of the record forces it to jut out jaggedly into space, an interjection into the flow of proper discourse not unlike a traumatic interruption in a woman’s life. A careful listener will discover violence in the song, potentially describing a form of domestic abuse or the act and aftermath of rape. The disjointed story is related predominantly from the viewpoint of the victim,

⁴ Chrissie Hynde is the frontwoman of new wave band The Pretenders. Love quoted in Kim Neely, “Courtney Love,” *Rolling Stone*, December 23, 1993.

⁵ Crawford, *Live Through This*, 1.

though lines such as “You should learn when to go/ You should learn how to say no” also allow the stance of victim-blamers into the narrative. Of particular interest is the pre-chorus, a quiet, sparsely textured section of the song, which expresses the shock of being thrown away after being used—“When they get what they want/they never want it again”—followed by the furiously roared taunt of the chorus, “Go on take everything, take everything/I want you to.”

Before Mélisse Lafrance’s analysis of this song in 2002, critical interpretations of “Violet,” and songs with similar themes such as “Asking for It,” studiously avoided detailed analyses that involved scenarios of rape or domestic violence, even while acknowledging the theme of victimization. Frequently, critics evaded dealing with the texts of the songs as much as possible by summing them up with interpretations of incoherent, hysterical female rage without obvious purpose, or less frequently, as tired whining:

The ideas and techniques in Hole’s music...have become tokens, guarantees to pay the bearer an accepted amount of turmoil and trauma...Here they are again. Fear of the body, and guilt at taking pleasure in it (“Doll Parts”, “Plump”, “Jennifer’s Body”) Persecution physical (“Asking For It”), intangible (“Miss World”, “She Walks On Me”) and imaginary (where to begin?). Being a woman without having to be Woman. It would be cretinous to deny these topics as part of people’s experience. Some treat them as obstacles to be defied, derided and overcome; others relish them as a ticket to victimhood. Courtney is remarkable for achieving the former by means of the latter, becoming a success on the back of a reputation for whining [sic].⁶

An incident that occurred at a performance in London in 1991, when Hole was on tour opening for Mudhoney, forcibly confronted Love with a powerful reason for

⁶ David Bennun, “Good Day at the Orifice,” *Melody Maker*, April 9, 1994.

feminine anger, and her way of addressing that trauma and similar experiences (not necessarily her own) in fact displays remarkable sophistication. That night when Love stage-dived members of the audience forcibly removed her clothing, groped her, and digitally violated her before she was able to make it back to the stage.⁷ Love reminded the world of her anger over the trauma with biting commentary on the abusive treatment of performing women woven into the video for “Violet,” in which the violence revealed in the lyrics is married to male voyeurism.⁸

The video begins with ballerinas in virginal white, lacy costumes performing on a raised stage before an audience of well-dressed men. Other shots display similarly refined, respectable images of women in a performance setting suitable for viewing: a disrobed woman posing for a painting, a woman sitting at her piano at home, little girls being judged at a junior beauty pageant. After the first refrain of the chorus the video turns for the first time to a shot of strippers in front of a large audience. The shots switch back and forth from the strippers to the same well-dressed male audience that ogled the ballerinas, making it clear that male consumption of the female performance is something vulgar. Shots of the strippers become more common as the song progresses, interspersed with the earlier images of classier women and occasional footage of rats, emphasizing uncleanness. Love appears in intermittent shots in a darkened frame with a metal pole and the same wallpaper as in the room where the strippers dance. The Love in these shots begins to slap and claw

⁷ For a full account of the incident see Love’s quote in Kim France, “Feminism Rocks,” *New York*, June 3, 1996.

⁸ The song “Asking for It” also remarks on this incident, and criticizes indifference toward the sexual abuse of women more generally.

at herself, and her lips are out of sync with the recording. Back in the strippers' scene, the well-dressed men have transformed into an all-male rock crowd and begin to reach for the dancers. Love in her earlier ballet costume departs from a stage onto those outstretched hands which hold her aloft the crowd as they violently pull at the gauzy fabric of her dress.

"Violet" and its video prove that Love, her bandmates, and production team are all acutely aware of the power dynamics that inform in the spectacle of female performance. The visual reference to the stage-diving assault makes clear that the message is not targeted at men in general, but focused specifically on male rock fans. In his writings on heavy metal, Robert Walser asserts that the music and its masculine culture are tools for recreating and reaffirming a specific construction of masculinity for the disaffected, predominantly male youth who consume it, and that in order for young men to effectively reconstruct a masculinity into which they fit, women must be controlled and marginalized.⁹ In fact, despite grunge's supposed stance as the destroyer of previous rock conventions (those of heavy metal in particular), it too served in this capacity for young men, and women were relegated to a handful of acceptable roles.

When the uniquely female life stage of motherhood is explored in the album, it is without the rosy euphemizing typically slathered on the topic. Instead, it is here invoked through repeated references to milk and sickness. "I Think That I Would Die" appears to transmit the anxiety Love experienced after Child Services wrested

⁹ Robert Walser, *Running With the Devil*, 108–11.

custody of her daughter Frances Bean away from her in the aftermath of the lurid
1992 *Vanity Fair* profile:

*I want my baby
Where is my baby?
I want my baby
Who took my baby?*

*Rose White, Rose Red
Rose up in my head
Rose White, Rose Red*

The crooning of fairytale figures in a rhyme as if to soothe an upset child, accompanied by distraught exclamations about being out of milk that come later in the song, express a mother's fretting, and therefore a tenderness rarely ascribed to Love. Yet this song is also one of the angriest on the album: its climax consists of a wildly screamed expletive when almost all other sound cuts out, betraying also a mother's fury. While this track is one in which Love's personal experience is easily detected, many songs on the album jump around different points of view within a contained narrative. Track 3, "Plump," deals with similar domestic themes, but the songwriter's point of view is seemingly discarded for a significant period of time.

"Plump" is often interpreted as a testament to Love's own unhealthy body image. In the years before the release of the album she had lost a noticeable amount of weight and regularly derided her past heavier form in interviews.¹⁰ Lyrics that describe the act of vomiting in the first person are taken to refer to bulimia, a condition from which only tabloids have ever asserted Love has suffered. Given the

¹⁰ See for example the mention in Hirschberg, "Strange Love," *Vanity Fair*; or Love's own quote in Dennis Cooper, "Love Conquers All," *Spin*, May 1994.

full context of its lyrics, however, the song lends itself well to a vision of a domestic scene given from the points of view of a fussy infant and a tired mother:

*Shakes his death rattle
Spittle on his bib
And I don't do the dishes
I throw them in the crib*

*I'm eating you
I'm overfed
Your milk's in my mouth
It makes me sick*

*Now I've stumbled here
Failed to make it mine
They say I'm plump
But I throw up all the time*

Certain listeners have interpreted the milk referred to in this song as a metaphor for either heroin or a sex act,¹¹ but sudden switches between characters and perspectives are common throughout the album, and certain verses in the above text more strongly suggest the perspective of an infant than anyone else. At the very least, the invocations of a crib and the mention of a baby strongly suggest the presence of such a child. It is an unglamorous portrait of a young mother's home life suggesting exhaustion, frustration, and a messy house.

Refusal among critics and audiences to engage with the challenging social and political text of *Live Through This* is indicative of a squeamishness uncharacteristic of rock criticism and fandom, and therefore revealing. The fact that critics consistently perceive an autobiographical narrative in each song on the album, despite Love's

¹¹ See Burns and Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas*, 121. See also the fan interpretations found on the popular lyrics site *Genius*: "I Think That I Would Die," *Genius*, accessed November 19, 2018, <https://genius.com/6325189>.

protestations to the contrary, attest to a motivated desire to keep Love boxed in an image of self-centeredness, and, considering the often disturbing topics addressed in these songs, hysteria. Although certain lyrics match up very well with what is known of her biography and were likely inspired by life events, others clearly express positions she has never occupied. Alternating points of view are frequent and noticeable in her songs, and are almost always accompanied by changes in musical content such as dynamic shifts or melodic changes. These multiple points of view are indicative not of a manic, unstable personality, but of a practiced author writing characters into her music. The characters whose various points of view are privileged in the songs each provide insight into scenes of women's lives to make a powerful statement on society and its treatment of women in the home, in the media, and in rock.

Was She Asking For It?: Strategies of Delegitimization

Kurt Cobain is almost always mentioned at some point in any publication written about Courtney Love. His presence in her reception is so consistent that one might imagine that authors are under the impression that it is grammatically incorrect to name one musician without the other—at least, when the one in question is Love. Some writers might be tempted to deliberately subvert this tradition by mentioning Cobain as little as possible, and for the purposes of purely textual or musical analyses, this tactic is perhaps appropriate. However, for an analysis that attempts any kind of historical contextualization of this album, Cobain must be summoned. With the exception of a chosen few people involved with the production of the album and

several lucky critics who previewed it before its official release,¹² *Live Through This* has never been heard without the context of Cobain's suicide. To paraphrase Anwen Crawford: Kurt Cobain haunts this album.¹³

Perhaps the ghost of Cobain that lingers around *Live Through This* would have been laid to rest eventually, had his fans not deliberately tied his creative spirit to the work by contesting Love's authorship. Still today, comments such as "this album is some of Kurt Cobain's finest work" are easy to come by on the internet and in conversation.¹⁴ It may be impossible to track down when or where exactly the rumor started, but it is easy to speculate why. These smears are, ironically, testaments to the album's excellence: *Live Through This* is a critically acclaimed record. By November of 1994 it was awarded a Gold record by the RIAA, and at just a little over a year old it was certified Platinum; *Spin* awarded it the number one spot on its 1994 Album of the Year list.¹⁵ Critical reviews could not help but praise the lyrics (even though they rarely engaged with them), Love's compelling vocal style, and the marriage of grunge and catchy hooks in the music. But despite expressions of praise for the music, reviews featured the same kind of patronizing language that had been inflicted upon Love since she became involved with Cobain, and particularly since

¹² These include Cooper, "Love Conquers All," *Spin*; and Robert Hilburn, "The Trials of Love," *Los Angeles Times*, April 10, 1994. Note that while these reviews were published after Kurt Cobain's death was discovered, they were written before the event.

¹³ Crawford, *Live Through This*, 13.

¹⁴ The heckler in the comments section of this article is typical. Tom Breihan, "Live Through This Turns 20," *Stereogum*, April 11, 2014, accessed November 28, 2018. <https://www.stereogum.com/1675044/live-through-this-turns-20/franchises/the-anniversary/>.

¹⁵ "The Best 20 Albums of 1994," *Spin*, December 31, 1994.

the infamous 1992 *Vanity Fair* profile. In a review for *Rolling Stone*, David Fricke described Love in language used for psychotics and addicts:

Even before she ascended to celebrity spousehood, Love was the scarred beauty queen of underground-rock society, a fearless confessor and feedback addict whose sinister charisma—part ravaged baby doll, part avenging kamikaze angel—suggested the dazed, enraged, illegitimate daughter of Patti Smith.¹⁶

This excerpt was taken from a *positive* review of the album, yet mentions of Hole's frontwoman are slanted with implications of insanity, instability, and addiction. As Lafrance notes, "reading Hole and Courtney Love as discrete and divisible popular cultural formations appears to constitute the prevailing strategy in the mainstream press."¹⁷ Although respectable press outlets rarely deigned to give credence to the repeatedly refuted claim that Cobain wrote Hole's album, the irresistible urge to pathologize and diagnose Love suggests that they were afflicted with the same mental block about the work that fans ran into: such a detestable woman could not have written music that good.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the history of journalists and critics using Love's personal background and stage persona as justification, or evidence, for charges that she was unoriginal, trashy, and inauthentic. It was easy for the media to dismiss her in this way when she had "barely sold enough records to fill a dustbin,"¹⁸ but the fact that this rhetoric continued in spite of the obvious critical and commercial success of *Live Through This* is surprising. Regarding a woman who supported herself for many

¹⁶ David Fricke, "Live Through This," *Rolling Stone*, April 21, 1994.

¹⁷ Burns and Lafrance, *Disruptive Divas*, 98.

¹⁸ Jim White, "Caught Between A Rocker and A Hard Case," *Independent*, February 5, 1993.

years stripping in her youth and who became famous for her distinctive “kinderwhore” fashion, thinly veiled accusations of promiscuity and fakeness were for many too tempting to resist. Indeed, there is seldom an article written about Love or her band in which her appearance is not addressed. That alone may not be a sign of any particular bias, as Love deliberately constructed an eye-catching fashion for the specific purpose of drawing attention. But the fact that the attention was heaped just as often and just as unflatteringly upon her body as her clothes, and the fact that the implications of her fashion sense were automatically assumed to denote rampant sexuality reveal prejudice. When Lynn Hirschberg’s scathing 1992 *Vanity Fair* profile described Love as a brutish, sluttish poseur, she gave license for subsequent articles to depict her similarly while still seeming legitimate. The success and evident artistry of *Live Through This* failed to uncouple Love from the damaging tropes that article had tattooed on her reputation. The *Vanity Fair* article’s impact on subsequent press coverage and on the general public likely owes not only to the unparalleled celebrity of Love’s husband, but also to the cult of authenticity that surrounded the grunge scene.

As a descendent of punk rock, 1990s grunge was devoted to authenticity and was a self-conscious response to the excessive spectacle of the previous decade’s heavy metal. Both the sound and aesthetic elicited rawness, a seeming return to manly simplicity from the effeminate spectacle that had defined the ’80s. Followers of this religion could not see the girlishly done up Love as anything other than artificial and could not fathom that her music might contain any poignant message. One record executive was quoted in *Newsweek* saying, “When I heard this album, I was blown

away. It never occurred to me that she had talent.”¹⁹ But her artificiality is in fact a discourse, a deliberate acknowledgement of the presence of the male gaze and a desire to disturb its brittle foundations, a desire that was indulged both in live performances and in the music videos of the *Live Through This* singles.

The messages *Live Through This* conveys through its sounds and images are angry and express a woman’s subjectivity, and while the exact meanings of lyrics can be disputed, the general sentiments are overt. It is not hard to understand what the songs are about with careful listening. Although Kurt Cobain was doubtless a master songwriter, his subjectivity does not appear on this album, and despite what certain devotees might claim on the internet, *Live Through This* does not sound like a Nirvana album. Nonetheless, rampant gender anxiety compels some to insert Cobain where he does not belong.

He Keeps You in a Box by the Bed: Containing the Uncontrollable Woman

Susan McClary writes that the representation of madwomen in music is characterized by musical excess and makes for a marvelous spectacle that audiences love to behold, but must always be “framed” or contained by a male force (either vocal characters or coded-male instrumental material) out of a need to control deviant and potentially contagious feminine behavior.²⁰ Unlike the characters constructed by male composers and librettists, Courtney Love represents herself, and she is a shrewd entertainer who deliberately makes herself a spectacle. She knows she is being

¹⁹ Jeff Giles, “For Better or Worse,” *Newsweek*, April 10, 1994.

²⁰ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 81–82.

watched and she attempts to control and direct the (male) gaze. Carolyn Abbate connects female opera characters' demands to be looked at (such as the demands of Gluck's Eurydice and Strauss's Salome) to a type of agency that asserts female authorship in male-controlled situations.²¹ Manipulation of the male gaze transforms these women from objects to be admired into actors in their own story, and disrupts hierarchical gender dynamics. Love's outlandish, excessive behavior on and offstage then agitates patriarchal societal impulses to impose a sort of "frame" on her, to contain her influence if not her person by shaping the lens through which audiences see her.

Many lenses were employed, but some inevitably fit better than others. Why, for example, was Kurt Cobain doggedly applied as the intended mold for Courtney Love but guitarist Eric Erlandson was left alone? Cobain did occupy a traditional place of power in Love's life as her husband; he also commanded an incredible degree of cultural clout in American music and is thus an effective frame. This is made all the truer because of his death; his name can be invoked but his voice can never be raised in refutation of critics or in support of his wife. Yet Erlandson, who co-founded Hole with Love and co-wrote the band's songs as the primary arranger, would also seem like a potentially promising candidate for containment. He was not used in this capacity. Mainstream media frequently mentioned Erlandson, but his presence was minimized. If Erlandson was dismissed by media as a possible controlling device for Love, it likely had less to do with his purportedly patient and soft-spoken nature than it did with the fact that acknowledging his central role in the

²¹ See Abbate, "Opera; or, The Envoicing of Women," 227–229.

band would destabilize several of the established containment attempts already employed against Love. Most obviously, the media sought to isolate Love by focusing on her speech, appearance, and wild behavior and keeping mention of other band members to a minimum. This firstly served to support the idea that Love is essentially unlikeable, which justified her continued abuse. If Erlandson were recognized as her songwriting partner, instead of a lackey, this idea could be easily challenged. Secondly, focusing on Love alone gives her the appearance of a solo act with a backing band, a much more conventional position for a woman to hold as opposed to a member of a legitimate rock band. Additionally, if their songwriting partnership were recognized as such, it would run the danger of adding the hated Love to the pantheon of legendary songwriting teams such as that of Carole King and Gerry Goffin or even Paul McCartney and John Lennon, thus re-inscribing her agency and value as a songwriter by association.

Instead, Courtney Love is framed as a provocateur. Her loud voice, brash nature, interviews, and lyrics that combine candid speech with off-putting irony are all well-documented, as are her sex life and drug habits. She knows how to draw media attention, even if she has never figured out how to deflect the worst of it. In her case, conventional sources of feminine containment – husband, children, employers, peers – had not proven effective, so the media and the public then became responsible for keeping her behavior, and therefore her image and message, in check through other means.

One of the most consistent areas of coverage about Courtney Love's life concern her series of feuds with other musicians and pop culture figures. Whether it

was her former bandmate Kat Bjelland and petty disputes over the originality of a shared fashion sense, regular potshots at Madonna, or altercations with Axl Rose, the media thrived on pitting Love against other high-profile artists, and to be fair, she regularly obliged them. When there was no recent spat to talk about, a common tactic was to compare her to other female stars. Although Love seemed inclined to compete with both men and women in equal measure, in the press she was typically juxtaposed with other female artists, evidence of an inclination to confine her to a space where she would not be a threat to men. These same impulses are no doubt why some have never outgrown using the pejorative “foxcore” to describe her music—fencing off the woman-fronted acts designated by this term, such as Hole or Babes in Toyland, into an arena in which they fight each other and are never able to break into a real competitive market.

Tellingly, some of the most vicious attacks made against Love during the *Live Through This* period were made by other women, often challenging the idea that she was a feminist, and comparing her to more “respectable” female artists who knew how to watch their mouths. One such author in the *Washington Post*, at the end of an article that expressed disgust at the attention Love attracted and outright denied that Love was a feminist, concluded: “Love may be the most powerful female rock icon in the country, but the term is an obvious oxymoron. Her power is limited to the ability to start fashion trends and bed famous men. No wonder she’s so unladylike.”²² Although media outlets profited from the regular gossip-worthy stories that Love

²² Nicole Arthur, “The Hole Truth,” *Washington Post*, May 21, 1995.

provided, societal norms made it necessary to deride her behavior and use women to sell that derision to other women, positioning them against Love and thus containing the potential impact of the feminist message of her music. Consider an example from *Newsweek* in 1995:

Courtney's antics leave a nagging impression that her music is not an end in itself, but a means to another end, a way to power. The irony is that in the '90s, more and more women are building solid careers with their music, not their image, as a focus. Melissa Etheridge has sold more than 2 million copies of her latest album, "Yes I Am," and the fact that she's an open homosexual hasn't distracted anybody. Sheryl Crow is the biggest female rock singer of the year, and nobody knows who her boyfriend is. Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth has become the Marmee figure of alternative rock: she's the female punk prototype who influenced Courtney and so many others. And Chrissie Hynde is still Chrissie Hynde. Courtney could learn a thing or two from all these women. She may be getting all the attention right now, but they've got the respect.²³

This passage is revealing on two counts. It first recognizes Love's ambition as something threatening but offers no reason why it should be considered thus: an undesirable outcome in the event Love gains power is simply assumed. It further implies that power is or should be separate from her music, which is ironic considering that Love's music deals intimately with power relations, particularly those navigated from the position of a woman; indeed, the topic is central to her music. Secondly, it denies that Love is worthy of respect as a musician, not on account of her ability, but because of her unladylike behavior. The article then provides more suitable examples on whom potential female readers could model themselves. An article like this makes clear the social work being performed by the

²³ "Playing the Game of Love," *Newsweek*, February 5, 1995.

media in controlling feminine behavior, a fact not lost on certain other writers. As critic Lorraine Ali points out, such writing:

illustrates and contributes to a double-standard in rock, one in which strong women are held to more constrictive moral and personal standards than male artists...the media also can't resist...judging her by the same old measures used exclusively for women. Does she have sex appeal? Is her social behavior ladylike? How is she as a mother? And she often faces questions about intimate matters that rarely surface in articles on male performers.²⁴

The press's impetus to demonize, pathologize, and sexualize Love speaks to a media culture that had not caught up to the music it was reporting on or the times it was reporting in, or rather, it was actively fighting against those changes. If the press could not fit Love into a model that resembled stereotypical ladylike behavior, conventions of hard rock criticism dictated that she must then be categorized as a femme fatale. As Walser explains, the femme fatale is a construction of a woman, born of male anxiety, who uses sexual appeal to lure men to their downfall. She is especially dangerous because she need not perform any action to cause harm: her mere presence is enough to cause damage to the male constitution—or rather, male control of her and himself.²⁵ Portraying Courtney Love as a succubus, a woman who sucks a man's life out with sex, makes her dangerous to the public's image of Cobain and rock music, and therefore necessitates her abuse by the media. In the mind of the public, that old misogynist slogan "Courtney killed Kurt" is not merely the product of a wild conspiracy theory—as I will discuss in Chapter 3—but the voicing of a

²⁴ Ali, "Courtney Love and the Flipside of Criticism," *Los Angeles Times*.

²⁵ Walser, *Running with the Devil*, 118.

masculine anxiety. Love could never be allowed to grasp true power and influence; it would have meant draining Cobain's away.

Someday You Will Ache Like I Ache: Living Through It

In the months following the release of *Live Through This*, Hole and DGC imposed a voluntary hiatus on all promotion of the album out of respect for the losses of Cobain and Pfaff. During this time the band hired a new bassist, the twenty-two-year-old Melissa Auf Der Maur, and Love largely retreated from the public eye until the label reignited their advertising campaign and the band set dates for a new promotional tour beginning in late August. Hole's return was inaugurated by several guest appearances at the 1994 Lollapalooza touring festival, in which Nirvana had once planned to participate, and served as an opening act for the Smashing Pumpkins, the Lemonheads, and Nine Inch Nails on their domestic tours. Several of these shows were received poorly by critics who were appalled at Love's apparent loss of control and periodic displays of grief onstage.²⁶ Charles Aaron of *Spin* panned one of the Nine Inch Nails shows:

As "Softer, Softest" fell apart, she reverted almost completely to her stripper days, sticking out her belly and writhing in spazzy circles...She finally took off the guitar, stumbled over to a huge speaker, and leaned into it like she was about to pass out. Then, while being led off by an assistant, she stepped back, pulled up her top one last time, and flipped us off with both hands. A guy with a video camera zoomed in. A kid near me yelled, "That's why they call you a whore!" His friends, girls and guys, giggled sheepishly. If you cared at all, it was devastating.²⁷

²⁶ See Greg Kot, "Cobain Was Here," *Chicago Tribune*, October 23, 1994; and Everett True, "Love Hangover," *Melody Maker*, August 13, 1994.

²⁷ Charles Aaron, "Hole, Nautica Stage, Cleveland, Ohio," *Spin*, August 29, 1994.

Similarly, accounts unanimously declared Hole's performance at the 1994 Reading festival a disaster, implicitly shaming Love for publicly contending with her grief. There was plenty of ammunition. Hole's show was erratic: Love got into physical fights with other artists, removed clothing onstage, masochistically hurled herself into mosh pits, and cried in public.²⁸ A year-end review of rock festivals in *Melody Maker* stated that Love "spent much of the second half of 1994 behaving like a woman fueled by a macabre death wish" and that "her sorry, confused presence will long dominate our memories of the festivals of 1994."²⁹ After all its efforts to restrain and muzzle her, the media had to contend with the fact that even in widowhood Love was disruptive, but her public meltdown in the latter half of 1994 did ease the work of discrediting her.

Between the challenges to Love's musical authorship, accusations that she was a domineering virago in her marriage, and surreptitiously muttered conspiracies that circulated in the wake of Cobain's death and would hound Love for the rest of her career, she became one of the most maligned figures in pop culture. The concerted efforts of fans, who were emboldened by the sexist biases of mainstream media, and whose myriad abuses online, in print, and in person coalesced into an intimidation and misinformation campaign of substantial proportions, utilized the memory of Cobain against his wife as she was mourning his death. On the first anniversary of Cobain's death in 1995, America Online temporarily took down

²⁸ See Everett True, "Live Through This!," *Melody Maker*, September 10, 1994.

²⁹ "Festival Madness," *Melody Maker*, December 24, 1994.

Hole's forum due to a wave of abusive posts and at least one death threat made against Love.³⁰

The weaponized memory of Cobain interacts curiously with ideals of his masculine dominance, because conjuring him in this matter requires his victimization. As discussed in Chapter 1, this too was partly codified in the Hirschberg profile, where amid second-guessing the Love's age and implying that she was a whorish gold-digger, Hirschberg found room to describe Cobain as beautiful and talented, helpless and sweet.³¹ It is ironic that a rock god, a figure who stood at the pinnacle of disaffected, youthful admiration, should be described in such an emasculating manner in order to smear his flamboyant wife.

And emasculation seemed to be a powerful anxiety when the rock world considered Courtney Love. Her new access to the resources of a major label, and the public interest she garnered as the spouse of the most famous man in '90s rock, gave Love a powerful platform from which her fiercely feminist political messages could pose a real threat to the masculine hegemony of rock for the first time in her career. Her talent also meant that she could potentially pose a threat to the dominance of her husband, with whom she made clear she was consciously competing.³² *Live Through This*, a monument of anti-misogynist poetry, coupled with Love's outlandish and unconventional public persona, made that threat tangible, and was not tolerated

³⁰ "Rock Star's Forum Grows Too Raucous for On-Line Service," *New York Times*, April 12, 1995.

³¹ Hirschberg, "Strange Love," *Vanity Fair*.

³² See Love's quotes in Jessica Hopper, "You Will Ache Like I Ache: The Oral History of Hole's 'Live Through This,'" *Spin*, April 14, 2014.

lightly. And Kurt Cobain was dead. His army of fans was easily galvanized to challenge the authorship of the album and deride Love as a fake, a thief, a whore, and all manner of other unpleasant things. For she who wanted to break into the hypermasculine world of mainstream rock was now vulnerable; an influential husband who once dispelled myths on her behalf could instead be used as a tool of her undoing.

Chapter 3: Tales of Redemption, or, Can Courtney Love Get a Make-Over?

In 1995 Courtney Love was a hot topic in the presses. If the media had ever been inclined to pull their punches out of respect for the grieving widow, that time was now over. Love's public displays of grief onstage throughout 1994 and repeated confrontations with other artists were delectable morsels for the news to snap up. In one incident at the beginning of the year at the MTV Video Music Awards, Love unceremoniously crashed a live interview Madonna was giving to MTV's Kurt Loder, who invited the visibly inebriated Love to take part. The pop queen was not impressed. In an interview she later gave to *Spin* Madonna mentioned the incident:

I am fascinated by her, but the same way I am by somebody who's got Tourette's syndrome walking in Central Park. I want to stop and just watch their human behavior...I think [Loder] wanted to see a catfight. She was babbling about 25 different things. And at one point, she did grab my arm and said something to me like, "'94 sucked, but '95's going to be better, isn't it?" And in that one moment I looked in her eyes and felt her vulnerability and her sadness and I felt bad for her.¹

Her words summarize a general sentiment toward Love in early 1995, as someone to be regarded as both ridiculous and pitiful. But Love was not preparing to retreat into some miserable, isolated widowhood; she was preparing for a comeback.

Hole was a mainstage act on the 1995 Lollapalooza touring festival and at the Reading festival in London, garnering mixed to positive reviews despite incidents of raucous behavior. That year Love also made another foray into acting after a drastic

¹ Bob Guccione Jr., "Live to Tell," *Spin*, January 1, 1996.

change in image. The Courtney Love who was once recognizable for her torn vintage dresses, wild hair, and bold red lips was replaced by a starlet who opted instead for a designer wardrobe and more conventionally glamorous makeup to complement several surgical enhancements and alterations. Her lauded performance in the Academy Award-nominated *The People vs. Larry Flynt* in 1996, in which she played the female lead, Althea Leasure, made Love a surprise Hollywood success. Her transformation was complete with a turn toward a radio-friendly pop band sound on Hole's 1998 album *Celebrity Skin* that, like *Live Through This*, was met with near universal acclaim from critics.

Love's change in presentation and her new interest in mainstream acceptability were met with a certain sense of approval by the media, but also tempered by writers who noticed the apparent irony of Love's new "adult" image juxtaposed with periodic reminders that Love was still herself: making inappropriate comments in interviews, starting feuds and occasionally physical fights with other artists, and swearing, stagediving, and rocking in performances. Meanwhile, critics and Hole fans who had been loyal to Love during her punk years now felt that she was "selling out." For the first time in her career Love could be considered on her own artistic merit in the absence of her husband's overwhelming presence, for so long twisted by the media and audiences to overshadow all of her efforts. No doubt skeptics expected her to simply fade away. If, as some believed, Cobain had propelled Love's celebrity and provided significant contributions to Hole's records, then without him she would have nothing left to offer. Her mounting successes on the tour

circuit, an outstanding performance in a major film, and another platinum-selling and Grammy award-nominated album defied that logic.

In order to attain those accomplishments, however, Love made calculated decisions about how she and her music would be presented to the public. Love found that despite major successes in the years following Cobain's death, the vital rock capital of "authenticity" was elusive. Kristin Lieb reveals that popular music artists, female pop stars in particular, are conceived and strategically constructed as brands in the music industry.² Whereas under normal circumstances the media and the music industry can be reasonably expected to act according to the interests of selling an artist positively, regarding Love this may not have been the case, because her husband's brand was also on the line.

This chapter traces Love's transformation from her first signs of "rebranding" in 1995 to the reception of Hole's third album in 1998. My analysis reveals the strategic efforts to rehabilitate her reputation in the public eye as an avenue to greater career accomplishment. This rebranding pivoted on the marketing of a redemption narrative evident in *The People vs. Larry Flynt* and the commercially accessible pop-punk sound of 1998's *Celebrity Skin*. I further argue that although the media appeared to temporarily acquiesce to Love's wishes for an image change, her reception ultimately reverted to a focus on derangement, mockery, and misogynistic stereotypes and conspiracies because the media and fans felt compelled to enforce gender hegemony by making sure that the late Cobain's successes could never be

² Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, 37.

overshadowed by those of his wife. While Love's look and sound may have changed, it is clear her messages, actions, and successes continued to disrupt gender boundaries.

Reasons to be Beautiful: Changing the Negative Image

Lieb identifies Love as a member of the "Hot Mess" category on her Lifecycle Model for female popular artists, defined as someone who may "engage in public self-destruction" and for whom the "public's focus is directed to their behavior, not their talent."³ While these characterizations would seem to hold true for Love for the entirety of her career up to 1995, Lieb specifies that the "Hot Mess" label is often applied to female artists who publicly grapple with their emotions in the wake of some trauma or distress.⁴ Their suffering may even be profitable to the music industry—so long as their public display of emotion draws audiences, there is no incentive to change the narrative.⁵ After a period of public mourning, Love displayed remarkable agency when she endeavored to change that narrative herself, stepping out of her messy image into a role on Lieb's Model that she had never before occupied: the "Good Girl."

The first stage of Love's rebranding necessitated visibility—she had retreated from the public eye for months following Cobain's death, and had received a large quantity of negative and dismissive press responses to Hole's late 1994 performances.

³ Ibid., 112 and 153.

⁴ Ibid., 153.

⁵ Ibid., 155.

1995 proved to be more fruitful. On Valentine's Day the band performed for MTV's Unplugged acoustic concert series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York. Their set included their biggest hits, "Doll Parts," "Violet," and "Miss World," and also a few Nirvana covers including "You Know You're Right." Reviews were kind; the *Los Angeles Times*'s Robert Hilburn emphasized Love's musicianship over her behavior when he said that "Love is so naturally flamboyant that she often comes across to outsiders as more a personality than an artist. Tonight, however, the artist is on display."⁶ On Unplugged Love appeared to play the same Martin D-18E that Cobain had played at Nirvana's iconic Unplugged performance in November 1993, re-stringed for a right-handed player. Throughout this year of landmark successes in her career Love would teeter between paying tribute to her deceased husband and striking out on her own. The media would wrestle with largely the same conundrum: journalists struggled over how to consider Love, who occupied a rare position as a rock widow who was herself a prominent artist.

The 1995 Lollapalooza tour put Hole on the main stage with Sonic Youth, Pavement, Sinead O'Connor, and Beck as they traveled across the U.S. It was a major accomplishment, but witnesses found Hole's performances turbulent. *Newsweek* declared that Love stole the festival, but not always for her band's music; Love was volatile on tour, hurling abuse at fans from the stage and punching Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna in the face.⁷ Additionally, conspiracy theories about Love's

⁶ Robert Hilburn, "Courtney Love's Pure Emotion on 'MTV Unplugged,'" *Los Angeles Times*, April 17, 1995.

⁷ See Karen Schoemer, "On Love's Rocky Road," *Newsweek*, July 24, 1995.

involvement in her husband's death circulated among audiences on that tour, which hinted at future trouble. The *Los Angeles Times* reported that at one performance an audience member threw shotgun shells at Love onstage and at another she threw her guitar at a heckler who kept yelling: "Who's your next victim?"⁸

Performing at the Reading festival for the second consecutive year in August alongside other major acts such as Green Day and Smashing Pumpkins, Love disrupted standards of courtesy by wading into the photography pit during the Smashing Pumpkins' set. In *Rolling Stone*, David Fricke asked Pumpkins frontman Billy Corgan about his take on the incident. Journalists were particularly interested in Corgan's appraisal of Love's behavior, because the two dated in the years prior to Love and Cobain's marriage, and were rumored to have relations after Cobain's death. Corgan's reply is testament to the persistent stigma that surrounded Love: "What do you say about her that hasn't been said? I could say nice things, but people wouldn't believe me."⁹

Popular media continued to be highly interested in any romantic relationships Love might be involved in, including with Corgan, Trent Reznor of Nine Inch Nails, and Evan Dando of the Lemonheads. In interviews, both Love and her suspected lovers were routinely asked questions about their sex lives, a topic of clear journalistic curiosity. Norma Coates speculates that part of the reason Love's romantic pursuits became public interest is not merely due to the media's general

⁸ Robert Hilburn, "The Love Machine: Mad, Not Crazy," *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 1995.

⁹ David Fricke, "Smashing Pumpkins: Disillusionment, Obsession, Confusion, Satisfaction," *Rolling Stone*, November 16, 1995.

penchant to place women in sexual contexts, but also because it was perceived as deviant to polite society for a woman to date within a year of her husband's passing, ignoring the social mores of widowhood and single motherhood.¹⁰ Furthermore, Love appeared highly concerned with making herself more attractive. By the end of 1995 she had undergone several cosmetic procedures to enhance or modify facial and bodily features, and was beginning to throw out her old kinderwhore wardrobe in favor of designer fashions—to public approval.

Vanity Fair published a new profile of Love in June in what was clearly meant to be a reconciliatory gesture for the debilitating Hirschberg article. It was also a recognition of Love's changing status in the public eye. Kevin Sessums's reporting of Love emphasized her wit, her grief over her departed husband, and in a pointed refutation of the moralistic condemnation in the Hirschberg profile, her motherly activities. Sessums was careful to describe Love playing with her daughter, reading Frances *Beauty and the Beast*, and taking a sewing needle away from the toddler before she could hurt herself.¹¹ It also emphasized Love's physical attractiveness and sexual allure: "her white breasts, like great cakes of soap, bob about in front of me."¹² Where the photographs in Lynn Hirschberg's 1992 profile had obscured Love's face with her wild hair and focused instead on her heavily pregnant body, these new captures featured close-ups on Love's newly refined features and one posed her on a

¹⁰ Coates, "Moms Don't Rock," *"Bad Mothers" The Politics of Blame in Twentieth Century America*, 329.

¹¹ Kevin Sessums, "Love Child," *Vanity Fair*, June 1, 1995.

¹² *Ibid.*

bed of roses. The lead photograph perhaps put too fine a point on the message of the article: Love was dressed as an angel, complete with big golden wings, posing with two young blond boys as cherubs, but the picture is surrounded by an ornate golden picture frame, self-conscious of its own staging.

Love was asked, and appeared to willingly answer, intimate questions about her sexual habits, which were designed by Love and Sessums to reinforce ideas of traditional gender roles in her marriage: “That’s one of the misconceptions about my husband that was so fucked up—that he was passive. He wore the pants in a big way.”¹³ These quotes were Love’s strategic concessions to normative marriage and gender politics, putting herself in a subordinate position to her late husband in order to obtain a more advantageous standing in the public eye. The Sessums article sought to encourage a change that was taking place around Love’s reputation, that she was not a haunted baby doll *a la* Chucky, but a much more familiar and mundane type of female provocateur: a sex symbol.

No Second Billing—You’re a Star Now: The Good and Bad of the Love Movies

Love’s new enhancements made her marketable to Hollywood, and she rekindled her dreams of acting when she successfully auditioned for the role of Althea Leasure in Miloš Forman’s upcoming *The People vs. Larry Flynt*. This 1996 film is based on the life of founder and CEO of the pornographic *Hustler* magazine and the litigation brought against his company by popular televangelist Jerry Falwell.

¹³ Ibid.

The lawsuit resulted in the Supreme Court case of *Hustler Magazine v. Falwell* in 1988, which ruled in Flynt's favor and is today considered a landmark decision on First Amendment rights.

Aware of Love's widely reported struggles with drug addiction, Columbia Pictures required Forman to take out an insurance policy on his new star actress for \$750,000, which he made room for in his budget, because he was insistent that Love be in his movie.¹⁴ Her performance was lauded. One critic wrote that "the film's real revelation is Love, who suddenly doesn't need a music career anymore."¹⁵ Through one incredible role, Love obtained a degree of legitimacy in Hollywood, and this could be used both as a means of escape from her past notoriety in music, and a way to rebuild her celebrity image apart from the monstrous portrayal that had been forced upon her in that world. The media expressed relief at the evidence that Love could play the role of someone behaved and submissive under patriarchal power.

The approval Love received for her role as Althea Leasure Flynt was closely tied to the disposition of the character. Although in some ways unconventional, Althea is a patriarchal vision of the perfect wife. At the beginning of the movie she is an exotic dancer; main character Larry Flynt first notices her onstage as an object for male pleasure. After she is hired to serve on the board of the magazine, she impresses her future husband by making article suggestions that are bolder and more obscene than those by the men on the board, who assert that "some things are sacred." She thus proves both her aggressive sexuality and her willingness to subordinate that

¹⁴ Steve Dougherty, "In Like Flynt," *People*, February 24, 1997.

¹⁵ Michael Atkinson, "American Gigolo," *Spin*, February 1997.

sexuality to the cause of male desire. Upon Flynt's marriage proposal she assures him that she has no intentions of holding him to a union of monogamy. She is Flynt's loyal companion, supporting and providing for him throughout the movie, standing by him through multiple lawsuits and acting as his most trusted advisor on matters of the magazine. After Flynt is shot by an unknown assailant, she devotes herself to his care, and it is this selfless care that instigates her downfall as she becomes addicted to the same drugs that Flynt depends on to control pain. By the time Flynt's libel case is brought before the Supreme Court, Althea is very sick from AIDS, implied to have been contracted through intravenous drug use. Flynt, who has previously been inclined to make a mockery of court proceedings to the point of being found in contempt, only behaves after the accidental drowning death of Althea, so weak from AIDS and painkillers that she could not hold her head above water in the bathtub.

Love had played many roles in the public eye since becoming famous and was pigeonholed into many different tropes, but the role of Althea, which she performed so masterfully, is not the product of rock tropes but of operatic and biblical ones. The nature of Althea's demise calls upon a romantic operatic female stereotype, what Linda and Michael Hutcheon call the *tipo Traviata*.¹⁶ In their analysis of portrayals of disease in opera they argue that AIDS, like the earlier, heavily utilized literary device of consumption, is an affliction ripe for metaphorical romanticizing as an illness that primarily affects the young, does not typically present with any unattractive symptoms, and carries a sordid association with promiscuity.¹⁷ Moreover, the image

¹⁶ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death*, 38.

¹⁷ Ibid.

of Althea—tall and thin, with pale skin, bright blue-green eyes, and dark hair—matches the idealized rare beauty of the nineteenth-century consumptive as she appeared in literary and operatic portrayals.¹⁸ Verdi's *La Traviata* gives us Violetta, the exemplary operatic consumptive, and a woman of ill repute, who falls in love with a man from a good family. Her (un)timely death from disease ensures that her lover will return to his family and remain in good standing in society. Althea, a woman who has made her career in the sex industry and dabbles in drug use, dies at the climax of *The People vs. Larry Flynt* just before her husband, a man of poor reputation but of high station, is vindicated after a long and arduous process of litigation when the Supreme Court rules in his favor.

The timing of Althea's death scene and the prominent use of Christian allegory in the film, stemming in part from the real-life Larry Flynt's flirtation with religion, also situates her in the role of a Christ figure. This juxtaposition of depraved and holy when weaving themes of biblical significance into a film about pornographers no doubt appealed to director Forman's sense of drama. It also called on an established literary trope of low-class women, frequently sex workers, who display a sense of moral compass and virtuous self-sacrifice. *Les Misérables'* Fantine is a prominent example of this archetype in literature, and Althea falls into this tradition. Religious symbolism overwhelms her death scene: when Flynt discovers Althea dead in the bath Dvořák's *Stabat Mater* plays loudly as he cradles her and weeps, resembling classical images of a Pietà—Mary grieving over the dead Christ.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Althea serves as a feminine ideal of a woman who is beautiful, industrious, clever, loyal, submissive, sexually and behaviorally pliant, and utterly content to put her many talents and virtues in the service of her husband. Finally, she submits also to societal needs by dying as a result of her sexual and narcotic transgressions, so that her husband, now free of drugs and removed from sex by his paralysis, can rise as a paragon of patriotic free speech at the movie's triumphant conclusion. Althea redeems not only Flynt, but also Love, and reviewers were quick to draw parallels between her character and her own biography, as someone who came from a background of sex work and was married to a famous, rich, and powerful man: "‘Larry Flynt’ could be the movie New Courtney made about Old Courtney."¹⁹ This performance offered a comforting illusion, because the character of Althea Leasure lived the life and died the death that society prescribed for Courtney Love. As her punk persona appeared to die, a redeemed, disciplined, and feminine Love rose from the ashes.

Initially, this silver screen redemption appeared to pay off. At the 1997 Academy Awards *The People vs. Larry Flynt* earned two Oscar nominations for Best Actor in a Leading Role and Best Achievement in Directing. While as a Hollywood newcomer Love was passed over for an Academy nomination, she was recognized with the nomination for a Golden Globe for Best Performance by an Actress in a drama and won several prizes in critics' awards ceremonies, including the New York Film Critics' Circle Award for Best Supporting Actress. The role did lead to subsequent film opportunities, notably in *Man on the Moon*, also directed by Miloš

¹⁹ Jeff Giles, "Courtney's Second Coming," *Newsweek*, October 21, 1996.

Forman. At awards ceremonies and screenings Love's behavior and persona was quieter, politer, and more controlled than her rock star stage persona had been, and critics and Hollywood insiders were delighted, even suggesting that this version was the True Courtney:

Love took Kurt Cobain's mother to the Flynt premiere, dressed impeccably at award shows, subdued her sharp tongue and accepted the Best Supporting Actress award from the New York Film Critics Circle with a sweetly slyboots speech: "I've never won anything but Worst Dressed from Mr. Blackwell, so this is really nice." Humility was Love's new costume—forget those slutty baby dolls. To be fair, Love had to do something to alter perceptions. Some critics thought she was merely playing herself as Flynt's junkie ex-stripper of a wife. Flynt director Miloš Forman thinks Love's wild-girl-of-the-mosh-pits routine may be the real act: "Courtney explained to me that she's always very much under the pressure of the music people to play, to act, this character who is on the edge, because that's what sells records and that's what brings the kids into her concerts."²⁰

Indeed, for about a year Love's reception would suggest that she had pulled off a successful rebranding to save herself from what Lieb calls the "Hot Mess" category, where she had languished since 1992.²¹ Love attempted to ride this good publicity back into music when she entered the recording studio in 1997 to make Hole's third studio album.

Only Skin Deep: Celebrity Skin and the Struggle for Authenticity

Hole's long-awaited third album, *Celebrity Skin*, was released on September 8, 1998. Love conceived this record as Hole's "California album," and it was

²⁰ Fred Schruers, "Rebel Diva Love's Labor's Lost," *Rolling Stone*, April 3, 1997.

²¹ Lieb, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry*, 152.

musically and aesthetically distant from the band's previous noise-punk and grunge-styled records. Consistent with her rebranding efforts, Love did not revert to her previous punk fashion when she stepped out of Hollywood and back into music. Where previous album covers had featured a stylized visage of bandmembers or had not shown them at all, *Celebrity Skin* prominently displays all four bandmembers, including post-Pfaff bassist Melissa Auf Der Maur, in what appears to be a black and white still of the band walking away from a fiery explosion. As the only member to stare directly into the camera, Love draws the looker's gaze to her as she, in a midriff-exposing spaghetti-strap top with lightly painted lips, evokes a trendy, contemporary image of the '90s. The only reference to her past aesthetic is a small black bow pinned to the side of her head.

Thematically the album stresses the pressures of celebrity life and appears to make repeated references to the passing of Kurt Cobain. With these themes structuring the work one might expect *Celebrity Skin* to develop into another acerbic punk rock album, but Hole's third studio album utterly abandons the rough distortions, unrestrained exclamations, and grotesque evocations and images of earlier Hole work. By contrast, this album offers bright, jangly guitar chords reminiscent of 1970s California soft rock, tuneful harmonization provided by Auf Der Maur, and tighter, less obscure lyrics. Love forsakes screaming and growling, instead adopting a clear but hard-edged vocal style that settles in her middle range. Critics were delighted, and comparisons to Fleetwood Mac (perhaps a sweet gesture knowing that Love is a Stevie Nicks fan) were common:

But *Celebrity Skin* is nothing if not focused—meticulously conceived and scrubbed over four years...The songs “Hit So Hard,” “Malibu,”

“Heaven Tonight” and “Boys on the Radio” are all tight, crisp and utterly pop. Even rough stuff like “Celebrity Skin,” “Awful” and “Playing Your Song”—as close as the new album gets to the terse ferocity of 1994’s *Live Through This*—has a sweet California-car-radio gleam, as if punk rock had been born of Fleetwood Mac’s *Rumours* instead of in opposition to it.²²

After various production peregrinations, Michael Beinhorn [producer] ends up finding a bastard mix of sweetness and weight: ice cream grunge, with a shock of fab guitar parts from Eric Erlandson plus a gang of new-wave synthesizers...In exchange for the astonishing consistency of mood that made *Live Through This* a breakwater of ’90s rock, *Celebrity Skin* produces a cataract of great songs, spectacularly polished.²³

As the quotes above reveal, while reviewers reacted positively to the sound of *Celebrity Skin*, they betray assumptions that the less “hard” sound of the music translated to sugarcoated messages as well. Comparisons to candy or ice cream imply that the work consists of meaningless pleasantries, as if Love’s desertion of angry punk sounds rendered her offerings vapid. This approach not only forgets Love’s history of careful songcraft but neglects evidence of her growth as a songwriter and musician.

The title track and lead single, “Celebrity Skin” is Love’s acknowledgement of the media’s drastically changed attitude toward her since she played Althea in *Larry Flynt*. The lyrics address both past negative press (“Honeysuckle/she’s full of poison/she obliterated everything she kissed”) and the more recent accepting press (“no second billing/cause you’re a star now”) while voicing persistent anxieties about not fitting in to that idolized mainstream world (“Oh Cinderella/They aren’t sluts like you”). It is appropriate then, that the composition of “Celebrity Skin” also juxtaposes

²² David Fricke, “Sweet, Slick, and Dangerous,” *Rolling Stone*, October 1, 1998.

²³ Joshua Clover, “Hole – Celebrity Skin,” *Spin*, October 1, 1998.

elements of Hole's old and new musical styles. The verses are built on a simple, distorted progression of three power chords, each rendered with two sharp downstrokes—reminiscent of the former punk sound.²⁴ The chorus, “Hey so glad you could make it/Yeah, now you’ve really made it,” presumably remarking on Love’s Hollywood success, is composed of alternating major triads D and A, resulting in a bright, optimistic sound that expresses a wry awareness of the fickle nature of that success when the chorus moves to F#m and B. The bridge turns contemplative, “When I wake up/in my makeup/it’s too early for that dress,” tottering between A major and a suspended fourth played by acoustic guitars, removing all distortion and more disruptive sounds such as drums to allow a moment for quiet thought.

“Celebrity Skin” also draws on Love’s literary tastes, as she connects the text of this song to the work of admired bards. For instance, the opening of the second verse, “Oh look at my face/my name is Might-Have-Been” is taken almost verbatim from the poem *A Superscription* by nineteenth-century British poet Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Additionally, the line “So glad I came here with your pound of flesh” alludes to a cruel form of debt payment that serves as a plot point in Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice*. It is used here to suggest that Love has paid her debts in rock and now may rise to live in a new state of social acceptance.

As they had done with all of Love’s past work, fans and critics approached *Celebrity Skin* mining for evidence of the deeply personal: signs of grief, rage, vulnerability, or instability. The album was too well-produced and coherent to read hysteria or instability into, but listeners looking for signs of grief were satisfied: the

²⁴ A power chord consists of I and V, sometimes with the tonic doubled.

album abounds with references to death, drowning, ghosts, and coldness. These twisted lyrics juxtapose and subvert the bright California sun suggested in the jangly music of the work.

Although Hole bandmembers had suffered numerous losses since the formation of their band, including bassist Kristen Pfaff, Erlandson's father, a roadie, and several friends, critics' searches were only sated with "Reasons to be Beautiful," which seems to express the trauma of losing Kurt Cobain. The most obvious reference to Cobain is contained in the lyric, "It's better to rise than fade away," which is a direct reference to "it's better to burn out than fade away," a lyric that Cobain included in his suicide note taken from Neil Young's "My My, Hey Hey (Out of the Blue)." Much of the song appears to express the hardship Love faced in the period following his death, and suggests that her changes in physical appearance were products of an attempt to move on:

*Love hates you
I live my life in ruins for you
And for all your secrets kept
I squashed the blossom and
the blossom's dead*

*Oh, give me a reason to be beautiful
So sick in his body, so sic in his soul
Oh, give me a reason to be beautiful
Oh, and everything I am*

*Miles and miles of perfect skin
I swear I do, I fit right in*

The sound of the song is also one of the few on the album that retains a grunge character with heavily distorted guitars that play a riff deliberately reminiscent of Nirvana. "Reasons to be Beautiful" gave critics exactly what they were looking for: a

link to Cobain that expressed grief, anxiety, and personal trauma that they could use to reinsert the fallen rock star into conversations about Love, as well as the evidence of mental anguish that justified a gradual return to pathologizing portrayals.

Despite the album's critical acclaim, a challenge to the authenticity of the work presented almost immediately. Love wanted to bring in Billy Corgan, with whom she had had a rocky relationship in the past but whose abilities she trusted and artistry she admired, to produce her band's next album. Eventually Michael Beinhorn, known for his work with the Red Hot Chili Peppers and Soundgarden, produced the album, but Corgan was brought into the studio for nearly two weeks to help the band tighten up their sound. He contributed to the musical material for five songs on the album of twelve, including "Celebrity Skin," though all lyrics were written by Love and the most substantial part of the composition written by Erlandson, as per usual.

Uncannily, even without the overshadowing presence of Cobain, Love was forced to endure challenges to the authorship of her own album. Some rock fans attributed far more credit to Corgan than was due, suggesting that he wrote or otherwise masterminded *Celebrity Skin*. Most major outlets quoted the band refuting those claims ("he was there for only 12 days... out of the three years it took us to write this") but the ubiquity of the rumors' mention in reviews of *Celebrity Skin* attest to how widely they were propagated.²⁵ Corgan himself exacerbated fans' feeding frenzy in interviews, in which he stated "I was their Svengali," and claimed that the

²⁵ Melissa Auf Der Maur quoted in Alan Di Perna, "Skin Tight," *Musician*, January 1999.

album would never have come together without him.²⁶ Hole refuted these claims.²⁷

The fact that Love and Corgan had a romantic history and were the subject of constant rumors that their romance had rekindled probably made Corgan too enticing a framing device to pass up, because the media and fans were so used to analyzing Love through the lens of a talented male rock star that they may not have even known how to start considering Love on her own merits.

The fans of Love's old style were perturbed by her musical turnaround. A portion of her largely female Generation X audience interpreted Hole/Love's abandonment of the grunge/punk sound and deliberately disturbing kinderwhore imagery as evidence of the fakeness that came with Courtney Love's new glamorized face, body, and Hollywood accolades. Whatever claims the group could make to punk authenticity in the past were eliminated with a lyrically tight, catchy, broadly appealing power-pop-rock record. Female critics who had found power in the band's previous work, full of female trauma and rage, were clearly disappointed by the new material. Writing retrospectively, critic and fan Anwen Crawford admitted that she, "was so invested in Courtney Love as a punk rock heroine that *Celebrity Skin*, at the time, felt like a personal betrayal."²⁸

Contrary to the charges of "selling out," *Celebrity Skin* may have actually exhibited Love's most honest and personal songwriting and composition. In this

²⁶ "Svengali" refers to a character from George du Maurier's 1985 novel *Trilby*. The character hypnotizes the title character into becoming a great singer. Matt Hendrickson, "Whose Hole Record Is It Anyway?," *Rolling Stone*, October 6, 1998.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Crawford, *Live Through This*, 10.

album she returned to her childhood favorites in 1970s rock as guiding material, and the California concept signaled a re-adoption of a California identity that the San Francisco-born Love had abandoned while settling into the Seattle-based Northwestern punk scene with her husband. The shiny, jangly production of the album appealed to the flair for the glamorous that she had always displayed, even while twisting it ironically. And, while Love's work had always suffered from facile autobiographical interpretations from critics, for certain songs on the album, of which "Reasons to be Beautiful" is the most prominent example, it had never been more appropriate.

In subcultures such as punk rock, it too often seems that any change in an artist's sound or style is interpreted as a sign of giving in to popular demands to meet a greed-motivated capitalist agenda, bending to the will of the faceless, nameless, brainless, all-consuming masses. But if subcultural capital, authenticity, requires so much effort to maintain, including practices of strict self-denial of all identification with music, fashion, or behavior that could be considered "mainstream," then it seems clear that preserving the trappings of subculture is an exercise in artifice. The issue then was not that Love engaged in fakery but that she abandoned her previous allegiance to a specific practice and instead inserted herself into a commercially viable and ideologically opposed one.

But sales suggested that, although Hole may have been alienating their old crowd, new buyers were plentiful. *Celebrity Skin* was certified Platinum on December 21, 1998, and while *Live Through This* gets all of the attention in retrospective

evaluations of the group, it is Hole's third album that remains its best-seller today.²⁹ The track "Celebrity Skin" hit number 1 on the Modern Rock Chart, making it Hole's most successful single. The album also proved to be the band's highest-charting, peaking at #9 on the Billboard 200. At the 1999 Grammy Awards Hole was recognized for the first time with three nominations for Best Rock Album, Best Rock Song, and Best Rock Vocal Performance by a Duo or Group. To the indignation of admirers, Hole was defeated in all eligible categories, but the nominations were in themselves a huge triumph for a band that once looked as though it would never emerge from the shadow of the grunge superstardom that had surrounded Kurt Cobain.

Even in the immediate reception for *Celebrity Skin*, suggestions of discontent were present. Writers expressed a wistful nostalgia for the "old Courtney"; others doubted that she could maintain her new polished persona, assuming that the wild woman they had known was her truest self. And the insidious rumors stoked by a documentary that had been released only months before *Celebrity Skin* urged dissatisfied rumblings from a camp of devout Cobain admirers.

I Swear I Do, I Fit Right In: The Value of a Brand

Nick Broomfield's *Kurt & Courtney* debuted at the Sundance Film Festival in 1998, despite significant legal pressure from Love and her attorneys to block the

²⁹ Recently, this album has benefitted from a boost in interest due to the title track's inclusion on the soundtrack of Marvel's 2019 blockbuster *Captain Marvel*. The official video for "Celebrity Skin" on YouTube has enjoyed increased viewership as a result. See HoleVEVO, "Hole – Celebrity Skin," (music video), posted June 16, 2009, accessed April 14, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3dWBL0U--E>.

production and screening of the film. A documentarian known throughout the '90s for his self-reflexive style of filming, often compared to Gonzo journalism, Broomfield also had a history of making films about women with sensational public images, including Hollywood madam Heidi Fleiss and serial killer Aileen Wuornos.³⁰ He claimed the purpose of the documentary was to uncover truths about the matter of Cobain's death. What resulted was a spasmodic collection of interviews with people of doubtful reliability and his own narratorial complaints about Courtney Love.

Two of the eclectic collection of people Broomfield interviewed had absurd but ultimately damaging theories about her. One was Love's own estranged father, Hank Harrison, and the other was a private detective named Tom Grant whom Love had hired to find her husband in the four days he was missing prior to the discovery of his body.³¹ Neither man had ever met Cobain, seen his body, or the scene of his suicide. Both were in the process of writing books that claimed Cobain had been murdered and that Love was involved. In the film, after interviewing these questionable characters, Broomfield announces that he no longer gives any credence to the rumors that Love had had a hand in her husband's death. But he immediately undermines Love's "acquittal," because in the very next scene he goads an interviewee into declaring that "If Kurt wasn't murdered then he was driven to murdering himself."

³⁰ See Michael O'Sullivan, "Documentary: Love Hurts," *Washington Post*, July 17, 1998.

³¹ For the full account of events in this timeline, see Cross, *Heavier than Heaven*, 346–49. Cross claims that Love found Grant in the Yellow Pages.

Most critics panned the film. Richard Harrington of the *Washington Post* said it was a “badly conceived, mean-spirited documentary” that relied on interviews with a “rogues’ gallery of ex-lovers, addict pals and others with an obvious agenda.”³² But Broomfield’s goal was never to win the praise of critics or discredit conspiracy theories, and in fact through his actions, regardless of what he said about the credibility of his interviewees, he reified them. Love had enjoyed largely positive reception for the first time in her career after her image change and *The People vs. Larry Flynt*; when the film emerged, her band was preparing to release their first album in four years in the atmosphere of this warm sentiment. With this documentary, Broomfield took a sledgehammer to the fragile foundation of good press on which Love was to build her comeback by unearthing old weapons to use against her—the purpose of which was to keep Love in her place. The effect was immediate: in the same paper on the same date as Harrington’s scathing review, a second reviewer found the film “riveting,” despite noting poor journalistic practice and attention-seeking behavior from Broomfield, and tellingly concluded his article thus:

As a media-soaked nation, our culture has notoriously short attention spans and memories, but “Kurt and Courtney” [sic] goes a long way toward undoing the meticulous public relations campaign that Love has orchestrated in an effort to whitewash her tarnished image as a trailer-trash junkie. The title of Broomfield’s film indicates that Cobain is an equal part of the story, but the saddest thing about this tragic tale is that his half of the story, his talent and his wounded sweetness, gets drowned out by the shrill and grandstanding behavior of his monstrous wife.³³

³² Richard Harrington, ““Kurt and Courtney’: Blaming It On Love,” *Washington Post*, July 17, 1998.

³³ O’Sullivan, “Documentary: Love Hurts,” *Washington Post*.

This reaction reveals not only the effect, but the underlying, possibly subconscious, motivation for Broomfield's film: Love was doing too well. After an initial period of outrageous behavior following her husband's death, Love rallied to become a media darling—well dressed, demure, and conventionally pretty and feminine. Her talent was recognized, press praised her new presentation, attacks on her mothering ability faded, and mentions of Kurt Cobain diminished. It is that last point in particular that admirers of Cobain could not abide. Love's newfound acceptance and popularity threatened Cobain's legacy, which centered on the idea of him as a tortured genius with Love playing the part of his abuser. Love's apparently successful rebranding after Cobain's death infringed on the primacy of Cobain's own brand, which his fans felt compelled to preserve in death. Broomfield's film catalyzed the resurfacing of briefly forgotten attacks on Love, necessitated by her return to a musical career.

Additionally, Love was caught in a double-bind throughout the '90s between maintaining the subcultural markers that indicate punk authenticity and acquiescing to mainstream pop conventions to attract greater popularity. Whichever end of the spectrum she occupied, Love was the target of accusations of fakery. Where to the mainstream the kinderwhore look, experimental music, aggressive political messages, and penchant for outbursts and getting into fights made Love an incomprehensible and threatening enigma, the young, especially female, punk fans thought she was the embodiment of sardonic, aggressive, feminist rage. Similarly, most of the mainstream media recognized Love's musical and presentational changes as a sign of maturity, but Hole fans saw a commercially motivated sell-out, full of all the detestable

artificiality of Hollywood, while Nirvana fans perceived a threat. In short order, the briefly friendly media responded to these forces, and Love's period of positive press ended.

Catharine Strong notes that Love's attempts to "grow up" in the public eye have been unsuccessful because they "do not correspond with the needs that those most often discussing her in the media have of her" and that "Love is of interest for her more wild and unconventional behaviour."³⁴ Love's image change and Hole's new direction provided Love with opportunities to be legitimately accepted in a world of conventional celebrity. But if this came to pass, and Love achieved widespread popularity rather than merely serving as the deviant role model to "angry young women," then her status might obscure that of the dead Cobain. In his critique of Broomfield's documentary, Richard Harrington stated that Broomfield "seems mostly interested in canonizing Cobain [and] demonizing Love."³⁵ In fact, he might have said that Broomfield's aim was to canonize Cobain through demonizing Love, and this was a torch that a legion of Cobain's fans took up devotedly. If Love were allowed to successfully rebrand herself, there was a possibility that she could overshadow the achievements of Cobain, whose potential for greater accomplishment was limited by his death. The media followed the fans, retreating from praising Love in favor of pathologizing and mocking her, out of a recognition that Cobain's brand held greater esteem than her own.

³⁴ Strong, "I'd Stage Dive, But I'm Far Too Elderly," in *"Rock On": Women, Ageing and Popular Music*, 124.

³⁵ Harrington, "Kurt and Courtney: Blaming It On Love," *Washington Post*.

It is further interesting to note that in the post-Nirvana period of the '90s, the public still showed signs of difficulty accepting Love as a creative entity separate from Cobain. This is in part because it had invested so much time and effort into the discrediting charge that Love was a vampire who lived off her husband's talent and success and possessed nothing of her own to offer, and in part because American society at the end of the twentieth-century still had trouble conceiving of married and childbearing women as autonomous and independent entities. Furthermore, Love's perpetually embattled position as a rock star with its fickle claims to legitimacy reveals the reluctance of the masculinist rock complex to accept her in that role. As Norma Coates says, "real men aren't pop, and women, real or otherwise, don't rock."³⁶

To give Love the kind of recognition her work deserved, to acquiesce to her desire for a rebranding, would chisel away at the masculinist structure of rock at a crucial period when the nature of that genre was experiencing unprecedented alterations. The following decades saw a campaign of consistent ridicule and strategic forgetting of Love and Hole's value to '90s rock that has today contributed to their absence from public memory in any form other than a joke.

³⁶ Coates, "(R)evolution Now?," in *Sexing the Groove*, 52–53.

Conclusion: Fading Memories and Enduring Stories

During the making of *Celebrity Skin* Patty Schemel, Hole's drummer of six years, departed after severe disputes with producer Michael Beinhorn—signaling the beginning of the end for the band. Bassist Melissa Auf Der Maur left the group the following year, after finishing up a series of short tours that included *Beautiful Monsters*, a poorly conceived joint tour with Marilyn Manson.¹ Founders and remaining members Love and Erlandson became entangled in a massive lawsuit with their label Geffen while seeking to be released from their contract, which had seemed like an incredible deal years before. By the time Hole finished disengaging from their clinging label, half of the band had left, Courtney Love had become involved in advocacy for mp3 sharing, and Erlandson also appeared ready to move on. The spark was gone, the '90s were over, and the band dissolved officially in May 2002.

It is evident how the development of Love's reception in the 1990s has reified her reputation as a toxic femme fatale today. Although her earliest press in 1991 teetered between confusion and admiration as it grappled with her loud and aggressive punk music and personality, the trend of her reception took a decided turn upon her marriage to Kurt Cobain. To some, the union of these two musicians must have appeared to be a parody of a traditional American marriage, one in which the

¹ Love and Marilyn Manson never got along. Hole withdrew from the tour after performing fewer than ten shows. Gil Kaufman, "Best of '99: Boston Promoter Says Hole Dropping Off Manson Tour," MTV News, March 12, 1999, accessed March 30, 2019, <http://www.mtv.com/news/512787/best-of-99-boston-promoter-says-hole-dropping-off-manson-tour/>.

tall, brash, energetic Love domineered over the smaller and quieter Cobain. If her bold personality and ambitious career-mindedness were not enough, the disturbing, woman-centered imperatives of her music and stage presentation troubled the rock-consuming population of the United States. The press became instrumental in suppressing her potential impact by accentuating the most sensational aspects of her persona at the expense of her music. The most damaging of these efforts was undoubtedly Lynn Hirschberg's *Vanity Fair* profile, which solidified the misogynistic tropes that would be applied to Love throughout her career.

The persistence of these tropes speaks to the power of the press to interpret phenomena on the behalf of the public, and implies the latent anxieties over changing gender dynamics that the public experienced at the end of the twentieth century. As women gained influence and visibility in politics, the workforce, and in cultural institutions such as music, resistance to the restructuring of gender politics arose. The manifestation of this cultural trend was never more apparent in Love's career than after Kurt Cobain's suicide, a tragedy for which she was implicitly and overtly implicated. Although Love did experience a period of mostly positive press while she was more prominent in Hollywood than music from 1996–1997, considerations of her reverted to their prior contempt shortly after her return to rock in 1998. Love's insurgent presence in her husband's field, even after his death, was perceived as a challenge to his cultural status as a rock star.

This thesis has shown that the caustic nature of Courtney Love's reception throughout the '90s was intrinsically linked to her deviant position as the outspoken and career-oriented wife of Kurt Cobain, whose status as a superstar rock artist

demanding his dominance in a patriarchal society. In order to satisfy the cultural norms that dictated standards in rock music and marriage in the United States at the end of the twentieth century, the press was instrumental in marginalizing Love through demonization and ridicule in order to suppress her own political messages and artistic contributions and subordinate her to the value-laden construction of Kurt Cobain.

This thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship promoting the visibility and value of female artists in popular music. Through this study, I hope to encourage a reconsideration of the social mores that designate powerful and talented women involved with powerful and talented men, such as Courtney Love or Yoko Ono, as scapegoats to be blamed and hated. Only a recognition of this historical trend and the hegemonic structure it reinforces could spur a rejection of the general indifference that allows these scapegoating practices to continue in the media. Such a recognition might also combat the cultural amnesia that is applied to female artists after they retreat from mainstream prominence.

Although Love was a favorite media morsel for roughly a decade, with the passage of time and the careful narrative control the media exerted over her story, it became easier to fixate on the bad and forget the good. Within years of the group's disbandment, Hole began to fade into the historical void always waiting to engulf woman-centered music. Love stayed in the presses as a provocateur and as the widow of Kurt Cobain, her music was fading to faulty memory, while rumors, jokes, and conspiracy theories came to constitute the locus of her modern-day reputation. One might hope that, twenty-five years after the death of Kurt Cobain and the height of

Hole's popularity, Love might be entitled to a reevaluation, or at least a reprieve from the public humiliation she has suffered. If such a mercy is in development, I have yet to see concrete signs of its arrival.

Strategies of Selective Memory

Those without direct access to events and persons must rely on the media to report and interpret events, and that reliance affords the media the opportunity to direct the narratives. The most striking aspect of Courtney Love's media reception is that it was so consistently negative—offering open indictments, brazen insults, and backhanded or qualified compliments—that at times it almost seemed as though the attacks were coordinated. As Susan Faludi notes, “like any large institution, [the press's] movements aren't premeditated or programmatic, just grossly susceptible to the prevailing political currents.”² The case of Courtney Love is a study in the punitive and containing powers of the media when confronted with a phenomenon threatening to normative patriarchal society. The media was happy to repeat negative opinions and interpretations on a loop, presenting the public with an endless stream of vitriol that justified the vilification of a woman for faults and via means that the media itself had created. As Marion Leonard notes of Love's case, “the tendency of writers to use past reports as source material has resulted in mythic profiles being reinforced rather than deconstructed. Moreover, the regurgitation of previous news stories resulted in the information on Hole in the articles under consideration

² Faludi, *Backlash*, 77.

remaining within a narrow framework.”³ Love’s criticism was a self-perpetuating cycle designed to preserve the patriarchal power structure within the popular music industry and traditional ideas of an American marriage.

After the 1990s, journalists continued to invoke tropes that developed in the earliest days of Love’s fame and solidified in Lynn Hirschberg’s 1992 *Vanity Fair* profile, ultimately molding her reputation in the present day. Well after Love retreated from the forefront of public consciousness, she was summoned with the stereotypical images of a dangerous, deranged, and disreputable woman. A reliable media tactic in the twenty-first century has been to use Love’s continued struggles with drug abuse, public outbursts, and legal troubles as justification to excoriate her for being the celebrity nightmare the media had a large role in creating. Love’s universally panned solo effort, *America’s Sweetheart*, released in 2004 when Love’s struggles with addiction were severe, invited a mixture of unbridled abuse and a strange patronizing pity as critics registered what they supposed to be Love’s final decline. One journalist said the song “Sunset Strip” sounded like “if a drug-addled hooker recorded a song while stumbling down Sunset Boulevard,” invoking unnecessary but predictable images of addiction and loutishness to describe a poorly recorded song.⁴ 2010’s *Nobody’s Daughter* was received more positively, but reviewers appeared determined to interpret every song on the now middle-aged

³ Leonard, *Gender in the Music Industry*, 79.

⁴ Sal Cinquemani, “Courtney Love, America’s Sweetheart,” *Slant*, February 15, 2004, accessed March 30, 2019, <https://www.slantmagazine.com/music/courtney-love-americas-sweetheart/>.

Love's album as some variation on "junkie meets slut, slut loves junkie, junkie loves junk."⁵

Even as the grunge era became a memory and Love distanced herself musically from it, she could never be considered on her own terms. As if the average reader needed an introduction to Love after a decade of her name in some of the juiciest news in pop culture, she was reliably introduced with references to her late husband. Love's historical and present-day reception is stained by the same glaring double-standard that existed while she was married to the most interesting man in rock: she never did anything that Kurt Cobain did not also do equally bad or worse, including drug abuse, starting feuds, writing songs on morbid topics with graphic imagery, having private outbursts, and exhibiting scandalous behavior onstage. She, however, is the one who is remembered for such negative behavior while her late husband is posthumously celebrated with near-deification.

Some of the most enduring negativity that surrounds Love today derives from the persistent conspiracy theories generated in the wake of Cobain's death. Nick Broomfield's documentary propelled the opportunistic private detective Tom Grant and Love's estranged father Hank Harrison into the public consciousness, and in 1998 so-called investigative journalists Ian Halperin and Max Wallace approached Grant to use his conspiracy theories as fodder for the book *Who Killed Kurt Cobain?* Similar to Broomfield's documentary, the book acknowledges its own failure to prove that Cobain's death was a murder or that Love had anything to do with such a crime if one was committed; it feebly concludes that the case deserves a second look by the

⁵ Rob Sheffield, "Nobody's Daughter," *Rolling Stone*, April 26, 2010.

police.⁶ No doubt encouraged by the sales and cult status their previous book enjoyed, Halperin and Wallace teamed up again to release a sequel in 2004 titled, *Love and Death: The Murder of Kurt Cobain*, claiming to have amassed further evidence to support suspicion over the manner of Cobain's death.⁷ Love once again was implicated. The book made the *New York Times* Bestseller list and confirmed Love's guilt to fans susceptible to conspiracy theories.

This publicity and apparent commercial profit encourage new tales to periodically generate. The most recent conspiracy comes from Frances Bean Cobain's ex-husband Isaiah Silva, to whom she forfeited her father's legendary 1959 Martin D-18E model guitar, used for the Nirvana MTV Unplugged performance, in their 2017 divorce. Silva filed a lawsuit in 2018 alleging that men, including Hollywood manager Sam Lutfi, came to his home and battered and possibly attempted to kidnap and kill him over the guitar, and that this was done at Love's behest.⁸ Media outlets are reluctant to pass judgement on the outcome of ongoing litigation, but have expressed a degree of skepticism at these outrageous claims.⁹ Yet the fact that Love is

⁶ Max Wallace and Ian Halperin, *Who Killed Kurt Cobain?: The Mysterious Death of an Icon* (Secaucus, NJ: Carol Pub. Group, 1998).

⁷ This book also implies that Love had something to do with Kristen Pfaff's overdose. Max Wallace and Ian Halperin, *Love & Death: The Murder of Kurt Cobain* (New York: Atria Books, 2004).

⁸ Love had previously worked with Lutfi, but she and Frances Bean Cobain both filed and were granted restraining orders against him in 2018, see Daniel Kreps, "Courtney Love, Frances Bean Cobain Granted Restraining Order Against Ex-Manager," *Rolling Stone*, January 2, 2019; For a full account of the publicly available knowledge about Silva's lawsuit see Alexia Fernandez, "Frances Bean Cobain's Ex Sues Courtney Love, Claims She Tried to Kill Him to Get Kurt's Guitar Back," *People*, May 30, 2018; Anna Gaca, "The Full Courtney Love, Frances Bean Cobain Murder Conspiracy Lawsuit is Even Crazier Than it Sounds," *Spin*, June 5, 2018; Andrew Trendall, "Frances Bean Cobain's Ex-Husband Isaiah Silva is Reportedly Suing Courtney Love for Trying to Kill Him," *New Musical Express*, May 30, 2018.

⁹ Gaca, "The Full Courtney Love, Frances Bean Cobain Murder Conspiracy Lawsuit is Even Crazier Than It Sounds," *Spin*.

again embroiled in such an incredible tale does at least appear to support the veracity of a claim that she made in an interview with *Spin* some two decades earlier: “All I have to do is lick my finger, stick it up in the air, and shit sticks to it.”¹⁰

Very few women have ever occupied Courtney Love’s position. While many women throughout history have found themselves the too-young widow of a rock star, those women have hardly ever been an ascending rock star themselves. The only true precedent for Love’s situation is that of Yoko Ono. Love’s consistent comparison to Ono loads any reception of her with the associations of a famous rock femme fatale who has been constructed in the popular imagination as the destroyer of The Beatles. This comparison positions Cobain as the ‘90s John Lennon, a beloved cultural icon married to an ambitious, dangerous woman whose success comes at the cost of her husband’s relationship with his band, his mental stability, and eventually his life. Love’s other cultural doppelgänger, Nancy Spungen, arguably forms an even less flattering connection. Although the popular construction of Spungen no more resembles the actual woman than a funhouse mirror truly reflects its gazers, she is nonetheless the typical example of an unclean, clinging rock groupie who lurks around a male celebrity, siphoning the benefits of his talent because she possesses none of her own. The connections the media persistently drew between Love and Spungen suggested the position they wanted her to occupy in relation to her husband: the dominated arm-candy lover of a powerful, charismatic man.

¹⁰ Craig Marks, “Endless Love,” *Spin*, February 1995.

While the media's widespread abuses against Love no doubt sullied her reputation with pop culture consumers, that work was augmented by powerful rock musicians whom she had angered or who had simply decided, likely based on what they had read about her in the media, that they despised her. An example of the latter includes Tori Amos, who despite having no close connection with Love was a known fan of Cobain's music. Amos's "Professional Widow," released in 1996, is purportedly about Love; it castigates the addressee for being a "starfucker" and mentions a man blowing out his brains.¹¹ Thematically, Nine Inch Nails' "Starfuckers, Inc." takes a similar approach; rumors that this song was written about Love were stoked by the knowledge of her past relationship with frontman Trent Reznor.¹² But perhaps the most striking musical indictment of Love was the Foo Fighters' "Stacked Actors."¹³ Dave Grohl, former Nirvana drummer and frontman of the Foo Fighters, implied in interviews with Mary Anne Hobbs' Radio 1 show and *New Musical Express*, among others, that the song was about Love, and that the lyrics derided all that is "fake, plastic, unglamorous, and unreal."¹⁴ This indictment of Love from a surviving member of Nirvana was particularly harmful. As someone who possessed the capital of "authenticity" attacking an artist who had always struggled to

¹¹ Tori Amos, "Professional Widow," *Boys for Pele*, Atlantic 82862-2, 1996, CD.

¹² Nine Inch Nails, "Starfuckers, Inc.," *The Fragile*, Interscope Records 0694904732, 1999, 2 CDs.

¹³ Foo Fighters, "Stacked Actors," *There is Nothing Left to Lose*, RCA Records 07863 67892-2, 1999, CD.

¹⁴ "Trent Hates Manson Hates Courtney Hates Dave Hates Courtney Etc.," *New Musical Express*, October 12, 1999; "No Love Lost with Foos," *New Musical Express*, November 15, 1999.

obtain it, Grohl's derision of Love as a fake and a poseur hit hard; his was a voice that fans of Nirvana would listen to.

Over time, Love's accomplishments became totally overshadowed by her dramatic interactions with other celebrities, public outbursts, and internet flame wars. Despite her determination and efforts to succeed as a serious artist, popular media was determined that Love should never be remembered as anything more than scandalous. Her Hollywood-driven comeback in the later '90s was limited by Love's own unrepentance, but also by the organized efforts of opportunists such as Tom Grant, Nick Broomfield, and Hank Harrison who stood to make money from her vilification. Perhaps the media followed a similar logic: maybe scandal sold better. But that does not explain the forgetting process the media facilitated in regard to Love's achievements. In 2014 *Rolling Stone* published a retrospective article detailing the best albums of 1994. Whereas the magazine's original year-end awards list of the best music of 1994 had declared *Live Through This* the Best Album of that year, in the retrospective list Hole's work had fallen by seven places without comment.¹⁵ The demotion of Love's work diminishes the memory of how impactful the album was at its inception, contributing to public forgetfulness.

Catharine Strong's 2011 study on grunge and memory among Australian fans found that Love was remembered predominantly as a vampiric figure, hated and ridiculed by her interlocutors. Asked about Cobain's death, one responded, "I just remember being pissed off that it was him and not Courtney Love" and that they "had

¹⁵ "1995 Music Awards," *Rolling Stone*, January 26, 1995; "1994: The 40 Best Albums from Mainstream Alternative's Greatest Year," *Rolling Stone*, April 17, 2014.

this perception of her at the time that she was this groupie slut who, you know, got to go out with Kurt Cobain and then, you know, [had] driven him to kill himself.”¹⁶ Few had anything gracious to say, only a single woman expressed any sympathy for Love’s situation after Cobain’s death, though several admitted to liking her music in the ‘90s.¹⁷ Although Strong’s is among the very few studies published on the memory of grunge music and artists, her conclusions regarding Love are supported by the universal barbs and jibes found in the comments sections of Hole music videos, online reviews, and news stories. Her authenticity is denied, her authorship is contested, and she remains pigeonholed into the roles of a woman both monstrous and pitiful.

Final Thoughts

While many once prominent female rock artists of the ‘90s have faded into obscurity—left off of retrospective considerations, glossed over in classes, and blocked out of the rock repertory, Love’s name lives on through her association with her husband, a permanent fixture in the canon. Through the suppressive efforts of the media and fans, twenty-five years after the death of Kurt Cobain and the release of Hole’s most influential album, her memory is only one of a provocateur and succubus.

In recent years there has been a surge of interest in the treatment of women in popular culture and media, coinciding with the #MeToo movement that seeks to

¹⁶ Strong, *Grunge: Music and Memory*, 122.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122-123.

rectify the systemic abuses and harassment committed against women in public and in the workplace. While legal wins for the movement have been limited, it has brought to light long accepted and tolerated abuses against actresses and pop stars such as Kesha, and stirred not only public outrage at their mistreatment, but also an increased interest in listening to their stories—even when those stories challenge the formerly unquestioned privileges of men. Likely as a result of this new public interest, some have begun to look into past abuses. Recently, late night host John Oliver addressed the mistreatment of female public figures in the media when he dedicated the subject of his March 17, 2019 show on *Last Week Tonight* to the lambasting of Monica Lewinsky, another young woman of the 1990s who found herself the subject of a deeply sexist, media-driven campaign to sully her reputation.¹⁸ Oliver portrayed Lewinsky as a funny, intelligent survivor, and allowed her to speak on her own behalf in an interview in which she addressed the relentless slut-shaming, mockery, and moralistic grandstanding heaped upon her—and the audience was receptive, cheering at her triumphs. Such examples suggest that the U.S. may have reached a point where we can look back at the wrongs committed against female public figures of the antifeminist backlash period and take steps to rectify them.

But concurrently, there are opposing signs that suggest that American society is still loyal to traditional narratives about women in the spotlight, and especially those who might steal that spotlight from a man. In 2018, *A Star is Born* received its third reboot, this time starring the historically provocative and controversial Lady

¹⁸ See Last Week Tonight, “Public Shaming: Last Week Tonight with John Oliver (HBO),” YouTube, March 17, 2019, accessed March 20, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yq7Eh6JTKIg>.

Gaga alongside Bradley Cooper. While the plot of the film has undergone some alterations and updates with each retelling, the basic narrative remains constant. A talented male artist with an addiction to alcohol becomes attracted to and quickly marries an unconventional, small-time female talent. At first the new power couple basks in the spotlight together, but soon the public appears to develop greater interest in her. Meanwhile the husband's addiction worsens to the extent that his career falls into decline and eventually he, despairing over his ruined career and marriage, commits suicide. The film, originally presented to American audiences in 1937, is the narrative of a woman who, in obtaining fame and success in her husband's field, thrives at his expense, resulting in his shameful decline and death. Courtney Love and Kurt Cobain lived that story. And whether they were cognizant of it or not, audiences recognized the plot they were watching unfold, because it is one that speaks to some of most ingrained prejudices Western society retains about the place of women and men in the spotlight and in marriage. Boiled down to its simplest terms: a marriage is a microcosm of patriarchal Western society; if a woman appears to overpower her husband in any way, the entire structure crumbles.

The fact that the new *A Star is Born* was received so well attests that nearly two decades into the twenty-first century, society preserves these notions of marriage, success, and fame. In one of numerous laudatory reviews, *The New York Times* said that the film “wrings tears from its romance and thrills from a steadfast belief in old-fashioned, big-feeling cinema. That it's also a perverse fantasy about men, women,

love and sacrifice makes it all the better.”¹⁹ American society is invested in these performances of gender dynamics just as it is invested in the mythology of the male rock god, which demands that Kurt Cobain must be propped on a pedestal and Courtney Love burned at the stake.

These sociocultural norms resist change, and fact-checking alone is likely not sufficient to disperse the most tawdry and defamatory rumors that linger around Love. That would require a fundamental reconfiguration of the manner in which the press and public evaluate her. It would require reassigning merit and agency to her artistic contributions and recognizing the hyperbolic and sexist nature of her historical reception. Separating fact from fiction in a heavily mythologized story such as that of Courtney Love is difficult, and something I have struggled with mightily over the course of this project. But if we care about how female public figures are treated in the future, we would do well to turn toward cases such as hers with an ear prepared to listen. She is, after all, a musician. The truth of her merit is in her music.

¹⁹ Manohla Dargis, “‘A Star is Born’ Brings Gorgeous Heartbreak,” *New York Times*, October 3, 2018.

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