

"Women in Rock Music" Revisited: A Response to Sawchuk's Critique in *Atlantis*, Vol. 14, no. 2

Emily Nett
University of Manitoba

Although my role in the actual research and writing of the manuscript "Women in Rock Music" (published in the Fall 1984 issue of *Atlantis*) was minimal, I do assume the greater responsibility for whatever feminist theory it contains. The article was based on a term paper that Deb Harding, then a MA student, wrote to fulfil the requirement for a Women's Studies course I taught. Owing to my age and education, I was, and still am, more in tune with classical music than with any of the variety of styles of rock music.¹ Rock music was Deb Harding's "thing," to use the *au courant* term from the early rock and roll era. Since I lost contact with Deb after her migration to New Zealand, I alone shall try to defend our joint effort, much maligned by Sawchuk in Volume 14, no. 2 of *Atlantis*. I am grateful to do so.²

First, I would like to correct what I consider to be several apparent misunderstandings. For one, contrary to Sawchuk's assertion, I do not disdain popular culture. In fact, the aesthetic distinction between it and so-called "high culture" escapes me entirely. Aesthetic qualities can be found in all forms of art and artifact and, these being productions of human imagination, I certainly do not "presuppose that artistic creations should be realistic" in the sense that Sawchuk seems to imply by that ambiguous term.³ For another, Sawchuk contends that, in the end, the confusion of "sex" and "sexism" in the article leaves Harding and Nett "in a world without sex, the 'real' world — the world of the home, which has not been a particularly liberating space for women."⁴ Yet, neither from my reading of quotes that she provides, nor from my rereading of the

text, can I find the basis for such a conclusion. On the contrary, Sawchuk's interpretation of my idea of "reality" for women is way off the mark, similar to her implication that I perceive the home as being devoid of sex.

As I have said elsewhere more recently, my criterion for the depiction of women's reality in creative works is "authenticity."⁵ According to the feminist literary critic, Cheri Register, "authenticity" in artistic productions about women requires "representations of 'female experience,' 'female consciousness,' or 'female reality'."⁶ Representations of women must be non-stereotypical. However (still going by Register's definition), a work of art need not be politically orthodox or interpretive to be considered authentic; consequently, "female reality is not monolithic, but has many nuances and variations."⁷ To all of this I heartily subscribe and, therefore, I find Sawchuk's own interesting analysis of one lesbian (I presume) musician's way of dealing with "sex" within the rock music genre to be quite "realistic." The "real" world of women is everywhere that women are located, and women are indeed to be found in all imaginable as well as actual places — neither just "in the home," nor just in previously forbidden erotic encounters (which, not incidentally, take place in the home for too many unwilling female child victims of patriarchal desires), but certainly there too. The "real world" refers to that which women *do*, not what they *are* in the masculinist constructions of the feminine, including the lyrics of popular songs among other texts.

Perhaps I, too, have misread Sawchuk, for I am deeply disturbed by the paralogism I perceive in her complaint that Harding and Nett have confused "sex" and "sexism" — more than I am by her unwarranted inferences about our stance on popular culture or the nature of reality for women. Of course, we conflate "sex" and "sexism," and for very good reasons. How else can a feminist conceptualize "sexism" unless she assumes that "sex" and "sexuality" are both ideas that have developed historically within the patriarchy, reaching their zenith in very recent times?

Sawchuk says that she "is interested in a social construction of sexuality which is constantly reproduced for subjects in signifying practices, such as rock and roll."⁸ Although she has not further elaborated the concept, she states that her "idea of sexuality as produced by different social technologies is taken from Michel Foucault's work on sexuality."⁹ According to Foucault:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct; not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasure, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistance, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.¹⁰

However, even as Sawchuk accepts that "sexuality" is a social construction, she posits, in contra-distinction to Foucault, a "natural self-understanding of our sexuality."¹¹ *Natural?* Since when and in what culture have humans even had *natural* self-understandings? And is the sex-desire celebrated by Smith in "Gloria," as Sawchuk describes the lyrics and music, *natural?* On this score, I must side with Foucault in his notion that desire, in the contemporary guise of "sex" (as the "unique signifier and as a universal signified"),¹² is merely another of the many mythical elements in the current construction of sexuality. As I understand Foucault, "sex" is the lynch-pin in the social construction of sexuality because the mere idea of it as possession of or by another body has been elevated to the position of the holiest of holies in contemporary Western culture. For "sex," people are prepared to risk all, for the myth has it that, if they do not experience sex, they are nothing. "Sex" is believed to be absolutely

essential to every person's health and welfare. Even in old age, once defined as a sanctuary from the hormonal and sensual tumescence of the adolescent and adult years, there is no escape from the sway of "sex" over people's lives in the texts of our times. Because sex-desire is socially created, it cannot be *natural*. Sensuality has indeed a natural (physio-neural) basis, but hardly the socially constructed "sex" of our time and place.

More absurd to me, however, is the notion that, by acting against the former taboos and engaging in what were once defined as "perverted" bodily practices, power can be subverted. The idea that women, merely practising forms of bodily stimulation and release besides the marital, heterosexual, and genital ones, and by sharing the male discourse that exalts them, can rebel effectively against the patriarchy, appears to be one of the major contributions that Sawchuk has earmarked as the influence of "recent French feminism, and the work of British feminists centred around the now defunct journal *m/f*."¹³ Feminists, unlike Foucault who refuses to grant an authorial claim to one sex for the current signifying practices, must surely recognize that, historically, the social construction of sex and of sexuality is a masculine fabrication.¹⁴ It is in the phallogocentric culture that bodily pleasures that are limited to the types that males can experience, preferably under socially prohibited circumstances and with tabooed objects, have been elaborated into "desire" and raised up as the ultimate in human experience. In this culture, it is the other sensual pleasures available only to female bodies — menstruation, pregnancy, parturition, nursing, etc. — that have been denied or turned into their opposites — pain and disgust.¹⁵ Sexologists' recent "discovery" that females share with males the ability to experience sex-as-desire does not alter the fact that so-called liberation from sexual taboos is more of a gain for men than it is for women, just as liberation from late nineteenth-century industrial society's family roles has been.¹⁶ Women may pursue "sex," experience it in many forms and enjoy it, but that does not give them the power (except in marginalized groups) to define the wider range of their own bodily experiences as pleasurable over and against the patriarchal definitions of them as dirty, fearsome, and evil.

Sawchuk criticizes Harding for using the method of content analysis to uncover the symbolic representations of the feminine in rock songs played *in*

1981 by radio stations in Canada (not, as Sawchuk contends, the entire genre of rock; nor ahistorically).¹⁷ Quite the opposite, I welcome Sawchuk's semiotic analysis of a rock song with a difference. Sawchuk's work is different from Harding's, but not better. First, it should be noted that Harding's research was conducted prior to the publications of the "new French feminists"; therefore, Sawchuk had the advantage of having another method from which to choose. Second, as Sawchuk herself observed, the questions addressed by the two studies are not the same, and it seems to me that the methods are appropriate to their specific concerns.¹⁸ Surely a claim of superiority for post-structuralist methodology over other methods used by feminists is vulgar de Lauretis at its worst.¹⁹

One can only be concerned about the current modishness of feminist semiotics theory in North America if it demands an orthodoxy never before envisaged by feminist scholars.²⁰ I surely hope it does not. I also hope that other scholars who put the theory into practice are not merely content, as Sawchuk claims to be, to make a "'critique' of culture," instead of "reinstating" a new morality "in the place of a patriarchal one."²¹ The one claim of unity among such diversity in theory and method within our feminism has always appeared to me to be the shared belief that, by taking into account the experiences (i.e., "subject position") of women as well as men, we shall be able to devise a new and better morality. If we do not share that belief, and our work reflects it, then what does feminism mean?

NOTES

1. I would not argue the point made in Kimberly Anne Sawchuk, "Toward a Feminist Analysis of 'Women in Rock Music': Patti Smith's 'Gloria'," *Atlantis*, Vol. 14, no. 2 (Spring 1989), p. 48, that "rock music is not [a] uniform or homogeneous musical experience." The technical name for the "subdivisions" she enumerates is *style*, and the fact that various styles of music have emerged within the rock genre does not mean that "there is no such thing as rock and roll *per se*." The distinction is made by Robert Scholes *Textural Power: Literacy Theory and Teaching of English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), p. 2, as follows: "*Genre* refers to things regularly done and *style* to a way of doing things.... Genres are social and durable; they persist through changes in style. A style is more local, often personal.... Both genres and styles, however, manifest themselves in recurrent patterns or codes that can be constructed by analysing a set of individual texts." As Sawchuk notes on p. 54, whereas the personal style of k.d. lang parodies the country music genre, it is still inside the latter's codes. The point at which a personal style becomes a *social* style (i.e., a genre) is the point at which its power is apparent. Social style is a

- representation of a group's cohesiveness; I do not believe this is the case in any of the women's styles of rock music cited by Sawchuk.
2. Because the content analysis was done by Harding for Deborah Harding and Emily Nett, "Women and Rock Music," *Atlantis*, Vol. 10, no. 1 (Fall 1984), pp. 61-76, I shall not be able to address myself to specific criticisms regarding the detextualization and distortion of the lyrics of which Sawchuk, p. 46, accuses her. I would say, however, that detextualization is not inherent in the method of content analysis; it may be a possible weakness in this study where no checks on reliability were made.
 3. Sawchuk, p. 49.
 4. Sawchuk, p. 57.
 5. Emily M. Nett, "The Naked Soul Comes Closer to the Surface: Old Age in the Gender Mirror of Contemporary Novels," *Women's Studies*, Vol. 18, nos. 2 and 3 (1990).
 6. Cheri Register, "American Feminist Literary Criticism: A Bibliographical Introduction," *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, Josephine Donovan (ed.), University of Kentucky Press, 1975.
 7. Register, p. 12.
 8. Sawchuk, p. 49.
 9. Sawchuk, p. 45.
 10. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Vol. 1, An Introduction*, translation by Robert Hurley, New York: Vintage Books, 1980, p. 106.
 11. Sawchuk, p. 45.
 12. Foucault, p. 154.
 13. Sawchuk, p. 49.
 14. One such feminist theorist who recognized this, upon whom Sawchuk herself relies, is Teresa de Lauretis, *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinemax*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
 15. In an interview, Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, Leon S. Roudiez (ed.), translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine and Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1980, p. 10, says "Mallarmé asked, 'What is there to say about childbirth?' I find that question much more pungent than Freud's well-known, 'What does a woman want?' Indeed, what does it mean to give birth to a child? ... The arrival of a child is, I believe, the first and often the only opportunity a woman has to experience the Other in its radical separation from herself, that is, as an object of love." If, as Kristeva says, psychoanalysts do not talk much about childbirth, neither do women who write songs for the popular culture and perform them.
 16. See Barbara Ehrenreich, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment*, Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974. Her thesis is that the male revolt against the breadwinner ethic preceded the feminist movement of the 1960s. She included a description of Beat males who "rejected both job and marriage," and their media transformation into "beatniks" (pp. 52-53). The original Beats (the word derives from "beatitude") "had sex with countless women (and men)," and they engaged in many other defiant acts. According to Ehrenreich, Jack Kerouac, for one, wrote *On The Road* "almost a decade before the emergence of the mass counterculture, before Marcuse, before Woodstock, before hippies and flower children," in the early 1950s. Alan Ginsberg, for another, flaunted his homosexuality "at a time when almost nobody found this condition 'gay'" (p. 54). Historically, the Beats appeared simultaneously with rock and roll, and had the same working class origins. Rebellion against heterosexuality and marriage is not an original ploy with feminists and, to my mind,

- is not a very successful strategy for changing the power relations between the sexes.
17. For Sawchuk to collapse "sociological" and "content analysis" into a single discourse is surely to fall into "the trap of representational coherence," of which she accuses Harding and Nett, p. 49.
 18. Sawchuk, p. 45.
 19. de Lauretis, p. 169, describes the two main emphases in post-structuralist semiotic theory. The one is focussed on the *subjective* aspects of signification; the other stresses its *social* aspects. She equates the former with opportunities to acquire knowledge about women, and the latter, about woman. She says regarding the objective and subjective, "it seems to me that only by knowingly enacting and re-presenting them, by knowing us to be both woman and women, does a woman today become a subject." (p. 186)
 20. I have other concerns about the popularity of this new theoretical development in academic feminism but I can only mention two briefly. One is the matter of its relevance for, or its accessibility to feminists outside the university; the other is the attraction it has for academic men in the humanities and social sciences, who have vigorously resisted the older brands of feminism but have been irresistibly drawn to this new theory. Both these matters require further discussion by feminist theorists and practitioners...
 21. Sawchuk, p. 49, uses the term "moralism" instead of "morality," apparently to cast Nett and Harding together into the role of the "censure of pleasure and sexuality." I use the term "morality" to refer to rules of conduct by which people live in groups.

Stone Bubbles

I come to you for therapy; you say, *go back, go back and find what it is that sinks you.*
 I close my eyes on a flattened stone that skips away
 from my grey flannel skirt with the white flannel
 lamb, flaring away from my four-year-old legs.
 All these stones, collected on the table, gathered
 in corners, under the windows, along the sill,
 flecked in the sun, dark like wool. What do they
 hold, these finished rocks, tossed in the sand,
 confiscated from streams, congregated here
 in the eaves of permission? Knowing wouldn't
 scare me, not burning wire hairs against
 a skinny, shivering thigh, not the sound of anger,
 crashing from grown-up mouths like rocks against
 the tides in my ear, not the smell of semen, damming
 the roof of my mouth, or the lulling erosion of pain
 into a trance, interior blankets, eddyng over
 the grainy hours. Because they must be someone else's
 memories. Someone braver than I, who cast mistrust
 over the wake of its own rippling reflection, someone
 lifted, clean and whole, sparkling in the hands of a
 lover. The polished stones won't tell, their colors
 edged in darkness; not until whatever holds them
 together crumbles in the press of my palms
 covering over the lids of my eye. It's that
 crumbling, not the darkness, that scares me.

*Judith Chalmer
 Montpelier, Vermont*