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## "I Want It That Way"

Teenybopper Music and the Girling of Boy Bands

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You are my fire  
 The one desire  
 Believe when I say  
 I want it that way.

- Backstreet Boys, "I Want It That Way"

[1] Among recent trends in youth music culture, perhaps none has been so widely reviled as the rise of a new generation of manufactured "teenybopper" pop acts. Since the late 1990s, the phenomenal visibility and commercial success of performers such as Britney Spears, the Backstreet Boys, and 'N Sync has inspired anxious public hand-wringing about the shallowness of youth culture, the triumph of commerce over art, and the sacrifice of "depth" to surface and image. By May 2000, so ubiquitous were the jeremiads against teenybopper pop performers and their fans that Pulse, the glossy in-house magazine of Tower Records, would see fit to mock the popularity of Spears and 'N Sync even as it dutifully promoted their newest releases. Featuring a cover photo of a trio of differently outfitted "Britney" dolls alongside a headline reading "Sells Like Teen Spirit"--a pun on the title of the breakthrough megahit ("Smells Like Teen Spirit") by the defunct rock band Nirvana--Pulse coyly plotted the trajectory of a decade's-long decrescendo in popular music: from the promise of grunge, extinguished with the 1994 suicide of Nirvana lead singer Kurt Cobain, to the ascendancy of girl and boy performers with their own look-alike action figures.

[2] Yet the cover's tone of mocking condescension toward teenybopper pop music is also facilitated by a gendered hierarchy of "high" and "low" popular culture that specifically devalues the music consumed by teenage girls. In Pulse, this high/low distinction is represented through the figures of Cobain and Spears; yet its organization by gender concerns not merely biological sex (Spears as a female, and thus less legitimate, performer than Cobain) or commercial popularity (Spears as the greater "sellout") but the status of the feminized mass of consumers with which Spears, in this case, is associated and even conflated. Like the term "teenybopper," a mid-1960s coinage for an early adolescent girl "held to be devoted to perpetual stylistic novelty, as in fashion or social behavior" (according to American Heritage Dictionary), this high/low hierarchy is based around notions of the fickleness, superficiality, and aesthetic bankruptcy of the material forms that girls' desires take in popular culture.

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Operating through a discourse of degraded women's consumption dating back to the eighteenth century, it collapses producers and markets, symbolically feminizing male vocal groups that have had special appeal for young female consumers. The power of this hierarchy, however, is not limited to the organization of notions of good and bad art. Rather, as in the Pulse example, it makes it possible to render an aesthetic critique in the form of a patronizing depiction of the teenybopper herself.

[3] "When Pop Becomes the Toy of Teenyboppers," an article by New York Times music writer Jon Pareles, offers one example of such a depiction. In Pareles' portrayal, the mass of girl-fans poses a threat to the authority of the male rock critic, the traditional arbiter of popular music value. Referring to these fans' enthusiasm for teenybopper acts, Pareles writes:

This season belongs to the kiddie-pop brigades. Applause is passé; the reaction most eagerly sought by pop culture right now ... is a high-pitched squeal from a mob of young girls. When it's directed at males, that squeal signifies romantic fantasy while it tests out some newly active hormonal responses. Directed at females, it's a squeal of sisterly solidarity and fashion approval. And for the last few years, its volume has been steadily rising until it threatens to drown out anything with more mature audiences in mind. (1)

[4] As in earlier diatribes against the excessive influence of women in the marketplace, Pareles' article depicts contemporary pop music in a contradictory fashion. In it, girls are both consummate consumers, defined through their relationship to commodities, and powerful cultural purveyors, able to "toy" with the music industry. At the same time, their consumption practices conform to a predictable pattern of (same sex) identification and (other sex) desire, preempting possibilities that blur the binaries of gender and sexuality. Yet it is in its conclusion that "When Pop Becomes the Toy of Teenyboppers" speaks most revealingly to the issues of girls' social agency and cultural authority. For as Pareles finally assures readers (presumably those "mature" audiences struggling to be heard above the din of girl-screams), the cultural dominance of "kiddie pop" is, like adolescence, a temporary annoyance: "an intermission between crises ... less troublesome than genuine rejuvenation could ever be" (32).

[5] This essay takes issue with such characterization of teenybopper pop as a hiatus between cultural moments of obvious social and political import, finding instead that it articulates multiple and overlapping crises. Indeed, I suggest that in order to critically analyze teenybopper pop, we must first shift our thinking about youth culture and crisis, resisting and recasting the assumption that the latter can only be expressed in the form of "troublesome" (i.e., implicitly masculine) expressions of angst or rebellion (Frith, McRobbie). Instead, following a trail blazed by recent feminist scholars who establish the centrality of women in postwar rock music cultures (O'Brien, McDonnell and Powers, Raphael,

Whitely), this essay inquires into the cultural logic of musical practices seen to cater to, and generate desire among, girl audiences, interrogating the deeper structuring by gender of the music, its producers, and its consumers. How, I ask, is the pleasure of girl-consumers elicited and negotiated in music deemed so formulaic or inauthentic that even pop's habitual defenders rush to distance themselves from it? How do boy band performers represent themselves as cultural icons to be consumed, visually as well as aurally? Why and how do they inspire such noisy, ecstatic response? Is the consumption of teenybopper music as clearly governed by the "rules" of heterosexual division as Pareles's article suggests, where girl-fans want boys and want to be like other girls? What kind of agency do girls enact in their passionate embrace of "teenybopper" music? This last question is not to restrict the field of cultural producers to men; indeed, it is precisely to the fraught terms of the visibility of women or girl performers, especially as sexualized objects, that I return at the end.

[6] My primary example here is the Backstreet Boys, the most iconic--and arguably, the "original" (admittedly a tricky word in this context)--of the various boy bands that rose to international fame in the late '90s, inspiring a degree and intensity of fan adulation often compared to Beatlemania. Like the Beatles, especially in their early incarnation as four long-haired "lads from Liverpool," the Backstreet Boys perform a "girlish" masculinity mediated through their appropriation and adaptation of black performance styles--in this case, styles associated with black male vocal-harmony groups of the 1980s and early '90s. Such "girlish" masculinity is, in turn, an important source of their success with fans, who use it, singly and collectively, to negotiate their own fluid gender and sexual desires. Not surprisingly, this girlishness has also provoked considerable anxiety (typically expressed as disdain for the music), raising questions of what the Backstreet Boys "really" are--girls or men? black or white? gay or straight?--and of what it means to be a consumer of "girl" music. For answers to these questions I turn primarily to the evidence of music video, not to scant the music itself but to emphasize the importance of visual spectacle to the communicative "pacts" between boy-band performers and their audiences.

[7] Although I coin the phrase "girlish" masculinity to describe the fluid (if not necessarily any more liberating) gender identity of the Backstreet Boys, I do not mean to suggest that such performance of gender is unprecedented. Indeed, both of the performers I began with, Britney Spears and Kurt Cobain, have attracted attention for their flouting of social norms of gender and sexuality - Spears for flaunting her sex appeal despite her youth, Cobain for self-consciously blurring the lines between hetero/homo, male/female, and girl/boy. From his famous appearance in a yellow prom dress on the MTV show "Headbanger's Ball," to his often quoted claim that "everyone is gay," to his band's derivation of the title of its most famous song, "Smells Like Teen Spirit," from the name of a deodorant (Teen Spirit) specifically marketed to teenage girls, Cobain drew attention to the constructedness of rock masculinities, offering an image of the male rock star as gender and sexual changeling. Similarly, many of Cobain's alt-rock

contemporaries, following the example of established performers such as David Bowie and Prince, were noteworthy in the 1990s for performing versions of abject, submissive, or sexually ambiguous masculinity. In this way, bands such as Sebadoh and performers such as Beck and Billy Corgan (of the band Smashing Pumpkins) experimented with male (rock) guises and tropes. What separates these performances of non-normative masculinity from the "girlishness" of more recent boy bands, however, is the latter's specific and intentional address to girls. For even as many of these male musicians performed non-normative gender and sexual identities, their masculinity ultimately remained secure and (or to the degree that) retained broad public appeal among straight male consumers. In contrast, male teenybopper performers display a feminized masculinity that constructs male fan desire as homoerotic even as it both shapes and serves the erotic desires of straight girl fans. As my reading of boy band performance reveals, playing with the codes of masculinity is thus related to, and yet distinct from, playing specifically to and for girls' pleasure.

[8] It almost goes without saying here that I treat teenybopper pop as replete with social and cultural significance, although detractors almost universally characterize it in terms of its disposability, evanescence, and aesthetic inconsequence. In fact, such characterizations afford a useful place to begin an inquiry into how teenybopper music, and in particular the discourse of boy bands, sheds light on the cultural imagination of girls as consumers, citizens, and subjects. Disparagement of teenybopper music as inauthentic or simply "bad" is not merely a function of its being formulaic or mass-produced. Rather, the terms of such aesthetic discrimination are filtered through racialized concepts of gender and sexuality that are themselves negotiated, conceptualized, and contested in popular culture. It follows that the term "teenybopper" is not only descriptive, either of a type of music or of a girl of a certain age and disposition; instead, the term serves a simultaneously enabling and disciplinary function, affording/assigning girls a means of cultural visibility and shaping the ways they are encouraged to live out their social identities as gendered subjects.

A lot of people want to discount us. Because unlike a rock band or a garage band, they don't think we paid our dues. A lot of people don't know we've been together seven years. We weren't playing bars, but we played high schools all over the United States. High schools aren't bars, but teenagers are tough crowds, man.

- Backstreet Boy Kevin Richardson (Wild, 45)

[9] Most contemporary popular music genres, from rock to country to hip hop, incorporate within their popular mythologies a notion of authenticating space, or a place that credentials the authenticity of a performer, especially one who later makes it big. In rock this authenticating space varies, although it is most often imagined as a garage or a series of clubs (the seedier the better, in keeping with the presumed authenticity of male working-class identity); in hip hop it is the proverbial "street," a metaphor that

calls to mind the social and economic forces that shape the urban locales most often associated with the music. What these disparate authenticating spaces share is an opposition to the domestic, or to spaces perceived as having a domesticating influence on musical creativity and genius. They are therefore highly gendered places, although female popular music performers have long found ways to make use of them or to envision alternative sites of musical authenticity.

[10] In contrast, contemporary teenybopper pop has no such authenticating space written into its popular mythology, in part because it is not assumed to have the same organic genesis as these other genres. Rather, consistent with its self-conscious embrace of artifice--its elevation, as Simon Frith and others have argued, of style as a sign of authenticity--the point of origin of teenybopper pop is more often located within the music industry itself, underscoring the necessity of a cast of "supporting professionals" (Attali, 79), especially the producer, in translating the music into pop spectacle. This is the case with the Backstreet Boys, formed as the result of a 1993 open audition sponsored by Louis Pearlman, a Florida entrepreneur searching for young talent to follow up on the success of earlier male vocal acts such as Menudo and New Kids on the Block. Held in Orlando, a city famous for its dedication to spectacle, that audition turned up four of the group's members--Howie Dorough, A.J. McLean, Nick Carter, and Kevin Richardson--aspiring young performers drawn to the TV and film opportunities generated there by Disney and MGM studios. (Before he was "discovered," Richardson, for example, had been earning money singing in a Disney World show.) A fifth was found when Richardson recruited his cousin Brian Littrell, who quit his junior year of high school in Kentucky to join the group.

[11] Under Pearlman's sponsorship, the Backstreet Boys honed their skills playing gigs at such distinctly inauthentic spaces as area high schools and local tourist spots like Sea World, eventually releasing Backstreet Boys, their eponymous debut album, on the independent Jive label in 1995. Yet it was not until 1997, two years after the group had garnered a rapturous following among teenage girls in Europe, Australia, and Asia, that the Backstreet Boys earned any significant commercial success in the United States. Once they did, a constant stream of hits followed, first with singles from the re-released U.S. version of Backstreet Boys, then with the follow-up Millennium, which entered the Billboard Top 200 Album chart at No. 1 in June 1999, breaking country singer Garth Brooks's previous record for most copies of an album sold in its first week of release. (Black and Blue, released in 2000, would not fare as well, its sales figures lagging behind industry expectations). As is so often the pattern, such success led to a highly publicized lawsuit in which the group sued Pearlman and his company Trans-Continental, alleging the misappropriation of profits. (The suit, which the group eventually won, was further complicated by the fact that Pearlman, in the interim between Backstreet Boys albums, had gone on to create the rival boy band 'N Sync.) The ensuing break from the manager they alternately dubbed "Poppa Lou" or "Big Poppa" enabled the Backstreet Boys to rewrite their history: on the one hand, to disassociate themselves from an implicitly homosexualizing "Daddy" figure while on the other, to

cast off the "baggage" of aggressive industry sponsorship more readily associated with the Motown "girl" groups of the 1960s. Eschewing these signs of unstable masculinity, official web sites (e.g., <[backstreet.net](http://backstreet.net)>) emphasize a narrative of male artistic auto-genesis, highlighting rituals of male bonding and group chemistry, and recasting the band's early touring days in high schools across the nation as a form of "paying dues." Although fans remain well aware of Pearlman's roles as a patron and mentor, mention of the fateful Orlando audition has thus, in the course of the group's development, given way to a more "appropriately" gendered narrative of origins.

[12] Trivial as these details may seem, they bring to light a rather obvious, if often ignored, notion in discussions of popular music: namely, that even the most patently commodified cultural formations are replete with cultural - not merely sociological or anthropological - interest and value. In the case of the Backstreet Boys, such qualities are intimately bound up with the group's self-conscious, if not necessarily self-critical, emulation of contemporary African American male vocal groups as a source of musical authenticity. Music writer Rob Sheffield has memorably dubbed the Backstreet Boys "princes among thieves" in mocking homage to their singular talent among contemporary boy-band plunderers of black musical legacies, especially of the hip-hop flavored New Jack acts (such as Boyz II Men and New Edition) of the late 1980s and early '90s ("1999 Pazz and Jop"). Although Sheffield doesn't make the connection, such cross-racial theft/emulation cannot be separated, analytically speaking, from the Backstreet Boys' performance of boyish charm and innocence. In fact, their appeal to young girls - not to mention the many adults that deem the Backstreet Boys safe for girls' consumption - depends on a certain concerted distancing from the more sexually frank and staunchly heterosexual lyrics, dance moves, and vocalization of the very black vocal groups they tout as models. For example, while they appropriate the harmonic singing style and melodic hooks of such groups, lyrically the Backstreet Boys avoid overt sexual reference, instead imbuing mild sexual come-on with ambiguity (e.g., "I want it that way") or voicing fantasies of fidelity and devotion ("I'll be the one") that mirror fans' own expressions of loyalty (Christgau). Notably, too, such lyrics are sometimes evacuated of specific gender reference, making them amenable to a variety of erotic interpretations and appropriations, including those of gay and lesbian fans.

[13] The Backstreet Boys thus take their place in a familiar and ongoing historical trajectory of "white" male interpreters of "black" sounds for (overwhelmingly though by no means exclusively white) "girl" audiences. More specifically, they construct an appealing and marketable "girlish" masculinity by simultaneously evoking and distinguishing themselves from the very groups they take as models. Backstreet Boy Kevin Richardson unwittingly explicated this gender/race dynamic in an interview with Rolling Stone in January 2000, when the group seemed commercially invincible. Asked about the Backstreet Boys' potential to break away from their "teenybopper" reputation, as boy groups like the Beatles eventually did through self-consciously experimental albums such as Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band, he observed, "We'd

like people to look at us like Boyz II Men or New Edition, only we're white" (Wild, 44). In a similar vein, in noting his group's uneasiness with the "boy band" label, and thus implicitly with girl-audiences, Jeff Timmons, a member of the group 98 Degrees, is quoted as observing, "It's curious to me that people see Backstreet Boys when they look at us, and not Boyz II Men or BLACKstreet or Dru Hill" (Taylor, 73). Offered with a certain naive and no doubt self-serving bewilderment, such comments cloak what might be called white racial ambition in the guise of "props" (respect) for black musical peers. In particular, the phrase "only we're white" seems disingenuous on at least two counts: first, because it downplays the structuring by race of male performers' cultural visibility and commercial viability; and second, because it naturalizes the whiteness of the Backstreet Boys, although at least two of the group's members are of Puerto Rican heritage. (In fact, Howie Dorough narrowly missed out - to no less than "Latin" sensation Ricky Martin - on a coveted spot in the boy band Menudo, a group that would have publicly conferred "Latino" identity on him.)

[14] Similarly, the sexual and racial "innocence" of the Backstreet Boys, although seemingly less objectifying of female sexuality than the performance of groups who make such objectification explicit, tenders a form of romantic instruction that has the potential to be a powerful source of the domestication of female sexual desire. For example, in addressing themselves to conventionally feminized fantasies of romantic intimacy, songs bearing titles such as "As Long as You Love Me" and "Anywhere For You" envision women's and girl's social agency primarily in terms of their ability to break boys' hearts--a dubious power that hinges on their ongoing definition as objects of male desire. Much the same could be said of the performance of "girl" singer-dancers such as Spears, who treads a notoriously slender tightrope between female sexual self-assertion and self-objectification. The ambiguousness of Spears's self-representation is brilliantly referenced, if further complicated, in the title track of her second album, "Oops ... I Did It Again," a phrase that simultaneously describes Spears's persona's "innocent" seduction of boys and (girl) consumers alike. In short, although "adult" voices more often fault contemporary rock for their misogyny and their objectifying portrayals of women, it bears remembering that conceptions of what is culturally "safe" for girls may be no less deeply invested in patriarchal notions of female sexuality and subjectivity, including notions of female domestic virtue. Seen in this light, what seems protective--for example, encouraging girls' interest in the Backstreet Boys over the more "sexy" Britney Spears--actively reinscribes both the heterosexism of the dominant culture and its anxious policing of girls' sexual expression.

[15] Here I am borrowing a page from third wave feminist discourses, which in their embrace of female musicians who evince "control" over the display of gender and sexuality (from superstars Janet Jackson and Madonna to lesser known figures such as Ani DiFranco), significantly revise assumptions about relations between girls' safety and their sexual agency. Within a culture (not least the specific culture of the music industry) that continues to pressure women to conform to patriarchal scripts of femininity, third wave feminism envisions sexual "liberation" for

women and girls in terms of a prerogative to play with the expression of sexual desire, and to do so in ways that acknowledge, but do not privilege, male heterosexual desire. What seems especially relevant here is third wave feminism's articulation of feminist resistance as a messy process, one inevitably tethered to the very expectations, conventions, and policing mechanisms it sets out to disturb. Hence the radical potential of modes of women's popular performance in which normative femininity is simultaneously displayed and disrupted, recuperated and transgressed (Maglin and Perry, Alfonso and Trigilio).

[16] Such insights of third wave feminism point to the pitfalls, especially within a discussion of teenybopper pop, of pitting fan agency in opposition to the directives of commodity culture. For one, such an opposition assumes that fans merely project their desire on to the figure of the pop star, failing to recognize that popular music culture is where desire is tested out and negotiated, inculcated and disciplined (Hall, 474). Indeed, girl-consumers also use boy bands, among the most slickly produced and marketed youth/music industry products of recent memory, in intensely personal, individually empowering, and occasionally unsanctioned ways. This includes recasting the industry imperative to consume boy bands according to a straightforwardly heterosexual model of desire - a model materialized through the fashioning of different personas for each member of a boy band (one's the shy one, one's the prankster, one's the romantic, one's the rebel, and so on) - and instead using boy-band fan practices to mediate intimate relationships between and among girls.

[17] The more general point here concerns the futility of analyses of youth music culture that force a choice between the artificiality of the market and the authenticity of pleasure, rather than insisting on the instability of both. Along these lines, here is what an informant tells the authors of the 1986 volume Re-Making Love: The Feminization of Sex about the meaning of her Beatlemania: "Looking back, it seems so commercial to me, and so degrading that millions of us would just scream on cue for these four guys the media dangled out in front of us. But at the time it was something intensely personal for me and, I guess, a million other girls. The Beatles seemed to be speaking directly to us and, in a funny way, for us" (Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs, 31). More than forty years later, the obvious and unabashed commercialization of boy bands likewise does not mitigate the ability of fans to experience agency in and through their identities as fans. Indeed, the very commercial address of boy bands - their construction of cultural consumption according to preordained choices as a "proper" exercise of girls' agency - turns out also to be a key source of their appeal in this regard.

[18] Here the importance of music video as a means of the visual representation of a boy band such as the Backstreet Boys cannot be overstated, since it's predominantly through video that they perform their willingness to submit to the erotic possession of fans. Such videos offer millions of viewer-listeners (including those do not have access to increasingly costly live concerts) an illusion of physical proximity to otherwise remote performers, complementing

the illusion of intimacy fostered through pop vocal techniques and technologies of amplification. They also make the stars available to audiences as embodied spectacle, ceding to us an authority to enjoy them as objects of visual pleasure. As anyone who has ever danced to MTV, BET, or VH-1 knows, the fact that music videos are typically consumed privately, in living rooms and bedrooms, complements this fantasy of ownership and makes possible distinct varieties of fan practice and pleasure not encouraged by recorded sounds alone. Such effects are heightened in the context of pop videos, where the focus on dance implores viewers to construct a mimetic relation to the body of the performer--a dynamic illustrated by the practice in which fans carefully memorize dance moves performed for the camera.

[19] The spectacularization of the body in music video performance renders it a particularly charged arena for the cultural representation and articulation of gender--especially, in this case, of masculinity and male sexuality. In making this claim, I don't mean to understate the enormous implications of music video for the mediation of women's and girls' social, sexual, and cultural agency. As Lisa Lewis and others have shown, the advent of music video created new opportunities for women's cultural authorship of female gender and sexuality, even as it multiplied avenues for the cultural subjectification and exploitation of women and girls as sexualized objects. In particular, video fostered the ability of female performers to construct modes of visual address that, in appealing specifically to (young) female audiences, also offered critical commentary on women's and girls' relation to publicity itself. Yet whereas female gender traditionally has been defined in relation to women's perceived availability to a sexualizing and objectifying (male) "gaze" (one reason it has been such a powerful vehicle for female performers, from Madonna to the rappers Eve and Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott), the spectacle of the eroticized male body poses a direct threat to normative constructions of male gender and subjectivity. However much music video has "routinised" (in Paul McDonald's words) the spectacle of the male body, heterosexual masculinity still depends on a certain control over looking and being seen that is seemingly undermined by the positioning of male performers as consumable objects of visual pleasure (McDonald, 280). On the other hand, this threat to stable masculinity must be understood within a larger social context of gender inequality, in which male subjects in general enjoy an ability to negotiate bodily display on their own terms. Examples of such male authority to negotiate visibility in the context of the perils of cultural performance are readily available: in male rock performance, for example, the mediating status of the guitar as a prophylactic appendage (or "strap-on") of phallic masculinity is well documented, whereas in male rap video performance displays of the pleasures of male homosociality are often "balanced out" by the presence of scantily clad women or objects (such as cars) that specify an end-point of heterosexual desire (Walser, Waksman). As these examples suggest, moreover, although they are articulated through the conventions of musical genre, such strategies of negotiating male gender and sexuality are profoundly raced, consistent with the long history of the spectacularization of African American men (and to different degrees Latino and Asian American men) as bodies inscribed by

racial difference, and thereby subject both to sexual fetishization and heightened state (police) scrutiny.

[20] The Backstreet Boys occupy a complex position in this discussion, insofar as their cultural self-fashioning as white male teenybopper idols (i.e., as cute and accessible "boys") requires forms of erotic address that threaten their ability to hold on to normative masculinity. For one thing, as a vocal group (the "band" moniker notwithstanding), the Backstreet Boys cannot fall back on rock tropes of instrumental virtuosity as a means of securing heterosexual masculinity despite their "girlish" looks, as the Beatles once did. Nor does their boy band image - the product of a complex series of racial negotiations of gender - allow for the sort of open representation of heterosexual eroticism that would assuage such anxieties. Such exigencies requiring the Backstreet Boys to be primarily visible as spectacularized bodies are at the root of what I am calling their performance of a "girlish" masculinity.

[21] To illustrate how this girlish masculinity is both enacted and interpreted, by various communities of audiences, I want to turn to the example of "I Want It That Way," the Backstreet Boys' debut single from their Millennium album, and a song that received heavy radio and music television airplay throughout the summer and into the fall of 1999. (Less noticed but just as significant, it spent an impressive fifty-two weeks on the Billboard Adult Contemporary Chart, which tracks music played on radio stations targeting middle-aged audiences). A mid-tempo love ballad, "I Want It That Way" is sung in voices full of ardent longing--although for what or for whom, beyond a generic and non-gender-specific "you," the lyrics, coy to the point of incomprehensibility, never specify. While it's clear that the song concerns a perilously endangered relationship, the yearning it conveys is indefinite, compelling listeners to supply their own interpretations of such equivocal phrases as, "I never wanna hear you say/ I want it that way." Such lyrical banality is arguably a source of the quality of universal appeal of "I Want It That Way," its platitudes aptly and even touchingly communicating the very difficulty of giving language to desire. "The music sweeps forward, delicate and soulful; the words might have been computer-generated," observed New York Times music critic Ann Powers, one of the few professional music writers sympathetic to the appeal of teenybopper pop. Yet like the very best pop songs, she added, it has the power to transport listeners beyond the immediate moment, into a realm of "pure pleasure" (B5).

[22] Set at an airport, the music video for "I Want It That Way" translates this pleasure into visual form, re-imagining the song as a paean to the mutual "romance" between the Backstreet Boys and their female audience (lyrical reference to the imminent break-up of this love affair thus conveniently excised from the video's representation). Although the video effects such translation in the form of a rudimentary narrative that concerns the band's departure for an unspecified location, such a "plot" is, in fact, little more than a contrivance used to stage images of the Backstreet Boys performing, first in a sunlit aircraft hangar (before a gleaming plane later revealed to be a private "Backstreet Boys" jet, a winking

reference to Lou Pearlman's business interests in the air charter company Trans-Continental, which provided him the capital to invest in the Backstreet Boys), and subsequently in an airport terminal, where band members' white-attired figures float against a backdrop of bustling humanity. In these performance scenes, desire is elicited and manifested in suave costumes, private jets, and sparkling surroundings that exude an air of wealth and excitement. More important, it is physically and visibly articulated in the Backstreet Boys' own looks, which are trained directly at the camera, creating an impression of nearness to the viewer at home. Indeed, except for occasional overt technical obtrusions (for example, in obvious edits or shifts between medium-shots and close-ups), there is little in this first part of "I Want It That Way" to mediate between the viewer's gaze and the bodies and faces of the performers, which are displayed in a manner that nurtures fantasies of authenticity and spontaneity, despite their obvious stylization and visual framing. The band further develops these impressions of immediacy and sincerity through hand and facial gestures that illustrate and embody the lyrics, such that a finger pointing at the camera indicates "you," while a hand pressed over the heart translates "want" or "desire."

[23] As the song builds to its climatic bridge and final chorus, however, the scene at the airplane hangar shifts to include a group of waving and cheering girl fans, who presumably have arrived at the airport to wish the Backstreet Boys bon voyage. This triangulation of the "look" previously shared between the members of the band and the television viewer serves a series of interrelated purposes. For one, it represents the erotically charged relationship between the Backstreet Boys and the female "mass," interspersing shots of the crowd bearing homemade signs and flowers with close-ups that depict individual fan desire in terms of the "ecstatic" looks worn by various girls. Such depiction of the mass not only represents fandom as a privileged mode of consumption, creating a space for home viewers to imagine themselves as members of this desiring body, but it also establishes heterosexual "looking relations" as the proper mode in which to view the performance--a point underscored by the absence of fans who might be seen as inappropriate objects of the Backstreet Boys' own desire (i.e., boys and very young girls). Yet paradoxically, the image of the crowd is also a prelude to the video's acknowledgment of the "real" distance that must inevitably intercede between the Backstreet Boys and their audience. This necessity--already latent in lyrics addressed to "my one desire," even while spoken to an audience of millions--ultimately manifests itself in the video's final image of the Backstreet Boys, backs turned to the crowd and the camera, as they approach the airplane that will carry them to parts unknown. Here the gleaming "Backstreet Boys" jet that awaits them signifies the transnational appeal of U.S. teenybopper pop, the market for which propels the group (or so the video would lead us to imagine) to new sets of adoring fans in far-away locations.

[24] Back in the United States, meanwhile, fans catapulted the "I Want It That Way" video to a position of undisputed popularity, in a public exercise of their gendered agency as consumers. They were abetted in their efforts by "Total Request Live" ("TRL"), the

enormously popular MTV after-school video countdown show that has succeeded in translating a staple of radio marketing--the listener request--to a visual medium. In the "TRL" version of on-air radio requests, email and studio-audience "shout-outs," in which fans explain why they cast their vote for a particular video, periodically air while the video is playing. Through this practice of giving viewers a platform to broadcast their preferences before a live television audience of their peers, "TRL" capitalizes on the popularity of a select number of videos while elevating and spotlighting the figure of the female fan, making her an object of viewer identification/desire and, arguably, the show's real "star." Through her, in particular, otherwise atomized viewers imagine themselves as part of a virtual "community" of fans joined in the collective project of voting in the day's favorites, a fantasy underscored by the posting of voter tallies for the day's top videos.

[25] Where "I Want It That Way" was concerned, this fan community mirrored the enthusiasm and loyalty modeled by the figure of the female mass in the video itself. Not only did fans rally to ensure the months-long dominance of "I Want It That Way" on the "TRL" chart (until the video was forcibly "retired" from the countdown by executive decision of the show's producers), but they came to constitute a significant presence in the studio audience and in the crowds that daily gathered in Times Square, outside of MTV's New York studios where "TRL" is broadcast, vying for a chance to appear on camera. And much like the fans depicted in "I Want It That Way," the girls who lined the streets of Times Square to support the Backstreet Boys frequently appeared bearing signs addressed to their favorite band members. This was not, however, a case of real life imitating a commercial, of fans simply playing out the roles that the video had preordained for them. Rather, it exemplified the ability of fans to use music video to render their own practices more visible and more "popular." Indeed, for the overwhelmingly female audience that voted for it, the appeal "I Want It That Way" lay in its respectful representation of fans and fan pleasure, not merely its depiction of the Backstreet Boys as objects of visual desire. At the same time, the democratic rituals of "TRL" tend to re-affirm a gendered hierarchy that imagines consumption as a privileged and proper mode of girls' social visibility and cultural agency. Once again, the question looms of the overlaps and intersections among girls' pleasure, their cultural agency, and capitalist rites of "choosing."

[26] A rather different interpretation of "I Want It That Way" was offered in September 1999 by the all-male neo-punk band Blink-182, whose video for their breakout single "All The Small Things" (off of the album Enema of the State) comically spoofed "I Want It That Way" as well as videos by 'N Sync, 98 Degrees, Britney Spears, and Ricky Martin. Framed by scenes that specifically parody the opening and closing scenarios of "I Want It That Way," "All the Small Things" alternates between images of Blink-182 playing "themselves" and images of the trio playing a dorky and feminized boy band or, in the case of Spears, to play an equally dorky girl. In each instance, the video's debunking of the image of familiar teenybopper stars centers on the failure or inversion of an erotically charged moment, such that a scene meant to be seductive instead comes off as hopelessly foolish or downright

embarrassing. For example, in Blink-182's take-off of the Backstreet Boys "All I Have to Give" video, band members ruin the illusion of sexy suavity by smiling to reveal missing teeth. A romp on the beach with a buxom, bikini-clad model (from 98 Degrees's "I Do") becomes a messy, awkward affair, and a contemplative seaside walk with a canine friend (from a Britney Spears video) mutates into a girl singer's frantic attempt to resist a dog's stubborn efforts to expose her behind. Qualities of teenybopper pop sincerity are upbraided in scatological fashion when a doe-eyed male singer, his face knitted with concentration, is revealed to be sitting on a toilet; and in a parody of Martin's "(Livin') La Vida Loca," a scene of sexual titillation involving hot candle wax turns more painful than pleasurable. Finally, in a concluding riff on the scene representing the female mass from "I Want It That Way," we see the boys from Blink-182--Tom, Mark, and Travis--surrounded by a group of screaming and crying fans, only this time the crowd includes the bikini-clad model waving a placard announcing "Travis, I'm Pregnant" as well as a naked male fan holding aloft a sign that reads, "I Want You That Way."

[27] The relentlessly sexualizing manner in which "All the Small Things" caricatures teenybopper pop, especially the music and performance of boy bands, stands out in these examples. The salient issue here is not the video's mockery of teenybopper music per se or even its parody of pop as sexual spectacle, but its representation of the superficiality and banality of the music through a satire of the masculinity of its male performers. In particular, in devaluing teenybopper pop as a "feminized" form of cultural expression from which "real" men would naturally wish to distance themselves, "All the Small Things" elevates (punk) rock as a sphere of "healthy" masculinity and male erotic self-display. Hence whereas the pleasure of the Blink-182 video lies in the band's affectation of the sorts of highly stylized looks and body language with which the Backstreet Boys communicate their sincerity and earnestness in "I Want It That Way," it can only "work" to the degree that these signs of boy-band "effeminacy" are juxtaposed with images of more conventionally gendered punk masculinity, as embodied in aggressive guitar strumming, intentionally rough or jerky body movements, and looks that either directly challenge the viewer or avert the camera's gaze altogether. In the juxtaposition of the pregnant swimsuit model and naked the male fan whose sign implicates the Backstreet Boys in the cultural mediation of "queer" desires, the end of the video crystallizes the homophobic undertones of this opposition of punk virility and pop girliness. Anxiety about heterosexuality also potentially explains the video's otherwise gratuitous satire of Ricky Martin, who has a large gay following and is himself widely rumored to be gay.

[28] To the degree that it hinges on the stable differentiation of "real" boy bands from those who only play at being boy bands, "All the Small Things" belies certain inevitable tensions and ironies, however. The most interesting of these concerns the enthusiastic reception of the Blink-182 video by the very audience of teenage girls whose desires it irreverently caricatures. A major hit on "TRL," where it shared a place in the Top Ten with the Backstreet Boys's "Millennium" video (about which more shortly), "All the Small

Things" earned Blink-182 a level of cultural visibility and commercial success more associated with teenybopper performers. Whereas the band initially had set out to lampoon boy bands, it thus effectively became one through its popularity among those consumers who also constitute the major marketing demographic for teenybopper pop. Here the example of "All the Small Things" raises once again the question of the status of the fluidity of girls' musical consumption, the parameters of which would seem to be able to accommodate even an "anti-boy band" such as Blink-182. Such fluidity is surely attributable, at least in part, to the fickleness of commodity culture, or to girls' complicity with homophobia and misogyny; yet to read it solely in narrowly sociological terms would be to miss the larger point of the video as a site of pleasurable negotiations, erotic as well as aesthetic. For example, the intimate knowledge of pop music videos necessary to correctly read and interpret the allusions in "All the Small Things" strongly suggests that its "proper" audience is not boy rock fans but girl fans of teenybopper music. Here it doesn't hurt that the sound of "All the Small Things" already borrows heavily from pop, that its lyrics are as ambiguously productive as those of "I Want It That Way," and that its melodic chorus melts into a round of sing-song-y "na na na nas." (Were such address overt, it could only lead to heated speculation about the band's pandering to a "girl" audience.) Girls are potentially responding as well to the fact that the members of Blink-182 are so obviously relishing the opportunity to act out a boy-band fantasy in a manner that resonates, despite its mocking intentions, with their own fan practices. Not least, of course, are those momentary images in "All the Small Things" that suspend Blink-182 in the ambiguous space between parody and appropriation, creating opportunities for female viewers to consume them in much the same eroticized fashion in which they would consume the Backstreet Boys.

[29] The success of "All the Small Things" on MTV thus points us back to the issue of the social and cultural value imputed to cultural products explicitly associated with girls in the public imagination. On the one hand, in a context of male musical performance that specifically associates "selling out" with the attraction of a significant female audience, the popularity of "All the Small Things" among girls threatens Blink-182's ability to hold on to punk authenticity, a quality already significantly compromised (at least from the perspective of many a punk aficionado) by the band's forays into pop. Acknowledging as much, Mark Hoppus noted to a Rolling Stone reporter, "We're like Fisher-Price: My First Punk Band" (Edwards, 34). On the other hand, although Blink-182 has enjoyed some of the success of a boy band (to the point of appearing in photo spreads next to the Backstreet Boys in teen magazines), a variety of factors, not least the longstanding association of punk with rebellious, white working-class masculinity, have defrayed the sorts of anxieties about gender that "All the Small Things" expresses in its send-up of teenybopper idols. Seen in this light, "All the Small Things" is a campy indulgence, not an "authentic" performance.

[30] Blink-182 are not the only ones to have raised the question of the sexuality of either the Backstreet Boys or their male fans. Indeed, the question of whether male fans can be straight if they

derive pleasure from a band that is so obviously "gay" has been a recurring topic of debate on the Internet, where detractors of boy bands vehemently deem the "Spice Boys" too "girly" for male consumption. Such anxiety also informs the recent parody by "shock jock" Howard Stern, "If I Go the Gay Way," a song that mines homophobic (specifically scatological) images of anal sex, proposing that "I Want It That Way" renders its listeners gay (that is, they become "Backdoor Boys"). Even Robert Christgau, an influential Village Voice rock critic who has defended the Backstreet Boys, citing the excitement of their live shows, voices his respect in tellingly ambivalent terms, repeatedly affirming that they "don't suck" (Christgau, 71).

[31] Such apprehensions about the sexuality of contemporary boy bands are not "merely" homophobic, I would argue, but conflate homophobia (expressed particularly as the fear of male homosexuality) with a misogynist contempt for girls and girls' pleasure. Even more than this, the binary of "ideal" versus "girlish" masculinity designates broad categories of the desirable and the undesirable, deeming certain subjects and cultural practices erotically appealing (at least within hegemonic representations) while repressing others. According to this binary, in other words, not only are boy band performers and their (male) fans insufficiently masculine--a notion exploited in the Blink-182 parody--but girls' desire and fan practices are nascently "queer," that is to say, threatening to hegemonic conceptions of (male) desirability.

[32] The contradiction here is that the sort of ecstatic fan desire portrayed as deviant in "All the Small Things" can only be produced by keeping at bay any signs of eroticism among boy performers. (This goes for boy bands as well as for pop-punk rockers.) The careful regulation of signs of male homosexuality in turn creates opportunities for girls to engage in modes of consumption that have a markedly homoerotic component, although they are typically characterized in terms of (heterosexual) "puppy love." This is the case with forms of private consumption, which are often collective despite their appearance of being individualized (e.g., involving girls sharing sexual fantasies about boy bands or dancing to videos together); but it is especially evident at live performances, an important feature of which is their mediation of collective practices of dressing up, screaming, dancing, grabbing each other, and swooning. Indeed, one of the values of live shows--particularly those at large stadium venues, where most of the audience is likely to experience the performers as tiny blurs on a far-away stage--is precisely their fostering of opportunities for girls to engage in forms of female bonding, intimacy, and collective self-display. At a Britney Spears concert in July 1999, for example, young female concert-goers not only appeared dressed in the singer's signature garb, the most popular outfit being the sexy schoolgirl uniform worn by Spears in her "Baby One More Time" video; but just as often they dressed in identical outfits of their own design, a practice that advertised their affiliation with and affection for each other, rather than their affiliation with the teenybopper star. The desire such practices negotiate is alternately hetero-, homo-, and autoerotic; they are also highly dynamic, liable to shift in response to the performance.

[33] The dynamism of fan practices is further illustrated by girls' strategies of responding to the characterization of boy bands as "gay" and therefore musically inept as well as insufficiently masculine. In particular, in adapting the genre of the coming-out narrative to go public about their admiration for the band, fans of the Backstreet Boys demonstrate their ability to strategically undercut disparaging portrayals of their desire, which have in turn been used to denigrate boy bands. "The media has given the Backstreet Boys such a teenybopper image, that many people don't want to like them for fear of ridicule," writes Oceana555@aol.com (who identifies herself as female) on Backstreet.net, an unofficial Backstreet Boys website (the slogan of which also happens to be "Keeping the Pride Alive," in following with a Backstreet expression that ostensibly refers to fan self-respect, not Gay Pride). "I was one of these people, and I kept my posters and knowledge of them a secret, except to my closest friends." Oceana's commentary on "secret" fan desire is echoed by J.C. Herz, a technology writer for the New York Times, who begins her glowing review of the Backstreet Boys "Puzzles in Motion" CD-ROM game in the following manner: "If I were saying this on TV, I would request a wig and disguise my voice. Because I have something to say, and it needs to be heard. But it's deeply embarrassing, and potentially damaging to my reputation. I've been struggling with this for a while now. And I think at this point, it's best to be honest with myself and my readers" (E4). Some fans, on the other hand, have simply chosen to embrace the "girliness" of the Backstreet Boys, adopting a position that ironically reveals the contradictions of homophobic discourse. As a teenager named Amy Dawson recently confided to a Rolling Stone reporter, "I love the Backstreet Boys. I don't care if they're gay"--an observation the reporter clarifies by noting that "Amy and her friends often explain that gay does not mean, you know, gay. It's just a generic insult" (Dunn, November 1999, 107). Apparently, too, the Boys themselves are OK with their gay male fans. "They're cool," affirms Backstreet member Howie, "They know we all, you know, date girls" (Dunn, May 1999, 44). Meanwhile, drag kings have appropriated the butch potential of the boy band phenomenon (as well as the double entendres of phrases like "I Want It That Way"), and issues of "closeted consumption" were addressed in a recent cover story in The Advocate, the national gay and lesbian newsmagazine, about boy bands' substantial following of gay male fans (Epstein).

[34] Notwithstanding such talk of their "gayness" in the wake of the success of "I Want It That Way," the Backstreet Boys have managed to retain their status as teenybopper icons while bringing their performance of masculinity more in line with the ideal modeled by Blink-182 (when playing itself) in "All the Small Things." In part, they have achieved this revision of their gender and sexual identity through the strategy of claiming to have transcended their "teenybopper" origins, with band members working to establish musical authenticity through their assumption of diverse artistic roles as video directors, songwriters, and even producers. The point here is not whether these roles indeed confer greater agency over musical production, but that their very signification in this context as more artistically complex and demanding, requiring greater degrees of skill and expertise, is

implicitly predicated on a gendered binary of producers and performers, where the latter is (perhaps predictably) feminized. This opposition complicates the more familiar binary of production and consumption, which pits (male) performers against (female) audiences, making visible the gendered division of labor that emerges from within the category of production itself. It also speaks to the capitalist logic that sees performance as the less "productive" of the two terms.

[35] More immediately, this process of re-masculinization has taken place within the realm of visual representation, specifically in the video for "Larger Than Life," the follow-up single to "I Want It That Way." An homage to fans ("Every time we're down/ You can make it right /And that's why you're larger than life"), "Larger Than Life" is a noteworthy departure from previous Backstreet Boys videos; as a contributor to the Backstreet.net bulletin board put it, in the video the band "breaks out of their 'pretty-boy' image." In fact, "Larger Than Life" draws on the notion of outer space as a "frontier," a familiar staple of both U.S. foreign policy and U.S. popular culture (especially cinema and video games), to construct a narrative of imperial masculinity. Set in the year 3000, "Larger Than Life" depicts the Backstreet Boys as space explorers piloting sleek combat vessels and wielding futuristic weapons, although against whom or what is unclear. Indeed, the aggressive images on the screen acquire power precisely through the vagueness of the identity of the enemy, suggesting that the Backstreet Boys need no alibi or justification for their violence. The staging of this violence outside of a specific context of defense or retribution further allows for it to be fetishized as a source of visual pleasure in and of itself. The nationalist subtext of these images is underscored by the band's quasi-military outfits, which bear the conspicuous imprint of pumped-up pectorals and rippling abs--in short, costumes that are a far cry from the suave, flowing ensembles of "I Want It That Way." Gone, too, are the illustrative gestures and facial expressions of the earlier video, which gave the dance the appearance of being organically rooted in the performance, to be replaced by "harder," robotic moves highlighted in a dance routine keyed to the song's "break" (i.e., that part where the melody falls away to reveal an underlying rhythmic structure).

[36] Unlike in "I Want It That Way," in "Larger Than Life" such dance routines, which borrow explicitly from the moves of African American performers, enable the Backstreet Boys to weave in and out of the racial boundary, alternately and even simultaneously constructing themselves as "white" and "black." This is not only because the dance sequence features a cadre of backing dancers, including African American performers, who lend it an air of racial-ethnic diversity and inclusivity that mediates the terms of their appropriation. Whereas their starring roles in the video are as the protagonists of a narrative of militarized outer-space conquest closely associated, in historical memory and in the broader cultural imagination, with heroic "white" masculinity, in the dance segment of "Larger Than Life" they also invoke "blackness" through their embodiment of rhythm, a quality closely associated with African American music. Once again, moreover, we see how race and gender work together, such that race can only be conceived and represented in gendered terms. In particular, the signs of

"blackness" in "Larger Than Life" help to mediate the Backstreet Boys' revision of the "girlish" image they previously cultivated through strategies of self-conscious distancing from African American male vocal groups. Here the band's performance rests on a logic of white male gender self-fashioning that depends on a profoundly sexualizing construction of African American music and (male) performers. Indeed, the very continuity of this logic, which remains unchanged from "I Want It That Way" to "Larger Than Life," contrasts with the Backstreet Boys' own cultural agency as "white" performers to produce varying and fluid representations of gender.

[37] The issue of the erasure of women's cultural agency becomes even more complicated when we consider that the immediate precedent for the dance sequence of "Larger Than Life" is Janet Jackson's "Rhythm Nation," a video that imagines Jackson as the sexy, charismatic, and "in control" female leader of a "nation" of popping, robotic dancers. Like "Larger Than Life," "Rhythm Nation" uses militaristic imagery to represent Jackson's command--not merely of the "citizens" of this imagined community, but also of the desires of her fans and of her own self-representation (not incidentally, "Control" is the title of the album on which "Rhythm Nation" appears.) In so doing, moreover, the video demonstrates the plasticity of nationalist and/or militarist discourses, which may be deployed to divergent ends. Here "Rhythm Nation" differs markedly from "Larger Than Life," which frames its dramatic dance sequence with images of bloodless battle to communicate the "global supremacy" of the Backstreet Boys, who appear in it (at least outside of the dance sequence) as action-figure heroes. Although set a thousand years in the future, this narrative has a "real," present-day analog in the success of the Backstreet Boys as teenybopper pop superstars who have symbolically conquered the "world" (in hegemonic terms, the global marketplace) through the sales of their first two albums. In contrast, "Rhythm Nation" centers on the synchronized moves of a multiracial cast of hard-bodied dancers to project an image of black female authorship of, and authority within, the "real" world. Whereas the uniform-like costumes and the "underground," post-apocalyptic landscape of the video are vaguely threatening of past and future violence, the video also conveys an image of solidarity, uniting Jackson, her dancers, and her fans in their mutual allegiance to the song's driving, catchy beats.

[38] Whereas "I Want It That Way" opened up a space within the video for the representation of girls as sexual and cultural agents, in "Larger Than Life" the centrality of the spectacle of white male violence relegates female subjects to the status of decorative, "background" objects devoid of agency, sexual or otherwise. Moreover, whereas the video for "I Want It That Way" translated a song without any lyrical reference to girl-fans into a showcase of their desire, "Larger Than Life," a song ostensibly dedicated to the girls who made the Backstreet Boys international teenybopper pop icons, is in contrast devoid of any representation of fans or, for that matter, of girls at all. When female figures do appear in the video, meanwhile, it is as fetish objects resembling the models from Robert Palmer's well known "Addicted to Love" video. Dressed in bondage-fantasy red vinyl bodysuits and sporting cleavage, glossy

red lips, and heavy eye make-up, they are conspicuously silent, present as symbols of the band's desire, although in keeping with the notion of women as "distractions" from prototypically "masculine" concerns such as space conquest, the Backstreet Boys never directly interact with them.

[39] My intention in thus comparing "I Want It That Way" and "Larger Than Life" is not to establish the superiority of the earlier video; indeed, by most measures "Larger Than Life," with its bigger budget, greater degree of polish, convincing special effects, and energetic dance routine, would be judged the more accomplished of the two. Moreover, the band's subsequent video for "The One," a montage of images from the band's 1999 world tour, re-focused attention on the dynamic between the Backstreet Boys and the female mass, featuring as well erotically charged images of the on-the-road "male bonding" of band members themselves. Rather, I end with "Larger Than Life" because of its significance in suggesting the degree of social license granted for male sexual and gender "experimentation" even within the context of "girl culture." Although girl-fans were overwhelmingly responsible for voting "Larger Than Life" to the No. 1 position on "TRL" until its mandatory retirement, it was a video that "even guys like," as a fan named Lindsay recently commented on a Backstreet Boys message board. It is in this sense, too, that the Backstreet Boys differ crucially both from important female influences such as Jackson and female "colleagues-in-kiddie-pop" such as Spears. Indeed, Jackson and Spears are crucially important to my reading of the Backstreet Boys insofar as their performances evoke the boundaries of race and gender routinely crossed by boy bands as a means of furthering their cultural agency as male performers. In short, whereas the phenomenon of "girling" may implicate boys/men as well as girls/women, it remains a question whether the "power" of "girl power" belongs, after all, to the boys.

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