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Interview with the Spice Girls
— Kathy Acker (1997), Vogue Magazine

The Spice Girls are the biggest, brashest girlie group ever to have hit the British mainstream. Kathy Acker is an avant-garde American writer and academic.

They met up in New York to swap notes - on boys, girls, politics. And what they really, really want. Fifty-second street. West Side, New York City. Hell's Kitchen - one of those areas into which no one would once have walked unless loaded. Guns or drugs or both. But now it has been gentrified: the beautiful people have won. A man in middle-aged-rocker uniform, tight black jeans and nondescript T-shirt, lets Nigel, the photographer, and me through the studio doorway; then a chipmunk-sort-of-guy in shorts, with a Buddha tattooed on one of his arms, greets us warmly. This is Muff, the band's publicity officer. We're about to meet the Girls...They are here to rehearse for an appearance on Saturday Night Live. Not only is this their first live TV performance, it's also the first time they'll be playing with what Mel C calls a 'real band'. If the Girls are to have any longevity in the music industry, they will have to break into the American market; and for this they will need the American media. Both the Girls and their record company believe that their appearance here tonight might do the trick. There is a refusal among America's music critics to take the Spice Girls seriously. The Rolling Stone review of Spice, their first album, refers to them as 'attractive young things ... brought together by a manager with a marketing concept'. The main complaint, or explanation for disregard, is that they are a 'manufactured band'. What can this mean in a society of McDonald's, Coca-Cola and En Vogue?

However, an e-mail from a Spice fan mentions that, even though he loves the girls, he detects a 'couple of stereotypes surrounding women in the band's general image. The brunette is the woman every man wants to date. Perfect for an adventure on a midnight train, or to hire as your mistress-secretary. The blonde is the woman you take home to mother, whereas the redhead is the wild woman, the woman-with-lots-of -evil-powers.'

So who are these Girls? And how political is their notorious 'Girl Power'? Even though I have seen many of their videos and photos, as soon as I'm in front of these women, I am struck by how they look far more remarkable than I had expected, even though Mel C is trying not to look as lovely as she is.

I had intended to say something else, but instead I find myself asking them: 'If paradise existed, what would it look like?' Geri speaks first, and she is, I think, reprimanding me for being idealistic. 'Money makes the world what it is today,' she says, almost before I have time to think about my sudden outburst, 'a world infested with evil. All sorts of wars are going on at the moment. Everyone's kind of bickering, wanting to better themselves because their next -door neighbour's got a better lawn. That kind of thing.' 'Greed,' Victoria adds. Mel C: 'Instead of trying to be better than someone else, you have to try to better yourself.' In a few minutes, they are explaining to me that the Spice Girls is a type of paradise, Spice Girls is a lifestyle. 'It's community.' That's Geri again. She and Mel B - one in a funky, antique Hawaiian shirt, the other in diaphanous yellow bell-bottoms and top - do most of the talking. Mel C, in her gym clothes, is the quietest. Geri: 'We're a community in which each one of us shines individually, without making any of the others feel insecure. We liberate each other. A community should be liberating. Nelson Mandela said that you know when someone is brilliant when having that person next to you makes you feel good. "Not

envious,' adds her cohort, Mel B. These are the two baddest Girls. At least on the surface. I suspect otherwise. 'It inspires you.' Geri again. 'That is what life's about. People should be inspiring.'

I can't keep up with these Girls. My generation, spoon-fed Marx and Hegel, thought we could change the world by altering what was out there - the political and economic configurations, all that seemed to make history. Emotions and personal - especially sexual - relationships were for girls, because girls were unimportant. Feminism changed this landscape; in England, the advent of Margaret Thatcher, sad to say, changed it more. The individual self became more important than the world. To my generation, this signals the rise of selfishness; for the generation of the Spice Girls, self-consideration and self-analysis are political. When the Spices say, 'We're five completely separate people,' they're talking politically. 'Like when you're in a relationship,' Mel B takes over, 'and you're in love, you feel you're only you when you're with that person, so when you leave that person, you think 'I'm not me'. That's so wrong. It's downhill from then on, in yourself spiritually and in your whole environment.

In this band, it's different. Each of us is just the way we are, and each of us respects that. 'As Melanie says,' adds Geri, 'each of us wants to be her own person and, without snatching anyone else's energy, bring something creative and new and individual to the group. We're proof this is happening. When the Spice Girls first started as a unit, we respected the qualities we found in each other that we didn't have in ourselves. It was like, 'Wow! That's the Spiciness life vibey thing, isn't it?' Geri turns even more paradoxical: 'Normally, when you get fans of groups, they want to act like you, they copy what you're wearing, for instance. Whereas our fans, they might have pigtails and they might wear sweatclothes, but they are so individual, it's unbelievable. When you speak to them, they've got so much balls! It's like we've collected a whole group of our people together! It's really, really mad. I can remember someone coming up to us and going, 'Do you know what? I've just finished with my boyfriend! And you've given me the incentive to go 'Fuck this!' At this, the Spices cheer.

Giving up any hope of narrative continuity, I ask the girls if they want boys. 'Some of us are in relationships.' Mel B. 'I live with my boyfriend. For three years now, yeah.' I tell them that I've never been good at balancing sexual love and work. 'Of course you can. It doesn't make me a lesser person; to be in a relationship makes me a better person. Because I can still go out and ... flirting is natural.' I'm listening to Mel B, but all I can think, at the moment, is how beautiful she is. 'I can stay out all night and come in when I want. Your whole life doesn't have to change just because you're with somebody else. 'It depends on the individual,' says Geri. 'I think whoever we would chose to be with should respect the way we are ... and our job as well ...' Mel B. 'The way we are together. None of us would be interested in a man that wanted to dominate, wanted to pull you down, and wanted you to do what he wanted you to do.' I wonder what man could handle all this. 'If one of us was to go out with a dweeb of a man,' says Mel B, 'he would probably feel threatened by the five of us. Because we do share things about our relationships, so it's like a gang. Like a gang, but we're not. We can have relationships, but they have to be on a completely different level.' Emma talks only about her mother, and Mel C is very quiet. What hides, I wonder, behind that face, which appears more delicate and intense than in her photos? Victoria, I learn later, is upset about an ex-boyfriend's betrayal of her confidence; throughout our discussion she looks slightly upset. Several times she says that, above all, she wants privacy. Perhaps paradise is not as simple as it seems.

I know that, to find out more about these Girls, I must change the subject, but instead, I just blurt out: 'Let's stop talking about boys!' 'Yeah,' agree the Girls. Do they think the Spice Girls will go on forever? And if not, what will they do after it ends? What do you really want to do? 'We talked about that the other day, didn't we?' Geri, sitting on the floor, turns around to the three girls sprawled on a black sofa. Emma, in a white from-the-Sixties dress, perches on a high chair. Their hair has been done, their faces powdered, and they're ready for the photo. 'I want to own restaurants,' Victoria takes the lead. She wears a skin-tight designer outfit, perfectly positioned Wonderbra and heels seemingly too high to walk on. Unlike the other girls, she never lets her mask break open. 'The entrepreneur,' remarks Mel B fondly. 'Restaurants and art,' Victoria continues. 'I've always liked art. Ever since I was ...' She pauses. 'And I'd like a nice big house, and to fill it with, you know ...' 'Sculptures!' Mel B. 'Nude men.' That's Mel C. All the girls are laughing. Victoria admits - and her emotions finally start to show - that's she's always fancied doing art. A few years ago, she and Geri were going to return to college, but they didn't have the time. Now the others are teasing her about her shoes. I like these girls. I like being with them. 'I don't know what I want to do.' Mel C.

The Spices who haven't yet said anything are now talking. 'At the moment I am completely into what I'm doing, and I find it hard to think, right now, what I want to do later on.' Mel B. 'I want a big family, like the Waltons,' Emma admits. 'I like taking care of people, I love kids.' 'You can look after mine.' Mel C. Everyone's saying something. Victoria wants to live with her sister, and maybe her brother; Emma's thinking of her mother. I'm beginning to realize how different from each other the Girls are. Mel C says she likes living alone, but wishes she were geographically closer to her family. 'Me and Geri,' pipes up Mel B, who's rarely silent for more than a minute, 'come from up north. It's like living in a little community, isn't it? And moving down into London, it's like moving into the big wild world. I don't even know my next-door neighbour, do you?' 'No,' answers Mel C. I like these girls. They're home girls. 'I'd be in a cult, or join a naturist camp or something, and just live there, like back in the Sixties in the hippy days,' Mel B is gesticulating, 'where everything's just One Love, everything's free, and there are no set rules, where nobody judges you...' 'Geri tells me that she is a jack-of-all-trades. After speculating whether she might do her own TV show, or go into films, write a movie script, she announces that her model is Sylvester Stallone. I think of Brigitte Nielsen. 'I'll tell you why.' He couldn't get a part in Hollywood, she explains, so he wrote, directed and produced Rambo himself. 'I just think that's what it takes; I always love it when the underdog comes through.'

The Girls have been in show business for years. Emma started when she was three. All of the others were professional by the age of 17 or 18. I'm beginning to understand why these Girls have been picked, consciously or unconsciously, by their generation to represent that generation. Especially, but not only, the female sector. In a society still dominated by class and sexism, very few of those not born to rule, women especially, are able to make choices about their own work and lifestyle. Very few know freedom. None of the Spices, not even Victoria, was born privileged nor, as they themselves note, are they traditional beauties. Christine, a student of mine, watching them on Saturday Night Live, remarked to me: 'They're not even slick dancers or exceptional singers! They're just the girl-next-door!' And they are; they're just girls; as more than one of them remarked to me, 'We never really had a chance until this happened!' They're the girls never heard from before this in England; look, there are lots of them; ones who've known Thatcherite, post-Thatcherite society and nothing else, and now, thanks to the glory and the strangeness of British rock-pop society, they've found a voice. Listen to the voices of those who didn't go to Oxford or Cambridge, or even to Sussex or to art school...

Geri: 'I didn't really know that much, you know, history, but I knew about the suffragettes. They fought. It wasn't that long ago. They died to get a vote. The women's vote. Bloody ass-fucking mad, do you know what I mean? You remember that and you think, fucking hell. But to get back to what Victoria was saying about us, that we never got anywhere, you know, the underdog thing. This is why I feel so passionate. We've been told, time and time again, you're not pretty enough, you're too fat, you're too thin ... 'All the Spice Girls are now roaring.' ... You're not tall enough, you're not white, you're not black. What I passionately feel is that it is so wrong to have to fit into a role or a mould in order to succeed. What I think is fan-fucking-tastic about us now is that we are not perfect and we have made a big success of ourselves. I'm swelling with pride. 'But you are babes. They all protest.' We were all individually beaten down ... Collectively, we've got something going,' says Geri. 'Individually, I don't think we'd be that great.' 'There's a chemistry that runs through us and gives us ... where I'm bad at something, Melanie's good, or Geri's good at something at which the rest of us are bad,' says Victoria. Look, I say, I'm feeling stranger and stranger about these politics based on individualism. There are lots of girls who have the same backgrounds as they do, right? 'Right.

'So what is holding those girls down? Keeping them from doing what they really want to do? They start to discuss this. I can hardly make out who's saying what in the ensuing commotion. I hear 'society and conditioning'; another one, Emma perhaps, is talking about being in showbiz, receiving job rejection after job rejection; she's saying how strong you have to be to keep bouncing back. Geri mentions Freud, then states that parents' beliefs often hold back a child, parents and then the child's reception in her school. 'When you go and see a careers officer,' ponders Mel C, 'and you sit down and say, 'I want to be a space-man', instead of responding 'Go study astrophysics', they go, 'Yeah, but what do you really want to do?' That is so wrong. I think there should be a class in - what do you call it? - self-motivation. Self-motivation classes, self-esteem classes. 'I still feel that a bit of economic realism is missing here, but I can't get a word in edgewise. Not in all the girl excitement. These females are angry. 'I think it all goes back to everyone wanting to feel that they're part of an ongoing society,'

Geri tries to analyse. 'The humdrum nine-to-five, you know what it's like ... What do you do when you leave school? You go and get a job to have money to pay off the mortgage, you get a flat and have a nice boyfriend, pay off your bills, you go to work with your briefcase and your suit, and that's it. That's people's normal, everyday thing, isn't it? And if you branch out from that, it's... well, what does she think she's doing? It's going against the grain a bit - which not many people do. It's not even going against the grain; it's just clinging on to the bit you want to do and thinking I'm going to do it, who cares?' The Girls, including Geri, tell me that they've got an American philosophy, an American dream. 'But me,' says Mel B, 'before I was in the band, I thought I'd like to be a preacher. I still do. Something like that. They've actually got this place in London which is called Speaker's Corner. You get up on your stand there; you can speak about anything. I'd like to speak about people, the emotional or mental blocks people have, especially regarding other people, things like that. That's what the tattoo on my stomach means, 'Spirit Heart And Mind', because that's what fuels me; communication fuels me. You learn about yourself, about other people and life in general, through communication.'

She says that's she's been writing since she was 11, writing everything down, 'why the world is this shape, what would happen if everyone on earth died ...' 'Stoned questions ...' mur-

murs another Spice. 'I'd love to go back to the Sixties,' Emma says in her clear voice. 'I'd love that. I wouldn't wear headbands though. 'What about some of the politics of the Sixties, I ask. Malcolm X? The fight against racism? 'The other day I watched The Killing Fields.' Now Geri's doing the talking. 'That was in the Sixties, Vietnam. I think it's very healthy that there's an element of that today. Through the media today we can see people demonstrating for human rights. In Cambodia, on the other side of the world. I think it's brilliant when you see people standing up, when they have a voice, it kicks the system, a little bit, into touch.'

But what about in England today? I mention that in the US, racism is still a big issue. Mel B and Geri start talking about racism. Geri tells me that she's learned about racial prejudice from Mel B, who says, 'The thing I find really bizarre about America and England ... You say that the racism thing is worse in America, yet if you look at television here (in NYC), they're really scrupulous about making sure, for instance, that they have a black family in an advert. On the adverts in England, you wouldn't find that.' Suddenly all the Spices are talking among themselves. I can't understand anything.

Then we're on the subject of Madonna, of people who have inspired us, and Geri starts speaking about Margaret Thatcher. Why she admires her. 'But we won't go down there!' 'Don't go down there!' advise the Girls. 'We won't go down there, but ...' and Geri, who never seems to listen to reason, begins. She says that when politicians discuss the economy, they're just talking about shifting money from one spot to another, and someone always suffers. This is the same distrust of government that so many Americans, both on the right and left - and especially among lower and working-class people - are feeling and articulating. Mel C says softly, 'We talked about suffragettes and getting the vote to women, and all that. But a lot of women don't vote; a lot of our generation doesn't vote. I don't. I don't feel I should because I don't know anything about politics ...' 'That was what I was going to say,' adds Emma.

They blame the lack of political education in schools. Whether they like or dislike Margaret Thatcher or Tony Blair, they distrust both the political industry and the related media. 'Intellectual people chatting in bathrooms,' comments Mel B. 'We are society,' exclaims Geri, 'so really ...' 'We should be running it,' Mel B finishes the statement. 'I'd like to run it for a day,' says Victoria, looking directly at me. 'But Victoria, who's going to let you do such a job?' Geri reminds her. 'The only way to go is growth,' says Mel B. 'I think everyone's turned a bit to the spiritual life.' 'You know,' interjects Victoria, 'if you believe in evolution, we only use 20 per cent of our brain ... if that. So it's natural that we can evolve to the next level. We've got to, really.' 'Nowadays, people do sit down and ask themselves 'Why am I doing this?'' Mel B continues. 'They question themselves and what they've got around them. I know I do it, and you find your own little mission. And you fucking go for it. A lot more people are like that now.' Do they all feel like that? There's a general quiet, then a 'Yeah' all around me.

I ask the Spices to describe themselves. For a moment, they're lost for words. Victoria: 'I love what I'm doing. I'm with my five best friends, and I've seen some great countries. I'm happy, I'm very happy. I care a lot about my family. Regarding my personality, I'm private. There are things for me to know and no one else to find out.' She hesitates. 'I just accept the way I am. You have to make the most of it, make the best of yourself. I'm a bit of a fretter. If I'm going to do something, I want to do it properly. I want to do the best I can. I'm a perfectionist.' Emma: 'Me, I'm definitely a bit of a brat. I worry about what other people are feeling, that sort of thing.' Geri: 'I have quite an active mind. Quite eccentric, really. A conversationalist. I believe in fate in a big way, a very big way.' Mel B: 'I'm always asking

inward questions about things. I live off the vibes, I do, that people give me. If I don't like someone then I won't speak to them, even though something might be coming out of their mouth that I should listen to. I like to think I'm a bit of a free spirit. I don't run by any rule book. I live on the edge a little bit. I always think, well, at least I'll die happy today rather than worrying about it tomorrow.' Mel C: 'I'm very regimented. I really enjoy my own company, although I love being with other people.'

I'm watching the Spice Girls perform Wannabe on Saturday Night Live, but not seeing them. In my mind, I'm seeing England. When I returned there in July last year, lad culture was in full swing. Loaded was running what had once been a relatively intellectual magazine culture. Feminism, especially female intellectuals, had become extinct. 'Where have all the women gone to?' I asked. Then came a twist named the Spice Girls. The Spices, though they deny it, are babes - the blonde, the redhead, the dark sultry fashion model - and they're more. They both are and represent a voice that has too long been repressed. The voices, not really the voice, of young women and, just as important, of women not from the educated classes. It isn't only the lads sitting behind babe culture, bless them, who think that babes or beautiful lower and lower-middle class girls are dumb. It's also educated women who look down on girls like the Spice Girls, who think that because, for instance, girls like the Spice Girls take their clothes off, there can't be anything 'up there'.

The Spice Girls are having their cake and eating it. They have the popularity and the popular ear that an intellectual, certainly a female intellectual, almost never has in this society, and, what's more, they have found themselves, perhaps by fluke, in the position of social and political articulation. It little matters now how the Spice Girls started - if they were a 'manufactured band'. What does this have to do with feminism? When I lived in England in the Eighties, a multitude of women, diverse and all intellectual, were continually heard from - people such as Michele Roberts, Jeanette Winterson, Sara Maitland, Jacqueline Rose, Melissa Benn. Is it also possible that the English feminism of the Eighties might have shared certain problems with the American feminism of the Seventies? English feminism, as I remember it back then, was anti-sex. And like their American counterparts, the English feminists were intellectuals, from the educated classes. There lurked the problem of elitism, and thus class.

I am speculating, but, perhaps due to Margaret Thatcher - though it is hard to attribute anything decent to her - a populist change has taken place in England. The Spice Girls, and girls like them, and the girls who like them, resemble their American counterparts in two ways: they are sexually curious, certainly pro-sex, and they do not feel that they are stupid or that they should not be heard because they did not attend the right universities. If any of this speculation is valid, then it is up to feminism to grow, to take on what the Spice Girls, and women like them, are saying, and to do what feminism has always done in England, to keep on transforming society as society is best transformed, with lightness and in joy.