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“WE ARE THE REVOLUTION”: RIOT GRRRL PRESS, GIRL EMPOWERMENT, AND DIY SELF-PUBLISHING

KEVIN DUNN and MAY SUMMER FARNSWORTH

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Punk rock emerged in the late 20th century as a major disruptive force within both the established music scene and the larger capitalist societies of the industrial West. Punk was generally characterized by its anti-status quo disposition, a pronounced do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos, and a desire for disalienation (resistance to the multiple forms of alienation in modern society). These three elements provided actors with tools for political interventions and actions. A significant avenue for DIY intervention was self-publishing, particularly with “zines”—independently created publications, usually handcrafted and photocopied. This essay explores the development of DIY self-publication as it related to Riot Grrrl, a movement that developed in the early 1990s by young women challenging the sexism of North American punk scenes. By focusing on Riot Grrrl Press, this article offers a corrective to mainstream media misrepresentations of the movement, as well as scholarly works on Riot Grrrl that focus almost exclusively on its musical production. As this article argues, the Riot Grrrl punk bands were only one aspect of Riot Grrrl’s overall purpose and goal. At its core, Riot Grrrl was committed to girl empowerment and self-representation. Central to these goals was the creation of alternative media and DIY self-publishing.

Punk and Riot Grrrl

The term “punk” first emerged regularly in accepted terminology in the late 1970s with regards to the music scene in New York City’s

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Lower East Side, which included bands such as the Ramones, Television, Blondie, Richard Hell and the Voidoids, and others. But punk music and style gained international attention largely through the emergence of a scene in the UK, particularly in London, and specifically around the well-publicized antics of the Sex Pistols, a band "invented" by their manager Malcolm McLaren. Informed partly by the New York scene (McLaren briefly managed the New York Dolls), the UK punk style also drew from its antecedent subcultures, from skinheads, mods, rude boys, glam rockers, as well as reggae and rockabilly. Heavily conditioned by class politics and working-class culture, the original British punk scene both reflected and mocked the disintegration of British society in the late 1970s. Led by bands such as the Sex Pistols, the Clash, the Slits, the Buzzcocks, X-Ray Spex, the Raincoats, Gang of Four, the Mekons, and the Damned, British punks tended to view established social conventions as hypocritical obfuscations obscuring the brutality of real life. The punk scene that emerged out of Britain and New York quickly spread and evolved, and major punk scenes were created in Washington, DC, Los Angeles, as well as in cities and small towns across the globe, from Mexico and South America to Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Greil Marcus argued that punk provided "a surge of new voices unprecedented in the geopolitics of popular culture—a surge of voices that, for a time, made a weird phrase like 'the geopolitics of popular culture' seem like a natural fact" (65). Musically, punk rock reflected a certain degree of diversity. As Chumbawamba's lead singer Boff observed, "in Britain, a lot of the original punk which fired us up was really diverse and challenging. From the Fall to Wire, ATV, the Slits, the Raincoats, they were not all playing 4/4, male rock music. That was really important to us, that all these people were a part of punk" (qtd. in Sinker 124). Since its inception, punk, like all musical genres, has mutated and fragmented. Within the punk community, attempts to define the term often invite scorn and derision. Nevertheless, over time, punk began to assume a conspicuously masculine identity.

The initial punk scene was extremely diverse, drawing in males, females, transgendered individuals, straights, and homosexuals. Numerous bands contained women members and all-female bands abounded. Craig Lee, who played guitar in the female-fronted band The Bags, wrote in his *Hardcore California: A*

History of Punk and New Wave, “In Los Angeles circa 1977, female bass players were almost a requirement, and it seemed that it was often the women who dominated and controlled the Punk scene. This equality of the sexes was just another breakdown of traditional rock and roll stereotypes that the early scene was perpetuating” (20). After several years, however, punk became less hospitable to women as the scene reflected some of larger society’s patriarchal tendencies. This was particularly pronounced on the West Coast, where hyper-masculine bands became leaders of the new American punk scene of the 1980s. As Lauraine Leblanc writes, “All-male bands such as San Francisco’s Dead Kennedys (formed in 1978), Hermosa Beach’s ‘muscle punk’ Black Flag (in 1979) and Fear (in 1980) invaded the California punk scene. These bands had a harder-edged sound than did the previous San Francisco bands, and were less interested in (feminine) arty self-expression than they were in creating a controversial expression of (masculine) punk anger, energy, and humor” (50). As Jennifer Miro of the San Francisco punk band The Nuns recalls, “There were a lot of women in the beginning. It was women doing things. Then it became this whole macho, anti-women thing. Then women didn’t go to see punk bands anymore because they were afraid of getting killed. I didn’t even go because it was so violent and so macho that it was repulsive. Women just got squeezed out” (qtd. in Klatzker). This was reflected across the U.S. as hardcore rose to prominence not only on the West Coast but also in East Coast scenes like NYC and DC.

While the initial punk movement of the late-1970s reflected a disruption of the male/masculine culture of traditional rock and roll, the scene by the late 1980s was largely male-dominated and, in some cases, marked by pronounced sexism. As such, many women in the American punk community found themselves pushed to the margins of their own scene. Writer and political activist Anne Elizabeth Moore recalls finding herself “at the back of the club with other females holding their boyfriend’s jackets” while the boys slam danced and played in the bands (Personal interview). By the late 1980s/early 1990s, a female-led backlash to the male appropriation of the punk scene was underway. This move of female empowerment aimed at reclaiming the multi-gendered spaces of the initial punk movement was most clearly manifested in what became known as the Riot Grrrl movement.

Riot Grrrl came into existence in the Spring of 1991. Allison Wolfe and Molly Neuman (members of the band Bratmobile) worked with fanzine editor Jen Smith to establish a collectively-authored feminist zine called *Riot Grrrl*. At the same time, Kathleen Hanna (of the zine and band *Bikini Kill*) began organizing weekly "Riot Grrrl" meetings with about twenty other girls (*Bikini Kill* #2). Female-only Riot Grrrl meetings included zine makers, activists, artists, musicians, and members of the punk community in their teens and early twenties. While the founding members of Riot Grrrl eventually moved back to Olympia and started another Riot Grrrl chapter there, Riot Grrrl DC continued to hold weekly meetings and produce zines. The early members of Riot Grrrl DC (Allison Wolfe, Erika Reinsteint, May Summer, Joanna Burgess, Mary Fondriest, Claudia VonVocano, Ananda La Vita, Morgan Daniels, Kristen Thompson, and Sarah Stolfa among others) kept open lines of communication with members of Riot Grrrl Olympia (including Danni Sharkey, Corin Tucker, Tracy Sawyer, Kathleen Hanna, Becca Albee, Wendi Albro, Angie Hart, Misty Farrel, Michelle Noel, and Nomy Lamm).

From July 31 to August 2, 1992 Riot Grrrl DC held a national convention, which brought girls from all over the country together to discuss issues central to the movement at the time: sexual identity, self-preservation, racism awareness, surviving sexual abuse, and whether Riot Grrrls "fit or don't fit into the punk community" (Riot Grrrl Convention). The flyer for the convention lists hands-on workshops on "everything from self defense, to how to run a soundboard, to how to lay out a zine" (Riot Grrrl Convention). Many of the convention participants went on to create new Riot Grrrl chapters in their home cities. By 1993, weekly Riot Grrrl meetings were being held in a dozen cities across the country: St. Paul, MN; Ann Arbor MI; Chicago, IL; Cleveland, OH; Richmond, VA; Harrisonburg, Va.; Boston, MA; Wilkes Barre, PA; Mountaintop, PA; New York City, and of course, Olympia and DC. By that time the movement had also extended to Europe. Riot Grrrl UK (Leeds) produced a zine featuring a Riot Grrrl glossary, lists of European feminist organizations and zines, and a discussion of pro-choice activism in Poland (*Riot Grrrl Press*). A statement issued by Riot Grrrl DC published in *Bikini Kill* #2 describes the Riot Grrrl movement as a place for young feminists to support each other and exchange ideas: "With this whole Riot Grrrl thing,

we are not trying to make money or get famous; we're trying to do something important, to network with grrrls all over, to make changes in our lives and the lives of other grrrls" (Hanna *Bikini Kill* #2).

Much attention was given to the rise of several punk bands, such as Bratmobile, Bikini Kill, Calamity Jane, Heavens to Betsy, Huggy Bear, Tribe 8, Cunts with Attitude, and Team Dresch. A number of these bands were active around the Pacific Northwest region, but, like the Riot Grrrl movement, the punk feminist music scene was not regionally limited. Bikini Kill's song "Double Dare Ya" became a rally cry for many in the scene, with its opening line: "We're Bikini Kill and we want Revolution Girl-Style Now!" Politically charged, Riot Grrrl bands played aggressive punk rock with a pronounced feminist agenda, placing gender issues at the forefront. Directly challenging the physical marginalization of women in the punk scene, bands like Bikini Kill encouraged women to come to the front of the stage, where they passed out lyric sheets. For Riot Grrrls, the response to traditional patriarchy—in the immediate punk community and in the larger society—was "girl power." Songs focused on issues central to Riot Grrrl such as rape, domestic abuse, women's health, sexuality, and, above all, female empowerment. Bikini Kill's Kathleen Hanna saw girl bands as a way for women to take ownership of their own bodies: "It's a good way to act out behaviors that are wrongly deemed 'inappropriate.' This is a refutation of censorship and body fascism. This can deny taboos that keep us enslaved. . . . To discuss in both literal and artistic ways those issues that are really important to girls. Naming these issues, specifically, validates their importance" (*Bikini Kill Color and Activity Book*).

Riot Grrrl's main contribution to feminist change was its persistent opposition to the mainstream media and its call for women and girls to publicly express themselves. Alternative feminist forms of mass communication were central to Riot Grrrl's mission from the very beginning. Riot Grrrl Olympia, for example, created a radio show and a television program in addition to their music and zines. Daina from the band Cunts with Attitude produced six episodes of *The Riot Grrrl Variety Show* for a cable access channel. It featured programs on feminist history, women's punk music, and vegan cooking (Sharkey). Individual "riot grrrls" created spoken word performances, art projects, and short films.

At DC-area protests and rallies, riot grrrls could often be seen writing provocative messages on their bodies in permanent marker. Spray-painting feminist slogans on public property was another common Riot Grrrl tactic. Perhaps Erika Reinstein best sums up Riot Grrrl's attitude toward the media in her attempts to define the goals of the movement:

BECAUSE we girls want to create mediums that speak to US. We are tired of boy band after boy band, boy zine after boy zine, boy punk after boy punk after boy . . .

BECAUSE in every form of media I see us/myself slapped, decapitated, laughed at, trivialized, pushed, ignored, stereotyped, kicked, scorned, molested, silenced, invalidated, knifed, shot, choked, and killed . . .

BECAUSE every time we pick up a pen, or an instrument, or get anything done, we are creating the revolution. We ARE the revolution." (Reinstein, *Fantastic Fanzine* no. 2)

Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald write, "Instead of tirelessly insisting on the right to be called 'women,' as mainstream feminism has long been advocating, riot grrrls foreground girl identity, in its simultaneous audacity and awkwardness—and not just girl, but a defiant 'grrrl' identity that roars back at the dominant culture" (Gottlieb and Wald 266). Indeed, reclaiming and politicizing the word "girl" was an integral part of Riot Grrrl's feminist media project. An article in an early issue of *Bikini Kill* clearly emphasizes this goal: "[W]e are angry at a society that tells us that Girl=Dumb, Girl=Bad, Girl=Weak . . . girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will, change the world for real" (Hanna, *Bikini Kill* #2). The editors of *Upstut* also describe their zine as "uncovering the horror that is high school and empowering/educating high school girls about their own inner beauty, strength, and intelligence" (*Riot Grrrl Press*).

Despite Riot Grrrl's emphasis on DIY feminist media production, or perhaps because of it, reporters from the mainstream press started to pay attention. By 1992, just one year after the start of the Riot Grrrl movement, several high profile articles had appeared in *Seventeen*, *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Newsweek*. Not surprisingly, the coverage had a detrimental impact on the movement. As Corin Tucker of Heavens to Betsy said in an interview for the *Riot Grrrl Retrospective* online exhibition: "I think it was

deliberate that we were made to look like we were just ridiculous girls parading around in our underwear. They refused to do serious interviews with us, they misprinted what we had to say, they would take our articles, and our fanzines, and our essays and take them out of context. We wrote a lot about sexual abuse and sexual assault for teenagers and young women. I think those are really important concepts that the media never addressed” (“What got lost”). Girls who felt exploited by this new media attention used zines to voice their discontent. Writing collectively in the zine *Jigsaw* #5 1/2, Bikini Kill stated:

We have been written about a lot by big magazines who have never talked to us or seen our shows. They write about us authoritatively, as if they understand us better than we understand our own ideas, tactics and significance. They largely miss the point of everything about us because they have no idea what our context is/has been. Their idea of punk rock is not based on anything they have ever experienced directly or even sought an understanding of by talking to those who have, yet they continue to write about it as if their stereotypical surface level view of it is all it is. . . . So these kinds of experiences have led us to not feeling much like talking about our ideas at all. Sometimes not even to each other. But fuck that you know and we are making a new fanzine about this whole weird media phenomenon that we have been associated with and so you should look forward to that. But in the meantime we ask you to think about what you know about us and how you got that information cuz in most cases it probably isn't too accurate . . . (“Bikini Kill Is”)

Though Kathleen Hanna called for a “media block” in 1992, the damage was done. Many felt that the mainstream media was misrepresenting, if not outright subverting, the message of the movement. The superficial appropriation of “girl power” by the Spice Girls and Lilith Fair further undercut the movement. Riot Grrrl countered this negative media attention through the creation of Riot Grrrl Press.

Punk and DIY Self-Publishing

In the spring of 1993, Erika Rienstien and May Summer (one of this article’s co-authors) formed the zine distribution network Riot Grrrl Press. Originally members of Riot Grrrl DC, they had chosen to relocate to Olympia to join the Riot Grrrls there and

to attend Evergreen State College. However, before completing their first year at Evergreen, May and Erika returned to the DC area in order to start Riot Grrrl Press. They recruited the assistance of fellow riot grrrls Mary Fondriest and Joanna Burgess and set up the Press in a rented apartment in Arlington, VA (which was also where Mary, Joanna, and Erika lived). Members of Riot Grrrl Press each worked outside jobs while also running the Press in their spare time. While the founders of Riot Grrrl Press lacked the funds for copy machines and computers, they maintained a connection with a Riot Grrrl employed by the photocopy chain Kinko's Copies. This provided Riot Grrrl Press with access to state-of-the-art copy machines and computers at reduced prices and sometimes for free.

The creation of Riot Grrrl Press was part of an established tradition of DIY self-publishing within punk. In order to better understand the work of Riot Grrrl Press and zine-making, it is useful to examine some of the core concepts in punk, namely its anti-status quo disposition, its dedication to disalienation, and its DIY ethos (Dunn 193–210). From its conception, punk seeks to challenge and reject the world as it is. For many, this critical opposition to the status quo is a defining element of punk. As Guy Picciotto of the seminal Washington, DC, band Fugazi observed: "The whole concept of punk was something that was against whatever seemed normal or whatever seemed kind of handed down. To me the basic tenets of punk have always been: no set of rules, no set of expectations, and that it always challenges the status quo." Pat Thetic of the Pittsburgh punk band Anti-Flag notes "Punk rock is about fighting against the status quo and trying to find other ways of seeing the world that are more productive and less destructive to people." Punk was also dedicated to the process of disalienation. Punk emerged in a late 1970s social context in which the youth in numerous Western industrialized countries struggled with feelings of alienation from the social, economic and political forces around them. For many youth, politics and economics appeared as distant, uncontrolled, alien forces. Punk offered an attractive response to the dominant culture, just as punk was an attractive vehicle for feminist-minded women in the Riot Grrrl movement. As Matt Davies notes, "Punks strove to eliminate the distinctions between performers and audience, and did so by a radical form of egalitarianism: anyone could be a punk,

and any punk could play in a band or, if they preferred, to publish a zine, to organize shows, or to produce or distribute records. A punk scene is of punks, for punks, by punks” (126). For many, punk has offered resources for participation and access. This was definitely the case in the emergence of the Riot Grrrl movement.

In punk, the two elements of disalienation and anti-establishment thought have resulted in the embrace of a do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos. The DIY ethos reflects an intentional transformation of punks from consumers of the mass media to agents of cultural production. As Legs McNeil wrote in his low-budget, self-produced fanzine *Punk*: “Punk rock—any kid can pick up a guitar and become a rock ‘n’ roll star, despite or because of his lack of ability, talent, intelligence, limitations and/or potential, and usually do so out of frustration, hostility, a lot of nerve and a need for ego fulfillment” (qtd. in Leblanc 35). An example of the DIY ethos is represented in a well-known, widely circulated drawing of how to play three chords on a guitar, accompanied by the caption “Now Form a Band.” Bands like the Buzzcocks and Scritti Politti printed instructions for making a recording on the hand-made covers of their own albums. Zines carried similar messages, informing readers how to play chords, make a record, distribute that record, and book their own shows. *Punk Planet* magazine carried a special section in which contributors offered their own DIY input, and the magazine *MaximumRockNRoll* created a resource guide to the global punk scene called “Book Your Own Fucking Life,” which is online at <http://www.byofl.org>. Daniel Sinker, founder of the magazine *Punk Planet*, points out that “Punk said that *anyone* could take part—in fact, anyone *should* take part” (9). He continues, “Punk has always been about asking ‘why’ and then doing something about it. It’s about picking up a guitar and asking ‘Why can’t I play this?’ It’s about picking up a typewriter and asking, ‘Why don’t my opinions count?’ It’s about looking at the world around you and asking, ‘Why are things as fucked up as they are?’ And then it’s about looking inwards at yourself and asking ‘Why aren’t I doing anything about this?’” (10). While the Riot Grrrl movement inspired countless girls (and boys) to pick up instruments and to sing about their lives, the movement was also heavily engaged in DIY self-publishing zines. In fact, Riot Grrrl Press carried a zine called DIY, which it described as a “How-to Guide for Publishing a High School zine.”

In her essay "Be A Zinester: How and Why to Publish your own Periodical," Anne Elizabeth Moore traces the history of self-publishing, arguing that "zines are currently one of the means by which hidden histories occasionally come to light. Zines are personal, small-scale paper ventures and tell the kinds of stories deliberately ignored, glossed over, or entirely forgotten by mainstream media. Zines are created by prisoners, young girls, people with emotional and physical disabilities, queers, geeks, non-native speakers of English, survivors of sexual assault, radical offspring of conservative politicians, homeschoolers, members of the military, Native Americans, sexworkers, and anyone else who has ever felt that the voices speaking for them in the larger culture weren't conveying their stories" (Moore "Be a Zinester"). Moore notes that zines—or fanzines—first emerged in the 20th century among fans of science fiction. As an underground vehicle, fanzines immediately provided opportunities for females to participate in ways they couldn't in the traditional, masculine world of professional publishing. As Moore notes, "Clearly, the unprofessional natures of comics and science fiction fanzine publishing allowed for a great deal of flexibility in interpreting approaches to authorship, craft-honing, and audience: the high rate of participation by women, when compared to professional participation in comics and scifi publishing, was only one indication. Clearly, the democratic nature of fanzines was advanced by their status as outsider modes of communication" (Moore, "Be a Zinester").

When punk emerged in the 1970s, zines were quickly embraced as part of the DIY culture. Photocopied fanzines, such as *Sniffin' Glue*, *Search and Destroy*, *Flipside*, and *Profane Existence*, became major aspects of the punk scene. Zines and punk made a perfect match, for as Heath Row notes in "From Fandom to Feminism: An Analysis of the Zine Press": "The punk press demonstrates that not only clothes and music can be produced cheaply and immediately from limited resources and experience" (Row). Moore observes that the "DIY ethic of punk culture, the bucking of mainstream acceptance, and the newly minted pejorative of 'selling out' all combined to grant zines the official voice of punk culture—or at least as official as it was going to get. Originally, too, this combination meant that the zine press developed a heavy reliance on music reviews, interviews with musicians, and talk of 'shows,' 'gigs,' and 'sets'" (Moore, "Be a Zinester"). By the end

of the 20th century, however, zines were by no means the exclusive domain of either punk or music fans. Zine culture took on a life of its own, with zines dedicated to such topics as crappy jobs (*Dishwasher*), killing (*Murder Can Be Fun*), unique thrift-store purchases (*Thrift Score*), and zine culture (*Factsheet 5*).

Interestingly, the Riot Grrrl movement grew as much out of zine culture as it did punk. The very name was taken from an established zine and, as mentioned earlier, Bikini Kill was a zine-making collective before it was a band. As Jennifer Bleyer writes, “From the late eighties to the mid-nineties, thousands of zines sprouted up like resilient weeds inside the cracks of the mainstream media’s concrete . . . after Xerox machines became widely accessible and before the explosion of the Internet, there was a brief moment during which people realized that they could make their own rudimentary publications on copy paper, fasten them with staples, and send them out along the zine distribution thoroughfares that coursed across the country, without any permission or guidance whatsoever” (44). With its roots in zine culture, Riot Grrrl helped inspire a virtual “revolution” in self-published girl zines. Significantly, the media blackout announced by the Riot Grrrl movement meant that zines like *Girl Germs*, *Satan Wears a Bra*, *Girly Mag*, and *Quit Whining* became the primary form of communicating and archiving the history of the movement. And that brings us back to the emergence of Riot Grrrl Press.

Girl Zines and Riot Grrrl Press

Riot Grrrl Press was formed directly out of the frustration felt by many in the movement that the mainstream media was misconstruing their message and producing damaging representations steeped in gender stereotypes. Drawing upon punk’s DIY ethos and dedication to disalienation, Riot Grrrl Press sought to provide an active vehicle for female empowerment. With the creation of Riot Grrrl Press, “what resulted, given the climate of free expression already engendered by the larger zine community, was a media revolution of unprecedented proportion” (Bleyer 46). Riot Grrrl Press and the girl-made zines complemented Riot Grrrl’s musical output through the production and distribution of self-published zines from across the movement.

By this time, the term "Riot Grrrl" had gone from appearing in small zines and protest signs to becoming a buzzword in entertainment magazines and major newspapers. At first, some members of the movement had been encouraged by this new media attention, hoping that more people would read the zines and that the movement would grow as a result. Yet the coverage tended to be superficial, at best, and damagingly counter-productive, at worst. May Summer personally remembers the article in the music magazine *Spin* as a critical moment. Erika Reinstein had spoken with a reporter about the Riot Grrrl movement and their zines. When the article was published, however, it contained some erroneous passages. Perhaps even more telling, *Spin* had hired a thin, "attractive" model to portray the image of a riot grrrl in the photo spread. The model appeared topless with words like bitch and slut written on her body. As we have already mentioned, riot grrrls often wrote on their bodies with a sharpie marker at political protests, but *Spin* had appropriated this political act for a fashion statement. May and Erika found it offensive that the editors distorted Riot Grrrl's message and portrayed its members as sex objects. While Riot Grrrl members wanted to spread the word about Riot Grrrl and make connections with likeminded girls around the country (particularly in small isolated towns), they did not want the movement to become co-opted or turned into a sexy, pouty, quasi-feminist fad. Erika wrote an article titled "Big Takover" about the implications of corporate media on the Riot Grrrl movement:

What we are doing is sincere and real. We are not trying to be trendy or the next big thing like we're some kind of pop band. We are a group of girls who get together for support and to network because we need each other in this society that wants to act like we don't exist. For any reporter to try and package and market that is fucking obscene. I mean it is not necessarily bad for "the movement" cause other girls are finding out about it and they might get inspired to do something of their own, it's just that these big companies are profiting from riot grrrl. They're taking it out of our hands and turning it into a commodity to be sold. (Reinstein *Fantastic Fanzine no. 3*)

More articles appeared in the national press, even in prominent "mainstream" magazines like *Newsweek* and *Seventeen*. In these articles, like the one in *Spin*, a great deal of attention was paid to

the way the women in the movement dressed and wore their hair. Riot Grrrl-related bands, particularly Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, also received a high degree of attention, but not for their political activism. In fact, the mainstream press rarely discussed the movement's zine production or the social protests. At the same time, Kathleen Hanna was occasionally misconstrued as the movement's leader. As she recalls, "I was uncomfortable being its spokesperson when it was the labor of so many that made Riot Grrrl popular" ("Kathleen's Herstory"). Erika saw this phenomenon as another inevitable consequence of the "Big Takover": "Even though we try to tell them [reporters], they just can't seem to grasp the idea of a movement of individuals working together without some kind of map or chart or set of rules . . . they understand even less that we don't have leaders and we are actively and continually trying to eliminate hierarchy whenever possible" (Reinstein *Fanzine* no. 3).

Riot Grrrl was facing a dilemma that had been an issue within the larger punk subculture since its inception: getting one's message out to a larger audience versus having that message adulterated by corporate media's appropriation (Hebdidge 92–99). The anarchist musical collective Chumbawamba scored a major commercial hit when they signed to EMI in Europe and Universal in the US after being dropped by their indie label. Defending his band's decision to sign with the majors, lead singer Boff argued "We understand the relationship between band and label. We are trying to use them to sell whatever message we have and the music we make, and they use that to make a profit. That's fine and we accept that. . . . If we hadn't signed that piece of paper with Universal, we wouldn't be having this conversation with you. Our whole thing is about communication" (qtd. in Sinker 128). As Anti-Flag's Pat Thetic notes, "You have to use that system [global capitalist economy]. Obviously it's cliché but you have to at least be able to have a voice to say this is fucked up, rather than to have no voice and scream in the wilderness and nobody hears you." But Ian MacKaye of Fugazi and Dischord Records has argued that signing to a major corporate label compromises both the artist and the artist's message: "When a band signs to a major label, no matter how good a contract they think that have, no matter how much control they think their contract provides, it's unavoidable that you are conscious of being an investment.

Somebody puts money into you and you have to pay it off somehow. And you *want* to pay it off" (qtd. in Sinker 20). Similarly, it became clear that the media coverage, in the case of Riot Grrrl, was part of a larger trend to restrain and domesticate the social and political threats posed by the movement.

In many ways, the Riot Grrrl movement was re-living challenges similar to those faced by their predecessors at the inception of the punk movement. One of the elements that originally made punk significant was that it represented not just a form of musical expression but a social and political disruption. In Dick Hebdige's discussion of punk rock as a subculture and a style, he observes that "[s]ubcultures represent 'noise' (as opposed to sound): interference in the orderly sequence which leads from real events and phenomena to their representation in the media" (90). Within the highly mediated world of the past several decades, punk provides resources for the (often violent) disruption of the orderly sequence involved in the communication of dominant social ideas and practices. The Riot Grrrl movement continued that disruption of the authorized codes—particularly the gender codes—through which the social world is organized and experienced.

Yet threatening cultural fields like punk in general and Riot Grrrl in particular can be commodified and contained over time. As Hebdige notes, "As the subculture begins to strike its own eminently marketable pose, as its vocabulary (both visual and verbal) becomes more and more familiar, so the referential context to which it can be most conveniently assigned is made increasingly apparent. Eventually, the mods, the punks, the glitter rockers can be incorporated, brought back into line, located on the preferred 'map of problematic social reality'" (93–94). It is through the continual process of recuperation that the dominant social order is repaired and its social power reasserted. Drawing from the work of Roland Barthes, Hebdige notes that "The process of recuperation takes two characteristic forms: (1) the conversion of subcultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects (i.e., the commodity form); (2) the 'labeling' and re-definition of deviant behaviours by dominant groups—the police, the media, the judiciary (i.e. the ideological form)" (94).

With the mainstream media's coverage of Riot Grrrl, these processes of commodification and ideological redefinition had

begun. With regards to the first move, Riot Grrrl and “girl power” style and fashion was commodified in ways similar to how punk had originally been mass-produced and marketed. Just as one could buy “punk” fashion and accessories in shopping malls across the US within a few years of its emergence as a subculture in London and New York, so too was Riot Grrrl being commodified in the marketplace. With regards to the ideological form of the process of recuperation, Hebdige argues: “Two basic strategies have been evolved for dealing with this threat. First, the Other can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated. Here, the difference is simply denied (‘Otherness is reduced to sameness’). Alternatively, the Other can be transformed into meaningless exotica, a ‘pure object, a spectacle, a clown.’ In this case, the difference is consigned to a place beyond analysis” (97). The mainstream media’s coverage of the Riot Grrrl movement, as evidenced by the articles in *Spin*, *Seventeen*, and *Newsweek*, provide excellent examples of both strategies: trivializing and exotizing the Riot Grrrl Other. As Naomi Klein wrote in *No Logo* regarding the appropriation of girl power: “the cool hunters reduce vibrant cultural ideas to the status of archeological artifacts, and drain away whatever meaning they once held for the people who lived with them” (72–73).

May and Erika, like many others in the Riot Grrrl movement felt that they were creating alternative, girl-made, independent media for a reason. They explicitly rejected the notion that large media conglomerations were the only way to reach broad audiences. They decided that in order to be in control of their own image they would create a zine distribution network so that their zines could speak for themselves. May and Erika saw Riot Grrrl Press as an effective tool for combating the media’s appropriation of Riot Grrrl. The idea was that if girl zines could be distributed on a larger scale, Riot Grrrls could express themselves and reach large audiences without having to rely on the mainstream press. Writing at the time, Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald observed, “zines provide a forum, outside (though not detached from) the music, in which the members of riot grrrl subculture can engage in their own self-naming, self-definition and self-critique—can comment, in other words, upon the very shape and representation of the subculture itself” (Gottlieb and Wald 265).

The “media backout” became the movement’s official policy toward the media in 1993. Riot Grrrls approached by reporters

agreed to offer only the address of Riot Grrrl Press and nothing more. While most members went along with this, some riot grrrls continued to speak to reporters, which caused divisions within the movement. Band members, like the members of Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heaven's to Betsy, agreed to simply refer to Riot Grrrl Press if reporters asked them to discuss Riot Grrrl. The September–November 1993 *Riot Grrrl Press Catalogue* listed six reasons the Press was created. The first is perhaps the most important and deserves to be quoted in whole:

Self representation. We need to make ourselves visible without using mainstream media as a tool. Under the guise of helping us spread the word, corporate media has co-opted and trivialized a movement of angry girls that could be truly threatening and revolutionary. And even besides that it has distorted our views of each other and created hostility, tension, and jealousy in a movement supposedly about girl support and girl love. In a time when Riot Grrrl has become the next big trend, we need to take back control and find our voices again. (*Riot Grrrl Press*)

The members of Riot Grrrl Press made their own zines, *Discharge* (Mary), *Cherub* (Joanna), *Jaded* (May), *Marika* (May and Erika), *Star Gang* (May and Joanna), and *Wrecking Ball* (Mary and Erika), and they used their publications to advertise the Press. They also solicited flat master copies of girl-made zines from around the country, which were subsequently listed in the *Riot Grrrl Press Catalogue*. As the Press stated: "We will take the burden off of (usually) young women who can't afford to distribute their zines, or whose zines aren't well known. First it'll get the word out to everyone who gets the catalogue and PLUS we'll be doing all the shit work of copying and dealing with \$." The zines listed in the catalogue were sold at minimal cost and the authors sending flats did not receive royalties. May recalls, "we were not trying to make money, just cover costs" (Farnsworth). In 1993, Riot Grrrl Press carried over sixty zines and a handful of videos. The catalog listed zines about the sex trade industry (*Buy Me*), masturbation and sexual health (*Clitoris*), incest and sexual abuse (*Fantastic Fanzine*, *Hangnail*, *Luna*, *Rape*), high school (*Curmudgeon*, *Upslut*), women of color (*Lost ID*), body image (*Grrrl Trouble*, *Cherub*), queer identity (*Brat Attack*, *Luna*, *Party Mix*), among other topics relevant to feminist girls.

Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald describe how zine making cultivates solidarity among marginalized girls and illustrates the feminist belief that the personal is political:

[T]he small “girlcore” fanzine network that has sprung up around Riot Grrrl allows women to participate actively in the ongoing perpetuation and (re)definition of the subculture. Most obviously, the “zines foster girls” public self-expression, often understood as the ability to tell private stories (secrets), which are otherwise prohibited or repressed by the dominant culture. These include girls’ descriptions of their experiences of coming out as lesbian (especially in the “queercore” zines, which as early as the mid-eighties took to protesting hardcore’s heterosexism and homophobia); the disclosure of their traumas as rape and incest survivors, or as women struggling with eating disorders; and their gushy affirmations of girl-love and devotion to punk music. Thus publicized, such narratives often become the stuff of political commitment and an affirmation of girls’ legitimacy within the realm of the political. (Gottlieb and Wald 264)

As Heath Row notes, “Riot Grrrl zines attempt to expand the boundaries of feminist conversation through discussion of editor’s sexual exploits, the ins and outs of menstruation and feminine hygiene, and the danger of silverfish. . . . Like punk zines, Riot Grrrl zines exhibit the rough-edged, hand-written text, doodles in the margins, and third-generational photocopied photographs.” The zines produced and distributed by Riot Grrrl Press were aimed at doing explicit political work, primarily challenging established gender norms. Anne Elizabeth Moore recalls, “Through collage, text, and comics, publishers like Nomy Lamm radicalized the rejection of mainstream beauty images by sexualizing physical disabilities, fatness, queer desire, and masculine women” (Moore, “Be a Zinester”).

Riot Grrrl Press was obviously instrumental in expanding the network of like-minded feminist “zinesters.” Distributing zines across the country connected young females in small towns to a larger community. As *Riot Grrrl Press* stated, “RG Press will make women’s zines available to people who wouldn’t necessarily get them otherwise. Yeah, that’s right. Networking. There are a lotta people in this world and there are probably several who would benefit from and/or enjoy reading our zines but haven’t had the opportunity. There are also a lot of radical activists and groups that

we really need to network with NOW ok?" In this way, the Press was as useful in spreading the new feminist message of the Riot Grrrl movement as the bands that were receiving increased media attention. While networking was clearly an important facet of the zine culture, perhaps a more important aspect was spreading the message of personal empowerment. This was a message that had always been at the forefront of zine culture. Riot Grrrl Press and the zines it distributed, encouraged readers to produce their own zines; to be more than consumers of culture, but producers of their own media. It was clear from the catalogue that the zines presented were not necessarily final products but steps toward the process of self discovery. Mary Fondriest's description of *Discharge* sums up the sentiments of many girl-zine editors "I think my ongoing goal with *Discharge* is to find my voice—and with each time I put out an issue, I come closer. Sometimes I feel it's unsuccessful and incoherent. But it is the only way, for now, that I can feel safe" (*Riot Grrrl Press*). Zine editors also frequently used the Press to solicit submissions for future issues. As the catalogue repeatedly proclaimed: "This is self-representation." While the Press was dedicated to pluralism, there was no place in the catalogue for antifeminism, "This catalogue carries just about any thing made by girls (unless we find it offensive)" (*Riot Grrrl Press*).

The biggest obstacles facing Riot Grrrl Press, like most other independent presses and zine distributors, were money, time, and space. They did not want to charge a lot per zine so they usually asked for a couple of dollars and a stamp. But that left no money for the Press's workers. Even with four people running Riot Grrrl Press, it was difficult for the members of the collective to balance their zine work with college and outside jobs. In the winter of 1994, Erika and May moved back to Olympia. The Press stayed in DC, operated mainly by Mary Fondriest and Seanna Tully. Erika maintained her involvement in Riot Grrrl Press as she traveled back and forth between Olympia and DC. In the Spring of 1994, Erika and Mary moved to Chicago, where they rented a space for Riot Grrrl Press within the anarchist collective, the A-Zone. Sarah Kennedy, who joined the Press at that time, remembers that orders for zines were coming in regularly. Sarah was excited to work on the project, even without pay, because she felt a personal connection with the Riot Grrrl movement. She had heard about Riot Grrrl while still in high school in the small town of Normal, Illinois

and had been inspired to make her own zine, *Miss America*. During the day, Sarah worked full time at a bookstore but spent most of her evenings and weekends stocking zines and filling orders. Just as it had in the DC area, Riot Grrrl Press soon discovered a way to obtain free photocopies in Chicago; a friend with the key to an office building allowed Riot Grrrl Press to sneak in to the copy room and use it for reproducing zines after work hours. Riot Grrrl Press successfully operated in Chicago for two more years. However, Mary and Erika relocated Riot Grrrl Press once again when they moved to Olympia in 1996 (Kennedy). This was probably the last year of production for the Press. Unable to continue the project, Mary and Erika passed their fanzine collection on to other volunteers who kept it going for a short time after that. It is not clear exactly why the Press ceased operations but, most likely, the new organizers lacked access to photocopiers and/or workers willing to dedicate time to project. Keeping prices down had always required members of Riot Grrrl Press to work for free and to continually rely on illegal and clandestine photocopies.

When discussing the end of Riot Grrrl Press, Bleyer argues: “Despite pools of copier ink spilled in earnest discussions of race and class, girl zines were largely a hobby of white, middle-class young women” (52). She further argues that, “Participating in girl zine culture requires that one have the leisure time to create zines, a life generally uncluttered with the rudiments of survival, access to copy machines and other equipment, money for stamps and supplies, and enough self-esteem and encouragement to believe that one’s thoughts are worth putting down for public consumption—all marks of a certain level of privilege” (52–53). But such an explanation is too trite, if not historically inaccurate. Our discussion of Riot Grrrl Press should dispel the image of privileged college kids sitting around making zines in their extensive leisure time. Most members of Riot Grrrl came from lower middle-class and working-class backgrounds. Many of the riot grrrls in college worked outside jobs to pay their way through school. Several riot grrrls worked poor-paying jobs to make ends meet, with very little time to produce or distribute zines, which was precisely one of the reasons Riot Grrrl Press took over zine distribution. More than a few riot grrrls worked in the sex trade industry. Access to equipment—such as copiers and stamps—as we have discussed here were either perks of low-paying jobs or

acquired through illicit means. Yet, despite these facts, Riot Grrrl members were never naïve about their privilege. Indeed, most zines produced through Riot Grrrl engaged in direct and challenging discussions about class and race privilege. However, it is true, as Bleyer states, that most Riot Grrrl zinesters exhibited a high degree of self-esteem. Empowering girls was, after all, one of the main goals of the Riot Grrrl movement. Riot Grrrl Press worked to create a space in which girls from diverse locations and backgrounds could feel encouraged to pay attention to each other and express themselves. The members of Riot Grrrl and Riot Grrrl Press did not subscribe to the notion that self-esteem was the exclusive right of any one gender, race, age, or social class. As Joanna Burgess writes about making her first fanzine "it was scary but totally empowering and I'm really glad I did it" (*Riot Grrrl Press*).

Conclusion

By the late 1990s, Riot Grrrl had effectively ended as a unified movement: "[t]he entire zine movement was effectively over, one could say, almost as soon as it began, having been swallowed up by the great maw of popular culture with dollar signs flashing in its eyes. Like hip-hop, grunge, and punk rock, the language style of Riot Grrrl were absorbed, repackaged, and marketed back to us in the most superficial form of its origin" Bleyer argues (51). While she is certainly correct about corporate media's appropriation of elements of Riot Grrrl, she seems to suggest that the movement ended in failure. Bleyer's account fails to appreciate the impact Riot Grrrl had—and continues to have—on contemporary self-representation and girl empowerment. We would argue, in contrast, that Riot Grrrl had a lasting influence on women involved in punk and zine making. As of this writing, Riot Grrrl-inspired organizations continue to meet, publish zines, and exchange information all over the US and the world. Recently, Elke Zobl conducted interviews with women all over the world who consider themselves part of a global "grrrl zine" community. Many of today's female zinesters, in places as diverse as Malaysia, Brazil, the United Arab Emirates, Netherlands, and Argentina, cite Riot Grrrl as the source of their inspiration (Zobl).

The importance of self-representation was the most valuable lesson of Riot Grrrl Press. As Anne Elizabeth Moore has observed, “The experiences of women involved in Riot Grrrl show us that history wants to package and proselytize, and it gives us one way to avoid contributing to the creation of neat boxes in which we will later be placed” (“Be a Zinester”). Self-representation through alternative media sources is not a luxury of some privileged group, but rather a necessity for all those wishing to challenge the destructive social forces—from patriarchy to corporate-controlled capitalism—within society at large.

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