

Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from within

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Signs

Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within

Everybody has girls, every country has girls,
every group in the world has girls as a part of it.
— Lailah, age 16, Brooklyn, New York

Very few self-proclaimed Riot Grrrls¹ would, if asked, like to explain exactly what the term means. Many call it punk rock feminism, even though Riot Grrrl has moved beyond punk circles. When a group of girls in Washington, D.C., started Riot Grrrl in the summer of 1991, their intent was to make girls and women more involved in D.C.'s predominantly white, male punk scene, in which girls participated mostly as girlfriends of the boys.² In the late 1970s, punk initially had been very profeminist (the ideals of feminism fit in with punk's do-it-yourself [DIY] ethic of self-empowerment and independence from authority), but as it became commercialized around 1977, its ideals became assimilated into the mainstream patriarchal belief systems.

The name *Riot Grrrl* was chosen to reclaim the vitality and power of youth with an added growl to replace the perceived passivity of "girl." It was most popular initially in the lively punk scenes of D.C. and Olympia, Washington, where Riot Grrrl had one of its first defining moments. In the summer of 1991, K Records of Olympia held the International Pop Underground Festival, and the first night was designated Girls' Night. As

In the spring of 1997, Pennsylvania Riot Grrrl Jessica Rosenberg and *Signs* Program Assistant Gitana Garofalo convened four conference calls with ten Riot Grrrls from around the United States to discuss the movement in general and their own experiences in particular. These discussions, in conjunction with an E-mail survey administered by Rosenberg, revealed Riot Grrrls' resistance to hegemonic interpretations of themselves and the Riot Grrrl movement(s). Rosenberg and Garofalo selected and edited excerpts from the conversations and correspondence. The following forum represents a multifaceted and open-ended exploration of Riot Grrrl.

¹ Also known as Riot Grrl (or Girl). The name is a feminist reclamation of the word *girl* with a less polite and more assertive political stance. Riot Grrrl/Grrl refers to a very loosely connected group of punk feminists who publish zines and play in bands. The coinage of the term *grrrl* is frequently attributed to Kathleen Hanna, a member of the band Bikini Kill.

² For a more detailed history of Riot Grrrl, see Klein 1997.

the zine *Girl Germs* noted, "The idea was formulated by several Olympians, who saw an opportunity to demarginalize the role of women in the convention and in punk rock." Led by bands such as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy and zines such as *Girl Germs*, *Jigsaw*, and *Chainsaw*, more bands and more zines came into being and a network of Riot Grrrls was created, based largely on those zines. Chapters were started across the country. Girls held conventions where Riot Grrrls met and exchanged zines, bands performed, and workshops were held on topics such as eating disorders, rape, abuse, self-mutilation, racism, self-defense, and zine production.

When Riot Grrrl received press coverage in magazines ranging from *Sassy* to *Newsweek*, the movement grew even further from its punk rock beginnings. Many girls became acquainted with the movement through the mainstream media rather than the punk rock underground. Some girls have felt that the press coverage has distorted the message of Riot Grrrl, while others have felt it is just another tool to let people know about the movement. Regardless of how they learned of it, for the girls involved, Riot Grrrl has changed the way they think and act and how they see themselves in their everyday lives.

Perhaps because it was based on the punk scene, Riot Grrrl is much angrier than was the second wave of feminism of the 1970s. Riot Grrrls are loud and, through zines, music, and spoken word, express themselves honestly and straightforwardly. Riot Grrrl does not shy away from difficult issues and often addresses painful topics such as rape and abuse. Riot Grrrl is a call to action, to "Revolution Girl-Style Now." At a time in their lives when girls are taught to be silent, Riot Grrrl demands that they scream.

To most girls, Riot Grrrl means a community and emotional support. Madhu, of Massachusetts, says, "Through Riot Grrrl, we can get with people with similar problems and interests, and constructively try to change our world. It's a community, a family."³ While other feminist movements have been geared more toward political action, Riot Grrrl, although remaining staunchly political, also pays attention to the personal and the everyday. It focuses more on the individual and the emotional than on marches, legislation, and public policy. This creates a community in which girls are able to speak about what is bothering them or write about what happened that day.

The most common means of communication in the Riot Grrrl community is the zine. Across the country and even internationally, girls produce

³ E-mail questionnaire response, April 26, 1997.

countless zines. Riot Grrrl sees zine writing and publishing as a basic method of empowerment; zine production is self-motivated, political activism that a girl can do entirely independently. Zines subvert standard patriarchal mainstream media by critiquing society and the media without being censored and also give girls a safe place to say what they feel and believe. Through ads in other zines, distributors, and word of mouth, zines have created a network of Riot Grrrls, which Emily White (1992) calls "an underground with no Mecca, built of paper." Lisa, of Olympia, explains, "Zines are so important because so many girls feel isolated and don't have other girls to support them in their beliefs. Zines connect them to other girls who will listen and believe and care if they say they've been raped or molested and harassed. Zines provide an outlet for girls to get their feelings and lives out there and share them with others."⁴

More recently, Riot Grrrl has formed a community on the Internet. Although discussion topics range from racism to music, from zine promotion to company boycotts and legislative politics, girls write most often about their days—something small that has upset them or something great that has happened. In that environment, what they create is genuine and accessible. Because the feminism of Riot Grrrl is self-determined and grass-roots, its greatest power is that it gives girls room to decide for themselves who they are. It provides a viable alternative to the skinny white girls in *Seventeen* and *YM (Young and Modern)* magazines. The fact that the vast majority of girls involved in Riot Grrrl are white and middle- to upper-class has caused outsiders to deride the movement and some of those involved to dissociate themselves from it. Although there has been much discussion recently of race as an issue within Riot Grrrl and society in general, no one seems to have conceived any viable solution to the racial homogeneity of Riot Grrrl. Most of the problem lies in the fact that Riot Grrrl travels primarily through punk rock, a very white underground, zines, and word of mouth, which tend to go from white girl to white girl because of racial segregation. For many, Riot Grrrl is a community in which girls can transgress and challenge something they don't believe in and still feel comfortable; when girls feel alone because they disagree with the cultural majority, they have a network of people they can turn to and rely on. Riot Grrrl empowers girls to become angry and speak and provides a community in which to do so.

—Jessica Rosenberg

⁴ E-mail questionnaire response, April 27, 1997.

A declaration by the band Bikini Kill outlines Riot Grrrl philosophy:

BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways.

BECAUSE we wanna make it easier for girls to see/hear each other's work so that we can share strategies and criticize-applaud each other.

BECAUSE we must take over the means of production in order to create our own moanings.

BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how [what] we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status quo.

BECAUSE we recognize fantasies of Instant Macho Gun Revolution as impractical lies meant to keep us simply dreaming instead of becoming our dreams AND THUS seek to create revolution in our own lives every single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit christian capitalist way of doing things.

BECAUSE we want and need to encourage and be encouraged in the face of all our own insecurities, in the face of beergutboyrock that tells us we can't play our instruments, in the face of "authorities" who say our bands/zines/etc. are the worst in the U.S. and

BECAUSE we don't wanna assimilate to someone else's (boy) standards of what is or isn't.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to falter under claims that we are reactionary "reverse sexists" AND NOT THE TRUEPUNKROCK-SOULCRUSADERS THAT WE KNOW we really are.

BECAUSE we know that life is much more than physical survival and are patently aware that the punk rock "you can do anything" idea is crucial to the coming angry grrrl rock revolution that seeks to save the psychic and cultural lives of girls and women everywhere, according to their own terms, not ours.

BECAUSE we are interested in creating non-hierarchical ways of being AND making music, friends, and scenes based on communication + understanding, instead of competition + good/bad categorizations.

BECAUSE doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things that validate and challenge us can help us gain the strength and sense of community that we need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodyism, ageism, speciesism, classism, thinism, sexism, anti-semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives.

BECAUSE we see fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process.

BECAUSE we hate capitalism in all its forms and see our main goal as sharing information and staying alive, instead of making profits or being cool according to traditional standards.

BECAUSE we are angry at a society that tells us Girl=Dumb, Girl=Bad, Girl=Weak.

BECAUSE we are unwilling to let our real and valid anger be diffused and/or turned against us via the internalization of sexism as witnessed in girl/girl jealousy and self-defeating girltype behaviors.

BECAUSE I believe with my wholeheartmindbody that girls constitute a revolutionary soul force that can, and will, change the world for real.⁵

Discussants

Lailah Hanit Bragin

i'm sixteen and am growing up in brooklyn, new york city. i've been involved with riot grrrl for about two or three years now. i wanted to participate in [this discussion] for a couple of reasons. the first is that i think it's important that riot grrrl as a movement is documented as a "youth feminism" of the 1990s. riot grrrl has made really significant contributions to the lives of many girls and should be recognized as a valid form of feminism and youth resistance. that said, i [also] think that there's a lot of change and growth that needs to be a part of riot grrrl. [the second reason is] COMMUNICATION! any opportunity girls have to talk honestly and openly with each other about our experiences and ideas is totally valuable. . . . i hope reading the conversation will give you something to think about and inspire you to continue in your struggle, whatever it may be.

⁵ *Bikini Kill* (Olympia, Wash.), n.d., no. 2.

Kim M. Garcia

I cannot say that I'm a Riot Grrrl, because I will not classify or label myself. I identify with many of the beliefs and understandings the Riot Grrrl movement presents, but I do not want to be thought of as only involved with this one movement. I help those that I know need to be helped, and I do understand what it is to be discriminated against. I am a gay, half-asian and half-chicana girl. I feel I have to face the ignorance of others every day of my life, but I am proud of who I am at the age of sixteen.

My main interest in participating with this discussion was to somewhat show what the Riot Grrrl movement is supposed to be. Many people do not know what the significance of Riot Grrrl is, and society seems to be publicizing the movement to those that were never exposed to the movement.

Jake Greenberg

I'm eighteen. I got the name Jake by scaring away some scary guys in an Israeli discotheque by telling them I was really a man. It worked. I go to SUNY Purchase. I play bass and write poetry, songs, and the occasional short story or play. I got involved in Riot Grrrl through hearing a Bikini Kill song and really liking it and looking for more music like that. When I got on-line, I found a B.K. [Bikini Kill] bulletin board and got sent to a R.G. [Riot Grrrl] board from there and somehow went from asking if there were going to be any conventions on the East Coast that year to helping organize one in Philly a year later. I write for the zine *Queer Fish*.

Jessica Farris

i've been involved with riot grrrl or the so-called riot grrrl "scene" for about three or four years now. i published/put out two zines: *Ballroom Etiquette* and *Reject Gene*. i also do a self-run distro-type thing of stickers, patches, and probably more fun stuff soon, and that's called Geekette Productions.

i was interested in participating in this discussion because i've always felt that it's important to get the idea of "riot grrrl" out there and not even necessarily that as much as the idea of "hi, we're girls and we're doing cool things and we're here. we're alive." y'know? gosh i could go on and on. but to get this out to girls that may have not been subjected to it previously and maybe make some sort of impact or difference is a major part of participating in [a discussion] like this.

Madhu Krishnan

my name is madhu, which is sanskrit for "sweet" and other such words with sugary connotations. as my name may suggest, i am an indian of

american descent. my parents are both immigrants, who have done wonderfully well, by any standards. my ethnic background has added an interesting element, as well as conflicts, to the usual teenage rebellion thing, as well as added to the generation gap.

i discovered riot grrrl when i was a little grunge-girl-teen-angst-lost-alone kid in junior high, through books i'd been reading and music i had been listening to. my perception of time is always off, but i think that was around 1994. (has it really been that long? time is frightening.) it started out as a musical attraction of "hey! i can do this!" and grew from there, as i acquired more knowledge of other aspects of riot grrrl, namely literature, in the form of fanzines. i think the main thing about riot grrrl that i find so attractive is how it made me feel connected with all these girls from hundreds of miles away.

feminism was nothing new to me, but riot grrrl was, and since then my interest in it has grown, as have my perceptions of it. i probably wouldn't call myself a riot grrrl per se, because i don't think that you can BE a riot grrrl, although you can be part of the MOVEMENT of riot grrrl. i can't see something like riot grrrl as separate from other struggles and movements for equality, as to gain equality in one area means it is necessary to gain it in all others.

right now i do a few zines. *soiled princess* is my own zine that i wrote a year ago. it's about the personal as well as political. *kittybrat* is with my friend becca, and about everything imaginable. *secret language* is my zine on self abuses. *CxVxBxNxMx* is my attempt to universalize what's personal. i'm also working on another zine more like *soiled princess* in style, which has no name, as of now, and have started a fanzine on the PeeChees with my friend melissa, which is unnamed and won't be done for a few months.

Erin A. McCarley

I am an eighteen-year-old girl who has been involved with riot grrrl since I was fifteen. I have done numerous zines, including *Glamour Queen*, *Room Double Zero*, *Rome Wasn't Built in a Day*, and *Racecar*. I played drums for the bands Catcall and The Volateens. I'm presently in three bands: I drum for Lucid Nation and The Makeshift Conspiracy. I also play bass in a band with four of my guy friends, and I am tentatively planning to do an acoustic solo project titled *Steakknife*. I have a record label, Kill Cupid Productions.

Lindsay Oxford

Lindsay Oxford was born in 1981 and is a junior in high school. When not studying, she plays guitar and bass guitar and writes.

Jamie E. Rubin

I am sixteen years old and have been involved with Riot Grrrl since I was thirteen, although at the time I didn't understand exactly what it was, only that it was a bunch of girls like myself who were tired of the laws society has forced on women for . . . well, forever. I've done a few zines including *Spitshine*, *Pressure Points* and am now working on a new one titled *Kiss and Make Up*. The first zine I actually did was called *Baby Fat*, and I almost got suspended from middle school for passing it around. I'm currently in a punk band called Pavlov's Dogs. . . . We play shows a lot, including playing the Philadelphia Riot Grrrl convention last summer. . . . Last year I left high school to home school and am currently attending Montgomery County Community College in Blue Bell, Pennsylvania.

Tamra Spivey

I play guitar, bass, and drums and sing in the band Lucid Nation; we have a cd: "The Stillness of Over" on my indie label, Brain Floss Records. I edit or coedit the zines *Lucid Nation*, *Tvi*, and *Eracism*, which are distributed by Pander and The Way Sassy. *Eracism* is distributed to gang truce offices and prisons. Writing from these zines will appear in the book *Zine Scene* by Hillary Carlip and Francesca Lia Block. I recently had my first one-person art show at Luckdragon in Venice, California, consisting mostly of autopsy stamp mandalas and free-standing surreal assemblages. I'm a twenty-two-year-old blue-eyed blond with african american and cherokee ancestors.

Riot Grrrl goals and politics

Jessica Rosenberg: What do you think Riot Grrrl is?

Jessica E.: OK, Riot Grrrl—it's feminism, it's music, it's making sure we're not alone, it's communicating.

Jamie: I think it's different for everyone. It doesn't have one specific definition. It means that women can do what they want to do. And it's a support group. People are very supportive and creative.

Tamra: What Riot Grrrl means? Well, it does mean real freedom when it comes to creative self-expression. That was one of the things that attracted me to Riot Grrrl. I got laughed at for even carrying a guitar. I'd walk into a club and people thought I was carrying it for someone else. I know an African American drummer who says, "Everyone is a drummer because you have a heart." The simplicity of that applies to Riot Grrrl. I've seen a hundred girls and boys sitting in a circle in tears and experiencing total healing. I've never experienced anything like that anywhere else in society.

Jessica R.: What appealed about Riot Grrrl? How did you get involved?

Kim: I can't say that I'm a Riot Grrrl per se, but I really believe in equality, not just making the girls the greatest above all. The goal of Riot Grrrl is for everyone to be equal, and that's what I love.

Lailah: The thing that really appealed specifically to me about Riot Grrrl was the no apologies, breaking-down-boundaries kind of thing. Other movements were trying to involve [those outside the movement], appeasing the oppressors, those not involved. Riot Grrrl is about me.

Kim: [Riot Grrrls are] very outspoken, don't hold back what they're feeling.

Lailah: The goals of Riot Grrrl are really wide. They're not really concentrated. It's very widespread. It's important to be really widespread [and include] people from different walks of life. I'd been involved in different movements, some socialist youth organizations, an organization that worked with kids internationally through the United Nations, a group of youth from a progressive summer camp I used to attend, and a few clubs at my former high school, that weren't really doing it for me.

Jessica F.: My best friend's sister was into Hole and then she got into Bikini Kill. I found out about Riot Grrrl through a zine type of thing. I heard Heavens to Betsy, Bikini Kill, and a Kill Rock Stars compilation.⁶ It just went from there. I thought, "Oh, there's all these people out there." I really identified with what they went through. I really wanted to be part of it, and I started my zine.

Jamie: I guess for me it was like a backlash. Up until about sixth grade I was really into Paula Abdul and that kind of stuff. In seventh grade I met this guy who was into the Dead Kennedys and the Dead Milkmen. I listened to Bikini Kill. People on-line sent me zines. It was also around the time I started dealing with my abuse. I realized I had to start dealing with this.

Jessica R.: What do you think the goals of Riot Grrrl are?

Lailah: Working on any sort of oppression that faces anybody and connecting all of [the oppressions]. Seeing oppression as a sort of system, seeing the ways that people are affected according to sex, age, belief, life experiences, economic situations they may have faced, all of the different factors that can make up someone's life, mobilizing, empowering girls—by girls, about girls. This is important. Girls are going without a genuine voice, at least [a] mainstream and widespread [voice]. Riot Grrrl is about

⁶ Kill Rock Stars, an Olympia-based independent record label originally run by Silver Moon and Tinoviel, was vital to the formation of Riot Grrrl, putting out records by such bands as Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy.

Riot Grrrls getting girls to do it for ourselves, changing the stuff going on in our lives, change it ourselves because we can't wait for someone else to do it.

Jessica R.: What are the politics of Riot Grrrl?

Erin: The basic underlying one [is] be who you want to be, regardless of sex, race, class. [Riot Grrrls are] not limited. They're typically very liberal, but a Riot Grrrl can be a Christian antiabortionist. The main thing is don't compromise others' beliefs. Think strong for yourself even if you don't agree with other Riot Grrrls. Opinion about abortion is a good example of this. I've come across Riot Grrrls who are like, "No, this is who I am and you can't hold it against me."

Madhu: It's about speaking out, not keeping quiet. Sticking to what you believe in — not buying into that whole put up or shut up.

Jessica R.: What is Riot Grrrl saying?

Jake: Talking about the unfair advantage people have over others — the social commentary. . . . Society in general is messed up. People who have power and people who don't. This is about opening their eyes to what's going on — dieting, the fashion industry. There's a lack of knowledge about others — racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia — for no reason. It pisses me off. It's frustrating. It's not getting through. The whole supposed liberation movement — women are still being raped, sexually harassed, earning seventy-five cents for every dollar a man earns. There's still a lot of ignorance and bigotry. Riot Grrrl is speaking out against this, [saying], "This is wrong. Change it." [See, e.g., fig. 1.]

"One person, a Magic Marker, and a piece of tape"

Jessica R.: What's the best way to spread Riot Grrrl?

Lailah: Riot Grrrl has a lot of chapters and is changing. The point is, it's not only in one place. I believe in the power of one person, a Magic Marker, and a piece of tape. Like the stuff I've done in school. I may be the only one who reads flyers. People who are involved just have to get out there and make flyers and put them in bathroom stalls. I did that so people would read. If you felt comfortable, you could put your own phone number, address, or the number of a Riot Grrrl chapter or say, "Come to the corner and meet me." Anything as a way for people to contact you would be great. Flyers. Make flyers, hand them out, paste them up all over the city, school, or bathroom. Put them in *YM* and *Seventeen*. I had an idea to put zine ads in those magazines saying, "Do you like this? Here, read something good." You must have faith in pieces of paper, have faith in yourself. It's not glossy. It's slow. But honestly represent yourself, stick

You Know what I'M Sick Of?

REALLY Sick Of?...

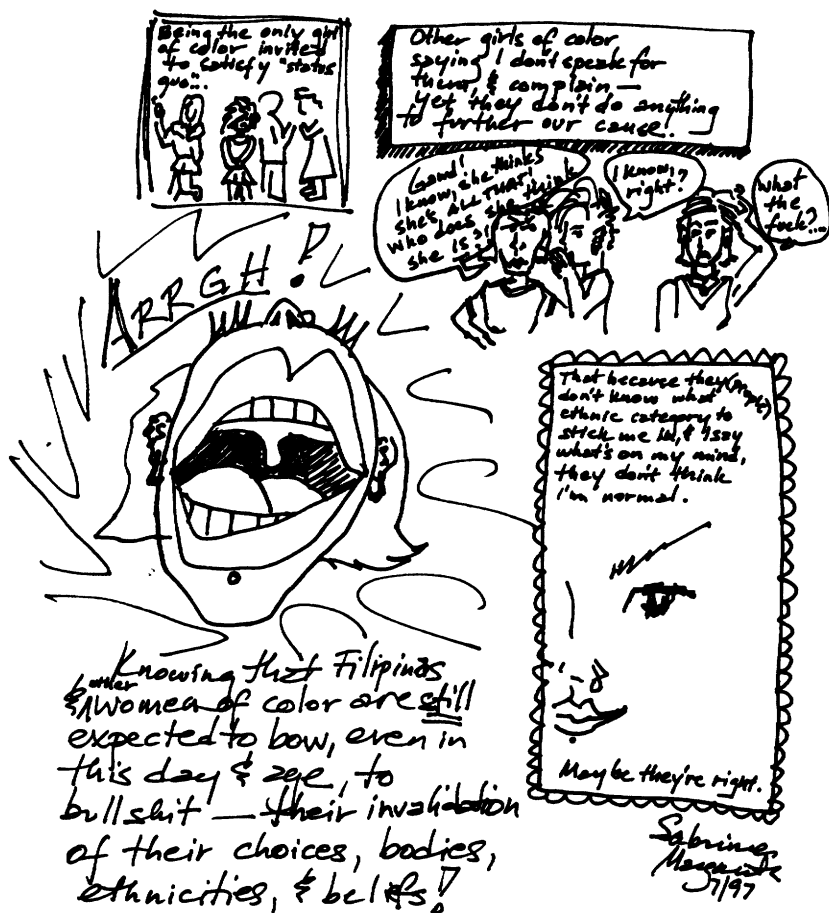


Figure 1 Zine illustration, Sabrina Margarita Sandata, *Bamboo Girl*, 1997, no. 6

things in the library, write in the margins of textbooks. Or just do everyday things. Spread the word; it's important. There are shows and stuff like that. They're important, but not all girls are into the same scene or can go. You can reach out to a lot more girls with flyers.

Kim: I really like your idea about sticking stuff in *YM*. You have to go about it by word of mouth and writing. Those are important. . . . There's a variety of music. Talk with people after shows about it. Word of mouth is good. You can really get to talk to people. Zines are important. Writing is important—make people know what it's about.

Jessica R.: Speaking of word of mouth, whether you heard about Riot Grrrl from your sister or you listened to Sonic Youth, it's hard to get out of certain communities. Does it attract a diverse group of people?

Kim: I know so many different types, ethnicities, of people. I talk to them all—they're all interested. It doesn't matter what type of music people listen to. It's how women are empowered.

Lailah: Getting people to listen is hard. I transferred schools. In my old school I was sticking stuff up in bathrooms because I didn't want people to know; some of the stuff was the same stuff I'd written on the walls and you'd get in trouble for writing on the walls, so I was doing it anonymously. I could hear people talking about it in the halls. It was getting out to people. My old school was segregated, not only ethnically, but also between elite crowds. It was hard to talk honestly. I went for a more anonymous route. Here, I say, "OK, it's on your turf now. Look at that flyer in the mirror while putting on your lipstick." You have to make it available to other people who may be very close-minded and guarded. People weren't down with women being in power—girls included. People would make judgments on me. They didn't want to hear it from someone with hairy legs and blue hair. They need to digest it on their own time and [in] their own way.

Community

Jessica R.: Why is it important that Riot Grrrl has become a community?

Jamie: A lot of girls feel the same way. Before Riot Grrrl they thought they were the only ones. And then, after Riot Grrrl, they're writing zines and singing about the same problems these girls have. It gives them hope that, if these girls can do it, why can't they?

Jessica F.: I didn't have anyone around me. I found girls that had the same problems. And then, through America Online, found a community. It's really amazing.

Jamie: The thing about Riot Grrrl is that it's really special. I tell these girls things that I'd never tell my parents. It's cool there are Riot Grrrl communities.

Jessica R.: What about the [E-mail] list makes it trustworthy?

Jamie: I've been on the list for about a year and a half. At first people just talked about day-to-day things. People started opening up eventually. I'd be on there and just start typing up a storm. I knew that there were people out there who actually cared about me.

Jessica R.: How does the ability to talk to people about personal issues relate to more political aspects of Riot Grrrl?

Tamra: Normally I'm pretty shy. I don't like getting into people's face. I'm not able to deal with confrontation. The list has allowed me to be authentic. The result of being on the list [is that] you can really deal with problems and be together and deal with day-to-day things. What I just saw on TV really bothers me and I have no one to talk to. I can't go to a club and vent the way a boy band can. On the list I can vent about things that are inappropriate anywhere else. Through dealing with each other on a day-to-day basis we have a political group. If we can unite Riot Grrrl, which is basically women who want equality (which isn't too much to ask at the end of the millennium—we live in a capitalist society, we want equal pay, we can address this issue as a group), then we have a political movement. We're a group of very intelligent, sensitive individuals.

Jessica R.: I've talked with other Riot Grrrls about being online and the trust there. Zines build trust—they're emotional and people write about really personal issues. Why do you think Riot Grrrl does such a thing?

Jake: Riot Grrrl basically says, "We're here for you. If there's something bad, we want to help stop it too. Whatever you need." The whole concept of girl-love. There are other people who're being discriminated against. Necessarily there's the concept that people are going through the same things. It's easier to talk with strangers or people who have been there—to stand by and really support you. I don't know why. Girls support and stand by each other.

Jessica R.: Are you comfortable saying that to girls at your school?

Jake: No, because I couldn't be sure they'd understand what I was going through. Just that I don't know them that well. I don't have that kind of unconditional relationship. "Unconditional" is the wrong word. They're not necessarily predisposed to listen to what's going on. I don't know whether they'd even have a common ground to stand on. I could say something, but how would I know that they wouldn't take the other side and attack me instead of support me?

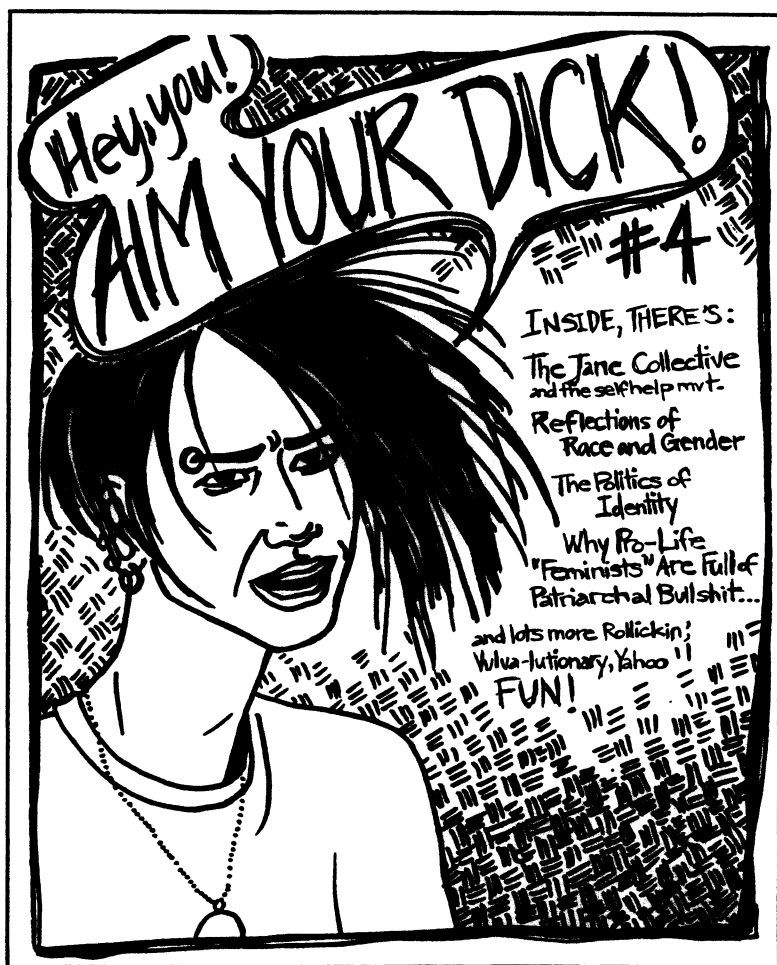


Figure 2 Zine cover, Mimi Nguyen, *Aim Your Dick! #4*, n.d.

Creating our own culture

Jessica R.: Why do you think zines and music are a bigger part of Riot Grrrl than other forms of art? Why are they the most recognized forms of communication? Why do you think self-expression found in Riot Grrrl zines and music is important?

Lindsay: Because they're real. You can feel people's emotions in their music and their writing. They're not filtered, not trying to be dignified. [See, e.g., fig. 2.]

Madhu: Zines are a way to get into other people's heads. I really love Erin's zines. There are things I've never thought about. They're so real.

Erin: Thanks, Madhu. I think zines have so much to do with [Riot Grrrl] for a number of reasons. If you live in a town and don't have [computer] access, zines are a way to contact other people who share your feelings. Before I could drive, it was a way to interact with people who felt the same way. It keeps your sanity; it's therapeutic. If I come home and I'm bummed out because something happened, some degradation or something, I can just sit down and start typing. Zines are a way of typing how you feel, letting it out. It's another form of crying.

Madhu: Emotionally purging the bad stuff.

Erin: Putting it on paper is making it real. Someone will read this and make it real. People can revalidate you. With the music aspect—it's not so much emotional as physical—yelling, running around, playing guitar, getting it all out. A band is a musical zine.

Madhu: When you get really mad you want to break windows and scream. You can do that in a band—get it all out.

Erin: The stuff in my zines [is] in my songs. It's another way to express myself.

Jake: Perhaps because it's a more open means of communication than, say, magazines or newsletters. Except for TV, there doesn't seem to be any other national media. Something that can go all over the country. There's MTV or radio. Not a lot of kids are going to a bookstore to look for books on solidarity or civil rights. There's music—people are exposed to it through summer camp, or their older sister's in a band. It's a good way for young people to find out about ideas. You like the beat, or whatever, you buy it, you listen to the words, you start thinking about them. This isn't stuff you hear on the radio. It seems like music is just always there. In the past, it has always been a way for people to get ideas across, [for example,] freedom gospel tunes from days of slavery. You get ideas across through communication. If you keep it to yourself, there can be no change. If one other person listens, there could be change. You have to speak out, allow people to listen to your ideas and what you're saying. If anything is going to change or be different, you have to say what should be different and why and how can we go about it. It needs to be out there for people to see, hear. Communication is a necessary factor for any idea.

Madhu: Well, in terms of theater and filmmaking, I know a lot of people who do that. Visual arts as well. Zines and music are more accessible. Anyone can buy them.

Erin: I agree. It also has something to do with class. As a middle-class girl, I have access to canvas and paint. I can use my dad's camera. If you're working class, you [may not] have access. There are many talented people who don't have access. It's a privilege to be in a band because of the equip-

ment. I get dissed for having bad equipment—my drums. I don't have an extra \$400 to get new ones. You need money to press the vinyl; tapes are not acceptable to some people. I really wanted to make a zine with my photography, but photos look like shit when they're photocopied. I have access to a scanner, but not directly, so it's a hassle. I don't have the resources. I know girls who make films and movies, but who can buy videos? How do you publicly display across the nation a painting you've just done?

Madhu: There's no way I can get to all the art I've heard about. I won't see it.

Erin: To show your art locally, it's really satisfying. To get it outside of your room. We're trying to set this show up in August. We're trying to get people's art. When else can you see this woman's rad art and film with her there showing it? We're getting this group from Santa Ana called Tagrrrls. Tagging is so dominated by boys.⁷ We're having them come do a workshop on political messages or whatever. It's great to have a workshop taught by other girls, especially Hispanic girls.

Madhu: Riot Grrrl Boston is planning a convention. I'm planning on getting this multimedia artist that I'm most excited about. I want to be exposed to as many forms of art as I can. I live in the suburbs where there aren't as many forms of expression.

Jessica R.: How is self-expression an act of feminism?

Lailah: It's an act of feminism because culture is really important. It's the story of your life. . . . It teaches us so many things. You try to find yourself in culture, your story, history, where you fit in. Creating your own culture is a feminist act. If you're a woman and you're creating your own culture, hopefully, your culture is saying that you have a place that's free of anything set up before you—being strong, safe, not hurt, being so many different things. A culture that involves people from all walks of life. Feminism empowers women. It's an empowering act to create your own culture that has positive messages about you. Unlike our culture, which ignores and tries to kill a lot of groups, this is about celebrating groups.

Madhu: I don't think you can have art without a statement of any kind—can't separate the two. From my viewpoint, something can be really, really beautiful but have no meaning and is therefore not valid to me. Something can be a technical mess but full of emotion, and it's the most wonderful thing. Meaning and validity go hand in hand.

Erin: It's circumstantial. If I saw some girl who was really good at painting, but who didn't think she was good, paint a picture, I think it'd be great. I'd disagree if she painted a rape scene and she didn't have some sort of . . . if there were no subtleties saying it was wrong. Just because a

⁷ Tags are graffiti, usually in the form of street names, gang names, or symbols.

woman does something doesn't mean it's good. You see women in politics who behave just as badly as the men.

Madhu: They're just as oppressive. But people will say a woman does it, so it's good.

Erin: A lot of Riot Grrrls are abuse survivors. They learn behavior from their parents and do things to other people. Riot Grrrls who justify their behavior because they are Riot Grrrls—I don't agree with this.

Madhu: Girl-love. "So-and-so is a girl, therefore I love her." It invalidates a person.

Erin: You could prove to be so much more caring if you'd be critical. I find so much more girl-love with girls who've called me on being classist or racist. If someone doesn't love you, they're not going to teach you.

Madhu: I have a big problem with talk and no action behind it. I think it's great that people can talk, but action is necessary. It's really easy to sit and say this is really fucked up and wrong, but it's a whole other thing to actually do something.

Erin: It's preaching to the converted. You go to shows, see the same people. You're going to have to piss people off, and they might kick your ass. . . . [If] you write to the same people, you all know what you're trying to say. [We need to put] up flyers to let [other] people know what's going on.

Madhu: We did a compilation zine dealing with a variety of topics. Gave it away free to people at our school. I hate all the kids at my school, but I don't really know all of them. I'm starting to get to know the popular people, and they're not that bad. I have more in common with them than I would like to admit.

Erin [to Jessica R.]: Are you speaking in terms of women making art that's feminist? I think it's a feminist statement just to make it. A girl getting dirty! Personally, I like making a statement with it, but if someone just wants to make a pot, more power to them.

Lailah: I'm totally split on this one. It's pretty important. In my own experience I do a zine. The one I used to do, I'm not too proud of it. We didn't do anything important. It was important, as girls, that we used our voices, and we learned a lot. We weren't that free from what could've been done at YM. I was doing to myself what YM could've done for me, but it's an important step. I can do this myself. That's good, but it's not the full step because you can still have all those boundaries and ideas that are still acting on everything you do. They're still hurting you. It's a difficult process. If writing is revolutionary, just being honest and talking about your life is revolutionary. If everyone did that, it'd change things. If you start to chip away at walls that are within you, you'll eventually get revolutionary writing.

Jessica R.: Is having control over your work connected to what Riot Grrrl is?

Jake: Having power over what I write and say is connected to Riot Grrrl. Having the power to say something is wrong. That you're saying I can't speak about this, I can't say these stories, is wrong. I'm going to do it anyway. It's not having people saying you can't do this. "Yes I can, watch me do it. You're not going to impose your will over me."

"An air-brushed rock star": Riot Grrrl and media representation

Jessica R.: How are the ideas expressed in *Time* or *Newsweek* different than in zines, and why? Are the style and tone the same?

Jake: People in magazines are in positions of high power. *Time* is meant to sell copies; it's glossy. Zines are a rejection of mass media. If I want to [abbreviate] a word, use a heart instead of the word "love," spell words in different ways, who says I can't? You can't tell me that it's wrong. It's legitimate. There's nothing wrong with that. There aren't rules.

Kim: Why is it so different [to] write a zine instead of a big magazine? It's the whole mainstream thing again. It can be totally changed around and confuse people about what Riot Grrrl is all about. A zine has someone who is with it in the movement and who is writing about it. A person who is part of the movement who is writing.

Lailah: In a mainstream existence, it's hard to ask someone to get that far away from what the mainstream is saying, to reject so many aspects of what society says you should be and have been raised on. It's important that you create your own culture that doesn't need the mainstream to exist, to go on. That allows people to grow, to learn as much as possible, to not make concessions. You need to take it away from the mainstream, build your own ballpark. It doesn't need to answer to anyone but yourself. People create their own music and zines. There are independent labels and studios, and they're run by women. They're great and helpful. It's important. We can't always change things right away, but we can try living that. We can't wait for the entire world to change.

Jessica R.: Are *Time* and *Newsweek* worthwhile?

Jake: Sure, getting ideas across is always worthwhile. Their style is different—their personality. If you have *Time* writers and zine writers in the same room, I doubt they would talk, act the same. The way you write expresses who you are. Courtney, Steph, and Tai are different from the people working at *Newsweek*.⁸

⁸ All three are zine writers. Courtney has a zine called *Bitchfield*, Steph has *Hospital Gown* and *Kill Supermodels*, and Tai has the zine *Cicada*.

Jessica R.: What separates them?

Jake: What they think that they want. *Time* writers are writing for a job. They know they're writing to get paid. Zines are written to get information across, get things out of their heads. It's more of a personal thing. Zines create their own community. Zines are more of an emotional interplay. "This is my piece of work. If you want it, I'll give it to you." It's not profit driven. It's driven by the desire to get ideas out. Magazines are driven by getting money.

Jessica R.: The mainstream reaches so many people. What do you have to sacrifice to reach them?

Jake: To reach the mainstream, you [have to] sacrifice content. One isn't better than the other. In that situation, it's impossible to do that and say what it is. Commercial people want control—you don't control yourself. They say, "You can't do this, you can't write this." It means giving up something of our work [in order to reach the mainstream].

Jessica R.: Does it make you angry to see [mainstream] media representations?

Jake: Only if Riot Grrrl is portrayed inaccurately. It depends on how Riot Grrrl is portrayed. If it is portrayed as it is, for the reasons it exists, then I'm happy that it's getting mainstream attention without being corrupted or changed into something it isn't. In terms of the organization itself, I feel Riot Grrrl is media-shy.

Jessica R.: What about being underground—is grass roots effective?

Jake: Not having to buy into corporate stuff, paying five dollars to get into a show. You can publish a zine by yourself, not through a publishing house. You can sell it for five cents a copy. It's accessible. I think that underground is a way to keep integrity. There isn't a way to go mainstream without dealing with media stuff, interviews with mainstream media. As long as people aren't getting rid of their ideals when going mainstream, it's no problem. It's good. You're getting your ideals across to more people. As long as there's no compromise to the industry, to commercial sponsorship. What if the TV station you're broadcasting on has a commercial by a company you're boycotting? It's a question of ideals or things you care about.

Jessica R.: How do you feel about the media attention Riot Grrrl has gotten?

Lailah: By falsely exposing people to Riot Grrrl, it gives people a false impression of what it is. I think it's something, a movement, that could help other girls who don't know it exists, to find it and get connected. But they're being introduced to some air-brushed rock star. Not that they call themselves Riot Grrrl. Some media mogul took a label that didn't belong to them and put it on [the rock star]. Someone who didn't want it. They could be what Riot Grrrl really is, but because of all these fake things,

they may not find out about the real Riot Grrrl. They may write it off. They don't have a chance to find out what it's about.

Kim: Or they'll see that this girl acts this way. They'll follow [her] ways and not know about the movement. This person acted this way, so Riot Grrrl does this. It's a stereotype of Riot Grrrl.

Jessica R.: Is it possible for the mainstream to portray the underground accurately? Can Riot Grrrl be portrayed accurately in the mainstream media?

Jake: Yes. To look at it as they see it, not make assumptions. Take what's going on and report it. "[There are] these people, this is what they're doing, what they believe, what they're working towards." Not make it seem like what they want it to seem.

Lailah: I'm scared of mainstream media. I'd have to say no. I think anything trying to portray Riot Grrrl is difficult because it's a diverse movement with a diverse focus and goals. I know Riot Grrrls who are very different from me. [It's] generally hard to portray Riot Grrrl. When you're talking about the core of Riot Grrrl, genuine, not watered down, when it's working, it's a subversive group. It's supposed to be something radical and revolutionary. The media represent things that Riot Grrrl is against or act as a voice that spreads things that hurt Riot Grrrl. It's unlikely that the media would ever want to help a group that seeks to change the basis of whatever they're thriving off of. I can't see the media fairly portraying Riot Grrrl. A fair portrayal would be helpful to a lot of people. I don't think it's possible. They wouldn't want to.

Kim: I don't think Riot Grrrl would work in mainstream media. They'd corrupt and change it around. It's best by word of mouth . . . because it gives the true meaning. It's not using it as a tool for publicity. Riot Grrrl doesn't want to be the next new story—like the whole grunge thing in Seattle. Bands say, "We're Riot Grrrl." But they have no belief, no idea what Riot Grrrl is about.

Lailah: In response, I think that it's almost dangerous for Riot Grrrl to be in the mainstream because it'll get distorted. The thing is, if you use a mainstream audience, you're trying to appease them. Groups like Riot Grrrl get screwed up because they're busy making sure no one is offended or put off, and that dilutes the whole point. You can be as radical as you want to. Riot Grrrl is good for all people, but it's not good for the media. Not everyone is into punk rock, but there are other ways for people to get involved. At school I was handing out flyers and talking to people, trying to get people to think more radically. I had to tone things down, whether I was talking to a flaming queer, a stripper, or an immigrant from Ethiopia. It's important for Riot Grrrl to be important for all those people. If their

background is Top 40 and they look like the cover of *YM*, you have to say, "Break free." Help them help themselves. You have to lure them in — appease them ("It's cool. It's a group. We work on issues"). See if they'll come to a meeting or an action. If it goes further than that, great. I don't really want to scare people and act militant.

Tamra: Most people who are being abused are not heard. I get so much pleasure when the media types go, "Oh, Riot Grrrl, that's passé." There were nine conventions last year. Did you hear about that, Mr. Media? This happens with anything that has a large consciousness. It's not just a large bunch of girls. It's an evolution of the entire planet — a consciousness. The problem is obvious; the solution is probably more simple than we admit. Why don't we admit it? The air is bad, the sky is bad, the water is bad, there's inequality. We shouldn't have to live with it.

Jamie: About the whole media/Riot Grrrl thing. The media thought they were using us, but we were using the media. Here's some action, let's get in on it. But the more coverage they gave us, the more girls got behind it. It doesn't matter how they heard about it. I hear people say, "Oh, she just heard about it a year ago through *Seventeen*. She's a cheerleading type." I say, "Welcome to the club. Now, we've got a lot of work to do." [See, e.g., fig. 3.]

From DIY punk to DIY Riot Grrrl

Jessica R.: Why is Riot Grrrl so much a part of punk rock?

Tamra: I think that [Riot Grrrl] started in the punk rock scene. It's not that it's just your boyfriend. It's not. That's part of the freedom. If somebody does spoken word, if they have a frying pan and spatula to say something, I say, "Yeah! Go girl!" I had to work through the fear of picking up the guitar. In my band, I'm more extreme. I've got a lot of rage to deal with. I saw [the band] Team Dresch and they all switched instruments, and I was like, "That's it!" I saw the freedom there. It goes beyond punk rock. I see the limitations of the patriarchy, and I won't play that. I don't have to.

Jamie: I think also—I've had a lot of problems. The boys are always bringing guitars to school, playing these totally Foreigner solos, and they're like, "Here, you play." And I, I think it's not just memorizing something. It's another medium you can use for your anger. If I start playing the same chord and screaming out all of my anger, it's a lot stronger and more valid.

Jessica F.: I know, for a long time all I knew was "Axeman" by Heavens to Betsy. I remember taking it to school and playing to the boys there, and

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Figure 3 Zine cover, Lisa Jervis, *Bitch*, n.d., no.1

the boys were like, “What’s that shit? Can’t you play ‘Stairway to Heaven?’” Just because it isn’t the greatest guitar playing in the world. I don’t want to play “Stairway to Heaven”!

Tamra: You can have all the technique in the world, but what’s that?
[General agreement from discussants.]

Tamra: That’s the point; technique alone is unimportant. You will continue to do so, for technique evolves naturally from self-expression, but you will always value sincerity over virtuosity. It’s no problem, but the fact [is] that the only thing you’ll put on MTV is a girl in a dress doing it to the camera. There’s a patriarchal media that makes female high visibility available only to the beautiful and, as Courtney Love calls them, “the do-able.” That’s not acceptable.

Jamie: What’s also wrong with that is the traditional white-boy formula

they have. I remember a guitar teacher a few years ago saying that there is this formula for a guitar solo. It goes in the middle of the song.

Tamra: The guitar playing isn't bad, it's extraordinary. I'd like to see one of those big boys play their guitar solos behind Kathi, Tobi, or Kathleen.⁹

Jamie: My guitar teacher, whenever I played any Heavens to Betsy or Bikini Kill, said, "This music is too easy for you to be playing. You should play 'Stairway' or 'Paint It Black.'"

Tamra: If he wants you to play Stones, he should go to the source, Robert Johnson. I had a bass teacher who made me not want to play for years.

Jessica F.: I had a terrible teacher who made me not want to play.

Jessica R.: If Riot Grrrl started out in the punk scene, how did it get out of the underground? Now there are all these baby tees with "Riot Grrrl" on them at the mall. Gwen Stefani on the cover of *Spin* with the words, "Riot Grrrlie."¹⁰

Tamra: We can't blame her for that. It's boy-controlled. Feel sorry for Gwen Stefani. I wanted to be a rock star, but guess who got to? Wow, another all-boy band, how unusual.¹¹

Jessica R.: How is Riot Grrrl different when taken out of the punk context? Why did it have to start out in punk rock?

Jessica F.: Punk had so many of the same ideals as Riot Grrrl. Rebelling against what you're supposed to do and how you're supposed to act.

Tamra: Punk was smarter and more socially conscious [than its contemporaries]. It was a natural evolution.

Jamie: I think there are people in bands out there just to be in a band. They want to use their voice for some good. People like Henry Rollins can do some good until they get really jaded.

Jessica F.: I get really pissed when [people say that] people like Madigan are not punk.¹² I believe that they are.

⁹ Kathi Wilcox, Tobi Vail, and Kathleen Hanna of the band Bikini Kill. Vail did the zine and tape label *Bumpidice* as well as the popular zine *Jigsaw* (Tamra Spivey, E-mail communication, July 28, 1997, and Jessica Rosenberg, E-mail communication, September 17, 1997).

¹⁰ Gwen Stefani sings in the band No Doubt (now infamous for the song "Just a Girl").

¹¹ Stefani is the only woman in the band; all of the nonvocal instruments are played by men. In pop music groups with female vocalists, the backup instruments have been predominantly played by men. Instrumentation is considered to be the backbone, while the vocals, although central, are often seen as adornment.

¹² Madigan Shive was in a two-woman band called Tattle Tale. She now performs solo under the name Madigan with her cello and guitar and sometimes with someone else on drums or contrabass. Her albums include *Sew True* (with Tattle Tale), *Rockstop*, and *Fortunes from the F-holes*.

Tamra: Do [musicians like Madigan] challenge you? I think that's punk.

Jessica R.: At the time of the Sex Pistols [in the late 1970s], there were bands like the Raincoats, with a unique voice, and they had so much to say. You couldn't listen to the Raincoats and think they were anyone else. I feel like a lot of Riot Grrrls aren't doing that anymore. It can be totally valid, but it sounds like something that's been written before.

Tamra: It's just morphing. All of a sudden it morphed into something new. I guess that's an aesthetic of it. It'll always have something—somebody saying something truthful. We can get as elaborate as we want, we can do anything that we want. Right on!

Jamie: Somebody said let's get the Sex Pistols and make some money. The Monkees were a lot more real than the Sex Pistols.¹³

Jessica F.: At that time it was odd for a girl to be doing something.

Tamra: But why is it still odd?

Jamie: It's not if you stay within the boundaries.

Tamra: If girls are screaming, it's not valid, but if boys are screaming, it's valid.

Jamie: I played a show on Friday [and] this girl . . . came up and I asked if she liked it. She said, "I'm sick of Riot Grrrl singing." My guy friend made a good point that, if I'm screaming, it's automatically [assumed to be] Riot Grrrl.

Jessica R.: I heard this boy at my school say that he doesn't like to hear girls screaming. We have these different sort of aesthetics of what should be pretty voices.

Jamie: I played Heavens to Betsy on my radio at school and boys walked in and said, "Hey, I didn't know that pterodactyls were still alive!" It's like they're programmed to not hear beyond the screams.

Tamra: You know what kind of scream it is? It's like when you're a little girl—you're not supposed to make that sound.

Jamie: On the other hand, we don't hear guys scream and yet [when they scream] that's acceptable.

Tamra: They honestly do not hear it.

Jamie: Boys get programmed at an early age not to hear it. I remember I played some spoken word [a style of musical performance] by mistake at school. They made me turn it off—not the teachers, the other students. I was like, "You've got to hear it. This is real. You can't turn away."

Tamra: That's sort of a Riot Grrrl thing, how hardcore you are. They're like, "Turn this off." But I'm like, "This is real."

¹³ Malcolm McClaren organized and promoted the groundbreaking band Sex Pistols, exerting complete control over them. The band was in large part a capitalist commercial entity.

Jamie: There's a difference between not wanting to hear it because it touches something inside of you that you can't deal with and those who want to deny it.

Tamra: Yeah, like, "Not now." I know my boundaries. I kind of put my head down and cried, but then I was like, "No, I want to deal with this." It's scary, but you've got to know yourself, know you can deal with it. You've got to be smart enough to understand that people are turning it off because they're denying a reality.

Jamie: You can tell the difference.

Tamra: Absolutely.

Jessica R.: What are the ties between Riot Grrrl and the punk movement?

Kim: It originated in punk because punk was the outcast in music. The interested people join and are a part of new ways and ideas that are coming in.

Lailah: Here in lovely NYC, there's a weird punk scene. I only knew one girl who started a Riot Grrrl group. Now she's twenty years old and doesn't identify with it anymore, though she's still a feminist. Her identification as a Riot Grrrl is different than mine. She wasn't involved in meetings; her involvement was mostly musical. She was the only Riot Grrrl I knew from the punk scene. A large part of punk is apolitical in a way that frightens me. Who looks punk can be different than who really identifies as punk. The thing about Riot Grrrl is the whole do-it-yourself thing, which comes from punk values. I think that's very empowering and important for all people. It's associated with punk, but it's so helpful to any group. Being able to change things and have power in your hands. If you're a group that's being ignored and no one's listening, no one's telling your story—tell it yourself. Change things. We're going to do it. Don't sit around waiting for someone to do it. Do it yourself. That's the punk connection.

Half a revolution? Gender politics in Riot Grrrl

Jessica R.: One of the things that we discussed on E-mail as we were planning the 1996 Philadelphia convention was, should we let boys in or not? What do you guys think?

Jessica F.: My feeling is, I think boys have a chance to be with girls at any time of the day. We should have a chance to be by ourselves. I know boys that would like to take part. I have to say, "You're my friend, but I don't think you can be a part of what I am."

Jamie: My best friend is a boy, so I'm a little biased. We had Riot Grrrl

meetings for girls only. [The boys] accepted the fact that we needed our space. If they agree with the Riot Grrrl principles, they should understand. They started their own “Boys for Riot Grrrl.” At conventions, during bands, boys can watch. But during the sex abuse workshop, I wouldn’t be as comfortable talking if boys were there.

Tamra: That’s appropriate. For abuse workshops, it’s necessary to be same sex. For the LA convention it wasn’t clear on the flyer. You have to find a venue with different rooms. You can’t stick boys outside, [but] girls should feel safe for two hours for a workshop.

Jamie: Things that can happen in a women-only space. It’s amazing.

Tamra: Ronnie, in my band, is the biggest advocate for women-only space. With all the privilege that boys have (height, size, gender) and the impact their voice has, a girls-only space is necessary for women’s health.

Jamie: If boys are wanting to go to a Riot Grrrl convention, then they should understand.

Jessica R.: People say it’s just reverse sexism, but it’s not because, since boys and girls are placed differently in the power structure, it’s a different action.

Jamie: I’ve said to boys, “You should come to the convention.” And they say, “They’d all cut my dick off.” They have preconceived notions of what it is. And there’re also guys who want to pick up girls. It’s a hard issue.

Madhu: Riot Grrrl shouldn’t be limited just to girls. Rape and sexual abuse are girl issues, but Boston has a boy’s group. There can be no revolution with only half the population.

Lindsay: Exclusion doesn’t accomplish anything.

Madhu: I agree. I’ve seen relationships where the woman dominates. That’s not revolutionary. That’s the same screwed-up power dynamic. Feminism is about equality.

Erin: I wouldn’t be comfortable with boys at workshops. Boys are suppressed in other ways. They can’t cry and show emotion. Riot Grrrl is about screaming, crying, and getting it out.

Madhu: I agree. I understand not being comfortable with guys at workshops. In Boston we’re deciding whether boys can be at workshops and, if so, which ones.

Erin: I agree. It occurred to me [that] it’d be more revolutionary to have boys at those workshops that are about girls, like rape [workshops], because then they could see what are the causes, what are the results. If girls are okay with it and willing to take this risk. Let them in there to get a firsthand look. How will they know (I mean as much as they can) how it really feels?

Madhu: I completely agree. If there’s a problem with anyone, they should speak up about it. The Olympia chapter broke up because this one

girl made everyone else feel really small and stupid, and no one wanted to talk about it. So they all just stopped going to meetings instead of confronting the one girl who caused the problem.

Lindsay: Riot Grrrl is here to educate. If we really want to educate, they should be there to talk about it, regardless of gender. Education isn't education if it doesn't teach everyone.

Madhu: I agree, but I wouldn't want to make people uncomfortable. I don't like being exclusionary. The ideal is for everyone to be comfortable.

Erin: Our chapter didn't have a meeting for three months. . . . We'd have a list of people to call, [but] there are people that people don't call because of personal conflicts—old boyfriends, ex-girlfriends. There are complex social relationships. We need to set those aside and concentrate on the common ground and common goals.

Every aspect of our lives

Jessica R.: How does Riot Grrrl deal with issues outside feminism?

Tamra: I do it with every show I play—a Food Not Bombs benefit. We support the New African Vanguard Movement, Amnesty International, animal rights, or any girl who has five copies of a zine and wants to share it with people.¹⁴ I'll share my zines at Koo's Cafe in Santa Ana or anywhere. I help Food Not Bombs get money to fight homelessness, etcetera. The sad thing that still happens is that, when girls get involved, they end up doing all the cooking for Food Not Bombs. I would say to the boys who want to participate in an effective way: boys know how to cook and put food in bowls too! Maybe they'll think of a better way.

Jamie: Food Not Bombs is always being handled single-handedly here by one person. Fifty or sixty guys should get involved [in running Food Not Bombs].

Jessica R.: How does Food Not Bombs relate to feminism?

Jamie: I think that it has to do with Riot Grrrl. It's the whole thing of social consciousness, more than just feminists becoming more aware [of] the communities around you. What Tamra was saying before, how there's so much injustice—Riot Grrrls are especially sensitive to that. Most of the Riot Grrrls have been abused in some way. Society has hurt them; when they see someone society has hurt, they want to help them.

Tamra: Unification of two different groups.

¹⁴ The New African Vanguard Movement recently had its national meeting and changed its name to the New Black Panther Vanguard (Tamra Spivey, E-mail communication, July 28, 1997).

Jamie: Same way feminism first started. Feminists worked with abolitionists. If they hadn't been helping each other — safety in numbers, you know.

Jessica F.: When you have two different groups, different backgrounds, there are more stories to utilize — learn from each other.

Jessica R.: Why did Riot Grrrl expand from empowering girls to other movements?

Lailah: Everybody has girls, every country has girls, every group in the world has girls as a part of it. Riot Grrrl has realized this. People who were involved with Riot Grrrl, and chose to stay with it, realized that a group that wants change can't alienate part of the group that it wants to change things for. It's really important [that], if you really want to change things [and] value girls, you need to integrate every aspect of their lives. [You can't say,] "We're only here to talk about your experiences as a girl." That's how it should be evolving. But I don't know if [Riot Grrrl] has always been successful at doing that.

"We're not going to wait until we're older"

Jessica R.: It feels like, though there's a lot of different people, those involved with Riot Grrrl are really young. Why is that?

Jessica F.: I think that it appeals to us. [People] in our age-group have a lot of ideas, all of that working together. Women who are over thirty remember the 1970s. While they're supporting us, it's not their thing — a different mind-set.

Jamie: I think that a lot of it is being raised in a certain time. What's going on now is totally different. When I explain it to my mom, she thinks Riot Grrrl is great, but she hates the music. So I think a lot of older women haven't really heard of it. I mean, when my mom tells people I'm a Riot Grrrl, people are like, "What's that?"

Jessica R.: People say revolutionary stuff starts with kids. That students are really important. What do you think? Why are there so many girls in Riot Grrrl and not women much more than ten years older than us? Do older women feel differently?

Madhu: I'll always feel like this. In ten years, yes, or twenty years, when I have my own family. Women my mother's age, they have to take care of family, job — they have so much stress in their own lives. I'll always feel like this; someday I'll grow up and won't have time to write fanzines, talk to people, but —

Erin: Yeah, my politics will stay the same. I don't think I'll turn into a right-wing antiabortionist. Right now, the way I express [my politics] is

through bands and through Riot Grrrl. I'll find different ways to express them. I won't be a housewife. The way I raise my children will be affected by Riot Grrrl. My politics will be expressed differently. I think that the way I'd express my political beliefs when I get older is through things such as the way I'd raise my children to be open-minded, the companies [or] corporations I support [or] boycott, and so forth. I hope to still play music. I think right now that's a big outlet for me. Even now I don't feel like I'll feel as committed to Riot Grrrl in a year as I do now. I don't want to feel committed to Riot Grrrl. I mean, it has done a lot for me personally, but as a movement, I'm starting to feel it's almost a moot point.¹⁵

Jessica R.: Is there a generation gap between Riot Grrrl and, say, our mother's feminism? What's different about Riot Grrrl?

Erin: It's my own personal experience. My mom, before I was born, was getting *Ms.* magazine and was totally into feminism. I can sympathize. Now she's married and doesn't have time. Not that everyone's like that, but she says, "It's so angry." Older people say, "You're so bitter and angry, you'll never get anywhere." I think it's comfortable. I'd like to think I'll go to Riot Grrrl meetings with my kids.

Madhu: Another reason we're alienated from older people is the name. My mom says, "Why do you have to call it Riot Grrrl? It sounds so bad." She's an authority figure, and I feel uncomfortable. Like I'm a stupid kid. That's not true, but those are my feelings.

Jessica R.: Were feminists in the 1970s less angry?

Madhu: I think they were just as angry, but they showed it in different ways. I think they were more so, but less aggressive. I think Riot Grrrl is loud, aggressive, and in your face. It was more symbolic back then.

¹⁵ "It's ridiculous when I see these Bikini Kill/Hole clones running around. What is so fucking revolutionary about that? I just wish that these girls would take those messages a bit further, and more to heart, and BE THEMSELVES. Especially lately, whenever I go through any Riot Grrrl chat rooms on-line, all I read are profiles that read similar to: Hole/Bikini Kill/Sonic Youth/Marilyn Manson/Nirvana/Silverchair/Babes in Toyland/Rainbow Bright. . . . And I'm not even dissing those bands or the people who like them, because that is their freedom, but I want to know what's so fucking 'cool' and 'Riot Grrrl' with that? I mean, I get so pissed off because those are these Big Media Hyped bands (aside from Bikini Kill and Sonic Youth, but even they're both well known), and I ask myself—'OK, so if these kids are so into supporting each other and community, WHERE ARE ALL THEIR LOCAL BANDS that they should be supporting, and what about all their projects and zines, etc? and I think this to myself, and I get really cynical. I don't want to be called a 'Riot Grrrl.' I dislike so much [what] it has come to be associated with. Fuck the labels. I can't be a 'Riot Grrrl.' I can't be 'hard-core,' I can't be 'emo.' I can't be any of those things because I am a big messy combination of opinions and contradictions" (Erin McCarley, letter to Gitana Garofalo and Jessica Rosenberg, July 24, 1997).

Erin: I do think that times have changed. Obviously we've made gains. Just because we have [made gains] doesn't mean it's far enough. They think things are pretty equal—office stuff, promotional stuff. But us going to school, we interact socially with people. We see [in] the subtle comments that things haven't changed.

Madhu: Things are not equal. [Females] make up 51 percent of the world's population, do three-fourths of the work, own one one-hundredth of the world's land, and earn one-tenth of the world's revenue. It makes me sad to think I'm going to grow up and have kids and this is the world I live in. I don't comprehend how people can be so prejudiced.

Erin: On the news yesterday, between [reports on] a woman who was raped and an abuse story, there was this story on a guy from Huntington Beach who opened a store called Destroy All Girls. . . . His girlfriend probably says, "He's really not like that." How can you do that so blatantly?

Lindsay: Or they say, "He was just kidding."

Erin: Yeah, well, the joke's over.

Lindsay: Half the time they say that. "He was just kidding." It's horrible.

Madhu: I can't see any humor in it.

Erin: Even in normal Southern California there's not a lot of joking around about rape and abuse. But eating disorders have not gotten through. I've known women who say, "She's a bitch, she's so skinny." Insulting them instead of understanding that you're somewhat responsible for this. It's still happening. It hasn't gotten through. I call people on it, but they don't get it.

Madhu: Weight problems also. People will say, "Look at that person there. She's so fat and gross." I say maybe they're happy. [See, e.g., fig. 4.]

Erin: A lot of it's body image. Riot Grrrl has done so much for this. And incest, molestation, and child sex abuse. There's a girl I know who tried to commit suicide. Hours before we had been talking. She started talking, and I didn't know what to say; I was trying to be there. She basically told me that her older sister used to touch her when she was little. She was saying, "It's gross. I'm gross." She thinks she's dirty. People are still oblivious. She couldn't say this to her friends.

Madhu: There's still a lot of shame associated with it. I wore a T-shirt with the word *rape* on it to school, and I had friends who were like, "You shouldn't wear that to school." People are ashamed to talk about this stuff.

Jessica R.: Why does Riot Grrrl focus on young women?

Kim: We're finally trying to discover who we are. When you're older, you're more fixated on the ways you were raised. Here's my analogy. You have a mind of Play-Doh. As you get older it gets harder, becomes cement. Girls are trying to discover who they are, and Riot Grrrl is helping them.

Lailah: In a lot of ways I agree with Kim. It's important to get these things in while we're young, but I don't think that minds need to turn into cement. We're raised to think that way. Riot Grrrl's crucial. It's saving girls' minds. There are so many different situations that girls face. The point is that you don't have to take that. It's not teen angst! This is real. This is your life. It's not like we're going to wait until we're older. Riot Grrrl needs to be there for girls who are young, because they need help now, because you can't wait until you're old and abuse has already happened.

Jessica R.: Is the term *girl* empowering?

Lailah: I read this somewhere. The value of using the word *girl* can be that. A lot of times as women or female people, we're expected to go from this state of babyhood [directly to womanhood]. We're not really given an in-between. We're helpless, subservient, dependent, and have no control like babies or, as women, we're sexualized and thought of as totally competent adults: "Take care of your life." If you're not given genuine time in [between] being a baby and being a stable person, it's like there's something wrong with you. [You're] a baby or a dysfunctional person. Behaving as a child and being weak are attributes [assigned] to women. I'm not *supposed* to be an adult who's totally stable. Everybody's constantly evolving. It's important that you know you can always learn and grow [and] change more. Using the word *girl* is saying "I want to be called a girl, don't treat me like I'm five, and don't put these ideals [on me] that I don't believe in or that I can't learn." However Freud [defines] it, I don't really give a rat's ass. This time that we're in is ours. We define it and call ourselves what we want for as long as we want. No one is into calling girls girls or women girls. This is a time no one else has defined. This is what's going on for us.

Jessica R.: The culture created through Riot Grrrl is angry. Could you compare Riot Grrrl with the 1970s women's movement?

Kim: I think that the style has changed. In the 1970s they were pretty radical. Now we may seem angry, but they were loud and angry for their time. They were the ones who really gave us the steps to move to. They opened the path that we can follow. . . .

Lailah: I think it has changed because we know a bit about our radical feminist mothers. They had issues, and I don't think they have all been resolved. Now we have their anger. We know what their problems were in addition to the new problems. There's so much to deal with. The anger is not just "I wrote an article" — it's our lives, it's personal anger. Stuff seems purely political, then it enters your own life, which is personally charged. You can see these things working themselves out in your own life. This makes girls really angry. My impression on the differences would be, if we're still doing it, is that we're trying not to say we're so sorry that we're



Figure 4 Zine illustration, FaT GiRL Collective, *FaT GiRL*, n.d.

angry. The apology takes away so much. Girls have been making those apologies. This increase in anger may come from the absence of the evil apology. You shouldn't say "sorry" for taking back your life.

Revolutions from within

Jessica R.: In what ways [has] Riot Grrrl affected you or changed you?

Madhu: It has changed who I am and my opinions. It gave me the ability to say, "I'm not going to kill myself. I'm not a victim." Made me more obnoxious. Speak out and say whatever. Opened me up to a lot of stuff that I've been reading—books, authors, political issues. I'm Indian; Riot Grrrl has given me a sense of self and identity. Before I was uncomfortable being nonwhite in a 95 percent white suburb. It has changed my life.

Lindsay: For the longest time I was always the girlfriend. I just took up space, told a joke once in awhile. Now I can say what I mean. I don't care if people disagree. I'll listen, but I don't care.

Erin: It gave me an outlet to be obnoxious. Made me be angry instead of taking it. I grew up as a tomboy, so those tendencies were always there. Riot Grrrl provided the space where I could do it. Space to do it and be taken seriously. Also, there have been opportunities to travel. How else could I say I'm going to Boston and be able to stay in a safe place and see all these rad things? I really don't know what I'd be doing today without Riot Grrrl.

Jessica R.: What has Riot Grrrl changed?

Lailah: In terms of Riot Grrrl, change really has to be looked at on a personal level. The revolutions are revolutions from within. I had this awful experience [when] someone told me that they, the feminists, thought that you can change the system and laws, but that you'll never change people's minds, the way things really are. This invalidated my entire experience with Riot Grrrl because the changes that are made are made within individuals, who affect everyone around them. They spread it. My conception of who I am and others [are] has changed drastically. Stereotypes have been dashed to the ground. I've learned so much about different people. How I look at other people has changed for the better. In so many ways, Riot Grrrl has really changed not my personality but what I can do with my life. There's so much messed-up stuff in your life from society. You can't really change things that well. Riot Grrrl has changed core things about me, allowed me to change things around me. We've learned a lot from each other, everyone I've interacted with. We're challenged in useful ways. It makes [people] reevaluate things they've never thought about. . . . Those are real changes. There are laws against rape, but that doesn't stop it from happening. Riot Grrrl has been successful in making girls have revolutions within their lives. It carries it out to people they know. As long as they continue spreading their ideas, Riot Grrrl will continue to be effective.

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