A Revolution Begins In A Million Pink Bedrooms: Riot Grrrl and Feminism in the 1990s

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Abstract

This thesis examines riot grrrl, a movement that used punk music as a conduit for social change and female empowerment. Riot grrrl encouraged girls to express their frustrations and anger through music and challenged societal norms by protesting for political change. This research uses riot grrrl to combine the scholarship of both the punk and feminist movements to showcase the progress and limitations in two significant social movements. The punk and feminist movements brought systemic racism and gender discrimination to the forefront of social discussion; however, both struggled to fully and equally include diverse peoples and voices. By examining these shortcomings, this study complicates scholarship that views punk and feminism strictly as either positive or negative movements. This research also uses riot grrrl as a microcosm for both the broader punk and feminist movements to explore the how lack of intersectionality causes division and instability in sociopolitical movements. Lastly, this research poses questions about ways in which political activism can include diverse voices, what it means to be an intersectional movement, and how uniting diverse communities can increase social impact and promote social change.

Revolution Girl Style Now![1]: Introduction

In 2009, New York University established the Riot Grrrl Collection as a new addition to the Fales Library of English and American Literature to preserve the riot grrrl movement's history. The Riot Grrrl movement spanned from the early to late 1990s, but its cultural impact endures to this day. Despite holding impressive ephemera including the papers of famous riot grrrl artist Kathleen Hana, the collection carries few items that belonged to riot grrrls of color. At the time of its establishment, the collection contained some items by Asian grrrls with 'zines like *Slant* and *Chop Suey Spex*, but only one 'zine from a Black creator– Ramdasha Bikeem's *GUNK*. In the collection's corresponding book, contributing essayist Johanna Fateman commented, "The examination of riot grrrl grew out of a fundamental question that many of us would grapple with: How could girls– drawn from punk's predominately white demographic, who relied on that scene's resources– form a truly inclusive revolutionary agenda?"[2] Riot grrrl searched for this answer throughout the early to late 1990– a search that continues thirty years later.

The collection's lack of items from people of color demonstrate a pattern within riot grrrl's history– or versions of its history. Riot grrrl is portrayed as a mostly, white, middle class movement composed of young women and girls, but what about the non-white grrrls hidden in these narratives? In 2012, Mimi Thi Nguyen– former riot grrrl and now scholar– donated her collection in collaboration with the People of Color 'Zine Project. The collection contained 'zines from people of color both within riot grrrl and the broader punk movement. In Nguyen's donor's statement for the collection, she criticizes how archives "resolve" the lack of non-white contributions through efforts presenting non-white voices as either supplemental or additions to the collection and greater narrative. Nguyen posits that non-white voices in collections like hers,

[1] Bikini Kill, Revolution Girl Style Now, Bikini Kill Records, 1991, Spotify.
[2] Lisa Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 16.

"are not an interruption into a singular scene or movement but the practice of another, co-present scene or movement that conversed and collided with the already-known story, but with alternate investments and forms of critique."[3] While riot grrrl brought women's experiences such as rape and sexual violence to the forefront of political and social discussions, it replicated– either intentionally or inadvertently– replicated the limitations of its punk and feminist predecessors, namely the concentrated focus on whiteness within its circles and its appropriation of racial identity to adopt the feeling of oppression. These shortcomings not only hindered the movement's ability to create lasting political change, but also contributed to the silencing of non-white voices seen in the archives today. This thesis seeks not portray riot grrrls of color as either interventions or deviations from riot grrrl's historical timeline, but, Nguyen describes, a co-current collective existing alongside the dominant riot grrrl narrative.

Methodology

This thesis addresses both the success and shortcomings of riot grrrl to showcase how social and political movements can both create and hinder lasting social change. It provides a textual and discourse analysis of riot grrrl, drawing on primary sources such as 'zines, interviews, newspaper and magazine articles, films, and archive materials. The thesis is organized into four chapters. Chapter One discusses feminism's evolution through its three waves to highlight how each wave both built upon its predecessor while also contributing new insights into the discourse. Chapter Two provides background on punk history as riot grrrl was both a feminist and punk movement and is inextricably connected to the subculture that fostered its development. Chapter Three will contextualize my arguments within the broader history of

[3] Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Fales Library Donation Statement The Mimi Thi Nguyen Collection in Collaboration with the POC Zine Project," New York University Libraries, 2012. Updated November 2019.

riot grrrl to enhance understandings of how riot grrrl's beginnings and formation contributed to the disconnect between white non-white riot grrrls. Chapter Four analyzes the dialogues between white riot and non- white riot grrrls to highlight their disconnect and show how these limited riot grrrls' means of activism. I conclude this thesis with a small epilogue summarizing the progress and shortcomings of the riot grrrl movement and what modern feminism can learn from them.

"I Wanna See Some History:"[4] Historiography

Despite the extensive scholarship on punk's history, women and the gender dimensions of the movement have received little scholarly inquiry. Lauraine LeBlanc, in *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture,* addresses the paradox of girls' participation in the punk subculture. While proclaiming values that align with feminism such as equality and social justice, punk often replicated social norms, including patriarchal gender relations. Using oral histories, Leblanc argues that girls used punk subcultures to resist mainstream social mores, in particular notions of conventional femininity.[5] LeBlanc's work stands as a first attempt to integrate women and girls into punk history. Meanwhile, in *Revenge of the She-Punks: A Feminist Music History From Poly-Styrene to Pussy Riot* Vivien Goldman evaluates women's place in the punk music canon and what drives female punk musicians in the ongoing revolution of women in rock. Goldman argues that punk always belonged to women and still belongs to women.[6] The book argues that focusing on women in punk music opens up a discussion about the international impact of female punk rockers by including a range of voices (via oral history), giving a diverse picture of the female punk scene.

[4] The Sex Pistols, "Holidays In the Sun," Track 1 on *Nevermind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols,* Virgin (U.K.), 1977, Spotify.
[5] Lauraine LeBlanc, *Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in Boys' Subculture,* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 13.
[6] Vivien Goldman, *Revenge of the She-Punks: A Feminist Music History from Poly-Styrene to Pussy Riot,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2019), 11.

With respect to riot grrrl in particular, Sara Marcus's *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* provides a history of the movement through the experiences of those involved during the height of its significance.[7] Additionally, Nadine Monem's *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!* seeks to challenge the mainstream narrative of riot grrrl at the time of this publication, where riot grrrl received negative press in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[8] However, because both books use oral history from riot grrrls they knew personally or had connections with and 'zines they personally collected. Their narratives provide insight into the riot grrrl movement through the lens of those who lived it, creating a first-hand, personalized narrative of riot grrrl. However, by limiting their sources to those within their social circle, the collections do not create a comprehensive representation of riot grrrl. These sources only portray a small portion of a much larger movement, yet the authors assert these narratives comprise riot grrrl's entire history. Monem's work, by comparison, includes additional perspectives by including the British riot grrrl scene, while Marcus's work only focuses on riot grrrls from the Washington D.C. and Olympia, Washington areas.

Despite nearly thirty years of scholarship in a range of disciplines, few scholars address riot grrrl's complicated relationship with race, in particular its inability to fully include people of color. Kristen Schilt and Mimi Thi Nguyen represent the only scholars within this line of inquiry. In "The Punk White Privilege Scene:" Riot Grrrl, White Privilege, and 'Zines," Schilt argues while riot grrrls acknowledged their white privilege, they struggled to understand how aspects like race and class impacted women's lives as riot grrrls saw feminism as a cause for all women– regardless of age, race, sex, or class.[9] Nguyen as a former punk and now scholar, has spoken

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[7] Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution,* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 10.
[8] Nadine Monem, *Riot Grrrl: Revolution Girl Style Now!,* (London: Black Dog Press, 2007), 7.
[9] Kristen Schilt, "The Punk White Privilege Scene:" Riot Grrrl, White Privilege, and 'Zines," in *Different Wavelengths,* ed. Joe Reger, 39-56, (New York: Routledge, 2006): 40.

extensively about both riot grrrl and punk's racial disparities. In *Punk Planet* and *Evolution of a Race Riot* she criticizes punk's indifference to race and asserts that punk's preoccupation with disavowing individual racists and white punks' deflection of white privilege neglects the larger societal structures oppressing people of color.[10] Her article "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival" questions riot grrrl's culture of sharing personal experiences with each other as a means of self-actualization, and argues that, although such activism might be effective and revolutionary for white women, for people of color, this method can be more intrusive than welcoming. [11] She likewise asserts how non-white women's critiques are presented influences our memory of prior feminist and outlook towards future feminist movements. These narratives, according to Nguyen, influence which events are memorable achievements or responsible for destabilizing feminist movements.[12]

[10] Mimi Nguyen, "It's (Not) a White World: Looking for Race in Punk," in *White Riot Punk Rock and the Politics of Race,* ed. Maxwell Tremblay and Stephen Duncombe (Brooklyn: Verso Books, 2011): 257-258;
Mimi Nguyen, "Evolution of a Race Riot," 1 (Berkeley, 1998): n.p.
[11] Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," *Women & Performance: a Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 2-3 (2012): 174-175.
[12] Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 175.

Chapter One: "Resist This Psychic Death:" The Feminist Waves

Kathleen Hana sings on track 5 of *Yeah Yeah Yeah Yeah / Our Troubled Youth* "... I will resist with every inch and every breath, I will resist this psychic death…[13] Taken from the original riot grrrl manifesto, resisting psychic death means, "Don't allow the world to make you into a bitter asshole."[14] Hana and the manifesto urge their audience to not conform to societal pressures and norms at the expense of their personal identity. The 1990s represent a significant change in feminism and gender equality. As Second Wave feminist Betty Friedan warned, "...women now suffer from a new identity crisis and new problems that have no name…"[15] Her warning echoes the "problem that has no name" she identified in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In the 1960s, women's "problem that has no name" was having to reconcile between the expectation of motherhood and her ambitions outside of this expectation. Now years later, she once again makes the same observations of how women face new social challenges and circumstances impacting their lives.

Scholars typically analyze the development of feminism in terms of waves. The First Wave of feminism began in the nineteenth and twentieth century. Feminism developed from industrialization, liberal socialist politics, and the abolitionist movement in the 17th century. [16] First Wave began at the Seneca Falls convention in 1848 where leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott argued in the Declaration of Sentiments that all men and women are

[13] Bikini Kill, "Resist This Psychic Death," 1992.
[14] Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* 19.
[15] Quoted in Susan Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991), x.
[16] Martha Rampton, "Four Waves of Feminism," Pacific University of Oregon, n.d; Rachel Filene Seidman, "Review of Women and the Abolitionist Movement, by Ira V. Brown, Wendy Hamand Venet, Shirley Yee, Jean Fagan Yellin, Deborah Pickman Clifford, and Dorothy Sterling," *NWSA Journal* 5, no. 2 (1993): 254. . http://www.jstor.org/stable/4316264.

created equal and deserve equal rights under the law.[17] Building on this declaration of equality, the First Wave's platform included multiple issues beyond the noted right to vote. In addition to the Declaration, feminist authors like Victoria Woodhull and Emma Goldman wrote about women's sexuality, disparaging views of sex as an immoral act and addressing the socioeconomic disparities that force women into prostitution.[18]

In 1858, William Acton stated in his medical treatise, *Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs,* women "the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind."[19] First Wave feminists recognized women's sexuality and women's sexual autonomy–including in regard to family planning. Two movements emerged in the nineteenth century that encouraged women's control over their sexuality– "voluntary motherhood" and the free love movement. Voluntary motherhood asserted women had the right to decline sex and decide if and when to have children.[20] Additionally, the "free love" sought to demarcate romance and sexuality from state government, stating the government should not be able to dictate whom or how people choose to express their love– both romantic and otherwise.[21] First Wave leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton, recognized that women in addition to being politically, socially, and economically equal to men should also receive the

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[17] Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "'Declaration of Sentiments' from the History of Women's Suffrage" in Feminist Theory: A Reader, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 71.
[18] Victoria Woodhull, "The Elixir of Life: or, Why Do We Die?" in Feminist Theory: A Reader, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 95; Emma Goldman, "'The Traffic in Women' from Anachronism and Other Essays," in Feminist Theory: A Reader, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 95
[19] William Acton, The Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs in Youth, Adult Age, and in Advanced Life: Considered in Their Physiological, Social, and Psychological Relations (1857; 2d ed., London, 1858; expanded American ed., Philadelphia 1865) as cited in Carl Degler, "What Ought To Be and What Was: Women's Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century," The American Historical Review 79 no. 5, (December 1974): 1467; *Functions and Disorders* after its publishing went on to be a widely circulated book and a leading authority on medical expertise in the 19th century. The Victorians believed that women had no sexual desire and no sexual impulse whatsoever, making the idea of sexual equality a non-issue.
[20] Lauren Thompson, "Supreme Court's selective reading of US history ignored 19th-century women's support for 'voluntary motherhood," The Conversationalist, September 6, 2022.
[21] Olivia Waxman, "The 19th Century Advocate For 'Free Love' and Women's Liberty," *Time*, November 2, 2021.

same sexual equality as well.[22] These movements sought to recognize female sexuality and women's control over their own bodies as First Wave feminists identified bodily and sexual autonomy as a fundamental right for women.

While the voluntary motherhood and free love movements recognized female bodily and sexual autonomy within the U.S., the topic of birth control and abortion remained a contested topic within the U.S. Abortion was illegal and women sought desperate measures to deal with their pregnancies, including resorting to home remedies appearing in books such as Owen's *Moral Physiology*, and birth control methods existed as well with Dr. Alice Stockham's "Karezza."[23] Still, First Wave feminists remained divided on the topic. Margaret Sanger and Crystal Eastman advocated for women to be able to control the size of their family through women's reproductive health education and by increasing awareness regarding birth control, especially for working class women.[24] Most working class women lived in poverty and did not have the economic stability or the conditions to raise many children. Likewise, working class women and families in poverty also lacked access to healthcare. Those against birth control argued birth control would only increase men's power over women and gaining the right to vote would help women combat these issues. First Wave feminists never reached a consensus regarding birth control and the feminist movement remained divided on the topic. While the Wave made some advancement in women's sexual autonomy, it did not secure it entirely. The First Wave presented the topic of sexual rights and future Waves would build upon this start to advocate for it further.

Feminists built upon the efforts of their predecessors' ambitions for women's rights. The Second Wave continued the First Wave's efforts to achieve women's sexual and bodily

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[22] Abigail Raebig, "Birth Control and First Wave Feminism," *Ibid. A Student History Journal* 14, (Spring 2021): n.p.
[23] Raebig, "Birth Control and First Wave Feminism," n.p.
[24] Raebig, "Birth Control and First Wave Feminism," n.p.

autonomy, while also expanding their focus. After World War II, the United States experienced an unprecedented period of economic growth, but with the growing anxiety of communism and nuclear war, men and women believed the country needed a return to normalcy. For women, return to normalcy meant the expectation of being caregivers and mothers.[25] In 1963, Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* wherein she stated that women suffer a "problem that has no name."[26] When women left the home during WWII to work as factory workers, they assumed roles traditionally for men and experienced the autonomy women were previously not allowed to have. When societal roles shifted after the war, middle-class women were expected to return to the home; however, some identified with the increased autonomy they had experienced during the war. The internal conflict between the expectation of motherhood and the desire for more in life beyond motherhood, as well as the fear in younger women of continuing this lifestyle led them reconsidering a women's role and envisioning a life beyond the four walls of the home.

In the 1970s and the 1980s due to advancements like access to birth control and joining the workforce, the definition of femininity expanded beyond the traditional notion of women as strictly housewives to include women who wanted more outside of this role such as entering the workforce, choosing not to have children, and also deciding to remain unmarried. The Second Wave sought to secure women's ability to choose and pursue her own desires in life without the societal pressures that expected women to follow a narrow path towards motherhood. Second Wave feminism focused on gender inequality in the workplace and sexual harassment, but in advocating for these issues, Second Wave feminists often formed networks with women they

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[25] Aimee Imundo, "WAM-Bam Thank You Ma'am: The G.I. Bill of Rights and Women's Education in the Post-War Years," Georgetown University Library, 1991.
[26] Betty Friedan, "*The Problem That Has No Name from* The Feminine Mystique," in Feminist Theory: A Reader, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 198.

already knew or had connections to. This means of connection often created advocacy groups of women with similar experiences and backgrounds, unintentionally excluding those who differed from this shared mentality such as non-white women. Even though not all feminists excluded women of color, the broader movement struggled to fully incorporate all voices into their activism.

In expanding the definition of femininity, sex became a discussed topic for the Second Wave. During the First Wave sex– while discussed and supported by some– was still seen as an uncomfortable topic by wider society. Issues such as abortion could not be discussed in public due to the threat of legal prosecution. The Second Wave challenged the idea of sex as a private matter. Kate Millet defines "sexual politics," as a paradigm describing the power dynamics between men and women– a relationship of dominance and suppression– which maintains a societal structure that prioritizes men and subjugates women.[27] While Millet addressed the societal frameworks in which sexism operates, Schulamith Firestone questioned the basis upon which women's oppression rests. Firestone argued that sex is the root cause of gender discrimination in society as the demarcation of sexes based reproductive functions led to the division of labor upon which women's economic and cultural injustices developed.[28] Critical theory like Millet and Firestone's, brought sex into a public forum in which it could be discussed.

The shift from sex as a private to a public issue, led to larger discussions about the power dynamics between men and women. Rape and sexual harassment became additional topics the Second Wave sought to address. Sexual harassment existed before the Second Wave. Sexual coercion of enslaved African American women was ubiquitous, and free women employed in

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[27] Kate Millet, "'*Theory* of *Sexual Politics from* Sexual Politics" in Feminist Theory: A Reader, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 218-219.
[28] Schulamith Firestone, "*From* The Dialectic of Sex," in Feminist Theory: A Reader, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 226.

domestic service faced unwanted advances from men in the houses they worked for.[29] In 1887, Helen Cambell's *Women Wage-Workers* report equated household service to the worst form of women's degradation and detailed the sexual abuse and advances towards women in the garment industry.[30] Likewise Women in the 1920s were encouraged to quit their jobs if they could not handle unwanted attraction or advances from men.[31] Despite sexual harassment being a widespread– although not talked about– issue, legal avenues provided little support towards women wrongfully terminated or violated. In the 1960s and 1970s as more women entered the workforce, sexual harassment became a larger concern. Second Wave feminism sought make sexual harassment a visible social concern instead a quiet reality through grassroot organization efforts and larger political protest.

Organizations like Working Women's United (WWU) sought to create national awareness of sexual harassment. WWU formed after Carmita Wood's case against Cornell University where she was denied unemployment benefits after she resigned from her job due to her boss's unwanted advances.[32] She sought help from the Human Affairs Program's (HAP) women's section at Cornell. Lin Farley, Susan Meyer, and Karen Sauvigné all worked at HAP and assisted Wood with securing legal representation and support for her case. Within WWU, Farley, Myer, and Sauvigné organized a public protest– a "speakout"– to raise awareness about sexual harassment, a term they decided on to classify unwanted sexually charged behavior.[33] The speak out brought 275 women together to share public testimonies about their experiences with harassment in the workplace and was covered by various news outlets including the *New York*

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[29] Reva B. Siegal, "Introduction: A Short History of Sexual Harassment," in Directions in Sexual Harassment Law, eds. Catherine A. MacKinnon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 3.
[30] Siegal, "Introduction: A Short History of Sexual Harassment," 3.
[31] Sachsa Coen, "A Brief History of Sexual Harassment in America Before Anita Hill," *Time,* October 12, 1991.
[32] Carrie N. Baker, "The Emergence of Organized Feminist Resistance to Sexual Harassment in the United States in the 1970s," *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 3 (Fall 2007): 5-6.
[33] Carrie N. Baker, "The Emergence of Organized Feminist Resistance to Sexual Harassment in the United States in the 1970s," 8-9.

Times–' who included the term "sexual harrassment" in their headline– which sparked a broader discussion about sexual harassment in the workplace.[34]

The Second Wave also challenged the popularity of pornography in mainstream U.S. culture, but the Second Wave remained divided on the topic in a conflict named "the Sex Wars." Feminists took opposing sides– either anti-porn or pro-sex– depending on their perspectives. Anti-Porn feminists argued against porn as they believed it perpetuated the power imbalance between men and women. Feminists like Susan Brownmiller and Andrea Dworkin took strong anti-porn stances. Andrea Dworkin strongly disparaged the pornography industry in both its production and consumption. In "Pornography is a Civil Rights Issue for Women," Dworkin says the porn industry perpetuates violence towards women as porn creators place actresses in degrading or infantilizing scenes, and the consumption of porn replicates violence towards women by making dangerous pornographic acts desirable and acceptable.[35]Anti-porn feminists saw porn as another institution privileging men and oppressing women.

While anti-porn feminists saw pornography as an extension of the patriarchy, pro-sex feminists argued that the patriarchy negatively affected all sexual participants, not just women. [36] Pro-sex feminists like Ellen Willis Ellis countered anti-porn by stating that the resistance against pornography prevented women from fully exploring their sexual desire.[37] The anti-porn feminist revulsion towards pornography only perpetuated the same puritan and sexually repressive environment that restrained women's sexual freedom. Pornography divided the Second Wave between those who saw it as detrimental or beneficial towards advancing women's freedom.

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[34] Carrie N. Baker, "The Emergence of Organized Feminist Resistance to Sexual Harassment in the United States in the 1970s," 11.
[35] Andrea Dworkin, *"Pornography is a Civil Rights Issue for Women,"* 21 University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform 21, no. 5 (1988): 56-58.
[36]Salucci, Mariavittoria, "The History of the Sex Wars," G– Club, January 22, 2021.
[37] Ellen Willis, *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays,* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012) 6-8.

Although the Second Wave advanced women's rights in the workforce and sexual freedom, the Second Wave's shortcomings lay in their struggle to include women of color in their activism. Audre Lorde observes how the focus on white, educated, upper class women's issues fostered a collective of white feminists who based their activism on similar experiences. She describes this collective as a "sisterhood," and observes how basing a movement on similar experiences excludes those who differ from said experiences.[38] The Combahee River Collective in "A Black Feminist Statement" criticizes white women's lack of initiative in educating themselves about non-white experiences, and emphasizes education about social injustice and racism is white women's responsibility.[39] bell hooks additionally criticizes Second Wave thinkers who cite the imbalance of power between men and women as the source of all discrimination, and how this mentality prioritizes feminism as the sole political focus while disregarding other oppressions.[40] Women of color's criticisms of the Second Wave highlight the movement's lack of intersectionality in trying to advance women's rights. Although the Second Wave did advance women's rights, the movement's neglect or marginalization, albeit unintentional, of intersectional identities, hindered its ability to create change for all women.

The Third Wave began in 1991 when Anita Hill testified in the Supreme Court that nominee Clarence Thomas sexually harassed her during his time as chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity commission.[41] Despite months of hearings and a televised testimony from Hill, Thomas still received the nomination by a 52 to 48 margin. This event represented a new era for U.S. youth– especially young women and girls. As Jennifer Baumgardner, writer

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[38] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 339.
[39] The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 314.
[40] bell hooks, "Feminism: a Transformational Politic," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 464.
[41] Terry Gross, "Anita Hill Started A Conversation About Sexual Harassment. She's Not Done Yet," NPR, September 28, 2021.

and activist, reflected on that time, "There were things that happened all in a really quick succession that generations of people who were like eighteen and nineteen in the late 80s experienced and we knew that they were wrong."[42] Violence against women and active undermining of women's rights became a recurring issue throughout the late 1980s and into the early 1990s. In addition to this hearing, Patricia Bowman took legal action against William Kennedy Smith who raped her at his home in West Palm Beach. Despite being a highly publicized trial, the jury found Smith not guilty after seventy-five minutes into the trial.[43] These repeated acts of violence against women and their dismissal by legislators exposed a new generation to the injustices women faced and indicated the feminist movement still must continue to achieve women's equality.

The Third Wave, like previous Waves, built upon its predecessor while also contributing its own issues and platforms to the movement. While the Second Wave expanded the definition of feminism to encompass more than the traditional mother and caregiver role. The Third Wave incorporated aspects of gender to show how societal perceptions of men and women also contributed to women's oppression. Critical theories like Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* argues gender is socially constructed performance enforced through subconscious, daily interactions reaffirming our perceived gender identity, and how these interactions derive from societal expectations of men and women's behavior.[44] The means of activism also changed within the Third Wave. Some activists in the Second Wave rejected using beauty products like makeup because they saw these products as extensions of male objectification of women. In the Third Wave, young feminists readopted these practices and incorporated them into the movement.

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[42] *The Punk Singer*, directed by Sini Anderson (Sundance Selects, 2013), 24:32-24:45.
[43] Mary Jordan, "Jury Finds Smith Not Guilty of Rape," *The Washington Post,* December 12, 1991.
[44] Judith Butler,"*From:* Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity," in *Feminist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Wendy K. Kolar and Frances Bartowski, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 496.

While some Second Wave feminists considered women's fashion and beauty products oppressive, radical Third Wavers often embraced them, proving you could wear short dresses and lipstick and still be a feminist. The Third Wave built upon the legacy of both the First and Second Waves to further the advancement towards women's equality.

Chapter Two: Background On Punk

"No Future For You"[45]Introduction

While feminism provides important insight into riot grrrl, so too does punk as both movements influenced it. Scholars identify many different beginnings of punk, the dominant being Vivien Westwood and Malcom McLaren's shop SEX on Kings Road in London.[46] Punk's ethos came out of the social malaise of mid to late 1970s England, but Westwood gave punk the visual aesthetic it became known for. Her designs became mainstays as popular artists like The Sex Pistols bought clothes from SEX as part of their performance wear.[47] Other popular bands and artists also diffused punk culture to the English masses with groups such as The Clash, The Adverts, The Slits, and X-Ray Spex performing political, provocative, and punk music.[48] In the New York city punk canon, The Ramones also founded punk with their release of their first album in April 1976.[49] The city then saw a punk rock community grow with acts like the New York Dolls, the Velvet Underground, and Patti Smith all collaborating within the same city blocks. Additional origin stories represented in both scholarship and popular culture look at other major U.S. cities like Los Angeles as well as smaller cities like Detroit.[50] These differing perspectives demonstrate the various origins of punk--and that punk cannot be contained to one single site of origin. As a music genre first and foremost, punk began through various exchanges

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[45] The Sex Pistols, "God Save the Queen," Track 6 on *Nevermind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols,* Virgin (U.K.), 1977, Spotify.
[46] Matthew Worley, "Punk Into Post Punk," Museum of Youth Culture, n.d., For an in-depth overview of punk before 1976 see: Trash Theory,"Before1976 Revisited: How Punk Became Punk," January 22, 2022, YouTube, 43:43.
[47] N.A., "Vivienne Westwood: Punk, New Romantic and Beyond," Victoria and Albert Museum, n.d.
[48] Worley, "Punk Into Post Punk."
[49] Ben Sisario, Ramones': The Story Behind a Debut Album From Punk Pioneers, *The New York Times,* March 18, 2016.
[50] AJ+, "The Very Latinx History of Punk," November 1, 2019, YouTube, 13:01, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSyo1zd9jcw; Mike Rubin. "The Band That Was Punk Before Punk," *The New York Times,* March 12, 2009.

of 45s and flyers by like-minded artists meeting and sharing creative passions with each other in exchanges that shaped a generation of music.

"Crisis? What Crisis?[51]" Punk Subculture and the Welfare State

While the musical styles of punk constitute a genre, punk also includes the larger subculture that its participants created. Subcultures represent much more than fashion choices and musical tastes as their participants identify with the subcultures' messagings and adopt these messagings as part of their identities. Identities are socially constructed; therefore, subcultures cannot be separated from their social, political, and economic contexts. Punk began as a reactionary movement to the social malaise in 1970s England. England's economy saw a major economic downturn as a result of global issues like the 1973 oil shock that impacted England's working class the hardest. The Labor Government lacked the proper organization to adequately resolve the subsequent effects of these global issues, leading to widespread distrust and dissatisfaction with the English government.[52] In this highly politicized and turbulent time, youth found themselves disaffected, disillusioned, and seeking a means to escape this troubling reality.

English artists responded to the late 1970s economic and political climate by channeling their anger and frustration into music. The Sex Pistols spearheaded this aggression with provocative songs like "God Save the Queen" and "Anarchy in the U.K." Their music stunned listeners with declarations like "I am an Antichrist" but also commented on the situation within England at the time with "There's no future and England's dreaming" and "Our figurehead is not what she seems."[53] These song lyrics were aimed at the general public who seemed oblivious to

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[51] Robert Saunders, ''Crisis? What crisis?' Thatcherism and the Seventies," in *Making Thatcher's Britain* ed. Ben Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), n.p.
[52] Helen Reddington, "The Forgotten Revolution of Female Punk Musicians in the 1970s," 441.
[53] The Sex Pistols, "Anarchy in the U.K.," Track 8 on *Nevermind the Bollocks, Here's the Sex Pistols,* Virgin (U.K.), 1977, Spotify; The Sex Pistols, "God Save the Queen."

England's decaying state and remained loyal to an ineffectual institution. Other artists also commented on England's strife. The Clash's "Clampdown" calls youth to use their anger to fight against the oppressive "clampdown–" an allusion to England's social system replicating the same dissatisfied, working-class lifestyle across generations.[54] The explosion of punk onto England's 1970s music scene introduced a musical style fueled by anger and frustration at a depressed social state and set the tone for what would come after.

After the 1970s, punk adapted to meet the new socio-political circumstances of a new generation, and for the 1980s punk needed to answer the rise of neoliberalism and conservative politics in the U.S and the U.K. Under Margaret Thatcher, neoliberal economics placed emphasis on industry deregulation, free trade, and privatization of government programs in efforts to cut government spending and boost the economy.[55] In the U.S., Ronald Reagan's neoliberal economic policy– dubbed "Reaganomics–" reduced government interference in the marketplace and the government deficit in an effort to create economic stability.[56] While these neoliberal policies did stimulate the economy in their respective countries, this economic revival came at the expense of public welfare. To reduce government spending, both Reagan and Thatcher sought to privatize government welfare programs, believing regulation by corporations rather than the government, would best benefit society. While politicians saw neoliberalism as an economic opportunity to bolster big business, for the populace , neoliberalism meant a disinvestment in public welfare creating deep stratification in social classes and a host of social concerns. During Reagan's administration the top 0.1 percent of earners increased their share of the national income from 2 to 6 percent between 1978 to 1999. Due to this economic inequality,

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[54] The Clash, "Working for the Clampdown," Track 1 on *London Calling,* Epic Records, 1979, Spotify.
[55] John M. Zak, "The Great Wave: Margaret Thatcher: The Neo-liberal Age and the Transformation of Modern Britain," *The Cupola: Student Publications at Gettysburg College* (2020): 2.
[56] Ravi K. Roy and Arthur T. Denzau, *Fiscal Policy Convergence from Reagan to Blair: The Left Veers Right* (London: Routledge, 2003), 12. As cited in Ravi K. Roy and Manfred B. Steger, "Three Waves of Neoliberalism," in *Neoliberalism: a Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 24.

the rates of mass incarceration also increased with the U.S. prison population increasing from 200,000 to 2 million between 1973 and 2004. The majority of this population were people of color and women.[57]

Despite beginning with Ronald Reagan's presidency, neoliberalism continued into the 1990s with Bill Clinton's tenure. Although neoliberalism began as under political conservatives it was also adopted by center-left politicians who incorporated aspects of it into their policy as well. Clinton's neoliberalism focused more on free trade as it would ideally boost economic growth globally due to the belief that consumerism appealed to all people.[58] In the 1990s, American punk responded to the effects of neoliberalism and a changing political climate by channeling their feelings of discontent and frustration into music.

"White Riot:"[59] Punk and Race

Punk in its philosophy promoted equality and social justice, but in reality things were different, namely, less altruistic and idealistic. While punk aimed to fight social inequalities like racism, over time, punk began to replicate the same societal structures it sought to resist. Punk both benefited from and appropriated non-white cultures to support its aesthetic and musical style. In the 1970s, one would not expect a loud and brash musical style to be intertwined with a style like reggae, but the two communities frequently interacted with each other. The Slits' Paloma Romero remembers this connection, "We were neighbors in the same struggle against a system that said we had no value."[60] In the 1970s, punk and reggae shared an amicable relationship based on their shared positions as social outcasts. Likewise, punk artists

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[57] Lisa Levenstein, *The Didn't See Us Coming: The Hidden History of Feminism in the Nineties,* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 4.
[58] Ravi K. Roy and Manfred B. Steger, "Three Waves of Neoliberalism," 38.
[59] The Clash, "Working for the Clampdown," Track 4 on *The Clash,* CBS Records, 1977, Spotify.
[60] Reshma B, "Palmolive Talks The Slits, Punk's First Female Band," Tidal, September 18, 2019.

incorporated the musical composition of reggae into their own sounds with bands like the Clash covering reggae artists.[61] These cultural interactions point to an amicable relationship between two groups connected by shared ostracism; however, scholars interpret this relationship differently.

Dick Hebdige, author of *Subculture The Meaning of Style,* argues punk used reggae's political and anti-authoritiarian rhetoric to express their own feelings of marginalization within British society. Hebdige points out the troubling racial aspect of this relationship. White punks came from completely different social and cultural backgrounds compared to reggae's Caribbean and British-Caribbean community, the main difference being race. Reggae's politically charged music derived from a legacy of racism and an equally discriminatory present which motivated them to use their politically charged style as a means of resistance. White punk, however, did not possess such history or present reality. White punk's marginalization came from a prejudice towards their outward appearance and its associated subcultural values.[62] This appearance could be removed and adapted, while Caribbean and British-Caribbean as visible racial identities could not. White punks adopted the styles and languages of the oppressed to relate to oppression themselves, despite not having lived the experiences of the oppressed.

[61] Dotun Adebayo, "Junior Murvin Has Died But the Story of Police and Thieves Lives On", "The Guardian, December 4, 2013; Reshma B, "Palmolive Talks The Slits, Punk's First Female Band," Tidal, September 18, 2019.
[62] Dick Hebdige, "Bleached Roots: Punk and White Ethnicity,"in *White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race,* eds. Maxwell Tremblay and Stephen Duncombe (London: Verso Books, 2011), 39-41.

Chapter Three: A Tale of Two Washingtons

Washington State

Riot grrrl began in Washington– both the state and the District of Columbia. During the late 1980s, subgenres of punk began to develop and Washington– specifically Seattle– became associated with the grunge subgenre. Grunge became a popular music style and attracted an audience within the city, but it's dangerous and exclusionary environment marginalized women's participation. Moshing became a grunge identifier during the late 1990s. A style of dance where participants slam into each other in a dance floor called a "mosh-pit," moshing created a dangerous atmosphere for women due to its violent nature. Said Corin Tucker of Sleater-Kinney, "It was a wild scene… and it was very physical, violent… all of these young women who wanted to be part of the scene… were getting physically shoved."[63] Male grunge artists did try to reduce the violence towards women within the community. As the most visible figure in Seattle grunge and the grunge subgenre as a whole, Kurt Cobain frequently spoke out topics such as rape and sexual assault, but the physically violent atmosphere excluded women from the local punk community.[64]

Olympia, a college town outside Seattle, already had the foundations for what became a thriving artistic and punk community due to its emphasis on self-sufficiency and inclusiveness. Local radio station– KAOS- played a majority of music based in Olympia, and in 1982 Calvin Johnson started K records, regarding bands in Olympia and distributing music in what became known as the International Pop Underground.[65] Matthew "Slim" Moon– president of the Olympia independent record label "Kill Rock Stars-" said, "The energy here is really different…

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[63] The Punk Singer, 17:11-17:30.
[64] Banks, Alec, "Why Kurt Cobain Was the Last Great Rock Star," Highsnobiety, n.d.
[65] Nadine Monem, *revolution: grrrl style now!*, (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2009),15.

I can think of few bands from Olympia who don't look at punk rock from the DIY angle… Olympia is kind of a stronghold for that we exist in a different world."[66] The sleepy town on the fringes of a punk capital like Seattle developed a unique atmosphere that fostered independence and creativity. Olympia also benefited from Evergreen State College, an experimental liberal arts school founded in 1967. The school and its student population transformed Olympia into a thriving center for artistic collaboration.[67] With a large number of students, Olympia also created safer environments at venues, welcoming fans of all ages unlike Seattle.[68] This focus of welcoming all audiences gave younger people in Olympia a space to converge, fostering connections amongst the city's youth. These connections led to other like-minded artists coming together to form artistic projects and musical pursuits.

In keeping with these connections, women in Olympia and Washington began to use fanzines as a space to communicate and meet other punk women. Fanzines (called "'zines" more colloquially) were small, handmade, and photocopied magazines distributed at shows or through the mail. These 'zines became a crucial communication device. Women formed connections based on like-minded ideals and perspectives found in each other's zines. In 1988, a student at Evergreen State College, Tobi Vail started her zine *Jigsaw* to "try and meet other girls and express some kind of feminism."[69] In *Jigsaw,* Vail discussed topics like feminism and what it meant to be a girl at a punk rock show. Zine friendships materialized in real life with readers and creators contacting each other to pursue collaborative projects. After reading Vail's 'zine, other Evergreen college students Kathleen Hana and Kathi Wilcox contacted Vail with the idea to form a band. The band they formed with William Francis Karen became Bikini Kill, one of the most

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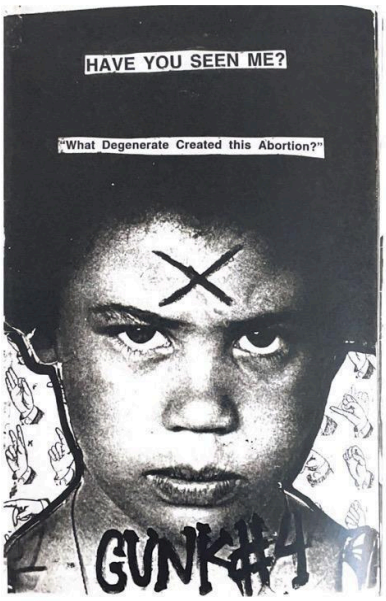
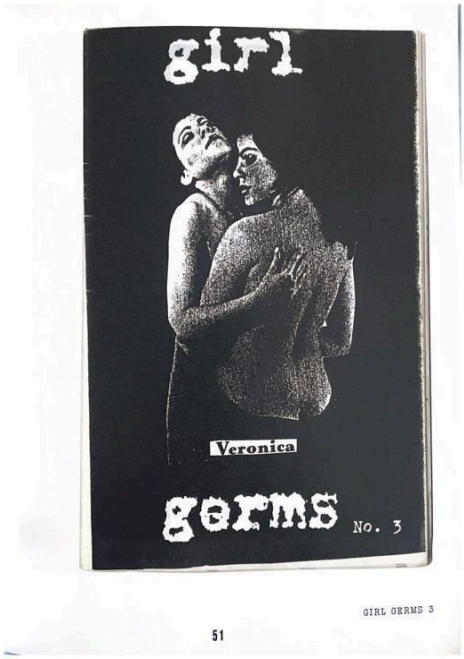
[66] Slim Moon, "EMP Riot Grrrl Retrospective Interview", 1999. As cited in: Monem, revolution: grrrl style now!, 15.
[67] Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 15.
[68] Monem*, revolution" grrrl style now!,* 15.
[69] Monem, *revolution: grrrl style now*, 18.

famous riot grrrl bands and leaders of the riot grrrl movement in Olympia.





From top left to bottom center: Ramdasha Bikeem's *GUNK #4* [Lisa Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* (New York: The Feminist Press, 2013), 14]; *Bikini Kill: A Color and Activity Book #1* [Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* 64]; Alison Wolfe and Molly Nueman's *Girl Germs #3* [Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* 90]

While Bikini Kill began playing together in Olympia, at the University of Oregon, Alison Wolfe heard a screaming girl in the hall of her dorm. The screaming girl would become her neighbor and friend Molly Neuman. Wolfe and Neuman became friends due to their shared passion for music. As the two continued to share music, they quickly became associated with the music scene in Olympia as Eugene, Oregon offered little in terms of music. Their exposure to the Olympia music scene and Bikini Kill inspired them to form their own band in 1991, calling themselves Bratmobile.[70] Wolfe and Neuman participated in Olympia's growing 'zine culture by creating *Girl Germs*, a 'zine discussing topics such as physical abuse, sexual assault, and feminism [71] Readers and supporters of both *Girl Germs* and Bratmobile, Bikini Kill became avid fans of Wolfe and Neuman. The pair split their time between Olympia and Neuman's home of Washington D.C. throughout early 1991. After quickly becoming enmeshed in the D.C. punk scene and continuing to develop their band, Wolfe and Neuman decided to spend the summer of 1991 in D.C.[72] Meanwhile, Bikini Kill set out on their first tour with the band The Nation of Ulysses. After the tour ended, the members of Bikini Kill joined Wolfe and Neuman, converging in Washington D.C. during the summer of 1991.

After a summer of creative exploration, the members of Bikini Kill and Bratmobile returned to Olympia for a music festival called the International Pop Underground Convention. The five-day event began with an all-girl line-up called "Girls Night." Fifteen acts including Bikini Kill and Bratmobile performed that night. Like any music event in Olympia, the festival set out to be a safe space for creative and musical exploration. The purpose of Girls Night was to encourage young women and girls to get up on stage and play music, regardless of skill or

[70] Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 60.
[71] Molly Neuman and Alison Wolfe, Girl Germs, 1, (Olympia, 1991), n.p.
[72] Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 70.

expertise. Margaret Doherty– one of the convention's organizers– corroborated, "It was mostly about putting a fire under them to get themselves out there… you can jump off a cliff and your community will catch you."[73] Girls Night brought a hundred people to the festival even though the roster included mostly unknown bands. The event showed the capacity for female bands to attract an audience in a celebration of women in music. When Alison Wolfe and Molly Neuman looked back on the night, they called it "prdt, Punk Rock Dream Come True."[74]

After the International Pop Underground Festival, the members of Bikini Kill and Bratmobile returned to Washington D.C. Although Olympia fostered their creative growth and their early musical pursuits, the conservative politics of the area conflicted with Bikini Kill's values. As Kathleen Hana reflected years later, "Olympia's a really great scene in terms of community, but in terms of politics, it was kind of difficult for us."[75] The Washington D.C. scene was overall more liberal than Olympia. Likewise D.C. historically welcomed political music and political song writing, so for bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, the move to the other Washington made sense both creatively and personally. In addition to politics, Bikini Kill's Olympia was changing. The Olympia scene soon became a mecca for corporate music labels trying to capitalize on a now popular and lucrative punk-grunge sound. In 1991, Olympia band Nirvana released "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and inadvertently brought grunge music into mainstream music and cultural significance.[76] Their cultural juggernaut album *Nevermind* followed soon after. Between politics and corporate interference, Bikini Kill and Bratmobile outgrew their respective hometown and the move to D.C. allowed them to keep pursuing music on their own terms.

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[73] Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 93.
[74] LA Weekly News Article, Riot Grrrl Publicity Collection.
[75] *The Punk Singer*, directed by Sini Anderson (Sundance Selects, 2013), 24:45.
[76] Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 102-103.

Washington DC

While the Olympia scene continued to develop, Washington D.C. 's punk rock scene was fracturing. While the 1970s into the early-1980s D.C. scene felt like a close-knit community due to the tight circles of musicians and bands; however, by the mid 1980s, it became infiltrated by interlopers. Due to the popularity of punk and its rise to the mainstream, the new wave of D.C. punks saw the scene as an aesthetic to express violence.[77] This influx of outsiders created an aggressive atmosphere with many punks identifying as "skinheads" and the existence of "drunk punks."[78] Veteran D.C. punks became frustrated with the changes in atmosphere and sought to revive the values and culture they once loved in the scene by booking shows at different venues to get away from the violent atmosphere. The reclamation of punk by the old guard and rising bands during the summer of 1985 became a movement called "revolution summer" with the goal of bringing creativity and camaraderie back to the D.C. punk scene.

While some punks broke away from the miasmic community of skinheads and drunk punks during revolution summer, older forms of divisiveness still soured the scene. Women on the late 1980s punk scene often struggled to be taken seriously by the boy gatekeepers of D.C. punk. Revolution summer also revived hardcore, an older punk subgenre within the D.C. scene from the late 1970s to early 1980s. While punk music encouraged amateurism when it came to musical technique, hardcore placed emphasis on instrumental skill as well as speed due to its fast and loud sound.[79] The focus on skill put pressure on artists to be masters of their instruments and created a gatekeeping culture within punk based on assessments of individual artists' talent. For

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[77] *Salad Days*, directed by Scott Crawford, (MVD Entertainment Group, 2014), 50:48-52:10.
[78] Skinheads and drunk punks became an enclave of D.C.'s punk community that engaged in a culture of violence and drugs; *Salad Days,* 51:28.
[79] Monem, *revolution: grrrl style now,* 16.

women in punk, this gatekeeping further excluded them from the broader movement as men frequently demeaned female artists as not being true musicians or questioned their ability.

Like the punk movements of yesteryear, the D.C. scene additionally struggled to be inclusive towards women due to its increasingly "all-boy" environment. Monica Richards of Madhouse remembers, "When it started out I really felt disrespected. I really felt like I wasn't taken seriously because I was a girl singer."[80] Common back-handed compliments like "you're good for a girl" circulated amongst female musicians, leading female punks like Sharon Cheslow– member of female punk band Chalk Circle– to say "I should be good because I like what I'm doing. And it doesn't even matter if I'm good because that's not what punk is about!"[81] Women in punk often conformed to punk's overarching theme of masculinity in efforts to be taken seriously. As Megan Adkins, a member of band Special K, reflected, "I remember when I sang with Special K I really struggled with the idea that it would be okay for me to wear dresses on stage."[82] Women in the D.C. punk felt as women they could not be taken seriously as musicians by punk's predominately male demographic. For women like Adkins and Richards, this demeaning environment caused them to suppress their femininity in efforts to be respected by the male punk populace. Yet, no matter how well women musicians played, no women singers or bands reached the same level of popularity or respect as their male counterparts. Despite having prominent female bands Fire Party and Jawbox, D.C. punk remained a boy's club.

When Bikini Kill and Bratmoblie returned from their performances at the International Pop Underground Convention, they sought to infiltrate this all-boy punk culture in D.C. Nicole Thomas of Fire Party stated, "it was a really interesting phenomenon… We had spent all this

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[80] *Salad Days*, 47:46.
[81] Monem, *revolution: grrrl style now*, 17.
[82] *Salad Days*, 1:23:54.

time trying to play in a way that we would be respected for who we were… suddenly these girls were coming along saying no this is the forefront of our identity …"[83] Female musicians in D.C. grew accustomed to suppressing their femininity onstage and performing in certain ways to be taken seriously by male artists. Female artists needed to adapt their music and themselves to fit the male expectations in the scene, yet, riot grrrl destabilized these norms by making femininity central to their music. For Kathleen Hana, bringing femininity to the forefront of punk music meant more than wearing dresses onstage and rejecting the obligation of musical skill. Hana sought not just to bring girls to the front, but to carve a space for women in punk. To do so, Hana envisioned a movement much like the revolution summer of 1985 where punk could be revitalized again to be more inclusive towards women.

Jen Smith, a D.C. punk and roommate of Bratmobile, shared Hanna's vision. Smith also questioned the lack of women's voices and musicians in D.C.'s punk scene. Much like Hana, she envisioned a girl riot where punk women could take control of D.C. 's punk stage and push themselves into the spotlight. On May 5th, 1991, a riot ensued after the shooting of a Salvadoran man– Daniel Enrique Gonzalez– by a police officer in Smith's Mount Pleasant neighborhood of D.C. The riot continued for several days and became known as the Mount Pleasant riots.[84] The energy Smith saw from her Salvadoran neighbors inspired her to bring the same sense of urgency and action to feminism and the D.C. punk scene.[85] She wrote to Alison Wolfe proclaiming that D.C. needed a similar "girl riot."[86] The phrase continued to haunt Smith and Wolfe's circle of feminist punk revolutionaries and eventually contributed to the name of the movement's founding 'zine.

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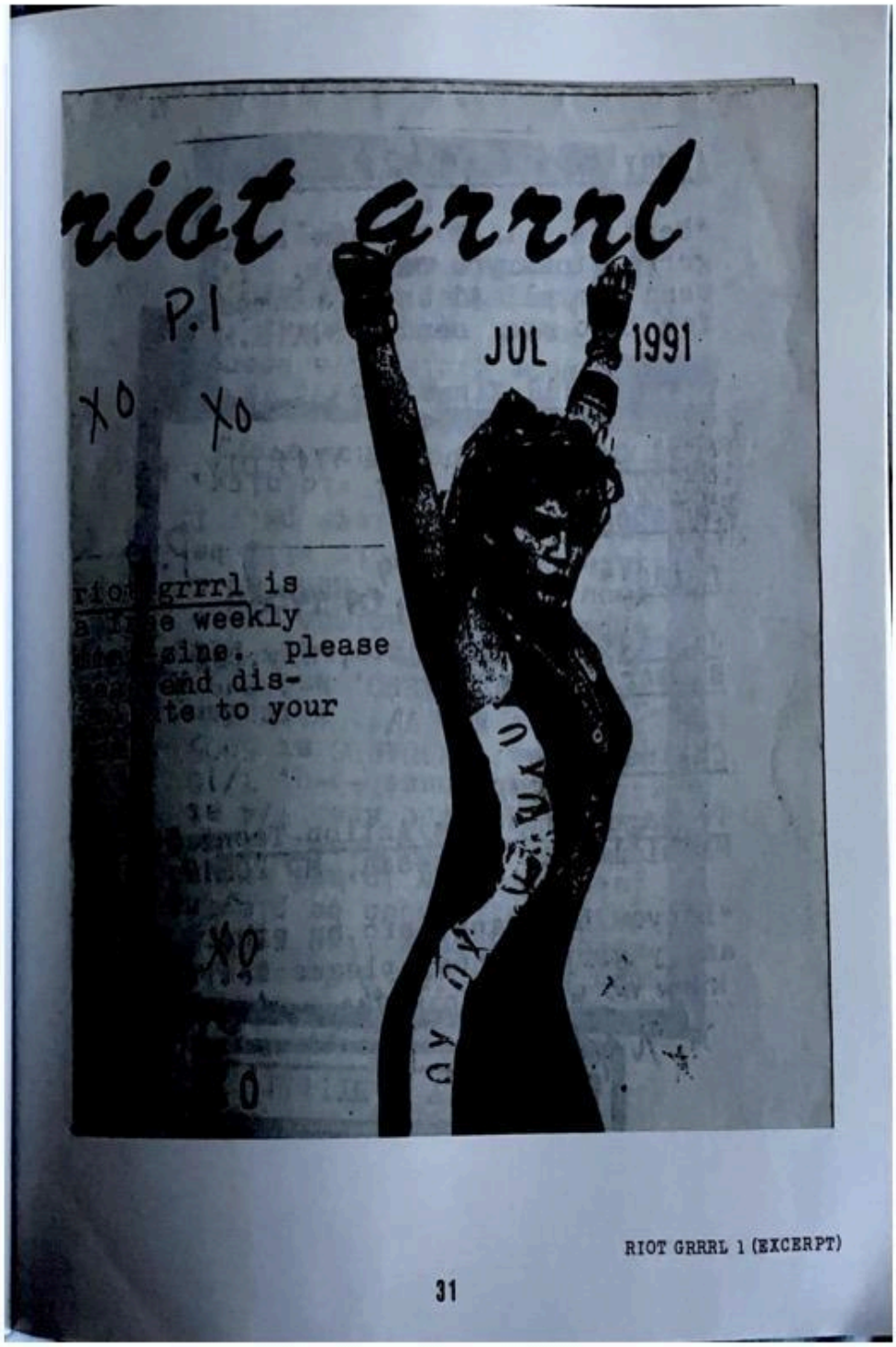
[83] *Salad Days*, 1:24:22.
[84] N.A. "1991," University of Maryland University Libraries, n.d.,https://exhibitions.lib.umd.edu/dc-punk/year/1991.
[85] N.A., "1991."
[86] Marcus, *Girls to the Front*, 73.

The fanzine in question became *Riotgrrrl.* On a random night in the summer of 1991, Alison Wolfe, Jen Smith, Molly Neuman, and Kathleen Hana ran off copies of a new 'zine they had made. The name came from a blend of Smith's original "girl riot" phrase and Tobi Vail's spelling of girl in her own 'zine *Jigsaw*.[87] The initial 'zine spawned a sequel and then a third issue. Each issue of the 'zine discussed topics like feminism and political events at the time. With each issue, the intention of reaching more girls and women grew. The first issue was distributed at a summer barbeque at one of Bratmobile's member's parent's house, but by the third issue, the zine began being circulated at shows. The second issue advertised a location for other female punks to meet as well as the invitation, "We don't know all that many angry grrrls, although we know that you are out there."[88] Hana envisioned a physical manifestation of this desire to meet other girls and young women. She began planning a potential meeting where women and girls– both in the punk scene and not– could meet and talk to one another. In the third issue, *Riotgrrrl* announced a meeting and location, Hana spoke onstage about the meeting before shows, and Alison Wolfe circulated through crowds with a clipboard taking the names and phone numbers of women and girls interested in attending.[89]

[87] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 82-83.
[88] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 86.
[89] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 88.



Alison Wolfe, Jen Smith, Molly Neuman, and Kathleen Hana's *Riot Grrrl #1* [Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* 31]

The first official riot grrrl meeting took place on July 24th, 1991 at a D.C. organization called Positive Force. Positive Force existed in the D.C. punk scene for quite some time. Founded in 1985 by Matthew Anderson, the organization sought to bring D.C. punks together to advocate for social and political change in the D.C. area. Said Amy Pickering of Fire Party, "Positive Force was actually a really good addition and brought an organization to an otherwise disparate community."[90] The Positive Force headquarters– a house in a suburban neighborhood across the Potomac river– served as a neutral and well-known location for the meeting to take place. The meeting attracted around twenty people– including future riot grrrl leaders like Erika Reinstein and Anada La Vita.

Hana did not know what the meeting would be when planning, but once the meeting began, it quickly became a space for women and girls to simply talk to one another about their experiences, especially violence and sexual abuse.[91] The meeting was soon followed up by another, attracting more and more girls and young women desiring a space and community for themselves and the ability to talk to each other. Hana said of the meeting in an interview with Anderson, "People talking about sexual abuse and getting beat up and emotional abuse in their houses is so important, and making bands around that issue is, to me, the new punk rock… I want to encourage people… to break their silence…with all that energy and anger if we could unify it in some way–"[92] Even though Hana denied being any type of riot grrrl leader–a role she still denies to this day–her words became a vision statement for what riot grrrl could be.

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[90] *Salad Days,* 1:14:11.
[91] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 90-91.
[92] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 91.

Chapter Four: "Where's the Riot, White Grrrl?"[93]:

Not Every Girl Is A Riot Grrrl

Mimi Nguyen writes in her 'zine Slant that "The mythic & organic 'sisterhood'… was nothing I knew or aspired to."[94] The idea of sisterhood– a collective community of women and girls who support each other– for Nguyen was always associated with whiteness. Speaking about her experiences growing up as a Vietnamese refugee/U.S. citizen Nguyen connected sisterhood with the exclusion felt from her white girl peers because of her race. She continues on to say, "it was the little whitegirls with their nascent blood-sister ties that… compelled my distance from a distinctive 'girlhood'… because I was… alien (refugee, accented, yellow)."[95] The idea of sisterhood may conjure memories of childhood friendships for some, but these can be the same forces that push other people to the margins. Riot grrrl became a type of sisterhood as women and girls came together to support each other in a welcoming environment. Yet, as riot grrrl continued, non-white riot grrrls felt like this "sisterhood" only applied to white riot grrrls. Riot grrrl, despite creating a welcoming environment, inadvertently isolated non-white riot grrrls by only focusing on white riot grrrl experiences. This unintentional marginalization caused riot grrrl to fall into the same exclusionary pitfall as its Second Wave feminist foremothers by neglecting the experiences of women and girls of color.

Riot grrrl used sharing personal experiences with one and another and connecting those experiences to political issues as a form of activism. Connecting personal experience and political issues showed riot grrrls that their experiences were parts in larger, systemic issues rather than an isolated event unique to them. Exposing these systemic issues gave women and

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[93] Mimi Nguyen, "Its (Not) A White World: Looking for Race in Punk," in White Riot: Punk Rock and the Politics of Race, edited by Maxwell Tremblay and Stephen Duncombe (London: Verso, 2011): 263.
[94] Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* 300.
[95] Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* 300.

girls the sense of community, belonging, and voice they felt their lives lacked. Many riot grrrls experienced rape, sexual assault, or harassment that resulted in feelings of shame or guilt, thinking they somehow brought it on themselves rather than it being a social issue. Sarah Marcus– author of *Girls to the Front: the True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*– remembers her teens before riot grrrl as "miserable, alienated, and isolated… I was sure I was the only one who felt this way."[96] After hearing about riot grrrl meetings and attending one herself, Marcus realized "these things weren't [her] fault, and we could fight them all together. For the first time in years, I knew I was going to be okay."[97] These connections formed through riot grrrl represented more than dialogues about social issues and plans for activism campaigns, they allowed women and girls to share and express their emotions in a safe and supportive space– something most of them either lacked or never had before. Riot grrrl used the emotions these connections and conversations started to fuel their activism and motivate them to push for systemic change.

This method of activism built upon Second Wave's ethos of "the personal is political," but in doing so, fell into the same pitfall as its Second Wave foremother. Second Wave feminism embodied "the personal is political" through conscious raising groups similar to riot grrrls' group meetings where members shared experiences and others responded with their own experiences as well. Like riot grrrl, these connections created a "sisterhood" of women bound together through their shared experiences. However, basing activism on finding like-minded people, the movement will attract mostly people who share the same ideas and mentalities. When every member in the collective has the same mentality and comes from a similar background, the movement becomes unintentionally exclusionary to those who differ from the shared experience.

[96] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 8.
[97] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 8.

The Second Wave fell into this pattern. Critics of the Second Wave critiqued how the basis of similarity amongst its members created a "sisterhood." Audre Lorde acknowledges the limitations "sisterhood" poses for feminism in her essay Age, Race, Class, and Sex published in 1978. She states that "There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word sisterhood that does not in fact exist."[98] The concept of a sisterhood assumes its members share the same experience despite shared experience being a mythical construct. Lorde critiques Second Wave feminism for focusing only on their oppression as women and neglecting women of color's experiences of both racial and gender discrimination. Riot grrrl followed a similar approach, which undermined the inclusivity and diversity of the the movement.

For non-white riot grrrls, sharing and relating to personal experiences to form connections made feeling accepted in the riot grrrl community difficult. Like Lorde critiques in Age, Race, Class, and Sex, riot grrrl based its means of connection on shared experiences. Riot grrrl's "sisterhood" depended on its members being able to see themselves reflected in the conversations held and stories shared. Those telling their stories and those listening felt acceptance through understanding they were not alone; however, most riot grrrl groups were composed of predominantly white members' experiences. Ramdasha Bikeem remarks at a riot grrrl meeting "...mostly all riot grrrls are white…I think I was one of the only 3 black kids there…"[99] As a mostly white movement, riot grrrl's conversations focused predominantly on white women and girls' experiences at the expense of excluding non-white riot grrrls. Corbin Tucker, singer of the band Heavens to Betsy, commented on riot grrrl's whiteness stating, "riot grrrl Oly [Olympia] had a lot of the same problems going on as many white middle class feminist movements have always had. we often centered on white middle-class sexism and white

[98] Audre Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference," 339.
[99] Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 158.

middle girls and therefore excluded women of color and white working-class women's issues from our discussions."[100] The Second Wave followed the same pattern. Women in the Second Wave largely came from a white, educated, upper middle-class background. Their perspectives influenced the focuses of their platform and those they unintentionally neglected. bell hooks in "Feminism: A Transformational Politic" critiques Second Wave feminist for focusing solely on the patriarchy as the origin of all oppression.[101] This mentality caused Second Wave feminists to prioritize fighting against patriarchy in feminist activism over other injustices such as racism. By making patriarchy a priority and other injustices incidental, non-white women did not see themselves represented in the movement. The emphasis on the inequality between men and women excluded non-white women who experienced both racism and gender discrimination. For non-white riot grrrls, this focus on whiteness meant they did not see themselves being represented in riot grrrl conversations and felt unable to share their experiences as they had no other non-white members they could relate to. Riot grrrl, despite connecting riot grrrls, together kept non-white riot grrrls silent and isolated from the connections riot grrrl made.

Although riot grrrl groups attempted to address riot grrrl's racial disparities in the movement, these conversations quickly became co-opted by white riot grrrls who either became defensive or rejected the observations organizers tried to discuss. In an *off our backs* article Melissa Klein describes how "a debate arose over the subject of 'reverse racism' when several white women expressed hurt over jokes or generalizations made about whites by blacks."[102] Similarly, another riot grrrl, Ramdasha Bikeem, spoke to another grrrl after a meeting who said "... the Asian girls were blaming all the white girls for racism and that she just 'couldn't handle

[100] Darms, *The Riot Grrrl Collection,* 241.
[101] bell hooks, "*Feminism: a Transformational Politic,*" 464.
[102] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 165.

that'."[103] White riot grrrls' defensiveness and failure to fully understand and incorporate the experiences of non-white riot grrrls reflects another continuity with the Second Wave. The Combahee River Collective in "A Black Feminist Statement" highlights white feminists' reluctance towards education by stating, "...we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism…"[104] Many non-white riot grrrls' contributions met negative reactions from white riot grrrls, especially when riot grrrls of color's stories expressed hard truths related to systemic racism and white privilege. Rather than welcoming and listening to these experiences, white riot grrrls became defensive or reactionary. Riot grrrl's resistance and/or avoidance to non-white riot grrrl contributions reflects a level of reluctance to learn about experiences outside of their own, continuing the limitations of the Second Wave and furthering non-white riot grrrls' marginalization.

In riot grrrl conversations, non-white riot grrrls also felt their stories could not be shared without feeling obligated to explain their experiences for white riot grrrls' comprehension, or felt white riot grrrls' only had a superficial desire to learn about their experiences. The Second Wave also suffered from this same pattern. As Lorde further critiques in "Age, Race, Class, and Sex", "Whenever the need for some pretense arises… it is the responsibility of the oppressed to teach their oppressors their mistakes."[105] In riot grrrl, whenever the topic of race came up in discussion it was the non-white riot grrrls expected to share thier experiences– not as participants in riot grrrl's exchange in stories to build connections– but as the educators for white riot grrrls.

This dynamic of always being the ones to teach white riot grrrls became a tiring role for non-white riot grrrls in the movement. Bianca Ortiz, author of *Mamasita*, states "I am sick of being the example, the teacher, the scapegoat, the leader, the half Mexican girl in the group of

[103] Darms, *THE RIOT GRRRL COLLECTION,* 156.
[104] The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 314.
[105] Lorde, "Age, Race, Class, and Sex," 338.

'allies' who either attempt to praise me or destroy me, or both at once."[106] Ortiz's comment above reflects the frustration the educator role elicited for non-white riot grrrls. White riot grrrls expected non-white riot grrrls to be their educators and to teach other non-white riot grrrls about their experiences. "A Black Feminist Statement" further states, "Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do."[107] Similar to Lorde's critique of the Second Wave, white riot grrrls put the responsibility of education on non-white riot grrrls, rather than acknowledging their responsibility to educate themselves on non-white experiences.

Riot grrrl's activism was rooted in the idea that personal experiences could be shared in public as a means of self-actualization for both the listeners and the sharers. By sharing stories with each other, riot grrrls could understand themselves and find community. This method reflects a continuity from Second Wave feminism as it used the same model in meetings such as conscious raising groups to make connections between women sharing challenges in their lives and receiving advice from women who experienced similar issues. Having a community based on similarity poses a challenge as the community can become exclusionary towards those who differ from the majority. This shortcoming is reflected in both the Second Wave and riot grrrl.Second Wave feminism and riot grrrl became "sisterhoods" composed of women from the same socioeconomic backgrounds. Both movements became increasingly white centered as they attracted mostly white, educated, middle class women and predominantly focused on issues related to them. This focus on whiteness excluded women of color from participating as they did not see themselves represented in the movement. Riot grrrl struggled to be inclusive in this regard. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, the focus on whiteness within right grrrl created

[106] Bianca Ortiz, "Mamasita" 5, n.d. as cited in Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," 180.
[107] The Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," 314.

a disproportionate level of visibility and power for white women within the movement that elevated white voices and suppressed non-white contributions.

We Are Family

Mimi Nguyen wrote in the introduction of her 'zine *Evolution of a Race Riot* that "the race riot has lagged years behind the grrrl one for reasons that should be obvious by now: white boy mentality became a legitimate target but whitegirls' racial priveledge and discourse went unmarked."[108] Nguyen's comment reflects a then growing concern within riot grrrl: most of the movement's discussions heavily centered white, middle class, women's voices. By the mid-1990s, riot grrrl reached its height of popularity. As more riot grrrls joined the movement, more voices also joined into the conversation. Marginalized riot grrrls noticed that their voices within the movement became muffled and sidelined. Whether through 'zines or concert line-ups, some riot grrrls did not find themselves being supported or acknowledged in the movement. Furthermore, they saw topics such as racial oppression and systemic racism being represented without their voice and/or misinterpreted by white riot grrrls claiming to be an authority on the topics. The disconnect between white riot grrrls and riot grrrls of color, as well as the disproportionate visibility and power within the community reflect riot grrrls shortcomings in its promises to elevate social justice issues like racism.

The following analysis will primarily focus on writings by a riot grrrl Erika Reinstein. While 'zines were in demand and following during their production, the means of their proliferation was erratic and spontaneous with many 'zines being left on buses for passerby or slipped into lockers at school. With no authorship or dates, riot grrrl's found difficulty sharing their work with wider audiences. Seeking to rectify this issue, riot grrrl began forming

[108] Mimi Nguyen, Evolution of a Race Riot, 1 (Berkeley, 1998), 4.

distribution centers where 'zine makers could send in their work to be forwarded to a wider audience. Erika Reinstein and May Summer founded the first distribution center– Riot Grrrl Press– in 1992 to help other riot grrrls' 'zines reach wider audiences.[109] Riot Grrrl Press became a central epicenter for riot grrrl publishing.

Erika Reinstien reflects riot grrrl's discourse due to her power and influence within riot grrrl. Upon becoming a leader in the riot grrrl movement, Reinstein's work often reached a large readership and other riot grrrls respected her work. While Reinstein alone cannot speak for the entirety of riot grrrl, her words reflect an image of riot grrrl's attitudes and ideology during the early to mid 1990s. The following analysis will juxtapose Reinstien's work with the works and responses of non-white riot grrrls to create the dialogue missing from the original riot grrrl movement. In doing so, the disconnect between white riot grrrls and non-white riot grrrls can be analyzed to reveal riot grrrls's shortcomings in their endeavor to create lasting social change.

Reinstein's 'zine *Wreckin Ball #3* illustrates riot grrrl's understanding of race and how their understanding hindered meaningful conversations within the movement. Riot grrrls often described themselves as non-white despite being white and having no clear claims to a different racial identity. Reinstein's 'zine reflects this pattern. The 'zine included an interview in which Reinstein discussed her alleged racial identity and what it meant to grow up as a non-white person in the U.S., even though she was white. The interview begins with Erika describing her racial identity: "my mom is scotch-irish and newfoundlish, which probably means english or german i think… and my dad is.. swiss, and scottish and jewish. which equals portuguese, possibly polish/prussian and african and thats all i know"[110] Reinstein considers race a combination of different aspects of ancestry when combined equate to a racial identity, when in

[109] Marcus, *Girls to the Front,* 248.
[110] Erika Reinstein,"Wreckin Ball #3," 1995, Zann Gibbs Riot Grrrl Collection, MSS.364. Box 9, Folder 17, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, n.p.

actuality, they do not determine one's race. Reinstien adds and subtracts parts of her family ancestry to be what race she wants to be. She views race as both an amalgamation one can create to claim an identity and something you can claim by having a small tie to a racial identity. In the interview Reinstein also claims "...if you have one drop of african blood well then you're black, well then fine i'm black and that's important…[111] Reinstein throughout these comments presents race as a concept where one can be whichever race want simply by desiring to be said race.

By presenting herself as non-white, Reinstein disregards the societal abuse people of color face as a consequence of their race. Racial discrimination is a systemic and longstanding aspect of American society people of color experience. Black Americans carry the legacy of slavery, Latinx people face discrimination as immigrants, and Asian Americans and Native Americans were once seen as savage or unfit to be citizens. Although Reinstein never explicitly mentions her whiteness in the interview, in an earlier part of the 'zine she describes herself as "...white and [considers herself] as having thought and spoke alot about racism and [her] role in fighting it…"[112] This statement contradicts her claim to non-whiteness and shows her awareness of embodying non-whiteness as white person. By being white Reinstien can choose whether or not to embody the races she wants to be and has the privilege of being able to don these identities at her convenience. Reinstein will never face the racism people of color face because, no matter how much she claims to be non-white, she will always be perceived as a white individual. Reinstein presents a contradictory image for riot grrrl– a movement that claims to be anti-racist– by making racially insensitive statements like the ones presented in *Wreckin' Ball #3*.

[111] Erika Reinstein, "Wreckin Ball #3," n.p.
[112] Erika Reinstein, "Wreckin Ball #3," n.p.

Reinstien's comments met backlash from non-white riot grrrls. In the 'zine *Kreme Koolers*, Keyan Meymand responds to Reinstein's racial interpretation saying "you treat race like a fucking chemical equation…"[113]Additionally he comments on Reinstein's claim to being Black by having distant African ancestry, "Bullshit science, again. It seem like yr using science as a way of not having to admit that you have no idea what the american black experience is, firsthand." Reinstein in the interview claims a non-white racial identity and supports her claim with an arbitrary explanation demonstrating her lack of understanding about race. Meymand further criticizes this lack of understanding, "You have no idea what race means… i'm talking about yr life…Some people don't have the position of privlege to play these fucked up games of yours."[114] Reinstein's comments regarding race and Meymand's subsequent response reflect a larger pattern within riot grrrl. White riot grrrls when speaking about race made or presented themselves as authorities on racism and the experiences people of color face without consideration for the systemic oppressions people of color face. This pattern challenged riot grrrl's ability to hold meaningful conversations about race as white riot grrrls began to speak as authorities on non-white experiences without actually understanding or experiencing them themselves. By doing so, white riot grrrls perpetuated the same racist rhetoric they sought to eradicate.

[113] Keyan Meymand,"Kreme Coolers," 1996, Zann Gibbs Riot Grrrl Collection, MSS.365. Box 1, Folder 22, Fales Library and Special Collections, New York University, n.p.
[114] Keyan Meymand,"Kreme Coolers," n.p.

Conclusion

By the mid to late 1990s, riot grrrl began to slowly lose the momentum that drove its sociopolitical activism. Scholars cite many different reasons for riot grrrl's decline in the late 1990s. In 1993, due to frequent misrepresentations of riot grrrl as an "angry girl movement"--a derogatory phrase used to describe riot grrrls' rage and frustrations towards women's injustices and lack of legal action in response– riot grrrls refused to talk to media outlets in an effort to stop the misinterpretations.[115] Despite these efforts, the media continued to represent riot grrrl as an infantile, reactionary phenomenon, which increased negative commentaries. Another reason is the co-option of riot grrrl's aesthetic, specifically their phrase "revolution girl style now," by those seeking to capitalize on its empowerment of young women and girls.[116] This co-option reflects a larger trend of feminism's commercialization in the 1990s with acts like the Spice Girls advocating for "girl power."

Despite this, riot grrrl still made a significant impact. Riot grrrl revitalized feminism for a new generation. Beginning as a music movement to create more female visibility in punk rock, riot grrrl brought a new energy the feminist movement lost after the end of the Second Wave. Riot grrrl encouraged girls to express their anger and frustration at societal injustice and harness it towards advocating for change. It brought new means of protest by reclaiming the femininity that the Second Wave abandoned, showing that girls could like makeup and clothes while still being feminists. While riot grrrl brought these contributions to the larger feminist movement, it also replicated limitations similar to its feminist and punk predecessors, namely the focus on

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[115] Kristen Schilt, "A Little Too Ironic": The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians," *Popular Music and Society* 26, no. 1, (2003): 13.
[116] Marion Leonard, "Rebel Girl, You are the Queen of My World: Feminism, Subculture, and Grrrl Power," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender,* ed. Sheila Whiteley, (Oxfordshire: Psychologist Press, 1997), 245.

white experiences and neglect of people of color's experiences. Riot grrrl's main limitation lay in the lack of communication between its members--particularly white and non-white riot grrrls. This disconnect represented a systemic issue within the movement that proritized white voices and marginalized non-white contributions. From this lack of communication, riot grrrl's movement became a hegemonic "sisterhood" based on white grrrls' experiences, perpetuating the same problematic interpretations of race in the 1990s. These factors hindered riot grrrl's efforts to create social change for diverse groups of women.

The struggle to include diverse voices continues both in historical narratives and archival efforts like the Riot Grrrl Collection at New York University. Institutions look to "rectify" these absences with inclusions from people of color as a means to represent non-white voices; however, these inclusions can occlude bigger questions of visibility. Rather than adding contributions to fill the silence, as Mimi Nguyen suggests, these absences can become opportunities to examine greater themes of exclusion and erasure.[117] As Nguyen states in her donation statement, her collection "[points] to not a side story in riot grrrl movement, but the story of encounter and contest, exchange and challenge…"[118] Contributions like this thesis seek to present non-white riot grrrls' experiences that existed alongside the dominant riot grrrl narrative. In representing non-white voices as parallel experiences rather than additions or diversions, larger questions can be asked about visibility and representation in historical movements.

[117] Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Fales Library Donation Statement The Mimi Thi Nguyen Collection in Collaboration with the POC Zine Project."
[118] Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Fales Library Donation Statement The Mimi Thi Nguyen Collection in Collaboration with the POC Zine Project."

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