

Real girl power? Representing riot grrrl

David Buckingham

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It's now a quarter of a century since the media began announcing the death of riot grrrl. The movement did not last very long – although as is often the case, some people maintain that it has never died, while others claim to detect periodic signs of revival. Certainly, there are few under the age of forty who are likely to have heard of it. Yet arguably, riot grrrl continues to exercise an influence that has been much more lasting than its relatively short life-span would suggest.

The thumbnail history would run something like this. Riot grrrl was an explicitly feminist youth movement that emerged from the US post-punk and hardcore scenes. It was born in early 1991 in the small college town of Olympia in Washington State, USA; although it wasn't named until later that year, when members of two key bands, Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, were staying on a summer break in Washington DC. The movement was consolidated back in Olympia in August of that year when these and other female-only (or female-led) bands played at a 'girl night', which opened the International Pop Underground Convention. From these origins, riot grrrl became a national movement, spread both by coverage in the mainstream media and by a proliferation of 'zines' published and distributed in informal networks right across the United States, and eventually elsewhere. For reasons I'll explore, the moment of riot grrrl was fairly brief: most of its leading participants had moved on within three years or so, although echoes of the movement could still be felt in the later 1990s.

The history of youth culture is always contested, as has been evident from previous essays in this series. Yet in recent years, a considerable amount of documentation about riot grrrl has been appearing. Some of this is fairly nostalgic and celebratory, and some of it tends to overstate the reach and impact of the movement: riot grrrl was by no means on a par with the first wave of punk, for example, or the hippy counter-culture. Nevertheless, a good deal of this writing is more thoughtful and critical. There are now several books and films about riot grrrl; and while the music is easily accessible, extracts from the zines can also be found online and in edited collections. There is an extensive riot grrrl archive at New York University, which I was able to consult during my research for this piece: it appears to be extensively used. This renewed interest suggests that riot grrrl may have something important to say to our contemporary situation.

My aim here is not to write a definitive history, even if such a thing were possible or desirable; and as a male, British academic of an earlier generation, I make no claim whatsoever to personal experience. On the contrary, as with my earlier essays, I want to explore what we can learn from riot grrrl, in the context of broader debates about youth culture and media – and in this instance, about feminism and identity politics as well. At present, there is renewed interest in feminist politics, for example

in the wake of the #metoo movement; yet there is also growing resistance to those who are described as ‘feminazis’. Meanwhile, the notion of ‘intersectionality’ points to the need to address gender alongside, and in interaction with, other aspects of social identity. None of these are, in my view, new or unprecedented developments; but in our currently polarized situation, riot grrrl may provide a useful historical lens through which they might be seen more clearly.

Following an initial overview, I focus on two key issues. The first is to do with representation: I consider debates about how the movement was portrayed in the mainstream media, and how the participants sought to represent themselves, especially via the zines, which were in many respects more distinctive and original than the music. I then move on to consider the internal politics of riot grrrl as a ‘movement’ or a ‘scene’ (or a network of scenes): I look at debates about inclusiveness and leadership, and particularly about identity politics. Each of these areas was a focus of tension and conflict for the participants; and it was the combination of both that arguably led to riot grrrl’s fairly rapid demise.

Riot grrrl in context

Riot grrrl can be understood as a double reaction – both against the misogyny of post-punk musical subcultures, and against the style of feminist politics practiced by an older generation of women. There was an undeniable intensity and anger in the music and the zines; but riot grrrl was not (or not only) a spontaneous expression of pent-up emotion. On the contrary, the participants in riot grrrl were also very deliberate and self-aware about their response to what had gone before, and about their aims and methods.

Most of the key riot grrrl performers – and those who quickly took up instruments in attempting to emulate them – were aware of the long history of women’s involvement in rock music. (And it’s important to emphasise that the focus here is on rock, rather than soul or rhythm and blues or hip-hop, or even mainstream pop, where rather different arguments would apply.) Prior to the advent of punk, ‘women in rock’ were often little more than eye-candy for male consumers: they functioned as decorative or sexy singers (and much less frequently as instrumentalists), or occasionally as ‘girls with balls’, who would mimic traditional masculine styles of performance. There are numerous notable exceptions to this; but even where rock appeared to move beyond established gender stereotypes (as for example in ‘glam rock’, which I considered in a previous essay), this was largely a matter of *male* ‘gender-bending’ rather than females coming to the fore.

Similar arguments have been made about the involvement of young women in youth subcultures more broadly. Writing in 1975, Angela McRobbie and Jenny Garber described the marginalization of girls in the iconic British post-war subcultural groupings like teddy boys, mods, hippies and skinheads. In each case, these groups included a few ‘honorary’ or token girls, but in most cases girls were invisible or subordinate. Girls, McRobbie and Garber argued, were largely confined to a domestic ‘bedroom culture’ – although in retrospect, their account of the 1970s ‘teenybopper’ phenomenon seems to present girls largely as victims of patriarchal manipulation.

To some degree, punk offered different possibilities in this respect. The anarchist 'DIY' (do-it-yourself) ethic of punk encouraged the idea that anybody could become a performer or an artist – girls included. It wasn't necessary to have years of music training before you could form a band; or indeed to have a literature or design degree before you could create and publish a zine. DIY seemed to provide a guarantee of honesty and authenticity, although it could also become an artfully constructed pose.

The roots of riot grrrl can be traced to some of the all-female bands that emerged in the early days of (British) punk, such as the Slits and the Raincoats, and performers such as Poly Styrene (of X-Ray Spex) and Siouxi Sioux (of Siouxi and the Banshees). These artists were typically strident and assertive – an approach carried forward in the wake of punk, albeit in sometimes muted and contradictory ways, by performers like Debbie Harry (of Blondie), Madonna and Patti Smith. Yet punk was arguably always ambivalent in this respect: the scene was heavily male-dominated, and it's hard to think of many examples where female performers were not (once again) required to emphasise their sex appeal or alternatively their 'tomboyish' masculinity.

The evolution of punk – especially in the United States – towards 'hardcore' had led to a reassertion of masculine domination, both of the music itself, and of performance spaces. Some hardcore and grunge bands were blatantly misogynistic, although again there were notable exceptions, some of whom (like the bands Nation of Ulysses, and to some extent Nirvana) were associates of the riot grrrl bands. However, riot grrrls were generally frustrated by the violence that often surfaced at gigs, and by the boys' dominance of the mosh pit just in front of the stage. 'Girls to the front' was a frequent call at early riot grrrl performances; some venues ran female-only gigs, or all-ages gigs, while some charged higher entry fees for men (unless they turned up wearing women's clothes); and bands would sometimes stop playing mid-set in order to call out aggressive male behaviour (such as slam-dancing or thrashing) among the audience. Julia Downes has argued that, in line with the DIY ethos of punk, riot grrrl bands sought to challenge the dichotomy between the performers and the audience, in order to provide more opportunities for girls to collaborate.

However, riot grrrl was not simply a reaction against the contemporary musical scene: it was also much more broadly and explicitly political. As we'll see, it was suffused with a powerful, angry rhetoric about 'revolution girl-style' that was much more than superficial radical chic. Here again, the movement needs to be understood in relation to a longer history (or herstory). Many of the original participants in riot grrrl were the daughters of 'second wave' feminists, whose politics had developed during the 1970s. This was apparent in some of the methods they used – most obviously, the fact that groups of young women were encouraged to come together, not just at gigs, but also for discussion meetings and workshops, and to share personal experiences in ways that sound very similar to seventies-style 'consciousness raising'.

Riot grrrl emerged at a time when many feminists perceived there to be a counter-reaction against the advances of the second wave – an argument most famously

articulated in Susan Faludi's 1991 book *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women*. In this context, riot grrrl appeared to represent a new kind of feminist politics, which was aligned by some with the emergence of a 'third wave' – a term coined in 1992 by the writer Rebecca Walker in response to the appointment of Justice Clarence Thomas to the US Supreme Court, despite persuasive accusations against him of sexual harassment. These recurrent announcements of 'waves' should be regarded with caution; but it's possible to see in riot grrrl a coming together of the ethos and aesthetics of punk with a potentially new and distinctive form of feminist politics among younger women. As Kathleen Hanna of the band Bikini Kill later put it (in the film *The Punk Singer*), riot grrrl aimed to 'take the feminist stuff we read in books and filter it through a punk rock lens'.

While riot grrrl was generally more 'sex positive' than some second wave feminism, and more inclined to play with the trappings of feminine girlhood, it's important not to underestimate its political militancy. The early riot grrrl bands were activists, who played at feminist benefits and abortion rights rallies; as well as gigs, there were support groups and conferences; and many zines contained passionate feminist 'agit prop', which also drew attention to the connections between sexism, racism and homophobia. Among countless expressions of this explicit political motivation, perhaps the most widely circulated example appeared on an early flyer for Bikini Kill: sometimes headed 'What is Riot Grrrl?', and subsequently extended and adapted in numerous zines, it may have been written by Hanna and her band mates, including drummer Tobi Vail. Riot grrrl was needed, it proposed,

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

BECAUSE a safe space needs to be created for girls where we can open our eyes and reach out to each other without being threatened by this sexist society and our day to day bullshit...

BECAUSE we need to acknowledge that our blood is being spilt; that right now a girl is being raped or battered and it might be me or you or your mom or the girl you sat next to on the bus last Tuesday, and she might be dead by the time you are reading this...

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

BECAUSE I am tired of these things happening to me; I'm not a fuck toy. I'm not a punching bag. I'm not a joke...

The fury is evident in the language (not least the repetition and the accumulating lists), but this wasn't merely an accidental development, or a spontaneous outburst of frustration. There was a strongly experiential, personal dimension to the music and the zines – as indeed had been the case in second wave feminism – but there was also an intellectual engagement with theory. Many of the key participants in the early days of riot grrrl – such as the members of bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile and Heavens to Betsy – were students following women's studies courses at

Olympia's liberal Evergreen College. The zines and personal papers included in the New York University archive contain a great many references to radical feminist and cultural theory – and some even contain reading lists. There is also an acknowledged influence of various *avant-garde* artistic and political practices, from Dadaism to situationism.

Kathleen Hanna, for example, had originally hoped to become a writer, until she was encouraged to form a band by the radical feminist author Kathy Acker. Hanna's papers in the archive include annotated articles by cultural theorists like John Berger and Susan Griffin, as well as writings about anti-censorship feminism, post-structuralist theories of identity, and socialist-feminist work on representation. However, as Marion Leonard notes, riot grrrl had an ambivalent relationship with academic feminism: some participants challenged views of the movement as a kind of 'academic curiosity', and resisted what they saw as scholarly attempts to impose a singular interpretation of it. Despite the prevalence of manifestos and mission statements, many in riot grrrl also resisted the idea that it should have a 'line' or a 'programme', insisting instead on the importance of acknowledging contradiction. Indeed, for Hanna at least, contradiction itself 'might be the most powerful feminist tool yet, creating a kind of paralysis, or night-blindness, in the man/boy imagination' (interview in *LA Weekly*, 1992).

It is this combination of punk and feminism – and the reaction against dominant trends in both areas – that accounts for some of the key motivations of riot grrrl. If we confine our attention just to the music, it's actually quite hard to identify many distinctive characteristics. Bikini Kill, who are often taken as the emblematic band, display all the trademarks of first generation punk: short songs, fast tempos, simple chord sequences and riffs, abrasive and distorted guitars, shouted vocal lines, thrashing drums, repeated anthem-like choruses. More in line with the later US hardcore style, extreme dynamics are important, with abrupt and brutal shifts between quiet or silence and high-volume intensity. There is no self-conscious display of virtuosity or lyrical cleverness here: subtlety is not what it's about. However, other riot grrrl bands reflect a range of stylistic influences: to my ears, Heavens to Betsy sound more like a downbeat emo band, while Bratmobile are more poppy, in the tradition of sixties girl groups. Aside from the lyrics and the high-pitched vocal screams, it's hard to identify much that is *musically* distinctive here: 'riot grrrl' is not really a defined musical genre.

The visual dimension, however, was another matter. Here again, the riot grrrls owed a certain amount to their punk precursors such as the Slits and Poly Styrene. In some cases, performers chose not to emphasise their gender, but in many instances there was an overt challenge to traditional notions of femininity. The term 'grrrl' was an attempt to reclaim a positive, playful notion of pre-teen girlhood, combining an element of nostalgia, but inflecting it with an angry growl or snarl. This approach extended to the naming of bands: aside from those I've mentioned, others in or around the scene directly parodied sexist names for female body parts, like Snatch, Hole and Burning Bush; while zines carried titles like *Girl Germs*, *Satan Wears a Bra*, *Discharge*, *Cupsized* and *Intimate Wipe*; and Riot Grrrl NYC once organized a festival they named 'Pussystock'.

Many riot grrrls combined the fashions and paraphernalia of traditional girlhood with those of punk, in a kind of parody reminiscent of the original St. Trinian's films: short school uniform skirts, pigtails and hair barrettes could be worn with combat boots, ripped stockings and punk jewellery. There was sometimes an element of 'dorkiness' or deliberate awkwardness about the style. However, this was by no means a demure version of girlish femininity (these were not 'Lolitas'), but a form of aggressive resistance to it. In a direct challenge to the objectification and abuse of women, grrrls would write words like SLUT, WHORE and BITCH in marker pens across their bare midriffs and limbs; bands sometimes performed in their underwear, and would occasionally bare their breasts, not in any kind of seductive display but rather in a brazen affront to sexist ideas of decency (one of Bikini Kill's more notable early songs was 'Suck My Left One'). As with first generation punk, there was a definite influence here of *avant-garde* performance styles, and of the confrontational approach of situationism. (Such influences are also apparent in the visual style of the zines, which I'll discuss in a later section.) However, these aesthetic choices are pressed into explicit political service: riot grrrl was very clearly informed by a socialist-feminist *politics* of representation, and of self-representation.

If the music of riot grrrl was fairly unremarkable, the lyrics were something else. Riot grrrl songs are typically about anger and dissent, but also about self-assertion and empowerment. Like the zines, they seek to confront male power, by talking about abuse, rape and incest, and by parodying and pouring scorn on conventional sexist expectations about women's appearance and behaviour. Many – such as Bikini Kill's most famous anthem 'Rebel Girl' – express feelings of female solidarity and 'girl love' that are based in friendship, and directly challenge the sexual competitiveness that is seen to arise once boys and men become a focus of attention.

Another early Bikini Kill song, 'Double Dare Ya', presents this form of political defiance very clearly. The recording is prefaced with the famous slogan 'we want revolution girl-style now!', and the song begins with the call 'hey girlfriend!' (sung in a kind of parody/homage to Debbie Harry, perhaps). It continues:

*Dare ya to do what you want
Dare ya to be who you will
Dare ya to cry right out loud*

It then switches to a parental voice:

*Don't you talk out of line
Don't go speaking out of your turn
Gotta listen to what the Man says
Time to make his stomach burn*

The concluding verse is a kind of call to arms:

*You're a big girl now
You've got no reason not to fight
You've got to know what they are
'Fore you can stand up for your rights*

*Rights, rights?
You do have rights!*

As this implies, the riot grrrls injected a new sense of anger and urgency that was far removed from what they saw as the increasingly bland 'liberal feminist' approach of the second wave – although this receives much more elaborate expression in the writing of the zines, to be considered later.

As with earlier youth subcultures, it's possible to define riot grrrl in terms of what Dick Hebdige called a stylistic 'homology' – an assembly of semiotic elements (fashion, music, visual design, and so on) that resonate with each other, and combine together to form distinctive cultural meanings. However, this approach tends to underplay the direct and explicit politics of some subcultures, and the quite deliberate, even calculated, ways in which particular forms of expression are taken up. The riot grrrls knew very well what they were doing. This was not an incoherent expression of rage, let alone of adolescent hormonal imbalance, but an explicit political strategy.

Attempting to define any youth cultural style – let alone to recover the history of a movement – raises awkward questions about representation. Who claims to speak for a particular movement or style – and who has the right to do so? Any such account (especially a brief one such as this) is bound to iron out diversity and inconsistency. There is perhaps an inevitable tendency to concentrate on specific 'scenes', events or locations, and on particular individuals – in this case, on the handful of bands coming out of Olympia, and specifically on Bikini Kill and Kathleen Hanna (although, as we'll see, Hanna herself was uncomfortable with being seen as a 'leader'). There is no 'official version' of riot grrrl, and probably this is as it should be. Emphasising the distinctiveness of the movement can also lead one to ignore its influences and its relationship to longer traditions. As Mary Celeste Kearney has argued, there is a danger that riot grrrl can be pulled into a rather patronizing 'women in rock' or 'angry punk' narrative that serves to marginalize its political dimensions – and thereby makes it easier for it to be commodified for mass consumption. These difficulties particularly apply to the ways in which any such movement is represented in the mainstream commercial media; and as we'll see in the following section, this was a particular focus of concern and debate within riot grrrl itself.

Riot grrrl meets the media: recuperation and resistance

In his book *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, published in 1979, Dick Hebdige provides an influential account of how the mainstream media deal with youth subcultures. According to this narrative, youth cultures emerge seemingly spontaneously 'from the streets', from outside the capitalist economy; and they are then inevitably recuperated by the mainstream, as their challenge is diluted and commodified. Radical bands are seen to lose their edge as they are signed to major record labels; entrepreneurs soften street fashions as they package them for mainstream high-street consumers; leaders of the style are nominated, and often endowed with additional glamour and charisma. Media play a key role here, albeit veering erratically from prurient fascination with taboo behaviour to melodramatic 'moral panic'. The

seemingly wild and inexplicable antics of youthful 'folk devils' are held up both for voyeuristic contemplation and for moral condemnation – and in the process, their harmful and anti-social effects are often highly exaggerated. Yet, in Hebdige's account, *diffusion* via the media inevitably results in the *defusion* of the challenging dimensions of subcultural style.

This argument reinforces an easy, self-glorifying distinction between the 'underground' and the 'mainstream' that is very familiar within youth cultures themselves. As Hebdige points out, the moral opprobrium that subcultures typically attract often increases their appeal for would-be participants: if these adults are so outraged by us, we must be doing something right. Yet there's a kind of political romanticism about this account, which belies the complex hierarchies that operate *within* youth cultures, and the often symbiotic relationships between them and mainstream media and commercial culture. In reality, the distinction between the underground and the mainstream is constantly shifting: the mainstream needs the underground as a source of new ideas, while the underground needs the mainstream in order to define itself by what it is not.

Hebdige's book was written in the founding moment of punk, in late 1970s Britain. Subsequent scholars of youth culture have qualified this account in several ways. Writing in the mid-1990s, Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton argued that this narrative of recuperation was no longer relevant in a much more complex and fragmented media environment. Subcultures, aided and abetted by the media and cultural industries, actively encourage 'moral panics' as an attractive publicity strategy (as indeed did the original punks). Disapproving media coverage may actually help to legitimate youth subcultures, and even bestow a political edge that they might not otherwise have possessed. Meanwhile, these 'folk devils' are much more capable of speaking for themselves, in their own specialist media outlets, and to some extent of speaking back to the mainstream. McRobbie and Thornton also draw attention to the operations of the music press, whose location on the cusp between the mainstream and the various subcultures allows them to play a crucial role in this respect: once again, the music press needs musical subcultures, just as much as those subcultures need the music press. While some of these observations no longer apply today (the music press has declined, not least with the advent of online media), they are especially relevant to understanding the fate of riot grrrl.

In this changing context, as McRobbie and Thornton imply, the relationships between reality and representation are inevitably much more complex: it's not easy to determine who should 'speak for' a given social movement, to assess the accuracy of reliability of any story that is told about it, or to evaluate claims about its significance. At the same time, audiences can no longer be regarded merely as dupes of media manipulation: what some might see as a misrepresentation or trivialisation of a subculture might nevertheless be read as an incitement to join it. Furthermore, as Alison Jacques suggests, it is mistaken to see this narrative in terms of a simple 'before and after': it is not as if subcultures enjoy a pure, oppositional or resistant identity, which is then corrupted by media and commodification. There is often no single *moment* of recuperation, but rather a dynamic and continuously shifting relationship between the underground and the mainstream.

These issues became a particular concern for riot grrrl almost as soon as it began to attract attention outside the small local venues of Olympia. Mainstream media coverage was simultaneously a risk and an opportunity, whose consequences were difficult to foresee. On the one hand, the media were clearly excited by the prospect of an army of angry girls. Despite their deliberate rejection of conventional expectations about female beauty, teenage girls in various states of wild abandon and undress were bound to prove titillating for the readers of middle America. On the other hand, riot grrrl had many of the ingredients for moral panic. There was sex and violence, at least of a certain kind; although admittedly there was little mention of drugs or crime. There was a good deal of revolutionary rhetoric, and much discussion of hot topics such as rape, incest and child abuse that were beginning to appear on the media radar. It was hard to see why media editors would want to ignore such an attractive opportunity – especially if they wished to reach elusive younger readers.

Inevitably, there was a fair amount of inaccuracy and misrepresentation to be found in such coverage. Quotations were taken out of context, nuances were ignored, and much of the analysis was superficial. Journalists were inclined to speak to participants who were ready and willing to speak to them; and in the process, they tended to portray the wrong people as typical or representative. They conflated riot grrrl with overlapping but distinct musical scenes, such as grunge. They oversimplified – and sometimes gently mocked – the revolutionary feminist politics. They exaggerated and trivialized and sensationalized. They got some important details very wrong. Yet most of this was surely to be expected.

Reading through some of the early media coverage, I was struck by how even-handed – and in some cases, even sympathetic – much of it was. One of the first major articles was a substantial piece entitled ‘Girl Trouble’, written by Elizabeth Wurtzel for the *New Yorker* in June 1992. The article looks at riot grrrl in the context of other contemporary developments, including the role of women in grunge bands such as Hole, L7 and Babes in Toyland, who were beginning to be signed by major labels. Kathleen Hanna – who was increasingly singled out as the spokesperson for the movement – was quoted at some length, talking about how she was wary of ‘assimilation’, and was seeking to promote ‘revolution and radicalism and changing the whole structure’.

Numerous shorter articles followed in national publications like *USA Today*, key local newspapers such as the *New York* and *LA Times*, music papers like *Spin*, and the teenage girls’ magazine *Sassy*. Several were accompanied by ‘sexy’ images of riot grrrl performers, many of them deliberately posed. For a nascent movement, which was still relatively small, this was a high level of attention – and perhaps some of it was a kind of overflow from the enormous success of the grunge bands, some of which had also started out in Olympia. For example, Hanna was frequently credited with inventing the title of Nirvana’s album ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit’; and fellow band member Tobi Vail’s boyfriend was Ian Svenonius of the band Nation of Ulysses – ‘the sassiest boy in America’, according to *Sassy* magazine. This kind of fame-by-association (especially with men) was certainly unwelcome; and some riot grrrl participants were uncomfortable with the feeling that they were being placed ‘under the microscope’ of a mainstream national audience.

However, it was a piece called 'Revolution, Girl Style' by *Newsweek* reporter Farai Chideya and others, published in November of that year, which became notorious. Chideya had encountered difficulties in contacting the best-known riot grrrl spokespersons, but she was also interested in looking beyond the usual suspects to more everyday participants. Her article quotes Kathleen Hanna at some length, describing her as 'a former stripper who sings and writes about being a victim of rape and child abuse'; and there are also quotations from the 'What is Riot Grrrl?' piece that effectively functioned as an evolving 'manifesto'. Riot grrrl is described as 'feminist', and as 'sexy, assertive and loud'; it is defined as being more 'pro-sex' than older generation feminism; and the story explains how riot grrrl performers exaggerate negative stereotypes of women in order to force others to 'confront their own bigotry'. None of this seems especially inaccurate.

However, as the article proceeds, Hanna is also identified as 'the extreme edge of the grrrls' rage', and contrasted with a girl called Jessica Hopper, who seems to have been contacted quite by chance. Hopper is described as 'more typical': 'young, white, urban and middle-class... like most teenage girls, she's a bundle of contradictions'. And in its final paragraphs, the article appears to neutralise any potential threat its readers may have perceived: riot grrrl (mis-named 'riot girl') is described as 'feminism with a loud happy face dotting the "i"', and the conclusion speculates about whether Chelsea Clinton might become a riot grrrl when she moves to Washington DC.

The *Newsweek* article might be read as a telling instance of media recuperation: in part, it appears to reduce riot grrrl to something cute and unthreatening. However, it also gives a good deal of space to Kathleen Hanna and to the movement's more forthright feminist rhetoric; and this, along with the unwary Jessica Hopper, provides a point of access for girls outside the scene who might potentially want to get involved.

To some extent, it was the very ambivalence of riot grrrl – its 'girlish' version of radical feminism – that proved so fascinating, at least for some media commentators. 'From hundreds of once pink, frilly bedrooms comes the young feminist revolution,' exclaimed *USA Today*. 'And it's not pretty. But it doesn't wanna be. So there!' Certainly, much of the appeal of riot grrrl for the mainstream media derived from the girls' physical appearance, and their self-conscious play with ideas about femininity and sexuality. In some instances, it was the illustrations in the articles that proved more problematic than the writing. It was easy for the press to misread the parody of 'sexiness' that was intended by the riot grrrls themselves as just a new, slightly titillating version. Some recall a 1992 article in the leading national music magazine *Spin* as a particularly critical example. Although the report itself was reasonably supportive, *Spin* had hired a topless model to pose with the words 'bitch' and 'slut' marked on her body.

Retrospectively, as Alison Jacques suggests, angry white teenage girls might have appeared more palatable – and even positively charming – to white journalists as compared with the angry black men who were dominating some of the rap music of the time. Yet the riot grrrls also took the opportunity to raise uncomfortable issues such as sexual violence and abuse, and to place a forthright version of feminism back on the agenda of public debate.

By contrast, the music itself was relatively neglected, except within the specialist music press. *Maximum Rock and Roll*, for example, drew attention to riot grrrl's DIY ethos, arguing that its rejection of 'professionalism' could prove inspiring, especially for other girls: 'if girls are ever going to start being in bands as the norm rather than the exception, they need to see people up there who have just started playing'. Here again, Kathleen Hanna (along with fellow band member Tobi Vail) was regularly identified as a leader or spokesperson for the scene; and her writing from riot grrrl zines was frequently quoted. *Spin* described her as 'the angriest girl of all' and a focus for 'young, impressionable girls': 'she's a 23-year-old woman who sees everything she does as part of a movement, as a sign, and everything that thwarts her as part of a conspiracy'. The *Village Voice*, addressing an older readership, was predictably dismissive; but the alternative music magazine *Option* set riot grrrl bands in a longer history of female rock performers, and voiced their complaints against journalists' tendency to label and pigeonhole them into pre-defined categories.

Meanwhile, *Sassy* brought riot grrrl to a rather different audience of teenage girls. With an estimated readership of around three million, this was in many respects a typical glossy consumer product, akin to *Seventeen* or a junior version of *Cosmopolitan*: its pages were dominated by advertising and stories on fashion, beauty products, health and celebrities. *Sassy* was a target of some feminist criticism, but it sought to prioritise notions of self-esteem, and its editors clearly had some sympathy with the younger feminism of riot grrrl. The magazine frequently included brief band interviews and reviews of riot grrrl records and zines (with addresses on where they could be obtained), and featured a 'zine of the month'. At one stage, it even organized all-ages gigs and marketed a compilation of riot-grrrl related music on Olympia's Kill Rock Stars label.

In the UK, where riot grrrl enjoyed a brief flurry of interest a year or so after its foundation in Olympia and Washington DC, the media coverage was similarly double-edged. As Marion Leonard describes, the national press displayed a familiar mixture of moral outrage and confused fascination. However, the music press (especially the *Melody Maker*) was generally much more supportive, reflecting its more symbiotic relationship with subcultures: an enthusiastic early cover feature by Sally Margaret Joy documented the US scene in a way that seems to have inspired active local groups such as the one in Leeds and Bradford, as well as conferring some credibility on home-grown British bands like Huggy Bear.

While a certain amount of this media coverage might well be accused of distorting or sensationalizing riot grrrl, and while some of it was undoubtedly condescending, much of it appears reasonably fair and accurate when seen in retrospect. Indeed, many of these stories were written by female journalists who were by no means unsympathetic to the movement's aims, even if their editors might have obeyed other imperatives. Even so, the intense media interest posed a dilemma that is very familiar within many youth cultural movements. (I've also written about this in my *Growing Up Modern* essay on the 'soul scenes' of the 1970s.)

On the one hand, the riot grrrls were keen to proselytize. They did not want to preach only to the converted: they wanted more young women to hear their message, to learn about what they were doing, and to get involved in the movement.

In the process, they knew that they themselves might need to exaggerate or sensationalise what was happening, just as much as they accused the media of doing. For example, in one early interview for *LA Times*, Kathleen Hanna apparently lied to the reporter about the reach of riot grrrl, suggesting that there were 'chapters' in many US cities, and thereby hoping to incite girls to form such groups. This need was perhaps accentuated by the geographical spread of the United States (as compared, for example, with the UK): getting the message out to girls in more obscure or less populated locations would take a long time, especially if one relied only on live appearances and informal networks.

Yet on the other hand, the riot grrrls obviously feared recuperation: they felt that publicity and commodification would undermine their authenticity, dilute their political message and defuse their impact. It was this that ultimately led some leading figures in the movement – notably those around the Washington DC-based Riot Grrrl Press – to initiate a 'media blackout' late in 1992. All mainstream media outlets were to be boycotted, journalists' enquiries were to be ignored, and interviews were not to be given.

Certain key participants took an especially militant stance on this. Kathleen Hanna was particularly angered by the suggestion that she had been abused by her father (although to be fair, this is not what the *Newsweek* article directly claims). In a video interview recorded at the time by the documentary-maker Lucy Thane, Hanna accuses the media of a form of abuse: on the one hand, they were 'giving us candy', while on the other they were 'fucking us over'. She condemns the women journalists as 'careerist feminist bitches' who had 'internalised the system of domination'. Personally, Hanna also claimed to be uncomfortable with being constructed as the 'leader' of the movement; although she (and others) were equally uncomfortable when girls outside the original core group of bands and zine writers were quoted or seen as authorities. Indeed, it was some of these 'leaders' who sought to impose the blackout, although inevitably it proved difficult to police – not least because, as riot grrrl grew, it was bound to become less homogeneous.

As we'll see, the zines offered what Hanna called an 'underground network', which would bypass 'His media' in order to reach girls who wouldn't otherwise have heard about feminism. However, others argued that riot grrrls could and should use the mainstream media. *Sassy*, for example, was a key means to take the message of riot grrrl beyond the immediate in-crowd to readers outside college towns and major urban centres. Isolated girls 'trapped in high school' might read past the condescending tone of *USA Today* or the corporate music papers, and be inspired to seek out riot grrrl music or zines – and there is plenty of evidence from memoirs and oral histories that this is precisely what they did. Even negative coverage reflected some kind of recognition of the importance of the movement: some riot grrrls took mainstream media attention simply as an indication that the movement was making a difference. On the other hand, wider coverage might well also attract the attention of detractors who would not otherwise have bothered to express a view – as well as those who were only too keen to pounce on instances of 'selling out'. This is a game where there are rarely outright winners.

One might dismiss such coverage as 'exploitation', but any exploitation was at least mutual. Riot grrrls were not simply seeking to 'express themselves': they were also

deliberately drawing attention to themselves, in the hope of communicating their political message and drawing other girls to their side. Putting particular individuals forward as 'leaders' or even 'role models' might have undermined the egalitarian feminist ethos, but it might have been necessary in order to make the movement palatable enough to attract mainstream media coverage. By contrast, a media blackout risked reinforcing the insularity and isolation of the scene, and it might well prove counter-productive, as media reports would continue in any case. Remaining politically pure behind the screen of a media blackout could even be construed as a form of elitism.

I've focused here on the issue of media coverage, but some in riot grrrl were equally wary of what they saw as other forms of recuperation. Bikini Kill, for example, were courted by several major record labels, but decided that this was not what they wanted: their music is still only available on their own label, although it is easily accessible online. There's an interesting contrast here with the strategy of some of the earliest punk bands (most obviously the Sex Pistols, who were keen to attract attention from major labels). This principled independence was also very different from the stance of other female-led bands from the grunge scene such as Hole and Babes in Toyland, who were signed to major labels in the wake of Nirvana's success. Indeed, for some in Olympia, the very popularity of grunge was a kind of betrayal of its authentic punk origins.

By mid-1993, *Rolling Stone* was already announcing that the riot grrrls were 'at war' with other female performers – perhaps attempting to create the spectacle of a 'cat fight'. Courtney Love (leader of Hole, and the partner of Nirvana's Kurt Cobain) and veteran Kim Gordon of Sonic Youth were both quoted criticizing Hanna and Bikini Kill for being 'sanctimonious', and 'setting a new yardstick' by which female performers were to be measured. The rivalry culminated when Love assaulted Hanna at a rock festival in 1995: she was convicted and sent to anger management classes. The differences here were not just personal, but explicitly political. Hanna resented being aligned with other female bands outside the immediate riot grrrl scene. She described Love as 'assimilationist' (in *Option* magazine, 1992), and clearly saw herself as more militantly feminist. Yet even Hanna could not entirely evade the lure of celebrity feminism: in 1994, for example, she was profiled in *Ms. Magazine* in a feature on 'Fifty Ways to be a Feminist', complete with a picture showing the word SLUT on her bare midriff.

Retrospectively, it seems surprising that many of the key figures in riot grrrl were unable or unwilling to play the media at their own game. The fear of recuperation – of being packaged and commodified, and thereby incorporated within the 'system of domination' – was real enough. But many of these young women had read academic texts in Cultural Studies, and were aware of the possibilities of 'semiotic guerrilla warfare', at least in principle. Simply blocking out the media was not a viable option, and might well have led to further misrepresentations. Creating an alternative means of expression and communication was perhaps a stronger possibility – although, as we'll see in the following section, it was not without its limitations either.

The means of production: alternative media

Printed zines were by no means the only medium used by riot grrrls. The group in Olympia created a radio show and a video programme; while Dana Younkins of the band Cuntz with Attitude produced several episodes of a television 'variety show', as well as music videos. However, it was the zines that provided the movement's most widespread form of cultural expression – and were arguably more lasting in their impact than the music.

Underground zines had existed in earlier youth subcultures, of course. The hippies had an elaborate alternative press, which occasionally enjoyed very wide circulation (see my discussion of the magazine *Oz* in an earlier essay). Second (and indeed first) wave feminists also produced leaflets, pamphlets and magazines in order to publicise their concerns and to support networks of activists. Punks created several 'DIY' zines, whose style and layout might have been an inspiration for the riot grrrls – although the riot grrrl zines were much less focused on music than the early punk publications (which is why I'm using the term 'zines' rather than 'fanzines'). I have seen no evidence that 'zinesters' involved in riot grrrl were aware of any of this prior history. Nevertheless, the zines appeared right from the start, in some instances in parallel with the music (the members of Bikini Kill and Bratmobile, for example, were among the earliest zine producers), but in many instances quite independently of it.

As riot grrrl ran into difficulty with mainstream commercial media, the zines were framed more explicitly as an alternative means of communication and networking. In Spring 1993, Erika Reinstein and May Summer founded the Riot Grrrl Press, based in Washington DC, as a kind of national distribution network and clearing house for riot grrrl zines. As a later Canadian edition of the Riot Grrrl Press catalogue put it:

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

The zines themselves helped to collate information on these alternative means of production. A 1993 issue of the UK's *Leeds and Bradford Riot Grrrl*, for example, contains detailed instructions on how to design, produce and distribute zines, alongside similar information about recording, pressing and distributing music tapes and CDs. The scale of this activity is very hard to assess, but the first Riot Grrrl Press catalogue listed almost 90 zines; while according to Sara Marcus, in the following year a Canadian newspaper estimated (a little implausibly) that 40,000 zines of all kinds were in circulation across North America.

As Mary Celeste Kearney suggests, the zines could not hope to be wholly independent of mainstream media. In principle, like the music, zines reflected the DIY ethos of punk. Anyone with access to a typewriter – and even, in some cases, just to pen and paper – could produce a zine. However, photocopying cost money,

even if some zinesters seem to have made illicit use of copying machines, for instance at their workplaces. Distribution also relied on the government postal service. Mainstream media sources – like *Sassy* magazine, or some of the music press – also helped to spread information about the zines that were available, and how to obtain them.

To some extent, this kind of alternative media production depends on class privilege: middle-class young people (as the riot grrrls mostly were) are more likely to have access to the equipment and opportunities to create their own media. However, these arguments would apply more strongly to music: access to musical instruments and associated technology is significantly more costly than the relatively low-tech requirements for making and distributing zines. Although some notable riot grrrl zines were produced by collectives, most were created by individuals or very small groups, who also did the work of distribution. Readers would need to send in stamps to cover postage, but otherwise zines were distributed free, sold at cost, or bartered in exchange for other zines (although some could be found in ‘alternative’ bookshops). Very few zinesters used the digital desk-top publishing software that was then becoming available: most zines were simply cut-and-pasted with scissors and glue. By contrast, while the dissemination of the music depended on ‘alternative’ record labels and publications, and on a network of independent venues and festivals, the costs of production and distribution were significantly greater – and as such, the boundaries between the underground and the mainstream were much more blurred. In several respects, zines were a more accessible form of cultural expression than music (or, at this time, video-making) for the majority of potential riot grrrls.

However, the ‘alternative’ nature of the zines wasn’t just a matter of their production and distribution: it was also apparent in their content and form. The zines addressed issues that – at least from the perspective of their authors – were often marginalized or trivialised in mainstream media, although they were very similar to the agenda of second wave feminism. They included familiar ‘personal-is-political’ concerns: domestic and sexual violence, body image and eating disorders, pornography, menstruation and women’s health, as well as broader concerns to do with gender identity and sexuality. As we’ll see, discussions of race and class were apparent from the start, although they became more prominent over time. Some zines contained quite academic pieces, for example about black writers or about feminist history, although these were often written in quite personal terms. Many also published reviews of music or of other zines, as well as articles about ‘youth’ topics like skateboarding; and many contained information about how to contact local riot grrrl groups.

Figure 1 contains a summary (taken from the New York University archive) of the contents of the six issues of *Riot Grrrl NYC* published between 1991 and 1993. This was more of a collective production than some other zines, although it gives a good indication of the range of content overall.

Figure 1: Contents of Riot Grrrl NYC, 1991-93

Source: summary in New York University Riot Grrrl archive

Issue #1 is titled Rape and Ritual, and is focused on organized religion as a tool of social control, as well as the links between religion and sexual assault. The issue

contains a piece called 'Girl gangs must rule all towns' by Kathleen Hanna, as well as personal stories of sexual assault. There are numerous poems, often written by Jill Wienbrock, that predominantly deal with themes of sexual and physical assault. The issue also includes reviews of records.

Issue #2 begins with an editorial on refusing to soften the tone of the zine to accommodate male readers. The issue contains poetry and prose, often on the theme of sexual assault, and includes excerpts from the book *Moons* by Jane Hohenberger. There are reviews of shows by Babes in Toyland, Huasipungo, and Lunachicks, as well as a Bikini Kill show at Wesleyan University and printed lyrics of Bikini Kill songs. The zine also features a bell hooks clipping, an advert for WHAM (Women's Health Action and Mobilization), and a report back from the DC March for Women's Lives on April 5th 1992.

Issue #3 is dated October 1992 and begins by announcing that Riot Grrrl NYC meetings will be held at Reconstruction Records on East 6th Street every Sunday. There is also an advert from Flytrap Records, seeking all-female bands. The issue addresses the intersections of performance and politics in an article on burlesque and The Bowery Girls, and also refers to homophobic attacks taking place in the state of Oregon. There is poetry dispersed throughout the issue.

Issue #4 is dated January 1993 and is dedicated to the memory of the African-American writer Audre Lorde, who died in November 1992. There are further references to current events through newspaper clippings detailing war rapes of Bosnian and Croatian women during the Yugoslav Wars. The issue also contains a satirical gossip page, a recipe page, and a letter from a woman trying to encourage people to smoke less during riot grrrl meetings.

Issue #5 is dated March 1993. Quotes from various girls about what riot grrrl means are dispersed throughout this zine. Media critiques include examples of the backlash against the movement in the press, as well as critiques of the mainstream girls' magazine *Sassy*. Calls for participation include projects on sexual abuse and radical activism. Personal writings focus on relationships with mothers, in addition to the destructive effects of drug use on friendship. The zine features reviews of books and local art by and about women and women's issues. An audio compilation of spoken word to support the pro-choice movement is described. The zine concludes with an extended interview with Jennifer Blowdryer and an excerpt from her book *Wrong Wrong Wrong*.

Issue #6 is dated April 1993. The issue begins with ecofeminist poetry and prose from the anthology *Sisters of the Earth* by Lorraine Anderson. There is also additional poetry and prose on themes of sexual assault, heterosexual relationships, and lesbianism dispersed throughout the issue. The issue contains a selection of articles dealing with pornography, alternative pornography, and Andrea Dworkin's views on pornography. There is also an article on street harassment that focuses on a series of cards a woman made to hand out to men who harass women on the street. Music components include a review of the 1991 split LP by Bikini Kill and Huggy Bear.

While some of the writing in the zines was public and declaratory, much of it was direct and personal, almost in the style of private diaries or letters. Despite (or in addition to) the public politics of the movement, individuality – the particular, the eccentric and the quirky – seems to have been considered a value in itself. Many zines published poetry and fiction, as well as painful confessional pieces. As in riot grrrl fashion, there was sometimes a deliberately incongruous mix of writing styles: zines might switch between ferocity, bitterness and rage at male misogyny and a very friendly, playful tone.

The visual style of the zines was often defiantly low-tech and anti-professional. The very 'scrappiness' of the zines, like the lack of polish of much of the music, arguably helped to equalize the relationship between the writer and the reader. Typewritten or hand-written text would be pasted in deliberately irregular and uneven ways, or chopped up to make way for illustrations and headings. There's an appearance of chaos, but the influence of early *avant-garde* collage and photomontage techniques is also apparent in some instances (there's evidence in the archive that at least some riot grrrls were aware of the work of artists like Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Jo Spence, for example).

As in the performances of riot grrrl bands, the zines often make playful but subversive use of mainstream images of women, sometimes taken from old-fashioned sources (such as fashion catalogues and girls' magazines). Many seek to expose how the appearance and performance of femininity is constructed; and they frequently reflect on what they take to be the fragmentation and contradictions of gender identity. It is sometimes hard to tell what is sincere and what is intended to be ironic here. As Alison Piepmeier suggests, the zines are not a matter of straightforward 'self-expression', or the manifestation of a singular, coherent self: on the contrary, identity is often shown to be confused, multifarious and fluid. Girls, they seem to say, are not simply victims or powerful agents, but both at the same time.

While some of the zines are fairly perfunctory, some of the more elaborate ones point to the considerable possibilities of the form. Three examples might serve to illustrate this. Kathleen Hanna's 40-page *My Life with Evan Dando, Pop Star* (1993) is a reflection on the author's apparent infatuation with a poster boy of the grunge scene (the former frontman of the popular band the Lemonheads). Hanna veers from expressions of lust and romantic obsession to murderous rage (there are references here to Valerie Solanas, who shot Andy Warhol), although it's deliberately hard to tell how serious either position is. Contradictory fragments of typewritten text cut across torn, smudged images of Dando, echoing Barbara Kruger's agit-prop-style collages; and the text also contains hand-written sections and crude drawings. *My Life* is, on one level, painfully intimate and personal; yet it is also a complex, powerful political statement about gender and stardom, about male entitlement and female ambivalence.

Doris, created by Cindy Crabbe (a.k.a. Cindy Ovenrack), is a more idiosyncratic production, which in parts comes closer to a personal diary. Issue 6, published around 1995, is pocket sized (around A5) and unevenly typed, with few illustrations. It reads at times like a stream of consciousness (or perhaps a flood of

consciousness), and at times like a confessional. It relates stories of the author's friends rather as if it assumes we already know them; and in this respect, it has much in common with a private letter, perhaps written to somebody who used to live in the same town. On the other hand, a feature called 'Romance 101' is a numbered list of (mostly mean and sadistic) ways in which one might convey to a romantic partner that your relationship is over: after one hundred such suggestions, the punch line (number 101) is simply 'fuck'. *Doris*, which eventually ran for more than 15 years and over 20 issues, is discussed in much more detail in Alison Piepmeier's book on zines, as an instance of a kind of activist emotional autobiography.

My third example, *Bitch*, is different again. Founded by Andi Zeisler and Lisa Jervis (who had been an intern at *Sassy*), it began publishing in 1995, providing what it calls 'feminist response to pop culture'. In the mid-1990s, for example, it was including critiques of Wonderbra advertising and the gender bias of children's toys, alongside a celebration of the 'inspirational' *Harriet the Spy*. Written with gusto and anger, it also had a good line in irreverent sarcasm; but it didn't take a single or predictable line on the issues. By the end of the decade, *Bitch* had grown from a photocopied fanzine into a professionally-produced magazine, with a much larger group of writers; it was also taking advertising. The feminist critique was no less forthright (articles on plastic surgery, women in advertising, and the sex industry, for example), but this came alongside profiles of leading women in the mainstream media that would not have been out of place in *Ms.* magazine. Today, *Bitch Media* (as it is now known) appears to be thriving, with an extensive website, spin-off podcasts and other publications: it claims a readership of around 80,000.

Andi Zeisler, who continues as creative/editorial director of Bitch Media, has produced her own account of the intervening years in the book *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to Covergirl: The Buying and Selling of a Political Movement*. Her story is clearly about the commodification and depoliticisation of feminism; but the evolution of *Bitch* itself suggests that this has not been simply a matter of betrayal or 'selling out', and that other outcomes are possible. (I'll return to the issue of 'commodity feminism' in my conclusion.)

Viewed in retrospect, the zines might be regarded simply as early precursors of online forms such as blogging, and more developed forms of social networking. In some ways, they reflect a particular style of amateur creativity that pre-existed the internet. Aside from some of the exceptions I have discussed, for the most part they are deliberately home-made, small-scale and ephemeral. As Alison Piepmeier suggests, there is something about the physicality or tangibility of the zine (and its mode of distribution) that conveys a shared intimacy, as well as the sense of being part of a 'gift economy', where zines are exchanged like private letters. These qualities are not necessarily available online; and it's perhaps partly for these reasons that some people continue to create hard-copy zines.

However, the differences here can be overstated. I've written in another *Growing Up Modern* essay about the use of the social networking site MySpace within the emo movement – a more male-dominated post-punk subculture that (like riot grrrl) emerged from the US hardcore scene towards the end of the 1990s. The intense, confessional writing of some of the riot grrrl zines could also be found on MySpace, although digital technology allowed emo kids greater possibilities for visual self-

representation. The function of these different media was ultimately quite similar: as Chris Atton has argued, both zines and blogs (and more elaborate social networking profile pages) provide opportunities not just for 'self-expression', but also for sociality – for creating intimacy and community across distance. However, the more public nature of online communication created new problems, as well as offering new opportunities: by putting their confessions and profiles online, emo kids were exposing themselves to levels of mockery and vilification from outsiders that were rarely evident in the culture of zines. Nevertheless, as we'll see in the following section, the riot grrrl movement was increasingly riven by its own internal tensions and divisions.

Inclusion and identity politics

As I've implied, the riot grrrls' debate about media was to some extent about the issue of inclusion. On the one hand, they wanted to reach out to a wider audience, and to generate a larger movement; and the mainstream media provided a potential means of enabling this. Yet on the other hand, they feared that in doing so, their message would be diluted and their political impact would be defused. Although this debate took an explicitly political form in this instance, it reflects a wider tension between individual self-expression and identification with the group that is typical of many youth subcultures.

On one level, the issue is to do with *membership*. Who is, or is not, a 'member' of a given subculture (or scene, or movement)? How do we distinguish between the authentic members, and those who are merely fakes or 'wannabees'? How are the boundaries between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' established and maintained? This leads on to questions about *leadership and hierarchy*. Who has the right to define or determine who will be included or excluded? How is their authority established and sustained, and how can it be challenged? Who represents, or speaks for, the group, both internally and within the wider public arena? Finally, how do these issues relate to broader questions about *identity politics*? Are there particular social groups (defined, for example, in terms of gender, race, class or sexuality) who appear to be excluded? How does this occur, what consequences does it have, and how might it be remedied?

These issues were particularly fraught for those involved in riot grrrl, partly because of its explicit political aims, but also because of its insistence on individual autonomy. Riot grrrl was about girls' right to self-expression, but it was also about group solidarity. These tensions were apparent from a very early stage, but they increasingly came to focus on the issue of identity politics; and it was partly as a result of this that the movement began to falter, and ultimately to implode, after a comparatively brief life-span.

Like most such movements, riot grrrl began with a small group – and as such, it inevitably provoked the charge that it was 'cliqueish'. Despite claims of inclusiveness ('Every girl's a riot grrrl' was a common slogan), many of those who tentatively approached the group at gigs and meetings found it intimidating. Were they wearing the right clothes, was their hairstyle appropriate, would they say the wrong things? As time went on, divisions between established members and 'newbies' were bound

to emerge – and some outside the group were keen to point to differences between ‘militants’ and those who were less inclined to fully identify. It was easy for outsiders to sneer at riot grrrl as ‘insular’ or as a ‘coffee house clique’.

Riot grrrls themselves were aware of these issues. The zine *Riot Grrrl Huh?*, published in Olympia in 1991 or 1992, addressed questions that were clearly troubling the early participants: who is a ‘scenester’ and who isn’t, whose band gets to play and whose doesn’t, who is cool or a snob, and who isn’t? As we’ll see, this zine also laid out some difficult questions about identity politics that were already being raised. However, riot grrrls also pushed back at such charges, pointing to double standards at work. In the widely-circulated zine *What is Riot Grrrl Anyway?* (probably published in 1993), Anjelique writes:

I have heard a lot of people say a lot about Riot Grrrl being exclusive. Here are some things I have NOT heard those same people say: the way we speak is excusive (‘hey guys’, ‘yeah man’ etc.) - the way I/we write is exclusive – straight edge is exclusive – punk rock is exclusive – my cool club friends & I are exclusive... I never heard a word about exclusion until there was some thing going on that is not about rich straight white males.

These problems were compounded by the problem of leadership. The anti-hierarchical strain of feminist politics, combined with the anarchism of punk, meant that leadership of any kind was very likely to be resisted – as indeed it frequently was. Yet many would argue that political movements need leaders, both in order to organize and develop strategy, and in order to attract and manage outsiders. As I’ve noted, Kathleen Hanna was often singled out by the media as a charismatic representative of riot grrrl, who would ‘speak for’ the movement in general. In recollections of the period, authors like Marisa Meltzer have described the ‘hero-worship’ she and her friends bestowed on Hanna in particular. Yet Hanna herself consistently claimed to feel uneasy about this; and her exhaustion with this role partly accounts for her eventual withdrawal from the scene. Hanna also blames the media for generating disputes among riot grrrls and their sympathizers – although once again, this was surely to be expected.

However, these issues were increasingly implicated with forms of identity politics. To some extent, this was to do with gender. Riot grrrls were accused of excluding males, and of a kind of ‘reverse sexism’, and sometimes became targets of male abuse as a result. Bands were heckled by men in the audience while onstage, and they sometimes intervened to shout back. Several zines contain articles rejecting such accusations; and several riot grrrl bands included male members in any case (albeit not as an issue of ‘policy’). They argued that young women had been excluded for so long from the punk scene that they needed to organize separately if they were ever to participate fully within it. Female-only events and spaces in which to learn and perform were thus a necessary political strategy. Yet in some respects, it was easy to push back at such claims about gendered exclusiveness: for riot grrrls at least, ‘straight white boys’ were an easy target – even in the politically correct form of hardcore punk and straight edge (‘living righteously and being a “good guy” is not enough any more, dude’, as one zine writer put it).

Divisions over sexuality were sometimes apparent within riot grrrl, although they were rarely addressed explicitly. As Sara Marcus suggests, the model for riot grrrls was 'the bisexual-with-a-boyfriend', and most were essentially heterosexual. Riot grrrl drew on aspects of lesbian cultural style and politics, although in some instances (most notably in Riot Grrrl NYC) it sat a little awkwardly alongside the much longer-established lesbian scene.

However, other forms of exclusion proved more difficult to address. Riot grrrl's limitations here partly reflect its history and its geographical origins. Olympia was (and is) a college town, and many of the original riot grrrls were undergraduate students. They were mostly middle-class and almost exclusively white (although in these respects they were arguably not untypical of the wider punk/hardcore scene). As the movement began to spread from Olympia to Washington DC and then beyond, the representativeness of the membership inevitably began to be called into question. While class inequalities were considered from time to time, they were not addressed with anything like the intensity that attached to race and racism.

It's not as though race was an unexpected omission: on the contrary, as I've noted, the issue was on the agenda from the start. For example, *Riot Grrrl Huh?* lays out in some detail the advantages of 'white privilege', which it suggests are often taken for granted. It also describes a nexus of interlocking oppressions (to do with gender, race, class, nationality, religion and sexuality), which would now be called 'intersectionality'; and it describes the author's continuing difficulty in 'seeing myself as an oppressor'. Arguments about the limitations of 'white girl feminism' were not new – indeed, they had had a far-reaching impact on second wave feminism, especially in the 1980s.

Riot grrrls were also called out in this respect by the few young women of colour who became involved in the movement. Ramdasha Bikcheem (author of the zine *Gunk*) and Mimi Nguyen (author of *Slant* and other zines) were two powerful voices here. Both wrote of their experiences of frequently being the only person of colour in the 'white bread scene' of punk, and of riot grrrl too. However, they also resisted the idea that they should somehow be responsible for educating their white sisters. Nguyen in particular has been fairly excoriating in her criticisms of white liberal anti-racism, which she sees as self-regarding, competitive and hypocritical: the 'girl love' or solidarity of riot grrrl, she argues, was merely a charade, a manifestation of white privilege.

However, it's hard to see how the riot grrrls might have moved forward in a situation where any attempt to address the problem could be seen as a further manifestation of white guilt. It seems that practical attempts to reach out in these terms were ineffective. For example, Theo Cateforis and Elena Humphreys describe several attempts to diversify the line-up of gigs organized by Riot Grrrl NYC, but this didn't seem to have had much effect on the composition of the crowd. The fact remained that the forms of music favoured by riot grrrls were not those preferred by most African-American girls, who were able to look to the burgeoning hip hop and R&B scenes of the period. It's not impossible that the exclusion worked in both (or several) directions at once.

Despite its egalitarian feminism, and the anarchism it inherited from punk, riot grrrl was also prone to the forms of ideological policing and sectarianism that frequently inhibit progressive social movements. Intersectionality can degenerate into a futile competition over a hierarchy of oppressions: the call for 'coalition work' is hard to sustain in a situation where race is believed to override gender, or gender trumps class. An atmosphere of guilt, shame and self-accusation can prove politically debilitating, particularly if there is not much one can do to move beyond it. As Sara Marcus suggests, the 'willingness to be wrong' that was important at the outset of riot grrrl eventually became a rare quality: politics increasingly appeared to become a matter of individual self-righteousness, of purifying the self from any taint of incorrectness – a position that can itself be accused of a kind of complacency. Marcus's thoughtful and comprehensive history ends with a powerful sense of disillusionment: like other recent commentators, she is keen to keep the legacy alive, but she cannot avoid the fragmentation and recriminations with which the movement ended.

It's likely that the initial energy of riot grrrl would have dissipated in any event. This was partly a matter of generational shifts, which are bound to occur in youth subcultures. Older participants, many now in their mid-twenties, were wary of younger enthusiasts seeking out the scene, fearing that they just didn't 'get it'; while some younger participants were alienated by the dominance of established authorities, and quickly drifted off elsewhere. As some participants later suggested, it was restricting to remain fixed in a 'moment of anger': the original riot grrrls simply grew up and out of the scene, and those who came up behind them had other concerns and motivations. The movement was still active in the mid-1990s, although the label 'riot grrrl' was no longer always claimed or applied; but by 1997-8, most of the early activists had long since moved on. Again, one might well make similar observations about other such phenomena: the history of youth subcultures could to some extent be told as a history of summer 'moments' – the hippy summer of love (1968), the summer of punk (1977), and the 'second summer of love' induced by rave and acid house (1988) – although such moments might also be regarded as mere media inventions. Even so, perhaps it is wrong to attempt to sustain such moments; and perhaps sometimes a moment is all that is needed.

Conclusion: selling 'girl power'

Riot grrrl was not a homogenous phenomenon. Indeed, in this essay, I've hesitated between different ways of referring to it. To some extent, it was a 'movement' – a political campaign with explicit and broadly shared aims. It might equally be seen as a 'subculture' – a term which implicitly defines it more in terms of cultural expression and style (fashion, music, zines). It was also a 'scene', or a looser network of scenes – a set of locations and publications where people temporarily came together. Riot grrrl was all of these, rather than just one of them; and different people engaged with it at different levels and in different ways.

Even so, it's important to distinguish between riot grrrl and some of the developments that followed it. As I've noted, the first riot grrrl bands emerged from some of the same locations as the early grunge scene. The media often blurred the distinctions between them and all-female (or female-led) grunge bands like Hole,

Babes in Toyland and L7, seeking to identify a wider movement of 'angry women in rock' (in some cases, pejoratively termed 'foxcore'). There were similarities here, albeit perhaps less in terms of music than fashion: many of these bands displayed the subversive mix of girlishness and sleazy adult sexuality that came to be called the 'kinderwhore' look. However, the music of the grunge bands was more polished, and most were eventually signed to major labels; many of them were more media-friendly, not to say attention-seeking; and their apparent 'feminism' (for instance, in the case of Hole's Courtney Love) has certainly been open to question. Perhaps the only exception here is Sleater-Kinney, who remain by far the most lasting (and most commercially successful) band to have arisen from the early riot grrrl scene in Olympia.

However, the more pertinent contrast here is with the more willing commodification of some of the female bands and artists who followed in their wake. Singers like Alanis Morissette, Liz Phair and Fiona Apple, who emerged in the mid-to-late 1990s, as well as later stars such as Avril Lavigne and Britney Spears, all occasionally displayed anger towards men, and promoted messages of empowerment and independent sexuality, which may have been influenced by riot grrrl. However, their music was much slicker and poppier, and they were all presented and packaged as more feminine and conventionally 'attractive'. One might also trace a continuity from these performers through to the even more commercial girl groups that followed, most obviously the Spice Girls. A group pre-fabricated by a music industry mogul, the Spice Girls brought the slogan 'girl power' into the mainstream, along with feel-good messages about girls' friendship, empowerment and independence.

For some, this is a straightforward story of recuperation. Kristen Schilt, for example, argues that performers like Morissette and the 'angry women in rock' phenomenon 'appropriated key concepts from the riot grrrl movement and turned them into a million-dollar enterprise'. In packaging and commodifying feminism for mainstream consumption, Schilt argues, these artists neutralized its threat to male power and eviscerated its politics. As with Dick Hebdige's original analysis, discussed above, there's a sense here that dissemination to a wider audience necessarily entails a dilution (and often a complete betrayal) of the movement's political challenge. In this account, the original riot grrrls are commended for resisting recuperation, through strategies like the attempted media blackout, even if they were not successful.

However, there is a more optimistic version of the story. In her book *Girl Power*, published in 2010, Marisa Meltzer begins by describing her own early teenage identification with riot grrrl. However, she also accuses the movement of becoming increasingly 'dogmatic' and 'militant'; and she suggests that it effectively ensured its own demise by failing to engage with the media and commercial culture. Meltzer then goes on to outline the varieties of 'girl power' music that followed, arguing that (to different degrees) feminist messages were gradually diffused within the culture at large. While her judgments are careful and even-handed, in my view she gives undue credence to claims about the 'empowering' feminist potential of performers like the Spice Girls.

If the narrative of 'recuperation' is unduly simplistic, therefore, there are problems with this more optimistic argument as well. As I've emphasized, riot grrrl was a form of feminist activism: it was not just a matter of music or fashion, but of explicit

politics. Although it reacted against some elements of second wave feminism, it should not be confused in any way with 'post-feminism', which at least in some versions appears to assume that the feminist struggle has achieved its aims, and is no longer necessary. Riot grrrl was also anti-consumerist, and resisted commodification in ways that later performers have not. As Alison Jacques suggests, there is a line that can be traced from the riot grrrls' scrawling 'BITCH' and 'WHORE' on their midribs to the similarly-adorned slogan t-shirts of the mid-2000s; but there are some very significant differences as well.

There are some complex debates here, which go beyond my scope in this essay. The diverse critical views of Madonna would be one obvious index of this: right from the time of her ascent to pop super-stardom in the early 1990s – coincident with the 'moment' of riot grrrl – critics have argued at length as to whether Madonna should be seen as a feminist, and indeed what that might mean. However, I find it hard to imagine a world in which the Spice Girls could meaningfully be described as feminist. Comparing the Spice Girls and Bikini Kill is like comparing apples and oranges, or Westlife and Radiohead: it doesn't get us very far, not least because they address such different audiences. Taking account of the wider implications of all this also raises much broader questions, for example about the changing relationships between politics and consumer culture, the growing importance of celebrity and social media, and the ambivalent consequences for girls in particular.

Although it was a short-lived phenomenon, riot grrrl undoubtedly had a lasting, life-changing impact on many of those who were involved in it: that much is clear from the continuing interest it has sustained. Questions about its wider influence, beyond the brief moment of its first appearance, are more difficult to address: one would need to look much more closely, not just at the artists themselves, but at how their work was understood and used by audiences of different kinds. However, as I hope to have shown, the fate of riot grrrl still has a good deal to teach today, not just for feminism but for progressive political and cultural movements more broadly.

SOURCES AND REFERENCES

This essay is one of an ongoing series on youth subcultures. There are several cross-references here to earlier pieces, including essays on the 'soul scenes' of 1970's Britain, on glam rock, on emo and on the hippy counter-culture. These can all be accessed via my website at: <https://davidbuckingham.net/growing-up-modern/>

I have drawn on a great many primary and secondary sources for this piece. For the former, I am particularly indebted to the staff at the New York University Fales library, for access to their riot grrrl archive. Some material from the archive (including extracts from several of the zines I discuss) can be found in the book *The Riot Grrrl Collection* (edited by Lisa Darms, and published by Feminist Press, 2013), and online.

Several publications on riot grrrl include elements of memoir and oral history. Sara Marcus's book *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: Harper Collins, 2010) is the most comprehensive and astute history. Marisa

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David Buckingham
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