

# YOU cAN rUN buT yOU the iNCoRpORAtION of riot grRRl

by Alison Jacques

*Cet article nous parle de la récupération du mouvement politico-musical des Riot Grrrls. En dépit des efforts pour résister à l'attention et à la mainmise des mass médias, certains éléments des Riot Grrrl ont été efficacement incorporés dans la culture dominante. Les mass médias ont trivialisé le mot «grrrl» et ont commercialisé l'habitude qu'elles ont d'écrire sur leur corps en imprimant des slogans thématiques féminins sur des t-shirts à la mode.*

The group of young punk feminists calling itself "riot grrrl" always struck me as a subculture built on contradiction. On the one hand, its call for a "Revolution Girl Style Now" is basically an angrier, more urgent version of the second-wave feminist assertion that "sisterhood is powerful." Springing from the male-dominated terrain of punk (and male-dominated society at large), riot grrrl promoted female empowerment, expression, and "girl love," and gave voice to many women's experiences that have traditionally been silenced. But, rather than taking the opportunity to spread its message and reach out to as many girls and women as possible through the mass media, riot grrrl opposed media coverage with a vehemence that verged on paranoia. Much of the group's energy was spent staying out of the spotlight, and its "revolution" was therefore limited to those in the know.

I am interested in the process by which a subculture is brought to the mainstream, and I will attempt in this paper to demonstrate that riot grrrl was subject to this process of incorporation despite its attempts to resist.

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## **Incorporation or Cooperation?**

Dick Hebdige wrote extensively on the subculture of punk and the process of its incorporation in 1970s Britain. He suggests that the process evolves from two specific forms, once a subculture is (dis)covered by the popular press: the commodity (or "real") form and the ideological (or semantic) form. The commodity form marks "the conversion of sub-cultural signs (dress, music, etc.) into mass-produced objects" (94). Items that once comprised sub-cultural capital become widely available. For example, "[a]s punk became marketable style, it became its opposite" (Ewen 253). The ideological form, on the other hand, is characterized by "the 'labelling' and re-definition of deviant behaviour by dominant groups" (Hebdige 94). Two basic strategies exist to deal with the ideological threat, or full-fledged moral panic, imposed on the mainstream

by a subculture: first, "the Other [the threatening group] can be trivialized, naturalized, domesticated ... the difference is simply denied"; and second, the Other can be transformed "into meaningless exotica, a 'pure object, a spectacle, a clown' [Barthes]... the difference is consigned to a place beyond analysis" (Hebdige 97). In other words, difference(s) between the members of the subculture and "the rest of us" are either dissolved or made unresolvable in order to neutralize any perceived threat to dominant culture. The case of quintessential punk band The Sex Pistols perfectly illustrates the second strategy; according to singer Johnny Rotten,

... People have blown our involvement in violence right out of proportion. They *want* to associate us with violence.... It makes us out to be just crude, ignorant, and loutish. Which means we aren't a threat to them. (qtd. in Coon 102)

The process of incorporation, or co-optation by the mainstream, then, "invariably ends with the simultaneous diffusion and defusion of the sub-cultural style" (Hebdige 93). The signs that once marked a subculture are widely adopted, and their original meanings change or are lost. The scene itself disappears, or continues on as a neutered, mass-marketed style movement.

How does the process of incorporation begin? Hebdige's process suggests clear stages of "before" (sub-cultural anonymity) and "after" (commercialization), separated by an identifiable moment of incorporation

# can't hide into mainstream culture

brought on by the popular press and exploited by the marketplace. Indeed, mass media appear to be bearers of “bad news”; newspapers, magazines, and television report on the antics of “kids these days,” and in the process, expose their scenes to the light of day. However, Thornton disputes a clear opposition between subcultures and media/commerce; in particular, she refuses to position subcultures as innocent victims of media manipulation. Rather, “mass media misunderstanding is often a goal, not just an effect, of youth’s cultural pursuits” (184). Tricia Rose points out that creativity in hip hop has never opposed commodities; in fact, she says, it is “a common misperception ... that during the early days, hip hop was motivated by pleasure rather than profit, as if the two were incompatible” (82). What emerges from these subcultural debates is that there is not necessarily a “moment” of incorporation. The transformation from underground to mainstream is complex, and relationships with mass media and commerce may be scene-specific. Hebdige’s commodity form and ideological form of incorporation do come into play, and are useful tools of analysis, but involve different degrees of resistance by—and even within—each particular subculture.

## **Riot Grrrl: Revolution, Whose Style?**

The beginnings of the riot grrrl (RG) movement can be traced to 1990 when, according to Theo Cateforis and Elena Humphreys, young women in Olympia, Washington, “decided to react against that city’s

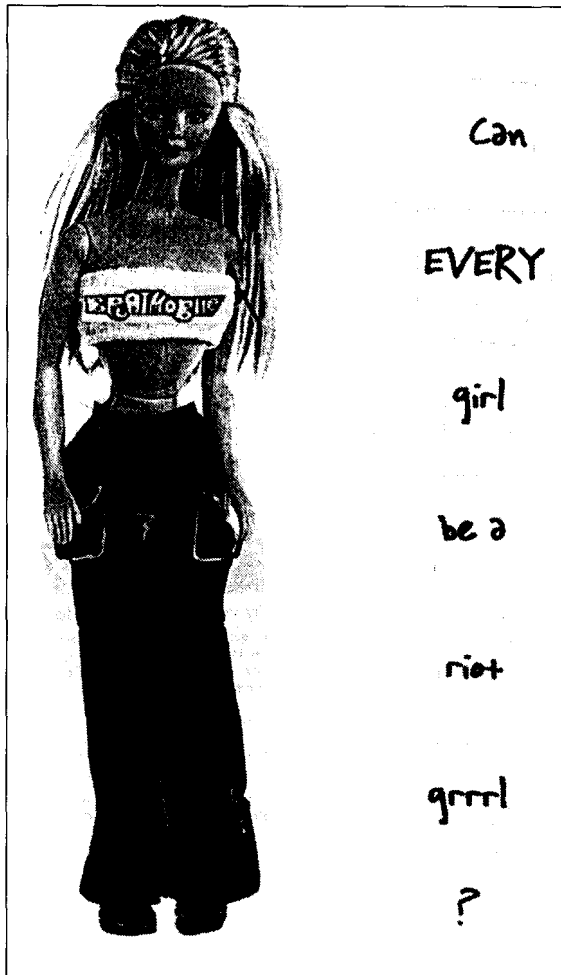
**Riot grrrls were certainly not the first women in punk, nor were they the first feminists to make political music. But, as a group, they were the first to deliberately and explicitly fuse the two realms with such an aggressive, in-your-face style.**

stagnant male-dominated punk scene” (320). In August 1991 the week-long International Pop Underground Convention in Washington, D.C., kicked off with Girl Day, which, in retrospect, was RG’s “coming out” party. In 1992, the three-day national Riot Grrrl Convention was held in D.C., comprising a number of educational workshops on topics such as violence against women, fat oppression, and unlearning racism; performances by female bands and spoken word artists; and the “All-Girl All-Night Dance Party” (Cateforis and Humphreys 320; Klein 214).

Generally speaking, RG emerged as an American-based movement comprised of young female punks who were fed up with the overwhelming maleness of punk rock, as well as being feminists who were fed up with sexism in general. The bands (e.g., Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Heavens to Betsy) were on independent record

labels. Media-savvy grrrls hooked up through self-published fanzines and word-of-mouth. Their lyrics and other writing centred on themes of sexual abuse, oppression, and body image. They attended and organized conventions and fundraisers around feminist issues. They adopted slogans like “Revolution Girl Style Now” and “Stop the J-Word Jealousy from Killing Girl Love” (Klein 213). They took the original punk do-it-yourself approach to music-making, encouraging female peers to pick up instruments and form bands. They were overwhelmingly white, mostly middle class, many were college educated, and a large proportion identified as queer. Membership of RG was relatively small when compared to that of other subcultures, such as punk or hip hop. According to the pop-cult web site *alt.culture*, RG numbers were “grossly over-inflated by a media titillated by the notion of a teenage girl army” (“rock women”).

One must consider the context from which a subculture springs, as well as the context within which it is received by the mainstream, in order to avoid overstating its innovation—a tendency of early subculture theorists (see Clarke). As stated, RG was a musical and political subculture, born of punk rock and feminism. Riot grrrls were certainly not the first women in punk, nor were they the first feminists to make political music. But, as a group, they were the first to deliberately and explicitly fuse the two realms with such an aggressive, in-your-face style. A Bikini Kill performance, for example, was described as “not just a vague, fuck-society punk gesture, but a focused critique of the [patriarchal structure of the] punk



scene itself" (White 399). Several writers have noted a mid-'80s shift within punk toward a hardcore, misogynist scene that many females found hostile and unwelcoming (Cateforis and Humphreys; Gottlieb and Wald; Klein; Wald). Many riot grrrls were students or graduates of college Women's Studies programs, as well as being "daughters of seventies women's libbers" (White 404)—feminist discourse and political action were familiar. In terms of the context within which RG was received—or, why the media would be "titillated by the notion of a teenage girl army"—I believe it is significant that rap music was gaining widespread popularity in the late 1980s; it is possible that angry white women seemed positively charming to the media compared to angry black men.

Antagonism between RG and mainstream media is well documented (see Cateforis and Humphreys; Gott-

lieb and Wald; Greenblatt; Klein). The most popular version of events is that distorted or dismissive press coverage of RG led the grrrls to establish a nationwide media blackout in 1992–93. After all, according to Kathleen Hanna (Bikini Kill singer and oft-touted RG leader), "we weren't doing what we did to gain fame, we were just trying to hook up with other freaks" (qtd. in Greenblatt 25). However, neither RG nor the media were homogenous groups and, despite the call for a media blackout, there was no monolithic RG resistance to co-optation. The relationship between the two resembled both Hebdige's oppositional model and Thornton's cooperative model. For one thing, some riot grrrls didn't mind talking to the mainstream press, and did so (see Malkin); others continued to do interviews with underground publications like *Punk Planet* and *off our backs*. The "alternative," but-still-mainstream teen magazine *Sassy* promoted RG to some three million readers, demonstrating that "the media, beyond its function to control and contain this phenomenon, may also have helped to perpetuate it" (Gottlieb and Wald 265). In addition, for a political movement that wanted to reach out to alienated girls, the media-blackout strategy closed RG off to girls in smaller centres and risked defining RG as an exclusive, insular movement. Indeed, Gottlieb and Wald advise that:

If Riot Grrrl wants to raise feminist consciousness on a large scale, then it will have to negotiate a relation to the mainstream that does not merely reify the opposition between mainstream and subculture. (271)

Although this dilemma to remain "authentic" but risk elitism, or to reach a wider audience but to "sell out" exists in all subcultures, I believe it was especially prevalent for RG because of the movement's foundation in both punk rock and feminism. Depending on one's perspec-

tive, each can be seen to limit RG's ability to resolve the reach-out/sell-out dilemma. On the one hand, while feminist praxis ideally involves consciousness-raising and the fostering of women's diverse voices, punk tends to be an insular scene with a high degree of subcultural capital and disdain for outsiders and commercial success; on the other hand, while punk promotes a strong d.i.y. ethic that opens itself to amateurs, feminism traditionally has been a vehicle primarily for educated, middle-class, white women (as was RG). Discussion of this dilemma implies that there was a real choice to be made, that the scene/music in question could take or leave the path to success. However, there is the distinct possibility that RG music was ultimately unsellable: the combination of punk's abrasive sound and low production quality with the grrrls' frank feminist lyrics may not have been as attractive to the media as the grrrls themselves. Judging by the fact that the media did not champion RG music, it seems the media felt riot grrrls were better seen and not heard. As one grrrl wrote in her zine, "[t]he media didn't give a shit about any of the things any of the girls were saying, they just wanted to sell their paper [sic] with pictures of angry grrrls and riot grrrl fashion" (*channel seven* 4). Ultimately, media attention turned to other female rockers—women whose anger was more palatable, like Alanis Morissette and Liz Phair. Although RG chapters still exist around North America, and continue to start up worldwide, many of these grrrls "have no tangible connection with the women from the beginning" and the original musicians have moved on to new projects (Cateforis and Humphreys 337).

#### Incorporation: Grrrl For Sale

Although RG bands were never featured on the cover of *Spin* or on the *Billboard* charts, I propose that the media did their best to neutralize the ideological threat posed by RG by co-opting and trivializing the move-

ment's very name. As well, I will argue that a particular RG system of signification—namely, the words some grrrls wrote on their bodies—was commodified and mass-(re)produced in the form of slogan t-shirts. As Hebdige points out, of course, both ideology and commerce can be seen to “converge on the commodity form” (96). So, although I have classified appropriation of “grrrl” as an example of the ideological form of incorporation, dissemination of the word occurred in the marketplace; at the same time, while mass-production of girl-themed t-shirts represents the commodity form of incorporation, the display of words is a behaviour with significant symbolic-value and, as such, is linked to the ideological form.

### The Ideological Form (An Example)

The name “Riot Grrrl” is a deliberate manipulation of signs: the word “riot” implies protest and aggression; the word “girl” describes female childhood and is condescending when used to refer to a grown woman; the transformed word “grrrl” literally includes a growl that turns the sugar-and-spice connotations of “girl” upside-down. For the mass media, an industry that thrives on sound bites and buzz words, “grrrl” was a commercial dream come true. Through decontextualized adoption of this word, the media effectively trivialized its origins and, in so doing, minimized the otherness of RG. After initial reports on RG itself, the popular press used “grrrl” to refer to any independent, noisy (white) female rock musicians, such as Kim Gordon (of Sonic Youth), L7, and Courtney Love. Then it was spread to other genres. A 1995 *Rolling Stone* article on Natalie Merchant (of 10,000 Maniacs), for example, was called “Flower Grrrl.” The term was also taken outside the music world into general pop-cultural terrain: also in 1995, a profile of a female athlete in *Seventeen* was called “Biker Grrrl”; in

*Wired*, a story about a female computer whiz was called “Modem Grrrl” (Cateforis and Humphreys 337). The very word with which a subculture had named its defiance was re-defined to encompass mass public femaleness. Once established as a trend, of course, it became destined for obsolescence. In 1996, a *Newsweek* article reported that “[f]emale rage is all the rage” (“Where the wimps are”: 80); by 1998, a *Time* feature on young feminists described “grrrl” as “that tiresome battle growl” (Labi: 55).

### The Commodity Form (An Example)

Riot grrrls were “skilled creators of spectacle” (White 405). Music and fashion are hard to separate in any case; with RG, as with punk, hip hop, and grunge, the name refers equally to sound and style. Many grrrls used their bodies to convey bold statements in two ways: first, through “punk fashion irony” and the juxtaposition of gendered signs (e.g., “1950s dresses with combat boots, shaved hair with lipstick, studded belts with platform heels”) (Klein 222); and second, through writing politically loaded words such as “rape,” “shame” (Japenga 30), “prophet” (France 23), and “slut” on their arms and midriffs. I believe a line can be drawn from the words that riot grrrls wrote on their bodies in the early 1990s to popular girl-themed slogans printed on t-shirts in the mid- to late '90s. A 1993 story on RG in *Seventeen* stated that grrrls “like to ‘accessorize’ with black Magic Markers” (Malkin: 81). In 1993, *Rolling Stone* reported on this “new” trend, as publicly displayed by four (male) rock stars: Prince, Eddie Vedder, Shannon Hoon (of Blind Melon), Nuno Bettencourt (of Extreme)—adding, “Riot grrrls do it, too” (“Body talk” 16). So-called “alternative” shops were soon flooded with “baby tees”—tight-fitting t-shirts for girls—emblazoned with sassy, sexy words like “Tasty,” “Tart,” and “Maneater” (Heinrich B1). More

riot grrrl



Give her a windowful of memories she can look at every day.

recently, Porn Star became a popular t-shirt moniker and, thanks (?) to the enormous popularity and ubiquity of the Spice Girls, circa 1997, malls were flooded with “girl power” merchandise from t-shirts to shoelaces and stickers.

T-shirts have long been popular public forums for political slogans and advertisements alike. Indeed, “girl power” (or “girls rule,” “girls rock,” and so on) is a message—a catchy slogan, to be exact: the nature of the medium—that girls should wear on their sleeves, so to speak. Giese argues that the wearers of such t-shirts are political in that they “are taking a risk by going public with their beliefs and are forcing everyone in sight to deal with those views” (20); however, as D’Andrade points out,

For some people, it’s a way to bypass the complexities of feminism—it’s a lot easier to wear a

"girls kick ass" t-shirt than to learn how to defend yourself physically. (21)

A "Girls Rule" t-shirt is probably no more or less a politically authentic statement than a "Save The Whales" bumper sticker, depending on its wearer and the context of its use. Still, it is important to remember that RG was deliberately anti-consumer culture; writing on oneself with a marker is not only a political, feminist action (first, in choosing to "deface" the feminine body which is ideally a flawless object; second, in drawing attention to issues of women's oppression through the words), but displays the classic do-it-yourself ethic of punk. While anyone willing to mark herself has access to a felt pen and a range of words limited only to her imagination, a baby tee must be purchased at its marked-up retail cost. Whether or not its slogan is meant to be ironic, any critique of capitalism is, by definition, lost in its (mass) production.

### Conclusion

Despite generalizations made for the purposes of this paper, RG was not a homogenous entity—nor was it self-contained. I suspect that many self-declared grrrls also reached beyond this movement in their tastes and style (and that other girls reached in), and it would be worthwhile to find out where RG intersected with other subcultures and the mainstream. As well, it would be interesting to compare the path of RG bands with that of women who attained commercial success in the mainstream music industry. After all, RG's inception—that is, pre-*Jagged Little Pill*, Lilith Fair, and the Spice Girls—preceded the amalgam of "women in rock" that peaked at the end of the 1990s. In particular, comparisons with the more visible major-label "angry women" (e.g., Hole, the contents of *Women In Rock* compilations) may determine whether "selling out" necessarily requires that women com-

promise a feminist stance. The contradiction with which I opened this paper rears its head again here: it may be true that riot grrrl remains an "authentic" and enormously empowering movement for thousands of girls, but there are millions more who might pay attention if the "Revolution Girl Style," were indeed televised.

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