

From RiOt gRRrL to MaMAGiRL iN OMAha, NeBRAskA

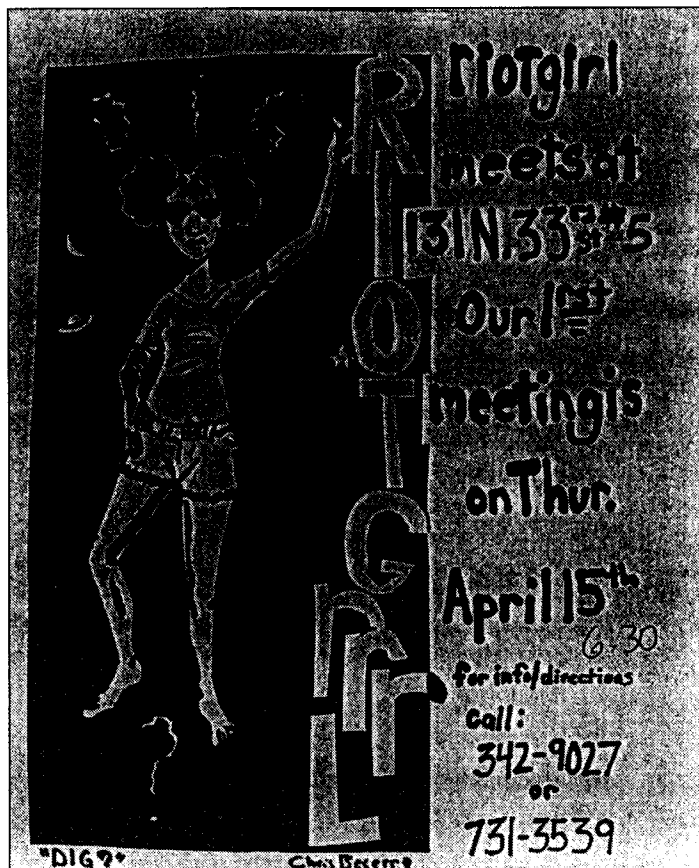
by **Monica Brasile**

Cet article analyse l'émergence de la conscience féministe des années 90 qui a mobilisé les jeunes femmes de l'Amérique du Nord. Elle décrit son expérience personnelle dans le mouvement « Riot Grrrls » qui a été assimilé éventuellement par la culture populaire mais qui continue d'influencer son style de vie.

Proceeding from the feminism of the 1970s and in spite of the backlash of the 1980s, a new feminist consciousness developed in the early 1990s, mobilizing young women across North America who called themselves “riot grrrls.” Emerging from what is sometimes referred to as the “MTV Generation,” and aware of the power of mass media, riot grrrls sought to reposition themselves as creators of ideas and culture, producing and distributing a variety of photocopied zines and musical recordings.

As an outgrowth of the punk music scene and a response to its heterosexist flavor, music was an important dimension of the riot grrrl movement, and girl-powered bands like Bikini Kill proclaimed the need for “revolution girl style now!” Using the familiar oppositional tactic of reclaiming derogatory identity labels, these young women transformed the word “girl,” so often used as a belittling term when referring to anyone over the age of twelve, into a snarling badge of power. The benign and frilly became something forceful, even threatening. To be a “grrrl” meant refusing to be polite, silent, and subservient, and signaled a readiness to protest loudly—to riot—against injustices.

I was a senior in high school in



Christopher Becerra, “Our First Meeting.”

1993 when some friends and I decided we were riot grrrls. It was a decision we made in a single moment, driving around after school one spring afternoon. I sat in the back seat with Andee as she read us a letter from a friend who had recently moved to Olympia, Washington, one of the major hubs of riot grrrl organizing. Living in Omaha, Nebraska, we weren’t quite sure what inclusion in this group required, but the zine produced by the Olympia group, *What Is Riot Grrrl, Anyway?* gave us 25 answers to this question, all from different grrrls, making it clear that there was no prerequisite.

We are a collective of individuals. We don’t have a favorite

color... We are accepting all of our struggles and strategies as real and valid. —Angelique

There are no secret codes, handshakes, or list of rules. —Anonymous

As the stale Nebraska air gusted through the car windows, Andee announced, “I want to be a riot grrrl!” Her exclamation seemed so daring to me. It was as if she was shouting out a dangerous secret, one that excited me tremendously. I pictured us in a punk rock girl gang turning the city upside down with witty graffiti and combat boots, kicking out an arena for our voices of resistance. “Yeah!” I shouted triumphantly, “Me too!”

Our friend Ann wholeheartedly agreed, "We *are* riot grrls!"

Although we were fairly young (only Ann had graduated from high school) and Omaha was highly conservative, we were already fluent in activism. We had been involved, for many years, in the local organization Youth For Peace, we had burned flags, written letters, engaged in civil disobedience and performed guerilla theater, raised money, held vigils, organized, marched, and rallied. These actions were relatively small-scale, and their lasting impact conjectural, but we had nonetheless developed a proficiency in political action. After founding various clubs at Omaha Central High School, such as a peace studies group and an Amnesty International chapter, getting the word out about riot grrrl was not a daunting task. We eventually set the date for a first meeting and distributed flyers at school. Eight girls attended.

Journal Entry, April 22, 1993

We talked about date rapes happening in Omaha, how we protect ourselves, ways to be alert, and our feelings of anger. Then we went to Kinko's and made Riot Grrrl flyers to put out what we're about, so people know and stop misunderstanding. To let girls know we exist for them even if they're not in our group of friends. Then off to the grocery store to get olives and bread and fortune cookies-Yum!

Meetings frequently involved such a mix of elements, from serious, passionate discussion, to creative endeavors, to pure enjoyment of life and each other. The gatherings rested loosely on the paradigm of 1970s women's consciousness-raising groups and maintained what we called a "women-only space." This element was vital, as we discovered that many

Excuse Me



Hi, I just wanted to let you know that I am not going to

- ★ smile
- ★ act dumb
- ★ hide my body
- ★ pretend
- ★ lie
- ★ be silent





for you. And that everything I do I do for me and I'm not going to let you laugh at me, make fun of me, harrass me, abuse me or rape me anymore. Because I am a girl and me and my girlfriends are not afraid of you!



Ann Carroll, "Excuse Me."

of us were rarely, if ever, in such an atmosphere and thus free from performing any one of various roles for men.

It was also a common goal of many riot grrrls to examine their relationships with other women, working particularly to break down competitiveness, a task facilitated by the all-girl environment. Many of our male acquaintances were vocal about their irritation at being excluded from riot grrrl groups, but we took care to maintain our position, refusing to cater to this anxiety. Although some of us had boyfriends and one of us was married, we avoided men as a topic of discussion, choosing instead to focus on creating strength and awareness in ourselves and other young women. Because this movement embraced expressions of anger and could therefore be easily dismissed as a society of man-haters, we worked to resist that stereotype to assure that the grrrls we were trying to reach had an accurate perception of the group's primary concentration on creating a positive community of and for women.

Riot Grrrl is not about hating boys. It is about loving girls and loving myself. —Jane

I went to the Riot Grrrl meeting not really knowing what to expect. I thought that there would be a lot of girls talking about getting even with men or they would be really close and I wouldn't be accepted. It was none of those things. I was made to feel very comfortable. We did no man hating, just talking about upcoming events pertaining to women and a little about ourselves.

—Anonymous

Boys, what we do is not about you or your needs/desires/wants... Riot Grrrl is because I was scared walking here tonight, because a collective that is by, for, and about girls and womyn is an absolute necessity, because of how beautiful and alive and free I can feel in a girl environment that is non-competitive and supportive and engaging. —Angelique, *What Is Riot Grrrl Anyway?*

Building skills and knowledge within the group was a high priority. We worked to encourage a safe environment where grrrls could talk about their personal experiences and struggles, and circulated information on issues like rape, sexual abuse, and eating disorders amongst ourselves, in our schools, and at concerts. Without a precise awareness of distinctive first and second waves of feminism, and certainly without any self-identification as a third wave movement, riot grrrl was only partially conscious of the nuances of previous feminist activism. In many ways it was the criticisms of prior feminist move-

ments that we understood best, particularly the assertion that feminism was a movement of and for white, middle-class women. We were young and had no access to or interest in the corporate world, and we therefore saw groups like N.O.W. as catering mainly to the middle-aged and college-educated. As products of the postmodern era, we refused to conceptualize "woman" as a fixed category and were as interested in our differences as our similarities. Although the overwhelming majority of riot grrrls, including myself, were white, we represented a variety of class backgrounds, and were committed to helping each other identify our

own prejudices. Since we were becoming acutely aware of the intersection of all forms of oppression, our zines, meetings, and conventions consistently focused on issues of racism, classism, and homophobia in relation to sexism. The Omaha group spent time examining these issues, studying and discussing the work of writers such as bell hooks, Angela Davis, June Jordan, and Jo Carrillo. One packet of materials we read, entitled "Understanding Privilege," included excerpts from zines, a paper written for a college course, bibliographies, and numerous reprintings from *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*. Zines like Nomy Lamm's *I'm So Fucking Beautiful*, which analyzed fat oppression on a personal and cultural level, also provided insight and instruction.

Our studies were exceptional in that they took place outside the context of the classroom, and indeed, none of the Omaha riot grrrls had ever set foot in a college women's studies course. Although Riot Grrrl was sometimes reprimanded from



Ann Carroll and Andrea Davis, "Watch Out."

within and without for the tendency to tokenize women of color in our attempt to understand their experiences of racism, this kind of constructive self criticism was welcome and expected, and for all our imperfections, our desire to confront prejudice in ourselves and the world was sincere. We kept asking questions.

How do you feel when people of color talk about racism? Do you believe them? How do you feel about racism? Do you believe yourself? How do you feel about being white? What is your ethnicity? What kind of environment did you grow up in? Was it in the city, in the suburbs? In a small town? On a farm? None of the above? Who did you grow up around? What kinds of schools did you go to? Did you go to school? Does your family have a history of run-ins with the law? Do cops believe you? How do you feel about being white? —Mary Fondriest, "Some Questions I Want To Ask White Girls" flyer)

Activist Strategies: On Bodies, In Print, Through Music

Resistance is everywhere, it always has been and always will be. Just because someone is not resisting in the same way you are (being a vegan, an out lesbian, a political organizer) does not mean they are not resisting. Being told you are a worthless piece of shit and not believing it is a form of resistance.

—Tobi Vail, *Jigsaw* zine

Our activist vocabulary was also changing and increasing. We wanted to improve upon the strategies we were familiar with to create something more personal and immediate. Old

means of protest, such as boycotting, were called into question as we realized that the financial freedom to choose products based on brand is a privilege itself. Most of us were not of voting age, and in any case, we had already developed skepticism about the political process. Public confrontation and spectacle were the preferred methods of getting our message out. Drawing from punk tradition and from the tactics of other political groups like ACT UP and Queer Nation, we invoked the bold, the angry, and the unapologetic. Kathleen Hanna of the band Bikini Kill, who performed with words like "slut" written in black marker across her belly in an attempt to confront and question stereotypes, made the practice of writing on the body well-known. Black markers were cheap and accessible and could be applied to posters, bathroom stalls, shop windows, or any part of the body. The Omaha group's flyers evolved from the informational (Riot Grrrl meets at 7:30 on Tuesday) into bold questions ("Why Do You Honk at Me?") and messages of warning



Ann Carroll, "Smart Like Eve."

("WATCH OUT Because next time you yell 'Hey Babe' you might be left wondering what hit you.") Posted throughout downtown Omaha, they increased our visibility, boosted meeting attendance, and regularly spurred people to write responses on them.

All these super great girls have started coming to Riot Grrrl and I am so psyched! We are on our way to taking this town over! (Almost.) Finally our flyers were useful for something other than idiots writing stuff on 'em like "I wish every riot grrrl was dead" and "You just need to discover your inner masculine." Whatever! —Ann Carroll, *Smart Like Eve* zine

Another important means of riot grrrl communication was the hand-

produced and photocopied zine. Now abundant in a variety of genres from the poetry zine to the travel zine, these were the outgrowth of early punk culture's music-oriented fanzines, and part of the centuries-old history of feminist underground journalism. Riot grrrl zines flourished in the early 1990s and were usually very personal, strewn with profanity and bold graphics, and contained only as much correct spelling, grammar, or punctuation as the author desired. Standard English was often abandoned consciously as a way to write outside the patriarchally established linguistic tradition. The zine was a way to use the means of production available to us—copy machines, maybe old typewriters, markers, scissors, and glue—to publish and distribute our own writing. Anyone could have a voice in this medium, and accessibility was one of our most important objectives. Innovative grrrls in the Washington, D.C. area developed the underground mail

order system, Riot Grrrl Press, to promote equal opportunities for distribution, and postage stamps or zine exchanges were preferred payments. Thus, as well as evading mainstream publishing institutions, communication through zines subverted the capitalist profit motive through the use of barter. We wanted to maintain visibility while avoiding exploitation and commodification by the mass media, and high-profile riot grrrls even instigated a "media blackout" when articles on Riot Grrrl began appearing in publications like *Newsweek*. Here in Omaha, Andee and I started the zine *Goddess Juice* and Ann wrote *Smart Like Eve*. Our zines made their way all over the country via the U.S. Postal Service and were also distributed locally by independent record stores. Collaborative zines were the activity of many

meetings and all-grrrl slumber parties in Omaha, and the collection of childhood stories, *Get Off My Property*, attracted a substantial readership.

All the doves that fly past my eyes
 have a stickiness to their wings
 In the doorway of my demise I stand
 encased in the whisper you have taught me
 How does it feel? It feels blind
 How does it feel? Well, it feels fucking blind
 What have you taught me?
 Nothing
 Look what you have taught me
 Your world has taught me nothing
 As a woman I was taught to always be hungry
 Women are well acquainted with thirst
 We could eat just about anything
 We might even eat your hate up like love
 —Bikini Kill, "Feels Blind"

Bikini Kill was an influential band as well as a highly articulate zine, and music was yet another way that grrrls were speaking out. Groups like Bikini Kill, Heavens to Betsy, and Bratmobile tackled topics as diverse as rape, social conformity, claiming power, mental freedom, friendship between women, and participation in the sex industry. As with zine publication, women were producing culture outside the existing framework, teaching each other how to play instruments and putting out their own records. Although women had always been active, if marginalized, in punk music, heading bands like X-Ray Spex and The Nuns, feminism was never a prominent theme, and punk shows were often the site of violence and harassment. Riot Grrrl music was an attempt to reclaim the male-dominated punk and grunge scenes and improve on their masculinist aesthetics with our vintage

dresses and pink guitars. Riot Grrrl's girly aesthetic was itself a transformation of the artifacts of girlhood that have come to symbolize mindless ornamentalism. Hearts and stars adorned zine pages, bordering critical analyses of consumer culture, and grrrls discussed strategies to decolonize their minds with, like, valley girl accents.

Limitations and Transformations

The irony of my involvement as a riot grrrl lay in the abuse that was emerging simultaneously in my own life. I had never been a victim of any type of familial violence, but soon after high school graduation I moved in with my boyfriend. We had been dating for two years, and like many first loves, he monopolized my attention, much to the disapproval of everyone close to me. It wasn't until we began living together that his abusive tendencies became dreadfully obvious.

It's hard to explain the level of mind control that happens in a relationship like this. It is insidious and progressive, causing fear, isolation, and depleted self-esteem. Our relationship followed the classic cycle of abuse, and I became increasingly more alienated from my friends, including Ann, Andee, and the girl gang that was supposed to rid the world of injustice against women. I even stopped attending riot grrrl meetings for quite a while, convinced that my friends were, indeed, a bunch of man-haters. The first time physical violence entered the mix of my boyfriend's controlling behavior and emotional battering was when he threw a glass jar at me at the height of an argument about riot grrrl. As the year went on, these episodes became progressively worse. I kept what was happening a secret from everyone in my life. I hid my bruises. As my own friends and girls all across the country were breaking their silence, mine was just beginning. In spite of what was happening, this is what I find in my journal entries from that period:

Journal entry, 9/93

[He] is the most incredible person, such a loving and honest and true being. The love I feel with him is far warmer than blankets, far deeper than ocean water, far shinier than crystal in sunlight.

The silence permeated even my relationship with myself. I feared retaliation for writing about the things that were happening, knowing that my supposed true love sometimes read my diaries and often destroyed my belongings. I was essentially without privacy or property. It wasn't until two years later that I was able to write about that first incident.

Journal entry, 5/31/95

I was afraid that he was going to hit me or that he had the potential to get angry enough to hit me. I remember him being all pissed that I was scared and when I told him exactly how I was feeling (this was back in the days when I could still do that) he basically told me I was stupid for feeling that way and that he would never be physically violent to me and that there's a difference between throwing things and hitting people. I remember him sweeping up the glass as I stood sweating and shaking. I remember ending up convinced that he was only healthily expressing his anger even though I was totally scared and intimidated. I believed him when he told me he would never hurt me. I remember telling that lie to my mom all the times I moved back home because of the abuse. I totally wanted to protect him. I didn't want anyone to know the truth, I was ashamed of it.... I lied to protect him for so long. I lied to myself.

In the spring of 1994, I became pregnant. After the most mentally and emotionally wrenching months of my life, I decided I was going to have

the baby. I knew this decision meant that I would probably parent alone, but I was still harboring a hope that everything would change and we could be a healthy family somehow. Pregnancy gave me a renewed respect for myself, however, and the abuse became increasingly more intolerable to me. I lived alternately with my boyfriend and my parents, and I reestablished somewhat strained connections with my friends. They felt abandoned and betrayed, and I felt ashamed. What kind of a feminist could I be while staying with someone who mistreated me? Violence was still part of my life, and I was still keeping it a secret, although toward the end of my pregnancy it made itself fairly obvious. Ann would be the one to ask me about it directly and to tell my mother what was happening, something I could not bring



Monica Brasile, "Mamagirl."

myself to do. I will always love her for being so courageous. Our friendship grew again, little by little, and I began to reemerge from isolation. Riot Grrrl was still going strong, and Ann and Andee were organizing a grrrl convention in Omaha. I got involved in the planning and preparation, and in the days before the event we made copious amounts of food and silk-screened enormous piles of thrift store t-shirts with the words "go girl!"

Almost 100 grrrls descended on Omaha that July, from the midwest, the south, both coasts, and Canada. This was not the first Riot Grrrl convention. Olympia, D.C., and even Ohio had sponsored similar gatherings in the previous three years. We organized a concert featuring bands from around the country and arranged workshops on racism, class privilege, self-defense, and women's health. We picketed and escorted patients at an abortion clinic, and my belly, just beginning to swell obviously at four months, became the sign upon which I wrote "Mother for Choice" in black, delighting the other grrrls and disturbing the counter-demonstrators. Downtown Omaha

never saw so many different hair colours. We camped on the Platte River and swam and barbecued tofu and veggies. We sang and talked and traded zines. I made friends and fantasized about keeping them forever, but truly I felt very separate, because of my pregnancy and because of the greater context of my life in which this was happening. Still, knowing what I had to go home to, I wanted it to last forever.

My son Gabriel was born on the morning of December 20, 1994. I left his father for the last time two weeks later and got a protection order. (I wish this were all as simple as it sounds.) In 1996, Gabriel was the only riot boy at the Midwest Girl Fest in Chicago, and the inspiration for my zine *Mamagirl*. By age four, Gabriel had developed a media consciousness able to analyze how toys were being marketed differently to girls and boys in commercials. Now at the more philosophical stage of age six, I overheard him the other day telling a friend, "God is a woman too." I love being his mom, and the unit the two of us make is comfortable and perfect. Andee now has a beautiful three-year-old daughter Emma. Feminist parenting, as old as feminism itself, continues to shape our children.

Becoming a mother and surviving a violent relationship made the limitations of the scope of riot grrrl painfully evident in my life. Its focus on young women left domestic abuse largely out of the forum, although such brutality is not by any means restricted to middle-aged married couples. I knew the percentages of rapists who were convicted and how to poke a stranger's eyes out with my thumbs; I didn't know the classic behaviors of men prone to abuse, or how to jump from a moving car at eight months pregnant to escape a death threat (I figured that out on the spot.) We certainly would have benefited from knowing the signs that a woman is in an unhealthy relationship and what to do about it. I wonder how many other riot grrrls were

suffering in this way, or how many former riot grrrls are suffering now.

Although the riot grrrl movement has largely dissolved, men are still raping, beating, molesting, harassing, and generally mistreating women and girls around the world. Feminist activism is as important now as it ever was, and I doubt that any of my old grrrl-friends have become apolitical. For all of us who have silences that are yet to be broken, the powerful voice of riot grrrl is still resonant. Its assimilation into mainstream culture was, inevitable in spite of the efforts to prevent it, but perhaps the five-year-olds in their "girl power" t-shirts will be the ones to pick up where we left off and include a little of what we left out. In the meantime, I'm still striving for revolution—mom style.

Monica wishes to acknowledge the Women's Studies program at UNO for bringing CWS/cf to her attention, and Dr. Julia Garrett for her encouragement and guidance.

Monica Brasile is an undergraduate studying fine arts, women's studies, and anthropology at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. She is also a certified Childbirth Educator and Labour Assistant.

ALLANA STUART

bruises bloom like violets
beneath the translucent layers
of my skin,
and my flesh is fiery
in the hot spaces
where you pressed your fingers,
pinching hard
to keep your grip on me
like steel bands across my soul.
how can you still look
me in the eye
and tell me I'm beautiful
when you have made me
so ugly
with the black and blue shadows
of your anger.

Allana Stuart is a journalism student and hopes to one day create her own magazine.

References

- Bikini Kill. "Feels Blind." distributed by Kill Rock Stars, 1991.
- Carrillo, Jo. "And When You Leave, Take Your Pictures With You." *This Bridge Called My Back: Radical Writings By Women of Color*. Eds. C. Moraga and G. Anzaldúa, New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983. 63-64.
- Davis, Angela. *Women, Race and Class*. New York, Random House, 1983.
- hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman?: Black Women and Feminism*. Cambridge: South End Press, 1981.
- Jordan, June. *Technical Difficulties: African American Notes on the State of the Union*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1992.