

Girls To The Front:

Riot Grrrl and Zines as a Cultural Artifact

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HIST400: Senior Seminar in History

May 12, 2017

For many people, the word “punk” conjures up images of loud, angry males in bands promoting a space that allows for violence and unsafe behavior. It is less common for people, upon hearing this word, to think of a group of young women using music and their connection with each other to create a network of political activism and feminism. However, that is exactly what the Riot Grrrl movement of the 1990s was. Finding origin in the punk music scene, the feminist movement that was Riot Grrrl spread itself further than originally thought imaginable, not only through music, but also with weekly meetings in select cities across the United States and through the creation and distribution of zines. Zines, short for fanzines, are self-made and self-distributed by anyone with access to the materials needed, like a typewriter and stamps, and many in the Riot Grrrl movement found this medium helpful as a way to connect to other members, as well as share personal stories and thoughts. While there is no denying that the music associated with Riot Grrrl, courtesy of the bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy, is political and feminist at its core, a discussion of race and inequality is missing in their lyrics and overall discourse. The bands in this movement were helpful in igniting the spark that became Riot Grrrl, but associating the movement too heavily with these groups creates setbacks in how inclusive and far-reaching the Riot Grrrl message can be. While tying Riot Grrrl exclusively with a music scene has become commonplace, it also creates issues in how the movement is remembered, as many no longer associate Riot Grrrl with a network of young feminist women but rather associate it with only punk music. The Riot Grrrl movement was able to spread their ideology and core values in their purest form more effectively through zine distribution rather than song. By looking at the movement as a network of young women sharing ideas rather than a music scene, the typical critiques of Riot Grrrl, like their lack of discourse about racism and class inequality, disappear.

At its core, Riot Grrrl in both music and in zines was about addressing topics that were important to women that were not talked about elsewhere in society. The women did not have a public space to discuss what they felt impacted their lives most, so they created one as an extension of their DIY, or “do-it-yourself” mentality that was ingrained in them because of their ties to the punk underground. Riot Grrrl, based on the nature of the movement, is hard to define even in its infancy, but there is consensus that:

The subjects Riot Grrrls addressed in zines and songs (rote gender stereotyping, devaluing of intelligence and musicianship, sexual objectification and abuse, mental health) and the institutional issues with which the movement itself grappled, for better and worse (classism, racism, sex work, power dynamics) mirrored the efforts of second-wave consciousness-raising groups in the microcosm of punk music.<sup>1</sup>

Riot Grrrls, in their broadest definition, are a group of politically active young women who use music and zines to reach their political goals. By using the mediums available to them, the group labeled themselves “Riot Grrrls” in order to highlight these goals, which included above all else equality for women, and radicalization of the movement. The word “riot” is key because it embodies power, urgency, and importance, all of which were vital to these women.

In order to understand the depth of the Riot Grrrl message and movement, one must first know where the movement got its roots. The founding members of the movement mostly resided in Olympia, Washington where many of them were from or were attending the local college, The Evergreen State College. Because the local punk scene was becoming inaccessible to women, the founders of the movement sought to carve out their own space in the punk world. It is important to note that for the original Riot Grrrls, and many after them, being a punk did not mean mohawks and spikes, “but doing-it-y ourself, or DIY : creating something from nothing,

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1. **Andi Zeisler**, *We Were Feminists Once: From Riot Grrrl to COVERGIRL, the Buying and Selling of a Political Movement* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 175.

fashion from garbage, music and art from whatever was at hand... DIY was a philosophy and a way of life.”<sup>2</sup> The DIY mentality led the young women to create all girl bands, something that was considered almost a novelty in the male dominated music scene of the 1990s. It was the DIY mentality that allowed women to break into the Olympia punk scene, because by creating their own music and style, they garnered more credit as musicians despite being women. Creating music was a way for these girls and their feminist ideas to be heard, and by doing so in a sphere that already existed, the Riot Grrrls soon created a following of young women who not only wanted to engage in political conversation, but also wanted to create personal connections with the girls up on stage. The bands that came to be associated with Riot Grrrl, Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy, used their lyrics as a way to talk about issues that adults were too afraid to talk about or did not know how to discuss, including alcoholism, incest, family violence and alienation.<sup>3</sup> The music also brought to light how much inequality existed in the punk music scene, especially in the physical space of shows and live performances. Punk shows were not realms in which it was safe for many women to attend, mostly because of how violent the men there would get, creating mosh pits which left women on the sidelines, if they even attended at all.<sup>4</sup>

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**2. Sara Marcus, *Girls To The Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010), 37.**

**3. Donna Gaines, “Border Crossing in the USA,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 231.**

**4. Inequality in music scene discussed by Marcus in *Girls To The Front*, specifically on page 49, and Tobi Vail in the *Bikini Kill 1* zine.**

This lack of a public safe space at shows is what created the best-known phrase of Riot Grrrl “girls to the front,” where members of the all girl bands would invite other girls attending the show to occupy the space right in front of the stage where they were free to dance and enjoy themselves without the fear of injury or harassment. This idea, though simple in its execution, was life changing for the women who could now attend shows where they did not feel safe previously. While the lasting implications of this aspect of the movement is hard to track in its entirety, “the revolution of Riot Grrrl was the act of simply taking up space- on stages, in mosh pits, on paper, and in public. The cry of ‘Girls to the front!’ was about more than demanding an expansion of the mosh pit; it was about foregrounding female experience.”<sup>5</sup>

Where zines gave any girl the power to define her role in society and Riot Grrrl, the music scene was exclusionary for a variety of reasons. When one was focused on Riot Grrrl associated acts, the lyrics become gospel, and what was discussed in song become the sole focus of political activism. By no means were the typical lyrical content of these bands, like sexual assault and incest, unimportant, but they are not all encompassing. It is naïve to think the problems directly affecting the white, mostly middle class girls in these bands are the end all be all of issues facing young women.

Riot Grrrl, when looked at through the lens of music, refused to accept that music is not a universally accessible entity. The bands associated directly with the movement were not nearly as accessible as zines were, and if a band did not have a tour date in your immediate area or you did not have access to a friend with a cassette, then the music scene ignored you completely. Also, even if a young woman wanted to start her own band, it is not possible for everyone. The

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5. **AndiZeisler**, *We Were Feminists Once*, 174.

ability to devote the time and money necessary to create original music is a privileged one.<sup>6</sup> For those of a lower class, devoting the time to music that could be spent working or using money that was supposed to be saved to live off of on equipment was entirely out of the question.

The musicians' lack of discourse on class and race issues came to a head during the Riot Grrrl DC Convention in 1992. The convention was intended to create a place where Riot Grrrls from all over could meet and exchange ideas in person. However, one of the many panels quickly became focused on issues of race within the movement, and the discussion did not end well. The panel turned into a forum on the issues within Riot Grrrl itself. Concerns were voiced about the lack of women of color involved, and the steps that could be taken to change that.<sup>7</sup> At the time of Riot Grrrl, punk had turned into a majorly white subculture, and while members wanted to include women of color in their narrative, some thought it a tokenizing gesture towards them.<sup>8</sup> The consensus of this discussion was that the music scene and the weekly meetings focused too heavily on issues affecting white girls, and thus became too whitewashed for women of color to want to get involved. When criticism that was aimed at being constructive was initiated, the Riot Grrrls shut down and could not come to terms with their critiques. Riot Grrrl was too white for all members to feel at home, and the women of color felt their issues and their thoughts were ignored in favor of white feminist ideas.

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**6. Lawrence Grossberg, "Is Anybody Listening? Does Anybody Care? On 'The State of Rock,'" in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 51.**

**7. Sara Marcus, *Girls To The Front*, 165.**

**8. Sara Marcus, 166.**

While issues regarding race were talked about often in zines, there are only a select number of songs with lyrics addressing race issues in an overt way. The Heavens to Betsy song titled *White Girl* features the lyrics “White Girl/I want to change the world/ But I wont change anything/ Unless I change my racist self/ It’s a privilege, it’s a background/ It’s everything that I own/ It’s thinking I’m the hero of this pretty white song/ It’s thinking I’m the hero of this pretty white world.”<sup>9</sup> These lyrics are the best found in any of the Riot Grrrl associated bands’ discography that directly talks about the lack of race discussion in white feminist discourse. The lyrics draw inspiration from the lack of diversity within the movement, and the racist implications of excluding women of color. Heavens to Betsy wanted to make the point that white girls cannot change the world without including the ideas and thoughts from women of color. Bratmobile also addresses race issues in their song *Polaroid Baby*, though the content of this song is more covert in its lyrics. The song reads, “Polaroid girl/ Polaroid boy/ You’re so white and you’re so cute/ Burn to the [expletive] ground LA/ Whitey’s gonna pay/ Whitey’s gonna pay.”<sup>10</sup> However, this song, despite dealing with race, ignores the experience of women of color in Riot Grrrl specifically. The song’s intent is to talk about the LA Race Riots, which occurred in the same year as the Riot Grrrl Convention in 1992.

The songs with connections to race issues are not entirely honest in their intent as they were written as a reaction to issues in the movement rather than as an inclusionary step for

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**9. Heavens to Betsy, “White Girl,” recorded November 1993, track 11 on *Calculated*, Kill Rock Stars, compact disc.**

**10. Bratmobile, “Polaroid Baby,” recorded July 1992, track 8 on *Pottymouth*, Kill Rock Stars, compact disc.**

women of color. Both *White Girl* and *Polaroid Baby* were released on records released in 1993—a year after the DC Convention sparked the discussion of race within Riot Grrrl. This leads to the conclusion that the songs gained inspiration from the race issues in the subculture and the mainstream, the songs acting as a way to distance the bands from the movement. While *White Girl* does offer some apology for the girls' ignorance, it also creates a separation of the musicians from the everyday Riot Grrrl. The song acted as a way for the musicians to distance themselves from Riot Grrrl and the issues that clearly needed to be addressed instead of taking responsibility for the white, middle class ideologies that dominated the discussions. Had the musicians really wanted to address Riot Grrrl through the lens of intersectional feminism, race issues would have been featured more overtly in songs, and these songs would have been written before the problems were brought to the attention of the movement as a whole.

In addition, a natural extension of the music scene and the DIY mentality was the creation of a zine network. It was common for bands to create their own zines featuring lyrics, tour dates, and personal anecdotes from members, including *Jigsaw* by Tobi Vail and *Bikini Kill* by Kathleen Hanna, both members of the band Bikini Kill. However, one did not need to be in a band to benefit from zines and the network of sisterhood and mutual communication they created. During the early to mid 1990s, there was a surge in how many zines were created that celebrated Riot Grrrl ideologies, and spoke about “a lack of girl power in society as a whole, and in the punk rock underground specifically.”<sup>11</sup> While in the beginning of Riot Grrrl the movement was a trifecta of activism, spreading through music, zines, and weekly meetings, zines were able to spread the Riot Grrrl message the furthest. Even before a nationwide zine network was

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11. Riot Grrrl 1, In *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 32.

created, zines were able to have their individual messages reach others more effectively just based on their very design.

The importance of zines and the networks centered on them is significant because it is unique to this group of individuals. While fanzines were created before the Riot Grrrl movement, this particular group of women was the one to best harness the power of the zine for their benefit. Young women at the time struggled to find realms in which they could express themselves, and it can be argued “young people from aggrieved communities have been the creators of the most dynamic and innovative forms of youth culture in the postindustrial era.”<sup>12</sup> Zines are innovative and unique. Young women of the 1990s took resources easily accessible to them and used them as a way to bring their thoughts and ideas into the public sphere where they could be legitimized and recognized. This type of cultural artifact is in direct contrast with male youth culture, which is centered on the street and public performance.<sup>13</sup> Zines, in this way, are a typically feminine medium because girls’ youth culture is based around activities that can be experienced in the home privately, like creating visual materials and keeping journals. Riot Grrrl, as a female based activist group, took advantage of experiences that they were already socialized towards. Riot Grrrls were able to reinvent journaling, an activity already present in many young girls’ lives, and use these skills to meet political and social goals.

While the music is a vital aspect of Riot Grrrl as a subculture, it is not solely responsible for defining the movement, and “zines foster girls’ public self-expression, often understood as

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12. George Lipsitz, “We Know What Time It Is: Race, Class and Youth Culture in the Nineties,” in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music & Youth Culture*, ed. Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 20.

13. Joanna Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, “Smells like Teen Spirit,” 256.

the ability to tell private stories (secrets) which are otherwise prohibited or repressed by the dominant culture... Thus publicized, such narratives often become the stuff of political commitment and an affirmation of girls' legitimacy within the realm of the political."<sup>14</sup> Zines provided a forum outside, though not entirely detached from, the music scene. Zines gave Riot Grrrls and their subculture a way to engage in their own self-definition process because the representation was based on their own words and ideas and not other writer's lyrics.<sup>15</sup>

Riot Grrrl should be analyzed through zines rather than music. The language used, and the medium of zines as a whole, is feminist at its core. Using printed words and personal stories as a means of political gain is an experience unique to women. An anonymous Riot Grrrl flyer states that "Riot Grrrl is... because we girls want to create mediums that speak to US."<sup>16</sup> Zines, reading like private diaries, create a bond and a sense of solidarity between the readers and the authors. Zines create a network of likeminded individuals from all walks of life whereas music and punk is limited in its scope. Zines exist in a world outside the dominant culture, meaning that they exist in a world outside male and societal regulation.<sup>17</sup> The political activism reached through the cultural artifact of zines is feminist at its core.

Zines are superior because they are accessible to anyone. Zines are cost effective not only to make, but also to receive, and as a medium they are able to bypass the accessibility issues of starting a band. Those wishing to resist societal norms and domination can only do so in arenas

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**14. Joanna Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, 264.**

**15. Joanna Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, 265.**

**16. Anonymous Flyer, In *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 168.**

**17. Anita Hams, "gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls in Late Modernity," *Feminist Review*, no. 75 (2003): 46.**

open to them and zines are a universal cultural medium.<sup>18</sup> Not everyone who wanted to be a Riot Grrrl had the time or money necessary to start a band, but most could spend a few dollars to create or receive a zine.

Zines also fostered a network of Riot Grrrls around the country that could never be formed through music or local meetings alone. Meetings are limited by location and music is limited by distribution and tour schedules, however, everyone has access to the mail. Creating and receiving zines allowed young women to create personal connections with people they related to and who shared similar interests and political ideas. Because zines were based on personal experience and expression, no zine could be judged better or worse than another. This is in contrast to the music industry who often encourages a culture of competition, especially between all girl bands. Riot Grrrls across the country found solace in the zines, as evidenced in an excerpt from *Girl Germs 3* stating:

One thing that I am finding a lot of comfort and inspiration from is all these girls, states-wide, that have surfaced... and I hear these girls, girls I don't know, girls I have never met, make these same promises and these same threats. They speak to me and I speak to you and I know our time has come... revolutionary girl soul force... wow.<sup>19</sup>

Across geographic barriers connections were formed- something that could have never happened through music alone. The Riot Grrrl movement through zines was not bound by geographic region or collective image- it was formed through an underground cultural network and personal connections.<sup>20</sup>

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**18. George Lipsitz, "We Know What Time It Is," 20.**

**19. Girl Germs no. 3 Zine, In *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 66.**

**20. Photobooth Toolbox no. 1 Zine, In *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 273.**

Riot Grrrl zines created a community of young women in which social and political ideas were best spread through personal expression and thoughts. In the 1990s, girls were excluded from public discussions about their “place” in post-modern society, and zines were a way for them to get involved in the discussion. Using the private sphere in which they already existed, zines harnessed the power that girls already had, but they made the power political instead of personal. Zines “offer spaces for young women to discuss and organize among themselves, and in particular to wrestle with and parody contemporary images of girlhood that enable the management of their experiences into either power or risk.”<sup>21</sup> Zines were the only medium already available to girls during this era that could be politicized. Zines are unique to the female experience, as well as the Riot Grrrl movement, because they took a medium that is feminine by nature and politicize it in a personal way. By using examples of their own personal experience, zine authors are able to situate their own ideas and experiences into the dominant culture in a way that they could define themselves, which is unique to the zine experience. While male-dominated society dictated the ways it would like girls to behave and think, zines are a way for girls to define themselves.

While the music scene was limited to the problems facing white, middle class women, in zines issues of race and class were discussed more often. In the zine *Gunk 4*, for example, a young black woman from New Jersey named Ramdasha uses the medium to discuss her issues with the movement, including her own perspective on the 1992 convention, which she critiques for the lack of diversity.<sup>22</sup> Ramdasha writes that, “I mean mostly all Riot Grrrls are white and

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21. Anita Hams, “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines,” 45.

22. Lisa Darms, “Grrrl, Collected,” *The Daily* (blog), *The Paris Review*, July 30, 2013.

<https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2013/07/30/gml-collected/>.

only a few Asians were there. I think I was one of the only 3 black kids there I mean Riot Grrrl calls for a change, but I question who it's including.... This sounds kind of snotty but I see Riot Grrrl growing very closed to a very chosen few i.e white middle class punk girls."<sup>23</sup> Ramdasha was able to use her zine to discuss, in depth, the race issues ingrained in Riot Grrrl. She used *Gunk* to talk about her own personal experiences in Riot Grrrl as a young black woman, and the experience she has is troubling. Riot Grrrl, through music and meetings, was supposed to be a safe and open space for anyone who wanted to take advantage of it, but in reality it was not. Ramdasha felt isolated from the other girls at the convention because, although it was not overtly stated, she felt her ideas and place at the convention were not as important as the white girls'.<sup>24</sup>

Zines, because they could be written on any topic important to the author, often included the race issues that were absent in music and meetings. When looking at the Riot Grrrl movement only through the lens of music, race is almost completely ignored, and the mentions of race in song are reactionary. Zines bypass the race issue altogether. If Riot Grrrl is only examined through zines, the movement in its purest form emerges, and all women are able to discuss issues that are the most pressing to them. Through zines women from any racial background are able to discuss political issues from their point of view and share their ideas with others in the zine network enlightening them on how being a punk-of-color affects them.

Issues of classism are also discussed in zines. While musicians encouraged everyone to start a band, this call to power is naïve in that many did not have the resources needed to create music. In *Doris 6*, a zine written by a woman named Cindy based in California, the issue of class is discussed. Cindy, a lower class woman, writes that she is bitter about her "friends who live in

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23. *Gunk no. 4 Zine*, In *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 158.

24. *Gunk no. 4 Zine*, 150-59.

a poverty fantasy. The ones who have access to money and always will... [She doesn't] know how they couldn't see that their words [were] insulting to someone whose poverty isn't self imposed."<sup>25</sup> The other Riot Grrrls Cindy knew suffered from what she called "self-imposed poverty," defined as people who had access to money through their parents or families, but refused to take it in hopes to make it on their own. However, Cindy's situation was not like that. She found that actually living below the poverty line was something that other Riot Grrrls in her area could not understand and she felt isolated because of it. Despite her class, Cindy was still able to publish a zine because of the universality of the medium. Poverty did not affect Cindy's ability to create a personal expression of thoughts and ideas, even though her class isolated her from the other aspects of the Riot Grrrl movement.

In Riot Grrrl music, political experiences were becoming prioritized, and women of color, whose political issues were more profound than those of white girls, found that they were not being heard over others. While the musicians tried to lower the entry barrier to punk music, "zine writing had music beat without even trying."<sup>26</sup> Zines were, and had always been, inclusive and available to anyone who sought them out. However, even when the barriers were lowered and women in bands and at shows were commonplace, music still glossed over issues many girls were facing. Not everyone could attend shows, or for that matter even wanted to. The punk music of Riot Grrrl was exclusionary by taste and by subculture, and those who felt they did not fit in or those who did not define themselves as punk were excluded instantly. Zines did not do this. Zines created a nurturing and communicative network of women. Zines were able to grow

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25. Doris no. 6 Zine, In *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, 280.

26. Sara Marcus, *Girls To The Front*, 316.

and transform with political changes and with their authors while music and meetings became stagnant.

Zine culture also outlived the Riot Grrrl music scene by years. With the creation of Riot Grrrl press in 1992, zines were still available to girls first finding the movement years after its prime. A surge in activity happened at the Washington DC headquarters in the year 1994, and because zines were the primary focus of this new wave of activists, the movement again became what it had been in the beginning because it was not clouded with institutional issues. Riot Grrrl, in DC in 94, was

A nationwide network of friends and friends who wrote each other passionate letters and occasionally traveled the country to meet up in person. The difference this time was that whereas the initial group had connected through music, with the gospel spread by touring bands, riot grrrls in 1994 were reaching one another through zines.<sup>27</sup>

When the word of the movement was spread through zines, it was in its purest form. It was then a network of friends sharing ideas, and it was exactly what the original members envisioned.

While the original members, the musicians, started off the movement with good intentions, their influence on Riot Grrrl overall was negative. In modern memory, the political aspect and activism is downplayed, and many just remember it as a music scene.<sup>28</sup> To those who remember Riot Grrrl as just a music genre, at best it was a period of strong female musicians, but

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**27. Sara Marcus, *Girls To The Front*, 314-15.**

**28. Gillian G. Gaar, in her book *She 's A Rebel: The History of Women in Rock & Roll*, downplays the political aspects and zines, while reinforcing that Riot Grrrl is only a music scene. Some of the musicians she cites as being “Riot Grrrl” never aligned themselves with the political aspirations of the movement, and instead Gaar used the term as a sloppy way of defining a generation of female rock musicians in the 1990s. This perpetuates the idea that Riot Grrrl’s most important contribution to culture is song, when it is really zines.**

at worst it was “an ideology of bad musicianship or a style of dress.”<sup>29</sup> That is why Riot Grrrl should not be remembered and analyzed only through music. Music and musicians limit the movement, and through the founder’s limited political aims and distance from Riot Grrrl, the political aspects of the movement are downplayed in modern memory. When looking at the movement through zines, however, one can see how political Riot Grrrl was. When not associated with a few white women musicians, Riot Grrrl is a feminist movement that not only made political and social strides, but one that also created a network of friendship and communication across the nation. That is what Riot Grrrl should be remembered as- a feminist movement that found roots in punk subculture, and ultimately created a nationwide network that encouraged the spreading of personal stories and political ideologies.

In conclusion, Riot Grrrl should be examined through the cultural artifacts of zines. Zines are unique to the female experience and are unique to this movement. However, in modern memory zines are not prioritized, and rather musicians are cited as the most influential cultural aspect that came out of the Riot Grrrl movement. The musicians did not contribute as much to Riot Grrrl as the writing of zines did because music making depends on class and the lyrical content of Riot Grrrl bands ignored issues of race almost entirely. In the wider context of history, this proves that periods of time can look entirely different depending on the sources being analyzed. Through music, Riot Grrrl is an elite and exclusive subculture that has political aims but none that go beyond the problems facing middle class white women. Through zines, however, the movement is untainted, and Riot Grrrl is a cultural underground network of feminist ideas and personal friendships. Riot Grrrl is a feminist movement that encourages the

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29. Sara Marcus, *Girls To The Front*, 9.

expression of personal ideas and antidotes, and through zine analysis rather than lyrical analysis or analysis of individual musicians, the movement is in its purest and more inclusive form.

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