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GRAO EN INGLÉS: ESTUDIOS LINGÜÍSTICOS E LITERARIOS

*The Riot-Grrrl Feminism
of the Early '90s in North
America—The Punk Scene*

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Abstract

In this undergraduate essay, I have analysed and portrayed the '90s feminist punk movement Riot Grrrl in order to understand the relevant contributions they made by connecting punk and feminism at such an early time. This essay is divided up into three chapters—context, analysis and influences—apart from an introduction and a conclusion. The introduction will present the main ideas and source materials used throughout the book, that will be followed firstly by a chapter concerning the context and foundations of the movement. Secondly, I will deal with the analysis and presentation of some of the principles and values that shaped the Riot Grrrl agenda, such as sorority, collectivism, male chauvinism and sexism in the punk scene, the visibility of sexual abuse and street harassment, and also the concept of ethnicity within the Riot Grrrls. Thirdly, the decay of the movement and the contributions and influences they had on other artists and feminists of the twentieth-first century. Lastly, I have come to some conclusions concerning the enormous relevant the Riot Grrrls had at that very specific moment. In order to achieve these goals, I have consulted the fanzines in *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, edited by Lisa Darms, and some others filed on the internet. The fanzines, together with the music they created, constitute the bulk of the material that I have analysed and compiled. Further details, some fanzine samples and other materials can be found in the appendix.

Because every time we pick up a pen, or an instrument, or get anything done, we are creating the revolution. We ARE the revolution. - “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto”

Introduction

In this undergraduate essay, I am going to analyse and explain the different social issues tackled by the Riot Grrrl Movement in the early decade of 1990 in the United States of America. This analysis is formed by a series of collected materials—namely fanzines and songs—written by the pioneers of the movement and less recognizable people who took action at that time. On the one hand, feminism is the central ideology in this material, raising awareness about sexism, the rights and struggles of women, gender identity, male superiority in the Punk scene, sexual abuse or ethnicity within the movement, among others. On the other hand, the music was the tool they used to make their message more visible, using Punk as their philosophy. Moreover, according to different sources, Riot Grrrl is divided up into two different generations or movements, however, in this project, the first generation, which oversaw the creation of the etiquette, is more portrayed than the second one. Therefore, this essay consists of the description and analysis of the Riot Grrrl movement, focusing on the language, register, and the graphics and visual elements they used to fight against sexism.

Furthermore, the portrayal and analysis of this scene will be the main goal of this essay: confirm and verify the outstanding amount of production that the Riot Grrrl movement carried out in the decade of 1990, together with the influence of the aesthetic punk on others. Firstly, even though their production is not very well-known, it has a large number of songs and fanzines published during several years. On the one hand, as Marcus states in *Girls to the Front*, in 1993, according to “a Canadian newspaper article estimated that forty thousand zines were actively published in North America” (296). On the other hand, there were not a fixed number of bands created at that specific moment, nevertheless, the production of music was relevant due to the fact that the Riot Grrrls encouraged women to form their own bands. There are many well-known bands with its own career pathways, being part of the music

business, such as Bratmobile, Bikini Kill or Sleater-Kinney, among others. Nevertheless, many of them had no repercussion in the music business. First of all, they had no material published or exhibited, or did not sign a record label, mostly due to their improvised and spontaneous style, which is so typical of the DIY ethic. Secondly, together with the acknowledgement of the Riot Grrrl production, the analysis of this material will show the influence that this scene provided to other artists or feminists. Though this movement faded away in a few years, however, it influenced the creation of late bands like Gossip, The Distillers or even the 21th-century Russian punk feminist collective Pussy Riot.

In conclusion, this paper is meant to be an overview and a portrayal of the Riot Grrrl agenda by means of analysing some of their materials. Moreover, the aim of this project is to show the cultural, social and artistic contribution of the Riot Grrrl scene, and the influence they exerted on other artists and feminists from their own generation. It must be noted that thanks to the language and graphic aesthetic that they created through Punk, and which they portrayed in their fanzines and songs, feminism appeared as a powerful tool around social issues that affected women around the world.

1. Origins, Context & Foundations

1.1 Origins

Riot Grrrl, a radical Punk feminist collective, emerged in the Pacific West coast of the United States in the early '90s, specifically in the city of Olympia. With just 46,000 inhabitants, Olympia it is located in the state of Washington, 60 miles from Seattle. In fact, Seattle was the capital of Grunge, which was living its peak at that moment, becoming part of the mainstream music with the release of Nirvana's *Nevermind* and the first single "Smells Like Teen Spirit"—September 10th of 1991—. However, in this case, the city that acted originally

as a “mecca” for the Riot Grrrls was Olympia. The atmosphere transmitted by this place is essential to understand the type of activities created there. As Sara Marcus relates in her *Girls to The Front*:

“Olympia had been a sleepy hamlet at the southernmost extreme of Puget Sound’s clan of salty inlets, a town held afloat by nearby logging operations, a modest shipping port, and the seasonal influx of state legislators who flooded the tawny capitol building before retreating to Aberdeen or Kennewick or Wenatchee” (36).

Olympia was a modest city before starting its own development in fine arts, with the foundation of The Evergreen State College. Moreover, the socioeconomic situation of the town was also accompanied by the rainy and cloudy weather, which *Weather Spark* describes as “mostly cloudy 77% of the time.” This climate provokes a concrete atmosphere, very reflected in Grunge, with its recognizable dense, a noisy sound, and, especially as far as Punk music is concerned, normally connected with pessimism and nihilism.

The main factor that changed Olympia’s socioeconomic system creating a new scene in town was The Evergreen State College, which Marcus describes as “an experimental state school founded in 1967, where grades and majors didn’t exist and classes often assigned creative projects instead of term papers” (36). This college of liberal arts helped to develop an underground Punk scene “a self-sufficient and decidedly all-ages musical culture” (Marcus, 37). At that stage, in the ‘80s, Olympia became the town of artistic development. As a result, young students encouraged others to play music, write or paint among other activities, no matter the knowledge they had, thus improving experimentalism and improvisation. This is how, within this new Punk scene, a new subculture grew in Olympia called DIY, “do-it-yourself.” In this case, DIY aesthetics consisted of “creating something from nothing, fashion from garbage, music and art from whatever was nearest at hand” (Marcus, 37). Using cheap

materials to be independent of capitalism, self-managing their own message without the intrusion of others in their work. In addition, DIY (Do it Yourself) philosophy was the principal base for fanzines.

At that time people did not use computers and the internet did not exist, so the word-of-mouth, which sometimes did not keep the original message, was their method to communicate among them. This was how people from Olympia used a physical medium: Fanzines. According to *Collins Dictionary*, a fanzine is “a magazine, usually produced by amateurs, devoted to a special-interest group, such as fans of science fiction or comic books.” In this case, these fanzines— “Angry Girl Zines” —were distributed in concerts, universities or among friends. Amazingly, the production of fanzines was high considering that there were many unknown zine’s writers who were linked to the movement at that time. Their production of fanzines remained personal or was kept among friends, nevertheless, in some other cases, it is certain that there was a high number of zines that were openly published.

Together with fanzines, the formation of new bands composed by amateur members was fairly common in this town. Normally, these bands seem to have lasted very little time, for instance, some of them were only assigned just for one concert with a setlist formed by one or two songs only. Definitely, this made possible the idea of art as something reachable for everyone, promoting this way new and personal ideas linked to a certain ideology, Punk in this case, which was the principle lifestyle in Olympia. This “do-it-yourself” (DIY) philosophy was reflected in music and fanzines, the two main tools used by the Riot Grrrl movement. According to it, everybody would react to the rules imposed by the society.

The Underground Punk and the DIY subculture were present already in Olympia by the ‘80s, and the Riot Grrrl movement was starting to emerge by 1989. The pioneers of the Riot Grrrl movement met in this town, most of them attending The Evergreen State College.

In this case, the first person known to be part of this group, and one of the co-founders is Kathleen Hanna, an Evergreen student from Portland. Even though this movement does not obey a leader, she is known as the Riot Grrrl icon. She was interested in Feminism, and she found inspiration in the feminist pro-sex punk writer Kathy Acker, who gave her the advice of creating a band instead of getting herself stuck in open word shows. The idea of taking music as the most effective tool to spread her word is the fundamental idea of Riot Grrrl. Hanna managed to get to interview Acker for the magazine *Zero Hour* in Seattle, where the writer told her: “If you want people to hear what you’re doing, don’t do spoken word, because nobody likes spoken word, nobody goes to spoken word. There’s more of a community for musicians than for writers. You should be in a band” (Marcus, 34). Hanna started to follow Acker’s advice, creating bands like Amy Carter, and later, the most iconic of all Riot Grrrl bands: Bikini Kill.

Thereafter, Bikini Kill—Kathleen Hanna, Kathi Wilcox, Tobi Vail, and Billy Karren— started the Riot Grrrl scene together with the band Bratmobile—Allison Wolfe, Molly Neuman, and Erin Smith—. At that moment, a series of fanzines and bands started to design a new concept of art connected to gender. Moreover, immediately a connection was created between two cities: Olympia (WA) and Washington D.C., the capital of the United States. Olympia’s women went there to politicize their message: “Maybe it was because DC had always loved political bands, from Bad Brains to Fugazi... For starters, the DC area was much richer than Olympia. While most Oly Punks had gone to Evergreen—public, inexpensive, experimental—DC’s punks had attended some of the country’s best public and private high schools” (Marcus, 77).

There was a link between two cities, two communities, and two independent record labels known as Dischord Records (DC) and K Records (Olympia). These companies helped

to record and release Olympia and DC underground music. Besides, the members of these independent labels were part of the Riot Grrrl movement: on the one hand, Ian MacKaye was co-owner of Dischord and singer in the band Fugazi, which shared a tour with Bikini Kill in 1991; on the other hand, Calvin Johnson was the co-owner of K Records, very involved in Olympia's scene. All in all, even though 2.800 miles (4.500 Km) separated these cities—one on the East coast and the other on the West—the link was strengthened as a result of the good relations between these record labels.

It was thanks to this scenario and the relationships that were established that the new movement was founded and gained further momentum. Even though the movement already existed with Bikini Kill and Bratmobile's shows and fanzines, it was not until the summer of 1991 that it was named. Jen Smith—a zine writer of the D.C. Punk scene— was the one in charge of creating the public name for the movement. As the book *Dance of Days* relates, Smith sent a letter to Allison Wolfe from Bratmobile reacting to the Mount Pleasant riots that occurred in May 1991 at Washington D.C. Smith tells in her letter: “This summer is going to be a girl riot” (314). Rather interestingly, this signature was formed completely by the creation of the zine *Riot Grrrl*, the most emblematic one, in which Vail—Bikini Kill—conceived the ultimate name that Marcus explains as “a blend of Jen's “Girl Riot” and the growling “grrrl” spelling that Tobi had recently made up as a jokey variation on all the tortured spellings of “womyn/womon/wimmin” (80). Consequently, a series of zines started to be produced by this community in Olympia and DC, taking *Riot Grrrl* as a reference. The most representative fanzines were *Bikini Kill*—written by Kathleen Hanna, Tobi Vail, and Kathy Wilcox—; *Jigsaw* by Tobi Vail; *Girl Germs* by Molly Neuman and Allison Wolfe from Bratmobile; and *Chainsaw* by Donna Dresch from the band Team Dresch.

The scene lived its peak in the summer of 1991 which Tobi Vail named as the “Revolution Summer Girl Style Now!” That summer too many all-girl bands were away, that is why Bikini Kill made an effort to strengthen the scene playing in Washington while people nearby started to hear about them. Furthermore, the production of fanzines increased and the first Riot Grrrl meeting took place on July 24, 1991.

1.2 Ideologies

1.2.1 Feminism: The Third-wave

The other factor that outlined Riot Grrrl was its way to acting as a radical “face-to-face” movement which encouraged others to participate, creating meetings and conventions in order to help each other as a centre to young women to strengthen their bonds and especially, to overcome the numerous setbacks they had suffered in the course of their lives. This is how a series of new chapters were created in several spread cities of the United States. Together with music and fanzines, Riot Grrrl developed a radical feminism by incorporating old resources created by the Second Wave Feminism from the decade of 1970.

The social and political situation concerned Riot Grrrls considering that George Bush became the President of the United States in 1989, provoking the increasing power of the conservative political party in the country. Furthermore, Bush presidency caused problematic issues such as the Gulf War (1990-1991), Bush’s Gag Rule which consisted of “preventing federally funded clinics from offering abortion counseling” (Andersen, 313), racism and police brutality, or sexism, among others. Consequently, a Third Wave Feminism was being born as a rebellious and anti-establishment answer. The term “Third-wave” was addressed for the first time by Rebecca Walker in her essay “Becoming the Third Wave.” This essay was created after Anita Hill “accused U.S. Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, her

supervisor at the United States Department of Education and the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, of sexual harassment” (*Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History & Culture*). Walker wrote this essay moved by the hostility in the press according to Hill’s accusation, and, consequently, she stated: “I am not a postfeminist feminist. I am the Third Wave.” This term refers to the Second-wave feminism from the ‘70s, predecessor of the Third-wave, in which Betty Friedan’s *Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, is framed.

On the one hand, the webpage *DailyHistory.org* states that the Second wave “started after the women were forced out of the workplace after the end of World War Two and essentially ended with the failure to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.” Moreover, the goals of the Second wave were based on several principles shaped by two ideologies:

Increasingly in the 1960s and 1970s, Second-wave feminism diverged into two separate ideological movements: Equal rights feminism and radical feminism. Within equal-rights feminism, the objective sought equality with men in political and social spheres, where legislation and laws such as legalization of abortion and efforts to make women more established on the workforce equal to men were the primary goals. Radical feminism, on the other hand, wanted much more radical change to the society that fundamentally saw it as patriarchal and needed to be altered if women were to escape its oppression. (*DailyHistory.org*)

On the other hand, the *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains that the Third wave “was made possible by the greater economic and professional power and status achieved by women of the second wave.” Furthermore, the “third-wave feminists sought to question, reclaim, and redefine the ideas, words, and media that have transmitted ideas about womanhood, gender, beauty, sexuality, femininity, and masculinity, among other things.” Moreover, the concept of intersectionality was applied for the first time by Kimberlé

Crenshaw in 1989. As Crenshaw relates in a *New Statesman* article “Intersectionality draws attention to invisibilities that exist in feminism, in anti-racism, in class politics, so, obviously, it takes a lot of work to consistently challenge ourselves to be attentive to aspects of power that we don't ourselves experience.”

Consequently, the Second wave provided the Third wave with some tools, for instance, the women’s shelters where Kathleen Hanna worked as an intern before all started. Her work at Safeplace, a domestic violence shelter, shaped her feminism and the feminism of the Riot Grrrls, considering that “after shows, girls from the audience would come up to Kathleen, wanting to talk about their own abusive fathers, violent boyfriends, and incest flashbacks. Kathleen would switch gears from performer to counsellor” (Marcus, 38). As Kathleen recalls “I was doing the same work that I did at the shelter” (Marcus, 39).

Therefore, Riot Grrrls discussed feminism based on sexism, that is, certain situations that caused panic among women and which did not catch the right attention to the structures of power, mass media or the public opinion, and which were kept in silence. For instance, the right to abortion, street and sexual harassment, sexual abuse, rape, incest, male dominance upon women in the workplace, or in the artistic context, and especially, gender identity, among others.

1.2.1 Punk

Punk was the genre used to spread the word, as said before, this type of music was part of an Underground movement in Olympia, besides, it was the correct genre to convey their message. The use of Punk strategies simulated the anger Riot Grrrls wanted to instill into the audience, this rage could have been part of other genres, however, Punk provided them with the political weight they needed. There are several questions about Riot Grrrl identity and

philosophy, which are linked to the Punk scene and shaped by it. Some of them will be dealt with below.

Riot Grrrl ideology comes from the atmosphere of Olympia as the pioneering city where the movement took place, inevitably connected to Punk and feminism. As Mark Andersen explains in his book *Dance of Days* “historically, Olympia had one of the more gender-balanced punk scenes; macho hardcore had never seized control there, and the creative feminist aesthetic of early punks like Stella Marris had helped to set the tone.” (309). This circumstance helped Riot Grrrls to develop there. Even though, Andersen relates that Olympia had “one of the more gender-balanced punk scene” there was sexism in that scene, and this was part of the topics discussed by the Riot Grrrls. Therefore, the “Revolution” that Riot Grrrls conveyed in their music was very linked to deconstructing this chauvinistic Punk scene in order to take it and use it as their own tool to confront sexism. Not just in the Punk scene, but in the society as a whole.

Punk always has been the genre of “misfits” or people who do not fit into the limits of the society, either by their lifestyle, their way of thinking or other factors. Furthermore, as Lauraine Leblanc points out in her *Pretty in Punk: Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture*:

In many cases, girls’ attractions to punk are the result of a number of factors: rebellion against their parents; attraction to the music, style and lifestyle; agreement with its political ideologies; rejection of mainstream conventions; desire for a support network. For those for whom the subculture provides a way to rebel or to express a political opinion, becoming a punk involves rejecting the mainstream norms enforced by parents, peers and school authorities. (79)

Nevertheless, the prime reason why these women opted for the Punk genre is due to a “general sense of alienation from the mainstream adolescent culture of their neighbourhoods or schools. Many girls reported being outsiders even before becoming punks, being barred from the popular friendship groups in mainstream adolescent culture” (Leblanc, 79).

Another reason why Punk is the chosen genre is due to its political value over other genres like Pop, Country, or Metal. Moreover, the comparison between these genres makes us aware of their limitations against what Punk stands for, ideologically speaking. The blog *Punx in Solidarity* points out that Punk ideology is based on “rebellion, anti-authoritarianism, individualism, free thought and discontent.” In short, Punk ideology is linked principally to radical left-wing politics. This political content implies a radical statement accompanied by the anger and rage typical of the Riot Grrrl feminist approach.

Besides, Punk has its own rules and laws, as part of an underground culture. As the *Collins Dictionary* defines it, the term Underground refers to “newspapers, films, music, etc. that are unconventional, experimental, radical, etc.” This means that the rejection of mainstream, mass media and famous record labels together with the non-hierarchical structure was mandatory. That is why many famous bands, linked to the Riot Grrrl scene, were not part of it as they belong to the mainstream culture. For instance, famous bands like Hole, L7 or Babes in Toyland were identified by mass media as Riot Grrrls, just because they were women. In addition, these bands wrote about issues discussed by Riot Grrrls as well. In fact, there is a song called “Asking for it”, by Hole, which talks about sexual abuse, very visible in its chorus: “Was she asking for it? Was she asking nice? If she was asking for it, did she ask you twice?” (*Live Through This*, 1994). However, they signed valuable contracts, appeared on television channels for mainstream music as MTV and they sold many more records than the Riot Grrrls.

Another example and probably the most recognizable one is the case of Nirvana. Cobain was the friend of Kathleen Hanna and Tobi Vail from Bikini Kill, with whom he shared a similar passion and ideologies for music, Punk, and feminism. Kathleen even created the name of the first Nirvana's single "Smells Like Teen Spirit" by spraying in Kurt wall's "Kurt Smells Like Teen Spirit" due to a famous deodorant called Teen Spirit. Nevertheless, Nirvana was banned from taking part in the Riot Grrrl movement unlike other male bands, such as Fugazi or Nation of Ulysses. This procedure began when the band signed a contract with Geffen Records, part of Universal Music Group, becoming internationally famous due to their second record, *Nevermind*.

This rejection of the mainstream culture was reflected in why Riot Grrrls decided to move away from Grunge, which was in its finest moment. Grunge changed mainstream music, joining Rock and Pop together under the same field. According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*:

Grunge, genre of rock music that flourished in the late 1980s and early '90s and, secondarily, its attendant fashion. The term grunge was first used to describe the murky-guitar bands (most notably Nirvana and Pearl Jam) that emerged from Seattle in the late 1980s as a bridge between mainstream 1980s heavy metal–hard rock and postpunk alternative rock.

On the one hand—as mentioned in the first chapter "Origins"—Grunge and Riot Grrrl shared a connection due to several factors: geographical proximity, attitudes towards politics, young age, and, paradoxically, a profound disagreement. Even though they shared similar opinions and social circles, Riot Grrrls dissented from Grunge ideology considering that its belonging to mainstream culture was the opposite to their political goal. That is, mainstream could not be the right field to express disagreement towards the political or repressive forces.

Consequently, some of these women rejected Grunge, naming it as the enemy of Riot Grrrl ideology, reinforcing their Punk attitude. For instance, Marcus relates in *Girls to the Front* how Kathleen Hanna criticized Nirvana's decisions in a zine interview: "the people there were totally into money and getting fucked up. Kurt, Dave, and Kris [Novoselic] are really nice guys... and I'm not dissing on them, but they're getting led around by their fucking balls. They don't know what's going on; they're not in control" (103).

On the other hand, Grunge was taken as a trend, making its second-hand flannel shirts part of high fashion at the moment: "that a utilitarian style—born of the Northwest's weather conditions, economic marginality, and thrift stores—was becoming a status symbol for deracinated fashion elites" (Marcus, 209-210). The North American Generation X—the Grunge and Riot Grrrl scenes—was similar in the eye of the public; however, it was remarkable the number of distinctions and disagreements within this group. Grunge political content was not too serious as it obeyed in a way the power structures, making money as they ignored their own social background and mentality, while Riot Grrrls respected their activist philosophy.

All in all, Punk shaped the Riot Grrrl's philosophy, acting as the tool with which they managed to convey their message, focused on raising awareness about sexism, sexual abuse, and other problems women would suffer. Moreover, all kind of political content was present and represented by the anger which accompanies and characterised the Punk scene, taking into account the latent disagreement with Grunge. This anger was central to the Riot Grrrl music and fanzines. Through the music, they created an audience, and besides, it facilitated the distribution of their feminist discourse making it available for a much wider audience.

2. Different Issues Tackled by the Riot Grrrls movement

This chapter will convey the reader the analysis of some of the most relevant topics discussed by the Riot Grrrls. It is true that there were many more social issues that were tackled by this feminist collective, nevertheless, the extension of this essay is limited and makes it impossible to deal with all these issues in detail. Therefore, I have chosen topics which I have considered more relevant in political and social terms, and also the ones which have shaped the scene, showing its strengths and weaknesses in the process.

2.1 Riot Grrrl Values: Revolution, Girl Support, and Girl Power

The Riot Grrrl scene was created under the principles based on the Third-wave feminism, which was quite new at that time, conceiving a distinct way of activism founded on collective action. The feeling of belonging to a collective was reinforced by their main values and the way they presented it. The term “sorority”, i. e. women supporting one another, would be the means and values by which Riot Grrrls established their movement, as the foundation of every thought they had.

As the *Cambridge University Press* explains, a sorority is, originally, “a social organization for female students at some US colleges.” However, this word, which came from the Latin word “soror”, meaning sister in English, has evolved to a concept related to feminism. The concept of sorority is linked to sisterhood, which the *Merriam-Webster* defines as “the solidarity of women based on shared conditions, experiences, or concerns.” This solidarity or mutual support is very relevant in the case of the Riot Grrrl scene as they used this concept to gather together all women interested in voicing social issues that were affecting them in a rather profound way.

The Riot Grrrl movement referred to this concept constantly; in their case, Sisterhood was connected to the idea of “Revolution.” A clear example is exposed in the “Riot Grrrl

manifesto”¹, “published 1991 in the *Bikini Kill* zine 2” as the website *History is a Weapon* states and published in the website *Condenado Fanzine*. In this manifesto, they point out the different values and goals they wanted to achieve—indeed, these values were the foundations of the movement—. For instance, the reference to sisterhood is reflected in sentences like this: “we need to build lines of communication so we can be more open and accessible to each other”. Or “we need to accept and support each other as girls.” In addition, the manifesto lists thirteen values, devoting a paragraph to each thought or idea, which began with the word “BECAUSE” written in capital letters. The use of capital letters—typical of Manifestos—is very common throughout the Riot Grrrl production of fanzines, illustrating the rage and importance of their message, making visible a kind of urgency regarding, for instance, male chauvinism—or, such as it happens in this particular case, the unity among women—. Moreover, there were also different graphic designs that showed this so-called “girl love” that Riot Grrrls spread all over their materials. For example, we can see it in pictures with two women standing naked while embracing each other², or a group of women taken by their hands. Nevertheless, unity was central and relevant linked to the role of individualism. According to Punk ideology, individuals must be independent of the other members of their community, acting as if there were no rules, using their voice to express their ideas without any kind of censorship. That is why every Riot Grrrl could start writing a fanzine without asking for permission.

Furthermore, the idea of creating safe spaces for congregations was a key point, also considered in the manifesto: “BECAUSE a safe place needs to be created for girls where we can open our eyes and reach out of each other without being threatened by this sexist society and our day to day bullshit.” In this example is visible the use of curse words as it is, for instance, the word “bullshit.” This type of lexicon was connected to colloquialism, which

¹ See appendix number I.

² See appendix number II.

transmitted proximity among young women, and it made them feel powerful at the same time. Moreover, as previously explained, the Third-wave used the Second-wave shelters and its dynamics in order to create their own circle as a safe place, where they could feel comfortable without being disturbed by others who thought differently.

This concept of sisterhood was also connected to Revolution and anger. In this scene, the idea of revolution is constantly present, either in the production of music or in the production of fanzines. This connection means that both terms, sisterhood and Revolution, should coexist in order to achieve the goals they had established. That is, Revolution would not be possible without the solidarity and mutual support between women. A visible example of this is in the Riot Grrrl anthem “Rebel Girl” by Bikini Kill:

When she talks, I hear the revolution
In her hips, there's revolution
When she walks, the revolution's coming
In her kiss, I taste the revolution.

On the one hand, these lines—which present an anaphora in the first with the third line, and the second with the fourth line—address issues related to the relevant concept of community: women are encouraged to work and act together in order to create the Revolution. However, as it is explained in the chorus of *Girls to The Front*, there are some other ideas that must be taken into account when talking about collective action: “The rebel girl is the queen of “my”, not “our”, world—the ‘70s collectivism (“We are a gentle angry people”³) has morphed into the self-centered language of alienated adolescence and been adapted for the political primacy, especially potent in the early ‘90s, of the personal story” (Marcus, 110-111). It happens exactly the same with the personal pronoun “I.” Thus, individuality was also a very relevant idea in the Riot Grrrl discourse, despite their main interest was mostly on

³ “We are gentle angry people”: a line from the song “Singing from Our Lives” by the feminist activist and singer Holly Near. This song was used in protests and demonstrations dealing with inequality.

collectivism. As a whole, jealousy was set aside to spread admiration among women: “That girl, she holds her head up so high / I think I wanna be her best friend, yeah.” A relevant issue also discussed by the Riot Grrrls in their fanzines, as for instance in the *Bikini Kill* zine 1⁴: “STOP the J word jealousy from killing girl LOVE... encourage IN THE face of insecurity” (44)⁵. On the other hand, apart from the message provided by the lyrics, the style of this song is very well defined. In fact, many other Riot Grrrl songs have a similar construction: for example, the number of repetitions, in this case, as the use of the title “Rebel Girl” throughout the song.

To sum up, we can conclude by saying that solidarity and support shared by women were the main factors which shaped and transformed the Riot Grrrl movement, and the ‘90s feminist movement, allowing them to reach their goals. They were able to establish a bond that will strengthen their public positions in order to achieve the revolution—in other words, the fight against sexism and gender discrimination—. Besides, as we have said above, they always considered individuality as something necessary to overcome gender setbacks and as a relevant part of the new Third-wave feminism.

2.2 “We are Pro-People Without Voices”⁶: Male Chauvinism & Sexism in the Punk Rock Scene

Male chauvinism was present, as it is nowadays, in the Punk scene of the ‘90s. That was how the members of the Riot Grrrl movement became aware of the necessity of involvement in the fight against this misogyny and gender inequality. Kathleen Hanna and Toby Vail started to question the male attitude towards women in the Punk field, creating a series of opposition reflected in their actions on stage, and by written procedure. As a result, they carried out

⁴ See appendix number III.

⁵ As most fanzines are not numbered I am quoting the page of the book *The Riot Grrrl Collection* in which they appear, instead of the fanzines' page itself.

⁶ “We are Pro-People Without Voices”: sentence written by Neuman and Wolfe from the band Bratmobile in their fanzine *Girl Germs*. Found in Anderson’s book *Dance of Days* (311)

remarkable actions towards male domination in their performances and concerts— “Girls to the front” —, but also these actions inspired their concept of musical business and were a relevant part of their Punk lifestyle.

The first symptom of these references addressing male domination was the inclusion of the Hard-core genre into the Punk scene. It is true that many female artists like Patty Smith, Siouxsie and The Banshees, or Joan Jett among others, were pioneers of the movement in the late ‘70s, however, the introduction of the Hard-core genre changed Punk aesthetics. As Marcus explains in *Girls to The Front*:

So it wasn’t as if Punk had always been a male-dominated domain; far from it. But as the ‘80s drew on, hardcore became the dominant sound of punk. Its simple musical conventions were easy for untrained teens to imitate... The concerts’ mosh pits, flurries of flying elbows and wandering hands, drove most girls to the sidelines or out of the scene altogether. (105)

This dynamic influenced certain attitudes such as the aggressive behaviour of male audiences. Riot Grrrls acted against this with the motto “Girls to the front.”⁷ In fact, Kathleen Hanna reminded this in all Bikini Kill concerts: “The more girls up front the better... and if anybody is fucking with you at this show because of certain reasons, and you need to come up front, come up front, and come and sit on the stage and get away from them and let us know” (Marcus, 155). As a consequence, Riot Grrrls started to write about it, for example, making flyers explaining how to create a safe environment in concerts, avoiding violence, like in the mosh pits— “the area in front of the stage at a rock concert where members of the audience dance energetically and violently” (*Cambridge University Press*)—.

While enjoying the lovely sounds of Bikini KILL please remember. Things go best when the boys mosh in back! The kills strongly encourage girls/ladies/women to

⁷ The Riot Grrrl motto “Girls to the front” should not be confused with Sara Marcus’s book *Girls to The Front*, as the latter takes its title from the former one.

dance up front... The reason why we made this flier is cuz we've had to deal with a lot of violence at our shows and are trying to deal with this better. (Bikini Kill flyer, circa 1995, 170)⁸

It is visible that the language used in this flyer is completely informal, and colloquial due to several reasons: firstly, due to the use of contractions like "we've"; secondly, there are many grammar mistakes, gaps, and an incorrect use of punctuation. As Lisa Darms recalls in her *The Riot Grrrl Collection*, "no one used spell-check, but no one cared. There was an urgency to get the message out that superseded perfection" (12).

After the male domination of the punk scene, and the Rock genre in general, Riot Grrrl analysed, and portrayed the gap between genders, exemplifying the need of space for Punk women. When analysing sexism in the musical Punk scene many women from the movement tried to exemplify and analyse the chauvinistic patterns with stories, anecdotes, confessions or essays. The main goal consisted of the following: if they were able to change the sexist Punk scene, they would be able to change sexism in the society, as the first one was a reflection of the latter. On one hand, they explained the problem, expressing that the change was an urgent need. For example, "The Riot Grrrl manifesto" portrayed this issue: "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" (*Condorado Fanzine*). Moreover, a flyer from the band Heavens to Betsy, written by Tracy Sawyer and Corin Tucker, remarked that "it is so frustrating to be girls in a puke rock band and to keep banging our heads against the walls of the "alternative" scene. What is so alternative? everything in punk and alternative scenes is still owned by white men and so many of the same racist and sexist structures still exist"⁹ (1994). This message, full of frustration, transmitted a new argument to Punk women: it does not mean that because this scene belongs to the

⁸ See appendix number IV.

⁹ See appendix number VI.

underground culture is not affected by sexism and racism. It happens exactly the same as in other cultural instances, like for instance, the mainstream music.

On the other hand, there were other ways to approach the same message, for instance, using storytelling or anecdotes. By this means, they facilitated the understanding of the problem by women who were not aware of it, looking after one another. This approach connected different situations or stories in order to provide a reliable explanation about a certain issue. For instance, the *Bikini Kill* zine ¹⁰, in this case, written by Tobi Vail, exemplifies an evening with a male band, all of them friends, which made her feel the gender roles, as an example of male superiority in the music scene:

If you look at the fact that most bands are mostly or all guys and then you look at how if you are a girl who is hanging out with a band you have less say then they do because everything is totally based on what their band is doing that you start to see how the whole thing is sort of structured to make girls feel dumb. (41)¹¹

The message consisted of the verbalization of the necessity of building a female Punk scene. Vail recalls: “I spent way too much time trying to figure out how to fit in to the guy scene instead of realizing that my band and my songs and my whole thing was just as cool, just as interesting, just as valid, just as important as theirs.” This anecdote is connected also with Yoko Ono’s story, considering that she experienced gender oppression and sexist attitudes, still present by the time of the Riot Grrrls.

Overall, sexism in the underground culture was a topic very discussed by the Riot Grrrls as male and female groups coexisted in that scene. The fight against it caused a response, reflected in zines, flyers, and shows. Moreover, the Riot Grrrl’s motto “Girls to the front” was used by those who rejected violence and male domination of the stage. These

¹⁰ All fanzines and flyers that appear from now on have been consulted in the book *The Riot Grrrl Collection* published by the Feminist Press in 2013. In addition, this material can be consulted in the appendix.

¹¹ See appendix number IX.

responses searched for a female Punk space, reinforcing their power by expressing their problems in the same scene which was causing them. The conclusion reached by many of them was: “underground music can be really just as oppressive, and in a lot of the same way even, as anything else” (*Bikini Kill* zine 1, 41). This message was constantly spread among women of the Punk scene to make them aware of the different sexist issues which existed in their circle.

2.3 The Visibility of Sexual Abuse & Street Harassment

Nowadays, in the second decade of the twentieth-first century, women have started to draw attention to sexual abuse, rape, and street harassment making the society aware of it in press and social media. However, in the early nineties, sexual abuse was not visible, it was hidden like a taboo, and, as a result, women did not have the resources to express their opinions about it in open spaces, or in the public sphere. It was not even mentioned in art or music. The Riot Grrrl scene, nevertheless, converted these hidden personal stories into a real public discourse. However, there are not many fanzines published from those days which show these issues as the movement respected the intimacy surrounding these personal stories. Concerning this issue, I am going to show and analyse mostly songs, following the same ethics about respecting others personal stories of sexual abuse. Nevertheless, there were some fanzines which tackled these issues without reflecting a personal story of abuse, or without mentioning it in a direct way.

To begin with, nowadays vocabulary is more specific, because there are many terms in the field of “inappropriate sexual behaviour”, for instance, the concepts of sexual abuse, rape, sexual assault, and sexual harassment. These concepts may be different in terms of law, and of course they have different legal qualification; however, each and every of them threaten the freedom and rights of women in every field, not only in the streets but also in

their marriages, in their work and in other contexts, exactly in the same way. That is why, I am going to use different terms without downplaying the significance of each event, as it is common to think that rape, for instance, is the most serious crime of all, even though every victim of sexual harassment has to overcome similar psychological traumas.

As part of the Riot Grrrl agenda, sexual abuse, rape or sexual harassment was present as well in the seventh paragraph of the “Riot Grrrl Manifesto”—*Bikini Kill* zine 2—: “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 mum or the girl you sat next to on the bus last Tuesday, and she might be dead by the time you finish reading this. I am not making this up.” In this statement, the tone is perfectly chosen in order to transmit the urgency and concern about sexual abuse or rape, and the request to other women to become part of the fight. Hanna¹², in this case, chooses a strategy based on fear and chaos. This fear is noticeable expressed due to the use of very graphic words, such as “blood”, or even the word “rape”. Society normally censors this concrete word, thus making this problem invisible, as if it did not exist. That was why the Riot Grrrls used the word rape constantly in their writing, and in a very graphic way, for instance painting it in their own bodies. Besides, the use of real situations, like the ones used in the manifesto, make the reader feel urgency throughout empath with anybody suffering a situation like that.

As said before, rape was expressed by referring to personal stories of young victims of sexual abuse. For example, it is remarkable the number of stories of incest, like one published in *Girl Germs* zine 3. As a whole, the Riot Grrrl collective considered the lack of visibility of these matters, and for this reason they produced a huge amount of punk music related to sexual harassment and rape. Several examples of songs concerning physical abuse, sexual abuse and rape are listed below.

¹² Kathleen Hanna explains in a 2013 interview that she was in charge of writing “The Riot Grrrl Manifesto” in 1991. This should be clear up, as we know that the fanzine *Bikini Kill* was written by Toby Vail and Kathy Wilcox as well, all of them from the band Bikini Kill.

The song “Suck My Left One” by Bikini Kill, from the album *Revolution Girl Style Now!*, refers to issues such as incest. For instance, the lines below show clearly a concrete incestuous father-daughter situation:

Daddy comes into her room at night

He's got more than talking on his mind

My sister pulls the covers down

She reaches over, flicks on the light

The fact that these lines are recounted by a third person narrator gives the audience a feeling of anguish, as the narrator would be a mere witness, not the victim. A feeling of helplessness is neatly transmitted as well by the way the song is narrated, step by step, evoking the slowness of each action, without taking part in it. Paradoxically, the word “daddy” resembles childhood, as if the poetic voice or “witness” would be a child. The website *Vocabulary.com* explains and defines the use of the word “daddy” as:

Many young children call their fathers daddy, and the word is believed to come from baby talk, or the initial sounds — da da — that a baby or toddler tends to make when she's first learning to speak. It's less common for a grown person to call her dad daddy, although some people use the childish nickname throughout their lives.

In addition, according to the writer and activist Mark Anderson, who explains in *Dance of Days* the atmosphere in a Bikini Kill show, he reported that “this performance of the song carried a sense of triumph, while it evoked street harassment and abuse” (335). Despite the song clearly recounts a story of abuse and incest, for many people these lyrics were representing all types of abuse, as an anthem for surviving victims of sexual harassment.

Street harassment was also an issue highlighted in the Riot Grrrls' discourse. There were many fanzines focused on the fear experienced in the streets by young and old women. In fact, the fanzine *Girl Germs 3* exposes it in a poem entitled “Maybe You Should Take All

This”¹³: “Fear of becoming the next statistic / Streets that seem so safe at day / At night take on a meaning I’ve learn to hate” (37)¹⁴. This poem reflects the potential dangers and the fear and loneliness that women experience in the streets, when walking at night. This similar fear is reflected as well in the first example above. This is how two different situations—one lived in the streets, publicly, and the other at home, privately—are shaped by the same factor: male physical superiority over women either in the public or in the private sphere. This feeling of impunity, treating women as if they were a property, is also part of the Riot Grrrl discourse. As a result, the key concept ‘fear’, often expressed by women who experienced dangerous situations, is continuously present in the aforementioned poem, in fact it is repeated at the end of each stanza, by using the word “threatening”.

Another example of street harassment is present in a Fugazi’s¹⁵ song called “Suggestion” from the homonymous album *Fugazi*. The very first lines of this song start with several questions. This interrogative tone is present throughout the song, though, in this particular case, it is more explicit and more visible than in other occasions. The reason why this happens is due to the fact that, from the very beginning, they try to emphasize the main theme, which is street harassment, and to convey its didactic message to the audience:

Why can't I walk down a street free of suggestion?

Is my body the only trait in the eye's of men?

I've got some skin

You want to look in there?

The lyrics begin with a first-person singular narrator, visible due to the repetition of the pronoun “I.” However, the rest of the song mixes different voices. For instance, the fourth stanza starts with the plural form of the first person “we”: “We sit back like they taught us /

¹³ See appendix number VII.

¹⁴ In this case, the fanzine *Girl Germs* 3 is numbered.

¹⁵ Fugazi was a punk rock and hardcore Washington D.C. band. It was very recognizable in the Riot Grrrl DC area due to its involvement and support in the movement with the lead singer’s (Ian MacKaye) record label, Dischord.

We keep quiet like they taught us... We don't want anyone to mind us.” The use of different voices corresponds to the undisputable didacticism of the lyrics. In fact, the use of the singular form would be the voice of the victim, and the use of the plural form would correspond to the voice of the audience, the witnesses, or the society’s point of view. The message of this song would be the silence of the victims of sexual harassment and sexual abuse, who often suffer without the help of the others, and the lack of involvement against the sexual molesters, together with the lack of support to victims of abuse. Precisely for that reason, the end of the song finishes with these two lines which condemn not only the molesters, but contemporary society as a whole: “We blame her for being there / But, we are all guilty.” This statement is addressing everybody who may be turning a blind eye to the violence, aggressiveness and hate towards women. Besides, it also condemns the fact that the society normally judges abused victims instead of judging the guilty ones, for this reason, the last line of the song blames the former ones.

Apart from that, the narrative of this song was controversial among Riot Grrrls as Fugazi was an all-male band exposing sexual harassment from a first-person point of view, simulating the role of the victim. On the one hand, the decision of choosing sexual harassment as an issue by an all-male band could result in an act of solidarity with women, the same support that Riot Grrrls expressed in their fanzines and music. On the other hand, some Riot Grrrls saw this concrete activist action as a kind of an appropriation of female activism towards sexual harassment. The fact that they composed a song considering this issue was not taken seriously because, obviously, they had not a direct experience of what they were talking about. As Marcus explains, “it had begun to sound to some *riot grrrls* like a self-righteous white boy appropriating girls’ issues so he could appear more virtuous...To find their own voices, they felt, they couldn’t accept anyone else’s attempts to do it for them” (116-117).

In conclusion, Riot Grrrls created their own discourse, exposing issues—sexual harassment, rape, or incest among others—that were once hidden due to society’s prejudices, which only helped the guilty and blame the victim. This group of women was reinforced until reaching the status of community: “A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common” (*Oxford University Press*). This “particular characteristic” was, in this case, the abuse and fear suffered by the victims of any type of sexual abuse. The tool used to support one another was the fanzines, together with the music itself. This bond of unity was relevant to help women who were suffering these issues, in addition, the rage and authenticity of their stories are neatly reflected in the explicit content of those lyrics and compositions.

2.4 The Dilemma of Ethnicity Between Riot Grrrls

While the Riot Grrrls spread girl support, unity, and anger towards the same issues, there was a part of the movement which could not get much representation. This part of the community was formed by Asian and black women. These women wanted to fight against sexism, but towards racism as well. The fact that the movement was based on the struggle of *some*¹⁶ women was not enough for the other sector, who shared their thoughts in their fanzines expressing a feeling of isolation within the collective. Even though there were many fanzines focused on racism—like *Bamboo Girl* or *Chop Suey*, among others—I have chosen the fanzine *Gunk*, number 4¹⁷. This zine written by Ramdasha Bikceem circa 1993 presented her thoughts about racism as much as they were present in the Riot Grrrl movement, the Punk Rock scene, and the overall society.

¹⁶ My emphasis.

¹⁷ See appendix number XII-XX.

As explained in chapter 1.2.1, the Third-wave feminism was intersectional, a term that Kimberlé Crenshaw¹⁸ coined in 1989. As the webpage *IWDA* (International Women’s Development Agency) explains, professor Crenshaw “saw that gender and race were looked at as completely separate issues. To Crenshaw, studying them in isolation to each other made no sense.” This theory was supported, and one of the foundations of the Third-wave, as well as part of the Riot Grrrls principles. However, this collective condemned racism, and “white privilege”—as many of them called it—the majority of these women belonged to white middle class which did not live under certain racist circumstances. As a consequence, some black and Asian Riot Grrrls complained about the fact that race was not part of their discourse, and that they did not have a space for it in their movement. The chapter “Remapping the Resonances of Riot Grrrl: Feminisms, Postfeminisms, and “Processes” of Punk”—*Interrogating Postfeminism: Gender and the Politics of Popular Culture*—written by Anna Feigenbaum affirms that:

“Middle class whiteness often subsumed all social difference without much interrogation, leaving out or glossing over the experiences of many young punk women of color. However, these critiques were often levelled from within the community, and many women critiquing the movement identified themselves with it or in proximity to it. (142)

This atmosphere created chaos and uncertainty among the Riot Grrrls. The fanzine *Gunk 4* is proof of this dilemma. Bikceem, who was 17 years old when she wrote this zine, exposes the difficulty, elaborating on the fact that there was no space for other ethnic groups. This fanzine is written as a type of diary about the author’s life, in which Bikceem narrates in a natural way some trips, and also some routine events introducing her deep thoughts, ideas, and critics about more serious issues. The first line which establishes another type of tone in

¹⁸ “Professor at Columbia Law School directs the Center for Intersectionality and Social Policy Studies and is a co-founder of the African American Policy Forum” (*Columbia Law School*)

her narrative is provoked by the exposition of the race issue in the Punk and Riot Grrrl scene. This line changes radically the positive, even relaxed tone in which humour was constantly present, by turning progressively into some kind of sarcasm: "I'm laughing so hard it doesn't look like I'm laughing anymore..." And later she continues with "I used to laugh at this whole white bread punk rock scene, but now I'm not laughing as much as I'm getting more annoyed." (153)

The situation which provoked Bikceem emotions towards the attitude of Riot Grrrls took place in the "Riot Grrrl Convention" in the summer '92. The author explains her trip to Washington D.C. day by day, writing in a critical tone towards the racist and violent male Punk scene, accompanied by the feelings that she experienced in a community completely formed by white women.

Bikceem's story is realistic and objective as she recounts the good and bad moments of the convention, also referring to the different interesting people she met there. An interesting point is the one focused on the African American and the Punk community, distinguishing them as two different groups and pointing out, however, the similarities between them at the same time: "I think that my friend Betty was telling me that somebody said that punx¹⁹ were the "white niggers". What exactly does this mean? I guess it means that punx, like African Americans often reflect what a lot of people don't want to see. They don't want to see the result of their oppressive society." (153) Bikceem, points out that African Americans and punks share a similar attitude towards social discrimination. The term "white nigger" refers to this similarity, as the author explains:

Punx are revolting against a society that has repressed personal expression, which has intern resulted in the way of a lot of them (us???) act... Whereas in the case of African Americans their (our????) oppression has resulted in poverty, lack of

¹⁹ The term "punx" belongs to slang and it is used as the plural form of "punk."

education, and low self-images. But what this concept of “white nigger” fails to realize is that white punx couldn’t possibly come close to the stigma that is attached and associated with African Americans. (153)

As explained in chapter 1.2.2, normally outcasts see themselves identified with the Punk community finding in it the help to overcome different setbacks. However, these communities—African American and Punk—have different goals. African Americans normally do not fit in the punk community due to the type of social fights they carry out, considering that the Punk movement is mostly based on white middle-class issues. The fact that punk ideology defends the rights of the working-class and the minorities at risk may be confusing, simply because, generally speaking, they do not include black people as part of the foundation of the movement. In fact, it was carried out by whites who are unable to fight against issues that were not affecting them directly.

This summer convention in D.C. is famous for its problem with racism. Some white Riot Grrrls who attended the event were not open about race issues. Blacks and Asians complained about the fact that there was not space in the Riot Grrrl’s discourse for those race issues, and, as a result, the movement philosophy would be addressed to the white middle class only. Bikceem explains that there was a workshop about racism the third day of the convention, however, she concludes that it was not “effective” at all: “it wasn’t too effective, but really how could it have been if it was filled up with mostly all white girls. One girl I spoke to after the meetings said that Asian girls were blaming all the white girls for racism and that she just “couldn’t handle that”. Ever heard of the word Guilt???” (156)

Aesthetically speaking, the graphics inserted in this fanzine could help to transmit the message in an easier and more direct way. As Bikceem states, “I was so excited about doing a ‘zine that I kinda forget that it also has to be intelligible.” The aesthetic is a very symbolic one, as can be deduced from the chaotic design chosen by the author. The design resembles a

newspaper column, with only two colours, black and white. The colours are also relevant and symbolic to the issue discussed by Bikceem, the racism within the scene. The black colour could be interpreted as a response to the term “people of color”; bringing black colour to the surface, empowering it, instead of hiding it. Besides, the newspaper layout would reflect some kind of urgency, transmitting the relevance of this particular piece of news, conveying the reader the idea of something that had to be read in a precise and very conscious way. This difficulty of reading reminds us of the concept of “read between lines”, when the real message seems to be hidden or implicit. What it looks like a normal diary encapsulates, in fact, an important message.

It is important to emphasize that several white members of the Riot Grrrls disagreed about the racist attitude in that convention. In fact, the band Heavens to Betsy gave their opinion and tried to instruct those girls about racism, warning others to pay more attention to this issue: “we often centered on white middle class sexism and white middle class girls and therefore excluded women of color and white working class women’s issues from our discussions. I think our discussions about racism and white privilege were important, but we have a long way to go.” (241)²⁰ This problem, together with several lies, and the often-biased approach to the Riot Grrrl community by the press, were some of the factors which provoked the decay of the movement.

Moreover, in the field of music, Heavens to Betsy²¹ also published in 1994, in the album entitled *Calculated*, a song called “White Girl.” This song is the most representative of all those reporting racism. In this song, every single line addresses the Riot Grrrls to induce them to include the issue of racism as a relevant one in their discourse: “I want to change the world / But I won’t change anything / Unless I change my racist self.” According to this song, the first step of this process would be the deconstruction of every racist pattern acquired in

²⁰ See appendix number VI.

²¹ Important Riot Grrrl band and a perfect example of a temporary project as they only published one record. The lead singer, Corin Tucker, also founded the band Sleater-Kinneyr.

the past. All in all, what these lines point out is that normally everybody—sometimes unconsciously— produce racist patterns, as racism is part of our contemporary society the same sexism is.

Finally, Afro-American and Asian women from the Riot Grrrl collective reported and condemned the Riot Grrrl lack of involvement in racial inclusion. These women did not have the chance to stay quiet as long as the movement recognized their right to be part of their agenda, fighting equally against sexism and racism. This dilemma grew among white Riot Grrrls, nevertheless, it is important to clear up that there were many of them who supported this initiative. The reason why there was a problem of inclusion or mutual understanding could be split into two. Perhaps this dilemma was part of an internal racist problem among the Riot Grrrls; or perhaps the movement was not racist in itself, it had just been born in a concrete context, formed by white women only, who obviously have not the same difficulties as black or Asian women.

3 Decadence & Influence

The internal problems—like the lack of diversity in the Riot Grrrl discourse, previously explained in chapter 2.4— together with other difficulties, were among the issues which provoked the decline of the movement. As a result, it became unstable and fragile. The main factor that provoked decadence was probably the harmful role of the media, which, more often than not, portrayed a fake image of the scene in order to make it fit into mainstream culture. The appearance of the Riot Grrrls in the press was due to the increase of Grunge's popularity as a common trend among teenagers, something the media tried to expand to the Riot Grrrls. This type of popularity did not coincide with the Riot Grrrl ideology, provoking an internal crisis among the members: some of them supported the media blackout while others disagreed about it. Despite the decay of the movement, which took place in just a few

years, their influence on female feminist musicians around the world has been very significant in the last few decades.

Thanks to the Riot Grrrls, an aesthetic and artistic tendency has influenced many others in the underground culture. Later, bands like Sleater-Kinney, the Distillers, or Gossip among others, were born. Even far from the US—in Eastern Europe and South America—there are bands which are inspired by the Riot Grrrl’s values and aesthetic. But above all, almost thirty years later, we can say that the Riot Grrrls have contributed to many artists from the 21st century. The best example is probably the feminist punk collective Pussy Riot²² formed in Russia in 2011. This collective is well-known for acting politically against every problematic sign of inequality, protecting feminism, the LGBT community or civil rights. These women are easily recognized for their peculiar way of acting, showing always a powerful and challenging attitude. As everybody knows, they strongly support the feminist fight in their shows, often by displaying anti-Putin messages, and using a specific explicit language, wearing unconventional clothes, dancing, and even playing videos, to spread their message.

Nowadays, the Riot grrrl punk is drifting towards hip hop rhythms, accompanied by mixers and samplers. In fact, Riot Grrrl attitude— “angry grrrl sound”— is currently present in other music genres such as Hip Hop and Trap. The weight of this feminist philosophy has passed on to this type of genre which is led by a youth urban community that feels socially angry. For instance, there are young female musicians like Princess Nokia²³ who reminds us

²² Three members of the feminist group were arrested and sent to prison in 2012 due to an illegal performance of a punk song in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, in Moscow. The song denounced Putin non-laic state. The members were charged with hooliganism.

²³ As the *Music and Riots Magazine* affirmed in one of its articles of 2018: “Princess Nokia – Destiny Frasqueri – continues her path to world domination as the emo rap queen chanteuse that deserves everyone’s attention. A constant source of inspiration for Black and Brown teens who like emo and punk, who are slightly off-the-wall, and are often labeled as the “alternative type,” Princess Nokia’s music serves as a safe haven for the weird ones who often feel alienated for being different.” This description of the artist’s style coincides with the main attitude of the Riot Grrrls, resembling difficulties derived from the ethnic minorities of the punk scene.

of the Riot Grrrl explicit or implicit messages in her shows: “Just make us sure that ladies are safe” (Boiler Room, 0.17).

Apart from the artistic influence on Punk music, it is visible the Riot Grrrl’s philosophy in 21st century discourses, namely in phenomena such as “8 M”²⁴ in Spain, or the “#Me Too” movement, mostly developed through the social media. The philosophy focused on voicing and denouncing sexual abuse or gender-based violence that Riot Grrrls once reported is now out in the streets, gathering women together exactly against the same issue.

In conclusion, the sound has changed, but the message is preserved, although it is obvious that times are different. Paradoxically, the negative reputation created by the media has contributed in a positive recognition of the Riot Grrrl movement by younger generations, renewing their image and attitude, adjusting them to the current times. Riot Grrrls have contributed as well to the creation of a new discourse based on public denounces reflected currently in the social media, promoting street protests and demonstrations that gathered together women from around the world. The artistic, musical and political contributions of the punk scene are nowadays taken up by younger generations, using different communication tools, such as the internet, leaving aside the famous Riot Grrrl’s word of mouth, but preserving their message and philosophy.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have analysed some of the different issues tackled by the Riot Grrrl collective over the decade of 1990. As previously noted, I have only chosen some of the most relevant issues due to the limited extension of this essay. Nevertheless, there were multiple discussions about other social struggles like the rights of the LGBT collective, the pro-sex

24 March 8th: International Women’s day. This day has become of great interest in Spain due to the number of cases of male violence against women under the unfair laws that protect them, together with numerous cases of gender inequality. In 2019 there were over 550,000 attendants to these demonstrations in the cities of Madrid and Barcelona.

philosophy of the Riot Grrrls, environmentalism, the rights of animals or Veganism and vegetarianism, among others. This scene was, in fact, a centre for activism, fighting against gender inequality, but also fighting to help other minority groups at risk.

Riot Grrrl saved and helped young women in a society that concealed their truth to calm the guilt of those who restricted their freedom at some point. This group condemned the guilty, but, above all, developed actions in order to assist the victims. Its agenda was marked by the activist philosophy, sometimes ignoring the artistic and musical weight to help the others. Their action provided protection and shelter, and also, initiated a new era as much in the feminist movement as in the underground music scene, thus starting the Third-wave of feminism. They were able to use punk ideology as a reflection of a sexist society.

Despite their positive achievements, the movement did also suffer its own internal battles. Their values did not fit everybody's necessities, and their broad-minded feminist perspective that was at the beginning based on basic feminist fight evolved as the movement grew to tackle more arduous issues, such as class and race. Perhaps the fact that this scene was constructed in a rather improvised way provoked some kind of confusion in people who did not take part in it from the very beginning.

The way they acted as a collective set up a new and innovative system, as they obeyed their punk ideology with its freedom of choice and lack of hierarchy. This system was, maybe, the reason why the movement did not last much, as nobody seemed to be able to take control of the ever-growing public agenda. Nevertheless, the contributions they made, like the thousands of fanzines—collected nowadays in museums and libraries—and the aesthetic influence on many 21st century musicians, artists, and feminists, can be considered of great relevance to the underground scene. But above all, the fact that this influential scene was created within a group of friends emphasizes the idea that they were always interested in transmitting authenticity, beyond their socio-political or artistic perspectives.

Nowadays, the Riot Grrrl alternative philosophy is protected, collected and studied mainly by scholars. The information available about this collective is not very extensive, nevertheless, the number of thesis and essays analysing the movement's action in the early '90s can be considered rather relevant. From the ideological point of view, there is no doubt that they have created a solid discourse and a powerful aesthetic, as it is reflected in their fanzines and songs. Despite their agenda was quite innovative in 1990, nowadays some of their values would be regarded as being outdated. However, analysing their material for this essay I have come to the conclusion that women's vulnerable situation in the '90s, as it was depicted by this movement, is by no means very different from today's. I wonder if the world still needs a 21st century Riot Grrrl Revolution in order to fight against women's vulnerability, from male chauvinist violence to everyday *micromachismos*²⁵.

²⁵ Small-scale male chauvinism or everyday sexism that is not perceived because it is practically inserted in the contemporary society.

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Appendix
