

Riot Grrrl as Rhetorical Intervention

The Construction of Girlhood in the 1990s

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Kathleen Hanna's "Riot Grrrl Manifesto" from *Bikini Kill Zine 2* and "The Glory On Highway 69" from the zine *Girl Germs* are two texts that emerged amid the male-dominated punk music culture. These texts gave rise to a subculture full of women who sought to challenge patriarchal expectations of gender, reject the normalization of abuse, and foster alternative spaces for women to share their experiences without fear of censorship. I will analyze how these texts helped cultivate the Riot Grrrl movement by applying Bitzer's theory of the rhetorical situation, Palczewski's theory of publics, and Fraser's theory of counterpublics to understand the material's role in the movement's foundation. Self-proclaimed Riot Grrrls thoughtfully communicated their doctrine through zines, a non-mainstream and self-published form of media, thereby enabling networks of solidarity that helped create a shared feminist consciousness and identity among Riot Grrrls. These two texts preserve political ideology that speaks directly to the beginning of Riot Grrrl, and the agent of communication, the zine itself, functions as a political entity.

Kathleen Hanna's "Riot Grrrl Manifesto," published in *Bikini Kill Zine 2*, explicitly states the motives, demands, and cultural ideals that the Riot Grrrl movement was founded on. Hanna's call to action outlines the urgent need for unfiltered feminist dialogue that had not previously been accessible to women in the punk music community. She believes this is accomplishable through self-published zines to ensure the sanctity and safety of fellow Riot Grrrls in sharing their experiences and desires. Hanna wrote, "BECAUSE viewing our work as being connected to our girlfriends-politics-real lives is essential if we are gonna figure out how what we are doing impacts, reflects, perpetuates, or DISRUPTS the status

quo.”¹ Intertwining the constraints of these women’s real lives with the need for collective political action in their subculture is the manifesto’s primary goal: to radicalize others to resist the dominant, misogynistic culture of punk that has silenced these women.

Girl Germs was foundational to the Riot Grrrl movement because it developed a space for dialogue among Riot Grrrls, not exclusive to the physical realms of punk. Molly Neuman’s zine, *Girl Germs*, exemplifies the conversations about identity, sexual liberation, and power that Riot Grrrls contributed to zines. *Girl Germs* features artwork, testimonies, and handwritten notes from readers and the zine’s founders that highlight the unfiltered feminist narrative forming at the time. This form of grassroots communication was community-building in that it created a space where women could understand their personal accounts in relation to a broader feminist critique of patriarchy in the early 1990s. One contributor wrote, “I never knew that punk rock was anything but a phallic extension of the white middle-class male’s frustrations.”² Sexism was inherent within the punk culture, and women knew that the scene was not fostered with a space for them in mind. *Girl Germs* demonstrated to readers that their internal struggles with finding belonging in a subculture that did not carve out space for them were significant in reshaping punk music and, ultimately, re-defining female identity in the third wave of feminism.

In analyzing the Riot Grrrl movement as a series of rhetorical acts, I will apply Lloyd Bitzer’s theory to examine the sociopolitical conditions that prompted the movement. Bitzer’s concept of the “rhetorical situation,” as defined by his 1968 text, hypothesizes that the existence of rhetorical discourse responds to preexisting conditions of the rhetorical situation.³ My analysis follows the origins and development of the Riot Grrrl movement by demonstrating how the discourse executes three components of Bitzer’s framework: the exigence, the audience, and the constraints. Bitzer argues that the rhetorical situation presents itself when an exigence emerges that demands a response. The exigence is characterized by its sense of urgency, abnormality, and deficiency, functioning as the emergency that is imposed on the audience.⁴ The audience consists of those capable of being affected by the exigence and who can take the action needed to solve the exigence. Bitzer acknowledges that there are constraints, tangible and ideological, that inhibit the amount of action and means of communication that the audience can exert, immediately or in time, to resolve the exigence.⁵ Through applying Bitzer’s framework, the Riot Grrrl movement’s inception can be un-

1 Kathleen Hanna, “Riot Grrrl Manifesto,” *Bikini Kill Zine* 2, 1991, www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/riotgrrrlmanifesto.html.

2 Molly Neuman et al., “The Glory on Highway 69,” *GIRL GERMS*, 1992, 22.

3 Lloyd F. Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” *Philosophy & Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (1968): 2, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40236733>.

4 Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” 8.

5 Bitzer, “The Rhetorical Situation,” 8.

derstood by examining how its dialogue responded to sociopolitical exigencies through the zines and lyricism, which I am evaluating as deliberate rhetorical acts against the sexist conditions of the punk community.

Bitzer's recognition of constraints amplifies the effectiveness of analyzing Riot Grrrl through a theoretical lens that concentrates on the marginalization of communities. To expand on this idea, I will implement Palczewski, Fritch, and Ice's theory of publics and Nancy Fraser's theory of counterpublics to study how Riot Grrrl facilitated the dialogue that attracted the mainstream media. Publics, as defined in *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, are "formed by people coming together to discuss common concerns, including concerns about who they are and what they should do, and as a result constructing social reality together."⁶ This theory clarifies how the social reality that constructed the punk scene facilitated the evolution of the Riot Grrrl as a counterpublic. Fraser defines counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, which in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs."⁷ Through the lens of Bitzer's rhetorical situation, it is possible to identify where and when people began to come together, who they were, and the common concerns that united them. However, Fraser's concept of counterpublics is more accurate to the historical context of Riot Grrrl as a critique of mainstream norms. Viewing Riot Grrrl as a counterpublic is a testimony to the dialogues being held in this rhetorical space about identity formation.

In relation to Bitzer's rhetorical situation, the exigence that prompted Riot Grrrl's emergence is very clearly stated in early zines, particularly *Girl Germs*. Created by Bratmobile singers Molly Neuman and Allison Wolfe, *Girl Germs* was an outlet for political activism, personal stories of abuse, and community-building through segments to which readers can contribute their own writing. The zine explains that "the idea was formulated by several female Olympians, who saw an opportunity to demarginalize the role of girls in the convention and punk rock."⁸ The "idea" refers to the very origin of the movement—an event known as Girls' Night, which took place on August 20, 1991, in response to the marginalization of women in the punk scene of Olympia, Washington. The early 1990s were an era when women were forced to congregate in corners of punk spaces as spectators and "groupies." Girls' Night was the first intentional opportunity for women to perform their own music on stage and participate in the audience as autonomous contributors to punk culture. Punk women demanded that they were no longer viewed as extensions of their boyfriends or male bandmates. This event, as interpreted through the lens of Bitzer's concept of exigence, marks the

6 Catherine Helen Palczewski et al., *Rhetoric in Civic Life* (United States: Strata Publishing, 2022), 266.

7 Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," *Social Text*, no. 25/26 (1990): 67, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466240>.

8 Neuman et al., "The Glory on Highway 69," 22.

critical conditions that provoked Riot Grrrl's rhetorical intervention.

Applying Bitzer's concept of constraint within the rhetorical situation allows me to analyze Riot Grrrl's contributions to the third wave of feminism and understand why the movement eventually dissipated over time. The central constraint was the movement's lack of intersectionality. Riot Grrrl was created to address the exigencies of white, cisgender women. Bitzer's concept of the audience is identifiable as cisgender white women because the political activism did not give platforms to transgender women or women of color. For example, the "Sista Grrrl Riot" scene developed to provide black girls, who felt excluded in this predominantly white scene, an opportunity to participate in Riot Grrrl's activism and cultural practices. Critiques also appeared within the movement itself. Heavens to Betsy critiqued the white feminism of Riot Grrrl in a song titled "White Girl", which confronts Riot Grrrl's appeal to white guilt activism, rather than advocating for racial justice and inclusion. As feminism transitioned into the fourth wave, its focus broadened to examine how racism, sexism, transphobia, and other systems of oppression intersect. The conversations about intersectionality transformed how young women fought for sexual liberation.

Analyzing the formation of the Riot Grrrl movement by applying Palczewski, Fritch, and Ice's theory of publics clarifies how Kathleen Hanna's "Riot Grrrl Manifesto" established a space for understanding girlhood as a political experience in America, which I am analyzing as the deliberate construction of a social reality. Hanna's manifesto explicitly outlines the demands of Riot Grrrl, contending that young women need a discursive space where their concerns and experiences are not overshadowed by men in the punk scene. Hanna's statement that "[Riot Grrrls] must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings" highlights zine production as a means by which young women can define their identities without external interpretation.⁹ According to Palczewski, Fritch, and Ice, publics are formed by people who come together intentionally to construct social reality through shared concern.¹⁰ Interpreting the manifesto through this lens, I believe it positions itself as a foundational text in building an alternative feminist punk culture. Through the framework of Nancy Fraser's theory of counterpublics, this dialogic space can also function as an oppositional sphere that challenges the male-centered dominant culture of punk, which is what causes Hanna to envision a reality where girlhood is fully integrated into punk culture.

Relating Fraser's theory of counterpublics to Riot Grrrl's development reveals how Kathleen Hanna explicitly states what Fraser called the "oppositional interpretation of their identities, interests, and needs" in the "Riot Grrrl Manifesto."¹¹ Hanna said that Riot Grrrls "seek to create revolution in our own lives every

9 Hanna, "Riot Grrrl Manifesto."

10 Palczewski et al., *Rhetoric in Civic Life*, 266.

11 Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere," 67.

single day by envisioning and creating alternatives to the bullshit Christian capitalist way of doing things.”¹² In this context, I am examining the dominant public as the Christian capitalist society that forces patriarchal norms onto young women. Riot Grrrl, by rejecting its values and building its own communicative space, functions as a counterpublic that is an alternative cultural sphere fostering identity formation devoid of patriarchal expectations. Hanna’s excerpt frames Riot Grrrl as a methodical political force aimed at disrupting the culturally prescribed implications of girlhood. Rather than accepting the identities imposed on them by their oppressors, Riot Grrrls insist on defining themselves with their own words.

Riot Grrrl’s self-representations in their own published alternative media do not fully align with the mainstream media’s coverage of their agenda and work. During the early 1990s, as the dominant culture grappled with the transition between the second and third wave of feminism, popular magazines introduced the underground world of zines to a much larger audience, sparking discussions about feminist identity on a much broader scale. In this next section, I examine how scholars analyze the mainstream media engagement with zine culture and the ways that the Riot Grrrl’s communications were distorted when filtered through mainstream channels of communication.

In the early 1990s, the dominant public began to reflect on the cultural and political legacy of the feminist movements of the past few decades. This period witnessed the mainstream media’s ever-changing attitudes toward content that was identified as feminist and their role in specifying which ideologies qualified as feminist. A pivotal point for feminism occurred in 1991 when Anita Hill’s testimony against Judge Clarence Thomas was nationally televised. This display of resistance against sexual harassment and gender inequality exposed to the public the urgencies of feminist politics. Gemma Griffiths noted, “reports that offered up the 1990s as the so-called ‘post-feminist age’ either prematurely celebrated that feminism had fully achieved its aims or suggested that feminism had in some way failed.”¹³ Mainstream media outlets of this time translated elaborate feminist concepts into naïve personal narratives that misrepresented to audiences the complexities of feminist activism and desires. Feminists that were coming of age during this trial understood that second wave of feminism had not failed in its ideals, but the discourse needed to transform to address the growing conditions that shaped women’s lives in the United States. The polarization between those who regarded feminism as gratuitous and the emerging generation of young feminists who aimed to expand the movement influenced the decade’s cultural politics.

The media’s postfeminist lens believed that feminism was a bygone era in politics, but also acknowledged that there is now a group of young women that

12 Hanna, “Riot Grrrl Manifesto.”

13 Gemma Griffiths, “The Politics and Aesthetics of 1990s Punk Women’s Writing: Reading Riot Grrrl after Kathy Acker and Against the Anti-Feminist Backlash,” *LJMU Research Online* (2020): 22, <https://researchonline.ljmu.ac.uk/id/eprint/13180/>.

face new responsibilities in the capitalist society, producing a cultural fascination with “girlhood” as a period for women before they are empowered agents within normative society. Girl revolutions in the early 1990s existed within a cultural moment that recognized the newfound construction of girlhood. Anita Harris says, “[Through] the cultural fascination with girlhood and the modes of governmentality by which their bodies, labour, and behaviour are regulated [...], young women emerged as their own phenomenon: a category [...] seen to have their own values, perspectives, and political objectives.”¹⁴ Incorporating Harris’ analysis into my understanding of girl revolutions during this time, I understand how the texts I have analyzed from the Riot Grrrl era respond to not only the existing conditions of the punk scene, but the conversations that the dominant public were holding about the agency that young women should hold.

Elaborating on the cultural attraction to girlhood, our modern-day interpretation of the young feminists’ response to the culture’s evaluation of girlhood derives from their engagement with youth-oriented magazine publications. I have studied how the Riot Grrrls recognized and documented their identities through zine coverage, but most girls across the United States did not have access to zine culture until it hit the pages of their favorite magazines. While the mainstream media outlets debated the authority and influence of girlhood in day-to-day life, publications such as *Sassy* arranged for a section called “Zine Corner” to educate young girls about the arising zine scene.¹⁵ Through this decision to inform a larger non-punk audience about the underground world of zine culture, *Sassy* guided the attention surrounding girlhood-ism toward the attestations of girls expressing themselves within that culture. Rather than being the subject of scrutiny and the gender-performance-police, zines allowed girls to dictate the narrative being pushed about their identity politics. Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garfalo identify the strain between mainstream coverage and individual self-perception saying, “Some girls have felt that the press coverage has distorted the message of Riot Grrrl, while others have felt it is just another tool to let people know about the movement.”¹⁶ The relationship between the patriarchal depiction of girlhood as promoted by the dominant culture and the lived experiences of young women underlines the prominent disconnect between the representation of girlhood and the reality of life as a young woman. That gap was filled with grassroots networks that hold space for authentic expression about identity. However, despite the distortion of the Riot Grrrl movement once it hit mainstream outlets, a broader audience was called to think about how they think about their own identities in

14 Anita Harris, “gURL Scenes and Grrrl Zines: The Regulation and Resistance of Girls in Late Modernity,” *Feminist Review* no. 75 (2003): 40, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1395861>.

15 Janice Radway, “Girl Zine Networks, Underground Itineraries, and Riot Grrrl History: Making Sense of the Struggle for New Social Forms in the 1990s and Beyond,” *Journal of American Studies* 50, no. 1 (2016): 7, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44162970>.

16 Gitana Garofalo and Jessica Rosenberg, “Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within,” *Signs* 23, no. 3 (1998): 810, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3175311>.

general. This change in cultural consciousness exhibits that the zine acted as a political agent, rebelling against dominant structures of media representation.

The dominant public's first impression of Riot Grrrl is inherently opposed to the status quo because the zine itself acts as a political entity. Comstock explains this phenomenon saying, "Composed of 'rants' against the homogenizing effects of mass culture and popular media, zines forego the grammar, layout, content, and distribution methods of conventional publication."¹⁷ Comstock recognizes that Riot Grrrl zines are comprised of young female rhetoricians re-envisioning what "girlhood" means to Americans in the 1990s, and that allows me to interpret that the disconnect between dominant media and underground zine culture stems from the radical and nonconventional methods that Riot Grrrls articulated their feminist ideals.¹⁸ The mainstream impression of Riot Grrrl was a diluted version of the movement, they believed. Once consumers embraced the slogan "girl power," the Riot Grrrl movement's activist-driven, nuanced calls to action lost credibility as they were reduced to content for a shallow capitalist vision. Lindsay Wright examines this as the movement's decline, saying, "Given the misrepresentation of Riot Grrrl in the mainstream media as well as overselling the commodified concept of girl power, Riot Grrrl's momentum appeared to slow in the mid to late 1990s."¹⁹ The excessive media coverage pulled Riot Grrrl away from its DIY punk roots, presenting how integral zines were to the core of Riot Grrrl.

Building on the sources that I have chosen to explore Riot Grrrl's relationship with mainstream media outlets, the contextual issue at hand is the strained relationship between prominent cultural beliefs about the role of women in society and underground feminist movements of the early 1990s. Scholars, such as Griffiths, Harris, and Comstock explore how feminist action during this time contradicted the portrayal of feminism as a failed political experiment. While capitalism attempted to navigate the emergence of girlhood as a social category, a new generation of feminists subverted their newfound expectations by contributing to alternative media scenes, specifically zine culture. The dynamic between mainstream media and Riot Grrrls represents how third wave feminists rejected the portrayal of girlhood as a passive phase of life, insisting that they do have sociopolitical agency in contemporary society.

The texts I have analyzed, alongside the scholarly interpretations of the Riot Grrrl movement's formation and cultural impact, demonstrate that Riot Grrrl was a deliberate act of rhetorical intervention in the cultural and political construction of girlhood in the early 1990s. The conversations held in these zines al-

17 Michelle Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks: Re-Composing Spaces of Authority, Gender, and Culture," *JAC* 21, no. 2 (2001): 384, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20866409>.

18 Comstock, "Grrrl Zine Networks," 384.

19 Lindsay Wright, "Do-It-Yourself Girl Power: An Examination of the Riot Grrrl Subculture," *James Madison Undergraduate Research Journal* (2016): 55, <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1018&context=jmurj>.

lowed young women to navigate their identities together amid the “postfeminist” era. My application of these theories from Bitzer, Palczewski and colleagues, and Fraser has allowed me to trace the conscious organization of this movement, as well as its eventual decline. I believe the most significant insight from my study is the effect of commodification on activist groups: when media corporations monetize a grassroots movement, they strip it of its authenticity and cultural power. Riot Grrrl’s trajectory exhibits how subcultures are best preserved when they remain in the hands that molded them.