

MULTIMEDIA REVIEW

“VERNACULAR THIRD WAVE DISCOURSE”: NEW WORKS ON RIOT GRRRL, GIRL ZINES, AND GIRL ROCK

by Virginia Corvid

DON'T NEED YOU: THE HERSTORY OF RIOT GRRRL. 40 mins. Directed by Kerri Koch. Produced by Urban Cowgirl Productions, 2006. DVD available for purchase: \$14.99 plus shipping, http://urbancowgirlproductions.com/uc/?page_id=3/.

Sarah Marcus, **GIRLS TO THE FRONT: THE TRUE STORY OF THE RIOT GRRRL REVOLUTION.** New York: Harper, 2010. 281p. \$14.99, ISBN 978-006180636.

Marisa Meltzer, **GIRL POWER: THE NINETIES REVOLUTION IN MUSIC.** New York: Faber & Faber, 2010. \$14.00, ISBN 978-0865479791.

Alison Piepmeier, **GIRL ZINES: MAKING MEDIA, DOING FEMINISM.** New York: New York University Press, 2009. 272p. \$22.00, ISBN 978-0814767528.

GIRLS ROCK! THE MOVIE. 89 mins. Directed by Shane King & Arne Johnson. Produced by (Your Name Here) Productions and Ro*co Films International, 2008. DVD available for purchase for home use: \$25.00 plus shipping, <http://www.girlsrockmovie.com/order>. Licensing for educational and public showings also available.

Marisa Anderson, **ROCK 'N' ROLL CAMP FOR GIRLS: HOW TO START A BAND, WRITE SONGS, RECORD AN ALBUM AND ROCK OUT!** San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2008. 191p. \$14.95, ISBN 978-0811852227.

In the early 1990s, the punk feminist movement called Riot Grrrl emerged in the United States, with hubs of significant activity in Olympia, Washington, and Washington, D.C. Combining musical performance, zine production, irreverent style, and the DIY ethos of punk, Riot Grrrl forged a feminist praxis premised upon social and personal transformation through cultural production and girl community — or, as Riot Grrrl put it, girl love and girl power. Recent scholarship has begun to examine this movement and the larger Third Wave of feminism in which it was located. Simultaneously and with significant overlap, Riot Grrrl participants have begun to document their activities and to foster

the empowerment of a new generation of girls. Like Riot Grrrl, these new offerings confront ongoing struggles with intersectionality in feminism and misrepresentation of feminism in the mainstream media. Throughout these tensions, however, the transformative power of women and girls creating culture and critiquing patriarchy remains the touchstone in these vibrant works.

For those new to the history of Riot Grrrl as a feminist musical movement, *Don't Need You*, a documentary film by Kerri Koch, offers an excellent introduction. The film features interviews with the prominent zinesters and musicians, such as Corin Tucker of Heavens to Betsy, Allison Wolfe of

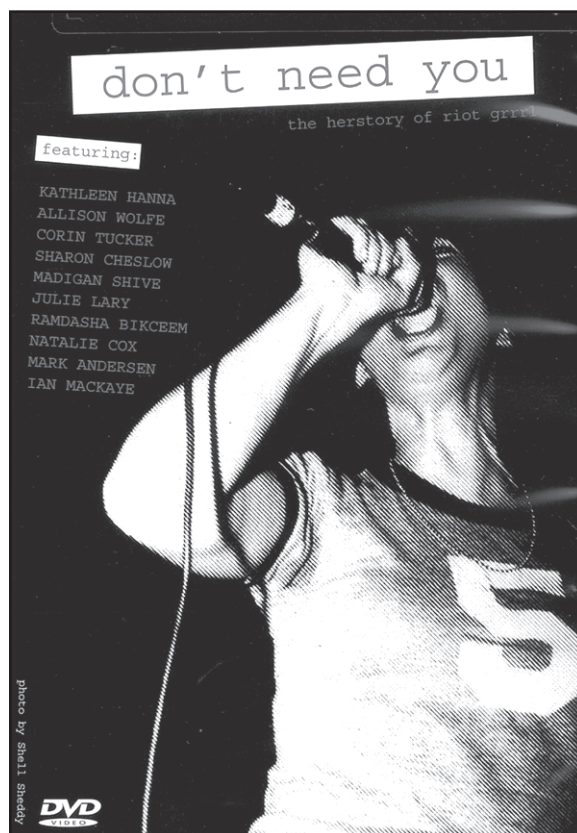
Bratmobile, Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill, Sharon Cheslow of Chalk Circle, Ramdasha Bikceem of Gunk, and Madiigan Shive of Tattle Tale.¹ Koch uses interview footage and archival materials interspersed with excerpts from the Riot Grrrl manifesto originally published in *Bikini Kill 2* to weave the fabric of the narrative.² This approach tracks individual experiences of Riot Grrrl, as well as a historical timeline of Riot Grrrl's rise to prominence and subsequent participant disillusionment relating to the movement's primarily white, middle-class participant base and trivialization in the media.

The film closes with reflections on the meaning and significance of Riot Grrrl that recuperatively position it as

a feminist movement of young female artists. With this narrative arc and material, Koch's composition not only provides a compelling introduction to Riot Grrrl, but also strikes the sensitive and informed tone necessary for conveying the story of a movement that was ideologically opposed to definition and experienced outside definition as such a negative force. Alongside the documentary, Koch provides extended interview and archival material footage in the bonus features, making the film an even greater resource for further Riot Grrrl scholarship.

For a more indepth examination of the history of Riot Grrrl, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, by Sara Marcus, delivers on its subtitle and offers a singularly comprehensive, multi-faceted account. Marcus brings a unique insider/outsider perspective to Riot Grrrl history. As she reveals at the beginning of the book, Marcus missed the early years of Riot Grrrl development but later connected to Riot Grrrl at a center of activity in Washington, D.C. Therefore, she has an intimate familiarity with Riot Grrrl feminist analyses, but also a distance from the stormiest events in Riot Grrrl's history. From this position, she relays many of the complicated and dispersed strands of Riot Grrrl history based on her familiarity and five years of research. Her account covers the bands Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Huggy Bear, as well as Riot Grrrl activity in Olympia, D.C., New York, the Twin Cities, and Omaha. Throughout, the account incorporates interviews, lyrics, and zine excerpts and positions Riot Grrrl in the context of the 1990s backlash, especially anti-abortion politics. As the

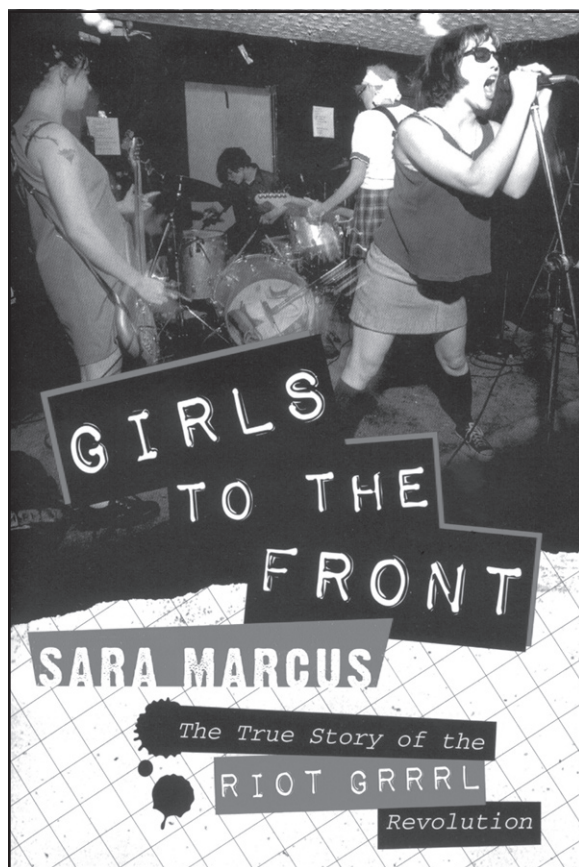
timeline unfolds, it transitions from the early centrality of punk to the later centrality of zines. The trivializing and sensationalized media fascination with Riot Grrrl and the controversial media blackout also receive indepth coverage. Although other writers have addressed these aspects of Riot Grrrl history before, Marcus brings a new level of detail and temporal development.



Girls to the Front also offers sustained attention to the focus, in Riot Grrrl, on sexual harassment, physical abuse, and sexual violence, which most previous coverage has either glossed, ignored, or actively suppressed. As Marcus demonstrates, the personal experience of these issues motivated many young women and girls to connect to Riot Grrrl in an era when the media was declaring feminism dead. This previously under-addressed per-

spective emerges from Marcus's innovative narrative style, which grounds her presentation of Riot Grrrl activity in the perspectives of the actors. Contradictory perspectives, analyses, and interpretations receive side-by-side sympathetic telling, yet the overall coherence of the work remains intact and is strengthened by the contradictions. The book would have benefited, however, from more attention to the perspectives of grrrls of color. Although Marcus attends to the predominantly white participant base of the movement and the resistant reaction elicited by an "unlearning racism" workshop at the first Riot Grrrl convention, interviews with prominent grrrls of color like Mimi Nguyen and Ramdasha Bikceem are notably absent. Despite this failing, *Girls to the Front* has much to offer and deepens the extant scholarship on Riot Grrrl.

In another approach, Marisa Meltzer examines Riot Grrrl as an antecedent to the music and marketing phenomena of girl power. She states her intentions in the preface to *Girl Power: The Nineties Revolution in Music*: "In this book I have traced the roots, evolution, and eventual co-option of girl power in an attempt to figure out what it all means and where music and feminism are headed" (p. ix). Meltzer also makes it clear that she intends to focus on privileged perspectives on this history, commenting, "The good feminist in me wants to make sure that I'm not overlooking any outsider groups, but they are not part of the story I am looking to tell" (p. x) — a shortsighted approach, since constructions of white femininity, consumerism, and heterosexuality have been at the heart of co-opted definitions of girl power. With



this broad, vague research question and self-authorization to downplay or ignore issues like race, class, and sexuality, the slim volume unsurprisingly comes across as hollow. It reads like a series of long expository magazine articles covering, in succession, Riot Grrrl, “Angry Womyn” in rock, 1990s girl groups, 1990s female pop stars (aka “Pop Tarts”), and Ladyfest feminist musical and art festivals.

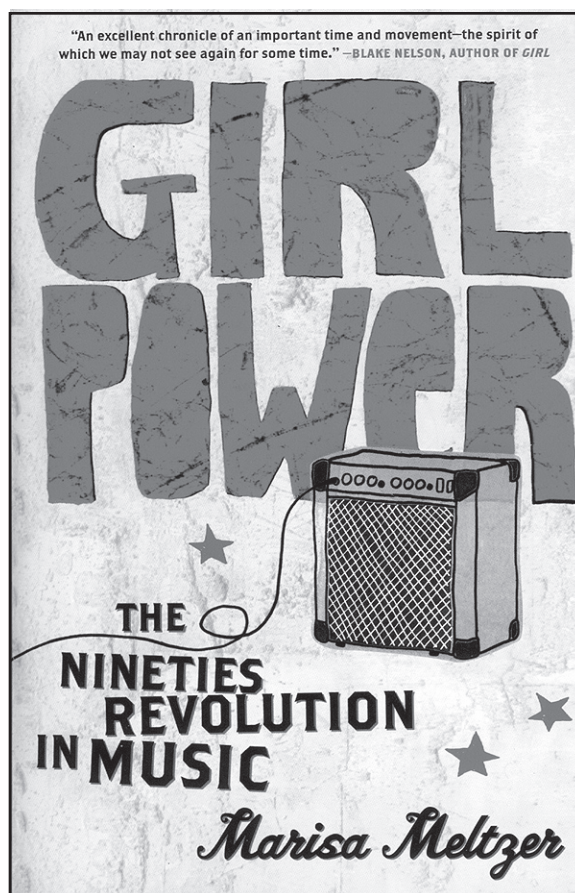
Girl Power comes across as a thin layer of journalistic coverage stretched over Meltzer’s personal grappling with the contradictions between enjoying the consumption of pop culture and her feminist analyses. *Girl Power* taunts the reader. Underneath the pop-culture details, music history summaries, and personal anecdotes lies an enduring feminist debate: female pleasure versus resisting oppression. Without an explicit or coherent take on the debate, though, much of the book’s discussion seems arbitrary and based on personal

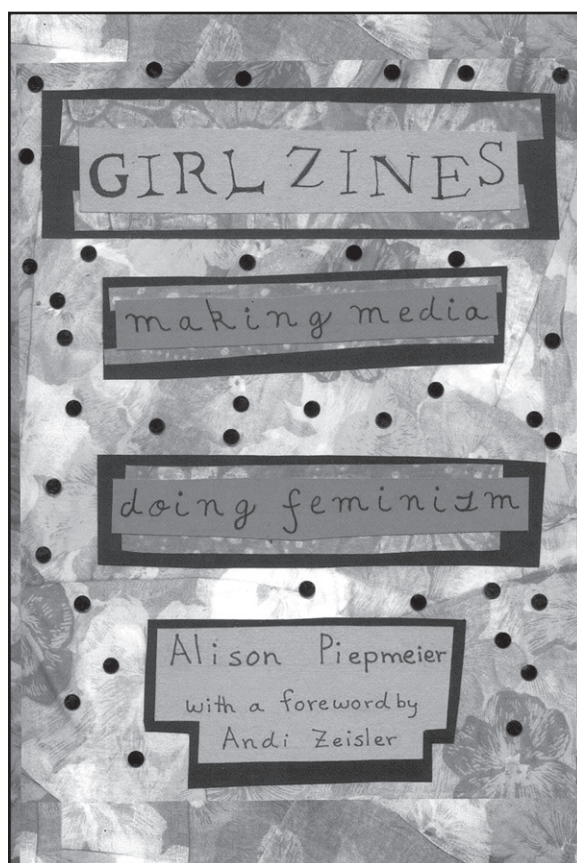
taste: Spice Girls and Brittany Spears: thumbs up. April Lavigne and Pussy Cat Dolls: thumbs down. Both Meltzer and this topic have more to offer than the blog-post-like fare presented in *Girl Power*.

While Meltzer examines Riot Grrrl as part of a larger musical history, Alison Piepmeier, in *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*, addresses the movement as part of a larger development of feminist zines. The first monograph-length academic examination of feminist zines, Piepmeier’s work is an insightful and long-overdue engagement with the feminist work in zines, which

played a pivotal role not only in Riot Grrrl but also in the development of the Third Wave in general. Piepmeier aptly defines zines as “vernacular third wave” discourse (p. 9), and she combines “the existing scholarly work on zines with a much-needed broad range of interdisciplinary perspectives on book culture, activist art, and participatory media in order to map out as fully as possible the personal, political and theoretical work that grrrl zines perform” (p. 7). Observing that “the third wave has been widely described but undertheorized,” Piepmeier suggests that “the theoretical

contributions — the vocabulary, conceptual apparatus, and explanatory narratives — of the third wave have not been recognized by scholars because they’re being developed in unexpected, nonacademic sites, like zines” (p. 10). The text helps bridge this gap with well-researched examinations of exchange in zine culture, the Third Wave, and the range of constructions of femininity in zines, as well as the handling of intersectionality and revolutionary hopefulness in zines. Comfortable with complexity, Piepmeier critiques binary divisions of victimization/agency and complicity/resistance to develop a nuanced perspective of the feminist work and discourse in girl zines. Overall, the book admirably engages the complicated nature and context of girl zines, including girl culture, Third Wave feminism, and girl zines themselves whose creators contradict and explicitly resist





definition or description (pp. 11–12). This thoughtful and multi-disciplinary examination of feminism in girl zines should be in every collection on zines or the Third Wave.

Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls combines Piepmeier's observation that Third Wave theory is developed in "unexpected nonacademic sites" and Riot Grrrl feminist musical practices. Founded in 2000 in Portland, Oregon, by Misty McElroy as a student project, the camp brings together girls aged 8–17 for a week to form bands, choose instruments, write songs, and perform them in a showcase concert. Although music provides the structure for the camp, girl empowerment is the focus. Camp activities include a self-defense workshop from Free to Fight, attention to conflict resolution, and discussions of the representation of women in the media and women's exclusion from musical production. Volunteers

teach classes, facilitate the bands and perform music throughout.

The documentary film *Girls Rock!*, directed by Shane King and Arne Johnson, provides an insider look at the experience of Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls from the perspective of participants, their families, and staff. Following the girls through an intense and tension-filled week of everything from learning instruments to performing with a group of recent strangers, the footage rivets. Besides presenting the compelling event that the camp is, the film also mirrors the focus of the camp and emphasizes the difficulties girls face with self-

esteem and body image. In-depth serial interviews with a selection of camp participants, their families, and staff — including Carrie Brownstein of Sleater Kinney, sts of the Haggard, and Beth Ditto of the Gossip — function as the strengths of the documentary. The directors and camera crew clearly established a rapport. Yet, because the film directors were just learning about the history of women in music and the effects of sexism on girls as they worked on the project, the film has some weaknesses. For instance,

although the camp had a diverse staff and participant group, the directors presented a whitewashed version of the history of women in music, and used one-dimensional statistics about girls. More subject expertise on the part of the directors would have enhanced the framing of the film, but the coverage of the camp itself is outstanding and a worthwhile watch.

While *Girls Rock!* provides a window into the experience of attending camp, *Rock 'n' Roll Camp for Girls*, edited by Marisa Anderson, offers a DIY version of the camp in book format, or, as the subtitle puts it, "How to Start a Band, Write Songs, Record an Album and ROCK OUT!!" Its tone is pitch perfect, both accessible and smart, and it's aimed at "anybody who has ever dreamed of playing music" (p. 12). Illustrations by Nicole Georges and photos from camp, rendered in lime-green and black and white throughout and



assembled with a cut-and-paste style, create a zine-like feel for the book. Numerous contributors offer advice and directions based on personal experience, including notables Carrie Brownstein of Sleater-Kinney, Sarah Dougher of Cadallaca, Cynthia Nelson of Ruby Falls, Kaia Wilson of Team Dresch, Beth Ditto of The Gossip, sts of The Haggard, and a host of other seasoned musicians, organizers, and writers. As a whole, the compilation combines inspiring essays on women in rock and the artistic process with practical directions on songwriting, instruments, electrified sound, and starting and promoting a band. Sections on self-defense and punk rock aerobics, a glossary of relevant music terms, chord charts, and contact information for rock camps round out the book as a resource for girl musicians. Get it for the girl in your life and support her art.

Notes

1. Band and zine references refer predominantly to projects contemporaneous with the heyday of Riot Grrrl. All artists referenced in this review have been involved with multiple projects, too many to list. Googling them yields rich returns and is highly recommended by this reviewer.

2. Riot Grrrl sought to avoid hegemonic doctrine and encouraged all participants to develop their own notion of Riot Grrrl. Many Riot Grrrl participants therefore developed "Riot Grrrl is..." manifestos, so many, indeed, that the term *manifesta* has since found widespread usage. By far the most widely published Riot Grrrl *manifesta*, however, appeared in the zine *Bikini Kill 2*, the compelling prose and vision of which has engendered its continued prominence. The full text is available at http://onewar-art.org/riot_grrrl_manifesto.htm. Note: this site erroneously claims that Kathleen Hanna founded Riot Grrrl, a claim that runs counter to the spirit of Riot Grrrl and that Hanna herself has spent a considerable amount of time contesting.

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