

# Safe Space: The Riot Grrrl Collection

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RÉSUMÉ Riot Grrrl, un mouvement du début des années 1990 pour adolescentes féministes, s'est inspiré du mouvement punk pour adopter les modes d'expression du « *Do it yourself (DIY)* », dans le but d'encourager les adolescentes à aborder leur oppression commune. La collection Riot Grrrl, détenue par la Fales Library & Special Collections de l'University New York, documente le mouvement grâce aux documents personnels de celles qui en étaient actives durant ses premières années. Cet article se sert du concept féministe du « lieu sûr » (« *safe space* ») afin d'examiner la collection à partir de deux perspectives : celle de sa fondatrice, Lisa Darms, qui est archiviste supérieure à Fales, et celle de l'ethnomusicologue Elizabeth Keenan, une spécialiste qui a travaillé en profondeur avec cette collection. Le concept du lieu sûr était crucial pour les adolescentes lors de leurs réunions et soirées dansantes et pour leurs groupes musicaux qui ensemble ont contribué à la fondation de Riot Grrrl. Les auteurs soutiennent que le lieu sûr de Riot Grrrl a créé un « contre-public intime » – c'est-à-dire un espace dans lequel les adolescentes ont pu établir une communauté féministe par l'entremise de textes partagés – mais un contre-public qui opérait parfois contre ses propres intentions : les limites imposées pour délimiter le lieu sûr ont parfois mené vers des exclusions basées sur la race, les classes sociales ou l'identité de genre. Les auteures élargissent le concept du lieu sûr aux questions liées à la création de collections par des communautés militantes et dans ces milieux; aux idées de l'intimité et de la vie privée auxquelles sont confrontés les donateurs et les chercheurs dans la salle de lecture des collections spéciales; et à la tension entre le désir d'avoir accès à l'histoire militante et les besoins liés à la conservation archivistique. Cet article examine comment l'itération du lieu sûr se fait par rapport aux documents personnels des archives Riot Grrrl, tant du côté des documents eux-mêmes que de leur place dans les archives.

ABSTRACT Riot Grrrl, an early-1990s teen feminist movement, adopted punk's DIY modes of expression to encourage girls to address their shared oppression. The Riot Grrrl Collection, held at New York University's Fales Library & Special Collections, documents the movement through the personal papers of those who were active in its formative years. This article uses the lens of feminist "safe space" to look at the collection from two perspectives: that of its founder, Lisa Darms, who is senior archivist at Fales, and that of ethnomusicologist Elizabeth Keenan, a scholar who has worked extensively with the collection. The concept of safe space was crucial

to the all-girl meetings, dance parties, and bands that formed the foundation of Riot Grrrl. The authors argue that the safe space of Riot Grrrl created an intimate counter-public – that is, a space where girls established a feminist community through shared texts – but one that sometimes worked against its own intentions: boundaries erected for safety sometimes led to exclusion along lines of race, class, or gender identity. The authors extend the idea of safe space to issues of collection building from and within activist communities; to ideas of intimacy and privacy as they play out for donors, for researchers, and in the special collections reading room; and to the tension between the desire for access to activist history versus the requirements of archival preservation. The article examines how iterations of safe space are enacted across the personal papers in the Riot Grrrl archive, through both the materials themselves and their place in the archive.

## Introduction

Riot Grrrl, a 1990s feminist movement directed at young women and teenage girls, grew out of punk subculture and adopted punk's DIY<sup>1</sup> modes of expression to encourage girls to address their shared oppression. By forming bands, writing zines, and meeting in all-girl groups to share experiences, riot grrrls<sup>2</sup> sought to appropriate and radicalize the tropes of girlhood in the service of a girl revolution. Originating in Olympia, Washington, and Washington, DC, Riot Grrrl started small, but owing to (largely unwanted) media attention, it grew to influence a generation of teen girls and North American culture at large.

The Riot Grrrl Collection at New York University's (NYU) Fales Library & Special Collections documents the creation of early Riot Grrrl zines, music, and activism, primarily through the personal papers of those involved in the movement.<sup>3</sup> Because Riot Grrrl was (and is) both a political and cultural movement, its output was diverse; the individual collections comprise correspondence, artwork, journals and notebooks, audio and video recordings, photographs, clippings, and flyers, as well as source materials related to the creation of artworks, writings, fanzines, bands, performances, and events. Although the collection is not a zine collection, zines currently make up approximately half of the paper holdings. At the time of writing, the collection

- 1 DIY refers to "do-it-yourself"; in punk and other subcultures, it refers to the act of creating or building something without the help of experts or authorities, often with the goal of creating alternative economies outside the mainstream.
- 2 In this article, we use "Riot Grrrl" to describe the movement and "riot grrrl" to describe individuals, following the common practice among scholars of the movement.
- 3 Although people still identify as riot grrrls today, this collection documents the movement's most active period, from its formation and general dissolution during the period 1989 to 1997.

comprised fourteen manuscript collections and two archives,<sup>4</sup> all of which were donated by their creators. The collection constantly expands, and with new donations its scope and content change radically every few months.

Although the collection is only a few years old and represents less than half of one percent of the total archival holdings at Fales, it is already being used by about 15 percent of Fales archives patrons. It is also regularly shared in classes taught by Fales staff to students from NYU, the New School, Fordham University, the School of Visual Arts, PACE University, and elsewhere. In addition to its scholarly interest, the collection has received coverage in the popular press, including the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Le Monde*, Pitchfork, and more. In an attempt to make the collection even more accessible, the Feminist Press published a book of materials selected from the collection by its curator, Lisa Darms, in summer 2013. The amount of publicity the collection and book have received foreground the tensions inherent in making available to a scholarly “public” a collection of personal, “private” papers from an underground movement – one committed to creating “safe space” for its members.

The relationship of these two “publics” – the public from whom these personal papers are drawn and the public who uses the collection – raises questions about access, privacy, and privilege, as well as the protected but complex nature of the safe space that Riot Grrrl sought to establish and that the archive mirrors. In recent years, social theorists have drawn on Jürgen Habermas<sup>5</sup> to develop concepts of publics and counterpublics that address questions of access and power,<sup>6</sup> the construction of identitarian (and anti-identitarian) movements,<sup>7</sup> and the development of “women’s culture.”<sup>8</sup> For Lauren Berlant, the idea of an “intimate public” is one where participants “feel as though it expresses what is common among them, a subjective likeness that seems to emanate from their history and their ongoing attachments and actions.”<sup>9</sup> According to Berlant, women’s culture is a mass-marketed inti-

4 The word “archives” is used throughout this article in the specific American sense to denote organizational archives as opposed to personal archives (“manuscript collections” in the United States).

5 Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger with Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989).

6 For critiques of access and power in publics, see Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig J. Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2, Intimacy (Winter 1998): 547–66; and Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

7 Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

8 Lauren Gail Berlant, *The Female Complaint: The Unfinished Business of Sentimentality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

9 Berlant, *The Female Complaint*, 5.

mate public, where “a set of problems associated with managing femininity is expressed and worked through incessantly.”<sup>10</sup> While Berlant addresses mass culture, her idea of the “intimate public” is especially useful for discussing Riot Grrrl, whose participants sought to shape a collective idea (and critique) of “girl” culture through the production of music and zines, in which they addressed such intimate topics as young women’s sexuality, eating disorders, and sexual abuse, and also combated the perception that girlhood itself was weak or bad.

But in its musical style of discordant, jagged songs performed with a cultivated, deliberate amateurism, Riot Grrrl had the potential to alienate and invite simultaneously. This marks it as more of an intimate *counterpublic* – a possible alternative public outside mainstream women’s culture, which manages the problem of traditional femininity. Nancy Fraser was the first to introduce the concept of the feminist counterpublic, arguing that the second wave created a “parallel discursive space” away from the main public.<sup>11</sup> Fraser notes that, on the one hand, counterpublics “function as spaces of withdrawal and regroupment; on the other hand, they also function as bases and training grounds for agitational activities toward wider publics. It is precisely in the dialectic between these two functions that their emancipatory potential resides.”<sup>12</sup>

The kinds of texts that Riot Grrrl produced demonstrate the movement between withdrawal and agitation that characterize a counterpublic created through intimate affinities. In their performances, Riot Grrrl musicians often couched their feminism as agitation toward a greater public. For example, a 25 July 1992 performance by the band Bikini Kill, which took place on the United States Capitol plaza, featured a direct engagement with and critique of the Supreme Court’s rightward swing; this performance also featured one of Riot Grrrl’s founders, Kathleen Hanna, who purposely asked the audience to consider forms of feminism outside the framework of punk rock.<sup>13</sup> However, the majority of the materials in the archives reflect the space of withdrawal, which was often secured through an aesthetic of small-scale production that fostered a sense of intimacy. Riot Grrrl’s texts, most prominently recordings and zines, were circulated through both mass-mediated channels and personal contact, with a preference for the latter. Zines – the movement’s most frequently cited texts – were created for a relatively small audience; although

10 Ibid.

11 For this argument, see Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere.” For an elaborated concept of publics and counterpublics, especially through the lens of queer culture, see Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*.

12 Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere,” 124.

13 For footage of this performance, see Fales Library & Special Collections, Kathleen Hanna Papers, MSS 271, ID. #271.0041.

published using photocopy technology, a tool of “mass” production, they were produced in small batches and often distributed girl-to-girl at shows, or by request or exchange through the mail. Similarly, the cover art for Riot Grrrl recordings often featured deliberately sloppy artwork that reflected the aesthetic of the mix tape rather than the polished appearance of major-label recordings.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Riot Grrrl’s music spoke to a self-selecting group of girls who would identify with punk rock, circumscribing the audience by style, as well as by race and ethnicity. Thus, Riot Grrrl’s intimate counter-public ran up against its slogan, which insisted that “Every Girl [was] a Riot Grrrl.”

As a movement that emphasized safety and intimacy in its meetings, encouraged girls to share their experiences of sexual violence and oppression, ensured the safety of girls at punk shows, circulated its ideas through semi-public zines, and (in some local scenes) instituted a media blackout when its key players felt that journalists had misconstrued their goals and misrepresented their music, Riot Grrrl drew close, protective boundaries around its participants. While this action was sometimes exclusionary, the roots of the protective stance extend back to the late 1960s and the women’s liberation movement, which upheld the idea of the safe space. The concept emerged from consciousness-raising groups, but it extended much further in the development of various feminist ideologies.<sup>15</sup> At times, different groups had staked claims to safe spaces within feminism: women of colour<sup>16</sup> and lesbians, especially, used safe spaces as strategic locations from which to develop critiques of white, middle-class, heterosexist feminism and to begin the ongoing process of moving it toward a more inclusive movement.<sup>17</sup> Most recently, the

- 14 Fales Library & Special Collections, Kathleen Hanna Papers, MSS 271, Box 2, Folder 8. An example of this deliberate aesthetic can be found in Hanna’s instructions for the production of Bikini Kill’s single “Anti-Pleasure Dissertation”: “Also, please don’t clean up any paste-up lines – we want it to look ‘rough.’ We want the colors + the photographs, etc. to look AS MUCH LIKE THE ORIGINAL AS POSSIBLE. I will call you tomorrow to go over our order and answer any questions.”
- 15 Cultural feminism, which evolved out of radical feminism, took the idea of the “safe space” to the next level, arguing instead for a separatist, feminist sphere. See also Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America, 1967–1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Echols has critiqued cultural feminism’s rejection of the public sphere as evading, rather than confronting, patriarchy.
- 16 See, for example, Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 111. Collins argues that “one reason that safe spaces are so threatening to those who feel excluded, and so routinely castigated by them, is that safe spaces are free of surveillance by more powerful groups. Such spaces simultaneously remove Black women from surveillance and foster the conditions for Black women’s independent self-definitions.”
- 17 See Dana R. Shugar, *Separatism and Women’s Community* (Lincoln, NB: University of Nebraska Press, 1995). Shugar historicizes the shift from the idea of “safe space” for women to the idea of lesbian separatism.

term has been taken up by organizations seeking to protect LGBTQ youth.<sup>18</sup> In many ways, Riot Grrrl offers a fulcrum between these two modes of safe space. Its young, mostly female participants drew on the second wave's idea of the safe space as essential to consciousness raising, but they placed a greater emphasis on valuing youth culture, especially "girl" culture.

Riot Grrrl cultivated a protected space of girl-centred discourse away from mainstream journalism and the male-dominated punk and "alternative" music scenes. The adoption of safe space and other activist tropes helped to define Riot Grrrl as more than just a local music scene and to tap into a broader cultural debate about feminism in the early 1990s, when the movement and its accomplishments were facing a serious backlash. Riot Grrrl recognized this backlash from its inception, but its participants also shaped their movement in response to negative or exploitive reactions in the mainstream press.<sup>19</sup> This further drove Riot Grrrl into an insular, protected space that was perceived increasingly as elitist. Safe space does not just protect its members; it also draws boundaries. Much of the academic literature on Riot Grrrl, especially studies that focus on its zines, portrays it as an elitist movement.<sup>20</sup>

The construction of an intimate counterpublic, even under the rubric of the safe space, inevitably creates barriers to entry that can replicate the power structures of the larger public. In "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," Mimi Thi Nguyen critiques the movement's rhetoric of "public intimacy," which cultivated "aesthetics of access."<sup>21</sup> Nguyen notes that:

race confounded such intimacy in order to demarcate the boundaries of riot grrrl aesthetics as both form *and* critique. In other words, whereas the insistence on intimacy may indeed be a revolutionary charge within the circumstances from which riot grrrl emanates (including girl jealousy or subcultural cool), such an insistence, when viewed in light of histories of desire for access and attachment to racial, colonial others, may turn out to be the reiteration of those histories in new idioms.<sup>22</sup>

18 For example, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) provides Safe Space Kits for educators ([safespace.glsen.org](http://safespace.glsen.org)).

19 In particular, riot grrrls have cited articles in *Newsweek* and *Rolling Stone* as being especially damaging to the movement. For additional information on these articles, see Sara Marcus, *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution* (New York: HarperPerennial, 2010).

20 For descriptions of zines as the products of white middle-class girls, see Kristin Schilt, "'The Punk White Privilege Scene': Riot Grrrl, White Privilege, and Zines," in *Different Wavelengths: Studies of the Contemporary Women's Movement*, ed. Jo Reger (New York, London: Routledge, 2005); and Mary Celeste Kearney, *Girls Make Media* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

21 Mimi Thi Nguyen, "Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 22, no. 2–3 (2012): 173–96.

22 Nguyen, 174–75.

As Nguyen argues, the confessional intimacy of Riot Grrrl zines, based in personal revelation leading to a personal revolution, reinforces whiteness as normative through enacting a confessional confrontation of gender and sexuality norms that applied mainly to middle-class white girls. Nguyen asks, “But then how could experience yield revolutionary knowledge about race, where the dominant experience was whiteness?”<sup>23</sup> Furthermore, she argues, white participants’ quest for intimate knowledge about race enacted a kind of violence on women of colour, who were treated as examples, teachers, and conveyers of knowledge, rather than peers, which reinforced colonial structures of gaining knowledge about the “other.”

These critiques were also being made contemporaneously from within the movement. In her 1993 zine *Gunk 4*, teenager Ramdasha Bikceem responded to the 1992 Riot Grrrl Convention and the limitations of the movement’s “secret society” model:

Another reason why I was kinda unhappy about the whole D.C. thing was the realization of how ... dare I say ‘white bread’ everyone was. I mean mostly all Riot Grrrls are white and only a few Asians were there. I think I was one of the only 3 black kids there I mean Riot Grrrl calls for a change, but I question who it’s including... I mean the liberation of women is not just for us it will affect every single aspect of this fucking planet so when we say o’ it’s the Grrrl movement, it suggests that this is all we care about and this is all we stand for and we only want what we want Me! me! me! is all I hear. This sounds kinda snotty but I see Riot Grrrl growing very closed to a very chosen few i.e. white middle class punk girls. It’s like it’s some secret society, but then again there are some who feel that a secret society is what we need.<sup>24</sup>

The confessional intimacy of Riot Grrrl zines, as well as the closed nature of the meetings and shows, demonstrates the limits of the intimate counter-public: the kinds of tactics that allowed young, white, middle-class women to identify so totally through shared experience are the same things that forced others out.

In some ways, Riot Grrrl’s prohibitive secret society ethos parallels the special collections model of research, which, while having access as its final goal and *raison d’être*, also mediates that access. The reading room, and the mechanisms of control that surround it, can be viewed as a kind of safe space that simultaneously protects and excludes. Archivists limit access to archival documents in an effort to preserve them, of course. But the institutional context of special collections can set up psychological barriers to access as well, for both potential researchers *and* potential donors. Ideally, archives like

23 Nguyen, 179.

24 Fales Library & Special Collections, Ramdasha Bikceem Riot Grrrl Collection, MSS 354, Box 5, Folder 23, *Gunk 4*.

the Riot Grrrl Collection would exist simultaneously in institutional settings like NYU and in community-driven collections like Brooklyn's Lesbian Herstory Archive, complementing each other with their different strengths: long-term, sustainable preservation on the one hand and community-controlled access and descriptive practices on the other. But in the meantime, professional archivists working in institutions need to develop activist collections in ways that honour the radical intentions of their creators. Within such a framework, how do we preserve this history so that it accurately documents both what exists and – because of Riot Grrrl's exclusions – what does not? And how do archivists, collection donors, and researchers respond to and balance the private, personal nature of the materials with their own personal histories and relationships to the creators?

### **Lisa Darms on Building the Collection**

My desire and ability to start the collection were engendered in part by my own history with punk, feminism, and Riot Grrrl. I moved to Olympia, Washington, in 1989 to go to college and was part of the punk scene there on and off throughout the 1990s (moving away and returning several times). Although I never called myself a riot grrrl and chose not to attend meetings, I read Riot Grrrl zines, went to the shows, and was a friend of some of the people who, years later, would donate to the collection. As one of the organizers of the music festival Ladyfest in Olympia in 2000, I experienced some of what I had missed at Riot Grrrl meetings. Coming as it did on the heels of the Experience Music Project's oral history of Riot Grrrl, Ladyfest also provided me and many other participants with the opportunity to regard the movement from a historical perspective for the first time.

Ten years later, in my second career, and as the new senior archivist at the Fales Library & Special Collections, I saw an opportunity to preserve the movement and make its primary sources more accessible in an institution that could commit to long-term preservation. I took as a model the Fales Downtown Collection, which was founded in 1993 by Fales Director Marvin Taylor to preserve the cross-disciplinary art, literary, and performance scenes of downtown New York City in the 1970s and 1980s. The almost 200 archives and manuscript collections range from the documentation of dance and happenings in Judson Memorial Church to the personal papers of punk icon and writer Richard Hell and artist David Wojnarowicz. The collection includes the archives of art collectives and theatre groups, and the papers of AIDS activists, no-wave filmmakers, and interdisciplinary artists. In short, the Downtown Collection documents a late-twentieth-century scene that was experimental, activist and queer, much like Riot Grrrl. And also like Riot Grrrl, this scene produced a panoply of "non-traditional" archival documents, such as flyers, zines, performance props, and audio and visual elements, which



Fales has had to learn to preserve, describe, and make accessible. Because of these precedents involving materials of similar content and form, I knew that we had the skills to manage the Riot Grrrl Collection.

But the repository is only part of the story. No collection can exist without donors, and the Riot Grrrl Collection's inception and early development were driven in large part by my collaboration with one of its founders, Kathleen Hanna. She and Le Tigre bandmate Johanna Fateman were old friends of mine. The fall before I became senior archivist, the three of us attended a panel, held at Fales, about artists donating to the archives. Afterward Hanna, who has spoken publicly about her fear of erasure of feminist movements and her commitment to combating that process, was especially excited about the possibility of a Riot Grrrl Archive. When I began working at Fales in 2009 and started to develop the collection, Hanna, who had been carting around a filing cabinet of Riot Grrrl files for years, became its first donor. She also helped me contact several of the early instigators of Riot Grrrl, and she talked to them about the importance of preserving the movement's history, relaying her own enthusiasm for Fales as the right home for the collection.

The decision to build this collection primarily through personal papers was one of necessity. As I have learned from the Downtown Collection, the histories of activist movements and collectives were often preserved by individuals – people who had voluntarily taken on a secretarial or archival role and continued to store documentation long after such groups had disbanded. Thus, materials traditionally conceived of as “archives” – documenting the activities of an organization – are often housed within manuscript collections.<sup>25</sup> Riot Grrrl was much less centralized than these other organizations and collectives, and therefore even less likely to be documented outside of personal collections. In addition, its activities were geographically dispersed, and no single organization could or did preserve its history. Built into the Riot Grrrl ethos was a “personal is political” methodology that shaped not only its activist practices, but also the manner in which the movement was documented: primarily through materials that are more traditionally the domain of personal papers, such as manuscripts, letters, and small-run zines (which, as will be discussed, are as much a part of manuscript tradition as print tradition). Furthermore, because of the movement's concern for privacy and safe space, those activities that do mirror institutional practices, such as Riot Grrrl

25 For example, the “archive” of the important Downtown art group Collaborative Projects (Colab) is part of the personal papers of Colab's secretary, Andrea Callard. See Fales Library & Special Collections, “Guide to the Andrea Callard Papers,” MSS 156, accessed 30 Aug. 2013, <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/callard/>. See also the Act Up (Aids Coalition to Unleash Power) files in, for example, the Alan Klein Papers: “Guide to the Alan Klein Papers,” MSS 118, accessed 30 Aug. 2013, <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/klein/>.

meetings, are virtually undocumented in the Riot Grrrl Collection. The scant meeting-related material that does exist is found in personal journals and a single notebook. Finally, even in the collections I have deemed “archives” there is considerable blur between the institutional and the personal. For example, the Outpunk Archive, documenting the Outpunk zine and record label, originates entirely from Outpunk founder Matt Wobensmith.

Activist and “outsider” movements by nature leave few institutional traces, and their history relies on the preservation of personal papers. And yet much of the archival literature about comprehensive collecting of underdocumented communities assumes not only an institutional context for collections but also a *governmental* one. As Moore and Pell point out, “the dominant understanding of the role of archives in publics has often manifested in official stories of the Public (e.g. the Nation) residing in the Public Archives.”<sup>26</sup> State archives have a fundamental duty to make their documents public, but in fact many of the institutions collecting activist and minority archives (at least in the United States) are now private academic libraries. In some ways, the private, academic context of the Riot Grrrl Collection allows me *more* freedom – starting the collection, for example, was relatively easy – but, at the same time, without the top-down collecting policies mandated by state-run or corporate archives, I bear more responsibility for the collection’s potential weaknesses and failures.

This personal responsibility is only increased by the fact that several of the early donors to the Riot Grrrl collection were friends or were part of the broader network of friendship and subculture I had been a part of. Others became friends through the process of building the collection. At first, this gave me pause, as if my personal relationships with donors created a kind of archival conflict. However, all of the collections are donated, and no one profits from the donations. Furthermore, I believe that both my personal history in the punk community and my relationships with donors give me a certain subject knowledge and expertise that is impossible to replicate academically. Finally, both as a representative of the subculture and of the institution, I can understand and address the fears some donors may have about “institutionalizing” an anti-establishment scene.

Informed by both documentation strategy and the DIY practices of punk, I have taken an “activist” position in creating this collection, working to collect materials that represent a broad spectrum of early Riot Grrrl activities and actors. This position follows from Howard Zinn’s radical challenge to the profession in 1977, in which he concluded that “the rebellion of the archivist against his normal role is not, as so many scholars fear, the politicizing of a

26 Shaunna Moore and Susan Pell, “Autonomous Archives,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 16, no. 4–5 (July 2010): 256.

neutral craft, but the humanizing of an inevitably political craft.”<sup>27</sup> Whereas it was a shocking proposition thirty-five years ago, an activist approach is now accepted by many archivists as an ethical imperative in which “archivists have opportunities to push against ... forces of power and control, to assert a vigorous and active engagement in societal power relations, and to ensure a more nearly complete and accurate documentary record of human experience.”<sup>28</sup> Although I question the possibility of a “nearly complete and accurate” archive, my goal is for the collection to reflect the many iterations of the movement and its distinct local scenes comprehensively; to include materials not only from its “superstars,” but also from anyone who chose to identify with – or react against – the movement. I hope to document Riot Grrrl’s successes and its failures, its internal and external antagonisms, its simultaneous sophistication and naïveté.

Archival activism exists in opposition to an older model of archivists as neutral custodians or caretakers. But this passive “curation” is far from neutral, assuming as it does that history accrues naturally and that our only duty is to preserve it and make it accessible. For minority and activist cultures that did not self-document or whose work was not valued and preserved, what accrues is often absence and historical erasure. The same can be said for minority positions *within* activist cultures. Active curation can, partially, “fill the gaps” that the “neutral” sit-back-and-wait method cannot, but it requires an honest baring of curatorial methods, openness to collaboration, and honesty about one’s personal relationship to the archive. I try to be forthright about my own relationships with donors and materials as a way of maintaining a kind of objectivity. And because I, as an individual, have so much power to shape this history, I seek to recognize and work against the limitations of my subject position.

The donation of the Mimi Thi Nguyen Zine Collection serves as a model for collaboration in collection building, one that has potential to counter the limitations of individual curatorship. In summer 2012, I posted on Twitter a request for suggestions of materials to include in my book drawn from the Riot Grrrl Collection. In response, Daniela Capistrano of the People of Color Zine Project expressed her concern that zines by people of colour be well represented. This led to Capistrano’s offer to help coordinate the donation to Fales of Nguyen’s zines – those collected before 1997 for her compilation zine *Race Riot*, the first zine by and for punks of colour to comprehensively address race and racisms in punk and Riot Grrrl. *Race Riot* now serves as

27 Howard Zinn, “Secrecy, Archives, and the Public Interest,” *Midwestern Archivist* II, no. 2 (1977), 20.

28 Randall C. Jimerson, *Archives Power: Memory, Accountability, and Social Justice* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2009), 297.

important documentation of how Riot Grrrl's "intimate counterpublic" created barriers to entry for many people of colour. Furthermore, the fact that the zines in Nguyen's collection were rarely already present in the (admittedly still new) Riot Grrrl Collection – that very few zines by people of colour existed in the collection at all – reflected the reality that not only had Riot Grrrl effectively excluded those voices, but also that the archive itself (and my collecting practices) could be replicating that exclusion. But as Nguyen makes clear in her donor's statement – a sort of expanded provenance note that we incorporated into the finding aid – the donation "does not necessarily address the underlying troubles for feminist historiographies of riot grrrl movement"; absences within archives document a certain history of exclusion and should be preserved: "an almost-empty archive might lend greater substance to the story of epistemic violence that erases or otherwise contains our presence."<sup>29</sup> I believe that the contextual descriptive practices and creator-centred model of archival practice actually enable a kind of preservation of this absence. Interestingly, grouping the Riot Grrrl collections within a personal papers rubric, in which the collecting practices of individuals is preserved, itself documents the history that required this intervention, as well as the original exclusions. And while this donation does not compensate for the absences, and in fact foregrounds the limitations of an activist archiving model that seeks to "fill in the gaps," it does provide a model of collaboration that I hope to use more often.

A special collection's provenance should be as thoroughly described and considered by its users as that of the individual archives and personal papers it contains. That is why I try to talk openly about my own history and my relationships with donors, even though I am uncomfortable about bringing attention to myself in a project that is not about me. But as much as collections are formed by their creators, I think the role that researchers play in shaping collections through use is under-examined. While most of the journalistic press and academic writing about the collection has so far focused on me as the collection's curator and on the donors as individuals, it is the researchers who are the interpreters and disseminators of this material and who thus have a role in the transformation from the intimate public of the archive to a larger public.

29 Fales Library & Special Collections, "Guide to the Mimi Thi Nguyen Collection, in Collaboration with the People of Color Zine Project," MSS 365, "Donor's Statement," accessed 15 April 2103, <http://dlib.nyu.edu/findingaids/html/fales/nguyen/admininfo.html>.

### **Elizabeth Keenan on the Researcher's Perspective**

I sometimes feel as if I am violating the safe space of Riot Grrrl through the very act of reading the materials in the collection. While I have felt this shiver of voyeurism when reading the zines, the feeling has more often occurred when looking at the less-publicized parts of the collection – the correspondence and notes exchanged by people. These materials offer insights into the highly emotional nature of late-teen and early-twenties friendships, which are bound by shared musical and political tastes. Like most letters, diaries, and notebooks in manuscript collections, this often deeply confessional correspondence was not written with the public in mind, and the protective boundaries that Riot Grrrl drew around itself as a movement are always somewhere in my thoughts as I sift through the collection. Where do I, as a researcher, draw the boundaries in the materials that I will use? Is my research coloured by my experience and knowledge of Riot Grrrl as a safe space? How do I best take advantage of the resources in the archive without taking advantage of the sources?

Unlike Lisa Darms, I was not part of the scene that fostered Riot Grrrl, nor was I initially a fan, though I am the right age. But when doing my master's research on all-girl bands in New York City, Riot Grrrl formed a common touchstone for my ethnographic interlocutors, a few of whom had been on the fringes of the scene in Washington, DC. Later, when I began investigating topics for my dissertation, I volunteered at Ladyfest\*East 2001, which took inspiration from the first Ladyfest in Olympia. Over the years, Riot Grrrl has become a central focus of my research, especially because of its influence on the third wave's empowerment discourses and framing of sexuality, not to mention its message to girls about participating in and creating their own popular culture, whether through writing zines, playing music, or engaging in some other activity. In the course of my research, I have also come to understand Riot Grrrl as a movement that created its own private spaces within the larger public: Riot Grrrl meetings were small-scale events; punk shows, while public, have ways of creating barriers for outsiders; zines are, by design, limited-scope publications; and style – simply looking the part – restricted the numbers within the movement.

An ethnographer by training, I am always concerned with the ethics of representing people who are not public figures. Although some of Riot Grrrl's participants have remained active as musicians in public culture, others have deliberately lived lives out of the spotlight in the years since they were active in the movement, and still others – the vast majority – only ever participated as private, sometimes deliberately anonymous, individuals.<sup>30</sup> While it is clear

30 A number of zine writers, for example, created pseudonyms that obscured their real identities.

that the collection donors have given consent to open their papers to the prying eyes of researchers, many of their correspondents are likely unaware of the existence of their written material in the archive. At times, I have paused over letters detailing messy breakups with prominent musicians, others in which a notoriously private person makes a startling confession, and dozens more that may in some way embarrass their authors twenty years later. But balanced with these concerns is the knowledge that the correspondence creates a more holistic view of Riot Grrrl than has previously been available. Across the archive, the intimate confidences also paradoxically serve to connect the movement to other forms of music and political activism in the 1990s, by making visible a network of friends and friends of friends who supported Riot Grrrl but may not have participated in it directly.<sup>31</sup>

In particular, the letters in the collection of Molly Neuman, early riot grrrl and drummer for the band Bratmobile, offer a way to approach the movement as an intimate counterpublic, unlike the more publicized zines. Zines, while written for a small, intimate audience and often in a confessional mode, are deliberately semi-public; letters, on the other hand, are more often only for the eyes of their intended reader. The Neuman Collection, covering the years 1986–2002, comprises the largest selection of letters between Riot Grrrl participants, as well as letters that situate Riot Grrrl in relation to other subcultural movements of the time. Neuman's correspondence also represents one of the least-culled portions of the archive, containing letters from other founding riot grrrls, such as Tobi Vail, Erin Smith, and Allison Wolfe. In addition, the collection includes letters from Neuman's grandmothers, parents, high school friends, and others who, though far outside the closed counterpublic of Riot Grrrl, help to give context to the middle-class framework of the movement.<sup>32</sup>

In Neuman's correspondence, I witness other girls' friendships, filled with explorations of sexuality, whether boy-crazy or girl-crazy, and I sometimes

31 At times, the collection's materials revealed connections that resonated with me as a researcher. When I opened one of Molly Neuman's notebooks from 1991, I discovered on the first page the name and phone number of a fellow feminist ethnomusicologist who also gave workshops on sound engineering for women in the Washington, DC, area.

32 Conversely, the letters also create a number of blank spaces. First, letters by people of colour are not always "visible," in the sense that correspondents only rarely identify themselves by race; many of the known correspondents are white. This absence is somewhat mitigated in Neuman's collection, which contains a series of letters discussing race, class, and gender with a male friend going to a prominent African American college, as well as Neuman's correspondence with her high school friends, many of whom were international students. These letters provide an interesting intersectional lens, wherein the correspondents connect through shared class background. Second, while the collection includes the letters to Neuman, only a few of her letters to others – mainly around the time of the breakup of her band Bratmobile – are included in the archive. Thus, in her own collection, Neuman's voice is often absent.

feel as if I am eavesdropping on a conversation between cool kids. One letter contains a short poem about Nation of Ulysses, a band that I first learned about in *Sassy* magazine: “Jan’s a fox / but James is too / Oh, I love every boy / in N.O.U.” While on the one hand this poem is about a teen-crush fantasy, it also serves as a reminder that Riot Grrrl’s intimate confessions were not always of the most serious variety. More importantly, the letters offer insight into the quotidian discussions of music and politics that helped foster Riot Grrrl. A letter from drummer Tobi Vail of Bikini Kill, written at the beginning of her friendship with Neuman, stands out for its desire to connect over music and politics. Vail writes, “It’s really inspiring to find out that there are actually people in the world who are thinking about the same sort of things I am ... sometimes I feel kind of isolated, I guess.” Later in the letter, after listing some of the shows she had attended in Eugene, Oregon, Vail enthusiastically describes her courses at Evergreen State College in Olympia:

It’s cool that you’re studying about sexism & racism in school. I wanted to take a class at Evergreen this quarter called something like “Race & the Politics of Racism,” but instead I took “Freud, Feminism, and the Social Construction of Sexuality,” and it’s been totally blowing me away. It’s psychology, philosophy, and social and political theory. I guess what we are studying is called “post-modern” feminism, whatever that means. All I know is it seems totally new and exciting to me....<sup>33</sup>

Vail wrote this letter before Riot Grrrl existed as a movement, but it shows her interest in sharing feminist community, as well as her admission of feeling isolated in her music scene in Olympia. That is, it shows the impetus for Riot Grrrl – a craving for finding other young women who wanted to be active as feminists and as musicians.

In contrast, other letters in the Neuman correspondence reflect the strain of moving between the protected space of Riot Grrrl gatherings and the small-town atmosphere of Olympia, as well as the strain of engaging with a wider set of publics. Some letters portray the struggle of awareness around issues of class, race, and sexuality that arise in cities with greater diversity. However, others are often more private in nature than Vail’s optimistic missive, and though they provide valuable insight and can complicate the historiography of Riot Grrrl, they also require extra diligence in order to maintain the safe space of the archive. As a researcher with now over a decade of familiarity with Riot Grrrl, I am aware that there are differing levels of comfort among the movement’s participants with regard to their past activities and making those pasts public; personal writings that one person would readily give permission to reproduce might feel very private to another. Regardless of whether indi-

33 Fales Library & Special Collections, Molly Neuman Riot Grrrl Collection, MSS 289, Box 2, Folder 14, Tobi Vail to Molly Neuman, 11 May 1990.

viduals know that their letters are in the archive, I must seek permission to use that material. In some cases, my request represents the first time a person learns that her letters are in the archive.<sup>34</sup> In fact, when obtaining permissions for this article, we received a request from one letter writer not be quoted, which required us to revise and rethink our project.<sup>35</sup> While I am interested in complicating the historical narrative of Riot Grrrl and fleshing out its politics, I must never do so in a way that violates the safe space of the archive.

### **Zines and the Intimate Counterpublic of Riot Grrrl**

Since the mid-1990s, zines have formed the primary focus of academic work on Riot Grrrl. This should come as no surprise, given that zines form the texts of the intimate counterpublic of Riot Grrrl. As Nguyen points out, the primary modality of communication in zines is intimacy. But little of the academic work on Riot Grrrl addresses the scope or reach of individual zines; instead they are treated more like self-published books that have a wide audience than objects that circulated within a closed network. For example, Mary Celeste Kearney describes the network of Riot Grrrl as reaching out first through the zines *Bikini Kill* and *Riot Grrrl*, next through teen-oriented *Sassy* magazine, and then through the mainstream adult press. Although this trajectory is technically accurate – Riot Grrrl zines were highlighted in *Sassy* magazine and mainstream media did cover the movement – Kearney obscures the scale and audience of zines. She writes:

Championing the DIY ethos of punk culture and living the “females-can-do-anything” attitude of feminists, Riot Grrrl media producers have boldly seized control of the tools and practices related to the creation, reproduction, exhibition, promotion, and distribution of media texts in order to offer representations of girlhood alternate to those mass-produced by the commercial culture industries. In the process, they have motivated thousands of other female youth to do the same.<sup>36</sup>

In positioning zines as “media texts,” or mass-mediated works, Kearney equates them with mainstream teen-oriented magazines. While zines are alternatives to mainstream media, they are by no means equivalent, especially in the case of Riot Grrrl. Kearney overlooks the personal nature of zine writing and the often intentionally small audience that zine writers cultivate.

34 While a few donors chose to contact authors of letters for permission before donating their archives, this was a personal decision. As with most archives, most donors did not do so. Others are holding back “personal” materials until after their deaths.

35 This letter writer found out that her letters had been donated to the collection when we asked for permission to quote from them. This led to the de-accession and return of the letters to the writer, with the permission of the collection donor.

36 Kearney, *Girls Make Media*, 68.



Like traditional magazines, zines are meant to be circulated, but their scope is, by design and intent, much smaller. The exposure that some Riot Grrrl zines received in mainstream publications such as *Sassy* distorts the reality that many authors did not intend for their material to be circulated among more than a few people. A letter to Ramdasha Bikceem from a skeptical friend about Bikceem's zine *Gunk* being featured in *Sassy* speaks volumes about zines' intended audience: "I don't know, Dasha, it's pretty fucking sketchy. Maybe it'll reach a lot of lonely teenage girls or maybe it'll reach a lot of undeserving superficial assholes. Maybe it's worth it, maybe it's not."<sup>37</sup>

Like the intimate public that Lauren Berlant describes, the primary focus of Riot Grrrl was connection among girls, based on common interests, which mainstream teen media rarely ever construct. Berlant's intimate public, though, is based on "women's culture," which extends across a variety of mass-mediated genres. In the context of Riot Grrrl, and especially zines, the focus has to shift to the idea of the counterpublic. In an intimate counterpublic, zines are circulating texts but are understood by their readers and makers as belonging to a small group of people and intentionally cultivating a smaller audience. In 1997, for example, *Outpunk* zine editor and record label owner Matt Wobensmith compiled and reprinted a number of zine excerpts from the early 1990s in *Outpunk 6*. In his editor's note, Wobensmith writes:

It's also hard to ask someone who may never have intended more than 20 people to read their words, to reprint them later for the benefit of thousands. I was very surprised at the amount of people who had no problem with this. I think much of the beauty contained in the writing comes from someone who's unsure of the future, who's reaching out and saying something to an uncertain audience. You get an incredible emotional snapshot of someone at a point in their life, captured in copy toner for you to contemplate. Just try to get the same thing from *The Advocate* or *Out*. Yeah, right!<sup>38</sup>

Wobensmith acknowledges the difference between the private space of the average zine in the early 1990s and what his own zine had become by 1997: a professionally printed and bound publication, distributed to record stores such as Tower Records and to bookstores such as Barnes & Noble. It also touches on the intimacy of the private space of zines – a safe space that not only encircled Riot Grrrl and queer zines, but also helped to distinguish the Riot Grrrl movement in ways that extend beyond zines.

The function of zines within an intimate counterpublic can also be seen in their role of helping to cultivate immediate friendships among participants. For example, in *Residential Garbage 3*, Andrea from Vancouver writes:

37 Fales Library & Special Collections, Ramdasha Bikceem Riot Grrrl Collection, MSS 354, Box 6, Folder 26.

38 Fales Library & Special Collections, Outpunk Archive, MSS 297, Box 1, Folder 11, *Outpunk 6*, Matt Wobensmith, "Editor's Note."

so we come to an end. another zine by the same girl. this started off as another zine, maybe a different girl. musings about the changes that have occurred in my life since last summer. part of my change has been found in zines. before last summer i did not know what one was. much less the effect that it would have on me. zines introduced me to the local vancouver punk/hardcore scene. zines introduced me to the causes and issues that i was otherwise never aware of. i made friends i would have otherwise never made. my voice has been heard. my frustrations have been vent out. in my room there are two large boxes. one has zines the other has letters. those boxes are filled with words of people who like me have wanted to be heard. and through zines they have. i don't know when i will stop doing this. i always think that I will stop after completing a zine. why do i do all this? for the same reason i read zines. this has become a source of healing for me, a way to have someone to share things with. maybe you can see it too. and so another zine is done by a girl who likes to be heard, and maybe you could relate to what i feel. this naive girl does have things to say.<sup>39</sup>

Andrea places zines in relation to other private texts – letters – that were part of the zine network. Andrea is not creating zines to offer an equivalent to mainstream media texts but to explore issues that matter to her, to build friendships with other zine writers, and to share her thoughts with a small group of people in a relatively protected space.

In libraries, zines are often catalogued like books and periodicals, conceptualized as their equivalents and part of an evolutionary narrative of print history that starts with Gutenberg. Increasingly, zines form their own libraries. But zines can equally be seen as primary source material, part of a manuscript tradition rather than a print one – indeed, they are symbolically treated this way in the Riot Grrrl Collection, simply because they exist within the personal papers. As outlined above, Riot Grrrl zines were often created for a limited, intimate audience, but even in their materiality and physical uniqueness, the zines in the collection often fight against their conceptualization as mass-produced multiples. Some were printed in different colours for different runs; some contain original drawings or unique elements that were glued into each issue by hand after they were copied; many were hand-addressed, sometimes with an added personal note to the recipient. And in the archive, their content is augmented by the contextualization of the diaries in which they were drafted, the letters sent out with them and received in response to them, or the artwork that went into them.

To posit that the collection's zines are akin to unique manuscripts is not to argue against zine libraries: zines in archives and zine libraries can augment and enhance each other by providing different kinds of description, access, and reading experiences. Nor is it to suggest that zines are private and there-

39 Fales Library & Special Collections, Sheila Heti Riot Grrrl Collection, MSS 366, Box 1, Folder 3, *Residential Garbage 3*.

fore require a privileged space in terms of access. Rather, when read alongside personal papers and in the same way, zines benefit from the context of other documents, as well as from the context of the creators who made and collected them. When viewed as being more like letters or diaries than published materials, with their mistakes, misspellings, and erasures, their status as incomplete, evolving dialogues is more apparent.

## Conclusion

To cite Wobensmith again, “much of the beauty contained in the writing comes from someone who’s unsure of the future, who’s reaching out and saying something to an uncertain audience.” This could describe the Riot Grrrl Collection as a whole. It also underlines the bravery of those who have donated to the collection: unlike most archival donors, these are people in their mid-30s to mid-40s, who are donating materials from their youth without the benefit of supplementing that youthful snapshot with documentation about who they later became. The willingness of these donors to make themselves vulnerable – to make their private lives *public* – is what allows this evolving history to be preserved. But for most, that willingness is *contingent* on the limited, safe space of the reading room: many donors are willing to have their letters read in the archive but were unwilling to allow them to be published in Darms’s book, which was drawn from the collection; others are fine with allowing their zines or notebooks to be accessed in the reading room but do not want them to be digitized and published online. And some, as we discovered in the process of preparing this article, are not comfortable with having their writings in the archive at all. These are not issues of profit or intellectual “property” – they are issues of privacy.

Access to Riot Grrrl as a movement was limited in a number of ways: intentionally, when the space being created (a meeting, an all-girl dance party, the space in front of the stage at a punk show) was for girls only, in an attempt to protect them from emotional or physical harm; and unintentionally, via barriers of aesthetics, class, race, and age. But access to the Riot Grrrl Collection is mediated for the same reason that applies to any special collection: to balance the need for current access with the commitment to long-term preservation and *future* access. While the Riot Grrrl Collection has made accessible what was once inaccessible – liberating these papers from basements, closets, storage lockers, and under-the-bed milk crates – it is also crucial that the private, intimate safe space of the reading room and of the archive itself not perpetuate Riot Grrrl’s history of exclusion.

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