

Reading Riot Acts: Unpacking the Riot Grrrl Movement

By Oona Schreur

First Place: Researched Argument (UNIV 200)

The year is 1991, and you're a woman in your twenties walking to a show in Olympia, Washington. You couldn't be more excited. You get there and are immediately hit in the face with sound and smell. Loud, fast, and abrasive punk music blasts into your head. You are surrounded by sweaty boys rocking back and forth in a small room, but you also notice that you are one of only a few girls there and can immediately feel your place in the crowd. Your place in the crowd almost feels out-of-place so you join your fellow ostracized girlfriends on the edge of the room. Such an experience was all-too-common at these shows—women being pushed to the sidelines. The punk subculture was meant to be an inclusive place for outsiders. It was born as a response to corporate rock music and capitalism and strove to escape, critique, and oppose those dominant cultures. It was created as a do-it-yourself (DIY) space and subculture. However, like other subcultures built to be spaces of refuge from the social inequalities of dominant society, including sexism, the punk scene was largely a toxic space for women.

The dominance of men in the punk space made women feel unsafe and unheard. Sexism in the punk scene was all-too-common. Oftentimes, women at punk gatherings and shows were held to a sexual double standard. They were not only expected to stand outside normative culture, but also to be the sexual objects normative culture requires. With this, women faced the threat of sexual assault and were subjected to highly misogynistic lyrics and actions. To take one of countless, all-too-offensive examples, the Misfits, one of the most important punk bands,

boast in their song, “Last Caress,” “Well I got something to say / I raped your mother today / And it doesn’t matter much to me / As long as she’s spread.”

The Riot Grrrl movement arose in response to such sexism and aggression. The movement originated as a collaboration between prominent women in the punk scene, specifically Allison Wolfe and Kathleen Hanna. The beginning of the Riot Grrrl movement, like the punk movement in general, had a grassroots and DIY mentality, but in their case, it was specifically a response and protest to the alienation and discrimination women felt in the punk scene. They needed a space for just them. At first they did this through self-publications, gatherings, and lyrics. These acts were used as tools to discuss social issues and subjects that would otherwise not be heard.

Riot Grrrl used the word “Grrrl” vs “Girl” to remove the passive, often derogatory association with the word “girl,” as well as to invoke the anger behind the movement, “Grrrl” being reminiscent of a growl. They spread information through zines, word of mouth, and their music. Their message quickly found a growing audience, resulting in a large following and support. They spread their message in three important ways: by creating and distributing their own publications, by creating and performing songs, and in the end by disbanding in a way that encouraged contemporary iterations to adapt and flourish. Although this movement faced criticism for their lack of intersectionality and actions which led to their end, the movement has continued in various important, vibrant subcultures today. From its small beginnings, the Riot Grrrl movement became an important cultural force for the equality and empowerment of women in the punk scene and in society in general.

The Riot Grrrl founders and members made a very effective decision to spread their message by using DIY publications and hosting community gatherings. This was effective because they were able to reach likeminded people who shared their ethos. Zines (the word is short for “magazines”) were handmade, DIY publications that members of Riot Grrrl created and distributed to anyone who would read them, specifically women. According to the popular 2005 culture blogger Anne Elizabeth Moore, zines, like those produced by the Riot Grrrls, were important because they were “messy, nonlinear, and unprofessional; this describes not only the way they are constructed, but also the reasons they are made” (as cited in Wright, 2016, p. 55). In the case of the Riot Grrrls, this unstructured layout contributed to their fight against structural oppression. As Michell Comstock, an English professor at the University of Colorado–Denver, states in her study, “Grrrl Zine Networks,” it is important to “situate the grrrl zine’s formation within the context of grassroots, counter cultural publications, a context that is often at odds with larger, more mainstream ideological and political movements such as feminism” (2001, p. 384). Although mainstream media and pop culture did pick up this zine communication style, at first Riot Grrrl movement was very small and located in only one state, Olympia, Washington. It was a tight-knit group of women who wanted to discuss and respond to sexism in the punk scene, among many other things. It did not have a political goal like feminism. This DIY idea is a very common way to spread rhetoric and have complete control. The Riot Grrrls recognized this, and as Lilly Estenson (2012) a doctoral student in gender and women studies at Scripps college, says, the Riot Grrrl movement “saw the feminist potential in deconstructing and reconstructing identities through zines” (p. 59). Zines are a way to have complete control over the information you’re spreading, and they are at the heart of this DIY movement.

The Riot Grrrl movement believed in members actively engaging in cultural production rather than following existing guidelines, which allowed for an abundance of creativity and self-expression. The zines often featured ads for Riot Grrrl conventions or meet-ups, promoting events that would be happening like self-defense workshops, zine layout instruction, and much more. There were also other zines, t-shirts, and tickets for live shows for sale at these conventions and advertised in their flyers (see appendix A). These conventions ranged from being structured and organized to casual with small groups of people in a room. The Riot Grrrl movement shared this need for publications, conventions, and space of their own with the punk movement generally, but used these means to oppose much of punk culture. Estenson (2012) points out that punk was founded upon patriarchal and misogynistic practices that excluded women and reserved many main hands-on roles for men only. By creating their own space for women, the Riot Grrrl movement was able to empower like-minded women and hold space to talk about important issues. A big theme in these conventions and Riot Grrrl zines was talking about topics that had no place anywhere else, such as eating disorders, sexual assault, and feminine rage. (See appendices B and C for pages of zines promoting these conversations.)

This DIY movement allowed for a nearly endless possibility of new chapters, bands, and zines. Riot Grrrl was self-led, but there was an overarching ethos and some rules subscribers are encouraged to follow. The zine in appendix D illustrates this ethos and “rules” in a personal essay. You see the unnamed author (1991) saying, “resist the temptation to view those around you as objects and use them” and “acknowledge emotional violence as real” (pp. 7, 8). The Riot Grrrl movement found zines, conventions, and shows to be an effective way of spreading such messages, and thereby promoting their ethos, speaking out, and in turn gaining members.

Creating and performing songs was another effective way the Riot Grrrl movement advanced their feminist agenda by using lyrics that encouraged and empowered listeners to **join**. The Riot Grrrl movement is also naturally integrated into a music genre of its own, with bands singing songs about the alienation and discrimination women faced in a male-dominated music scene. Their main goal was to address this from a feminist perspective through lyrics in songs. As Soraya Alonso (2021), a hispanic music and culture scholar who focuses on critical discourse, states, “writing songs implies a strong level of self-involvement. Songs do not only provide meaning, they also convey emotions” (p. 100). Therefore, because music is a powerful way to express and interact, it can also become a tool for understanding and community-building. With music comes performance and perception. The leading band in the Riot Grrrl movement was Bikini Kill, with front-woman and self-proclaimed founder of this movement Kathleen Hanna. According to Jessica Rosenburg and Gitana Garofalo (1998), two scholars published in the scholarly journal *Signs*, the performance of these songs were a big part of their feminist agenda and empowering listeners. These performances were loud and in-your-face in a time where women were told to be quiet and out of the way. Alonso supports this notion by pointing out that at these shows Bikini Kill, and specifically Kathlene Hana, would invite girls to the front rows by screaming their famous slogan, “girls to the front.”

The energy at these shows facilitated “girl power” and “girl community.” The shows were seen as a safe space. Kristen Schilt (2003), an associate professor of sociology and director for the study of gender and sexuality at the University of Chicago, argues that, at “Bikini Kill shows, microphones were often passed around so that the audience could share stories of sexual abuse” (p. 9). This is a way the Riot Grrrl movement created space and spoke about topics

relevant to feminism. This act of sharing stories at shows was a literal way of providing space to be heard and to speak. Similarly, Alonso (2021) argues that the creation of the strong bond between the singers and the (female) audience led to a strong sense of community and a feeling of belonging. As Johanna Fateman (2013), a young woman living in Olympia at the time, said, “[I] developed fierce life-changing friendships with other women” (p. 7).

Lyrical expression and songs were another tool this movement used to promote their ethos. “Rebel Girl” by Bikini Kill was released in 1993. It is the band’s most recognized song. It is about sisterhood and was considered the movement's fight song, as Sara Marcus (2010), a writer and musician, suggests. It was written by Kathleen Hanna about a “queen” listeners should follow and admire. The use of third-person in the lyrics allows listeners to examine and apply the message to themselves:

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

[Chorus]

Rebel girl, rebel girl
 Rebel girl you are the queen of my world
 Rebel girl, rebel girl
 I know I wanna take you home, I wanna try on your clothes, uh

The topics of idealization and appropriation suggested in these lyrics are not accidental. Alonso (2021) points out that the song “portrays a girl from the hood who is a potential role model for American girls” (p. 110). At the same time, Maria Katharina Wiedlack (2015), a professor in gender studies and a connoisseur of Riot Grrrl culture, argues that this idealization and rebellious appropriation of the hood “symbolized their privilege to choose a lifestyle” (p. 267). On the other hand, Rosenberg and Garofalo discover in an interview with a self-proclaimed Riot Grrrl that Bikini Kill is “singing about the same problems these (punk) girls have. It gives them hope that, if these girls can do it, why can’t they?” (p. 820). As these several quotations suggest, the song’s lyrics invite varying reflections and responses, all to promote the (female) audience to examine themselves and their culture and to claim their own goals and power.

The Riot Grrrl movement's collective decision to officially disband was an effective move in advancing their feminist agenda, because it allowed space for new iterations to learn, adapt, and grow. By the late 90’s, almost all Riot Grrrl chapters had ceased activity, and most of the original Riot Grrrl bands had broken up. Although the movement largely ended because of significant limitations and problems I will discuss, the end was also generative in allowing its messages and influence to spread.

The general, agreed-upon reason behind the dissolution of the movement was the lack of intersectionality and inclusion. Put bluntly, the Riot Grrrl movement ended as a result of bigotry and hypocrisy. Although the Riot Grrrl movement projected a space of equality and stewardship for women, it tended to be a very white space. Jessica Rosenberg, a self-identified Riot Grrrl from Pennsylvania, described it as a space where information traveled from “word of mouth,

which [tended] to go from white girl to white girl because of racial segregation” (quoted in Garofalo, Rosenberg, 1988, p. 811). Many women, including working-class women and women of color, could not comfortably participate in this predominantly white group. Maria Katharina Wiedlack (2015), a professor in gender studies and a connoisseur of Riot Grrrl culture, argues that “Riot Grrrls’ rebellious appropriation of working class stylistic elements, or markers of poverty like torn or dirty clothes by predominantly white bourgeois college girls, did not correspond to their experiences as working class women of color” (p. 267). For all its efforts to oppose dominant cultural norms and stereotypes, the Riot Grrrl movement perpetuated class and race discrimination.

There was a lack of intersectionality and inclusion in Riot Grrrl gatherings and publications. Estenson (2012) points out that the movement has come to be widely criticized for practices that isolated and excluded women of color and queer individuals. This is something that was talked about in personal essays in various zines (see appendix E). The Riot Grrrl movement, similar to third-wave feminism, claimed to be inclusive and anti-racist, but the group fell through or lost sight of this because of their one-track goal of altering the punk scene. It began as a feminist movement with feminist ethos, but ended up marginalizing some of the very women they sought to include and empower. Gabby Bess, a writer for Vice magazine, amplifies Tamar-Kali Brown voice, a Black woman involved in the 90s punk scene, who explains, “I didn’t think it was exclusive, but it didn’t feel inclusive to me... It just felt super white” (As cited in Bess, 2015). Brown, incidentally, went on to start Sista Grrrl Riot, a space for Black women outside of the male- and white-dominated punk scenes. As I will suggest, this is an example of

how the movement, despite the problems that led to its dissolution, continued to be influential and inspiring to later feminist movements.

The Riot Grrrl movement has also been criticized for invalidating transgender women's identity. Estenson (2012) points out that "the movement [was] inaccessible to those who were not white, middle-class, cisgender, and heterosexual" (p. 16). Unfortunately, this cisgender prejudice was another internal contradiction that was partly to blame for its end. Angela Garcia (2018), an avid punk rock music fan and radio host, has pointed to the behavior of Kathleen Hanna, a leading woman in the movement, toward transgender women. Garcia states, "Kathleen Hanna's participation in Michigan Womyn's Festival, a festival with a strict womyn-born-womyn policy that only allows women who were female assigned at birth to attend, led to the erasure of transgender women's identities as valid." This stance directly contradicted the feminist ethos as promoted in a manifesto written by Kathleen Hanna: "We see fostering and supporting girl scenes and girl artists of all kinds as integral to this process" (cited in Estenson, 2012, p. 105). Hanna's participation in Michigan's Womyn's Festival went against the position of her own manifesto by not supporting girls of "all kinds" and showed some of the limitations and fissures that would result in the end of the Riot Grrrl movement.

The dissolution of the original Riot Grrrl movement, however, did not end its importance and influence on the on-going feminist movement. In fact, the end of the Riot Grrrl movement, paradoxically, has strengthened its significance and the causes it set out to promote. Its legacy and influence on feminism, music, and culture continue to shape modern feminist praxis. Malina Ryzik (2012), author of "A Feminist Style That Still Inspires" in the *New York Times*, reports that today, in 2022, "people are flocking to . . . reminiscences [of the Riot Grrrls] because there

remains a tremendous hunger for the kind of liberated, don't give-a-damn femaleness that was in full flower in the '90s, with nothing quite as potent since." This deep impact would not have happened without the disbanding of the Riot Grrrl movement and the subsequent opening of space for new iterations. To give just one example, Martina Camacho (2022), a thirteen-year-old Colombian student who writes for Malala.org, celebrates current bands and groups who are "reclaiming the legacy of the movement by making zines and music that emphasize the intersectionality of the Riot Grrrl movement and encourage anyone—and everyone—to join."

Contemporary Riot Grrrls-followers are even more hyper-aware of modern intersectional feminist ethos, in part because of the failings and limitations of the original movement. The Riot Grrrl movement is alive in contemporary subcultures operating in opposition to dominant power. "Today, there are established Riot Grrrl groups in Malaysia, Brazil, Paraguay, Israel, Australia, and across Europe.... Moreover, there are Riot Grrrl-inspired bands, zinesters, and activists around the globe" (cited in Wright, 2014, p. 56). The movement and its current iterations resist the characterization that they are a carbon copy of the original movement. Instead, they put a particular focus on the process of "re-defining" and transforming the Riot Grrrl movement through their activism, according to Estenson (2012). This new wave of self-proclaimed Riot Grrrls are effectively including and uplifting grrrls outside of the original movement's favored demographic.

Riot Grrrls continue to challenge dominant and common cultures by voicing their opposition through their unique acts of self-expression. Estenson (2012) states that, "although current Riot Grrrl communities may not be as strongly aligned with punk subculture ... contemporary Riot Grrrl activists also pursue accessible mediums of creating art and music that

are purposefully and publicly not for profit.” Additionally Estenson (2012) points out that, “contemporary Riot Grrrls have demonstrated their commitment to subverting capitalist systems by participating in explicitly anti-capitalist political initiatives such as the Occupy movement” (p. 8). This DIY, anti-capitalist mentality is deeply rooted in the original Riot Grrrl movement. This mentality is coupled with young fans of the new Riot Grrrl ethos feeling heard, confident, and free in their own way. Martina Camacho (2022) emphasizes this idea by saying, “Thanks to Riot Grrrl, I can make art and experiment with self-expression without feeling like I need to be great at it.” As a true follower of the Riot Grrrl spirit, Camacho feels free to make art and is breaking the capitalist idea of perfectionism in her self-expression. Although the original Riot Grrrl movement and members lacked an intersectional inclusive commitment, the new, reworked movement has learned and developed from their mistakes. This would not have been possible without the original movement's failure that led to disbanding. I believe new iterations of Riot Grrrls will continue to grow, adapt and become more inclusive while aiding in shaping our world today.

In conclusion, I believe that the Riot Grrrl movement was a revolutionary DIY movement. This movement has had lasting effects on society and culture. You can see its influence on young individuals via social media like TikTok and the hashtag #riotgrrrl trending with important conversations, observations and music. Additionally, this movement has been seen in mainstream culture enough to affect entire aesthetics of clothing and lifestyle. Think about how early 2000’s grunge made a re-appearance in 2022 or Kathleen Hanna's signature hairstyle of “micro bangs” being seen on the famous musician Grimes and even, speaking personally, my friend Lizzie. The ability to have this much lasting influence on groups of people

and ways of thinking is a testament to their effectiveness in breaking the status quo and empowering women. Although the original movement ultimately failed due to lack of radical inclusion, I believe these errors provided needed space for reflection for current and future self-proclaimed Riot Grrrls. I believe that the errors in this movement, like lack in full inclusivity and intersectionality, are lessons for the current and future self-proclaimed feminist activists. Without this failure on their part, there would not be space to reflect, learn, and adapt into new greater movements.

We, as a society that is progressing, still have leaps and bounds to go to reach radical inclusivity and equality, but this movement past and present has pushed boundaries greatly. From its small beginnings, the Riot Grrrl movement became an important cultural force for the equality and empowerment of women in the punk scene and in society in general. It did so in three important ways: by creating and distributing their own publications, by creating and performing songs, and in the end by disbanding in a way that encouraged contemporary iterations to adapt and flourish. Although this movement faced criticism for their lack of intersectionality and actions which led to their end, the movement has continued in various important, vibrant subcultures today.

To speak personally—because, after all, speaking personally is exactly what the Riot Grrrl movement was most about—I often find myself inspired by the movement. In my practice as an artist and my life as a woman, I am inspired by its defiant energy, its profound understanding of women’s pain and oppression, by the joy it sparked and inspired, by its faults, its honesty, and its passion. I am moved, for instance, by scenes from its early days of giving girls a microphone in the middle of a concert to talk about their experiences and to commune together. These voices

that they first gave the right to speak are still heard today, and I partly can own my own voice because of them. The riot continues.

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calling all grrrls and women!
 the riot grrrls in and around Washington DC
 are organizing a three-day riot grrrl convention
 this summer. we invite
 all grrrl and feminist bands
 and performers, grrrl fanzine
 writers, and energetic
 grrrls and boys
 from across the country
 to contribute their skills,
 energy, anger, creativity
 and curiosity. we will be having
 at least three shows, as well as
 workshops on everything
 from self-defense,
 to how to run a
 soundboard and
 how to lay out a zine.
 plus, there will be a lot of
 time to talk with
 other women about how
 we fit (or don't fit!) in
 the punk community.

**RIOT GRRRL
 CONVENTION**
 July 31
 August 1
 August 2
 Washington DC



we also have
 riot grrrl t-shirts
 hand-screened by us



pink, red or
 white shirts
 L or XL
 \$7 ppd
 make t-shirt checks
 payable to Kristin Thomson



GO!

*what bands
 are playing?*

*what else
 is going on?*

*where can
 I stay?*

riot grrrl!
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 arlington, va 22205
 or call
 301/935-5463

plus!

riot grrrl #7 is out!
 send \$1.00 plus 2 stamps
 and we'll send you a copy
 of our fanzine

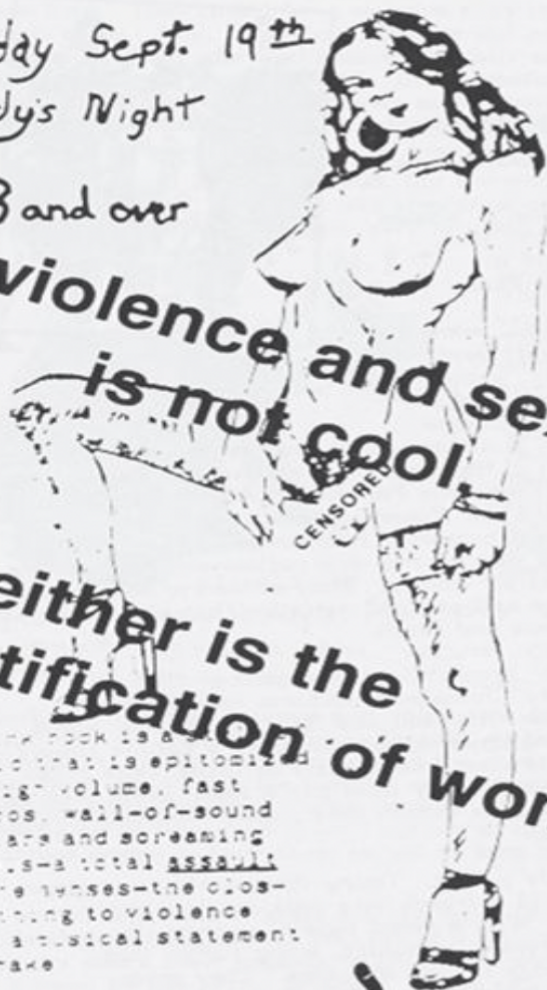
Thursday Sept. 19th
Lady's Night

18 and over

violence and sexism
is not cool

neither is the
objectification of women.

punk rock is a
music that is epitomized
by high volume, fast
tempo, wall-of-sound
guitars and screaming
vocals—a total assault
on the senses—the clos-
est thing to violence
that a musical statement
can take



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Dicksister with Genocide

Appendix C

Flier for a concert and a discussion about sexism Dupont Circle, Washington, DC, August 2

Sunday, Aug. 2
at Dupont Circle

10:30 - 12:00 girls and boys come together to talk about ending sexism.

12:00 - 6:00 girl powered bands and performers will rock your world

if you wanna do something, show up
we'll try to fit you in! ♡

RIOT
-washington dc-
GRRR!

XOXOXOXO

Appendix D
Riot Grrrl, Weekly Zine, 1991

Trust.

THE REVOLUTION STARTS HERE AND NOW
within each one of us

Recognize that you are not the center of the universe.
Figure out how the idea of winning and losing fits into your relationships.
Be a dork, tell your friends how you really feel.
Selectively ignore all oppressive laws.
Don't judge other people, only yourself.
Resist the temptation to view those around you as objects and use them.
Acknowledge emotional violence as real.
Close your mind to the propaganda of the status quo by examining it's effects on you, cell by (artificial) cell.
Resist psychic death.
Be as vulnerable as you possibly can.
Recognize vulnerability and empathy as strengths.
Cry in public.
Don't allow the fact that other people have been assholes to you make you into a bitter and abusive person.
Burn down the walls that say you can't be connected to other people and species.
Refute organized religion as a distraction from the revolution.
Resist the internalization of capitalism, the reducing of oneself and others to commodities, meant to be consumed and discarded.
Commit to the revolution as a method of psychological and physical survival.
Make ammendments to this list and think about why you don't agree with some of what i've written.
Enjoy sex, food, and the company of other people without having to hoard them.
If someone tells you they are in pain, believe them. Help them figure a way to stop the pain or deal with the pain's existence.
Don't assume people invent pain in order to manipulate you or make you feel bad.
Decide that you'd rather be truly alive and in a state of constant flux than to have everything under control (labeled, your identity staid and unchangeable, you've figured everything out) and lead a dead simulation of existence.

Appendix E

Riot Grrrl, Weekly Zine, 1991

No we are not paranoid.
 No we are not manhaters.
 No we are not worrying too much.
 No we are not taking it too seriously.

When you say sexist/racist/homophobic/speciest shit around me I AM GOING TO SAY SOMETHING. i expect you to call me on my shit. i expect confrontations with my friends. its one way that i am learning stuff. its one way that i am unlearning stuff.

When i tell you i think you are acting like a jerk because you said something (usually sexist)...you act like i am attacking you, like i am only telling you how i feel to personally attack you and thats just not the way it is. i am crying because you hurt me. Because my friends are so important to me and i don't want them to be jerks. i know they are just the hosts (as i am) for all this bullshit that the world's taught us..BUT...it is not enough for me to know that they/you/i "don't mean" to hurt anyone...it is also important for me to know that i/we/they are actually gonna work on undoing all this shit.

A GIRL WHO TELLS ON A BOY IS A DEAD GIRL.
 Silence. it eats me up. its so hard to step out of here, this room where everyone talk talk talk is talking and saying no no no nothing. And when i step out from these shadowy drapes of denial, i am told that i am dising you....i am told that it is not you, it's your friends...But you can't explain to me how you are trying, you can't put your arms around me...you can't ask me what you can do to help me...you can't (ever ever ever under any circumstances) say you are sorry.

If it is "dising" for me to state my needs...if i am breaking your balls by being upset that the people i love most, respect most are perpetuating this stupid bullshit...THEN I AM DISING YOU GOD DAMNIT AND I AM NOT AFRAID.

LISTEN UP BOYSTOWN....GIRLTOWN IS SICK OF SCREAMING INTO PILLOWS AND CRYING IN THE BACKSEATS OF CARS, YOU EITHER MAKE IT EASIER FOR US TO TALK OR WE ARE ROLLING ON OVER YOU AND INTO OUR OWN LAND, ACROSS THE TRACKS, BEHIND THE BOWLING ALLEY, SENDING SECRET MESSAGES THRU BATHROOM STALLS AND TAMPON DISPENSERS....IT IS NOT ALWAYS OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO TELL YOU THINGS ARE FUCKED UP...IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO ASK....

See we can't talk in here and there is no room to breath cuz there are all these subtle shut me ups and we spend hours days weeks our lives trying to construct the language to explain these things and then we come home and you got your feet up on the couch and i try and tell you something and there is silence or you tell me i'm dising you AND the air is not safe for me to swallow down anymore because I AM SICK OF SWALLOWING EVERYTHING.

If i lapse into what i really want to say for even 30 fuckin seconds i am wide open to attack. i can NOT explain sexism with your dick in my mouth, i can not keep keep keep try try trying.

Please understand, i don't mean this shit as a personal attack on any one....but it always seems to be "someone else" who is being sexist and never the boy that any of us girls are addressing. It is time to take responsibility, acknowledging the "isms" within yourself and to your friends is so important. Boys letting other boys' sexism "slide" just gives us the message that you just don't give a shit. Afterall, if you let it "slide" does that mean we should "swallow" it?

If this doesn't make sense to you and your a boy why not ask a girl what she thinks, ask her what you can do.