

Where's the Riot?

by Claire Villacorta

Ask me about Revolution Grrrl Style Now! in the Philippine setting, and this is what I have to say: there is no real riot grrrl movement to speak of. Well, none that has really surpassed the sub/cultural co-existence, or to put it simply, the shared spaces within punk. Of course, this isn't to disparage anyone of her self-identification with riot grrrl. I do know of a few, give or take a couple of girls with zine-publishing and/or punk backgrounds.

At some point in her life, Athena took the Riot Grrrl Manifesto to heart, and Loi was often tagged as such. But in reality, the latter has said:

"The experiences from women from the U.S. where riot grrrl originated are very much different from our experiences here. For me, it's not a question of leaning here or there. I'm a feminist in my own way, and it shows in the songs I write."
(from an interview in *Fucked By Condition #2*)

There's no denying, though, that her involvement within punk had paved the way for female participation, however little in numbers. To this day, she has my unwavering respect.

All this had happened while I was far removed from the ideological swing of things, grappling instead with the modernist terrain of the "culture industry". So what had been handed down to me, in turn, was a riot grrrl diluted, watered down beyond belief by the mainstream media's tireless hype machine. It seemed like anything could pass itself off as "girl power": from a project band of mid-nineties rockerettes formed at the whim of their straight male manager, to the spectacle of Miss Piggy, packaged and sold at your nearest record or toy store. I certainly didn't buy into any of this, and if anything, I was put off by these misconstrued notions of riot grrrl, since its appeal left very minimal impact. And it didn't exactly strike me as the real deal, either.

Riot grrrl captured my attention by way of zines, facing a critique from zinesters of color in America. It began as a sub/counter-cultural feminist movement that raised a collective middle finger to the alienating male-dominated punk scene. Riot grrrls favored safer spaces for communication and girl-centric production, over a mere "power-sharing" with the boys. By the time I was introduced to riot grrrl, it had already been reassessed and criticized as partial to the experiences of middle class white girls. Like the assumed universality of punk and its prevailing colorblindness, riot grrrl too, either marginalized, overlooked, or even grossly misinterpreted the intersections of race, class and sexuality, challenged time and again by their colored participants.

For me, this put into perspective the importance of context and relevance. The issues and concerns of First and Third World punks, no matter how ideologically alike, do not translate the same way in livable terms. Hello! It's only, like, culture! And when you factor in economic conditions, social norms, and the long, bloody history of Western colonization, it's a surprise that punks "at home" and "away" have anything in common at all.

It becomes all the more clear when white punk bands come here to play. Their frame of reference is, after all, limited to what they have back home, or the countries they've toured. So when you have someone like Felix Havoc commenting in his *Maximumrockandroll* column about the Philippine punk scene being the most male-dominated he's ever come across in these Asian parts, he is merely basing his crude observations on Code 13's Asian tour. But when he concludes that we are "begging for a riot grrrl movement," complete with hack generalizations that the "Filipina plight" stems from "our subjugation" by the "Christian values" that have permeated our culture or society, here I am, outraged beyond belief at the oversimplified manner in which he chooses his words to propose the very apt "solutions" that can "champion our cause". That we are in dire need of a riot grrrl movement "or any other sort of revolt from within the music scene to give women some rights and recognition" is by far the most

condescending pap I've ever read in the pages of MRR! And this coming from a straightwhitehardcoreboy whose week-long stay in the Philippines "qualifies" him to write up a histo-ethnography of Philippine punk as if he were so goddamn knowledgeable about the socio-cultural damage that's already been done here, be it colonization, globalization, foreign policy, or even down to our corrupt and greedy political systems. And being a one-time MA History major myself, I've encountered one too many white academics attempting PHILIPPINE STUDIES, who primarily slant their own findings to their convenience to insinuate our country's underdeveloped status, backwardness, and inability to become a fully independent nation. Yeah, like they're one to talk when Western hegemonic structures are making Third World countries depend on the United States (hello, foreign aid!). Felix's ambassador-like stance, one that spells out I-hate-what-our-government-has-done-to-your-people-but-I-am-a-friend-I-am-not-anything-like-them, still does not excuse him from having any privilege at all, because he still has white privilege. No matter how saddened he claims to be by the TNCs (i.e. fastfood joints) that can be found on practically every street corner in Manila, or the idea that Filipino punks go to shopping malls, or even how white-washed our culture is and how he couldn't take anything that was "authentically Filipino" with him to remember our country by (oh, boo-fucking-hoo) - who is he anyway to sum up our existence in such neat, quantifiable terms? I certainly don't revel in the atrocities of Western "progress", either, but when white people bemoan our countries efforts towards development and, worse yet, give Filipinos (punks included) reason to believe that they/we are living in a "Third World shithole", it's almost as if there's little or close to nothing to aspire to, apart, of course, from self-hatred. And when I observe these sentiments in punk-rock ranting, I see nothing more than the American Dream revisited, much to my disappointment. In line with gearing us towards white love, Felix's proposal of riot grrrl only come off as an imperialist idea spawned from his own prejudgments of Filipina women as submissive, so unlike the strong women of the First World who are more inclined towards feminism. To him, riot grrrl will "save us" but he should know better that he is not being helpful here if he looks down on us as some kind of plight. And to quote Korean-American zinester Yumi Lee (External Text), we are "not a fucking plight," waiting to be redeemed by some white hardcore dude from Minneapolis who thinks he knows what's best for us.

Not that I have any aversion towards riot grrrl - I don't. But like punk, riot grrrl is certainly not universal. It can be appropriated and recontextualized ON OUR TERMS. But while there's little to give it any relevance here, there's not much for me to piece together, either. I like to dabble with the possible intersections where riot grrrl in the U.S. and the proliferation of local zines penned by females (not necessarily within punk) in the mid-90s somehow cross or call to question whether there is any relational aspect to begin with. That Athena was a self-proclaimed riot grrrl and Loi's old band, Abrasive Relations, were known to cover Bikini Kill might just as easily formed the connection. However, their reasons for publishing can't really be put into such oversimplistic terms. Riot grrrl may have been an incidental influence rather than the fire that started it all.

As it is, everyone's exposure to zines and zine-making is different. The publication of zines like *Rampage* and *Dissent*, authored by Dang and Loi respectively, were closely intertwined with punk, as they themselves were active participants in the subcultural scene. I would estimate '96 as a safe marker for the more noticeable "boom" in local girl zines. I'm not quite sure who came out with what first - Wendi with *w.r.i.n.g.* or Athena with *Stuff!* They were worlds apart, that much I can say. I read Athena's post-*Stuff!*, post-*Took Yr Lollipop* zine *Breakfast* at her 22nd issue. She was 13 then, and already knew how to articulate her discontents: sexism/homophobia, Catholicism, the counter-productivity of school-sponsored community service, cultural imperialism in a local American school, and the complexities of class issues and privilege (while owning up to her own). *Breakfast* also served as a scaffold for reconstructing the self - Fil-Chinese identity, feminism, and bi-queerness. The seriousness of Athena's writing, however, was evened out with a little homage here and there to her favorite girl bands. She then gradually graduated onto postcolonial rhetoric as she discusses race, language, and the representation of food in her more current text, *Framing Historical Theft*.

As the Teen Queen of zines, her prolific is certainly free of cheeseball, at once awesome and razor-sharp, you have to envy somebody with such an endless supply of brain food.

The post-collegiate Wendi w.r.i.n.g., on the other hand, indulged in iconography (most notably rock stars), travel, boy love/lust, girl stories, sex and theory, and body image, incorporating wit, sarcasm, and the most creative play of pop-culture referencing in her radiant prose. As my first zine trade, *w.r.i.n.g.* # 7-9 had posed a challenge for my *Giant Robot*-like guilty pleasures, both stylistically and ideologically. While I got my zine fixes elsewhere and took my writing to more theoretical dimensions, *w.r.i.n.g.* # 10 came along and almost instantly changed the way I viewed the state of local zines, which I felt was too wrapped up in the punk paradigm of things, given its dominance in our subculture of zinedom (*HeartattaCk*: good because it's so effin' punk rawk; *Voltes V*: bad because it's, duh, mainstream). Wendi was certainly not confined to anything, almost carefree with her life and her words, brutally honest with her observations (there's the bile), problematized ideologies when she saw it fit and was by far one of the best conceptual writers I've come across. Why I'd overlooked that, I don't know, but it was well worth returning to *w.r.i.n.g.*'s chronological growth and to recognize Wendi's genius, at last. Oh, well. Better late than never, I guess.

Where there be collectively-run zines, the girls still ruled the school - from the personal with a dash of music (*Freedom Pad*, *Barrel*, *La Puztizo*, *Tattle Tale*, to name a few, now defunct I guess) to the more reproductive health-oriented feminist zine (*Sapling Thoughts*) to pop culture and art (*Lunar Landing*). Plus the sheaf of girl zines that I haven't come across - *Toilet*, *Catatonía*, *Welcome to My Dollhouse*, *Slush*, etc. And let's not forget the ladies who co-publish - zines like *Make Your Own* (animal awareness zine published by Gani and Adie), *Halo-Halo* (Pinoy pop culture critique published by yours truly and my partner Paolo), and *Batmun Conspiracy* (edited by Egai of Batangas and Raya of Muntinlupa to cover the punk scene in both areas) are proof of that. Maica runs the show with *Fucked By Condition*, a contributor-friendly zine packed with the punk and the personal. And the list may still go on!

The other year, I was delighted to find an issue of *Ecotone* in my mailbox. However, It did take a while to figure out that this ecology zine was done by a girl, Dwane, who, as it turned out, was a regular contributor of *Sapling Thoughts*! While my alertness level had momentarily been shot for one reason or another, it's really not at all hard to figure out that some of the girls behind the aforementioned zines have formed their own communities or networks, even outside of punk. Which is more than I can say for punk/hc boys who bother to address the "utter lack" of growing physical presence of girls (other than the "boyfriended cheerleaders" of band members) at the d.i.y. shows when they themselves can't even go beyond sightseeing! Like dialoguing was in their "best interests." If this were the case, wouldn't they be flipping through these zines instead, just to see how most of them would have a flair for waxing personal or critical rather than ripping off 90% of their content from outside sources?

Regardless, this lil girl invasion that doesn't have a name to consolidate its broad-based zine-girl representation has managed well without having to beg for the recognition, much less concern themselves over these boyish whims (tho this has been properly addressed in *Dissent* #1). The numbers at the shows don't match up at all when you've realized how these girls have the better knack for penned ideas.