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FEMINIST RESPONSE TO POP CULTURE

bitch

MICRO / MACRO

SUMMER 2013

NO. 59 | USA \$5.95 | CANADA \$7.50



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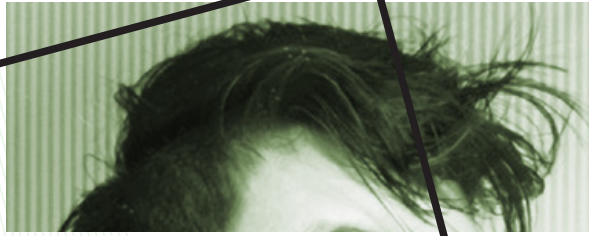
REVISITING THE RIOT

AN INTERVIEW WITH PUNK
VETERAN MIMI THI NGUYEN

interview by Tina Vasquez | photos by Mimi Thi Nguyen and Fiona Ngo

Mimi Thi Nguyen is punk as fuck and always has been. Twenty years after publishing her first zine, the associate professor of gender and women's studies and Asian American studies at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, still proudly admits that punk saved her life.

Nguyen, author of 2012's *The Gift of Freedom: War, Debt, and Other Refugee Passages*, grew up in Minnesota and later lived in San Diego, California, where she was drawn to "the do-it-yourself ethic, the angular-melodic music, the passionate intensity, and the sense of urgency shared with other misfits, freaks, and weirdos." However, she



eventually realized that the subculture was filled with a lot of political posturing at the expense of people of color, causing Nguyen to quit the scene “at least eight times” out of rage and disappointment—though she says now, “I’m currently at a point where I’ve accepted that I will forever be an old-lady punk.”

Nguyen, who’s also cofounder of the blog Thread-bared, a collaboration with Minh-Ha T. Pham that discusses the politics, aesthetics, histories, theories, cultures, and subcultures related to fashion and beauty, says that riot grrrl informed her punk feminism, but also name-checks anarchists and radicals such as Lucy Parsons, Emma Goldman, Rosa Luxembourg, the JANE Collective (a Chicago-based group that provided abortions when the procedure was still illegal), and the Lesbian Avengers. She also found her intellectual and political footing in women of color feminisms and postcolonial feminism, which still greatly inform her writing today, as evidenced by her hard-hitting 2012 essay “Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival,” published in a special issue of *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*. In “Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival” Nguyen posits that riot grrrl was one of the greatest things to ever happen to punk, even as it replicated some of the more problematic things that continue to happen within feminism. Here, the feminist scholar talks about her life in zines, her groundbreaking writing, and the wounds that riot grrrl created.

In the first note at the end of “Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival,” you say that the essay has taken the entire duration of your punk life to complete. How were the first seeds for the article planted?

I was 16 in 1991 when riot grrrl first cohered as a punk feminism, but I wouldn’t have claimed then that I was a riot grrrl. I was a semi-crusty punk whose feminist politics were deeply invested in a radical critique of the state and capital. This critique was not completely absent from riot grrrl, but it was not a critique that is often identified with riot grrrl, so riot grrrl did not *immediately* speak to me. But the longer I was in the punk scene, the more I appreciated riot grrrl’s critique of punk’s masculinist aesthetics and politics. I found the theoretical and political provocations occurring in riot grrrl via lyric sheets, zines, and conventions much more compelling than the macho posturing of so much punk. So even though I didn’t think of myself as a riot grrrl, I valued it as an intellectual and creative scene—and I still believe it’s one of the best things to happen to punk. At the same time, I was a gender- and women’s-studies major and was cutting my teeth on women of color feminisms, postcolonial feminisms, poststructuralist feminist theory—and I applied the critical skills I learned to



what I saw around me. The troubles and critiques of the feminist movement I learned from women of color feminisms seemed to be manifesting themselves in riot grrrl, in punk. So the first seeds were planted in my zines—I engaged with riot grrrl as it unfolded in real time.

There is renewed interest in riot grrrl, from Sara Marcus’s 2010 book *Girls to the Front: The True Story of the Riot Grrrl Revolution*, Abby Moser’s 2011 documentary *Grrrl Love and Revolution: Riot Grrrl NYC*, to SisterSpit cofounder Sini Anderson’s *The Punk Singer*, an up-close-and-personal look at Bikini Kill/Le Tigre lead singer Kathleen Hanna. As this movement gets retold in the form of books, documentaries, and other projects, how would you like to see the issue of race addressed? Do you think it has been adequately addressed?

It is interesting to see this moment being revisited, and how I interact with these revisitations, how I am asked to revisit or how I am not asked to revisit, and how histories of that moment are the result of institutional sanction and authority that defines (and sometimes replicates) troubling theories of value, i.e., whose experiences are solicited, by whom, toward what end.

[In regard to the retrospective turn,] my friend Iraya Robles said, “We are continually narrated and approached, even in retrospect, like we’re a scar or a painful memory for punk feminism—in that story, we ruined it. And there is so much more to our story than that.

The question also remains—where’s the work we made? With California being missing in the timeline, you just erase so many people. Where are the Los Angeles riot grrrls, or the punk women of color in the Bay Area who did so much art and activism related to riot grrrl or queercore, which these movements benefited from? How come all the women of color making impactful zines and bands are left out?”

I would like to see race addressed not as a painful memory, as the ruin of riot grrrl, as deafening absence, but as a copresent, productive presence in and around riot grrrl—one that speaks to alternate investments and encounters. I haven’t yet seen race be addressed adequately, but I have not yet read Adela Licona’s *Zines in Third Space: Radical Cooperation and Borderlands Rhetoric*, which deals primarily with zines by feminists and queers of color. But there are definitely new conversations about it, which are promising. The 2010 compilation zine *International Girl Gang Underground*, put together by Kate Wadkins and Stacy

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Konkiel, collects some of these conversations and is a valuable resource. There are so many rad people who want this conversation that I feel like it’s possible for us to do better.

In your essay you talk a great deal about “the politics of intimacy” and “the subculture of intimacy.” Break this down for me: What are the politics of intimacy?

One of riot grrrl’s central tenets is that girls are alienated from other girls through multiple means—jealousy, competition, etc. A parallel tenet is that girl cultures actually contain alternate means for girl-girl intimacy to emerge and thrive. So in zines particularly, aesthetics and politics of intimacy coalesced. This isn’t to say that what we found in zines were “true feelings”—many riot grrrl zines were strategic and self-reflexive about how intimacy was construed aesthetically, and politically. But nonetheless, a confessional aesthetic and politic emerged, one that prized the appearance of openness to others’ scrutiny.

In “Riot Grrrl, Race, and Revival” you discuss girl love, saying that at workshops held at numerous riot grrrl conventions, race and racism proved to be the stumbling block that “threw the promise of ‘girl love’ all askew.” Why was it so difficult to honestly address race in a movement that claimed to be intimate and honest?

Race disrupts the premise of “we” and “us.” Feminist theorist Norma Alarcon, whom I read as an undergraduate and whom I still teach, observes that under asymmetries of race and indigeneity, sometimes one “becomes a woman” (citing of course Simone de Beauvoir) in opposition to other women. For any movement that hinges on a presumably common experience (including the feminist movement), the presence of difference disrupts this premise. Even more disruptive is the idea that experience is *not* the origin of authoritative knowledge (“Because I am this, I know that”), but that experience itself is the thing that requires interpretation and explanation. So being honest about one’s experience—whatever that means—is not enough.

So the politics of intimacy don’t necessarily translate to self-awareness.

The demand to be intimate or honest with a public can be invasive when the experiences of racial others are commodified as stories or objects that might be traded as evidence of intimacy, as proof of “being good,” for nonracial others. In this way, intimacy might act as surveillance, through which some people—women of color, for instance—must reveal themselves to bear the burden of representation (“You are here as an example”)

and the weight of pedagogy (“Teach us about your people”). Intimacy can be a force—especially when others set its terms and conditions. So what if you *don’t* love the (white) girls who exhaust you, who want too much from you, who want to turn you into a commodity or a badge or an experience to share? What if you become a girl in opposition to other girls?

This is also the problem with definitions of racism as ignorance, and ignorance as the absence of intimacy—which posits that intimacy is the solution to ignorance. This gives us terrible, stupid disavowals like “I’m not racist, I have black friends,” as if intimacy is a shield that protects the wearer from harm. It limits our sense of what racism is to the scale of the interpersonal, when it is in fact this enormous constellation of forces and moving parts that structures our institutions—and so-called intuitions—profoundly.

Mainstream feminist movements have historically failed to be inclusive of women of color. Why does the problem continue to be perpetuated? Is it a matter of not recognizing the problem, or do people recognize the problem but not really understand how to address it?

I would imagine that it is a combination of these things. Feminist movements do not just organize around gender but actively produce it as well, so when they produce it as a singular experience—as if the category of “women” were coherent and obvious—these movements will inevitably fail to account for other women, be they women of color, indigenous women, trans women, etc. An insistence on a singular experience violently disappears histories of racism, colonialism, empire, and transphobia. But don’t get me wrong—it’s definitely hard work.

Did the movement have the potential to be inclusive of women of color?

In retrospect, that’s an impossible question to answer. What would inclusion entail? There were women of color who were a part of riot grrrl groups and who organized girl conventions. In early-1990s Los Angeles, riot grrrl was organized by Latinas Dani and Sisi, who produced an amazing zine called *Housewife Turned Assassin*. In their writing, they never claimed that all girls or women shared the same experience of gender or sexuality. At the same time, many women of color did come to feel alienated from riot grrrl, for all the reasons I outline and more. Our zines did not circulate as widely as other zines did, maybe because we didn’t focus solely on singular forms of gender or girlhood. *Housewife Turned Assassin* is brilliant, but who knew the founders’ names outside our circles of punk women of color? And if and when their names are remembered, are women of color at the center of the story or are they the supplement?

In your essay you say that riot grrrl has become the name of “an often romanticized moment of young women’s feminism,” one that was dominated by white women and whose retelling is dominated by white academics. Why do you think this is?

There are a number of possible factors for the focus on white women in academic and popular studies of punk and riot grrrl. One or more might be a matter of access: It matters which persons, bands, and zines are already mentioned in earlier studies, or are found in academic and other archives. So we have to ask, what is in the archive, and how did it get there? What are the criteria for assembling, organizing, and presenting materials? Who selects and collects, shapes and donates their stories to an archive? What is *not* there? It is stating the obvious to observe that no archive is an authoritative source for grasping a record of the past.

Another is a matter of media: Because of distribution and production models, bands circulate more widely than zines. There are multiple forms through which we might encounter a band—albums and songs are easily copied and sent to others. And, at least for me, most of the women of color I knew were zine writers, not musicians or performers, so they were much less visible in the scene and in the so-called mainstream press, both during riot grrrl’s moments of emergence and today’s moments of commemoration.

A third factor is simply that punk, and riot grrrl by association, are often perceived as mostly white subcultures. There have always been women of color in and around punk; our numbers are smaller, but our presence informs so much of the earlier provocations of punk aesthetics, as well as punk feminisms—most obviously Alice Bag and Poly Styrene. But even for those of us who have spent years and years discussing and discovering women of color in punk and riot grrrl, these are semisecret histories, and if you are a researcher from outside the scene, or from outside even the black and brown punk scene, you might not even know what questions to ask.

Why, all these years later, is there still so much resistance to discussing the lack of representation of women of color in the riot grrrl movement?

The recent retrospective tells me that there is a hunger for what riot grrrl stands for in a utopian feminist imaginary decades later—whether or not this matches the realities of riot grrrl for those of us who lived through its first incarnations. It’s absolutely true that riot grrrl was amazing and moving in turns. So in part, it may be that this utopian image of riot grrrl recalls an aesthetic of provocation and protest that appears to be absent now. But I worry that riot grrrl retrospectives or calls for revival will take the form of a story of the loss of some idealized moment of feminist intimacy, a story where race is either a disruption or an intervention that we have gotten over, even though we continue to live with the same practices of violence.

In your essay you say that in revisiting the movement, we not only have to look at the scars that riot grrrl laid bare, but also the wounds riot grrrl made. What are the wounds that were created and how—or where—does the healing start?

The so-called wounds are the same as they ever were in feminist movement: producing a singular story of gender that perceives dif-



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ference as disruption, privileging a singular story as necessary for a feminist movement to cohere and act against another produced, singular story of power—like patriarchy. Too often, this works against other women who perceive gender or power differently. And really, I am not sure that “healing” is the right frame—for one thing, these violences are still with us. A good start, however, toward more nuanced politics, would be self-reflection and accountability, both in word and deed. Of course, these also are complicated paths, because what does accountability look like? These paths would be best paved through reading and engaging with women of color feminisms, postcolonial feminisms, queer of color critique, and critical indigenous theory in our stories and practices of feminist movement.

In your essay you talk about the idea of being a “killjoy” by pointing out riot grrrl’s many flaws. For many women, riot grrrl was their introduction to feminism. I’m curious: What has been the reaction to your article? Have people accused you of putting a damper on a movement that was formative to their feminism?

I haven’t heard one negative word about the essay so far. The reaction has been overwhelmingly positive—from others in that cohort, from feminist scholars wholly outside of the scene. Really, most of the women I know who were in or around riot grrrl at that time are on board with the critique. These are smart women, women who are committed to feminist inquiry and recognize the fault lines. Some of them read this critique the first time around, when these arguments were seeded in my zines, in other zines by other women of color, and in our interactions in the scene. This critique is not a surprise—it’s been a years-long collaborative endeavor with and within punk feminisms.

You engaged the burgeoning riot grrrl movement in the '90s through zines, with your 1994 zine *Slant* (“an in-your-face feminist reclamation of an Orientalist trope”), which changed names in 1997, becoming *Slander*, which is what it’s still called today. This is also around the time you began collecting people of color—authorized zines and contributions for the compilation zine *Race Riot*. So, you’re a punk in academia and a zinester/scholar. What is it like navigating these very distinct worlds at the same time?

It’s a very odd thing at times. For me, punk was sitting in the dark, listening to records, and telling intense stories about how punk saved your life, or fucked it up more, and about the art you make from it. So punk keeps me in contact with passion, rawness, and urgency, all of which can be hard to come by or sustain in the academy. Punk informs so much of how I present myself and also how I perceive love and romance with friends, with lovers, with the world. At the same time, punk was deeply unsatisfying for me on multiple fronts, especially its dumb side, its white punk-boy side, its reactionary side. So I did have to go elsewhere or create new spaces like *Race Riot*.


Tell me about your involvement in the POC Zine Project. How did it come about and why did you feel compelled to get involved?

Daniela Capistrano, founder of the POC Zine Project, contacted me in 2010 about digitizing and distributing for free the *Race Riot* zines. I am so proud of those zines and excited about putting them back into circulation, especially after Osa Atoe from *Shotgun Seamstress* wrote a *Maximumrocknroll* column the previous year asking, “Where did all the black and brown punk foremothers go?” and naming me and Helen Luu and Iraya Robles specifically. It made me consider how punk emphasizes production as presence, but also how these zines marked in particular a moment grappling with race in punk, which might still be valuable to revisit. At the time, I wanted the compilation zine to be an informal record of “We (punks of color) were here” for those who I imagined would follow after me, because at that point I was going to “quit” the scene. My collaboration with Daniela and the POC Zine Project is a reckoning with that history, and also a wish to respond to Osa’s question: *I’m still here, I’m still with you, we can make spaces that sustain us.*

So when I was scheduled in November 2011 to present an academic paper at the University of Pennsylvania, I contacted Jenna Freedman at the Barnard Zine Library about taking a side

trip to do an event there. Jenna has focused that zine collection on women of color zines specifically, and we’ve been in contact on and off for a number of years. In short order, she organized the first “Meet Me at the Race Riot” panel with Kate Wadkins of For the Birds Feminist Collective and Distro and Daniela, and the rest is history. We had an amazing turnout and a thrilling dialogue with the audience. Daniela thought we should take the show on the road, so the first POC Zine Project/Race Riot! Tour happened in September and October 2012: 12 cities in two weeks. It was truly awesome to stage these conversations every night—sometimes twice in one day—about race and racism, activism, and art.

If there is a riot grrrl revival, are you at all confident that race, class, sexuality, etc. will be properly addressed?

I am not sure that we need a riot grrrl revival. What would that mean? Why not make something new? As I said before, the riot grrrl retrospective too often takes the form of a melancholic longing for some previous moment of feminist optimism, in which the present can only be understood as failure—which is troubling, since the reasons for the diminishing of riot grrrl had to do with some truly terrible racial politics. To mourn its diminishing too often “blames” racial tension, and by extension girls and women of color as a source of violence. We need instead to create the conditions for new forms of feminist theory and practice to emerge. We also need to acknowledge that there are already existing forms—postcolonial feminisms, women of color feminisms, hip hop feminisms, and even other punk feminisms—that we can look to for provocation, protest, and politics. I feel that feminist futures can’t look like feminist pasts, and that we can’t predict or pretend to know what these futures will look like or feel like—because when we try, we foreclose on all the as-yet unthinkable possibilities for feminist movement. 

Tina Vasquez is a writer and editor from the Los Angeles area who fiercely loves her 12-year-old cat, Jacky. She has written for *Bitch*, *Curve*, and *Herizons*, and is a frequent contributor to *TheGlassHammer.com*. She is currently working on a book about her fucked-up teen years.