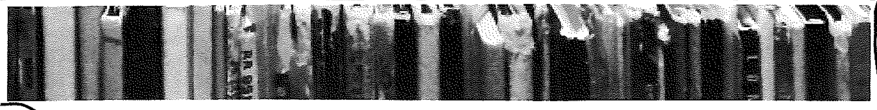

Constellations

Cielo Lutino

My family didn't have the money to send me on visits to any of the schools I applied to, so when I flew from South Carolina to Portland, Oregon, in August 1990, it was my first time in either the Pacific Northwest or at Reed College, a small, private liberal arts school.

I'm telling you this because, looking back, it's hard to separate the newness of Riot Grrrl from everything else that was new to me then: Gore-Tex; public transit; living somewhere it never thunderstormed; where coffee was an art, not a beverage; and the part that was newest and the reason I was even there: college. My classmates were predominantly white, generally from the West or northeast. Some had gone to boarding school, were related to Vanderbilts. They sported one of two looks: outdoorsy or retro. The first featured a lot of fleece and an unwavering loyalty to hiking boots no matter the occasion. The second look was more charming—thrift-store finery consisting of gas-station attendant shirts, pegged trousers, beaded cardigans, cat-eye glasses, and heavy work boots.

I was born in Manila and immigrated to the American South when I was six years old. By college, I cultivated a distinct Southern femininity: long, beribboned hair; kempt clothing; habitual *yes, m'ams* and *thank-you, sirs*. I didn't look or act like other Reedies (as they're known), but that didn't last long. Like other first-year students, I eventually calibrated how I dressed and spoke.

It's the kind of transformation that can seem fake, like somehow you're not being who you really are. In the student paper, one writer—a short-haired, fleece-and-hiking-boots white girl—dubbed the other group *coolies*[1] for being, I guess, too cool for school with their vintage clothes and dark shoes, as if they were worn to deliberately exclude her. Her critique seemed silly to me, like high school with its social divisions, but the act of naming does that: defines parameters, creating a politics of inclusion and exclusion.

Those politics were at play in the emergence of Riot Grrrl, a term I first read in a glossy—*TIME* or something. It's a little embarrassing to admit that in this zine because I feel like I should've had the Riot Grrrl manifesto duct-taped to my bedroom wall, but I was at the movement's periphery, an accidental bystander. I happened to be enrolled at the same college as Johanna Fateman, who later formed Le Tigre with Riot Grrrl figurehead Kathleen Hanna, and I was in

1 As far as I know, she never publicly copped to the racist history of this term, and no one wrote in to object to its use.

Portland between Seattle, Olympia, and the Bay area, the I-5 corridor shuttling musical and cultural revolution from north to south and points beyond. Riot Grrrl wasn't news to me because I was surrounded by it, but I was from the South and understood how different and threatening the movement would seem to a good ol' boy network actively invested in the oppression of women and minorities.

I got Riot Grrrl—intellectually and practically. I benefited when Hanna told men at shows to step to the back so women could be closer to the stage. I took self-defense classes because of a piercing, urgent message: Women are routinely violated. And Reed, as well as the larger environment of Portland, seemed engaged—contentiously on occasion—in issues Riot Grrrl addressed. There were Take Back the Night walks on campus and friends who started record labels, stapled zines, and played in all-girl bands.

It was all undeniably, glamorously cool.

I'd like to say we owe it to Riot Grrrl (we don't credit women enough), but that would mean ignoring the context. We were on the West Coast, a place less burdened by tradition than the East, and in the Pacific Northwest, with its history of contrarian rabble-rousers; think of the Wobblies and the State of Jefferson.

The region also has a racist past. For years, the Oregon constitution banned anyone with Chinese or Japanese blood from owning land, and blacks weren't allowed to live in the state at all, a provision kept in the books until 1927. Those restrictions are largely responsible for the region's majority-white population of today.

Riot Grrrl was informed by those histories as much as it was by the achievements of First and Second Wave feminists. It preached revolution grrrl style, but the proselytizers were typically white women from middle-class, suburban backgrounds. I admired their moxie and their doing-ness—shit got done, son—but I couldn't fully relate, even though I was sometimes in the social circles of those most associated with Riot Grrrl and its cultural inheritors.[2]

Why didn't Riot Grrrl affect me the same way? It was partly because I hadn't grown up with money. Neither had plenty of women who identified with Riot Grrrl, I'm sure, but it was hard to tell who had really grown up poor and who had

2 Portland was a smaller city then, and if you were into "alternative" music and went to Reed College and weren't an asshole, you stood a good chance of knowing them in some way. For instance, I nearly bought property with Miranda July. We were part of a group of five others interested in buying a building to live in co-op style, but July's involvement is less interesting to me than the fact that we didn't do it, given property values in Portland today. Missed opportunities.

family they could fall back on if shit got real. Then, as now, money was still one of the most taboo subjects in America, and it was hard to express how revolution felt like privilege, like a choice.

Opting out of capitalism and all the other toxic -isms Riot Grrrl rightfully rejected to pursue my dreams felt dangerous, selfish, irresponsible. My parents, who had immigrated to the United States with just $700 and who never took vacations so they could save enough to send my sister and me to good schools, to them would I say, "I choose to be poor"? No.

But the through-line wasn't that stark. Feminism as defined by Riot Grrrl didn't guarantee poverty, but it did champion a magical resourcefulness and, by default, a tolerance for instability. That was the tension in Riot Grrrl for me: the ideal of living life as you wanted, unencumbered by convention and patriarchal dictates, versus honoring the sacrifices and struggles of other people (in my case, family) who had worked such long hours to give me—what?—the opportunity to reject bourgeois life?

Of course the strictures of that life were deeply flawed; that's why Riot Grrrl existed. But to sneer, as some did, at other women who didn't wear the movement's uniform—its little-girl barrettes and baby-doll dresses, its underarm hair and bedhead messiness—and to question lives made up of 40-hour workweeks, tired husbands, and car payments struck me as uncharitable and simple-minded, imperious and lazy. Who were these Riot Grrrls? Who were they, with their early-version Etsy endeavors, stitching and bitching, power knitting and downward dogging? You found them at craft nights and yoga studios, locking their recumbent bikes at farmers markets, and as the 90s ended, buying organic cotton onesies and drinking kombucha. You rarely saw them testifying at city-council hearings or at podiums giving stump speeches or blocking the sidewalk at groceries, asking you to sign a petition.

Reclaiming *the personal is political* from Second Wave feminists to jumpstart conversations about body image and sexual violence lent Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, Sleater-Kinney, and a bunch of bands like them a snarling, admirable power.

Yet the transformations they and Riot Grrrl promoted were largely cultural and linguistic, addressed a select group, and, through inaction, maintained sociopolitical structures that prevented poor, nonwhite women from joining the party.

I remember going to a Bikini Kill show and scream-singing along with the band. The floor in front of the stage was filled with other women dancing; the thrashing mosh pit of boys and men typical of shows of that era was gone. Us girls jumped and sang, the rock stars above us emanating a kind of glittery heat. By night's end, I was sweaty and hot and wired. The next day I would wake at 4 a.m. for my minimum wage job, the night before as distant as constellations.