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Hand-Made Memories: Remediating Cultural Memory in DIY Feminist Networks

Red Chidgey

[A]mnesia about political movements is not only an innocent effect of general forgetfulness, but is socially produced, packaged, promulgated, and perpetuated.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis and Ann Snitow, *The Feminist Memoir Project*

Introduction: Feminist Cultural Memory in Grassroots Media

As DuPlessis and Snitow (1998) recount in no uncertain terms in *The Feminist Memoir Project: Voices from Women's Liberation*, the State and mainstream media do not typically guarantee collective memories of social justice movements, but subject them to distortion, domestication and erasure. Part of feminism's cultural battle is thus to secure the role of women's movements in popular memory (Heller 2002). Feminist media can become discursive 'weapons' in this struggle: to contest hostile framings and to put forward counter-understandings of what feminism is, what feminism can do, and who a feminist can be.

This chapter considers the practices and mediations of feminist cultural memory within the micro-political sphere of DIY feminist media networks. DIY (do-it-yourself) feminism refers to a loose network of cultural producers who draw their political coordinates from anarchism, anti-capitalism, Riot Grrrl, animal rights and queer cultures. Deploying both residual and emerging media forms, such as analogue and digital technologies, these feminists mobilize low-budget resources to create participatory political cultures and to preserve activist memory. The memory work that they establish – documenting their own social movements, critiquing dominant media representations, and making links to broader feminist praxis – creates much-needed *counter-memories* (Foucault 1977) and sites of feminist identification. Furthermore, these media channels (such as blogs, zines, videos, and podcasts) enact an archival function: they move feminist memory out of the realm of the institutional and create grassroots memory texts that are mobile, shared and networked.

Remediating Feminist Memory

I define feminist cultural memory here as the ways in which past feminist movements are discussed and understood in the present moment, through the making and consuming of cultural artefacts. In considering cultural memory it is crucial to think about the practices and contexts of *remediation*. As conceptualized by David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (2000), remediation analyzes how media content is shaped as it moves across medial forms, and how emerging and residual media and networks historically refashion each other. The web, for example, refashions the book, magazine, radio, film, television, diary and personal letter. As remediation is multi-directional, these analogue forms and practices are also remediated by the digital. These refashionings happen through a double logic. As media forms multiply and are linked together, a *logic of hypermediacy* heightens the forms' materiality (for example, the user is made aware they are interacting with an interface). Where traces of mediation are erased in order to give a sense of real-time presence, the *logic of immediacy* is at play (such as in the use of a webcam). Whilst hypermediacy dominates the web – with its audio-visual possibilities and hyperlinked information – both logics coexist in digital media.

Remediation is an important part of cultural memory practices. As Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith (2002: 9) put it, "Unlike the traditional archives of history, the archives of cultural memory consist not only of the stories, images, or documents of the past but also of the 'acts of transfer' without which we would have no access to them". How cultural memories are transmitted play an intrinsic role in how these memories are fashioned: cultural memory is socially, culturally, and medially produced. As Astrid Erll and Ann Rigney clarify, "Just as there is no cultural memory prior to mediation there is no mediation without remediation: all representations of the past draw on available media technologies, on existing media products, on patterns of representation and media aesthetics" (2009: 4).

In this chapter I explore the concept of feminist cultural memory in relation to two empirical examples: First, through a scrapbook produced by Riot Grrrl Pittsburgh member Nicole Emmenegger in 1996, which was digitized and published on her UK blog, *Jenny Woolworth's Women in Punk Blog*, in 2010. Emmenegger's cut-and-paste scrapbook is a visual record of mainstream, subcultural and personal framings of the youth feminist Riot Grrrl movement and highlights how remediation plays a key role in DIY feminist media production. My second example is the short animated video *We Are Connected by Words and Wires* (2009) by Belgian feminist Nina Nijsten. Through articulating feminist identification and action in the "here and now", I argue, this video breaks with post-feminist logics indicating the aftermath of feminism, and re-imagines a historicized and still active feminist movement on a local and transnational level.

Riot Grrrl: Disputed Memories

An important trajectory within DIY feminism, Riot Grrrl is commonly seen as “a ’90s third-wave-feminist punk subculture” that “spat out the image of girlhood in raw experiments in political activism, music, art, and self-invention” (Fateman 2010). Emerging in the United States in Washington D. C. and Olympia, Washington – and soon spreading to other cities and countries – Riot Grrrl was a decentralized youth feminist movement based around punk rock. Riot Grrrls organized conferences, consciousness-raising groups and street protests, dealing with issues such as sexuality, abortion, rape, harassment, body image, eating disorders, self-harm, sexual abuse, and domestic violence. Beyond mainstream media coverage, Riot Grrrls communicated through their own media and music channels. These independent networks became even more significant once prominent figures within the movement called for a “media blackout” at the end of 1992, following inaccurate and offensive coverage of Riot Grrrl within the mainstream press (Downes 2007; Marcus 2010). Riot Grrrl reclaimed feminism and fostered a girl-positive network that was both personal and political, introducing thousands of young women, men and queers to feminism.

Whilst the network’s music output has received the bulk of the journalistic and scholarly attention, Riot Grrrl was also a scene of writing, art, protest, organizing and creativity, with isolated individuals often finding new groups and support. As Emmenegger tells me, “Riot Grrrl was all about DIY and singular experience within a collective shared moment” (2011). However, multiple instances of unexamined class and race privilege – and blatant classism and racism – wore out the appeal of ‘girl love’ for many by the mid 1990s. As Riot Grrrl historian Julia Downes notes, “Riot grrrl has been understood as a fashion, a phase, as punk, as dead, as violent, as man-hate, and ultimately, as failure” (2007: 12). The movement is commonly assumed to have fizzled out or been abandoned by the mid 1990s.¹ From Emmenegger’s perspective, “There was a time after the ‘movement’ died out, say from 1998–2008, when there was hardly any mention of it [in the public sphere] except in ghostly remnants such as on a Spice Girls T-shirt or as a Halloween costume” (2011).

This metaphor of “ghostly remnants” seems particularly apt when thinking about the workings of cultural memory more generally: how historical moments are cited in increasingly stereotypical, fragmented, divorced traces, to the point where media representations, historical truth and cultural fantasy become utterly entangled. The commercially produced ‘Riot Grrrl’ Halloween costume that Emmenegger mentions, for example, is testament to how Riot Grrrl entered public consciousness in North America and how stereotypical assumptions of the “Riot Grrrl look” perpetuated within media accounts helped produce and calcify this awareness. Similarly, ‘Girl Power,’ the radical slogan of girls’ agency and politicization that appeared

¹ For an overview of transnational and more recent Riot Grrrl practices in relation to zines, see the *Grrrl Zine Network* (<http://grrrlzines.net>).

in a Bikini Kill zine in 1991, became internationally popularized as the (commercial) slogan of the manufactured mid-1990s British girl pop band, The Spice Girls. As Downes notes, “Riot grrrls have had their messages and slogans co-opted, diluted and sold back in the form of girl-powered commodities and all-girl pop groups” (2007: 12).

Despite its underground or subcultural appeal, Riot Grrrl has not been altogether forgotten as a political movement. A renewed journalistic, commercial and archival interest in Riot Grrrl has erupted in recent years, signalled by the movement’s twenty-year anniversary and its increasing institutionalization.² This public discourse has prompted reflection, documentation, interventions and counter-memories by Riot Grrrls and ex-Riot Grrrls. Women of colour activists have deconstructed and revisited the raced investments of whiteness and nostalgia surrounding Riot Grrrl appeals (Nguyen 2010).³ Individual disputes concerning the ‘official writing of Riot Grrrl’ continue to take place on blogs, book review sites, and in newspaper articles (Fateman 2010; Wolfe 2010). And participants have deployed Web 2.0 sites to solicit a range of personal memories from others: to coincide with her Riot Grrrl historiography *Girls to the Front* (2010) Sara Marcus invited people to contribute short videos about the influence Riot Grrrl on their lives (<http://www.girlstothefront.com/video.html>). Similarly, members of the band Bikini Kill launched a blogging platform to collect and document multiple stories and rare ephemera of their DIY musical career with the help of their fans (<http://bikinikillarchive.wordpress.com>).

My Riot Grrrl Notebook: Remediating Feminist Artefacts

Inspired by this renewed public interest in Riot Grrrl, Emmenegger created a three-part retrospective on her *Jenny Woolworth’s Women in Punk Blog*, finding it “the opportune time to dig into my own archives and digitize a few lost bits of my personal riot grrl journey” (Emmenegger 2011). Her three posts include a list of Riot Grrrl archives and her digitized scrapbook (2010a); a digital version of an unfinished zine from 1996 (“with the aid of modern technology, here at last is the *Beri-Beri* lost edition!” [2010b]); and an interview with Riot Grrrl historian Sara Marcus (who was also Emmenegger’s pen pal during the mid 1990s [2010c]). These posts document a vibrant, personal and mediatized legacy of Riot Grrrl, which still resonates for Emmenegger today. On uploading (and remediating) her teenage zine, she writes: “Embarrassing as it is for me to share this now,

2 Whilst there are too many instances of newspaper articles, films, exhibitions and books to mention here, see *Feminist Memory* (<http://feministmemory.wordpress.com/2010/10/25/riot-grrrl-media-timeline>) for an ongoing, interactive chronology. Riot Grrrl has also enjoyed renewed interest in connection with Ladyfest events – transnational arts and activism festivals launched in 2000 by some of the key players of the early 1990s U. S. Riot Grrrl scene.

3 For an analysis of race and class dynamics in DIY feminist networks, see *Race Revolt* (<http://www.racerevolt.org.uk>), *Thread and Circuits* (<http://threadandcircuits.wordpress.com>), and *make/shift* (<http://www.makeshiftmag.com>).

Figure 1: 'Talking back' to mainstream media discourses in "my riot grrrl notebook"



Image courtesy of Nicole Emmenegger

some fifteen years later, I have to say I am proud of what I accomplished then and still carry myself with that riot grrrl empowerment in everything I do" (Emmenegger 2010b).

Emmenegger created her Riot Grrrl notebook when she was nineteen years old, "to preserve and catalog all these various scraps" (Emmenegger 2011). A thirty-one paged spiral bound scrapbook, the front cover has "my riot grrrl notebook" doodled over strips of white masking tape and is decorated with Riot Grrrl aesthetic codes such as stars, female paper-chain characters, and the women's symbol (♀). Produced as part of Emmenegger's 'Feminist Presses' course at Antioch College in Ohio, this document enacts a personal 'talking back' to dominant discourses, and was originally shared with Emmenegger's professor, classmates and friends in its analogue form.⁴

This document is a rich historical resource: articles clipped from mainstream publications such as *Newsweek*, *Spin*, and *New York Times* sit alongside underground magazine offerings like *Your Flesh* and feminist coverage from *Ms Magazine* and *Off Our Backs*. All the articles are deconstructed, with sensationalist and sexist comments highlighted. The *Newsweek* article, for instance, is discussed as "a carbon copy of every other bit in the press. There are obligatory references to Bikini Kill [...] There is a picture of an anonymous girl with words written on her stomach and arms, displaying the grrrl tendency to use our young white bodies as confrontational billboards. And there is mention of messy, raw, angry zines that *all* grrls do. This article is a mass of stereotypes and misinformation and half truths" (see Figure 1).

4 See Piepmeyer (2009: 29–32) for an analysis of suffragette scrapbooks in relation to DIY feminist publications.

To counteract the inaccurate, sensationalized (and deradicalized) coverage in these collected media clippings, Riot Grrrl flyers, manifestos and images were also included in the scrapbook, with Emmenegger adding clarifications to the off-page context and resonance of this cultural ephemera.⁵ Like zines, which also document 'the movement', Emmenegger's scrapbook acts as an important counter-memory to mainstream media accounts by contesting patronizing frames of teenage rebellion and providing narratives against trend-orientated approaches in the press. As Emmenegger comments, "The mainstream press needed a leader, a manifesto, a clear path and that is just not what it was about" (2011).

As a form of feminist memory, it is not only the content of the scrapbook that is significant here, but also the process of digitization. Whilst Alison Piepmeier notes that "zine creators don't necessarily view blogs as a replacement for zines but, instead, as a supplement, a format that's doing something slightly different" (2009: 14), I want to emphasize how DIY feminists are using strategies of remediation to bring their hand-made artefacts online, in ways which maintain (to some extent) the 'feel' of their cut-and-paste culture.

When digitizing her scrapbook, Emmenegger scanned the document in full colour including the visual trace of the spiral binding holding the notebook together. She then uploaded her file onto the digital publishing platform *Issuu* (<http://issuu.com>) in a format which allows the pages to be flipped through in a codex form, mimicking, as far as possible, the experience of holding the scrapbook in one's hand. This process enacts logics of immediacy and hypermediacy: the digitization of the scrapbook is muted in the interface (the flip-book feel of the viewing medium providing a different reading experience to a rigid, downloaded PDF file, for example) whilst the juxtaposition between the yellowing pages of the document and the de-temporalized internet platform hosting it (where documents do not physically age or deteriorate) serves to emphasize the historical materiality and 'aura' of the original artefact.⁶

Through choosing a process of digital remediation which draws on the DIY impulse towards sharing documents and creating embodied media forms (Piepmeier 2009), this act of archiving and transmission is embedded within the "perceptual frames, affective attachments, [and] ideological pre-givens" (Straw 2007: 3) of the hands-on maker culture from which it originates, whilst also embracing the representational and archiving possibilities of the digital.⁷ Such strategies lend legitimacy to the counter-memories being archived on Emmenegger's blog.

5 Such texts need to be contextualized, interpreted and triangulated with other sources to ensure their historical veracity.

6 Websites can show signs of aging, however, through pages or items no longer accessible to the server, as flagged by 'page not found' or 'image not available' messages.

7 Such remediation techniques illustrate peer-led methods for capturing, storing and transmitting feminist ephemera online, reflecting the embodied, cultural economies behind the artefacts' production and reception. PDFs (Portable Document Format) also have important transmission and archiving roles. As my correspondence with Nijsten

We are connected by Words and Wires: Re-Imagining Feminist Histories

Figure 2. Remediating cultural memory to activate feminist participation.
Slides from *We Are Connected by Words and Wires*



Image courtesy of Nina Nijsten

Nina Nijsten's short animated film, *We Are Connected by Words and Wires*, similarly takes the themes of legacies and participation as its core message. Consisting of sixteen illustrated slides edited to a self-made soundtrack, this three minute film provides a definition of DIY feminism ("We can do, make, and organise anything. We don't have to be 'professionals'"), alongside a visualization of the maker's personal history within the scene and references to 'sister' feminist history actions past and present.

This is also a story of activation. The filmmaker is shown surrounded by zines and books, believing "the diy feminist movement was active long ago and far away" (see Figure 2). New media is then depicted as helping to forge cross-border connections between the still thriving movement, as the filmmaker-protagonist finds feminist groups and publications via the internet and starts local actions of her own – learning that she too "can participate". Residual (that is, 'old-fashioned' and analogue) media forms such as letters, zines, cassettes and hand-drawn comics are also shown as communication tools between feminists, demonstrating some low-cost entry points for producing feminist media. To rally counter-memories against the myth of post-feminism, Nijsten illustrates an annotated map of the contemporary feminist network, citing a range of zines, groups and events such as Ladyfest (South Africa), *Fallopian Falafel* (Israel), *Jawbreaker* (Philippines), *cyber-femin-club* (Russia), *Mujeres Creando* (Bolivia), and *Cherry Bomb Comics* (New Zealand) as examples of a new transnational feminist movement (see Figure 3).

attests to, PDFs can be considered "closer to hand-made/printed zines," being "easier to print and easier to save on a computer," and therefore "more tangible" (Nijsten 2011b). Digital archiving projects might do well to combine both formats: the presentation aspect of flipbooks and the archival and circulatory strengths of downloadable PDFs.

Figure 3. Emerging and residual media are used in DIY feminist networks to communicate globally. Slides from We Are Connected by Words and Wires

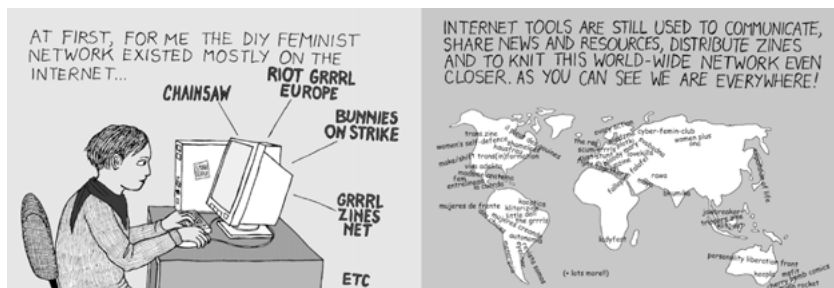


Image courtesy of Nina Nijsten

An amateur production, Nijsten's video documents cultural reference points that opened up DIY feminism for her personally. By citing little known groups and publications, the filmmaker also creates the seeds of a feminist memory consciousness. This is not straightforward representation, however. The animation showing Nijsten sitting amongst her books (Figure 2), name-checks publications like *Girl Germs* (an early Riot Grrrl zine), *Suffragettes To She-Devils: Women's Liberation and Beyond* (a visual history of feminist graphic design), *Notes from Underground: Zines and the Politics of Alternative Culture* (an academic study of zine networks), *The Power of Feminist Art* (an analysis of 1970s feminist art in the United States), and "Dolle Mina," which refers to the *Het Rode Boekje Van De Vrouw(en)* ("The Little Red Book of Women/Woman", a liberationist text by the Belgian feminist group Dolle Mina published in the early 1970s). The slide also shows a book about anarchist-feminist Emma Goldman (1869–1940) that was not itself based on any text that Nijsten had read or come across, but was included to pay homage to an inspiring historical figure and to underscore the anarcho-feminist roots of today's DIY political cultures (Nijsten 2011a).

Furthermore, the oversized "Riot Grrrl Herstory" book shown in this slide may have been influenced by a recent publication at the time (Monem 2007), but the title and cover is pure fabrication (Nijsten 2011a). To interpret this further, the "herstory" title (which does not appear on any mainstream books on Riot Grrrl) links Riot Grrrl to radical feminists of the late 60s onwards, who re-inscribed "history" as "her story" to draw attention to the male bias of the historical record. Furthermore, the cover image of a woman of colour tacitly draws attention to hegemonic and repetitive accounts of Riot Grrrl in which women of colour's voices and participation are routinely marginalized or erased. For example, in the handful of books related to Riot Grrrl that have been commercially published in recent years, many sideline the voices and input of women of colour, and all depict only white women (predominately from the band Bikini Kill) on their covers – evoking Emmenegger's 1996 scrapbook commentary on the *Newsweek* article, cited above, about the whiteness of Riot Grrrl in its tactics and in the media

imagination; a critique long-held by women of colour within the Riot Grrrl movement yet still not secured within Riot Grrrl historiography.

We Are Connected by Words and Wires is a mobile text. Nijsten's video has received close to 800 hits on YouTube at the time of writing and has been screened internationally at grassroots and institutional settings such as the Civil Media UnConference (Austria), Ladyfest Liège (Belgium), Gender Fuck Festival (Czech Republic), London Lesbian Gay Film Festival (U. K.) and the Elles Tournent feminist film festival (Belgium) (Nijsten 2011a). Its title, "We Are Connected by Words and Wires," not only reflects the *technologies* increasingly associated with third wave feminism (Garrison 2000), but also speaks to the logic of immediacy. As Bolter and Grusin (2000: 226) note with regards to remediation, "the promise of 'connecting to other people' suggests transparency – breaking through the medium to achieve human contact". By foregrounding the "happening here and now" aspect of do-it-yourself culture, Nijsten deploys this logic of immediacy as a source of activation, alongside the hypermediality of a mediatized activist culture. This double logic works to promote contemporary feminist identification, participation, and cultural production in the present moment, whilst creating links to an international politicized and historicized feminist past.

Concluding Remarks: Feminist Cultural Memory as Political Consequence

Activists have greater possibilities for researching, producing, and disseminating their own memory texts with Web 2.0 innovations. By deploying emerging and residual media forms via the internet, for example, DIY feminists create personal and remediated cultural memories that serve to reinvigorate feminist engagement in the present through providing links to historical-based resources around suffrage, civil rights, women's liberation, anarchism and riot grrrl. By sharing personal stories of feminist activation and creativity, DIY feminists also narrate the cultural reference points that signal 'inclusion,' 'authenticity' and 'participation' in these networks.

In Nijsten's video, Emmenegger's scrapbook, and countless other feminist zines, blogs, and grassroots projects, tentative counter-memories are therefore produced, cited, and circulated, creating new archives of meaning whilst also revisiting residual investments. These counter-memories draw on mainstream media accounts, challenge them, and further appropriate commercial platforms such as YouTube and Issuu to popularize and disseminate personal narratives held in a collectivity.

While this chapter has considered the techniques and implications of remediation, it is important to sound a broader note in this chapter's conclusion. An uneven terrain, feminist cultural memory embraces the experiences, artefacts, stories and also silences – from the personal to the institutional, and always mediated – that shape identities, structures of

belonging, and affective economies. As such, memories have political consequences.

As third wave feminist histories are still in the making, further documentation and assessment is needed to account for *what versions of the feminist past, present and future are being circulated, by which actors, for what purposes, and with what resources*. As feminist cultural memory is a site of contestation, it is important to consider how conflicts are narrated and legitimated within these networks, especially when these narratives pass into institutions and are further secured. Challenges ought to be made to DIY feminist narratives around *empowerment* and *participation*, for example, whenever celebratory story arcs risk muting antagonism from within.

As to the role of feminist cultural memory in activist networks more broadly, mediated memory can help map resistance struggles and offer feminists much needed resources to imagine alternative possibilities. Remediating political memory can also help alleviate strains of amnesia and déjà vu under late capitalism, forces which threaten present day mobilizations for social justice by robbing us of our feminist heritage and diverse connections to the past.

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