In the early 1990s, most people in North America, including most feminists, had never heard the term “Riot Grrrl.” By 1993, Riot Grrrl was synonymous with a style and politic signifying a new feminism—a feminism for the “video-age generation . . . sexy, assertive and loud.”¹ This is the story told by Sara Marcus in Girls to the Front. Like most people, Marcus discovered Riot Grrrl in the November 23, 1992, issue of Newsweek. As Marcus emphasizes in the history of Riot Grrrl she would publish nearly two decades later, for the young women connected to the Riot Grrrl scene in Olympia, the autumn of 1992 had been marked by a series of attempts to thwart the mainstream media’s cooptation of their growing movement. The Newsweek article was “a culmination of the madness that had been going on all fall. The big difference was that the girls had managed to beat back all the previous incursions, but this time the media got its story.”² The consequences of the Newsweek article and subsequent mainstream media profiles on Riot Grrrl were widespread. On the one hand, the article served as a call to arms for younger girls, like Marcus, who were not already connected to the Riot Grrrl scenes in Olympia, Washington DC, and Minneapolis. On the other hand, the Newsweek article opened the media floodgates,
placing Riot Grrrls on the defensive in an economy of representation they had previously subverted through their astute suspicion of the mainstream media and savvy deployment of DIY media. Although it would be misleading to imply that Riot Grrrl necessarily lost control of its image after the Newsweek article, the publication of “Revolution, Grrrl Style” represented a turning point—Riot Grrrl had gone viral.³

In many respects, the announcement of the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library bore uncanny resemblance to the movement’s initial “discovery” by the mainstream media. Lisa Darms, senior archivist at Fales Library and Special Collections, explains that news of the collection’s development was never a secret, but its announcement was also not something that remained entirely in either her control or that of the collection’s donors:

We issued an internal newsletter, which is for the library. It’s not private, but it’s simply a print and pdf newsletter about acquisitions. It generally goes to alumni and donors. They wanted to announce the acquisition of Kathleen Hanna’s papers. It was amazing to watch how quickly—I think the next day—at the L Magazine, someone who was probably associated with NYU in some way, found it and scanned it in black and white and put it on their online magazine. From there, it went viral. At that point, I barred myself—I worried about a flurry of people contacting me because it hadn’t gone through the press office, which is the normal way we would do such things, but instead of anyone contacting me, all subsequent articles referred back to that one L Magazine article. I was somewhat ambivalent about it. I wasn’t trying to keep the collection secret, but I did want to reach a certain number of potential donors before making it public.⁴

However, neither Darms nor her donors, including Kathleen Hanna and Becca Albee who were preparing their papers at the time of the announcement, are strangers to the media’s viral
potential. In 1992, all three women were students at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where they witnessed and to varying degrees were implicated by the initial media capture of Riot Grrrl. If anything, the conditions under which news of the collection’s development went public were all too familiar.

Although the L Magazine’s decision to scan and repost an article about the development of the Riot Grrrl Collection from an internal university newsletter and its subsequent impact is far less significant than the historical arrival of Riot Grrrl in the mainstream media, the similarities are worth considering. Like Riot Grrrl in its early stages of development, which was both public and fiercely protective of its ability to control its representation and circulation, the development of the collection was by no means a secret, but from the onset there was an attentiveness to maintaining control over the collection’s publicity. As Darms explains, the desire to control the collection’s representation was partly rooted in a commitment to ensuring it would not be defined too narrowly: “I don’t want it to be the ‘Kathleen Hanna Collection.’ She feels the same way. It’s a Riot Grrrl Collection, but most of the press was just about Kathleen.” Darms was also concerned about mitigating the circulation of misinformation about who would be able to access the collection and under what circumstances.

In the days following the L Magazine post, news of Fales Library’s Riot Grrrl Collection traveled quickly over multiple forms of media, proving especially viral in forms of media that had not yet come into being when Riot Grrrl entered most people’s consciousness in 1992 (for example, blogs, Twitter and Facebook). If many archivists and special collections librarians spend years attempting to generate interest in their collections, for Darms, this achievement was effortless. That news of an archival collection could “go viral” reveals as much about Riot Grrrl as a cultural phenomenon as it does about the significance of the Riot Grrrl Collection. The media interest in the collection points not only to what is potentially controversial about the collection’s development but also to the collection’s status...
within a network of women, which includes women old enough to have heard Bikini Kill play live in the early 1990s and young enough to have been born after the *Newsweek* article, who identify with Riot Grrrl as an aesthetic, cultural, and political movement unique to their generation of feminists. My primary concern, however, is with neither the controversy nor the affective attachments generated by the collection. As I explore throughout this chapter, preservation is a central part of the Riot Grrrl Collection’s mandate, but the collection holds the potential to do much more than preserve Riot Grrrl as it has been understood to date. As the collection develops, it also holds the potential to impact Riot Grrrl’s legacy and more specifically the legacies of the women most closely identified with its development. As I argue, the Riot Grrrl Collection may thereby be read as a radical form of “position taking” enacted in and through the archive.

Pierre Bourdieu’s theorizing on the field of cultural production offers a useful framework for beginning to understand how the creative products of a so-called “subculture” might be transformed through their entry into the archive and more specifically, how archivization might hold the potential to *retroactively* align previously unconsecrated cultural works with avant-garde movements. As Bourdieu maintains, every literary or artistic field is a “field of forces” and “field of struggles,” and the meaning of a work changes with “each change in the field within which it is situated for the spectator or reader.”

The task of the literary or art critic is to understand the space of positions and “position-takings” within the field of cultural production. This, however, is an invariably difficult task because the critic must reconstruct all the people, forces, and conditions that shape the field at any given time. On this basis, Bourdieu emphasizes that any sociology of art or literature must be able to account for “the social conditions of the production of artists, art critics, dealers, patrons, etc.” and “the social conditions of the production of a set of objects socially constituted as works of art, i.e. the conditions of production of the field of social agents (e.g., museums, galleries, academics, etc.) which help to define and produce the value of works
of art.” The objective is ultimately to understand any work of art or literature as a “manifestation of the field as a whole, in which all the powers of the field, and all the determinisms inherent in its structure and functioning, are concentrated.”

Bourdieu’s theorizing aptly draws attention to the extent to which literature and art are symbolic objects constituted by the institutions through which cultural products are endowed with value. While he lists many of the most obvious institutions engaged in such work, including museums, galleries, and the academy, he does not list the archive. Because there is no doubt that the archive does belong in this list, the oversight is especially notable, but the archive is also uniquely situated in the field of cultural production. Unlike either the gallery or art museum, which usually endows a literary or artistic work with value in the present, the archive’s work is more often than not retroactive. In other words, the archive is uniquely located to the extent that it permits works to migrate across the field of cultural production at different points in history. In this respect, a work originally produced primarily for a mass audience (or a work perceived as such) might become aligned with a work produced as “art for art’s sake.” The archive, thus, is not only an institution that Bourdieu overlooks in his theorizing on the field of cultural production but also the institution that arguably holds the greatest potential to disrupt the field as it is conceived in his work. Once more, as I emphasize, this is especially relevant to questions concerning the designation of an “avant-garde.”

While Bourdieu’s “field of cultural production” evidently privileges the spatial, his theorizing on the avant-garde is first and foremost temporal. If “conservatives” recognize their contemporaries in the past, then the avant-garde has no contemporaries and “therefore no audience, except in the future” (107). An avant-garde, according to Bourdieu, establishes itself not by recognizing their contemporaries in the past but conversely by pushing “back into the past the consecrated producers with whom they are compared” (107). If Bourdieu’s theorizing on cultural production fails to account for the question of the archive,
then perhaps it is because the archive, more than any other institution, holds the potential to interrupt this supposed process by prying open opportunities for an avant-garde to be established retroactively. This is not surprising, however, because the archive is first and foremost a temporal apparatus—at once committed to the endless accumulation of time, as Foucault emphasizes in his theorizing on heterotopias, of which library or archive exist as one example among many, as well as to the reordering of time. As I emphasized in chapter 2, materials in the archive are not necessarily aligned according to temporal logics. Players once estranged in the field of cultural production may become aligned. Contemporaries may be torn apart. Movements may be defined or redefined. In short, archival time challenges Bourdieu’s assumption that avant-garde movements are necessarily established via a series of displacements—through the anachronization of one’s predecessors. In the archive, an avant-garde conversely may be established via a series of strategic realignments that make present players who never had the opportunity to play in the same field but in many respects comfortably occupy the same field nevertheless.

The archive as an apparatus can be effectively wielded in a reparative manner, and this is precisely the movement I chart in this chapter. I specifically examine how relocating the Riot Grrrl papers from haphazard personal storage situations across the United States to the Fales Library and Special Collections in New York represents an attempt to redefine Riot Grrrl as a cultural movement as deeply marked by feminist politics and punk aesthetics as it is by legacies of avant-garde art, performance, and literature. After all, in contrast to the other collections featured in this book, the Riot Grrrl Collection is housed in an archive known for its art and culture collections (for example, the Avant-Garde Collection and the Downtown Collection) rather than holdings related to women’s history. As a result, across Fales Library’s special collections, one discovers the papers and cultural artifacts of several generations of innovative visual artists, performance artists, and writers. Among them are
many figures cited as influences on Riot Grrrl. The difference between the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library and existing collections of Riot Grrrl related materials at Barnard College and Duke University, then, exists in not only the types of materials these collections house (the papers and artifacts of individuals versus documents always already intended for public or semi-public circulation, such as zines) but also the histories these collections hold the potential to advance. Thus, while preservation remains the central goal of the Riot Grrrl Collection, the collection also serves other purposes: most notably to legitimize materials that may otherwise slip into historical oblivion and to authorize them as cultural rather than exclusively subcultural products and more significantly to validate the materials as cultural products with a particular lineage in an urban twentieth-century North American artistic and literary avant-garde.

Archive Viral

Past attempts to develop archival collections dedicated to women and the women’s movement have met considerable resistance. By comparison, the development of the Riot Grrrl Collection solicited little criticism. Nevertheless, the first response to the announcement on the L Magazine website read, “At what point does this become ridiculous?” Reactions to the provocation were uniformly critical of the writer’s implied accusation that the Riot Grrrl papers do not merit archivization. As the first response asked, “Why look down your nose at this? It seems perfectly reasonable to me that this stuff would wind up in a library. You can’t study feminism in 2010 (or 2005 or 1995, for that matter) and not talk about Hanna and the Riot Grrrl movement.”

Subsequent responses on the L Magazine website and other blogs reiterated the fact that the collection is one of historical significance. For example, two weeks after the L Magazine announcement, the following blog post appeared on Jukebox Heroines:

I have been trying to get copies of Kathleen Hanna’s, as well as, other Riot Grrrls zines from eBay and such, with
some success. I mean, since they were photocopyed, you can make more, but after a while, the copies of copies of copies get rather hard to read. I am so happy that Riot Grrrl and the movement is getting some credit from the academic side. I mean they have for a bit, some texts have been written about it, but preserving these documents ensures it will never be forgotten!\textsuperscript{18}

Like earlier responses on the \textit{L Magazine} website, Emily’s post emphasizes the historical significance of Riot Grrrl. Her post also suggests that, despite the fact that a zine, for example, may continue to be copied and even sold on eBay for an indefinite period of time, there is an integrity to the original and that “originals” may be important, even in movements where appropriation and copying are integral and celebrated practices.

Defenses of the Riot Grrrl Collection’s relevance were by no means limited to those rooted in making a case for the historical significance of the materials in their original form. In the days following the media leak, affective attachments to the papers being processed at Fales Library also came to the surface. Another participant in the spontaneous debate on the \textit{L Magazine} website replied, “I applaud the NYU Library for taking the feminist movement and the \textit{L Magazine} theory seriously, and am thrilled to see such a crucial part of my history, and countless others, illuminated by critical thought and inquiry. Not because we need the academy to validate who are . . . but because it’s an historical moment in time worth knowing about” (emphasis my own).\textsuperscript{19} Feelings of personal attachment are also expressed in Macy Halford’s op-ed piece published as part of “The Book Bench” column in \textit{The New Yorker}:

I’m extremely happy that the papers of Kathleen Hanna—Riot Grrrl, Bikini Killer, Le Tigress—are going to the growing Riot Grrrl archive at N.Y.U.’s Fales Library. Happy because I live in New York and I might be able to think up a reason to gain access (I’m not in the academy, but would that stop any self-respecting grrrl?), and happier because
it represents a major step toward overcoming the sticky formulation

Girl = Dumb, Girl = Bad, Girl = Weak

as Hanna and her sisters put it in the Riot Grrrl Manifesto, first published in 1991 in “Bikini Kill Zine 2.”

Halford assumes that the Riot Grrrl Collection will become a destination for researchers and fans and thus serve as Riot Grrrl’s equivalent to, let’s say, Graceland. This assumption is shared by Alyx Vesey. In a post about the collection on Feminist Music Geek, Vesey enthused, “it’s with great excitement that I report that Kathleen Hanna is donating her personal papers to NYU’s Fales Library for their Riot Grrrl Collection (which I didn’t know they had) . . . Looks like this moi has got some independent research to do. See you in the stacks.”

While these comments represent only a few of the hundreds of responses posted online in the wake of the Riot Grrrl Collection’s announcement, they are representative of the public reaction to news of the collection’s development. First, despite the critique expressed in the initial response to the L Magazine article, the collection solicited few questions about whose history and what types of history count. The absence of negative responses to the collection’s development suggests not only that Riot Grrrl’s legacy may already be well recognized (at least in some contexts) but also that both inside and outside the academy there is a growing recognition that histories of minorities, activist movements, and subcultures are histories worth preserving. The initial response to the Riot Grrrl Collection also revealed that it is by no means a typical archival collection (despite its similarities to existing collections at Fales Library). In contrast to most collections, for example, the papers and artifacts in question belong to not only living writers, performers, and artists but also women writers, performers, and artists who are, for all extensive purposes, still early in their careers. In addition, it is significant that the excitement about the papers’ arrival in the archive was shared by academic researchers, fans and people
with political affinities to Riot Grrrl. This is not to suggest, however, that the researcher, fan, and affinity group member are by any means mutually exclusive categories. In fact, both responses to news of the collection’s development and the content of the collection, which provides further evidence of Riot Grrrl’s intellectual roots, reveal how deeply entangled these categories can be and arguably always were in Riot Grrrl. Finally, the dialogue generated by news of the collection’s development revealed the extent to which the collection, despite its location in an institutional setting, is part of the affective economy in which souvenirs, memorabilia, and archival objects circulate. As Ann Cvetkovich reminds us, “memories can cohere around objects in unpredictable ways.” In other words, an object’s meaning and value are invariably prone to drift, frequently becoming invested with attachments previously unimagined by the original producer or owner. Although these are the papers of individuals, news of the collection was received with enthusiasm because so many women feel that these papers represent and belong to an entire generation of feminists. This very identification enabled the Riot Grrrl Collection to go viral before its contents were processed, but this identification or overidentification with Riot Grrrl and specifically with key figures may be what the collection’s development ultimately quells.

Although it seems likely that news of the Riot Grrrl Collection traveled as quickly as it did because many women feel a personal attachment to the materials the collection does now or will eventually house, the collection is defined by and asserts a much more narrowly conceived understanding of Riot Grrrl than existing collections of Riot Grrrl related materials. If existing collections, such as the zine collections at Barnard College and Duke University, have sought to promote an understanding of Riot Grrrl as a mass movement of girls and young women that originated in the 1990s, the Fales Library collection defines Riot Grrrl as a somewhat more temporally, if not geographically, bound movement synonymous with the cultural contributions of a core group of women musicians, writers, performers, and visual artists.
First, the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library spans a specific period—1989 to 1996—although the dates are, as Darms acknowledges, “not 100% firm.” When asked about the temporal bounds of the collection, Darms explains that in many respects, 1989 represents “the intellectual inception” of Riot Grrrl, because, by this time, Hanna and many other women connected to early Riot Grrrl activities were already at Evergreen State College and beginning to engage in the conversations that would lay the foundation for the movement. Although some materials in the collection, such as those related to Hanna’s second band, Le Tigre, postdate 1996, Darms suggests that by 1996 both Bikini Kill and the Riot Grrrl movement were already in decline. Situating the collection between 1989 and 1996 is not necessarily inaccurate, but it does entrench the idea of Riot Grrrl as a cultural phenomenon that happened in a particular place and time and involved a specific group of individuals. As a result, rather than the “every girl’s a riot girl” mantra that informs collecting policies at other institutions, one might conclude that the Fales Library’s Riot Grrrl Collection is more explicitly engaged in and committed to canon formation, albeit not without a healthy dose of self-reflexivity about the trouble of canons.

Despite this mandate, which may strike some fans as being at odds with Riot Grrrl’s ethos, it is important to recognize that the collection’s existence is contingent on longstanding friendships and connections that date back to Riot Grrrl’s inception in the early 1990s. As previously mentioned, Darms was a student at Evergreen State College in the early 1990s. “I never went to a Riot Grrrl meeting,” she explains, “But I was there and involved and doing the same things. . . . I wasn’t close friends with all the donors, but mostly, we were at least in the same places, at the same shows, at the same parties.” Perhaps more important, however, is Darms’s present connection to the women she first met at Olympia in the early 1990s. As emphasized, the widespread interest in the collection has been generated in part by the personal attachment so many women feel to the collection’s materials. The collection arguably only exists, however, because
the donors and archivists identify with and trust each other on the basis of their much less public history. Nevertheless, when I asked Darms about the importance of her personal connection to the donors, she initially hesitated to admit to its centrality in the collection’s development:

KE: It seems to me that this collection would simply not exist if you weren’t friends or at least acquaintances with many of the donors.

LD: I’m not sure. Maybe it wouldn’t exist at this time. Marvin Taylor, the Director of the Downtown Collection, is excited about the materials and had some knowledge of them . . . but no, you’re right, the collection wouldn’t exist yet.28

Later in the interview, Darms admitted, “I personally don’t have a problem with my personal relationship to my donors, but I’m concerned and keep waiting for someone else to have a problem with it.”29 When asked to elaborate, she added: “Although a lot of curators and archivists probably have a personal relationship to their donors and that is pretty standard, I still worry. There is no money exchanging hands and there is nothing that benefits me personally, so I’m not sure why I’m worried.”30 I wondered whether Darms was concerned about finding a way to rationalize how friendship and affective ties might play a central role in her professional work, but, as the discussion progressed, it became apparent that her lingering concerns may be more directly rooted in her own disciplinary training: “I’m also trained as a historian and maybe that’s part of it too—a desire to remain objective?”31 By the end of our exchange on this topic (in which she had initially rejected the idea that friendship might not only matter but be integral), Darms stated, “I truly believe that my relationship to the donors, my friendships, the fact that I was in Olympia when all this stuff was going on, puts me in a better position to build this collection.”32

If Darms was initially hesitant to acknowledge the importance of her personal connection to the donors, her donors were entirely forthcoming about the essential role their connection to Darms
has played in the collection’s development. Johanna Fateman explained, “It definitely helped that Lisa is a close friend, and that I trusted her to have a sensitivity to the issues surrounding the project.” Similarly, for Hanna, the decision to donate her papers to Fales Library appeared to be directly linked to Darms’s position there as senior archivist. “I really don’t think I would’ve been interested if someone else, besides Lisa Darms, had approached me,” explained Hanna. “It just felt like the universe lined up and it was meant to be.” In a sense, the universe had lined up, as the following origin story recounted by Hanna suggests:

Lisa and I and our friend Johanna had gone to an event about feminism and the archive at Fales before she got a job there and I LOVED Marvin, the head of Fales, from the second he started talking. As we were leaving Jo and I started joking about how great it would be if they did a Riot Grrrl Archive so we could get rid of all the stuff we’d kept over the years. 6 months later Lisa was hired as Fales’ senior archivist and called us up saying “What if a Riot Grrrl Archive really existed, would you all be involved?” I was completely thrilled. It was a dream come true scenario.

While Darms emphasizes her historical connection to Riot Grrrl (for example, the fact that she was in Olympia in the early 1990s when Riot Grrrl was taking shape), Hanna emphasizes that Darms’s present connection to the donors is at least as essential as her historical link to the movement: “I really trust Lisa’s intelligence and her ability to make great things happen. . . . Her proximity to the places and events that shaped RG make things a lot easier for sure, but to me, that’s secondary. More important is the fact that she has a great sense of humor which I think is pretty important if you’re going to put something together of this magnitude.”

Although many women who came of age in the 1990s and beyond feel a personal connection to the papers in the Riot Grrrl Collection, it is not necessarily their archive. That so many women have interpreted the collection as an archive of an entire
generation of feminists rather than a collection that contains several individuals’ personal papers, however, is not entirely surprisingly. Documents and artifacts connected to traditionally marginalized groups have historically been more likely to enter archives because they represent a demographic or cultural phenomenon than on basis of their connection to individuals. Many collections of women’s archival materials, for example, are comprised of diaries and letters written by anonymous or unknown women writers rather than writers who gained notoriety for their work; the materials are valuable because they tell us something about the conditions of women’s everyday lives in a particular era and not because they tell us something about the individual writers. In many respects, the zine collections at both Barnard College and Duke University extend this tradition of collection development in women’s archives. While both collections contain zines produced by or about the women whose papers are also housed in the Riot Grrrl Collection, it is important to bear in mind that even the same zine may represent something different in the collections at Barnard College or Duke University than it does in the collection at Fales Library. As Jenna Freedman, the founder and librarian responsible for the Barnard Zine Library, emphasizes, her collection is one that belongs to and represents “every girl.” A zine by or about Kathleen Hanna in the Barnard Zine Library is there as part of a larger and still growing collection of zines by girls and women and gender-queer subjects. By contrast, Darms emphasizes that her collection focuses on Riot Grrrl and more specifically on the papers of some women connected to the movement’s development. In this context, a zine by or about Hanna is not representative of DIY publishing or “girl power,” as it might be elsewhere. At Fales Library, it is one document among many that tells us something about Hanna’s development as an artist, performer, and activist.

By creating a collection with a mandate “to collect unique materials that provide documentation of the creative process of individuals and the chronology of the movement overall” (emphasis my own), Darms is not only creating the first collection
of Riot Grrrl papers, but she is also effectively relocating and redefining Riot Grrrl in ways that will profoundly impact how writers will consider Riot Grrrl and particular Riot Grrrl figures in the future. This collection’s development, including the combined geographic and symbolic acts of relocation it entails, represents a realignment of Riot Grrrl that highlights both the movement’s intellectual and artistic lineages and, by extension, the archive’s status as a historiographic technology.

Continental Drift

Like many observers, when I first heard about the development of the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library, I immediately questioned the choice of location. After all, while Riot Grrrls were active in New York in the early 1990s, the city was neither an early site of Riot Grrrl activity nor was Riot Grrrl NYC necessarily typical of the form Riot Grrrl scenes took in other cities. More importantly, I questioned whether Riot Grrrl could have emerged when it did and with such impact had it been conceived by a group of college-age women at a small liberal arts college in New York rather than one located in a bucolic setting on the Northwest Coast. Beyond the fact that finding space on a stage in New York is presumably more difficult than finding space on a stage in Olympia, especially if you are a young woman with a limited performance history, other circumstances would have made New York an unlikely scene for Riot Grrrl’s emergence in the early 1990s.

From 1989 to 1992, while Riot Grrrl was taking shape at Evergreen State College in Olympia, rising rates of HIV infection and HIV-related deaths combined with government apathy at the municipal, state, and federal levels had left New York’s downtown scene caught in a cycle of death, mourning, and activism. Young queer women were by no means immune to the impact of AIDS and the political and cultural movements it incited, even if few were ever infected by the virus. As revealed in the interviews that comprise Jim Hubbard and Sarah Schulman’s ACT UP Oral History Project, an extensive online archive
of interviews and interview transcripts with a surviving generation of AIDS activist, lesbians, perhaps especially in New York, were deeply involved in ACT UP and the many allied organizations and collective projects it generated in the late 1980s to early 1990s.\(^{39}\) On this basis, it seems reasonable to conclude that to be a young queer feminist in Olympia and New York in the late 1980s to early 1990s meant radically different things. What was pressing in New York’s downtown scene during this period was day-to-day survival, making it difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the conditions under which a girl-centered movement could have emerged in this context.

This is not to suggest, however, that Riot Grrrl was entirely untouched by either the impact of AIDS or the activism the crisis engendered. This indirect influence is apparent in the following passage from an unpublished essay by Hanna (now housed in Johanna Fateman’s files in the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library). Reflecting on her formation, Hanna writes:

I came of age as an activist/artist during the short lived media hey day of ACT UP, Queer Nation, The Guerilla girls and WAC. I watched these groups using confrontational, theatrical tactics to disrupt “the powers that be” and liked a lot of what I saw. At times I tried to use the same kinds of strategies within the punk/feminist community I was very much a part of at the time. Sometimes doing this drew much needed action and discussion to the issues I cared about most.\(^{40}\)

For Hanna, ACT UP, emblematic of a particular moment of media savvy queer and feminist activism in the late 1980s to early 1990s, exemplified how the creative deployment of the media might be used to achieve both aesthetic and political objectives. In *Girls to the Front*, Marcus also emphasizes the indirect influence organizations like ACT UP had on Riot Grrrl. As she explains, it is no coincidence that Angela Seguel—best known for posing naked with “every girl is a Riot Grrrl” written on her torso in the British magazine *i-D*—had spent time
engaging in ACT UP activism. As Marcus emphasizes, “Angela knew, from her time in ACT UP, that a carefully orchestrated image could say a lot,” and the infamous photograph she staged for *i-D* exhibited just such awareness.

Thus, while there is no doubt that some Riot Grrrls were involved in or at least impacted by the political struggles reshaping queer and feminist communities in the late 1980s to early 1990s, it seems likely that Olympia’s location away from the dire battles facing gay men and lesbians in New York, San Francisco, and other large urban centers at the time was at least a factor in Riot Grrrl’s development. Given the geographic specificity of Riot Grrrl’s emergence, however, on what basis might we justify the movement of the Riot Grrrl papers to the Fales Library and Special Collections in New York two decades later? If Riot Grrrl could not have emerged in New York when it did (at least not in the same form), what makes Fales Library such an appropriate home now? This question is particularly significant given that the Downtown Collection, with which the Riot Grrrl Collection holds most in common, was founded at the height of the AIDS crisis in 1993, in part owing to Fales Library and Special Collection’s Director Marvin Taylor, who realized the urgent need to create a home where the papers and artifacts of recently deceased artists could be housed and properly preserved.42

If Taylor’s impetus to create the Downtown Collection was the result of an urgent and even dire need, Darms has had the privilege of developing the Riot Grrrl Collection under much less pressing circumstances. When she considers the question of location, Darms first points to the practical challenges one faces when attempting to establish any special collection. “Perhaps, in an ideal world, they would be in an institution in Olympia or Washington, DC,” she admits, “but you need an institution that is committed to preserving these materials in the long term and that requires institutional backing and subject knowledge to support the materials.”43 Darms also emphasizes that New York is more accessible to researchers than other possible locations, such as Olympia, DC, or Minneapolis, and may even benefit
from a certain “neutrality” because it is not one of these locations, which are more synonymous with Riot Grrrl’s early development. Beyond such practical considerations, there are other issues at stake. Locating the collection in Olympia, Minneapolis, or DC may honor the movement’s geographic specificity at its moment of origin, but privileging geography also risks reinforcing the idea of Riot Grrrl as a subculture. After all, subcultures have historically been defined along the basis of not only style and cultural practices but also geography. This is evident in both British and North American theorizing on subcultures, which have frequently privileged and even romanticized the specific neighborhoods that have allegedly given birth to subcultures, from London’s East End to New York’s Harlem and the Bronx. Rather than privilege geography, the Riot Grrrl Collection privileges the movement’s historical lineages. Once again, in this respect, the collection’s adjacency to Fales Library’s existing special collections, especially the Downtown Collection, is significant, but Darms explains the difference: because “the Downtown Collection is obviously so specific to New York,” the connection is “more of an intellectual and aesthetic relationship.”

It is important to acknowledge that the question of relocation is by no means a question unique to the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library. Echoing other theorists on the archive, in the final chapter of An Archive of Feelings, Cvetkovich concludes, “The history of any archive is a history of space.” But as she further emphasizes, gay and lesbian archives have been especially engaged in transforming spaces because “their existence has been dependent on the possibility of making private spaces—such as rooms in people’s homes—public.” On this basis, she further argues that gay and lesbian archives are an “intriguing locus of debates about institutionalization and the tensions around assimilation in gay and lesbian politics.” In other words, the archive is not simply a space that promises to preserve traces of marginal subjects’ lives but also a locus that holds the power to integrate and even “mainstream” such subjects. Much of the controversy surrounding the Riot Grrrl Collection has focused on whether the
collection represents a form of institutional assimilation. While the critique is not entirely surprising, it rests on the assumption that Riot Grrrl, once upon a time, existed outside the academy, an assumption by no means consistent with either the movement’s history or its mandate.

Institutionalization and Assimilation

As previously emphasized, upon news of the Riot Grrrl Collection’s development, many bloggers celebrated not only the development of an archival collection dedicated to Riot Grrrl but also the appearance of a new destination for fans. A response to a posting on The Girls Are . . . blog read: “How awesome! Yes, roadtrip!” The Girls Are . . . agreed: “Seriously, I think I [could] craft a roadtrip around this one activity!” If the initial public response to the Riot Grrrl Collection was marked by preliminary plans for pilgrimages to Fales Library, then as the conditions of the collection became more apparent some fans responded with disappointment. In November 2010, the following tongue-and-cheek article appeared in the Village Voice, which may have further contributed to the rumors and confusion about the collection’s access policy:

... the collection is only open to “qualified researchers’ (a/k/a academies) to view in the Fales” reading room. For the rest of us unqualified schlubs, Darms is also looking to sponsor symposiums and conferences centered around grrrl cultural/feminism/queer studies as well as possible exhibitions and screenings.51

While the Village Voice piece was presumably not intended as a critique, responses on their website and subsequent online debates suggest that at least some fans considered the collection’s access policy at odds with Riot Grrrl’s central tenets. On the Village Voice website, for example, Fran responded, presumably under the impression that Hanna had never agreed to the terms of the collection, with the following post: “I don’t think that kathleen hanna would of donated this collection if she
had [known] that it was only accessible to the educated elite!"\textsuperscript{52} Darms not surprisingly rejects suggestions that the decision to locate the Riot Grrrl papers in a special collections library at a private university is necessarily problematic:

[Fales Library has] a relatively open policy for access, but it still needs to be an appointment made through me or another curator, and you still need to have a scholarly project. Scholarly is something we interpret broadly, because many of our researchers are artists. . . . I have made sure that the donations have happened with an understanding that the materials will be accessed for scholarly projects. This has been the motivation for the donors so far—a recognition that the materials will support research. They haven’t donated their materials to make them more accessible to fans.\textsuperscript{53}

This is not to suggest that the backlash has been entirely easy for Darms. She admits, “it is difficult for me because my background is an anti-institutional, DIY, fuck the institution philosophy.”\textsuperscript{54} Darms adds that, although she has not had any resistance from donors yet, “maybe the potential donors who aren’t responding have some qualms about placing their materials in an institution.”\textsuperscript{55} The women who have agreed to donate their papers clearly share much with Darms in their thinking about the archive.

Hanna’s and Fateman’s support for the collection’s development, for example, also emphasizes the importance of preservation. “I didn’t want to give all my stuff to some collective that might close down in a month and throw my stuff in the trash,” explained Hanna.\textsuperscript{56} When asked about the collection’s institutional location, Fateman also emphasized the desire to place her papers in an established archive: “There are DIY archives but are they committed to preservation? Likely not in the way an institutional collection is committed to preservation.”\textsuperscript{57} In addition to emphasizing the importance of preservation and the fact that institutional archives, such as Fales Library, are typically better
equipped to carry out preservation than collections located in community settings, which frequently lack proper storage facilities, Darms, Fateman, and Hanna offer shared responses, consistent with at least two important tenets of Riot Grrrl, to critiques of the collection’s location.

First, the collection, which will provide access to a wide range of academic and independent researchers but at the discretion of library staff, appears to reflect the Riot Grrrl movement’s own commitment to open access within limits. On this account, it is by no means insignificant that in defense of the collection’s institutional context, Hanna draws a parallel between the collection and contemporary zine production:

It’s like people who make paper fanzines in 2010 are making a specific choice to reach a smaller audience than maybe a blog could, it’s an artistic decision. One that has to do with having a tactile object that exists in the real world and can be physically passed from person to person. Choosing an archive that has an intended audience and isn’t for everyone is a similar choice to me. Also, since most of the stuff I donated was created before the internet, I would prefer it be viewed physically and in context. If it was open to everyone little bits of it would inevitably end up on the internet, and I don’t really want rough drafts of shit I wrote twenty years ago popping up online ahistorical style.\textsuperscript{58}

Second, Darms emphasizes the importance of understanding that this collection, unlike existing collections of Riot Grrrl related materials, contains the papers of individuals and not simply zines, recordings, and artwork that have already been in circulation, if only in the semipublic textual communities of zine producers.\textsuperscript{59} As a result, it requires more care and sensitivity and hence a heightened degree of what some fans perceive as institutional gatekeeping:

Much of the material is very personal and with the figures involved, it could be very divisive if certain information was freely circulated—we’re collecting journals, letters,
even legal documents. So I don’t think that it’s material that really needs to be accessible to anyone. I feel strongly about that in terms of archival reading rooms, even if it’s not a popular way to view library practice but in terms of the archive, this is really standard practice.  

This is not to suggest that Darms is uncommitted to supporting venues where Riot Grrrl materials are more readily accessible. In fact, she sees herself working in collaboration with other archivists and librarians building Riot Grrrl related collections: “there are still going to be venues where people can go to look at zines and that’s really important to me. That’s what Jenna Freedman is doing up at Barnard. But people are also taking it upon themselves to scan zines and create online archives. Those online archives may not last very long but it does create a way to make the zines accessible now.”

In addition to extending Riot Grrrl’s practice of facilitating access to information without entirely relinquishing control over its circulation, the Riot Grrrl Collection extends the movement’s longstanding practice of tactically deploying the academic apparatus. As Hanna explains, “Universities have more money than most left political groups and personally I don’t want lefty feminist groups spending their resources maintaining archives when they could be doing more important things.” In many respects, Riot Grrrl has always operated as a parasitic presence on the academy, never colonizing its host but consistently deploying its resources (intellectual and material) to further its own agenda. Once again, in this respect, it is important to recognize that the movement emerged in and around a college campus. Known for its innovative curriculum and commitment to collaborative and self-designed programs of study, Evergreen State College not only served as an institutional base from which to initiate specific projects (for example, a Riot Grrrl zine distribution network was started as an independent study course at the college), but, at least indirectly, it also supplied the movement with resources from copy paper and other zine-making supplies to space.
In the early 1990s, however, Riot Grrrl was doing much more than leaching the academy of material resources. Referring to the early years of Riot Grrrl and her own college experience at Evergreen, Darms emphasizes that “a lot of the materials people were reading were academic. It was a really smart movement, a well informed movement.” While academic feminist discourses by no means had been absent from an earlier generation’s community newspapers and journals, the range of scholarly discourses in nonrefereed second wave publications and forms of cultural production was limited. Outside the academy, and at times even inside the academy, it was *de rigueur* for second wave feminists to eschew theoretical discourses perceived as “elitist,” “difficult,” and “inaccessible.” By the early 1990s, however, the divide between so-called “academic” and “grassroots” feminisms was already dissolving, and Riot Grrrl was what it was because it emerged at this particular theoretical and political moment, when fixed notions of identity were rapidly giving way to a more nuanced and complex understandings of the subject—the moment when everyone appeared to be celebrating both the “smartness” and political potential of irony, parody, pastiche, and appropriation. After nearly two decades of steady political gains by feminists both inside and outside the academy, the early 1990s was also a privileged moment, a brief interval in which young feminists could afford to embrace emerging theoretical positions while remaining fully committed to most of the tenets of second wave feminist politics. And perhaps this is why Riot Grrrl, from the onset, sought to embrace and even celebrate rather than eschew contradictions.

On my first trip to access the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library in February 2011, I spoke to Darms, whom I had originally interviewed for this chapter in June 2010 (before the collection had been made available to researchers). After hearing about the form this chapter was taking, she directed me to five file folders of photocopied articles in the still unprocessed papers of Kathleen Hanna. Although it is not entirely clear at what point Hanna started to collect the materials contained in the files, the
range of materials not only points to the breadth of the artist’s reading and influences but also offers insight into the intellectual and political orientation of the Riot Grrrl movement. I offer an abbreviated list of some of the articles and clippings found in Hanna’s files. The list, to be clear, is not a finding aid but simply a selection of what I chose to record while looking through the first three of the five folders. In some cases, I have added notes, including notes about the bibliographical information, marginia and mark-ups that appear on the photocopied materials.

David James, “Hardcore: Cultural Resistance in the Postmodern”
Kathy Acker, “Realism for the Cause of Future Revolution”
Chris Straayer, “The She-man: Postmodern bi-sexed performance in film and video” (copied from Screen, Autumn 1990)
Helene Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (copied from Signs 1, no.4, 1976)
A book review of Derrida’s Glas (marked with pink highlighting)
Gregg Bordowitz, “Dense Moments”
Hazel V. Carby, “The Politics of Difference”
Hilton Als, “The Furies”
Robin West, “Pornography as a Legal Text” (note on back includes references to Lesbian Ethics by Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Daring to be Bad by Alic Echols, Not for Sale by Laura Cottingham, Illusions of Postmodernism by Terry Eagleton, Yes by Yoko Ono, and the Collected works Felix Gonzales Torres)
Review of Kathy Goes to Haiti, My Death My Life by Pier Paolo Pasolini, and Florida by Kathy Acker
Kathy Acker, “Dead Doll Humility” (copied from Postmodern Culture, 1990)
An article about the Montreal massacre published in *McLean’s* (Dec. 18, 1989)

Fragment from “Bodies that Matter” by Judith Butler (“Phantasmatic Identification”)


A pamphlet on abortion rights

Ann Cvetkovich “Sexual Trauma/Queer Memory: Incest, Lesbianism, and Therapeutic Culture” (copied from *GLQ*)

Laura Kipnis, “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust Reading Hustler” (extensive notes on back)

Excerpts from *Z Magazine* (1999)

Nikki Craft, “In Defense of Disobedience” (copied from *Fight Back*)

bell hooks, “Beauty Laid Bare: Aesthetics in the Ordinary”

If we accept the fact that, given Hanna’s place as one founder of Riot Grrrl, her personal reading inventory is by no means inconsequential to understanding the political and intellectual roots of the movement, then I maintain the above inventory is worth considering at length. First, several articles point to the influence of deconstructionist, poststructuralist, and postmodern theorizing (for example, the reviews of books by and about the Derrida, the excerpt from Butler’s *Bodies that Matter*, the copied articles by and about French feminist theorists, and the chapter of Terry Eagleton’s *Illusions of Postmodernism*). Second, there is substantial evidence that Hanna, like many of her peers at the time, was still grappling with second wave feminist debates (for example, Laura Kipnis’s article on reading *Hustler* and Hazel V. Carby’s discussion on the “politics of difference”). At the same time, the inventory points to the strong influence of queer theory and politics (see Gregg Bordowitz). These scholarly articles notably intermingle with news clippings (the article about the massacre of fourteen women in a classroom at École Polytechnique
SUBJECT TOPICS

- Alternative Spaces (Arts facilities).
- Art | v Exhibitions.
- Art | x Exhibitions | z New York (State) | z New York.
- Art | x Experimental methods.
- Artists and community | z United States.
- Dance music | z United States.
- Electronic music.
- Evergreen State College.
- Feminism and art.
- Feminism.
- Feminist music.
- Gender Identity | z United States.
- Interactive art.
- Lesbians | z United States.
- Multimedia (art).
- Politics in art.
- Punk culture.
- Punk rock music.
- Riot grrrl movement.
- Women artists | z United States.
- Women’s rights
- Zines

FIGURE 3.1 Subject topics listed in the finding aid to the Kathleen Hanna Papers, Riot Grrrl Collection, Fales Library and Special Collections.

in Montréal on December 6, 1989) and features from the radical press (the articles copied from the Whole Earth Review and Z Magazine). Finally, there are references to a particular lineage of avant-garde writers and artists through the references to William Burroughs, Yoko Ono, Hilton Als, and Kathy Acker.

While Hanna’s papers at the Riot Grrrl Collection paint a deeply complex picture of Riot Grrrl’s relationship to hardcore, punk, feminism, popular culture, critical theory, and
avant-garde literature and art, to date, few scholars of Riot Grrrl have accounted for this complexity. I admit that my own research on Riot Grrrl, beginning with a thesis on girl zines in 1994, is by no means exempt from this criticism. Looking back on my thesis (for the first time in well over a decade), I discovered that, although I recognized that the girl zine networks at the center of my research were inspired by, but not exclusively connected to, Riot Grrrl and further acknowledged the danger of constructing girl zine networks as a manifestation of a single youth culture or subculture, when discussing Riot Grrrl I generally referred to the movement as a subculture. My early research on Riot Grrrl, however, was consistent with other early studies on the movement, including Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald’s article, “Smells like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrl, Revolution and Women in Independent Rock,” which appeared in Tricia Rose and Andrew Ross’s edited collection, Microphone Fiends in 1994. In what was likely the first scholarly publication on Riot Grrrl, Gottlieb and Wald maintain that “from its inception, Riot Grrrl emerges as a bona fide subculture.” They draw generously on the work of Angela McRobbie and other British subcultural studies theorists, such as Simon Frith and Dick Hebdige, to support their depiction of Riot Grrrl as a “bona fide subculture.” Wald extends this position in her 1998 Signs article, “Just a Girl?: Rock Music, Feminism, and the Cultural Construction of Female Youth,” referring to Riot Grrrl as a “female youth subculture,” and a “musical subculture.” In many respects, it was by no means misleading to construct Riot Grrrl as a subculture. With its own distinctive style, music, discourse, and social codes, the movement fit neatly into existing case studies on subcultures, including Hebdige’s studies on British punk and McRobbie’s studies of the British rave scene. However, as Fateman emphasizes, “Many academics viewed RG rather romantically and wishfully. . . . There was a desire to see it as a spontaneous radical feminist teen movement that had a kind of ‘street cred,’ rather than something that was connected to campus women’s centers, take back the night marches, feminist scholarship, and avant-garde literature.”
The problem of bringing a subcultural studies model to bear on Riot Grrrl, then, may have less to do with what such a model imposed on the movement and more to do with what the model effectively obscured about the movement’s origins, influences, and long-term impacts. As Fateman observes, “The ‘girl gang’ image was cultivated by some within the movement, and it was ‘real’ in terms of certain guerilla tactics and punk antics, but Riot Grrrl was also an aesthetic thing (rhetorical, theorized).”

Fateman adds, “Its status as a political movement and social phenomenon still seems to overshadow its status as an artistic movement. Its products still aren’t discussed much as art.”

In Gender in the Music Industry (2007), Marion Leonard also addresses this oversight. She recognizes that “riot grrrl’s development parallels the way a number of youth subcultures have established themselves. It emerges from within ‘underground’ music circles; was promoted through gigs, events and zine networks; and was greeted with considerable levels of fascination by the mass media.” Leonard goes on, however, to warn that applying this model of analysis to Riot Grrrl is misleading. Emphasizing that “one of the flaws of subcultural theory has been its tenacious grasp of the concept of delinquency,” she observes, “Youth subcultures have often been positioned as oppositional to the ‘parent culture’ and thereby at odds with societal norms.” This approach, she emphasizes, has “particular relevance to Riot Grrrl” because “to place riot grrrl in a tradition of delinquent youth theory would be to ignore the nature of its protest and dismiss its feminist objectives as mere teen dissent.” Again, the scope and range of radical literatures, critical theory, and avant-garde works included and referenced in Hanna’s files in the Riot Grrrl Collection suggests that at least at its point of origin, Riot Grrrl was already far too self-reflexive and entangled in the institutions and industries it sought to occupy and critique to be understood simply through a framework of youth dissent.

Thus, on the one hand, the fact that the Riot Grrrl Collection is unavailable to every fan on a pilgrimage may appear to
come into conflict with Riot Grrrl’s commitment to locating girls and young women as agents of knowledge and cultural production and social change. On the other hand, the collection’s development is entirely in keeping with the movement’s longstanding relationship to the academy. Like the movement itself, the collection reflects a tactical deployment of the academy’s resources and represents an attempt to use the academy as a means to shape how the movement will be taken up in a larger public sphere. In our interview, Darms reflected briefly on her own early experience of Riot Grrrl. Her recollection reveals the extent to which the movement is not only indebted to punk but to multiple and overlapping aesthetic and intellectual traditions. Indeed, she emphasizes these complex lineages while simultaneously making a strong case for why the Riot Grrrl papers are at home among existing collections at Fales Library:

For me, Riot Grrrl is absolutely an off-shoot of punk. I don’t think that everyone experienced it that way, but historically, it was definitely a reaction to punk and the failures of gender in that radical aesthetic. But there are also important intellectual connections. Take, for example, the Semiotexte Collection. The people who are in that collection, like Kathy Acker and Eileen Myles, are people who women involved with Riot Grrrl were reading and inspired by. But there’s also other connections—even the little pocket Baudrillard that I remember seeing at a friend’s house for the first time when I was still in Olympia—it was like an introduction to a whole world. The same day I saw the Baudrillard, my friend played me Kathleen’s spoken word 7–inch. So in my mind, there are many connections both aesthetically and intellectually. Also, both collections [The Downtown Collection and the Semiotexte Collection] are very queer.77

From punk to Semiotexte, from Myles to Baudrillard, from a college-age Kathleen Hanna to New York’s downtown art scene,
Darms covers immense ground here, but in so doing she effectively demonstrates the slippages and connections that are integral to understanding Riot Grrrl. Far from a “bona fide subculture,” as Gottlieb and Wald argue in their early theorizing on the movement, Darms represents Riot Grrrl as queer feminist hybrid of punk, continental philosophy, feminism, and avant-garde literary and art traditions. Thus, the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library represents neither a form of institutionalization nor assimilation but rather foregrounds something that was always already part of the Riot Grrrl movement—its link to both the academic apparatus and to some of the theoretical and aesthetic movements it has sustained.

Avant-garde Heritage

The idea that a radical movement might have an “avant-garde heritage” is, I admit, at least somewhat contradictory. If we understand the avant-garde along Bourdieu’s lines, then avant-garde movements are by definition without a “heritage” or “lineage” to which they can truly lay claim because “‘young’ writers, i.e., those less advanced in the process of consecration . . . will refuse everything their ‘elders’ . . . are and do, and in particular all their indices of social ageing, starting with the signs of consecration, internal (academies, etc.) or external (success).” But this, evidently, is a perspective that is either no longer relevant to theorizing on how avant-gardes are formed or one in which Riot Grrrl stands as a notable exception.

As Fateman emphasizes, “Some Riot Grrrls (especially after the Newsweek, USA Today, Sassy articles) were quite young and knew nothing about Kathy Acker, Karen Finley, Diamanda Galas, Barbara Kruger, etc but those in the most notorious Riot Grrrl bands most certainly did.” It seems unlikely that a song like “Hot Topic,” released on Le Tigre’s debut album in 1998, could exist without such an awareness:

Carol Rama and Eleanor Antin
Yoko Ono and Carolee Schneeman
You’re getting old, that’s what they’ll say, but
Don’t give a damn I’m listening anyway

The song mentions a myriad of other artists, writers, performers, and scholars, including modernist icon Gertrude Stein, contemporary poet and experimental prose writer Eileen Myles, and celebrated late twentieth-century artist David Wojnarowicz. Notably absent from the list of venerated influences is Kathy Acker; however, Hanna’s connection to Acker is particularly illustrative.

Among the articles and newspaper clippings Hanna chose to keep and include in her donation to the Riot Grrrl Collection are dozens of articles by and about Acker, but the Hanna-Acker connection is also an exception. In contrast to other connections between established innovative writers and artists and the Riot Grrrl movement, this connection has already been recognized as part of Riot Grrrl history. In a 2002 article in the Village Voice, in which Acker is described as “a riot grrrl ahead of her time,” Hanna discusses a fated weekend workshop with Acker in Seattle in 1990. As the legend goes, Acker told Hanna, “If you want to be heard, why are you doing spoken word? You should be in a band.” As we all know, Hanna went home and started a band, and Acker was right—bands get more airplay than poetry. Whether Acker would have embraced the idea that she was a “riot grrrl ahead of her time” is unclear. After all, Acker was very much an individual, not a movement. Nevertheless, as a tough, sexually complicated, outspoken, punk writer and performer who had found a way to play with the boys and espouse feminist politics without being coopted by either camp, Acker was an ideal role model for Hanna and her peers. She exemplified what it meant to be both punk and feminist, political and theoretically engaged, a public figure but by no means an object of media manipulation.

While the Acker influence on Hanna was the result of a direct encounter, for other Riot Grrrls, the influence of Acker and other avant-garde women writers and performers, such as Eileen Myles and Karen Findley, may have been neither as
direct nor as widely acknowledged, but it is apparent in the work nevertheless. In *Girls to the Front*, Marcus makes a point of foregrounding these connections, and to her credit she carefully avoids implying that they were merely about young women searching for feisty feminist role models in the late years of the second wave feminist movement. As Marcus emphasizes, connections, such as the one between Hanna and Acker, were first and foremost intellectual and aesthetic:

Acker’s insolent, demanding fictions tackled female sexuality head-on and took an ax to literary form. In *Blood and Guts in High School*, the 1978 novel that got Kathleen hooked, a young girl begs her father for sex, joins a gang, has two abortions, and goes to a Contortions concert—all in the first forty-three pages. The story is told in a fragmented, deadpan way, through shifting points of view and collage: fairy tales, scripts, poems, line drawings of men’s and women’s genitals, pages from a Persian-language workbook. *Blood and Guts* suggested that the realities of women’s lives, especially with regard to sexuality and abuse, were too complicated to be told through typical narrative. Only contradictions, ruptures and refusals stood a chance of conveying the truth.  

Directly or indirectly, with few exceptions, early Riot Grrrl writing, such as the writing found in many of the zines published between 1990 and 1994, reflects this recognition that women’s lives, especially women’s experiences of sexuality and abuse, are too complicated to be expressed in linear narrative prose. As an example, consider the following passage that appears in the middle of an abuse narrative published in a Riot Grrrl zine from this era:  

“Is my real life pain and abuse good enough to be an article in a fucking fanzine for you to read WHO ARE YOU? stop reading this. I said STOP RITE NOW. you’re still reading. its okay you know I really want you to.”  

The use of such interruptions in a narrative that otherwise may be read as a typical confessional piece of writing on sexual abuse was by no
means uncommon in Riot Grrrl writing at the time. In fact, a distinctive marker of early Riot Grrrl writing was its disjunctive narrative style, which frequently included insertions intended to make the reader aware of their complicity in the production of the text and at times their potential voyeurism. By extension, early Riot Grrrl writing had a tendency to destabilize the speaking subject, often rendering the writer’s intentions ambiguous and even inaccessible. As demonstrated above, the writing was also marked by notable typographical innovations and grammatical irregularities, making it difficult for readers to ignore the extent to which language is a scene of power, regulation, and constraint that must be interrogated. Thus, while one could read such writing as a form of life writing or autobiography, the repeated use of these conventions suggests that early Riot Grrrl writers were by no means working on the assumption that language is a mere vehicle for representation. In this respect, their writing arguably shared much more in common with the disturbing, clever, and disjunctive narrative presented in Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School* than with texts typically theorized as life writing or autobiography. My point here, however, is not that the unidentified writer of the above passage was necessarily directly influenced by Acker (as we know Hanna was) but rather that there is a substantial basis upon which to read such texts as more rhetorically and aesthetically sophisticated than they have typically been read. After all, many early Riot Grrrl writers (note, I am choosing to refer to them as *writers* rather than *zinesters* here) were, like Acker and her contemporaries in the avant-garde writing scenes in New York and San Francisco, committed to creating a textual space where competing tendencies, narratives, truths, styles, and aesthetics could coexist; this, however, is something that has been largely ignored by researchers of Riot Grrrl. The question remains: *why* have critics generally assumed that Riot Grrrls were doing what they were doing (on the page and the stage) more or less naively, without a sense of the innovative literary and art movements that preceded them?
One could easily conclude that the relative neglect of Riot Grrrl cultural production as literature and art reflects the general status of women writers and artists, especially those affiliated with so-called avant-garde movements. After all, even when women have been present from the onset, such movements often have been primarily or exclusively attributed to one or more male “geniuses” (hence, the hero worship of the Tzaras, Duchamps, and Debords). Following these lines, one might assume that the problem is nothing less than the “girl” in Riot Grrrl, but the relative absence of controversy surrounding the development of the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library suggests that, in many respects, Riot Grrrl has already been recognized as a historically significant cultural phenomenon. The problem is not necessarily one of recognition but of the mode of that recognition, and as such gender alone cannot account for the oversight in question.

Returning to the question of Riot Grrrl writing, it is important to recognize that, with few exceptions, researchers have tended to ignore the specificity of Riot Grrrl writing by classifying this writing within the broader category of girl zine writing. Viewed through this lens, most apparent are the common issues Riot Grrrl and other girl zines address (for example, abuse, eating disorders, sexuality, and so on) rather than the mode of address or the procedures at work in the texts. In other words, content is invariably privileged over form, pushing aesthetic questions to the margins. This is evident in Alison Piepmeier’s *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*. Notably absent from Piepmeier’s study is any extended discussion of zine writing in relation to pastiche, détournement, appropriation, or questions of authorship. Rather than take up this writing as literature, Piepmeier understands both Riot Grrrl writing and other girl zine writing primarily in relation to its social and political content. When aesthetics are taken up more explicitly, it is in relation to concepts such as “bricolage,” an anthropological term and one with considerable currency in subcultural studies.\(^{86}\) Although this is by no means a reason to overlook Piepmeier’s important study on girl zines, it reminds us—as Darms evidently hopes
to foreground through the development of the Riot Grrrl Collection—that context matters and that context more specifically holds the potential to produce the critical perspectives that amass around a given cultural product to determine its status as a symbolic object in the field of cultural production.

**Recasting the Field of Cultural Production through the Archive**

To be clear, the objective of this chapter was not to rewrite Riot Grrrl as an avant-garde movement. After all, such a history merits an entire book, and it is a book that should be written. I wish to highlight here that the Riot Grrrl Collection at Fales Library and Special Collections holds the potential to facilitate precisely such a rewriting of Riot Grrrl. On this basis, we can conclude that the collection’s development demonstrates how archives are implicated in, what Bourdieu describes as, “position-takings.” In other words, the collection reveals how archives are part and parcel of the process of endowing works of art and literature as well as *individual* artists and writers with varying degrees of cultural capital and prestige. If the archive is integral to such “position-takings,” however, it is to the extent that it is or holds the possibility to be engaged in the production of critics and their writings. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, the Riot Grrrl Collection not only draws attention to the role of the archive in the field of cultural production but also challenges Bourdieu’s understanding of how avant-gardes are established within the field by revealing how an avant-garde may be established through a strategic alliance with the past rather than through a “pushing back” of one’s predecessors. Finally, in addition to offering an occasion to challenge Bourdieu’s theorizing (for example, his oversight of the archive’s position in the field of cultural production and assumptions about the conditions under which avant-gardes are formed), the development of the Riot Grrrl Collection offers an occasion to challenge both feminist critiques of Bourdieu and perspectives on the feminist subfield.
As a response to Bourdieu’s theorizing on the field of cultural production, in her 2002 article, “Feminist Periodicals and the Production of Cultural Value,” Barbara Godard contends, “Gender . . . is not a category that Bourdieu introduces into his model of complex social stratification. For him, distinctions operate primarily within differentials of class.”

Women, Godard observes, are only taken into account by Bourdieu as a target market of cultural products rather than as producers. Bourdieu’s oversight is especially relevant to understanding the status of “high art,” under which the so-called avant-garde, innovative, and experimental are typically grouped:

Because of its relative difficulty or rarity, the “high-art” produced by the field of “restricted production” is considered “pure” and functions as an element of social prestige. Such anti-economic behaviour paradoxically constitutes “symbolic capital”: disinterest in “‘economic’ profits” works dialectically to consolidate “a capital of consecration” by “making a name for oneself.” . . . Through the prestige of a signature or trademark, those agents can “consecrate objects” and so create cultural value across fields.

To illustrate, we might consider the success of some cultural movements/industries that emerged simultaneous to Riot Grrrl in the early to mid 1990s, which include “indie” film and music and open source programming. By initially rejecting profit as a primary motivation for their acts of creation, these largely male-dominated movements/industries gained a cachet that was in turn soon converted into cultural prestige and economic capital (hence, the sudden trend of established Hollywood directors choosing to direct and produce “indie” films for prestige and profit or the for-profit redeployment of forms of digital creativity that were anti-economic at their point of origin). By comparison, Riot Grrrl, which opted out of established publishing and recording venues to embrace a DIY approach marked by a parallel anti-economic mandate, did not necessarily benefit financially or in terms of cultural prestige from its decisions.
Godard maintains that such differentials reflect the conditions of the “feminist sub-field” in the larger field of cultural production: “In a feminist sub-field . . . [the] same disinterestedness or anti-economic behaviour is unable to transpose its disavowal of short-term profit in the marketplace into long-term prestige in other fields.”

Godard’s analysis provides a plausible explanation for why Riot Grrrl has, unlike other “indie” creative movements that emerged in the early to mid 1990s, remained both unprofitable and largely unrecognized as an artistic and literary movement. What Godard’s analysis fails to fully account for, however, is that the “feminist sub-field” is also a space of possibilities.

Far from preserving the history of Riot Grrrl as it has been preserved to date, the Riot Grrrl Collection represents a possible interruption in both the field of cultural production and its feminist subfield. Although the possibilities are, thus far, mostly unexplored, as researchers use the collection its possibilities will become increasingly apparent. As emphasized throughout this chapter, without necessarily pushing Riot Grrrl’s status as a subculture or submovement of punk entirely into the background, the collection’s location at Fales Library and Special Collections relocates Riot Grrrl in relation to some of the “rarefied” and “consecrated” cultural products of earlier and concurrent avant-garde literary, art, and performance movements, hence drawing attention to the fact that the “grrrls” were engaged in forms of cultural and knowledge production that can and should be taken seriously as art, literature, and theory and not simply youthful rebellion. The collection’s development, which is the result of the longstanding relationship between the collection’s archivist and donors, reveals the extent to which these cultural producers recognized the archive as the space and apparatus most capable of executing such a radical position-taking in the present.