LITERARY ARCHAEOLOGIES
A Comparative Study of the Compilation Zine "Evolution of a Race Riot"
by Trisha Remetir

WHAT'S A RACE RIOT?

Why this exists: I'm flipping through a zine and I read an ad by a white woman calling for submissions from white women and women of color for a compilation she wants to put together about racism. And she's calling it Sister We Are One or something equally homogenizing, something to deflect conflict and differences across race and class and geography... And I'm thinking, this call for submissions (I mean, literally) is typical, this is an affirmation of existing and far too dominant white feminist/radical discourse that magisterially invites the person of color to participate, not in dialogue with other people of color, but with white women and men. (Evolution of a Race Riot 4)

Evolution of a Race Riot (1997-1998) was a collaborative zine by Mimi Thi Nguyen that challenged the DIY punk and Riot Grrrl worlds. The zine began as a response to an ongoing dialogue about race and gender in an environment that was wholly dominated by white, feminist punks. As Nguyen writes in the introduction, "how much of our time and energy has gone toward whites who constantly demand our attention, our validation, our absolution, our presence as political fetish (monster, mammy, ‘third world’ revolutionary, token), whatever?" (Evolution of a Race Riot 4) By revealing the many names and positions that tokenize people of color in race discussions for white audiences ("a monster, mammy, political fetish"), Nguyen assertively rules this practice out as an unacceptable for the discussion taking place in Evolution of a Race Riot. Instead of replicating the rules for race discussions in previous zines, Nguyen brings punks of color to the forefront as the writers and the audience, allowing for the creation of a space for their individual experiences to be heard and witnessed. In other words, the zine imagines and enacts the possibility for the race riot to flourish from street to page.

What follows is a brief survey of the transformation of Evolution of a Race Riot; that is, in the spaces it addresses and the spaces it occupies in its written and digitized forms. Originally intended as a collection of writings by people of color protesting the white culture of punkdom, it is now a valuable resource that reveals the intersections of race and the DIY/punk culture scene in the late 90s. Throughout the years, it has even been archived in both physical and digital libraries. This paper will explore two seemingly identical editions of Evolution of a Race Riot as they occupy space in two different libraries: the first, a physical copy attached to the Ailecia Ruscin Collection at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women's History and Culture in Duke University, and the second a digital facsimile made available via the POC (People of Color) Zine Project (poczineproject.tumblr.com).
In both of their archival excavations, Mak and Trettien demonstrate how digitization carries its own materiality and ability for meaning-making, even when purporting to be a simple transmittal of the original text. Zines, on the other hand, exude their own particular kind of materiality: they are produced through cutting and pasting information and pictures onto the page like a collage and then photocopied, collated, folded, and later distributed through informal means (such as through mail, infoshops, music venues).² In order to adapt this archeology for the zine, I expand Mak’s concept of a synchronous space to include not only the space of meaning created by the convergence of content and form now present in the digitized copy, but also the publication’s position as a static object amongst a multitude of objects within the synchronous space of the library. Zines that become acquired by a library inevitably undergo a change in readership, circulation, and status due to the barriers put in place to preserve them from falling apart. Thus, they sit almost paradoxically as relics from another time, their form and content speaking to an audience long moved on. Whether the zine goals become compromised as soon as they become digitized is the main concern for this essay. By investigating Evolution of a Race Riot’s place in both libraries, we can compare the digital environment’s ability to preserve and maybe even create newer spaces for the race riot.

**PRINT MATERIALITY & DIGITAL MATERIALITY**

Nguyen’s zine, like most zines, is a “multiple mutation” project. From the period of 1993-1999, Nguyen culled together excerpts from zines written by punks of color and solicited for more writings about race and identity through the usual channels of call outs in other zines. The result is a collection of at least 55 works written by zinesters of color at various different times. Speaking to the sheer amount of unique voices included in *Evolution of a Race Riot*, Nguyen writes:

> This project has undergone multiple mutations, and in its final shape here it’s become a huge compilation zine written exclusively by people of color in and around punk and grrrl, which is a milestone in itself. And I think it’s a good start to do exactly what I wanted it to do: begin dialogues with each other. (Evolution of a Race Riot, 4)

Speaking to the multiple temporalities of each individually crafted story, Nguyen highlights the main motivation behind the zine as a way to bring disparate voices from different times and location letting the audience make connections and distinctions between each piece.

Nguyen’s phrase “multiple mutations” could also be a nod to the unique tradition of zine production that gives each edition a rogue materiality of all their own. Generally speaking, individual zine editions are oftentimes reprinted from previous copies, not the original, making distortions from copy to copy normal and even expected. For example, a quick look at some of the pages in the Ailecia Ruscin Collection’s version of *Evolution of a Race Riot* housed at the Rubenstein library reveal warped lines and faint traces of words that have been lost from printing to reprinting.
Furthermore, many of the page numbers in the Ailecia Ruscin version appear to have been written by hand on the original copy and then lopped off in the printing due to marginal limitations of the copy machine's printer.

Even with only one copy in hand, an archivist can trace a narrative of the text as first being assembled without page numbers, then having them added at a later time, only to be cut off at the time of printing. These blemishes and marks are normal and a recognizable quality of reading a zine, calling to mind Matthew Kirschenbaum's idea of data remanence, a la Foucault. Embodied within these so-called imperfections are records of multiple temporalities of production. Each printing gives us a new "mutation" to borrow Nguyen's words. It gives us a new reiteration of the text itself and of its form.

Moving from the copy machine to the digital scanner, these mutations evolve. In 2011 the POC Zine project uploaded a scan of Evolution of a Race Riot to their account on issuu.com, making it part of their collection of zine by and for zinesters of color. While in some ways the texts share similarities (the page numbers are similarly cut off, showing that the scanned text was at least made from a copy machine with the same 1cm margin limitations as the one used for the Ailecia Ruscin edition), certain differences to arise.

An initial scan of the cover page spread, for example, reveals the possibility of new remediation to the text. While both cover page spreads have the same section to write an address, in the digitization Nguyen has actually crossed out the "send this to" address and put her own instead.
In both of these spreads, the cover page seems to be nearly the same, featuring a naked feminine figure holding a fist up and then down toward her face. Neither has changed except that the editor has remediated the left text to include her own address. And in other moments, such as Bianca’s contribution called “el odio”, a nonfiction prose piece in which the author writes about the struggle of falling into the stereotype of a Mexicana filled with rage, there are attempts to digitally correct some of the fading lines of the first paragraph so that they’re more legible. That the first paragraph in the POC Zine Project’s digital copy stands out as the clearest part of the first page suggests a continued tradition of multiple temporalities in a synchronous space.

The very tradition of the zine as a synchronous space containing multiple modes of production completely throws older discussions of whether or not facsimiles produce a “true” document, because the existence of that true document is not real in the first place. What matters, then, is what the zine promises: a mutation of the original piece and the production of newer pieces too.
So right now I can see myself turning into the perfect American minority: the Mexican who is so full of rage I can’t even think about what I even care about. It’s this environment I’m trapped in, this huge experiment is finally getting to me and I’m sick of it. I’m hating everyone and all those stupid white people, the clueless ones and the ones who call out reverse racism as if it exists. It all makes me so upset and so violent that my first thought of confrontation is to yell at them and then beat the shit out of them. Cuz I’m hating white people and I’m hating my friends and I’m hating all of my mother’s family who hate me cuz I’m a half Mexican/half white piece of shit. And then my mom’s father died a couple of months ago I was so happy, people told me I was sick how happy I was. I have been waiting for him to die my whole life. I’m waiting on every white person I hate to die and I know it’s callous and I know it. I know that I am full of hate and I’m hard to be like this. I’m so preoccupied with this rage, this awful consuming hatred of white people, because to me they represent everything I hate. Everything I’ve been through that isn’t right for a little kid to go through. And I can hear them saying, even if they’re nice to my face, “she’s overreacting”, “she’s just a dumb pissed off Mexican”, “she doesn’t know what she’s saying.” And this penetrates all of my relationships with whites even if they aren’t even aware of it. But usually I tell people straight up about how I feel about them being white. I can’t help but think about all white people like this because
One last comparative example takes this idea into full force, as the POC Zine Project's online edition takes a drastic turn from the print edition. The centerfold spread of the Alicia Ruskin edition contains an article, entitled “Race and the Race Riot”, in its entirety. The article was written by Jason Cherkis and details a few people of color in punk whose voices were silenced for either loving punk or being a person of color in the punk world. The whole article is printed horizontally, making it so that in order to read about Eddie Ayala, the reader has to pick up the zine and hold it up with both hands, as if mimicking the piece's original intended reading method as a newspaper broadsheet.
In the digital scan, however, the centerpiece is drastically different: the whole entire centerfold on the verso side is simply a workaround for the limitations of the proprietary software that the POC Zine Project uses. Everything else is the same, even Nguyen's handwritten note that portions of the text were touched up because they didn't scan well is preserved (this is no different than in the Allecia Ruscin edition). Yet as a result, from page 47 on, the zine assumes different form. Page 49, which should be on a verso side, now appears on the recto side, and now all of the successive pages appear on the opposite side of the spread they originally appear in. This spread from the POC Zine Project digitization shows the page numbers closer to the middle (where previously, in the print editions and in manuscripts in general, the page numbers appear toward the outer part of the leaves).

The reason for this shift is understandable. The PDF viewer issuu that hosts *Evolution of a Race Riot* for public viewing does not have a function for rotating PDFs. To provide the whole centerfold on the verso side is simply a workaround for the limitations of the proprietary software that the POC Zine Project uses. Everything else is the same, even Nguyen's handwritten note that portions of the text were touched up because they didn't scan well is preserved (this is no different than in the Allecia Ruscin edition). Yet as a result, from page 47 on, the zine assumes different form. Page 49, which should be on a verso side, now appears on the recto side, and now all of the successive pages appear on the opposite side of the spread they originally appear in. This spread from the POC Zine Project digitization shows the page numbers closer to the middle (where previously, in the print editions and in manuscripts in general, the page numbers appear toward the outer part of the leaves).
With every spread effectively flipped and one page moved down one, not only are the page numbers different, but the reconfigurations of the spreads are different. In the above image, the POC Zine Project shows bamboo stalks framing the middle spine where in the print edition they would actually frame the text within the page, creating more of a unified whole. And on pages 51-52, there is a text call-out for zine submissions for the Sisi ad, but the arrow points paradoxically to either the column on the left or to that of the ether that lies beyond the page. In this case, the digital remediation has actually made some of Nguyen's original arrows and editorial marks that are present in the printed zine ineffectual through the page misnumbering.

While in some ways the digital text of the POC Zine Project has been fixed to correct previous errors the process of digitization has introduced other errors along the way. The POC Zine Project digital edition is not perfect, and in many ways pushes against traditional conventions of what makes a proper edition (Tanselle). With all of this said, would we really be able to say that the zine that we are viewing in the POC Zine Project project is a flawed, and therefore unusable, edition? Given the fact that imperfections between editions are a large part of the zine's materiality, we must turn to find other ways in which the POC Zine Project enacts the text's call for making new spaces for discussion. For this, we shall turn to a more McKenzie-influenced view of the text, one that "alerts us to the roles of institutions, and their own complex structures, in affecting the forms of social discourse, past and present" (McKenzie 15).

**SPACE**

While the POC Zine Project's edition of *Evolution of a Race Riot* introduces more aberrations to the text, its purpose actually sheds light on another emblem of the zine's materiality—its ability to be easily circulated. Piepmeier has long talked about the discussion of the zine's materiality as made for small circulation, stating that zines "instigate intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and readers, not just communities but what I am calling embodied communities, made possible by the materiality of the zine medium" (Piepmeier 58). It would thus be worthy to analyze how the communities of those zines change as they become institutionalized (by being included in zine libraries) or made available to an expanded audience.

To access the zines at the Sallie Bingham Center for Women and Culture at Duke University, visitors must first register as a researcher on the Duke website. Though not required to be part of any institution, it is much easier for those who are affiliated with Duke or neighboring institutions to enroll, delineating through its ease of process the library's implicated audience: the researcher. From there the visitor searches the Rubenstein library's catalogue where zines are searchable by their specific titles and—with their permission—by the zine author's name (library.duke.edu).
WHAT ARE YOU?

Piepmeier’s vision of embodied communities, we can see that the POC Zine Project’s digital space as creating meaningful, and more physical. Returning to the POC Zine Project’s digital space as creating the possibility for positive change. If at anything, it seems to be even more in tune to zine culture’s irreverent pirating of means of production to produce something more meaningful, and more physical. Returning to the POC Zine Project’s digital space as creating Piepmeier’s vision of embodied communities, we can see that the POC Zine Project succeeds in securing that space of human interaction through materiality.

The process of acquiring, cataloging, and allowing zines open for view at a research institution dramatically changes the audience envisioned by any zine creator. This of course weighs heavily on any good librarian's mind. Speaking directly about their zine collection, Kelly Wooten has written extensively about how to steward the zine collection at the Duke Library so that the writers and creators of the zine collections do not simply become consumed for an academic audience (Wooten, library.duke.edu). In a post on the Rubenstein library website, Wooten argues that Duke purposely obscures some bibliographic information about the zines in their collection because of the myriad complications related to permission, copyright, and privacy. Respecting any zine creator’s request to have their zines taken down or removed from their institution is protocol, since their zines are almost always never intended to be put in an archive. Furthermore, Wooten argues that to digitize zines a reader would “miss out on the physical experience, an aspect that is even more important as the medium of communication has shifted to the electronic” (Wooten).

That being said, there are physical limitations to any object on view at the Rubenstein Library, where all archived zines go to be read. The process of requesting the containing box of Evolution of a Race Riot and viewing it at a sterile space severely limit a reader’s physical interaction with a text. Various rules are in place to keep zines from becoming disorganized. For example, one cannot take more than one zine out of a box at a time. All zines must be read with its spine on the table (thus taking the fun out of holding up the LA Weekly spread on page 47-8), and only within the space of the Rubenstein library. You cannot borrow the zine or take it home with you; all interactions must take place in a sterile, quiet space (“Using the Reading Room”, library.duke.edu).

The POC Zine Project, on the other hand, lies on the other side of the sharing spectrum. As an open blog that regularly shares resources, digital scans of zines, and spotlights for other zinesters of color, the POC Zine Project is virtually available to anyone who looks for it. Both the digital edition and the blog itself are hosted on proprietary content (issuu.com and tumblr.com, respectively), but for very specific reasons. issuu.com is a very popular website that allows viewers online to host PDFs for free, and tumblr.com is a blogging tool that has found a following among zinesters of the digital age for its ability to easily share art, text, and videos.

The banner at the very top of the POC Zine Project very clearly states the goals of the organization: “MAKING ZINES BY PEOPLE OF COLOR EASY TO FIND, DISTRIBUTE, AND SHARE. ACTIVISM AND COMMUNITY THROUGH MATERIALITY” (Poczineproject.tumblr.com). This is a space committed to the POC zine’s materiality, its community, and through them, the possibility for positive change. If at anything, it seems to be even more in tune to zine culture's irreverent pirating of means of production to produce something more meaningful, and more physical. Returning to the POC Zine Project’s digital space as creating Piepmeier’s vision of embodied communities, we can see that the POC Zine Project succeeds in securing that space of human interaction through materiality.

WHAT ARE YOU?
One last example I’d like to linger on is the way in which the POC Zine Project’s particular
digitization uncovered new meanings within the original space of the zine. This can be found
on pages 58-9 of the POC Zine Project edition, which contains another ill-matched spread.
The written selection is Bianca Ortiz’ zine Hey Mexican!, in which the author talks about her
mixed-race identity as half white and half Mexican. In the print edition the first page of the
piece appears like this:

And yet in the digitization, the spread’s reconfiguration creates a new meaning, with the
words “what / are /you?” popping out of the page in heavily outlined font, a grabbing uni-

But between each word of the big question comes the author’s personal history floating in
small font between those lines:

But I am this person I am la campesina de la tierra. This is the me who knows that to care
for only yrself is a waste, who believes in the spirit and soul, who respects the deities of the
Sun, Moon, Earth, Water, Plants and Creatures. This is the me who can talk to the dead in
dreams and always remembers the Sun is in the sky. Inside of me I know there is a garden, a
Sun, Moon, Earth, Water, Plants and Creatures. This is the me who can talk to the dead in
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Against her constant battle of being labeled as a "gringa, wetback, mestiza," Ortiz reminds herself what she really is: a peasant of the earth, one who "remembers the Sun in the sky." (Evolution of a Race Riot, 58) This turn to the earth as a land still untouched by "the land of strangers and stupid bullshit" known as America is where Ortiz' allegiances lie. Though she will always be interrogated about her race, for two pages Ortiz is allowed to complicate the duality that inevitably lies behind the question "What are you?" (which in actuality is, are you American or something else?) to a multiplicity of identities beyond racial constructs.

As we’ve now seen, Evolution of a Race Riot is a slippery creature, one that actively works against modern book conventions and welcomes mutations of the text. Intended for a smaller circulation, zines must be analyzed by both its materiality and its location (whether it be placed in an academic institution like Duke University or online via Tumblr). Thoughout this essay, I’ve taken McKenzie’s theories of new bibliography to heart, insofar as considering the "the human motives and interactions which texts involve at every stage of their production, transmission, and consumption" (McKenzie 15). In the evolution of Ortiz’ piece, we stumble upon a human motivation that was hidden—albeit always present—within the text. This is only one of the dozens of unique narratives in Evolution of a Race Riot that carries the hopes, dreams, and motivations of people of color in the punk scene.

To conclude this comparative archeology, I will end with what I think epitomizes Evolution of a Race Riot as a zine that reconfigures the conventions of race discussions in books and on the internet. In Nguyen's own words:

"this is about finding the language & vocabulary to describe the condition of belonging to these multiple, provisional & sometimes contradictory social spaces, communities, & identifications –racial, ethnic, cultural, musical, religious, lingual, political, sexual, etc. – and how we negotiate the gaps, friction, etc. this is about wanting to create new spaces." (Evolution of a Race Riot, 82)

NOTES

[1] A note on the publishing date: first published in 1997, at least two versions of the zine exist. The editions I will be comparing are both from 1998.


[3] According to Kirschenbaum, "Data remanence is also a function of the physical properties of storage media and the difficulty of reversing or obscuring what are tangible interventions in a physical medium" (Mechanisms 60).

WORKS CITED


