Grrrl Zine Networks: Re-Composing Spaces of Authority, Gender, and Culture

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> [Zines] are little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design. . . . In zines, everyday oddballs [are] speaking plainly about themselves and our society with an honest sincerity, a revealing intimacy, and a healthy "fuck you" to sanctioned authority—for no money and no recognition, writing for an audience of like-minded misfits.
>
> —Stephen Duncombe

> From the Revolutionary rabble-rousing of Thomas Paine's pamphlets, to the Unabomber manifesto, Do-It-Yourself publication is as American as Mom's homemade pipe bomb.
>
> —Ann Magnuson

A wide range of workplace and civic writing communities have garnered the attention of many composition scholars and teachers, yet the everyday literate activities of a growing do-it-yourself (DIY) zine network have remained relatively unaddressed in the various realms of academic inquiry.[1] There may be many reasons for this omission, not the least of which is the decidedly nonacademic layout, style, grammar, tone, and content of the zine genre as well as its history in American counterculture. However, if we as teachers and researchers of writing wish to continue situating academic literacies within the larger framework of cultural production and pedagogy, the zine movement and its most recent progeny—what is known as the riot grrrl zine scene—have much to teach us about the sites, practices, politics, and economies of writing. As this article will demonstrate, grrrl zine editors are collectively engaged in forms of writing and writing instruction that challenge both dominant notions of the author as an individualized, bodiless space and notions of feminism as primarily an adult political project.[2]

By appropriating the political tactics and writing practices of both the punk zine scene and the larger feminist movement, the grrrl zine network

is creating new spaces for postfeminist authorship—a term I use cautiously given its popular "post-revolutionary" and anti-feminist connotations. As I will later explain, these new authorial positions (and positions of authority) are not necessarily confined to biological age or even to a particular generation but are informed aesthetically and politically by the historical events and ideological movements of the late 1980s and 1990s. Postfeminism, as I use the term here, does not entail a rejection of second-wave feminism, nor does it foreclose the promises of this earlier movement; instead, it represents an adjustment by grrrl zinesters of these earlier feminist principles, including the very privileging of gender as an universal category. As Ednie Garrison states in her study of grrrl (sub)cultures, "The shift from speaking about 'women' as a unified subject to a recognition that women are not all the same, nor should they be, is something most feminists, young and not as young, take for granted in the 1990s" (145). This recognition is not simply a generational or recent phenomenon, but builds on longstanding efforts in feminism to acknowledge racial, class, sexual, and cultural difference.

Situating the grrrl author as a postfeminist author politicizes and historicizes her newly adopted stances, styles, technologies, and practices of writing. We may, therefore, look to this contemporary grrrl zine network for more than just new sites of authorship; we may also understand these young and not so young women as rhetoricians engaged in the important political processes of re-envisioning and revising "feminism" and "girlhood" in the contemporary United States. Before discussing some of the more specific transgressive or postfeminist writing sites, practices, and economies, however, I want to briefly situate the grrrl zine's formation within the context of grassroots, countercultural publication, a context that is often at odds with larger, more mainstream ideological and political movements such as feminism.

Zine Scene: A Site of Extracurricular Writing

With its roots in the small press ("lilmag") and fan magazine communities of the 1950s and 1960s, the contemporary zine scene comprises a significant extracurricular site of reading and writing pedagogy, where editors, writers, and readers learn the critical practices of countercultural production and distribution outside of formal institutional settings. Composed of "rants" against the homogenizing effects of mass culture and popular media, zines forego the grammar, layout, content, and distribution methods of conventional publication. Most of them originally appeared on "one sheet of legal-sized paper copied on both sides and

folded three times, trimmed and stapled to make a 16–page 'mini' zine" (Vale 4).

According to Stephen Duncombe, the typical zine begins with a "personalized editorial," moves to "a couple of opinionated essays or 'rants,'" and concludes with reviews. Poems, interviews, drawings, comics, stories, solicited letters from friends, and reprints from the mass media are also scattered throughout (Duncombe 10). Zinesters are notorious for mixing genres and strategically combining personal stories, fiction, rants, poetry, and essays, which are practices that are facilitated by photocopiers and cut-and-paste desktop publishing programs (see Green and Taormino xi). Undoubtedly, the zine tradition has undergone a great deal of "mainstreaming" in the last few decades, with slick cyberzines now dedicated to the arts of browsing and buying online products. However, this so-called co-optation of the zine genre seems to have occurred just as more women and girls became involved in online and offline zine writing.

In critical response to the male-dominated punk zine scenes of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, the grrrl zine movement has constructed a space for young women to act as writers, designers, artists, and Web designers. They have challenged not only the gendered hierarchies of alternative writing cultures, but also the exclusionary sites and practices of mainstream authorship. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the riot grrrl "rants" against dominant notions and images of girlhood and femininity first appeared in the punk and grunge music subcultures of Olympia, Washington and Washington D.C. As Emma of *Riot Grrrl 5* explains, "Riot Grrrl is about *not* being the girlfriend of the band and *not* being the daughter of the feminist. We're tired of being written out—out of history, out of the 'scene,' out of our bodies. . . . For this reason we have created our zine and scene" (qtd. in Duncombe 66). Many grrrl zinesters, such as Mimi Nguyen, began their writing careers in response to sexism in the punk music and zine scene. In a widely reprinted editorial written for *MaximumRocknRoll*, Nguyen argues that a column by Rev. Norb on Asian women's sexuality is a "racist fetishization of a fragmented female body" and is "ideologically comparable to the imperial European fascination with the 'Hottentot Venus.'" Nguyen's editorial, along with a series of other letters written by women musicians, inspired a string of stories (and later entire zines) about the role of women in the punk movement.

Appropriating the term "girl"—much in the same way punks had appropriated the term "loser"—riot grrrl, with its triple *r* growl, redeploys

the term to serve both as a critique of dominant and punk girl images and as an alternative collective identity for young women writers. The following riot grrrl "call-out" below testifies to the use of writing as a tactic for critical or alternative subject formation outside both the male punk scene and the mainstream feminist movement. Here, zinesters create a radical grrrl self without rules, labels, or limitations, a grrrl who "needs to make some noise":

> GRRRL PoWeR = GRRRL LoVe =
> ReSpEcT = EnCoUrAgEmEnT =
> StRoNg SeLf ImAgE =
> DeSiRe tO TeAr DoWn tHe RuLeS =
> GRRRL PoWeR =
> R E V O L U T I O N.
>
> This is a page for the grrrl in every female out there who needs to MaKe SoMe NoIsE!! We are here to listen to one another and define the meaning of "Girl Power" and I'm not talkin' about the Spice Girls!!
>
> GRRRL PoWeR iS:
>
> feeling okay about being a girl: Be proud! We ROCK!
>
> promoting girl love and friendship: A kind of sisterhood. Don't talk to me about cliques or sororities; in this clique there are no rules, no certain way to be, and we don't leave anyone out!
>
> encouraging one another: Telling each other it's cool to be who they are and let them express themselves!
>
> teaching: girls, boys, men, women, old or young about grrrl issues things that affect each one of us (equality, individualization, the right to speak your mind and let your thoughts run free).
>
> respecting each other: to realize the individuality of every girl on this planet, not to divide people into groups like race, religion, ethics, etc., to look down upon derogatory names and phrases against girls and anyone else. ("Riot Grrrls")

As this manifesto indicates, the postfeminist revolution is founded on difference, individuality, and a continuing effort to define the loose cultural and political spaces of grrrl power and sisterhood. Although riot grrrl manifestoes like this one were originally distributed via grassroots

networks (for example, independent bookstores, reading groups, rock concerts, and community centers), many are now created and dispensed online for a larger, more diffuse mass audience. Rhetorically speaking, the grrrl zine movement—with its changing spaces, purposes, imagined audiences, contents, and political effects—offers us a glimpse at the shifting contours of contemporary authorship and countercultural production. While compositionists have written astutely about the zine genre's promise for noncanonical reading and writing in the classroom, few have seriously explored what zines, particularly riot grrrl zines, tell us rhetorically about acts of writing in complex political and cultural contexts.[3]

As writers and designers working collectively to counter dominant cultural images of adolescence and girlhood, grrrl zine culture comprises yet another significant site of what may be called "extracurricular" writing instruction, defined by Anne Ruggles Gere in another context as a place where writers learn how to produce and distribute texts outside of formal educational settings (see "Kitchen" 80). Like the writing groups documented by Gere in *Intimate Practices*, grrrl zine networks are gendered sites of cultural production and pedagogy in critical relation to more bureaucratized high school and college writing classrooms. The impulse to inscribe an alternative girl self—or rather an alternative girl space outside more formal writing environments (where one can "say what you want to say and not be afraid")—testifies to the importance of writing as a site of (counter)cultural pedagogy. As Linda Brodkey argues, it is this highly rhetorical "turn" to writing that we wish to replicate in our classrooms (140).

In what follows, I provide a rhetorical mapping of grrrl zines as sites of cultural production and pedagogy, where the very spaces, practices, economies, and politics of (feminist) authorship are in dispute. Although necessarily brief and partial, this mapping highlights the extent to which zine writers and Web designers have reterritorialized grrrl identities as sources of political and social authorship and agency. The grrrl zine scene has offered many young women ways to reconceive their participation in the public sphere not just as consumers but also as producers and writers of culture. Furthermore, the grrrl zine has also been a means for young women to take up authorial positions outside the academy's often paternalistic discourses of student need and "banking" approaches to literacy education.[4]

In many writing classrooms, we have already begun to recognize how traditional notions of literacy, authorship, and the text marginalize viable alternative forms of writing and communication. Bruce Horner claims

that imagining authorship as a position occupied by individuals distinct from social and historical pressures can lead us to deem certain kinds of literacies "marginal" (505). Dominant notions of what constitutes work, writing, and authorship, according to Horner, "blind us (and others) to the kind of cultural work . . . accomplished in the writing and reading in which we and our students engage" (522). Aware of the important political and cultural stakes, many writing teachers place less focus on texts and products and grant more attention to the social conditions and practices that mark the space of "authorship." The space of the grrrl author, for example, is marked by the rhetorical desire to network young women who are isolated in homes, high schools, and colleges, and provide them with alternative literacies (tools and knowledges) for self-expression and solidarity.

As the following discussion demonstrates, the struggle over grrrl authorship is an embodied one that is often articulated at the site of the traumatized, adolescent female body. This rearticulation, like most forms of writing, is not without its significant economic and political effects. Especially as more young women choose to publish their zines in online environments, the lines between corporate sponsorship, popular culture, and (post)feminist political action have become increasingly difficult to trace. Whether it is in their initial encroachments on the boy-centric punk zine scene or in their infiltration of a mostly male World Wide Web, grrrl writers and designers teach us that authorship is not a fixed or completely predetermined category but a site of collective struggle and interactivity.

The Grrrl Writer and Embodied Authorship

> It's amazing that all these young (mostly white) women have decided to redesign the whole world according to the architecture of their private-made-public traumas and promises of "girl love" wish-fulfillment. Riot Grrrl is amazing in so many ways: as confrontation, as education, as performance, as aesthetic, as support, as theory, as practice, etc.
>
> —Mimi Nguyen

> You don't need to be a punk.
> You don't need our permission.
> There are no rules.
> No leader.
> Every girl is a riot grrrl.
>
> —"Riot Grrrls"

The "grrrls want to riot too" slogans of the early riot grrrl zine movement opened up room for many young women writers (mostly white and middle class) in the male-dominated world of DIY publication. Building on the larger zine scene's ethos of shared difference and communitarian anarchy, grrrl editors began composing an embodied, postfeminist collective identity grounded in the "private" traumas of rape, incest, and eating disorders, as well as the "public" issues of job discrimination, sexual harassment, and reproductive rights. Almost every riot grrrl zine in the early 1990s contained a poem or story about sexual abuse by a male friend or family member; rants about self-image, including the mass media images of women; and manifestoes explaining what a riot grrrl is and her place in the world.

According to Duncombe, the process of "sharing their stories with [each] other and pointing their fingers at the accused" allowed these young women to "express their rage, relieve their shame, and overcome the isolation that accompanies such an experience" (67). In turning to zine writing and publishing, however, grrrls not only expressed rage, they also radically altered the places and subjects of authorship, resituating them on the conflicted discursive and material sites of the traumatized girl body. The grrrl body, the girl writer, like any other authorial position, is a site of gender, racial, and sexual struggle. In the second issue of her famous riot grrrl zine, *Bikini Kill*, Kathleen Hanna describes the grrrl writer and performer as a grotesque mixture of gender and sexual contradiction:

> to be a stripper who is also a feminist, to be an abused child holding a microphone screaming all those things that were promised, in one way or another, "I won't tell." these are contradictions I have lived. they exist, these contradictions cuz I exist. . . . because I live in a world that hates women and I am one . . . who is struggling desperately not to hate myself and my best girlfriends, my whole life is constantly felt by me as a contradiction. in order for me to exist I must believe that two contradictory things can exist in the same space. this is not a choice I make, it just is.

In Hanna's case, the traumatized grrrl body, with its contradictory and tabooed functions, becomes a performative site of writing and collective space-making. The scenes of authorship are displaced onto "out of place" bodies that bulge, bleed, and ooze over the boundaries of an appropriate and normalized white, middle-class femininity and constitute a community of young women mutually appreciative of a contradictory body out of control. Historically, girl groups have challenged the patriarchal

control of public space, along with its privileged authorial positions, by articulating and performing a grotesque female body and its disharmonious representations (for example, its very physicality and sexuality) that mark its territory. This includes affirming through narratives and images of bodily behavior and functions deemed private and threatening to the "disembodied" realms of male-dominated publics and cultures (see Campbell 16).

The difficulties associated with rearticulating the grrrl body as a site for pleasure and resistance are the subject of many zine columns and rants. For example, Tammy Rae Carland writes, "I've been thinking about how I think about my body. Or rather how I don't think about my body. About how I was taught not to consider my body as a site for pleasure and/or resistance. It was the place where I stored memory and secrets, and it was the thing that attracted unwanted attention. In other words, it was an awkward container" (46). Carland's observations suggest the political and social stakes in appropriating the adolescent, female body as a forum for expression and solidarity. School literacies rarely provide the tools and knowledges for constructing this type of forum, especially as it relates to violence and sexuality. In high school and university writing courses, for example, many women are met with fear or confusion when they attempt to articulate their experiences of bodily trauma. For example, Michelle Payne discusses the anxieties that teachers experience when confronted with "personal" student essays on violence in relation to the female body. This kind of writing, argues Payne, "challenges our purposes, our roles, and our power as teachers. . . . Subjects such as abuse, suicide, death, and divorce are perceived as more closely connected to a private, more vulnerable sense of self, a self that some believe does not belong in a writing class" (xvii-xviii). Although many grrrl editors have spent many hours writing and reading in university classrooms, they have chosen the zine scene and not the academy as their vehicle for change. For them, the grrrl body is a textual body (an authorial position) marginalized by the dominant discourses of the university. As Payne claims, this marginalization is partly due to continued cultural anxiety about the female body as well as by adult anxiety about the adolescent body, which is often translated in terms of disruption, trauma, change, and violence.

Playing on this anxiety, writers such as Hanna irreverently invert the common understanding of white, middle-class female adolescence in order to create an alternative grrrl aesthetic and politic. The sexually knowledgeable, "out of control" female adolescent asserted by *Bikini Kill* and other grrrl zines appropriates and deconstructs the ubiquitous virgin/

whore figure of adolescence, producing what has been described as the "kitten-with-whip grrrl aesthetic" (Burana 76). This grrrl aesthetic draws on two powerful images of cultural consumption—the hyperfeminine "Hello Kitty" iconography associated with the tools of school literacy (perfumed erasers, pencils, backpacks, and carrying cases) and the hypersexual, dominatrix iconography associated with whips, weapons, and the leather-clad Tank Girl. Refiguring these images allows zinesters to construct a new aesthetic and a new forum for grrrl solidarity that together challenge the gendered power relations associated with zine writing and (counter)cultural production. The kitten-with-whip aesthetic and ethos, however, do not work to desexualize the grrrl writer and her audiences; rather, they seek to create what Mary Ann Doane calls in a different context a "terrain of fantasy" where oppressive representations of girls and women are playfully denaturalized (180). In many ways, writing and reading grrrl zines is another instance of feminist camp or gender parody, defined by Pamela Robertson as "a critical tool and a promising means of initiating change in sex and gender roles" (10). Through text and images, grrrl editors playfully make stylized femininity fantastic and literally incredible (see Figures 1, 2, and 3). The grotesque

Figure 1: Riot Grrrl Cover Art

Figure 2: *ChickClick Chica* by Tiffany Spencer

morphing of the cute, mouthless Hello Kitty style with a screaming punk rock and S/M iconography demonstrates the reader/user's recognition and misrecognition of herself in these stereotypical images (see *Chickclick*; *Hellfire*; and Chan, "Riot").

The grrrl writer's conflicted kitten-with-whip identity is informed not only by contradictory notions of gender and adolescence, but also by complicated and intersecting discourses of class, race, and nationality.

Figure 3: *Bad Girls Play with Fire*

Grrrl solidarity is an exclusionary project, operated by young women with the necessary leisure time and resources. And, as previously stated, it is a project that centers on a primarily white, middle-class femininity. Nguyen, creator of *Slant*, rants against the network's racism: "As a resident racial agitator, I'm cast in the role of an 'outsider' rocking the boat. Past discussions of race issues have been cut short as girls and women bemoaned to 'fighting' as bad for grrrl unity, meaning, racial difference is bad for grrrl unity" ("White"). Although Nguyen and others construct a mostly white zine network, in many instances grrrl editors identify as "mixed race" or "women of color" and highlight those contradictions that inform overlapping racial, national, and sexual identities. Sabrina Sandata of *Bamboo Girl* began her zine in early 1995 because she "couldn't find anything to read on girls like me, a mutt (Filipina/Spanish/Irish/Scottish/a little Chinese) who was in-your-face about issues within the hardcore/punk and/or queer communities." For

Sandata, the turn to writing involved a movement toward those things that were "'not nice for girls to be thinking,' especially for 'a nice little *Asian* girl'" (98). More than just countering mainstream white images of girls and women, however, Sandata's and Nguyen's work highlights the fragmented nature of American "girlhood" and underscores the idea that the girl self is always under construction and is resistant to easily identifiable gender and race categories.

Of course, not everyone can easily comprehend the fragmented identities of the grrrl zine movement. As I suggested earlier, its imagined and intended audiences are not necessarily academic nor even political. In fact, most of the rants, letters, and reviews seem rather solipsistic. Zinester Leah Lilith Albrecht-Samarasinha's use of a personalized confessional discourse is common: "In *Sticks and Stones*, I published the rants about abuse in my family that I'd been writing in my journal since I'd got the hell out, but had never even shown my close friends" (3). For Albrecht-Samarasinha, zines represent "homemade productions from other crazy girls that told me I was not crazy or horrible, a freak isolated from all the world" (3). The effects of this "homemade" network, however, have been social as well as personal, as many young women have begun to understand themselves as writers and participants in a significant, alternative public sphere. Similar to Nancy Fraser's concept of "subaltern counterpublics," zines such as *Bikini Kill* serve a dual private and public function. The zine's rant spaces, on the one hand, offers places away from oppressive home, school, and work environments where young women can confess, receive support, and regroup (Fraser 123). On the other hand, they constitute a "training ground" for cultural and political activities directed toward wider publics (see Fraser 114). The dialectic between these two functions—private enclave and public training ground—gives these grrrl counterpublics their emancipatory potential within the stratified societies of both mass and alternative cultures.

The Grrrl Zine Scene and Networked Authorship

Piecing together the grrrl counterpublic is less an act of authorship in the conventional sense than an act of critical editorship. Grrrl zinesters selectively cut and paste the styles and genres of popular and alternative cultures and engage in writing as an intrinsically networked process of both consumption and production. The assumption of any writing subject position entails inheriting a whole set of social and economic practices and conditions that define the very parameters of "authorship" in that

community. Likewise, becoming a grrrl writer requires the acquisition and internalization of the practices and codes of the "private-made-public" grrrl network. These practices include methods of critical pastiche inherited from the world of countercultural zine publishing, along with forms of political and cultural resistance borrowed from the more established feminist movements.

Committed in part to punk principles of anarchy, the grrrl movement tapped into the grassroots production and distribution practices of a larger zine and amateur press scene that historically have resisted mainstream and academic notions of authorship as ownership. With lengthy "reader letters" sections and magazine cut-outs, grrrl zines often work to confound easy reader/writer and copyright distinctions. And although many may develop a strong sense of individual voice, most grrrl writers use the resources of typeface, layout, and writing style to demonstrate multiple contributions. Furthermore, extensive attention to letters and reviews makes grrrl zine writing less about individual creative expression (though there is emphasis on that) and more about providing a network or forum for writers, artists, and musicians on the fringes of mainstream culture. Zine production and circulation practices (for example, cutting and pasting found media images, handwriting rants and manifestoes, photocopying, folding, stapling, and mailing with reusable stamps) follow what Michel de Certeau calls a "re-use" or "reappropriation" of mainstream marketing structures. With the decline in cost of personal computers and the influx of desktop publishing tools into schools and workplaces, for example, many grrrl zinesters "liberate" computer and copier time for their own countercultural work. As de Certeau argues in another context, they attempt to "deflect the technocratic functioning of the mainstream and popular presses by means of a multitude of tactics" and employ a rhetorically savvy, context-specific, makeshift creativity associated with "groups caught in the nets of discipline" (xv).

Makeshift grrrl writing styles and practices revel in anti-discipline and the improper. Zinester Pagan Kennedy's approach is typical: "Almost instinctively I broke every rule of respectable fiction. I published my own work (for serious literary types, self-publishing is considered a sign of rank amateurism). I drew pictures. I wrote unpolished sentences and hardly went back to revise" (9). This impropriety stands in direct opposition to the ethics and values of another writing scene—the university classroom. While university writing classrooms often become what Brodkey calls "middle-class holding pens," where students learn to write well-formed and well-mannered essays displaying their "knowledge of

and fealty to middle-class values," the grrrl network places value and worth on resistance to these middle-class values, especially where they concern the reproduction of white, middle-class femininity (135). Writing for many of these young women demands the reappropriation of the tools and practices of school literacy in order to highlight codes of femininity. According to Amanda, cofounder of a West Coast teenage feminist collective, the value of grrrl zines is their ability to break the rules of both conventional essay writing and traditional femininity: "There are so many things that we [young women] are not allowed to say; if we only just fucking screamed them and made people hear them, then it would become okay." Zinester Toad explains that ranting is "taking the ugliest detail and amplifying it 500 times—that way everybody gets used to it" (see Vale 48).

Like its style and tone, the distribution methods associated with grrrl zine publishing are networked, rhetorical practices that form an integral part of the overall writing process. Circulation counts, for example, are scaled to maintain a sense of "personal contact" with readers, a strategy illustrating the high value zinesters place on social capital over economic profit (Duncombe 12). Slow production time and erratic release dates also illustrate that the primary reward for writing is not necessarily monetary profit (though economics are important), but entry into the world of misfits and independent grrrl publishers. Within the zine scene, as in most literary writing environments, there is what Pierre Bourdieu calls a homologous connection between symbolic and material capital. Similar to the avant-garde publisher profiled by Bourdieu, the grrrl zine editor insists on more direct contact with writers, readers, and the work; thus, she is able to confront the financial risks "by investing . . . in undertakings which can, at best, bring only symbolic profits." As Bourdieu points out in another context, an editor makes this investment, however, "only on condition that he [or she] fully recognizes the specific stakes of the field of production and . . . pursues the sole specific profit awarded by the field, at least in the short term, i.e. 'renown' and the corresponding 'intellectual authority'" (100). In the case of the contemporary grrrl zine scene, this symbolic capital or "renown" comes in the form of citation (inclusion in other zines and catalogues) and a wide but controlled, hand-to-hand distribution. All of this works toward the final "pay-off": membership in the network.

Membership in the grrrl network depends partly on the articulation and enactment of what zinesters call "girl love," the principles of which are passed on in lists and manifestoes intended to unify as well as exclude:

> Girl Love is . . . making space where women/girls feel unthreatened and unintimidated . . . talking about abuse and rape when no one else will listen . . . learning and teaching each other how to do stuff and be active . . . screaming in public . . . knowing that you are connected to all girls and the way you view yourself is related to their self-image as well . . . sharing resources with other girls . . . helping each other see our beauty and build our own culture around what we see . . . refusing to let companies prey on our insecurities in order to get our money . . . trying to understand how oppression and the status quo work and how we fit into it . . . reclaiming our customs and rituals (hanging out in the bathroom, slumber parties, shopping, the color pink, whatever we fucking want). (Chan, "Girl")

In a society where cultural and economic capital depends on "networks of contacts and the information, norms, and values filtered through them," these grrrl writers seem cognizant of the economic and symbolic power of reclaiming the exclusive rituals of middle-class, suburban girlhood (Hanson and Pratt 7).

The cultural hierarchies associated with these rituals are expressed in the following passage from the grrrl zine *doris*. Here Cindy O. demonstrates a recognition of the economies of writing and distribution and their relationship to the codes and practices of "girl love":

> i was on the bart train the other day and there were these four girls, high school girls. three of them looked just like TV, long hair that they would brush back with their fingers. all four had practiced facial expressions, small noses, lines drawn around their eyes. but one girl, she was too tall and gangly and it looked like she just got her braces off, the way she kept feeling her teeth with her tongue. her backpack had paintings of suns and moons and flowers that you could tell she painted on there, and you could tell her friends made fun of it behind her back. she was the one i watched. her backpack was unzipped part way and i snuck doris number one in, number one, full of my secrets. i couldn't hand it to her because i knew she wouldn't take it, not with her friends watching. i snuck it into her life for her to find later, alone, in her bedroom. the people on the train who saw me do it glared at me, mean and suspicious, like i'd stolen something from that girl, and maybe i had. i got off at the next stop. (71)

The passage illustrates, among other things, how methods of grrrl zine distribution depend on the tracing of young women's routes through the city and the profiling of those who look like they belong. This kind of distribution or exchange, as Cindy O. indicates, comes with its own set of cultural and economic gains and losses. Writing and reading grrrl zines implies travel into new forms of affiliation, as well as exclusion, and the

adoption of values and beliefs resistant to yet dependent on the TV world of mainstream girlhood.

These forms of affiliation have been further complicated by the grrrls' movement online. Although the Web has allowed many more young women access to network literacies, the relatively anti-commercial grrrl zine scene must now contend with the corporate distribution and marketing structures associated with Web writing environments. Internet and Web technologies are changing the practices and economies of most writing contexts, and the online grrrl network is no exception. The struggles over online grrrl authorship and sponsorship illustrate many of the changes in larger, more established writing communities inside and outside the academy.

Online Grrrl Writing Networks: The Problematics of Sponsorship

When grrrl zinesters became Web-mistresses in the middle to late 1990s, the "revolution grrrlie-style" rhetorics of the print zine movement acquired different forums and formats in their shift to online environments. Now mediated by high-speed computer networks, the online grrrl zine scene highlights many of the limitations and promises of hypertext writing and Web contexts for progressive political practice. Compositionists have celebrated the disruptive potential of hypertext writing, claiming that hypertext's multivocality and nonlinear format challenges traditional academic discourse, while many researchers have also noted its failure to pose truly radical textual interventions.[5] In their article on the relationship between hypertext theory and feminist praxis, Donna LeCourt and Luann Barnes reassess the ability of hypertext to enact a feminist textual intervention into the conventional, logocentric discourses of the academy. Their conclusion emphasizes hypertext's potential for "speaking the multiple subject," while at the same time noting its inability to transcend particular discursive contexts (66). Although their focus is primarily on more localized, academic contexts, LeCourt and Barnes' critique could also extend to the larger technological and commercial contexts of hypertext writing. Indeed, as many grrrl zine editors have discovered, writing on the Web is necessarily embedded in the discursive and material contexts of corporate sponsorship.

The globalized production and distribution technologies of Web writing have challenged the DIY and coalition-building practices of the riot grrrl movement and diffused their ongoing efforts to build separate grrrl spaces and readerships. The context of the Web is, as we know, a place where corporations increasingly mediate the production, distribu-

tion, and reception of even the most radical forms of critical literacy. And although online zines still hold promise for young women writers and artists as sites for social critique and change, it is becoming increasingly difficult to discern who exactly sponsors or regulates these newly formed sites of critical literacy.

A simple Web search for grrrl zines and groups, for example, reveals an ongoing dispute among grrrl editors, Web development companies, and media corporations over the virtual and material domains of grrrl power. Most search engines will locate site categories relating to riot grrrl conventions and feminist groups. While many sites situate grrrl identities and practices within the more anti-commercial, not-for-profit riot grrrl zine movement, other sites linked to the "grrrl" keyword construct a vastly different discursive terrain. If you type in "grrl," categories referring to women and computing, shopping, sports, and e-zine production appear. One such site, *Planet Grrl*, claims,

> We try to encourage, support, befriend, teach, respect and recognise other women and grrls online regardless of race, religion, political standpoint, age, orientation, employment status or anything else. Promote individuality and freedom of expression and opinion through new media. Have a sense of humour and laugh at ourselves and the rest of the world. Enjoy being a grrl. Have some fun!!
>
> ... We're called PlanetGrrl because it was one of the few grrl domains not taken by a porn site or the ChickClick gals. It means Nuthin. Really. Except it's for Grrls all over this planet.

Unlike their print zine colleagues, Cybergrrl Alison Gianotto and Riotgrrl Nikki Giovanni seem more committed to making a name in the commercial end of technology as professional writers, Web designers, or computer technicians. This becomes more possible as the grrl signature—with its tough, edgy connotations—assumes cultural currency in these sectors. "It's interesting how the concept of 'grrrl/grrl' has morphed and changed," notes *Bikini Kill* contributor, Kristy Chan. She continues, "There are a lot of places most feminist women I know wouldn't want to be associated with—you know, the sites that are like Cosmopolitan girls in tough-girl gear yet still conveniently kissing the Man's ass—but many others that offer differing views that have enlightened and broadened the meaning of being a young and powerful woman" ("Riot"). Although the number of *r*'s may signal different writer identities and political agendas, in the context of the Web, the placement of the *r*'s also indicates ownership over domain space, thus making the connections between

authorship and economic capital more explicit. Resembling the trademarks or copyrights of print culture, domain names such as "riotgrrrl" are for sale. Once claimed or bought, the domain becomes a restricted area, leading to the influx of "girl" derivatives listed above.

Geekgirl zine editor Rosie Cross, for example, fought to no avail in 1997 to protect her trademarked grrrl territory from Web entrepreneurs, who, according to Cross, were capitalizing on her zine's popularity (Salkowski). More likely, they are capitalizing on the wider significance of the geekgirl writer identity. Entrepreneur Helana Peterson took on the name "geekgrrl" because she was looking for something "aggressive." She explains, "The industry I'm involved [with] is male dominated, and I didn't want to have some flippidy foo name." To counter these attempts at appropriation, Cross called on the part of the DIY zine ethic that privileges originality: "I have a trademark, reputation and have spent considerable money protecting my name, identity and integrity. . . . The world knows I am the original, the only, one true geekgirl" (see Salkowski).

Joe Salkowski's "Geekgirl Grudge Match" highlights a more general debate over the sites of authorship on the Internet. Authoring a protected or resistant space of one's own has become problematic not only in terms of domain ownership but also in relation to the very interactivity of online writing environments. The complexity and mutability of Web-page production and reception processes, in which authorship is established through inter-networked travel, makes it impossible to trace unmediated lines of grrrl or feminist resistance. *Geekgirl*, for example, is a highly interactive site; as such it dissolves the traditional boundaries of authorship and ownership associated with writing and design. Following the mixed formats of the print zine genre, many *geekgirl* articles do not carry bylines, just Web addresses, and the ones that do cite authorship are recycled from books, Web sites, and print zines. In fact, most online zine articles are light on content and heavy on links or directories that serve to mark online networks. Thus, they often resemble what Jay Bolter has called, in another context, "topographic" writing, a "writing *with* places" as distinct from the writing of a place (25).

Buried under sporadic editorial content, however, are indications of *geekgirl's* growing connections to institutional lines of distribution or sponsorship. More mainstream "adult" organizations are recognizing and appropriating *geekgirl* as both a cultural and pedagogical site. The New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York, for example, featured *geekgirl* in its "alt.youth.media" exhibition, which explored video and

media works intended for youth audiences. The Museum of Victoria in Australia also integrated the site into its traveling exhibition on Internet literacy called "cyberzone," which allowed thousands of "unconnected" people (mainly youth) to access *geekgirl's* resources. As people log onto *geekgirl* from various public and private sites and contexts, the lines between cultural and economic capital begin to blur. How, for example, are the patrons at the New Museum of Contemporary Art reading or viewing *geekgirl*? As part of a larger political project or as an individual design portfolio or both? *Geekgirl's* acknowledgment pages identify funds from organizations as diverse as the Australian Film Commission, the University of South Wales, and "the grrrls at Microsoft." It therefore becomes impracticable to identify who or what at any given time *geekgirl* is mediating. Are the articles and images mediating between grrrls and the Internet "boy's club"? Or between nonprofit government agencies and their technologically illiterate citizens? Questions such as these—questions regarding the political and cultural agency of writers and writing communities—are symptomatic of late capitalist economies, where the boundaries between micro-media and mass media and global industries and local businesses are in flux. Thus, distinctions between grassroots writing communities and more established institutional and commercial ones now tend to obscure more than they explain.

Not all grrrl editors have been comfortable with the commercial (or for that matter interactive) readership of Web writing space. Their discomfort resembles that of many writers first confronted with the virtual audiences of Web address. Some have taken their zines offline, preferring the more controllable, slower rhythms of print authorship. While others, like lisa, rarely update their pages, claiming their first priority is to their more local print audience: "i'm considering taking my webpages down soon. i'm feeling really anti-internet lately and too vulnerable. i get about 50 hits a day now and it scares me that that many people are reading this. plus i've become too dependent on my webpage and it's taking me away from actual paper zines." Echoing the concerns of many of her leftist colleagues, *Cupsize* editor Emelye claims that Web writing facilitates a dangerous dependence on the computer market and its chosen experts. Again, these critiques signal an understandable desire to control the spaces of authorship and audience and to root zine authorship and agency within a unified, physical sense of self and experience.

I do not wish to imply that print zine authorship is any less fraught with struggles over control, distribution, and ownership. Indeed, as more grrrl writers have entered the zones of mainstream print publishing, they

have contended with restrictions not yet firmly established in online writing environments.[6] Internet authorship, more than mainstream print authorship, seems amenable to the DIY ethic of the print zine movement. Those privileged enough to have access to a computer, modem, Internet software, an e-mail account, and some Web design knowledge can publish online. This access is complicated, however, as disputes over the boundaries of grrrl text space continue and more e-zines editors are forced to post corporate banners or logos. And even as some of these sites strive to be "grrlie"—storing Web resources and tools for grrrl users—many also seek to be as "professional" as possible with state of the art Web designs and navigational tools. Although issues of corporate sponsorship and co-optation hang over grrrl e-zine projects, many editors—such as Cross, Chan, and Nguyen—are attempting to compose diverse, imagined communities of young women with multiple and asymmetrical points of access and identities. This kind of writing can constitute a significant form of cultural production and resistance in a moment when social and economic power is inextricably related to the knowledge and use of communication technologies.

Grrrl Zine Writing and the Future of (Post)Feminist Authorship

The grrrl zine scene's ambivalent relationship to both the corporate mainstream and the countercultural raises questions about the shifting spaces of political or radical authorship. Are traditional notions of radical authorship indeed possible in today's mass-mediated writing communities and environments? In the case of the grrrl zine network, such questions too often degenerate into divisive, generational debates over the political efficacy of "girl power" or DIY feminism. Many in the mainstream and feminist media have (mis)read the DIY grrrl ethic as an attempt to sell watered-down versions of feminism to white, middle-class, high-school and college-aged women. The grrrl zine scene, according to feminists and anti-feminists alike, constitutes just another cultural fad, or worse, a highly commercial, reified site of individualism. In a recent issue of *Time* magazine titled "Is Feminism Dead?" reporter Ginia Bellafante asks, "Want to know what today's chic young feminist thinkers care about? Their bodies! Themselves! . . . In the '70s, feminism produced a pop culture that was intellectually provocative. . . . Today it's a whole lot of stylish fluff. . . . The voice of the movement, *Ms.* magazine dissected women's roles, status and pay. [Now the] voice of the 'new girl order,' *Bust* sarcastically dissects often wacky sexual exploits" (54–56). In a patronizing tone, Bellafante attributes the "new girl order" to a narcissis-

tic obsession with one's body and associates the new postfeminist rhetorics with the apolitical discourses of self-help manuals. Debbie Stoller, coeditor of *Bust*, contested Bellafante's feminism-is-dead critique with the following statement: "We Third Wave feminists should stop having so much fun. We should stop writing books and publishing magazines that people enjoy and that make people laugh out loud. . . . The strategy of producing an embraceable girl culture that allows us both to point out what's wrong with our culture and at the same time celebrate an alternative is clearly just too subtle and complex for the simple-minded grasp of Ms. Bellafante" (qtd. in Brown).

Bellafante and Stoller represent just two voices in a complicated dialogue over who qualifies as a feminist writer and activist. Debates like these, however, are particularly disturbing in their attempt to divide feminist communities reductively along generational lines that also partition writing into categories of work versus play, public versus private, or the political versus the popular. Perhaps these generational tensions signal larger concerns over commodification (for example, the market translation of "grrrl revolution" into "Spice Girl Power"), as well as anxieties over online authorship and intellectual property. Protest over locating feminist agency in the conflicted, fragmented, and at times "trendy" grrrl body is in many ways analogous to concerns over the commercializing effects of Web authorship. Editors of online zine *grrrowl* highlight these concerns in their article "Post-feminism Sell Sell Sell." They observe, "The popular picture of a post-feminist is a stylised nineties chick who is smart, sassy and sexy. Anything and everything goes—especially if it's cyber'd, wired, grrr'd. . . . We're led to believe that post-feminism is about hype and hip whereas feminism is about daggy rhetoric." Here, *grrrowl* editors show how popular versions of postfeminist identity—versions built on erroneous generational differences—are marketable ones, especially in online environments. In order to write effectively and build coalitions in these environments, grrrl editors must therefore balance the politics of the anti-commercial feminist movement and the zine scene with the pro-technology, capitalist ideologies of the Web.

In their research on women and online environments, Gail Hawisher and Patricia Sullivan state that the women in their study often described their e-spaces as "behind-closed-doors, private, all-girls' discussion" (192). This depiction is surprising, they argue, given the highly public and commercial nature of Internet spaces. While Hawisher and Sullivan agree with many grrrl zine editors that "feminists must harness the new

technologies to serve their own just political and social goals," they also contend that women who participate in online spaces need to rethink public and private distinctions—that is, how these sites might function as both shelter and battleground, as both resistance and production (195). Whether online or offline, grrrl zine networks are working to confound traditional notions of private and public space in order to articulate an alternative, embodied postfeminist writing subject—a subject mediated by the political, technological, and ideological events of the late 1980s and 1990s as well as by a thriving youth zine counterculture. Seizing the production and distribution practices of countercultural publishing and strategically mixing the popular and political, grrrl zinesters point to the possibility of social change within commercial, academic, and mainstream feminist contexts. Moreover, as critical examples of the limits of academic and mainstream literacy, print and electronic grrrl zines alert us to the important material and symbolic effects of writing as an internetworked, cultural practice.[7]

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Notes

1. Grrrl zines are receiving more mainstream media attention with recent coverage in *Entertainment Weekly*, the *New York Times* (Fryer), and *Spin* (Powers). St. Martin's has published at least one complete book on the grrrl zine movement (see Green and Taormino) and Penguin Press recently released *The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order*, a collection edited by Karp and Stoller, the creators of the print and electronic zine, *Bust*. The Feminist Press has highlighted the movement with several articles in *Ms.* (Sherman), *Signs* (Rosenberg and Garofalo), and *Feminist Studies*. See also Bernstein and Silberman.

2. In a recent ***JAC*** article on the contemporary youth crisis, Giroux claims that "educators in a variety of fields, including rhetoric and composition studies, have had little to say about how young people increasingly have become the victims of adult mistreatment, greed, neglect, and domination" (10). He argues that educators must pay more attention to how youth resist and challenge "the complex cultural politics and social spaces that mark their everyday lives" in order to provide them with the necessary intellectual and material resources for active citizenship (10).

3. For a useful discussion of the use of zine writing assignments in composition courses, see Frazier.

4. See Crowley who argues that the development of composition as a discipline has depended on the discourse of student need and its universal

writing requirement meant to "socialize students into the discourse of the academy." "Like the narrative of progress," she writes, "the discourse of needs interpellates composition teachers as subjects who implement the regulatory desires of the academy and the culture at large" (233). The diverse desires and abilities of the students themselves thus remain largely ignored.

5. For multiple perspectives on the impact of hypertext writing and theory on composition studies, see Hawisher and Self, *Passions*. See also the special issue of *Computers and Composition* on gender, which offers an excellent discussion of the intersections between feminist theory and hypertext in composition teaching and research (Gerrard).

6. One such example is zinester Summerstein's failure to market her zine to mainstream print publishers. In a recent article, she writes, "The book I intended to write was a modern feminist guide/manifesto, which I planned to call *Generation X: Women Here and Now*. . . . I wanted to create a platform for young women to share real, honest stories that would inspire and support us and lead us back to our long-forgotten power." Her New York literary agent told her, "Make it fresh! What's Courtney Love talking about? What's Alanis doing? *Just. Make. It. Fresh.*" Another editor, Summerstein writes, "beat the thing into mainstream-ready submission, dividing my ideas into chapters like 'Go for It, But Keep It in Check' and 'Let's Get Real.'" Feeling too compromised, Summerstein finally withdrew her proposal and began writing her book without a contract. Interestingly, Summerstein's story does appear on the Web.

7. This essay has greatly benefitted from a series of generous readings by friends, colleagues, anonymous reviewers, and teachers, including Patricia Harkin, Bill Hart-Davidson, Johndan Johnson-Eilola, Rachael Groner, Lisa Langstraat, Becky McLaughlin, Tom Moriarty, Yasmin Nair, Tim Peeples, Siobhan Somerville, Patricia Sullivan, Jan Wellington, Tom West, Gabriel Wettach, and Mike Zerbe.

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