

Girls, Zines, and the Miscellaneous Production of Subjectivity in an Age of Unceasing Circulation

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Francis Fox Professor of Literature, Duke University

*A lecture presented by the Center for
Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing and the Literacy
& Rhetorical Studies Minor*

**Speaker Series
No. 18 ♦ 2001**

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Preface

Janice Radway is Francis Fox Professor of Literature at Duke University and author of numerous works on literacy, popular literature, and theories of readership. On December 1, 2000, Radway delivered a keynote speech as part of the Annual Colloquium of the Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing. A number of faculty and graduate students involved in the Literacy & Rhetorical Studies Minor attended a luncheon where Radway advised us on the prospects for our Interdisciplinary Graduate Minor in Literacy & Rhetorical Studies. Following a luncheon, Radway delivered her keynote lecture, which a variety of faculty and graduate students across the campus attended.

What follows is a reprint of Radway's keynote speech, "Girls, Zines, and the Miscellaneous Unceasing Production of Subjectivity in an Age of Circulation," which focused on issues of gender, authorship, readership, and emerging popular literatures. She is the author of *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, and the recently published *A Feeling for Books: The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle Class Desire*. In her speech, Radway discussed "girls at risk" and her interest on diagnosing and ameliorating the current state of girls' psychology. According to Radway, it is also "a literature of anguished cultural critique."

CISW is grateful to the many departments and the organizations that helped sponsor this event: the Office of the Vice President for Research and the Dean of the Graduate School (History of Literacy Planning Grant and Interdisciplinary Funds); the College of Liberal

Arts (Scholarly Events Fund); and the Office of University Women (2000 Special Grants.)

The Center's Annual Colloquium and its Speaker Series contribute to its primary mission, which is to improve undergraduate writing at the University of Minnesota.

These activities, along with faculty development workshops, conferences, publications and other outreach activities, are designed to foster active engagement with issues and topics related to writing among all of the members of the University community. In addition, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty members who study any of the following topics:

- curricular reform through writing across the curriculum;
- characteristics of writing across the curriculum;
- connections between writing and learning in all fields;
- characteristics of writing beyond the academy;
- the effect of ethnicity, class, and gender on writing; and
- the status of writing ability during the college years.

We are pleased to present Dr. Radway's lecture as part of ongoing University initiatives on literacy. We invite you to contact the Center about this publication or other publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Mesut Akdere, Editor
June 2001

Girls, Zines, and the Miscellaneous Production of Subjectivity In an Age of Unceasing Circulation*

In the last ten years or so in the United States, a significant literature has been produced in both the field of popular culture and in academic circles about a topic that might be called “girls at risk.”[†] Alarmed by an apparent increase in the incidence of eating disorders, bodily mutilation, depression, and diminished expectations among adolescent

* I would like to dedicate this talk to two young women, Kate Radway and Jessica Rosenberg, from whom I have learned a great deal about the many varieties of “girl culture.” I also want to acknowledge the influence of several of my present and former students who have also discussed girls and their cultural activities with me. I especially want to thank Katie Kent, Diane McKay, and Jessica Blaustein for their stimulating conversations and observations over the years.

This paper is the text of a talk given at The Center for Interdisciplinary Studies of Writing at the University of Minnesota on November 30, 2000. The talk represents very early, quite preliminary work on one aspect of a larger project about girls’ cultural production. Although my intention in that larger project is to look at the nexus between girls’ cultural production and consumption by focusing on a number of different sites and media, this early paper looks only at two zines produced by young women. At the same time, while the larger project will make use of a range of different research methods, this paper relies solely on the strategies of literary close reading to interpret the meanings and significance of the two zines considered here. As such, the observations that follow are presumed to be exploratory and tentative. The interpretations I offer are mine alone and, as consequence, they are meant to be hypothetical only. I have no way of knowing whether or not they would coincide with interpretations offered either by the zine’s producers or their readers. I have been looking closely at the texts of girls’ zines and thinking about their meanings as a way to formulate possible hypotheses and theories about girls’ cultural activities that might be investigated more systematically in a carefully designed, multi-sited study.

[†] Although it is difficult to date the appearance of a full-blown public discourse about girls, it certainly began to emerge soon after the publication of books by research teams under the direction of Carol Gilligan at Harvard University. The first, entitled Making Connections: The Relational Worlds of Adolescent Girls at Emma Willard School, was edited by Gilligan, Nona P. Lyons, and Trudy J. Hanmer and published by Harvard in 1990. The second, Meeting at the Crossroads: Women’s Psychology and Girls’ Development, was authored by Gilligan and Lynn Mikel Brown, also published by Harvard and appeared in 1992. The impact of these two volumes was affected and perhaps augmented by the near simultaneous appearance of two reports issued by the American Association of University Women that documented girls’ loss of self-confidence during adolescence and correlated it with their treatment in school. Those two reports were entitled Shortchanging Girls, Shortchanging America (1991) and How Schools Shortchange Girls (1992). In addition, the convergence of these publications with growing media attention to eating disorders and self-mutilation among young girls produced an extensive public discussion of the myriad ways in which girls are put at risk by American culture. While full documentation of that discussion is beyond the scope of the present paper, I should note the significance of perhaps the most well-known intervention in the debate, that is, Mary Pipher’s best-selling book, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, Ballantine Books, 1994).

girls, researchers and popular psychologists have warned parents and educators about the negative impact of popular culture forms such as magazines, rock music, MTV, and advertising on teen-age girls' self-image. Although this literature is undeniably concerned with diagnosing and ameliorating the current state of girls' psychology, it is also a literature of anguished cultural critique. As such, it takes aim at certain aspects of mass culture, which it then blames for actively transforming high-spirited girls into depressed teens obsessed only with their weight, clothes, and complexion.

Buried within the literature, of course, is a set of familiar assumptions about how popular texts are produced by corporations and consumed wholesale by pacified girls. Girls, it would seem, are nothing more than the receptive endpoint of a unified chain of production, distribution, and consumption. Mass culture, rather than the larger capitalist social formation that produces it, tends to become the target of critique. Girls are produced yet again as hapless consumers by the very discourse that would aim to help them. Girls would be different, this literature, implies if they only would resist the temptations of mass culture to consume other, better texts. Cultural conservatives and Christian evangelists prescribe religious reading, sexual abstinence, and adherence to moral encomia like "Just Say No" and "What Would Jesus Do?" Feminist activists and other progressives campaign variously for critical media literacy, the teaching of women's literature, and curricula that will inspire girls to develop agency and voice rather than their bodies and their smiles.

Although my sympathies are undeniably with the latter political project, I also worry that some of the interventions envisioned by even the most thoughtful of these advocates are often couched in the language of self-realization, that is, in a search for

something called *authenticity*. What these critics want adults to do is to develop strategies that will enable girls to discover their “true” selves, those buried beneath cultural prescriptions. More often than not, the goal of this kind of intervention is a coherent, self-consistent, individuated selfhood. Girls should look within themselves to discover who they truly are, these advocates suggest. They should throw off the fetters of the culture that surrounds them in order to become singular women of character and achievement.

This approach is at the heart of one of the most popular and widely discussed of the “girls at risk” books, the 1994 best seller by Mary Pipher, Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls. Based on her own therapeutic practice with middle class girls in the Midwest, Pipher develops the argument that girls of today are “much more oppressed” than those of earlier generations. As she puts it, “America today is a girl-destroying place. Everywhere girls are encouraged to sacrifice their true selves.” She continues:

Their parents may fight to protect them, but their parents have limited power. Many girls lose contact with their true selves, and when they do, they become extraordinarily vulnerable to a culture that is all too happy to use them for its own purposes.

In her diagnosis of the problem, Pipher constructs a model of the self that pits the self against the culture that surrounds it. The two are, in effect, discontinuous. The culture is powerful, she suggests; individual selves are therefore inherently vulnerable. Even parental selves cannot withstand the power of the supreme monolith, “culture.” How could girls, who are so much more exposed than boys, *not* be impinged upon by this all-powerful form, Pipher wonders? In her account, girls are neither *of* the culture that

surrounds them nor enabled by it. Rather, they are drawn away from their “true” selves to speak and act in ways that are alien to them.

This theoretical model clearly limits the kinds of interventions that Pipher can propose. She suggests that girls must find a way to stand autonomously against their culture; they must find a way to resist it. Although she suggests that girls should learn how to critique the culture within which they find themselves, she says little about where they are to find the resources to do so. Essentially, she trusts that they already have it within themselves to perform such a critique. Their selves are intact, she suggests. All girls have to do is trust those selves. As she puts it, “The process involves looking within to find a true core of self, acknowledging unique gifts, accepting all feelings, not just socially acceptable ones, and making deep and firm decisions about values and meanings.” Pipher adds, “Once they have discovered their own true selves, I encourage them to trust that self as the source of meaning and direction in their lives.” As a practical route to becoming “honest and whole,” she recommends daily centering, diary keeping, constant self-reflection, and the vigilant maintenance of boundaries between the self and the rest of the world.

Although historian Joan Brumberg, the author of another highly acclaimed book about girls entitled The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls, does not explicitly take issue with Pipher’s recommendations, she does express skepticism about the model of selfhood that drives Pipher’s analysis. Brumberg states adamantly, in fact, “that individual autonomy has been oversold as a model for female development and for social life in general.” In keeping with this view, she challenges Pipher’s claim that all girls have to do is to rely on their own inner resources. Brumberg observes, “Many

young women, particularly those under twenty, do not have the emotional resources to be truly autonomous or to withstand outside pressure from peers and boyfriends, whom they desperately want to please." In her account, girls are much more a part of, and therefore taken in by, the very culture that is the source of their suffering. As she puts it, "Adolescent girls simply are not mature enough, or sufficiently in control of their lives, to resist all the social and commercial pressures they face in our hypersexual, televisual environment."

Yet, even as Brumberg recognizes that adolescent girls are caught up within the culture that subordinates them, she also acknowledges that they can be adept critics of the very media forms that sexualize them. She suggests, therefore, that what is needed is a multigenerational conversation about sexual ethics that will involve girls themselves, as well as parents, educators, and all those interested in girls' fate. "This is the terrain on which liberals and feminists should do battle with the forces of reaction," Brumberg writes. She continues:

Although many people will not like it, American girls should be presented with the full range of sexual options that young women now experience, including lesbianism as well as heterosexuality, and also thoughtful discussions of female pleasure as well as danger. In the teen years, the focus should not be on finalizing a clear-cut sexual identity – Are you straight or are you gay?--but on helping young women evolve a standard of sexual ethics that has integrity, regardless of the gender of their partners.

Brumberg recognizes that such a conversation will not be easy and that its outcome cannot be secured in advance. She ventures the recommendation, nonetheless, that the goals of such an ethics should be "safety, reciprocity, and responsibility in all forms of human intimacy."

Joan Brumberg's approach to the question of whether girls are at risk at the beginning of the twenty-first century is the most judicious I have seen among the many recent books published on the topic. She is especially good when she questions the model of autonomous selfhood proffered by so many, and when she acknowledges the media sophistication she finds among her own students. Yet her recommendations are still hampered, I believe, by a residual tendency to construe culture as if it exists outside girls, as if it were a thing or force with a certain alterity and will all its own. Brumberg almost escapes this when she acknowledges that girls are both acute media critics *and* willing accomplices in their own sexual subordination. However, she doesn't really do enough with what is a theoretically important insight. I don't think she adequately acknowledges that what we call selfhood is itself a production, an effect of specific practices, and a work under construction in several senses. Not only are individual girls constantly struggling to fabricate themselves as people who can speak and act in multiple contexts. So, too, are they fashioning those self-constructions out of the very substance – both materials and forms -- of the culture that they find all around them. And those materials appeal to girls by enacting complex processes of fantasy and desire. Those materials thus subject girls precisely because girls select among them and adapt them to the process of self-fashioning. Girls are intricately and intimately enmeshed with the culture that consequently controls them *and* enables their every move.

Action and agency, it seems to me, are wrongly construed if they are seen as coming only from within a supposedly authentic self that is set simply in opposition to an imprisoning culture. Subjects are intertwined *with* culture—they are made of its very substance. Children are not born with their resources intact. They can't speak, they can't

express themselves, and they can't even move their bodies about in space. Children gradually develop resources by taking up particular languages, objects, gestures, and habits, those that are presented to them as they emerge always *within and through* culture. It is, finally, the vision of the self that is portrayed in the girls-at-risk narratives that I take issue with because I think those narratives ironically diminish the power and evacuate the agency of the very girls they aim to help. Those narratives construct adults – the parents, teachers, and advisers of girls – as their saviors, as if girls can't or won't have a hand in constructing their future for themselves. This, I think, is a terrible mistake.

It is a mistake because girls are always more than simple consumers of a mass-produced culture that impinges upon them. When their parents or care-givers read to them from the Berenstain Bears series, or invite them to sing along with the music of Raffi, or place them in front of “The Rug Rats,” or, finally, relent and buy them a Barbie doll, those adults are not simply inscribing their girls within an alien culture that manages to control them completely by dictating what they might want. They are also literally offering those girls languages to think with, repertoires of images and ideas that spark imagination and desire. Girls use snippets and fragments from this contradictory, multi-discursive, cultural tapestry as soon as they engage in pretend games with their toys or with their friends. They draw upon that repertoire as well when they dramatize themselves for the first time as the narrators of diaries. The music girls hear in their homes, in stores, and on TV are actively re-circulated as a backdrop for rope skipping routines and as the subject of phone conversations and gossipy friendships. Later, the teen magazines that are so ubiquitously promoted to girls are relentlessly torn up, cut up,

re-arranged, and pasted together in new form as collages that adorn loose-leaf notebooks, diary covers, and art works handed in to countless middle school art teachers. Girls *are* cultural producers. And, like all artists, the materials they work with are those that are ready to hand. Girls can't create *except* materially. They must make whatever new forms they can envision by recombining the very words, images, ideas, tools, and narrative forms already available to them. Those materials come necessarily from the saturated cultural milieu they encounter day in and day out as participants in our media-dominated environment. Girls re-circulate cultural texts and not always in the form in which they were first encountered.

Recently, a body of new work has begun to appear that insists on the significance of girls' cultural agency. Much of this work has been written by young women themselves, only a few years removed from girlhood. In many cases, these books were conceived explicitly in response to the "girls at risk" narratives. They sport titles such as Ophelia Speaks; Girls in America: Their Stories, Their Words; A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World: Writing from the Zine Revolution; and Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism.ⁱ Clearly, these books insist on girls' active agency, on their ability to speak and act, on their struggles and engagement with a culture, which they see as oppressive. In addition, this work has itself been discussed and augmented by a growing body of academic scholarship on girls that insists on seeing them as something more than passive cultural consumers. I am thinking here of the work of writers and activists like Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, Mary Celeste Kearney, Lauraine Leblanc, and Angela Hubler among others.ⁱⁱ This work, like its non-academic counterpart, seeks

to contest the popular image of girls as passive victims of a patriarchal culture they cannot control.

I don't have the time today to discuss this alternative girl discourse in depth, a discourse I like to call the "girls speak out" narrative. Still, I do want to call attention to the fact that, like the "girls at risk" narrative, this alternative discourse is struggling to detect whether girls can have agency in a media-saturated environment. Equally alarmed by the commercial culture that is aggressively marketed to girls through magazines, MTV, and ads, this discourse seeks evidence of girls' capacity to resist, to perform what Mary Celeste Kearney calls "detournement." She uses the term to refer to girls' ways of "appropriating and reconfiguring mass-produced cultural artifacts into personalized and politicized creations in the subversion and resistance of privileged notions of gender, generation, race, class, and sexuality." Despite Kearney's explicit acknowledgment that girls' creativity emerges from the fact of their immersion *within* mass culture, her ongoing preoccupation with agency tends to reconstruct the girl/culture divide. For the most part, she pits individual girl speakers against a dominant, unitary, "mainstream" culture. This tendency, in fact, is widespread in the "girls speak out" discourse. In the interest of demonstrating that girls are more resistant than has previously been thought, the discourse constructs a counter-image to the all-powerful "culture" of the girls-at-risk discourse. It thus celebrates a feisty, mouthy girl, one who can speak up and talk back. The counter-image, however, tends to over-estimate the speaking girls' coherence and autonomy. It also over-estimates her status as an always thoroughly gendered product. Because most of the proponents of the "girls speak out" narrative are interested in intervening *as feminists* on behalf of subjects whom they characterize unitarily as "girls,"

they adhere to a developmental narrative that projects the *necessary* emergence of the gendered being, woman, from the childhood of a girl. This tendency causes them either to miss or to underestimate the ways in which girls themselves are sometimes straining to critique or even to sidestep the engendering practices that seek to pin them down always precisely as “girls.”

Now I need to point out here that I heartily endorse the effort to understand girls as cultural producers and as agents who can speak and act on their own behalf. I also enthusiastically support the desire to recognize, to celebrate, and to build on girls’ own understanding of what it means to be a girl, a woman, and a feminist. Still, my early research into some of the cultural productions generated by teens who identify themselves as “girls” suggests that we should not be too hasty either to render unified the kind of subjectivities that emerge through those fabrications or to organize them always under the sign of gender.ⁱⁱⁱ Nor do I think we should always figure this form of production through the use of the metaphor of voice since I think that figure embeds what is produced in these texts within singular bodies conceptualized as containers for unitary selves. In my own early work on both paper and electronic zines, I see much more disorder, contradiction, and confusion than the notion of a resistant, oppositional girl can encompass. Zine writers are struggling, it seems to me, not simply with the languages of the self and with the idea of planning an individual future but also, and perhaps more radically, with the viability of collaborative production and communal forms of sociability. I see them trying to articulate new social forms that would not leave the self, alone and vulnerable, confronting an alien culture, but rather would situate it in collective communication, communion, and concert with others. Zines are preoccupied with

friendships, alliances, affiliations, and groups. They explore the delineation and porousness of boundaries, crossings, connections, and comminglings. Zines are also deeply engaged in conversation with many different discourses appearing in the surrounding culture. Indeed they are so engaged with them that they cite, reference, and even ventriloquize a multifarious range of discourses precisely in order to respond to all of them. Thus, they re-circulate cultural discourses at the very moment that they alter them by juxtaposing and combining them.

I see the writers of zines struggling to produce political positions that are not always, nor necessarily, gendered. Girl zine writers do tend to meditate about the future and try to envision the sort of woman they might become. But they also often construct those futures in ungendered terms as they explore what it might mean to be an activist, an athlete, a musician, a writer, or a filmmaker. This need not be seen as a refusal of feminism or a sublimation of gender oppression, it seems to me. It could also be viewed as a halting, exploratory, quite subversive effort to think beyond gender binaries. I think we need to pay more attention to zines as complex and contradictory forms, as fractured productions that respond to and thereby mobilize multiple technologies of subject construction. Zines are interesting precisely because they are chaotic jumbles of material culled from mass culture, everyday life, and affective experience. They ought to be read, it seems to me, less for the way they are *expressions* of emerging, idiosyncratic selves or earnest, searching explorations of singular identities. Rather, I think zines should be read more for their radical generativity, for the way they combine and recombine rich repertoires of contradictory cultural fragments. They are experimental, multifarious performances, it seems to me, instantiations of multiple subject-positions.

Zines are nothing if not motley. They display a wild mixture of handwriting and print, nearly all of which refuses to stay put within the lines. They sport images that overlap and bleed into one another. In some cases, those images strain to burst from the page, and sometimes narratives do not necessarily follow serially, page by page. Zines are filled with an energy that refuses to be circumscribed within the decorous confines of the print form or the ordered circuits through which print usually circulates. They also defy familiar social binaries like those of public/private, personal/political, feminist/feminine. They discuss the most quotidian slights that happen to a girl on an ordinary school day and then juxtapose that with what they defiantly call "rants" on political issues like vegetarianism, atomic power, and sexual harassment or rape. Zines are quite literally miscellanies. They display discourses of self-construction as effects of *linguaging*, that is, as an endless process of quotation and response, as a contested, fluid, messy, and fundamentally contradictory business. As such, they enable us to see that the containment and disciplinary effects produced by ideological forms are always incomplete precisely because all of us, girls included, are solicited by and can take up the challenge of multiple, contentious discourses.

I don't have enough time to provide a full analysis of zines as a specific aesthetic form, so I would like simply to compare two different examples of the genre today.^{iv} The first is the not particularly outstanding but relatively unified and self-consciously gendered feminist zine, Riot Grrrl.^v The second is a less well known and more commercialized example of the form created in Orlando, Florida. Entitled Bitch Rag, the editors proclaim explicitly above the logo, "WE ARE NOT A RIOT GRRRL ZINE!!!" You will note, of course, that both titles gender the producers of the zines at the

outset. I have decided to focus on these two despite the fact that many zines have been produced by girls that don't take gender as their key principle of organization. I have done so because I hope to show that even within relatively simple zines where gender could be said to organize the concerns of the writing collective, one can find columns, letters, visual images, and narrative vignettes where the artists also struggle to respond to and therefore to articulate discursive positions that are otherwise organized and engaged. What these zines display so effectively is the process of subject formation precisely as an unsecured struggle. These girl artists seem to know almost instinctively, and perhaps because they have not yet been adequately disciplined into organized forms of adulthood, that no single subject position or political program offered to them by their culture can adequately address all that they know or want. In response, zine artists generatively multiply textual fragments. They experimentally produce a range of contradictory discourses without concern for their coherence or their consistency.

The zine, Riot Grrrl, was created and circulated from Washington, D. C. It associated itself through its title with a subculture of girls known as the Riot Girrl movement, which emerged in the early nineties in Olympia, Washington, around certain all-girl bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy.^{vi} It is important to know that the petulant spelling of girl as g-r-r-r-l was apparently invented to invoke an angry growl. Although it is usually attributed to Kathleen Hanna of Bikini Kill, she has denied inventing the term. In any case, Riot Grrrl culture emerged when Hanna and a number of other young female musicians began to form their own all-girl bands in response to the ways in which girls were inscribed in punk culture as traditionally feminine groupies. Neither their desires nor their expressions of anger, however, could be contained within

the musical forms they developed. As a result, in addition to their club and CD performances, they produced a two-page manifesto called “Revolution Girl-Style Now” (Gottlieb and Wald, 262) This manifesto led to the imitative creation of locally produced riot grrrl zines which were then circulated at music festivals and through the mail.

Although these zines were only produced in small numbers, when the girls who collaborated to produce them passed them out to others, sold them for a minimal fee, or simply exchanged theirs for another group’s zine, they acted in hope of creating a more extended community of like-minded people. Indeed, Emily White, one of the first media commentators on Riot Grrrl noted that it was an underground culture with no Mecca, built of paper (quoted in Rosenberg, 811).

Riot Grrrl #6 exhibits the characteristic ad hoc, pasted-together appearance of nearly all early zines. More like a magazine melange than a pamphlet or a book, this zine, like most, is not authored in any traditional sense. It does not seek to express a single, coherent point of view. It is collectively produced and gives the appearance of having been assembled somewhat randomly. Combining cartoon images of Wonder Woman and Super Girl with a print logo that at once evokes the iconography of America and the excess of super-hero tales, Riot Grrrl #6’s front page proclaims that “No stopwatch on earth can clock D. C. girls on the go-go!” Nonetheless, it promises, “By special request, we present a few scenes in slow-motion from the startling adventures of D. C.’s Groovy Girls!!!” The use of repeated exclamation marks here deploys a commonplace strategy in girls’ diary and note writing practices. In both forms, exaggerated, repetitive punctuation is mobilized again and again to suggest affective intensity. This is a critical comment, I think, on the way girls feel reigned in and controlled by the conventional and

restrained writing styles and narrative forms they are given in school as models to emulate. Here, those exclamation marks combine with the usually devalued cartoon image to associate both the zine and the girls who have produced it with less legitimate, alternative cultural forms as well as with an intense expression of emotion.

Interestingly enough, the inside front cover then seems to rein in the expressed exuberance by contrasting two other quite distinct writing styles. The reader next encounters an informal, somewhat breezy form of handwriting and a straightforward, sanserifed print font. The handwritten passage insists on the complexity of riot grrrl culture and then makes a sketchy reference that evokes another political discourse, that of socialism or Marxism. After welcoming the reader, the authors declare, “This is a zine with no exclusive rights to any one group; it is the collective property of grrrls everywhere. There is no limitation to means of production.” Although the reference is obviously brief and not entirely coherent, it does seem to be straining to place these artists in opposition to a commercial culture that is dependent upon intellectual property rights that enable the process of cultural production. The handwritten form itself seems to suggest that writing and publishing are open to all, that girls are potentially a part of a revolutionary, do-it-yourself collective.

In shifting then to the more formal sanserif font, the authors seem to be trying to suture the force and authority of official print forms to their desire to take up the subject position of revolutionaries. In commenting on a possible Riot Grrrl Convention '92, they note somewhat tentatively, but nonetheless hopefully, that “riot grrls and boyz from all over *could* [emphasis added] converge in Washington, D.C., sometime this summer. There could be days filled with lessons of revolution GRRRL STYLE and nights

dedicated to the smashing sounds and actions of teen spirit.” Expressed in handwriting, this wish might come across merely as subjective desire. Presented to the reader in print form, it carries the added force of typographically fixed, published discourse. Thus the writers of Riot Grrrl # 6 invite their readers to participate in a *public*, revolutionary act. “Write to us with your band suggestions, workshop ideas, and other creative actions,” they plead. “This can work!”

Although most of Riot Grrrl #6 is couched in the vocabulary of feminism, the feminist discourse that is developed is neither unitary nor unrelieved. Indeed, the third page of the zine actually seems much more invested in the language of animal rights activism, consumer culture protest, and even class analysis than in the feminism that is also undeniably there. Printed diagonally and adorned around the edges by two hand written “yucks,” a paw print, and the image of an alligator, a brief passage by “Laura” recounts her recent experiences at the mall. In addition to the mixing of multiple discourses here, what is interesting is the blithe unconcern with which it moves from position to position. Note the fast slide from feminist sympathizer to animal rights activist to consumer culture critic. Laura writes:

i was at the mall this lady's car – cadillac – was broken into it was night her fur coat was stolen i didn't feel sorry for her so am i a bad one no i don't think so its just me i didn't say anything – like “that's what you deserve” – that would have been a cruel threatening thing to have said to an isolated and scared female no I couldn't have done that no matter how much i hate the mind set of women (people) who wear or want to wear fur coats i hate what society has done to us how its made us strive for materialistic approval how its instituted in us this blood thirsty hunger for endorsement we will do all things cruel if it will help us to feel superior over other women

Laura does not make a rational argument here for a feminism that would address cruelty to animals. Nor does she suggest that a feminist activist should also critique the ways in

which capitalist culture relentlessly suggests that the route to fulfillment is through the purchase of commodities. Instead, she simply shifts her vocabulary along with her imagined interlocutor, moving from one politicized subject position to another. The lack of punctuation facilitates the slide. The lower case “I” seems to hinder any effort to fix the narrative voice, to pin it to a single textual marker. The passage thus dramatizes a constant internal conversation between each sequentially adopted political stance and another that would critique the limitations of the former’s political goals. The character, “Laura,” it would seem, can occupy all of these positions without worrying whether they accord with one another.

The same kind of relentless dialogue that one finds on display in this passage is performed on the back page of Riot Grrrl #6. Framing a space left empty for the writing of a subscriber’s address is a vertical list of imperatives that seems to call forth a feminist subject who would be decidedly different from the imaginary feminist the text constructs as its predecessor. Readers are enjoined to “write, read, sing, cut all your hair off, hug a slamdancer, organize a protest, ride a motorcycle, and get a tattoo.” However, as if in fear that the list might appear too butch, too strident, readers are also told to “wear a dress” and “bake a pie.” This effort to construct an alternative view of a feminist girl is repeated within the zine itself where a long meditation on the question, “why is ‘feminist’ a dirty word?” is punctuated by the large, Barbara Kruger-like banner, “I am a feminist. So is my dad.” Again, it is almost as if the writer can imagine the response her rant might evoke. Aware that she might be accused of separatism or even reverse discrimination, she anticipates such objections by asserting that men can be feminists too.

Nearly all zines I have examined exhibit this jagged, nervous, almost zig-zaggy discursive form. Zine writers portray themselves as if in constant conversation with imagined others. Virtually every utterance and every representation is staged as a response. Nothing appears before the reader *sui generis*, as if originating within the writer. Rather, every speech act is called forth as part of a dialogue. The moment the writer manages to take up a certain subject position and speak in a certain voice, that voice is interrupted. The effect is edgy, above all else. Zines construct not unitary, authentic selves. Instead, they stage a tense cacophony of contending voices; they ventriloquize subject positions that jostle for control and dominance. One gets the impression that zine writers are dissatisfied with all the positions they find on offer within the culture that surrounds them. As a result, they careen energetically from position to position. They perform endlessly. They exuberantly multiply personas in defiance of demands that they be only one way and not others. Zine writers stage their determination to escape the culture's discipline. They refuse to remain docilely within the lines, within the margins of a page, within the proper sequence of a book's pages. In effect, they defy the putative boundaries of the coherent, self-consistent subject. It must be said, nonetheless, that however multiple girls perform that defiance, they do so precisely by assuming always partially and temporarily subject positions already offered to them by the fractured culture of which they are a part. As a consequence, they are at once sutured within cultural discourses at the very same time that they manage to foster or orchestrate their clash. Thus they generate a sort of dialectical commentary and critique, an ambivalent oscillation between discursive fragments and subject positions.

This is as true of Bitch Rag as it is of Riot Grrrl #6. As I have already noted, even before the announcement of the zine's title, its editors proclaim "WE ARE NOT A RIOT GRRRL ZINE!!!" Thus put on notice, the reader has to wonder immediately just what it is about riot grrrl culture that has occasioned Bitch Rag's response. The response comes quickly on what might be considered the title page. Inviting readers to join in on the enterprise, one of the zine's collective asks, "Want to be a writer?" The invitation continues, "It's so easy! Write something personal (that's the best way to impress me), and send it to me today! Yes, that is easy! NO POETRY, NO FICTION, NO HAIKUS, NO 'COLLEGEY' CRAP, just simple everyday language. We're Bitch Rag, ya know?!?" Impatient with the pretensions of the literary, this writer seems to position herself and the zine squarely within the non-college attending working class. It contests the expectation that all zine writers are educated, literary, "colleegy" types. Furthermore, the zine refuses to criticize commercial culture. It refuses to take up the familiar zine position of self-righteous critic of the advertising business. In fact, Bitch Rag includes many advertisements placed by Orlando area merchants, a fact that testifies at least indirectly to the economic entrepreneurialism of its editors. One writer even concludes her apostrophe to her "dear readers" with the aphorism, "Change isn't always bad (but dollar bills are better)."

In further constructing their position as "not a riot grrrl zine," the editors subsequently print a letter from "Kendra and all the Women of Armageddon," which accuses Bitch Rag of being superficial. Kendra writes, "Your zine has no depth nor any important issues and a profound lack of creativity; it's more of a teen-drama-trauma outlet for the lack of individuality and personas." This accusation provides the occasion

for “April’s” acid response on behalf of Bitch Rag. She fumes, “How sad that you can’t over look your own jealousy to contribute something to us or to anyone by writing about your ‘gang’. I thought femni-nazi’s liked other women. I know some nice riot grrrls but you girls are like so many of them—opinionated, rude, and completely unaccepting of anything or anyone that’s not just like them.” She rounds out her dismissal with a little joke. “How many roit [sic] girls does it take to change a light bulb? None – they can’t change anything.”

While the femni-nazi reference seems to place the writers of Bitch Rag in opposition to feminism, this joke suggests that their position is much more complicated. They, too, believe things should change. Indeed, throughout the zine, they speak of multiple forms of discrimination against women and express anger, even rage, against what they call “asshole men.” But the zine does not take up a single coherent, feminist position nor ever really define what in society needs changing. There are photographic collages warning women away from certain awful male types including the “freak” who needs “a mommy to feed me” and who “likes his diaper changed.” Another essay entitled “Who Is Les Bo?” by Lauda, explains why she would rather be called “bent” than “lesbian.” Bitch Rag also includes an essay promoting public transportation and another recommending chronic complaining. Most of the zine, however, is devoted to music reviews, commentary about events in bars, and the pursuit of sexual pleasure. Feminism is there sporadically but it never manages to unify all the elements of the zine. It does not infuse or even underwrite every narrative fragment.

Work, on the other hand, does. It is ever in the background as something inevitable, implacable, and inescapable, as something to be endured. It is the reason one

needs a battered, second-hand car. It is the thing that structures one's use of public transportation. It is the situation one escapes by going to a bar, listening to music or hanging out with one's gang. Work is ubiquitous in Bitch Rag. The zine even includes a column instructing readers how to make work more enjoyable. Among the recommended activities – “talk on the phone, unplug the phone, ignore customers, go through the bosses' desk, go to the can.” My point here is that although feminist observations make their way into Bitch Rag, the zine's critique of contemporary culture is not solely targeted at the sex-gender system. Bitching, it would seem, is as much a function of the alienation of labor as it is of gender oppression.

Like Riot Grrrl # 6, then, Bitch Rag slides from issue to issue, from position to position, restlessly seeking a point of view from which to pinpoint the cause of so much experienced unhappiness, restlessness, and angst. Although it seems to want a feminism that would attend to issues raised by non-middle class work, it can never quite settle on a wholly useful language of critique. It can't find the one voice that would do justice to all of its rage. In the end, Bitch Rag opts for an elaborated, miscellaneous collection of opinionated rants against everything from “men who stink up rest rooms” to those “who won't take responsibility for themselves.” Although the editors are certain things need to change, because work seems so much a part of the inescapable background of their lives, they cannot imagine how to change either its character or the fact of its existence. Instead, they opt to recommend changed behavior in the privatized world of leisure and pleasure. As Kali, one of the editors, puts it succinctly, “Change your own diaper, damn it!”

At this point, certain obvious questions need to be asked. What does it matter, finally, that zines tend to be collectively produced? What difference does it make that zines are not expressions of singular, unitary, wholly differentiated selves? Why should we attend to their motley, miscellaneous character? And, perhaps most significantly, what are the political consequences of focusing upon the radical productivity of zines, on the way they assemble aggregate selves and ad hoc, hodge podge communities?

To begin with, such an anti-identitarian approach draws our attention away from the presupposition that identities are necessarily fixed. It enjoins us to attend to process, that is, to the multiple practices through which individuals make their way in the world. In doing so, it enables us to see that all political subjects, girls included, are contradictory, multifarious, and discontinuous. Thus, they are protean for all that. They can take up a received position to reflect critically upon another. Because they are constituted by and through a culture that is itself fractured and contradictory, girls can also move about within that culture, they can contingently marshal one cultural strategy or practice against another. This means that girls do have the resources to think critically about mass culture. But those resources do not exist outside the already existing culture. They are themselves always already cultural. This means that the political interventions we would design must address girls on their own ground. It simply will not do to lecture “just say no” when girls have already learned to inhabit a sexualized, tightly tank-topped body. Rather, we must engage girls in the conversations they have already started both within and among themselves. We must seek to understand what girls already know. And what they seem to know, better than the adults who would address them, is that

change is constant, multiplicity can be generative, and contradiction, rather than a form of stasis to be feared, is something more like a matrix that is endlessly generative.

ⁱ Sara Shandler, Ophelia Speaks: Adolescent Girls Write About Their Search for Self (Harper Collins, 1999); Carol Cassidy, Girls in America: Their Stories, Their Words (TV Books, 1999); Karen Green and Tristan Taormino, eds., A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World: Writings from the Girl Zine Revolution (St. Martin's Press, 1997); Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, eds., Third Wave Agenda: Being Feminist, Doing Feminism (University of Minnesota Press, 1997). See also Lyn Mikel Brown, Raising Their Voices: The Politics of Girls' Anger (Harvard, 1998) and The Bust Guide to the New Girl Order, eds. Marcelle Karp and Debbie Stoller (Penguin Books, 1999).

ⁱⁱ Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, "Smells Like Teen Spirit: Riot Grrrls, Revolution and Women in Independent Rock," in Microphone Fiends: Youth, Music, and Youth Culture, eds. Andrew Ross and Trica Rose (Routledge, 1994), 250-274; Mary Celeste Kearney, "Producing Girls: Rethinking the Study of Female Youth Culture," in Delinquents and Debutantes: Twentieth-Century Girls' Cultures, ed. Sherrie Inness (New York University Press, 1998), 285-310; Lauraine Le Blanc, Pretty in Punk: Girls' Gender Resistance in a Boys' Subculture (Rutgers University Press, 1999); Angela Hubler, "Can Anne Shirley Help 'Revive Ophelia'? Listening to Girl Readers," in Delinquents and Debutantes, 266-284. See also, Dana Collins, "No Experts Guaranteed!": Do-it Yourself Sex Radicalism and the Production of the Lesbian Sex Zine Brat Attack," Signs (Autumn, 1999), 65-89; Ednie Kaeh Garrison, "U. S. Feminism: Grrrl Style! Youth (Sub)Cultures and the Technologies of the Third Wave," Feminist Studies (Spring, 2000), 141-170; and especially the Feminisms and Youth Cultures issue of Signs (Spring, 1998). For a collection that foregrounds issues of race and class among girls, see Bonnie J. Ross Leadbeater and Niobe Way, Urban Girls: Resisting Stereotypes, Creating Identities (New York University Press, 1996).

ⁱⁱⁱ I should note here that my approach to the complex concept of subjectivity has been influenced by the large body of diverse work known as "queer theory." For an introduction to the field and to the ways in which subjectivity is understood to be a performance, see Annamarie Jagose, Queer Theory: An Introduction (New York University Press, 1996). See also Nick Mansfield, Subjectivity: Theories of the Self from Freud to Haraway (New York University Press, 2000).

^{iv} At this point, I have no way of knowing whether these two zines could be constructed in any way as representative of girls' cultural production in the zine format. For the most part, I have only had access to one young girl's personal zine collection. In addition, I have browsed the World Wide Web in order to examine electronic zines. To conduct a more thorough, systematic study of girls' zines, it will be necessary to visit the developing collections already being assembled at libraries (at Bowling Green State University, for instance, and Michigan State University, as well) and to seek to document zine production through collections and extant distributor's catalogues. Clearly, this will be a daunting task since so much of this production was distinctly ephemeral, local, and conducted in very small numbers.

^v It is difficult to know how to cite a zine since it is not possible to identify the author, or publication place, source, or date in the usual sense. Riot Grrrl # 6, for instance, is identifiable only by its title and by a reference to Washington, D. C., on the front cover. The zine does not list editors' names in any systematic fashion although some contributors are identified by their first names. Similarly, it is difficult to offer page numbers in citations since many zines are not formally paginated. I received Riot Grrrl #6 from a distributor. It was folded but not stapled. Although it seemed clear that the first page was intended to be the cover, the pages that followed did not necessarily follow in coherent, sequential order. The problem of citation has been further complicated in this instance because my copies of the zines discussed here disappeared at a conference presentation when I circulated them among the audience. I have not yet been able to find additional copies of the zines to verify page references. Before this paper can be formally published, I will need to verify and include page numbers at least from Bitch Rag, which was printed and distributed in more traditional fashion. Given the tentative nature of this paper, then, and the state of my citations, I request that this work not be cited without my permission.

^{vi} The account given here of Riot Grrrl is drawn from the work of Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald and from that of Mary Celeste Kearney. See also Jessica Rosenberg and Gitana Garofalo, "Riot Grrrl: Revolutions from Within," Signs (Spring, 1998), 809-842.