

ReSisTiNg maInstReAm mEdiA GIRIs and the Act of mAkiNg zINes

by Melanie A. Ferris

En Amérique du Nord, les médias bombardent les jeunes femmes de messages qui tentent de les définir. Quoiqu'il y ait eu des recherches sur l'influence des médias sur les jeunes filles, on ne connaît pas celles sur les filles et les femmes qui manipulent les médias à leur avantage. Dans cet article l'auteure discute de l'importance et des limites des « zines » comme moyens de résistance.

In North America, the media plays a huge part in the lives of young women. We have been bombarded by messages telling us how we are supposed to define ourselves. We get messages about what to wear, what food to consume, what beauty products to buy, which sex to be attracted to, what musicians to listen to, and so on. As a result, the media has been targeted by the women's movement. In the 1970s and 1980s, the women's movement challenged the broadcasting licences of many television stations on the basis of their sexist representation of women, as well as their ignorance of women's issues (van Zoonen 94).

Although there has been extensive research about how media affects young people; there has been little questioning about how young people manipulate the media to their own advantage (Chu). Julie Chu explains,

Policy and research alike have successfully framed media as one of the most daunting terrains for youth—one in which young people are powerless, constantly “at risk” of “corrupting” messages, and therefore requiring the close supervision and control of adults. (72)

Girls who create zines are not worried about the feelings or comfort of their readers; most zines tend to deal with issues in a very confrontational, honest, and frank manner, an approach which may make some readers uncomfortable.

In this article, I will examine how young women in North America have resisted mainstream media through the act of making zines.

What Are Zines?

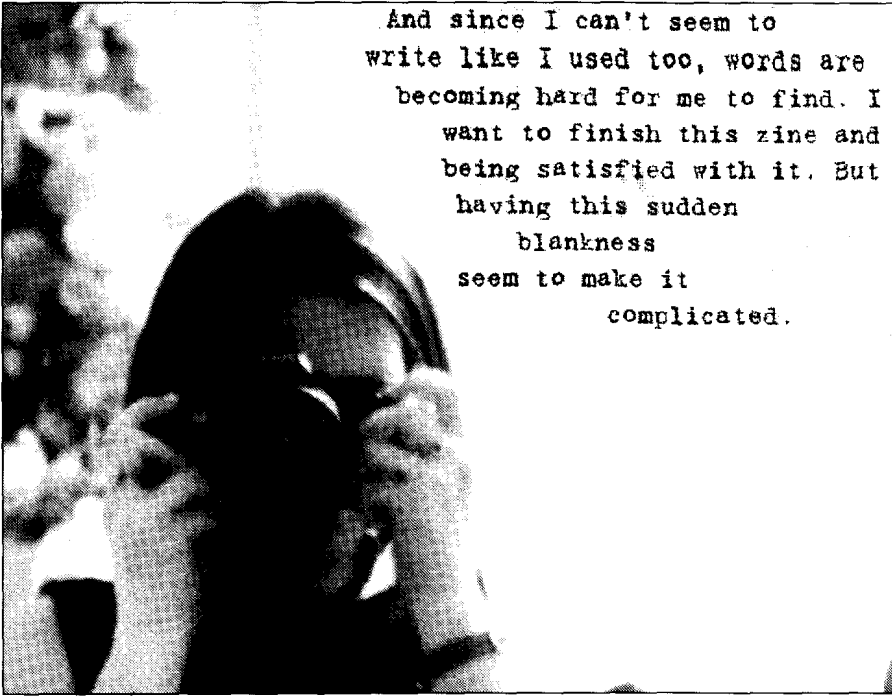
According to Stephen Duncombe, “zines are noncommercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines that their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves” (427). R. Seth Friedman, creator of the infamous *FactSheet Five* zine (which is dedicated to reviewing and exposing zines across North America), explains that zines are:

A small handmade amateur publication done purely out of passion, rarely making money or breaking even. Not short for “magazine” or written with an apostrophe (zine), though the derivation is from the word “fanzine.” (qtd. in Chu 71)

Fanzines became particularly popular in the 1970s with the rise of punk music in Britain and the United States. Duncombe explains that fanzines were used to “celebrate bands and music that were by and large ignored by the commercial and journalistic arbiters of rock music” (428). Although these fanzines increased an awareness about self-publications, zines have been traced all the way back to the sixteenth century when Martin Luther posted his zine “Ninety-five Theses” on the Castle Church door at Wittenberg (Chu 73). In the early twentieth century, poetry and literary chapbooks and zines were also popular, along with science fiction zines in the 1930s (Chu 74).

As Karen Green and Kristen Taormino explain in *A Girl's Guide to Taking Over the World*, although girls and boys have been making zines for years, in the 1990s, zines exploded into an immense underground culture. This explosion of zines has caused zinesters to place their creations in different categories which include fanzines (usually dedicated to a musician or band), perzines (personal zines), queer zines, and *grrrl* zines (zines made for, by, and about girls).

Before the explosion of zines in the 1990s, the zine world consisted mainly of punk fanzines and science fiction zines produced by males, and largely for male consumption (Duncombe). In the “letters” section of a 1983 issue of the zine, *America's Maximum Rock N Roll*, Duncombe found that while males were arguing over the question “what is punk?” girls were writing in to say that they felt ignored by punk. One girl stated:



And since I can't seem to
write like I used too, words are
becoming hard for me to find. I
want to finish this zine and
being satisfied with it. But
having this sudden
blankness
seem to make it
complicated.

Sonia Noël, Sixty Zine, Issue No. 6, Feb/March 2000, Moncton, N.B.

When I flip through these American punk zines, all I see are pictures after pictures of what looks like the same guy with an almost-shaved head, leaping and grimacing with a microphone and no shirt.... God, it gets boring! Just once, I'd like to see a picture of a girl playing a guitar and really working at it. (440-441)

The lack of representation of girls in the punk zine scene led to the development of riot grrrl, which began in the early 1990s. According to Duncombe, riot grrrl was "a network of young women linked by zines and bands... and by their anger" (441). Members of riot grrrl developed manifestos. Lisa Wildman, a riot grrrl from New York city explains that "We want the definition of Riot Grrrl to be whatever anyone who wants to use the term wants it to be" (qtd. in Duncombe 444). Duncombe suggests that riot grrrls were trying to "construct a new model of community... the new community will be based not in common understandings, but in shared dialogue" (445).

Julie Chu suggests that youth also

use zines as an outlet for self-expression; zines provide a place outside of the mainstream where "these self-made works carved out an intimate arena for young publishers to make their own sense of 'youth'" (Chu 76). The ability to articulate ideas about self-identity is incredibly important to girls because our views tend to remain unheard. Having the ability to construct a zine, a format which is unrestricted, is very liberating. Green and Taormino explain that the zine excerpts in their book,

Originate from a need for expression, a need girls have to discover the truth about themselves and their lives. Through zines, we can see young women uncensored and free to discuss their realities. (xiii)

Zines are an accessible format and they enable girls to create communities based on shared experiences and communication. Girls write about "feminist issues, such as race, gender, and class... self-esteem, relationships, growth, and pain... incest, rape, violence, sexual abuse, and mental illness" (Green and

Taormino xii). The ability to discuss such taboo issues is important because we do not see experiences similar to our own represented within the media. Duncombe writes, "the world in which we live is an increasingly mobile one and becoming ever more decentralized across space" (430). Because of this decentralization, girls do not have a common gathering space; and trading zines creates a space and opens up communication across state boundaries.

Some of the most prevalent issues within girl zines include sexuality, body image, politics, and feminism. While some of these issues may be discussed within mainstream media, the way in which the zines deal with these issues is often much different. For example, while the mainstream media may discuss sexuality in a very serious tone, the discussions of sexuality in girls' zines may often range from melodramatic to satirical to fiercely honest and personal. It is also apparent that girls who create zines are not worried about the feelings or comfort of their readers; most zines tend to deal with issues in a very confrontational, honest, and frank manner, an approach which may make some readers uncomfortable.

The media's portrayal of women's sexuality affects every aspect of life because it teaches us what is normal and what is not. The most prevalent message is that we are supposed to be heterosexual. The media also enforces stereotypes about women's sexuality, such as "do not touch yourself" and "if a woman has lots of sex, she's a slut. If a man has lots of sex, he's a stud" (Muscio 8). So girls are taught to feel ashamed of our sexuality.

It is apparent in excerpts from girls' zines that young girls are constantly trying to come to terms with their sexuality. In "Girl Picnic," Elissa Nelson discusses a sexual experience with another girl. In her story, it is her friend who pursues her, and Elissa merely goes along. In the end, the two girls end up kissing and touching each other, but then the friend goes to school and tells everyone at school

about their experience. Elissa recalls:

No one in school will talk to me now. And the walls in the girls' bathroom say stuff about me, mostly just that I'm a lesbo. Somebody wrote not to let me in the bathroom because I'm not a real girl ... they act like I would rape them or something if I saw them naked.... So I was the only one who had to go see the counsellor, and he was going to call my mom. So that's when I cried too, and I said that none of it had happened, the girl was mad at me for something else and, ick, I said, did he really think I'd touch another girl like that? (qtd. in Green and Taormino 17-20)

In this excerpt, Elissa concludes that she wasn't sorry that the sexual experience happened. But it is apparent that she realized what she did was viewed as wrong and because of this, she pretended to be disgusted about the rumours the counselor had heard. "Girl Picnic" is an excellent example of the negative stereotypes of queer and bisexual females. These negative stereotypes influence some girls to avoid or repress their sexuality.

In "Learning to Fuck," Sandra Lee Golvin writes that "on my forty-first birthday I learn how to fuck you. How it took so many years I cannot explain" (qtd. in Green and Taormino 6). In this excerpt, Golvin is addressing her "butch love." It has taken her more than 40 years to come to terms with her sexuality, and it is only after all this time that she has been able to learn how to be intimate with her lesbian lover.

"Girl Picnic" and "Learning to Fuck" obviously deal with lesbianism, but there are also zines which deal with other sexuality issues such as masturbation. Many of the messages which girls receive about sexuality affect body image. For example, we are either not taught about vaginas, or taught they are dirty. This leads to much self-disgust and fear. Inga

Muscio, in her book *Cunt*, recounts being shown a movie about menstruation in Grade Six. The result of seeing this movie led Muscio to believe:

That my cunt was the yucksville reason I had to sit in that stupid cafeteria watching some hack nurse show me how to safety pin a three-mile wide wad of cotton to a pair of brief underpants ... while the other half of the sixth grade population was out in the sunshine playing softball. (29)

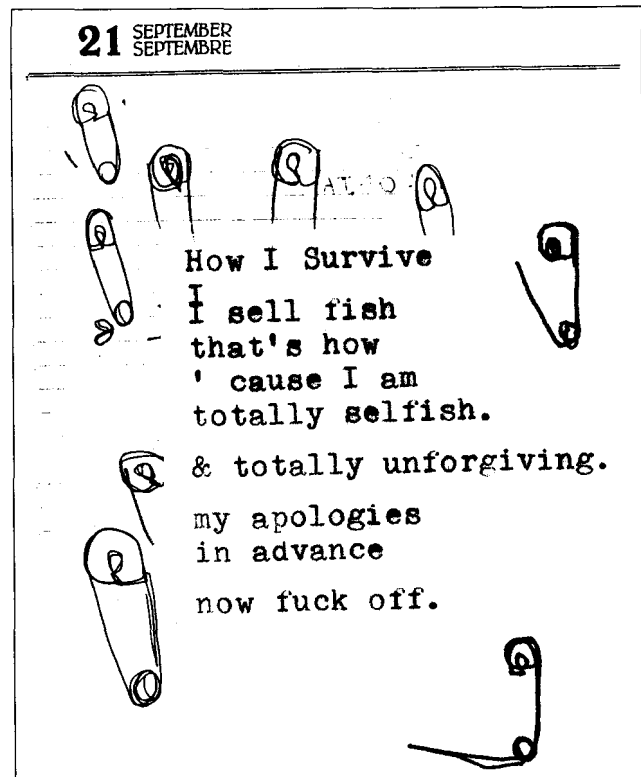
Muscio, like many other girls, became disgusted and ashamed of her own body.

It is important for girls to discuss the issue of body image because:

Young women are under enormous pressure to fit in with a perpetual beauty competition; they are taught to judge and criticize their own bodies from the outside, as society sees them, and to deny how their bodies feel, within. Many women internalize self-hatred as teenagers ... almost every woman feels there's something "wrong" with some part of her body. (Watkins, Rueda, Rodriguez 138-139).

In "There is Something Horribly, Terribly Wrong," Sarah F. writes that:

There is something horribly, terribly wrong when so many girls suffer from eating problems. i'm not talking about the clinically-diagnosed anorexics and bulimics—i'm referring to me, perhaps you, and i believe most middle and high school girls in this country who have



Sonja Ahlers, creator of various zines, Victoria, B.C.
Creator of *Temper, Temper* (Insomniac Press).

made food our best friend and worst enemy. (qtd. in Green and Taormino 31-32)

In "The Fat Truth," Max Airborne discusses the difficulties she has with her body image. When she starts seeing a therapist, she tells him/her that she is okay with her body image. The rest of her rant is about how she really isn't okay with her body, but how she is trying to come to grips with her feelings and self-esteem. Airborne writes, "I need to love myself anyway, despite the fat-hating world" (qtd. in Green and Taormino 45).

In "Girl Talk," Tammy Rae Carland writes that:

All these symptoms of self-loathing and self-deprivation really need to be addressed. Within the critique of representation, we also have to foster a dialogue amongst ourselves about how this affects women's relationships to their own bodies. (qtd. in Green and Taormino 46)
In her book, *Wake Up, I'm Fat!*,

actress Camryn Manheim discusses body image and self-esteem. Manheim discusses how the zine *Fat!So?* affected her, saying that she found:

A community in which I belonged. For the first time I could read magazines about women without feeling shitty and hating myself. I could identify with the stories; the letters were from people who had similar experiences, and, yes, the pictures were of women just like me. (133)

Zines can serve as a way for feminists around the world to connect. Zines provide an outlet to discuss issues connected to feminism. In "An Interview with Action Girl," Taormino discusses girls and zines with "Action Girl" Sarah Dyer. Dyer explained that she was feeling alienated because she was working on a punk zine with a guy, and she was also booking shows with a guy, and although she did half or more of the work, she never got mentioned or received any thanks. So, she decided to start her own zine. Dyer was able to network with other female "zinesters," many of whom began to write to her and ask her about feminism. Girls wrote Dyer that they agree with many feminist principles, but don't think that they can call themselves feminist because they were makeup or have a boyfriend. Dyer said that "feminists of the original Women's Movement of the '70s don't understand that young women of today grew up with the things that feminism was trying to achieve for women. So, adolescence is completely different today" (qtd. in Green and Taormino 167-170). The networking and connections which zines provide enable girls to pose questions to others who might be able to help them.

In "Things I'm Gonna Stop Doing with My White Privilege," "Mary" lists 15 resolutions. Some examples include, "asserting my knowledge of it [white privilege] with non-white

people, as if it's not already obvious enough" and "think i'm disconnected from racism cuz i'm white; the ways in which racism affects me are often invisible because i benefit from it" (qtd. in Green and Taormino 189-190). By publishing a piece about her white privilege, this "zinester" is making other white girls aware of their privilege. "Mary" is asserting the fact that although she is white, she is not going to be silent about racism, something which affects us all.

An awareness of white privilege is something which was missing on the campus of Barnard College. In "Sisterhood Would Have Been Powerful," Sasha discusses how liberal feminists were unaware of the troubles of their working-class sisters. At her school, secretaries and clerical workers (many of which were Black and Latino) had been on strike for months, demanding more control over their wages. Sasha noticed that the press and feminists virtually ignored the striking women. On the evening of Take Back the Night, Sasha decided to not join in the march because:

I have found that most of the women before me tend to see "women's issues" as a preordained set of concerns in a vacuum, divorced from politics in general, and consequently fail to make the obvious connections to issues unmentioned in Women's Studies 101. Most of them have ignored the strike, which seems to me like the most pressing "women's issue" on campus. (qtd. in Green and Taormino 171-174)

The issues which girls discuss in their zines is something which many people may not understand. Persons belonging to older generations may not agree that girls should be concerned with issues of body image, sexuality, feminism, etc.

Zines allow girls to be ourselves. Zines allow girls to challenge the dominant discourse about how a girl

should/should not define herself. In an excerpt from a zine called *The Bad Girl Club*, Amy writes that everyone should do a zine,

Because you can do whatever you want!... If you got stuff to say, say it! and say it in a zine. Its one of the best ways to release, and if people read your stuff and it strikes 'em as familiar... you've related with someone you don't even know. (qtd. in Green and Taormino 147)

Although it is apparent that zines are an important forum for discussion and communication amongst young women, zines also have limitations. Zines are an underground form of expression, thus, it can be difficult for people to get their hands on them (Dixon). Zinesters generally do not make any money from their zine, so it can be difficult for them to print many copies of a zine (unless they have access to free photocopies). It's the same situation for distribution; stamps can be too expensive for many girls, and it is difficult to find people to distribute zines. When girls do find stores that will carry their zines, it becomes difficult to compete with the highly-produced, glossy magazines. Most zinesters do not make enough money from sales to cover the production costs of making a zine, hence, there is no money left to advertise or promote awareness for the zine. The last obvious limitation of zines is that they are often extremely short-lived. Girls do not make money off of zines and they are not working for anybody; because there is no binding agreement that these girls must continue making their zine, they are free to stop the zine at any time. Therefore, if a potential zine customer finally finds out about a particular zine, it may be too late to purchase it. Although it is clear that zines have many limitations, girls are now turning to cyberspace and the creation of e-zines in their search for liberation.

E-zines and print zines share many

commonalities. The computer world, like the zine world, has typically been male-dominated. However, many girls and women are learning how to navigate the web. Girls are also learning how to build web pages and use email. The interesting thing about the cyberspace is that it is virtually unrestricted and available to everybody who has access to a computer and modem (Hamilton). In comparison to print zines, online zines are more likely to be more successful in terms of creating a community and encouraging dialogue because e-zines can be accessed by more people on a wider scale (people all over the world surf the 'net) (Dixon). It is important to note that while e-zines appear to have limitless possibilities, they too, have limitations. E-zines are not accessible to persons who do not have access to computers, and even though girls are attempting to promote communication about feminist issues, "this expansion of discursive space does not necessarily, nor easily, translate into shifts in dominant public discourse" (Hamilton 183). However, cyberspace does have many possibilities for girls seeking to express themselves and reach a wider community of young women. Dixon writes that "the significance of ezines for feminist resistance lies mainly, but not exclusively, in the possibility for networking, connection, and community" (131).

Although it is clear that both print zines and e-zines have limitations, these problems do not outweigh the positive aspects of girls' zines. Zines continue to be important in the lives of young women because they act as a form of resistance to dominant messages about how a girl is supposed to define herself. Zines serve not only as a forum for self-expression, but also as a way of creating a community and promoting communication amongst young women.

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C. J. SAGE

A man in the mall

keeps following me
it's hard to understand
lots of other girls
young and green
he could pick
my irises
burn like suns
scream at him
he catches up anyway
stops around in front of me
whispers
what's wrong

nothing
I say
I'm just going
through this
thing

he nods
holds his hand out
open it
he says

a fresh cut
bud inside
a small steel
perforated box
jasmine or
honeysuckle
perfect

he says
for you

C. J. Sage's poems have appeared (or are forthcoming) in a wide variety of journals and magazines. C. J. is the Managing Editor of the poetry magazine Disquieting Muses.