DIY Feminism: Grrrl Zines in the Third Wave
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This exhibit highlighted the connection between participatory media and feminism, using materials held in The University of Michigan’s Labadie Collection and the Art, Architecture, and Engineering Library’s Special Collections. It focuses on DIY (do-it-yourself) feminist media in the 90s and early 21st century through the format of the zine. Merriam-Webster defines the zine as “a noncommercial often homemade publication usually devoted to specialized and often unconventional subject matter.”

Seizing the Means of (Re)Production

There is a storied history between women and DIY media. Women have often been shut out from the publication modes of mainstream society. The images presented here represent a sample of women’s independent publications created throughout the years.

In the mid-19th century, women created scrapbooks to share personal thoughts and stories in a time when they were unable to do so in the public sphere (Piepmeier, 2009). In the late 19th and early 20th century, suffragettes faced prosecu- tion for spreading homemade pamphlets related to the sexual healtheducation (Piepmeier, 2009). The rise of duplication machines in the mid-20th century provided Second Wave feminists an inexpensive means to spread their message and build their movement (Piepmeier, 2009). This tradition continued into the 90s by Third Wave feminists (binary and nonbinary, straight and queer) because, as noted in the zine Bikini Kill, “we must take over the means of production in order to create our own meanings.”

Third Wave Feminism resulted as a reaction against the doctrine of the Second Wave. It emerged as a fight against elitism and white privilege, though the Third Wave would not be free of similar transgressions. As technology advanced and widespread accessibility to photocopiers increased, the zine was an ideal means to spread a new feminist message. Zines came out of the culture of punk, which sought to subvert mainstream culture through a DIY aesthetic to art, music, and life (Bates & McHugh, 2005). Grrrl zinesters combined this DIY ethos with a Third Wave agenda.

The Physical and the Personal

Even in today’s world, dominated by the digital, the popularity of the physical zine has remained. The images below provide examples of the physical and personal nature of grrrl zines. Meaning exists in written words, but also through the zines’ physical carrier and the act of creation. Zinemaking engages individuals with material culture outside of the mainstream media, allowing for experimentation and transformation of meaning (Piepmeier, 2009). This feminist crafting puts value in the intrinsic object and the process, while creating community amongst its participants (Piepmeier, 2009).

Most grrrl zines contain political and personal content. This content is often constructed as an antithesis to traditional “female” identity. Grrrl zinesters take mainstream media images and turn them on their head, making the zine both a method of self expression and a method of destabilizing the self.

Rebel Grrrl

By the '90s, women were vocally confronting sexism in the punk scene and moving from the role of consumer to active participant. Riot Grrrl was the explosion of a feminist focused music scene originating in Washington DC and Olympia, WA. Forefront to this scene was the band Bikini Kill, featuring two notable zinesters as members, Tobi Vail and Kathleen Hanna. Riot Grrrl grew to become more than a regional music scene. It came to

Resisting the Riot

The critique of prevailing white feminism was not a new phenomenon with the coming of the Third Wave or Riot Grrrl. In the 70s, feminists of color criticized the Second Wave as their voices were often washed away in a sea of white homogeneity. Many white feminists focused on gaining equality with men, while ignoring other factors of difference and privilege outside of the male/female binary, such as race, sexuality, and ability (Piepmeier, 2009).

Critiques of white feminism continued into the '90s, into the subculture of Riot Grrrl and punk, and in zine culture. Many women of color were frustrated by a general insistence on a common “sisterhood” and the tendency of white women to try and speak for all feminists (Schilt, 2005). Creating zines was an opportunity for these women of color to share their personal stories and confront the problematic issues of the Riot Grrrl movement.

Zinester, punk, feminist, and scholar Mimi Nguyen sums this up in her essay, “It’s (Not) a White World: Looking for Race in Punk” (2011):

Now, I truly believe that riot grrrl was- and is- the best thing that ever happened to punk. Please, quote me on that. Riot grrrl critically interrogated how power, and specifically sexism, organized punk. Unfortunately, not grrrl also reproduced structures of racism, classism, and (less so) heternormativity in privileging a “we” that primarily described the condition of mostly white, mostly middle-class women and girls.