GIRL ZINES
making media
doing feminism
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with a foreword by Andi Zeisler
Introduction

We have big plans for a grassroots, girl power, teenage girl movement of youth rebellion—jackets, we need jackets. The power of style must not be downplayed in terms of political mobilization. Can’t you picture it—gangs of girls—teenage girls in gangs all across America, breaking through boundaries of race and class and sexual identity, girls so strong together that they don’t listen to people who tell them they are stupid or that they don’t mean anything because they don’t really exist—girls so strong together that no one dares to fuck with them when they are walking down the street—girls so strong together that they learn to help out their moms and help them to get away from their dads when necessary. . . . GIRL SOLDIERS . . . we need jackets. And just think of the books that will be written, the cultures that will arise, the bands, the movies that will be made etc.


Fans attending Bikini Kill concerts in 1991 might have received a small photocopied booklet with the title *Jigsaw* printed across the top in a large typewriter font and messy handwriting across the bottom scrawling the words “true punx, real soul and the revolution girl style now.” The cover features a photograph of the band Bratmobile performing. In the blotchy, photocopied image, the lead singer of the band stands with her hands on her hips, mouth open, singing into a microphone. She looks defiant and also feminine, wearing retro cat’s-eye glasses and a dress with a small white heart on the lapel. To the left, the guitarist chunks at her instrument, wearing a kilt, hair pulled back with a large headband. The women, divided by a drumset, are intent on their performance: they are serious musicians. In contrast, the top and bottom of the cover are
bordered by photocopied foil stars, like the kind that a teacher would put on an elementary school test. The cover is simultaneously—and perhaps surprisingly—friendly, playful, and fierce, like the revolution girl style that the scrawled handwriting invokes. Here punk girls play their own music and create their own publications, and Bikini Kill’s fans could shove the booklet into their pockets and take it home to read about what it means to have a revolution not just by and for girls, but girl style—grounded in aesthetics, narratives, and iconography that emerge from the experiences of girls in the early 1990s.

Jigsaw is a zine, a frontrunner in the proliferation of zines by girls and women that began in the 1990s, catalyzed by the punk movement, Riot Grrrl—a feminist political and musical movement (sometimes identified as a subculture) that began in the early 1990s in Olympia, Washington, and Washington, D.C.—and the emergent third wave of feminism. Zines are quirky, individualized booklets filled with diatribes, reworkings of pop culture iconography, and all variety of personal and political narratives. They are self-produced and anti-corporate. Their production, philosophy, and aesthetic are anti-professional. According to Stephen Duncombe, the author of the only book-length scholarly study of zines, they are “scruffy, homemade little pamphlets. Little publications filled with rantings of high weirdness and exploding with chaotic design.” Like Jigsaw, most zines are messy, photocopied documents that may contain handwriting, collage art, and even stickers and glitter. Because zines are ephemeral underground publications, it is impossible to determine how many are in circulation, but one scholar estimated 50,000 in 1997, and overflowing stocks at zine distributor Microcosm Press and bookstores like Quimby’s in Chicago and Reading Frenzy in Portland testify to their prevalence today.3

They cover every imaginable subject matter, from food politics to thrifting to motherhood. They are an example of participatory media—media created by consumers rather than by the corporate culture industries—and, as such, despite predictions of their demise in the mid-1990s due to the rise of the internet, they are part of a continuing trend in late capitalist culture.4

Zines created by girls and women—what this study will call “grrrl zines”—are sites where girls and women construct identities, communities, and explanatory narratives from the materials that comprise their cultural moment: discourses, media representations, ideologies, stereotypes, and even physical detritus. According to girls’ studies scholar Mary Celeste Kearney, zines are “the primary type of media created by
Cover of *Jigsaw* #4 (left), courtesy of Tobi Vail.

Example of zines on display at Quimby's Bookstore in Chicago (below) (photo by Natalie Coffin).
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contemporary American girls," and I argue that these documents not only
reveal girlhood on the ground but also are a site for the development of a
late-twentieth-century feminism.8 Though a number of scholars have in-
vestigated grrrl zines in recent years, this volume, Girl Zines, is the first
book-length study of zines by girls and women.7 The central questions I
address in this book are the following: Why zines? What forms of expres-
sion do zines enable that may not be possible in other media? How do
girls and women make use of contemporary cultural materials in creating
zines, and to what ends? I ultimately contend that, considered collectively,
zines are sites for the articulation of a vernacular third wave feminist the-
ory. Grrrl zines offer idiosyncratic, surprising, yet savvy and complex res-
ponses to the late-twentieth-century incarnations of sexism, racism, and
homophobia.

Before discussing the intellectual agendas and underpinnings of Girl
Zines, I want to consider Jigsaw as a brief case study. Grrrl zines' inform-
ality can be deceptive: the starred and scrawled Jigsaw might look like
girlish bedroom play—the kind of thing that scholars are quick to dis-
miss as trivial or unsophisticated—but, in fact, Jigsaw and zines like it are
often offering serious reconceptualizations of gender, race, sexuality, and
identity. They are tightly packed artifacts with levels of signification. This
complexity is apparent in a close examination of one part of Jigsaw. Tobi
Vail, Jigsaw's editor, ends the issue with "The Jigsaw Manifesto." Excerpted
in the epigraph to this introduction, this manifesto reflects a number of
traits that are characteristic of grrrl zines and the third wave of feminism
more broadly.

"The Jigsaw Manifesto" calls for a revisioning of gender—a "girl
revolution"—that links identity with the formation of female-centered
community. This gender work takes place at multiple levels. Most visible
is the level of content, with the image of tough girl gangs. In a culture that
celebrates the catfight as the paradigmatic mode of female interaction and
generally represents women as weak and physically ineffectual, Vail of-
fers the alternative—and resistant—idea of female strength through com-

community. She envisions girl gangs—identifiable "GIRL SOLDIERS," wearing
their jackets—combating the sexist hostilities of mainstream culture. The
reader can imagine these groups of girls, perhaps wearing black leather,
ignoring those who tell them they are stupid, deflecting street harass-
ment, and rescuing their mothers from abusive fathers. This image also
encompasses broader identity categories than gender, as the girl gangs are
"breaking through boundaries of race and class and sexual identity." She
offers a vision of girls changing the world, with cultural artifacts springing up to document what they have done. This is an effort both to reimagine childhood and to generate feminist community, and, by calling for cultural productions—books, music, movies—to be part of this process, Vail makes a space for her own zine as part of this effort for cultural change.

Another level at which Vail’s revisioning operates—one not, perhaps, as immediately obvious—is the level of rhetoric. Her manifesto uses excessive language, as when she demands “a grassroots girl power teenage girl movement of youth rebellion.” In this short phrase, she reiterates age categories four times and lists three terms related to agency: power, movement, and rebellion. Similarly, she repeats the phrase “girls so strong together” three times in this excerpt. Throughout the manifesto, she deploys and perhaps mimics a stereotypically girlish rhetoric that suggests enthusiasm and over-the-top affect. Her repetition of words, phrases, and ideas, however, also signals that she is struggling against constraints, struggling with saying something that is difficult to say with the vocabulary available to her. The images of girls in conflict are so overwhelming in consumer culture industries that she must reiterate “girls so strong together” as a kind of refrain to counteract the dominant message.

Her efforts to alter and control how girls are represented are also evident in the visual elements of the zine. Vail was part of the Riot Grrrl movement (discussed in chapter 1), a movement that, among other things, rewrote the word “girl” to incorporate an angry growl: grrrl. This term became one of the most recognizable markers of third wave feminism and girl culture, quickly appearing not only in zines but also in mainstream media and advertising. Vail was among the cohort credited with coming up with the phrase “riot grrrl,” but she later said it was a joke and didn’t like to use the terminology. What’s interesting is that Jigsaw #4 is filled with the word “grrrl,” but in my copy, every instance of “grrrl” has been crossed out—presumably by Vail, as a protest against the popularity of the term.

Rather than writing a new zine or a manifesto against the terminology, Vail changed the existing artifact. Her zine, then, must be understood not simply in terms of its content but in terms of its existence as a material object that can be altered to mark the passage of time and changing opinions. It can be difficult for a reader to identify Vail’s tone, and this elusive quality, rather than being a shortcoming of the writing, strikes me as indicative of grrrl zines more broadly. For instance, even the title “The Jigsaw Manifesto” is so earnest that it can seem sarcastic in the context of
the girlish pictures and stars in the zine. A similar instability emerges in the writing itself: Vail begins the excerpted passage with what is apparently a serious call for rebellion, but she immediately follows this phrase with the insistent “jackets, we need jackets” and the emphatic statement that the “power of style must not be downplayed.” Here she seems both to be mocking the media’s emphasis on women’s fashion and simultaneously attempting to marshal the possibility of fashion as a means of self-construction and creation of solidarity. Her unwillingness to be transparent is characteristic of zines; indeed, grrrl zines seem to offer an implicit critique of the notion of transparency, which suggests a one-dimensionality and self-awareness at odds with the identities being constructed in these zines. Jigsaw offers no clear distinctions between the ironic and the sincere, playing fast and loose with both and, as in the previous example, often deploying irony and sincerity simultaneously, an approach that is both cagey and strategic.

Just as the zine vacillates between irony and sincerity, so, too, does it tip between hope and cynicism. Vail’s manifesto offers a utopian vision, and some of her language seems to register it as fantasy. By saying “Can’t you picture it” and ending the list of ways girl gangs will be documented with a vague “etc.,” Vail allows for a kind of imprecision that’s more appropriate
for a dream than a political précis. Indeed, the almost breathless momentum of the manifesto, propelled by dashes, suggests enthusiasm without commitment. And yet the anger that flares up in her description of "girls so strong together that no one dares fuck with them" hints at an uneasy negotiation between utopia and reality. Vail seems to want this vision to be real, but she can't really believe that it could be. This uneasy negotiation, as I discuss next, is a central element in grrl zines' work of third wave theory production.

By calling for the creation of female community, interrupting mainstream gender norms, identifying intersectional identities, and moving seamlessly between tongue-in-cheek irony and hope, "The Jigsaw Manifesto" maps out the terrain that grrl zines inhabit.

*Theory Production in Grrrl Zines*

The themes that appear and reappear in *Jigsaw* have emerged, as well, in my conversations with grrrl zine creators. In order to make sense of *Jigsaw*, to assess the cultural work that this artifact and zines like it are performing, it is necessary to situate grrrl zines historically and theoretically. I take up their historical positioning in chapter 1. For now, I focus on the intellectual scaffolding that I used in this study to examine grrrl zines. While *Girl Zines* builds on the zine scholarship of Duncombe's *Notes from Underground*, the primary frameworks for this study are girls' studies and third wave feminism. Many scholars working in these areas are aware of zines but have either devoted limited attention to them or have approached them from a singular disciplinary vantage point (often sociological). In contrast, in this volume, I combine the existing scholarly work on zines with a much-needed broad range of interdisciplinary perspectives on book culture, activist art, and participatory media in order to map out as fully as possible the personal, political, and theoretical work that grrrl zines perform.

In taking seriously the literary, cultural, and interpersonal productions of girls and women, this volume contributes to a growing academic discussion about girls and girl culture. In particular, this study follows on such recent girls' studies scholarship as Mary Celeste Kearney's *Girls Make Media*, Anita Harris's *Future Girl*, and the work of Janice Radway. These scholars position girls as producers of culture, not merely consumers, countering mainstream media depictions of girls, as well as youth culture scholarship that has by and large positioned boys as agents and girls as
onlookers. Further, these scholars recognize girls' identity construction as a complex phenomenon that takes place messily at the intersections of the individual and her social context. The most interesting girls' studies work undertakes interdisciplinary explorations of girls and their culture, drawing on literary, sociological, and media studies methodologies, and it is with this work that Girl Zines is aligned.

A related, sometimes overlapping, scholarly conversation—and one that occupies a greater portion of this study—emerges from third wave feminism. Grrrl zines are deeply and thoroughly implicated in the scholarly and cultural concept of the third wave of feminism. The "third wave" is a term that loosely defines a generational and political cohort born after the heyday of the second wave women's movement. It is not an untroubled term, to be sure; the concept of a third wave of feminism is contested, with some scholars embracing it and others arguing that it should be abandoned. Those opposed to the framing of late-twentieth-century feminism in terms of a third wave contend that the "wave" terminology has lost its usefulness. They note that young feminists are still facing many of the same issues that feminists of the second wave fought, an observation that might suggest that we are still in the second wave. They point out, too, that the terminology is sometimes used to dramatize generational differences where none exist—turning feminism into a catfight—and to flatten nuanced ideological differences that aren't necessarily linked to chronological generation.

While there is merit to these arguments, I still find the third wave to be a useful concept, because it identifies and catalyzes a particular generational group—a group that encompasses a great deal of diversity of perspectives but that shares relevant similarities. It's a term I use with awareness of its problems but that I am not ready to abandon, in part because it designates certain distinctive characteristics of late-twentieth-century feminism. Girls and women who came to consciousness in an era in which second wave feminist ideals were part of the culture—taken for granted, even if not actually enacted—have a different view of gender than earlier generations. This is not to suggest their view of gender is better or somehow more enlightened; indeed, one of the characteristics of this cohort is the fact that their initial encounters with feminist ideas are often mediated through the conservative backlash against feminism, and thus they often couch their own feminist assertions in the apologetic "I'm not a feminist, but . . . ." In addition, this group has grown up in a late-capitalist culture that has shaped individual subjectivity, designating
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(in often limiting ways) what is possible and what is imaginable. These characteristics, however, are part of what makes the third wave a useful concept, because they mark ways in which this generation of feminism is distinctive. In an earlier publication, Rory Dicker and I argued that this cohort's "political activism on behalf of women's rights is shaped by—and responds to—a world of global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism, and environmental degradation." Although there are certainly significant lines of connection between the second and third waves, "we no longer live in the world that feminists of the second wave faced," and it's therefore useful to examine how feminism has changed and how it manifests itself today.¹⁴

Explorations of the third wave as an identity group attempt to delineate who third wave feminists are, how they interact with previous feminist generations, and the ways in which they respond to and intervene in late-capitalist, backlash culture.⁹ Some of the fault lines are sexuality and pleasure, race and ethnicity, engagement with popular culture, and comfort with contradiction and incoherence. Although third wave feminism, particularly in early publications about it, was often conflated with "postfeminism," the two concepts now are widely recognized as separate, with the third wave designating a distinctive incarnation of feminism and "postfeminism," a term primarily used to imply that feminism has ended.⁹

Some of the distinctive characteristics of the third wave are visible in grrrl zines. Many of the questions scholars have asked about the third wave are equally applicable to the grrrl zine phenomenon: Is it truly activist, or simply immaturesly self-absorbed? Is it actually different from the second wave, or mostly a marketing scheme? Does it emerge from real postmodern theoretical foundations, or is it merely offering a fetishizing of contradiction and fragmentation for its own sake? Here I contend that zines provide a vantage point on the third wave, and considering the two in tandem will allow us to answer these questions. As vernacular third wave productions—generationally if not ideologically, but often both—zines are a rich primary source, more revealing and extensive than the television shows and music that have often been the focus of third wave studies. As I explain in chapter 1, the origin stories of the two are inextricably intertwined. Grrrl zines are coterminous with the third wave; grrrl zines and third wave feminism respond to the same world.

Beyond sharing a historical moment with the third wave, grrrl zines are often the mechanism that third wave feminists use to articulate theory
and create community. The third wave is not merely a grouping of people whose ideological and generational affiliations can be articulated, nor is it simply a historical story to be told, although these are the ways in which it has most often been discussed. Indeed, since the mid-1990s, the third wave has been widely described but undertheorized. I suggest that the theoretical contributions—the vocabulary, conceptual apparatus, and explanatory narratives—of the third wave have not been recognized by scholars because they’re being developed in unexpected, nonacademic sites, like zines.

The idea of zines as sites of theory production may be somewhat surprising, as theory is generally associated with elitist academic practices, and zines occupy the opposite end of the spectrum, so intentionally lowbrow as to be able to be mistaken for trash. Carolyn Dever usefully broadens the category of theory in her study Skeptical Feminism: “All feminisms, I argue—whether in the classroom, on the streets, or in the pages of Time magazine or academic journals—that attempt to present a systematic justification, definition, explanation, or hypothesis linked more or less concretely to a body of evidence are ‘theoretical.’” Dever notes that, since its inception, feminist theory has existed in a state of uneasy tension: theory requires a certain degree of abstraction, but feminist practices have rightly demanded attention to material origins and conditions that are particularized. I contend that zines up the ante on this tension because they are intensely and intentionally local, individualized, and eccentric. However, Dever explains that this tension is “powerfully useful”: not something to be resolved or eliminated, it produces and propels a dialectic at the heart of feminist inquiry. Grrrl zines’ negotiations, then, of the specific and the generalizable—their sometimes messy careening between the local and the global, the personal and the political—are a process by which third wave theory is produced. This study draws on both aspects of third wave scholarship, viewing the third wave as a content area (particularly as set forth in chapter i) and as a set of conceptual strategies that grrrl zines practice and enact.

One such conceptual strategy is what Radway calls “insubordinate creativity”: creative construction of the self using the cultural materials that are “ready-to-hand.” These cultural materials—the ideas, conditions, and artifacts of late-twentieth-century America—generally do not originate with the girls and women who make zines. In fact, they don't always originate from sources that have the best interests of girls and women in mind; Jigsaw, like many zines, documents a culture that is actively hostile
to girls and women. But grrrl zinesters are able to bring these materials together in surprising ways, leveraging them against one another to release meanings that challenge, contradict, and go beyond the cultural materials themselves. Radway identifies this creativity as insubordinate, and it often is: unruly, insurgent energy that calls into question dominant cultural norms and that, in some cases, may be so disruptive that it is invisible or unintelligible from mainstream vantage points, misread as comical, trivial, or insignificant.

Clearly, however, the identity and community construction that take place in zines are not always resistant or countercultural. Indeed, grrrl zines often reveal levels of complicity with corporate culture industries and their repetitive, omnipresent, flattening representations of girls and women. *Bust,* for instance, a feminist magazine that started as a zine, has come under fire from some feminists for its adherence to certain conventions of mainstream women’s magazines, such as offering columns reviewing cosmetics and featuring fashion plates. It has also been critiqued for its approval of pornography, including its publication of explicit sex columns along with “The One-Handed Read,” a pornographic story featured in each issue.2 Action Girl Newsletter, too, could be seen as more complicit than resistant, as the manifesto included in each issue featured an apology for excluding boys: “This is NOT an anti-boy project. Okay, it is exclusionary—only projects done primarily by a female will be reviewed. But it’s because this is a specialized list, not because ‘boys are bad’ or ‘boy’s zines aren’t good.’ . . . So don’t be sad.”23 Further, Action Girl creator Sarah Dyer decided to appear in the quintessentially mainstream Seventeen magazine rather than the more alternative and feminist-friendly Sassy to publicize her zine.

I find, though, that I’m reluctant to read these zines and others like them as simply complicit, dupes of the patriarchy. Yet I’m also uncomfortable with the celebratory rhetorics that often accumulate in scholarly and mainstream commentary on zines and suggest that zines provide an expressive space free from cultural constraints.24 In short, I am skeptical of the kinds of intellectual binaries that would have us divide cultural productions in terms of complicity or resistance. This binaric thinking is pervasive, particularly in conversations about girls and women. In contemporary discourse about girls, it crops up as the dichotomy of the “at-risk girl” versus the “can-do girl,”24 categories that present girls either as victims of an oppressive culture or as resistant agents who are the success stories of late capitalism. This is another way in which grrrl zines and third
wave feminism are linked, because the third wave is often categorized according to the same rubrics, with third wave feminists presented either as complicit "fuck me feminists" or as radicals who are far surpassing their second wave predecessors. These categories can be seductive even for feminist scholars, particularly those influenced by some of the girl power/power feminism rhetorics of the third wave and the marketplace. It is tempting to celebrate the resistant and to dismiss works deemed complicit with hegemonic discourses.

These sorts of binaries obscure as much as they reveal. They imply that these categories—victimization and agency, complicity and resistance—are complete, coherent, and mutually exclusive, when, in fact, they almost always coexist in the lives of individual women and in cultural discourses and practices. As legal scholar Martha Mahoney notes, “Neither concepts of agency nor of victimization fully take account of women’s experiences of oppression and resistance in relationships” or in other aspects of their lives. By not allowing for the coexistence of agency and victimization, these categories serve to make one or the other invisible, so that the can-do girl is seen as being unaffected by a sexist culture, and the agency of the at-risk girl—identified as a passive victim of cultural inequities and ideologies—is elided, unable to be recognized. This bifurcated thinking constructs a distorted picture of girls and women and their relationship to their culture. They are either unaffected or completely overwhelmed. In fact, our relationships with our culture are much more complex, with girls and women simultaneously affected by cultural pressures and also able to act on their own behalf and as change agents, exhibiting agency within a context of varying levels and kinds of oppression.

As much as possible, then, in this volume I avoid the binaries—either of easy celebration or snide condemnation—opting, instead, to take zines seriously as literary and cultural artifacts with weight and merit and considering what they have to tell us about the American culture within and against which girls and women are operating. With this study, I align myself with the critical theoretical perspectives of poststructuralist feminist scholars such as Lora Romero, Chela Sandoval, Susan Bordo, and Carolyn Dever, who resist these kinds of bifurcated thinking. As these scholars’ work would suggest, asking whether girls and women are victims or agents, or whether grrl zines document complicity or resistance, flattens this rich resource. These are the wrong questions. Instead, in this volume, I consider what kinds of resistance are possible within this particular cultural and historical context and how girls and women leverage the
available cultural materials to create personal identities and communities. How are they articulating a feminism that is grounded in the specificities of the late-twentieth century (and early-twenty-first)? Grrrl zines are operating within the contemporary culture of late modernity, a culture that Anita Harris describes as “characterized by dislocation, flux, and globalization,” emphasizing “a new brand of competitive individualism” and demanding citizens who “can manage their own development and adapt to change without relying on the state.” In this volume, I examine what agency looks like in a social and cultural context defined by dislocation and self-creation, along with many persistent and innovative versions of the sexism, racism, and homophobia that feminists have been critiquing throughout the twentieth century.

**Blogs versus Zines**

One of the important questions to address at the outset is the connection of zines to the world of the internet. When one of my undergraduate research assistants explained this book project to her friends, she found that the easiest way to describe zines was to say, “They’re like blogs—just on paper.” In many ways, the connection between zines and blogs is an obvious one. Blogs and zines have a number of significant similarities: they’re both participatory media, spaces in which individuals can become creators rather than simply consumers of culture. They allow for the public sharing of the minutiae of life. They are publications that forego the gatekeepers of the traditional publishing marketplace—editors, publishers, and others who determine who’s in and who’s out. Anyone who wants a blog can have one, as long as he or she has access to a computer with an internet connection. Similarly, anyone who wants to create a zine can do so, as long as he or she has access to paper and the ability to photocopy. Both forms of media allow for creations of communities beyond the boundaries of the creator’s immediate physical environment.

It’s clear to anyone who’s paying attention, however, that digital media are becoming the twenty-first century’s predominant mechanism for communication and expression. Starting as early as the 1980s, observers of the zine community began forecasting the rise of the e-zine, and in the years since then, scholars and commentators have contended that the internet, in particular the blogosphere, has superseded paper zines—or will do so soon. Indeed, the rise in digital media has caused some critics to
predict not only the death of the zine but the death of the book as well—the death of paper media altogether.\textsuperscript{12} Zines, then, can be seen as a sort of nostalgic medium, harking back to a punk or grunge era that no longer exists. As I've explained this book project to colleagues, some have asked, "Does anyone even make zines these days?"\textsuperscript{12}

The answer is emphatically—and perhaps surprisingly—yes. Zines are still being made, and in great numbers. In the course of writing this book, I've acquired approximately one hundred newly made zines, given to me by the zine creators I've interviewed or my own students, or purchased in my many forays into independent bookstores around the country or online zine distribution sites. Blogs have not replaced zines.\textsuperscript{31} In fact, many of the zine creators I interviewed actively produce both zines and blogs. This fact alone suggests that zines and blogs, while related, aren't identical. The zine creators don't necessarily view blogs as a replacement for zines but, instead, as a supplement, a format that's doing something slightly different.\textsuperscript{14} While I examine some of the differences at length in chapter 2, I want to take a moment here to map out why girls and women continue to make zines in a digital age.

The climate of the internet itself is part of the answer. On the one hand, girls and women play vital roles on the internet. In December 2007, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that girls do significantly more blogging than boys.\textsuperscript{19} In particular, the internet has become a space where much third wave feminist activism and community-building are happening. Blogs such as Feministing, Blac(k)ademic, Feministe, Pandagon, Angry Black Bitch, and Girl with Pen, to name only a few, have become some of the main voices for the third wave.\textsuperscript{46} In 2006, the Guardian (Manchester, U.K.) estimated the number of feminist blogs to be 240,000, and these sites are visited by hundreds of thousands of readers a day.\textsuperscript{17}

On the other hand, mere presence doesn't necessarily challenge the structural conditions of the internet and cybercommunities. In an essay describing her own experiences creating and maintaining websites, zine creator Mimi Nguyen troubles the notion of the internet as a welcoming space for girls and women:

The feminist performance theorist Peggy Phelan writes, "If representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young white women should be running Western culture." It seems I might be able to offer a parallel observation, that if representational visibility equals power, then almost-naked young Asian women should be running a very big chunk
of cyberspace. That is, whenever I type "asian+women" into search fields
I get almost nothing but them.6

Nguyen's observation points to a fact that many bloggers and scholars
have recognized: the internet is a space that replicates many of the struc-
tural inequities of the nondigital world.39

The internet can be a racist, sexist space. In a 2008 issue of the zine/ 
magazine Bitch, Jaclyn Friedman reports on the "violent, gendered threats"
that she and other female bloggers have faced and the generally hostile cli-
mate that the internet provides for women.40 A number of recent studies
have documented the hostility of the internet for women. According to a
2006 University of Maryland School of Engineering study, "female-named 
chat-room users got more threatening and/or sexually explicit messages
than male-named users—25 times more, in fact."41 Similarly, a 2008 Pew
Internet and American Life Project report showed that being female was
a significant "risk factor" for being contacted by strangers on social net-
working sites, including contact described as "scary or uncomfortable."42

Nguyen provides an example of how this "scary or uncomfortable" vibe
can play out for female bloggers and web administrators. She features
many visual representations of herself in her zines, as discussed in chap-
ter 4. However, her online publications—including her websites "Worse
Than Queer" and "exoticize this!"—do not. She explains that her reason-
ing has to do with the climate of online communities: "The lack of pho-
tographs, of me, at least, had been a deliberate omission. . . . I have no
pressing desire to cater to that particular urge of the anonymous voyeur,
powered by a deceptively friendly neighborhood browser. (Nothing to see
here, folks)"43 And yet she notes that the "anonymous voyeurs" found
her nonetheless; she received regular hate emails because of her websites,
emails that recycled old and new stereotypes about feminism, and that,
she explains, "share a singular purpose, that is, to fuck with me."44 Numer-
ous other female bloggers have shared this experience of being "fucked
with" by anonymous readers, whose tactics Friedman describes as "satu-
rated with juvenile, racist, misogynist, and homophobic language and
imagery."45

To be sure, zine creators like Nguyen, Lauren Jade Martin, and others
don't posit the zine community as a utopian alternative to the internet;
they are clear that the zine world is not necessarily a space of "true" com-
community, where such dissent and hatred don't occur.46 As discussed in
chapter 2, however, zines do provide a kind of intimacy, and demand a kind
of effort, that seems to block some of the more opportunistic aggression that is prevalent online. Writing a hostile anonymous comment on a blog is easy; taking the time to write a letter, on paper, and mail it to someone whose zine you read is a more labor-intensive endeavor. It's also a more intimate one, since only the person who created the zine will read the letter, as opposed to the ostensibly broader audience for blog comments. For these reasons, at least in part, the zine creators I spoke to reported receiving a great deal fewer hostile responses from their zines than from their blogs. For instance, Ayun Halliday, creator of the zine *The East Village Inky*, told me that she's only received one critical letter in the ten years of producing her zine, and it "was so witty that I couldn't be that mad about it." In contrast, she explains, "On my last blog tour for [her book] *Dirty Sugar Cookies*, I did swing by one parenting [blog] that was great because it got me a ton of publicity, but *whooa*, some of the nasty comments, you know?"¹⁷

It's also the case that zines as paper artifacts register the connections of bodies and the passage of time more fully than digital technologies (addressed in chapter 2). Zine creator Lauren Jade Martin wrote a post on her blog about taking one of her essays off line because she's a much different person now than when she wrote it. It was an essay she originally published in a zine, and she explained why she felt comfortable with the essay in zine format rather than digital:

> Zines are tangible, are material. The writing is contained in an object that physically ages. Ink fades. Paper yellows. Holding a zine from even just ten years ago feels like holding an historical document. It's easier to place it, the writing inside, and the person who wrote it, in a particular moment in time, to contextualize it. Words appearing on a computer screen, even if they are date-stamped, seem the opposite: decontextualized, ahistorical, atemporal.¹⁶

Because her zine registers age, readers can intuitively understand that they are reading something that Martin might well have moved beyond; the zine, like the human body, changes with time. Halliday makes a related observation, explaining that she appreciates the longevity of zines:

> I'm not convinced that what's written on a blog, that it's still gonna be there if you don't print it out, you know? In ten years, is it just going to be sucked into the ether? Whereas maybe a hundred years from now
somebody's going to go into an attic or a basement and find a copy of *The East Village Inky* rattling around, and that, to me, is very exciting. I like the idea of the time capsule quality of something that's on paper in multiple units.  

Digital media, then, strike these zine creators as both atemporal and ephemeral in ways that zines are not. The materiality of zines differentiates them from blogs, not only in terms of the artifacts themselves but also in terms of the communities that accrue around them. Although zines and blogs have relevant similarities, the blog has not replaced the zine. Zines are a living medium with both historical and contemporary relevance for the lives of girls and women and for feminism's third wave. Historically they are a space where many third wave ideas and iconography developed, and as a contemporary phenomenon they allow for different kinds of community and different modes of activism than digital media.

**Organization of the Chapters**

Here in *Girl Zines*, I draw on a range of disciplinary perspectives—from participatory media to print culture studies to art theory—to trace a trajectory through zines' history, form, content, and effects. Because these categories operate interdependently, each chapter builds on the preceding ones to develop an increasingly complex picture of the cultural work of these zines and the girls and women who create them. With their uneven quality, their propensity for incongruity and fragmentation, and their comfort with lack of closure, grrrl zines don't play by the rules of previous historical moments or literary cultures. Understanding zines means that we must take them on their own terms. Rather than a comprehensive history or overview of the grrrl zine phenomenon, the chapters that follow offer particular thematic explorations accompanied by close readings of zines and comments from their creators.

This study begins with origin stories. Although most often zines are identified as originating in male-dominated spaces—from the pamphlets of the American Revolution to the punk zines of the 1970s—in chapter 1, I trace a feminist trajectory for zines, from the scrapbooks of nineteenth-century women's clubs through the mimeographed manifestos of second wave feminism. Positioning grrrl zines within a feminist legacy makes women's resistance visible. This perspective also keeps grrrl zines from
appearing to be an aberration when, in fact, they are part of a long-standing feminist legacy. Many grrrl zinesters have felt that they were creating an entirely new feminism, but I contend that they were revising feminism without reinventing it. Central to this origin story are the influence of Sarah Dyer's *Action Girl Newsletter* and the Riot Grrrl movement, both of which helped to spark the grrrl zine explosion that began in the 1990s. While Riot Grrrl has received scholarly and mainstream media attention, the *Action Girl Newsletter* has been less often recognized as one of the catalysts for the grrrl zine explosion and third wave feminism, and I argue for the importance of *Action Girl.* The *Action Girl Newsletter* and Riot Grrrl emerged simultaneously with the terminology of "third wave feminism," so grrrl zines and the third wave help to define each other.

Third wave feminism is one theoretical lens through which to examine zines. I offer another theoretical approach, grounded in the materiality of zines, in chapter 2, where I consider the fact that zines are not merely words on a page: they are material artifacts that must be examined with attention to their visual and sculptural elements as components of their meaning. Using tools drawn from print culture and art scholarship, I offer close readings of five zines—*I'm So Fucking Beautiful, Fragments of Friendship, The East Village Inky, No Better Voice,* and *Doris*—as case studies of the different ways in which zines can deploy what print culture scholars call "the semiotics of concrete forms." One phenomenon that interests me about zines is the miscellany that accumulates around them, the gifts and letters that circulate between zine creators and readers. In this chapter, I consider zines as the hub of a gift culture and argue that zines' materiality helps form a particular kind of connection between zine readers and creators, what I call an "embodied community." Pleasure plays a key role in creating embodied community. Pleasure is at the heart of the zine endeavor, motivating the creation of zines, connecting zine writers and readers, and making even bad zines worth reading. The embodied community, the attention to materiality, and the importance of pleasure are ideas that inform every subsequent chapter.

Grrrl zine creators' negotiations with the material terrain of gender—and their pleasures in doing so—are the focus of chapter 3. Most zines by girls and women address gender, taking on mainstream concepts of femininity in complex ways. As this chapter's title, "Playing Dress-Up, Playing Pin-Up, Playing Mom," suggests, zines often function as spaces not only for gender construction but also for gender play. Here I consider a broad set of grrrl zines—from one-off zines like *Grit & Glitter* to zines
like *Bust* which have become full-fledged magazines—with attention to the ways in which these zines are generating complex, creative subjectivities: third wave subjectivities. These zines document the challenges of female embodiment, embrace and redefine transgressive models of womanhood, and generate communities grounded in enjoyment and pleasure. I pay particular attention to the "mama zine," a subset of zines created by women, often in their thirties, who have children. These zines offer specific reconfigurations of what it means to be an adult woman, mapping out a terrain that is far more complex than mainstream media depictions of motherhood. What the idea of third wave subjectivities suggests is that these zines aren't offering depictions of authentic, coherent selfhood—"the real girl." Instead, the zine creators make strategic use of fragmentation and incompleteness, constructing tentative, multilayered, and sometimes contradictory self-representations, representations that are well suited to a late-capitalist, postmodern climate.

These third wave subjectivities are often amplified in zines by girls and women of color. Although grrrl zines are primarily created by white girls and women with access to material resources, the number of zines written by women of color suggests that the zine medium is a useful space for articulating intersectional subjectivities. In chapter 4, I consider zines that challenge the flattened, depoliticized discourses of multiculturalism and diversity in a post-civil rights era. The zines I examine in this chapter, including *Quantify*, *Evolution of a Race Riot*, *Slant*, and *With Heart in Mouth*, activate complex, shifting self-representations, with attention to the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, class, and history. They identify the personal as a site that's constrained and configured by larger institutions and power structures, as well as by the symbolic realm, and they make those constraints visible. In particular, I argue that zinesters make creative use of limiting cultural symbolism, leveraging their own self-representations against such familiar racist and sexist iconography as the sexualized "Oriental" woman and Aunt Jemima. In so doing, they give the lie to claims that we are a "colorblind" society. Notably, they challenge the rhetoric of colorblindness, not only in the culture at large but in the world of feminist politics and activism as well. Just as Sarah Dyer used the *Action Girl Newsletter* to make space for her voice within a punk community, the zine creators I consider in this chapter use their zines to make feminism more inclusive and true to its own ideals.

I culminate the book in chapter 5, in an examination of grrrl zines' political effects. While some zines are self-consciously political and others
emphasize personal reflection, all zines fit under the rubric of what communication scholar Clemencia Rodriguez calls "citizens' media," media that "activate subtle processes of fracture in the social, cultural, and power spheres of everyday life." Zines configure resistance at the microlevel; rather than a grand revolution, they offer resistance in small, particular, utterly grassroots manifestations. In chapter 5, I consider three different sets of zines that offer three different pedagogical modalities: pedagogies of process, active critique, and imagination. While global capitalism and media consolidation work to create homogenization for the sake of ever-larger markets, zines embrace the unmarketable, the local, the particular, and the quirky. They perform micropolitical interventions within hegemonic systems and within the symbolic order; indeed, their interventions are so personalized that they are often invisible as activism to scholars who are searching for the kinds of social change efforts that were prevalent in the social justice movements of the earlier twentieth century. By offering an alternative to mainstream late-capitalist modes of operation, zines enact a public pedagogy of hope.

Over the past several years, I have collected hundreds of zines by girls and women, and I have had lengthy, in-depth conversations with a dozen zine creators. I have also had conversations with fifteen zine readers who are located across the country who explain what zine reading means to them. I have spoken with women whose zines went on to become successful magazines, such as Lisa Jervis and Andi Zeisler of Bitch and Laurie Henzel and Debbie Stoller of Bust. In addition, I’ve interviewed women who have created zines—sometimes many of them—with no magazine aspirations, such as Neely Bat Chestnut and Nomy Lamm. In these conversations, zine creators answered the question of why they made paper zines, particularly in an era of digital media, which I explore in chapter 2. Most identified zines as a site for working through ideas about gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and other identity categories, as I discuss in chapters 3 and 4. And as I explain in chapter 5, many of the conversations revealed a complex interplay of personal and political motives in the zines. It is worth noting, however, that I relied less on individualized, psychological readings and more consistently drew on tools of cultural analysis for this study.

While most of these zine creators are on the East and West Coasts, in urban hubs where zines are familiar objects and where zine distribution networks are often in place, I have also spoken with zine creators from more surprising locales, including Nashville, Tennessee; Asheville, North Carolina; and Charleston, South Carolina. As discussed in chapters 2 and
5, zines inspire other zines so that the zine phenomenon is self-sustaining, creating what Duncombe calls a "virtual bohemia." He notes that these other locales almost certainly outnumber urban hubs for zine production. Often, the zines emerging from locations not known for having alternative or bohemian subcultures are the most interesting, revealing how girls and women create community and identity in the absence of a supportive in-person community.

The work that girls and women do in and through zines may seem personal, but the theoretical structures that zines build and the hope that zines offer point to the larger political project of grrrl zines. Grrrl zines provide a glimpse of the future of feminism. They document feminism's ability to transform itself to respond to a changing culture and to help girls and women construct firmer social identities and innovative political interventions.