Zines Then and Now:
What Are They? What Do You Do with Them?
How Do They Work?¹

Janice Radway
Northwestern University

Zines are peculiar.² There’s no way around that fact. They are well known enough to have been the subject of a number of compilations, anthologies, books, and films devoted to their analysis, most issued since 1990.³ They are considered significant enough to be archived at a number of university, state, and big city libraries in the United States.⁴ Collections have also been developed in Europe, the UK, Canada, and New Zealand.⁵ The wealth of online material relating to zines includes an alternative online encyclopedia dedicated to zines in general, known as Zinewiki, as well as an elaborate site, Grrrl Zine Network, providing access to a huge

¹ The author would like to thank Anouk Lang and two anonymous readers for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
² The word, “zine,” is a contraction of the word, “fanzine,” itself a neologism generated to refer to amateur publications produced by fans of various popular cultural forms – initially, science fiction, later comics, television shows, music and musicians.
⁴ There are major zine collections at Barnard College, Bowling Green State University DePaul University, Duke University, Michigan State University, San Diego State University, Smith College, the University of Michigan (the Labadie Collection), the Salt Lake City Public Library, and The New York State Library. In addition, there are a number of private zine libraries including the ABC no Rio Library in New York, the Denver Zine Library, and the Olympia Zine Library in Olympia, WA.
amount of material about girl zines, the Riot Grrrl movement, and third wave feminism. Yet, more often than not, if you explain to someone that you are researching girl zines, the immediate response is to ask, ‘What’s a zine?’ This is as true for me as it was for Stephen Duncombe in 1997, when he began the first full length academic book about the recent zine explosion, *Notes from underground: zines and the politics of alternative culture*, with the sentence, ‘But what are they?’ A more recent how-to book on the subject even underscores the familiarity of the question with its zine-speak title, *Whatcha mean, what’s a zine?*

The ubiquity of this question even in the face of the increasing legitimacy enjoyed by zines has meant that the initial gesture on almost all the websites and in nearly every published discussion is to venture some kind of a definition while acknowledging how difficult a task that is. Most agree with Duncombe and Julie Bartel, both of whom suggest that it is difficult to convey the true essence of zines “without a show-and-tell session.” Indeed, after agreeing that ‘Zines are not easily defined,’ the Duke University Library’s website for the Sarah Dyer Zine Collection nonetheless ventures a definition by foregrounding their distinctive physical characteristics and by highlighting their do-it-yourself production and circulation beyond the mainstream:

They can be a messy hodgepodge of personal thoughts or an expertly

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6 See http://zinewiki.com, accessed 21 Jan 2008. Zinewiki describes itself as ‘the zine encyclopedia that anyone can edit’ and notes that it ‘is an open-source encyclopedia devoted to zines and independent media. It covers the history, production, distribution and culture of the small press.’ The site includes useful lists of distros (zine distribution services), zine events, zine libraries, and even of zinesters themselves.

7 Stephen Duncombe, *Notes from underground: Zines and the politics of alternative culture* (London: Verso, 1997). Duncombe’s book was one of the first academic books to treat zines seriously. It is still the single best account of the zine phenomenon and should be consulted by anyone interested in the history and significance of zine-ing.

8 Mark Todd and Esther Pearl Watson, *Whatcha mean, what’s a zine? The art of making zines and minicomics* (Boston, MA: Graphia, 2006).

designed political treatise. They can fit easily into a pocket or take up an entire 8 1/2 x 11 sheet of paper. They can be heavily collaged or minimalist; colored or black-and-white; handwritten or typed; stapled, sewn, or loose. The unifying thread is their outside-of-the-mainstream existence as independently written, produced, and distributed media that value freedom of expression and freedom from rules above all else.  

Defining zines abstractly is difficult, nearly everyone agrees. Better to invoke their materiality, their particularity, and their modes of production, distribution and circulation.  

And yet, however often definitions like these focus on zines as unique forms of material culture that circulate socially through do-it-yourself distribution and informal social networks, those offering the definition more often than not move quickly past materiality and sociality to focus intensively on their textuality and therefore on the content of zines.  

They do so by likening them to magazines and

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11 Stephen Duncombe’s book, Notes from Underground and Chris Atton’s Alternative Media (London: Sage, 2002) are notable exceptions here in that they treat the modes of production involved in zine-ing as well as their common methods of distribution and circulation as alternative political forms, that is, as social activities designed as a refusal of the traditional social relations prescribed by a capitalist system of mass production and consumption. Still, because both are heavily invested in judging the effectiveness of zine politics, they spend a substantial amount of time discussing the coherence and consistency of the ideas conveyed in zines. At the same time, because Duncombe and Atton retain the traditional distinction between the cultural realm and a separate, distinct realm of the political, they judge the political effectiveness of zines wanting because they did not propel their creators to full-blown political activism in the public sphere. It should become clear through the course of this essay that I find this approach somewhat myopic in its focus on the short term and in its failure to assess the way zines might have functioned as practices of subject-formation with gradual, extended, long-term effects. It is also worth pointing out here that because much of the early work on girl zines connected them to Riot Grrrl (a movement originating among girls bands within the punk music scene) and placed them in the context of third wave feminism, that work tended to focus most intensively on the nature of girl zines’ ideological resistance to the dominant culture despite the fact that early scholars did acknowledge the political significance of zinesters’ alternative modes of production and distribution. As a result, this scholarship tended to foreground zine content and the way zines took up questions about sex and gender, body image, eating disorders, rape, and physical abuse. See, for instance, the following early articles about girls and zines: Joanne Gottlieb and Gayle Wald, ‘Smells like teen spirit: Riot Grrrls, revolution and women in independent rock’, in Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (eds.), Microphone fiends: Youth music and youth culture (New York: Routledge, 1994), 250-74; Catherine
books and by highlighting their status as part of the underground or alternative press. As a result, most accounts move on to analyze the politically and ideologically alternative nature of what is contained within them. In doing so, such studies designate zines as book-like texts. What you do with zines, they suggest, is read them.

Library-based zine collections underscore this move by providing topical finding aids that direct zinesters, fans, and researchers alike to the subjects covered in zines. This practice assumes that all of these groups are interested principally in what zines “say.” A number of the compilations assume the same thing by organising their zine excerpts, which are rendered in the uniformity of print, according to the topics they take up. Though several of the compilations reproduce actual pages from zines in an attempt to convey their material specificity and in exemplification of their graphic creativity, none of them insist on the aesthetic integrity of the zines themselves by reproducing them in toto. Even the book, *zine scene*, by Francesca Lia Block and Hillary Carlip, which was designed to encourage young people to produce their own zines and therefore highlights the materials and practices involved in making them, begins by discussing what zines are about. Whatever else they might be, it seems,

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Driscoll, ‘Girl culture, revenge and global capitalism: Cybergirls, Riot Grrls, Spice Girls’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 14.29 (1999), 173-93; Ednie Kaeh Garrison, ‘U. S. feminism – grrrl style! Youth (sub)cultures and the technologies of the third wave’, *Feminist Studies* 26.1 (Spring 2000), 141-69; Melanie Ferris, ‘Resisting mainstream media: Girls and the art of making zines’, *Canadian Woman Studies* 20/21.4/1 (2001), 51-5; Anita Harris, ‘gURL scenes and grrrl zines: The regulation and resistance of girls in late modernity’, *Feminist Review* 75.1 (2003), 38-56. Although I, too, am interested in the feminist politics of girl zines and the zinesters who created them, I think it imperative to pay close attention to the practices of subject formation and community building at the heart of girl zine-ing. In doing so, it becomes possible to see that girl zine-ing was not generated solely by anger, rage, disappointment, or depression but also by profound hope that alternative ways of being in the world might be created through zine-ing.

12 See, for instance, Friedman, *The Factsheet five zine reader*, 42-44, where he reproduces two comics-like pages from *babysue* but then transposes a long piece from *Celluloid All* into the regularity and uniformity of print. Similarly, although V. Vale acknowledges the importance of the aesthetic act of zine creation in his compilations, *Zines*, vols. I and II, and closely questions the zinesters whose work he features there about their aims and aesthetic decision-making process, he rarely reproduces more than a single page of a zine at a time. More often than not, he illustrates the printed interview with small images taken from larger zine pages.

13 Despite the early focus on zine content, attention to the aesthetics and formal qualities of zines has been increasing. Indeed, Liz Farrelly, *Zines* (London: Booth-Clibborn, 2001), a large, art-book type
zines end up being construed as texts to be read.

If you have ever held a zine in your hands, you might well be tempted to say, ‘what’s the problem here? This looks like a pamphlet or a little magazine. It seems to have a title, an apparent editorial page, and a back cover with a space for the address of a hoped-for reader. Its interior pages, therefore, must be addressed to imaginary readers with whom the zine’s “author” wants to communicate. How else would you approach zines except by analogy to books and magazines? Aren’t they part of the alternative press? What else could you do with them but read them?

Indeed. The status of the zine as text-to-be-read appears self-evident. Yet it is that very self-evidence I want to complicate by invoking the rich interdisciplinarity of the field of book history, whose practitioners have insisted for some time that taken-for-granted notions about books, texts, authors, readers, and reading must be complicated by reimagining them as the contingent effects of particular social relations and social activity.¹⁴ Book historians have taught us that books are more than texts and that people do more with their books than read them. And even the practice of reading itself, they have argued, is far more complex and contingent as a practice than it is sometimes portrayed. Even as they read their books, people engage with them also as material objects. At the same time, they treat them as occasions for participating in different kinds of activities or performances, including the solitary

¹⁴ Compilation reproduces images from selected zines on heavy, high quality paper. The editor and book designers comment: ‘The main body of this book is visual. We want you to see just how graphically innovative these publications are, so we’ve pulled out favourite images and played with them. Up at the front of the book is information about the zines; dimensions, materials, and dates. We’ve selected writings from the publications and printed taster samples; sadly there just isn’t space for complete articles, but many of the existing books on zines present written content very comprehensively’. Similarly, Todd and Watson, Whatcha mean, what’s a zine? The art of making zines and minicomics and Alex Wreck, Stolen Sharpie Revolution: A DIY zine resource (Portland, OR: Microcosm, 2003), both volumes aimed at would-be zine creators, emphasise the material process of producing a zine. Again, though, because of space, they do not reproduce zines or even zine pages in toto. ¹⁴ For an introduction to the field, see David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery, An Introduction to Book History (New York: Routledge, 2005.) For a sampling of work done in the field, see their companion volume, The Book History Reader (New York: Routledge, 2001.)
work of meditation and the more social, intersubjective activities of conversation, discussion, recommendation, and evaluation. They also treat books as tools for generating subsequent activities like writing.

Book historians have taught us, then, that books and other forms of mediated communication must be approached at once as signifying texts, as materially crafted objects, as occasions of and for social exchange, and as incitements to reading and writing as well as a host of other activities. In order to manage such an inclusive approach to book production and use, book historians call upon the full array of knowledge practices associated with a range of disciplines including literary studies, art history, material culture studies, social, economic, and cultural history, communication studies, and the history of technology. The interdisciplinary mode of apprehension they employ directs our attention to the way book-related activities have been articulated together at particular historical moments through specific constellations of social relations. In effect, book history suggests that the now familiar question “what’s a zine?” ought to be reformulated in both a more social and more performative way. We ought to ask not what a zine is but what zinesters do with them, how, and in what contexts. At the same time, we ought to ask how the practices of zine-ing reciprocally act upon all those who engage in them. We need to know how zine-ing works and how the forms it generates exert their multiple effects.

What I am suggesting here is that the constant posing of the definitional question, ‘what’s a zine,’ is not simply a function of zines’ obscurity or their position on the cultural periphery. Rather, the question recurs because we haven’t yet adequately attended to them as the critical yet integral element in complex forms of social and cultural activity. This performative mode of apprehension is hampered by the lingering effects of discipline-bound knowledge practices that direct attention and
focus analysis on only one or two aspects of zine-ing at a time. Usually, the textual forms that result from the activity of zine production, thereby reifying and simplifying the activity significantly and missing its distinct playfulness and investment in defying familiar categories. In my view, knowledge practices that are too discipline bound hinder our capacity to understand the significance of the fact that zines are actively created by individuals who also circulate them and use them deliberately to trouble all sorts of familiar categorical distinctions to powerful effect.15

Zines deliberately confound the boundary between the particular and the generic, for example, between the unique and the formulaic. They prompt us to wonder, are they unique art objects or ritualized forms of communication? Zines also disrupt the boundary between the materialities of writing and typeface and the signifying capacities of language. Should they be considered forms of material culture, then, or texts demanding to be read? Zines play, too, with the dividing line between orality and print as well as that between affect and reason. Should we attend to their rhetorical effects or primarily to their ideological content? Zines also disturb the categorical distinction between production and consumption, between writing and reading. As a consequence, they trouble the too-easy dichotomy between author and reader. Most significantly perhaps, zines worry the distinction between object and event, between text and the activities it sets in motion.

It is not enough to focus on what zines are, therefore. We need to pursue more resolutely not only how individuals and groups act in and through zine-ing but also

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15 A significant historical question needs to be posed about why zinesters engaged in boundary defiance of all sorts during the 1980s and 90s. What prompted their desire to blur the boundaries between texts and the world, writing and reading, affect and reason, culture and politics? Although this will take further investigation, it seems possible that their efforts in promoting category confusion had something to do with the fact that they were working at a moment of rapid technological change as computers and digital communication promoted economic integration and further extension of consumer society as well as the passive forms of attendance that have accompanied it. Zine practice may have developed as an exploratory effort to construct forms of subjectivity and sociality capable of negotiating this world without capitulating totally to it.
how they mobilize zines as dynamic, unsettling forms in order to challenge familiar distinctions that traditionally separate art from life, politics from the everyday, the individual from the social, and the self from the world. We need to understand not only how zines work upon those who initially created them, exchanged, them, mailed them, and read them, but also how they continue to work on those who now engage zines in different contexts and considerably after the moment of their major efflorescence in the 1980s and 90s.

I introduce this latter point into this larger discussion because my preliminary investigation of the practice of girl zine-ing has demonstrated to me that though many of the girls who engaged so enthusiastically in this activity in the 1990s gave up zine-ing as they moved into their twenties and thirties -- and though zine-ing has waned some in popularity as a new cohort of girl cultural producers has gravitated to other forms of writing and reading -- including cell phone texting, blogging, and communicating through webpages like My Space and Facebook – zines actually live on. They have not simply disappeared into boxes of stored teen memorabilia. In fact, girl zines now live complex afterlives in the library archives I have already mentioned, in popular and academic articles about zines like this one, in university course syllabi, in high school classrooms, in films, on the web, and even in art exhibits. And they do so, I have discovered, due in part to the efforts of former zinesters who have played a critical role in perpetuating the life of zines by preserving their collections, by writing about zines in a number of different contexts, by convincing others to investigate zines, and by building on the effects of zine-ing in their own present-day lives. Indeed the contemporary activities of former zinesters -- as well as the activities of the many others who have been inspired by their earlier zine work -- testify to the extended impact that zines and zine-ing have had since the
moment of their first creation.\textsuperscript{16}

In my view, we will only begin to understand zines and the full extent of their impact by taking both an interdisciplinary and a longitudinal approach to zines and zine-ing. It seems especially imperative given the fact that zines have not disappeared as ephemeral, subcultural forms to avoid the assumption that the political effect of zines can be judged in the short term according to whether they propelled their original creators into radical politics in the conventional public sphere. This mistake has been made by Stephen Duncombe, Chris Atton and a number of other commentators on zines, whose work is otherwise excellent.\textsuperscript{17} They have assumed, with Mike Gunderloy, the creator of Fact Sheet Five, a key review newsletter about zines, that most zines lived only half-lives because they disappeared so quickly after they first appeared. Instead, a longitudinal approach will enable us to understand how zines have functioned over time as aesthetic, rhetorical, and social technologies for making an array of things happen. It will enable us to take the measure of zines as historically specific forms of social practice that have continued to involve, inspire, influence, and affect not only their initial creators and their immediate interlocutors but also a panoply of subsequent students, fans, and proponents of the genre who, through their own subsequent labor, insure that zines live on as a cultural force with an articulated range of sometimes delayed effects. In my view, the zines of the 80s and 90s live complex afterlives at a range of different sites and in a number of different modes.

\textsuperscript{16} I am one of those who has been thus inspired. In fact, zines live on in my work in this paper. They therefore continue to exert their manifold effects even on someone who has never created a zine. My work here has been inspired by the hundreds of zines I have now read but most especially by the young women who created them and forged the social connections, friendships, and networks that enabled them to contest dominant representations of girlhood and thus, to suggest that a girl might have a future other than that of simply becoming a woman, that is a subject defined wholly by her gender. See pp. 10-15 for an account of how my interest in zines and zine-ing developed.

\textsuperscript{17} See note #11 for a discussion of this point.
I have been led to these latter assertions and to the insights about the practice of zine-ing on which they are based through a now extended interaction with a small collection of zines in my possession lent to me by the daughter of a colleague, a young woman I have known since she was born. Jess is close to my own daughter in age and, for a time, they were friends until we moved to another city. They have only seen each other briefly since we moved, usually during summers when our families visited. I first discovered zines during one of those summer visits when I happened upon a basket of obviously hand-made pamphlets that varied tremendously in size, length, aesthetic sophistication and even in the topics they covered. At the time, several things struck me about them. They were visually exuberant and written in a highly emotional, rhetorically intense mode. Most seemed to be created by girls and many of them made explicit reference to the way girls were treated in high school and beyond. Some even evoked the term, ‘feminism.’ I was intrigued by the juxtaposition of high political awareness with the familiar affective exuberance of adolescence represented through exaggerated punctuation, especially exclamation marks, and through the use of in-group abbreviations and teen jargon.

Like everyone else who happens upon zines, I asked immediately, ‘what are these?’ ‘Zines,’ Jess told me. Although I knew the term and was familiar with the field of fan studies that took the world of popular culture inspired fanzines as its proper subject, I knew little about the punk-related explosion of zine-ing in the 1980s and 1990s. In fact, I don’t recall much of what Jess said in response to my initial question but I do remember learning that, for her, zines were associated with punk music, especially that created by girl bands and that they were connected to a movement called riot grrrl, which she followed with a few friends from school but
mostly with girls from beyond her immediate environment. In fact, I was surprised by how the form took Jess significantly beyond the confines of the suburban community where she lived to engage with other riot grrrls and fans of bands like Bikini Kill and Bratmobile at gatherings in a number of different cities.

Eventually, when Jess graduated from high school and moved on to college, she allowed me to borrow her small collection as the basis for an emergent research project on zines, which had begun to take shape as I engaged in conversation with a few graduate students about the subject of girls and the changing nature of cultural forms targeting them. Indeed at the time I first discovered zines, we were discussing the magazine, *Sassy*, the television shows, *Beverly Hills 90210* and *My So-Called Life*, films like *The Breakfast Club* and *Sixteen Candles*, and celebrity artists like Madonna and the Spice Girls. Although I didn’t introduce zines into my cultural studies classes until much later as evidence of how some girls wrote themselves into a media and cultural environment they found alienating, I continued to read around in Jess’s collection and began to look tentatively into the history of Riot Grrrl and the place of girls bands and the fanzines they generated in the lives of young women in the U. S. during the 1990s.

I have now begun to explore more systematically the nature and extent of the girls’ zine universe in the U. S. by examining those held in archives at Duke, Smith, and

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18 The body of work on riot grrrl seems to grow every day. I have found the book, *riot grrrl: revolution girl style now*, edited by Nadine Monem (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007) especially helpful. Because the volume includes wonderful photographs of the bands, their performances, and their fans, as well as commentaries written by the young women who participated in the movement, it does a fine job of capturing the intense energy and complicated affects infusing the riot grrrl phenomenon.

19 I would especially like to thank Katie Kent, Mandy Berry, Jennifer Doyle, Jonathan Flatley, Melissa Solomon, and Jessica Blaustein for the many conversations that have inspired my work here – albeit at some temporal distance. Although they might not be aware of it, their thinking has had an enormous impact on my interests and ongoing work.

20 It is important to point here that although my work concentrates on the zine-ing generated by riot grrrl in the United States, the riot grrrl phenomenon was international in scope as demonstrated by the previously mentioned volume, *riot grrrl: revolution grrrl style now* and by Erica Zöbl’s website, *grrrl zine network*. 
Barnard, and elsewhere. I can tentatively say, at this point, that Jess’s small collection seems fairly representative of what can be found in those much larger archives. It contains riot grrrl zines—some well-known, others not (Bikini Kill, Riot Grrrl (nyc) Queer Punk Issue, #7); a host of explicitly feminist zines (Bitch, v. 1, no. 2; Princess Charming, #2; Sourpuss, #8 and #9); an important, much cited zine focussed on questions of race and ethnicity (Bamboo Girl, Issue #7); a range of zines preoccupied with questions of sex and gender identity (One Mint Julep, #2; Tales From the Clit, #2); a small number of what are known as perzines, that is, highly idiosyncratic and personal meditations on an individual’s interests, problems, and daily life (snarla, #2; Silver Rocket, number three); a range of obviously local, exuberant but inexperienced zines (Restroom, Issue #1; being real and getting clean) apparently generated in imitation of better known riot grrrl titles; and a number of zines focused intently on aspects of the alternative music scene (Teeter Totter, #5).

As soon as I venture this categorisation scheme for Jess’s collection, however, I am immediately dissatisfied not only with the categories themselves but also with the assignment of individual zines to them. Although some zines stress feminist politics while others focus on alternative music or the exploration of alternative sex and gender identities, many of them combine these interests in idiosyncratic ways. Like everyone else, then, I find it nearly impossible to define zines abstractly, to distinguish among them according to a set of relatively fixed criteria, especially when those criteria are pegged to a reading of them for their content. In fact, it was the difficulty of specifying the topical range of the zines contained in Jess’s small

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21 Julie Bartel discusses the problem of zine categorisation at length in Bartel, From A to zine, 77-91, where she observes, ‘Subject categories can be problematic (though not impossible) to define in any classification scheme, and zines take the difficulties to a whole new level. A zine may include numerous topics in a single issue; a title may change topics completely from issue to issue; and certain categories such as ‘perzines’ or ‘compilation’ zines are likely to properly contain so many zines as to become unwieldy all on their own’ (78).
collection that first suggested the importance of attending to the material and formal properties they shared as well as to the modes of address they adopted in common. And attention to those qualities in the context of discussions about changing gender norms and forms of sexuality in the nineties prompted interest in how zines functioned internally as mechanisms of gendered subject formation and how they circulated socially as technologies of network construction.

This latter topic had been on my mind since I first marvelled at the way zine-ing expanded Jess’s social world beyond her local relations with her family, friends, and high school classmates. Indeed it was when I began to see that there was a distinct connection between the practices of subject construction rendered textually through writing, drawing, and collaging in zines and the actual networking activities through which zines were circulated that I began to see the importance of thinking about zines as a constellation of linked practices that had complex effects, individually and collectively, in the short and long term. Ultimately, the process of conceptualizing zine-ing as a concatenation of practices with mutually intersecting effects, pushed me to define my project as an oral history and a kind of longitudinally focused ethnography aiming to understand not only how zinesters functioned in the nineties but also how some of them recall their zine activities now and integrate their effects into their present-day lives. As they do so, they influence others and draw them into the orbit of the zine universe. Because I am only now just embarking on this larger project, what I aim to do here is to articulate a few preliminary formulations I have developed by working closely with Jess’s collection. These formulations seek to specify how zines may have functioned internally and externally for their young fans and to hypothesize about why such activity might have continued to generate
When first encountering the girl-produced zines in Jess’s collection, one can’t help but notice that they mobilise a range of aesthetic and rhetorical strategies as if deliberately to escape the condition of being inert. 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 many cases, those images strain to burst from the page and sometimes narratives do not follow serially, page by page. Indeed zines are nothing if not motley. Ordered reading is constantly disrupted, as a result, by jagged, nervous, zig-zaggy motion, by the sense that one is encountering random miscellany rather than ordered sequence. Zines display a protean energy that refuses to be circumscribed within the decorous confines of print form or the ordered circuits through which print and books usually circulate. As handcrafted material objects, therefore, they constantly call attention to the conventional limits of the handwriting, print, and paper out of which they are fabricated. As much as they demand to be read, they also foreground their status as ‘not books.’

I should point out that after I first conceptualized my larger zine project and wrote the initial draft of this essay, I discovered the excellent article by Jennifer Sinor, “Another Form of Crying: Girl Zines as Life Writing,” Prose Studies, Vol. 26, No. 1 -- 2 (April – August, 2003), 240-64, which conceptualizes zine-ing as a practice of life-writing. I have found Sinor’s important essay enormously helpful and believe it to be congruent with the performative approach I am recommending here. Indeed there is significant overlap between the account of zine-ing I develop based on Jess’s zine collection and the account Sinor gives in her essay, especially of the way the zine network is constructed both textually and extra-textually. I should note, however, that despite her recognition of the centrality of community to zine writers, I think Sinor individualizes zinesters too much as singular life-writers or as authors (the very idea of writing a life is bound up with the novel form and the way it develops in tandem with the emergence of bourgeois subjectivity) and thus risks placing too much stress on the expressive nature of their practice. As a result, though Sinor discusses the fluid nature of the subjectivities constructed in zines, she misses the highly social and intersubjective nature, which I believe was probably key to the attraction zines and zine-ing held for the many girls who involved themselves with them and tied the form just as it tied it to its historical moment. Thus, although I agree with her that the act of writing a zine was crucially important to zinesters, I do not agree that the act of being read was of less significance. (Sinor, “Life Writing,” 248).

I have come across a number of zines that graphically insist that they are not at all like traditional books, one night stand, for instance, which can be found in Box 6 of the Tinuviel Papers in the Sophia Smith Collection at Smith College, appears to be a 2 x 3 mini-zine, constructed from a single sheet of
Indeed zines gesture always and beyond the codex form of the book they evoke to the uncontainable actions and affective complexities of the zine artist(s) responsible for their creation. At the same time, they call attention to the fractured, layered and contradictory subjects generated within their pages through the use of the aesthetic practices of collage and the adoption of a range of rhetorical styles and strategies that call attention to their display of a kind of uncontainable, ecstatic generativity. They also highlight the densities and dynamism of the social relations that circulate through them and around them by calling attention to the words of others within their pages and by referring constantly to the imagined readers for which they are destined. Zines foreground their porousness, therefore, their radical openness to, and dependence upon, social activities that permeate them, extend beyond them, and actively set them in motion.

Zines gesture insistently toward the rich densities of the social world not simply through indexical reference and representation but, literally, by incorporating bits and pieces of that world within their pages. This is done through practices of collage, bricolage, citation, and cultural recycling. Indeed zines almost always carefully folded paper. Designed to open like a triptych, the cover image is drawn across the folds. When the cover is opened, however, an internal triptych is revealed and the potential reader must begin reading not on the extreme right but on the left. The reader must proceed down the extreme left, cross over to the center reading from top to bottom, and then move on to the right fold to follow the comments of the zine’s creators. Then, the folded triptych page lifts up and the reader must turn it around and over to keep reading. Eventually, the zine must be re-folded in order to finish reading on the back of the left-facing page of the tri-folded triptych. For an introduction to the most common fold and format strategies, see Todd and Watson, *What’s a zine?*, 45-57, where directions for the micro-mini, the no staples zine, the stack-n-wrap, and the fold-n-bind can be found. The authors also make suggestions about how to ‘Breakout! Of the Format.’ Because zinesters played so creatively with the familiar codex format, their zines defied conventional strategies for making them give way simply to parsable content. As a result, they never arrived “already read,” as Jennifer Sinor has argued (Life-writing, 242). They highlighted, then, the fact that a quite different practice of reading had to be forged in order to make any kind of sense of zines.

incorporate the words and images of multiple others into their miscellaneous mix. Zine artists constitute themselves, then, in and through constant conversation with others. Virtually every utterance and every representation is staged as a response. Nothing appears *sui generis* as if originating in a single writer. Rather, every speech act is called forth as part of a dialogue, at least, and more often as part of an extended conversation. Zines are not, in any simple way, then, expressions of pre-existing selves. Nor are they authored in the usual sense. Though they call attention to themselves as singular creations and often claim that expressive authenticity is their foremost reason for being, they also foreground their status as the work of a collective process, almost as the utterance of a chorus. Zines are performances, it seems to me, and performances of a particular type. They haul onto the stage a range of shape-shifting actors who play with multiple roles, ventriloquise through a range of voices, and experiment with an especially protean form of thoroughly socialised subjectivity. Not for nothing do zinesters continually refer to their involvement in zine-ing as being part of the zine *scene*. As performances, zines are transformative, productive and socially generative, which is to say, they propagate new ways of inhabiting the world.

Even zines that foreground familiar discourses of self-expression and stress how much their creators are giving authentic voice to ideas and affects usually proscribed by gendered standards of propriety evidence a propensity for trying out a range of points of view and a number of different identities. In fact, far from elaborating a coherent point of view and therefore a unified, coherent, and internally

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25 Stephen Duncombe places great emphasis on the search for originality, individuality, and authenticity among zinesters. In my view, though girl zines do mobilise languages of self-expression and self-exploration and insist on the importance of individuality and giving vent to ‘authentic’ emotions like anger, rage, and frustration, their actual aesthetic practices—as well as distribution procedures—function in considerable tension with such ideologies. In my view, the strength of the political critique embedded in zines rests upon the collaborative, collective, and conversational practices that characterise nearly all girl zines and not on their search for individual forms of ‘authentic’ critique.
consistent subjectivity, zines incorporate the views of others within their own textual representations. The self constructed within a zine is, therefore, an intersubjective self, a self in active, quite literal relation to another. At the same time, the subjectivity constructed in zines is highly fluid and always changing. Indeed zines careen from subject position to subject position as zine artists experiment with what it feels like to speak from a number of different positions. Sometimes, zines are even retitled or discontinued altogether to reflect felt changes in the zine artist’s self.

Significantly, these fluid, intersubjective forms of self-presentation crafted within zines apparently extend beyond the pages of individual zines themselves and even beyond any single act of writing or reading. Indeed in the 1990s, as soon as girls created their zines and sent them out into the world, they called into being a whole range of additional, decidedly intersubjective activities in the extra-textual world as well. In addition to generating reading of their zines, they also sparked exchanging, mailing, bartering, distributing, networking, letter writing, face-to-face meeting, and even the production of new zines. Zines, it would seem, had multiple and extended effects not only for the zine artist herself but also for those who received and witnessed her performance, reflected it back to her, responded to it, changed it, or passed it on. Passing it on was done by reviewing a zine, by giving it to another, by incorporating bits of it into one’s own zine, by circulating it through a zine distro. Zines proliferated then, and in multiple ways. They generated other zines; they called into being new zinesters; they expanded the zine scene; they generated new friendships. In effect, they constructed new social networks.

It seems clear, in fact, from a perusal of Jess’s collection and comparison of it with the larger collections found in the major zine archives that the social networking at the heart of zine-ing was of critical importance to young girl zinesters of the 1990s.
Evidence for such a claim emerges quickly, in fact, almost from the first moment one takes up a single zine. Indeed it’s impossible to avoid getting caught up in the latticework of citation and counter-citation that zines build together. Because every zine makes reference to other zines, one quickly gets a sense of an emergent zine network drawing girls out of their local situations and into connection with other like-minded girls united not by proximity but by interest. Indeed it becomes evident very quickly that zinesters actively sought to transmute their hoped-for readers into friends, and in quite utopian fashion, to transform those friends into an ever-expanding network of empowered girl zinesters.

Take *Velvet Grass, #fourteen*, a relatively sophisticated zine found in Jess’s collection. Created by a zinester who identified herself only as “Grasshopper,” *Velvet Grass* is composed of Grasshopper’s own writings, clip art culled from a range of sources including books and popular magazines, excerpts from others’ zines, and constant apostrophes to her imagined and hoped for readers.26 As is true for most other zines in Jess’s collection, its back page incorporates a blank space under the heading, ‘DELIVER TO:’ This open-ended gesture inscribes the intense hope that generates and underwrites all girl-ing, that is, the longing to find an addressee for this hand-crafted composition, a like-minded reader. In this case, the addressee’s name is not filled in, suggesting that Jess may have acquired this particular zine at a riot grrrl event, club performance, or workshop rather than through the mail. Others in her collection, however, are specifically addressed to her and include special handwritten notes to her both on the back page and tucked into the middle somewhere, hailing her individually.27

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26 *Velvet Grass, #14*, Jess’s Zine Collection, in author’s possession. All subsequent quotations come from this issue.

27 One such message, handwritten on the back of a flyer addressed ‘To the Young Women of Orange County Riot Grrrl,’ notes ‘[Jessica]—Hello. I hope you enjoy #2. #3 will be out in a month (probably).
Clearly, zinesters desired more than the typical, anonymous reader who might pick up a mass-market paperback at the supermarket. Their textual and extra-textual activities suggest that what they really desired was direct communication with identifiable others who shared their interests, attitudes, and views. Apparently, what they longed for most was communication that might be pursued through letter writing, at the gigs of favorite bands, at girl-centered workshops and symposia, even at zine fests designed to bring zinesters together to promote zine-ing.

Among the many apostrophes to her imagined, not yet named readers included in *Velvet Grass* #1 is a selection that has been entitled by Grasshopper, “Do You Know Who Lauren Martin Is?” Apparently designed to introduce her readers to Lauren Martin’s zines, this page does not feature, as one might expect, Grasshopper’s own description and assessment of Lauren Martin. Rather, it reprints the text of a fan letter Lauren Martin herself wrote to Grasshopper about an earlier number of *Velvet Grass*. This rhetorical move joins Grasshopper to Martin socially and textually, interposes Martin’s characterization of an earlier Grasshopper zine into this particular issue, enables Grasshopper to represent herself through Martin’s evocation of her, and enables her to let Martin speak for herself through her own [i.e., Grasshopper’s] aegis. In effect, these two young women are thoroughly interposed, which is to say, made present intersubjectively through this representational strategy. Finally, at the conclusion of Martin’s letter, Grasshopper seeks to duplicate, even multiply, her relation to Martin by connecting her readers to Martin herself. She does so by instructing her readers on how to order Martin’s five different zines, including one entitled *Princess Charming*. Whether this recommendation moved Jess to order Martin’s zine is unclear. However, there is a copy of *Princess Charming* in her

This is a flier for the RG chapter I wanna start. I know that you don’t live around here (takes a genius to figure that out) but if you have contacts w/anyone in So. Cal I’d be super grateful if you could let ‘em know about it!”
One coincidence like this certainly doesn’t amount to much. But when single
ties like this one multiply, the zine network begins to emerge more strongly. Another
mini-zine in Jess’s collection, *sourpuss #8*, includes the usual clip art and refers
constantly to other zines. Despite the fact that it is only 3 by 3 inches in size and only
22 pages in length, it devotes an entire page to reviewing and recommending other
zines. At the end of the page, there is a recommendation of Villa Villa Kula, not a
zine, but rather a “collection of gerl labels done by nice, nice Tinuviel.” I didn’t make
too much of this reference initially until I discovered while working in the Smith zine
collection, that a significant portion of that collection is composed of zines collected
by Tinuviel herself, a former business partner of Slim Moon who was the founder of
the alternative label, Kill Rock Stars and the original producer of riot grrrl bands,
Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy. Not only did Tinuviel donate her zines
to Smith but she also sent a large collection of correspondence that includes many
letters and notes from the girl zinesters who were ordering music from her and
sending their zines in exchange. As we have seen with Jess’s collection, this kind of
correspondence was wide-spread among girl zinesters in the 90s. Indeed as zines
criss-crossed the U. S. as well as oceans and continents accompanied by notes of
introduction penned on all manner of postcards, colourful stationery and Hello Kitty
notes, they stitched their young creators together into a loose network of like-minded
girls and young women who amassed not only their own zine collections as a result
but also formed widely scattered, extra-local friendship groups based not on proximity
but on shared, incipiently feminist interests and on a critical orientation to the world.

It would seem, then, that the pleasures of zine-ing for girls in the nineties were
distinctly intersubjective and bound up with the exploration of new ways of being in
the world. Significantly, the act of forging new subject formations was pursued in concert and collaboration with others who functioned as witnesses, co-conspirators, and co-creators of alternative ways of being a girl. In a world where girls felt hemmed in by the gender discourses of others and divided from each other by competition and by the corporate interests of teen magazines and the cosmetics and fashion industries, girl zinesters sought to forge their own social networks, which they hoped might function as substitutes for the geo-spatial and local relations that situated them, in their view, so conventionally and problematically within their families, high schools, college dorms, and workplaces.\(^{28}\)

That this network and the political commitments that developed within it have had long-term effects is testified to by Tinuviel’s apparent desire to make her zine collection available to more, different, and later readers. Indeed her activism on behalf of zines has been repeated by others. The Smith Collection harbors not only Tinuviel’s zines but also those donated by Tristan Taormino. Taormino assembled her collection during her own activities as a zinester and during the process of producing one of the first mainstream books about zines, an anthology published by St. Martin’s Press in 1997, entitled *A Girl’s Guide to Taking Over the World: Writings from the Girl Zine Revolution* and designed to get more girls reading and writing zines. This book samples many riot grrrl zines and amply demonstrates that body issues, feminism, sexuality and alternative gender presentations figure centrally in girl zines. Though Taormino hasn’t formally explained why she donated her collection to Smith or what she thought the collection might enable, it does at least seem clear that, like Tinuviel, she hoped her donation would preserve her collection.

\(^{28}\) On the ‘the international communication network’ that has grown up around girl zine-ing, See Erika Zoble’s dissertation, ‘The global grrrl zine network: A DIY feminist revolution for social change’, (Academy of Fine Arts, Vienna, 2004). I have not yet been able to find a copy of this dissertation although there is an abstract of it on her website. The article previously mentioned in note #5 apparently summarizes some of the work in her dissertation.
of zines and make them available to new readers. Her present-day activities also suggest that the political commitments she developed and realized through zine-ing continue to animate her life. At the moment, she is the creator of *Pucker Up*, a pornographic website that bills itself as “smart, sexy, anal, kinky, and fun,” where Taormino herself declares, “My mission is to educate people of all genders and sexual orientations in their pursuit of healthy, empowering, and transformative sex and relationships. I spread my pleasure-positive message through my books, videos, writing, teaching, and coaching.”

Tinuviel and Taormino are not alone in helping to expand access to zines nor in seeking to extend their political views and orientation into new arenas. Former zinesters, Sara Dyer, Julie Bartel and Jenna Freedman, for instance, have been instrumental in helping to create respectively the Duke zine collection (named after Dyer in response to her founding donation), the Salt Lake City Public Library zine collection, and the one at Barnard. Barnard zine librarian Freedman also maintains an elaborate website devoted to the collection that allows people interested in zines to network with each other, pursue a range of bibliographic references and link to a wide range of writing about zines. Her site indicates that Lauren Martin’s own zine collection is now housed at Barnard, as is that of Yumi Lee, another zinester and one of Jess’s closest friends from her time at university. Additionally, Freedman is active in the Radical Reference movement within the library profession, which seeks to broaden and diversify the kinds of materials collected at libraries, including zines, in order to insure that they collect things other than the conventional and the mainstream. So many do, in fact, that a zine is now published targeting zine

Jenna Freedman’s website connects students, zine fans, and interested researchers to a number of other zine sites, including the aforementioned *Grrrl Zine Network*, which is the creation of Erica Zobl, who wrote her dissertation on the international girl zine network for the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna, Austria. Her website is even more extensive than Freedman’s with links to other writings on zines, both popular and academic, and it includes many references to academic papers by former zinesters including one crafted by Sabrina Margarita Alcantara-Tan, the creator of, *Bamboo Girl*, a well-regarded zine devoted to race, ethnicity, and the hybrid nature of identity in the contemporary world found in Jess’s collection.

Space won’t allow me to continue here but suffice it to say I could continue for some time listing the names of former zinesters who have established zine archives or written university papers, master theses, dissertations, and academic articles about zines. There are also many secondary school teachers who hold zine workshops in their classes and use zines to interest their students in the practices of writing and reading as activities directly relevant to their daily lives. All of these young women are involved in sustaining the afterlives of zines and, as they do so, they testify again and again to the impact of zine-ing on their self-understanding and on the kinds of later work they have taken up in the world.

Zine-ing, it would seem, has been nothing if not generative, bringing into being not only additional zines and zinesters but also transforming zinesters themselves, begetting thereby new friendship networks, new ways of acting in the world and subsequent modes of cultural production, a significant portion of which deliberately seeks to insure that zines and zine-making continue to live on, after the

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30 The zine is known as Zine Librarian Zine. There is also a Library Workers Zine Collection at the School of Library and Information Studies Library at the University of Wisconsin.
moment of their first flourishing. All of this is important because it calls attention to what may have been the most important impulse generating zine-making, that is, the driving desire to create new social networks through a web of citation, connection, reprinting, and circulation. What zinesters were apparently circulating when they mailed off their creations was hope—hope for a new kind of community, hope for a different future. Zines were engaged—quite literally, I think—in the practice of utopian social construction, an attempt to bring into being an elsewhere where lives might be different. They were also attempting to transform not only contemporary girlhood, but the very future of girls themselves. As individuals interested in the fate of girls, our challenge must be to understand not only how they tried to do this but also how successful they were, what the limits of their imagined communities might have been, and where and why they may have failed.

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I hope this exploratory account of zine-ing as a practice has made clear that, more than anything else, zine-ing is a social phenomenon, a form of social action driven by desires for new forms of sociability and new ways of being in the world. Yet it is important to note that zine-ing is not just any kind of social action. It is both a communicative practice and an aesthetic one, an activity that draws people into conversation with one another and one that results not only in the creation of an aesthetic object but also in the execution of an aesthetic performance. By drawing attention not only to the modes of connection, conversation, and dialogue mobilized by zinesters but also to the particular ways in which they engaged with and deformed the technologies of print and the codex form, we might be able to identify why at the precise moment of the waning decades of the 20th century, when new technologies were emerging everywhere and at warp speed pace, some young people seized upon
older modes of literary production --the typewriter, the pen, paper, paste, twine, and staples – and sought to play with them in new ways, turning turn them to their own ends.

It is significant, I think, that zinesters seized upon older, book production technologies at the very moment they were being superseded by the explosion of electronic and digital forms of communication. Reclaiming print materials and publication practices that for three hundred years at least had served as the material basis for the commercially organized production and reproduction of legitimate knowledge as well as virtually all literary communication, they insisted on the viability of do-it-yourself publication. They insisted as well on their right and ability to engage in DIY publication precisely so as to develop ideas that ordinarily would be ruled out of hand by corporate, commercial culture. At the same time, they revelled in the specificities of old typewriters, outmoded and highly variable typefaces, the individuated nature of handwriting, and the materialities of reproduction, folding, binding, stapling, and distribution. Thus they doubly refused corporately produced mass culture by defying its ideological strictures and by insisting on the materiality of the actual and quite varied forms of labor involved in publication. Indeed, as Steven Duncombe has pointed out, despite the expense of DIY publication and the claims it made on their time, zinesters actually testified again and again to how much they enjoyed developing a very different relationship to their own labor. In fact, their zines often called attention to the difference between the labor they invested in creating their zine, which they did for themselves, and what they did for others, whether at school or a job. Zine labor, they stressed, was a form of pleasure, not an onerous, alienating burden.

Additionally, by insisting on the tight relationship between their reading and
writing, girl zinesters refused the typical position offered to them by contemporary culture, that is, the position of champion consumer. Girl zinesters insisted again and again on the fact that they were not consumers of others’ ideas, but rather producers of their own. They called attention to themselves, therefore, as thinkers, as vernacular intellectuals -- although most would not have used that language -- as people with active capacities for reflection and a desire to think critically about the conditions of their everyday lives. At the same time, by using zines as a way to network, they also moved vigorously to create a space to debate their ideas, to compare them with those of others, to think collectively about the immediate world surrounding them. They sought, in effect, to create a more responsive, more girl-positive form of communication than the professionalized, mass-produced, commercial, system of the still patriarchal mainstream. Through their production, as a result, they modelled a different politics, one potentially more mutual and communal in structure than the hierarchical and gendered social relations that troubled them at school, at work, and in their families.31

Although it will take careful ethnographic research and oral history to be sure, it is worth assessing whether this vision of different forms of sociality and sociability produced changes in the lives of the girls who took up this form so passionately. This will be a challenge especially because the work will be retrospective. Whatever its difficulties, though, it seems worth attempting in order to assess whether girls’ activities as zinesters might have changed their way of being in the world and their capacities to act upon that world. Indeed it seems clear even now, that zine-ing transformed some of them at least into cultural producers and into advocates

31 As is undoubtedly true of all political practice, sometimes these activities proved more constraining than enabling for some. For a discussion of the ways in which the girl zine community could be rigid and as censorious about certain behaviors as even the most traditional of communities, see Sinor, “Life Writing,” pp. 260-62.
dedicated to insuring not only that the zines they created so enthusiastically would not disappear but would continue to have an impact on others in the future. The zines they created functioned in the end as incitements to social change, as rickety, handcrafted bridges to a future not yet imagined but dimly discerned just past the horizon. What was powerful about girl zines, it seems to me, was their capacity to generate hope and a determined willingness to act on that hope, even modestly, with only an old typewriter, a marker, scissors, paste, and a few stamps.

**Bibliography**


Harris, Anita, ‘gURL scenes and grrrl zines: The regulation and resistance of girls in late modernity’, *Feminist Review* 75.1 (2003), 38-56.


Indeed Jennifer Sinor has trenchantly observed, “zines do not arrive already