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Teaching Authorship, Gender and Identity through *Grrrl* Zines Production

By Sara Gabai

**Abstract**

Zines are self-published, non-commercial magazines that range in size, form and genre, and that tackle the most disparate issues including stories from everyday life. While academia has been reluctant to bring zines within the classroom due to their non-academic layout, multitude of styles, broken grammar, strong tones and content, this paper explains what brings zines into existence and how the latter give girls and women a chance to produce and write culture while creating new spaces of resistance. It will also investigate the politics of writing, the contradictions in *grrrl* zines, and their potential in displacing the boundaries of socially established conventions about language and authorship. Mary Louise Pratt’s (1991) theory of the ‘*Arts of the contact zone*’ will be used to investigate how auto-ethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation and vernacular expressions are incorporated in the zine *MOON ROOT, AN EXPLORATION OF ASIAN WOMYN’S BODIES*, which explores the diverse bodily experiences of women, gender queer and trans people of Asian descent living diaspora.

**Keywords:** authorship, women’s empowerment, gender, identity, zines

**Introduction**

Zine studies is a multi-disciplinary field of study that has developed predominantly in the United States and the United Kingdom and is at the intersection with art history, aesthetic theory, crafting and design, literary studies, queer and feminist scholarship, media literacy and popular culture (Chu, 1997; Duncombe, 1997; Williamson, 1994, Leblanc, 1999; Radway, 2001; Piepmeier, 2009). Even though academia has been reluctant to bring zines within the classroom due to their non-academic layout, style, tone, contents, languages, several researchers have investigated the use of zines as visual and narrative spaces for students to tell their stories within the classroom setting (Alyea, 2012; Bott, 2002; Fraizer, 1998; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Moore, 2009; Poletti, 2005); others have also identified zines as a kind of public pedagogy (Sandlin, O’Malley, and Burdick, 2011), a pedagogy of tactics, subjectivity, and of civic and political commitment (Knobel and Lankshear, 2001). In this paper, zines are situated in critical feminist pedagogy, one that sees women as knowers, that is concerned with equality and power, community building, consciousness about diversity and justice, and concerns with caring and empowerment (Chow et al., p. 260).

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Zines have their roots in small press and fan magazines communities in the 1950s and 1960s and are self-published periodicals covering a wide variety of subjects, including, those dedicated to punk and musical styles, poetry and literature, religion, science fiction, fantasy, ecology, politics, feminism, sports, among others. Despite their diversity in contents and genres, they share common characteristics: they trespass the boundaries and rules of copyrights and intellectual property, escape the proprietary relations and the hierarchies of traditional publishing industries, and often have a confrontational relationship with mainstream and corporate (media) culture. Moreover, most zinesters trade and exchange their work rather than sell it.

While zines are commonly recognized as being the result of non-elitist, do-it-yourself (DIY), participatory culture, and originating from the rise of the punk rock scene in the late 1970s, very few acknowledge their feminist predecessors and the artifacts, scrapbooks, documents, pamphlets, letters, produced by women from disempowered positions during the first and second waves of feminism. Alison Piepmeier explains, “one reason for this omission is that zines are resistant media, and women are, even today, rarely identified with resistance” (2009, p.25). This paper will be concentrating primarily on grrrl zines, literate cultural practices and gendered sites of cultural production in which sexism, racism and other forms of inequality may be interrogated and challenged, and identities negotiated and elaborated. By appropriating the term “grrrl”, zinesters have used writing to play with the symbols of dominant and mainstream culture to reimagine femininity and girlhood, and create alternative subject positions outside of the male-dominated punk zine scene, and the mainstream feminist movement. Grrrl authors, and in particular the Riot Grrrl network, have also greatly influenced feminist and postfeminist sites of cultural production, and have been instrumental in the creation of third wave feminism. Through the discourse analysis of the zine MOON ROOT, AN EXPLORATION OF ASIAN WOMYN’S BODIES, the paper will reflect on the importance of grrrl zines as transnational spaces for women, gender queer and trans people of Asian descent living diaspora to investigate the politics of race, desire and imagination, heritage and nostalgia, homeland, mobility and identity.

Grrrl Zines Authors and Literacies

Rapidly changing media environments are re-shaping our understanding of literacy and requiring new ways of teaching and learning, engaging with knowledge and culture, and communicating with others. Barton and Hamilton (1998) maintain, “literacies do not just reside in people’s heads as a set of skills to be learned; they are located in the interaction between people. Like all cultural phenomena, literacy practices are fluid, dynamic and changing as the lives and societies of which they are a part” (p. 12). One may conceive literacies as a form of activism in that they are both concerned with gaining competencies on how to access, read, analyze, and interpret the discourses that constitute and position us as subjects, and, involved in the production of new meanings that shape our culture and society. By appropriating the political tactics and writing practices of punk fan zines and those of the feminist movement, grrrl zines have opened up new spaces to re-think about literacies and authorship, situating authors as producers and self-reflexive critical readers and participants in the culture they occupy.

As for literacy, authorship cannot be thought of as an isolated or stable phenomenon; rather, it must be situated and theorized across social contexts (the classroom, public spaces, out of school environments, among others). It must also be understood in relationship to semiotics, the study of signs (words, pictures, symbols) which communicate meanings in a particular culture. In positioning girls and women as producers of culture, and not merely consumers of mainstream
media representations about girlhood and femininity, grrrl zines authors teach us that authorship is not something predetermined, rather it is a site of collective struggle and critical inquiry on the social systems (patriarchy, capitalism, sexism, racism, mainstream culture), that shape the social realities in which we live in, and the ways girls do gender. The role of the grrrl author is related to Walter Benjamin’s (1970) conception of the author as being also a producer. That is to say, one involved in the process of social production rather than the mere transmission of information; one that writes with a political vision in mind and who is both theorist and activist. Grrrl authors interrogate and challenge dominant and oppressive discourses, and offer alternative or oppositional responses through the production of what Lee Anne Bell (2010) has called resistance stories:

These stories have the capacity to instruct and educate, arouse participation and collective energy, insert into the public arena and validate the experiences and goals of people who have been marginalized, and model skills and strategies for effectively confronting racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of inequality. (p.62)

The works of activist, writer and artist Anne Elizabeth Moore, *Cambodian Grrrl: Self-Publishing in Phnom Penh* (2011) and *New Girl Law* (2013), are examples of how girls and women in post-Khmer Rouge Cambodia have used grrrl zines to bring about change in their country by documenting history, sharing their experiences with others, and speaking about genocide, political repression, gender equality, and social justice while promoting self-empowerment thorough writing. Cambodian women represent 51 percent of the country’s population, yet their ability to participate in social, political, and economic life is severely constrained. Conservative traditional norms value women less than men, and persistent gender power imbalances lead to poverty, illiteracy, gender discrimination, and other obstacles that prevent women from effectively participating in the country’s development (The Asia Foundation, 2013). Also women who are involved in the media face challenges; “Cambodian society dictates that women should be softly spoken, walk lightly, be well-mannered and always in the home. For obvious reasons, these cultural norms are not conducive to encouraging women to join the field of journalism” (Kounila, In IFJ, 2015). Moore’s project of encouraging girls and women to re-write the Chbap Srei (Girl Law), the Cambodian strict code of conduct for women, shows how zines may be used to rethink not only about national gender policy, but also as a space to speak about unuttered truths, taboos surrounding sexualities, gender, the female body, social roles, sex oppression, violence, sexual division of labor, and patriarchy. The *New Girl Law,* “calls for basic human rights, gender equity, the eradication of corruption, and funding for cultural production. It is a re-envisioning of a potential future for the country. It was co-written by all 33 of us in Phnom Penh” (Moore, 2010). Even though this zine is in English and was written mainly for an American audience (majority of Cambodians do not speak in English), Moore explains “these ideas have a way of filtering through cultures, and the right people will be able to read them eventually.” She adds, a young woman has started translating this book into Mandarin.

By generating a dialogue through zines production between constructors of mainstream discourses (*The Girl Law*), and those who appropriate them (*The New Girl Law*), these resistance stories may contest and challenge oppressive hierarchical positions of subject-

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2 https://jplzinelibrary.wordpress.com/tag/anne-elizabeth-moore/

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object relations, and enable those involved in the process of appropriation to become subjects. In an interview with the Phnom Penh post, Moore explained:

One by one, human ideals—of rights, freedom and of perfect solutions to everyday problems—were mulled over by the students. While the time-old tradition of the Chbap Srei hovered, specter-like in the background, new ‘laws’ emerged that managed to fit both what the group wanted to have and what they wanted to say to society.

Don’t speak in the way that you consider [your husband] as equal, says the original Chbap Srei. No matter what happen we have to wait to listen [to] the bad word (even if he says something bad you have to listen.)

To this, the ‘new girl laws’ state: Girls should be brave enough to make eye contact with and speak to boys. Girls should also be allowed to chose their own marriage partner [in consultation with their parents], have access to free menstrual protection and learn to protect themselves, to name a few. The ‘laws’ then widen into broader human rights concerns.

(Moore, In The Phnom Penh Post, 2013)

Many of the young women that have learned the skills of zines’ creation and self-publishing got jobs in NGOs, some went into banking, others got married, while many have come to study in the United States. Moore explains, these women have eventually come back to Cambodia “as a testament to their staunch desire to make it happen there. They’re just getting to the age where they’re starting to have larger questions about how international aid works and maybe questioning their presumptions that the best answer is always the American answer”.

In countries where freedom of expression, freedom of the press and access to information is under growing pressure and restrictions, and in societies that find it difficult to engage with uncomfortable historical legacies such as genocide (in Cambodia, over two million people died of exhaustion, starvation and murder between 1975 and 1979), writing zines, teaching self-publishing and bypassing traditional mainstream media outlets, may inform further historical inquiry. This is particularly relevant in the Cambodian context where, still today, the people (both the survivors of the Khmer Rouge and their descendants) are struggling to understand and narrate the history of their own country. Eltringham and Maclean (2014) explain that while the Killing Fields and the former S-21 prison in Phnom Peng (now the Tuol Sleng Museum), where 15,000 Cambodians were detained and tortured, have globally become symbols of the crimes of Democratic Kampuchea, and thousands of international visitors travel to these sites every year, many Cambodians have still never visited these sites. Moreover, Vickery (1984) contends that the official historical narrative promoted by the government does not correspond to the majority of Cambodians’ experiences. One may argue, the numerous unanswered questions about the history of this country, the lack of clarity and explanation from official sources, and the concerns for truth and justice, have positioned Cambodian zines as powerful counterculture historical artifacts, in a context where it is often difficult to distance oneself from established social, political and cultural norms. On one hand, these zines capture individual memories, on the other, they also serve as a public testimony (nationally and internationally) of the experiences of Cambodians as a whole, helping build a shared national history.
Even though not a Grrrl zine dealing directly with gender issues, “The Story of my Life” by Aki Ra, a Cambodian child soldier who devoted his adult life to clearing the landmines he planted in his youth, is a tangible example of the value of zines as historical accounts in contemporary Cambodia. Aki Ra reports events about the war that have been passed on to him by word of mouth and explains, “the purpose for writing this story is to highlight the horror of landmines which are still prevalent in Cambodia (…) an estimate of over three million. The country continues to be one of the most landmine and explosive remnants of war-affected countries in the world (…) My only goal in life is to make my country safe for my people”4. In addition to writing this zine, which indeed has offered a space for learning and remembrance, the author also embarked on a mission to educate Cambodian people, especially children, on the dangers of landmines, and has established the Cambodia Landmine Relief Museum Facility and the Cambodia Landmine Museum and Relief Fund. His mission to help orphaned landmine victims continues to gain international support. Aki Ra’s autobiographical zine shows how memory is used not only to preserve the past, but to adapt it so as to respond to present needs and affect change. Similar strategies or resistance stories that intersect writing and activism, may be used to speak about gender-based violence perpetrated during the Khmer Rouge. While research has almost exclusively focused on violence against women, very little is revealed about violence against sexual minorities. “A lack of documentation and data about their experiences during this time has had a negative impact on their healing journey from trauma and has contributed to the development of a culture of silence amongst LGBT, inhibiting this discourse in the transnational justice process” (Nakagawa, 2015). Until this day, LGBT people are rendered invisible in Cambodia and continue to face discrimination and exclusion.

Theoretical Framework and Grrrl Zine Composition

To further explain how grrrl zines provide a space to explore, exhibit and put forth resistance in ways that are pedagogical, I will refer to Mary Louise Pratt’s *Arts of the Contact Zone*, in particular, auto ethnography, transculturation, critique, collaboration, bilingualism, mediation, parody, denunciation and vernacular expressions. Pratt (1991) refers to ‘contact zones’ as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (p. 33). The understanding of grrrl zines as sites for girls and women to come to voice and subvert their cultural identities while still appropriating and making use of the materials of mainstream pop culture allows to study these cultural formations as contact zones.

The literary arts of the contact zone are actualized in the composition of the zine *MOON ROOT, AN EXPLORATION OF ASIAN WOMYN’S BODIES*, an anthology of poetry and essays written by women, gender queer and trans people of Asian Pacific Islander (API) descent living diaspora. This section of the paper will analyze the ways in which this grrrl zine offers a space for girls and women to express themselves, reflect on the complexity of their identities and duality of experiences, being both Asian and American. Goulding (2015) notes, “Asian American grrrls and other women of color have a rich history of zine-making; however, their contributions have been less emphasized in both scholarly literature and the larger Riot Grrrl movement” (p.162). Some of the most prominent Ethno racial Riot Grrrls who have used zines to create a space of inclusion and at the same time resistance in the Riot Grrrls network include, Kristi Chan (Asian-American), Johanna Novales (Latina-American) and Sabrina Sandata (Filipina-American). Zinesters Mimi

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Nguyen (Vietnamese-American) and Lauren Martin (Chinese-American) have also reflected in their zines the need to write at the intersection of race and gender, while criticizing the racial privilege discourses in Riot Grrrls and the invisibility of ethno racial grrrls. The annihilation and underrepresentation of women of different races and ethnicities have been persistent historically and in contemporary mass media culture as well, where Asian American women have often been stereotyped as being passive, naïve, submissive, quiet, in denial about their culture, or, as hypersexualized, exotic, sexual-romantic objects. Following Pratt’s notion of the “contact zone”, MOON ROOT may offer a forum to analyze the ways in which Asian American grrrl authors have been affected by those homogenizing misrepresentations and, through their resistance stories, provided oppositional readings and responses about their complex selves and identities.

Defined by Radway (2001) as “chaotic jumbles of materials culled from mass culture, everyday life and affective experience, and a recombination of rich repertoires of contradictory cultural fragments” (p.11), zines like MOON ROOT offer a linguistic space to experiment with multiple subject-positions and gender roles, while reshaping the ways in which we see ourselves and how we think others see us (détournement). Composed of a mix of literary styles, genres and vernacular expressions, through bricolage, this zine creatively combines personal stories, poetry, fiction, essays, letters, comics’ strips, diary excerpts, handwritten rants, media images, drawings, and photographs. It also uses parody, critique, mediation, denunciation, irony, abrupt punctuations, and non-linear narratives to display its political stance and subversion of dominant marginalizing discourses.

As in an auto ethnographic text, the authors describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them, and engage and appropriate stereotypes and mainstream media representations of what it means to be “Asian” and “American”, woman, trans and gender queer (transculturation). Published in 2011, the introduction of MOON ROOT clearly sets its goals:
Often, traditional educational settings fail to provide spaces for women and girls to speak about their identities, race, gender, sexualities, and bodies. Payne claims, “this marginalization is partly due to continued cultural anxiety about the female body, as well as by adult anxiety about the adolescent body, which is often translated in terms of disruption, trauma, change, and violence” (In Comstock, 2001, p.390). WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME by Sun Hashmi, is one example of a grrrl zine that may be used to teach about identities, as being generated in, and constructed at the intersection between the individual (self-attribution about what it means to be an American of Pakistani descents) and her social context (what others ascribe the author to be).
Figure 2: WHEN PEOPLE ASK ME

(Sun Hashmi, 2011)

This auto ethnographic text displays Hashmi’s cross-cutting (non) belongingness to both Pakistan and the United States, through specific languages that have been socially and culturally inscribed on her body. Pratt explains, these texts involve a selective collaboration with and appropriation of idioms of the dominant culture. From this zine, it is clear that the author’s “looks” have triggered Orientalist misconceptions and stereotypes of what it means to be a Pakistani-American, and one may argue also a Muslim American. The division of the text into: things people have asked the author, things people have told her, and things the author feels, incarnates the ongoing struggle over multiple and even contradictory versions of the self; that “third space of in-betweenness”
(Bhabha, 1994), where identities are hybrid, never fixed, rather, continually negotiated and elaborated. This third space is empowering in that in disrupting and displacing hegemonic colonial narratives of identity, cultural structures and practices, it enables other subject positions to emerge, parodic, oppositional representations to be created and new meanings to be produced.

INHERITANCE by Sine Hwang Jensen, is another zine that is suitable to teach about identities, migration, transnationalism, social recognition, assimilation, integration, and belonging.

Figure 3: INHERITANCE

(Sine Hwang Jensen, 2011)

The author speaks about the confusion people have about the origins and nature of her body:

“I have one body and three names.
One for the law.
One for the past.
One for me”.
Jensen writes in the form of poetry, uses strong metaphors drawn from the natural world and tells the journey of her Asian ancestors and the deep caves of crystals behind her sternum that she has inherited from them. The metaphor of the crystal caves is central in this poem. The author tells the readers that these caves are not visible to the naked eye or through Western medical devices (Xrays or MRIs); however, most people can still feel their strong vibrations. Jensen also writes about how those very same crystal caves never ceased to vibrate in the body of her mother, left behind when her family fled to China:

They were vibrating on the boats she rode and in the abandoned buildings she slept in. And they haven’t stopped. The crystals cannot be muted by Western medication, by denying the existence of magic, or by rendering the bodies that hold them invisible and irrelevant. All these strategies were employed against us, and they have caused great damage. But we have not been destroyed. (…) Radiating, glowing, glimmering. We resist assimilation, eradication, and implosion. (pp. 9-11)

These last words of the poem are powerful and display ways in which critique and denunciation work through zines. The author who is Asian-American, has not neglected her past and homeland, rather, is resisting assimilation, eradication and implosion by preserving the multiple allegiances to her people, family, places and traditions. The denunciation of how the western world denies magic or renders certain types of bodies invisible and irrelevant opens up a space to think about the ways dominant languages inscribe bodies, and how alternative or oppositional languages may subvert those inscriptions. The poem also invites to reflect about identity, space, longing and belonging.

Figure 4: LOVE LETTER TO MY BODY

(monna wong, 2011)
In LOVE LETTER TO MY BODY, monna wong counteracts the familiar cultural narratives and imagery of the female body and the struggles bodies bear to establish and re-establish the hegemony of phallocentric desire or male gaze. Through presenting disciplinary practices, the pressure of enacting certain gestures, postures and movements conceived as properly feminine, being “smaller, weaker, and fairer”, the author displays the ways in which the dominant discourse constructs the ideal body of femininity, hence the feminine body-subject. This zine is empowering in that it disengages from the male vision of what kind of woman the author is expected to be, and at the same time it elucidates the level of persistence at which the male gaze operates.

**Conclusion**

Even though academia has been reluctant in bringing grrrl zines within the classroom, this paper has shown how these literate cultural practices and gendered sites of cultural production may serve as spaces for girls and women to tell their resistance stories, interrogate and challenge sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of inequality. While very little scholarly literature exists on Asian-American grrrl authors and contemporary mass media culture still often misrepresents and stereotypes Asian American women, the zine MOON ROOT is an example of how women have reclaimed a space to speak and share their experiences of being Asian-American, gender queer and trans, shaping their conceptions of self and identity, and displaying their multiple affiliations to places, people and traditions in both their homeland and the country of their descendants. Indeed, grrrl zines provide a space for authors and readers to explore, exhibit and put forth resistance in ways that are pedagogical; both reclaiming media and producing their own cultural forms, and becoming better readers of mainstream media culture.
References


