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Boundaries to Fill: Alison Piepmeier's *Girl Zines*

The 1990's represent a significant shift in the history of women and self-publishing, a combination unlikely only due to its exclusion from mainstream commentary. Alison Piepmeier's text *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism* addresses the gap within history that fails to acknowledge the prominence of women in participatory media. Like the women of the Riot Grrrl movement, Piepmeier gives voice to this under-represented segment of history and in true do-it-yourself (DIY) fashion, connects the importance of zines and the Riot Grrrl movement to the third wave of feminism. Piepmeier examines the "feminist legacy of grrrl zines" (23) in the frame of third wave feminism and how zines are a material embodiment of community. She details how "zine makers negotiate the material terrain of gender itself, and how they use the zine medium to generate gendered subjectivities" (88) and finally, she demonstrates how zines contribute to a "public pedagogy of hope" (155) by affirming and promoting the DIY model for both creators and readers. Piepmeier achieves this by defining the term "zines," relating zines to the feminist movement, and by asserting the resonance and relevance of zines.

Participatory media is defined as "media created by consumers rather than by the corporate culture industries" (2) and as such, zines are found in this category.

They even take their name from the larger term, “magazine,” and the abbreviating of the term is indicative of the personalized nature of the creative booklets and exemplifies the DIY aspect. Piepmeier often uses “girl” and “grrrl” interchangeably when referring to zines, with each representing the idea of zines as an innovative space for feminist musings and community. This space is described as a site “where girls and women construct identities, communities, and explanatory narratives from the materials that comprise their cultural moment” (2). In many ways, there is still little space that females can claim as their own, though there is much more today than there was when girl zines first came into being and Piepmeier narrates the inception of the Riot “grrrl” (5). Embedded in this is the suggestion that “zines provide an expressive space free from cultural constraints” (11) and this is especially pertinent to the girl zine.

Girl zines were a reaction to the dominant patriarchal attitudes and limitations that were plaguing the punk rock scene and they offered “ idiosyncratic, surprising, yet savvy and complex responses to the late-twentieth-century incarnations of sexism, racism, and homophobia” (4). Piepmeier demonstrates this through personal narrative accounts and experiences of the women who were early girl zinesters. She synthesizes academia with story, validating and reaffirming the significance of the movement. Originating in a scene that had promised to be counterculture but failed to acknowledge females as equal contributors, zines gave voice to the under-represented

and the marginalized. With the success of zine distributors such as Sweet Candy Distro, it is clear that the values originally instilled in girl zines are still prevalent today. Piepmeier details the foundations of early feminist self-publishing and argues how the appropriation of the zine format contributed to the third wave of feminism.

Piepmeier contends that the production of girl zines is central to the third wave of feminism. They are used as a platform to communicate ideas and identities, and through this they begin to define a new type of feminism. Piepmeier observes that “zines are resistant media, and women are, even today, rarely identified with resistance” (25) and this explains the omission of women from the mainstream history of zines. Perhaps most intriguing is the ways in which women have been self-publishing for decades and viewing girl zines as an aberration invalidates the previous work of women. While not recognizable as the zines that Piepmeier describes today, she explains that “women throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have created informal publications -- from scrapbooks to women’s health brochures to mimeographed feminist pamphlets -- and a textual and formal analysis of these publications suggests that they are the direct historical predecessors of grrrl zines” (29). The concept of a literary precursor has always been an active issue in historical examinations of both men and women’s writing and Piepmeier is quick to make the connection between early women’s anxiety of authorship and the creation of girl zines.

Like those before, women who make zines are “speaking from disempowered positions” (29) and many will continue to do so. In *Girl Zines* it is significant that not only are women writing and self-publishing, but they are also creating and designing these publications for themselves. Zines are subversive: when women create zines, they are often “actively intervening and transforming the established mediascape” (163) and “making use of the ephemera of the mainstream culture” (191). Piepmeier furthers, “Grrrl zinesters, like their scrapbooking predecessors, often engage intimately with magazine advertisements . . . By doing so, they are developing marketplace literacies that they then often use to criticize the marketplace” (32). Included throughout the text are images from popular girl zines that exemplify this trait. Newspaper clippings will be pasted into the zines with new headlines or comments scrawled overtop the original newsprint. This concept of recycling popular media for the purposes of critique is central to the growth of popularity in zines as well as highly characteristic of the third wave movement and Piepmeier aptly assesses this.

The death of print culture is an argument that has no sway over zinesters, and the prevalence of zine repositories, zine libraries, and zine conventions are a testament to this. The fascination with zines and zine creation is seen prominently in their physicality and Piepmeier details “the notion that paper is better suited for facilitating human connection than electronic media” (63). With the emergence of web blogging,

self-publishing became infinitely more accessible. As well, unlike zines, websites do not reveal their age through physical markers, making the electronic format seem more sustainable and preservable to some. Piepmeier claims that “zines as paper artifacts register the connections of bodies and the passage of time more fully than digital technologies” (16). This statement is evidenced in the case of *Fragments of Friendship*, a zine created by Victoria Law. The connection between Law and her friend through email communication became entirely more memorable and significant when they were transposed to a print model: “Law created no new material for the zine but simply made already existing email correspondence into [a] material object . . . [somehow] the emails themselves were deficient” (63). Electronic publishing is a less sincere form of self-publishing, as the effort and motivation required to produce and distribute a zine is a more authentic and determined pursuit, as Piepmeier demonstrates through Law’s experience. Though the zine had “exactly the same content as the emails,” Law was able to create a zine that embodied the emails themselves and *Fragments of Friendship* became “a better artifact of their friendship” (65). This is one of many examples Piepmeier uses to support the assertion that zines are inherently participatory and resilient, even in the face of widespread access to self-publishing platforms through the internet. The resiliency of zines in their material form coincides with the message contained in them: “If I didn’t write these things no one else would either” (23). It is this attitude that zines thrive on.

In the introduction to *Girl Zines*, Andi Zeisler reasserts the objective of Piepmeier's text: to prove that girl zines are relevant, that they are "an ongoing conversation, a way to be achingly immediate yet also provide a link to the printed matter that came before" (xiv). Piepmeier herself also becomes a link -- by capturing history from the other half in her monograph, she immortalizes the raised fist of zines and the chorus of voices that they provide a platform for. Not only does Piepmeier reaffirm the role that zines have taken in the history of feminism and self-publishing, but she argues for their relevance and resilience today in regards to the defense of print culture. Piepmeier's text is not just essential for those interested in feminist pursuits, but also to the preservation of print culture. The existence and survival of zines defies our digital culture and embodies a restorative and inspiring tradition.

Work Cited

Piepmeier, Alison. *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*. New York: New York University Press, 2009. Print.