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# The Personal, Political, and a Little Bit of Everything Else: Girls, Grrrls and Perzines

*Le personnel, le politique et un peu du reste : les filles, les grrrls et les perzines*

**Annelise Sklar**

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# The Personal, Political, and a Little Bit of Everything Else: Girls, Grrrls and Perzines

par

Annelise Sklar

**Abstract:** Using her own zine story as a vehicle, the author relates the history of the riot grrrl subculture, describes the girl zine genre and its history, and examines zinester subculture and networking. She also explores zinesters' motivation and discusses the purpose girl zines fill in female zinesters' lives.

**Key words:** *fanzines — feminism — riot grrrl — personal zines.*

**It was** like it was made for me. I could write, rant, paste things together haphazardly with little worry about my lack of artistic ability, and be girlie, trashy, silly and punk rock at the same time, and I could do it all without leaving my bedroom or speaking to another human being. Discovering zines was the best part of my adolescence. It was a way I could be punk rock and DIY (do-it-yourself) and introverted at the same time, a way I could express my views without having to stand up and perform in front of a group of people and anxiously watch their instant reaction for instant (dis)approval. A zine was a way I could see and share my words in print with complete editorial control, and, unlike with school-sanctioned publications, I could limit the circulation so that the entire school wasn't necessarily reading my words.

I think the first time I encountered a zine was in the mid-1990s. I was a teenage girl at some punk rock show to which I'd been dragged by my boyfriend and to which, in turn, I dragged my best friend. Someone was selling a zine, and I, for a dollar, bought a copy of what turned out to be my future friend, roommate, and partner-in-crime's hand-written rants about her life. Inspired by her work, it wasn't long before I launched my own zine.

I started *The Vegetable Inside Us All* sometime in the mid-1990's. The details are hazy but I think it was 1994 or 1995. Kurt Cobain was already dead, Courtney Love was notorious but not officially nuts, and flannel, greasy hair, babydoll dresses, and grunge were giving way to leather jackets, spiked hair, and pop-punk. I certainly wasn't a pioneer; when I started *Veggie*, zines were just starting to catch mainstream attention in publications like *Time*, *Ms.*, *Seventeen*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and, of course, *Sassy*, where many teenage girls first got their taste of zinedom. Still, the punk, riot grrrl, and perzine (personal zine) scenes were small and somewhat close-knit, and I quickly became part of a network of zine traders and snail-mail pen pals in an age when the World Wide Web and email were poised to take over as everyday forms of communication. It seems amazing now, but when I started doing a zine, "Girl Power" was not yet associated with the Spice Girls, and any t-shirt baring that or a similar slogan was homemade with the aid of a magic marker. Like those later commodified versions of feminism, though, the girl zine boom of the mid-1990s can trace its lineage back, in part, to riot grrrl, a feminist punk/indie rock movement of teenage and twenty-something aged women.

## History of riot grrrl

Riot grrrl was a feminist offshoot of the punk subculture, adopting its angry political stance and general DIY ethic while countering male dominance with a strong female voice. Beginning in Olympia, WA, and Washington, DC, (largely due to the bicoastal transplantation of the band Bikini Kill), and germinating with the post-punk grunge scene, the message of “revolution girl style now!” was spread across North America and throughout the industrialized world primarily through the music of bands like Bikini Kill, Bratmobile, and Heavens to Betsy; fanzines like *Girl Germs*, *Jigsaw*, and *Chainsaw*; and riot grrrl meetings held in infoshops, apartments, dorm rooms, and other community gathering spaces.

The term “riot grrrl” came into use in the summer of 1991, coined, so the story goes, by combining Tobi Vail’s (Bikini Kill, *Jigsaw* zine) use of the term “angry grrrls” and a line in Jen Smith’s letter to Allison Wolfe (Bratmobile) that suggested, “We need to start a girl riot.” It was flipped around into “riot girl” and the spelling changed to “grrrl” (“Riot Grrrl Retrospective”), suggesting a ferocious growl and signifying the personal agency of western girlhood before it is stripped away and the girls become women molded by gender norms. That same summer, riot grrrl meetings began in Arlington, VA, growing from meetings Jenny Toomey, of indie label Simple Machines, had organized for young women. The meetings, typically women-only spaces, featured discussions of bands and music as well as serious women’s issues like violence and abuse. Reacting to sexism and macho attitudes in both the mainstream and underground subcultures, the idea behind the movement was that women could do it all, too: play loud music, mosh, create art and media, run record labels and distros, and organize protests and activist activities. The local meetings grew into conventions, concerts, and zine festivals that attracted riot grrrls from near and far.

Unfortunately, riot grrrl as an identity became more important than riot grrrl as activism, attitude, and the work its members did. Not long after I started *Veggie*, and perhaps even before, riot grrrl was already starting to show its logistical holes, primarily in its exclusion of men, in-fighting among female participants, and lack of crucial feminist agenda (or consensus about what constituted crucial feminist issues) at that point in time. Riot grrrl, like grunge and punk, appealed primarily to young white women, and the ideology was often at odds and uncomfortable in discourse with young non-white women—as well as men and older feminist women. In more mainstream punk subcultures dominated by boys, “riot grrrl” was often, if not exactly a dirty word, a feminist caricature prime

for ridicule. Riot grrrl had pretty much worn itself out by the mid-1990s, co-opted by mall fashion and replaced by more mainstream acts like Alanis Morissette, Tori Amos, Sarah McLachlan, and the Lilith Fair tour. However, it left in place a strong feminist network of zinesters. While many female zinesters did not or do not personally identify as riot grrrls, the ideology is reflected in a generation of perzines written by young women, and the “girl zine” (or “grrrl zine”) has emerged as its own genre, still going strong.

## Zines

*Veggie* was somewhat representative of the girl zine genre. Like other typical girl zines, it was half-size (8.5 x 5 inches) and photocopied, black type on white paper. (Some zines were more complex, but most authors did not have the means for more elaborate printing.) The standard girl zine was filled with articles; rants; reviews of zines, books, music, or whatever else came the author’s way; and vignettes that reflect teenage and twenty-something life: explorations of sex and sexuality, crushes, school issues, mental health, politics, feminist mythology and spirituality. Illustrations are primarily the authors’ own art or kitschy clip art. There was usually some Sanrio imagery and a variety of fonts. The first issues of *Veggie* were truly horrible: I reprinted outraged feminist email forwards and things I found, none of which were either exciting or factually sound, and I stole retro clipart from other current publications. The cover of the second issue displayed Hello Kitty of the Botticelli Venus’s half-clamshell. I learned as I went, refining layouts, discovering clipart books at the public library and in bookstores, and primarily sticking to my own text (though I was notorious for screwing up bands hometowns and other niggling facts like that). I published erratically, whenever I had a burst of energy and the urge to cover myself in glue, and I printed however many I could afford or flirt out of copyshop workers.

Though girl zines can trace their genealogy back to the punk zines and independent feminist press of the 1970s, the girl zine as we know it truly began with riot grrrl in the 1990s. Early zines included: *Riot Grrrl*, *Bikini Kill*, *Jigsaw*, *Girl Germs*, and *Chainsaw*. Official riot grrrls did not corner the market on female-produced publications, however. Equally influential to me and my girl zinester peers were *Pagan’s Head* and *Thrift Score* (both of which were later reborn as books), *Madwoman*, *Slug ’n’ Lettuce*, and *Fucktooth* as well as perzines produced by men such as *Cometbus* and *Dishwasher*.

Though I may be somewhat biased, in that it was my prime zinester era, I have to say that the mid-1990s were heyday of the girl zine. Among my peers were (along with many others I have inadvertently forgotten): *Action Girl Newsletter*, *Alabama Grrrl*, *Baa! I'm a Sheep*, *Baby Girl*, *Bamboo Girl*, *Billy's Mitten*, *Capt'n Nola*, *Cul-de-Sac*, *Cupcake*, *Delirium*, *Doris*, *The East Village Inky*, *Fat Girl*, *Flying Lesson*, *Go Teen Go*, *Hag Rag*, *Have You Seen the Dog Lately?*, *Hey Mexican*, *I Love You (Queerly, Not Dearly)*, *Kitty Magik*, *Leeking Ink*, *Little Super Human Guy*, *The Mad Cow*, *Muffin Bones*, *Oppress This*, *Pisces Zine*, *Plotz*, *Pottsie Nation*, *Power Candy*, *Red Hooded Sweatshirt*, *Slant*, *Suburbia*, *Tennis and Violins*, *That Girl*, *Thunderpusy*, *Velvet Grass*, *Violet Crimes*, and *You Might as Well Live*. Many of these zines still exist, but the list of popular current zines is too long to even start.

The content of individual girl zines varies, of course, from creator to creator. Some have themes—such as issues of race and racism or issues of sexuality and sexual identity like the masturbation zine—many are nothing more than a hodgepodge of the author's thoughts. The zine content Anita Harris studied in her article on zines as teenage girls' spaces of resistance was "characterized by information sharing, editorials or rants, music/book/art reviews, art and creative writing around issues relevant to young women. The topics themselves are wide-ranging, but often include body image, sexuality, health, violence, employment, education and contemporary law and policy" (Harris, 2003: 46). One issue of a zine will contain multiple topics of interest to its author(s), epitomizing the feminist intersection of the personal and political: "in a zine that discusses sexual assault or the privatization of women's prisons, one might also find recipes for hair dye, and the pages decorated with glitter and Hello Kitty images" (*Ibid.*: 48). In general, girl zines are fueled solely by the tastes of their creators, and, as they have little or no advertising and rarely break even, let alone make a profit, through sales, are not driven by advertisers' demands or hopes of courting readers. And, unlike zines created by male peers, girl zines rarely contained band interviews, even if music was a vital part of the author's life and/or subculture. Instead, girl zines are, Harris says, "sites of resistance" that "like a girl's bedroom ... can operate as a private place legitimately able to exclude both adults and young men" (*Ibid.*: 47), or, as zinester Cheryl Yanek (*Freak! Goodbye to NYC*) describes her zine: "It was personal and political, but mostly personal." More simply, Sarah Rose (*Tazewell's Favorite Eccentric*) explains, "I needed an outlet for my feelings."

They provide a forum for young women to express their opinions and enter the discourse surrounding issues in their lives, though, because a zine is a written, asynchronous form of communication, the "talking back," as Harris notes, "is more like whispering in corners" (*Ibid.*: 52) than screaming

from rooftops. That isn't to say that it wasn't always positive attention. Yanek remembers: "I used my real name which ended up getting me in some real sh--[sic] when people in my high school got ahold of it. I got in some serious trouble but continued to do it, without my last name." However, when kept in the right hands—zine afficianados—zines were a powerful means of community interaction.

### Zinesters and Zinester Networks

I built my zine collection first with what I found in independent record shops and bookstores, then through trades with like-minded zinesters, and, occasionally, through mail order—a dollar bill or two wrapped carefully inside a note—either from the zine creator or a distro. I found zines to acquire through the standard zine review resources: *Factsheet 5*, *Amusing Yourself to Death*, *the Zine Guide*, Kristy Chan's *Riot Grrrl Review*, the review sections in my friends' zines, and, later, email posts on the Zinesters list. Sometimes zines would show up on the merchandise tables at punk shows or other DIY/underground community events, too. Never very comfortable marketing myself, I sold my own at a few local stores and through an inconsistent handful of distros. My primary means of zine disbursal was through trades with fellow zinesters.

Personal interaction between zinesters is tied closely to the trading. Zinesters have a tendency to live their lives primarily in the print medium, so, due to distance and general introversion, written correspondence has always been the primary means of communication. Perzines, being personal, along with the supplementary letters that accompany them, quite easily breed true friendships among swappes. Some of my favorite people are zinesters I've never met, and some of my "real life" friends are those I met through our zine trades. Explains Sara Falls (*Untitled/Cien Fuegos*): "That community is a real inspiration as well as support, not only morally but also pragmatically—my zine community helped me distro, steal copies, get my zine out. We would write together, travel across country to stay up to the wee hours working on split zines and projects." And while each zine is its own unique entity, Sophie Scarlet (*Antisocial Scarlet*) notes, "my zine is part of a great body of zines being written by other feminists and they keep getting better!"

## Technology

The genre developed in tandem with the birth of the World Wide Web, but grrrl zines have always existed uneasily with the technology of their distribution. While copy machines were necessary for mass production, many authors refrained from using computers for anything other than typing articles, and others only wrote text by hand. The Zinesters listserv made communication between zinesters instantaneous, but early on, an uneasy chasm opened up between print zinesters and e-zinesters. The internet is now a more mainstream and financially-sensible means of distribution, and many of the early girl-zinesters have moved on to other life projects like college and full-time employment; many projects have been reborn completely on the web and most surviving paper-based projects are now distributed through or accompanied by web sites. Many former zinesters have now switched to blogs, which publish instantly. Explains Yanek, “i [sic] do much of what i [sic] used to do—without the photos and super visual element.” Yanek suggests that “zines may fade away, as the internet gains more and more power,” but other zinesters might disagree, citing their love for the print format and snail mail as resistance to mainstream technology, despite the cost of the now almost antiquarian means of distribution.

## The Future

Neither riot grrrl nor zining gets the media attention it got in the mid-1990s, but both are still around, operating on the fringes of underground and punk culture. Zines, like fiction, are primarily pleasure reading and will most likely continue to exist in whatever form is most appealing to their readers and creators, metamorphosing to compliment as of yet unforeseen changes in technology and subcultural ideology. While my zinester peers tapered off their zining as they got older, citing financial burden, the time-consuming other aspects of life (like relationships and jobs), other projects (chapbooks, blogs, academia, book deals) and a simple lack of angst-driven motivation (Says Scarlet: “I think its [sic] because I don’t feel as angry or fucked up anymore – my life isn’t as dramatic.”), girl zines shouldn’t be relegated to academic zine archives just get. Perzines continue to be outlets for indie and punk rock kids and have even been used as educational tools by their GenX teachers.

Older zinesters and zine fans have gotten a little pickier, as Cristina Favretto (*Rock Against Sexism*) explains, “Perzines can get a bit boring but when they’re good they really get me thinking.” Kerri



Provost (*Borderline! Tourist! Restoring Harmony! Radical Menstruation*) elaborates, “Good zines can be hard to find. There are people who waste too many trees for recognition or fame or whatever the case may be. I’m an academic who majored in English, and I am biased in that sense. When people can combine content with art, then they are making a positive contribution to the community.” Also, along with hoards of now-defunct half-size zines came the birth and coming-of-age of larger feminist zines like *Bust* and *Bitch*, which went on to be popular independent/underground magazines with wide distribution. These zines are full-sized, glossy-covered, and funded by revenue generated by advertising for hipster and feminist products. They are printed on a regular schedule and employ actual editorial staff. They are available across the country at newsstands and large bookstores like Borders and Barnes and Noble. However, though larger, these magazines are strongly feminist publications with a DIY agenda that captures the spirit of the smaller zines.

Girl zines, like feminism, are here to stay, though communities may wax and wane and the works themselves will evolve—adopting new names and formats—as new zinesters take the helm. Girl zines will continue to be whatever their creators want them to be—personal, political, companions to other artistic ventures and critiques on the authors’ worlds of school, work, literature, activism, music, whatever. Publishing and technology may change, but as long as there are pissed off girls and women with something to say, there will be a girl zine—or its futuresque equivalent—out there for your reading pleasure.

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