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## The Telling Case of GirlZone



I arrived early on the first morning of *GrrrlFest 2002: Throw like a girl*, the second annual weekend-long “celebration of girls and women” that offered over forty hands-on workshops and panel presentations on topics ranging from skateboarding and web design to “Claiming your Anger” and “Minding your Mind over your Manners.” As I meandered throughout the central Illinois Independent Media Center (IMC), the Fest’s home site this year, I looked at the artwork and texts that transformed the IMC into GrrrlFest headquarters. In addition to GrrrlFest schedules and flyers were tracts urging the closure of the School of the Americas, pre-addressed postcards encouraging the local university to add contraception coverage to graduate student insurance policies, and, of course, the Powerpuff Girls-informed GrrrlFest logo. What most caught my eye were the easel boards in each of the three adjacent rooms. On these boards, GrrrlFest participants could respond to prompts such as: “Design your own ‘Women’s’ sign for a bathroom”; “What did a teacher do?”; or, my favorite, “What do you say when someone says you throw like a girl?” All weekend, girls and women would gather around these easels. Some GrrrlFest participants wrote witty “comebacks” and funny anecdotes. Others discussed how misogyny and homophobia make the phrase “you throw like a girl,” a taunt, an accepted “fact” that circulates in girls’ everyday lives. On page after easel board page, girls and women poured out their thoughts, which then became stapled to the walls. Participants consistently checked for new entries, often dragging a friend or two along to see the newest “must read” response. Literally surrounding GrrrlFest participants, these responses made visible how texts mediate large-scale sociocultural forces that both reflect and construct who girls and women are on the one hand, and local ways girls and women redirect these forces on the other hand.

Exposing and redirecting damaging societal messages was a goal of GrrrlFest and its sponsoring organization, GirlZone. From 1997–2003, GirlZone and GirlZone-sponsored programs (such as GrrrlFest) offered over one thousand girls and women over four hundred hands-on workshops in activities they seldom had the opportunity or encouragement to

explore elsewhere. Participants discussed the activity of hands-on workshops (e.g., skateboarding, creative writing), yet crucial to GirlZone's success were talk and texts that mediated the social relations that shaped these workshops. *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies: Activism in the GirlZone* investigates these complex and, at times, contradictory social relations. In particular, this book examines how girls and women at one grassroots feminist organization used texts both to construct meaning and to construct themselves as meaningful in their everyday lives.

Throughout this research, I examine literate activities as a way to understand how people engage with the world, an approach that is beneficial for both literacy scholars and for those we study. For literacy scholars, *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* offers a model for studying literacy practices in out-of-school settings. My model provides a thick description of the broad cultural-historical contexts shaping how texts function and of the very local practices in and through which girls' identities and positions are being contested and reworked, especially through the literate worlds linked to this grassroots feminist organization. Through this model, I take up an engaged, praxis-oriented stance in order to better understand the complex phenomena at this site, and to work through the site to realize feminist goals of cultural and political change.

Understanding literacy as one way to make sense of and inform both local practices and cultural-historic contexts shaping these practices can also help those we study. For example, this understanding can help contemporary grassroots feminist activists develop tactics—from reworking girl culture to facilitating local activism—that foster social change on a local level. Consequently, *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* provides a case study for feminists, grassroots activists, and cultural critics considering how girls and girl culture have become cultural flash points, reflecting both societal and particularly feminist anxieties about and hopes for the future.

In the rest of this chapter, I contextualize these literacy and feminist projects before ending with descriptions of how the following chapters take them up.

## LITERACY IN COMMUNITY SETTINGS

In her chair's address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Chair Anne Ruggles Gere issued a call to supplement composition studies' attention to the literate activities in the classroom with attention to literate activities outside the classroom. This call was part of Gere's argument that the field itself needs to be located in *and beyond* the classroom:

Instead of a historiography based exclusively on textbooks used in schools and colleges, on the careers and works of prominent teachers

and scholars, on the curricular decisions made by universities and on texts produced by students, we can consider the various sites in which the extracurriculum has been enacted, the local circumstances that supported its developments, the material artifacts employed by its practitioners, and the cultural work it accomplished.<sup>1</sup>

In recent years, writing studies scholars have heeded Gere's call, addressing questions beyond the classroom in order to understand how people use literacy in their everyday lives. As we turn our attention to new research sites, this expansive understanding of everyday literacy transforms writing studies researchers from being composition teachers in the university to writing experts in the public realm.<sup>2</sup>

This shift indexes a definition of literacy, what I am calling "literate activities," that diminishes individual, decontextualized skills and foregrounds literacy as a social activity embedded in situated, cultural-historical contexts. This shift emerges, in part, from literacy research informed by anthropological/ethnographic traditions that focus on the diverse and interrelated activities surrounding the ways people use textual practices in particular settings.<sup>3</sup> Although theorists use different terms,<sup>4</sup> I use "literate activities" instead of "writing" or "literacy" to emphasize literacy's complexity. Sociohistoric theorist Paul A. Prior gets at this complexity when he describes the thinness of the term "writing":

Usual representations of writing collapse time, isolate persons, and filter activity (e.g., "I wrote the paper over the weekend"). Actually, writing happens in moments that are richly equipped with tools (material and semiotic) and populated with others (past, present, and future). When seen as situated activity, writing does not stand alone as the discrete act of a writer, but emerges as a confluence of many streams of activity: reading, talking, observing, acting, making, thinking, and feeling as well as transcribing words on paper. . . . "Writing" is too partial, too contextually thin, a unit of analysis.<sup>5</sup>

Like Prior, I find traditional representations of writing—and literacy more generally—too limiting, as if literacy is primarily a mental activity bound in a moment's time and place. When writing, reading, and designing documents, participants draw on imagined and real people as well as what Prior calls "material" and "semiotic tools" that span time and space. The ongoing, interactive, and situated associations of "literate activities" better calls attention to both the spatially and temporally striated nature of literacy as well as the constellation of people, practices, and institutions that inform how people work with (and are worked by) texts.

When investigating how people engage in everyday literate activities beyond the classroom, scholars have primarily examined the workplace and the home. Scholars have paid far less attention to situated studies of community organizations—sites where, from the ground up, people imagine what they want and what structures they need to achieve their desire.

This lack of attention to community organizations is surprising. As David Barton and Mary Hamilton note, there are hundreds of these organizations throughout towns and cities everywhere and we know very little about how the literate activities at these self-chosen, everyday sites function.<sup>6</sup>

At community organizations, participants take part in a wide range of literate activities as they design, read, and distribute mission statements, logos, e-mails, and flyers. The literate activities of value to the grassroots GirlZone community itself were the activities I privileged. This focus meant that I examined not only the ways people engaged with texts, but also how they engaged with visual and aural documents, documents particularly pervasive in youth culture. While I accept the traditional definition of literacy that prizes close analyses of print-based texts, contemporary documents such as the websites, newspapers, and even school textbooks use multiple modes (e.g., text, icon) to convey their messages. Each mode carries a significant part of what communication theorist Gunther Kress calls a message's "functional load."<sup>7</sup> To be literate in the twenty-first century, therefore, means being able to understand and design multimodal documents.

This expanded view of literacy is rooted both in traditional literacy scholarship and in contemporary technological possibilities. As Gere has argued, for years women's groups have used literacy to shape pressing social questions, such as those surrounding immigration, suffrage, working conditions, race, and so forth.<sup>8</sup> GirlZone illustrates that, today, groups of women still use literate activities to address pressing social questions, especially to intervene in a sexualized and commodified girl culture. Nonetheless, understandings of literacy have changed. Technological advancements alter the production and distribution of texts as well as the multiple modes included in these texts. Similarly, globalized business practices and mass-marketing have ratcheted up the importance and altered the means of sharing information. Literacy scholars need to attend to these changes that include and exceed print-based documents.

In addition to expanding the traditional definition of literacy, I call for new methods to analyze literacy. Since literacy is inherently situated, analyses should attend to local practices and to broader socioeconomic dynamics that both make texts meaningful and authorize particular individuals to be creators of texts. This expansion means that analyses of literacy should investigate the issues surrounding participants' practices (e.g., tensions surrounding contemporary girl culture or feminist girl-centered organizations) and the issues surrounding literacy itself (e.g., a challenge to libratory literacy myths).

As participants imagine, develop, and sustain a grassroots project, these literate activities expose participants' struggles to balance their representations with their lived realities. These struggles raise important questions: what identities are textually foregrounded and how are these enacted; how do people negotiate the competing representations of in-your-face manifestos and institutionally conservative grant proposals to shape an

organization's future, rewrite its past, and mediate its present; how do these representations and actions balance the demands and possibilities of institution building and of hands-on activism? *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* addresses these questions by examining the ways that one group of community girls and women used (and were used by), redesigned (and were redesigned by), and ignored (and were ignored by) "official literacies"<sup>9</sup> that shape this community organization.

As noted above, through this analysis, I complicate the enduring myth that literacy is liberating. This myth is supported by the disproportionate amount of literacy research that focuses on schools. As the sites of literacy research broaden and writing studies scholars explore the actual and not mythologized ways people use literacy, we see that literacy is far more complex than what many institutionally invested conclusions of school-based research may imply.

This research into literacy's complexity underscores how literacy does not necessarily work in ways writers anticipate. For example, GirlZone organizers wrote grant proposals to garner institutional resources. Although these literate activities successfully obtained funds, they also constrained organizers' ability to forward an innovative agenda for grassroots feminist activism by occasionally limiting what activities GirlZone would offer, an unintended consequence to be sure. This example also illustrates how the literate activities surrounding important institutional texts could powerfully draw participants and an institution into social relations that participants were unaware of.

Institutionally important texts reflect and construct what feminist sociologist Dorothy E. Smith calls "documentary realities."<sup>10</sup> People take up the expected ways of knowing and acting that these documentary realities construct. Examining these texts can reveal the social organization of knowledge and the social relations organizing power. Since we live in an increasingly knowledge-based and textually mediated world, it is critical to examine these textual realities in order to understand how these seemingly invisible constructions act upon us. For girls, women, and others who have generally been excluded from power and institutional knowledge-making, it is especially important to understand the ways that people take up these documentary realities in their everyday lives.

At GirlZone, the effects of documentary realities were evident, if not always recognized. There were the institutionally conservative grant proposals that linked GirlZone to national funding organizations, organizations that seldom had girls' organizations on their priority lists. There were also in-your-face manifestos and zines that linked GirlZone to radical feminist ways of producing knowledge and distributing information. GirlZone participants needed to negotiate their understandings of themselves and of their social relations within these contexts where divergent documentary realities at times overlapped and at times collided. Embedded in and shaped by a variety of institutional forces not readily apparent, GirlZone

participants' literate activities index a complex cycle of textual production and reproduction that attracted and discouraged participants, business support, and funding opportunities in often unacknowledged ways. This book explores the dynamic struggle between the participants' desires to shape these realities and literacy's enabling and constraining impact on how people do so.

## GIRLS AND GIRL CULTURE

*Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* locates its examination into how people use literate activities in a decidedly feminist space. At GirlZone as at other feminist grassroots organizations during the 1990s, participants struggled to make sense of how girls and girl culture were influencing the feminist movement and the United States culture more broadly. Theorizing this sense making, both at and beyond GirlZone, is a second project of this book.

Although society now values girls' and women reading and writing, consumer culture and the mass-media send mixed messages and offer difficult rhetorical (textual, visual) conundrums for girls and women to negotiate. These difficulties can be seen in the multiple representations of girls that became highly visible since the 1990s. In national best sellers, on the cover of *The New York Times Book Review*, in Hollywood and independent movies, and on television programs as diverse as *Oprah*, *Law and Order*, and *The News Hour with Jim Lehrer*,<sup>11</sup> the quaint but powerfully residual sugar and spice representation of young girls was shattered by a spate of "mean girl" books and documentaries. In addition to girls' meanness, a second prevalent representation of girls centered on their increasing sexualization. From tabloids to mainstream news, pictures of the highly made-up six-year-old beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey perhaps unwittingly broadcast this sexualization of younger and younger girls. These "prost-i-tots" profoundly troubled traditional notions of who girls are and what they want. Why, for example, do eight-year-olds want thongs, preteens set up casual sex dates, and teens desire breast implants as the up-and-coming high school graduation gift? Although high profile media examples are easy to point to—the infamous Madonna and Britney Spears kiss at the 2003 MTV awards; the exposure of Janet Jackson's nipple as the most talked about moment of Superbowl XXXVIII and the most watched TiVo moment to date—these media eruptions are not the culprit. Rather, they reflect the changing options repeatedly offered to girls. Although these options were most visible in the media and consumer culture, their causes were far more diverse.

Part of this diversity is evident in the expanding age range of those self-identifying as girls. Not only were female youth from toddlers to preadolescents considered girls, but also droves of teens and twenty-something women took up this and related monikers, such as "girlie"

“gURL,” or “grrrl.”<sup>12</sup> Ironically, this first generation of young women who grew up benefiting from second-wave feminist victories embraced a label that just a generation ago women rejected as an offensive attempt to infantilize them. Contrary to this assessment, twenty-somethings in the 1990s celebrated their “girl power.” This girl power was made popular in the mid-1990s when marketers pumped out girl power T-shirts, body sprays, and parenting guides, yet girl power had emerged earlier out of both grassroots feminist activism, popular press, and academic books. In this latter context, researchers claimed that girls’ power diminished when girls move into womanhood.<sup>13</sup> A new generation of “girls” wanted to reclaim that power and extend it to females beyond preadolescence.

The seeming desire to extend youth captured national and indeed international attention. Demographers, sociologists, psychologists and others are studying these 18–25-year-old “twixters”—women and men who are betwixt and between, unwilling and/or unable to leave youth and become adults. Some depict twixters as slackers. Because they lack financial and moral resources to make it on their own, this demographic rejects the trend of going to school, getting a job, and settling down with children. Others represented twixters as having the likely response to the changing socioeconomic times. Many have staggering college debt; face skyrocketing housing costs; and find fewer options for stable, well-paying jobs. Worldwide, this generation is living at home longer, getting married when they are older, and having children later in life. They will live longer and therefore will have to work longer than previous generations, so why rush?<sup>14</sup> As girls and women face new challenges, claim new identities, and seek new ways of being in the world, the emergence of these so-called twixters and the self-chosen “girl” moniker raises questions about how girls and young women understand and redesign the choices available to them.

These questions resonate far beyond girls and young women. Indeed, throughout the 1990s girls and young women functioned as cultural flash points that exposed society’s schizophrenic anxieties and hopes within the global economy. On the one hand, marketers, the media, and doctors, especially in the early 1990s, represented girls in crises, taking up dangerous coping behaviors such as anorexia, cutting, and depression to escape from schools’ “hostile hallways” and a “girl poisoning culture.”<sup>15</sup> In these representations, girls appear vulnerable, innocent, and agent-less in the face of vitriolic and misogynistic messages washing over them. As stand-ins for other innocents, girls are left to negotiate an increasingly dangerous and unstable world in which social institutions withdraw their safety net and social problems become privatized. On the other hand, popular representations of girl power in the mid-1990s, such as the Spice Girls, depict girls as expressing their agency through consumerism. In these representations, girls gain access to power through their bodies and their credit cards. Represented as enterprising and entitled, young women project the wishful

belief that in the marketplace everyone has equal opportunities for buying power.<sup>16</sup> Despite their divergences, these representations highlight how agency is framed within individualistic, often consumption-based models.

These competing constructions of girls and girl culture function not only as a tableau for societal anxieties and hopes, but also for enabling and constraining a new feminist generation. Contrary to the overrepresented generational tensions that have obscured racial, class, and other fissures about what it means to be a girl, a woman, and a feminist today, second-wave feminists have cleared a space for valuing and understanding women and girls. Since at least the 1970s, feminists have pointed out how scholars of youth culture marginalized, misrepresented, and profoundly misunderstood girls and girl culture.<sup>17</sup> Benefiting from this work, girls and young women are demanding to be seen and heard on their own terms. Instead of innocents needing to be saved, consumers duped by capitalism, or feminists-in-training, girls and young women argue that they are *present* agents who actively rework capitalistic and feminist frameworks that seek to configure options for girls and young women today. The ways that feminists of many generations and cohorts negotiate the representations and realities of girl culture will shape and already are shaping the current and future agendas of today's feminist movements.

An examination of literate activities provides one way to intervene in these important negotiations. As noted earlier, literate activities mediate the macro-level forces evident in “documentary realities” (e.g., the ways texts create—and not merely reflect—how people understand themselves and their relations to others) and the micro-level ways girls and women take up, modify, and/or reject these so-called realities. To understand this work requires extended, situated study of how people use (and are used by others’) texts in their everyday environment and how large-scale forces enable and limit this work. *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* offers both a method for such a study and a range of applications for how this study can inform real-world matters, like developing organizations or intervening in girl culture.

The situatedness of this research means that there can never be a “typical case” able to stand in for all cases of literacy research or of grassroots feminist organizing. Instead, these situated and extended studies highlight the unexpected contradictions of everyday life and the unexamined assumptions of many typical cases. The potential of what Dorothy Sheridan, Brian V. Street, and David Bloome call “telling cases” is that they exceed what generalized theories might expect of them and work against the flattening theoretical appraisals that offer predictable answers.<sup>18</sup> Yet over time, even telling cases can become typical ones. For example, without using the telling-typical distinction, scholars in recent years have contended that Shirley Brice Heath’s highly influential *Ways with Words*—an ethnographic account about the literate activities in several Appalachian communities—has shifted from a telling case to a typi-



cal one. At this point, Health's insights into the need to study literacy outside of middle-class classroom settings have become commonplace.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, we need new telling cases that disrupt this typical flattening, that lead to new theories, new ways of thinking about research, and new strategies to address real-world problems.

In *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies*, my analysis of how GirlZone participants used literate activities functions as a telling case that addresses questions about literacy, girl culture, and the future of grassroots organizations/community activism far beyond this local site. My attention to girls' literate activities in community settings extends beyond the few previous studies that have focused primarily on girls in relation to the classroom.<sup>20</sup> This research complements research on women's literate activities outside the classroom, from writing clubs and public declarations to family parlors and commonplace books.<sup>21</sup> It also redresses the privileging of boys in much research on the study of youth's extracurricular literate activities.<sup>22</sup> This extended, situated study of how girls and women are shaped by the documents they read and produce both complements and complicates the cultural studies-informed work that has been so influential in girls' studies.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, my multiyear, ethnographically informed data collection and close textual analysis works against the trend in popular press books that address the perils of female culture that rely heavily on anecdotal evidence.<sup>24</sup> Through detailed analysis, *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* illustrates the mutual construction of a voluntary organization like GirlZone and of the projected/enacted identities of a GirlZone girl.<sup>25</sup> In addition to investigating underresearched topics, *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* models an often voiced but seldom practiced goal of mediating macro and micro levels of analysis<sup>26</sup> by combining a cultural studies approach that examines large-scale political understandings of praxis with cultural-historical approaches that examine the complexities of local praxis. This combination complicates and enriches generalized assessments of typical cases.

## CHAPTER DESCRIPTIONS

*Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* has two main sections. The first three chapters make up part one "Setting the Scene." Together these introduce the specifics of GirlZone and the broader feminist, activist frames necessary to understand the rise and fall of this grassroots organization. The last four chapters and the coda make up part two, "Literacy in Action: Complicating Feminist Designs." These chapters investigate the complexities of the trends detailed in the first section by analyzing the messiness of how GirlZone participants used literate activities to pursue their goals.

In chapter two, "Building a Youthquake," I locate the place and the players of GirlZone within the disparate and largely uncoordinated activist

movements during the 1990s. These movements laid the groundwork for what would become a “youthquake,” an eruption of youth-based activism at the turn of the century that captured national and international attention. Responding in part to how multinational corporations construct and sell girlhood, third-wave feminists and others in this youthquake return to the local, including grassroots organizations, as a continuing and key site in which to educate future activists and to effect enduring social change.

In chapter three, “Representations of Girl Culture, Realities of Feminist Activism,” I examine how the multiple and conflicting representations of girl culture informed a spate of girl-centered feminist activism at the turn of the twenty-first century. This largely third-wave project of alternately celebrating girlhood and lamenting its destruction was facilitated by the second-wave project of clearing a space for girls to be considered worthy of attention in their own right and not merely as ornaments needing protection from or in preparation for men. GirlZone emerged as part of this project.

In chapter four, “Founding Documents, Founding Feminisms,” I examine how second-wave feminist resources both enable and constrain emerging third-wave activist projects. In GirlZone documents and in subsequent textual and material constructions of GirlZone based on these documents, participants negotiated internal feminist divisions as well as an external climate generally hostile to feminism itself. Despite these successes, the limitations of these negotiations were exposed in organizers’ thwarted responses to one girl’s unexpected suggestion that GirlZone put on a fashion show. This suggestion highlighted generational inflections of ongoing feminist debates as well as the significant fissures among GirlZone participants about who defines girl-centered feminist activism, an important issue as a new generation of feminist cohorts reshapes the practices of grassroots feminist activism.

In chapter five, “Circulations of a Feminist Pedagogy,” I explore what an effective feminist pedagogy for 6–12-year-old girls might look like. I examine this question through a situated analysis of RadioGirl, a five-year biweekly radio program sponsored by GirlZone and a local radio station. Noting how RadioGirl was best attended when facilitators embedded their feminism within activities that built girls’ skills in areas girls cared about, I argue against a pervasive pedagogy in many contemporary girls’ programs that focuses on changing girls’ awareness and affect. Instead, I argue for a pedagogy that encourages girls to be competent social actors, whether or not they take up the feminist label.

In chapter six, “Redesigning Girls’ Image Stores,” I argue that despite their ambivalence about engaging a consumer culture that elides an activist girl power into capitalistic messages selling nail polish and facial scrub, feminists need to develop strategies that resituate what Anne Haas Dyson calls youth culture’s commercialized “image stores”<sup>27</sup> within feminist frames. This chapter examines the complications of such a project. Focus-

ing on activities surrounding the logo for the annual GrrrlFests, this chapter studies how GirlZone organizers' redesigned consumer culture imagery and how GrrrlFest participants made sense of these remediations.

In chapter seven, "The Economics of Activism," I analyze the literate activities surrounding GirlZone's first and last grant proposal in order to investigate how socioeconomic forces make literate activities meaningful. GirlZone's first grant proposal exposed the ways in which remote funding organizations proleptically shaped this grassroots organization in far greater ways than organizers initially understood. Conversely, GirlZone's last proposal points to the inefficacy of literate activities in a funding climate where only 6 percent of "special population" foundation monies go to girls' organizations.<sup>28</sup> Taken together, these documents teach literacy scholars and feminists to acknowledge the uneven and often limited power literacy has in overcoming material shortfalls that chronically affect girls and women's organizations.

In the coda, "Success and Sustainability," I question how we should assess GirlZone. Should our judgment of GirlZone's success be based on the organization's sustainability? Or, should it be in terms of how people integrated the lessons of GirlZone within themselves or the communities they built? The effects of the latter assessment may require a long time to become visible and are sure to merge with other influences, making causal chains difficult to construct. And, if the effects of GirlZone are difficult to trace, the grounds of its success or failure may be even more difficult to determine. Consequently, this coda suspends a definition of success as permanence and investigates what GirlZone's closing can teach us about contemporary feminist and literacy practices.