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Review

Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies: Activism in the GirlZone by Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau, Albany: State University of New York Press. 2008.

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Last week, as I was packing up my books after my Women's Literature class, a female student stayed behind to visit. She is a particularly bright, engaged student who makes thoughtful comments in class and often stays behind to ask questions and talk about her many writing and research projects. As we stood in the hallway, she mentioned that she enjoys the class because she can learn about the "feminist" perspective from students in the class. I admit that I was taken aback by her comments—I hadn't heard anything overtly feminist from any student, and I had (wrongly) assumed that this accomplished young student would naturally assume the label of feminist. This rupture—one that many of us recognize as "I'm not a feminist, but" — is one that Mary P. Sheridan-Rabideau addresses coherently in her text *Girls, Feminism and Grassroots Literacies: Activism in the GirlZone*. Using as the basis for her analysis GirlZone, a local feminist organization in Urbana-Champaign, Sheridan-Rabideau examines the variety of ways that second wave feminism often conflicts with Third Wave feminism, and ultimately how both discourses sometimes fail to convince resistant stakeholders to create and sustain enriching opportunities for girls and young women.

Sheridan-Rabideau foregrounds Anne Ruggles Gere's call to compositionists to pay more attention to literate activities outside



the classroom. She spent six years watching GirlZone—an activist organization designed to engage girls in activities and workshops typically reserved for boys, such as skateboarding, jazz singing, and auto repair—grow from a group of concerned women to a vibrant and active community, all the while tracking the “literate activities” made visible through its development. One of the central tensions she addresses is the complex nature of the “foundational documents,” or the grants that functioned as the primary texts for GirlZone. She argues that these texts defined feminism in ways that both empowered and constrained GirlZone organizers. She also examines the complexities of “girl culture” in the 1990s, paying particular attention to the painful fissure between the idealism of second wave feminists to empower girls and provide them with challenging experiences and the seductive siren call of popular culture, a realm in which The Spice Girls, the Powerpuff Girls and Barbie create an atmosphere in which “agency is framed within individualistic, often consumption-based models” (8).

Sheridan-Rabideau reveals that she was searching for a way to connect her “academic feminist theory with an activist feminist agenda,” and so becoming involved with GirlZone, as a researcher and active participant, provided her with a sense of purpose. Thus, this book provides a refreshing blend of theoretically informed analysis and grounded case studies. This structure strikes a nice balance: Sheridan-Rabideau leverages her theoretical perspective against pop culture references, personal stories of arranging meetings while her children nap, and descriptions of how her personal involvement informed her role as a researcher and participant.

The second chapter provides a personal history of GirlZone and useful details about the founders, Gina and Aimee, who represent two different models of feminist activism. Gina took her cue from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and thus performed a second wave feminist approach that emphasized informed critique of the patriarchy. Aimee represents the “Third Wave cohort,” coming to feminism in a “post-feminist” age, when cultural critics claimed that feminism was



“dead” and individual gratification and pleasure become central to a revised conception of feminism. Many of the rhetorical conflicts in the literacy activities Sheridan-Rabideau addresses can be understood as conflicts between second and third wave feminism, or how to move beyond critique of patriarchal structures to invite more young girls into an implicitly empowering grassroots community and yet still retain a clearly empowering message.

In Chapter 4, Sheridan-Rabideau illustrates how the foundational documents of GirlZone successfully combined second and third wave rhetorical positions to “forward a coherent feminist agenda” (56). She demonstrates that GirlZone’s original grant proposal uses explicitly second wave feminist rhetoric to justify its purpose in the community while the GirlZone logo, a pig-tailed girl on a skateboard, represents a Third Wave feminist image. However, GirlZone organizers faced a dilemma when one of their participants requested a fashion show as a workshop activity, and Sheridan-Rabideau examines their responses as wide-ranging attempts to combine second wave feminist critique with third wave feminism’s emphasis on action. In the resulting workshop, entitled “Fashion Workshop,” facilitators allowed girls to discuss what they enjoyed about reading “teen” magazines and then asked them to create their own ads, which validated their experience of culture while pushing them to reimagine themselves as agents of change.

The rise and fall of RadioGrrl, a biweekly radio program written and hosted by GirlZone participants, dramatically illustrates the careful line that feminists must walk in order to engage young girls in a productive reassessment of the cultural roles available to them. Sheridan-Rabideau compares two RadioGrrl facilitators: Ayleen, who worked to empower girls by allowing them to design and shape the show itself; and Heidi, whose overt feminism was the focus of RadioGrrl’s program. Sheridan-Rabideau explains that while the girls responded positively to Ayleen’s support and encouragement, they dropped out soon after Heidi took charge. In response to the girls’ resistance to overtly feminist messages, GirlZone attempted to redesign what Anne Haas



Dyson terms the “image stores” available to young girls to create more “feminist friendly cultural models” (101). GirlZone’s facilitators knew that a hip GrrlFest logo would attract more attention from their young audience, and so they designed a logo that modified the Powerpuff girl into an angry, tough girl, with the motto, “Throw like a girl.” The logo successfully revised popular imagery in order to appeal to young girls at once plugged into consumer culture and searching for ways to define their own identities.

The last chapter examines the troubles GirlZone founders faced when trying to create economic viability. While the first grant they pursued worked, the second did not. The potential funders rejected the grant based on their mistaken belief that Aimee smoked pot. While GirlZone founders were obviously dismayed that grassroots literacy activities can fail based simply on personal prejudices, Sheridan-Rabideau argues that using “strategic rhetoric,” a discourse that avoids overtly political discourse and focuses on “entrepreneurship skills,” might be a means for feminist organizations to attract more funding. She uses the Third Wave Foundation and its discourse as an example of this strategy. Ultimately, GirlZone closed its doors when it lost funding, yet GirlZone’s commitment to the more than one thousand girls and women who participated in workshops, radio shows, festivals, and weekly activities provides clear evidence that it had an important impact on the surrounding community and worked productively to engage an often hostile consumer culture with an empowering feminist message.

This book asks important questions about the function of third wave feminism in the academy and our surrounding communities. As always, I worry that girls will be distracted by commercialized images—respond to the Powerpuff and not her anger—but I think that Sheridan-Rabideau’s analysis marks an important step toward re-imagining a feminist rhetoric for the Third Wave generation.



Review

Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing by Louise Dunlap, Oakland, CA: New Village Press, 2007.

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Undoing the Silence: Six Tools for Social Change Writing is a book about writing. It is also a book about the social forces that silence people and what ordinary citizens can accomplish when they are able to break the silence and put their truths, individually and collectively, into print. Louise Dunlap argues that when people are able to name their truths and take action in print to challenge injustices, “This is what democracy looks like” (2). Dunlap is determined not only to make readers aware of how they are silenced and silence themselves but also to deliver six practical tools designed to break those silences. Dunlap’s primary audience is career activists and ordinary citizens for whom process writing tools are new and who need a book that functions both as a workbook and reference for using process writing strategies to create change; however, teachers of writing will find Dunlap’s particular spin on these tools refreshing, particularly for coaching students in service-learning courses who are composing documents ranging from grant proposals to public service announcements. In addition, Dunlap’s take on both “The Audience Tool” and “The Feedback Tool” incorporate what some call the rhetoric of listening and contribute to the theory and practice of process writing.

In the first two chapters Dunlap gives us her own history, citing the forces that silenced people in her generation during WWII and the Cold