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Christine Laffer on Jun 14 1998
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Grrrl Power and the Structures of Feminism

When I take a look at feminism in the late 90's, I suffer from an odd disorientation trying to grasp the branches and sub-branches of feminist discourse: anarchist, separatist, essentialist, postmodernist, etc. It presents a confounding array that refuses to fit into a linear or hierarchical framework. Once I adjust to the profusion, though, I find a lot of gaps. Where, for example, does an pro-pornography feminist fit? Or a Riot Grrl? Does either of them have a place in that generalized genealogy of First Generation, Second Generation, and Third Generation feminism? If it's left up to literary critics, historians and other academics to decide when to add a new generation/category (or an old one, for that matter), then nothing would change. They analyze only after real people choose to alter their lives based on verbal and visual data. Change occurs at the interstices between ended histories.

I'd say that the idea of unified feminism is over. It burnt up all the ready fuel in the 1970's-era liberation fight against inequity in our male-dominated job market. Then, obscured in a decade of hazy smoke, the women's movement died and became Post-feminism and everything after. This mediated production of post-feminism (a play on postmodernism), placed postmodern feminists, who were in the process of critiquing the dominant patriarchal narrative, in the position of having to let their own history (as progress) come to an end. In that light, the appearance of multiple branches of feminism in humanities and women's studies departments makes perfect sense. No marker is understood as singular or fixed, no liberation narrative leads from slavery to freedom.

The end of unified feminism doesn't mean, however, that there are no more feminists. Given the limitations of my chosen metaphor, it seems to me that the fires of feminism still blaze on the margins of our culture even though few feminists or cultural critics notice. An intriguing phenomenon roughly shaped as grrrl power, carries on the rage and frustration in the alternative art and music scene. Girl bands have gone on-stage with in-your-face defiance of mainstream constructions of 'girl' or 'young woman.' So why hasn't it made it to any of the feminist charts? For example, on Kristin Switala's excellent website on feminism you'll find no reference to grrrl-anything, nor or does it show up in the feminist taxonomy posted at Southern Oregon University a of couple years ago by Warren Hedges. Maybe the latest phase of academic-feminists can't get a hold on what grrrls -- or cyber-feminists -- are and can't find a place for them in their schema. They've let them fall through the cracks.

Trying to get a handle on this issue through the web, I came across a lot more grrrl sites than I had anticipated. If the web is one of the current hot spots for identity formation and declaration, then grrrls are still steaming. These grrrls project youth, indignation, and desire for solidarity, attention, and independence, no matter what age they've reached. I found the seminal Riot Grrls, Rockrgrl magazine, a grrlzine of Riot Grrl art named Angel Cake, Web Grrls, Geek Girls, Nrrd Grrl with their ezine Grrowl, Modem Grrls, the U.K.'s Girlpower magazine, Asian gurls, Slantgirl, and
Hilary Carlip's *Girlpower*, to name only a few. Sites range from corporate (Japanese animatrices the **Power Puff Girls, Purple Moon, Grrl Gamer, American Girl**etc.) and parental (**Girl Zone**) endeavors to the more intriguing fan pages for girl bands, personal grrl sites, zines and comics.

Sometimes the 'grrrl' or 'grrl' spelling indicates how alternative a site is, but that rule of thumb doesn't always hold true. Ariel Bordeaux's "**Deep Girl**", underground comic grapples with the difficulties of a teenage girl turned feminist in a hostile, anti-girl, world. **Guerilla Girls**, art rebels par excellence, predated this miss-spelling.

Significantly, grrrl power has no preference for any single identity marker, like spelling, and no cohesive center. It thrives as an anarchic, sporadic, and personal rejection of adulthood as currently constructed. Born with the girl bands, Riot Grrrls found their own way to feminism, as reflected in an article "**What is a Riot Grrrl**" by Spirit. My tendency to want to call it a movement seems to stem primarily from the institution of "**Girl Power**" as a governmental campaign in November, 1996.

Over a year ago, this campaign by Dept. of Health and Human Services made a concerted attempt to siphon off subculture into the mainstream. Envisioned as a nation-wide, mediated, top-down propaganda drive in partnership with Girl Scouts of America, "**Girl Power!**" focuses on 9-14 year old girls to prevent them from engaging in "substance abuse and other risky behaviors" as they enter puberty -- a psychological booster program. Just inoculate girls with a dose of 'good body image' and all will be well.

This might sound like a wild guess, but by the time someone formulated "**Girl Power!**" and sent out official press releases, the representations of girl bands had made it to pop culture. This invention for a media stream had to be triggered by the rise of the Spice Girls, a group who had cultivated a following girls as young as 7 and 8. The Spice Girls have a lot that their young audience wants: a doll-like grown-up sex appeal, physical energy, confidence, independence, and lots of image propagation. The HHS staff wanted to reach that audience of pre-pubescent girls and hook them in for the next 5-7 years. They simultaneously co-opted the old 'Black Power' slogan (from roughly the same era as women's lib) in an evasive attempt to appear non-governmental (as if to simulate the power which that movement really had).

Appropriate for such co-optation, the Spice Girls are a slacked-up version of their out-of-control predecessors, girl bands that came on strong and hard in the 70's and 80's. Bikini Kill, L7 and Hole took on the tough stance of a Patti Smith or Siouxie Sioux, shouting out feminist-sounding rants and churning out heavy music (for a good reference see **Rina's Women in 1970's Punk**). Here is where the real powerhouse of grrrl energy got stoked up. Girls could play a mean guitar, pound a set of drums, scream into the microphone, mess with electronic equipment, and stay up all night. They got booked for tours, cut albums and cd's, and had riotous fans. They could do it all.

Would someone like Courtney Love want to wait for some quintessential age (18 or 21?) to become a woman and be eligible for liberation? You must be kidding. With lyrics like "**Was she asking for it? Was she asking nice? Did she ask you for it? Did she ask you twice?**" (Live Through This, 1994) she puts female sexual assertiveness up against a reluctant (speechless?) male, even as she questions how this aggression can be 'nice' behavior for a girl. In a sense, liberation comes with being not nice, with red lipstick, short skirts and high heels, through an exaggerated feminity that advertizes hormonal awakening. This stress on female sex attributes, added to obscenities and violence, breaks barriers around the proper female and all that is ladylike, just as bra-burners protested against physical restraint in the '70's and artists put tampons in galleries.

In visual culture, both **VNS Matrix** and **Gashgirl** go for female symbolism and her sex as denoted by cunt-slits and round protruberances (see M. Breeze's article in this issue of Switch). Dolls provide powerful girl-type content easily bordering on the abject. Other images incorporate violence, including one the best in-your-face shots: "**Exoticize This!**" Asian girls emerge not from the music scene but through cyber-culture, where 'chick' shows up as often as 'girl'. Mimi Nguyen has drawings of tough girls in t-shirts, jeans and carrying a gun, and Mimi Ilano has other drawings and photos

Another edge to girl imagery counters this preference for aggressive sexuality. Some girls wanted to remain girl-like even into their twenties or thirties and go for an innocent, tomboy-ish, raver look. An article published in the Sacramento News & Review, "**I Am a Girl**" by Rachel Orviro, addresses the positive girl-not-woman stance. Here older girls reclaim their lost freedom, one they had prior to the socialization that accompanies sexualized bodies, by endorsing a girly style that counters female stereotypes.

Not all girls have burgeoning wombs. As a trans-sexual, **Artificial Girl** occupies an
important interstice, a young girl constructing and defining her own identity -- clearly not an easy position to take in a culture that still tries to keep Daddy's sweetie from corruption.

The territory burns on. An article by Pearl in Grrrl Thang, Girls vs. Women, argues that girls are preferable to being women. But Susan Faludi (of "Backlash" fame) slams anything smelling of girl-dom in her article "All the President's Flings". She accuses women of calling themselves girls to avoid taking responsible and moral actions, preferring to sulk over the damage done to them by nasty guys. Her characterization of women-as-girls denies the grrrl power and girly/girl alternatives and sets women on top in a political move that I find offensive. I wonder if she thinks of bra burning as throwing a tantrum, since it was neither a responsible nor moral act.

Faludi's criticism comes off as an inappropriate sidestep, a failed attempt to rally women's pride in the media onslaught surrounding Clinton's lies. Responding to tv, newspaper and radio coverage, she turned to feminism for protest against media misrepresentations -- and in this she might have been joined by others claiming the feminine if she hadn't burnt her bridges in an attack on girlhood. In my humble opinion, girls push apart the remains of existing structures and toy with image-behaviors at the interstices. No doubt soon to be joined by menopausal women.

::CrossReference

last 5 articles posted by Laffer

:: Editors Notes - Jun 14 1998
:: Charred Edges - Jun 14 1998
:: Interview: Joel Slayton - Feb 21 1995