

## Review

Sheridan-Rabideau, Mary P. *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies: Activism in the GirlZone*. Albany: SUNY, 2008. 204 pages.

Kathleen J. Ryan

Efforts to extend research and activism from university writing programs to community sites are increasingly important for scholars, researchers, and administrators hoping to serve as, in Susan McLeod's words, change agents (112). The field's recent steps in this direction include the journal *Reflections's* Civic Scholarship for Outstanding Book Award, the *Community Literacy Journal's* mission, conversation on WPA-L and at recent conferences, and various publications—including Eli Goldblatt's *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum* and Linda Adler-Kassner's *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories About Writing and Writers*. Mary Sheridan-Rabideau's book adds to this conversation by taking us out of school-based studies on girl culture and literacy and into a grassroots feminist organization in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois in the 1990s. Activist scholars and WPAs doing literacy studies in community sites will find Sheridan-Rabideau's study of the intersections of feminist activism and community literacy at GirlZone an engaging read and a valuable resource.

Sheridan-Rabideau's approach, what she calls an "engaged, praxis-oriented stance" (2), is a strong example of the kind of micro- and macro-level hermeneutic Porter and his coauthors advocate for in "Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change." More specifically, Sheridan-Rabideau situates thick description and close analysis of GirlZone in the cultural-historical contexts of feminisms, girl culture, and youth activism in the United States. Within these layered contexts, Sheridan-Rabideau studies literate activities—print, aural, and visual—that helped and hindered GirlZone organizers and participants "imagine, develop, and sustain" and take part in this organization that encouraged girls' agency (4). The resulting text reads like a well-contextualized case study of one community orga-

nization, with immediate implications for the sites and means we use to study literacy and feminist activism. WPAs who partner with community literacy initiatives will find this study's methodology particularly useful as a research model.

The book is organized into two parts. Part One, "Setting the Scene," introduces GirlZone and two relevant contexts for the study: youth activism and representations of girl culture in the 1990s. More specifically, Sheridan-Rabideau locates this grassroots organization in the context of the "surge in youth activism in the 1990s," or "youthquake" (13), which emphasized a "Do-It-Yourself" approach to youth activism by community members and leaders. Troubling representations of girls as victims, aggressors, and consumers supported co-founders Aimee and Gina's creation of an organization encouraging girls' sense of agency. They developed workshops, GrrrlFest (a weekend celebration of women and girls), and RadioGirls (a biweekly radio show for and by girls) to encourage and celebrate girls' agency in contexts ranging from radio shows to skateboard workshops. Chapter One, "The Telling Case of GirlZone," provides an overview of this study's aims and methods. Chapter Two, "Building a Youthquake," introduces GirlZone's history, purpose, organizers, and participants. Chapter Three, "Representations of Girl Culture, Realities of Feminist Activism," considers problematic representations of girl culture from a feminist perspective.

Part Two, "Literacy in Action: Complicating Feminist Designs," explores GirlZone literacy practices as they are tied to feminist issues and the organization's sustainability. How the GirlZone logo, GrrrlFest logo, and GirlZone grants work in context become especially critical topics for readers, especially WPAs who might confront similar challenges. Chapter Four, "Founding Documents, Founding Feminisms," looks at second-wave and third-wave feminist interactions through the initial grant and logo for GirlZone. Chapter Five, "Circulations of a Feminist Pedagogy," focuses on RadioGirls as a site for studying how public pedagogies, or cultural commonplaces, come into dialogue with feminist pedagogies or sites beyond the classroom that "infuse feminist understanding into [public pedagogies]" (80). Chapter Six, "Redesigning Girls' Image Stores," offers the strategy of redesign or doubleness as a means of "evok[ing] a frequently circulating message and tweak[ing] that message to alter its meaning" (104). The Powerpuff-inspired GrrrlFest logo is a prime example: the logo includes an image of one of the Powerpuff Girls, a popular trio of cartoon girl superheroes, altered for the festival's purposes. Finally, the coda, "Success and Sustainability," resists equating the closing of GirlZone, after seven years and over a thousand participants' involvement, with a lack of success. Instead,

the author points out the difficulties of identifying “the impact of institutional and social change” as it unfolds unevenly, even unexpectedly, over time and place (151). She does, however, reinforce her point, elaborated on in Chapter Seven, “The Economics of Activism,” that grassroots organizers need to learn how to operate in the context of capitalist frameworks, particularly grant writing to court corporate sponsors, if they hope to move from the headiness of “intensive creative activity” towards sustainability (16). This chapter is particularly salient for WPAs since we regularly negotiate tensions among our ideals, projects, and budgetary needs—whether or not we work with community partners. Sheridan-Rabideau’s analysis of GirlZone reinforces the rhetoricity of grant writing.

Sheridan-Rabideau’s discussion of girl culture and feminism to situate the particulars of GirlZone in the larger context is one of the strengths of her study. Sheridan-Rabideau describes how representations of girls in the 1990s as victims or perpetrators, reflected in such texts as *Reviving Ophelia* or the movie *Mean Girls*, and as consumers through popular cultural images that render power as purchasing power, reinforce the need for organizations like GirlZone. Most interesting to me is how difficult feminist interventions in girl culture became because of different feminist positionings, largely explained in this book by identifying second-wavers with critique of patriarchy and third-wavers with more playful responses related to redesign. Workshop leaders were often troubled with the ways girls embraced the Spice Girls as models of girlhood; while some wanted to simply critique the girl band, others wanted to find ways for girls to use such fraught cultural representations differently. Participation in Radio-Girls dwindled dramatically when new leadership emphasized overt activism and feminism rather than more implicit practices that simply sought to “create a space where girls could explore public identities largely unavailable elsewhere” (85). In other words, to help girls find a productive sense of agency within conflicting and often disempowering depictions of girlhood is a challenge when feminist practices—here featured as critique and recreation—are so contested.

Chapter Four, “Founding Documents, Founding Feminisms,” shows how such tensions operate in key GirlZone texts. Sheridan-Rabideau performs a close analysis first of the initial grant that funded GirlZone, one that emphasizes second-wave feminist desires to “redress” women’s oppressions (58). Alongside her discussion of this document intended to fund and shape GirlZone, she places the logo, the first of two close analyses of visual texts. Sheridan-Rabideau identifies this logo of a pig-tailed girl getting air on her skateboard as an illustration of a third-wave feminist desire to design a graphic that shows a girl as many would like to self-identify: powerful,

free, and graceful (67). The author points to the challenges of enacting the different desires these texts offer, namely critique or redesign. For example, when one of the girls wants to do a fashion show, organizers and facilitators struggle with mixed responses: some workshop leaders were appalled at the anti-feminism of fashion shows while others, the self-named third-wavers, wanted to try to shift girls' fashion interest to new ends. Sheridan-Rabideau offers intervention and mediation as an alternative to such oppositions, but shows that doing so in practice is a real challenge.

Woven into this discussion of conflicting feminist goals and ideals is one about the limits and possibilities of literacy. Grants, as many WPAs know from experience, define, shape, and limit projects and organizations. Sheridan-Rabideau points out how the original grant situates GirlZone in a feminist context not always representative of the directions GirlZone took in workshops. In this and other instances, Sheridan-Rabideau disrupts the commonplace view that all literacy is empowering; for grassroots activists the genre of grants serves as a limit both because getting them is one challenge and conforming to sponsors' requirements is another, an area with which WPAs may well be familiar. Sheridan-Rabideau's claim that activists often need education in the professionalization of grassroots activism, especially when it comes to writing business documents and eliciting corporate sponsors, is well-supported in her analysis. For example, Sheridan-Rabideau's point "that those seeking foundation money had to change their textual representations of themselves and of their relations with the funders away from relations based on moral uplift and toward relations based on economic enterprise" may encourage WPAs to rethink any tendencies to couch exigencies in terms of responsibility to writers and our discipline when seeking budgetary support for programs and partnerships (141). That may mean framing a writing grant in terms of topics with currency, like assessment or retention, which may find a more ready audience among sponsors and upper administrators. The two logos, on the other hand, effectively "sell" GirlZone and its activities, possibly because of the appeal of visual literacies, consumerism, and third-wave feminism. Both images use redesign as a means of audience appeal: GirlZone uses the image of a girl on a skateboard and GrrrlFest takes its name from the RiotGrrrls and its image from the Powerpuff Girls. Both evoke third-wave feminist desires to support power and play and show that texts are more rhetorically successful when used for their specific purpose; as they move about in time or place, the message may no longer serve the organization as effectively. While the third-wave agendas and means of enacting and supporting feminisms seem most successful in advertising and branding GirlZone, the audience appeals to pop-culture and the interpretive openness of an image cannot be negated.

One observation I have of the book is that Sheridan-Rabideau's reading of literacy practices is thoughtful, but not as innovative as I'd hoped from my reading of the introduction. Sheridan-Rabideau claims she's going beyond a traditional definition of literacy to emphasize its social and multimodal dimensions, but because her starting definition of literacy is fairly conservative for 2008, this is not groundbreaking work. As such, readers will find the literacy analyses and discussions pertinent to the GirlZone case study and relevant for future study but not radically new except as they are brought to bear on new sites of study. Still, Sheridan-Rabideau's close analyses offer significant evidence of her claims about how texts work in GirlZone. Moreover, these discussions have strong bearing on ways writing program administrators and their community partners might compose or reconsider their own documents. This study can help WPA activists strategize literacy practices to use when collaborating with community partners and getting sponsors for projects.

Ultimately, Sheridan-Rabideau succeeds in her project at both the micro- and macro-levels. *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies: Activism in the GirlZone* offers, in the author's words, a "telling case" (8); that is, an extended case study that can "lead to new theories, new ways of thinking about research, and new strategies to address real-world problems" in the realms of community literacy and feminist activism (9). Moreover, readers may find *Girls, Feminism, and Grassroots Literacies* effects a (re)commitment to the growing desire and need for "rhetoric and composition scholars [to] be agents of social change outside the university" (Cushman 7) and "to engage in WPA work as strategic action" (Adler-Kassner 7).

#### WORKS CITED

- Adler-Kassner, Linda. *The Activist WPA: Changing Stories about Writing and Writers*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP, 2008.
- Cushman, Ellen. "The Rhetorician as An Agent of Social Change." *College Composition and Communication* 47 (1996): 7–28.
- Goldblatt, Eli. *Because We Live Here: Sponsoring Literacy Beyond the College Curriculum*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton, 2007.
- McLeod, Susan H. "The Foreigner: WAC Directors as Agents of Change." *Resituating Writing: Constructing and Administering Writing Programs*. Ed. Joseph Janangelo and Kristine Hansen. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995. 108–16.
- Porter, James, Patricia Sullivan, Stuart Blythe, Jeff Grabill, and Libby Miles. "Institutional Critique: A Rhetorical Methodology for Change." *College Composition and Communication* 51 (2000): 610–42.