

# The Spaces in which We Appear to Each Other: The Pedagogy of Resistance Stories in Zines by Asian American Riot Grrrls

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## ABSTRACT

The early 1990s marked the onset of Riot Grrrl, a grassroots feminist movement which galvanized in women-driven punk scenes in cities like Olympia, Washington, and Washington, D.C. Riot Grrrl was a new kind of feminism, one that was unapologetically aggressive and forthright in its responses to patriarchy, mass media, and consumerist culture. The message of the movement was, in part, disseminated through the use of zines—the small stapled booklets in which grrrls asserted their feminist ethos, shared personal stories, and reviewed bands and shows. In this paper, I report on a study of one subgenre of zines—those by Asian American riot grrrls. Zines used in the study were sampled from the Barnard Zine Library, a library dedicated to the presentation and preservation of feminist zines by women and girls living and working in the New York metropolitan area. Building on Maxine Greene's (1995; 2001) theories of aesthetic encounters and Lee Ann Bell's (2010) concept of "resistance stories," I examine the pedagogical possibilities of Asian American riot grrrl zines.

## Introduction

In 1991, members of Bikini Kill, a punk band based in Olympia, Washington, released the zine *Bikini Kill #2*. In its pages, *The Riot Grrrl Manifesto* appeared for the first time. Typed across an 5.5 by 8.5 inch page, the manifesto begins, "Riot Grrrl is..." The lines that follow do not, however, offer a definition. Instead, the manifesto's punchy opener declares, "BECAUSE us girls crave records and books and fanzines that speak to US that WE feel included in and can understand in our own ways"<sup>2</sup> (Hanna, Wilcox, & Vail, 1991, n.p.). Continuing until the end of the page, the statements offer biting rationales for a new kind of feminism, a counterpoint to the "Instant Macho Gun Revolution"

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2 Some of the sampled zines did not have dates or page numbers; publication date and pages are noted whenever possible.

(n.p.), the “capitalist way of doing things” (n.p.), and “self-defeating girltype behaviors” (n.p.). These musician-writers were naming a different feminist ethos, one in which girls formed their own bands, wrote and distributed publications, and unapologetically claimed a new world order where “true punx, real soul and the revolution girl style now” (cited in Piepmeier, 2009, p. 1) reigned supreme.

The Riot Grrrl Movement, which began in the early 1990s in such cities as Olympia, Washington, and Washington, D.C., was a third wave<sup>3</sup> feminist movement aimed as a response to patriarchy, domestic abuse, and sexual assault. Emerging from their involvement in punk scenes on the West and East Coasts, college-aged women (mostly white and working middle class) developed a multi-pronged grassroots movement disseminating a message of rebellious, aggressive female empowerment. This particular kind of feminism was unapologetic, Do-It-Yourself (DIY), and declarative. Tobi Vail, a member of Bikini Kill, rewrote the word “girl” as “grrrl” to reflect the angry snarl of the movement (Piepmeier, 2009). As explained in the opening lines of *The Riot Grrrl Manifesto*, the movement was also motivated by the dearth of spaces for young women to voice their rebellion and produce their own music and media (Duncombe, 1997; Star, 1999). Distributed at punk shows, libraries, and coffee shops, zines became one of the primary means through which the message of this new, unabashed feminism was broadcasted. Zines reflected the “unfiltered personal voices of young women and queer youth who are struggling against the societal and patriarchal corset and challenge the conventional meanings and expectations of femininity” (Zobl, 2003, p. 61). Embedded in punk, feminist, and queer subcultures, zines offered these young women a venue for writing outside and in resistance to traditional media. The Riot Grrrl movement would spawn much of the publication of zines by women and girls in the early nineties and continued to shape much of the emotional tenor, content, and aesthet-

ic of those produced in its wake.

## Zines and Asian American Riot Grrrls

“We asians [sic] are known to be superachievers, particularly math-science wizards who maintain high grade point averages and graduate from prestigious ivy university [sic] with honors,” (n.p.) writes Lynn Hou (1999) in her zine, *Cyanide No. 2: Resist Psychic Death*. Hou continues with a pointedly sardonic list: “we asians are an extremely submissive, quiet, and good species that rarely open our mouths” (n.p.) and “we asians are silent talented musicians who play a mean violin and set our piano on fire” (n.p.). At the end of the list, Hou adds, “What a crock of bullshit” (n.p.). Hou’s zine, full of frank quips countering racial stereotypes, is one example of a sub-genre of zines, those by Asian American riot grrrls. Asian American grrrls and other women of color have a lengthy and rich history of zine-making; however, their contributions have been less emphasized in both scholarly literature and within the larger Riot Grrrl Movement (J. Freedman, personal communication, April 25, 2012). Riot grrrls of color have long critiqued the members of the larger movement for allowing their privilege as white, middle class women to remain unacknowledged and under-examined (Zobl, 2009). The release of zinester and academic Mimi Thi Nguyen’s (1999) anthology *Evolution of a Race Riot* addressed many of these critiques and featured the work of women of color to support their “talking to each other, relating, learning, commiseration, laughing, recognizing little bits and pieces and whole chunks of our individual life-worlds in the writing or art of others” (p. 5). Recently, digital archives like the People of Color (POC) Zine Project and collections like the Barnard Zine Library and NYU’s Riot Grrrl Collection have turned their attention to zines by women of color. For grrrls of color—as Hou’s “we asians” statements tartly demonstrate—zines provide aesthetic and material forums for Asian American LGBTQ-identified and cisgender women and girls’ resistance stories.

Resistance stories, according to Lee Anne Bell (2010), are those stories

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3 Third Wave feminism refers to a generation of feminism that occurred in the late 20th century, situated in the backlash against the feminist movement, Reaganomics, globalization, new internet technologies, post-modernism, and post-colonialism (Garrison, 2000; Piepmeier, 2009).

that “resist racism [and other forms of inequities] and challenge the stock stories that support it to arrange for more equal and inclusive social arrangements” (p. 61). Resistance stories challenge normalizing racial and gender discourses. As mentioned above, zines aptly function as imaginative, creative mediums for such stories and, moreover, have implications for teaching and learning. Bell explains that resistance stories have the

capacity to instruct and educate, arouse participation and collective energy, insert into the public arena and validate the experiences and goals of people who have been marginalized, and model skills and strategies for effectively confronting racism and other forms of inequality. (p. 62)

Using zines collected in the Barnard Zine Library, a library that preserves feminist zines by women and girls, I examine a series of zines that intend to arouse responses and instruct about social inequities as experienced and made sense of by Asian Pacific Islander American (APIA) women and girls. Furthermore, I consider how the zine aesthetic provides a forum to explore, exhibit, and put forth resistance in ways that are pedagogical.

Resistance stories in zines by APIA grrrls confront “model minority” myths about Asian Americans. Historically, Asian Americans have been cast as docile, obedient, and as “good subjects” (Nguyen, 2002, p. 144) who, through sheer determination and hard work, acquire academic and economic success (Lee, 1996). Perspectives of APIA students are largely absent from educational scholarship, which scholars have argued is due to the prevalence of the model minority myth (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). Despite the diversity within this demographic, APIA students are widely perceived as academically high achieving students who require little attention in educational research. Asian Americans have also long been cast as foreigners who have little stake in racial equity in the United States (Inkelas, 2006). Such myths also serve to position other racial minority groups deleteriously, thus sustaining the status quo and white hegemony. In other words, the myth acts as a “hegemonic device” that “[desensitizes] the public about

the deep and troubling history of race relations in the United States” (Ng et al., 2007, p. 99). Zines by APIA riot grrrls demystify the model minority myth and reposition Asian Americans as a highly diverse group with multiple and intersecting identities, and as comprised of persons with a potent voice in the body politic.

For me, riot grrrl zines offered a first, searing glimpse into a way of being Asian American that had little to do with model minority myths. As a mixed-race, fourth-generation Japanese American, I had long served as a quiet and well-behaved placeholder teachers deployed in their seating arrangements to calm their more rambunctious students. A long-brewing rebellion, though, stirred within. Like many young women, my engagement with feminism, punk, and activism began as a college student in the Riot Grrrl Movement’s 1990s heyday. During a Take Back the Night Rally on our campus, Sabrina Margarita Alcantara-Tan, a well-known Filipina zinester, spoke. Alcantara-Tan’s zine, *Bamboo Girl*, had a fierce, boiling interiority and captured the messiness and here-nor-there experiences of being a mixed-race woman. It was my first exposure to an Asian American riot grrrl zine. In its pages I found a recalcitrant, impertinent Asian American-ness, one that also bubbled underneath my quiet exterior and silence in class discussions. *Bamboo Girl* soon inspired my own zine making efforts: I cobbled together *Freeze Dried Noodle*, a zine on Asian supermarkets, foodways, and mixed-race identity. In the zine, I constructed hasty collages of fish-tanks and Japanese supermarket advertisements and wrote stories of self-conscious shopping trips to my local Asian supermarket, Lucky Seafood. Immediately hooked from my college years, I became a life-long reader and writer of zines, haunter of zine distros, and a teacher of zine-making to my own high school students.

### **Zines as Aesthetic, Political, and Educative “Shocks”**

Zine studies is a fragmented, multi-disciplinary field and draws on arenas as vast as art history and aesthetic theory, crafting and design, literary studies, queer and feminist scholarship, public pedagogy, and aesthetic education. Much of the literature on zines revolves around

their physical appearance, construction, and homemade feel, qualities that make them an appealing and critical alternative to popular media (Poletti, 2005; Triggs, 2006; Whitlock & Poletti, 2008). Much of the pleasure and power of zines resides in the act of physically handling and interacting with them. Zines offer a pleasurable tactile experience such that the bodily interaction with a zine fosters a connection between author and reader (Piepmeier, 2008). Other scholars have studied the multiple meanings embedded in the physical qualities and constructions of zines (Congdon & Blandy, 2003). Text, graphics, and photography are utilized within a zine format to create disorder, lack of resolve, inconclusiveness and, ultimately, come to embody the very disjointedness of contemporary life. In the vein of literary and prose studies, some scholars conduct textual analysis of the narratives and life stories told within the form (see e.g., Stockburger, 2011). Another body of research has a decidedly less material and aesthetic bent. Instead, these scholars have focused on how zine writers pose critiques of existing power structures and norms, subvert traditional gender norms, and create spaces of expression and resistance for women, girls, LGBTQ-identified persons, and youth of color (see e.g., Buchanan, 2009; Chu, 1997; Gustavson, 2002; Harris, 2003; Jacobi, 2007; Sinor, 2012; Starr, 1999). Feminist zines, which stem from a long history of women as artists and makers (Stankiewicz, 2003), explore the fluidity of gender and sexuality, reflect intersectional identities, and excavate the invisible histories of queer women of color such as Josephine Baker and Alice Walker (Licona, 2005; Piepmeier, 2009).

In the field of education, practitioner research has examined the use of zines as a visual and narrative forum for students to tell their life stories in classroom settings (Alyea, 2012; Bott, 2002; Fraizer, 1998; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2004; Moore, 2009; Poletti, 2005). Other researchers have written about zines as engaging texts that support adolescent literacy (Congdon & Blandy, 2003; Wan, 1999). Less attention is given to zines as a form of pedagogy in and of themselves (see Comstock, 2001); however, Sandlin, O'Malley, and Burdick (2011) identify zines as a kind of *public pedagogy*. In their terms, public pedagogy is the

various forms, processes, and sites of education and learning occurring beyond formal schooling . . . . It involves learning in institutions such as museums, zoos, and libraries; in informal education sites such as popular culture, media, commercial spaces, and the Internet; and through figures and sites of activism. (p. 339)

Zines are a kind of “feminist participatory media” (Sandlin et al., p. 344) and “circulate liberatory discourses and [help] produce among women and other marginalized populations collective identities oriented toward social justice activism” (p. 344). A form of pedagogy working outside of conventional academic spaces and institutions, zines are fruitfully contentious spaces in which power hierarchies can be challenged and interrogated.

Zines are pedagogical in not only the political discourses they circulate and the coalitions they cultivate, but on aesthetic grounds, too. Maxine Greene (1995) writes of the “shocks of awareness” (p. 135) that the arts allow. These shocks, she explains, “leave us (should leave us) less immersed in the everyday and more impelled to wonder and question” (p. 135) and “leave us somehow ill at ease or prod us beyond acquiescence” (p. 135). Works of art shake us out of passivity and activate our ethical and political orientations and obligations. Aesthetic encounters enable learners to notice and see (Berger, 1972) and cultivate a capacity to sit with unease, be more watchful, and “wide-awake” to new possibilities (Greene, 1978, p. 173 & elsewhere; 1995, p. 4 & elsewhere; 2001, p. 26 & elsewhere). As readers of an aesthetic text such as a zine, we immerse ourselves in collages, scribbles, and pastings that display toughness, beauty, vulnerability, fear, rage, and humor. In submerging oneself in the aesthetic experience we are, as Greene argues, less likely to fall prone to dichotomous, uni-dimensional thinking, instead making empathic connections to the artists and subjects they conjure. Through their aesthetic forms and narratives of resistance, zines serve as shocks of awareness; they are, as Piepmeier (2009) notes, “uniquely situated to awaken outrage and—perhaps more crucially—the imagination” (p. 159).

## Research Methods

The zines used in this study were collected from the Barnard Zine Library in New York City. Founded in 2003 by librarian Jenna Freedman, the library is housed at Barnard College, an all-women's college affiliated with Columbia University. It contains over 2,000 zines in its collection, 800 of which are available in the public stacks. The collection has a special emphasis on urban women and women of color and contains "personal and political publications on activism, anarchism, body image, third wave feminism, gender, parenting, queer community, riot grrrl, sexual assault, and other topics" (Freedman, 2009, p. 4). The zine library serves as a place of learning (Ellsworth, 2004), one in which knowledge and resistance is shared, interchanged, and furthered (see Kumbier, 2009).

To locate zines for the study, I consulted with Jenna Freedman and also used Columbia University's library catalog system to search under "zines" and subject "Asian American." Each available zine was cataloged under its author, title, subject matter addressed (e.g., Arab identity, personal zine, literary zine, dating, sexual abuse) and a short summary of the contents. I sifted through 103 entries, reading summaries and tagging those zines in which resistance might surface within the content. Of the 103 total zines, I eliminated those in which resistance, at least from the brief summaries in the catalog, did not seem to be a prominent theme. In the end, I selected 31 zines for analysis. I read across these 31 zines, using sticky tabs to mark passages, images, and graphics in which resistance surfaced. Then, I used document analysis of these marked pages, drawing upon some of the techniques used by zine researchers and scholars (e.g., Piepmeier, 2009), such as textual analysis of content, and descriptions and interpretations of graphics, layouts, design, and photographs. Employing a "constant comparative method" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 73), I generated and modified definitions of Asian American women and girls' resistance as zines were reviewed.

After completing data analysis, I wrote the findings in conventional academic form and also created a zine of the research (See Figures

1 and 2). The zine included a narrative of my personal history with the form, scribbles on the major findings, and hodge-podge clippings from the zines I selected for the study. Mindful of my use of the zinesters' work for academic research, and in the spirit of a zine ethos of reciprocity, I sent my research zine and a decade-old copy of *Freeze Dried Noodle*, my own college-era zine, to the Barnard Library. The sharing of the research zine (at the library and an education research conference) has had unexpected, happy reverberations—two Asian American scholars conducting research on model minority myths and Asian American grrrl zines have reached out to me and librarian Jenna Freedman related to me the Zine Club at Barnard College has read and enjoyed my small contributions.



Fig. 1 The cover of the author's research zine. Used with permission of author.



Fig. 2 A page from the author's research zine that describes her history as a zine maker. Used with permission of author.

## Findings

### The Space for Appearance

One of the major concerns within the 31 zines studied is the struggle to find spaces in which grrrl zinesters can appear to others as their “true selves.” Hannah Arendt (1958) wrote of the “spaces for appearance,” which are, generally speaking, the spaces for action and speech in which human beings can be at their freest. In the case of the zines studied, zines operated more as spaces for speech rather than political action in the strictest sense of the word. However, some of the zines’ authors explicitly mention activism inspired by their zines and relationships to other zinesters. Many of the APIA women and girls in this sample have the urge to appear to others as *they are* and as they *see themselves*—as, say, queer, adopted, deaf, asexual, transgender, or punk—but find it difficult to do so within a society in which whiteness, heterosexuality, femininity, and able-bodiedness are privileged. In fact, expressions of identity in the sampled zines point towards the heterogeneity of Asian American identity as well as the intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) of race, gender, and sexuality within this demographic, a characterization model minority myths obscure and one that is scarcely addressed in educational scholarship (Ng et al., 2007). The zines reveal narratives and images of how their authors resist the expectations and norms imposed on them. What follows are some of the ways zines were spaces in which their authors strived to appear with fullness and complexity.

### Queer identity and troubling gender norms.

Almost all of the sampled zines deal with issues of sexuality and gender, as many of these zinesters identify as LGBTQ. This finding is not surprising, given the long tradition of riot-grrrl zines as affiliated with queer culture. The zinesters “come out” to the reader early into the pages of their zines, using “I am” statements in order to directly and forthrightly claim their identity as “queer and Asian” or “queer and mixed-race,” for example. Many of the authors discuss having crushes on girls, liking women but lacking sexual experience with them, or having a shifting sense of their sexuality such that they were attracted

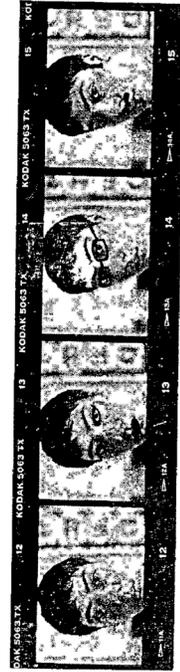
to both women and men, or were simply asexual. On this latter point, mixed-race queer zinester Lauren Jade Martin (2002) explains her asexuality at length:

I believe that sexuality is fluid, and that I can go through stages and phases with varying levels of attraction to people of assorted genders, but I can also go through stages and phases when *I am attracted to no one*. I don’t even remember the last time I had a crush on someone. (p. 22)

Across the zines, there is an assertion of sexuality that is not caught up in strict definitions or categories. Many of the APIA zinesters studied navigate and assert multi-faceted identities as both women of color and as queer.

Notably, a couple of the zinesters write about the difficulty of coming out to their Asian immigrant families (Anna, 2005a, 2005b; Lee, 2003). Stories were told in which zinesters would pose a hypothetical, “What if I was gay?” to their parents, to which they would receive some version of the reply, “But that would never happen!” Many of these writers assumed because of certain cultural factors—parents’ conservative politics or religion, for example—they would never be able to come out as gay to their families. In contrast to the silence within their Asian families around queerness, zinesters used the space of the zines to declare their sexuality and openly explore their desires.

Some of the queer-identified zinesters used the aesthetics and designs of their zines to resist gender norms and present a more complex vision of their sexuality and gender. One revealing technique used by a few of the zinesters is self-portraits (see Figure 3). Photographs are integrated within the text, depicting the zine authors bending gender norms through costume, dress, and makeup. For example, in Martin’s (2003) *Quantify*, she uses a series of Cindy Sherman-esque black and white photographs in which she appears as plain faced, hyper-feminine, and conventionally masculine. Photography is employed in these zines as a means of self-revelation but also to play with gender and undermine assumptions about how someone who is biologically female should act and look.



### Through Strangers' Eyes

My style, my presentation, is wholly inconsistent, changing day to day, even hour to hour, and the reaction I get from people alternately ranges from smiles and whistles to glares and nasty comments. The "safe" Lauren: looks female, Asian or white, light-skinned, is small, quiet, non-threatening, speaks English. The "dangerous" Lauren: is ambiguously gendered, a person of color (race unknown), doesn't smile, looks like a big ol' dyke, looks like a flaming fag, talks loud when she gets excited. Which Lauren has more privilege, which gets harassed more, which worries more about getting her ass licked, which gets talked less seriously, which gets interviewed for jobs, which gets the job? Impossible to answer, because strangers will simultaneously read me in both (or other) ways, some picking up on cues or codes (how is my hair styled, what am I wearing, what neighborhood am I in, who am I with?), others making assumptions based on stereotypes, all of them making inferences about my gender, race, class and sexuality.

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The answer to "What are you?" (in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and a host of other queries) is not so simple, so easy. Nine years ago, six years ago, three years ago, the answers sometimes terrified me, sometimes confused me, sometimes kept me up at night scribbling in my journal. But, as I've stated in other places, I am no longer in identity-crisis mode. (And just because the crisis is over, that does not necessarily mean that the process of naming is complete). I have reconciled the fact that my identity does not have to be consistent, and that it will probably never match up with people's preconceived notions as long as they are operating under a binary belief system. That is, it all started with race and my knowledge from an early age that the black/white dichotomy left no room for me, that my existence as a mixed-race Asian/Jewish person queers and totally fucks with that dichotomy. Throw in some queer and gender theory (i.e. break down those old-fashioned illusions of homosexuality versus heterosexuality, of male versus female) and everything just becomes so postmodern you can barely even handle it.

This Lauren is integrated, but she still likes to collect nicknames and alter-egos for herself. She has always had secret lives and competing personas—not just imaginary friends but imaginary identities. I grew up with the mythologies of Super Heroes and after-school cartoons, content with the knowledge that with the utterance of a few magic words, or the donning of a cape, or the alignment of the moon and stars, the body could be magically transformed, a new person could emerge, with super powers, even. These were not brand-new mythologies, of course, but rather

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Fig. 3 Lauren Jade Martin's (2003) self-portraits in the zine *Quantify*, no. 5. Zine by Lauren Jade Martin. Used with permission of author.

### Mixed-identity and acting against racial binaries.

A number of the zine authors identify as mixed-race and write about their experiences both appearing and not-appearing to others. These mixed-race writers explain how people can often not tell "what" they are racially, so they must navigate how they will reveal themselves to others via speech or providing other cues. These mixed-identities are also discussed in terms of family dynamics. In Anna's *Behind Wire Fences* (2005a, 2005b), there is a startling narrative about being a Korean adoptee with a white mother and a Japanese American father. This zine addresses a population—Asian adoptees—and how their Asian phenotypes shore up against the very different races and identities of their parents and the mostly white communities in which they are raised.

In zines by mixed-race authors, the concept of "passing," or being able to conceal parts of one's identity from others, is also prevalent. In *Quantify*, Martin (2002) uses poetic language and a sparsely-designed page to demonstrate how people often mistake her race, ethnicity, and gender. She gives the following account of passing:

If I keep my mouth shut, I can pass. It always happens when I am shopping. They say, "Can I help you sir?" Or they tell me in Chinese the price of three bananas. If I keep my mouth shut, I can pass. If I try to answer back, my trickster façade fades away and they are forced to do a double-take, to peer closer at this incongruous person with the too-high voice & the Staten Island accent. "Oh I'm sorry, ma'am," they'll reply, or they'll cluck their tongues and rephrase what they were saying in English. (p. 15)

This passage speaks to the complex, internal negotiations mixed-race, queer Asian Americans experience in interpersonal encounters. They can choose to be silent and allow the assumptions to remain unchecked, or choose to reveal themselves and observe the uncomfortable effects of that revelation. Some of the zines by APIA women and girls of mixed-race, then, reveal identities that defy easy interpretation and disrupt uni-dimensional understandings of gender and race.

## Invisibilities and hyper-visibility.

Among the selected zines, there are multiple examples of zinesters' feelings of hyper-visibility and, conversely, seeing themselves as invisible. On this latter point, Anna (2005a) writes,

I've spent a large portion of my life, feeling invisible. It's not just white folks or non-Asian folks of color. Invisibility comes from a lot of different places and people in my life . . . . My invisibility comes from my parents and my friends. It comes from places inside me that I'm trying to work on. (n.p.)

On the other hand, moments of hyper-visibility are apparent across the zines: zinesters described how people approach them in public spaces and blatantly ask about their racial or ethnic backgrounds. These themes also surfaced when some of the zine writers explained how they often were unable to "be themselves" fully among non-Asian friends or times where they subsumed their Asian identity in order to fit in with their white counterparts.

There are a few narratives about being mistaken for another Asian person, the idea being that "all Asian people look the same." An apt example of this mistaken-identity phenomenon appears in trans-identified Felix Endara's zine, *I Lie Like a Rug* (1997b). On one particular page in Endara's zine, there are several blurred images of a person whose gender is ambiguous. Against these images is text in which examples of being mistaken for someone else repeat and overlap (see Figure 4). Endara's artwork highlights how the medium of zine, in which textual messiness and ambiguity is encouraged, can be a potent tool for interrogating racial invisibility.

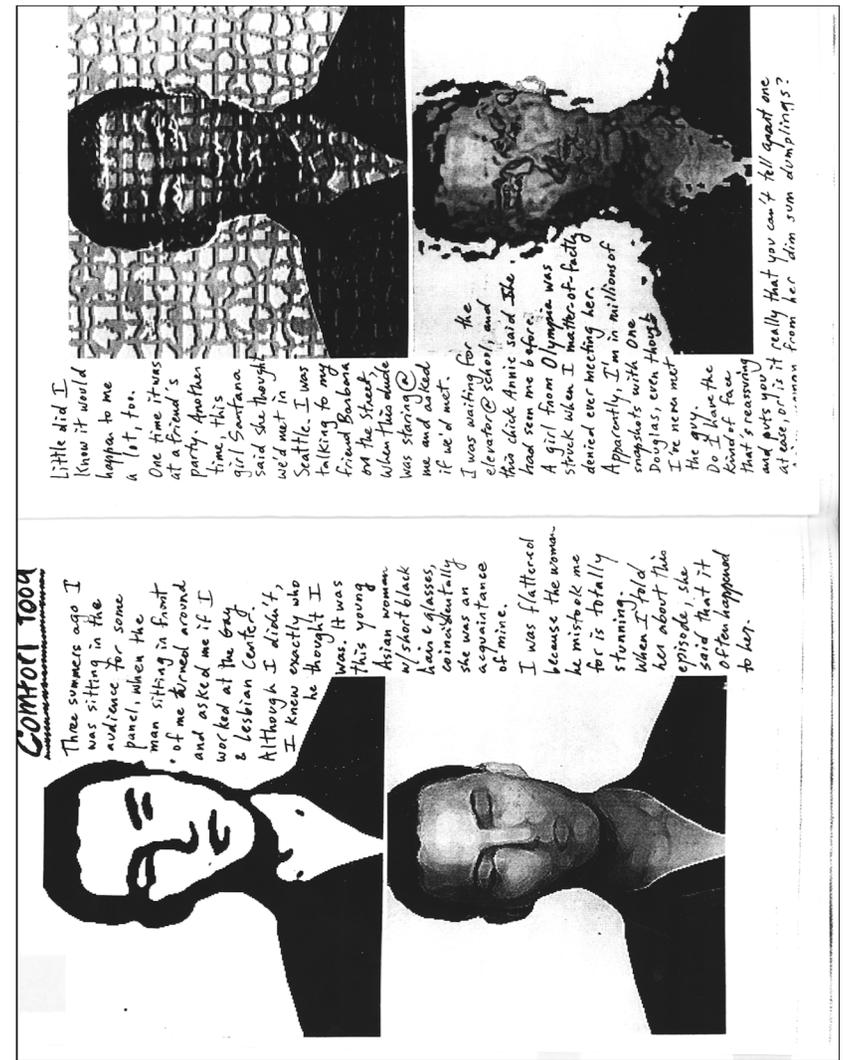


Fig. 4 From Felix Endara (1997b)'s zine, *I lie like a rug*. Used with permission of author.

## Our multiple languages, our families.

Additionally, in the study sample, there are revelations about language use within families and in other spaces. Within some of the zines, writers express regret about not having learned the language of their parents or describe awkward encounters with both non-Asians and Asians who expect that APIA persons should speak their “native” tongue. In one of the only examples addressing issues of ability, zinester Lynn Hou (1999) writes about her deafness and her parents’ decision to raise her to read lips, speak orally, and not use sign language. Hou’s deafness interplays with both race and language (for example, her brother was taught Chinese; Hou learned only English). Hou writes, “Part of my need and desire to unleash myself towards the world comes from being someone who has never known what [it] is like to live with natural hearing” (n.p.). Zines, then, became a space in which Hou could “unleash” herself, taking up not only deafness but also responding to racism and homophobia. Zines like Hou’s take Piepmier’s (2009) discussion of intersectionality in zines to new heights.

## Speaking Against

A second overarching finding is how the zine authors speak against injustice. As the zine tradition is highly personal, most of these injustices are grounded in the everyday experiences of APIA women and girls. For the most part, the zines describe a narrative of these zinesters’ direct experiences of racism, sexism, homophobia, and ableism. However, the zines also are explicitly pedagogical, as many of the writers acknowledge they are seizing the opportunity to educate their readership about critical race theory and Asian American history, and interrogate unquestioned norms and stereotypes about Asian Americans. The message is carried out in aesthetically creative and highly imaginative forms—collage, repetition of images, playing with fonts and layouts, and re-purposing magazine images and song lyrics to subversive effect.

## Troubling white privilege.

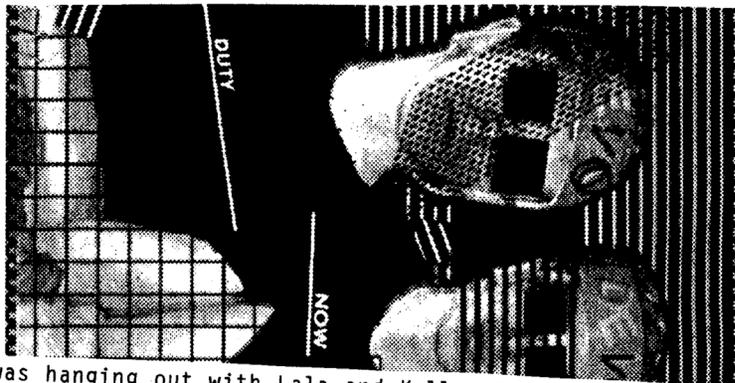
White privilege is a highly salient theme throughout selected zines, especially as it exists within activist, punk, or LGBTQ communities. There are a number of narratives about countering white privilege during activist events, at work, or at punk shows. These conversations about privilege are a source of great frustration for the zinesters. There are many examples of “failed conversations” about privilege, in which a white friend, co-worker, or colleague is not receptive to listening or even acknowledging their privilege and power. Conversations within the white queer community, according to the zinesters, tend to dead-end, as many saw themselves as “oppressed” as LGBTQ and therefore did not feel that they needed to examine their privilege as white persons.

There is an entire zine (see Figure 5) dedicated to the work of addressing white privilege within the punk community. With humor and defiant plays on language, *Chop Suey Spex* (Endara, 1997a) tells how its authors<sup>4</sup> entered Excene Cerbenka’s (a prominent feminist punk rocker) novelty store in Los Angeles. In this store, the authors spy a pair of “chop suey spex,” or glasses in which slanted eyes are papered into the lenses. The zine is a multi-narrative effort to depict the confrontation the two authors have with Cerbenka about the racist glasses. Initially, as “typical Asian women” (n.p.), they were “too timid to approach” (n.p.), Cerbenka, but eventually decide to tell her the glasses are racist. The zinesters script out the encounter, which ends with a hostile dismissal (Cerbenka tells them, “Whatever. I don’t care. You can steal them” [n.p.]). In an ironic play on the stereotype of the “quiet Asian woman,” the authors re-stage the encounter in fragmentary segments, collages, and a juxtaposition of photographs of the authors wearing the glasses against Cerbenka’s feminist and social justice-oriented song lyrics. The zinesters expose some of the tensions between Asian American femininity and direct, vocalized

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<sup>4</sup> *Chop Suey Spex* is listed in the Columbia University Library catalog as authored singularly by Endara (1997a). However, the zine includes first-person anecdotes by “Karla” and “Kelly,” who lend their perspectives to the incident at Excene Cerbenka’s store.

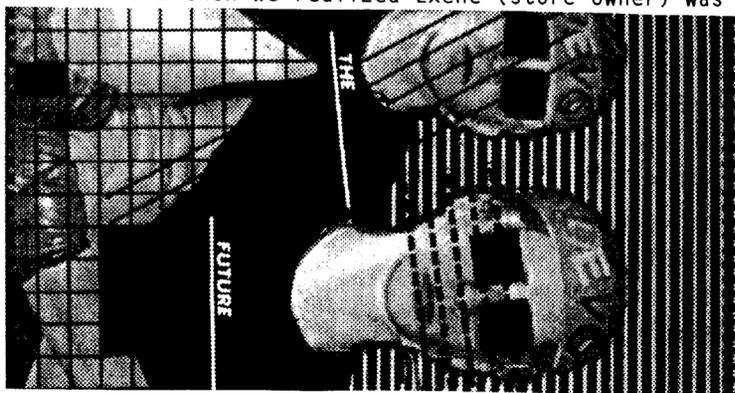
KARLA: I've had a few encounters with the Chop Suey Specs. My first was at a Tribe 8 show at "You've Got Bad Taste" on Sunset in Silverlake. Before the show I



was hanging out with Lala and Kelly. I was really excited to see Tribe 8 live because they are punk rock and there are women of color in the band. Anyhow, Lala



found a bunch of racist glasses for sale. We were like, "What the fuck is this?" We were wondering what we should do and then we realized Exene (store owner) was



nearby. We thought an Asian chick delegation was in order. But as typical Asian women, we were too timid to approach. Then Exene came toward us and I spoke up.

responses to racism. The zine format permits its writers the space to explore such tensions and opens up other possibilities of what constitutes confrontation and anti-racist work, especially for Asian American women. The zine also exposes some of the hypocrisy that exists within the white, feminist punk community; that is, while writing lyrics and professing social justice and solidarity with people of color, some white feminist punks are unable to take responsibility or even engage in dialogue about their own privilege.

### Combating racism and stereotypes about Asian Americans.

Importantly, these zines serve as spaces in which APIA women and girls can enter the racial dialogue. Some of the zinesters express frustration that the racial conversation in the United States is heavily focused on black-white relations. As Martin (2003) writes, "It all started with race and my knowledge from an early age that the black/white dichotomy left no room for me, that my existence as a mixed-race Asian/Jewish person queers and totally fucks with that dichotomy" (p. 5). A notable analysis of how Asian Americans fit into the black-white racial dichotomies appears in Mimi Nguyen's (1999) introduction to her compilation zine *Evolution of a Race Riot*. She asserts APIA persons have typically (and falsely) been considered more "white" than "colored." Nguyen argues punk communities have been more "accepting of Asian and biracial kids because of white perceptions of racial 'safety' or whatever, not because we actually are less 'dangerous' in reality" (p. 6). Her analysis underlines how white supremacy positions select racial groups as "better" than others; moreover, it challenges ways of theorizing about race relations in the United States premised on a white-black binary.

In the zines studied, there are several accounts of APIA women being called "chinks." The women and girls write of the shock and pain they experienced at hearing this racial slur directed towards them. As Yumi Lee (2000) writes, "I tell myself it doesn't matter and try to laugh it off. But words like chink, nigger, wetback hurt. And I'll always feel some initial shock/horror/rage/indignation upon hear-

Fig. 5 Page from Felix Endara's (1997a) *Chop Suey Spex*. Used with permission of author.

ing racial slurs directed at me, my family, my friends" (n.p.). In these stories, the zinesters note how the word "chink" often did not apply to the zinesters' actual racial identity but the word became a blanket epithet directed towards all Asian persons, reinforcing their feelings of sameness and invisibility.

Stereotypes about Asian Americans are troubled within the zines, often through unexpectedly humorous and rhetorically sophisticated approaches. In *Consider Yourself Kissed*, Yumi Lee (2000) writes about being an "overachiever." She gets straight As, plays in an orchestra, and is accepted for early admission at Harvard University. While she acknowledges that she conforms to many of the stereotypes about Asian Americans as "nerds," Lee puts a new spin on her achieverhood. She explains, "My achieving was a way of showing them that I could beat any of their white asses when it came to math or violin (so there!)...it showed that I was definitely at least equal to any of them" (n.p.). In another zine, Lynn Hou (1999) also rejects a model minority status, writing that it is based on a long "string of established stereotypes based on shallow and seemingly positive oversimplified impressions" (n.p.). These responses demonstrate the intellectual rigor, humor, and rebelliousness in response to these pervasive stereotypes about Asian Americans. These stories, as Piepmeier (2009) explains, destabilize the "power of certain stereotypes to shape what's available to see and to feel, and to shape the notion of 'normal' and 'natural'" (p. 141). In observing how such stereotypes function, these zinesters disarm their power and pervasiveness.

### **Responding to the exotification and feminization of Asian women.**

Many of these female zine authors write passionately about being sexualized as Asian women. Discussions of the ways APIA women are hyper-sexualized vary. In the case of *Lipstick My Espionage*, Kat Asharya (n.d.) takes a more personal approach, explaining how she is often worried when she dates a white man if he has dated Asian women previously or has an Asian fetish. Am I really beautiful,

wonders Asharya, or it is just "by proxy of my race?" (n.p.). *Bamboo Girl* (Sandata, 1995) takes a more aggressively funny, pedagogical approach, listing "Asian Fucking Stereotypes" (p. 29) such as "The Submissive Step-All-Over-Me-Thank-You Asian" (p. 29) and "The Don't Use My Chopsticks Or I Kill You Gangsta Chick" (p. 29).

### **Living with and against the weight of history.**

Lastly, across many of the zines, there is a shared sense of an Asian American history, a desire to reference and grapple with certain historical moments. Sometimes, this grappling surfaces in the forms of manifestoes or declarations. *Chop Suey Spex* (1997a), for example, quotes at length from Jessica Hagedorn's (1993) seminal anthology of Asian American literature:

The slit-eyed, bucktooth Jap thrusting his bayonet, thirsty for blood. The inscrutable, wily Chinese Detective with his taped eyelids and wispy mustache. The childlike, indolent Filipino houseboy. Effeminate. Untrustworthy. Yellow Peril. Fortune Cookie Psychic. Savage. Dogeater. Invisible. Mute. Faceless peasants breeding too many children. Gooks. Passive Japanese-Americans obediently marching off to "relocation camps" during the Second World War. (p. xxi)

The inclusion of these texts speaks to how Asian American zines are part of a larger movement to map out an Asian American history. Additionally, in a couple of the sampled zines, the Japanese American incarceration during World War II arose as a significant part of the zine's narrative. In *Behind Wire Fences*, zinester Anna (2005a, 2005b)—the Korean-adoptee with a mixed-race family—writes about her Japanese American grandmother's experiences in the camps. Martin (2002, 2003), too, shares a fictionalized account of a young woman attempting to discover her family's history in the camps. Uncovering and sharing moments of history, especially through one's own family's experiences, is one way these zinesters conceive of and develop a sense of themselves as Asian American.

## Conclusion: Zines as Pedagogy

What, then, do zines by APIA women and girls teach? In the broader sense, zines push us to re-conceive what counts as pedagogy, in what formats, modes, and spaces teaching and learning can occur. For one, as I found in this study, zines are out-of-classroom spaces that permit their writers to appear with fullness and complexity and speak against normalizing discourses and myths. Through their pasted-together, informal, and penetrating visuals and text, zines rouse the political engagements of grrrls of color and, through a culture of material exchange, build alliances and coalitions. As a form of visual culture, zines foster “the subversive activism of girlie culture and enable young women to reclaim and gain control over their femininity and feminist politics” (Buffington & Lai, 2011, p. 6). And, finally, zines invite emotional and empathic responses from their readers; they intend to provoke ethical and political obligations from audiences who may or may not share a social location with the zine-maker. Maxine Greene (1995) explains in our encounters with artistic works, we “may experience all sorts of sensuous openings” (p. 137) and “unexpectedly perceive patterns and structures...[and] discover all sorts of new perspectives as the curtains of inattentiveness fall apart” (p. 137). Zines, then, are a multi-directional flow of pedagogy: Grrrl makers engage in learning in the very process of constructing and writing their zines; zinesters teach other zinesters within their own socio-cultural milieu; and zines, as an aesthetic and political encounter, teach their various and sundry readers.

What prominently surfaced during my analysis of these zines was how the zines themselves acted as spaces for learning about the self. As mentioned in the findings, zines facilitated spaces APIA women and girls could respond to the various forms of prejudice and discrimination they experienced in their lives. The authors of the *The Riot Grrrl Manifesto* (Hanna, Wilcox, & Vail, 1991) wrote of “doing/reading/seeing/hearing cool things” (n.p.) that help young women “gain the strength and sense of community that [they] need in order to figure out how bullshit like racism, able-bodiedism, ageism, speciesism, clas-

sism, thinism, sexism, anti-Semitism and heterosexism figures in our own lives” (n.p.). For the APIA grrrl zinesters studied, the zine format supported expressions of aggression and verve, one that counters the aforementioned tropes of Asian Americans as “foreigners” or “over-achievers.” These zinesters, to use a phrase from Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), were “[wakening] the Shadow Beast inside” (p. 20). Though self-revelation, an assertion of their sexuality, and their reach towards other ways of knowing and being, these writers galvanize their own intelligence and power. For Asian American grrrls, zines play a role in reconfiguring APIA women and girls’ position within enfolded and static racial hierarchies, in histories of immigration and exclusion, in their familial relationships, and, ultimately, in their relationship to themselves.

In this study and as noted above, zinesters served as informal teachers of each other. Perhaps one of the most remarkable findings that emerged from the small sampling of zines studied was their intertextuality. Zinesters’ practice of exchanging zines was not merely for the pleasure and benefit of making and receiving zines. It was also a way communities among zine writers were established and sustained. It was surprising how many of the zine writers seemed to know each other and reference each other’s work. At the end of many of the zines, there are lists and reviews of other zines and many of the zines selected for the study’s sample were discussed among grrrl zinesters. Sometimes, writers would talk about meeting or doing activist/art projects with other Asian American zinesters. As Anita Harris (2003) writes, grrrl zines are a “space where young women can communicate and organize together outside surveillance, silencing and appropriation” (p. 46). In the case of zines sampled for this study, zines built alliances and friendships, stirred dialogues intra- and inter-racially, and became spaces in which resistance was lived and sustained.

It is precisely because of these powerful self-disclosures and disruptions that zines are pedagogical to their readerships. They urge us to reconsider times in our own lives where we felt the effects of racism, sexism, or ableism or where we participated in or stood silent during

these kinds of encounters. In educational institutions where teachings and conversations about white privilege and white supremacy seem fraught with silences, tensions, colorblind rhetoric, and political correctness, these zines offer a critical counterpoint. Because they operate outside of conventional academic spaces and institutions—and are part of a long tradition of DIY, anti-hegemonic, and subversive subcultures—they are fruitfully contentious spaces in which privilege is interrogated and dismantled. That is to say, there is no apology, no obfuscation, or euphemistic language in which privilege may hide and be eluded. While it is not certain zines could be introduced into formal classroom spaces without losing their political edge and verve, there are possibilities here of looking towards zines as pedagogical tools to teach about privilege, racism, homophobia, and ableism. By placing us so intimately within the emotionality, visual and aesthetic constructions, and life histories of the zinesters, zines confront their readers towards what is uncomfortable and difficult. Reading a zine is a pedagogical confrontation, one in which we may find both resonance and disjuncture.

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