Interview with Janice Radway,
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Interview conducted by James Hay
Interview edited by James Hay & Janice Radway

James Hay: As in some of the interviews that I have conducted for this issue of CC/CS, I want our interview to highlight ways that your recent work intersects with recent and older directions of critical studies, cultural studies, and media studies. Rather than work from your early projects to the present, let’s use your present projects to talk about some of the continuities and shifts in your research interests and investments, not to mention what you see as complicated about describing your work as “critical studies,” “cultural studies,” and especially “media studies.”

You have shared with me an unpublished essay, “Networks and Itineraries of Dissent: Making Sense of Girl-related Zines from the 1990s,” which represents the current direction of your research, but is also (from what I understand) a project on which you have been working for a while. Discussing that project is a useful way to begin an interview about the relation between the present and the past because, after all, this is a project that suggests why now (in 2013) it is worth revisiting the production of “girl-related zines.” So, would you mind beginning by describing some of the primary objectives of that project and how it came about?

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**Janice Radway:** The title to which you alluded is a paper title; the actual working title of the larger project is *Girl Zines and Their Afterlives* I'm still playing around with the subtitle as I figure out what the project is really about. The concept of "afterlives" applies both to girls and to zines. The project centers on the zines produced by young women in the 1990s. The focus on the term "girl" comes from the fact that many of those zines were generated in and around the Riot Grrrl movement, which was associated with punk and particular sub-sets of the punk scene. I am especially interested in what has become of the zines created in response to this movement as well as in the fate of the young women who created them. I'm interested in why these zines continue to be interesting to a range of people and thus live complex afterlives in the discourses and practices of others. At the same time, those former girl zinesters are now adults living complex afterlives which many feel were directly affected by their experience as zinesters. An obvious question is why.

**JH:** Riot Grrrl also has become the subject of a lot of critical historical research and theory, some of which you cite in the essay.

**JR:** Yes, Riot Grrrl is going through, and has gone through, a number of revivals, and there is even now a growing interest in it. I am especially interested in the question of why this might be so. Although Riot Grrrl was a somewhat inchoate movement, and a contentious one in various discourses about it, it has lived on in the memories of those young women who participated in it, as well as in the re-circulation and archiving of those zines. My project focuses on this particular sector of alternative, underground "self-publishing" by young women in the 1990s, on the impact that activity had on them, on their zines, and on what has happened to the zines and those young women since. Methodologically it is a project that brings together archival investigation with oral history interviews.

It's not different from the combination [of interests and practices] that has been at the heart of my work for many years—situating reading and textual material historically, and then drawing ethnographically (from interviews) on the experiences of people actually involved in those activities. That is generally the project's aim. The project has gone through various changes over the years, since I have been interested in zines for a very long time. The first paper that I gave on zines was in 1996 or 1997, so you can see that [laughs] I haven't yet managed to finish this project for various, interesting reasons.

I became interested in zines when visiting a long-time friend in Philadelphia. I came across a collection of her daughter's zines in a basket next to a sofa. At that time (1995/96), her daughter was in her late-middle school/early high school years. I started paging through her zines and was electrified. They were photocopied but clearly hand-made, and quite amateurish in presentation. They also seemed quite adolescent in their use of grammar and jargon that you associate with teenagers, but they were also quite obviously feminist, which is interesting because the 1990s was a
decade when all kinds of writing emerged about a “backlash” to feminism. For instance, Susan Faludi’s book came out in 1991 and, contemporaneously, there were many books published about girls as victims, and whether girls were being harmed at school. There was a lively, ongoing discourse about girlhood and the plight of feminism—about whether feminism was dead and whether it ever had been successful. My friend’s daughter’s zines, however, suggested otherwise—that feminism wasn’t dead if these were young girls speaking a feminist discourse. So I became interested in that, and especially interested in the ways that they were using language that evoked what is now often called “second-wave” feminist discourse. It struck me that they clearly had been influenced by the feminism that my generation knew, from the late 1960s and 1970s into the 1980s.

That is how I first became interested in the project. I used her collection and began to look around for others. My first paper was really based on her collection, which I read as would a trained literary critic. I was interested in how they used language, and I was particularly interested in the ways that zinesters constructed the subject-position of the author/speaker through a fractured and fragmented style. The zines and their authors were very interesting in the way that they tried to imagine the relationship between the speaker and a community of girls reading them. Throughout the latter half of the 1990s I continued to speak about them, even though I never published about them. During that time, and very quickly, there appeared a lot of academic articles about zines, many of which were published by former zinesters: women who had gone into graduate school. Then, at one point, the journal, Signs, wrote to me (as I was on the editorial board at the time) that the journal was putting together an issue on young feminisms, with essays by young women. They asked me if I knew anybody who might contribute. I indicated that I was doing work on zines, and I also suggested the name of my original interlocutor.

At that point it became clear to me that there was a growing interest in zines, and very soon after that, girl zine collections started being created and appeared in both big city and university libraries. Oddly enough, a collection suddenly appeared at Duke University when I was a professor there, though I did not find out about it until a couple of years later. The Sarah Dyer Zine collection was created through the aegis of librarians at Duke who were following the phenomenon and understood that it was both interesting and consequential. Sarah Dyer, the creator of Action Girl Comics, also had been looking around for a library where she could place her zine collection. Her collection was created after a previous one had been set up at Smith College, in the Sophia Smith Collection, which is a collection of documents pertaining to women’s history. Then, Barnard College developed another collection. Through these collections, it became clear that young women involved in this community were profoundly affected by their experiences producing zines, and that their zines were beginning to be seen as significant by others, including librarians, academics, and younger students. As a result, my project, which had first been about “what’s happening with zines,” focused on the effect zining was having (and
continued to have) on young women. The project has evolved since then with a more historical focus on the 1990s, what the 1990s meant for girls, and how they have used zining to move on after growing up during that decade.

JH: Well there are a number of questions that come to mind listening to you describe the project’s genesis and the “afterlives” of the artifacts, their producers and their conservers during that period. Your project seems to me to have developed partly as an effort to rethink the legacy of feminist thought and politics in the 1990s, but also the legacy of that moment—its historical contradictions—into the twenty-first century, the period when you have worked on and returned to the project. Folded into those foldings of history are your suggestions that the production of the zines becomes inseparable from the production of memory of (and the ongoing possibility of forgetting) the artifacts and makers, which have an intricate relation to collecting and archiving. This is a rich area to think about, at many levels (not the least of which concerns this interview’s aim to represent relations between critical and cultural studies’ past and present “inter-locuters”), but there are a couple of questions that I want to pose first.

One line of questioning concerns the “economies” of the zines as “collections,” within the economy of institutional archiving—particularly the role that institutions of archiving play in authorizing certain “collections” and collecting practices. But in that line of questioning is the question of how zine production and consumption were not exactly about building markets, in the typical sense of a “media market.” In the essay that you shared with me, you point out that there is an anti-consumerist ascription to the zines, their producers, and their consumers in the 1990s, and you clearly are interested in reflecting on the ways that the zine-economy operated as an “alternative” form of publishing in the 1990s, and had a relation to a longer history of “underground” publishing. To what extent have you thought about the zines operating in/as economies, or more technically media economies?

JR: Well, they certainly do comprise economies. In some ways my approach to zines is not much different from how I proceeded in Reading the Romance or A Feeling for Books: The Book of the Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire. Those projects situate literary practices of complex sorts within various economies, both financial and otherwise. Initially I became interested in this project because I had already done something on mass-market publishing and then on middle-brow publishing. I was interested not only in their feminist significance but intrigued by them as well as a form of “alternative” (or non-mainstream) publishing by young people. I thought that it would be interesting to think about this kind of economy of literacy in relation to the mass and the middlebrow. Also, most of the historical documents we have concerning young people and adolescents are not written by them. For the most part, adolescents appear in documents crafted by adults. There are diaries of young girls, of course, but the diary form is longstanding and quite formalized. Zines were a dynamic, changing form of communication, a form of
media that these young women turned to as a way to communicate among themselves and in a way that they understood to be below the scope of adult surveillance. What was most important to the young women around Riot Grrrl who were the first individuals to create “girl zines” [which, incidentally, I now call “girl-related zines” for complicated reasons] was their ability to use this underground form as a way to express ideas and feelings that they felt could never be published in mainstream media. They were writing about their rage at being harassed on the street. They were writing about sexual violence that some had experienced in their own lives or knew in the lives of others—from rape to incest to various forms of physical harassment in the everyday. In that sense, they were writing about subjects that they felt would never appear in mainstream girls, teen, and women's magazines. So zine production can be seen as an alternative form of publishing and an alternative economy where young women themselves determined what they could say and how. This was reinforced by the sense among zine author/producers that their production was not commercial, not something that they did to make money. They did it for love, as a ways of communicating with others, to find a community of like-minded people who had similar views to theirs. They also did it in order to publish material they believed young girls and women should have access to.

It's important to point out that many of these young women were people who understood themselves to be outside of mainstream norms. These were kids coping with middle-school and high-school experiences, which we know are incredibly difficult and bound up with the managing of conformativity and being seen as “normal.” So these were young women who were often dissident in some ways in terms of gender, and who understood themselves to be different in that they often described themselves as “nerdy.” They were not typically involved in cheerleading, fashion, or that sort of thing. They were people who also thought of themselves politically as citizens of larger communities and even in some cases of the world. They felt themselves to be isolated in their geographic locales of family and friends. Zining was a way for them not only to express themselves below the level of adult surveillance but to find others who shared similar views. And they did that by attending zine fests, very often going to clubs to see punk bands and distributing their zines there by hand, through exchange, and often through the mail.

As zining became more important in the punk community generally, things like distros and reviews began to appear. A distro is understood to be a distributor, a clearing-house, where you might send a couple of dollars and order zines. Reviews were published, as in Sarah Dyer’s Action Girl Newsletter. You would pick up a copy of the review, which listed titles, descriptions of them, and carried the address of the zinester. You could offer a zine for trade or send $2 in stamps—the whole thing a system of trade and exchange, an economy beyond the commercial mainstream, all done through local networks and the US mail. Now, when you go to a zine archive, depending on whether it’s been collected by a librarian or an archivist, and whether the zine collection has been kept intact as a collection, sometimes you will find letters
and little gifts inserted in those zines—the kind of things that people sent when they exchanged their zines with each other. You can trace what is a kind of gift economy: one person would send $2 to a zinester, that person would return a copy of her zine and sometimes include little stickers, glitter, a little gift, that sort of a thing. The trade, exchange, and economy tied these people to each other as an alternative community.

So, yes, I am interested in this as a non-commercial economy. I am also interested in it as a form of literacy that is not simply about personal expression but about community-building, community formation, and subject formation. So, yes, it does comprise a kind of alternative media economy.

JH: And would you say that, in these ways, you are interested in rethinking the idea of a media economy or in suggesting alternative ways of analyzing media economies? Your explanation emphasizes the complexity of their production, and your tantalizing description of their production and circulation as a “gift economy” underscores the complexity of their economy, and multiplicity of economies (some more dominant than others) operating through and around one another. And this is an important point to make historically, as a way to think about the interplay of cultural economies and about economies of media convergence and divergence (“mainstream” and “alternative”) which occurred during the 1990s but which contributed to subsequent media and cultural economies (for instance, the legal and illegal media economies of so-called “user-generated content” or “file-sharing” in the twenty-first century).

Your reference to what libraries do and don’t collect and make available further complicates thinking about zining as collecting and what you refer to as “depositories.” In a sense, your project charts interlacing networks and economies of collecting, archiving, and depositing. I don’t want to complicate too much or to make too big a deal about the relation of zines and libraries, but I do want to give you an opening to say something about how you think about zines as assemblages of productivity. In the essay that I’ve read, you do not devote a great deal of attention to terms such as “itineraries” and “networks,” but where you do it is in relation to zines as archives, depositories, and collections as assemblages. You clearly want to revisit zines not just in terms of what people produce or consume, but as archives within archives, as depositories within depositories, as collections within collections, and in those senses as complex assemblages. So I am wondering whether your predilection for these terms, as an analytic lens, is a strategy for conducting an alternative to the kind of political economic analysis that emphasizes the big institutions of production, distribution, and marketing, and whether analyzing zines as and within archives, depositories, collections, assemblages helps you represent them as alternative economies.
JR: Well, that’s really a complicated and good question, and you are right that I haven’t—or I don’t in that paper—develop the concept of networks and itineraries at great length. That paper was an occasion when I discovered those concepts and their importance to the project, but maybe I can work up to that by saying something specific about zines.

Zines are so interesting because if you read a lot of them, you see that they, like every other literate form, have their own formulas and regularities. Yet you become a bit overwhelmed by their diversity and unwieldiness as collections. Even though they clearly are girl-zine collections—they have a certain identity, as might be true of, any collection defined in essence by how it was put together.—Yet, some of the zines in these collections are less about girlhood than about veganism or about a particular band. Or, even though they might be interested in Riot Grrrl, they also are interested in questions about incest or rape, or anti-consumerism. So my question became how do you make sense of their diversity and their singularity. I have been intrigued by the ontology of the zine. What is a zine exactly? I keep coming back to Walter Benjamin’s concept of the aura and the “work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction,” and the way in which even though zines are photocopies, even though they have recirculated over the years, there is a kind of investment in their singularity through all of this. There is a particularity to them, which I find really intriguing. So I’ve been constantly thinking about how to deal with that.

At the same time there are many zines written by young women of color who were responding very critically to Riot Grrrl and Riot Grrrl-related zines. In some ways they have been written about as if they were an interruption in Riot Grrrl or girl-related zines. This point has been made by Mimi Nguyen. They’ve also been written about as if they are about something other than feminism. So I became very interested in those zines, in those, for want of a better word, “race-related” zines and how to make sense of them in relationship to Riot Grrrl. I struggle with how to understand that, how not to make them a secondary thing to feminism but to understand them as a very important intervention in zining and the larger scene of the 1990s.

When I would go to various libraries and archives and look at the collections, it became more and more difficult to operate as a literary critic, or even as a certain kind of social scientist, asking how I am supposed to sample the collection. How, am I supposed to figure out which issues are being represented in this collection? How am I supposed to decide which zines to write about and which not to write about? I simply was overwhelmed by the archive. The more I became involved in these questions, the more I began to think about archiving as a way to think about literature, not as a thing, but as social practices and as performances that I needed to set in motion again conceptually. To that end, I’ve been trying to think of the constellations within which the zines signify and trying to figure out how particular collections came together and were “put together” and assembled.
There is a wonderful collection at DePaul University called the Midwest Zine Collection. They’ve construed their zine archive around the question of the Midwest, because Chicago was a center of zine production. There was the Chicago Zine Fest, and the Chicago punk scene was also very important. Within that larger archive, DePaul has a really interesting collection from a young woman who was very active in the punk scene and who had many Riot Grrrl-related zines and many zines that focused on feminism. It would be possible to single out and talk about those alone. But on the other hand, the collection is dominated even more by her interest in veganism and vegetarianism—her explanations of veganism and vegetarianism. As a result, it occurred to me that this might be part of the story that I need to represent. These young people are communicating with one another through these zines and making their own archive, their own collections, and actually exploring different subject positions and positionings and exploring the construction of particular interests. They were gendered and classed, to be sure, and in some cases they were, people who understood themselves as raced as well. They were also people who understood themselves as subjects solicited by particular interests and communities. Given all this, it is interesting to think about what was happening to subject-formation within the 1990s, and to place that within the history of subject-formation over time, if that’s even possible. In addition, many of the young women involved in producing the zines, especially the zines which have survived and been recirculated, were young women who had one or two years at universities and colleges at least.—Some of them were in Women’s Studies classes, some of them were in Cultural Studies classes, some of them were in classes on race, and queer theory. So some of their zines also exhibit familiarity with the discourses that developed in the 1990s that began to theorize these changes and to call into question how subjects were constituted. In a sense, they also begin to understand subject-formation in metacritical ("postmodernist" or "poststructuralist") terms, as fragmented and fractured, as performances. It is important to focus on the fact that these developments happened simultaneously for complex historical reasons both in these zones of alternative literary production and in the more legitimated precincts of university-based intellectual production. The question is why. At this point, I see my project as a crucible to explore those connections and convergences among a range of overdetermined cultural practices at a particular historical moment.

In a way, some of these zine collections are “depositories,” a term that I use to emphasize the randomness of “collections” that have all sorts of things dumped within them. For example, a collection held at Smith College is the collection of young woman who called herself Tinuviel. Long involved with alternative recording companies, she began one of her own, which she named Villa Villakula, after the children’s book about Pippi Longstocking. As part of her distribution efforts, many young people—especially young women—would send her copies of their zines. She also wrote away for zines herself. At a certain point, she gave this collection to Smith. Although Riot Grrrl and girl zines figure in the collection—because Tinuviel produced the music of young alternative, women-dominated bands—the collection
is actually much more diverse than that—even random, one might say. The collection is more depository than a focused, personal collection assembled out of her own, individual preoccupations. There is an expansiveness and breadth to how it is put together which needs to be attended to—something that is not as apparent in Arielle Greenberg’s more tightly organized collection at Duke University. I’ve also looked at collections from other young women who have preserved them over the years. Some of these collections have been donated to libraries and archives and some of them are still owned by the producers to whom they remain important. The collections owned by their producers are more tightly organized around the producer’s own interests, history, and collecting interests. For instance, one of my other interlocutors is a young woman who is in graduate school right now and who has donated a part of her zine collection—which she started amassing when she was 15—to Barnard, though she has kept her favorite zines, the things that are and have been the most important to her, at her home. Her collection at Barnard, compared to her collection at home, is somewhat different and might lead to quite different impressions and conclusions about girl zines. It is important, then, to know how and why certain zine collections were assembled, just as it is important to know how and why the materials within zines themselves were assembled.

Through these experiences, I have begun to think about the material practice of collecting and archiving and how those materials and practices shape the materiality (the material production) of memory. What we see as girl zines are profoundly affected by the original collecting process of the zinester, by how she operated in that zine gift economy, and by how those zines have been redacted by her, winnowed by her, and been taken up by other collections and places by an archivist or librarian in other archives. I am trying to understand how that whole process produces the afterlife of these zines as well as the afterlives of these women.

JH: I want to tie part of my earlier line of questioning to what you are saying now. To what extent are you interested in, and how does your project explain, the relation between the public and private, and the institutionalized/professionalized and amateur, practices and modalities of collecting and archiving? Libraries historically have been in the business, or in the “public service,” of collecting books and have operated as institutions of a literary culture, and even of literature that operates most often within a commercial economy. I don’t mean to overstate this because there certainly are “libraries” that collect other materials than simply books and artifacts of a literary culture. Also, collections of work that are brought into libraries to be preserved are often (predominantly?) from well-known individuals, authors, celebrities, etc., around which a case can be made for collecting their material. What is interesting about the economy of zines as you’ve framed it (an unruly process of collecting and assembling, or a practice that plays by different rules) concerns the changing institutions and their organizational procedures for collecting and archiving, particularly in relation to amateur-, non-celebrity-orientated kinds of materials.
JH: The transformation of libraries has been going on for some time. I am not an expert on the special-collection policies and politics of libraries or archives, but I do know that collection policies began to change substantially in the 1960s and 1970s just as academic discourse changed in response to social movements—just as, for instance, literary criticism was profoundly affected by a growing interest in popular culture and in the writings of minority populations. As those academic disciplines changed, libraries' collecting and archiving practices also changed. This occurred as people began to recognize that there were ample collections of the materials of statesmen, important writers, politicians, people who could read and write, but that there were few collections about the social lives of ordinary Americans. In History as a discipline, for instance, labor history, social history, African American history, the history of popular culture all became very important by the 1970s. And libraries begin actively collecting the materials of so-called ordinary citizens, materials that could enable the recollection and memory of the daily lives of the ordinary population. So the trend that you ask about has been happening for some time.

JH: For instance, oral histories collected by folklorists (such as the Allan Lomax collection, and his/its relation to the American Folk Life Center at the Library of Congress) that dates back to the early part of the twentieth century.

JH: Yes, absolutely, that's right. For instance at the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, the Southern History Collection is famous for its many diaries, letters, cookbooks, etc. And it also holds collections of material culture—collections which enable the study of the folk life of people who were not highly literate. This change has been happening for a long time, so it's not surprising that librarians and archivist trained during that period would look at a zine collection as a very interesting phenomenon. It's not surprising to me that zines moved into libraries very quickly. But the other question you are asking has to do with what happens when zines are accessed through libraries or archives, which is a very contentious and political issue. I can tell you two interesting anecdotes that will illustrate this. One of the first papers I ever gave about zines was at the University of Massachusetts, at the invitation of one of my former students who was teaching a very large Introduction to Communications Studies class with 200 or so people. A very interesting debate developed in response to my paper when I was challenged by several young people who themselves were part of the punk community and who were zinesters. They thought that it was terrible that this academic was poaching on their territory, using their materials, and removing their work from their community—in short, doing bad things with what they had made. Other people, however, stood up and pointed out that community in fact had things to say, that a broader audience could benefit from their knowledge, and that there was a benefit to “giving a voice” to those who had produced the zines. I could see very early, therefore, that it would be a contentious issue.
More recently the Fales Collection at New York University, under the direction of Lisa Darns, has created a Riot Grrrl collection which includes the papers and materials of Kathleen Hanna and others who were associated with the first Riot Grrrl bands. Lisa Darns communicated about this internally within the NYU library community and, somehow, her communication made its way to Facebook or Twitter where it was recirculated and used to announce more broadly that the collection was going to be created for research purposes and would require permission to access it. This prompted a storm of controversy on the Web by people who were very opposed to doing that. They felt the material belonged to them and that access should not be restricted but accessible to all. There was a related debate about whether these materials are important enough to deserve to be preserved and protected by a library, or whether the materials should be allowed to make their way in the world on their own [through other media and networks]. There is no easy position to take about any of this. The materials are changed when they are held in libraries where permission is needed to gain access. Various people have tried to get around this. Jenna Freedman, who is the librarian for the collection at Barnard, has implemented a policy dictating that two copies of every zine be collected—one for the archive and one for circulation. So Barnard has a circulating zine collection that is open. There are institutions devising various kinds of policies to deal with this issue.

Zines as objects are animated by how they are connected with other zines in various kinds of networks, and how they connect zinesters, and how they move in terms of itinerary—how they have moved into the life of that person, how they move [as affect and circulation] through collection practices. Through the interviews, I trace the networks of connections that these young women see and experience in their lives through zining and I trace the itinerary they themselves have traveled and their zines have traveled. It’s a large project and quite unwieldy, and I’m not really sure I am going to be able to pull it off. However, the question of how a zine has trafficked through an itinerary is very interesting. Mimi Nguyen, for instance, is a central player in this whole history because she is one of the most well-known zinesters and because her critical intervention into Riot Grrrl about race was incredibly generative, influential, and important. She continues to be important and continues her ties to the zine world. You can actually now begin to trace what happened to her first compilation zine, which included all kinds of writings by other zinesters of color, as it moved through many individual zines collections. You can figure out its movements and where it has landed across the US by going to library collections, and researching who collected it and how it was related to other zines held in specific collections. And you also can trace the anthologization of her zine and her piece in various anthologies published for somewhat different audiences. So it’s a really interesting phenomenon. Now, whether one can do that with other less well known zines and authors remains to be seen.

JH: I like the way that a historical project which involves ethnographic research calls forth the kinds of questions that you are describing. When I was a younger media
scholar I used to think that ethnographic work about media audiences was incommensurate with historical work about media and audiences—that ethnography is about living subjects and that history is about the past. Your description of the project helps me think about a kind of study that forms around the material production and over-determination of memory—of projections on the past, and of “afterlife” (which becomes sometimes the point of debate and political struggle) in the present. Your use of the terms depository and collection (as part of networks and itineraries) underscores the complexity and interdependencies of the object/thing. And your consideration of the zines’ relation to institutional archives as collecting apparatuses makes your project reflexive about the rules, regulation, administration, and economies of afterlives and memory production. And to bring the zine into those institutional apparatuses and economies raises a number of interesting questions about the uses of culture since the 1990s. All of this makes your working from the intersection of ethnography and historical archival research quite interesting. Do you want to say something briefly about how much any of this drives the project?

JR: That is definitely now, increasingly what is driving the project. One reason that your points about complexity, interdependencies, and networks are salient has to do with race and community formation. If you simply treat girl-related zines as if they are about feminism only, the kind of story you will tell focuses principally on gender and sexuality, and you might be able to come up with certain kinds of statements about what happened to feminism over the course of the 1990s. But if you don’t pay attention to the ways in which sub-communities within girl-related zining got constituted (around other issues and through different practices and networks), as in zine production by people of color, or the production of Latina zines or of Asian community-related zines, then you might miss the ways in which these young women, “on the ground” and in their daily performance and practice, were trying to think subjectivity in ways that simply didn’t separate gender from race, class, or other things. Then, the story becomes even more complex when you try to trace these networks and itineraries and when you grapple with how, on the ground, their discourse and productions were also affected by academic discourses though not totally enthralled by them, with how discursively they worked out alternative subject forms and alternative forms of being in friendship and community, and with how all of that produced multiple effects. Understanding the making and circulation and re-circulation of the zines entails all of that.

JH: In some ways you are analyzing how a kind of productivity occurs through a chain/network of production, technologization, and rules (implicitly, it seems to me, as a technologization of the self and through the actor-networks of zining and afterlives). But you perform the analysis through interviewing, through the collection of personal anecdotes (afterlife as oral histories) that are folded into an analysis of material objects/things/technologies that also have an afterlife. In part that’s what I meant earlier about your working from the intersection of history and ethnography.
JR: Yes, well, oral history as a discipline is very sophisticated about interviewing in particular because of its engagement with problems and issues around the question of memory. I was not trained as an oral historian, just as I was not trained as an ethnographer, so I have to compensate for that by reading within the field of oral history. I’ve read some already but I don’t feel as if I’ve done enough yet. Oral historians are very sophisticated in the way they think about the interview as itself a social relation, and that the interviewer has to be very clear about the nature of that social relation. Not only does the interviewee come trailing a complicated past, but so does the interviewer. They meet on a certain kind of ground, so it’s very important to take account of that. Then, one has to think about memory, and the way in which memory has its own surrounding intentionalities, its own subconscious, its own erasures. One needs to check the interview account against other documents and other kinds of historical materials, of course, to see what actually hasn’t been acknowledged, what might have been erased, because those absences and erasures can tell you as much about the past you are interested in as the material that is evident and is actively referenced. So, it is a complicated discourse, but not different from the way historians always operate, which involves assessing the evidentiary material they are working with and being skeptical about its limitations even as they attend to it as a positive thing that has significance and meaning that can be mined.

JH: My question about and focus on your conception of ethnography, and its usefulness, is shaped by my own institutional position (in part) as historian of media and communications, where “media ethnography” is not often folded into “media history.” (There are examples but not many.) I should add that my questions about the ethnography–history nexus also are driven by my commitments as an academic intellectual who values relentless grappling with genealogies of intellectual and academic work (particularly in relation to histories of institutions). That’s one of the reasons that I wanted to conduct the interviews with (excuse the expression) “elderly” voices—to sketch how “old” rationalities and questions from earlier contexts do and don’t shape recent questions and dispositions in “critical studies,” “cultural studies,” and Media Studies. I often think that Communication and Media Studies, Critical Studies, and Cultural Studies (any discipline or inter-discipline) cannot grapple enough with their implication in these histories, which are always asking and expecting questioners in the present to pose certain kinds of questions. But in making that last point, I want to be clear that a reason why I am asking you about how you bring ethnography and historical research together in a project about collecting and archiving has to do with the project’s apparent interest in the relation of the past (the 1990s specifically) to the present. Since we have not yet discussed how/why the 1990s, “girl-related” cultural production, and zining matter today, would you mind suggesting a few reasons why the present context (or more specifically critical studies, cultural studies, and/or media studies) need a history of zines from the 1990s. You have implied a few reasons, but let’s address them more directly.
JR: It's a big question, but it is the key question ultimately. These young women have been very creative in their ways of thinking-through an ongoing interest in feminism. They were particularly invested in how feminism was or wasn't relevant to their own lives in the 1990s. Their way of thinking the relationship between gender and sexuality was especially preoccupied with queer and non-normative sexualities and what they might mean for all young women. That seems to me to have relevance to the ongoing set of questions about feminism in the present, including feminism's relation to discourses about race and class and sexuality, as feminism grapples with the complex formation of varying networks and discourses with somewhat different investments. Feminism, of course, is not one thing. Girl zinesters were, in effect, trying to imagine a feminism that would speak to the conditions of their own lives as they understood them in all their complexity.

Also, it should be pointed out that these were quite young people who were writing, often very skeptically about the use of categories to describe behavior, people, interests, etc. during the 1990s. This is one of the characteristics of adolescents that is really, really interesting. This skepticism about the usefulness of various categories gets re-read by adults as idealism—as adolescents who are perplexed by the contradictions of people who are saying one thing but behaving in a contradictory way. They are perplexed by the kinds of categories that get constructed. There is a critical intelligence among early adolescents that happens before processes of normalization succeed, before the imposition of dominant categories. I think this critical voice and its fluidity and flexibility, which many young people characteristically display—that capacity for critique and questioning—needs to be investigated, celebrated, and actually used more. Understanding this ability as an ability rather than a condition to be supplanted might have consequences with respect to education, to pedagogy, with respect to ways in which literacy and writing might be taught in middle school and high school—all of which interests me. What zines put on display is young people, girls, as "knowers," if you will, as intellectuals in their own right.

JH: But I want to press a bit more my question about the relation of the past to the present. There are ways that studying the economy of zines, as an ethnographic project about "media" subjects, asks somewhat (maybe very) different questions from the ones that drove your influential study, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature in 1984. Surely you would agree that a post-1990's economy of "literary" production and distribution involves a different relation between professional and amateur; the mode of production, distribution, branding, and the modalities of literature have changed significantly. The book, even the "zine," have been reinvented through different technological regimes and different networks of production and consumption. The technologies, economies, habits, and spaces of reading (1980s "romances" or 1990s "girl-related zines") have changed considerably. The crafting that you associate with zines, even their self-revelatory, self-expressive, and confessional features, have been harnessed to and made useful
through “social networking” and an economy of interactivity. The gift economy that you attribute to zining in the 1990s has become a term applied to forms of amateur-driven, “bottom-up,” so-called “user-generated content” — a “DIY culture” of media making.

So, I am wondering whether one of the lessons from your project might be that the historical contradictions from the 1990s surrounding girls or femininity and zining are still with us, perhaps residually. Or did girl-related zining lay some of the groundwork for a current mode of production — an economy of self-production, self-distribution, self-branding, the “sharing” of personal data, and the everyday archiving of one’s life? How exactly do you chart the “afterlife” of the zine’s relation to girlhood in the media culture and economy of 2013?

To the extent that your project is about the afterlife of “girl-related” production (crafting), the project also seems to be about, perhaps echoing the title of Angela McRobbie’s widely discussed book, “The Aftermath of Feminism” during and since the 1990s. What does this project help us understand about the legacy of or the changing contradictions of feminism for generations of young female crafters and consumers since the 1990s? Your interest in female readers and consumers of popular literature during the 1970s and 1980s likely makes the afterlife of even the 1980s a burning question for you in this project. I recognize there are a lot of developments to which I am pointing, but I am trying to suggest any number of ways that the 1990s (or even the 1980s) have not gone away, and make your project relevant now.

JR: It is helpful to have you articulate it this way and ask the question. I realize that this is an issue and it is one of the reasons I was interested in moving from a literature theory department [at Duke University] into a rhetoric and communications context [at Northwestern University]. I didn’t have much of an opportunity at Duke to engage with people who were dealing with new media and thinking about these issues. That has to do with the history of the literary studies discipline, which mostly did not deal with these kinds of materials, until very recently. It’s still a small part of the operation. So you are absolutely right in that the discipline where much of this has been thought through carefully is in Communication and Media Studies. I am just beginning a more rigorous study of recent work in new media and new media economies.

I recognize the issues that you are talking about. In fact, the “networking” that is at the heart of the zine world preceded widespread use of the Internet and the World Wide Web. The first zines were produced on paper, but then the zine makers connected through online services such as AOL. The historical developments to which you refer were also contemporaneously producing what was going on in zines, and then the zine mode [non-consumerist, alternative collecting] became networked in a different way by being connected to the commercial commodified capitalist economy. So yes, all of that is absolutely part of the history. But drawing from my
knowledge of cultural studies, and Stuart Hall’s very careful reading of Gramsci, I never would want to say that there are necessary relationships between this alternative economy and some kind of oppositional politics. I don’t mean to trivialize the problem of the alternative economy of zining having been taken up on a massive scale by media corporations that are very cheaply generating content based on user-generated material and are using it for their own purposes and paying very little if nothing for it. And certainly that also has to be part of my effort to understand how networks and itineraries have operated within, around, and after zines. Some of those networks are commercial and beyond the control of the original zinesters. Other networks are ones that are linked to or are closer to their own personal networks, and some connect with academic networks that see themselves as oppositional in other though related ways.

Riot Grrrl, for instance, could be thought of as the progenitor of bands like the Spice Girls, and the whole Girl Power commercialization operation. A former Riot Grrrl, Kristen Schilt, who now teaches in the Sociology Department at the University of Chicago, has written thoughtfully about the ways in which commercialized angry girl rock—Alanis Morrissette et al.—is not Riot Grrrl. Her argument is that this is true, because the development people in record companies controlled what those young women could say. They would only chose people who were “good looking” in a conventional way, and they demanded that they dress in a certain way. Schilt suggests that the lyrics and performance of someone like Alanis Morrissette are more contained and normativized than someone like Kathleen Hanna. In this way, girl culture certainly became commercialized early on. But that wasn’t all that happened. I’m interested in the ways one can think about that in relation or contrast to how zines have circulated through libraries and archives. In some ways, these are similar processes but, socially, politically, even economically, they have had different effects. One other thing that I haven’t mentioned is that many of the young women who went into zining have moved into cultural work—often in universities, in artistic production, in non-profit arenas, and in other kinds of political activity. As a consequence, I am interested in why that happened. I am interested in the relationship between the ideology of that zine community, the underwriting ideologies of that zine economy, and where it sent these young women in their afterlives. Where did they go, to do what, and why? What is their relationship to the dominant culture now?

You referred to the confessionalism of user-generated practice, which is an interesting historical development that intersects in some ways with the rise of what has been called “neoliberalism.” Girl zines certainly were confessional to a certain extent, and expressive of the self, but at the same time, they demonstrated an interest in public issues and in public action and protest. Also, through the actual collaging process—that is, through the actual material process of producing a zine by pasting the thoughts of many others right next to and interspersed with one’s own—which was paralleled by the sociability of the networking process itself, these young women also
produced what I call “choral subjectivities”—kinds of subjectivity that were intersubjective, collective, and communal. With that in mind, I am interested in how a self-centered or subject-centered discourse does not necessarily have to get articulated to neoliberalism or late-capitalism, or whatever we might want to call twenty-first century capitalism.

**JH:** But you would acknowledge it could tip in the other direction . . .

**JR:** It could and perhaps has, in some ways, but not in others. I think it absolutely critical that we do not lose those other ways just because we are so focused on the dominant, commercial economy and the way that it incorporates so many forms of resistance.

**JH:** . . . because one could easily say that social networking is a form of “choral self-revelation,” if that’s not an oxymoron. But I take your point of holding out the possibilities from this history.

Implicit in your explanation of the project, and in the essay that you sent me, are questions about agency, and particularly the issue of dissent—questions that I want to discuss a bit more. In *Reading the Romance*, you developed an argument about agency and reading, but the agency that you describe in that project had to do, in part, with the romance reader’s relative solipsism and her work at producing a time and a place for reading. Also, “dissent” or refusal (would you call it resistance?) may be part of your account of women’s romance reading during the 1970s and 1980s, but the literary romance is a much more “popular” and mainstream genre than are the zines. Your interest in zines strikes me as having formed more around questions about agency in a significantly different, decidedly “alternative” and “non-consumerist” economy and regime of productivity and distribution, and in the “choral” production and collecting that we already have discussed. Are there ways that these projects represent your changing thoughts about agency, and even modes of dissent? And again, how does either study help us think about the contradictions of women’s agency, and the possibilities of dissent, now—in what you refer to as the “afterlife” (or perhaps better, the “afterlives”) of feminism and its intersection with a 1990’s zine culture?

**JR:** That’s a good question. As you were talking, a lot of topics ran through my mind that are all very complicated and connected to one another.

The first thing to be said is that part of the reason I became interested in doing something on alternative literary production is because I was interested in the ways that readers were also writers. That is the most interesting thing about the zine. When a person picks up a zine it is very common for them to say, “I can do this.” Some people will only produce one zine in their entire life, but reading it may have generated a writing impulse, a move toward—and how you construct it is important
here—expressivity, practice, and performance. Although there has been a history of authorship and a history of reading, I increasingly have seen (and certainly now see) those categories as reifications—products of understanding communication under the regime of bourgeois capitalism, where property congeals something that was more effectively understood to be *languaging*. This is a very, very important point to make, because it asks us to think beyond the reified categories of “author” and “reader,” “production” and “consumption,” and to recognize that an author has been a reader, is always a reader. Some readers, because of complicated structures that have to do with education and class, never become writers, but most readers do some writing in their lives. So I am very interested in the ways that zining confounds those traditional reifications—the traditional distinction between writer and reader. The question is can such practices by utilized elsewhere? Could they be generalized? Reading in the past has often been thought of as passive, and that’s part of why I was interested in complicating that assumption in *Reading the Romance*. Even then, I recognized that reading is never passive, that it’s always about investments and involvements, though this has been aided and abetted by the ways in which literary production has been capitalized (and quite a bit). This connects with, what is often called in the zine world, Copy Left. Many zinesters are critical of copyright. Many zines include a statement that says “feel free to copy this but send me a copy if you use it or include a shout out to me to say where you got it from.” Many zinesters are invested in an ideology of circulation as opposed to an ideology of property.

**JH:** But there was another part to my question. It’s impossible to separate your interest in economies of reading or economies of the production and distributions of zines in the 1990s from your interest in *gendered* forms of agency and even dissent. Your work always poses questions about authorship, about amateur, semi-professional, and professional forms of literary and cultural production, and about the agency of consumers through studies about *women’s* lives.

**JR:** I think there is something significant here that is also a caveat. Through these interviews, I am interested in tracing what some of the zinesters have become and the way in which the itineraries of their lives have led them to certain kinds of work, labor, practice, and performance. So I am interested in them as laborers and political actors—many of them political actors on behalf of gender politics and feminist politics, and some actively involved in academic life, some not. That said, there’s a limitation and problem that still remains to be solved. These interviews are facilitated by the intersection of my networks as a feminist academic, and the young zinesters with whom I have been able to connect are ones whom I came to know about first by reading certain zines, but also by learning about certain authors in the zine world through my very particular network of contacts. So my interview pool is a particular group of young women who were/are privileged in certain ways, who were linguistically adept as young people, who were perhaps culturally oriented already, destined to go on to university if not graduate school. It’s not easy to specify right now how representative or unrepresentative my study is. There were working-class
zinesters, there obviously were many who did not continue to go on and write about zines, archive zines, and preserve their zines. How would I access them? How would you find out about them? How do you find working-class zine collections? Those are really interesting sorts of problems. What happened to those young women? Was their relationship to agency, to political practice, different? I don’t know the answer to that question, and it is going to be a very hard thing to figure out.

**JH:** There’s a parallel, maybe shadow, set of questions about how a history of zines matters in relation to your work on the history of the book. To the extent that your project is interested in an “afterlife” of a “zine culture,” to what extent is your interest in the history of the book oriented toward understanding how practices of publishing and reading books matter now? Would you talk briefly about your *History of the Book in America, Volume 4, 1880–1940* (2008)? I am curious about how those dates were decided. How were you recruited for the project and for that period in particular? And would you say something about the organization of your volume’s sections: one on trades, one on social uses, and one on reading?

**JR:** The project was commissioned and sponsored by the American Antiquarian Society, which is a very important archive and library that for a very long time has collected materials only up until about 1880. It is a very important archive for early American manuscripts, colonial manuscripts, and nineteenth-century books. That project was under the general editorship of David Hall at Harvard University who had written about colonial literary practices. When they decided to produce the collection it was to be a collaborative project, and driven by the same impulse as in the UK, France, Canada, etc. When the editorial board for the project started to look around for publishers they discovered that no publisher would publish such a project that did not take the story up to the present. So then Hall had to cast around, with the help of the editorial board, and find people who could deal with the recent period. My name came up, along with my co-editor, Carl Kaestle, who is a historian of American education and literacy, then at the University of Wisconsin. They wrote to us to ask if we would be interested. I had never met Carl, and we hadn’t even read each other’s work. But, as a consequence, we did and we got along very well. They wanted us to do the period, 1880 to [the] present and we just laughed at them. There was so much work! At that time I was working on my study about the Book of the Month Club, which involved research about the current state of the club but also about the club’s creation in the 1920s. We said “no, we can’t do that in a single volume, that’s not possible,” because the entire book industry really ramped up beginning in 1880 with mass production, the creation of cheap paper, with rotary presses, and a lot more. There was no way. We said we would be happy to do 1880 up to the Second World War but that they were going to have to find other people for the subsequent period. So they got other people to do 1940 to the present.

Carl and I worked with the editorial board to do something that was a little less book focused, because we thought of ourselves as social and cultural historians rather than
as bibliographers. We spent many weekends at the editorial board meeting sitting together and trying to conceptualize what we wanted to talk about. The volume's organization came out of that, and I would say that because of that there is tremendous emphasis in our volume on the social uses of print and literacy. We tried to re-conceptualize the history of the book to a certain extent and to move away from the idea that you start the process with the author and then trace the process from the author, to the editorial process, to the book, to distribution and consumption. Following Robert Darnton, we wanted to thematize the cycle of book production and the ways that print production has uses for all of the actors involved without implicitly privileging the author. So we focused on the trades, on books as objects, and then on the social uses of print, which meant not just reading, but what happened in libraries and elsewhere, for instance. So that work, and my collaboration with Carl, had an enormous impact on how I think about publishing, reading, and literacy.

One of the most productive things I agreed to do for this project was to write an essay on learned and literary culture from 1880 to 1940. That forced me to take a very long perspective on the fact that this was the period during which the American university developed. It was also the period in which professional disciplines developed, middlebrow culture developed, and it's also the period in which you began to see more wide-spread education of women, African Americans, and other minorities. So I began to think about what literacy meant to women and African Americans. And I began to realize that the important question was not simply about women and African Americans getting an education and then beginning to read. The story couldn't stop at the acquisition of literacy, even advanced literacy. I became interested in what happened to such individuals as they became readers and writers, as they become people who could gather and coalesce their community about them through their writing, contribute to their community, and therefore produce different kinds of subject-formation and different forms of community. So I think you can see in the volume's organization and production the seeds or genesis of the way I am now thinking about zines. I think it comes directly from this project.

JH: It is interesting to put the two projects side by side, not only because there are similar sets of questions being asked but because the periods are different. Collectively they gesture toward some interesting ways of thinking historically about the social uses of literature and about reading as a social practice. But since you didn't write the history of the 1940s to the present, I need to ask what your history of the book from the 1940s to the present would emphasize.

JR: I guess we've talked about some of it. Some of my version would concern the commercial media's challenge to professional, cultural, and literary elites—the sort of thing that Fred Jameson wrote about in his book about postmodernism, including the breakdown between the division between popular and high or literary culture and what that means, the way in which the culture industry voraciously breaks down the
boundary between them. Another theme in my version would concern the concentration of the culture industries, the building up of those great, huge, mega-bookstores and then their disappearance, and the consolidation of media production within very large corporations and companies.

JH: In the essay about zines you ask about “the fate of dissent when so much human discourse has come under the control of global communication conglomerates.”

JR: Yes, and you are alluding to another potential and very worrisome development—the questions of user-generated content and the ways in which that is getting absorbed and taken up into the maw of these giant corporations. The reason they are interested in audiences now is because they see free content! And what does that mean for dissent and DIY production? Is it possible to have an alternative and an outside, something subversive, beyond capitalist production, coordination, and cooptation? That is ultimately the question one wants to pose in media investigation research now, it seems to me, as it has been for a long time. It is a huge and very difficult question.

JH: It is a huge question and it also cuts in ways we haven’t discussed, but I feel compelled to mention at this point in our conversation that the whole project of ethnographic research (about the consumers of, say, popular women’s romance novels in the 1980s or of zine networks in the 1990s) has a very complicated and rapidly changing relation to the surveillance apparatus that operates as/through the marketing divisions of those big communication conglomerates to which you refer—and by the twenty-first century as part of the everyday use of “interactive” media. As “lifestyle programming” became the dominant practice for cable, niche-TV during the late twentieth century, media marketing increasingly turned toward what it called “ethnographic research” of consumers’ “lifestyles.” The documentary, Merchants of Cool, (2001), famously represented the MTV network’s practice of “ethnographic research” of its young consumers, charting their “networks” of consumption as “lifestyle cluster,” beyond watching MTV. Mark Andrejevic and others have examined how, in the twenty-first century, the surveillance apparatus of an interactive media economy, wherein revealing oneself and expressing oneself is productive of information that becomes valuable monetarily to those companies—casting media users in the role of conducting ethnographic surveys of themselves and their lives/lifestyles.

From the twenty-first century, I have often been fascinated about how the turn toward critical “audience studies” and “fan studies,” during the 1980s and afterwards, occurred precisely as “ethnography” was being harnessed to (deployed by) the “media research” conducted by media corporations. In one sense, the ethnographic research of your Reading the Romance, which propelled a lot of critical audience studies and their relation to “cultural studies” at that time, was not primarily about “media audiences.” And the academic interest and preoccupation during the 1980s with
media audiences/consumers as “active”—as having agency as “readers” of media texts—did adopt a “critical” posture toward media practices (albeit a posture that often did not energetically examine the economic structures and institutional frameworks, which is in part why your study in 1999 of the Book of the Month Club was useful). However, in another sense, that period of critical ethnographic study of media (or literary) audiences as “readers” and as actively involved producers/makers of meaning, identity, etc., did intersect historically with the trend toward lifestyle marketing and ethnographic research by media companies. And that historical convergence is worth recognizing and grappling with today—by Media Studies and Cultural Studies, about their past. Furthermore, as I have been asking indirectly in my prior questions, there are significant ways that the zinging practices and networks from the 1990s also were part of those broader historical developments—part of the emergence of the AOL economy, which you have mentioned, and which by the twenty-first century (despite the profound transformation of AOL) operates and acts through an economy of what increasingly are referred to as “produsers” (media “users”/consumers whose interactivity is productive of data and value for that economy, and whose “empowerment” through that economy involves a kind of self-administered “ethnographic study”).

JR: All of what you’ve said seems completely right, but it also cuts two ways. Behind your observations and questions is the idea that what looks like a politically alternative, or populist process, is in fact being produced by capitalist ideologies and capitalist economies. That is certainly true, and it seems to me that your account of cultural studies and reader-response theory is right about their conditions of possibility. It is not surprising that those conditions of possibility overlap with the conditions of possibility that generate certain kinds of changes in the TV industry, or the creation of the Web. That does seem right to me. I’m always unhappy, however, with politically invested discourse which wants to call attention to instances of cooptation and which suggests that, because ethnography can be used by corporations to figure out how better to market to people, or because confessional discourse gets absorbed by reality television in order to provide the television industry more content and money, both ethnography and the expressive cultural mode is therefore always coopted and useless. I am very impatient with that argument. I certainly think that this is always possible and that it does happen—indeed quite often. However, at the same time we who have studied readers and audiences critically were the product of a university that was generated within capitalist economies, was in some ways quite directly tied to them, yet was willing to bring in people with different backgrounds and histories, who introduced us to critical practices that challenged forms of “cultural dominance.” As a result, that shaped us in certain ways and produced/emphasized certain kinds of dissident discourses that weren’t completely and evenly associated with capitalist ideology. It seems to me the literary discipline has been disruptive, cultural studies has been disruptive, communication studies and feminism have been disruptive. To a certain extent, those discourses had the same conditions of possibility and they had alternative, quite different effects. So it seems to me that cultural practices, when sutured to other
kinds of practices, can have politically significant impacts and results. That is what I am interested in. That is why I am interested in networks and itineraries. When you articulate particular discourses to other types of discourses you can bring about certain kinds of political change, I think. There are no necessary consequences for any kind of practice. If I’ve learned anything from Stuart Hall—and I have certainly learned much— it is precisely that! And thus you have to pay attention to the process of articulation and how it works and how it moves.

**JH:** I would add, as a final comment, that I think this is why historical analysis and your way of doing it is helpful in the present. It reminds anyone working in cultural studies or media studies or feminist studies that they work within these historical contradictions, and within the confluence of “residual” and “emergent” discursive formations, where even though institutions, capitalist economies, professional and work habits, etc., are asking certain things of us, we need to be as vigilant about those institutional and commercial expectations and dispositions as about the possibilities of opening up alternative or (for those rationalities) unsettling lines of questioning. I would agree with you that we need reflexive, “counter”-histories and genealogies to provoke us continually to grapple with our implication in the world that we are trying to theorize or to analyze, and from a present that is changing.

**JR:** I agree that it is helpful to see our work that way. Thanks for the opportunity to discuss all this with you.