

SELF-PUBLISHING IN THE GLOBAL AND LOCAL: SITUATING LIFE WRITING IN ZINES

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Youth as a complex, shifting, and contradictory category is rarely narrated in the dominant public sphere through the diverse voices of the young. Prohibited from speaking as moral and political agents, youth become an empty category inhabited by the desires, fantasies and interests of the adult world. This is not to suggest that youth don't speak; they are simply restricted from speaking in those spheres where public conversation shapes social policy and refused the power to make knowledge consequential with respect to their own collective needs. (24)

This quote from youth culture theorist Henry A. Giroux is a fitting point of departure for a discussion of zine culture as a site of life writing. As objects of study in several disciplines, young people's interactions with mainstream society (or adult culture) have been well documented. Seminal studies such as those performed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, including the work of Dick Hebdidge, Stuart Hall, and Angela McRobbie have paved the way for analysis of young people's engagement with culture through their unique practices of consumption. In conjunction with other forces, these types of studies have led to youth becoming a privileged site of consumption, understood by mainstream culture as voracious consumers and trendsetters. The close attention paid to young people by the multimillion dollar fashion and music industries compounds and exploits what Rob Latham has described, in his analysis of youthful consumption through popular texts which utilize the figure of the vampire and cyborg, as "the fetishization of youth as desired/desiring substance at play within the collective activity of consumption" (5).

Contrary to most other youth subcultures studied, zine culture is a productive community, a writing and publishing subculture which takes as one

of its main focuses the critique of the commercialization of youth cultures. Through the production of independent publications, zine culture seeks to erode the predominance of mainstream and commercial interests in particular cultural activities. The zine community (or communities) is a form of alternative media, a subculture of story telling and knowledge sharing, engaged in what Neil Nehring describes as a “pedagogical exchange . . . of contumacious, critical response” to contemporary popular and subcultures, mixed with celebration and parody (149). While the texts produced in zine culture cover topics as diverse as thrift shopping, local music scenes, wrestling, fiction, design, sport, travel writing, and politics, life narrative zines have become a very popular type of zine in the last five to ten years. In this paper I will situate personal zines, and the unique and adapted modes of narrative which define them, within a broader zine culture, which in turn will be located within a context of DIY (do-it-yourself) and independent cultural practices. I will focus on two specific modes of emplotment in personal zines, cut’n’paste and direct address, as a means of indicating the diversity and richness of life writing in zine culture, and suggest interpretive strategies for exploring their relationship to contemporary autobiography scholarship.

THE ZINE MEDIUM AND CULTURES

Historical precursors to zines are many and varied, troubling an impulse to map the development of the genre. Stephen Duncombe has argued, in the only book-length study of the topic, that zine culture has its roots in the punk culture in Britain in the 1970s, and also in the political pamphleteering in America in the eighteenth century (27). “Fanzines” were produced by fans of the newly emerging genre of science fiction in the 1920s, and began as newsletters where fans of the genre could discuss the scientific probabilities of the stories, and later, publish fiction of their own (107). The use of the publications for fan activity has lessened as the internet has become the medium of choice for these interests, and the zine medium has become the focus of a diverse range of writers and artists.

Zines are self-published, low-budget publications produced predominantly by people between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five. While the publications can take any form, they are usually booklets A5 or A6 in size, black and white photocopied, and hand bound with staples, string, or sewing. Zines often include handcrafted elements distinguishing each copy, such as hand-coloring or painting, craft materials such as ribbons and fabrics, post-it-notes, handwriting, original photographs, or cut out images from magazines and books. They vary in length from two to fifty pages, and can be edited by

a group or a single person. People who produce zines are commonly known as "zinesters" in most countries where the publications are in circulation.

A unique aspect of zine culture and production is the distribution of the publications. Most zines are traded or sold at cost, and utilize the postal system as their main means of distribution. The majority of distribution happens through direct zinester-to-zinester (or zinester-to-reader) trade. Zinesters find each other through diverse means; the online presence of zines consists mainly of email groups where people can publicize their zines and find others to trade with (Healy), and on-line distributors where zines can be ordered. Distributors stock zines from countries such as Israel, Japan, Canada, America, Australia, New Zealand, France, UK, The Netherlands, and Belgium (Sullivan; Microcosm).

Many community events include zine fairs, such as the National Young Writers' Festival held annually in Newcastle, Australia, which has the largest zine fair in that country, and the Portland Zine Symposium held annually at Portland State University, Portland, Oregon, USA. Word-of-mouth is a common tool for circulation, with most zines including zine reviews containing details on how the reader can contact other zinesters. The publications are also stocked in some sympathetic music and bookstores which sell them on consignment. Some community organizations have zine libraries, and groups of people regularly organize "zine cases"—suitcases full of zines which travel with people and are sold and distributed at gigs, cafes, and backpacker hostels.

Zines also get left in public places: on trains, in cafes and pubs, and slipped between the pages of slick magazines in newsagents. These modes of distribution, coupled with comparatively small production runs (most zinesters in Australia only make fifty copies of an issue at a time), position zines as ephemera; lacking the constancy of an on-line presence or the permanency of the bound tome, zines occupy a space similar to the letter or diary, with the profound exception that they are public documents, available to anyone who can find them.

Zines intersect with other cultures which identify as DIY or "antiauthoritarian" culture, as it is described by Neil Nehring. These cultures include squatting, graffiti cultures, independent music, community event organizing (festivals, parties, and conferences), political and cultural activism, community gardens, culture jamming, "hacktivism," and independent media (known as "Indy Media"). From the perspective of most participants in DIY cultures, its value comes from the continued critique of the producer/consumer binarism of commercial culture as enacted through various forms of cultural independence, as well as more vigorous acts of resistance or protest. Kate Hodgson positions zines as being "[d]eployed on the margins of canonical and commercial

literature and art,” reflecting the explicit positioning of zines as “documents” of resistance (123). The margin(s) posited by Hodgson are indeed crowded and conflicted, as a plethora of independent cultural practices intersect, diverge, and connect. By establishing participatory communities which seek to erase the distinction between those who consume and those who produce culture, people involved in these activities feel more connected to their culture of choice (whether it be independent electronic music, zines, or independent media), and less harassed by the demands of consumer culture. This function of zine culture has been given prominence in feminist studies of “grrrl” zines and “grrrl” culture, where scholarly focus has been on the “aim to share information and build and politicize a community or network of young women . . . outside surveillance, silencing and appropriation” (Harris 46).

Within DIY cultures, zine culture specifically challenges the traditional distinction between readers and writers, encouraging people to create their own textual and/or visual products and trade them, in preference to the commonplace positioning of young people outside the domain of cultural production through practices of consumption. DIY culture facilitates sites of cultural practice and engagement which are self-defining and empowering, and is one of the few instances of young people exerting cultural and political power.

PERZINES: TWO SUBCULTURAL MODES OF EMPLOTMENT

The existence of a youth subculture with a strong life writing focus disrupts many assumptions regarding readership, text distribution, and the workings of the public/private distinction in the circulation of life narratives within contemporary theories of autobiography. Perzines introduce new, complex modes of emplotment for consideration, and also force us, as life narrative scholars, to rethink how age functions in the assumption of the narrator in life writing. While life writing scholarship has focused predominantly on the autobiographical forms produced by and for adult culture, the unique life narratives produced within the zine phenomenon and other sites of youth cultural production (such as hip hop) remain invisible to the discipline’s gaze. This absence of youth texts reproduces the marginalization suggested by Giroux, as well as segregating many dynamic and rich autobiographical forms from scholarly discussion.

In her introduction to *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism and Practice*, Laura Marcus interrogates the foundations of autobiography theory, exploring the assumptions in the canonization of particular styles of life narrative at the expense of other life writing forms. Marcus examines the

"conditions and limits" which have restricted access to the realm of the autobiographical, one of which is "implicit provisos about what constitutes 'valid' autobiography and these tend to be based in part on the perceived cultural status of the autobiographer" (4). Taking Giroux as a point of departure, we can see that young people's positioning outside "the spheres of conversation" that matter positions them with low cultural status. However, the adoration of young people through consumer culture also positions them as desired objects, hunted by the hired "correspondents" of advertising firms, courted at every turn by consumer culture begging for their seal of approval (Lopiano-Midsom). This conflicted positioning is explored in one mode of emplotment in perzines, which is the use of cut'n'paste collage: a practice which recontextualizes the materials of consumer culture (advertising slogans, headlines from newspapers and print media) as a form of life narrative.



Louise laments—

one problem is that most words have been taken from us. the words we need. freedom>s a furniture store. revolution sells 2nd hand cds and revolutionary is every unnecessary change to every unnecessary product. politics is old white men in suits soliciting votes. socialism>s Russia & cuba & china. anarchy>s just fucking shit up. the words we need to try to fight. by trying to say something beautiful. & beauty. that>s something unhealthy & expensive from a glossy magazine. (unpag.)

the context of public and commercial discourse. Aware of the consumer culture's cooption of revolutionary languages to sell products (usually to young people), Louise wonders how it is possible to speak of experiences, and to wish for change, using a language that is not hers. The placement of cut'n'paste

This page, at the beginning of the zine *Postconsumer Waste*, situates Louise's autobiographical writings within

collages alongside autobiographical writings creates a space within the autobiographical text (the zine) for the zinester to engage in the reclamation and resignification of mass media texts.

This mode of emplotment is common in perzines, and positions the act of life narration in sympathy with other non-autobiographical modes employed in the critique of commercial culture, such as billboard alteration. In Louise's collage the reader is confronted with the re-interpreted direct address of advertising and headlines ("you live in a dirty theme park, pay the price"), and then brought into concert with Louise's struggle to speak outside the commodified language of revolution—a process well documented by texts such as Naomi Klein's *No Logo* and Tom Frank's *Commodify Your Dissent*.

For Louise, her isolation from the conversations that matter, her low cultural status, is compounded by youth's cooption by consumer culture. The subcultural positioning of these life narratives assumes a reader who is in sympathy with a desire for change, and understands the frustrations of articulating wants and needs that cannot be satisfied by consumer practices. Predominantly made up of print media text and advertising images, collages in personal zines speak to the commercialization of everyday life and the structuring of libidinal impulses in the matrix of consumerism, a process vividly described by Rob Latham as "the incorporation of psychic impulses toward aesthetic and sensual gratification into a gigantic economic machine of capital accumulation" (30). The conflicts which arise from this mechanic incorporation are illustrated by Melamoo in a cut'n'paste collage which unites quotations, an image from advertising, and original text.



Here Melamoo castigates herself for the shift in her priorities from social justice ("ending the war and cancelling third world debt") to consumerism. This shift in Melamoo's habits of (non)consumption is linked to her recent employment—"I have been a slave to the capitalist system (yet enjoying living above the poverty line)" (unpag.)—and the increase in her income. Melamoo's dilemma gives weight to Robert Bocock's suggestion that "[a]ny protest against a consumption-orientated life-style seems to be short-lived once young men and women are in paid employment" (108). However, we can also see in Melamoo's desire to obtain "the red shoes" through the process of "looting and pillaging" associated with "the revolution" attempts to temper her recent turn to consumerism with more acceptable (in DIY culture terms) rejections of consumer culture.

The link between the red shoes and revolution is resonant of Dorothy's red shoes in the *Wizard of Oz*, which function as a transportation device between worlds, and suggest the discontinuous positions negotiated by Melamoo as her purchasing power increases (through employment); a dissonance produced by the simultaneous identifications as a "lesbian terrorist" (unpag.) committed to social change, and that of the privileged, idealized young consumer fetishized by the market (Latham 30). The red shoes, purchased through revolution, become a symbol of Melamoo's desire for a new world. This attachment of revolutionary desires to a consumer item suggests a "culture jam" of the shoes, re-signifying Melamoo's consumption of them as the first step in the revolution and the overthrow of consumer capitalism. This re-signification entwines Melamoo's libidinal desires with the domain of consumption, enshrining the allure of the objects of capitalism within the revolutionary impulse. While Melamoo's comrades in the fight for the dissolution of consumer capitalism's grip on the imaginary may view this with condemnation, Melamoo's collage vividly illustrates the situating of desires within consumerism, and the ongoing negotiations, resistances, and complicities played out between consumer and market. In this analysis of cut'n'paste, my strategy is to employ the terms "desire" and "libidinal" in a deliberately ambiguous fashion, invoking both the motivating lack of Freudian desire and the fullness of Deleuzian desire, to suggest the multiple experiences of the satisfactions and dissatisfactions of consumer culture.

This mode of emplotment, echoing the cut'n'paste graphic language of punk, closes the gap between media and consumer, allowing individual zinesters to reuse the language of the dominant, public spheres of discourse to situate their life writings. The cut'n'paste style is also a dramatic representation of the subjectivities found in perzines, which resist traditional autobiographical modes in favor of ephemeral, provisional narratives in preference to a coherent whole.

Another narrative strategy commonly employed in zines is the use of direct address. The subcultural positioning of these narratives sees the use of anecdotal stories and introductory essays which utilize direct address to assert subcultural commonalities, and to address the anxieties of life writing from a position of low cultural status. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson characterize the positing of a hostile reader as symptomatic of the hierarchy of “experience” which values traditional autobiographers over “others”; and they suggest that in some narratives, “the authority to narrate is hard-won in a constant engagement with readers posited as skeptical, unbelieving, resistant, and even hostile” (28).

This fight for narrative authority is exhibited in zines in conjunction with the assumption of a sympathetic, subcultural audience. The following example from *International Sweetheart of Rhythm #2* explicitly expresses anxiety about the status of the zinester as autobiographer:

What’s the point of this. You’re probably thinking I’m some brat with nothing to do. Stupid pseudo rights of passage, at least she’s not living in a third world country, spoilt. I just feel like I don’t have enough to say here. I just want a moment and some thoughts. Something to remember *me* by maybe. A place in time that was just mine, that I wanted to make a little bit beautiful. A little teasing glimmer to stumble upon some other time and smile. (unpag.)

The positioning of the narrating “I” as a spoilt brat is a defensive strategy which gives voice to the imagined criticisms of hostile readers. By giving voice to what zinesters imagine are the reasons readers may dismiss their life writing, the aim is temporarily to disarm the hostility, gaining reprieve from the readers’ resistance. The effectiveness of this strategy is mixed; while this kind of self-referentiality allows the zinesters to express their own (as well as the readers’) doubts about their narrative project, it can also place doubts in the mind of the sympathetic reader. These possibilities are recognized by Esther in her zine *I think so #4*, where she characterizes her life writing as “YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN writing”:

this is YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN writing. I’m hoping you get the gist – that you’ve felt or wondered about this stuff. to be more explicit would be (more) boring and to be less – well I feel compelled to honesty if only because I want to see a world represented that’s full of all this . . . but Lou’s write – it’s hard not to romanticise even if we do believe in unglamourising stuff (de-glamourising?) we want to write ourselves a cool life. and mike wrote in scenery “I don’t publish stories that make me look bad. would you?” I don’t know. I want to tell you about all the times I’ve been a total asshole but I won’t. (unpag.)

The references to other zinesters (Lou and Mike) and the use of the term "we" in this passage posit a subcultural audience. The narrator addresses a reader assumed to be part of the zine community and interested in the project of "de-glamourising" life through personal zines. These strategies are a common means of empowering the reader as zinester, affirming the reader as part of the community of zine culture, and subtly encouraging the production of zines through inclusive language—"This project is your project." The imagined zinester as reader also maintains the possibilities of turning hostile, as Esther confesses that her narrative could become "(more) boring."

While cut'n'paste collage is a mode of emplotment unique to personal zines, the use of direct address is employed in other non-traditional auto/biographical texts, such as Dave Eggers's memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, as well as in online life writing forms such as blogs and personal websites—texts which have connected to young people as readers of life writing, and which are subcultural modes of expression as well. The culture of personal zines presents a dynamic, globalized culture of life writing which connects to textual influences such as Eggers as well as punk and DIY culture. As one of the few life writing subcultures, it presents a dynamic set of challenges to scholars of autobiography.

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