

SAFE AREA GORAŽDE

THE WAR IN EASTERN BOSNIA 1992-95

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FANTAGRAPHICS BOOKS

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SILLY GIRLS

PART II

Ah, those
concoys!

Infused
with
stacks
of sacks
of flour
and
sugar!

Plucking
war-torn
women
back into
their
kitchens
again!

in particular
putting
Kimeta back
into her's

and in the
morning of
war-time
concoys
Kimeta
received
a chapter
into her-
self

PIRWHWA!

When I
came to
desserts
she was
Queen of
the Engine!



Kiki was
sweet on
Kimeta.
I think
-and who
could blame her?

and every
one was
astonished
by how loudly
she was re-
acting her with
the sound
of science

HELLO,
DARKNESS,
MY OLD
FRIEND...

Tonight we
were over
at Kimeta
and Sabinas,
their second
home since
escaping
from Lignite
in May '92.
The first
house their
family had
squatted had
been burned
down by the
Serbs in the
'94 offensive.
This place
was only
half gutted



I took her aside. I was International Press Suddenly I'd remembered. And the Real Truth was I hadn't come to Gorazde to record the antics of some silly girls.

but she grimed about the time the Cannon fired at her while she hung the wash.

and giggled about how bad posture saved her and Kimeta from disaster!

IT'S A GOOD THING WE WERE SLOUCHING

Amusing! One could say that I had my obligations, you understand, and let me add that I wasn't getting paid to sample Kimeta's desserts or listen to Ruki sing, either...

WHAT WAS YOUR WORST MOMENT?



Two months ago, she said
one of her best friends
— a cousin —
also 18
two months ago
killed by a sniper.

And her brother-in-law
he had escorted his wife,
Sahna's sister, out of Bosnia
all the way to Sweden
then returned to Gorazde
to fight the Serbs.



HE LIVED WITH US FOR FIVE MONTHS.
HE WAS KILLED IN ACTION IN 1993.
THAT WAS THE WORST MOMENT, WHEN I FOUND OUT.

WE WANTED TO TELL MY SISTER ON THE HAM RADIO, BUT WE COULDN'T.
WE DIDN'T HAVE THE HEART.
SHE FOUND OUT, THOUGH.

WE'LL SHAKE IT UP, BABY, TWIST AND SHOUT!

PROBABLY THE RADIO OPERATOR TOLD HER.

Together with thousands of men and boys captured by the Serbs in the break-out to Tuzla, they were exterminated.

It was the largest mass killing in Europe in 50 years.



All told, in the ambushes and executions, more than 7000 Muslim men were killed.

At a briefing on July 11, while the Srebrenica calamity was still unfolding, Janvier seemed to unilaterally abandon the notion that the U.N. would defend any safe area other than Sarajevo. To razde, he said, was perfectly capable of defending itself. As for Zepa:

IT IS ABSOLUTELY CLEAR THAT WE CAN'T REINFORCE ZEPA

WE CAN'T DEFEND ZEPA AS A RESULT



Within several days, Zepa would fall to the attacking Serbs with barely a murmur from those who had once proclaimed it a safe area.



PERSEPOLIS

THE STORY OF A CHILDHOOD



MARJANE SATRAPI

ON THE EVE OF MY DEPARTURE, MY GRANDMOTHER CAME TO SPEND THE NIGHT AT OUR HOUSE.

CAN I SLEEP WITH YOU?
THAT'S WHY I'M HERE!



I WATCHED MY GRANDMA UNDRRESS EACH MORNING. SHE PICKED JASMINE FLOWERS TO PUT IN HER BRA SO THAT SHE WOULD SMELL NICE. WHEN SHE UNDRRESSED, YOU COULD SEE THE FLOWERS FALL FROM HER BREASTS.



IT WAS SOMETHING TO SEE.

GRANDMA, HOW DO YOU HAVE SUCH ROUND BREASTS AT YOUR AGE?

EVERY MORNING AND NIGHT, I SOAK THEM IN A BOWL OF ICE WATER FOR TEN MINUTES.



SHE ACTUALLY DID, AND I KNEW IT. I JUST WANTED TO HEAR HER SAY IT.

I'LL MISS YOU.

OH, I'LL COME SEE YOU.



SHE TOO WAS LYING TO ME.

LISTEN, I DON'T WANT TO PREACH, BUT LET ME GIVE YOU SOME ADVICE THAT WILL ALWAYS HELP YOU.



IN LIFE YOU'LL MEET A LOT OF BUNKS. IF THEY HURT YOU, TELL YOURSELF THAT IT'S BECAUSE THEY'RE STUPID. THAT WILL HELP KEEP YOU FROM REACTING TO THEIR CRUELTY. BECAUSE THERE IS NOTHING WORSE THAN BITTERNESS AND VENGEANCE... ALWAYS KEEP YOUR DIGNITY AND BE TRUE TO YOURSELF.



I SMELLED MY GRANDMA'S BOSOM. IT SMELLED GOOD. I'LL NEVER FORGET THAT SMELL.





I COULDN'T BEAR LOOKING AT THEM THERE BEHIND THE GLASS. NOTHING'S WORSE THAN SAYING GOODBYE. IT'S A LITTLE LIKE DYING.



I COULDN'T JUST GO.



I TURNED AROUND TO SEE THEM ONE LAST TIME.



IT WOULD HAVE BEEN BETTER TO JUST GO.



"GRAPHIC ETHICS: THEORIZING THE FACE IN MARJANE SATRAPI'S "PERSEPOLIS

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GRAPHIC ETHICS: THEORIZING THE FACE IN MARJANE SATRAPI'S PERSEPOLIS

JOSEPH DARDA

Complex personhood means that all people . . . remember and forget, are beset by contradictions, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others. . . . Complex personhood means that even those called "Other" are never never that.

—Avery Gordon

In a 2005 *New York Times* comics-editorial, Iranian-French graphic memoirist Marjane Satrapi discusses her first trip to the United States in 2003 and her struggle to defend her birth nation of Iran during this trip. The editorial includes a telling collage. Colorful film posters fill the top of the panel: American men in aviator sunglasses aim guns and a timid-looking mother cradles her child. At the bottom of the panel, a throng of Iranians in chadors huddles together: just the hint of a single face with red lips is discernable in the otherwise all-black illustration. In this, Satrapi satirizes the Western representation of Iranians as fearful, helpless, and indistinct, a representation that facilitates American intrusions in Western Asia. As she captions the collage, "I had . . . to try to explain to people what Iran was really like. That not every woman in Iran looked like a black bird. That the axis of evil also included people like myself. That it was a very bad idea to give democracy as a present to people by bombing them" (2005). Satrapi's project of historical reclamation in the West is likewise apparent in her first major work, the émigré graphic memoir *Persepolis* (2003, 2004b). It is one of countless comics to engage serious political and autobiographical content in this once-marginal form since the great success of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, which was

published in two volumes in 1986 and 1991. In fact, scholars point to the form as an ideal space for interrogating epistemological assumptions and placing extra-textual “demands” on the reader.¹

Recent comics criticism, and in particular criticism of graphic memoirs, centers on the instabilities inherent in the multimodal text. Michael Chaney, Hillary Chute, Rocío Davis, James Hatfield, Theresa Tensuan, and Gillian Whitlock focus on the disjunctures between word and image, across panels, and in the present narration of a past self.² According to this scholarship, it is from the medium’s tensions and instabilities that it gains its political force, undermining hegemonic social structures, representing the unrepresentable, and positioning the reader as an intimate participant in its construction. Characteristic of this work, Davis contends that graphic memoirists “revise established genres to *destabilize* ideology and conventional strategies of meaning in order to enact distinct sociocultural situations. Readers who encounter these revisionary texts are thus *obliged* to reexamine their expectations and critical perspectives” (2005, 265; emphases added). Yet Davis does not articulate how exactly textual destabilization leads to the reader’s critical obligation. How does the text, in a state of tension, compel the reader to assess her ideological orientation to its subject matter? Critics indicate that the graphic memoir is uniquely capable of making an ethical appeal to the reader. But it remains unclear what this mechanism is and how it functions in the text. It is crucial that we recognize what representational practices do and do not communicate what Avery Gordon calls “complex personhood.” “Complex personhood,” she notes, “means that all people . . . remember and forget, are beset by contradictions, and recognize and misrecognize themselves and others” (1997, 4). The graphic memoir, I aim to make clear, lends itself to the transmission of this complexity. In considering the ethics of the graphic memoir, I first trace the origin of the debate within comics criticism. Second, calling on Judith Butler’s theorization of the Levinasian notion of “the face,” I establish an ethical framework to substantiate the thus-far-unclear claims connecting formal destabilization to reader obligation. Third, I demonstrate this ethical import as it operates within Satrapi’s *Persepolis*.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF CLOSURE

Although comics remain a growing site of interest among scholars, criticism of the form is in fact decades old. In his pioneering historical account of the comic strip, David Kunzle contends that comics are first and foremost a pictorial medium (1973, 2). The text of a panel, he argues, is subordinate to the work of the image, which “carries the burden” of narration (2). More than a decade later, Will Eisner attributes a similar precedence to the image.³ In his foundational work *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985), Eisner distinguishes the comics author from the traditional prose writer. Whereas a work of prose directs the imagination of the reader, Eisner argues, the comic strip determines it: “An image once drawn becomes a precise statement that brooks little or no further interpretation.

When the two are 'mixed' the words become welded to the image and no longer serve to describe but rather to provide sound, dialogue and connective passages" (122). Although *Comics and Sequential Art* remains a foundational text, opening up the since burgeoning field of comics criticism, Eisner's ideas come in almost direct opposition to present scholarship. Comics, we now insist, do not require *less* interpretation than prose but *more*. The words are not 'welded' to the image but coexist in a precarious state of simultaneous alignment and discordance.

Scott McCloud, some would argue Eisner's direct successor, begins to formulate this response in *Understanding Comics* (1994). He sees comics as a medium that is incomplete until it is read, until the reader sutures the numerous interruptions in the text. McCloud popularizes within comics criticism two essential concepts: the icon and the gutter. The icon is a representation of an object, and it can be more or less iconic—that is, more abstract or more realistic. McCloud contends that our self-perception is an iconic one (except when in front of a mirror), and therefore we can relate to or enter comics characters' perceptions with greater ease (36). The gutter is the liminal space between panels, a gap, McCloud argues, that the reader must close (67). "Comics panels," he indicates, "fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality" (67). Unlike a film reel, in which sequential images blend together through mechanical processes, comics emphasize the space between images and leave the reader to bridge it. So with McCloud the reader is put front and center, instilling closure between panels, imbuing icons with meaning, and uniting word and image. Whereas Eisner suggests that comics demand little interpretation, McCloud sees little but interpretation in the reading of comics. Still recent scholarship focuses less on closure than it does on "dis-closure."⁴ Whereas McCloud characterizes closure as almost inevitable, recent critics are more concerned with considering what happens when the gutter does not close, or when word and image do not come together, or when an iconic face does not welcome co-identification.

Such questions are at the center of current scholarship on graphic memoirs, or what Gillian Whitlock calls "autographics," a term she coins in order to emphasize the concurrence of word and image in the medium and the peculiar subject positions through which the autobiographer offers her account (2006, 966). Charles Hatfield describes these moments of dis-closure as "tensions," emphasizing the potential fissures in image/text relations, between the timeframe of the panel and that of the page, and in the self-conscious materiality of the form (2005, 36). Whereas McCloud suggests that the comics reader can generate a "unified reality" through closure, Hatfield suggests that the manifold tensions of comics can conflict with one another to the point that closure becomes altogether unmanageable (58). Hatfield's notion of "tensions" aligns with what Julia Watson calls "splits" (2008, 29), Chute calls "cross-discursivity" (2010, 5), and Jared Gardner calls "double-vision" (2006, 803). The autographic is full of holes and interruptions, not all of which can be integrated through subconscious acts

of closure. Sometimes comics refuse to cohere with familiar tropes and practices of signification.

Yet this destabilization is what makes the form a crucial counterbalance to other, more entrenched media. In its formal disclosures, the autographic presses the reader to reconsider the assumptions she brings to the text and the basic framework through which she understands the so-called other. Chute contends that the autographic represents a medium capable of rethinking the commonplaces of institutional histories and trauma studies. Rather than representing the "unspeakability" of trauma, graphic memoirs work to materialize this past while still foregrounding the difficulties of narrating trauma (2008a, 459). The form does not construct a better or more accurate representation of trauma and otherness. Instead, it highlights the constructedness of representation in general, and thus facilitates understandings outside of our prescribed notions of difference. Hence, the autographic troubles genre boundaries (Davis 2005, 261), the isolation of the historical past from the present (Gardner 2006, 803), the teacher-victim relations of "rescue politics" (Smith 2011, 70), and the naturalized social scripts of class, gender, race, and nation (Tensuan 2006, 951-52). In sum, the autographic complicates epistemological certainties and thus makes possible a less abridged consideration of political and social issues. To paraphrase Gordon, we cannot "imagine otherwise" until we understand the constraints of the present order (1997, 5).

So it is from the formal tensions (and resultant epistemological uncertainties) that the autographic gains its ethical import. Tensuan suggests that such tensions force the reader to loiter in the autographic panels and, in doing so, shift her position as spectator to that of the iconic narrator (2006, 951, 961). The form of the autographic puts an unfamiliar demand on the reader to take part in the construction of the narrative and thus to comprehend it from the inside rather than as a detached outsider. Watson suggests that the "splits" that mark the form engage the reader "affectively and ethically" in a reconsideration of societal norms (2008, 53). Leigh Gilmore argues that the autographic representation of trauma "demands" that the author participate in the act of witnessing alongside the narrator (2011, 158, 162). Chute meanwhile contends that the form affords a "mapping" of the author's precepts and thus offers a "sophisticated representational aesthetics and ethics" (2010, 27). It is not altogether clear from these accounts, however, what places this act of reading in the ethical realm. What compels the reader to meet the demands of the autographic? If the text encourages us to inhabit the precepts of the narrator, is this a site of ethics or one of egoism? Does the autographic accommodate the complex personhood of the one telling trauma or the one reading it? After all, to recognize oneself better is not to be ethical.

I would like to suggest that the graphic memoir does in fact facilitate ethical reading, as Chute, Watson, and Gilmore suggest. But this is a claim that still needs clarification and theoretical structure, an account of what I am calling 'graphic ethics.' Taking a step back from the judicious work of Chute, Davis, Hatfield, and Whitlock, I merge the discussion surrounding disclosure in

autographics with the nonviolent ethics of Judith Butler's interpretation of the face as a site of perpetual tension that can affirm the human in her fundamental precariousness. I further contend that the timeframe of the autographic enacts what Diana Taylor calls "the scenario," a repeatable, repeating, and changeable instance that situates us, as spectators, as part of the act, "implicating us in its ethics and politics" (2003, 33).

TOWARD A GRAPHIC ETHICS

Writing after the September 11 attacks and the ensuing processes of containment (involving the USA PATRIOT Act and other immigration and intelligence-gathering policies), Butler considers the national "frames" that inflect and limit our affective responses to transnational acts of violence. In particular, she criticizes US media representations of Western Asian subjects after September 11, 2001 and during the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In searching for an ethics that can counteract state violence, she distinguishes between two intersecting terms, what she calls "precariousness" and "precarity," the former as the common condition of life—unguaranteed and exposed to injury and death—and the latter as a political condition in which a population is "differentially exposed" to life's impermanence (2009, 25-26). Recognizing the precariousness or precarity of another is to recognize that her life will at some point end; to be living is to acknowledge a future death (15). When we acknowledge that a person will die, we make that life, in Butler's terms, "grievable" (15). That is, to see another person as living is to acknowledge that that person is in danger of dying and will at some point die, and vice versa. We must see a life as precarious and grievable in order for it to be a life in the first place.

Butler's contention, then, is that US media represent the Western Asian subject so as to make her "ungrievable" and thus not murderable: killing someone who cannot die and is therefore not alive is not killing to begin with. Butler asks, "If we accept that affect is structured by interpretative schemes that we do not fully understand, can this help us understand why it is we might feel horror in the face of certain losses but indifference or even righteousness in light of others?" (2009, 41-42). Her cautious solution, and the ethical grounding I propose to introduce to autographics, is the Levinasian notion of the face. In the face of the other, in its precariousness, one is met with two warring desires: the desire to kill and "the divine prohibition against killing" (J. Butler 2004, 135). The first is an impulse of self-preservation in light of one's own precariousness, and the second is an ethical impulse, a fear of committing an act of violence in the recognition of the other's precarity. In this, Butler (through Levinas) offers an ethics of nonviolence that is not a matter of peace but of conflict-in-suspension. One does not kill because the ethical prohibition that "thou shalt not kill" negates the opposing impulse (132).

The face belongs to the realm of ethics in part because it is incomprehensible. To use Gordon's term, the face signals the complex personhood of the other: she cannot and must not be altogether discernable. We must understand difference,

Levinas suggests, not as a project of assimilation or categorical othering but in terms of what he calls proximity: "Proximity as the impossible assumption of difference, impossible definition, impossible integration. Proximity as impossible appearance" (1999, 138). Rather than demanding that the other be more like oneself or attempting to understand otherness through artificial and static categories of difference—the "ethno-racial blocks" of US multiculturalism come to mind—the face communicates the proximity of the other as irreducible to "a 'kind of this or that,' neither 'unity' nor 'ultimate difference'" (138-39). The face positions the other not as alien but as a neighbor incomprehensible in her complexity. The face, as Levinas puts it, cannot "become a content. . . it is uncontainable" (1985, 87). The ethical tension of the face thus engenders an "excess of sociality" that transcends the framework of self and other itself (1999, 137). Ethics is not a matter of lack—an absence of conflict—but of surplus, an irreducible complexity that arises from contradiction. The face tempts us with murder at the same time that it prohibits us from committing it. The face is neither the same nor different.

This ethical tension, though, is not a certainty. Western media, according to Butler, abolish this ethical tension in two different manners: capture and erasure (2004, 147). The former makes the face commensurable, allows it to *mean*—the face of Osama bin Laden as an embodiment of evil—whereas the latter offers no face at all.⁵ The result is, in one case, a representation of the inhuman and, in the other, the total eradication of human presence. For an ethical and nonviolent response, then, the face must aspire to represent the human but fail and show its failure to represent or "capture" the human in total (144). It is in this unrepresentable face, I argue, that the autographic finds its ethical import. As an icon, the face of the other of the graphic memoir comes through in its attempt but failure to represent the human, the memoirist's past self.

The ethics of the face of the autographic finds reinforcement in the medium's enactment of the scenario. Taylor distinguishes between what she calls the "archive" and the "repertoire," the former as documentation that is somewhat stable and chosen for preservation and the latter as enacting embodied memory that is live and thus exceeds archival preservation (2003, 19). However, she troubles this binary with her notion of the "scenario," which she characterizes as a situation that "bears the weight of accumulative repeats" (28). The scenario samples from both the realm of the archive, in its "reactivation" of the past, and the realm of the repertoire, in its potential for change, for the revising of that same past. Although not performance or repertoire proper, the scenario does implicate us in its discourse. As Taylor puts it, "We need to 'be there,' part of the act of transfer" (32). So, in Butler's terms, the scenario precludes treating the iconic face of the other as either inhuman or absent. The autographic thus demands an ethical engagement from the reader as a sequence of in-tension scenarios representing the incommensurable face of the other. Satrapi's *Persepolis* embodies this graphic ethics, emphasizing the complex personhood of those cast as other.

OBLIGATING THE READER IN *PERSEPOLIS*

One of the fastest growing subsets of autographics is the Iranian émigré graphic memoir, now including Parsua Bashi's *Nylon Road: A Graphic Memoir of Coming of Age in Iran* (2009), Roya Hakakian's *Journey from the Land of No: A Girlhood Caught in Revolutionary Iran* (2004), Afshineh Latifi's *Even After All this Time: A Story of Love, Revolution, and Leaving Iran* (2005), and Azadeh Moaveni's *Lipstick Jihad* (2005). Most prominent among this set of texts, all dealing with the Islamic Revolution and its impact on Iranian women, is Marjane Satrapi's two-volume *Persepolis*. In *Persepolis*, Satrapi tells of her childhood and adolescence in and outside of Iran during the Islamic Revolution and the ensuing Iran-Iraq War. The child of radical leftist parents, Satrapi first represents her realization of the political, social, and religious realities of Iran in *Persepolis* and, in *Persepolis 2*, her struggle to reconcile her identification with the nation, seeing it as home but expressing frustration toward its politics and social structure. In the introduction to the 2003 US edition, Satrapi makes it clear that *Persepolis* is a project of historical reclamation. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, she notes, "[Iran] has been discussed mostly in connection with fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism. As an Iranian who has lived more than half of my life in Iran, I know this image is far from the truth" (2003, ii). Her autographic proceeds to trouble the mainstream Western understanding of Iran in offering an alternate and personal historical account.

In assessing *Persepolis*, it is important to consider the text's intended audience, as Satrapi is candid about her target readership. With a first printing in France from 2000 to 2003 (and in the United States in 2003 and 2004), the memoir is meant for a Western audience.⁶ As yet, there is still no official Farsi translation in print. In a 2004 discussion of her work, Satrapi clarifies, "I wrote [*Persepolis*] for the other ones, not for Iranians. For Iranians I wouldn't give so much explanation" (2004a). If her autographic is a work of historical reclamation, then it is one that takes place in the historical imagination of the West. Just like Butler, Satrapi's chief concern is the perception of Iranians and Western Asians in France and the United States as either inhuman or missing, as either global terrorists or historical absences. Her autographic presents a past self that is at center frame, right in the reader's line of sight, but that her drawings do not capture. She is there but as a human, not a figuration.

Taking account of its target audience—French and US citizens likely less than familiar with Iranian history—*Persepolis* is often characterized as a work of didacticism. Davis for one describes Satrapi's autographic as a "didactic project" capable of presenting an "insider perspective" on Iran (2005, 265). The *Bildungsroman* is after all a form that tends to educate and moralize. Yet Satrapi's autographic is, as her remarks in the introduction make clear, less about educating Western readers on Iranian history than it is about denaturalizing their prescribed understandings of Western Asia. McCloud suggests that the comics icon, in its abstraction, functions as "a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled" (1994, 36). Or, as Davis puts it, comics offer an "insider perspective" on their subject matter

and thus a didactic one (265). In contrast, I am arguing that the icon of Satrapi's autographic is not about the reader seeing herself as the protagonist—and thus, in effect, empathizing with herself—but about seeing the protagonist as complex, neither the same as herself nor irreducible to “a ‘kind of this or that’” (Levinas 1999, 138). Hence, interrogating the publication and reception of Satrapi's autographic foregrounds the transnationalism of her account, one that falls outside US frames of understanding and thus works to unsettle them.

On the first page of *Persepolis*, Satrapi makes this aim clear. In the first panel, she introduces us to Marji, her childhood self (see fig. 1). She presents Marji sitting at a table and wearing a headscarf. Above it, the caption reads, “This is me when I was 10 years old. This was in 1980” (2003, 3). Alongside it, the second panel depicts four girls sitting in the same position next to one another and wearing the same hood and headscarf. Its caption reads, “And this is a class photo. I'm sitting on the far left so you don't see me. From left to right: Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, Minna” (3). In this set of panels, Satrapi introduces the reader to a familiar image, an Iranian woman in hijab. But she complicates the more common presentation of Western Asian women just as she offers a familiar point of reference for the US reader. In separating herself from her classmates but at the same time pointing to her peripheral presence beside them, Satrapi is able to indicate at once the presence and potential absence of Marji. She singles her out in the first panel, pointing to the personal shape of the text at hand. But the second panel gestures to a possible erasure: she is lost in the throng of Iranian schoolgirls and does not appear in the frame at all. In the second panel, the text gestures to the historical practice of erasure against which it is working. As in the imagination of the Western audience, Marji is not “grievable” because she is not there in the first place. The text thus announces its intention to correct for this Western neglect at the same time that it points out the forces that necessitate this project.

As a repeating and altering act, the first panels of *Persepolis* signal the “once-againness” of the scenario. In articulating the scenario as a balance of setup and action, of formula and transformation, Taylor contends, “The frame is basically fixed and, as such, repeatable and transferable. Scenarios may consciously reference each other by the way they frame the situation and quote words and gestures. They may often appear stereotypical, with situations and characters frozen in time” (2003, 31). The scenario is much like the archive; it repeats and can transfer cultural imaginings as a result. Nonetheless, although the scenario is often “stereotypical,” it can be recast and gain different and oppositional meaning as it builds off preceding enactments.

In the first two panels of *Persepolis*, Satrapi sketches just one scenario, a scenario that repeats and alters itself from first panel to second. In the first panel, Marji is alone. She is ten, and it is 1980. In the second, Satrapi presents the same scenario again but with a different frame and additional information. This additional information—it is a class picture, and Marji is sitting beside her classmates Golnaz, Mahshid, Narine, and Minna—pushes the reader back into the

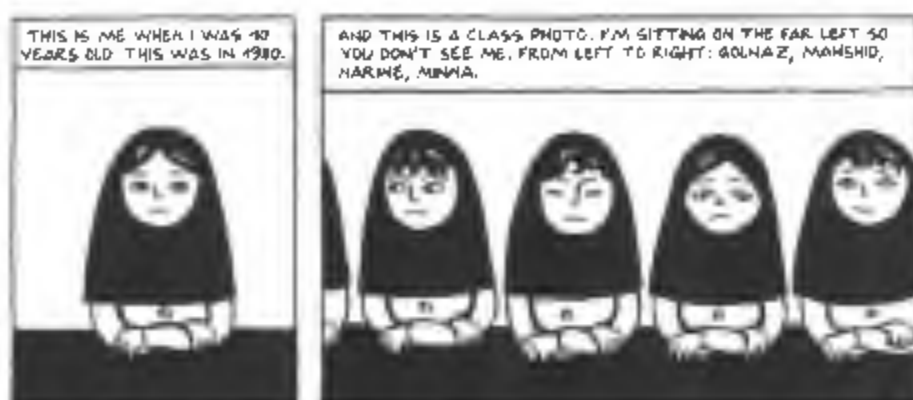


Figure 1. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris. Translation copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

first frame to recontextualize it in light of the second. The scenario remains the same but, in the mind of the reader, there is an alteration. This speaks to Thierry Groensteen's notion of "iconic solidarity." He contends that the comics form is "over-determined" in that its images are separated but nonetheless interdependent (2007, 18). The reader focuses on a particular panel at the same time that she remains cognizant of the peripheral content, a realization of the panel-in-sequence (19). Hence, although I read the panels from left to right in the present article, the panel-scenarios can be read "out of order." The point is that Satrapi enacts and reenacts the same scenario again and again, creating not a linear pattern but a circling and self-amending one. The autographic panel thus holds the reader's attention as it loops and shifts in meaning and reference.

Although the 'once-againness' of the panel scenario can incite the reader to attend to the unstable nature of historical and textual representation, it also emphasizes and then reemphasizes the face of the other. Scott McCloud maintains that there is a difference between how one sees another and how one imagines oneself: "When two people interact, they usually look directly at one another, seeing their partner's features in vivid detail. Each one also sustains a constant awareness of his or her own face, but this mind-picture is not nearly so vivid" (1994, 35-36). This less distinct image of oneself is, for McCloud, akin to the icon of comics. So, if the "mind picture" of one's own face is iconic, then the iconic representation of a character makes that character more relatable; the reader comes to see herself in the face of the iconic other. McCloud's contention, although somewhat pop-scientific in its ease and assumptions, reflects the sentiment of much of the later scholarship, approaching but not articulating the nebulous ethical responsibilities of the autographic form (see Chute 2010, 27; Gilmore 2011, 158, 162; Watson 2008, 53). What is missing in McCloud's proposition, though, is an obligation to the other rather than to oneself. If in the face of the other (in this case, Marji and her classmates) one sees not the precarity of

the other but one's own precariousness, as McCloud suggests, then the obligation is no longer an ethical one. The reader's empathetic reaction is not to the other; rather, she is in fact empathizing with herself, with the glimpse of her own plight that she sees in the face of the other. What McCloud articulates is less an ethics of comics than a narcissism, in which the reader attends to the text because of a fascination with herself—a fascination with her own, rather than another's, complexity.

Instead, in order to recommend an ethics of the autographic, there must be an impulse of both selfishness and selflessness. According to Butler, in looking into the face of the other, "there is fear for one's own survival, and there is anxiety about hurting the Other, and these two impulses are at war with each other, like siblings fighting" (2004, 137). In seeing Marji's face in the first panels, with the knowledge that this is an Iranian girl living in the wake of the Islamic Revolution and during the Iran-Iraq War, Butler's ethical subject must first cope with the impulse to perpetuate violence under the influence of fear for her own life. She sees, in Marji's precarity, her own precariousness—the fact that life, including hers, must end. In order to eliminate the appearance of her precariousness and the potential danger of the unfamiliar other, one desires to kill, to eliminate this reality. But in Marji's face there arises a second impulse, the ethical impulse that one cannot kill. The second, nonviolent impulse inhibits the first, violent one. It is the second alone that instills an element of ethics in the autographic form, an obligation to another rather than to oneself.

In this regard, it is crucial to consider that it is the nonviolent, ethical impulse that arrives second. If there is no encouragement to loiter in the panel, to return to it and reenact it, then no ethical obligation can declare itself. The other is made inhuman through a process of capturing, or absent through a process of disremembering, and becomes a target for unrepentant acts of violence. In order to be an ethical form that *destabilizes* acts of historicism and *obligates* the reader to attend to the other, the autographic must arrive as a series of scenarios that act and reenact archival structures of understanding, maintaining the reader's attention on and in tension with the face of the other. The autographic relates the proximity of the other, "as the impossible assumption of difference" and "impossible appearance" (Levinas 1999, 138), thus generating an 'excess' that surpasses the discourse of self and other. So what is crucial about Satrapi's self-representations is, as McCloud would contend, their iconic, two-dimensional form. In working toward a nonviolent ethics of the graphic memoir, it is important that the face is in a perpetual state of failing to represent the human and making this failure apparent (Butler 2004, 144). In order to demonstrate the dehumanizing process of representational capture, in juxtaposition to Satrapi's iconic self-portraits, it is worth first demonstrating how an image can capture and thus dehumanize its subject.

Following the May 2, 2011, assassination of Osama bin Laden in Pakistan, *TIME* published a special issue featuring a Tim O'Brien photographic illustration of bin Laden's face with a large red "X" through it. In it, bin Laden is facing

straight ahead and wearing a white headdress. The image represents his head alone, against a white background, and his face is without expression. This is the fourth "X" image *TIME* has run on its cover, the previous images being similar representations of Adolf Hitler on May 7, 1945, Saddam Hussein on April 21, 2003, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi on June 19, 2006 (Gustini 2011). It is an image that captures the human, and in this capturing makes him inhuman. In O'Brien's illustration, bin Laden comes to stand for and be commensurable with both wickedness and US triumphalism. In his blank countenance, O'Brien's bin Laden communicates no human feeling, no precariousness. As a head floating against a white background, he seems to be at once more than human and less than human, a figuration of some ideal. "We personify the evil or military triumph," Butler contends, "through a face that is supposed to be, to capture, to contain the very idea for which it stands" (2004, 145). O'Brien's bin Laden, in capturing its human subject, works to position the Western reader as remote from the evil for which he stands, to compartmentalize it, and to thus rationalize acts of violence against the other as acts of patriotism and of national triumph. It is not surprising that the feature article includes a collection of photographs of people unfurling American flags and pumping their fists in celebration. Unlike the face of Butler's ethics and the scenario of Taylor's historicism, *TIME'S* bin Laden illustration does not instill tension; the reader can see it, understand what it signifies, and turn the page without a second thought or glance. So, in considering the ethics of the autographic, it is crucial to attend to what the text does not capture of the subject and where it shows the limitations and failures of representation, communicating proximity rather than sameness or categorical difference.

In a scene emphasizing the failures of representation, Satrapi juxtaposes a pair of conflicting images that highlight the strange reality of wartime Iran. During the Iran-Iraq War, the Iranian Islamic republic under Ruhollah Khomeini distributed keys to teenage boys meant to represent their "key to heaven" in exchange for joining the Iranian forces. In a two-panel page, Satrapi depicts faceless bodies flung into the air in a minefield bombing (see fig. 2). Keys hang from their necks, and the caption reads, "The key to paradise was for poor people. Thousands of young kids, promised a better life, exploded on the minefields with their keys around their necks" (2003, 102). Below it, in a panel approximately half its size, Marji is in the foreground in a scene depicting her and her friends jumping around on the dance floor. Her hair is up in the air, and her mouth is open. The present self of the caption narrates, "Meanwhile, I got to go to my first party. Not only did my mom let me go, she also knitted me a sweater full of holes and made me a necklace with chains and nails. Punk rock was in. I was looking sharp" (2003, 102). What is most shocking about this page, as Chute points out, is the simultaneous treatment of sweeping acts of violence and the ordinary goings on of teenage life (2008b, 103). Still, like the opening panels of *Persepolis*, this is also a reflection on the process of representation itself: it mimes the historical neglect of the Western media in the first panel at the same time that it corrects for it in the second. In depicting the Iranian soldiers as faceless and with the false



Figure 2. From *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* by Marjane Satrapi, translated by Mattias Ripa and Blake Ferris. Translation copyright © 2003 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

offering of the keys around their necks, Satrapi is able to ridicule the historical record that forgets or makes absent the deaths of Western Asian soldiers—who fought in a war that the United States helped to bankroll (Khalidi 2009, 155–56)—but then counter it with the face of an Iranian, her past self, experiencing the normal growing pains of adolescence amid the atrocities of war.

This jarring gutter points to the impossibility of the face to represent or capture Marji, an impossibility that, Butler suggests, indirectly affirms the human (2004, 144). There is, of course, a degree of ambiguousness to Marji in the simple black-and-white depiction of her in *Persepolis* and in her changing appearance and numerous, conflicting identities. But the representation of Marji's face in this panel also points to its failure to represent in relation to the neighboring panel. The sketch of Marji and her friends in midair on the dance floor takes on additional meaning alongside the mirror image of other Iranian teenagers in midair on the battlefield. Satrapi's drawing of Marji seeks to represent her past self but fails, and points to this failure in highlighting the national backdrop to what, at first glance, appears to be a simple moment of carefree teenage fun. The tension across panels characterizes what Hatfield calls the "different order of literacy" comics demand: "there is always an underlying tension between different possible ways of reading, between serial and synchronistic timing" (2005, 58). Satrapi's conflicting images refute the idea of a singular, correct reading. Placing the two panels alongside one another reminds the reader of the social and political realities of Marji's adolescence: the Iran-Iraq War, the fallout of the Islamic Revolution, the West's misremembering of Western Asian casualties, and its financial legacies in this conflict. So, unlike the Iranian soldiers, Marji is not made absent, nor is she captured or reduced to a figure of extremism or wickedness. Instead, she comes to stand for the impossibility of representation, a failure of representation that confirms the human in her precarity and complexity.

What also comes through in this scene, which Tensuan emphasizes in her reading of Satrapi's memoir (2006, 957), is an amalgam of European and US influence. Throughout *Persepolis 1* and *2*, Western cultural icons appear and, for Marji, offer a form of rebellion. Her parents smuggle in Iron Maiden and Kim Wilde posters for her from Turkey. She purchases cassette tapes of Western artists on the illegal market. And she adopts the dress of Westerners; ignoring hijab policies, she wears denim jackets, Nike sneakers, and slim-fitting jeans. In the party illustration, she is wearing a chain-and-nail necklace and torn clothing in the fashion of the late-1970s punk scenes in New York City and London. But this act of teenage rebellion is less straightforward when set alongside an image of a minefield bombing that implicates the US and Britain. At the same time that Satrapi condemns the censoring of Western culture in Iran under Khomeini, there are undertones of cultural imperialism in her representation of the War and in Marji's deference to Western pop culture. In this light, the panels of the minefield and the teenage party begin to reflect one another's critical projects, one pointing to political coercion and one to cultural consent.

Yet, outside of the clothing and music that she collects and admires, the Marji of 1982 is not aware of the West's role in Iran. There is a sharp contrast between the past self of the images and the present self of the captions and design of *Persepolis*, what Silke Horstkotte and Nancy Pedri refer to as the "experiencing-I" and the "narrating-I" of the autographic (2011, 338-39). As such, the narrating-I comes to reenact and adjust for the scenario of the experiencing-I. Whereas the images of distant minefield killings and of teenagers dancing do not alone represent something unusual or unfamiliar, the images together and the captions connecting them alter and change both scenarios, necessitating further consideration.

Just prior to the minefield image, Marji learns that the Iranian forces are recruiting her family's maid's son with the promise of paradise. On the other hand, she learns that her wealthier friends, with whom she is dancing, are not targets for recruiters. With this in mind, the images of the minefield explosion and the dancing come to emphasize an imbalance in the Iranian social structure. Some sacrifice and others benefit from this same sacrifice. Some fight in a war against troops with Western funding and others take pleasure in Western cultural icons. Satrapi recruits the tensions of the form and the "suspension of judgment . . . they demand from readers" (Hatfield 2005, 36) to underscore the complexity of Marji's situation as it intersects with that of Iran. So what at first appears to be a pair of disparate images comes to implicate the Western reader on more than a single plane. The narrating-I reenacts this historical scenario, destabilizes its telling, and thus obligates the reader to reassess her position in relation to Marji's and Iran's histories.

Yet the reenactment of a historical scenario does not end, and Satrapi herself continues to rework and amend the scenarios of her personal and national histories throughout *Persepolis*. Whereas the minefield image in *Persepolis* mimes the Western media representation (or lack thereof) of Western Asian casualties, *Persepolis 2* returns to this scenario, introducing a face, in her childhood friend Kia, and her father's oppositional account of the Iran-Iraq War. After attending high school in Vienna from 1984 to 1988, Marji returns to Iran to find her birthplace in shambles. Buildings are bombed out. All of the streets are renamed after dead soldiers or "martyrs," as the state calls them. Slogans of the Islamic Republic litter billboards and the walls of buildings. And her parents, idealists prior to the war, are disillusioned about the state of Iran.

In Vienna, Marji ignored the turmoil back home. The Austrian press did not report on it, and she was more focused on dating and socializing. In this, Marji represents the West's disregard for Western Asia. Her Western friends know little about Iran or the region, other than their general opinion of it as, according to Marji, "the epitome of evil" (2004b, 41). But her father and Kia, a soldier in the Iranian forces, correct for this distance upon her return. Her father relates his understanding as a witness of the conflict, telling Marji, "This entire war was just a big setup to destroy both the Iranian and the Iraqi armies. . . . The west sold weapons to both camps and we, we were stupid enough to enter into this cynical game. . . . So now the state names streets after martyrs to flatter the families

of the victims" (99). Although her father is shocked to learn that Marji had not heard of this, or the 1988 bombings of Tehran, or the Republic's execution of tens of thousands of political prisoners, it is apparent to a Western audience that there is nothing unusual about it. Neither the Islamic Republic nor the United States wants this account in print, and there are abundant media and personal distractions, as Marji's time in Europe demonstrates.

What Marji's father's account (and, in recording it, *Persepolis*) offers is a historical reenactment of a familiar scenario. His counter-historical account of the Iran-Iraq War compels the reader to reconsider the earlier panel of faceless Iranian teenagers caught in the blast of a landmine, Marji's inattention to the turmoil in her home nation in the preceding chapters, and the media representations of Western Asia one does (or does not) encounter in the West. As Satrapi insists in her introduction, "One can forgive but one should never forget" (2003, ii). It is this memory-work that her autographic carries out, a perpetual process of remembrance in which historical scenarios are and must be sites of endless reenactments and debate, what Chute calls the "productive recursivity" of comics (2010, 8). Again, although *Persepolis* appears linear in arrangement, in part due to its initial serialization, its telling is in fact one of reiteration, encouraging the reader to return to preceding and succeeding panels.

Satrapi enacts the scenario of the Iran-Iraq War once more in *Persepolis 2*, instilling an ethical appeal in its telling through the introduction of Kia. Upon returning to Iran in 1988, Marji learns that her childhood friend Kia is, according to her grandmother, "almost dead" (2004b, 106). Kia had attempted to flee Iran at the outset of the war in order to escape conscription, but he was arrested and sent to the frontline. It becomes apparent, then, that Kia was among the faceless Iranians caught in the earlier image of a minefield detonation, or one of thousands just like it.

When Marji visits Kia, she finds that he has lost an arm and a leg. At first she is horrified and unable to get comfortable around him. As she takes account of his injuries, the panels jump in focus from his arm to his wheelchair to his face, representing Marji's initial discomfort and struggle to reconcile Kia's disabilities (the result of a war her father calls a "big setup"). It is a moment of self-reflection. Satrapi represents her past self's neglect of the political realities of Iran and at the same time points to the process through which Marji comes to terms with this neglect. As the panels leap from detail to detail before centering on Kia in full, the formal structure enacts Marji's piecing together of the intersecting parts of her nation and her friend, a merging of the historical and the personal. In the Western media, as in Satrapi's aping minefield image, Kia would appear only in the euphemisms of the national press, as 'collateral damage.' But in *Persepolis*, Satrapi emphasizes Kia's life as eluding capture or summation and, like Iran's past, incommensurable but still *there*. In Kia, Satrapi offers a final, personal reenactment of the initial, banal minefield scenario, further destabilizing Marji's (and the reader's) understanding of Iran's past and compelling her to reassess her relationship to this Western discourse of capture and erasure.

So *Persepolis* does more than supplant Western representations of Iranians with more humanizing ones. Specifically, the autographic marks the limits of representation and denaturalizes the frames through which the reader understands the subject at hand. Not long after returning to Iran, Marji takes the national exam in order to enter college. The exam for the college of art includes a drawing component. Anticipating the subject as “the martyrs,” Marji prepares a sketch beforehand. “I practiced by copying a photo of Michelangelo’s ‘La Pietà’ about twenty-five times,” she recalls. “On that day I reproduced it by putting a black chador on Mary’s head, an army uniform on Jesus, and then I added two tulips, symbols of the martyrs, on either side so there would be no confusion” (2004b, 127). In the corner of a panel in which the drawing is reproduced, Marji’s hand appears, shading in the bottom of Mary’s chador (see fig. 3). The panel speaks to the coercion of cultural producers in Iran at the same time that it corrects for homogenizing Western assumptions about Iranians. Embedded in the larger



Figure 3. From *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return* by Marjane Sarrapi, translated by Anjali Singh. Translation copyright © 2004 by L'Association, Paris, France. Used by permission of Pantheon Books, a division of Random House, Inc.

project of Satrapi's émigré graphic memoir, the panel underscores the limitations of what Marji is able to represent. Whereas Satrapi, the narrating-I, offers a candid and critical account of Iran and Marji's childhood in *Persepolis*, Marji, the experiencing-I, must work with a far more restricted set of icons and themes on the national exam. The capture of the sketch—the clear and ideological meaning of it—comes in stark contrast to the precarity of Marji's childhood. Yet the coercion of the Iranian Islamic Republic also modifies the US media's comprehension of Iran through its cultural products. Denaturalizing the production of a religious icon as coerced rejects assumptions of a homogenous Iranian subjecthood and thus gestures to the complex personhood of the so-called other. The iconic solidarity of the image, “over-determined by the fact of [its] coexistence *in praesentia*” with the rest of the autographic (Groensteen 2007, 18), emphasizes the potential for more than a single reading. The form thus destabilizes practices of signification and refuses representational capture.

Whereas the clichéd representation of a dead Iranian soldier, as a religious-national sacrifice for the good of Iran, communicates erasure-through-capture, the materialization of Marji's hand signals her precariousness and opens up a space of ethical engagement. Watson notes that the positioning of the reader as the experiencing-I of the autographic can “induce readers to engage with ‘othering’ practices” (2008, 53). The panel does not altogether absorb the reader into the mind of the narrator, as McCloud suggests (1994, 36). But it does urge the reader to consider the construction of self-other relations from a different angle. With the hand emerging from the margin, the panel communicates the proximity, though not identicalness, of the other. The relation between reader and experiencing-I is, then, one of tension—a tension between sameness and radical difference, between a desire to kill and a prohibition against killing. From this is produced an excess of sociality, and it is this excess that is the realm of the ethical. Hence, what Chute calls the “*excess* of representation” of the autographic (2010, 9) is exactly that which generates its ethical appeal, its graphic ethics. The other is present, is *there*, but is not altogether comprehensible. She possesses a complexity that escapes representation.

Marji's drawing presents still another moment of once-againness. Earlier, upon returning from Vienna, Marji finds Tehran plastered with public memorials honoring dead soldiers. Walking the streets, she sees one mural of a dead soldier in the lap of a woman in a chador (2004b, 96). Tulips fill the blank spaces around them. Her national exam drawing thus reactivates and revises this earlier moment. Marji (and the reader) learn just how such murals come to be: through the restrictions of the state that determine representational bounds. So Satrapi rearticulates this image through its reenactment as a scenario in which “viewers need to deal with the embodiment of the social actors” (Taylor 2003, 29). Through Marji's account, her embodiment as the experiencing-I, the reader cannot ignore, as Taylor puts it, “the social construction of bodies” (29). Just like the bodies of the dead soldiers, Marji is made to mean something specific, to be comprehensible, in the imaginations of Europe and the United States. But

in returning again and again to the site of construction itself, Satrapi is able to denaturalize the process by which Iranians are effaced through practices of capture and erasure. In particular, she reminds us that as an Iranian woman she is not a fearful, helpless “black bird.” She reminds us “that even those called ‘Other’ are never never that” (Gordon 1997, 4).

CONCLUSION: NATIONAL FRAMES AND THE ETHICS OF REPRESENTATION

On the afternoon of January 11, 2012, in northern Tehran, a man on a motorbike fixed a bomb to the car of Iranian scientist Mostafa Ahmadi Roshan. It detonated moments later, killing Roshan, demolishing his car, and causing chaos amid Tehran’s rush-hour traffic. Roshan was a department supervisor at the Natanz Nuclear Facility, a site the UN suspects of being a center for the production of nuclear weapons (Cowell & Gladstone 2012). Hours after Roshan’s death, Iranian officials accused the United States and Israel of organizing the assassination, an accusation both nations refuted. Still, regardless of the assassin’s purpose and affiliation, the attack added to ongoing tensions surrounding Iran’s nuclear program and further promoted anti-US sentiment in Tehran (Gladstone 2012). Although the Obama administration condemned the killing, a number of US public figures and publications did little to suppress their glee. Then-presidential candidate Rick Santorum, for one, referred to Roshan’s assassination as a “wonderful thing” (“Rick Santorum: US Wrong to Condemn” 2012). The *New York Post* proclaimed, “whoever’s behind it, we certainly hope they keep it up” (“Bomb, Bomb Iran” 2012). What is at issue, then, is not just Roshan’s assassination but also the political positioning of his assassination as a righteous act, as a means of rationalizing future imperialist acts of aggression in Western Asia. Although it is not apparent in most Western media representations of the region, in the end, it is Iranians like Kia and Marji who are lost in the aftermath of this righteousness as the ‘collateral damage.’

Thus, as the US’s relationships in Tehran deteriorate and as USA PATRIOT Act policies continue to construct and reinforce self-other boundaries, it is crucial that we attend to what media enable (or fail to enable) an ethical response to those cast as other in the present national discourse. When is representation commensurable and complete, situating the other as no more than a stand-in for abstract concepts (in Satrapi’s words, “fundamentalism, fanaticism, and terrorism”)? When is it absent? Who is forgotten and to what ends? The autographic, I have argued, facilitates an ethical response because it encourages this questioning; it challenges our assumptions about otherness and about representational practices in general. When Satrapi reminds us that “the axis of evil also included people like myself” (2005), she alludes to the danger of making someone comprehensible. When one is cast as a ‘content,’ as containable according to this or that schema, complexity is obscured and the potential for an ethical encounter is inhibited. So the autographic does not just offer a more accurate historical account. Instead, it interrogates the limits of what can

and should be understood—and the pernicious effects of an unbending desire for comprehension. The human, Butler suggests, is neither represented nor unrepresentable: “it is, rather, that which limits the success of any representational practice” (2004, 144). Ethical representation must seek but fail to represent the human, and it must show this failure. The autographic form lends itself to this ethical work. It communicates through what Levinas calls the face of the other, encircling but not capturing the human. Whereas national frames often restrict ethical relations, differentiating the human national from the inhuman or absent non national, autographics denaturalize this representational practice and press us to recognize the precariousness and complex personhood of someone made unfamiliar. Graphic ethics urge the reader to do more than see herself in or as the other. To act ethically is to first recognize that the other is neither oneself nor a figuration but an incomprehensible and precarious life; it is to recognize the other “as living, exposed to non-life from the start” (Butler 2009, 15).

NOTES

- ¹ Charles Hatfield indicates that the “tensions” of comics demand that the reader reimagine herself—and, in this, what it means to be a reader—as a critical starting point for further “sociological and ideological analyses” (2005, 67).
- ² In particular, Chute notes that comics recruit more than a single code “in their structural hybridity, their double (but nonsynthesized) narratives of words and images. In one frame of comics, the images and the words may mean differently, and thus the work sends out double-coded narratives or semantics” (2008a, 459). See also Chaney (2011, 25), Davis (2005, 264–65), Hatfield (2005, 36), Tensuan (2006, 951), and Whitlock (2006, 976–77).
- ³ Thierry Groensteen also sees the image as the dominant code of comics. “Its predominance within the system,” he argues, “attaches to what is essential to the production of meaning that is made through it” (2007, 8).
- ⁴ Julia Watson notes that the multiple “splits” in the form—between word and image, the self and the social realm, the reader and the autobiographical avatar, and the two-dimensional page and three-dimensional effects—complicate and dispel, rather than close, binaries (2008, 29). Charles Hatfield points out that the numerous tensions—the sites of dissonance that demand closure—run up against one another, complicating McCloud’s “pristine categories” (2005, 44). Michael Chaney meanwhile suggests that McCloud’s assertion that closure generates a “transhistorical ‘whole’” represents an imprecise universalism (2011, 40).
- ⁵ Butler’s emphasis on representational “capture” should be underscored, as it offers a counterargument to Slavoj Žižek’s dispute with Levinasian ethics. Žižek argues that Levinas’s notion of the face signals a “gentrified” otherness that masks what he calls the “monstrous” other, the “absolute other of the Real Thing” (2005, 143–44). He suggests that the face, rather than communicating the proximity of the other, gentrifies and distances one from the “monstrosity” of the absolute other (162–63). Butler’s “two distinct forms of normative power,” capture and erasure, speak to and address this gentrification of otherness.
- ⁶ The French publisher L’Association released *Persepolis* in four separate volumes between 2001 and 2003. In the US, Pantheon published the first and second volumes in 2003 as

Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and the third and fourth volumes in 2004 as *Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return*.

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4. Views from Nowhere: Journalistic Detachment in *Palestine*

Marc Singer

Joe Sacco has won accolades not only for his vivid and compelling works of comics journalism, but also for his criticism of how he and other journalists represent and exploit violent conflicts. In comics such as *Palestine*, *Safe Area Goražde*, and *Footnotes in Gaza*, Sacco insistently foregrounds his own position as a reporter, an outsider, a tourist, and an artist whose work depends on appropriating stories of other people's misery, dispelling any claims to journalistic detachment or impartiality. This apparent deviation from the practices of contemporary American-style journalism has earned attention and praise from other journalists, critics, and scholars, who typically celebrate Sacco for challenging journalism's presumption of objectivity. While they have devoted considerable attention to Sacco's representation of his own subjectivity, few scholars have examined how Sacco also aligns his work with the practices of objective journalism. This alignment is especially pronounced in *Palestine*, his first book-length work of comics journalism.

In the winter of 1991 and 1992, in the waning days of the first intifada, Sacco spent two months in the Palestinian territories. As he would tell Peter Aspden in 2003, "It is almost preposterous to think that a western reporter could be objective in a situation like that."¹ This lack of objectivity extended to his representation of the lives of the Palestinians he met: he told Aspden "that is why it is important to write in the first person. It would be very difficult to get that feeling across if you were pretending you were not even there, as traditional US journalism does."² Despite Sacco's disparagement of journalistic pretenses to objectivity, *Palestine* also replicates many of those same practices. Some of the testimonies he records, particularly (though not exclusively) stories of intra-Palestinian violence, prompt Sacco to fall back on the neutralistic detachment and professional objectivity of American journalism, presenting secondhand accounts and conflicting views without expressing his own opinions. This practice allows reporters to maintain the appearance of impartiality that press critic Jay Rosen, adapting a term from philosopher Thomas Nagel, calls "the view from nowhere."³ Contrary to its reputation as the most overtly subjective and self-critical of Sacco's major works of journalism, *Palestine* periodically resorts to this mode of viewless objectivity, selectively suspending Sacco's

willingness to comment on the stories he hears. Critical accounts of Sacco's defiance of journalistic objectivity should consider both the many meanings of that contested term and the degree to which Sacco's journalism has always been grounded in some of the same traditions that he opposes.

Objectivity and Experience

Objective journalism flourished after World War I in response to anxieties over the subjectivization of knowledge, particularly as it was revealed by the rise of both wartime propaganda and public relations.⁴ As promoted by journalist Walter Lippmann and editor Charles Merz, "objectivity" described the pursuit of a scientific method of verification and transparency that could authenticate and validate journalistic work. This method, however, was immediately subject to contestation and transformation. Michael Schudson speculates that most reporters in Lippmann's day used the term in a very different sense: "their concept of 'objectivity' was simply the application of a new label to the naive empiricism which reporters of the 1890s had called 'realism,'" namely the belief that simply reporting the facts will produce a story free of any ideology or worldview.⁵ By the 1930s, objectivity had become "an articulate professional value in journalism," though it was a value applied more often to the journalists themselves.⁶ As the concept has migrated from a method of verification to a standard of impartiality—a standard that many journalists and press critics believe is impossible to uphold—objectivity has increasingly become conflated with what Rosen terms the view from nowhere.

Rosen describes the view from nowhere as

a bid for trust that advertises the viewlessness of the news producer. Frequently it places the journalist between polarized extremes, and calls that neither-nor position "impartial." Second, it's a means of defense against a style of criticism that is fully anticipated: charges of bias originating in partisan politics and the two-party system. Third: it's an attempt to secure a kind of universal legitimacy that is implicitly denied to those who stake out positions or betray a point of view. American journalists have almost a lust for the View from Nowhere because they think it has more authority than any other possible stance.⁷

Rosen is careful to distinguish this viewlessness from other definitions of objectivity, such as "trying to ground truth claims in verifiable facts" or "the struggle to get beyond the limited perspective that our experience and upbringing afford us," which he wholeheartedly supports.⁸ The view from nowhere is Rosen's

attempt to label the position of impartiality adopted by many contemporary journalists and isolate it from the methods and standards of verification that also go by the name of objectivity.

When critics laud Sacco for breaking away from journalistic objectivity, then, they typically mean that he does not pretend to write from a neutral, uninvolved, or viewless position. Adam Rosenblatt and Andrea A. Lunsford state that “Sacco’s work is closer to traditional journalistic practices” than that of any other comics creator, but they nevertheless maintain that he “uses comics not just to create a new kind of journalism, but also to question the orthodoxies of more traditional reporting. . . . In stressing his subjective position, Sacco distinguishes himself from the traditional journalistic aims of distance and objectivity.”⁹ Kristian Williams suggests this challenge is endemic to the field of comics journalism, whose “inherent subjectivity contrasts sharply with the newsroom’s dispassionate prose”; he cites Sacco as an exemplary comics journalist who interrogates his own experience rather than adhere to journalistic conventions of balance or impartiality.¹⁰ Rocco Versaci locates Sacco and other comics journalists in the tradition of the New Journalists who “questioned the very possibility of objective truth.”¹¹ However, no critic carries this contrast between subjectivity and objectivity to greater extremes than Benjamin Woo, who suggests that Sacco’s representation of subjective experience disqualifies his work from consideration as journalism.

Woo proposes a number of reasons why Sacco’s work is not journalistic, but most of them boil down to Sacco’s refusal of the formulas, conventions, and publication channels that mark journalism in its most traditional forms:

I do not consider *Palestine* a work of journalism. For one thing, it was produced without the support of a news agency and released by a publisher of alternative and pornographic comic books. For another, Sacco has effectively abandoned the traditional indices of newsworthiness: comics are labor-intensive and slow to produce; chapters are organized thematically rather than chronologically; he meets no “notable” people; and there is, sadly, nothing novel about injustice and grinding deprivation.¹²

Many of these objections seem both petty and exclusionary. Fantagraphics Books does indeed publish pornographic comics, particularly under its Eros Comix imprint, but *Palestine* was not an Eros book and the publisher’s other titles have little bearing on whether it constitutes a work of journalism or not; Woo might as well argue that no article published in *Playboy* can be journalism either. Equally rigorous applications of Woo’s other criteria would rule out any stories by independent journalists, stories not written for the daily news cycle,

stories not organized chronologically, or stories about average citizens. Most problematically, Woo's last objection would seem to disqualify any story about injustice or deprivation as he apparently deems these subjects insufficiently newsworthy.

Woo's major argument for reclassifying *Palestine* proves equally arbitrary, based on a definition of journalism that is highly favorable to the kind of reporting Sacco's work challenges. Citing Walter Benjamin, Woo draws a sharp distinction between "the relaying of information and the communication of experience," associating Sacco with the latter and journalism exclusively with the former.¹³ In his view, *Palestine* is a work of storytelling and the documentary tradition, not reporting. But Woo admits that his definition is built on ideal types, not empirical descriptions of existing examples.¹⁴ His rigid partition of information and experience leaves no room for narrative journalism, also known as literary journalism or New Journalism, which blends journalistic and novelistic techniques to tell a story "that fundamentally engages the subjectivities of author and reader."¹⁵ Those techniques include "immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people" and "a consciousness on the page through which the objects in view are filtered," as well as journalistic standards of accuracy.¹⁶ The form erases Woo's distinction between the documentary and reporting—indeed, it is sometimes identified with the phrase "documentary reportage."¹⁷ Many scholars place Sacco in this tradition, recognizing that journalism already has an institutional space for his type of reporting.¹⁸

Michael Schudson observes that journalism has always pursued ideals of storytelling alongside ideals of information: information journalism's claims to moral or professional superiority over narrative journalism are products of their struggle for market position and at least in part "a cover for class conflict" between their historical constituencies, but the informative model is "not necessarily more accurate" than the narrative one.¹⁹ Other scholars of journalism similarly complicate Woo's assumption that information and experience can be neatly separated. G. Stuart Adam defines journalism as "the product of reporting—the gathering and presentation of slices and bits of human experience and thought," while Amy Kiste Nyberg states that "journalists distill experience into story" and notes that their techniques are as suited to conveying experiences as they are to relating facts.²⁰ If journalism is the distillation of experience into story as Nyberg and Adam suggest, then Sacco's work qualifies on the most important count. Woo says he only wants "to clarify the regime of authenticity that pertains to so-called comics journalism," but in defining the field so narrowly, he effectively reinforces the regime of authenticity claimed by so-called objective journalism.²¹ His statement that "Information, like journal-

ism, is a form of representation that strives to transmit the real as objectively and transparently as possible” presumes the very assumptions that Sacco’s work questions.²² Contrary to his own acknowledgment of the “ideological labor” that supports traditional journalism’s claims to objectivity, Woo’s idealized conception of journalism explicitly endorses those ideologically freighted claims.²³ It should be no surprise, then, that Sacco’s reportage will not fit within the narrow confines of Woo’s definition.

This disjunction is doubly ironic since Sacco’s comics journalism is far more traditional than his critics, his defenders, or most of his interlocutors acknowledge. In a rare departure from the prevailing critical discourse, Nyberg describes how “15 Minutes,” one of the stories in *Safe Area Gorazde*, relies on the conventional narrative structures and reporting devices of print and broadcast journalism.²⁴ For Nyberg, comics journalists adopt the practices of traditional journalism just as much as they adapt them; those practices include “the ways in which comics journalists absent themselves in response to the journalistic norms of objectivity and distance.”²⁵ While *Palestine* is more typically recognized for its subjective attention to Sacco’s experience and the experiences of Palestinians, it, too, is invested in these journalistic conventions. For all that Sacco foregrounds his own presence in *Palestine*, he selectively absents himself and his opinions to achieve, however fleetingly, the putative objectivity and distance of traditional journalism.

Viewless in Gaza

Certainly, Sacco has been critical of such pretenses towards impartiality, whether in journalistic, diplomatic, or political contexts. He mocks this viewpoint early in *Palestine* when he watches a dual demonstration unfold: the Israeli activist group Peace Now protests settlements in occupied East Jerusalem while counter-protestors call the Peace Now group traitors to Israel. Sacco writes, with hyperbole shading into transparent irony, “here’s *both* sides of the settler issue for consideration!”—the joke being that this common journalistic formulation, which reduces complex issues to two and only two highly polarized sides, completely excludes the Palestinian residents whose lives and homes are most affected by the settlements.²⁶ A few chapters later, Sacco presents another, equally false posture of objectivity when an Israeli soldier tells a Palestinian whose home has been attacked by settlers, “Look, on your side there are some extremists, and on our side there are some extremists.”²⁷ Sacco has no patience for such claims of equivalence, particularly when, as his Palestinian informant observes, the two sides are not treated equally under the laws the Israeli soldier represents and enforces. Nevertheless, when Sacco is

reluctant to question, criticize, or judge his subjects he can fall back on his own posture of journalistic detachment—not claims of balance or equivalence, but a simple muting of his own views. Sacco is particularly silent in Chapter Six, which addresses the subject of Palestinian violence against Israelis and against other Palestinians who are suspected of collaborating with Israelis.

In the story titled “Rooms,” an American teacher named Larry, who serves as Sacco’s guide in the Gaza Strip, takes him to meet some friends in the home of a Palestinian named Ibrahim, who celebrates Palestinian attacks on Israelis.²⁸ At the very beginning of *Palestine*, Sacco mentions how similar incidents, particularly the murders of the Munich Olympians and American tourist Leon Klinghoffer, colored his own perceptions of the Palestinian cause prior to his trip to Palestine.²⁹ When the men in “Rooms” ask Sacco how Americans view Palestinians, however, he offers no opinion on these attacks. Instead, he shifts subjects and says “the killing of collaborators hasn’t gone over too well,” as if that were the violence that had generated the most opposition in America.³⁰ Undeterred, Sacco’s informants defend the torture, disappearance, and execution of suspected collaborators. Sacco notes that from 1990 to 1991, intra-Palestinian violence killed two and a half times as many Palestinians in Gaza as Israeli security forces did in the same period, but otherwise does not question his informants’ defense of these killings. This silence does not connote endorsement on Sacco’s part, merely a willingness to allow his informants to indict themselves in their own words. As he told Mark Nevins, “I think I tried to present things as accurately as possible . . . If Palestinians said things that made themselves look bad, those were also included. I didn’t try to hide anything.”³¹ Neither does he try to challenge them, even in the narration he composes after the fact. Other men in Ibrahim’s room criticize the tactics of violence and terrorism, but Sacco doesn’t weigh in. This is the posture of objectivity—hiding nothing, questioning nothing, and repeating the testimony of others, often without comment—that defines Rosen’s view from nowhere.

If Sacco’s textual narration refuses to adopt any but the mildest disapproval of this violence, his visual framing of these stories is even more ambiguous. Sacco routinely illustrates the stories he hears from his informants, investing them with the same visual presence he gives to events he witnesses firsthand.³² The stories of Palestinian violence in “Rooms,” however, are presented at a double remove. Sacco illustrates them in a series of isolated images—two of Palestinian attacks on Israelis, one of Palestinians beating an alleged collaborator, and one of Palestinians listening to a collaborator’s confession on a cassette tape—while the accompanying narration and the surrounding panels depict the conversation in Ibrahim’s room (see Figure 4.1). Whereas stories of Israeli abuses like the harrowing imprisonment of “Moderate Pressure” or the

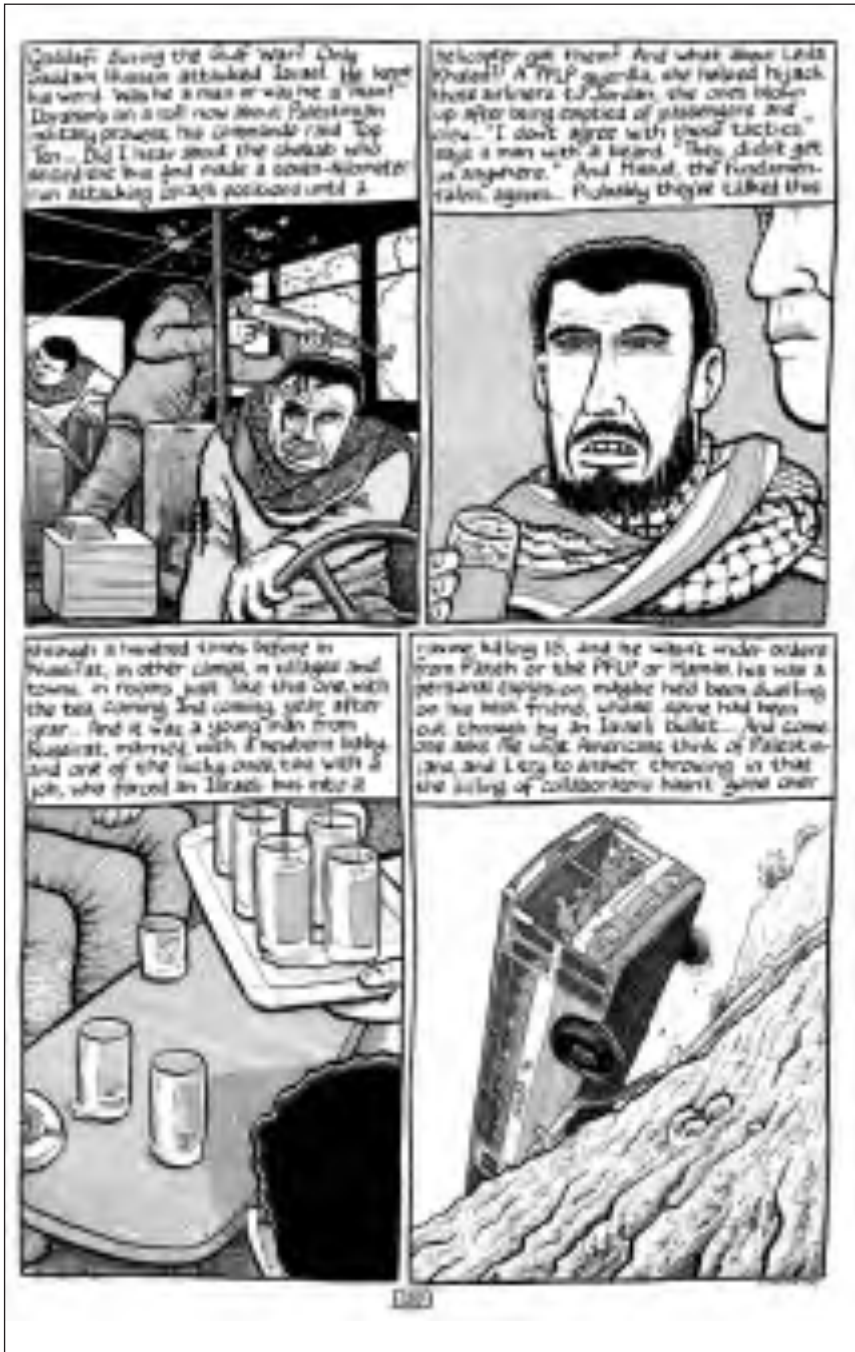


Figure 4.1. Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001), 155.

tragic succession of deaths and burials in “Pilgrimage” receive multi-page dramatizations, sometimes including dialogue and always showing a continuous sequence of actions and consequences, these stories of Palestinian violence are reduced to discrete moments and filtered through the comments of other Palestinians. They also display two telling absences: Sacco does not draw any of the Israeli victims except as distant silhouettes, and he does not portray himself taking part in the conversation. Panels depict the other men addressing him, showing him their work permits, and asking him for a light, images that are clearly drawn from Sacco’s point of view, but it’s a disembodied one—a view from nowhere. “Moderate Pressure” and “Pilgrimage” leave no doubts as to Sacco’s opinion of the Israelis’ abuses, but any similar judgments are left implicit in “Rooms.” The viewlessness distances Sacco from his subjects and releases him from any obligation to comment on matters that trouble his own sympathies.

The next story, “Law,” follows directly from “Rooms” and continues the focus on intra-Palestinian violence.³³ This time, the art offers an even more graphic demonstration of Sacco’s equivocations. In this story, Sacco speaks with a Palestinian lawyer who is defending a family that has committed an honor killing of their fifteen-year-old daughter, strangling her because she committed adultery with a collaborator. Sacco dramatizes this murder in the grotesque caricature that was typical of his work at the time (see Figure 4.2). On the facing page, Sacco asks the lawyer about his other cases and receives a litany of tortures and abuses inflicted by the Israeli security forces on his clients. The uppermost panel illustrates one of them, showing an Israeli man pressing a teenage boy’s face onto a hot plate (see Figure 4.3). The body language and the panel composition are virtually identical to the illustration of the honor killing on the preceding page, establishing a direct and immediate parallel between the two acts. But if the compositions invite a comparison between these two crimes with young Palestinian victims, the framing does not give them equal weight. The boy’s torture by the Israelis dominates the layout, floating over the lawyer and bleeding out to the edges of the page, while the girl’s murder by her own family is bound by a much smaller panel and relegated to an interior corner. This juxtaposition illustrates Sacco’s vacillation on his own journalistic position. Parallels are unavoidable when adjacent compositions are so similar, but judgments are not parceled out equally when one image is so much more prominent than the other. Despite the striking composition, these pages in some ways represent the worst practices of both objective and subjective journalism—Sacco draws precisely the sort of equivalency he derided earlier, but then weights it to minimize the murder in comparison to the torture.

These juxtaposed images become a way of presenting and withholding com-

ment, much like traditional journalists' practice of letting their sources answer each other. At the end of Chapter Six, Sacco discusses the day's testimonies with his guide, Larry. It is Larry, not Sacco, who voices his discomfort with the stories they have heard in Gaza: "You know that family honor killing that lawyer was handling? That really shook me up. What did you think?" Instead of recording his answer, Sacco skips ahead in the next panel to present more of Larry's objections: "The idea of armed struggle bothers me. I think the taking of someone's life under any circumstances is wrong. Killing someone is negating that person."³⁴ Rather than voice his own opinion, Sacco allows his sources to debate each other, a practice that Rosen and other press critics have termed "he said, she said journalism."³⁵ In this style of journalism, reporters quote clashing truth claims but do not assess them, assigning equal value to claims of varying accuracy or merit. This is slightly different from Sacco's position in "Rooms" and "Law," where the disagreements revolve around matters of opinion and moral judgment rather than fact, but he still allows Larry to take up the burden of challenging his other sources. Economics reporter Peter Goodman, who left the *New York Times* for the *Huffington Post* because he wanted "a chance to write with a point of view," described this practice as "almost a process of laundering my own views, through the tried-and-true technique of dinging someone at some think tank to say what you want to tell the reader."³⁶ Sacco's own views remain unspoken, with Larry serving at best as a proxy for Sacco, or at the very least as a late and barely audible counterpoint to the views of the lawyer and the other Palestinian sources.

Sacco has particular difficulty writing about the hijab, the veil or headscarf worn by many Muslim women, although he opens the story "Hijab" with a chastening anecdote that suggests he sometimes has good reasons for withholding his own views.³⁷ Sacco is quite free with his opinions on the first page, confessing, "I blank out most all the women who wear [the hijab], they're just shapes to me, ciphers, like pigeons moving along the sidewalk" until he is jolted out of this dismissive attitude by an unexpected conversation with a woman in hijab who speaks "perfect English! The King's!"—a suggestively patriarchal reference as the monarch of England, then as now, is a queen.³⁸ Sacco depicts himself as a poor authority on gender roles in Palestinian society, a Western man who initially accepts Orientalist narratives of silent, subjugated, and undifferentiated Muslim women.³⁹ In fact, he briefly floats the idea that "the hijab was more my problem than hers" before he reports that "the hijab is a focal point of some debate here" and proceeds to present that debate through the words and experiences of a number of women.⁴⁰ After his initial self-exposure, however, Sacco keeps his thoughts to himself. Even his self-criticisms are filtered through his informants' views, or rather, his imagining of their views:



Figure 4.2. Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001), 160.

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Figure 4.3. Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001), 161.

“One of the women seems put off by my questioning, like who am I to strut in with my Western, patronizing air?”⁴¹ Sacco is understandably reluctant, after his first encounter, to project or impose his opinions on the women, but while he “does not trump the women with a voice-over that asserts an authoritative perspective,” he still uses traditional journalistic techniques to present opposing viewpoints.⁴² Although the women say they wear the hijab by their own choice and not at the compulsion of Hamas (the Islamist organization that controls the Gaza Strip), they all reveal that some other form of social pressure—from family, school, or religious faith—has motivated them to do it. One of them has begun applying such pressure to her friends, and another relates a story of how she witnessed some young men stoning a doctor who wasn’t wearing the hijab.⁴³ Once again, Sacco allows his sources to contradict themselves instead of challenging their statements directly, although in this case he presents himself as poorly qualified to issue such a challenge.

He is not always so reticent. In Chapter Nine, he allows Naomi and Paula, two Israeli tourists from Tel Aviv, to present their views on Palestine as an explicit counterpoint to the rest of the book’s presentation of the Israelis “through Palestinian eyes.”⁴⁴ But Sacco interjects his opinions and challenges their arguments in a way he rarely if ever does with his Palestinian sources. As Sacco notes after Naomi asks him to see “our side of the story, too”—an appeal to conventions of journalistic balance and objectivity—he has no problem hearing the Israeli side of the conflict; he’s “heard nothing but the Israeli side most all my life.”⁴⁵ He instead invites them to see Palestinian life through his eyes when he offers to walk them through the Arab Market in Jerusalem’s Old City. Ironically, the request backfires: rather than allay the women’s concerns, their fear spreads to Sacco, who ends up viewing the market through their eyes after all.⁴⁶ This reversal notwithstanding, the episode revolves around Sacco’s wholesale abandonment of objectivity, his willingness to empathize with both Israeli and Palestinian perspectives, and his invitation to Naomi and Paula to do the same.

However, this rejection of objectivity turns out to be highly selective. Sacco alternates between his own subjective viewpoint and a more traditional view from nowhere that absolves him from voicing his opinions in contexts where they would prove professionally inconvenient. He can afford to disagree with Naomi and Paula because they are less essential to his reporting; he has heard their side of the story most all his life. The Palestinian point of view is much harder for Sacco to access, and he cannot afford to alienate his sources. He effaces himself at the moments that most disturb his own liberal humanist views—moments when Palestinians express their support for attacks on civilians or collaborators, for anti-Semitic threats or conspiracy theories, for

pressuring women to wear the hijab, for defending a family that murders their fifteen-year-old daughter. Sacco normally displays an admirable willingness to reveal and criticize his own viewpoint as a Western journalist in Palestine, but he conceals his opinions when they would most contest the views of the people he writes about.

Sacco's more recent work has moved away from this recourse to mute objectivity and he-said she-said journalism—although other critical accounts once again differ from this assessment, largely because of a countervailing shift in Sacco's art. Rosenblatt and Lunsford note that his drawing style has changed from “the highly caricatured, always askew style he used in *Palestine* and other works” to a “near-obsessive hunger for visual detail,” particularly in his renderings of landscapes and locations; they conclude that Sacco “seems less aggressive in his focus on his own subjectivity and more in tune with the traditional journalistic search for realism and objectivity.”⁴⁷ While Sacco is much less likely to make himself the subject of his later works, his journalism has continued to emphasize not only his own subjectivity but also the subjectivity of his sources.

In *The Fixer*, Sacco repeatedly asks readers to “put themselves in the shoes” of the people he meets, particularly Neven, the eponymous fixer and potential fabulist who guides Sacco through Sarajevo.⁴⁸ This refrain invites empathy, not impartiality, even as Sacco attempts to cut through the rumors and tall tales to get at the truth of what happened in the Bosnian war. He assumes an even more subjective posture at the end of *Footnotes in Gaza*, where he presents the final three pages from the first-person perspective of one of the Palestinians who was beaten and killed in a 1956 massacre.⁴⁹ By placing the reader in the viewpoint of his subjects, Sacco renders his meticulously researched findings with visceral immediacy while obliterating any claims to journalistic detachment. He frames these pages, in fact, as a rebuke of his own pretenses to an objective command of the facts, of his arrogant belief that he “knew more about that day” than the men who survived it.⁵⁰ Rejecting his earlier complicity in the conventions of objectivity, this graphic display suggests that good journalism—dedicated to an honest representation of experience rather than the pursuit of an arbitrary impartiality—is always grounded in a view from somewhere.

NOTES

1. Peter Aspden, “Tugged by the forgotten places,” *Financial Times*, June 27, 2003, 15.

2. Ibid.

3. Jay Rosen, “The View from Nowhere: Questions and Answers,” *PressThink*, November 11, 2010, <http://pressthink.org/2010/11/the-view-from-nowhere-questions-and-answers/>; see also Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

4. Michael Schudson, *Discovering the News: A Social History of American Newspapers* (New York: Basic, 1978), 121–44.

5. *Ibid.*, 155.

6. *Ibid.*, 155–57; see also Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism* (New York: Crown, 2001), 74.

7. Rosen, “The View from Nowhere.”

8. *Ibid.*

9. Adam Rosenblatt and Andrea A. Lunsford, “Critique, Caricature, and Compulsion in Joe Sacco’s Comics Journalism,” in *The Rise of the American Comics Artist: Creators and Contexts*, eds. Paul Williams and James Lyons (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 69.

10. Kristian Williams, “The Case for Comics Journalism: Artist-Reporters Leap Tall Conventions in a Single Bound,” *Columbia Journalism Review* (March–April 2005), 52, 55.

11. Rocco Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 114.

12. Benjamin Woo, “Reconsidering Comics Journalism: Information and Experience in Joe Sacco’s *Palestine*,” in *The Rise and Reason of Comics and Graphic Literature: Critical Essays on the Form*, eds. Joyce Goggin and Dan Hassler-Forest (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010), 173.

13. *Ibid.*, 172.

14. *Ibid.*, 171–72.

15. John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000), 40.

16. Norman Sims, *True Stories: A Century of Literary Journalism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 6–7.

17. *Ibid.*, 10.

18. *Ibid.*, 285–86; Versaci, *This Book Contains Graphic Language*, 130–31; Rosenblatt and Lunsford, “Critique, Caricature, and Compulsion,” 71.

19. Schudson, *Discovering the News*, 89–90, 118–19.

20. G. Stuart Adam, “Notes Towards a Definition of Journalism,” in *Journalism: The Democratic Craft*, eds. G. Stuart Adam and Roy Peter Clark (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 347; Amy Kiste Nyberg, “Comics Journalism,” in *Critical Approaches to Comics: Theories and Methods*, eds. Matthew J. Smith and Randy Duncan (New York: Routledge, 2012), 118–19.

21. Woo, “Reconsidering Comics Journalism,” 173.

22. *Ibid.*, 172.

23. *Ibid.*, 170.

24. Nyberg, “Comics Journalism,” 120–24.

25. *Ibid.*, 119.

26. Joe Sacco, *Palestine* (Seattle: Fantagraphics, 2001), 18, his emphasis. Two pages later, Palestinians assert their “side” of the story by picking up discarded Peace Now signs and conducting an impromptu “mini-demonstration”: “They march a few dozen yards . . . chanting their heads off

... raising more decibels in two minutes than I've heard all afternoon ... I mean, they're screaming like their lives depended on it!" (20).

27. *Ibid.*, 67.

28. *Ibid.*, 150–58.

29. *Ibid.*, 6–8.

30. *Ibid.*, 155–56.

31. Mark David Nevins, "Drawing from Life': An Interview with Joe Sacco," *International Journal of Comic Art* 4.2 (Fall 2002), 34.

32. Woo, "Reconsidering Comics Journalism," 174.

33. Sacco, *Palestine*, 159–63.

34. *Ibid.*, 177.

35. Jay Rosen, "He Said, She Said Journalism: Lame Formula in the Land of the Active User," *PressThink*, April 12, 2009, http://archive.pressthink.org/2009/04/12/hesaid_shesaid.html.

36. Howard Kurtz, "Huffington snags N.Y. Times star," *Media Notes*, September 21, 2010, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/howard-kurtz/2010/09/huffington_snags_ny_times_star.html.

37. Sacco, *Palestine*, 137–40.

38. *Ibid.*, 137.

39. Wendy Kozol, "Complicities of Witnessing in Joe Sacco's *Palestine*," in *Transmedial Perspectives on Human Rights and Literature*, eds. Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg and Alexandra Schultheis Moore (New York: Routledge, 2012), 167, 172–73.

40. Sacco, *Palestine*, 137, his emphasis.

41. *Ibid.*, 139.

42. Kozol, "Complicities of Witnessing," 173.

43. Sacco, *Palestine*, 139–40.

44. *Ibid.*, 256.

45. *Ibid.*

46. Williams, "The Case for Comics Journalism," 54–55.

47. Rosenblatt and Lunsford, "Critique, Caricature, and Compulsion," 83.

48. Joe Sacco, *The Fixer* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2003), collected in Joe Sacco, *The Fixer and Other Stories* (Montreal: Drawn & Quarterly, 2009).

49. Joe Sacco, *Footnotes in Gaza* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 386–88.

50. *Ibid.*, 385.

Zine-Making as Feminist Pedagogy

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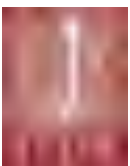
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Zine-Making as Feminist Pedagogy

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Introduction

One of the challenges that many gender studies instructors face is making complex topics—such as gender identities, political theory, and media criticism—current, interesting, and relevant to students’ lives. When I began teaching Introduction to Women’s Studies, one student said, “But the women’s movement is over. What is left for us to talk about?” Her classmates nodded in agreement and looked at me blankly. Many students came to the class believing that women’s studies was solely a history lesson, that the discipline had little to offer their own lives. To complicate matters further, Introduction to Women’s Studies students come from various levels of experience—from students in their first to fourth years—and major in subjects ranging from engineering to psychology.¹

In order to help students connect feminist theory to their own experiences, I suggest incorporating *zines* into gender studies courses as both reading and writing assignments. Zines are “non-commercial, non-professional, small-circulation magazines which their creators produce, publish, and distribute by themselves”

(Duncombe 6). They are available in many public and university libraries and independent bookstores, as well as from online zine distributors and other websites specializing in handmade goods (see Appendix for a teaching resource list).

Zines occupy a middle ground between traditional research papers or essays and Web-based media such as blogs. Unlike research papers, zine style is decidedly informal. Images are hand-drawn or cut-and-pasted by hand. Essays, poems, or confessional stories might also be hand-written—or typed with drawings framing the paragraphs. The informal, creative, and participatory character of zines shares some ground with blogs, but unlike blogs, zines are physical objects that can be held and passed from person to person by hand. Students find the middle-space of zines appealing. They like writing creatively for an audience beyond the classroom, but feel that their voices would be lost in the vastness of the Internet. The visual, material qualities of zines “ignite [a] creative urge” in students when they first touch, read, and share print zines (Piepmeier, “Why” 213).

Zine-making employs three principles of feminist pedagogy: participatory learning, validation of personal experience, and the development of critical thinking skills (Hoffmann and Stake). Whether an individual or collective effort, making zines is a collaborative process. Students collaborate by talking about their ideas, providing feedback on one another's writing, and working together to construct their zines. By fostering this kind of collaboration in the classroom, zine-making gives students "a model of ways for people to work together to accomplish mutual or shared goals, and to help each other reach individual goals" (Shrewsbury 9).

The zine-making process allows students to connect with feminist ideas in substantial and personal ways. Personal change has long been an important aspect of feminist pedagogies, rooted in feminist consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s and '70s (Hoffmann and Stake). Zine-making can be an intensely personal process. Students write about personal relationships and experiences that some of them have never shared before, while applying a feminist lens to those experiences. For example, one of my students wrote an analysis of proposed legislation that would allow employers to refuse insurance coverage of birth control for contraceptive purposes. While researching the essay, she brought up the subject with her grandmother, who had been the leader of a women's movement organization during the early 1970s. She said that making this zine would make her grandmother proud of her.

Making zines includes critical thinking about categories that are often taken for granted as "natural" (e.g., womanhood, heterosexuality). Zine-making requires students to analyze their own biographies

and experiences through the critical lens of feminist theory. The idea that animates this project is that efforts to "make sense of everyday life experiences [and] to intervene critically in [one's] life and the lives of others . . . is what makes feminist transformation possible" (hooks 70).

After a brief review of scholarship on zines, I discuss how instructors can use zines as both reading and writing assignments in the classroom. Reading about zines is useful for introducing students to zines as media and contextualizing zines in the history of feminist publishing. Incorporating zines into courses can also help instructors teach subjects that are underrepresented in academic literature and/or mainstream media. Writing zines in the classroom takes this a step further and allows instructors to facilitate a participatory learning experience for and with students as they create and distribute their own publications. I discuss two types of zines that students produce in classroom settings: cultural zines (feminist analyses of pop culture) and experiential zines (feminist analyses of personal life experiences). These zines exemplify both development of critical thinking and validation of personal experience, two principles of feminist pedagogy. I conclude with the outcomes of the zine project as well as limitations and suggestions for how zine projects could be tailored to specific student populations or academic disciplines.

Zine Scholarship

Zine historians typically identify three phases of zine publishing. The earliest zines—or *fanzines*—were written by science fiction enthusiasts in the 1930s as a means of sharing and commenting on science fiction stories (Duncombe).

In the 1970s, fanzines about punk rock music emerged as fans began to write about punk, which was “ignored by and critical of the mainstream music press” (Dubcombe 7). Zines that receive the most scholarly attention—which is still relatively little—are those that came from the riot grrrl movement of the 1990s (see, e.g., Comstock; Harris; Piepmeier, *Girl*; Schilt). Riot grrrl began as a small movement aimed at confronting sexism in punk rock music subcultures and grew into a national movement of young women confronting sexism in their everyday lives (Marcus).

Zines share commonalities with independent media of earlier women’s movements, such as scrapbooks, pamphlets, and manifestos.² In the nineteenth century, scrapbooks were popular forms of independent media produced by women’s clubs and individuals. Women’s clubs used scrapbooking as a means of documenting their activities and challenging news coverage of them (Piepmeier, *Girl*). In feminist movements of the mid-twentieth century, mimeographed pamphlets and manifestos were important ways of connecting communities and promoting feminist politics. Major texts such as “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” by Anne Koedt and *Our Bodies, Ourselves* by the Boston Women’s Health Alliance began as mimeographed pamphlets akin to zines. Unlike scrapbooks, of which there were only single copies, mimeographed texts of the mid-twentieth century allowed for wider publication and distribution of texts. These texts inspired “excitement and volatility of newfound, newly rediscovered knowledge [and] the sense that the knowledge was to be used, shared, and spread around to create new knowledge and to foster cultural and political change” (Flan-

nerly 23). Like scrapbooks and pamphlets, zines have allowed girls and women to write about issues that were not written about anywhere else (Flannery; Piepmeier, “Girls”).

Zine-making is an expression of a Do-It-Yourself (DIY) ethic, “a specific dimension of feminist expression centering upon grassroots politics and autonomous cultural production” (Kempson 4). Contemporary feminist activists and students of feminist theory have grown up aware of feminist ideas or stereotypes about feminism. Both “positive and negative perceptions of previous feminist movements” are influential in how contemporary zine-makers speak back to feminism in their work (Kempson 7). Turned off by what they perceive as the feminist orthodoxy of so-called second-wave feminists, some contemporary feminists make zines in an effort to articulate their understandings of feminist movements in opposition to orthodoxy. In doing so, they also use zine-making as a means of asserting their own subjectivities. For example, if they perceive an “official feminism” that is hostile to queer women of color, writer-activists might use zines as a means of challenging both the perceived exclusivity of feminism while also reaffirming their identities as queer women of color who identify as feminists (Kempson).

Zines in the Classroom

Using zines in the classroom has two goals: to create awareness about issues related to feminist theory (particularly those that are underrepresented in academic literature and/or mainstream media) and to critically evaluate media images and/or social issues. To meet these two objectives, I suggest incorporat-

ing zines into the classroom as both reading *and* writing assignments.

READING ZINES

Reading about zines makes the format more familiar. For example, students might read a selection from Alison Piepmeier's book *Girl Zines: Making Media, Doing Feminism*. The book presents a trajectory of feminist movements in the United States through "participatory media," beginning with the "informal publications" of suffragist movements and women's clubs in early twentieth-century America (28). This reading not only introduces students to zines as media, but also places zines within an historical tradition of feminist writing and publishing.

While sources like Piepmeier's book are useful for contextualizing zines as feminist media, reading *about* zines is not a substitute for reading zines themselves (Piepmeier, "Why"). Instructors could hold a class session at a library or bookstore with a zine collection or simply bring in a sampling of zines that they collect themselves. In my course, we visited the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP) zine collection early in the semester, and students spent time reviewing the collection to become familiar with zines as media and to see how zine makers integrate theoretical and political ideas with their own personal narratives and experiences.

Instructors might also encourage students to attend zine-related events in their cities or towns, such as zine fairs—which happen annually in many major cities worldwide—or zine readings hosted by local bookshops. If that is not possible, faculty could organize zine-related events on campus. For example, in the spring of 2013, a group of zine makers from the People of

Color (POC) Zine Project visited Pittsburgh. The goal of the POC Zine Project is to "make all zines by people of color easy to find, distribute and share." I worked with the POC Zine Project to organize a reading on the University of Pittsburgh campus as a means of connecting what was happening in the classroom to the wider university community. Students, faculty, and staff from across the university attended the event, which included readings on the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality as well as an exchange of zines and conversations lasting long after the event had officially ended.

The POC Zine Project is one example of how zines often "carry the message of a very specific subset of a community, a dialogue that probably could not be found in any other printed medium" (Wan 18). In this way, zines can help instructors teach issues that are underrepresented in academic literature and/or mainstream media. For example, as an introduction to transgender studies, our class discussed the zine *Short & Queer: The Coming Out Issue*. The cover of the zine features the author, Kelly, standing in front of a microphone announcing "I'm a boy!" (see Figure 1). Inside, Kelly writes about his experiences with coming out as a young trans man. The zine is a compilation of diary-like entries interspersed with emails sent between the author and his mother, which reveal how emotionally heartwrenching the coming out process can be for both trans people and their families—and how the relationship between mother and child changed over the course of one year. Discussion of this zine gives students an intimate look at the coming out process, one that cannot be conveyed as convincingly in scholarly texts.

The zine also contains a page in which Kelly and his friend “JDEW” discuss gender-inclusive language and pronoun usage. Kelly uses masculine pronouns (he/him) while his friend uses gender-neutral pronouns (ze/hir). Tips they give readers include, “don’t tell us how hard it is to change pronouns (think about how hard it is to come out)” and “correct yourself . . . and when you correct yourself, don’t freak out!” Below their “chat” is a gender pronoun word search, designed to help readers practice using gender-neutral language and switching between masculine and gender-neutral language. In my classes, students found this exercise enormously helpful for talking about gender-neutral pronouns—a subject that made many of them uncomfortable because it was unfamiliar to them. By practicing in an environment where they felt safe making mistakes, and asking questions, the exercise opened up questions about gender and language in a way that academic readings had not. I got the sense that many of them believed gender-neutral language was theoretical, something that only gender studies scholars care about. Learning about gender-inclusive language from Kelly and JDEW personalizes the subject. The authors acknowledge the discomfort that readers may feel when switching between gender-neutral pronouns, but make the point that transitioning from one gender identity to another is much more difficult.

Short & Queer, while deeply personal, also tackles some difficult and important political questions about how trans people negotiate their identities in a world that recognizes only two gender categories. In that way, it is an excellent example of how the zine-making process is about “personalizing politics”—a task that is



Figure 1. *Short & Queer* #4. Images used with the permission of the author.

central to feminist pedagogy—a process by which larger political questions are “refracted . . . through the eyes and experiences of the individual creating the zine” (Duncombe 28). This is the central goal for students who create their own zines: to take the material from a course and put a personal spin on it. If they do not feel as though they have enough life experience upon which to draw, encourage them to write a feminist analysis of pop culture or advertising. That allows them to distance the project from their own life experiences, but still encourages them to think analytically about course material.

WRITING ZINES

Zine-making is rooted in a DIY tradition. DIY ethics hold that there are no rules for making a zine; it is a purely creative pursuit. For this reason, making writing guidelines and a grading rubric for

student zines presents a challenge for instructors. DIY culture “emphasizes passion and creativity over skill and talent” (Freedman 52). Balancing these principles with university-mandated requirements may require some creativity on the part of teachers. For example, my courses were writing-intensive, meaning that students had to write a specific number of pages over the course of the term. As such, I imposed a word count for their expository writing in the zines. But in order to encourage as much creativity as possible, I urged students to use anything they wanted in their zines: poetry, photos, drawings, magazine clippings. I clearly stated, however, that it was a writing course, and I would only grade their writing, not their photography or drawing skills. This allowed me to balance the demands of the course with the creative flair of zine-making.

In order to facilitate a participatory learning experience, I suggest that instructors make collaborative workshops a central part of the zine-making process. In my courses, I organized three workshops. For the first workshop, we met at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, conveniently located across a plaza from our classroom building. Ahead of the workshop, the zine librarian and I pulled zines having to do with gender, feminism, and sexuality from the shelves and brought them to the conference room in which our class would meet. For the first half of the class, students browsed the zines freely; some students took them to secluded reading nooks while others sat at tables and took notes on what they read. For the second half of class, we discussed questions that arose as they browsed the collection. Questions range from practical

matters (“How long does my zine have to be?” or “Where can I get my zine photocopied?”) to substantive concerns (“Can I use swear words in my zine?” or “How do I go about using images?”) to raising anxieties (“I don’t have a lot of life experience; what am I going to write about?” or “How do I write about feminism in a personal way?”). In the second workshop, students reviewed each other’s work and gave feedback for improving both writing and theoretical links. During the third zine-making workshop, students constructed their zines by hand, sharing supplies that they brought to class.

As Piepmeier has noted, zines “instigate a kind of gift culture” (“Why” 214), and this is what I observed in my classes. To my surprise, most students elected to cut and paste their zines by hand, foregoing desktop publishing software for scissors and glue sticks. They liked the idea of a zine as a material object. Its physicality made their ideas and contributions feel more substantial. It also made it possible to donate their work to the library for the public to read. In the vast world of the Internet, they felt that their voices would get drowned out by all of the other voices out there. Physical objects, they reasoned, could have more impact. One student said she liked the idea of leaving her zine on her coffee table, so that visitors might pick it up and read it. Others made extra copies of their zines and shared them with classmates, friends, and family.

Student Zines³

Student zines cover more topics than the scope of this article allows, so I will focus on two types: *cultural* and *experiential*. I chose these types because they corre-



Figure 2. *Home Makers*, an anticapitalist critique of domesticity that uses images from women's magazines to critique the domestic ideals that they sell. The shape of the zine (a house) exemplifies how students use the form of the zine as well as the content to communicate their ideas.

spond to two important tenants of feminist pedagogy: the development of critical thinking skills and the validation of personal experience. *Cultural zines* are critical analyses of popular culture from feminist perspectives. For example, Jessie's zine, *Home Makers*, is a critique of domesticity using anticapitalist feminist theory as a guide (see Figure 2). Cultural zines allow students to "critique the media even as they consume it hungrily" (Piepmeier, *Girl* 173). This is "a pedagogy of active criticism," in which zine makers give up passively consuming media to become active producers and critics (*Girl* 172). *Experiential* zines explore personal issues such as body image, sexual encounters, and family relationships (see Figure 3), through the lens of feminist theory. Students write about these issues not only in terms of individual psychological processes, but also as analyses of social categories such as gender, race, and sexuality.



Figure 3. *Alternative Family Values* is a personal exploration of one student's family, pictured above, using class material on motherhood, gender, and lesbian marriage as a lens for exploration.

CULTURAL ZINES

In cultural zines, students use feminist theory as a lens for analyzing television, magazines, video games, music, and advertisements. One example of this is a zine with a double title: *Never Gonna Get It/Let's Get it On*. This zine explores the Madonna/whore archetypes in the style of a satirical feminist self-help book. In the introduction, the author, Cassie, writes, "The concept of this tiny book is to represent and satirize two conflicting modern notions of femininity—the Madonna and the Whore. The side you are about to read is the Madonna section. If you turn the booklet to the back, you will find the Whore section. [. . .] So, read on! I've filled these pages with the worst possible advice I could give. With any luck, you too will be thinking, 'Oh man, that is pretty fucked up.'" The form of the zine, which is written as a double-sided book, reflects the content of the zine, which is about

two archetypes of femininity (see Figure 4). In the middle of the book, the content runs together, making readers uncertain whether they're reading the Madonna or Whore half of the zine. While these archetypes are distinct, they share some characteristics. As Cassie points out, "[both archetypes] encourage women to refrain from speaking, focus on appearances, and downplay their intellect." These commonalities are signified in the blurring of the boundaries between the two—both theoretically and in the physical form of the zine.

By satirizing notions of femininity in the style of a self-help guide, Cassie critiques self-help books geared toward women. For example, in a section titled "See the Bad Girl Dress," Cassie offers the following "advice": "Wear tight fitted clothing. Try to cover up as little of your body as possible." In an analogous section in the other half of the zine titled "See the Nice Girl Dress," Cassie offers the exact oppo-

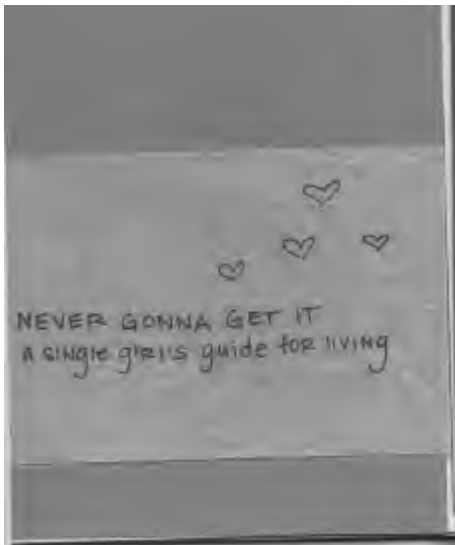


Figure 4. Cassie's zine, *Never Gonna Get It/Let's Get it On*, explores Madonna/whore archetypes in the style of a double-sided, satirical self-help book.

site advice: “Do not wear anything too tight. Try to cover as much of your body as you can.” There are similar sections with advice for speaking, learning, and dating. Using satire as her method, Cassie’s “advice” critiques modern dating and advice guides by critiquing sexual double standards.

Another example of a cultural zine is *(Wo)Man Up!* by a student named Alison. The title is taken from a series of advertisements for Miller Lite beer in which men are ridiculed by bartenders for carrying a purse or wearing skinny jeans. The attractive bartenders (who are all women) look at their male customers with pity, telling them to “man up” and drink Miller Lite, implying that “real men” do not carry purses or wear tight-fitting jeans. The advertisements are meant to be humorous by making fun of men for presenting themselves in ways that are culturally associated with femininity and telling them to be “real” men. In an essay about these advertisements titled “It’s Not for You,” Alison writes:

The majority of men in the Miller Lite commercials are white. Most of the women are white, too. [. . .] The men that Miller Lite markets to fulfill a specific vision that the advertisers have of masculinity. They are white, middle-class, masculine (supposedly straight) men who “should be” even more masculine. It is an outdated model of what masculinity looks like, especially in a world where so many alternate lifestyles and masculinities exist. [. . .] I recognize that the goal is to sell a product, but the way they go about it is alienating and offensive to so many groups. Shouldn’t they try to appeal to more than this narrow demographic if they want to sell more beer?

In this passage, Alison raises questions around the purpose of these advertisements. The goal of advertising is to sell products, but she points out that these commercials are geared toward a narrowly defined group: white, middle-class, masculine men. She asks, if the goal of the advertisement is to sell more beer, why not try to appeal to more people? She also states that she finds the ads “alienating and offensive” because they define the audience so narrowly. She concludes that “the type of masculinity portrayed in these commercials (white, male, and “manly”) reinforces racial and gender privilege” by implying that this is what an “average guy” looks like and excludes anyone who does not look that way.

These two zines are examples of how students employed critical thinking skills in their zine-making. Cassie used the format of the zine (a double-sided book) as well as the style (satire) and content to critique modern self-help guides. While self-help books aim to improve women’s lives, Cassie questions the extent to which this is true and claims that they reinforce double standards and negative stereotypes about femininity. The creative aspects of the zine as a form allowed Cassie more options for critique than a traditional research paper. Alison critiques normative representations of masculinity in television media through an analysis of beer commercials. She writes, “I did not really see how some of the articles for our class fit together when I first read them, but as I began to write articles for this zine, they began to come together for me.” For Alison, the process of writing a series of distinct essays connected by a theme allowed her to make connections among our readings—connections that might not have been made if she had written a traditional research paper.

EXPERIENTIAL ZINES

In experiential zines, students use feminist theory as a lens for analyzing their own life experiences and those of people around them, such as their families, friends, and/or peers. Bodies and intersectionality, in particular, were popular topics in experiential zines. A zine titled *Color Me* by a student named Rebecca is an excellent example of both. Rebecca begins her zine by writing about how personal the project was for her: “I had no idea where to start or what would come of this project. From the beginning I knew it would be very introspective [because] that is what I need right now. [. . .] I found this project to be therapeutic.” Like all students who wrote experiential zines, Rebecca begins by telling readers just how personal the zine-making process was for her. The title signifies the “range of emotions” that she explores in the zine, which is a personal meditation on her life through the lens of intersectionality theory.

The first essay in *Color Me* is a reflection on the politics of hair. Rebecca writes, “I’m sure for most people cutting your hair is far from the biggest deal in the world. It lacks controversy, does not impact your daily life. However for any woman that has

black ancestry, this is a different story.” The essay begins as a diary entry on July 16, 2010. That was the day that Rebecca went to a salon for “the big chop”—a term used by African-American women for the process of cutting off relaxed or permed hair when transitioning from chemically treated to natural hair (see Figure 5). After posting photos of her new look on Facebook, she earned praise and support from her friends and most of her family, but when her father saw her, he did not approve: “My dad was kind of upset and asked, ‘Why would you cut your hair without permission?’ to which I retorted, ‘I didn’t know I needed permission to cut my own hair!’ as I walked away more mad than disappointed. [. . .] My parents were born in Trinidad and Tobago, a small twin island Caribbean country off the coast of Venezuela. [. . .] It leads to conflicts between my household and how I interact with the rest of the world.”

In this passage, Rebecca expresses anger that, despite support from her friends and mother for her decision to cut her hair, she is angry that her father does not support her. She credits this to cultural differences between the Trinidadian values of her father, who expects to be asked permission when his daughter cuts her hair, and her desire for independence.



Figure 5. Images from *Color Me* by Rebecca. The photo on the right documents Rebecca’s “big chop.”

Rebecca continues the essay by describing the racism implicit in normative beauty standards and how, for a time, she tried to conform to those standards: “As with a lot of things, one aspect of colonialism and slavery is the dislike for anything that does not mirror European standards of beauty, including skin tone, hair texture, and physical features. [. . .] I thought I couldn’t go natural because I did not have ‘good hair’ that was easy to straighten, wasn’t too kinky, longer than shoulder length, etc.—beliefs instilled in me by my family’s adoration of these standards of beauty. This is the hair they gave me, but they cannot seem to appreciate it.”⁴

In this passage, Rebecca adeptly connects history and biography, race and gender. She points out how normative beauty standards are historically linked to whiteness and acknowledges that she was socialized to believe in those standards by her family. She points out that her hair was passed on to her by her parents, yet they instilled the belief in her that natural hair was not beautiful. By “going natural,” she asserts her belief that natural is beautiful. It is both an act of defiance and self-acceptance.

Near the end of her essay, Rebecca states, “To be black, first generation, natural haired and confident.” The phrase is in boldface type. It is not part of a paragraph. It stands on its own, demanding the attention of readers. It follows a paragraph about the difficulties she experiences in “having to prove [her]self equal, not only to men but to white people.” This bold phrase reads as a meditative affirmation—not for readers, but for Rebecca herself. Amid paragraphs in which she describes complexities and struggles at the intersections of race, gender, and culture stands

one bold phrase, as if to remind herself to be confident in who she is.

Limitations

Zines require a lot of time to design, write, compile, publish, and distribute. On commuter campuses where students often work full-time in addition to attending classes, in courses with a higher enrollment, or at schools that have shorter terms, instructors might elect to have their classes create a collective zine. In a collective zine, students each contribute one essay; the collected essays are then compiled into an anthology (see, e.g., Aulik “Dissident”). The zine-making process is truly a class collaboration in which the entire class must discuss organization, layout, and themes. Once the original zine has been compiled by the group, the instructor could arrange for enough copies for each member of the class. Working on a detailed, personal, and collaborative project such as a zine may help create a sense of community at school for students who do not live on campus.

Not all teachers have access to a zine collection like the one at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, but it is relatively easy to create a zine resource library. Zines are inexpensive, and there are numerous ways to find, request, and/or purchase zines both in person and online. The Barnard College Zine Library offers a comprehensive online list of zine collections from around the world. Some of these libraries allow teachers to email requests for photocopies of zines in small numbers, sometimes for free or a nominal fee. Many cities in the world, from Bogota to Minneapolis, host annual zine fairs, where teachers can meet zine makers and purchase their zines first-hand. Independent booksellers are another

source for zines. Online sources include large zine distributors such as Microcosm Publishing or the online marketplace Etsy (see Appendix for details on each of these resources).

I piloted this project in an interdisciplinary writing course where writing instruction was an important component of the course. Not all instructors have the time to devote to writing instruction, but zine-making could be adapted for a variety of disciplines and course formats. Zines are ideally suited for creative writing seminars, as they emphasize creativity in form and content (see Bott; Wan). Because zines often present ideas that are not represented in mainstream media—or challenge the politics of mass media in general—they could also be incorporated into courses on communications, media, and popular culture (see Aulik “Zine”). Teachers might ask students to make a zine as an alternative to a mainstream magazine, encouraging them to critically analyze mass media as well as propose alternatives. Education instructors might have students review textbooks on a particular topic and create an alternative. Zines as reading and/or writing material are also relevant to a number of courses in gender and sexuality studies, including social inequalities (gender, race, and class), feminist and queer theories (zines help students connect theory to everyday life), and feminist movements (zines are, after all, a major way that movements communicate their goals) to name but a few.

Conclusions

Zines are effective teaching resources that help students connect theory and everyday life. One student writes, “The personal element of the zine was what helped

me connect course content to my own life, which may not have been achieved through writing a research paper.” In a similar statement, another student writes, “I much much much preferred doing this zine as opposed to a research paper. I spent more time working on the articles and actually wanted to work on it. Since it was a zine, I felt that it reflected myself more than a paper would and so I was motivated to make the project good since it would be a reflection on myself and since it was on a topic that I chose.” These reflections highlight how the personal nature of zines helped students connect biography and theory. Students were motivated to work on the project and spent considerable time working on their zines, reading and rereading articles, revising essays, and refining the connections between theory and everyday life.

The collaborative, participatory classroom environment during the zine-making process enables students to dig into their own projects as well as the projects of their classmates. In reviewing and giving feedback on their classmates’ writing, students learned something not only about feminist analysis or a particular topic, but also about how to communicate their ideas effectively. The collective writing, assembling, and distribution of zines gives students experience writing for a wide audience and then delivering their work to that audience themselves. In doing so, students felt that their voices mattered and that others in the campus community were taking their work seriously.

Zine-making gives students an opportunity to tap into passion and creativity as they connect feminist texts and ideas to their everyday lives. Zines became labors of love as students began the writing

process, allowing them to connect with feminist theory in personal and meaningful ways. As one student put it, “My zine in particular really made me see how sexism and racism are still very much embedded in our society.” Comments like this—and the zines themselves—indicate the continuing relevance of the feminist adage “the personal is political.”

Appendix: Zine Resources for Teachers

Barnard Zine Library—Barnard’s collection boasts the largest collection of zines written by (cis- and transgender) women with an emphasis on zines by women of color. Since 2004, zine librarian Jenna Freedman has also collected zines on feminism and femme identity by people of all genders. The zines in the collection are personal and political publications on activism, anarchism, body image, third-wave feminism, gender, parenting, queer community, riot grrrl, sexual assault, trans experience, and other topics. <http://zines.barnard.edu>

Etsy—Advertising itself as “the world’s largest marketplace for all things handmade,” Etsy is an excellent resource for buying zines. <http://www.etsy.com>

Microcosm Publishing—Microcosm is a large publisher and distributor of zines on a large number of topics, including parenthood, sex, food, bike culture, fashion, gardening, and more. <http://microcosm publishing.com/>

People of Color Zine Project—Founded in 2010, the People of Color (POC) Zine Project aims to make zines produced by people of color easy to find and distribute. Members of the collective tour campuses across the United States to read their work and distribute the work of others. <http://poczineproject.tumblr.com/>

Student’s Guide to Making Zines—This guide includes information on every aspect of zine making: necessary supplies, laying out artwork, making a zine online. <http://grrrlzines.net/writing/student%20zine%20guide.pdf>

Syndicated Zine Reviews—A site devoted to reviewing zines, which is useful for teachers seeking zines to use as reading material in classes. <http://syndicatedzinereviews.blogspot.com/>

Teaching with Zines—This resource list includes books, articles, and lesson plans (for high school courses) that speak to using zines in the classroom. <http://zines.barnard.edu/teachingwithzines>

We Make Zines—An online forum for people who make and read zines. Members of the site can read and write zine reviews, answer calls for submissions to edited collections, and interact with other zinesters. Membership is free. <http://wemakezines.ning.com/>

Wikibooks Zine Making Page—Site devoted to the practicalities of making zines, from the writing process to binding zines by sewing or stapling the pages. http://en.wikibooks.org/wiki/Zine_making

Zine Libraries—The most comprehensive and up-to-date list of zine libraries in the world. The list includes American libraries organized by state and international libraries in Australia, Canada, France, Germany, Japan, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. <http://zines.barnard.edu/zine-libraries>

NOTES

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gender studies students for allowing me to use images of their zines.

1. The Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies Program at the University of Pittsburgh offers undergraduate and graduate certificates. Undergraduates must take the introductory course as a requirement for the certificate. Students who are not enrolled in the program take the writing-intensive section of the course as part of the writing requirements needed to graduate from the Dietrich School of Arts & Sciences.

2. At Shabazz City High School in Madison, Wisconsin, teacher Denise Aulik teaches zine writing courses that connect zine-making to the history of "underground and dissident press."

3. The student zines referenced and shown here were donated to the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh's zine collection, making them public documents. In order to ensure privacy, I do not reference zines that students did not make available for public use.

4. Rebecca mentions "good hair" in this passage—a reference to the 2009 documentary *Good Hair* directed by Jeff Stilson.

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Zine-making the commons: Reflections on a DIY workshop

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Abstract

This article was written collectively in the spirit of the commons and homemade, do-it-yourself (HADIY) creativity. It is animated by the observation that the once-radical suggestion of Raymond Williams that culture is ordinary forms the ‘commonsense’ of cultural studies. However, it argues that this remains a blind spot in the landscape of cultural policy and the creative ecology, especially as it pertains to the everyday creativity of ordinary people. The article is inspired by critical (re)engagements with sites and spaces in cultural studies which is evidenced in our work on the generative complexities of HADIY practices and sites across Australia. It derives its insights from the bounded space of a creative workshop led by zine-maker Cora Zon facilitated by the co-authors and in which they participated. Cora guided attendees through a range of introductory creative techniques to make their own zines and learn about HADIY culture. The article reflects on the zine-making workshop as a

*Cora Zon is credited as author and subject of this article. Direct quotations are derived from an interview with Cora conducted by Paul Long and Suzanne Grasso in September 2024.

This piece was written collectively in the spirit of the commons and homemade, do-it-yourself creativity.

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potential commons space, illustrating its insights with pages from a zine which was collectively created following the workshop and available as supplementary material to download, read in physical form, preserve and share. The zine presents some of the possibilities of the form and further imagines the themes and experiences documented here, challenging the reader to 'do-it-yourself'.

Keywords

creativity, homemade, amateur, DIY, zine, commons

Prologue

The once-radical suggestion of Raymond Williams that culture is ordinary now forms 'the disciplinary commonsense' of cultural studies (Kay, 2021: 1011) yet remains a broader blind spot within the cultural policy landscape. We see this at play in *Revive*, the Australian Government's National Cultural Policy, the title of which signals its approach to invigorate the cultural sector post-COVID. Despite welcome engagement with some dimensions of First Nations and other nationally marginalised communities, *Revive* focuses overwhelmingly on professional artists, major cultural institutions and their audiences. As such, Williams' work – especially his belief in 'the creative capacities of ordinary people' (Kay, 2021: 1011) and grasp of the significance of the ordinary (Williams, 1989 [1958]) – remains animating for research on prosaic creativities and everyday cultural participation against and alongside publicly-funded and commercial spheres of cultural and creative industries.

So too is the concept of the commons. Reflecting on cultural studies and/from/of the Global South, Fong and Lin (2024: 5) explore *cultural commons* as sites which exist 'both inside and outside the system' to consider 'a vision of community-based commoning from within'. From this work, we see that critical (re)engagements with sites and spaces offer much inspiration and we take up this approach in our work on the generative complexities of homemade, amateur and do-it-yourself (hereafter HADIY) practices and sites across Australia. Here, we begin by thinking through a more bounded space: a zine-making workshop. Led by zine-maker Cora Zon, this open workshop was held in mid-2024 in Melbourne, Australia, as part of an annual festival held at an Australian university. Cora guided attendees through a range of introductory creative techniques to make their own zines and learn about HADIY culture. Here we reflect on the zine-making workshop as a potential commons space and consider what we have learnt about commoning from the workshop.

The images which punctuate this text are pages from a zine which we collectively created following Cora's workshop (see Figures 1-7, below). A supplement to our thoughts and reflections here, the zine can be downloaded and read in physical form as per the instructions in Figure 8 (below). The zine presents some of the possibilities of the form and further imagines the themes and experiences documented here.

Zine-making: the process

In Cora's workshop, we each produced our own personalised zine. A myriad of subjects, perspectives and colourful responses to the injunction to be creative; every document *sui*

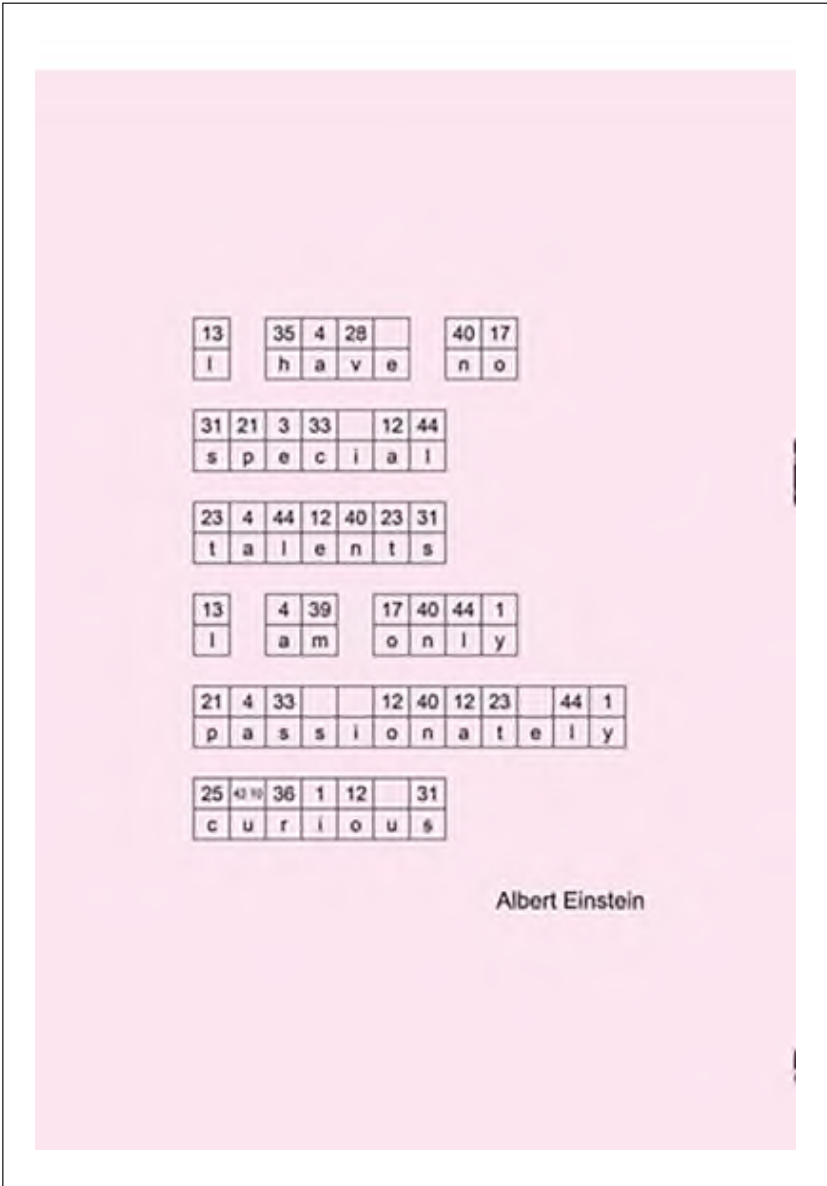


Figure 1. Authors’ zine page [see accompanying zine in supplementary material].

genris, yet conversely and recognisably a zine for the fact that each worked from an A3 piece of paper, folded and cut to create a physical template. A stack of magazines and newspapers had been scoured for inspiration, images and headlines appropriated, torn out or cut up and pasted as collage, background or newly configured statement and sign. Old bodies were given new heads, hands or legs, floral displays and borders decorating pages, typefaces reconvened to be vaguely reminiscent of the ransom-note style. Some



Figure 2. Authors' zine page [see accompanying zine in supplementary material].

drew and sketched their own images alongside the found materials. Some eschewed prose completely, others wrote up their inspiration, individuation expressed by handwriting and calligraphic expression.

Cora had brought a typewriter along. It remained untouched for the first half of the workshop, but eventually one participant proved a brave explorer and soon there was a line for the machine, for developing prose or playing with the figures and rhythms it produced from its keys and ribbon. When asked, Cora explained this choice of archaic instrument when every participant in the session was equipped with a smartphone and, most likely, a personal computer. The typewriter, she affirmed, was 'where zines began'; while acknowledging the value of digital creativity, its presence conveyed 'a part of the physicality of zine-making'.

We were then making zines anew while enjoining with a set of practices and challenges held in common by whoever designates that the pages they make constitute a zine. As Cora reported, her discovery of zining meant liberation from the constraints and barriers to entry of the publishing world to which she had once aspired. Zining was home-made: it could be avowedly amateur, do-it-yourself. It meant, as she said, 'anybody could do anything: they could write, they could draw, they could do poetry. It was really open, and I really liked the freedom and the accessibility of zines'. But with freedom comes great responsibility, and the flowering of expression that could be audited at the end of the workshop had begun with the considerable and fear-inducing challenge of the blank page. Even worse, the A3 sheet, when folded, created a zine of *eight* pages. Eight *blank* pages.



Figure 3. Authors’ zine page [see accompanying zine in supplementary material].

For Cora, the zine is ‘just a way of expressing yourself’. A zine could be about *anything* – but did we have anything to express? Something about the heart perhaps, a political point of view, a cultural review? Typewriter, coloured paper, pens and pencils, glossy printed pages of magazines waiting to be torn or cut up did not make the ready pages any *less* blank. Cora’s method to aid us was a version of what you hear in creative writing classes, to ‘write what you know’. In this case, she offered a starting point: an invitation to



Figure 4. Authors' zine page [see accompanying zine in supplementary material].

list twenty things from each participant's life 'that they really liked, to jumpstart the creative process', a positive and generative way to 'tap into a space where you start to activate your imagination. Go inward a bit'. Still, that's 20 things, but we did it: a zine of the found



Figure 5. Authors’ zine page [see accompanying zine in supplementary material].

poetry of the printed page (at least cut up to be so); a Beatles zine built on an apparently inexhaustible fascination with the band in the media; another eight pages (maybe one or two provocatively blank), asserting ‘This is not DIY art’, assessing what might be in or out of our assessment of the homemade, amateur and DIY.

There were over 30 of us in the workshop, each departing with something that constituted a zine: *our* zine. Maybe some left their zines behind, unrecognisable in the heaps of cuttings and discarded pages. For those with English as a second language – the majority



Figure 6. Authors' zine page [see accompanying zine in supplementary material].

of our collective being international students studying in Australia from across a number of Asian countries – the zine encouraged the diversity of expression Cora envisioned: diversity of languages, experiences, styles of representation. For some students among us, this creative opportunity was one encountered long ago in their education, certainly not usually one found in the social science space. For colleagues among us, this was a happy connection to something that was not labour. We worked alongside each other, in discussion and exchange, but not together as such. After all, we could all have produced a page or two and made one *super* zine. While we were inevitably operating under the

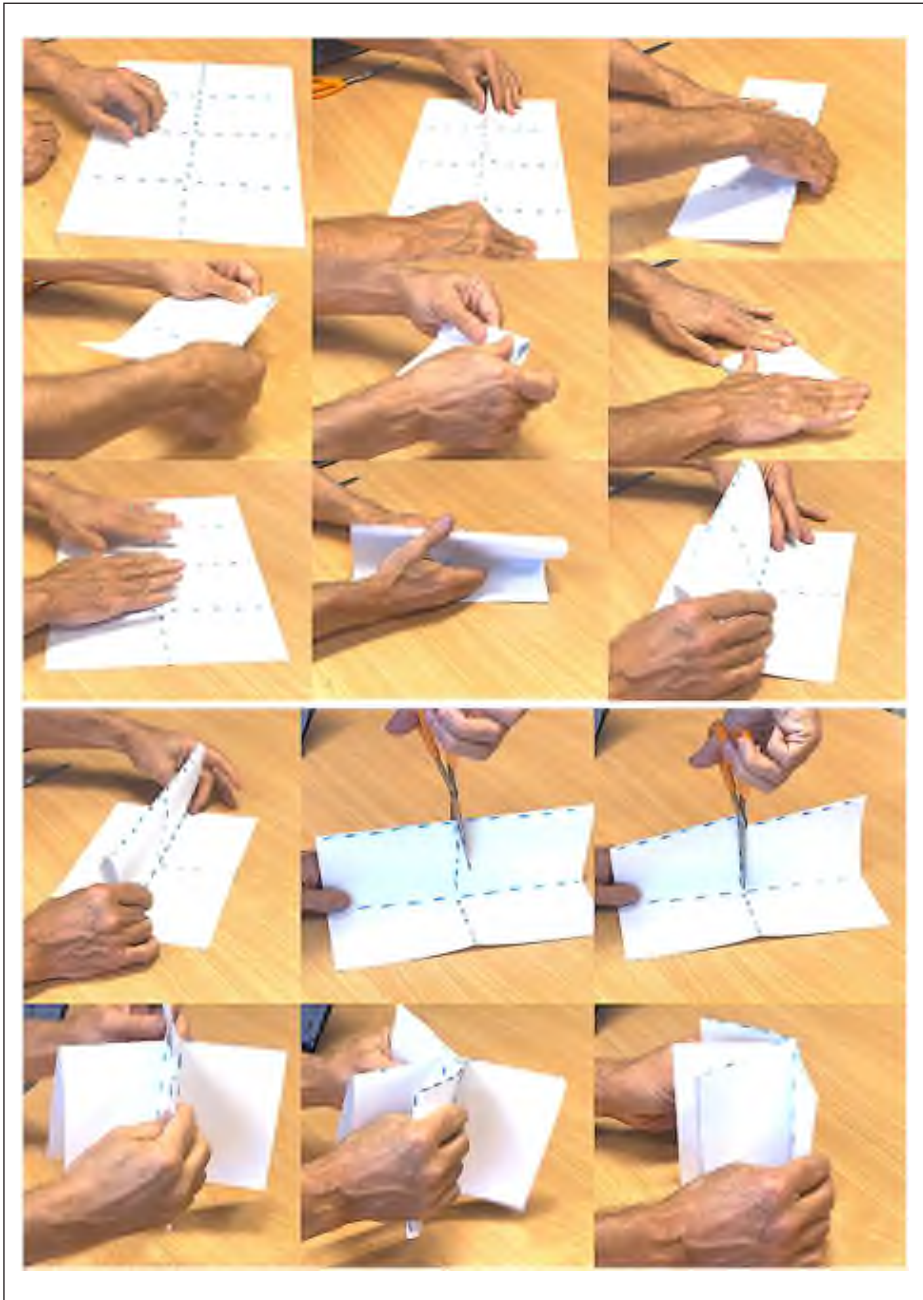


Figure 8. Take an A3 sheet of paper, fold it three times to make eight compartments on the sheet. Pinch and cut down the centre line. Fold to make an eight-page zine. Cut, paste, draw on the page at any time to create content. Alternatively make separate pages and edit them together or make your own rules.

however; the experience was momentary; some zines are made for the ages, some to be left around and found, and some specifically for the trash bin.

Zine-making: what is a zine?

Zines are independent, small-run, lo-fi, eclectic publications that people create themselves or in small collectives to share their interests, experiences, ideas or creative work. They can be handmade, hand-drawn, handwritten, typed, collaged, photocopied, stapled and/or hand-stitched: the creative diversity of the form means zines defy easy definition, yet each possesses a recognisable iconicity that makes material a DIY ethos and enlivens the substantial histories of independent and amateur publishing which zines progress (Radway, 2011; Watson and Bennett, 2021). The zine developed its iconic contemporary form throughout the 20th century as fan communities ballooned through postal networks and media technologies such as the photocopier became widely accessible (Bennett, 2005; Duncombe, 1997; Piepmeier, 2008; Poletti, 2008). Key figures of this recent history include sci-fi magazine readers who circulated their own fanfiction and fanzines in the 1930s, and punks and riot grrrls who embraced the medium as an alternative anti-mainstream mode to share material, build networks and connect throughout the 1970s and 1990s in particular. Zines have a significant place within feminist and queer cultures and histories too, intertwined with and apart from various other (sub)cultural manifestations (Barrière and Finkel, 2022; Ding, 2024; Grinnell, 2022; Radway, 2012). While still forming around other nuclei of interest – as with 20th century fanzines where more distinct networks were tied to specific music scenes, sports teams, other cultural or political interests or marginal subjectivities (e.g. Šima, 2022) – zine communities increasingly coalesce today around a central love for the zine itself.

Despite concerns that the Internet would herald the death of the form, zine genres have proliferated, zine fairs continue to grow, and public and academic interest in zine cultures and zine collections/archives is rising. This is in part due to the new scale of peers and audiences that creators can now reach with e-commerce sites and social networking platforms, as well as the broader intertwining of – as well as resistance to – the analogue and the digital in everyday life. Even as they seem to grow in popularity and circulate via mainstream digital platforms, zines continue to move ‘on the margins’ (Chidgey, 2006: 1) and enact a handmade, alternative, HADIY practice in opposition to mainstream, exclusionary, technocratic discourses and modes of creative production (Fife, 2019). The significance of this can be glimpsed through changing lexicon within zine cultures, such as the shift from zine networks to zine communities (Piepmeier, 2008) which reflect the participatory intent and invitation of zine-making (Triggs, 2010: 209). It can also be seen in the aesthetic modalities that remain popular: small physical print runs despite the infinite readerships and ease of digital publishing; creative tools such as typewriters (or the use of typewriter-esque fonts in digitally-made zines) that are clunky and leave traces of mistakes; the continued resistance to markers of artistic quality – the kind of ‘polish’ that draws acclaim within art and wonder fields; and the primacy of the hand-held experience of creation, acquisition, sharing, and reading (see Watson and Bennett, 2021).

An experiential dynamic, an open and intentional invitation to seek, play and try was central to the ethos Cora reflected. Discussing her style of approach to running such workshops, Cora explained that her role is

more about holding space. . . you could set out the same materials on a table and people may or may not sit down and make zines. But there's something about holding space, encouraging, just offering your energy, an intentional energy that we're going to do this.

With her presence, she works to cultivate the sense of openness and access that drew her to the medium as an alternative to traditional forms of creative work and publishing. Cora said, 'when I came across zines it was quite different. Anybody could do anything, they could write, they could draw, they could do poetry. . . it was really open, and I really liked the freedom and the accessibility of zines'. We see the participatory ethos of zine cultures in the experiential dynamic of the workshop: in the experience of making a zine yourself, in making it alongside others. As Cora suggests, participation is embodied in the form of zines themselves. The aesthetic qualities of a zine enliven a HADIY invitation. The sites and spaces where zines are found, stored, shared, archived and experienced carry a similar quality. This resonates with conceptualisations of the commons: commoning as a process, the commons as a thing, and commoning in/as sites and spaces of situating coalitions and communities of/for mutual interest (e.g. Fong and Lin, 2024).

Zine-making: where do zines go?

Here one detects how zines and zine-making expresses a specific ethos of the commons and connects with wider ideas of its maintenance and sustainability. First, in the form of the object itself: a materialisation of cultural expression untutored, uncontrolled and independent of any authority but that of a collectively owned agreement of what a zine might be. One's zine is *still* a zine even if another individual, however unlikely and whatever their authority and experience as a maker, might challenge that fact. Second, and building on this community of interest, is the making of zines as an articulation of the commons as practice and process. This process is expansive enough to incorporate the work of the individual who imagines themselves to be the latest inventor of any one zine as well as the domain of those who actively share in zining as commoning. This quality is manifest in the discovery of a wider field of practice and recognition of one's inclusion and approval of one's creativity within it.

While zine communities are informally constituted, it is important to register where and how self-made organisations operate and connect with public institutions and can affirm the values associated with them. Zines may be ephemeral by design, but their method merits recognition and preservation as public goods. A signal example is Melbourne's Sticky Institute, affectionately known as Sticky: a volunteer, artist run, not for profit zine-making hub which has been run by Luke Sinclair since 2001. This is a shared working and retail space in which one can make, buy and sell zines, its connectivity signalled by the fact that almost 20,000 zines have circulated through Sticky since it first opened. It was and continues to be the only zine shop in Australia, proudly representing 'the zine community, DIY ethics and the enduring spirit of punk' (Sticky Institute,

n.d.). Sticky supports the zine-making ecology by hosting two annual zine fairs that are free to attend as stallholders and attendees: *Hallozeen* (launched in 2013) and the *Festival of the Photocopier* (launched in 2010), where 200 stall holders and attendees gather over two days to give away, buy, swap, sell and celebrate all things zine. All the proceeds from zine sales go directly to the zine makers.

Cora recalled her excitement the first time she took a zine to Sticky and placed copies on its shelves. She was further delighted to find how ‘one of them has ended up at a Canberra library, and it’s catalogued. My very first zine. So that’s pretty exciting’. Outside of Sticky and festivals, zines are collected, exhibited and archived in Australia through a variety of GLAM institutions. These include the Museum of Contemporary Art Australia (2024), the National Gallery of Victoria (n.d.), Monash University, The University of Melbourne, and the State Library of Victoria which now holds the largest zine collection in Australia after the acquisition of the Polyester Books (2018) zine collection. The National Library of Australia acquires zines through zine fairs and donations (Ronning, 2020); the most notable collection in the library is the Nick Henderson (n.d.) Zine Collection, where Cora’s zine is now housed (Zon, 2020).

Zine makers like Cora are proud that their creativity is recognised and elevated by the selection, collection and archival preservation by a national institution. Cora expressed her delight at encountering zines in the State Library of Victoria, of enjoying the process of ‘tipping out the boxes of zines on the table in the reading room and, with gloved hands, poring over the zines with a sense of wonder’. Nonetheless, the process of consecration is not without its critics. John Stevens, chair of Sticky Institute and Arts Librarian at State Library Victoria, notes that some associate the collection and archiving of labelled zines, packaged in Mylar slips and stored in temperature and humidity controlled, archival quality, acid-free boxes as spaces ‘where zines go to die’. Such perspectives pose challenges to the ephemeral, spontaneous, informal, peripatetic and undisciplined nature of the DIY zine when it appears ‘enclosed’ by formalised, institutionalised technologies of barcode and catalogue.

Stevens (2017) responds to this challenge by asserting the integrity of the State Library as a public institution and the value of this process that seeks to archive zines as history:

We are able to provide that for makers and for those interested in zines. And in terms of being able to engage with the community, as time goes on, as awareness of the collection builds, to be able to facilitate interaction between zine makers and zine enthusiasts and the collection.

Epilogue

Zining is an instance of the homemade, amateur, DIY; a materialisation, space and process of commoning culture and creativity. Snapshots indicate its prodigious expression: Sticky’s inventory, the number of stallholders at *Festival of the Photocopier* or the fact that Luke Sinclair’s *You* zine has appeared *weekly* since its inception in 2001.

In general, zine-making constitutes a decidedly non-commercial form where its producers are ignorant of or actively resistant to growth models, exploitation of income

streams and routes to profit. Stevens (2017) observes how even when dealing with those who are not invested in particular ideologies such as anarchism or socialism,

there is still a pervading kind of belief that advertising and things like that don't really work within zines or don't really work within the zine community. And because of that, and because zines themselves are made in quite a small number and they're often not made for much money, there's not much money to be made off them really.

While zines might be sold and bought, bartered or given away, it would be difficult to imagine that any one example might enable its creator to make a living from their labour, let alone imagine the form as a creative industry.

To imagine such a connection may be contrary, but points to a wider absence in thinking about the continuum of the cultural economy, between commercial imperatives, public funding, everyday cultural participation and ordinary creative capacities.

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Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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Biographical notes

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Suzanne Grasso is currently working on the 'Mapping Australian Homemade, Amateur & Do-it-Yourself Cultural Economies' Australian Research Council project at Monash University. While working at State Library Victoria (SLV), Suzanne co-founded 'The Goat', a zine created for and by SLV staff to recognise and foster creativity and camaraderie behind the scenes at SLV.

Cora Zon is the producer and co-host of ZINE on Yarra Valley FM 99.1, Australia's only community radio program dedicated to zines. Cora has facilitated zine making workshops in libraries and schools, curated art zine exhibitions and is Festival Director of the Healesville Zine and Comic Festival.

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“I feel my inner child out”: Zine-making as a data collection tool in narrative inquiry

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ABSTRACT

This article attempts to answer two current calls in applied linguistics, including a specific call for more methodological investment in narrative inquiry (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021) and a general call for methodological innovation in all areas of applied linguistics (Li et al., 2023; Li & Prior, 2022). This article proposes zine-making as a fun, creative, ethical, and empowering data collection method in narrative inquiry (NI) in applied linguistics. Following a literature review of NI, zines and zine-making, I delineate the theoretical links between zine-making and NI in applied linguistics. I then demonstrate how zine-making was used to elicit individuals' life stories by reflecting on my experiences. An illustration of a sample of the findings from the zine-making data in NI is presented, along with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of zine-making from participants' perspectives. The article concludes with implications of zine-making as a methodological innovation in NI. Readers of this article will understand the basics of using zine-making for data collection in NI while being aware of and prepared for its limitations.

1. Introduction

...we welcome innovation and variety, without promoting overkill! We welcome approaches that make sense to researchers – teachers, teacher educators, academics – in their own contexts of work. Approaches that are feasible and useful to them, and that are equitable for all concerned.

(Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021, p. 2)

I begin my paper with this quote from the editorial article “Pushing the edge in narrative inquiry” by Barkhuizen and Consoli (2021) for a Special-topic Issue of the *Journal System*. The quote indicates an encouragement for methodological innovations in narrative inquiry (NI) that “make sense” to narrative researchers in their own contexts. It is the proposal of zine-making as a fun, creative, ethical, and empowering data collection tool in NI is the focus of this article. I wish to share this method, which has proved its feasibility and benefits in my context, with the wider narrative research community. I hope this proposal contributes to the current literature on methodological innovation in NI, without intending to abandon existing approaches, despite the discussions of its advantages over some of these approaches in this article.

This article comprises three main sections: literature review, researcher reflexivity, and illustration and discussion. The first section offers a brief introduction to NI and its five core dimensions, zines and zine-making, and a discussion of theoretical connections between NI and zine-making. This section identifies the research gap in the literature and highlights the potential of zine-making for NI. The second section offers a reflective account of my zine-making experiences, both as a participant in a zine-making workshop (focused

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on *feminists' navigating spaces in academia*) and as a facilitator of a zine-making activity (focused on *L2 PhD students' academic journeys in the UK*). These experiences suggest that zine-making can create a welcoming, safe, and inspiring environment for participants to reflect, create, and present their visualized life stories. Guidelines on how zine-making can be employed to collect people's life stories are outlined in both examples, justifying the contextual feasibility and appropriateness of using zine-making to elicit narrative data. The third section, illustration, and discussion, is based on two sets of data, including original zine-making data and semi-structured interview data, contributed by some participants of zine-making on *L2 PhD students' academic journeys in the UK*. Using the zine-making data, I present a sample of the findings that the analysis of zine-making data can generate in NI. Drawing on participants' feedback on zine-making experience in the interviews, I summarize the strengths and limitations of zine-making as a data collection tool in NI. This section thereby justifies the usefulness of zine-making as a data collection tool in NI and zine-making as a fun, creative, ethical and empowering tool for collecting people's life stories despite its limitations.

This article concludes with the implications of zine-making as a methodological innovation in NI, emphasizing its enormous potential. Additionally, I restate the purpose of this article and encourage narrative inquirers to consider zine-making as an alternative data collection tool in NI, providing they find this tool contextually appropriate.

2. Literature review

2.1. NI and five core dimensions

Narrative inquiry (NI), a crucial methodology in the humanities and social sciences, allows researchers to gain knowledge and make sense of life stories from participants' viewpoints (Barkhuizen, 2019). For instance, in language education, it has become an established approach to researching second and foreign language learning (e.g., Ahn, 2021; İnözü, 2018) and language teacher professional development (e.g. Barkhuizen & Wette, 2008; Johnson & Golombek, 2002). In simple terms, NI refers to research involving stories (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). However, NI is more than just telling stories (Bell, 2002). During narrative production and analysis, and the presentation and dissemination of the NI findings, complex knowledge construction, referred to as narrative knowledging (Barkhuizen, 2011), involves narrators, researchers, and readers of research reports. Although the operationalization of stories can vary in NI studies (Benson, 2014; Polkinghorne, 1995), five inter-connected core dimensions, each of which is a continuum, have been summarized to explain the fundamental features of NI:

(1) *Narrative as the object of study and narrative as a means to study a phenomenon*

For example, in Ahn's (2021) study, she uses drawings and verbal narratives by Korean undergraduate students to explore how they make sense of themselves in relation to English and how they perceive the impact of English on their future lives. As such, this study lies more towards the latter side of this continuum. However, if we focus solely on the analysis of the organization and presentation of the elements in the drawings, this study sits more on the former side of the continuum.

(2) *Stories as interaction and stories from interaction*

When stories are co-constructed through interaction, such as interviews, the analytical approach to stories can occupy either end of the continuum. For example, Riordan and Farr (2014) investigate the identity construction of student teachers through the narratives within the discourse of their reflective discussions about teaching. Drawing on discourse analysis techniques, this study depicts how student teachers construct their novice identities in these discussions. As such, this study sits towards the end of using *stories as interaction*. However, if the narrative in this study were analyzed thematically, this study would possibly use excerpts from the discussions, thus analyzing the *stories from interaction*.

(3) *Less and more researcher engagement*

This dimension is highlighted by narrative researchers' involvement in the lives of their research participants. The level of researcher engagement impacts the quality of the collected data and the validity of data analysis. However, this does not imply that more researcher engagement equates to higher quality of NI studies, as the appropriateness of researcher engagement is contextually bound. Take Ahn's (2021) study as an example again, the level of researcher engagement is situated towards the side of less researcher engagement, as there is no further engagement beyond collecting narrative data from students, and the analysis and (re)presentation of their data. Nevertheless, Ahn argues specifically that such a level of engagement with the participants can mitigate potential influences on participation, data, and interpretation. Whereas in Consoli's (2021b) study, which aims to uncover Chinese postgraduate students' motivation in a UK university (before, during, and after pre-sessional), he is significantly more closely involved with his participants in several ways, as the full account of his experience (Consoli, 2021a) indicates. First, he was the pre-sessional teacher of these participants and followed them from their professional life to their postgraduate life. Second, after interviews, he offered tutorial-like interactions to support participants academically, as part of the 'benefit' for their participation. Additionally, he organized social gatherings for his participants to show his care towards them. While acknowledging the challenges resulting from this additional engagement with his participants, he argued for 'good enough data' in this study.

(4) *Non-story data and data in story form*

Narrative traditions are culturally bound and thus the presence of life stories can differ in many ways, including structure and style (Pavlenko, 2002). Therefore, placing narratives along this dimension is challenging. This is particularly true with visual narratives, like drawings (e.g. Ahn, 2021) and photos (e.g. Greenier & Moodie, 2021), which do not align with conventional thinking of what a story is. For convenience and to avoid confusion, this article adopts Kramp's (2004) understanding of story as a narrative structure that organizes human events, with character(s), plot, time, and place as its integral parts. Considering this

conceptualization, data in Ahn's (2021) can be categorized as *data in story form*, since the four integral parts can be easily identified in both drawings and verbal narratives.

(5) *Analysis of narrative and narrative analysis*

In simple terms, *analysis of narrative* usually involves identifying common themes among narrative data, typically through thematic/content analysis. For example, Greenier and Moodie (2021) identify three intertwining themes throughout their participant's career trajectory by iterative analysis of narratives containing pictures and interviews. Therefore, their NI study sits more toward the end of *analysis of narrative*. Ahn's (2021) study, which presents the stories of six participants, can be placed towards the end of *narrative analysis*, as the telling of participants' stories constitutes the main research outcome (Benson, 2014).

In applied linguistics, various methodological approaches have been adopted or developed in NI research. Some notable examples include autobiography, positioning analysis, small story analysis, writing as analysis, narrative frames, and short story analysis (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021). The fact that research informed by narrative can take a variety of forms has raised the question of whether NI may lose its meaning (Davis & Dwyer, 2017). For example, Michael Bamberg (see interview in Davis & Dwyer, 2017) warns that "an anything-goes attitude" (p. 228) could disintegrate the purity of narrative. Freeman (2015) describes this phenomenon as "narrative fatigue due to overkill" (p. 22). On the other hand, NI welcomes and recognizes innovation and creativity that maintain methodological rigor and make sense to narrative researchers in their own contexts of work. Indeed, narrative researchers have been encouraged to push the edge of NI through creative, reflexive, and ethical considerations (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021). Recent years have seen a growing body of literature working towards this goal (e.g. Ahn, 2021; Golombek & Johnson, 2021; Greenier & Moodie, 2021; Randez, 2023). This article aims to contribute to this burgeoning methodological literature by proposing zine-making as a fun, creative, ethical, and empowering data collection tool for NI.

2.2. Zines and zine-making

Zines are small, self-published booklets, created by "piecing together" (Lonsdale, 2015, p. 8) multimodal resources, including "original and/or appropriated texts and images" (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014, p. 297). Popular methods of creating zines include collages and drawings, which are "not prescribed or predetermined in technique, media, or format" (Weida, 2020, p. 270). Zines can contain various contents: concepts, trends, rumors, art, essays, poetry, diaries, and more (Ashtari et al., 2022), and can take various formats and sizes (Lonsdale, 2015). See Fig. 1 for an example of a zine (or two zine pages) created by me in 2022 in a zine-making workshop focused on *feminists' navigating spaces in academia*. This event will be elaborated further later.

The earliest zines can be traced back to the 1920s when small pamphlets were created as a means of communication during philosophical and artistic movements (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014). The earliest zines, known as fanzines, were created by science fiction readers to share their reactions to science fiction stories (Creasap, 2014; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014; Gray et al., 2022; Weida, 2020). This is considered the first of the three cultural moments where zines emerged (Gray et al., 2022). Feminist zines were later created



Fig. 1. An example of a zine.

during the punk movement in the 1970s and the riot grrrl movement in the 1990s (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014; Valli, 2021). Zines have since continued to play a prominent role in feminist activism (Gray et al., 2022; Von Wald, 2023). With the advancement of technology, electronic zines began to appear in the 1990s (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014). The 1990s also witnessed the proliferation of many zines focusing on art and education (Weida, 2020). Zines have become more diverse in forms and contents while maintaining their popularity among marginalized communities (Silberstein & Thomas, 2022).

Traditionally, zine-making involves both the creation of zines and the local distribution and archival processes of zine collection within zine communities (Weida, 2020). Although zines can be created independently, this article conceptualizes zine-making as a collective act where participants learn about zines, make, and share their zine pages/zines, which can later be made into a collective zine or a collection of zines for distribution purposes within and even beyond the community. Therefore, the data generated from zine-making includes zines and the explanations of zines. When zine-making is used to collect people's life stories, participants make zine pages/zines to tell their personal life experiences, which reflects the given topic (for example, my zine in Fig. 1).

In disciplines outside applied linguistics, particularly in feminism studies and social work education, zine-making has been recognized as both a pedagogical tool and a research tool. As an engaging and empowering pedagogical tool, it enhances teaching and learning experience by fostering a more egalitarian classroom environment (Ashtari et al., 2022; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014). As an effective participatory dissemination tool, it enables research participants to interpret transcribed texts from researcher-conducted interviews and subsequently disseminate their output in the form of a collective zine (Valli, 2021). As a data collection tool, zine-making has been validated as a feminist autobiographical act, providing a valuable avenue for gaining insights into feminist life (Gray et al., 2022).

In applied linguistics, although zine-making remains relatively under-researched, it has been promoted as a valuable pedagogical tool, particularly within the context of English writing classrooms (e.g. Rallin & Barnard, 2008). As a research tool, zine-making has been integrated into classrooms as a literary practice to explore students' identity, agency, and relationship trajectories in an English language arts (ELA) classroom (Jones, 2017). This study reveals that participants use zines as an expression of their life experiences. This finding suggests the potential of zine-making as a tool for data collection in NI. However, a further review of the literature indicates that this potential has yet to be fully realized in NI. This is striking considering the advantages of zine-making in eliciting people's voices (Valli, 2021), and life experiences (Gray et al., 2022; Jones, 2017), and in supporting people's identity while generating a sense of ownership (Lonsdale, 2015). This article seeks to address this gap in the literature while answering the aforementioned call for more methodological investment in NI in applied linguistics (Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021). Additionally, the article echoes the growing attention to methodological innovation in applied linguistics (Li et al., 2023; Li & Prior, 2022).

2.3. Theoretical connections

2.3.1. Multimodal trend

According to Barkhuizen et al. (2014), multimodal data refers to narratives constructed through more than one mode (for example, photographs in addition to written or oral narratives). They categorize multimodal data into four types: (1) researcher-produced multimodal texts as prompts or supplementary narratives; (2) participant-produced multimodal data according to researchers' instructions (e.g. Ahn, 2021; İnözü, 2018; Kalaja et al., 2013); (3) participant-produced multimodal data as products of their regular working agenda, and (4) participant-provided multimodal data according to researchers' instructions (Greenier & Moodie, 2021).

Recent years have seen a growing interest in multimodal narratives in NI (Barkhuizen et al., 2014; Benson, 2014). Particularly, the emphasis is on using visual narratives. The benefits of multimodal narratives are various. For instance, Ahn (2021) uses a multimodal framework, the combination of visual (drawing) and verbal (written accounts of the drawings and a follow-up interview) means, to explore how Korean undergraduate students depict themselves about English and the impact of English on their future lives. Methodologically, she finds that incorporating visual data enables her participants to make strong claims and allows her to gain a more complex understanding of their identity construction.

Zine-making can generate both zines, as shown in Fig. 1, and zine-related explanations (usually in either oral or written form). Thus, zine-making data can be categorized as (2) participant-produced multimodal data according to narrative researchers' instructions (Barkhuizen et al., 2014). Therefore, zine-making, when used as a data collection tool in NI, aligns with the multimodal trend.

2.3.2. Ethical practice

NI in applied linguistics, with its goal to elicit, analyze, and (re)-present participants' life stories, brings upon narrative researchers "complex, ideological, and emotional responsibilities" (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 393). As such, narrative researchers are expected to satisfy both macroethical principles (macroethics, referring to the procedural ethics of review boards and the professional code of conduct) and microethical principles (microethics, referring to everyday ethical dilemmas encountered in specific research contexts) to ensure that ethical research is in place (De Costa, Randez et al., 2021).

To fulfill microethics, narrative researchers should observe three core ethical principles: (1) respect for persons; (2) yielding optimal benefits while minimizing harm, and (3) the preservation of justice (De Costa, Randez et al., 2021). The first principle is usually complied with by seeking participants' informed consent and ensuring the protection of their personal identity, whereas the latter two receive far less attention in research (Kubanyiova, 2013). Therefore, to conduct NI ethically, narrative researchers must ensure that their decisions about narrative data collection, analysis, and (re)-presentation observe the three core ethical principles, with special efforts devoted to the latter two principles.

Zine-making, when employed as a data collection tool in NI, shows enormous potential for achieving such ethical goals. Firstly,

zine-making as a tool for narrative data collection is accessible to any type of participant, since “anyone—from artists and writers, wishers and lovers, to students and teachers and everybody else—can make a zine” (Ashtari et al., 2022, p. 5). Secondly, it empowers participants by challenging the traditional way of expression (Damon et al., 2022), enabling them to “tap into passion and creativity” (Creasap, 2014, p. 166) to tell their idiosyncratic stories (Valli, 2021) and make “the invisible visible” (Ashtari et al., 2022, p. 16). Research on zine-makers has found that they advocate the form and freedoms that zines provide (Bryant, 2023). Thirdly, zine-making is “the gateway for people to join a community” (Bryant, 2023, p. 2) to express, access, and network, constituting a transformative way of data collection. Fourth, zine-making as a data collection tool has the potential to equalize the power hierarchy between researchers and participants, as equalized relationships have been found between teachers and students when it is used as a pedagogical activity in the classroom (e.g. Ashtari et al., 2022; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014). Lastly, for benefits beyond zine-making, zines can assist participants in developing resilient practices to cope with their fears, anxiety, and rage at social problems (Von Wald, 2023) and prove effective in chronicling emerging communities, including refugees and migrants, the diasporas of gender, youth, and identity, enabling their cultural participation within the main society (Bryant, 2023). In this sense, zine-making as a tool to collect narratives not only benefits its participants in the research but also after research, thus contributing to the three core principles.

3. Researcher reflexivity

In line with the reflexive turn in applied linguistics (Mann, 2016), applied linguists are now expected to illustrate and scrutinize their reflexivity in their published work (De Costa, 2024). This phenomenon is particularly important for narrative researchers, who are more than just storytellers (Bell, 2002) and are “intimately implicated in their research activities” (Barkhuizen, 2011, p. 393). Narrative researchers are called upon to be sensitive to their relationships with their research participants and their microethical decisions in collecting, analyzing, and reporting data (De Costa, Randez et al., 2021). Reflexivity in NI contributes to transparency, rigor, and additional methodological legitimacy. By performing an elevated level of reflexivity, narrative researchers can enhance the rigor of their NI study (Consoli, 2021b). Additionally, when narrative researchers are transparent about their NI research, they are not hiding the mess (Rabidge, 2017). This enables readers to evaluate their research and replicate the results (De Costa, Sterling et al., 2021).

Researcher reflexivity requires researchers to “acknowledge their own presence within the research processes, thereby identifying how their positionalities may shape the social reality under investigation” (Consoli & Ganassin, 2023, p. 3). An inclination is that some researchers may equate researcher reflexivity to researchers’ awareness and ability to prevent themselves from damaging or contaminating the research. To address this issue, a life capital lens has been proposed (Consoli, 2022). Life capital is depicted as one’s symbolic wealth, which can be interpreted as one’s life experiences and the associated “memories, desires, emotions, attitudes, opinions” (Consoli, 2021c, p. 122; Consoli & Ganassin, 2023, p. 6). It is argued that through a life capital lens, researchers can recognize their own complex life ecologies to enrich their findings and honor the humanness of the research (Consoli, 2022).

Therefore, to fulfill the expectation for narrative researchers to perform reflexivity, acknowledge my complex life ecologies, investigate the life capital I have brought to this study, and explain the appropriateness of zine-making for eliciting life stories, I now proceed to explain my zine-making experiences.

My initial encounter with zines and zine-making occurred in 2022 when I participated in the workshop on *feminists’ navigating spaces in academia* and created my first zine, as shown in Fig. 1. This two-hour workshop, organized by researchers specializing in the study of women and gender from sociology, aimed to form a space for feminist PhD students and postdoctoral researchers to gather, reflect, and share experiences of navigating conflicted spaces in academia through zine-making. The objective was to create a self-help zine with tips by assembling all participants’ zine artifacts. I was drawn to this event, firstly because at that time I was struggling with my new role as a PhD researcher both academically and psychologically, and sought communication, assistance, and guidance. Additionally, I was curious about how zine-making could facilitate the achievement of such objectives.

This workshop attracted around 10 female PhD students including me. Before gathering in a room and sitting around a table for zine-making, we had a brief socializing with each other while refreshments were provided. The detailed procedures of the zine-making workshop were as follows: first, we were introduced to zines with zine samples. Then, we were provided with materials (e.g., blank A4 paper, old magazines, scissors, glue, colorful taps, pens, and decorative items like colorful buttons, and craft glitter) and given approximately one hour to make our zines/zine pages. Finally, we were invited to share our stories orally by explaining our zines. At the end of the event, the workshop organizers collected our zine artifacts, which were later made into a collective zine, as promised. This collective zine was both digitized and printed, circulating among the participants and within the research community.

As a participant in this activity, I experienced a sense of pleasure and accomplishment in successfully visualizing my story as a female in academia into a zine artifact (as shown in Fig. 1). I appreciated the comfort of sharing my private stories with peers and found inspiration in listening to others’ stories. I was also surprised by the willingness and openness of many participants, including me, to share very personal stories, depicted in their zines with a group of people whom we had just met. Throughout the entire process, I felt cared for, supported, and understood. Although, as the organizers had warned before the event, problems might not be solved with a single event or a self-help zine, I did feel empowered after zine-making. As such, my intentions in attending the workshop were fulfilled.

With another hat as a researcher, I noticed the creative and diverse zines that we, as first-time zine makers, managed to produce in a very limited time. The rich data (including zines and zine explanations) from this zine-making workshop could be collected to explore female PhD students’ life stories or identities. From this experience, I concluded that zine-making seemed to be a fun, creative, ethical, and empowering tool for eliciting people’s life stories. I began to consider its potential for NI in applied linguistics.

My experience as a zine-making facilitator in 2023 convinced me of the usefulness of zine-making as a data collection tool in NI

applied linguistics. This zine-making activity was part of a one-day conference, a funded team project led by me, aiming to support L2 PhD students' academic journeys in the UK, with a specific emphasis on the interplay of language, well-being, and productivity. In the morning, the conference started with a speed-dating style networking, followed by a talk on PhD wellbeing and on-site mindfulness practice. In the afternoon, participants joined in a zine-making activity and an outdoor wellbeing walk. We believed these activities could provide valuable opportunities for participants to network, reflect, learn, discuss, discover, and develop, serving the aim of the conference. Specifically, I oversaw the zine-making activity, as I proposed the idea of zine-making, and I was the only team member who had some knowledge of zines and zine-making. Drawing on my previous zine-making experience, I arranged the 21 zine-making participants into groups of five or six and devised the following four steps to create a 90-minute zine-making activity:

1. Get to Know: An Introduction to zines and zine-making (10 min)
2. Have a Go: Participants make zines with provided materials (30 min)
3. Display and Share: Participants share their zines and tell their zine stories in oral/written forms (40 min)
4. Reflect and Conclude: An overall reflection on the zine-making activity (10 min)

The first stage went according to plan and every group received what I categorized as four types of zine-making materials (See Fig. 2):

1. Zine base materials: plain and colorful A4 paper
2. Zine content materials: old magazines; flyers and leaflets; highlighter & marker pens (various colors)
3. Zine decoration materials: art stickers; dry flowers; glitter glue pens
4. Supporting stationery: scissors; glue sticks; double-sided sticky tapes; black sign pen

After ensuring every group received the materials and addressing all questions about zines and zine-making, I started the zine-making session by playing some calming background music to create a relaxing atmosphere for reflection. This second stage exceeded the planned duration by around 20 min, resulting in a significant truncation of the last two stages. In the third stage, I invited participants to share their zines either orally with a group or in written form on a Padlet platform. In total, eight out of the 21 participants presented their zine explanations orally, and seven of them along with another 10 provided written zine explanations on Padlet. Due to time constraints, the fourth stage was hurried with very brief comments from participants regarding their first zine-making experiences. Nevertheless, we received very positive comments, including *"This is so much fun!"* and *"I feel my inner child out!"*.

As a facilitator of this zine-making activity, I had the chance to observe the participants' engagement throughout this zine-making activity. I witnessed varied approaches to zine creation. I heard chats and laughter from some groups. I noticed gradually, some participants began to open up and share the stories of their challenging PhD academic journeys in the UK. I saw many nodding and smiling in the room while one was sharing his/her PhD stories. It became evident to me that zine-making effectively fostered a welcoming, safe, and inspiring environment for participants to reflect, create, and share their life stories.

To meet the requirements of our sponsor for an event report/presentation about this conference and with participants' consent, we collected participants' zine pages, video-recorded participants' oral zine explanations, and participants' written zine explanations on Padlet. These zine pages were later compiled into a digitized collective zine, circulating among the participants, organizers, and the sponsor's community. While taking stock of the creative, rich, and diverse data gathered from this zine-making activity, I recognized the significant potential for use in NI studies on L2 PhD students' academic journeys in the UK. This realization solidified my belief in the feasibility of zine-making as a fun, creative, ethical, and empowering tool to collect data in NI. As such, for the study in this article, I reached out to zine-making participants to seek their permission to use their zine-making data and to gather their perspectives on the strengths and limitations of zine-making as a tool for eliciting people's life stories.



Fig. 2. An example of zine-making materials.

4. Illustration and discussion

After obtaining full ethics approval from the institution, I emailed the 21 zine-making participants, inviting them to participate in this study. Table 1 presents the demographic information of the seven participants who volunteered.

Two sets of data were collected: (1) zine-making data, including zine artifacts, video-recorded zine explanations, and written zine explanations, and (2) semi-structured interview data (video recorded). Appendix 1 provides the interview guiding questions. Fig. 3 presents an example of the first set of data contributed by Participant 1, Demir. The recordings of both sets of data were transcribed into their original language.

Several strategies aligning with the stated three core principles (De Costa, Randez et al., 2021) were employed to ensure ethical conduct in this study. First, considering that the first set of data contained participants' life stories, potentially "very personal and often cover confidential, ethically delicate topics" (Barkhuizen, 2019, p. 193), I made it clear to participants that they could keep this data private and contribute to the study only with their interview data. Participant 6, Chen, chose this option and therefore, I did not collect the first set of data from her. Second, upon collecting the six zines (See Fig. 4), I meticulously reviewed each zine to remove any personally identifiable information, ensuring participants' privacy (See zines 1 and 5). Third, in the interview, I prompted participants to reflect on their progress since the zine-making activity for their wellbeing, aiming to maximize the benefits of their participation in this study. Fourth, I assured my participants that they could select their preferred online conferencing platform for the interview and choose to have their cameras on or off during the interview. Furthermore, they could use a preferred language (Chinese or English) for communication. Most interviews were conducted on MS Teams in English, while Participant 4, Lin, and Participant 7, Qin, were interviewed in Chinese as per their request. Additionally, I used another third-party web-based video conferencing software for the interview with Lin to accommodate her accessibility needs. In this study, the verbatim quotes of Participant 4 and Participant 7 were initially presented in Chinese, accompanied by an English translation to cater to the international readership of this article. Lastly, all participants were assigned pseudonyms in addition to being numbered for reference purposes, allowing their personal opinions to be recognized while safeguarding their identity.

4.1. Illustration of zine-making data in NI

To illustrate the usefulness of zine-making as a data collection tool in NI, I now proceed to present a sample of the findings, focusing on one of the three themes identified from the data generated during the zine-making activity on *L2 PhD students' academic journeys in the UK*. This illustration situates itself towards the end of the analysis of narrative (Feature 5 of the five core dimensions), with qualitative content analysis (CA) (Elo et al., 2014) as its main analytical approach. Following the requirement for narrative researchers to engage systematically in reflexive practice (Consoli, 2021b) and to offer illustrative support to other narrative researchers interested in employing zine-making to gather data in NI, I detail how the three themes: *challenges*, *optimism*, and *solutions* were identified from the zine-making data.

The first theme, *challenges*, was identified without much effort. While familiarizing myself with the contents of the collective zine (See Fig. 4), I immediately considered *challenges* as a possible theme, since this word appeared on zine pages 1, 3, 5, and 7. Although zine page 2 did not contain this word, it listed concrete challenges, including *isolation*, *stress*, *supervisor*, *funding*, *time*, *future*, and *problems*. Zine page 4, which contained only pictures without explicit hints of challenges, required further investigation. I referred to the written and oral zine explanation to check if Participant 4, Lin, mentioned anything related to *challenges*. In the transcript of her oral zine explanation, Lin shared, "I think exercise is a very good way for us in the PhD journey to, you know, relieve our pressure, or you know some negative emotions". This triangulation of data confirmed the identification of *challenges* as the first theme.

The second theme, *optimism*, was identified similarly but required more effort to code. This theme was supported by direct references such as *your failures are helping you* on zine page 1 and *progress*, *recover*, *experience life*, *flower road*, *golden road* on zine page 7. Additionally, the picture of the graduation certificate on zine page 2, the pictures of *before* and *now* on zine page 3, the picture of the smiling lady on zine page 4, and the picture of the beverage below the word *goal* on zine page 5, all conveyed a strong sense of optimism. Consequently, the second theme was coded as *optimism*. Further triangulation with both the oral and written zine explanations provided additional support for this theme.

The last theme, *solutions*, was coded by referring to Ahn's (2021) argument that a visual element should be approached both through its surface meaning and its relationship with other surrounding elements. I analyzed how different visual elements were

Table 1
Demographics of participants.

Participant No.	Pseudonym	Year	Gender	Nationality	Discipline	Institution	Zine-making experience
1	Demir	Early 1st	Male	Turkish	Security studies	A	No
2	Jun	Late 3rd	Female	Chinese	Arts and media studies	B	No
3	Kevin	Late 1st	Male	Chinese (Hong Kong)	Clinical Psychology	A	No
4	Lin	Late 2nd	Female	Chinese	Applied linguistics	A	No
5	Mary	Late 4th	Female	South African	Applied Psychology	B	No
6	Chen	Late 2nd	Female	Chinese	Applied Linguistics	A	No
7	Qin	Mid-2nd	Female	Chinese	Applied Linguistics	A	No

Note: 1. Chinese refers to citizens from Mainland China. 3. Participants 1, 2, 4, and 5 gave an oral zine explanation in English at the conference. Everyone posted his/her zine with a message in English on Padlet except Participant 2.



Fig. 3. An example of zine-making data.



Fig. 4. A collective zine.

connected on a zine page. Zine page 5 offered a contrast between *challenges*-various causes of stress (left side of the zine) and *solutions*-different sources of happiness (right side of the zine). On zine page 2, the elements in the upper part showed various *solutions* to the challenging sources quo depicted in the lower part. The wrestling picture on zine page 1 suggested that fighting might be a way to overcome “*challenges*” and “*the barriers*”, although a triangulation of Demir’s oral zine explanation indicated an opposite strategy, “*do not try to fight at all times*”.

The sample of the findings is about the first theme, *challenges*. In this study, participants mentioned a wide range of difficulties they

encountered as L2 PhD students in the UK, some of which have been identified in the literature on international PhD students' experience in English-speaking countries (see a review study by Gao, 2021). In this study, I discovered four aspects of challenges encountered by L2 PhD students:

1. *Supervisor-related challenges.* Supervisors play an essential role in L2 PhD students' academic journeys in the UK. Participants reported that a failed relationship with supervisors could lead to numerous problems, including emotional distress and unpleasant academic pursuit (see Fig. 3 for Demir's oral zine explanation). In extreme cases, as Demir mentioned, he had to quit and restart his PhD all over again. Although he managed it in the end, Demir described the experience as "like dying". However, sometimes, problems can also arise despite a positive relationship with supervisors. In her oral zine explanation, Jun said "my supervisor left the UK, left our university... She didn't tell me until the end of last month". In Jun's case, it was the abrupt career change of her supervisor that caused significant stress for her.
2. *Academic-related challenges.* Doing a PhD is challenging. Doing it in L2 makes it more so. Surprisingly, language barriers, one of the frequently mentioned challenges by international students (Gao, 2021), were not expressed by participants in this study. Instead, more common challenges of pursuing a doctoral degree were brought up. For example, in her written zine explanation, Qin said she encountered "troubles coming up with promising analyses". In Kevin's written zine explanation, he acknowledged that he lacked "necessary skills set" for studying psychology and was thus "ill-prepared" for his PhD.
3. *Finance-related challenges.* Although research has shown that having no access to any kind of capital for a pricey overseas education does not deter international students from studying in the UK (Pásztor, 2015), self-funded international doctoral students from a humble economic background may suffer from financial burden. Mary was one of the self-paying international PhD students in the UK. In zine page 5, she specified her problem with the texts "Tuition fees" and "NO PhD FUNDING", accompanied by a sad face emoji. All these elements were placed on the left side of her zine and categorized as sources of stress for her. This difficulty was also repeatedly highlighted in her oral zine explanation "Seeking PhD funding. I have no funding. I am a self-funded PhD student. No funding for me."
4. *Emotion-related challenges.* In addition to stress caused by the factors identified above, L2 PhD students also met with other emotional challenges during their academic pursuit in the UK. In her oral zine explanation, Jun reflected on her feelings of loneliness and social isolation at the beginning of her PhD. Qin mentioned heartbreak due to "meeting incompatible people", an emotional challenge, which can be experienced by everyone.

In this section, I have reported some findings on the zine-making data by content analysis and by my researcher reflexivity during the analytical process. However, this is not the only way to approach the zine-making data. For example, the data can also be analyzed using a combination of social semiotic multimodal analysis and narrative analysis like the way Ahn (2021) approaches her data, a combination of visual and verbal data. Exploring all potential methodologies for using zine-making in NI studies is beyond the scope of this article. Nevertheless, this section has demonstrated the usefulness of zine-making as a data collection tool in NI. In the next section, I discuss the strengths and limitations of zine-making based on participants' feedback in the interviews.

4.2. Discussion of zine-making

4.2.1. Strengths

Similar to the conclusion I drew from my zine-making experiences as a participant and a facilitator, participants in this study also found zine-making fun. Mary, for instance, described it as a "nice experience going back to being a happy child". Specifically, participants identified the following four major strengths of zine-making as a creative, ethical, and empowering tool for collecting their life stories:

1. Zine-making, as an innovative and creative tool for collecting data about people's life stories is accessible to various participants (Ashtari et al., 2022), including those with special needs. Mary, with the experience of using diary studies, argued that zine-making was such a tool.

It could be fascinating for people...say, a person who is more hesitant to write. Maybe because of dyslexia or anything like that, or any other person who wants to just be more creative, it gives you something different than a traditional diary study...

Moreover, through zine-making, participants can explore difficult topics, including gender and politics. More traditional forms of data collection may deter them from expressing opinions on such issues. This aligns with the argument that visual methods are best for studies exploring "emotionally difficult, culturally sensitive or psychologically traumatic ones" since these are often "difficult to talk or write" (Kalaja & Pitkänen-Huhta, 2018, p. 172). As Jun argued, zine-making is a *gentle* approach that not only allows participants to express their ideas safely and creatively but also increases the likelihood that their ideas will reach a wider audience.

You will have pressure to talk in interviews or in writing. Zine is like... it is image so it will be a more creative and gentle way to show your ideas...you can say something while hiding something...

This strength reflects the fact that zine-making is "a secret mode of expression" (Bryant, 2023, p. 15) and explains its popularity among marginalized communities (Silberstein & Thomas, 2022).

2. Zine-making, as an innovative data collection tool, can reduce the observer effect (Greenier & Moodie, 2021) in NI. Participants sometimes act based on their assumptions about the research focus, which can lead them to produce data that does not help

narrative researchers “understand the meaning of a particular phenomenon” (Kramp, 2004, p. 108). This is particularly true when working with participants who are also researchers. As Chen pointed out, “*they may perform*” and “*have many skills to hide*” when a more traditional method is used to collect NI data from them. This echoes Demir’s caution below.

Particularly for PhD students...I think we have a high tendency to respond to any kind of framework... This is very dangerous because then you can unintentionally leave some information out, thinking this is too personal or this is not important...

3. Zine-making, as a multimodal way of storytelling, enables participants to express “something richer than text alone” (Davis & Dwyer, 2017, p. 234), including some abstract ideas that are beyond words. Kevin used an interesting metaphor to explain this advantage.

There are always some limitations in different languages. For instance, it’s very difficult to ask people to define what Yellow Color means, what Blue Color means...

By making the invisible visible (Ashtari et al., 2022), zine-making also enables participants to reflect on and examine their emotions in a multimodal way, thereby contributing to their wellbeing. Demir drew an analogy between “*spring cleaning his brain*” and his zine-making experience to emphasize how this visualization empowered him.

Our emotions are like 3D objects inside us. If you don’t take it out, you can’t see what’s beneath it. You know, like when I’m cleaning the house, I move the chair, I move the table or else I won’t be able to clean underneath...Zine-making made me express more than I usually, so it made me feel relieved... It was like a spring cleaning for my brain.

4. Zine-making, as a relaxing group DIY activity, was found to be psychologically therapeutic for participants in this study. The strong relationship between zine-making and the well-being of its participants has been reported (Bryant, 2023; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014; Valli, 2021). Specific benefits identified by participants include overcoming difficult life events, recognizing life issues, and enhanced wellbeing through giving and receiving validation from peers. Qin emphasized how this fun, creative experience helped her to heal from a recent breakup.

当时我受到伤害了嘛,做这个的话,比如说分散你注意力啊,做一些比较有趣的比较有创意的东西,有疗愈效果吧,有一种能够安慰的那种效果comforted,嗯,可以让你calm down下来[I was hurt at that time. Zine-making was helpful in distracting my attention. Such a fun and creative way has a healing effect. It comforted me and calmed me down.]

Both Jun and Kevin reported their surprise at the breadth and diversity of others’ PhD life stories and realized that they have ignored many other important aspects of life in their pursuit of a doctoral degree. Kevin elaborated on this by referring to his zine page 4:

As you can see in my work, the focus was just my PhD, I neglected part of my life. A very large proportion of my life is because I’ve married. So, I have a family, but I didn’t mention it in my zine-making. I didn’t pay attention to this.

Both Mary and Demir emphasized that they enjoyed the zine-sharing stage, as they gave and received validation from other international PhD students in the UK. Demir highlighted that only through sharing and listening can one empathize with others and gain a sense of belonging. This aligns with the argument that sharing zines evokes strong emotions in participants and thus brings everyone closer (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014).

I really wanted to share with friends that IT IS OK...because I reflect to myself and if I were to hear this two years ago... I would feel better... but I started my PhD under COVID restrictions. So, for quite a long time, I didn’t really feel like I belonged to my institution...that feeling of community or belonging only comes when you acknowledge that you have similar feelings or challenges.

4.2.2. Limitations

Having said this, participants in this study also perceived some limitations of zine-making. Possible strategies to address and minimize these limitations are also outlined in this section.

1. Zine-making, as a group DIY activity illustrated in this study, is more suitable to use when there is more than one participant. Zine-making was even described as an activity with “*仪式感 [a sense of ritual]*” by Qin, which requires a certain atmosphere to operate. One way to achieve this is by having participants sit in a group, which is not feasible if there is only one participant. Jun and Lin affirmed this point by emphasizing that one person’s zine-making could be too “*too strange*” and “*太孤独 [too lonely]*.” This limitation might be addressed if the narrative inquirer can participate in zine-making and form a two-person community with his/her zine-making participant. Although this strategy raises challenges related to narrative researchers maintaining a high level of reflexivity and concerns about authorial intervention during data collection, it appears ideal for narrative inquirers to negotiate their entry and build “a caring community” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). Additionally, this can be seen as the researchers’ effort to act ethically toward the participant by reducing the power differential and building rapport (De Costa, Randez et al., 2021).
2. Zine-making, due to its open-ended nature, might lead to the production of data that is unusable or irrelevant to the research topics under investigation. Demir expressed his concern about this issue by comparing zine-making to an interview.

It is good to have interviews so you can stay on the topic and get meaningful data. Meaningful in that it would support the research and direction, and so on. So, zine-making is so much free...it is very much dependent on the individual in zine-making.

One solution to address this risk is to design zine-making in a structured manner, similar to what [Ahn \(2021\)](#) implemented when using drawings to collect data from participants regarding their imagined identities and communities through the success or failure in learning English. In Ahn's study, participants were asked to draw three scenarios in three respective columns: *before learning English*, *after mastering English*, and *after failing to master English*. Another solution is to conduct a debrief session after the zine-making process, where each participant is asked the same questions to "standardize" (the word used by Mary) or to ensure the quality of the data.

3. Zine-making, due to the limited space offered in zine-based materials, might result in participants encountering difficulty in telling a complete story of their lived experiences. As Qin pointed out in the interview:

我觉得这只能表达一个比较宏观的, 嗯, 没办法表达特别特别细节。就是, 我在这里画出来的也只有在读博开始到Zine making那段时间。就我之前的人生我都没办法去给它画出来嘛。这个版面又有限。一些其他的之前的事情也会影响到PhD的[I think this can only express a macro picture, well, there is no way to express specific details. Because in fact, what I draw here is only the period from the beginning of PhD study to Zing making. I couldn't draw my life before that. The space is limited. Some other previous things will also affect the PhD]

However, as with all other methods, there are constraints on the time or space available for participants to share their life stories. As cautioned by [Bell \(2011\)](#), there exists a point at which narrative inquirers must declare that the story has ended. Therefore, if narrative inquirers are concerned about the scope of stories that zines may cover, they can adjust the size of the zine-based paper provided to the participants. Certainly, the size of zine-based paper can be enlarged according to narrative inquirers' research purposes or if zine participants consider it necessary (see zine page 5, Mary combined two pieces of A4 paper). Meanwhile, researchers also need to consider whether they can do justice to all the data collected at the end of the day ([Benson, 2014](#)), since "zines yield rich and fruitful data" ([Gray et al., 2022](#), p. 901).

5. Implications and conclusion

Overall, notwithstanding the limitations outlined above, zine-making proves to be useful in NI in this study. For my participants, zine-making created a welcoming and safe environment by bringing them together with other L2 PhD peers. Through zine-making, they were able to network, reflect, and share their academic journeys in the UK. By listening to others' stories, they gained deeper insights into their own life issues and were inspired to enrich their lives in other possible ways. By acting as listeners for each other, they were provided with valuable opportunities to support each other in this challenging PhD journey in the UK. One implication of using zine-making, therefore, is that it can serve as an ethical and empowering narrative data collection tool in contexts where research participants may feel isolated and thus desire to connect with others of the same or similar identity. In this sense, zine-making can be particularly useful in NI with marginalized groups.

For me as a narrative inquirer, zine-making has enabled me to conduct NI ethically and maintain a high level of researcher reflexivity throughout the research process. When presenting the sample findings through the *analysis of narrative*, I found that zine-making effectively reduced the difficulty of identifying themes by providing more straightforward data. The point that zine-making may alleviate narrative inquirers' burden of data analysis remains valid when *narrative analysis* is adopted to analyze zine-making data. Admittedly, constructing stories is "no simple task" ([Kramp, 2004](#), p. 108) and involves "recursive movement from the data to an emerging thematic plot" ([Polkinghorne, 1995](#), p. 16), which is "perhaps the most challenging aspect of narrative inquiry" ([Benson, 2014](#), p. 163). As [Consoli \(2021b\)](#) illustrates, narrative analysis can involve narrative inquirers in "painstaking and laborious processes" (p. 2). However, zine-making generates oral zine explanations (see an example in [Fig. 3](#)), which are already in the form of a story with a plot ([Kramp, 2004](#); [Polkinghorne, 1995](#)). These zine explanations can serve as a solid foundation for narrative inquirers to construct stories if they choose to do so. Therefore, zine-making appears to be particularly accommodating to novice narrative inquirers who may encounter difficulty with *narrative analysis*.

In this article, I propose zine-making as a fun, creative, ethical, and empowering data collection tool in NI. I draw theoretical connections between zine-making and NI, describe how zine-making was used to elicit people's life stories through reflection on my zine-making experiences, present a sample of the findings of the content analysis of zine-making data, and outline the strengths and limitations of the zine-making approach. Finally, I discuss some implications of zine-making as a methodological innovation in NI.

I started my article by referencing the call for contextually feasible and appropriate methodology in NI ([Barkhuizen & Consoli, 2021](#)), emphasizing that the proposal of zine-making was not intended to replace existing data collection methods in NI. In closing, I would like to also highlight that the illustration of how zine-making was employed in NI in this article is not prescriptive. Narrative inquirers interested in using zine-making to collect narrative data might need to make fine adjustments to make this tool contextually appropriate. I hope this article will inspire further exploration of the use of zine-making in NI, as it has enormous potential to empower both the individuals whose stories we (re)tell and empower us as narrative inquirers.

Statement

The authors received no funding for the research. No conflict of interest in this study. Ethical review and approval required for the study on human participants were in accordance with the institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed

consent to participate in this study and gave permission for the authors to use their data for this research.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Meifang Zhuo: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix 1

Part 1: Talking about your zine.

1. What was the story your zine tries to tell?
2. Why did you choose to tell this story? Why did you choose such a design?
3. What did your zine make you see about yourselves?
4. What was not depicted or absent in the zines?
5. If you were asked to make a zine on the same topic again, would it be any different?

Part 2: Reflecting on your zine-making experience.

1. Did you enjoy the activity?
2. What was your first impression when asked to make a zine and why?
3. Were your feelings changed during the process and why?
4. Which part did you enjoy the most, making the zine, sharing the zine, or listening to others?
5. How did you feel about sitting in a group to make zines?
6. How did you feel about the background music?
7. How did you feel about the two options of sharing your zines, orally or writing on the Padlet?
8. Could anything be done to improve this activity?

Part 3: Commenting on zine-making as a tool to tell your stories.

1. Were you concerned about your artistic ability?
2. How did you feel about using zines to tell your stories?

Part 4: Comparing zine-making with other data collection tools in NI.

1. What are the benefits of using zine-making as a data collection tool in NI?
2. Where else could this tool be used?
3. What are the possible concerns about using zine-making as a data collection tool?
4. Compared to other traditional methods (for example, interviews) to elicit people's life stories, what are the advantages and disadvantages of zine-making?
5. Compared to other innovative methods (for example, the combination of visual and written means), what are the advantages and disadvantages of zine-making?

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