

THE ART OF THE ZINE AND THE DIY AESTHETIC:
EXPLORING AND EXPERIMENTING WITH MULTIMODAL STORYTELLING

By

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CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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"Zines", short for "fanzines" refer to small-circulation self-published works containing original and/or appropriated texts and images, reproduced by photocopier. They are usually the work of one person or a small group of people. Due to their informal, ephemeral nature, do-it-yourself or "DIY" workmanship and relatively inexpensive production, they are popular within underground countercultures and marginalized groups, serving as a medium for profoundly personal and political narratives. Highly individualized and created without financial incentives, it allows great freedom of expression and room for experimentation with presentation, form, and design which in turn creates connections between creator and reader made possible only by the materiality of the medium. For my capstone, I chose to create a zine, under the direction of Professor Lauren Grodstein, a well-respected and published author and educator. I wanted to explore and experiment with different modes of storytelling over a long-form narrative arc drawn from personal experiences and utilize multiple styles and techniques. By drawing on a range of features of materiality, I hoped to create a more personal and immersive work.

Introduction

The term "zine", derived from "fanzine", has become a catch-all term to refer to self-published works covering everything from broadly political to the extremely personal, from the quotidian to the quixotic to everything in between. Self-publishing has been around for quite some time, recalling the science fiction fanzines of the '30s, literary chap books of the '50s and '60s, and underground counterculture publications of the late 60's and '70s. The explosion of popularity and quantity of self-published works can be traced to the availability and advent of cheap and accessible photocopiers and desktop publishing in the late '70s and '80s, the evolving infrastructure of a grassroots zine network, and the proliferation of genre-bending cross-pollination among zinesters, mail artists, cartoonists, poets, and activists eager to express untampered ideas and build communities. Zines provide "one of the only independent sites for tens of thousands of voices in a media environment otherwise dominated by corporate adult interests". (Chu 71) Indeed, zines are "a print form not intended to curry market attention or garner financial profits for their creators. There's no economic imperative at work, so you get purity to the art that rarely happens in 'normal' publishing." (Liming 122)

This outlet for pure expression encourages experimentation as writer and academic Stephen Duncombe describes "offer a space for people to try out new personalities, ideas, politics. Through this sharing, the argument with the outside world can begin to be replaced by a conversation among comrades. Zines build a foundation for readers and writers alike to formulate their ideals of an authentic life." (Duncombe 43) Language, according to cultural historian Mikko Lehtonen, is "essentially abstract and exists only through certain material forms such as writing, photographs, movies,

newspapers and magazines, advertisements and commercials. (Lehtonen 48) "These are conduits through which meaning is conveyed and where signs which stand for 'mental concepts' are arranged into languages. Just as grammars and syntax are created through written or spoken language so too might be the structures of visual language." (Triggs 72)

The semioticians Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen observe "a shift taking place in the 'era of late modernity' from a dominance of 'monomodality', a singular communication mode, to 'multimodality' which embraces a variety of materials and to cross the boundaries between the various art, design and performance disciplines. Language may be communicated through verbal or non-verbal means, or a combination thereof. The grammars of design operate in the same way as the grammars of semiotic modes and may be codified." (73)

My personal history with zines started in high school when I began listening to punk rock music and immersing myself in that subculture. Instead of going to the mall to buy albums, I would patron small hole-in-the-wall record stores that sold alternative and underground genres of music. There were always handmade stapled local zines for sale and I bought anything that caught my eye. It was around this time that I found the work of Aaron Cometbus, a West Coast creator, who has been self-publishing his punk zine, *Cometbus*, for, as of this writing, almost forty years. *Cometbus* stood out from other zines because of its honesty and thoughtfulness, its diverse content which consisted of everything from band interviews to comics, diary entries and political writing. The zine reflected what was going on Aaron Cometbus's life and what he was thinking and feeling at the time it was written. Years later, I would start writing and drawing my own self-published works with my friends, attend and table at zine fests and small-press shows up

and down the east coast, start bands, play and organize shows. These were some of my favorite times in my life – hanging out with my friends, selling our books at shows and engaging with attendees. It felt like home.

For my final capstone project, I wanted to work with Professor Lauren Grodstein. I had taken two classes with her, Fiction Writing and Writing From Life, as part of my MALS coursework and found those classes immensely enjoyable. My initial proposal was to do a comic but she told me that she really didn't have any experience with that. Thinking it over, I reworked my proposal as a zine finding that the format would provide more creative freedom and opportunities. Professor Grodstein was more receptive to that proposal and encouraged me to pursue it. My goal creating this work was two-fold. I wanted to tell a long-form narrative but also explore multiple ways to tell it. I was also interested in incorporating all the varied subjects that I took during my MALS coursework, everything from positive psychology to social dynamics of race and politics, while examining and utilizing the structures of different types of literary tradition such as roman à clef, bildungsroman, epistolary, and picaresque. I wanted to also vary the narrative storytelling using graphic design techniques, fine art and commercial processes, pastiche, collage and décollage. I began work and submitted chapters and pieces to Professor Grodstein. Her critiques and comments were supportive, encouraging, and insightful. She let me know which things worked and which things did not.

Roman à Clef

My capstone is based on personal experiences drawn from traveling across the country. It is told in first-person narrative as it follows an unnamed narrator as he rides a Greyhound bus from NJ to California, encountering a wide array of people along the way. Roman à clef, a French term meaning 'novel with a key', refers to works in which actual people or events are depicted under a façade of fiction. I chose to fictionalize actual events and experiences mainly for dramatic effect and narrative momentum but to also provide anonymity to friends and acquaintances. This, I felt, offered "a space to articulate non-normative ties, to assert and explore identities that are culturally marginal." (Boyde 158) I took a "write what you know" approach to my capstone and by changing the names (for example, the narrator is even unnamed), it granted me creative license to augment situations and offer personal insight or commentary on certain topics. "What the roman à clef offers readers is the titillating experience of seeing through conspicuous duplicity to how actual events and people are transfigured so as to betray their 'true' natures and their hidden webs of connections. While biographical sketches offer the pedestrian truth of correspondence, fiction seems to reveal the truth of coherence. The love of perfection, or completeness, is at the root of the passion for novel-reading." (Applegate 160) Author Sean Latham makes a case in his book, *The Art of Scandal: Modernism, Libel Law, and the Roman à Clef*, that "to be an educated reader, especially when reading modernist texts requires a decisive rejection of biography as an instrument for locating meaning in text. We are taught in high school to distinguish the poet from the speaker, and in college cautioned to look out for narrative bias. The roman à clef, then, mandates a different type of engagement, calling into question the very way we read.

Besides this fundamental and perhaps threatening quality, it also defies modernism's imperatives, namely the goal of absolute aesthetic autonomy." (Latham 79)

Bildungsroman

The bildungsroman or "coming-of-age" story is one of my favorite genres and I was eager to base my narrative on its tropes. "The term Bildungsroman was coined in 1817 by Karl von Morgenstern but not commonly applied until the end of the 19th century and it flourished through the middle decades of the nineteenth century, both in England and the United States. Bildungsroman is the name affixed to those novels that concentrate on the development or education of a central character. German in origin, '*bildungs*' means formation, and '*roman*' means novel." (Thamarana 22) The narrator in my story is his early 20s, having graduated from college the year before. The story spans from age 6 to 22 and chronicles the relationship between him and his ex-girlfriend. I felt that the 20s is an interesting time in our lives when we first head out into the adult world. We have new responsibilities and expectations. This is a period of identity formation, armed with a limited amount of accumulated knowledge and experience, we strive to put our ideas into action and reaction. The bildungsroman documents the "process of development and formation of a character in relation to society, offers the necessary extension and complexity to the realist literary concern with individual experience and the social background, a concern which is framed within a large-scale diachronic model of human existence." (Golban 4) In my story, the narrator is still working at the job he got while still in school, mainly because it feels "safe". It gives him an excuse not to grow up and venture forth. It is only when he receives news that his ex-girlfriend is getting married that he decides to leave his job, his family, and his friends to find a purpose. He has an unlimited bus pass that grants him the power to go anywhere he wants and along the way meets a cast of characters. This is similar to Victorian-era bildungsroman novels

where "the character receives a complex thematic representation. The shift from romanticism to realism is the shift from the individual to the general human, from the subjective to the social, from the human being as master of his or her destiny to a multitude of character types as social units, from the narrow circle of personal existence to the wide social panorama containing many social sectors and character types presented in social interaction. Realism tends to present its characters as being defined by social and economic factors." (18) I wanted to explore the maturation of the narrator in much the same way that the experiences of the narrator are drawn from my own life. By doing this self-referential inward analysis, I've been able to work out my own thoughts and feelings on the real-life events and people. The appeal of the bildungsroman is its literary universality. "The Bildungsroman is a novel genre which derives its very life from the awareness both of the given experiential framework of practical reality on the one hand and of the creative potential of the human imagination and reflectivity on the other." (Redfield 55)

Epistolary

The epistolary literary tradition is one that uses a series of documents such as letters, diary entries, journals and other materials, creating a more personal experience for the readers because of the intimacy and access to the writer's thoughts and feelings. From the Greek word 'epistle' meaning letter or message, this form of writing dates back to the Roman poet Ovid, who used epistles in his writings but the epistolary mode as it is known today really began in 1600s, gaining popularity in the 18th century.

In Chapter Six, entitled "Leave The Driving To Us", utilizes an epistolary approach using a sketchbook journal with entries and artwork to detail events as they happen. While this is a work of fiction, I set it against the real-world using pop culture references and actual geographical locations. This raises "some epistemological questions since a fictional discourse is truth within another fiction. These generic references are often textually significant both in constructing and deconstructing the illusion of reality necessary for a sympathetic response to the textual society, just as the existence of real literary works in a fictional universe both gives that universe credibility and opens to question the fiction's representation of life. Their function in the text, however, extends beyond mere allusion: they constitute intertextual extensions of the narrative by investing the text with a second, already determined narrative matrix, creating a palimpsestic relationship of narrated events." (Duyfhuizen 5) For example, I make real-world references to the construction that was going on at the Harrisburg State Capitol building during 1998 or to movies that were playing during that summer – not that these references were essential to plot or character but to give the narrative some verisimilitude and texture. "Epistolary novels are a provocative read in that they tell a story from the

first-person point of view, often in more voices than one, but in a way that is distinctively different from other interior monologues." (Maupin 67) The narrator of my story is documenting his trip via journal entries with no specific person in mind. He is a biased subjective witness to the events happening around him.

Picaresque

Although there is a debate as to the exact definition of this literary genre, picaresque works generally follow a likeable delinquent or rogue who undertakes a series of adventures and hardships and succeeds by his wits or trickery. This type of fiction "explores reality by building up an existential picture of an individual who, under social and psychological influences to which he has been subject from childhood, chooses a certain pattern of experience in which to realize himself in action, and is molded by it." (Parker 27) This antihero or 'picaro' has evolved into a staple of popular American literature through works by Herman Melville and Mark Twain and modern authors such as Saul Bellow.

The narrator of my story is a first-generation Asian-American, raised in a middle-class white suburban neighborhood. He is one of the few minorities in his town and, because of his ethnicity, feels like an outsider both socially and culturally. Asians are generally seen as hard-working, studious, "model minorities" and the narrator resents the obligations and expectations that come with that stereotype. He is a self-hating Asian due to feelings of inferiority resulting from persecution and his perceived subordinate status in society. Nonetheless he resigns himself with the other Asians at school, courts a white girl and in college, majors in the arts rather than fields (i.e. science, medicine, computers) expected by his parents. "The picaresque novel thus arises as an exposition of the theme of freedom, including the concept of moral freedom." (19) Being a first-generation Asian-American myself and having established that this narrative is a thinly veiled roman à clef, I wanted to write about social and cultural issues through the lens of a marginalized group. "The picaresque genre has survived because the author criticizes

political, social, cultural, religious, and judicial discourses in a tongue-in-cheek narrative so as to expose social injustice without obvious condemnation." (Crittenden 9) I throw a nod at the picaresque genre when my narrator chooses to bring Saul Bellow's novel, *The Adventures of Augie March*, on his trip. A celebration of the individual and self-exploration, it follows the title character, Augie March, around the country in various free-wheeling situations and exploring themes of love and loss, alienation and what it means to be an American. I used this novel as a starting point. Augie March goes off in search of a self-realization and love in self-contained episodic adventures. I kept this in the back of my mind when writing the short adventures taking place in various cities along the Greyhound route.

Visual Elements

From the outset, I knew that there was going to be a strong visual design element through the narrative. The protagonist is an art school graduate so I felt that the story needed to be a sort of visual exposition for his thoughts and ideas and things that are happening to him. I wanted to incorporate a pastiche of design ideas and graphic techniques such as collage, text art, and especially comics because of their multi-semiotic nature; they are both a visual and verbal medium.

Graphic design can create a multilevel storytelling experience through interesting page structure, panel transitions, and visual style. The usability of a page relies on an intuitive organization of the visual elements to lead the reader through a logical progression through the narrative. Scott McCloud's 1993 seminal work, "Understanding Comics", explains how the marriage of image and text are "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer." (McCloud 9) My hope is that the reader to focus on the drawing/art as its own subjective event, where the interest is less on the content and more in the representation of the event. Throughout my capstone project, I varied the art style and narrative voice; sometimes writing in the past tense and other times, writing in the present. The materiality of the work becomes its own objet d'art.

Another storytelling technique I utilized was pastiche. Art historian and lecturer, Ladislav Kesner, found that in order to engage more deeply with a work of art, "viewers must be able to tune or adapt their prediction mechanism to recognize art as a specific class of objects whose ontological nature defies predictability, and they must be able to sustain a productive flow of predictions from low-level sensory, recognitional to abstract

semantic, conceptual, and affective inferences." (Kesner 52) This means that artists intuitively attempt to strike a balance between predictability and surprise. The more effort the viewer or reader must expend, the less pleasurable the work of art. "Final gratification postponed as long as the artist has hidden enough micro reward the viewer can discover." (Van de Cruys & Wagemans 1050) Using pastiche reveals something to the viewer that is familiar and recognizable but is recontextualized to work within a whole as well as reinforcing recurring motifs and themes in the narrative. In my capstone, I would change the narrative style between subchapters – for example, in the first subchapter of the first chapter "Anywhere But Here", which takes place in New Brunswick, the narrative style is a collage style work that also recalls William Burroughs "cut-up" technique. The visuals match the disjointed stream-of-conscious prose. The second subchapter is a flashback to elementary school and is done as a journal entry in a marble notebook with crayon and marker art accompanying the text. The third subchapter is done in an underground comic style. The fourth subchapter take place at a family dinner and is presented in a more traditional prose style with artwork. A Filipino recipe is inserted as an aside to the action but is also intended to supplement the narrative and represent how food intertwines with cultural identity. This process continues for the rest of my novelzine. This technique can be "a philosophical attitude, an aesthetic position that can suffuse virtually any expressive medium." (Dunn, McLeod, & Kuenzli 60)

Another example can be seen in chapter two entitled "The Golden Experience" seems to be a non-sequitur section that is just talking about the Ferrero Rocher candy. I throw in a reference to David Foster Wallace at the chapter start with "Consider the Ferrero Rocher". The first page of this chapter is the nutritional information and company

information found on the back of a Ferrero Rocher tin of candy. I relate how the candy was a treat and its cultural significance as a status symbol in Asian culture in that it symbolized "the good life". (Aghajanian) I intended this chapter to reinforce a recurring "gold" motif, as in Ferrero Rocher's company tagline of "the golden experience" but to also prime the reader for the succeeding chapter "Up and Down, Over and Around" which, like the actual Ferrero Rocher candy, is layers within layers. "Up and Down, Over and Around" is a story within a story within a story within a story. Each succeeding story takes place further back in time than the previous one.

I feel that we live in an age of interdisciplinary theory and studies – we inhabit a sort of cut-and-paste culture. In this digital age, we experience different types of media simultaneously. One of my intents for this capstone project was for the work to become representative of the way that we presently share and consume information.

Recurring Motifs and Annotations

William Freedman in his essay, "The Literary Motif: A Definition and Evaluation", talks about "clusters or families of related words or phrases that, by virtue of their frequency and particular use, tell us something about the author's intentions, conscious or otherwise. continuities. Although critics have concentrated primarily on the metaphoric members of these language families, it seems obvious that the literal components, in conjunction with figurative, form a larger unit that may prove more revealing still. And when we combine the literal and the figurative into a single-family unit, we emerge what is perhaps most accurately called the literary 'motif'." (Freedman 123) Over the course of writing my capstone, I wanted to use a recurring motif around the color of "gold". The first mention of it is when I describe Becky, the girl who I eventually date in the future as having "golden-blond" hair. The tagline of the Ferrero Rocher chocolates is "the golden experience" – referring to the gold-foil wrapper around the candies. It can also be seen as a metaphor for falling in love – "a golden experience". Becky's favorite book is "The Outsiders", a book that directly quotes Robert Frost's poem "Nothing Gold Can Stay" and contains the famous line "Stay gold, Pony Boy". The novel also takes on multiple meanings in my capstone. The Frost poem is about the impermanence of nature and beauty. My story is, at its core, about the rise and fall of a relationship. The Outsiders is about teens on the opposite ends of the social hierarchy – the Greasers and the Socs. My story is about two people from opposite ends of the social hierarchy who end up in a relationship. The protagonist is a minority who starts a relationship with a girl who is white and considered "popular".

Race and culture is a theme that figures prominently in my capstone. Growing up as a first-generation Asian American, I wanted to try to capture a little of the experience of growing up in American society but still feeling not completely a part of it because of heritage and appearance. Asian parents have more ambitious expectations for their children than their Western counterparts. Children are expected to get good grades, go to good colleges, and major in fields like science, medicine, or law. In my story, you can see some evidence of the mother nagging about finding a better job that makes more money (tied to prestige) and disparages her son's art degree as worthless. Later in the story, when he encounters another Asian American brought up in a similar household dynamic, she makes a sarcastic comment about his art degree "going over well" with his folks. The protagonist would be considered a disappointment in his family and even though it is not explicitly mentioned, you can see how he identifies as a loser or underachiever. His values and identity are shaped by his cultural and familial expectations. This style of parenting, popularly called "tiger parenting", relates to the "achievement/adjustment paradox" wherein Asian American students have high levels of academic achievement, but low levels of psychological adjustment. This paradox may be most evident among Asian American adolescents who parents fit into the tiger parenting profile." (Qin 23)

America is referred to as a cultural "melting pot" while also being vehemently resistant to outside cultures. I wanted to also explore this dichotomy of America. There is the idea of America as a place of opportunity, equality and assimilation and the reality of America as xenophobic, isolationist and nativist. I have traveled around this country and witnessed its beauty and ugliness firsthand. The United States is pretty much a "white nation" and from first-hand experience, I am generally considered "the other" even

though I was born and raised here. I am often asked where I or my family is from, my country of origin, or sometimes I am assumed to have just "come over" – things I generally do not see other white people being asked. White is the default setting of America. The protagonist of my story is always explicitly and implicitly reminded of his "otherness". In school, his social clique becomes the other non-white students in school that only reinforces their separation from the other students. When the protagonist heads out west via Greyhound bus, I wanted to show a little of how our country is politically divided by geography. There is a general consensus that the East and West Coast and big cities are liberally blue, the rural areas are conservative red and the Midwest is purple and why it is electorally important. There are several instances of overt and subtle racism in my story. For example, when the protagonist starts dating a white girl, there is immediate backlash from her ex-boyfriend who uses explicit racist epithets. Later, when traveling through Texas, the protagonist and a friend walk into a bar that celebrates white supremacy. As the Greyhound bus winds through the Southwest, Border Patrol conducts illegal searches for undocumented immigrants. I felt that I could not do a story about traveling across America without having race to figure somewhere in that narrative.

Conclusion

Zines are the medium of the most unfiltered and personal artistic expressions because of its rejection of traditional modes of form and structure. Eschewing any form of commerciality, they are meant to be shared and read and due to their multimodal nature, they "instigate intimate, affectionate connections between their creators and readers, not just communities but embodied communities that are made possible by the materiality of the zine medium." (deGravelles 56)

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