

# The Resisting Subject: Per-zines as life story data

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## Abstract

This paper calls for zines – amateur publications written, designed and distributed on the margins of print and academic cultures – to be recognised as a new form of life story data. By concentrating on one particular genre of zines, the “per-zine” (personal zine), I will argue that these cultural artefacts are created by “resisting subjects” who deploy a range of narrative styles both incorporating and contesting existing life writing and autobiographical conventions.

The American zine *Sisu* will be discussed as a case-study to demonstrate how per-zines act as sites of life-writing, documenting personal, social, cultural and family histories. The paper concludes by examining how the future historian can best approach and administer these types of life story documents, through a new set of archival and interpretative strategies.

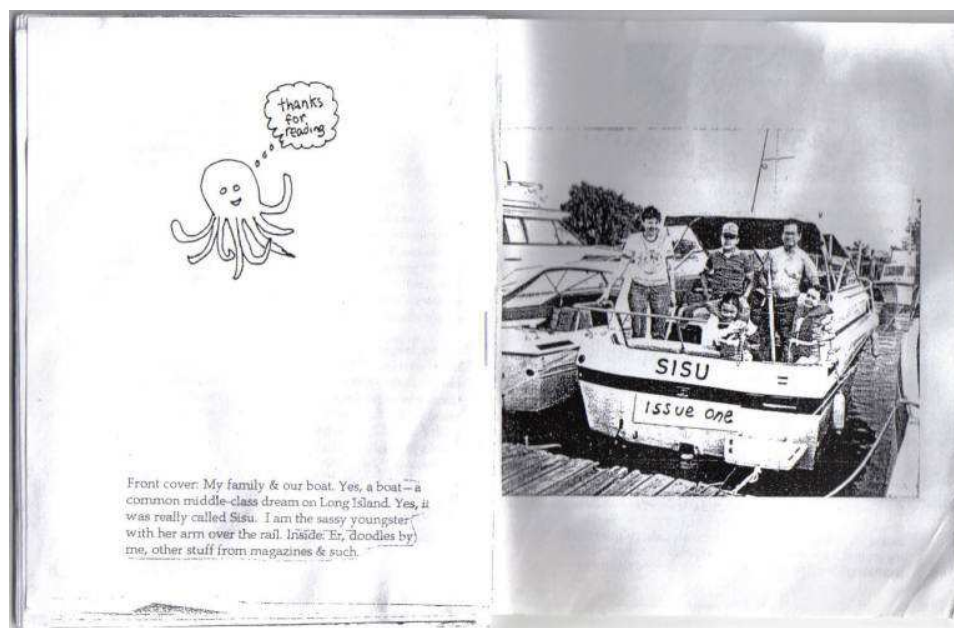
**Key words:** Zines, Life-Writing, Archive, Resisting Subjects, Grrrls.

## Introduction

Technological advances in Western society are often coupled with emerging forms of life history composition and documentation. Alongside the spread of autobiographic acts in connection to the rise of the internet over the past few decades,<sup>1</sup> this paper will demonstrate that also there exists other, more hitherto unrecognised, forms of life-writing taking place in the public-sphere. This phenomena involves zines; self-published paper booklets which combine the life story conventions of autobiographical writing, diary extracts, letters, personal photography, essays, and other literary and artistic devices. Zines represent a covert type of life narrative circulated in sub-cultural d.i.y (do-it-yourself) writing communities, largely produced as a form of self-expression by young people in their teens and twenties for public consumption. Zines exist as ephemeral yet powerful documents of personal testimony. It is the aim of this paper to bring to the attention of historians their purpose, and potential, in offering a series of voices and experiences often lacking in the public and historical record.

In this paper, I shall draw upon the American zine *Sisu* by Johanna as a case-study to illuminate the main issues of treating zines as life story documents suitable for archiving and research. To date, Johanna has produced three issues of *Sisu* between February 2003 and August 2004. The name “sisu”, the zine-writer informs us in *Sisu* #1, is a Finnish term meaning determination. It is also the name of Johanna’s parents’ boat – a photo of which is reproduced on the front cover of the first issue (see Figure One). As a Finnish- Asian-American twenty-seven year old, Johanna uses her zine to address the issues of identity, family, and the broader ‘second- generation’ immigrant community to which she belongs.

**Figure 1: Front and back cover of *Sisu* #1**



In terms of style and form, Johanna’s zines are all quarter-size, reproduced in black and white, and contain personal and critical writing around the themes of race, family and history. While no one zine or zine writer can be seen as representative of this textual community, the subjective life story narrative, as we shall come to see, can still be located within the generic features of the per-zine form.

This paper will be divided into five sections: I. An outline of zines and their relationship to contemporary life history documentation; II. A sketch of the “Resisting Subject” and outsider writing locales available to the zine writer; III. An evaluation of the common life writing techniques found in zines; IV. A summary of the generic features of zines which are *atypical* of other life history documents; V. Issues concerning the provenance and archiving of zines. In order to further assess the validity and reliability of per-zines as life history sources, we shall draw upon Alistair Thomson’s five-point template in this final section to consider the historical providence of such documents. This criterion includes the *autobiographical imperative*, *the time and place of narration*, *the relations of production*, *the genre and form*, and *the archival history* of life history documents.<sup>2</sup> Contextualising zines in this manner will aid future researchers in administrating zine extracts for historical interpretation.

## **I. The historical merit of zines**

Zines are difficult to define and reify due to their individual and eclectic natures. As amateur, non-commercial publications, they are written on all manner of topics and produced in a variety of formats and designs. Stephen Duncombe, who has authored the only book-length academic study and history of these texts, suggests fifteen categories of publications:

fanzines; political zines; personal zines; scene zines; network zines; fringe culture zines; religious zines; vocational zines; health zines; sex zines; travel zines; comixs; literary zines; art zines and ‘the rest’.<sup>3</sup> This paper will argue that the category of “history zine” should be added to Duncombe’s zine taxonomy, to include zine publications written around public events and also per-zines which incorporate lifewriting and memory work.

This paper will look at how per-zines in particular are composed through past memories and the documentation of the present. In its broader context, the treatment of the “present” as history, even for contemporary historians, is however something of a contested matter. Oral historians Neil Rafeek, Angela Bartie, and Hilary Young have taken up this vexed question, asking whether their recordings of a recent Scottish antiwar march could be merited as ‘oral history or reportage’. They concluded that their archives were in fact history work, not journalism, and advised others against having ‘an exclusively past-historical perspective that neglects to record any contemporary events even when they occur in one’s vicinity and are destined simultaneously to be part of local, national, and international history’.<sup>4</sup>

The criterion of being “destined” for historical merit is an interesting question with regards to zines. First of all, unlike the projects of oral history or mass-observation directives, these life stories exist *in situ* as organic and self-initiated projects; there are no interview frameworks, or directive guidelines, or any other authoritative editing and shaping force beyond that of the writer/s bringing these texts into being along their own compunctions and in line with the conventions of their writing communities. In terms of historians approaching a text, zines would appear as ready-made sources (such as diaries and letters). However, I would like to go further than this and argue that zine writers themselves often act as protean historians, collecting testimony, organising data for publication and distribution, and engaging critically and analytically with their material. Furthermore, whilst some zines discuss public events (such as anti-war marches and anti-capitalist protests, for example), the movements within zines are usually idiosyncratic, smaller, and very subjective (and not necessarily involving events in the local vicinity). It will be the scope of this paper, therefore, to argue for the merits of these movements in terms of providing useful and unique material for the historical record.

## II. “The Resisting Subject” Writing locales for ‘outsider’ narratives

Whilst some estimations place the number of zine titles currently in circulation at 10,000 to 20,000 copies, and the Global Grrrl Zine Network indexes that zines are being written across the span of continents and different cultures,<sup>6</sup> zines have still yet to be taken up as a site of historical research. Due to their status as illegitimate and subcultural texts, previous academic work has considered them in light of self-empowerment and communication strategies for dissenting teens.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, that *young people* are commonly zine producers may be a significant factor as to why historians have yet to legitimate and embrace these documents; within our discipline there is much to be gained by a greater consideration of the personal thoughts, reflections and experiences of ‘ordinary’ young people. To study zines as historical artefacts, therefore, would be to engage with the narratives and experiences of youth (and especially the writings of young women, who for a number of reasons, do not have equal access to resources or opportunities of public self-expression, yet make up the dominant sector of writing within per-zine communities).

A strong motivational force for young people narrating life stories in zines is that their accounts are seen as existing “outside of history” *proper*. In a five page piece entitled “**history** means all of us”, Johanna asserts:

I grew up without the sense that my family was tied into big events (despite my parent’s childhood in WWII occupied nations & my grandfather being on the Bataan Death March)...our families mostly existed for us in the here & now. We were all average, not decision-makers, not the types of people about whom books or articles are written.<sup>8</sup>

In choosing to write about the experiences of her grandfather, whose stories of surviving the 1942 Bataan Death March had been recounted to her as she was a child, Johanna states her intention to ‘bear witness and remember’<sup>9</sup> It is through *witnessing*, cited by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson as a genre of life narrative<sup>10</sup>, that some zine writers document the broader histories and cultures of their families and social experiences and act as protean historians. That “history means all of us”, to use Johanna’s words, also speaks of how zines are considered sources of advocacy and empowerment for those who make them, an attempt to bear witness to their own lives. This often occurs through a politicised historical consciousness (written in the vernacular) which seeks to privilege and explore the agency and actions of the non-elite; that is, to give testimony to the movements and complexity of their own lives.

Zine writers are often “resisting subjects” writing against the mainstream, using a fringe method of publication, and documenting lives which are often under-represented in the public record (for example, young women, women of colour, working class youths, queer and transsexuals, young feminists). Zine writers, writing their lives and the lives and circumstances of their families and communities, can also be seen as “resisting subjects” in terms of being a postmodern autobiographical subject. Sidonie Smith argues that ‘the old notion of an Enlightenment self – autonomous, rational, and unified- has given way throughout the century to new understandings of the subject’ which are fluid.<sup>11</sup> She proposes three types of subjects in life writing: the **subject of bourgeois individualism** (the white, male, bourgeois, heterosexual person normatively constituted as the ‘universal human subject’); the **collaborative subject** (where the narrative is co-written or involves a researcher or interpreter); and the **resisting subject**. Whilst some zine writers, including Johanna, act as collaborative subjects collecting other’s testimonies and histories, it is the “resisting subject” in terms of postmodern self-hood which characterises most zine authors. With regards to the resisting subject, Smith elaborates:

When people assigned in varying ways to the cultural position of “other” speak as autobiographical subjects, they consciously and/or unconsciously negotiate the laws of genre that work to construct them as recognisable subjects...Talking back to the dominant culture, formerly excluded subjects bring their experientially based history into biographical, autobiographical, and life writing locales and there undermine the intent of provided forms by staging different performances of subjectivity.<sup>12</sup>

In arguing that zines mobilise and transform certain conventions of life writing, I will now provide more concrete examples of how zine editors ‘negotiate the laws of genre’ to stage themselves as self-reflexive and resisting subjects.

### III. Per-zines and Life Narrative Writing

Duncombe’s statement, ‘the form of a zine lies somewhere between a personal letter and a magazine’<sup>13</sup>, is of significant interest to historians. What kind of life story documents are these, and how does the interplay of public and private writing forms affect the type of life stories told in zines? In this section we shall consider how zines draw upon the life-story conventions of letters, diaries, and the personal essay.

#### Letters

Whilst offering rich material as personal testimony and life narratives, letter-writing ‘appears to be a dying art’ and ‘a relatively rare document of life in the social sciences’<sup>14</sup>. Within zine cultures, however, letter-writing is a formative aspect of entering into ‘zine communities’ and establishing friendships. Zine-makers actively solicit feedback and letters throughout their publications, such as Johanna writing to her readers: ‘it would mean a lot if you wrote to me’.<sup>15</sup> Whilst in everyday life, letters (especially from acquaintances or strangers) are often thrown away, zinesters are prone to incorporate these subsidiary forms of life writing into their texts, either by responding to the comment’s they’ve received or by directly publishing the letters. They may also reprint email discussions- thereby transforming ‘virtual’ forms of communication into more permanent records through low-technology acts such as cut and pasting onto the page with glue and scissors. That these correspondences often turn up in future issues of zines thereby creates an archive of personal correspondence. It also highlights an *interactive* mode of life narrative in which the *readers* of zines can also unintentionally become published *writers* within them.

When the conventions of letter-writing are deliberately undermined to provide a provocative or challenging injunction to the reader, then the epistle *form* is used as a site of subversive rhetoric within zines. Bernard Bray considers how letters and notes are usually from one person to another, where ‘multiple authors or multiple recipients are exceptional’.<sup>16</sup> When zinesters use ‘open letters’ in their zines, the ‘intended’ addressee is assumed but not directly known. For example, in *Sisu* #1, Johanna adopts the style of a letter in a piece entitled “dear white people”, which addresses an aspect of racist ignorance. This open letter, in Johanna’s words, is ‘a command, laced with venom, born of fatigue and rage’ which calls upon white people to ‘SAY NAMES CORRECTLY’.<sup>17</sup> This aggressive tone deliberately jars with the form of address of ‘dear white people’ and the formulaic intimacy of being signed ‘love, johanna’. Of course, this letter only mimics the epistle form, using the address and signing off conventions of letter-writing as framing devices. The final line of the ‘letter’, hand written under the typed prose of ‘love, johanna’, is read as a post-script. It states: ‘(that’s “yo-hanna”)’. The *written* form of the letter, withstanding that letters have ‘traditionally being defined in terms of being a substitute for an oral conversation’<sup>18</sup>, is therefore used as a device to *phonetically* spell out a name often mispronounced by white Westerns. This technique therefore uses the conventions of the letter with a subversive irony. It acts as a “talking back”, not only to the dominant autobiographic subject of the white, heterosexual, Western male, but also to the dominant subject of the American zine community: the white reader. In this sense, therefore, it is important to remember that zine writers and communities are not monolithic and that they have their own internal power

dynamics and/or conventions which can effect how a zine writer will publish her material (and therefore shape what it said and how it is said).

### Diaries

Per-zines, as defined by Duncombe, are ‘personal diaries open to the public; shared notes on the day-to-day life, thoughts and experiences of the writer’.<sup>19</sup> Yet, is this conflation of a zine with a diary, and furthermore, the rendering of a zine as a wholly *public* form, an accurate analysis? The issue of publication is a key issue here. Doreen Piano differentiates zines from other forms of life narrative through this measure: ‘Although zines may be deeply personal and intimate in terms of content and use of generic forms such as the diary, the journal, and confessional, they are also consciously constructed for public use.’<sup>20</sup> However, despite being published, the life narratives within zines are sometimes as unpolished and raw as if they had just been taken out of a diary (again, the diversity of writing within and between zines should be acknowledged. Some authors take greater precision with editing their work for publication, some will write directly onto the page to be photocopied). Stylistically, however, we can draw general parallels between zines and what Rachel Cottam describes as characteristics within diary writing:

The diarist is expected to write with immediacy, using the language of everyday (spoken) colloquy. In addition, whereas most published forms attempt to render what are seen as the preparatory forms of the work invisible, the diarist leaves a trail of revisions, which creates the effect of a work executed with a slapdash vigour.<sup>21</sup>

Zines are often written in the vernacular with spelling mistakes and grammar left uncorrected. Sometimes zines also leave a ‘trail of revision’ in crossings out and qualifications, which show the making-subject and identity process in motion, and add to the self-reflexivity of the author’s presence in their zine.

The expectations set out by Duncombe that zines are wholly *public* texts, however, should be tempered slightly. Unlike digital life stories, which can potentially be viewed by anyone, zines exist within slightly more obscured channels of dissemination, along the lines of trading and mutual-communication between other zine writers. Whilst all zines are written for publication, there are still some instances whereby the text remains *closed and private to certain people* outside of the zine community. Within *Sisu* #3, it is the zine editor’s father who is cast off limits: ‘this zine, in many ways, was inspired by my dad. i plan on him never knowing about it though, which is a shame because it’s me trying so hard to understand him’.<sup>22</sup> By keeping this zine private from her father, the zine editor finds the space to record and talk critically about her family history. In this sense, the “underground” or subcultural aspects of zines act as a safety net giving zine writers a little more freedom to speak out about their personal lives, yet with the belief that their disclosures will remain relatively private to the general public and their immediate families. They are therefore written within a context based on an imagined community of truth-telling and the safe sharing of secrets and testimony.

Another major consideration which differentiates zines from diaries is the divergent temporalities which both genres of texts engender. Diaries, more often than not, are written in a chronological sequence with dated entries. Whilst all writing in diaries can be subject to re-editing at any stages, they can usually be read sequentially in a linear-fashion. Zines, however, have a unique temporality due to the stages involved in putting zines together: from

writing, to making artwork, to layout, and finally publication. There are numerous editing decisions which are made when the zine is constructed, and there is usually little congruence between the flow of the articles in the publication and the time of writing. Furthermore, the *aesthetics* of the zine compound the disorientation of usual reading strategies - pages are usually put together in a fragmentary, disjointed way, with the written aspects collaged with drawings, photos, fragmented words and statements in a 'cut and paste' fashion. With neither pagination, nor chronological or organisational flow between articles in zines, non-linear reading strategies are encouraged in the reader, and more abstract correlations and meaning-making can take place when analysing the work within zines.

### **Personal Essay**

In her introduction to the first issue of *Sisu*, Johanna writes: 'My old zines were often my journal equivalent, but now that I'm more faithful about journaling I want to write something more rigorous. Less emotional vomit, more critical thinking.'<sup>23</sup> The desire for "more critical thinking" can be seen in how zine editors utilise the form of the personal essay, an atypical aspect of diaries or journals. Within life writing and feminist writing communities, the use of personal experience as a basis to theorise and make broader connections between the individual and the social has long been considered an important part of forming new epistemologies and theory. Smith and Watson characterise the personal essay as a 'mode of writing that is literally a self-trying out', 'a testing ("assay") of one's own intellectual, emotional, and physiological responses to a given topic'.<sup>24</sup> Narratives such as these provide rich qualitative data as to lived community experiences and particular vernacular styles of speech.

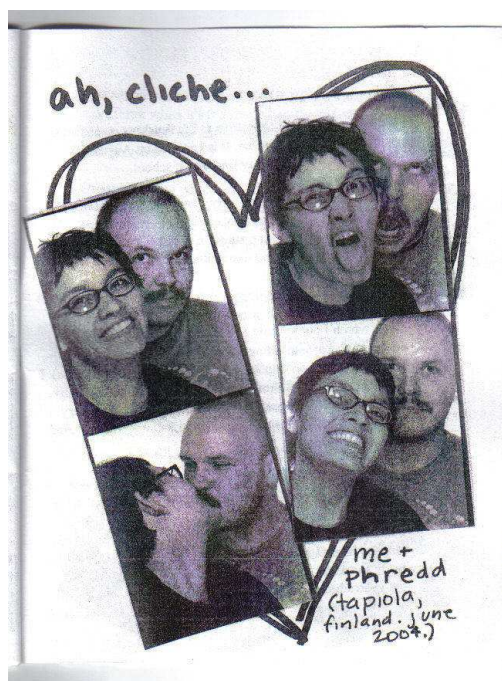
The personal essay of 'Half Wrong', which appears in *Sisu* #2, details Johanna's experiences of being of Finnish Filipino American descent. Here, Johanna critically engages with the "imagined community" of nationality and ethnicity of her peers: 'I feel the pressure to show that I'm not white washed, not a coconut (especially because I spent part of my life, I think, being just that)—so I notice keenly any differences from mainstream Filipino or Finnish cultural norms'.<sup>25</sup> Here, Johanna takes up the racial slur of 'coconut', a slang term referring to a person who is black on the outside, yet "white on the inside". That is, the term refers to someone who has internalised the dominant culture and lost sight of their own ethnicity and roots. Such autoethnographic forms of life narratives offer an interesting 'insider' position for feminist and post-colonial researchers interested in the ways in which women of colour write their personal testimonies. "Autoethnography", according to Mary Louise Pratt, occurs when "colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms".<sup>26</sup> In her essay, Johanna's documents and analyses the 'cultural norms' that she feels regulate her immigrant community and draws upon slang such as 'coconut'. That this essay also comes complete with footnotes and academic references also engenders a life narrative form which is 'autotheoretical'.

According to Stacey Young, and closely related to autoethnography, "autotheoretical" texts 'combine autobiography with theoretical reflection and the author's insistence on situating themselves within histories of oppression and resistance'.<sup>27</sup> Zines therefore, to be read fully, benefit from being placed within the greater sphere of life writing narratives and genres such as letters, diaries, personal essays, autoethnography and autotheretics, through which their utilise, subvert and mimic some of their conventions and writing techniques.

#### IV. Other Generic Feature of Per-Zines

Whilst we have begun to indicate the ways in which zines also *differ* from other forms of life writing documents, a key aspect of zines' unique form is their hybrid status as written and visual texts. Piano summarises the wide variety of life story documents which make it into the pages of zines: 'book lists, zine reviews, street and city maps, landscape photographs, music soundtracks, and self-portraits are atypical autobiographical aspects of perzines that within the context of production becomes a site for identity formation'.<sup>28</sup> Within *Sisu*, all these elements can be found - geographical maps of Finland and the Philippines, street maps of Queens in New York, personal photography and drawings. As such, zines act as open *archives* of life story appendices and cultural ephemera which would be otherwise lost or thrown away. Of special interest to the historian is the inclusion of family photos within zines, such as Johanna's inclusion of the picture of her family on their boat. A generic feature of per-zines is the use of the childhood photo of the author and the contemporary passport photo alongside personal writings. That this is a generic feature is also understood by zine authors themselves, such as Johanna's statement "Ah, cliché" written across the top of a page of passport photos of her and her partner (see Figure Two).

**Figure 2: Self-portraits in *Sisu* #3**



Sinor further outlines some of the generic *written* features of zines:

Zines generally begin with an opening statement on the part of the author reflecting on the production, the labor, of making the particular issue. Often, zinesters will look back to their previous issue and describe a kind of trajectory in their



writing/thinking. They might give reasons in the first two pages about why they are late with their zine. They often locate themselves, usually in terms of year in school as well as geographically and briefly describe what is happening in their lives.<sup>29</sup>

Sinor is describing some of the conventions of the 'intro' in per-zines, all of which can be found within *Sisu*. Alongside the 'intro' there is also the 'outro' – the “signing off” gesture at the end of the zine which might include booklists, soundtracks, acknowledgements, contact information, and a summary about the issues and themes of the zine. Therefore, both the intro and outro serve as “framing devices”. These provide the researcher and reader with information about the conditions/relations of production, the autobiographical imperative, and the time and place of narration. That is, the 'intro' and the 'outro' is where researchers are most likely to receive clues as to the provenance of the zine.

## V. The provenance of personal testimony in zines

Using Thomson's five-point criteria for placing life stories within their context of making and reception, we can better locate and read zines authentically. Through this, we can also begin to understand, as Plummer writes, 'why and how people come to tell their stories [or don't], why and how they assume the forms that they do, what happens to them once told, and how they connect to the life being told'.<sup>30</sup> As such, we can offer some initial guidelines as to the administration of zine extracts for historical interpretation.

### The autobiographical imperative

The 'autobiographical imperative' questions why some people, and not others, write about their lives. In terms of zines, it appears a very significant question: why write so intimately and publish your thoughts and opinions? There is something singular and unique in the form of communication that zines offer: 'they go where *the new york times* & *utne reader* & even *clamor* don't go.'<sup>31</sup> Johanna speaks of past zines as what she 'poured my heart into, what kept me sane, for some of the most tumultuous years of my life'.<sup>32</sup> As personal testimony and life writing, zines act as a vehicle legitimating the narrator's life, experiences and sense of self, and provide cultural scripts of femininity and agency not usually provided by more mainstream forums. They also act as sites creating a pedagogic community to address personal and political issues, such as Johanna's concern with confronting racism through the writing in her zine. Zines therefore are written as an act of “bearing witness”, as previously discussed, in ways which hope to educate and challenge the reader (hence the mixture of different writing styles to achieve this).

### Time and place of narration

In terms of girl zines, these publications are often produced in domestic settings, such as in bedrooms and on personal computers. Some zines are self-reflexive about the conditions of their making. For example, in *Sisu* #3 a page is entitled “21 september 2003- 2:21am”. As befitting the time of being produced at a very early hour, the writing is clipped in style and starts with the short phrase: 'can't sleep'. This suggests it was composed in a moment of restlessness. The piece is put together on the page in a disjointed cut and paste style over a black background (the rest of the zine follows the format of a minimalist style of type over a white page), and the immediacy of tone seems to recall a form of diary writing which is in-the-moment and raw. After writing about things which have been bothering her, Johanna concludes: 'I think, having written this out, I can stop weeping & go to sleep now. I certainly

hope so.’<sup>33</sup> The historian, therefore, would benefit from comparing different forms of writing within the zine (such as the above entry compared to the more formal, yet still personal, style of the personal essay piece), and consider what the *therapeutic* or *persuasive* effects and intentions of the writing are (and how the layout of the page either confirms or contradicts the writing within).

### **The relations of production**

As Thomson notes, ‘relationships of personal testimony – who it is written or spoken to and for – almost invariably affect what is remembered and recounted’.<sup>34</sup> With letters this may be the relationships with the recipient, within oral history it is the collaborative relationship with the researcher. There is certainly an intended audience in mind when the zine is written: other zine writers and readers. Zine editors can therefore be said to partake in a form of *community publishing* – not only writing the stories and histories of their lived communities, but being shaped by the expectations and boundaries of a virtual, non-geographical zine community. Kate Eichhorn describes zines as textual communities, “communities that emerge when people are brought together through shared texts, a shared set of texts, or a shared set of reading and writing practices”.<sup>35</sup> For Johanna, there is also a fear that those shared practices could unofficially regulate the legitimacy and acceptance of her work: ‘It’s been a while. Maybe my membership’s no good anymore’.<sup>36</sup> By using the metaphor of ‘membership’, Johanna’s words demonstrate the un/conscious parameters of a zine community, which could affect what type of stories are told, or at least their style of narration, due to narrative conventions and tacitly agreed subject matters.

### **Genre and form**

We have already considered some of the conventions of the per-zine form: a mixture of writing styles (including auto-theoretical, journalistic, therapeutic, creative, provocative, auto-ethnographic, and so on); the inclusion of visual elements (especially the passport photo or snap of the author as a child); and the feature of the ‘intro’ and the ‘outro’ as signposting devices giving a context to the zine and the author’s life.

Another particular element of zine cultures, which the historian should also bear in mind, is the possibility that zine editors might hijack their form and combine fiction, untruths, or fabrications alongside their ‘confessional’ modes of truth-telling. The ways in which these subjectivities and stories are *told* must therefore be paid attention by the researcher (as well as the usual processes of triangulation with other existing sources). Smith and Watson argue that ‘[w]hen life narrators write to chronicle an event, to explore a certain time period, or to enshrine a community, they are making “history” in a sense’.<sup>37</sup> However, they warn against treating this historical record, or history-writing, as transparent:

[life narrators] are also performing several rhetorical acts: justifying their own perceptions, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures among others. The complexity of autobiographical texts requires reading practices that reflect on narrative tropes, sociocultural contexts, rhetorical aims, and narrative shifts within the historical or chronological trajectory of the text.<sup>38</sup>

History-writing in zines, as well as the autobiographical imperative to write and create pedagogic communities, is shaped through the use of rhetoric – a mode of writing which is

intentionally used to persuade the reader of something. This underscores the benefit of approaching zines through a narrative analysis approach, to consider not just the historical content of the text but its means of expression, and to pick out key phrases, consider the tropes and images, and to read the text analytically. However, the potential zine researcher should also remain cautious as to not over-privilege the prose within zines. As ‘hybrid’ texts, with many fragmentary discourses competing on a page in a nonlinear way, the historian would profit from embracing new reading practices that consider the relationships and tensions between image, words and space.

### **Archival history**

Thomson argues that the ‘story of an autobiographical narrative does not finish with its creation; its archival history may also offer significant interpretative clues.’<sup>39</sup> Here, we can think of the ‘survival’ of the document, for, as Thomson suggests, ‘[t]he survival of a personal record may say something about its meaning and value for an author or family member who has looked after it, just as its loss may suggest a preference not to remember or commemorate the events recorded’.<sup>40</sup> Whilst it is unlikely that other family members have copies of zines, due to the confessional and critical narratives many engender, zines often survive beyond their own initial publication span. This can occur through zine reviews, being quoted by other zine writers, and from whole articles being reappropriated into new contexts. As such, this ‘passing on’ and reinscribing of past zine works into a new zine, becomes a form of testimony to the *history of the zine community* which is being created or contested.

Zines are transitory and ephemeral forms of writing published in small print runs. Many undergo serial title-changes or fail to survive past their first issues. There therefore remains a problem of *access* and *continuity*: both between the zines themselves and in uncovering the provenance of texts. Zines do not have a ‘mainstream’ presence and may be hard to obtain if one is not already in the zine ‘loop’. In terms of acquiring these publications, zines are usually non-profit projects that are traded, purchased through zine distros (distributors), sold at record or bookshops, gigs or marches, advertised through messageboards and flyers, and promoted through word of mouth and other zine reviews. Researchers therefore do not have to actively be a part of the zine community from which they draw texts – although this could be an advantage in terms of collaborating on future history work or gaining a greater understanding, via personal correspondence, of the aims and motivations of the zine writer.

The researcher can also access zines which have been deposited in collections. British libraries developing zine archives (either as open shelved material or private collections) currently solicit their material through flyers and letters within zine communities.<sup>41</sup> Relying on the donations of zine writers/readers themselves, and therefore their own sense of the importance of zines (or the desirability to make their zine writing, especially personal testimony, part of the permanent public record), may unintentionally impact on the types of zines which are self-selected. It is too early yet to look at zine archives and trace some of the conditions or factors shaping which zines are being deposited. However, we can speculate on the effect of institutional archives on the future practices of zine writers; it would be an interesting task to monitor the zine community and see how the discussions of their own work, and their sense of historical consciousness, changes as it becomes part of a legitimated, and public, archive.

There also exists a dilemma in how to present zine extracts in research. A comprehensive set of citation practices is hard to institute due to the varying bibliographic information which can be attributed to these publications. However, as far as possible, it is advisable to include the author’s/editor’s name (whether full, the first name, or a penname),

the title of the publication, issue number, month and year, and place of publication (city and country) in referencing systems. Zines are rarely paginated. When no explicit reference is given to the date of the zine, the historian should consider the other historical traces left in the zine- such as the date of events reviewed, flyers for other events or zines, and so on. From this, an approximation of the year of publication can usually be made. The researcher must also consider the ethics of documenting the text he/she is writing about. As outlined, some zines contain personal narratives which can include writing about abusive situations or events the author would not wish to make accessible to the broader public outside of zine communities. The researcher and historian would therefore be advised to follow usual policies of good practice and to make contact with the zine writer and gain permission for using their materials or to make anonymous the texts they are discussing.

### Conclusion

Zines are ‘messy texts’ made up of unpolished life stories which privilege the confessional, the questioning, and the episodic. Zines, especially per-zines, provide valuable qualitative data documenting the micro-histories and situated knowledges of lived experience. They also comment on, and explore, memories and the oscillations between private interpretations of events versus public myths. In per-zines we find the five key aspects of life narrative as suggested by Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson: *memory, experience, identity, embodiment and agency*.<sup>42</sup>

In combining conventions of life story data, zines furthermore thrive in making hybrid texts that *archive* different modes of writing and images. They also appropriate traditionally feminine forms of life writing – the letter and the diary for example – to reconfigure rigid notions of a split private/public self and to introduce writing which is shocking, confessional and personal. As we have seen, per-zines have their own set of generic features, and should be read with a consideration to both the provenance of the zine as a whole (and the individual entries, if possible), and the regulations and expectations of the writing communities through which they are conceived and distributed.

That zines are only just beginning to be archived in national UK libraries is of critical importance. It is imperative that archival practices and the formulation of adequate methodological approaches are established with an understanding of the unique nature of zines – the guidelines administered in this paper offer prospective researchers but a basic insight into using these documents as historical sources. The acknowledgement of zines as life story data, and thus their collection and increased availability for research, would furnish the contemporary historian with a vast wealth of qualitative data on a range of topics and life narratives. Zines can, and should, therefore take their place among other sources such as letters, diaries, and oral history interviews, as offering unique narratives demonstrating the *effects* of history, as experienced by its living participants.

## Endnotes

- 1 See Michael Hardy, "Digital Life Stories: Auto/Biography in the Information Age", *Auto/Biography*, 2004; 12: 183-200
- 2 Al Thomson (2004), "Anzac Stories: Using Personal Testimony in Historical Research", publication forthcoming in the *War and Society* journal (2007).
- 3 Stephen Duncombe (1997), *Notes from underground: Zines and the politics of alternative culture*, London: Verso, pp. 9-13
- 4 Rafeek et al (2004), "Scotland and 'The Coalition For Justice Not War' March, Glasgow, 15 February 2003", *Oral History*, 32:2, p. 85
- 5 See Duncombe, 1997
- 6 Grrrl Zine Network (<http://grrrlzines.net>)
- 7 See Grrrl Zine Network for a comprehensive index of different studies and academic papers on zines in a range of disciplines.
- 8 Johanna (2004), *Sisu #3*, America
- 9 Johanna, 2004, *Sisu #3*
- 10 Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001), *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, p. 207
- 11 Sidonie Smith (1993), "Who's Talking / Who's Talking Back? The Subject of Personal Narrative", *Signs*, 18:2, p. 393
- 12 Smith, 1993, p.204
- 13 Duncombe, 1997, p.10
- 14 Ken Plummer (2001), *Documents of Life 2: an invitation to a critical humanism*, London: Sage, pp. 54, 52
- 15 Johanna (2004), *Sisu #2*, America
- 16 Bernard Bray, "Letters: General Survey", in Margaretta Jolly (ed.), (2001), *Encyclopædia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, Vol 2, London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, p. 551
- 17 Johanna (2003), *Sisu #1*, America
- 18 Bray in Jolly, 2001, p. 551
- 19 Duncombe, 1997, p. 11
- 20 Doreen Piano (2003), *Congregating Women: Reading the rhetorical arts of Third Wave subcultural production*, PhD thesis: Bowling Green State University, p.128
- 21 Rachel Cottam, "Diaries and Journal: General Survey", in Jolly, 2001, Vol 1, p.268
- 22 Johanna, 2004, *Sisu #3*
- 23 Johanna, 2003, *Sisu #1*
- 24 Smith and Watson, 2001, p.200
- 25 Johanna, 2004, *Sisu #2*
- 26 Mary Louise Pratt in Smith and Watson, 2001, p. 185
- 27 Stacey Young (1997), *Changing the Wor(l)d: Discourse, Politics and the Feminist Movement*, London: Routledge, p. 69
- 28 Piano, 2003, p.132
- 29 Jennifer Sinor (2003), "Another Form of Crying: Girl Zines as Life Writing", *Prose Studies*, 26: 1-2, pp. 257-8
- 30 Plummer, 2001, p. 42
- 31 Johanna, 2004, *Sisu #3*
- 32 Johanna, 2003, *Sisu #1*
- 33 Johanna, 2004, *Sisu #3*
- 34 Thomson, 2004
- 35 Kate Eichhorn cited in Sinor, 2003, p. 244
- 36 Johanna, 2003, *Sisu #1*,
- 37 Smith and Watson, 2001, p. 10
- 38 Smith and Watson, 2001, p. 10
- 39 Thomson, 2004
- 40 Thomson, 2004
- 41 Zine archives now exist at the British Library (London), The Women's Library (London) and the Glasgow Women's Library (Glasgow).
- 42 See Smith and Watson (2001)